## Contents

*List of Maps, Tables, and Illustrations* ix  
*Preface* xv  
*Selected Abbreviations* xxi  

### Part I. Soviet Strategic Planning  
1. Framework for Disaster 3  
   - Frustration 3  
   - The *Wehrmacht* in November 1942 8  
   - German Field Commanders 11  
   - The Red Army in November 1942 12  
   - Soviet Field Commanders 15  

2. Soviet Strategic Planning: The Genesis of Plan Uranus 20  
   - Who Formulated Plan Uranus? The Historical Debate 20  
   - Competing Offensive Concepts 23  
   - Triumph of the “Different Solution,” 1–13 October 31  
   - Plan Uranus Takes Shape, 14–31 October 38  
   - Final Preparations, 1–18 November 41  
   - Reflections 50  

3. Gathering the Troops: Soviet Order of Battle and the Uranus Plan 55  
   - Regrouping Forces for the Counteroffensive 55  
   - Soviet Order of Battle 58  
   - The Uranus Plan 79  
   - *Front* and Army Plans 93  

4. The Balance of Opposing Forces on 18 November 127  
   - Soviet Forces 127  
   - Axis Forces and Defenses 131  
   - The Correlation of Opposing Forces 165  

### Part II. The Uranus Counteroffensive  
5. The Penetration Battle, 19–20 November 185  
   - Preliminaries 185
Maps, Tables, and Illustrations

Maps

1. Offensive concept of the Red Army General Staff’s Operations Directorate, 27 July 1942 28
2. Offensive concept of General Eremenko, commander of the Stalingrad Front, 6–9 October 1942 36
3. Plan for the Stalingrad counteroffensive (Operation Uranus), 4 November 1942 44
4. Operation Uranus: The Soviet plan 82
5. Operation Uranus: The Southwestern Front’s offensive plan 95
6. Operation Uranus: The Stalingrad Front’s offensive plan 107
7. Operation Uranus: The Don Front’s offensive plan 116
8. Italian Eighth and Romanian Third Armies’ defenses, 18 November 1942 143
9. Southwestern Front’s offensive: situation in the Serafimovich and Kletskaia bridgeheads at 0500 hours, 19 November 1942 194
10. 5th Tank Army’s operational formation, 19 November 1942 195
11. 21st Army’s operational formation, 19 November 1942 196
12. Grouping and fire plans of 5th Tank Army’s artillery, 19 November 1942 200
13. Southwestern Front’s offensive: situation in the Serafimovich and Kletskaia bridgeheads at 2200 hours, 19 November 1942 202
14. 5th Tank Army’s entry in the penetration, 19 November 1942 210
15. Southwestern Front’s offensive: situation in the Serafimovich and Kletskaia bridgeheads at 2200 hours, 20 November 1942 230
16. Southwestern and Don Fronts’ advance at 2200 hours, 20 November 1942 240
17. Stalingrad Front’s offensive: situation at 2200 hours, 20 November 1942 253
18. 28th Army’s area of operations 263
19. Southwestern and Don Fronts’ advance at 2200 hours, 21 November 1942 274
20. XIV Panzer Corps’ counterattack along the Don River, 21–24 November 1942 287
21. Stalingrad Front’s offensive: situation at 2200 hours, 21 November 1942 290
Illustrations

22. Situation in Stalingrad, 19 November 1942 295
23. Southwestern and Don Fronts’ advance at 2200 hours, 22 November 1942 301
24. Stalingrad Front’s offensive: situation at 2200 hours, 22 November 1942 326
25. German XI Army Corps’ defense, 22 November 1942 339
26. Southwestern and Don Fronts’ advance at 2200 hours, 23 November 1942 340
27. German XI Army Corps’ defense, 23 November 1942 354
28. Stalingrad Front’s offensive: situation at 2200 hours, 23 November 1942 361
29. Southwestern and Don Fronts’ advance, 25–28 November 1942 392
30. Advance by the Don Front’s 65th and 24th Armies toward Vertiachii, 19–27 November 1942 401
31. 51st Army’s advance, 19–30 November 1942 405
32. 16th Motorized Division’s defenses at 2200 hours, 27 November 1942 411
33. Fourth Panzer Army’s defense at 2200 hours, 26 November 1942 450
34. Fourth Panzer Army’s defense at 2200 hours, 27 November 1942 451
35. Plan for Operation Saturn, 26 November 1942 468
36. 5th Tank Army’s pursuit to the Chir River and Romanian Third Army’s defenses, 30 November 1942 474
37. Don Front’s advance against Sixth Army’s encirclement pocket, 27–30 November 1942 487
38. Sixth Army’s Stalingrad pocket [Kessel], 29–30 November 1942 489
39. Sixth Army’s Western Front (VIII Army Corps and XIV Panzer Corps), 30 November 1942 490
40. Fourth Panzer Army’s defense at 2200 hours, 28 November 1942 498
41. Situation in Stalingrad, 28 November 1942 507
42. Situation along the Krivaia and Chir Rivers, early December 1942 523
43. Situation in the Kotelnikovo region, early December 1942 529

