

Chapter 4

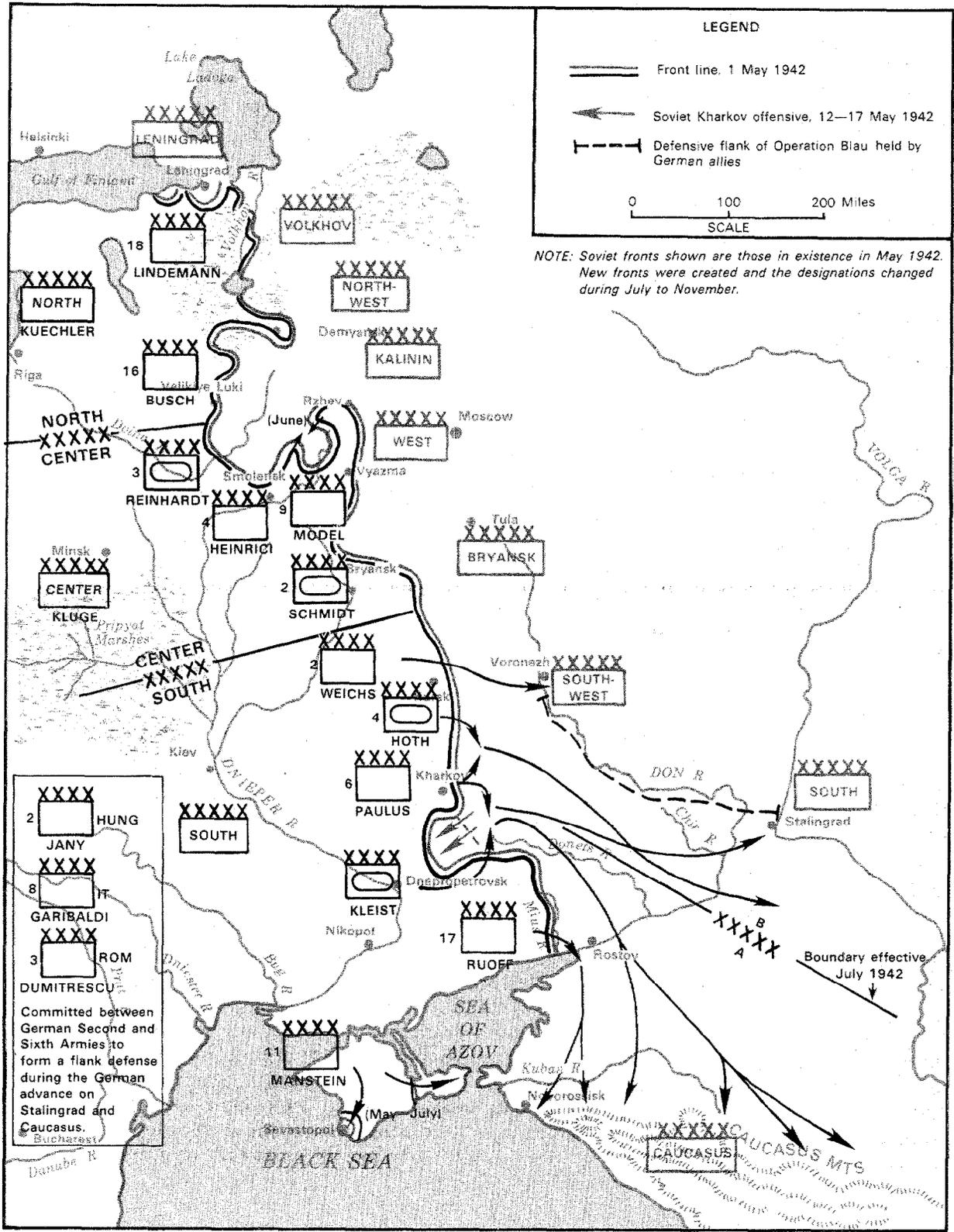
New Victories, New Defeats

Operation Blau, the German 1942 summer offensive in Russia, was vital to Germany's hopes for victory in World War II. Both a revived Britain and a newly belligerent United States could soon be expected to open new fronts in Africa, the Mediterranean, or France. Consequently, in terms of the Third Reich's grand strategy, a failure to knock Russia out of the war in 1942 would leave Germany embroiled in a hopeless multifront war against stronger adversaries.

Operation Blau entailed substantial military risk for the Germans. The recent winter battles had left the German eastern armies so drained of strength that they could not all be fully rebuilt to pre-Barbarossa levels with the limited resources available. By concentrating the flow of replacements and new equipment to selected units, a powerful offensive phalanx could be created on only a narrow portion of the front. This could only be done at the expense of the remainder of the German forces in the east, in which combat strength would remain at relatively low levels. If the few assault armies failed to land a knockout blow, the burden of sustained combat would then fall on the other, less-capable German divisions. Thus, Hitler's 1942 summer offensive implicitly gambled German long-term combat endurance against the chance for a rapid blitzkrieg-style victory over the Russians.

The main objective of Blau was the seizure of the Caucasian oil-producing regions. While Army Groups North and Center stood on the defensive, a reinforced Army Group South would be split into two separate maneuver elements. Army Group B, the more northerly fragment, would drive forward south of Voronezh, extending the German defensive front along the Don River. Its eastern terminus anchored at the Volga River industrial city of Stalingrad, Army Group B's lines would face generally northeastward, protecting the flank and rear of Army Group A's operations. Army Group A, in turn, would attack due east as far as Rostov and then wheel southward toward the prized oil fields (see map 8).¹

For such a crucial undertaking, Operation Blau suffered from surprisingly muddled strategic thinking. Even if successful, the Caucasian offensive would leave most of the Soviet armed forces intact. Following its recent winter counteroffensives, the bulk of the Red Army remained massed along a 300-mile front west of Moscow, with other significant concentrations opposite Leningrad and Kharkov. Though strong Soviet forces would probably be drawn into the southern fighting, it was unlikely that they could be subjected to encirclement and *Kessel*-style destruction as during the previous summer. (The German strategic deception plan for Blau intentionally aimed at keeping



Map 8. Plan Blau and German offensive operations, May–November 1942

Soviet forces in place before Moscow.²) Consequently, for a plan whose overriding strategic purpose was the timely and conclusive completion of operations in the Russian theater, Blau made no provision for dealing with the greater portion of Soviet military might.

Instead of striking at the Soviet armed forces, the Germans aimed at winning the war by economic means. And yet, even though the Caucasian oil regions were a valuable economic target, the precise strategic purpose to be served by their seizure remained vague. German analyses emphasized how Germany would benefit from the capture of the oil fields rather than how the Soviets would suffer from their seizure. Caucasian petroleum would certainly help Germany's own war economy; however, that its loss would fatally undermine the war-making potential of the Soviet Union—which had access to other, albeit lesser, sources of oil—was less certain.³ Moreover, any harm to the Soviet war economy resulting from the German southern drive would, at best, develop only gradually and would not serve the German goal of swiftly terminating the war in the east. German planners, including not only Hitler but the Army General Staff as well, therefore had not considered completely the relationship between Germany's strategic ends and Operation Blau's military means.

These faults, however, were not immediately apparent amid the renewed optimism of June 1942. What was obvious was the clear division of tasks between the "defensive front," composed of Army Group North and Army Group Center, and the "offensive front" poised farther to the south. (German officers actually used the terms "offensive front" and "defensive front" as a sort of verbal shorthand to describe the missions of the various army groups.⁴) The development of German defensive doctrine through 1942 is most easily pursued in a separate evaluation of these two fronts.

Problems on the Defensive Front

The German defensive front twisted for nearly 1,000 miles, stretching from the area north of Voronezh to the Gulf of Finland. The German armies holding this area were, broadly speaking, those that had suffered the most during the Soviet winter counteroffensives. Concurrent with their development of the Blau attack plans, German planners bolstered the defensive strength of the lines held by Army Group Center and Army Group North.

During February and March of 1942, Hitler and other senior leaders again toyed briefly with the idea of fortifying an "east wall" defensive barrier along a portion of the front. The main inspiration for this scheme came from General Friedrich Olbricht of the German Army Supply Office. On his own authority, Olbricht had undertaken some preliminary studies for such a bulwark, and as German plans for the coming summer began to take shape, he shared his ideas with other influential officers. Since the weakened frontline divisions could not be expected to provide work parties for such a project, Olbricht proposed shifting army training facilities temporarily into the combat zone and using trainees as the principal east wall labor force. General Friedrich Fromm, the commander of the Replacement Army, was being pressured to muster replacements for the shattered combat divisions as quickly as possible and therefore was reluctant to agree to any program that might

interfere with that process. However, Fromm conceded that such a construction project, using replacement personnel supervised by limited-duty officers with recent combat experience, might be possible provided that no more than six hours a day was devoted to construction work.⁵

With Fromm's concurrence in hand, Olbricht ordered his staff to prepare a detailed "Proposal for the Construction of a Strategic Defense Line in the East" at the end of January. Elaborating his basic concept, Olbricht requested that a fortified defense in depth be built along a line to be designated by the army chief of staff. Provided that adequate materials and support personnel were made available, Olbricht estimated a total actual construction time of just over three months. Olbricht circulated this written proposal to interested agencies within the German Army and High Command staffs, making occasional amendments to accommodate minor criticisms. Since the general response to the east wall concept was almost unanimously favorable, Olbricht submitted a formal written recommendation through General Halder to the Führer at the beginning of February.⁶

Hitler, with the winter defensive trials behind him and the prospect of a new win-the-war offensive in front of him, bluntly rejected the east wall construction scheme as an unnecessary diversion of precious resources. In a written memorandum to Olbricht, Hitler forbade further consideration of such an elaborate fortified line with the words, "Our eyes are always fixed forward." By way of further explanation, Hitler said that such a grandiose defensive project would convey an unfavorable impression to Germany's allies.⁷ At the time, Hungary, Romania, and Italy were all being pressed to invest more troops in the forthcoming summer campaign, and Hitler wished to forestall any doubts that these satellites might have had about Blau's prospects.

Instead of an east wall, the German defensive front in Russia was to be built up from the existing strongpoint lines. As a preparatory step, forward units had been ordered on 12 February 1942 to reestablish a continuous defensive line as soon as possible after the spring muddy period.⁸ On 26 April, after Hitler had issued his final directive for the conduct of Blau, General Halder ordered the strengthening of the German defensive front: engineer troops were to assist in preparing field fortifications, key rearward towns and installations were to be converted into major strongpoints, and "fortified areas" were to be designated behind the German front to act as supplemental defensive lines if needed.⁹

Despite the Army High Command's efforts to strengthen the defensive front of Army Groups Center and North, it remained shaky due to insufficient forces. In preparation for Operation Blau, Army Group South* was given strict priority of replacements in order to bring its divisions up to full complement by June. Because of this preferential rehabilitation, two distinct classes of German units existed on the Eastern Front. The assault forces mustering in the south were generally well equipped and ready offensively, while the ninety-odd divisions assigned to the two northern army groups were second-class

*The division of Army Group South into Army Group A and Army Group B did not become effective until the beginning of July.

organizations in which major deficiencies in personnel, weapons, and equipment had to be tolerated indefinitely.

The personnel shortages in the divisions manning the defensive front were particularly acute. Replacements reaching Army Groups Center and North in May and June scarcely covered the combat losses of those months alone, to say nothing of filling the ranks ravaged by the winter fighting.¹⁰ The quality of the replacements trickling into the northern army groups was also cause for concern: in order to flesh out the spindly divisions assigned defensive missions, General Halder had authorized these groups to receive men who had completed only two months' training.¹¹ Even so, the manpower shortfall remained so intractable that sixty-nine of the seventy-five infantry divisions assigned to the defensive front had their infantry component reduced from nine to six battalions.¹² This one-third curtailment of authorized infantry strength—accompanied by a proportional reduction in divisional heavy weapons in some cases—left these German infantry divisions permanently less combat worthy than the “standard” divisions still deployed in Army Group South. All problems considered, the average infantry division in Army Groups North and Center probably deployed about one-half the combat power of a full-strength division.¹³ In defensive terms, these reduced-strength divisions were less able to hold terrain in a positional defense and were less suited for prolonged attritional combat than the nine-battalion divisions fielded at the outset of Barbarossa.

Because of the need to endow Army Group South's forces with as much mobility and striking power as possible, the defensive front's infantry divisions were also starved of vehicles and weapons. Infantry divisions along the static front received no replacement motor vehicles and few replacement horses. In some cases, motor vehicles were actually taken away from northern units and reallocated to divisions assigned to the southern attack. These measures reduced the mobility of the defensive units, leaving them almost totally unsuited for fluid operations.¹⁴

The few mobile reserves held by Army Groups North and Center were also deprived of equipment. Noting that the southern buildup would completely

Soldiers of a bicycle-mounted reconnaissance battalion. For lack of motor vehicles, bicycles were often used for mobility of local reserves on the German defensive front in 1942.



exhaust the German stock of tanks, vehicles, and weapons, General Halder concluded that the mobile reserves for the defensive front could expect to "get nothing and must try to get along on what they still [had], acting as 'fire brigades' on the defensive front." Furthermore, unlike the panzer and motorized divisions assembling in the south, the northern front divisions were not allowed to stand down for rehabilitation. On the contrary, these divisions were actually stripped of some of their organic support vehicles and even had their offensive edge blunted by other makeshift compromises. The panzer divisions, for example, were allotted few replacement tanks and therefore fielded only a single understrength armored battalion each. Also, divisional reconnaissance units for the panzer and motorized formations were frequently remounted on bicycles, and logistical support for the mobile units (which previously had been fully motorized) was partially transferred to horse-drawn wagons, a stop-gap that severely reduced the mobile forces' sustained effectiveness in fluid combat.¹⁵

Neglected by the Army High Command's allocations of fresh resources, the defensive army groups thus held their designated fronts with stunted infantry divisions. The reserve underpinnings of the defensive front were also weak: the panzer and motorized forces, which according to German doctrine were to be used in defense as a mobile counterattack force, had had much of their mobility and shock power siphoned away. In many ways, Operation Blau thus wrought the same transformation of the German Army as had the 1918 Ludendorff offensives. A few selected units would carry the burden of attack, while lower-quality "trench divisions" were trusted only to hold ground in relatively quiet sectors. That the old Imperial German Army had disintegrated when the trench divisions proved unequal to the demands of the Elastic Defense seems to have gone unremarked in 1942.

Thawing snow and spring rains impeded the construction of German defensive works, since neither trenches nor bunkers could be properly excavated in the muddy gumbo. Luckily, the liquefied landscape also brought a halt to Russian attacks, as dismayed German soldiers watched their winter snow trenches and ice parapets dissolve into the slush.¹⁶ Not until late May or early June had the ground dried enough to allow the laying out of serious defensive positions.

Insofar as their blighted units and broad sectors allowed, the German armies along the defensive front tried to organize their defenses according to established doctrine. The actions of the German I Corps, settling into a portion of the Eighteenth Army's front south of Leningrad, were typical in this respect.

The four divisions of I Corps got a late start on their defensive preparations, having first to eradicate the so-called Volkhov *Kessel* in the German rear containing Soviet General Vlasov's ill-fated Second Shock Army.¹⁷ With that bit of operational housekeeping done, the I Corps began digging in along its assigned portion of the German front in early July. An 8 July corps order guided the organization of the defense and spelled out an abbreviated Elastic Defense (no advanced position was possible due to the proximity of the enemy). The corps commander directed that "the course of the HKL [main line of resistance] and of the Combat Outposts are to be set strictly in accordance with the principles of *Truppenführung*."¹⁸ Particularly urgent was the

need for subordinate commanders to ensure that a continuous trenchline be linked to all positions along the main line of resistance. Throughout the entire depth of the main battle zone, all weapons pits, command bunkers, and reserve dugouts were to be transformed into small strongpoints capable of sustained all-around defense. The order further specified the depth of the main battle zone in each subordinate unit's area and directed that "in each division sector a minimum of one infantry battalion [would] be held back as division reserve. Moreover, each sub-sector [would] designate its own local reserve, its strength depending on the situation."¹⁹

Due attention was also paid to fire support and antitank measures. The I Corps defensive order thoroughly discussed the coordination of artillery fire necessary to block enemy attacks against the German defensive front. Displaying an uncommon sensitivity to the shock effect of overrunning armor, the corps commander stated that "the prevention of enemy tank break-ins [was] decisive to the coming defensive battles." Conceding that German antitank fire alone was unlikely to hold enemy armor at bay, dense thickets of mines and antitank obstacles were prescribed to keep Russian tanks out of the German defensive positions.²⁰

The German Army's doctrinal defensive methods required a high degree of skill and aggressiveness from individuals and small units—qualities easily dulled by prolonged periods in the trenches. Recognizing this, the I Corps commander warned that "alertness, combat proficiency, and morale should not be allowed to suffer due to increased construction work [on fortifications]" and directed that a refresher combat training program be conducted continuously within the defensive positions. Furthermore, he noted that small-unit leaders played a key role in maintaining the daily combat readiness of their men and therefore needed to be spared burdensome administrative duties:

Positional warfare brings the danger of the over-exuberant growth of memo-writing, and with it a bureaucratization of the war. This development is to be resisted from the beginning. The preparation of defensive positions can be promoted without voluminous documentation. Small unit leaders belong with their men and at their workplaces, not at the writing table. The number of written reports required of forward units is therefore to be kept to an absolute minimum.²¹

Following the winter battles, in which tactical methods had been largely improvised to fit special conditions, such orders were helpful in restoring direction to German defensive efforts. Though striving to follow these doctrinal methods, German units still found that their defensive operations remained plagued by practical difficulties, with the result that actual defenses seldom approached the ordered standards.

The abiding shortage of infantry posed the greatest stumbling block. A General Staff officer, reporting his findings after a trip to Second Army's static front in early August, noted that rifle companies numbering only forty to fifty men were defending sectors in excess of three kilometers in width.²² Such low troop densities caused some abridging of German doctrine; therefore, few units actually conducted a full-blown Elastic Defense. The traditional defensive principles of maneuver and depth were especially compromised, placing even greater importance on firepower and counterattack.

Small-unit maneuver had been an important ingredient of the German Elastic Defense since its inception during World War I. German soldiers were

taught to avoid local Allied pressure by moving to advantageous positions within the defensive zones until the enemy attack faltered under German artillery and small-arms fire. This idea of small-unit maneuver had been revived in *Truppenführung* in 1933 and remained part of the German doctrinal concept through the early years of World War II. Small-unit maneuver had proved awkward during the winter strongpoint battles and, in practice, remained difficult on the Russian Front during the summer of 1942.