Tables

1. Composition and senior command cadre of the Southwestern Front, 19 November 1942 (less artillery and engineer units) 59
2. Composition and senior command cadre of the Stalingrad Front, 19 November 1942 (less artillery and engineer units) 66
3. Composition and senior command cadre of the Don Front, 19 November 1942 (less artillery and engineer units) 75
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Illustrations xi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4. Reinforcement and internal regroupings of ground forces within and between the Southwestern, Stalingrad, and Don Fronts, 1–18 November 1942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Operational indices of the Southwestern Front’s offensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Operational indices of the Stalingrad Front’s offensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Operational indices of the Don Front’s offensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Growth of Soviet production of combat equipment, weapons, and ammunition, 1942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. German weapons production, 1942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Supply of the Southwestern, Don, and Stalingrad Fronts’ armies with ammunition and fuel at the beginning of Operation Uranus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Strengths of the Southwestern, Don, and Stalingrad Fronts, 18 November 1942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Strengths of the armies subordinate to the Southwestern, Don, and Stalingrad Fronts, 18 November 1942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Armored strength of the Southwestern, Don, and Stalingrad Fronts’ tank and mechanized formations and units, 18 November 1942 (based on available data)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Personnel and weapons strength of cavalry corps subordinate to the Southwestern and Stalingrad Fronts, 18 November 1942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Composition and senior command cadre of German Army Group B, 18 November 1942 (from north to south)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Combat ratings of infantry (panzer-grenadier), pioneer, and motorcycle battalions subordinate to Sixth Army’s divisions, 16 November 1942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Personnel strength and weaponry of Sixth Army’s forces, mid-November 1942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Personnel strength of German Sixth Army based on its daily records, 11, 12, and 19 November 1942, and on Soviet military intelligence reports, 2 November 1942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Accuracy of Soviet intelligence estimates of the combat strength of Sixth Army’s divisions fighting in Stalingrad city, 1–2 November 1942</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Armored strength of Sixth Army and Fourth Panzer Army, 16–18 November 1942 (total tanks, including those nonoperational)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Personnel strengths (ration and combat) of Romanian divisions defending in Operation Uranus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Distribution and estimated strength of Axis forces operating against the Southwestern, Don, and Stalingrad Fronts, 19 November 1942</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
23. Strategic correlation of opposing Soviet and Axis forces in Operation Uranus, 19–20 November 1942
24. Operational correlation of opposing Soviet and Axis forces in the main attack sectors of the Red Army’s Southwestern and Stalingrad Fronts, 19–20 November 1942
25. Configuration and estimated tactical correlations of “bayonets” (infantry and sappers) in the main attack sectors of the Southwestern, Don, and Stalingrad Fronts and the armies conducting their main attacks
26. Scope of the Stalingrad pocket’s inner and outer encirclement fronts, 23 November 1942
27. Axis forces encircled at Stalingrad
28. XI Army Corps’ and XIV Panzer Corps’ defense of and withdrawal from the Sirotinskaia bridgehead, 22–27 November 1942
29. Combat strength of XI Army Corps’ 44th, 376th, and 384th Infantry Divisions, 16 November and 15 December 1942
30. Sixth Army’s command structure and operational fronts (sectors), 0800 hours, 2 December 1942
31. Sixth Army’s order of battle and senior command cadre, 1 December 1942
32. Opposing forces around Sixth Army’s Stalingrad pocket, 1 December 1942
33. Composition of Army Group Hollidt and Romanian Third Army, 1 December 1942
34. Opposing forces along the Don, Krivaia, and Chir Rivers, 1 December 1942
35. Composition of Army Group Hoth, 1 December 1942
36. Opposing forces along the Kotel’nikovo and Elista axes, 1 December 1942

Photographs
(following p. 52)
Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin
Colonel General Aleksandr Mikhailovich Vasilevsky
Colonel General Aleksei Innokent’evich Antonov
Major General Fedor Efimovich Bokov
Colonel General Nikolai Nikolaevich Voronov
Colonel General Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Novikov
Lieutenant General Nikolai Fedorovich Vatutin
Corps Commissar Aleksei Sergeevich Zheltov with N. F. Vatutin,
A. S. Zheltov, S. A. Krasovsky, V. I. Vozniuk, and S. P. Ivanov
Lieutenant General Vasiliy Ivanovich Kuznetsov
Major General Prokofii Logvinovich Romanenko
Lieutenant General Ivan Mikhailovich Chistiakov
Lieutenant General of Aviation Stepan Akimovich Krasovsky
Major General of Tank Forces Vasiliy Vasil'evich Butkov
Major General of Tank Forces Aleksei Grigor'evich Rodin
Lieutenant Colonel Georgii Nikolaevich Filippov
Major General of Tank Forces Andrei Grigor'evich Kravchenko
Major General Issa Aleksandrovich Pliev
Lieutenant General Konstantin Konstantinovich Rokossovsky
Major General Konstantin Fedorovich Telegin with the Don Front's
Military Council
Major General Dmitrii Timofeevich Kozlov
Lieutenant General Pavel Ivanovich Batov
Lieutenant General Aleksei Semenovich Zhadov
Major General of Aviation Sergei Ignat'evich Rudenko
Major General of Technical Forces Aleksei Gavrilovich Maslov
Lieutenant General Andrei Ivanovich Eremenko
Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev
Lieutenant General Vasiliy Ivanovich Chuikov
Lieutenant General Mikhail Stepanovich Shumilov
Major General Nikolai Ivanovich Trufanov
Lieutenant General Fedor Ivanovich Tolbukhin
Lieutenant General Vasiliy Filippovich Gerasimenko
Major General of Aviation Timofei Timofeevich Khriukhin
Major General of Tank Forces Vasiliy Timofeevich Vol'sky
Major General of Tank Forces Trofim Ivanovich Tanaschishin
Lieutenant General Timofei Timofeevich Shapkin
Colonel General Maximilian Freiherr von Weichs
Colonel General Maximilian Freiherr von Weichs, with Generals Paulus
and Seydlitz
Colonel General Hermann Hoth giving an order
Colonel General Hermann Hoth
General der Flieger Wolfgang von Richtofen
General of Panzer Troops Hans-Valentin von Hube
Illustrations

(following p. 380)
Generals Rokossovsky and Batov at 65th Army’s observation post during the Uranus counteroffensive
Soviet Katiusha multiple-rocket launchers firing in the preparation for Operation Uranus
Soviet artillery firing the preparation for Operation Uranus
Soviet tanks entering the penetration in operation Uranus
Soviet infantry beginning their assault in operation Uranus
Soviet infantry advancing under a smoke screen
Soviet troops and tanks assaulting Kalach-on-the-Don
Troops of the Southwestern and Stalingrad Fronts linking up at the village of Sovetskii
The Battle of Stalingrad, the epic World War II struggle pitting the Wehrmacht of Adolf Hitler’s Third German Reich and the armies of his Axis allies against the Red Army of Josef Stalin’s Soviet Union, culminated in November 1942 when Soviet forces struck back against their Axis tormentors. About six months had passed since Axis armies first lunged eastward across the southern Soviet Union. During this time, the Axis invaders wrought havoc on the defending Soviets, inflicting more than 1 million casualties on the Red Army and advancing over 600 kilometers (372 miles) to reach the northern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains and Stalin’s namesake city on the Volga River. Despite debilitating defeats and repeated futile attempts to contain and strike back at the invaders, the Red Army succeeded in halting Axis forces in the rubble-filled streets of Stalingrad in October 1942. With his and the Wehrmacht’s reputation at stake, Germany’s Führer ordered his country’s most famous army—General Friedrich Paulus’s Sixth—to capture Stalingrad at all costs. The grisly fighting that ensued bled Sixth Army white, leaving the frustrated Hitler no choice but to commit the forces of his Axis allies to front-line positions.