For want of riflemen, German company and battalion commanders were allowed far less freedom to maneuver their units than doctrinal texts recommended. Due to German numerical weakness, any penetration of the forward defensive lines was extremely dangerous and needed to be promptly contained or swiftly eliminated by counterattack. The key lay in keeping enemy incursions as small as possible, and German commanders struggled, virtually at all costs, to resist any widening of Soviet break-ins. German soldiers were therefore taught to "pinch" relentlessly inward against the shoulders of local penetrations, a movement that did constitute maneuver of sorts.²³ However, such rigidity was contrary to the doctrinal ideal, which promoted a less-structured shifting of units. Moreover, the peculiar problems of antitank defense precluded excessive movement within threatened sectors. On the contrary, German soldiers were told to remain in place so they could attack any Russian tanks with mines and grenades. Finally, Hitler's rabid "no-retreat" dictum continued to enervate German defensive operations, and even tactical withdrawals in the heat of combat were discouraged. The I Corps commander, for example, warned his subordinates that "my explicit approval is required for every rearward displacement of the HKL [main line of resistance]."²⁴

After-action reports also confirmed the extent to which lack of manpower robbed German defenses of their desired depth. As the 1st Infantry Division admitted in its report on 1942 summer defensive operations, "the demanded depth was seldom achieved due to the wide sectors and low combat strength."²⁵ Orders like those issued by I Corps directing the preparation of deep defensive zones frequently went unfulfilled for lack of personnel. Elsewhere, when rearward positions were actually constructed, they often remained almost totally vacant. In many units, the only manned positions in the depth of the German main battle zone were *Pak* nests, artillery firing positions, and battalion and regimental command posts. Some units hurried signalers and supply personnel into rearward trenches when Soviet attacks seemed imminent, while others emptied forward dispensaries of walking wounded and posted them in the support positions. The shortage of riflemen prevented some units from distributing their heavy weapons in depth as they desired, as all available machine guns were needed along the main line of resistance to help cover the impossibly wide frontages. This weakened German resistance in depth and also caused the unnecessary loss of valuable weapons to Soviet artillery preparations and long-range direct fire.²⁶

The 121st Division found the manpower squeeze to be so excruciating that its frontline companies were unable to man even combat outposts forward of the main line of resistance. The division's total defensive deployment actually amounted to a dangerous charade: a single continuous trench with little forward security or rearward depth. As the division's after-action report explained, even a strongpoint style of defense was impossible since enemy

infiltrators would then have quickly ascertained how weak the German positions truly were.²⁷

In the face of such desperate weakness, the traditional principles of firepower and counterattack became the real pillars of the German defense. The most desirable qualities of German fire support were the ability to mass fire on Russian main efforts, a process that required careful planning and coordination, and the ability to shift fire quickly from target to target as front-line crises demanded. In some cases, however, the extreme width of division sectors spread German artillery assets to such an extent that any echeloning of guns in depth would have seriously diluted available firepower. Where this was the case, reports recommended abandoning artillery deployment in depth in favor of concentrating maximum fire along the thinly manned forward edge of the German defense.²⁸ Even though rearward battery locations would still be improved to act as emergency strongpoints, this recommendation reflected the criticality of smashing Soviet assaults by fire as far forward as possible since little resistance could be mustered in the empty depths of the German defenses. German antitank guns were deployed in some depth, but they were almost the only weapons that were not drawn forward by the severe manpower shortage.²⁹

The role of reserves was equally critical. Where Soviet units ruptured the thin forward trenchlines, immediate counterattack offered the best, and often the only, chance of averting a major breakthrough. German commanders still considered speed to be more important than mass: small reserve forces stationed close behind the front were preferred to larger, though more distant, counterattack forces.³⁰ In a reluctant concession to improved Soviet tactics, German commanders occasionally parceled out tanks, self-propelled assault guns, and additional antitank weapons to their reserves in order to generate

German tanks and infantry counterattack a Soviet penetration near Orel, August 1942



maximum striking power against enemy combined arms forces. (As the war progressed, the dispersing of tanks and assault guns to forward units for local counterattack became an increasingly contentious doctrinal issue.)

The German strengths and weaknesses could not be concealed from the Soviets. A shrewd summary of German problems was discovered in captured Russian documents and distributed in an Army High Command Training Branch report entitled "Experiences With Russian Attack Methods in Summer 1942." Published in September, this report listed the Soviet assessment of German defensive problems:

Weakness of units. Strongpoint system. Defense therefore contains gaps and lacks depth. Clinging to towns and wooded areas, where they are easily trapped. Only tiny local reserves, and counterattacks with distant reserves are therefore mostly too late. . . . Numerical weakness in tanks facilitates [Russian] antitank measures against counterattacks. Poor construction of positions and obstacles makes it possible to break through their fire and overwhelm infantry.

The report also warned that, although Soviet training and tactical skill currently lagged behind that of the Germans, "the Russian is building his attack techniques on these supposed weaknesses and strengths of the German defense."³¹

This Soviet knowledge was built up during dozens of probing attacks against the German lines throughout the summer. Though diminished in strength by diversion of forces to the southern battles, these Russian assaults placed considerable pressure on the German defensive front.

In July and August, Soviet thrusts punctured Army Group Center's front on several occasions, causing local crises that were controlled only by repeated counterattacks of Field Marshal von Kluge's meager armored reserves. According to General Halder, a "very heavy penetration" of the Ninth Army's front during the first week of August placed "severe strain" on the German forces despite the intervention of three understrength panzer divisions.³² In Army Group North's area, a powerful Russian attack south of Lake Ladoga in late August penetrated eight miles into Eighteenth Army's sector. This breakthrough could not be contained with available reserves, and a major portion of Field Marshal von Manstein's Eleventh Army (reassembling for an attack on Leningrad after mopping up the Crimean Peninsula) had to be thrown into a major counterattack.³³ Even though mastered after fierce fighting, these repeated crises clearly demonstrated the frailty of the German defensive front.

While not achieving major victories, the Russian attacks on the German defensive front succeeded in wearing down those forces beyond tolerable levels. By September, the German High Command admitted that defensive capabilities would have to be improved drastically before winter.

The German leadership addressed the worsening defensive problem from two different directions. First, Hitler investigated the status of German defenses and issued a new Führer Defense Order decreeing improved defensive standards and procedures. Second, several programs were begun to increase the infantry strength of German forces on the Eastern Front.

The Führer Defense Order of 8 September 1942

Adolf Hitler blamed the German Army leadership for the growing defensive difficulties in Russia. From the experiences of the past winter, Hitler had

concluded that the Army's senior officers were timid and lacked the stomach to face crises. Further evidence of this, in the dictator's view, had come throughout the summer of 1942. It appeared to the Führer that, whenever Russian attacks breached the German lines, frontline commanders did little but whine about insufficient forces and submit panicky requests to conduct local retreats. Despite standing orders against withdrawals, many recalcitrant commanders continued to allow their subordinate units freedom of maneuver within the depths of their defensive zones, a policy that, in Hitler's mind, was merely an excuse for retreat. Furthermore, based on his own Western Front combat experience as an infantry soldier during World War I, Hitler considered himself to be an expert on defensive tactics and his military advisers to be fuzzy-headed theorists without personal knowledge of defensive combat. Stirred by these perceptions, Hitler decided to personally oversee the conduct of German operations.

On 8 September 1942, Hitler issued his most detailed defensive instructions of the entire war. Besides addressing current projects for upgrading German defenses, this Führer Defense Order soared into a rambling discussion that mixed general operational principles and detailed tactical instructions into a confusing melange. Woven into this exposition were occasional personal reminiscences and dubious historical examples. Written in Hitler's ranting style, the entire document was over eleven pages long. General Halder, who had vainly protested the unprofessional tone and content of earlier Führer missives, found the whole document to be so objectionable that he refused to allow his own name to appear on the published version, even though it bore the Army General Staff letterhead.³⁴

In the Führer Defense Order, Hitler developed several confused themes that showed an ominous misunderstanding of German doctrinal theories and Russian Front combat realities. Hitler emphasized the desirability of crushing Soviet attacks forward of German trenches, thereby avoiding altogether the problem of enemy penetrations into the German defensive positions. Seizing on the experiences of many weakened units, Hitler declared that it was always essential for overmatched troops to stand and fight rather than to disengage by maneuver. Although this idea had some validity in certain cases (as reported by those frontline commanders who felt that maneuver by weak forces fatally widened penetrations), it was flatly contrary to the entire concept of the elastic defense in depth.³⁵

Hitler then vented his displeasure with the Army's combat leaders. In the Führer's jaundiced view, many (perhaps even most) Russian penetrations occurred due to a lack of determination and will on the part of German commanders. "There is no doubt," he declared, "that some positions have been abandoned without absolute necessity." The arguments in favor of local retreats, he continued—namely, that the loss of terrain was of little consequence in the vast Russian reaches or that more advantageous conditions could be created by withdrawal—"are basically false." Gathering steam, Hitler cited examples in which immobile German artillery had been abandoned in place when Russian forces had overrun certain sectors. Where artillery pieces lacked sufficient mobility to redeploy, Hitler fumed, then the artillerymen, too, should be prepared as a matter of honor to stand and defend their positions with hand weapons until, the last round fired and no help arriving, they blow up their own cannons.³⁶

What Hitler really wanted, and what the disjointed Führer Defense Order gradually made clear, was a return to the rigid, terrain-holding linear defense that the Germans had practiced before the adoption of the Elastic Defense during the winter of 1916—17. "I deliberately turn back with this concept [of a continuous linear defense] to the style of defense such as was employed with success in the harsh defensive battles *up to the end of the year 1916* [italics added]." In these battles, Hitler recalled, the enemy had possessed overwhelming superiority in men and materiel, even "incomparably higher than [was] the case at some places on the Eastern Front," and had managed to inflict heavy casualties on the defenders. "In spite of this, the enemy achieved only insignificant advances after weeks of fighting at heavy loss to himself."³⁷

As historically minded German officers recognized, Hitler's use of the 1916 combat example was counterfeit. In holding up the Imperial German Army's sacrifices in the Battle of the Somme as a model of tactical virtuosity, Hitler ignored the resulting denouement: the German Army had purposely altered its defensive doctrine after the costly 1916 battles precisely because its own losses were unacceptable using the rigid linear tactics and because the Elastic Defense made more efficient use of Germany's limited manpower. Although more efficient, the Elastic Defense required a temporary relinquishing of terrain when tactical necessity dictated—a notion that went against the grain of Hitler's megalomania and which he therefore desired to banish from the minds of his battle leaders.

Even though his general observations were implicitly critical of the Army's doctrinal practices, Hitler stopped short of an outright rejection of the Elastic Defense. Indeed, one of the most confusing aspects of the Führer Defense Order was the way in which Hitler glibly combined established doctrinal concepts (depth, firepower, counterattack) with his own fevered visions of defensive warfare. However, careful readers noted that buried within Hitler's prose were three specific concepts that were patently incompatible with standard German practices.

First, Hitler proposed shifting units in order to mass forces in the path of Russian attacks: "When the attacker himself uncovers a particular section of the front in order to concentrate strong forces in another attack sector, so must the defense respond by the same method and to an equal extent. . . . It is necessary immediately to pull divisions out of thickly defended areas so that they can be shifted to the threatened sectors."³⁸ Under normal circumstances, reinforcing threatened sectors would amount to little more than ordinary military prudence. However, combined with Hitler's obsessive insistence on holding terrain, such lateral shifting of forces promised only to place greater concentrations of German troops on the Red Army's anvil, causing them to be hammered to pieces by the weight of Russian blows. The Elastic Defense sought to wear out enemy attacks by depth, maneuver, and firepower and then to defeat enemy assault forces by timely counterattacks against enemy weakness. Hitler's scheme planned to mass German strength against greater Soviet strength, thickening German defenses at points threatened by Russian attack. Such a procedure might be successful in blunting Soviet offensives without significant loss of territory; however, it would invariably do so—as on the Somme in 1916—at enormous cost in German lives.

Second, Hitler announced his personal intention to intervene even more frequently in the conduct of defensive operations in the east. In yet another historical allusion of doubtful veracity, Hitler compared this to actions during the Great War in which Hindenburg and Ludendorff had taken direct control of operations on the Western Front. Therefore, so he would have all relevant information available to exercise close personal control over future battles, the Führer ordered front commanders to provide him with detailed maps (down to a scale of 1:25,000) of their positions, assessments of unit capabilities, and their current supply status.³⁹ Enlarging on Hitler's previously displayed proclivity to interfere in battlefield operations, this announcement—which purported Hitler's direction of even division-level engagements—struck yet another blow at *Auftragstaktik* and the independence of subordinate leaders.

Finally, Hitler reiterated his insistence on standing fast in the face of defensive crisis. In an underlined passage, the Führer Defense Order stipulated that “no army group commander or army commander has the right to allow on his own authority the execution of a tactical withdrawal without my specific approval.” Rather than worrying about withdrawal or evasive maneuver, frontline commanders were ordered to undertake a prodigious new entrenchment program under the slogan: “Trenches and always more trenches.”⁴⁰

With these instructions, Hitler signaled to his combat commanders his desire for an unrelenting positional defense, one that would hold terrain without regard to casualties or doctrinal niceties. He also made it clear that he was prepared to exert his own authority to the utmost to ensure compliance. This Führer Defense Order must have made German officers uneasy, promising as it did to paralyze their conduct of defensive operations with still more of Hitler's doctrinal quackery.

For the short term, the damage to German defensive doctrine remained potential rather than actual as autumn rains interrupted operations for a time. Furthermore, in implementing the Führer Defense Order instructions, frontline commanders tried to minimize its disruptive impact by heeding only those portions that supported existing methods and by selectively ignoring Hitler's more obnoxious suggestions. Army Group Center contented itself with issuing a brief order directing improved trenchworks and a second directive prescribing the further fortification of logistics centers and the construction of large-scale antitank obstacles (mostly ditches) in its rear using civilian labor.⁴¹

General Gotthard Heinrici, the commander of Fourth Army, discussed the Führer Defense Order and its implications with his subordinates at a formal command and staff meeting on 25 September, but he limited his written implementing instructions to a defensive memorandum dealing exclusively with technical matters.⁴² The commander of the LVI Panzer Corps, noting that the Führer's order required “the construction of a defensive position of a sort equivalent to those of the 1914—1918 World War,” ingeniously forwarded a requisition for construction materials that included 75,000 rolls of barbed wire, 68,000 antitank mines, and 50,000 antipersonnel mines.⁴³ (This request was hopelessly optimistic, as these quantities were more than triple the amounts previously delivered during the entire summer. However, such requests were part of “playing the game” and allowed one to blame future failure on the nondelivery of required supplies.)



German infantrymen occupy forward trenches. Note the shellproof bombardment shelters at intervals along the trenchline.

The most visible immediate effect of the Führer Defense Order was some improvement and standardization of German defenses. The Fourth Army, for example, condensed Hitler's instructions into a directive specifying a standard defensive layout. Hitler's confused guidance notwithstanding, the Fourth Army's prescribed deployment replicated the Elastic Defense to a degree that should have satisfied the most pedantic doctrinal purist. Aside from some differences in nomenclature (for example, the successive positions within the defensive area were no longer referred to as independent "zones" but, rather, were regarded more as parts of a common whole), the Fourth Army's scheme almost completely agreed with combat practices of 1917—18 and later doctrinal publications.⁴⁴

Of course, commanders could not evade all of Hitler's guidance, and some important shifts in emphasis made their way into frontline instructions. The use of local reserves, for example, shifted subtly: instead of awaiting the enemy's disruption and exhaustion within the depths of the defense, reserves were now expected to confront enemy penetrations as soon as they occurred in order to win back the original front. This change was motivated by Hitler's impatience at even the temporary loss of ground and implied that the commitment of German reserves would henceforth be triggered more by the loss of terrain than by the enemy's vulnerability to counterattack. Likewise, new instructions included some of the ambiguity of Hitler's own thinking. For all

the emphasis on holding forward along the main line of resistance, there frequently appeared a concurrent, and apparently contradictory, emphasis on improving defensive positions in depth and often on creating a duplicate second position far behind the original front.⁴⁵

Although German commanders were duty-bound to implement Hitler's general designs, they were not blind to either the contradictions or the impracticalities of the Führer Defense Order. Even as he was dutifully ordering his Fourth Army to implement the Führer's directive, General Heinrici dispatched a secret letter to Army Group Center, decrying the impossibility of achieving those standards. Because of the scarcity of combat troops, Heinrici had already spread his divisions to the uttermost limits, leaving no manpower whatsoever to undertake new construction or to man more extensive positions. For example, along the Fourth Army's front, it was not uncommon for trenches to be posted at night with only one two-man team for every 60 to 100 meters of trench. Furthermore, competing daily requirements for local security, patrols, trench repair, training, equipment maintenance, and rest made it impossible to fulfill current tasks adequately, much less to bring Hitler's plans for a massive fortification project to life. The simple fact was, Heinrici declared, that present positions could not even be fully secured with existing forces, as evidenced by the steady loss of prisoners and casualties to Soviet raiding parties.⁴⁶

Heinrici's complaints emphasized Germany's main defensive problem: lack of men. Even though Hitler planned to banish the German Army's defensive problems by issuing a frothy directive, the Führer Defense Order could not be fully implemented for the same reason that I Corps' instructions had gone unfulfilled earlier in the summer. Whatever Hitler's headquarters might decree, the German divisions manning the defensive front lacked sufficient numbers of soldiers to conduct more than an expedient defense. For any real improvement in German defensive dispositions, the troop strength would have to be raised substantially. Finally, in midsummer 1942, the German High Command attempted to rectify its continuing defensive problems by generating additional manpower strength.

Bolstering Combat Manpower

In gross terms, the *Wehrmacht's* manpower problems were insoluble. Germany simply had too few men of military age to meet its expanding requirements. Also, Germany's consistent mismanagement and misuse of the manpower it did possess made this reality even harsher.

Adolf Hitler's Third Reich allocated its manpower resources similar to an oriental bazaar, forcing the German Army to jostle its way through various military, paramilitary, economic, governmental, and Nazi Party organizations like a none-too-wealthy rug merchant in search of a bargain. Each of these competing agencies jealously defended its claims to draft-age men by patronage and political intrigue, thereby robbing the army of choice manpower badly needed at the front. The two greatest offenders (and the ones with the most influence with Hitler) were the SS and the *Luftwaffe*.



A German machine gunner on the Eastern Front

Germany's conscription apparatus was managed by the Armed Forces High Command, which denied the SS a share of the draftees. The SS, which preferred to fill its ranks with pure volunteers anyway, circumvented this exclusion by energetically recruiting younger men who were not yet eligible for the draft. (At the beginning of the war, German conscription called only men twenty years old or older; many SS recruits were as young as sixteen.) Benefiting from Nazi Party propaganda and Hitler youth indoctrination, the SS was thus able to siphon off large numbers of highly motivated volunteers for service in its own *Waffen SS* field units.⁴⁷ Although *Waffen SS* units served at the front under army control, the duplicate training machinery and administrative bureaucracy maintained by the *Waffen SS* wasted thousands of men who could otherwise have been used as combat troops. Moreover, many of the high-quality enlistees drawn to the *Waffen SS* as private soldiers were needed in the army as potential noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and technical specialists.

At the beginning of Barbarossa in 1941, *Waffen SS* field units numbered six full divisions and a handful of separate battalions and regiments. Battle losses and a gradual enlargement of *Waffen SS* forces continued to draw men away from the army at a steady rate until August 1942, when Hitler sanctioned a massive enlargement of SS units that would double *Waffen SS* forces within a year.⁴⁸ Therefore, precisely at the time that the German Army was

frantically searching for ways to raise its own frontline strength in late summer 1942, the *Waffen SS* was becoming an even more voracious consumer of German manpower.