As they had done the year before, Stalin and his Stavka (High Command) skillfully exploited Hitler’s unbridled ambition, which pushed the Wehrmacht well beyond the limits of its capabilities. After failing repeatedly to identify and exploit weaknesses in Axis defenses during the summer and fall of 1942, the Stavka finally did so in mid-November 1942 by orchestrating Operation Uranus, the most important of a galaxy of counteroffensives designed to defeat the Axis enemy and seize the strategic initiative in what the Soviets now termed the Great Patriotic War. In its Uranus counteroffensive, the Red Army’s three attacking fronts defeated and largely destroyed the bulk of two Romanian armies and encircled German Sixth Army and half of German Fourth Panzer Army in the Stalingrad pocket, literally turning Germany’s world upside down. Within the next ten weeks, the Red Army parried and then defeated two German attempts to rescue Sixth Army, crushed Italian Eighth and Hungarian Second Armies, severely damaged German Fourth Panzer and Second Armies, and destroyed German Sixth Army in the ruins of Stalingrad. With well over half a million soldiers rudely torn from its order of battle in the East, Hitler’s Axis watched in horror as its status...
abruptly changed from victor to vanquished. In short, the Axis defeat at Stalingrad was a turning point in this war because it was a catastrophe from which Germany and its Wehrmacht could never fully recover.

The first two volumes in this trilogy describe the antecedents to this catastrophe: first, the Germans’ deceptively triumphal march east into the Caucasus and to Stalingrad, and second, the vicious battle of attrition in Stalingrad proper, which proved to be as pivotal in that campaign as the battle would become in the war as a whole. Both volumes exploit copious amounts of recently released archival materials to identify, document, and dispel those myths about the campaign that have prevailed since war’s end.

The mythology associated with the Stalingrad campaign is a natural by-product of the sources on which previous histories were based. The destruction of German Sixth Army in the ruins of Stalingrad has fascinated historians and the general public for seventy years. Despite this fascination and the innumerable books on the subject, many of the causes and events of this tragedy have eluded posterity. As the first two volumes in this study have demonstrated, the fighting in Stalingrad can be understood only within the context of a German campaign that originally had almost no interest in capturing the city. The invaders came within a few miles of their true goal, the oil fields of the Caucasus, only to fail. The broad causes of that failure were almost identical to those that had frustrated Germany in 1941: logistical overstretch, the inability to focus on a single objective, and the increasingly sophisticated organization and conduct of the Wehrmacht's opponent, the Red Army.

A second reason for our collective ignorance about this campaign is that participants on both sides wrote their accounts based on their memories, with little access to official records. Throughout the Cold War, many of the German records appeared to be irretrievably lost, and Soviet participants such as Vasilii Chuikov and Georgii Zhukov were also restricted to their own recollections.

A third and related reason for misunderstanding Stalingrad is the widespread acceptance, at least in the West, of the German mythology concerning the entire conflict. It is human nature to seek excuses for one’s failures and even to rearrange one’s memories in a way that provides a logical if oversimplified explanation of what is often a complex and disjointed process. Thus, most German survivors of the “Eastern Front” offered as literal truth what was, in fact, their own (perhaps unconscious) alibi for defeat. In this version, the German survivors remembered advancing easily, almost without opposition, until they became entangled in the bombed-out streets of Stalingrad. Then and only then, in the German collective memory, was their fanatical but clumsy enemy able to bleed them to death in a hundred combat actions. Once the German forces were depleted, the Romanian and Italian
units on their flanks crumbled in the face of overwhelming Soviet attacks that were able to encircle and strangle Sixth Army. Even then, the collective alibi argues, the Wehrmacht might have escaped were it not for the criminal interference of the amateur Hitler and the incredible passivity of Paulus. If nothing else, this final volume should demonstrate that Hitler was not alone in his mistakes and that the Red Army had become so effective and Sixth Army so weak that there was little chance of Paulus breaking out to join hands with the scratch German forces sent to his rescue.

We will leave it to the reader to discover the other causes of German failure and Soviet success, many of which are detailed in these pages and in the two previous volumes. Suffice it to say, despite incredible gallantry and suffering on both sides, the Red Army ultimately won out, beginning the long process of redeeming Soviet territory from the Axis.

Like its predecessor tomes, this third volume tests controversial questions and prevailing myths on the basis of fresh documentary evidence. The principal difference between this and the previous volumes is the sheer quantity of questions and myths associated with this period of the fighting. In short, this period is replete with controversy and unanswered questions, the most notable of which include the following:

- Who was responsible for developing the concept for Operation Uranus?
- Why did the Uranus offensive succeed?
- Could Sixth Army have escaped encirclement or been rescued?
- Why did the German relief attempts fail?
- Who was most responsible for Sixth Army’s defeat?

In addition to a wide variety of traditional sources, this volume exploits two major categories of documentary materials that were hitherto unavailable to researchers. The first consists of extensive records from the combat journal of German Sixth Army, which had been largely missing since the war’s end; large portions of this journal have now been rediscovered and published. The second is a vast amount of newly released Soviet (Russian) archival materials, including excerpts from the Red Army General Staff’s daily operational summaries; a wide variety of Stavka, People’s Commissariat of Defense (NKO), and Red Army General Staff orders and directives; and the daily records of Soviet 62nd Army and its subordinate divisions and brigades for most of the time fighting was under way in Stalingrad proper.

Because of the persistent controversy and mythology characterizing this period, we believe it is necessary and prudent to include in this volume verbatim English translations of the many documents on which we based our judgments and conclusions. These, along with other detailed evidence in the form of charts and tables, are the substance of the Companion. This
supplement to volume 3 offers concrete evidence necessary to accept, reject, or simply qualify our conclusions. Thus, like the first two volumes, this one offers unprecedented detail and fresh perspectives, interpretations, and evaluations of the later stages of the Stalingrad campaign.