Even more frustrating to the German Army was the conduct of Reichsmarschall Herman Göring's *Luftwaffe*. Like the *SS*, the *Luftwaffe* benefited from an elitist image among German youth and consistently attracted large numbers of zealots who were prime soldier material. With the curtailment of its offensive air activities since the 1940 Battle of Britain, the *Luftwaffe* found itself with an excess of ground support personnel. An attempt by the army to claim these men for retraining as infantry replacements during the summer of 1942 was parried by Göring, who argued to Hitler that transferring these "genuinely National Socialist" young men to the army would contaminate them by exposure "to an army which still had chaplains and was led by officers steeped with the traditions of the Kaiser."⁴⁹

Instead, in mid-1942, Göring ordered that 170,000 surplus air personnel be organized into twenty-two *Luftwaffe* field divisions for employment as ground units at the front. In the army's view, this remedy promised no relief since these *Luftwaffe* units would almost certainly be of low quality due to inexperience and lack of trained leadership. As Field Marshal von Manstein explained in his memoirs: "To form these excellent troops into divisions within the framework of the *Luftwaffe* was sheer lunacy. Where were they to get the necessary close-combat training and practice in working with other formations? Where were they to get the battle experience so vital in the east? And where was the *Luftwaffe* to find divisional, regimental, and battalion commanders?"⁵⁰ These questions were tragically answered in late 1942, when several *Luftwaffe* field divisions fell apart at their first taste of combat on the Russian Front. These 170,000 men, who as infantry replacements could have nearly replenished the bedraggled divisions of Army Groups Center and North, thus added very little combat strength to the German forces in the east.

The German Army shared some blame for the shortage of infantrymen. The infantry, respected in the Prussian and German Armies since the days of Frederick the Great as the "Queen of the Battlefield," had been eclipsed in popular affections by the glamour and publicity given to the mobile troops during World War II's early campaigns. Although conscripts could still be made to fill the ranks of infantry divisions, flocks of enterprising young soldiers avoided infantry service by volunteering for the new darlings of the German Army, the panzer and motorized forces. By late summer 1942, some senior officers even detected a growing "unpatriotic" tendency on the part of recruits to abhor infantry duty and to seek assignment to other, less-demanding jobs.

In an attempt to counteract these perceptions, General Halder authorized an information campaign on 27 July 1942, intended to "glamoriz[e] the infantry."⁵¹ A 1 August memorandum to field commanders from the German Army's chief of infantry invited suggestions from field commanders for regenerating the German infantry forces. In reply, General Heinrici suggested a number of wide-ranging reforms, including preferential career development for infantry NCOs, improved pay and benefits, and a better effort to counter the recruiting guiles of the *Waffen SS*, *Luftwaffe*, navy, and Reich Labor Service. Heinrici also cited a pervasive "east complex" as a major deterrent to infantry

enlistments, explaining that the reports of the desolate Russian landscape and harsh battle conditions in the east were causing widespread melancholia among frontline soldiers and discouraging recruits from volunteering for infantry service.⁵²

Another measure taken to ease the infantry crisis included using volunteer laborers—most of whom were paroled Russian prisoners of war—on work projects behind the German front. While not directly increasing the number of infantrymen, the use of these laborers at least reduced the demand for German auxiliary personnel somewhat.⁵³ In addition, officers of frontline infantry units were allowed to make recruiting sweeps through service and support units, attempting to persuade rear-echelon soldiers to volunteer for infantry duty. To prevent rear-echelon units from protecting their favorite personnel, an Army High Command order warned that even “indispensable clerks” were to be released if willing, since “only the Front Fighter is indispensable. For all others will a replacement be found.”⁵⁴ To enforce this edict, Hitler deputized General Walter von Unruh to comb rear area units to identify excess personnel. Unruh’s writ as “hero snatcher” included absolute authority to order individuals transferred to the front in the Führer’s name.⁵⁵ Such policies offered minor relief but could not greatly affect the overall combat worthiness of German units.

More substantial measures soon followed. In yet another Führer order, Hitler announced his displeasure at the intolerably low combat strengths of fighting units in relation to their support units and ordered all army commanders immediately to account for their subordinate divisions’ total ration strength versus infantry combat strength.⁵⁶ In a companion directive, General Kurt Zeitzler (who succeeded the disenchanting General Halder as chief of staff in September) ordered an immediate 10 percent reduction in all Army High Command, army group, army, corps, and division headquarters personnel. All freed manpower was to be sent to the front as combat replacements. Zeitzler also directed that the personnel in rearward support units regularly be reduced in proportion to forward combat losses, with the dislocated officers, NCOs, and soldiers sent forward. In this way, Zeitzler reasoned, the support units would share the inconvenience of reduced establishments and even actual casualties along with the fighting forces, thereby eliminating the traditional estrangement between “combat troops” and “rear echelons.”⁵⁷

General Zeitzler also ordered all rearward forces on the Eastern Front, including high-level staffs, supply troops, and signal personnel, to organize combat-ready “alarm units.” In addition to performing their normal duties, these units were to receive refresher infantry training and, ideally, were to be rotated periodically into the front lines for a few days’ exposure to real combat. In crisis situations, these alarm units were assembled and placed at the disposal of forward commanders for use as supplementary reserves.⁵⁸

His energy and enthusiasm for his new job as yet undimmed by Hitler’s stultifying command style, Zeitzler dashed off other memorandums addressing morale, leadership, and unit organization. In a 29 October 1942 order entitled “Front Fighters,” Zeitzler charged all officers with ensuring that the fighting troops receive the best possible treatment and creature comforts, even if this meant that service troops went without.⁵⁹ Worried that the constant attrition of junior leaders might jeopardize the esprit of small units, Zeitzler directed

that all junior officer and NCO requests for transfer to combat duties be given immediate, unconditional approval. The new chief of staff also specified that all leaders returning to duty from convalescent leave were to be returned, if possible, to their old units, as were officers and NCOs serving on detached duty at training depots or elsewhere.⁶⁰ Noting that combat losses and lack of adequate replacements had caused many divisions to disband one-third of their infantry battalions, Zeitzler urged on 20 November that all veteran companies be kept intact regardless of losses, even if reassigned to new parent units: "Every soldier is attached to his own particular company. Cohesiveness takes a long time to develop in new units—often it never develops at all. Thus it is better to keep together original companies. . . ."⁶¹

Collectively, these measures showed the growing German awareness of the severe pressures placed on their divisions by the lack of adequate manpower. For want of men, German commanders were being forced to compromise doctrinal Elastic Defense methods, sacrificing especially the traditional use of depth and small-unit maneuver to absorb enemy attacks without inordinate loss. The manpower shortage caused internal strain as well, wearing away at the morale, training, and general combat worthiness of German units. The desperate expedients taken to redistribute personnel within the German Army eased the stresses somewhat, but the ultimate solution to Germany's manpower problems lay far beyond the army's control. Moreover, catastrophic losses during the coming winter at Stalingrad and elsewhere would strain Germany's already overtaxed eastern armies even more severely.



Volunteers from logistics units are formed into a combat ski unit near Kharkov, 1942

Winter Battles on the Defensive Front

In the unfolding autumn of 1942, German soldiers and civilians were haunted by the specter of a second winter campaign in Russia. Seeking to allay those fears, the *Luftwaffe's* Reichsmarschall Göring told a cheering crowd in the Berlin *Sportpalast* in early October that "this time we are immune. We already know what a Russian winter is like."⁶²

With respect to the weather, Göring's prediction proved accurate. Drawing on their own experiences plus the knowledge exchanged in after-action reports, German divisions braced themselves for the expected cold temperatures and harsh conditions. In supplies, training, and shelter, German units were far better prepared for winter warfare than they had been the previous year. However, protection against the weather did not make German forces immune from Russian bullets. Even though Soviet strength had shifted to the south, the Red Army forces facing Army Groups Center and North remained sufficiently powerful to batter the German defensive front, causing several defensive crises during the course of the winter fighting.

The autumnal stiffening of German defenses prompted by the Führer Defense Order had also served as early preparation for winter. On 17 September, for example, the 58th Infantry Division directed that the mandated improvements in its own defenses be made so "the troops [could] spend the winter in the position."⁶³ One criterion emphasized at all levels was the construction of a continuous defensive line so as to avoid the costly and hazardous strong-point tactics of the previous winter. (One specific passage of the Führer Defense Order had even addressed this issue. Noting that a strongpoint style of defense had been compelled in "certain sectors" as an "emergency measure" during the 1941–42 winter, Hitler had made it clear that he considered such expedient measures to be peculiar to the previous winter and in no way a doctrinal model for winter defensive tactics. Instead, Hitler demanded a continuous defensive line even during winter months, a requirement that, for once, corresponded exactly with the opinions of frontline commanders as expressed in their own earlier after-action reports.⁶⁴)

Hitler added specific operational guidance on 14 October 1942 by issuing Operations Order 1. This order gave instructions for winter activities and implicitly conceded that Germany's strategic ambitions for 1942 had not been realized. Instead, Hitler promised that success in the coming winter battles would protect recent German gains, creating favorable conditions for the "final destruction of our most dangerous enemy" sometime in 1943. While directing the continuation of German attacks at Stalingrad and in the Caucasus, Hitler ordered the armies along the defensive front to prepare for a winter campaign. Reiterating the constraints of the September Führer Defense Order, he directed that winter positions be defended to the last under all circumstances. Hitler added that German units were not to avail themselves of evasive maneuvers or withdrawals, that enemy penetrations were to be contained as far forward as possible, and that any units isolated by Russian breakthroughs were to hold in place until relieved. Moreover, "the significance of a *continuous HKL* [main line of resistance] must once more be especially emphasized." And in what was becoming virtually a personal trademark, Hitler warned darkly that

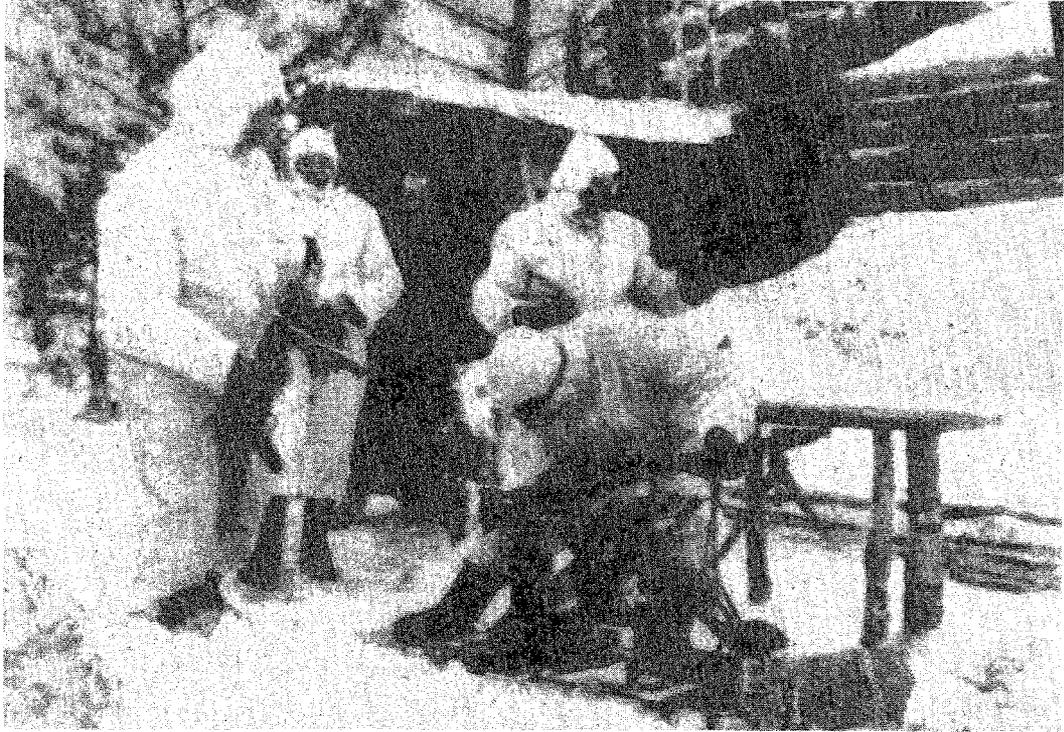
every leader was unequivocally responsible for the "unconditional execution" of his instructions.⁶⁵

Three weeks later, with intelligence reports predicting the imminent onset of powerful Russian attacks, Hitler directed the chief of the Army General Staff to remind army commanders of their defensive responsibilities. At a situation conference on 2 November, Hitler told General Zeitzler to issue a new memorandum "based on the Führer's Winter Directive [Operations Order 1] setting forth again the principles according to which operations [were] to be conducted." Apparently forgetting for the moment his own proscriptions against strongpoint defenses (the Führer did not hold himself to the same standards of obedience that he demanded from field commanders), Hitler added that "particular emphasis is to be given to the demand that every *Stützpunkt* [strongpoint] is to be defended to the last."⁶⁶ While the reference to strongpoints may have caused some officers to blink in momentary confusion (for a continuous defensive line was still the prescribed standard, and strongpoint defenses remained officially anathema), Hitler's basic message was clear. In the coming winter battles, German defenders would fight bitterly to retain their initial positions, and no tactical flexibility would be granted for the execution of "elastic" defensive methods that required the relinquishing of any terrain.⁶⁷

While Hitler rattled orders to his generals, German soldiers continued to gird for winter warfare. Where time and manpower allowed, defensive positions were improved to meet Hitler's qualifications. Foraging parties hunted through Russian villages for sleds and snowshoes, while German panzer units received extra-wide snow tracks for their tanks and assault guns to give greater cross-country mobility over snow and slushy ground. (Unfortunately, since the wider tracks did not fit German railroad flatcars or standard military bridging, they had to be removed each time the vehicles used a flatcar or a bridge.⁶⁸) Most divisions assembled special ski units, earmarking them for use as local counterattack forces. In the 132d Infantry Division, for example, troops of the division's "bicycle battalion" traded their bicycles for skis and continued as the division's only mobile reserve.⁶⁹

As is often the case, actual conditions at the front did not always match the hearty standards decreed by higher headquarters. Frontline visits by General Georg Lindemann, the commander of the Eighteenth Army, revealed enduring deficiencies among his units. Touring the front of the L Corps outside Leningrad in early November, Lindemann found that, in spite of repeated orders to the contrary, gaps still existed in the forward trenchlines. Explaining the lack of improvements, the corps commander pointed out to Lindemann that "due to the tremendous shortage of personnel only maintenance of the [existing] position is possible."⁷⁰

Though somewhat stronger than during the last winter, German divisions still manned extended fronts with understrength units. The 121st Infantry Division, holding part of Army Group North's line, had an average battalion strength of only 200 men and could muster only one composite bicycle-ski company and one alarm company (composed of service troops) as division reserves.⁷¹ In the 254th Division, each regiment held only one infantry and one pioneer platoon in reserve behind frontline troops that, according to the division commander, were "extremely tired."⁷²



Troops of Army Group North ready a machine-gun sled for a reconnaissance patrol, December 1942

Manned by worn-out and understrength divisions in haphazard positions, the German defensive front invited Russian penetrations. The defensive lines of Army Groups Center and North zigzagged back and forth, their twists and turns adding hundreds of unnecessary miles to the trenches held by German troops. The two army group commanders each requested Hitler's permission to conduct limited withdrawals in order to straighten their lines. These retreats, they argued, would free troops to thicken German defenses and form reserves. Hitler rebuffed both, scorning the notion that the surrender of terrain could in any way work to German advantage.

The most vulnerable portions of the German lines were the so-called Rzhev salient in Army Group Center, the Demyansk salient south of Lake Ilmen, and the narrow neck of land held by the Eighteenth Army east of Leningrad around Schlüsselburg. In each of these areas, German forces were geographically exposed. The Rzhev and Demyansk positions had been occupied since the 1941-42 winter fighting and represented stand-fast lines held by German divisions despite deep Soviet envelopments on each flank. At Schlüsselburg, the strip of land held by the Germans along the southern shore of Lake Ladoga was all that kept outside Soviet forces from lifting the land siege of Leningrad. A Russian breakthrough at any one of these points could have easily resulted in the encirclement and destruction of sizable German forces, especially considering Hitler's repeated injunctions against local retreats.