This volume concentrates only on German and Soviet planning and conduct of combat operations in the immediate vicinity of Stalingrad. Specifically, it focuses on the struggle in and around Sixth Army’s encirclement pocket, including the launch and defeat of German relief attempts; the Red Army’s efforts to expand its outer encirclement fronts to and beyond the Chir, Don, and Aksai Rivers; and the operations conducted by the Soviet Don and Stalingrad Fronts to reduce Sixth Army’s Stalingrad pocket. As such, it briefly describes the Southwestern and Voronezh Fronts’ planning and conduct of the Little Saturn offensive and the Stalingrad (later Southern) Front’s conduct of its Kotel’nikovo and Tormosin offensives.

Since the Red Army’s offensive operations conducted south and west of the Stalingrad region during the second half of December 1942 and January 1943 were so vast in scale, a supplemental fourth volume will examine the military operations outside the limits of the trilogy. Specifically, it will include operations tangential to Stalingrad but that had a major effect on the ultimate fate of German Sixth Army, such as:

- The Southwestern and Voronezh Fronts’ Operation Little Saturn against Italian Eighth Army
- The Stalingrad (Southern) Front’s Kotel’nikovo and Rostov offensives against German Fourth Panzer, Romanian Fourth, and, later, German First Panzer Armies
- The Voronezh and Southwestern Fronts’ Ostrogozhsk-Rossosh’ offensive operation against Hungarian Second Army
- Most of the Briansk and Voronezh Front’s Voronezh-Kastornoe offensive operation against German Second Army
- The Southwestern and Stalingrad Fronts’ offensive in the eastern Donbas region against Army Abteilung Fretter-Pico and Army Group Hollidt
- The Trans-Caucasus Front’s offensive in the northern Caucasus region against German First Panzer and Seventeenth Armies

A research effort of this magnitude would not be possible without the support of numerous individuals and agencies. In this regard, we must again thank Jason Mark, both for his generous personal assistance and for the groundbreaking tactical accounts of Stalingrad published by Leaping Horseman Books in Pymble, Australia. Likewise, William T. McCroden, who has spent a lifetime compiling detailed and definitive orders of battle for German
forces during the war, shared with us the numerous draft volumes produced by his research.

Most important for this volume, we are indebted to two individuals whose keen knowledge of the war and the German language proved indispensable. The accomplished German military historian Dr. Romedio Graf von Thun-Hohenstein generously and selflessly volunteered to critique the manuscript for this volume. He spent countless hours reading it and commenting on all aspects of it, pointing out errors in fact and interpretation, identifying necessary sources, and correcting our frequent mutilations of the German language. Dr. Lothar Zeidler, a veteran of the war who served for more than two years in the Wehrmacht’s 168th Infantry Division and was twice wounded, translated many pages of German documents and shared with us his copious notes and other memorabilia from the war. Both generously provided their assistance driven by the desire to make this volume as accurate and objective as possible. We deeply appreciate their help.

As with our previous efforts, we gratefully acknowledge the crucial role Mary Ann Glantz played in editing and proofreading the manuscript.

David M. Glantz
Carlisle, PA

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Leavenworth, KS
### Selected Abbreviations

#### German (Axis)

**Higher Commands**

- **OKW** (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*) — Armed Forces High Command
- **OKH** (*Oberkommando des Heeres*) — Army High Command
- **AG (H.Gr.)** (*Heeresgruppe*) — army group
- **A (AOK) (Armeooberkommando)** — army
- **Pz A** — panzer army
- **Harko** (*Hoherer Artilleriekommando*) — higher artillery command (army level)
- **Arko** (*Artilleriekommando*) — artillerie command
- **AC (A.K.)** — army corps
- **PzC (Pz.K.)** — panzer corps
- **D (Div.)** — division
  - **ID (I.D.) (J.D.)** — infantry division
  - **PzD (Pz.D.)** — panzer division
  - **ID (JD)(mot)** — motorized division
  - **MotD (Mot.D.)** — motorized division
  - **CavD (K.D.)** — cavalry division
  - **MtnD** — mountain division
- **Sec. D** — security division
- **LF D** — Luftwaffe field division
- **Br.** — brigade
  - **IB (Inf.B)** — infantry brigade
  - **MotB** — motorized brigade
  - **PzB** — panzer brigade
- **Rgt. (R)** — regiment
  - **Sec.R** — security regiment
  - **AR** — artillery regiment
  - **IR** — infantry regiment
  - **PzR** — panzer regiment

#### Soviet

**Commands and Forces**

- **A** — army
- **GA (Gds.A)** — guards army
- **TA** — tank army
- **TC** — tank corps
- **GTC (Gds.TC)** — guards tank corps
- **MC** — mechanized corps
- **GMC (Gds.MC)** — guards mechanized corps
- **RC** — rifle corps
- **GRC (Gds.RC)** — guards rifle corps
- **CC** — cavalry corps
- **GCC (Gds.CC)** — guards cavalry corps
- **MAC** — mixed aviation corps
- **RD** — rifle division
- **GRD (Gds.RD)** — guards rifle division
- **CD** — cavalry division
- **GCD (Gds.CD)** — guards cavalry division
- **AAD** — assault aviation division
- **BAD** — bomber aviation division
- **NBAD** — night bomber aviation division
- **FAD** — fighter aviation division
- **MAD** — mixed aviation division
- **FR** — fortified region
- **RB** — rifle brigade
- **TB** — tank brigade
- **GTB (Gds.TB)** — guards tank brigade
- **MB** — mechanized brigade
- **MRB** — motorized rifle brigade
- **NRB** — naval rifle brigade
- **DB** — destroyer brigade
- **RR** — rifle regiment
- **GRR (Gds.RR)** — guards rifle regiment
- **TR** — tank regiment
Selected Abbreviations

**German (Axis) (continued)**
- PzGR (Pz.Gren.R)—panzer-grenadier regiment
- EngR—engineer regiment
- MotR—motorized regiment
- MtrcR—motorcycle regiment
- Bn (Btl.)—battalion
- PzBn—panzer battalion
- MotBn—motorized battalion
- InfBn—infantry battalion
- EngBn—engineer battalion
- MG Bn—machine gun battalion
- Co. (kp.)—company
- Btry (battr.)—battery