Soviet attacks during the winter of 1942-43 tested the German front in each of these sectors but failed to achieve the catastrophic breakthrough

desired. At Schlüsselburg, the Russians managed to seize a thin sliver of land linking Leningrad with their main forces, but they did so without inflicting any decisive German losses. The Russian onslaughts pinned down nearly all the reserves belonging to Army Group Center and Army Group North, however, leaving virtually no forces available for transfer to the southern front once the Stalingrad debacle had begun.⁷³



Soviet sappers approach German lines near Leningrad, February 1943

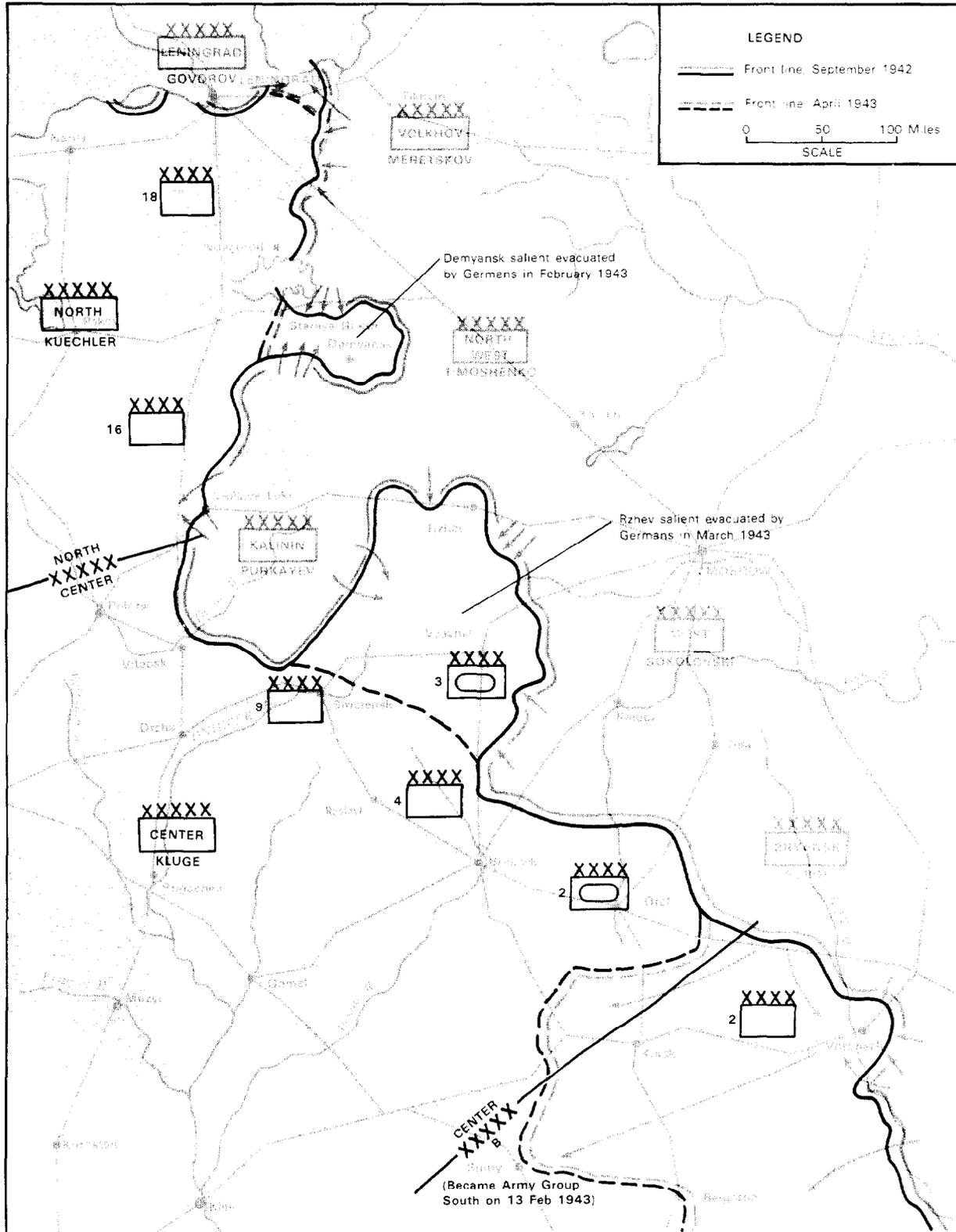
The one Soviet offensive that managed to destroy even a division-size German force on the defensive front occurred at Velikiye Luki. There, though less exposed than the forces in the Demyansk or Rzhev salients, the Germans tolerated gaps in the rough terrain areas to the north and south of the town. Even the German main positions were not completely tied together, for only lightly manned trenches linked platoon and company strongpoints. A Soviet advance through these gaps on 25 November surrounded 70,000 German troops from two different divisions in and around Velikiye Luki. For the next two months, German forces were embroiled in a savage battle to spring open the Velikiye Luki trap, an effort that eventually consumed elements of three additional divisions in desperate rescue attempts.⁷⁴

The battles around Velikiye Luki, as with the fighting at Schlüsselburg, Demyansk, and Rzhev, produced few surprises in defensive doctrine. As had already been demonstrated dozens of times in other places, inadequately manned German positions could be swamped by superior Soviet forces in winter combat. Unlike during the 1941–42 winter, the divisions on the northern front made little attempt to use strongpoint tactics, instead clinging grimly to their continuous defensive lines per Hitler's orders. The lack of manpower doomed this effort to failure. As one former corps commander wrote:

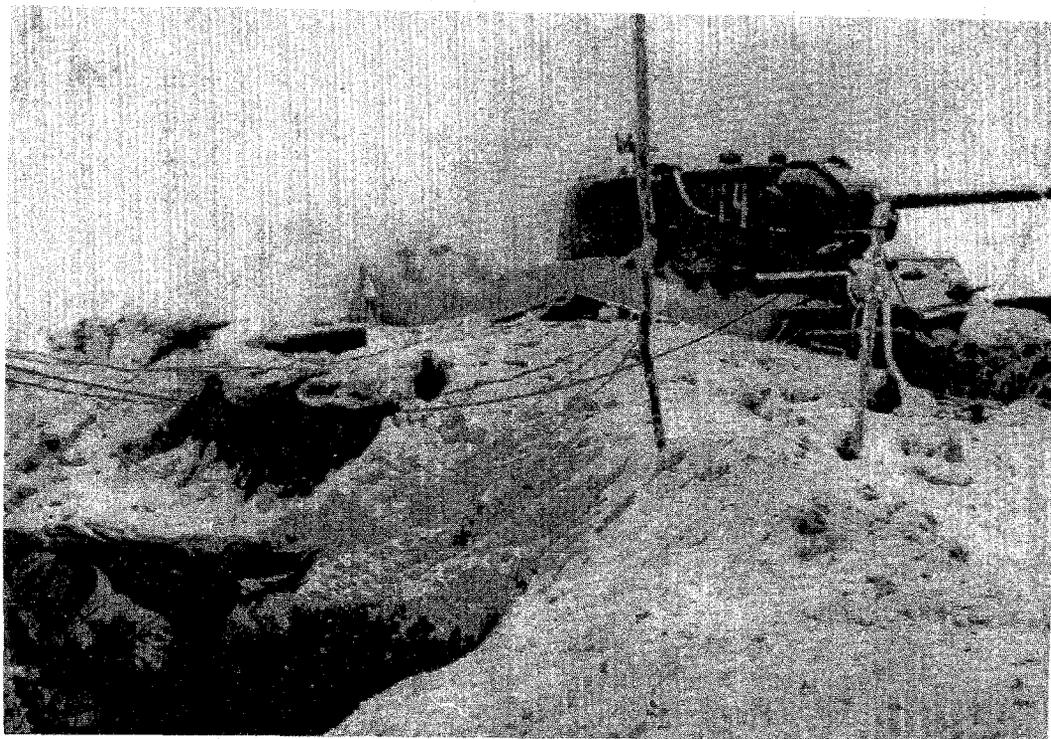
To be sure, there were no gaps—the reader will recall their serious consequences in the winter campaign of 1941/42—in the . . . front. The positions formed a continuous line during the early fighting, but it was impossible to man them adequately (a division had to hold a sector of from forty to fifty kilometers). Neither were there any major reserve forces. Only small, local reserves were available. Whatever could be spared had been transferred to the armies on the southern front.⁷⁵

German troops, stolidly holding on to the intact bits of front in accordance with the Führer's instructions, managed to sustain pathetic little islands of resistance against the Russian flood (see map 9). Ultimately, however, the retention of such points proved completely meaningless in the absence of strong mobile reserves. The German forces pocketed around Velikiye Luki, for example, eventually became a substantial operational liability, tying down precious reserves to no purpose other than to rescue them from a trap wrought largely by Hitler's rigid constraints. The commitment of German forces to such relief expeditions weakened German defenses at still other points and prevented the shifting of additional divisions to the concurrent decisive battles between Stalingrad and Rostov.

The same was generally true at Demyansk and Rzhev. There, German reserves were drawn into attritional battles that, although preventing Soviet breakthroughs and the consequent encirclement of the exposed German forces, accomplished little apart from satisfying Hitler's bent for holding ground. In early 1943, with the forces of Army Group Center and Army Group North near utter exhaustion and with no further reserves available to prevent future Russian penetrations of the defensive front, Hitler finally authorized the abandonment of both the Demyansk and Rzhev salients. These withdrawals substantially shortened the front—in Rzhev, for example, Operation Büffel reduced the German frontage from 340 to 110 miles—but they came too late to allow either the building of a new fully manned defensive line or the transfer of additional units to other sectors.⁷⁶



Map 9. Soviet attacks on Army Groups Center and North, winter 1942—43



Destroyed Soviet tank provides additional cover for German trench dugout, February 1943



German infantrymen retake a village south of Orel, March 1943

Hitler refused to acknowledge that his rigid defensive instructions hampered field commanders by precluding the potential advantages of the elastic defense in depth. Hitler, it seemed, could be convinced to authorize retreats or line-shortening withdrawals only after entire German armies had been shredded in positional warfare under disadvantageous conditions. Even when the Führer finally authorized rearward movement, such withdrawals offered little tactical relief since German losses in the interim had usually been so great that even the new, shorter lines could not be properly secured.

The Offensive Front

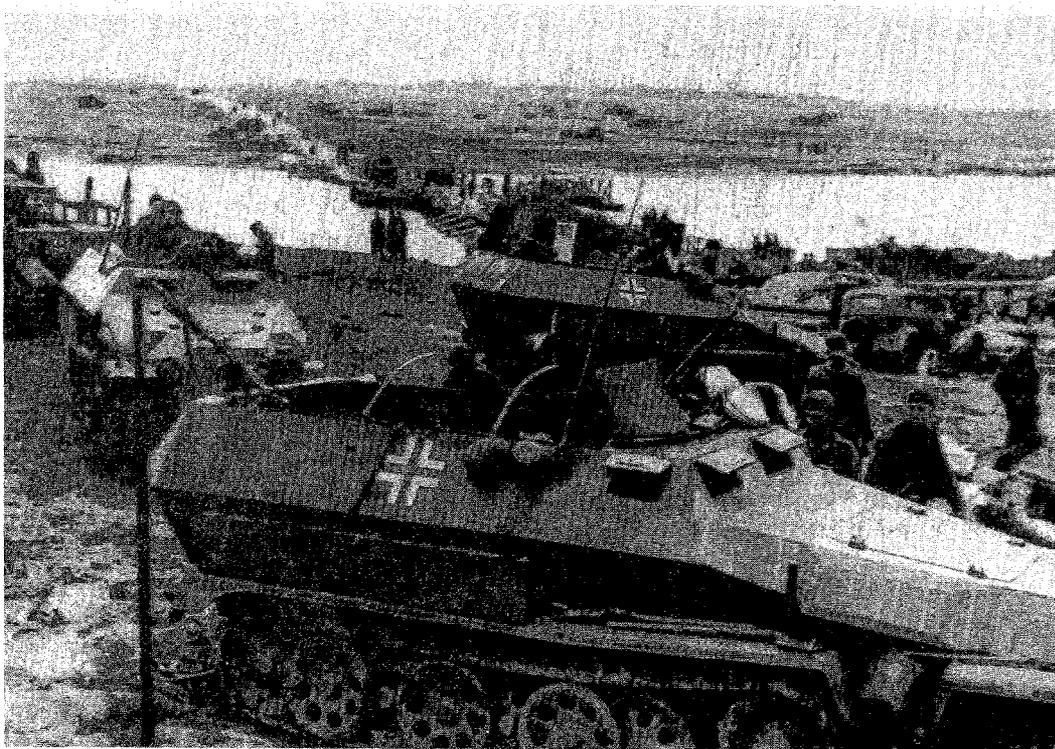
Compared to the stripped-down divisions left holding the defensive front, the German southern attack forces that assembled for Operation Blau seemed sleek and powerful. However, this appearance was deceiving. The divisions assigned to Army Group South (later divided into Army Groups A and B) suffered from many deficiencies that compromised their offensive and defensive capabilities.

In May 1942, most of the infantry divisions in Army Group South stood at about 50 percent strength. Although brought nearly up to strength over the next six weeks, the southern divisions had little time or opportunity to assimilate their new troops. Only one-third of the infantry divisions committed to the upcoming attack could be taken out of the line in early spring for rehabilitation; the remaining divisions stayed in their old winter defensive positions and tried to train and integrate their replacements even as they fought desultory defensive battles against minor Russian attacks.⁷⁷ As a result, the general training standards in the southern assault forces were far below those of the 1939–41 German armies. Losses in officers, NCOs, and technical personnel during the 1941 winter battles had further sapped the combat abilities of the German forces. In fact, many German units now regretted the use of artillerymen, signalers, and other specialists as infantry during the winter months since they were so hard to replace. Moreover, even after stripping vehicles and equipment from the northern forces, Army Group South's divisions lacked their full complement of motor transport. According to a General Staff study in late May, the spearhead forces (those divisions that would actually lead the attacks toward Stalingrad and the Caucasus) would embark with only 80 percent of their vehicles, and the follow-on infantry divisions and supply columns would be slowed by shortages of both horses and vehicles.⁷⁸ For all of the ruthless economies inflicted on their poorer relatives to the north, Army Groups A and B would therefore be more clumsy, be less mobile, and have less logistical staying power than the German armies that had launched Barbarossa a year before.

Army Group B had two distinct missions in Operation Blau: first, to carve its way eastward along the southern bank of the Don River some 300 miles to Stalingrad, and second, to post a defensive screen along its northern flank as it went, protecting its own rear and the further unfolding of Army Group A's attack to the south. Though not the decisive thrust (Army Group A would actually push into the Caucasus toward the strategic oil fields), Army Group B's mission was crucial to German success.



German infantrymen prepare to attack during Operation Blau, July 1942



German motorized infantry forces cross the Don River, July 1942

Army Group B's far-flung tasks could not be accomplished with the German divisions at hand. Consequently, the most critical jobs were given to the more powerful German armies, and the less-demanding tasks were allotted to a polyglot of allied contingents. The Sixth Army and the Fourth Panzer Army were to attack toward Stalingrad, while the veteran Second Army was to seize Voronezh and then form the link between Army Group Center's defensive front and Army Group B's flank pickets. The job of covering the long flank in between was handed to allied armies of lesser fighting value.

In the spring of 1942, Hitler prevailed on the Reich's military partners to provide additional combat forces to augment the German armies. Romania, Hungary, and Italy all reluctantly consented to deploy additional forces on the Eastern Front, though they each insisted that their contingents fight under their own army headquarters rather than as separate divisions in German corps and armies.⁷⁹ By early August, thirty-six allied divisions were committed in the southern portion of the front, roughly 40 percent of the total number of Axis divisions in that region. Even though German liaison staffs were assigned to these forces, the combat effectiveness of the allied armies was generally poor.⁸⁰ By relegating the allied forces to purely defensive missions along the German flanks, the German High Command figured to minimize the demands placed on these forces while still conserving *Wehrmacht* divisions for crucial combat roles.

Through early summer, the forces posted along Army Group B's northern flank had little difficulty in fending off Soviet assaults. A Second Army after-action report on 21 July 1942, following the defeat of Soviet counterattacks near Voronezh, was particularly reassuring. Written at the request of the General Staff's Training Branch in Berlin and circulated throughout the German Army's higher echelons, this report allayed lingering fears caused by the Red Army's winter successes in 1941-42. "Russian infantry in the attack is even worse than before," the report began. "Much massing, greater vulnerability to artillery and mortar fire and to flanking maneuver. Scarcely any more night attacks."⁸¹ This report brightened the prospects for successful defense along Army Group B's northern flank.

Despite this reassurance, Army Group B's left wing remained vulnerable. Hitler's own interest in this potential weakness began in early spring when he ordered that the Second Army be reinforced with several hundred antitank guns as an additional guarantee against the collapse of Blau's northern shield.⁸² In anticipation of its defensive operations, Second Army also had been assigned numerous engineer detachments, labor units, and Organization Todt work parties for general construction and fortification. After its successful attack on Voronezh in early July, Second Army attempted to fortify its portion of the exposed flank using these assets throughout the remainder of the summer.⁸³

To the east beyond Second Army, however, the Don flank was held by troops of the Hungarian Second Army, the Italian Eighth Army, and the Romanian Third Army. Other Romanian formations, temporarily under the command of Fourth Panzer Army, held the open flank south of Stalingrad. As expected, these forces proved to be mediocre in combat, leading German commanders to be even more uneasy about this long, exposed sector. By September, General Maximilian von Weichs, the commander of Army Group



A German 88-mm flak gun awaits attack by Soviet tanks outside Voronezh

B, regarded his northern flank to be so endangered that he ordered special German "intervention units" (*Eingreifgruppen*) rotated into reserve behind both the German- and allied-held portions of his left wing.⁸⁴

The use of intervention units was not new to German defensive doctrine. In fact, the Elastic Defense doctrine of 1917 and 1918 had required that intervention divisions be used to reinforce deliberate counterattacks against particularly stubborn enemy penetrations. In 1942, however, the role of these intervention units went beyond counterattack. They could also provide advance reinforcement—"corsetting"—to threatened sectors since, according to Weichs' explanation, the Russians "seldom were able to conceal preparations for attack." Thus, the intervention units could support faltering allied contingents, hopefully steeling their resistance until additional help could arrive.

In October, General Zeitzler, the new chief of the Army General Staff, began to echo Weichs' concerns. In a lengthy presentation to Hitler, Zeitzler argued that the allied lines between Voronezh and Stalingrad constituted "the most perilous sector of the Eastern Front," a situation that posed "an enormous danger which must be eliminated." Although Hitler made sympathetic noises, he refused to accept Zeitzler's conclusions and ordered no major changes to German deployments or missions.⁸⁵

Even though the Führer rejected Zeitzler's recommendation that German forces withdraw from Stalingrad, he did authorize minor actions to help shore

up the allied armies. One of these measures was the interspersing of additional German units (primarily antitank battalions) among the allied divisions. In accordance with Hitler's published defensive instructions, if the allied units were overrun, these few German units were to "stand fast and limit the enemy's penetration or breakthrough. By holding out in this way, they should create more favorable conditions for our counterattack."⁸⁶ Another protective



Captured German War Art Collection

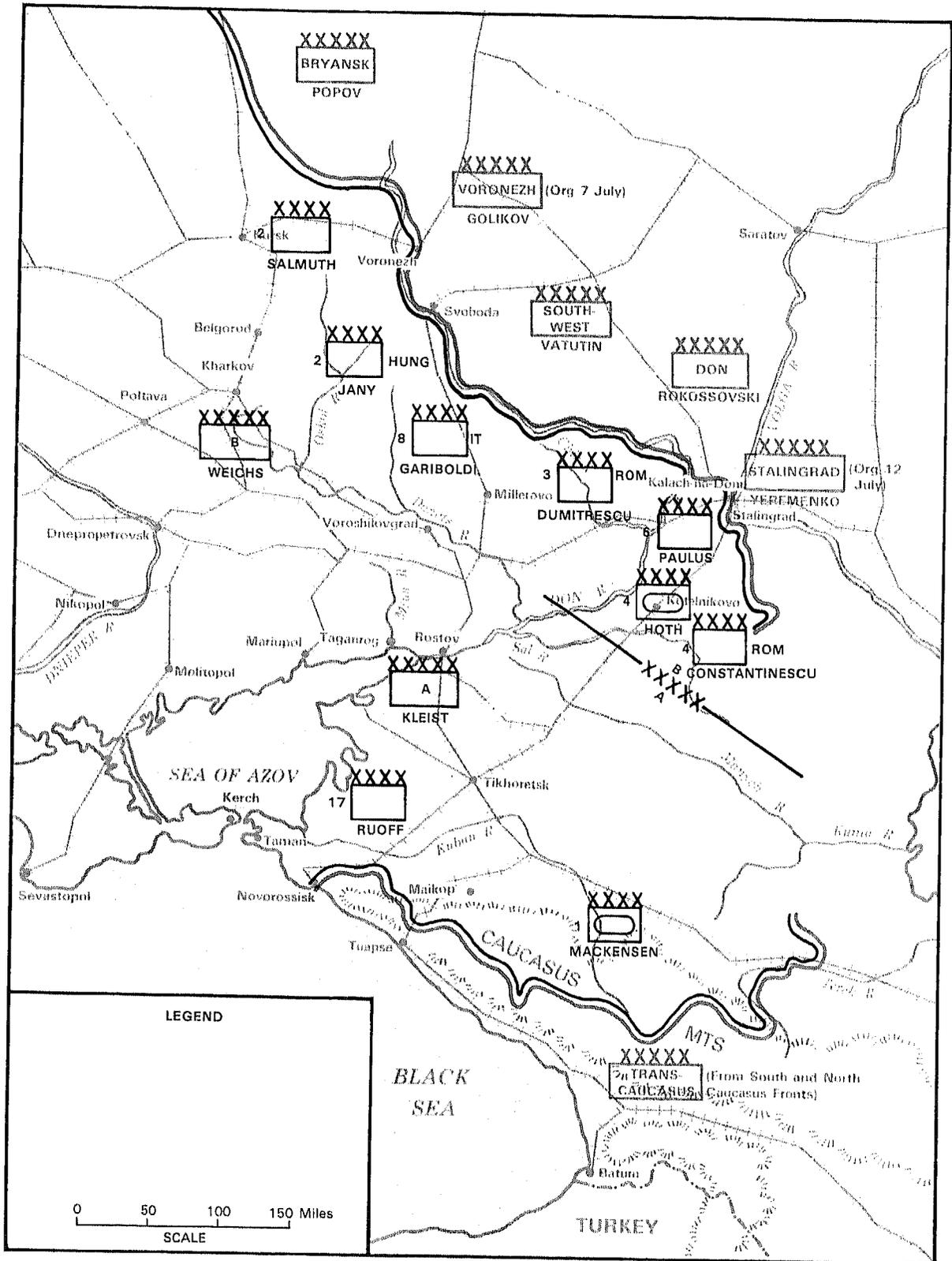
A drawing of German sentries on the Don River

measure was the repositioning of a combined German-Romanian panzer corps behind the Romanian Third Army. This unit, the XLVIII Panzer Corps, consisted of only an untried Romanian armored division and a battle-worn, poorly equipped German panzer division. Weak as it was, this corps was not placed under the control of the Romanians or even Weichs. Rather, it was designated as a special Führer Reserve under the personal direction of Hitler and therefore could not be committed to combat without first obtaining his release.⁸⁷ Finally, from October onward, German signal teams were placed throughout the allied armies so the German High Command could independently monitor the day-to-day performance of those forces without having to rely on reports from the allies themselves. These and other measures were not executed without some friction, however: the Italians, for example, huffily rejected German suggestions for improving their defensive positions.⁸⁸