**Miscellaneous**
- Abt. (abteilung)—detachment or battalion
- A.A.—reconnaissance abteilung
- Pz. A.A.—panzer reconnaissance abteilung
- Abschnitt—section or sector
- Aufkl. (Aufklärung)—reconnaissance
- Gp. (Gruppe)—group
- HKL—front lines (hauptkampflinie or main combat line)
- Inf.—infantry
- Kpfgp. (Kgr.)—kampfgruppe [combat group]
- mot.—motorized
- Flak (fugabwehrkanone)—antiaircraft guns
- Jg (Jäg) (Jäger)—light
- i. G.—in the General Staff
- Pak (panzerabwehrkanone)—antitank gun
- Pi—Pioneer (engineer)
- Pkw (personenkraftwagen)—personnel carrier
- Pz.Jg. (panzerjäger)—antitank unit
- St.G. (Stu.Gesch.) (stürmgeschutz)—assault gun
- IG (infanteriegeschutz)—infantry gun
- v.—von
- z.b.V.—temporarily formed

**Soviet (continued)**
- GTR (Gds.TR)—guards tank regiment
- AR—artillery regiment
- Gds.AR—guards artillery regiment
- ATR—antitank regiment
- TDR—tank destroyer (antitank) artillery regiment
- AAR—assault aviation regiment
- BAR—bomber aviation regiment
- MAR—mixed aviation regiment
- RAR—reconnaissance aviation regiment
- CAR—corps artillery regiment
- GAR—gun artillery regiment
- HAR—howitzer artillery regiment
- G-MR (Gds.-MR)—guards mortar (multiple-rocket launcher or Katiusha) regiment
- MtrR—mortar regiment
- MRR—motorized rifle regiment
- CR—cavalry regiment
- GCR (Gds.CR)—guards cavalry regiment
- RAS—reconnaissance aviation squadron
- RBn—rifle battalion
- TBN—tank battalion
- AABn—antiaircraft artillery battalion
- MG-Arty Bn (MGArtyBn)—machine gun—artillery battalion
- G-MBn (Gds.-MBn)—guards mortar battalion
- Sep.ArmdCarBn—separate armored car battalion
- ArmdTrainBn—armored train battalion
- Co.—company
- Btry—battery

**Miscellaneous**
- AA—antiaircraft
- Arty—artillery
- AT—antitank
- Cav.—cavalry
- CP—command post
- DAG—division artillery group
- DD—long-range artillery group
Selected Abbreviations

**German (Axis) (continued)**

(R) (r. or ru.)—Romanian

(I)—Italian

(H)—Hungarian

(G)—German

**Soviet (continued)**

Det.—detachment

FD—forward detachment

G (Gds.) as a prefix with any abbreviation—guards

Gp.—group

MTF—motor tractor factory

MTS—motor tractor station

OP—observation post

PVO—antiaircraft defense

RAG—regimental artillery group

Res.—reserve

RVGK—Reserve of the Stavka of the Supreme High Command

Sep.—separate

SF—state farm
PART I

Soviet Strategic Planning
CHAPTER ONE

Framework for Disaster

FRUSTRATION

By September 1942, Adolf Hitler was acutely aware that his window of opportunity was closing. When Germany had invaded the Soviet Union 15 months earlier, Hitler, as well as his senior advisers, had confidently assumed that they could destroy the Red Army in a series of encirclement battles in the Soviet Union’s western border region, battles that would lead inevitably to the collapse of the Soviet regime. Instead, both the Red Army and its parent government had demonstrated remarkable resilience, continuing to fight despite almost 4.5 million soldiers killed, wounded, and captured in the first six months alone. Furthermore, though the Red Army was often suicidal, its penchant for stubbornly attacking into the teeth of the German juggernaut in defense of the Soviet homeland inflicted serious damage on the Wehrmacht’s advancing forces. By weakening Hitler’s vaunted panzer spearheads and causing attrition in his infantry, these hundreds, if not thousands, of small Russian cuts gradually weakened the invaders. This led directly to the Wehrmacht’s unprecedented defeats at the approaches to Leningrad in the north during September and October 1941, at Rostov in the southern Soviet Union in November, and, in a surprising climax of Operation Barbarossa, in the Moscow region in December. At the gates of Moscow, senior Red Army generals watched in utter astonishment as their desperate counterattacks against the advancing Germans suddenly succeeded. Within a month, these local counterattacks had developed into multiple counterstrokes and ultimately an ambitious general counteroffensive encompassing the entire front from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

These setbacks, however, did little to dampen Hitler’s offensive ardor and unquenchable appetite for total victory. The Soviets’ winter counteroffensive collapsed in April 1942, and smaller-scale Red Army offensives in the Khar’kov and Crimean region ended in embarrassing defeats in May 1942. Then the German Wehrmacht renewed its offensive in Operation Blau (Blue) in late June and early July 1942. Yet victory eluded the Germans, despite their triumphal advances through the eastern Donbas region and across the Don River into the mountains of the Trans-Caucasus region. By
Chapter One

September the Germans were no closer to military victory than they had been in June.

Politically and militarily, Hitler believed that he had to reach some stable conclusion in the East by the end of 1942 so that he could confront the growing strength of the United States, on which he had declared war in December 1941. Economically, the Blau offensive had so far failed to solve Germany’s critical need for petroleum. When Army Group A overran the small Maikop oil field in southeastern Russia on 8 August 1942, the Germans found that the retreating Soviets had destroyed all the wells and refineries in the area. Larger oil fields still beckoned at Grozny in Chechnia and in Azerbaijan, but Field Marshal Wilhelm List, the commander of Army Group A, seemed unable to advance the last few hundred kilometers to seize these prizes. Not the least of his problems was that all supplies for the army group had to be funneled through the bottleneck river city of Rostov, then transshipped from railroad cars to trucks or animal carts for the long journey forward to the Caucasus. Moreover, given the difficulties the Germans had in converting and operating the Soviet rail system, supplying the Caucasus would come at the expense of the attack on Stalingrad.