The allied units were not the only soft spots on the defensive flank. By autumn, several newly raised German divisions, hastily consigned to Army Group B in June in order to flesh out its order of battle, were also causing some concern. For example, barely days before its preliminary June attack on Voronezh to secure the German flank, Second Army had received six brand-new German divisions. Though game enough in their initial attacks, these units quickly began to unravel due to poor training and inexperienced leadership. In one case, the 385th Infantry Division reportedly suffered "unnecessarily high losses," including half of its company commanders and five of six battalion commanders in just six weeks, due to deficient training. This fiery baptism ruined these divisions for later defensive use. The loss of so many personnel in such a short period of time left permanent scars, traumatizing the divisions before time and battle experience could produce new leaders and heal the units' psychological wounds. Second Army assessed the situation on 1 October 1942 and informed Army Group B that these once-new divisions were no longer fully reliable even for limited defensive purposes and that heavy defensive fighting might well stampede them. Unless they could be pulled out of the line for rest and rehabilitation, these divisions, which accounted for nearly half of Second Army's total infantry strength, could only be trusted in the defense of small, quiet sectors.⁸⁹

The German southern offensive thus trusted its long northern flank to a conglomeration of listless allied and battle-weary German units. Like the forces farther north on the defensive front of Army Groups Center and North, these armies were stretched taut, manning thin lines with few reserves beyond insubstantial local forces. Barely strong enough to hold small probing attacks at bay during the summer and early fall, these armies lacked the strength to meet a major Russian offensive without substantial reinforcement (see map 10).

Shielded by this doubtful defensive umbrella, Operation Blau made good initial progress. In fierce house-to-house fighting, General Friedrich Paulus' Sixth Army gnawed its way into Stalingrad, the projected eastern terminus of Army Group B's defensive barrier. Despite nagging shortages of fuel and other supplies, as well as Hitler's confused switching of forces and missions, Army Group A had cleared Rostov and penetrated the northern reaches of the Caucasus Mountains by late August.



Map 10. Southern portion of Russian Front, 1 November 1942

read up

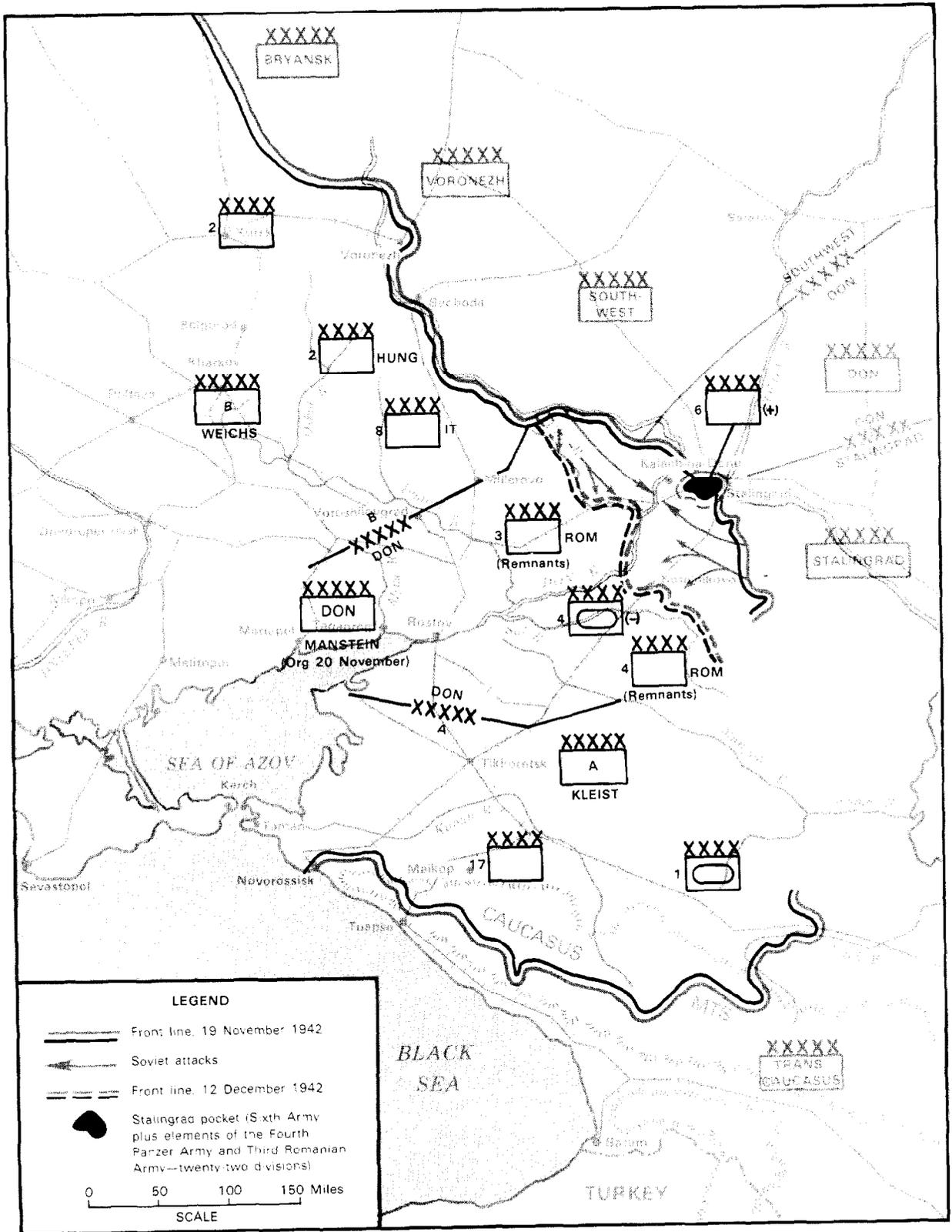


German propaganda photograph entitled "Storming the last bastions in Stalingrad, 9 November 1942"

At this point, the German campaign lost whatever coherence it might have possessed earlier. Forgetting that Army Group B's mission was but secondary to that of the advance toward the oil fields, Hitler became obsessed with capturing Stalingrad. Ordering not only Sixth Army but even the cream of Fourth Panzer Army into the city, Hitler committed the German forces to a prolonged battle of attrition for control of Stalingrad's rubble streets and factories. By late autumn, Operation Blau had degenerated into a test of military manhood between Hitler and Stalin on the Volga.

Whatever the outcome of the battle for possession of Stalingrad, by October it was clear that another winter defensive campaign was imminent. As described earlier, Hitler's Operations Order 1 ordered winter defensive preparations on all parts of the front, though in that same directive he bade the Stalingrad fighting continue. Yet even the Sixth Army in and around Stalingrad began to take preliminary steps for a winter defense. After discussions with Sixth Army staff members, an Army High Command liaison officer dispatched a memorandum to Berlin in mid-October assessing the feasibility of fortifying a miniature "east wall" on the Volga steppes and recommending the transfer of additional engineer units to Paulus' command for that purpose.⁹⁰

The German defensive arrangements along the Don River held together only until 19 November, when a Red Army offensive flattened the Romanian Third Army northwest of Stalingrad and knifed southward toward the rear of the German Sixth and Fourth Panzer Armies (see map 11). A day later,



Map 11. Soviet winter counteroffensive, 19 November—12 December 1942

another Soviet attack burst through the Romanian lines south of Stalingrad. On 23 November, these pincers met near Kalach, severing Sixth Army's land supply routes. The collapse of the Axis defenses along the Don River and the encirclement of Sixth Army transformed the situation of the southern front, casting the *Wehrmacht* forces there into a desperate struggle for their very survival.

The ensuing winter defensive battles in southern Russia can be divided into three separate phases. In the first phase, lasting from 19 November until 23 December 1942, the Germans scrambled to hold an advanced defensive line near the confluence of the Don and Chir Rivers from which they could support relief operations toward Stalingrad. Once the attacks to relieve Sixth Army were irretrievably repulsed, the focus of German defensive efforts



German troops move forward to attack tractor factory in Stalingrad



German troops in hasty defensive positions overlooking the Volga River on the northern outskirts of Stalingrad

shifted. During the second phase, lasting from the last week of December 1942 to mid-February 1943, German divisions fought to block another huge Soviet envelopment, this one aimed at the rear of the entire German southern wing near Rostov. Finally, from mid-February until the spring thaw, the third phase of the winter battles saw the restabilization of the front south of Kursk.

German defensive operations differed in each phase, and these differences reflected variations in the mission, the strength and composition of German forces, and the actions of the enemy. In no case, however, were these chaotic defensive actions conducted along doctrinal lines. Instead, from the initial collapse of the Romanian armies in November 1942 to the stabilization of the front in March 1943, German defensive operations were once again almost completely extemporaneous.

The first phase of fighting focused on the fate of the beleaguered German Sixth Army in Stalingrad. Ordered to stand fast and repeatedly assured by Hitler that Sixth Army would be relieved, General Paulus swiftly put his forces into a giant hedgehog defensive posture.

Establishing an effective defensive perimeter at Stalingrad was doubly difficult due to a desperate shortage of infantrymen (the bulk of whom had fallen in the earlier street fighting) and the lack of prepared positions. On the eastern face of the Stalingrad pocket, German troops continued to occupy the defensive positions built up during previous fighting for the city. However, the southern and western portions of the perimeter lay almost completely on

shelterless steppes, and the hasty defenses there never amounted to more than a few bunkers and shallow connecting trenches. (Because the steppes were almost treeless, no lumber was available for building fires for heat or for constructing covered defensive positions.) Significantly, the subsequent Soviet attacks to liquidate the surrounded Sixth Army came almost exclusively from the south and west against the least well-established portions of the German defenses. On 23 November, well-built positions to the north of Stalingrad were rashly abandoned without orders by the German LI Corps commander, General Walter von Seydlitz-Kurzbach, who had hoped thereby to provoke an immediate breakout order from Paulus. This hasty action sacrificed the 94th Infantry Division, which was overrun and annihilated by Red Army forces during the movement to the rear, and also gave up virtually the only well-constructed defensive positions within the Stalingrad *Kessel*.⁹¹

Sixth Army had difficulty in defending itself because of insufficient resources. Lack of fuel prevented the use of Paulus' three panzer and three motorized divisions as mobile reserves. Hoarding its meager fuel supplies for a possible breakout attempt, Sixth Army wound up employing most of its tanks and assault guns in static roles. Likewise, shortages of artillery ammunition and fortification materials hindered the German defense. The *Luftwaffe's* heroic attempts to airlift supplies into Stalingrad were hopelessly inadequate: since daily deliveries never exceeded consumption, the overall supply problem grew steadily worse in all areas. In some ways, the aerial resupply effort was counterproductive. Scores of medium bombers were diverted from ground support and interdiction missions to serve as additional cargo carriers, a move that emptied the skies of much-needed German combat air power at an extremely critical period.⁹²

For both tactical and logistical reasons, then, what the Nazi press dramatically called "Fortress Stalingrad" was, in reality, no fortress at all. Surrounded by no less than seven Soviet armies, Sixth Army was marooned on poor defensive ground without adequate forces, prepared positions, or stockpiles of essential supplies. Forbidden by Hitler to cut its way out of the encirclement, Sixth Army's eventual destruction was a foregone conclusion unless a relief attack could reestablish contact.

In response to this crisis, Hitler created Army Group Don under Field Marshal von Manstein on 20 November. Manstein was to restore order on the shattered southern front and, even more important in the short term, to direct a relief offensive to save Sixth Army. To accomplish this, Hitler promised Manstein six fresh infantry divisions, four panzer divisions, a *Luftwaffe* field division, and various other contingents.

Sixth Army's temporary aerial supply and eventual relief required the Germans to hold a forward defensive line along the Chir River, where the most advanced positions were only about forty miles from the Stalingrad perimeter. This line also covered the main departure airfields for the airlift and could serve as an excellent jumping-off point for a counterattack to link up with Sixth Army.

While Manstein worked out his plan for a relief attack, the Chir River line was held by whatever forces could be scraped together. Initially, these forces consisted of mixed combat units swept aside by the Russian offensive,



Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus, commander of the German Sixth Army trapped in Stalingrad without adequate forces or supplies



Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, commander of Army Group Don during desperate winter battles in 1942—43

alarm units called out from various support units, service troops, rear area security forces, convalescents, and casual personnel on leave. All these were formed into ad hoc battle groups and plugged into an improvised strongpoint defense along the Chir “like pieces of mosaic.”⁹³

That this rabble managed to hold the Chir line—and even some bridgeheads on the eastern bank—was due as much to Soviet indifference as to German improvisation. Through early December, the Soviet High Command was content to tighten its coils around Stalingrad and made little effort to exploit the German disarray farther west. In so doing, the Soviets were avoiding their great strategic mistake of the previous winter, when Stalin’s failure to concentrate forces on major objectives frittered away excellent opportunities to no decisive gain.

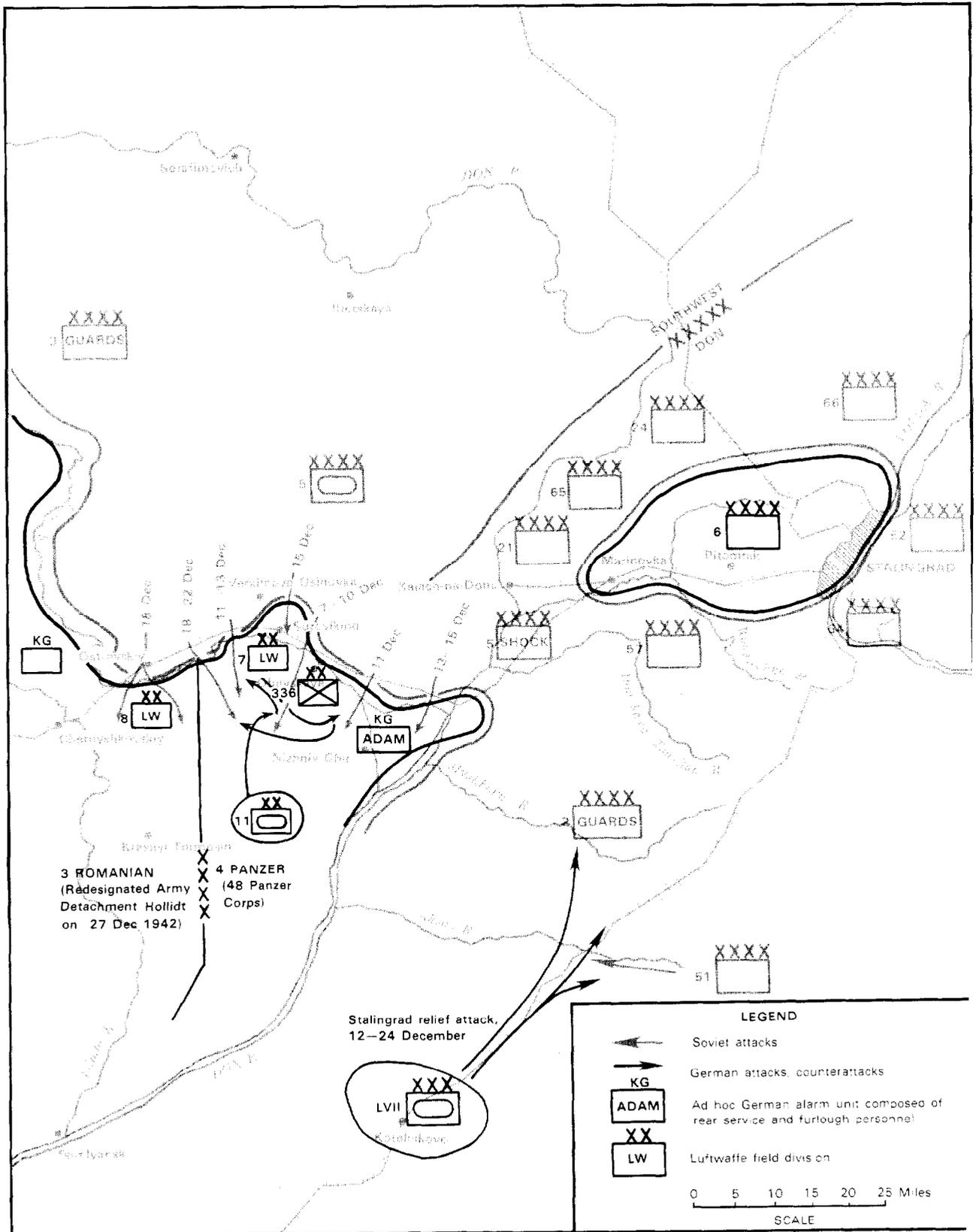
In mid-December, however, the fighting on the Chir front accelerated, with both sides committing substantial forces to this crucial area. On 12 December, Manstein began his relief attack toward Stalingrad. Intending to pin down German forces and to prevent reinforcement of the rescue effort, Soviet forces hurled themselves against the Chir line at several points. Meanwhile, the Germans reinforced the ragtag elements along the Chir with fresh units, most notably the reconstituted XLVIII Panzer Corps (11th Panzer Division, 336th

Infantry Division, and 7th *Luftwaffe* Field Division). These mid-December defensive battles demonstrated both the capabilities and the limitations of German defenders during this phase (see map 12).