List was hamstrung not only by the long and slender logistical path to his rear but also by the growing effectiveness of the Soviet troops to his front. Almost invisibly to Hitler and his principal advisers, the Red Army had contested every meter of the 1942 German advance, launching incessant if clumsy counterattacks and counterstrokes that slowed and weakened the invaders. Some Soviet units collapsed, as they had the previous summer, and the Red Army still experienced a severe shortage of commanders and staff officers who could orchestrate the combined arms and logistical support in formations the size of a field army and larger. Nonetheless, the Soviet defenders, survivors of the bitter defeats of 1941–1942, were growing in competence and determination every day. What Hitler regarded as the excessive caution of his generals was really a necessary response to the increasing capability of their adversaries. In fact, those adversaries might have been even more dangerous were it not for the fact that the German advances, in combination with Josef Stalin’s own impatience for success, had prompted the Red Army to launch many of its counteractions prematurely and without ensuring effective command and control. Such premature attacks had repeatedly sacrificed both troops and arms for want of a few extra days to prepare and coordinate. The sad reality was that attacking Red Army forces still lacked the necessary expertise to overcome prepared German defenses, much less contend with experienced German panzer forces maneuvering on an open battlefield.

List’s difficulties in the Caucasus were mirrored and complicated by the problem facing Colonel General Maximilian von Weichs, commander of
Army Group B, at Stalingrad. The original operations order for the Blau campaign (Führer Directive No. 41, 4 April 1942) had barely mentioned this industrial city and transportation hub on the Volga River. Aiming for the Caucasus oil fields, the German planners had intended to bypass Stalingrad and simply neutralize it by aerial and artillery bombardment. Only gradually did the city become a magnet for the Germans, primarily because its name made it a key propaganda goal. Yet Army Group B lacked sufficient forces to take the city and simultaneously deflect a series of Soviet counterstrokes on both flanks of the city. General of Panzer Troops Friedrich Paulus, the commander of Sixth German Army, was able to reach the city and slowly clear it only because his army group commander, Weichs, continually reshuffled and rotated troops to give Paulus enough combat power to sustain the advance. Moreover, to put even a handful of German divisions into Stalingrad and the Caucasus, the Germans had to use other Axis troops to protect their long, vulnerable left flank. Thus, by early October 1942, Second Hungarian Army, Eighth Italian Army, and Third Romanian Army, in that order, were all stretched thin to provide this flank guard along the Don River northwest of Stalingrad, with Romanian VI and VII Army Corps (scheduled to become Fourth Romanian Army on 20 November) continuing to protect the area west of the Volga River and south of the city. Yet the Italians, Hungarians, and Romanians lacked both numbers and weapons to defend against a serious counterattack. Although a few German antitank batteries and other specialized units reinforced these satellite troops, the defenses on both flanks lacked heavy weapons and were vulnerable to a major mechanized attack.

By contrast, inside Stalingrad, the defending Soviet 62nd Army under Lieutenant General Vasilii Ivanovich Chuikov received enough—although sometimes just barely enough—reinforcements to deny the city to the Germans. In two months of bitter, house-to-house fighting through the ruins of Stalingrad, the Germans lost all their advantages of maneuver warfare, and close-quarters fighting limited the use of German fighter-bombers and artillery. In fact, Chuikov’s troops deliberately “hugged” the German assault groups so that German aircraft and guns could not fire, for fear of hitting their own troops. By late September, Paulus had succeeded in clearing the southern two-thirds of the city, but only at the cost of bleeding his army white. Each infantry and panzer-grenadier regiment could barely muster a few hundred combat infantrymen to continue the advance, while Chuikov’s men clung grimly to the factory district in the northern part of the city. To maintain the offensive, Paulus had to rotate engineer and infantry units between the city center and flanking defenses outside.

All this increased Hitler’s sense of frustration and his belief that his subordinates were failing him. Each time field commanders used their own judgment or otherwise ignored Hitler’s intent, they only reinforced his
suspicions. Nor was his frustration completely unjustified, considering that many of his generals persisted in thinking in terms of destroying Soviet military forces—a tactical or operational goal—while ignoring the designated strategic objective of securing more oil.\(^7\) From Hitler’s point of view, Operation Blau had degenerated into a long series of missed opportunities as the small-minded, overly cautious professional soldiers sought to dissuade their Führer from following the correct course to victory. Given the number of times these generals had been wrong in the past, the creative gambler in Hitler was naturally inclined to follow his own instincts.

Weichs had inherited command of his army group after Hitler fired his predecessor, Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, on 13 July for excessive caution during his advance. Two months later, the German dictator lost patience with the rest of his senior military leadership. On 9 September, he sent Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, the submissive head of the Armed Forces High Command [Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, or OKW], to instruct List to resign. Instead of appointing a new commander of Army Group A, for the next two months Hitler simply had the two field army commanders of that group report to him directly on alternate days! General Franz Halder, who since 1939 had loyally served Hitler as head of the German Army General Staff [Oberkommando des Heeres, or OKH], found himself retired on 24 September, and Hitler hinted at further dismissals. Moreover, subsequent chiefs of the General Staff no longer controlled the assignment of General Staff officers, a function that Hitler moved to his adjutant, Rudolf Schmundt.\(^8\) Yet this shake-up simply exacerbated Germany’s command problems without producing any improvement at the front. Increasingly, therefore, the German dictator avoided meeting with his staff, preferring to pass orders through the new and relatively enthusiastic General Kurt Zeitzler, who succeeded Halder as chief of the OKH.

Despite his reputation as a supporter of the Nazi regime, Zeitzler was a competent General Staff officer. He quickly became concerned about the same issues that had cost Halder his job, especially the lack of sufficient German units to seize the Caucasus oil fields and Stalingrad simultaneously. He was also acutely aware of the toxic atmosphere at headquarters, where Hitler was openly suspicious and contemptuous of his professional advisers.

In mid-October, the new chief of staff made an appointment to give Hitler a private briefing on Zeitzler’s estimate of the strategic situation. Because there were no witnesses to this meeting, we have only Zeitzler’s account of what transpired. Still, given his known actions during the following month, it seems probable that the general did, in fact, provide Hitler with an unvarnished appraisal. If so, then two of Zeitzler’s main points proved especially prescient:
2. The most perilous sector of the Eastern Front was undoubtedly the long, thinly-held flank stretching from Stalingrad to the right boundary of Army Group Center. Furthermore, this sector was held by the weakest and least reliable of our troops, Rumanians, Italians, and Hungarians. . . .

4. The Russians [sic] were both better trained and better led than they had been in 1941.9

According to Zeitzler, Hitler heard him out without interruption, but then politely dismissed the general’s entire argument, assuring Zeitzler that he was too pessimistic in his appraisal.10 The dictator was equally optimistic when he spoke with Weichs and Paulus, apparently believing that even those subordinates he still trusted needed encouragement if not outright goading.