The XLVIII Panzer Corps intended to hold its sector of the Chir front with two infantry divisions forward and a panzer division in reserve. The 336th Division was an excellent, full-strength unit that had recently arrived on the Russian Front from occupation duty in France. Even though reinforced somewhat with *Luftwaffe* flak and ground combat units, the division could only man its wide front by putting all its assets forward, holding only a handful of infantry, engineers, and mobile flak guns in reserve. Even so, the 336th Division formed "the pivot and shield" of the German defense.⁹⁴ The 7th *Luftwaffe* Field Division, though well equipped and fully manned, was poorly trained and lacked leaders experienced in ground combat. Behind the infantry, General Hermann Balck's 11th Panzer Division, which had recently been transferred from Army Group Center after fighting in several tough defensive battles, assembled for duty as a mobile counterattack force. Although its infantry strength was fairly high, it (like other weakened divisions from the northern defensive front) had only a single battalion of Panzer Mark IVs in its entire tank regiment.⁹⁵

On 7 December, even as the Germans were still settling into position, Soviet tank forces penetrated the left flank of the 336th Division. The Germans had not yet had time to lay mines or erect antitank obstacles, and their few *Paks* could not be used effectively. (Though relatively flat, the steppes were crisscrossed by deep ravines that provided excellent covered approaches into the German positions.) Facilitated by the weakness of the German antiarmor defenses, Russian tanks forced their way through the thin infantry defenses, overran part of the division's artillery, and thrust some fifteen kilometers into the division rear. In a three-day running battle, the 11th Panzer Division carved up this Russian tank force with repeated counterattacks against its flanks and rear. Despite the heady successes enjoyed by Balck's panzers and mechanized infantry (reports claimed seventy-five destroyed Russian tanks), the fighting was not all one-sided. For example, between 7 and 10 December, Russian tanks overran one infantry battalion of the 336th Division three different times.⁹⁶

Even tougher fighting followed. Beginning on 11 December, fresh Russian attacks charged against the Chir front, forcing several local penetrations. Though eventually broken by counterattacks and the fire of the 336th Division's artillery, these Soviet probes threatened to erode the German defenders by attrition. In one case, a German battle group holding a bridgehead south of the Don-Chir confluence lost 18 officers and 750 men in ten days of combat.⁹⁷ Breakthroughs in the 336th Division's front between 13 and 15 December produced an extremely confused situation, with groups of enemy and friendly troops finally so intermixed that German artillery could not be used effectively for fear of firing on its own forces.⁹⁸ Moreover, Soviet tanks again broke through as far as the German artillery positions, overrunning some guns and knocking out others by direct fire.⁹⁹ By nightfall on 15 December, the situation of the 336th Division had become so grave that, according to one staff officer, the division's continued survival depended "exclusively on outside help."¹⁰⁰



Map 12. German attack to relieve Stalingrad and defensive battles of the XLVIII Panzer Corps on the Chir River, 7—12 December 1942

Again, the 11th Panzer Division saved the German position on the Chir. Harkening to desperate appeals from the 336th Division for additional anti-tank support, the 11th diverted three of its precious tanks to buttress the flagging infantry, while the balance of the German armor hammered the Soviet flanks. By 22 December, the Chir front was quiet as both sides slumped into exhaustion.¹⁰¹

The battles on the Chir River had been a masterpiece of tactical improvisation by the Germans. Although regular combat troops were gradually brought into the fighting through reinforcement, the initial German defense had been conducted almost entirely by hastily organized contingents of service troops. While the performance of these units in no way matched that of regular combat veterans, their gritty stand fully vindicated the German Army's policies of training, organizing, and exercising rear-echelon alarm units on a regular basis.

Doctrinally, the committed German infantry forces in the XLVIII Panzer Corps' sector lacked the manpower and local reserves to conduct a competent defense in depth. Additionally, the German defense was throttled by Hitler's standing orders against tactical retreat, leaving the forward divisions little choice but to hold on to their initial positions even when penetrated or overrun. Short of antitank weapons, the German infantry forces were almost powerless against the Soviet armor. Had it not been for the availability of the 11th Panzer Division as a "fire brigade" counterattack force, the German defenders would almost certainly have been doomed to eventual annihilation in their positions clustered along the Chir.

The deft counterattacks by 11th Panzer Division repeatedly exploited speed, surprise, and shock action to destroy or scatter numerically superior Soviet forces. The generally open terrain provided a nearly ideal battlefield for mobile warfare, and the tank-versus-tank engagements almost resembled clashes in the North African desert more than they did other battles in Russia.

The Germans used simple command and control measures to conduct this fluid combat. According to General Balck's postwar accounts, command within the 11th Panzer Division was exercised almost entirely by daily verbal orders, amended as necessary on the spot by the division commander at critical points in the fighting.¹⁰² Liaison between the panzer units and the forward infantry divisions also was managed largely on a face-to-face basis.¹⁰³ These casual arrangements were made possible in part by the rather simple coordination procedures that developed during the Chir fighting. The positions of the forward German infantry were well known and, due to Hitler's insistence, seldom changed. The broad sectors and relatively low force densities on both sides tended to leave units conveniently spaced. Balck's well-trained and experienced forces seldom operated in more than two or three maneuver elements. General Balck was thus able to truncate normal staff procedures largely because there were very few moving parts in the German machine, and even those were comfortably separated. However, the rude German control methods sacrificed many of the benefits of synchronization and close coordination. By General Balck's own admission, for example, little effort was made to integrate indirect fire with the German maneuver forces.¹⁰⁴

The German defensive efforts benefited from other favorable circumstances. The Soviet attacks on the Chir front were not conducted in overwhelming

strength and were intended primarily as diversions to pin down German forces and to prevent reinforcement of the Stalingrad relief expedition. Also, the Russian assaults were piecemealed in time and space. Instead of a single, powerful attack in one sector, the Red Army forces jabbed at the Chir line for nearly two weeks with several smaller blows. As a result, the Germans were able to make the most of their limited armored reserves.¹⁰⁵ Equally beneficial was the poor Soviet combined arms coordination in these battles. The Russian attacks were conducted mainly by tank forces, and the Soviet infantry played only a minor accompanying role. Therefore, the Germans concentrated their panzers solely on the destruction of the enemy armor and paid scarcely any attention to the enemy riflemen.¹⁰⁶ This also greatly magnified German combat power, placing a premium on the superior tactical skill of the German tank crews while allowing the weaker German infantry to remain huddled in dugouts. Furthermore, the Red Army artillery remained amazingly silent throughout the battles, which left the Russian tank forces to fight without the benefit of suppressive fires. Soviet air power likewise was ineffective.¹⁰⁷

The German defensive successes on the Chir River were victories of a limited sort. First, despite their tactical virtuosity, even the German panzers were unable to wrest the operational initiative from the Soviets. Throughout the December actions, the Germans were compelled to respond to the uncoordinated Red Army blows by fighting a series of attritional engagements. The Russians retained complete freedom of maneuver and, in all likelihood, could have crushed the German resistance if they had been more skillful in massing or in coordinating their efforts. Second, even though the Germans inflicted serious losses on their enemies, they also suffered substantial casualties of their own. The hapless 7th *Luftwaffe* Field Division disintegrated during the Chir battles, and by mid-January, its ragged remnants had been amalgamated into other formations. The 11th Panzer Division, whose bold exploits saved the Chir position on several occasions, saw its combat power diminished by half from the beginning of December. Third, though driving back Soviet attacks, neither the 11th Panzer Division nor the balance of the XLVIII Panzer Corps was able to hold the ground that it won by counterattack. To defend terrain required infantry, and neither the panzer formations nor the overextended German infantry divisions had sufficient riflemen to conduct a positional defense.¹⁰⁸ Conversely, German tanks performed best in fluid combat and were notably less successful when trying to drive Red Army troops from their consolidated positions. For example, the Soviets managed to hold a few well-entrenched bridgeheads on the western bank of the Don-Chir line despite repeated German armored attacks.¹⁰⁹

Although rebuffed by the skill and steadfastness of the German defenders, the Soviet attacks against the Chir River line succeeded in preventing reinforcement of Manstein's relief attack on Stalingrad. Under Manstein's concept, the XLVIII Panzer Corps was to have joined those elements of Fourth Panzer Army (LVII Panzer Corps) making the main relief attempt from farther south. However, as already seen, the XLVIII Panzer Corps had struggled just to stave off its own destruction and never entered into the offensive effort. Without that support and without even the full reinforcements that Hitler had originally promised, the German drive to open a corridor to Sixth Army had to be abandoned after 23 December. From that time on, the defensive battles in the south entered a new phase, with German defensive efforts shifting to

the containment of a new major Soviet offensive attempt to sever the entire Axis southern wing (see map 13).

The new Russian offensive began by scattering the Italian Eighth Army, which was still in position on the northern Don. Driving southward toward Rostov, the Soviets aimed at cutting the communications of both Army Group Don and Army Group A. Also, this attack directly enveloped the German defensive line on the Chir, making the German position there untenable. This not only spoiled all prospects for a renewed attack to free Sixth Army, but it also resulted in the eventual loss of the forward airfields supplying Paulus' encircled divisions.¹¹⁰

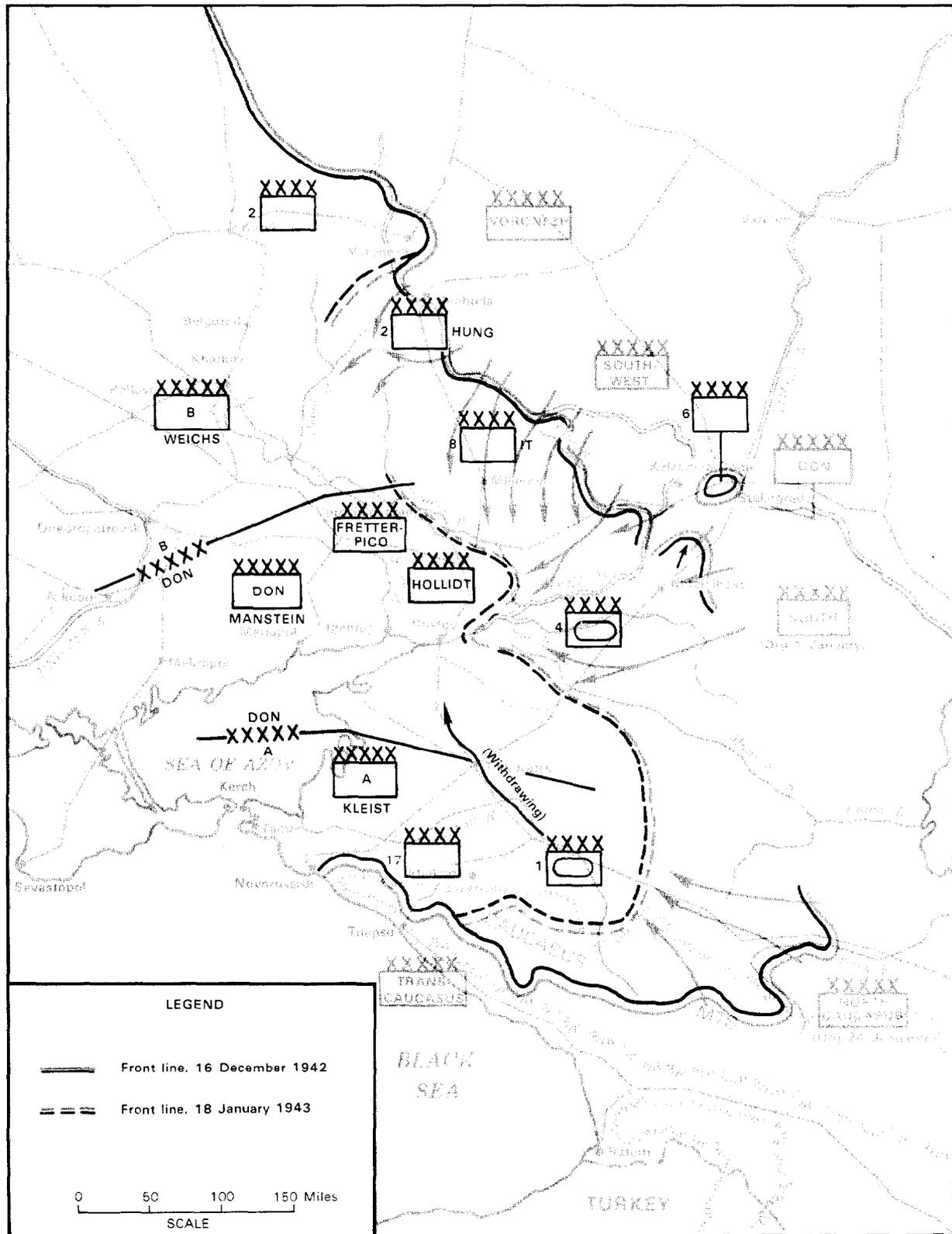
In contrast to the earlier jabs against the Chir line, the new Russian advance swept forward on a broad front, brushing aside the counterattacks of the weak 27th Panzer Division (earlier posted behind the Italians as a stiffener) as if they were bee stings. Clearly, the sleight-of-hand defensive tactics used by the Germans so successfully on the Chir River were not sufficient to cope with this new threat.

Two major problems hampered German attempts to forge an effective defensive response to the ripening crisis. The first problem was the lack of fresh combat forces. The best units in the German Army, groomed in the spring of 1942 to carry out Operation Blau, were now either wintering uselessly in the Caucasus (Army Group A) or else withering away at Stalingrad or in vain attempts to relieve it (Sixth Army and Fourth Panzer Army). The various impromptu commands set up to defend the Chir and lower Don were barely adequate for that task alone and stood little chance in a set-piece battle against the massive new Soviet onslaught.

In addition, reinforcements could be shifted from other parts of the front only with difficulty. The drained units of Army Groups Center and North had been stripped of assets months earlier to provide resources for the Blau offensive and were hard-pressed to resist the Soviet attacks drumming against their own positions. Therefore, local commanders from the northern defensive front, who saw only their own pressing problems, opposed attempts to siphon reserves away from them. Only at the highest command levels could the assembly and transfer of reserves be accomplished fairly and effectively. In

Soviet infantrymen charge past a disabled German tank northwest of Stalingrad, December 1942





Map 13. Widening Soviet offensive and threat to German southern wing, 16 December 1942—18 January 1943

this case, however, the smooth redistribution of forces by Hitler and the Army High Command was handicapped by complex variations in the status and structure of German units.

By this point in the war, most German divisions had major discrepancies between their paper organization and their actual structure. This was due partly to unredeemed combat losses, partly to the German Army's de facto policy of propagating organizational peculiarities by constantly changing the divisional structure of newly forming units, and partly to the stripping of resources from some divisions for assignment elsewhere. Some frontline units, for example, had little or no motorized transport, substituting instead horse-drawn wagons or even bicycles for logistical and tactical mobility. Others were short their full complement of artillery or else had entire battalions fitted out exclusively with captured guns. Other divisions lacked reconnaissance units or even full infantry regiments that had been detached for anti-partisan duties.

In addition to organizational oddities, German divisions also differed greatly in combat readiness due to fluctuations in their morale, training, replacement status, combat experience, fatigue, and quality of junior leadership. These eccentricities made centralized management of German forces extremely difficult, since nearly every division deviated in some way from its normal status. Since Hitler and the Army General Staff were not always aware of these organizational peculiarities, some confusion ensued when corps and army commanders, ordered to release divisions for emergency use elsewhere on the front, sometimes forwarded units that were unsuited for the particular missions for which they had been requested. In December 1942, the Army High Command initiated a new reporting system to correct this situation, requiring corps and army commanders to submit secret subjective evaluations of their divisions' combat worthiness on a regular basis.¹¹¹ (Frontline commanders found it to be in their own interest to be as candid as possible in these assessments, since a frank statement of liabilities was considered to be some protection from having to feed additional forces into the "Stalingrad oven.") Such inventories made the paper management of the threadbare German resources more efficient, but the fundamental lack of adequate combat forces to cover the expanding Eastern Front crisis remained unresolved.

The second problem shackling German operations was the Germans' own Byzantine command arrangement. Afield in the southern portion of the Eastern Front were three autonomous army groups (Army Groups A, B, and Don). No single commander or headquarters coordinated the efforts of these army groups save for the Führer himself. From his East Prussian headquarters, Hitler continued to render his own dubious brand of command guidance. Inspired by the success of his stand-fast methods the previous winter, the Führer now balked at ordering the timely withdrawal and reassembly of the far-flung German armies, even truculently resisting the transfer of divisions from the lightly engaged Army Group A to the mortally beset Army Group Don. Hitler's opening response to the new Soviet offensive against the rear of the German southern wing was to decree a succession of meaningless halt lines, ordering the overmatched German forces to hold position after position "to the last man."¹¹²

Field Marshal von Manstein, whose Army Group Don was to halt the Soviet offensive, confronted both of these major problems head-on. In a series of teletype messages to Hitler, Manstein pleaded for the release of several divisions from the idle Army Group A in the Caucasus in order to put some starch into the German defense. Though relenting too late to assist the relief attack on Stalingrad, Hitler at last ordered a few divisions and then finally all of First Panzer Army to move from Army Group A to Manstein's control.¹¹³

Manstein also pressed Hitler about command authority. In late December, Hitler offered to place Army Group A under Manstein's operational control. However, this consolidation of authority was not consummated because, as Manstein later explained, Hitler "was unwilling to accept my conditions" that there be no "possibility of interference by Hitler or of Army Group A's invoking . . . decisions in opposition to my own."¹¹⁴ Less than two weeks later, furious that Hitler was still insisting on a no-retreat policy and forcing him to beg permission for each tactical withdrawal, Manstein presented the Führer with an ultimatum. On 5 January, Manstein sent a message to the chief of the Army General Staff for Hitler's consideration: "Should . . . this headquarters continue to be tied down to the same extent as hitherto, I cannot see that any useful purpose will be served by my continuing as commander of Don Army Group. In the circumstances, it would appear more appropriate to replace me. . . ."¹¹⁵ Hitler chose to ignore Manstein's ultimatum, but he did at last concede a singular (though temporary) degree of autonomy and flexibility to Manstein for the conduct of defensive operations. Although Hitler's draconian stand-fast policy remained officially in effect, Manstein was allowed freedom of maneuver by means of a face-saving charade: instead of asking permission, Manstein would simply inform the Army High Command of Army Group Don's intention to take certain actions unless specifically countermanded, and Hitler by his silence would consent without actually abandoning his hold-to-the-last-man scruples.¹¹⁶

As a result of this arrangement, Manstein conducted operations from early January until mid-February largely unfettered either by Hitler's customary interference or the rigid no-retreat dictum. No other German commander was allowed to enjoy these two privileges on such a large scale for the remainder of the war. As a consequence of this independence, German defensive operations during the second phase of the southern winter battles evinced a measure of flexibility, economy, and fluid maneuver unsurpassed on the Russian Front during the entire war.

While these command arrangements were being ironed out, the operational situation continued to deteriorate. Still more Soviet attacks had routed the Hungarians and the Italians, completing the disintegration of the entire original flank defensive line along the Don River east of Voronezh. By late January, hardly any organized Axis resistance remained between the surviving units of Army Group B (Second Army) at Voronezh and the hard-pressed forces for Army Group Don along the lower Don and Donets Rivers. The German Sixth Army, now in its death throes at Stalingrad, ironically provided one source of hope: the longer Paulus' troops could hold out, the longer they would continue to tie down the powerful Russian armies encircling them, thereby delaying the reinforcement of the widening Soviet attacks farther to the west.

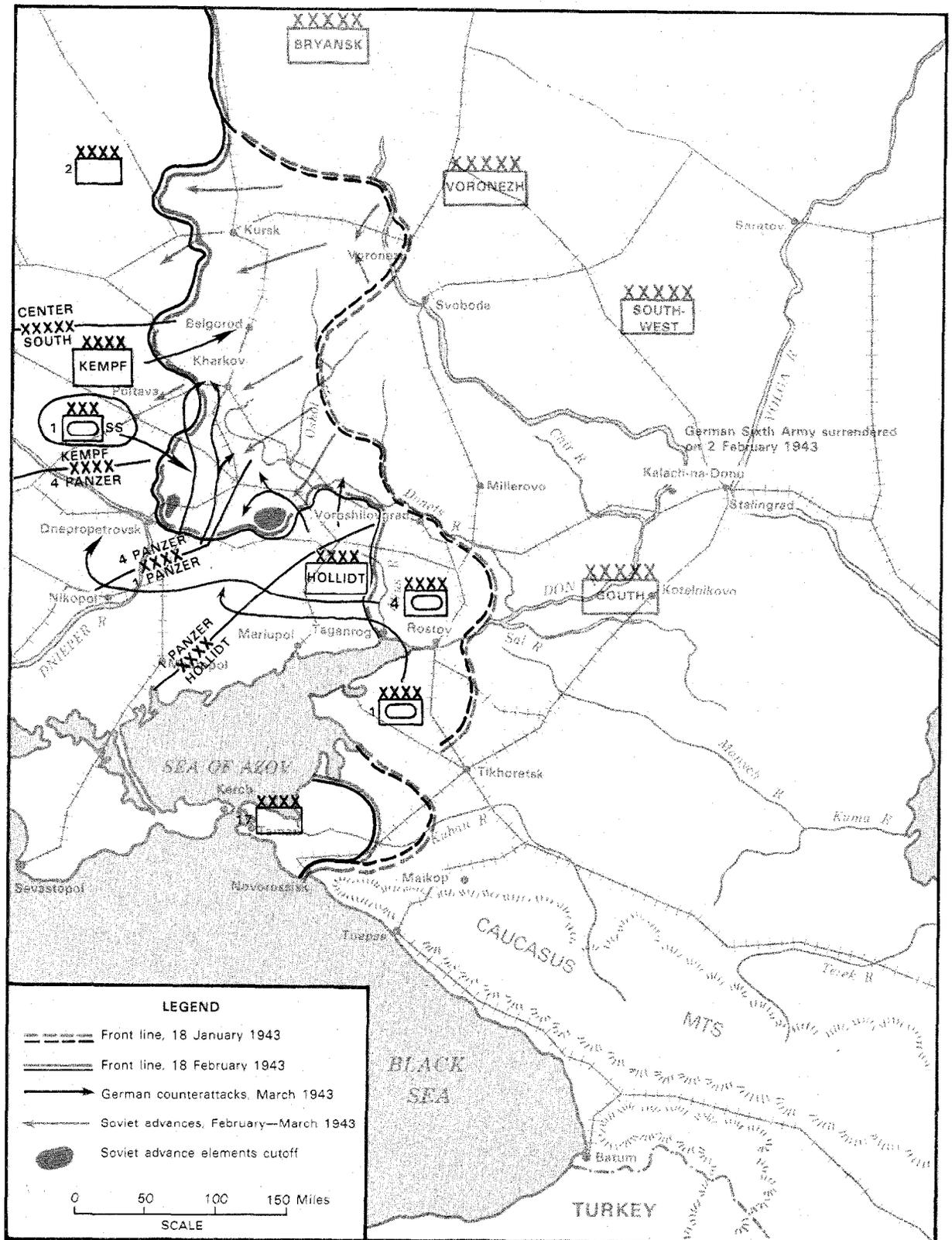
Manstein's overall concept of operations was to combine the withdrawal of First Panzer Army units from the Caucasus with the establishment of a defensive screen facing northward against the onrushing Soviets. One by one, the First Panzer Army divisions were pulled through the Rostov bottleneck and redeployed to the northwest, extending the makeshift German defensive line ever westward. The Soviets could still outflank this line by extending the arc of their advance to the west and, in fact, did so even while maintaining frontal pressure along the Donets (see map 14). Each of these wider envelopments, however, delayed the final decision and allowed Manstein to leapfrog more units into position. Moreover, the farther the Soviets shifted their forces to the west, the more tenuous the Russian supply lines became.¹¹⁷

This operation was exceedingly delicate. Any major Soviet breakthrough or uncontested envelopment could cut through to the rail ganglia on which both Army Groups A and Don depended for their supplies. Army Group Don thus had to accomplish three tasks simultaneously: slow the Soviet frontal advance, shift units from east to west to parry Soviet envelopments, and preserve its forces by allowing timely withdrawals to prevent encirclement or annihilation.

These tasks had to be performed under several tactical handicaps. First, even with the gradual reinforcement by First Panzer Army, Manstein's forces remained generally inferior to those of the enemy. Discounting the late arrivals, most of the divisions of Army Group Don were extremely battle worn, having been in continuous combat for over two months. Too, the preponderance of the German forces were less mobile than the Soviet tank and mechanized forces opposing them, a factor that weighed heavily against Manstein's hopes of exploiting the Germans' superiority in fluid operations.

Second, many of Manstein's forces were grouped together under impromptu command arrangements. The German order of battle included several non-standard control headquarters identified simply by their commanders' names, such as Army Detachment Hollidt, Group Mieth, and Battle Group Adam. Even many of the divisions assigned to the various headquarters lacked normal internal cohesion. For example, by January 1942, the 17th Panzer Division was conducting defensive operations with an attached infantry regiment (156th Infantry Regiment), which possessed neither the training nor the vehicles to allow it to cooperate smoothly with the division's tanks and organic *Panzergranadiers*.¹¹⁸ Similarly, in mid-January, two infantry divisions within Army Detachment Hollidt contained substantial attachments from two shattered *Luftwaffe* field divisions, while one so-called division (403d Security Division) was actually a division headquarters controlling several thousand troops whose furloughs had been abruptly canceled.¹¹⁹ These ad hoc forces generally lacked the precision that comes from habitual association and common experience, and this internal friction was magnified by the rapidly changing combat conditions confronting Army Group Don. Moreover, none of the improvised groupings were structured for sustained combat; therefore, they lacked the technical and support assets that normally would have serviced such large units.¹²⁰

Third, though relatively fresh and well organized, the First Panzer Army divisions arriving from the Caucasus came with their own special problems. In Manstein's words, these forces suffered from the "hardening up process



Map 14. Manstein withdraws First and Fourth Panzer Armies from southern wing and counterattacks to recapture Kharkov, January–March 1943



A German flak unit of the First Panzer Army in the Caucasus, October 1942. Manstein hurriedly withdrew these divisions and threw them into the battles to save Rostov, January—March 1943.

which inevitably sets in whenever mobile operations degenerate into static warfare." Their relatively inactive sojourn in the Caucasus from September to January had caused these "troops and formation staffs [to] lose the knack of quickly adapting themselves to the changes of situation which daily occur in a war of movement." The first symptom of this stagnation was the snail-like pace of the Caucasian disengagement. Having accumulated "weapons, equipment and stores of all kinds . . . which one feels unable to do without for the rest of the war," the divisions of First Panzer Army invariably requested "a long period of grace in which to prepare for the evacuation." When finally committed to combat along the Donets, these forces maneuvered lethargically at first, their earlier snap and élan dulled by the routine of prolonged positional warfare.¹²¹

Finally, the Germans were plagued by the enormous mobility differential between their own infantry and panzer forces. In previous campaigns, this problem had been most evident in offensive operations, as during Barbarossa when the swift panzers had outrun their infantry support. In southern Russia in January and February of 1943, this disparity proved equally disruptive in defensive operations, vastly increasing the difficulty of orchestrating German maneuver.

Since the bulk of the German combat power consisted of infantry, of necessity the German defensive tactics were built on the less-mobile infantry forces. The infantrymen, their numbers frequently including engineers, flak units, and various alarm units, were disposed in forward defensive lines.¹²² Because of

the lack of heavy antitank weapons and in order to gain some protection from Russian tanks, infantry positions were preferably sited along the rivers, streams, or ravines cutting through the area. Occasionally, the defenses were laid out in continuous, entrenched lines; more often, however, infantry units deployed in strongpoints to protect their flanks and rear from armored attacks. For example, the 17th Panzer Division, a veteran of heavy fighting on the Don, Chir, and Aksai Rivers, deployed its organic infantry battalions in individual battle groups. These groups, however, were so widely separated that the divisional artillery batteries could not support them all from central locations, necessitating the temporary attachment of even heavy guns to the battle group commanders.¹²³ Describing the fighting along the Donets River in January (in which the 17th Panzer Division played a prominent part), Field Marshal von Manstein observed that the enemy was halted "first and foremost [by] the bravery with which the infantry divisions and all other formations and units [e.g., alarm units] helping to hold the line stood their ground against the enemy's recurrent attacks."¹²⁴

German armored forces complemented the infantry's forward defense. The mobility of these formations allowed commanders to shuttle them about the battlefield, throwing their weight into developing crises. The scarcity of these forces prevented their employment in a general mobile defense, however. To shore up threatened sectors, counterattack remained the most common mission for the armor. Additionally, the German tanks and mechanized infantry made ideal rear guards, allowing other less-mobile units to disengage or to regroup when necessary.¹²⁵ Rear-guard mobility proved so crucial during the fluid battles in January and February that some regular infantry divisions even concocted their own motorized contingents by commandeering all available motor vehicles for use as troop carriers. As an example, Army Detachment Hollidt's 294th Infantry Division built such a mobile unit around several self-propelled 20-mm and 88-mm flak guns and used this composite group almost exclusively as a forward covering force or rear guard during that division's defensive battles.¹²⁶

The panzer formations also delivered spoiling attacks on enemy assembly areas, buying time until other German forces could redeploy or dig in. In early January, for example, the 17th Panzer Division succeeded spectacularly with such an attack. Supported by one infantry regiment, General von Senger rammed his one weak tank battalion into a Soviet assault concentration, destroying twenty-one enemy tanks and twenty-five antitank guns against the loss of only three panzers before withdrawing. In undertaking such a thrust, the division commander

resisted any temptation to distribute his tanks for the protection of his infantry, or even to husband them as a counterattacking force against Russian penetrations. In risking them in a far-flung [offensive] operation . . . he not only made them unavailable for the defense of the division's threatened southern sector but also accepted the danger of their being cut off entirely. . . . But his danger was rewarded. By seizing the initiative, he was able to inflict heavy losses on the Russians at small cost, disrupt the Soviets' offensive preparations, and gain valuable time for his division and the entire army front.¹²⁷

Such calculated boldness in using mobile forces was possible due to superior German training and leadership. As one German officer recalled: "The German superiority at this time lay not primarily in their equipment but in

their standards of training. The training of tank crews never ceased, even in combat. In the 17th Panzer Division it was the practice to hold a critique after each engagement, in which successes and failures were discussed, just as after peacetime exercises."¹²⁸ Equally important was the aggressiveness, imagination, and flexibility of the German leaders. Commenting on the operations of its improvised mobile rear guard, the 294th Division's after-action report explained that "the choice of a leader [was] especially important" since such units "[were] not led according to field manuals or even according to any fixed scheme."¹²⁹

Despite its aggressiveness and skillful use of mobile forces, Manstein's defense of the German southern wing was not a mobile defense in the classic sense. Army Group Don's forces could not be insensitive to the loss of territory, since to have done so would have endangered the vital rail lines leading through Rostov. Furthermore, the bulk of Manstein's formations were relatively immobile and could only be used in a succession of static defenses. Although playing an important role, the German panzer and motorized forces operated principally as intervention forces in support of the pedestrian infantry.¹³⁰

The German defensive method was thus actually a potpourri of tactical techniques. What set these battles apart from others was Manstein's style of control. What Manstein did—and what Hitler, as a rule, did not—was to provide firm operational guidance to his subordinates and then to allow those commanders to use their forces and the terrain to maximum advantage. The hard-pressed infantry forces, often composed of hastily assembled patchwork units without any real unit training, were best employed in static defenses from prepared positions. Mobile panzer and motorized bands delivered sharp



A German soldier inspects a destroyed Soviet T-34 tank, February 1943. The tank's turret rests on the ground at right.

counterattacks to help sustain the infantry defenses and, occasionally, kept the enemy off-balance with preemptive spoiling attacks. If the infantry's main positions became engulfed, the panzers and mechanized infantry helped the slower forces to disengage. The mobile formations also fought delaying actions while subsequent main positions were being organized. Major defensive lines were designated well in advance, allowing units to make deliberate plans for their withdrawals. (This practice alone added considerable coherence to German operations. Hitler usually procrastinated about allowing retreats until, when finally ordered, the withdrawals had to be done pell-mell to avoid encirclement.) For example, in fighting its way back from the Chir to the Donets in January, a distance of roughly 100 miles, Army Detachment Hollidt occupied no less than nine intermediate defensive lines. Its movement from the Donets to the Mius in February followed the same pattern.¹³¹

In contrast to preferred German defensive methods, these battles were fought almost entirely without tactical depth. Indeed, the fluidity of the battles in southern Russia stemmed, in large measure, from the German inability to absorb the Soviet attacks within successive defensive zones. Lacking the forces to establish a deeply echeloned defense, the Germans instead combined maneuver—including both lightning attack and withdrawal—with stubborn positional defense to give artificial depth to the battlefield. In this way, the Germans were able to brake major Soviet attacks, preventing catastrophic breakthroughs while still preserving the integrity and freedom of action of their own forces.

As with the XLVIII Panzer Corps' December battles on the Chir River, these tactics—like the traditional Elastic Defense—were essentially attritional. Russian attacks were contained or worn down one by one, and even though German units occasionally seized the tactical initiative by some aggressive riposte, the operational initiative remained with the Soviets. However often single German panzer divisions sallied in preemptive spoiling attacks, the Red Army's major maneuver units were never in danger of sudden annihilation.

This situation existed because the scarcity of German forces and the great distances in southern Russia kept German units dispersed. In blocking the Soviets' relentless broad-front advance, the Germans operated completely from hand to mouth and were therefore unable to engineer any operational massing of their own. Significantly, from the time of the cancellation in late December of the three-division Stalingrad relief attack until the conclusion of the winter battles' second phase in late February, all the German panzer divisions on the southern front were employed piecemeal to relieve local emergencies. No two panzer divisions ever combined their meager assets to make a concerted blow. For instance, Army Detachment Hollidt, which in mid-January fielded four panzer divisions, retained only one division under its own control and assigned the other three to its individual subordinate commands for "fire brigade" use in support of their infantry divisions. While effective in stemming local Russian attacks, this task organization made it impossible to concentrate powerful mobile forces for larger-scale operations.¹³²

Manstein appreciated this fact and, from mid-February, began laying the groundwork for a different employment of the German armor. The fresh SS Panzer Corps, just off-loading near Kharkov with two crack *Waffen SS* panzer divisions, together with other reinforcements formed the nucleus of an opera-

tional *masse de manoeuvre*. Convinced that casualties, mechanical breakdowns, and lengthening supply lines must have taken their toll of the Russians, Manstein foresaw an opportunity to seize the operational initiative with a counteroffensive of his own. Manstein's target was the Soviet armored spearheads, then still careening southwestward between Kharkov and Stalino.¹³³

The third phase of the winter campaign saw the restabilization of the southern front. The centerpiece of this phase was a strong German counterstroke by five panzer divisions against the Soviet flank south of Kharkov. Manstein's 22 February riposte completely surprised the Russians and, within days, had shattered the Soviet First Guards Army as well as several independent armored groups. As trophies, the Germans counted 615 destroyed enemy tanks and over 1,000 captured guns. The haul in prisoners, however, was disappointingly low: as always, the infantry-poor German panzer formations were unable to seal off the battlefield, and thousands of Soviet troops casually marched out of the German trap.¹³⁴

Despite its success, Hitler took little satisfaction in Manstein's Kharkov counteroffensive. As Hitler had admitted in his Führer Defense Order of September 1942, his defensive ideas were of a pre-1917 vintage. Consequently, Hitler's own preference, first and last, was for a rigid no-retreat defense. He had been uncomfortable enough with Manstein's parry-and-thrust tactics in January and early February, but for all of its tactical dash, that style of defense had still been operationally conservative and had remained focused

German motorized infantry on the outskirts of Kharkov, 14 March 1943





German SS troops inside Kharkov

on denying the Russians access to certain critical areas. What rankled Hitler most was the purposeful relinquishing of terrain on an operational scale. When Manstein continued to give up ground—even after the Soviet drive showed signs of stalling on its own—while building up his reserve striking force, Hitler's nervousness increased. In the end, Manstein barely saved his counteroffensive plan from Hitler's shrill demands that the new reserves be thrown into battle piecemeal to prevent further territorial losses. And yet this very strategem finally provided the basis for Manstein's counteroffensive, as the Russian advance eventually overextended itself and lay vulnerable to the hoarded German reserves. Hitler prized the holding of ground even over the annihilation of sizable enemy forces, however spectacular.

Bought breathing space by Manstein's successful counteroffensive near Kharkov, the other tattered German forces managed to patch together a continuous defensive line on the southern front. Army Detachment Hollidt, withdrawing by bounds from the Donets, moved into Army Group South's old defensive lines on the Mius River. Except for a series of salients north of Kharkov, the German southern armies in late March held again nearly the same positions from which the Blau offensive had begun the previous spring.