It would be unfair, however, to depict Hitler as a blundering amateur who ignored the threat to his flanks. During September, he made repeated efforts to bolster the defenses there. Based on Weichs’s recommendations, on 13 September a Führer order directed that preparations be made for limited advances to clear and secure the flanks once Stalingrad was secured, in particular, toward the city of Astrakhan’, near where the Volga ran into the Caspian Sea. The plan even allocated scarce reserve divisions, such as the 29th Motorized and 14th Panzer Divisions, to make such advances possible. Unfortunately for Hitler and for the future of Sixth German Army, the tenacious Soviet defense of that city continued for another two months, rendering the 13 September order virtually moot.11 From the German viewpoint, Stalingrad appeared to be the last operation of 1942. To some extent, in fact, the fight for Stalingrad became a struggle by Sixth Army to acquire shelter for the impending winter.

From September onward, Hitler frequently expressed concern about the Don River flank. He often reminded his staff of Stalin’s experience during the Russian Civil War, when Semion Mikhailovich Budenny’s 1st Cavalry Army had conducted a rapid thrust from Stalingrad to Rostov. Therefore, Hitler ordered the German Luftwaffe (Air Force) to increase interdiction attacks on bridging sites over the Don and on suspected assembly areas along the river’s northern bank. Further expressing his disquiet, he issued Operational Order No. 1 on 14 October and a supplement to that order on the 23rd. These directed a number of defensive precautions, including the construction of fallback positions south of the Don. Yet Hitler was intensely human, and he resented his subordinates reminding him of risks he could do little to avert. On 27 October, for example, Zeitzler reported that the Soviet government was generating a massive propaganda campaign about a forthcoming offensive. Hitler dismissed this report and instead worried about reinforcing Army Group Center, the German force opposite Moscow.12
Nor was the Eastern Front Hitler’s only problem. As the tide turned against him in western Europe and the Mediterra
ean, he tried to shore up his defenses. This resulted in various efforts to defend Crete, the British Channel Islands, and North Africa, diverting scarce resources from the East. On 3 November, one of his favorite generals, Erwin Rommel, openly disobeyed the Führer by retreating from El Alamein in Egypt. This betrayal only fueled Hitler’s anger at the professionals, which he vented by firing several additional staff officers. Six days later, in response to the Anglo-American invasion of northwestern Africa, Germany invaded the previously unoccupied portions of southern France.

Moreover, Hitler was physically absent from his eastern headquarters, code-named “Werewolf,” in Vinnitsa, Ukraine, during the crucial two weeks of mid-November. On 7 November, the dictator left Vinnitsa to make his annual speech at Munich commemorating the 1923 Beer Hall Putsch. While in the Bavarian capital, the Führer publicly proclaimed that Paulus’s Sixth Army had already secured Stalingrad, in the mistaken belief that this announcement would strengthen the resolve of the troops. His subordinates dutifully reported that this speech had reenergized the exhausted assault forces of Paulus’s army. Thereafter, Hitler remained in Germany, traveling or vacationing at Berchtesgaden, until 23 November. Although he received constant reports, this absence isolated him from daily contact with Zeitzler and the OKH staff. It is tempting to attribute this absence to a subconscious desire to avoid an intractable situation, but the dictator certainly had other problems besides Stalingrad.

THE WEHRMACHT IN NOVEMBER 1942

The stalemate of October–November 1942 reflected the limitations of the German war machine. When Germany first invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, 19 panzer and 15 motorized infantry divisions had provided the Wehrmacht’s cutting edge, but the bulk of the German army still consisted of 118 foot- and horse-mobile infantry and cavalry divisions. This invasion force depended on artillery and supplies hauled by more than 600,000 horses across the Soviet Union’s woefully underdeveloped transportation network, and the harsh Russian environment took an even greater toll on horses than it did on motor vehicles.13 Germany’s allies were far more limited in their equipment and mobility; for instance, there was only one Romanian armored division, equipped largely with obsolescent tanks.

For the 1942 campaign, Germany fielded several additional panzer divisions, as well as more Waffen (combat) SS motorized divisions, which had the same combat power as army panzer units. Overall, however, the Germans’
combat power on the ground was probably less in 1942 than it had been the previous year because of the disastrous loss of vehicles, crew-served weapons, and horses during the winter of 1941–1942, to say nothing of the experienced *landser* and officers who had perished or been maimed in the Barbarossa campaign. During the first seven months of the Soviet war, in addition to suffering almost 1 million human casualties, the Germans had lost more than 41,000 trucks and 207,000 horses, at a time when horses were the primary means of mobility for artillery and supply units in most infantry divisions. The cost in artillery, antitank guns, and mortars exceeded 13,600 gun tubes, while the *Luftwaffe* had written off 4,903 aircraft as destroyed due to battle damage and accidents.\(^{14}\)

These losses were never completely replaced. Instead, to prepare for Operation Blau in 1942, the Germans prioritized their shortages. In Army Group South, where the new offensive would occur, mechanized units were supposed to reach 85 percent of their authorized strength; farther north, each panzer division was authorized enough armor to equip only one tank battalion rather than the two or three battalions of the previous year. The same was true even in some panzer divisions of First Panzer Army in the south. These battalions were just a jumble of different variants of the same tank. For example, Panzer IIs and IVs might be identified as “short” or “long,” depending on the main gun barrels; in general, the longer barrels were high-velocity guns with greater armor-piercing capabilities.

Infantry divisions fared even worse in the distribution of resources. In Army Groups North and Center, 69 out of 75 infantry divisions were reduced from nine to six battalions of infantry, and their artillery was cut from four guns per battery to three. These divisions also sustained great reductions in horse and motor transportation, making it difficult for them to redeploy forces in response to an enemy attack. Although the *Luftwaffe* reluctantly agreed to release some of its personnel for ground duty, these potential reinforcements were not transferred to the army; rather, they were formed into separate *Luftwaffe* field divisions, lacking in heavy equipment and staff experience.\(^{15}\)

To complicate matters further, the majority of divisions in the East were not even withdrawn to the rear to rest and refit; they had to reconstitute themselves while still defending a sector of the front. Thus, even before the 1942 summer offensive, the typical German division was notably less capable than it had been in 1941. Because of its high production priorities, the German *Luftwaffe* began the 1942 campaign at substantially the same level (2,750 aircraft in the East) it had fielded in 1941 (2,770).\(^{16}\) Still, these figures concealed a decline in the training level of aircrews after nearly three years of active warfare.