This line could easily have been forced at almost any point prior to the spring thaw at the end of March 1943. For example, the XXIV Panzer

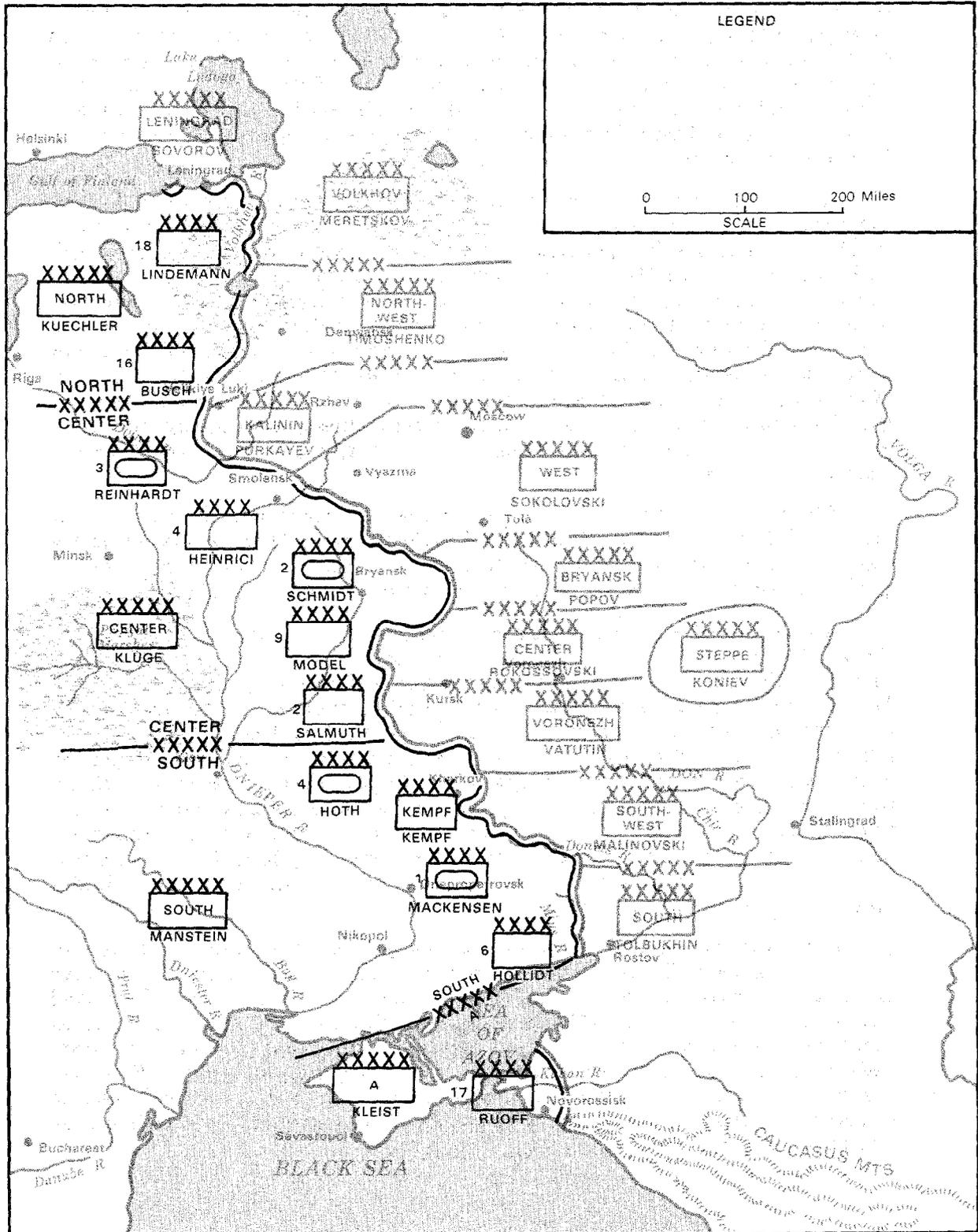
Corps—which, in fact, had no panzer units whatsoever—held the extreme southern portion of the German line with one infantry and two patchwork security divisions. These forces, whose sector ran for nearly 125 kilometers (including a stretch of Azov coastline), amounted to only fourteen understrength infantry battalions. A XXIV Panzer Corps after-action report noted that the two security divisions' organization, cohesion, and weaponry were so uneven that little could be expected from them. Fortunately, these units occupied old defensive works along most of their front and also were able to retrain and rehabilitate their forces due to the lack of renewed offensive action by the tired Soviets.¹³⁵

The German Kharkov counteroffensive and the tenuous restabilization of the southern front ended the winter campaign's third phase. As the crisis subsided, Manstein's independence from Hitler's close control also evaporated. Hitler's patience with Manstein had actually begun to wane in early February. Then, alarmed by the enormous swatches of territory being surrendered by Manstein's forces, Hitler reasserted his personal authority over Army Group Don on 12 February 1943 with Operations Order 4, which ordered Manstein to reestablish a solid, stand-fast front on the Mius-Donets line. In fact, only Manstein's promise to Hitler to recover much of the lost ground with the Kharkov counterstroke, together with the awkwardness of switching field commanders in the midst of such a confusing battle, probably saved Manstein from being relieved.¹³⁶

With the dissipation of Manstein's autonomy came a reassertion of all Hitler's defensive nostrums, and the fragile German defenses taking shape along the southern front reflected this. Once again, the standard defensive guidance became "no retreat; hold to the last man!" (see map 15).

General Walther Nehring, supervising the improvement of his XXIV Panzer Corps positions, displayed the uncomfortable blend of traditional defense and Hitlerian caveat that had become doctrinal practice. In an 18 March 1943 defensive order to his units, Nehring directed the improvement of positions in depth, the careful coordination of artillery fire support, and the siting of clusters of antitank weapons behind the main positions in perfect accord with the Elastic Defense system in *Truppenführung*. However, Nehring's instructions also ordered compliance with Hitler's benumbing provisos: "Penetrating enemy elements are *instantly* to be thrown back by immediate counterattack and the HKL [main line of resistance] regained. Evasive maneuver before the enemy or evacuation of a position without my [Nehring's] special order is forbidden."¹³⁷

German defensive practice therefore had gained little from the lessons of the previous year. Despite the strained battles on the northern defensive front, the disaster at Stalingrad, the desperate fights between the Volga and the Mius Rivers, and finally Manstein's brilliant operational riposte at Kharkov, the German armies on the Eastern Front looked forward to future defensive fighting still handicapped by Hitler's rigid constraints. Even so, German Army units continued to review their own tactical methods and to suggest modifications to defensive doctrine within the limits established by the Führer's guidance.



Map 15. Situation, spring 1943

German Doctrinal Assessments

In late 1942, various German units along the Russian Front prepared routine after-action reports summarizing their experiences. These reports dealt primarily with activities along the defensive fronts of Army Groups Center and North. The confusion and turmoil in the south prevented a careful assessment of those battles until the spring of 1943.

Army Group North prepared the most detailed critique of German defensive methods. On 20 September 1942, Army Group North tasked its subordinate units to prepare reports on "Experiences From Fighting on a Fixed Front" and listed sixteen major discussion topics. These items included the accuracy of German Army doctrinal manuals, methods for organizing defensive positions, location and use of major weapons, intelligence indicators of impending enemy attacks, and general training suggestions.¹³⁸

By and large, units endorsed the basic applicability of existing doctrinal publications. "Our manuals," wrote the 21st Infantry Division's operations officer, "have generally proven themselves with respect to the selection and construction of positions."¹³⁹ However, several units complained that the German field manuals did not address the peculiar problems inherent in defending excessively wide sectors with inadequate forces. These reports noted that doctrinal guidance was deficient in explaining how standard Elastic Defense methods should be adapted to these all-too-common circumstances. The Eighteenth Army, for example, took the most extreme line in its report to Army Group North: "The principles of our field manuals . . . have only limited validity in the East because in practice they are seldom possible."¹⁴⁰

In the same vein, several units were cautiously critical of Hitler's obsessive insistence on holding even the forwardmost trenchlines. According to one divisional report, this practice robbed the German defenses of essential depth. With so many troops and heavy weapons committed within the forward main line of resistance, only the slenderest of local reserves remained to occupy positions in depth. When enemy break-ins occurred, this immediately thrust much of the responsibility for resistance in depth on the few troops manning German command posts, artillery positions, and rear services strongpoints. Consequently, as the complaints revealed, the entire German defensive concept seemed to have degenerated to the costly retention of the main line of resistance at the expense of a legitimate defense in depth.¹⁴¹

Another criticism of German doctrinal manuals cited the lack of advice on how to defend under special conditions, such as in swamps and forests, or during periods of limited visibility. The 22d Fusilier Regiment insisted that battles fought under these circumstances required special techniques beyond those given in the German Army's training manuals. The 58th Infantry Division confirmed this, citing as an example the erroneous tendency of some leaders to deploy defensive forces along the edge of wooded areas. Once the Soviets discovered this habit, it was simple for Red Army artillery to paste the occupied woodlines since they made such well-defined targets. Experienced German commanders placed their troops in camouflaged positions forward of the woods or else had them dig in at some irregular distance 25 to 100 meters inside the treeline. (This latter method was preferred: enemy troops attacking

the woods could not place accurate small-arms or indirect fire on the entrenched defenders until the enemy had advanced through the German artillery barrage and entered into the defenders' close-in killing zones. Yet the thin wooded apron forward of the defensive positions was too shallow to shelter any large body of enemy troops.)¹⁴²

Such techniques demonstrated not only the extent to which German tactics were tailored to minimize casualties, but also the continuing desire of German commanders to avoid tactical schemes that placed unnecessary psychological strain on their soldiers. The Russian climate, periodic supply shortages, close combat antitank methods, and lack of rest—not to mention the enemy's apparent numerical superiority and reputed savagery—all imposed heavy demands on German morale and discipline. Therefore, after-action reports were full of suggestions for avoiding the wasteful depletion of German moral energies. For example, since the defense of an entire sector might well depend on the skill and aggressiveness of local reserves, many units emphasized the desirability of selecting the best leaders and most reliable men for reserve roles. Ideally, these local shock troops were kept razor sharp by constant training and alarm drills and were spared excessive fatigue details such as trench construction. Another psychological ploy suggested by General Heinrici, the Fourth Army commander, was the blind firing of German artillery at presumed Red Army attack concentrations just prior to enemy assaults. Such fire, whatever its real effect on the Russians, was of inestimable value in "giving at a minimum a moral boost to our infantry in the moment of danger."¹⁴³ Other units emphasized the extreme importance of regular training on such particularly fearsome subjects as hand-to-hand fighting and being overrun by enemy tanks. Most important to defensive morale, reported the 1st Infantry Division, was that "each soldier in the defense must be convinced of the superiority of his own training and his own weapons."¹⁴⁴

Except for Hitler's command interference and crippling no-retreat strategy, the most contentious doctrinal issue to emerge during 1942 and early 1943 concerned the proper defensive role of German armor. Prewar German manuals had consigned the panzers to a counterattack role commensurate with their "inherently offensive nature." While none would deny that panzers made ideal mobile reserves and counterattack forces, a considerable doctrinal din arose about the apportionment and control of those forces.

On one side stood the panzer officers themselves. Since the 1930s, Guderian and the other high priests of armored warfare had taught their flock a simple, unremitting catechism: panzers should be employed only en masse and should never be split up or parceled out in infantry support roles. The rectitude of this view had been demonstrated most clearly in the 1940 campaign in France. There, the numerically superior French and British armor had been foolishly deployed in "penny packets" and had justly gone down to fiery perdition at the hands of the German armored forces. By late 1942, the need to employ armor en masse had become an absolute article of faith among the armored forces.

As a corollary to this, German armor commanders were reluctant to see their panzers placed under even the temporary command of nonarmor officers for fear that they might commit some sacrilege by splitting up the tanks into support roles. Discussing the proper task organization of reserves for counter-

attacks, for example, General Heinrich Eberbach of the 4th Panzer Division made his own feelings clear in a memorandum on 30 September 1942: "Do not subordinate a tank battalion to an infantry regiment; rather attach to it [tank battalion] an infantry battalion, an engineer company, an artillery detachment, and a self-propelled antitank company, and give to this battle group a clear mission."¹⁴⁵ General Hermann Hoth, whose Fourth Panzer Army was ripped apart by the Soviet November 1942 counteroffensive, had also argued against assigning small panzer detachments to infantry forces. In a 21 September 1942 memorandum to the Army High Command, Hoth declaimed that "the Panzer Arm achieves its success by *massing* [italics in original]." While conceding that small groups of tanks had played a major role in salvaging the German position during the winter of 1941–42, Hoth stated that "this should not therefore lead to single tanks as a universal solution [for strengthening defensive resistance]. . . ." On the contrary, argued Hoth, examples in the late summer of 1942 showed that real defensive success came from "the determined will-to-attack of infantry and panzer divisions." Against "the fallacious call of the infantry divisions for 'solitary panzers,'" Hoth spluttered that such dispersion of tanks not only would compromise the armored troops as a decisive battlefield force, but also would fatally corrupt the infantry forces' "will to attack" by making them unduly dependent on armored support.¹⁴⁶

In opposition to this chorus stood those German officers—primarily, but not exclusively, infantrymen—whose troops were actually holding the forward defensive lines. These officers had no argument with the massing of tanks in theory but cited several cogent reasons why German defensive interests could be better served in practice by a greater dispersion of the limited armored resources. In countless battles against Russian attacks, these officers had developed a doctrinal creed of their own, namely, that under the prevailing conditions of weakness and constraint, the best way to defeat a Soviet penetration was by immediate counterattack. While not new, this conviction grew stronger as defensive experience accumulated. On 14 October 1942, General Heinrici wrote that immediate counterattack, led by energetic leaders and striking the enemy's troops while they were still disorganized, could achieve "full success in every case."¹⁴⁷ This sentiment was echoed by many units who regarded speed far more important than numerical strength or firepower in dislodging Russian forces.¹⁴⁸ To implement their counterattacks as quickly as possible, these frontline commanders were therefore willing to sacrifice even mass in order to hit penetrating Soviets before they could consolidate.

What the infantry commanders preferred was that tanks in company or platoon strength be doled out to support their own tactical reserves. With this low-level task organizing, panzers would have to be placed under the command of local infantry commanders. Furthermore, in exceptional cases (as it was for the hard-pressed 336th Infantry Division on the Chir River in December 1942), German infantrymen would also want some tanks placed at their disposal to act as mobile antitank guns in support of their static positions. As expected, German panzer officers vigorously denounced all these ideas.

This dispute was so heated because there was little possibility for compromise. Given the width of the Russian Front and the scarcity of German

General Hermann Hoth, commander of
Fourth Panzer Army



panzer forces, it was impossible to provide concentrated armored reserves to all sectors—the only solution that might have satisfied everybody.

If, as the panzer commanders desired, the German armor was kept concentrated in rearward assembly areas, then the tank forces could not arrive at the scene of local crises until hours—or even days—after the Soviet penetrations had occurred. Infantry commanders considered such belated assistance to be of little value. They reckoned that such delays would allow the Russians time either to expand their penetrations, causing the possible collapse or annihilation of the defensive line altogether, or else to have so fortified their newly won ground as to make its recovery extremely costly. Also, the infantrymen were not impressed by the occasional successes of concentrated armor in annihilating Russian breakthrough forces. They knew that these victorious panzer battles—such as those of Balck's 11th Panzer Division on the Chir River—too often came only after the forward German infantry had been all but wiped out. Cynical German infantrymen might have noted that, while the panzer officers toasted their glorious victories, the infantrymen were the ones consigned to burying their excessively numerous dead.

On the other hand, if the German tanks were parceled out by platoons to support every infantry battalion or regiment whose sector was threatened by attack, it would be impossible to reassemble the panzers in time to deal with any massive Soviet breakthrough requiring a massed German response. The 17th Panzer Division's General von Senger, whose experiences on the southern front in the winter of 1942–43 qualified him to speak with authority, wrote pointedly of his own adherence to the defensive “principle that the armor [be]



German self-propelled antitank guns support an infantry attack west of Stalingrad, January 1943

kept together in defense but [be] used offensively at the right moment. Commanders less familiar with armored tactics, and those who were conscious only of the endless front, thinly occupied and under threat from the enemy's armor, would under these conditions have been tempted to fritter away their own armor." Defending the primacy of the armored forces, Senger added: "Thus the armored divisions, originally organized as purely offensive formations, had become [by early 1943] the most effective in defensive operations."¹⁴⁹

In further rebuttal, panzer officers cited their own recent experiences and indicated that dividing armor in the furtherance of limited-objective counterattacks resulted in disproportionately high tank losses. Therefore, General Eberbach suggested that the infantry be made to repulse "small break-ins" with available forces, saving the massed panzers for those penetrations that exceeded five kilometers in depth. When actually committed, opined Eberbach, the panzer commander should take control of all available assets and should return control of the embattled sector to the infantry commander only when the tanks withdrew. Justifying this judicious use of panzers, Eberbach noted that "the life of a tank crewman is not more valuable than the life of an infantryman." However, he explained, the careful commitment of armor was in the ultimate interest of both the armored and infantry forces since, otherwise, the finite German armored forces would soon be completely extinguished and no longer of any use to anyone.¹⁵⁰

Both sides in this dispute were completely correct. Every German commander, regardless of branch, wanted to see his own forces used in accordance with their peculiar strengths. No panzer leader wanted to see his precious tanks sacrificed a few at a time in what were, after all, only local emergencies. Nor did any infantry officer wish to see his own men massacred in living up

to Hitler's "hold-at-all-costs, recover-all-lost-ground" policies when the assistance of a few tanks could cut his casualties dramatically.

Despite a flurry of bureaucratic activity and memorandum writing, no compromise was reached on this issue. A draft "Instructional Pamphlet on the Use of Panzers in the Defense," which circulated in both the Ninth and Fourth Armies, attempted to resolve some of the outstanding sources of armor-infantry friction. Except for a suggestion that tanks never be employed in less than company strength, however, this pamphlet failed to come to grips with the broader issues.¹⁵¹

Certainly no compromise was apparent at the Panzer Training School in Wünsdorf, where a February 1943 "Instructional Pamphlet on Cooperation Between Panzers and Infantry in the Defense" sounded a particularly militant note. This tract, for example, announced the following principles for employing tanks in the defense:

- Tanks should only be employed in counterattacks and never as part of the stationary defense.
- Tanks should be held sufficiently far behind the front so they can respond to enemy penetrations across a wide sector of responsibility.
- Tanks should always be employed en masse: the commitment of individual tanks alone is forbidden.
- The smallest unit for immediate counterattacks with infantry support is the tank battalion (minimum of forty panzers).¹⁵²

A similar pamphlet for higher-ranking leaders added that panzers should remain under the control of either division or independent task force commanders, suggesting archly that tank "attachment to subordinate [infantry] leaders can only be allowed for limited periods and for limited missions."¹⁵³ As both of these pamphlets originated at the Wünsdorf tank school, their distribution was limited primarily to panzer officers. To a great extent, therefore, these tracts merely told German armor officers what they wanted to hear. Neither publication received general dissemination throughout the German Army, and neither had any real doctrinal impact.

This confused doctrinal chorus reflected the German Army's situation on the Eastern Front. By late spring of 1943, German defensive doctrine on the Russian Front had become a patchwork of makeshift compromises. The Elastic Defense remained the basic doctrinal framework, which had been established in prewar manuals. However, this doctrine was being increasingly distorted by several factors. The Germans lacked adequate forces to man their extended fronts with a deeply echeloned defensive network, and German divisions had been forced to use a variety of tactical half measures. Adolf Hitler had further muddled German doctrine by issuing confusing directives. Though at times the Führer had benignly endorsed the general theory of elastic defense in depth, in practice he had thundered angrily against weak-willed commanders who allowed the enemy to penetrate beyond the foremost trenchline.

The upshot of these problems had been to focus German defensive efforts on the holding of a rigid linear defense. In short, the elastic defense in depth as practiced by the Germans in early 1943 had, due to Hitler's orders, lost most of its elasticity and, due to the lack of German manpower, had aban-

done most of its depth as well. Still, German units did their best to adapt themselves to these straitened circumstances. They could not do so, however, without occasional strain and squabble as the arguments over the defensive use of German armor illustrated.