Such was the state of the *Wehrmacht* when the second great offensive
began in early July 1942. Four months later, it was again only a shadow of its former self. Constant operations, fragile logistics, and incessant enemy activity wore down men, vehicles, and horses. For example, 24th Panzer Division, formed in early 1942 from the former 1st (horse) Cavalry Division, spearheaded the entire offensive and was instrumental in clearing the city of Stalingrad. Between 28 June and 31 October 1942, this division of 11,000 men suffered 5,870 killed, seriously wounded, and missing; in addition, 36 of perhaps 100 tanks were permanently destroyed, and many others were rendered nonoperational by combat and excessive wear. Another 2,791 men had been lightly wounded but remained with their units, while the division received only 2,298 replacements during this four-month period. As it gathered for another urban assault on the morning of 31 October, 24th Panzer Division’s actual dismounted rifle strength, including two panzer-grenadier regiments, a motorcycle battalion, and a combat engineer battalion, was only 41 officers and 960 men.17

By mid-November, the 16 divisions of Sixth Army were, in the aggregate, understrength by 107,982 men, or an average of 6,748 per division. Front-line infantry units were even weaker than these overall figures suggest. Compounding this numerical weakness, the tenuous German logistical system was unable to meet requirements for ammunition and petroleum products, nor was the army able to build up winter stocks of food. On average, Sixth Army received only about half the required daily trainloads of supplies. With winter approaching on the barren steppes around Stalingrad, German horses were so malnourished that many did not survive being moved to winter recovery centers.18 The troops were almost equally sickly after months of combat and uncertain rations. Although they suffered fewer combat losses, Germany’s air formations also declined under constant use in extreme conditions. Thus, the Fourth Air Fleet [Luftflotte 4], the air force unit supporting Operation Blau, started with 1,600 aircraft in early July but had only 950 left in September. On any given day, perhaps 550 of these were operational, a figure that declined with the arrival of extreme cold.19

Such problems were not confined solely to the long-suffering troops in Stalingrad. By early November, Army Group A’s effort to take the Caucasus oil fields had also reached the end of its tether. On the morning of 5 November, 13th Panzer Division, operating more than 2,000 kilometers from its starting point 16 months before, found itself cut off and surrounded in the outskirts of the city of Ordzhonikidze by the Trans-Caucasus Front’s Northern Group, under the command of Lieutenant General Ivan Ivanovich Maslennikov. Although First Panzer Army eventually extricated its forces from this trap, 13th Panzer Division left behind most of its equipment as well as a significant number of casualties. Counting the losses of 13th Panzer Division and two other divisions of III Panzer Corps involved in the same
fierce fight for Ordzhonikidze, the Soviets recorded destroying or capturing 40 tanks, 7 armored personnel carriers, 70 guns, 2,350 vehicles, 183 motorcycles, more than 1 million rounds of ammunition, and countless other supplies, while killing more than 5,000 German and Romanian troops.\textsuperscript{20}

Acknowledging the overall weakness of its combat forces in the East, on 8 October 1942, the OKH had directed all headquarters above division level to release 10 percent of their personnel as replacements, while all support units not engaged in combat were to form standby “alarm detachments” [\textit{alarm abteilung}] to respond to sudden emergencies. Six weeks later, these alarm detachments in various sizes and shapes proved to be critical in restoring a tenuous front line after the coming Soviet offensive.\textsuperscript{21}

In short, by early November, the German forces were exhausted, incapable of doing anything more than holding their positions until the arrival of better weather and significant reinforcements. Given Hitler’s consistent reluctance to fully mobilize his economy and population, rebuilding the forces for a third campaign in Russia would be at least as difficult as the second effort had been.

GERMAN FIELD COMMANDERS

Even those German leaders who survived Hitler’s housecleaning did not always prosper. Paulus, the loyal workaholic who had dedicated his entire life to gaining acceptance as a General Staff officer, had long been a favorite of Hitler’s, but this status would lead him to take a sacrificial role, trying to clear and then defend the city long after his shattered Sixth Army had become ineffective.

Of the many other field commanders in the East, two would emerge as pivotal in the coming campaign. The first of these, Fritz-Erich von Manstein, had just received a field marshal’s baton for the brilliant offensive operations that had cleared Soviet forces from the Crimean Peninsula in May and captured the Soviet fortress of Sevastopol’ in early July. On 20 November 1942, he was preparing his Eleventh Army for a new attack near Vitebsk when Hitler summoned him to deal with the huge breach created by the first Soviet counteroffensive against Stalingrad. Born in 1887, Manstein was a wizened disciplinarian of great ability and great ego. In the coming crisis, he nearly succeeded in his assigned task of building bricks without straw, halting and reversing the Soviet counteroffensive with a handful of threadbare German divisions. Although he was ultimately unable to save Paulus’s forces, Manstein conducted a series of brilliant offensive maneuvers that contained the great Soviet offensive and saved a large portion of the German army in the East.\textsuperscript{22}
Manstein's great achievements and unabashed self-promotion have generally obscured the equally brilliant performance of his counterpart, Colonel General Ewald von Kleist. A committed royalist and Christian since his birth in 1881, Kleist had a distaste for Nazism that had led to his retirement in 1938. Recalled when the war began, this superb cavalryman showed a consummate grasp of mobile warfare, commanding First Panzer Army up to the gates of the Caucasus oil fields in 1942. In early November, as noted earlier, Kleist was already stymied in the Caucasus by a combination of desperate Soviet resistance, winter weather, and incredibly extended supply lines. While Manstein tried to halt the advancing Soviet torrent as head of the new Army Group Don, Kleist would have the similarly difficult, if less glamorous, task of extricating the entire Army Group A back to the Rostov area. This feat eventually earned him a marshal's baton.23

THE RED ARMY IN NOVEMBER 1942

Soviet forces had suffered even more than their German counterparts during Operation Blau. Between 28 June and 18 November 1942, the Red Army and Navy units defending against the German offensive suffered 694,000 dead from combat and illness, a figure that did not include the nearly 200,000 dead in the Caucasus region.24 Despite, or perhaps because of, detailed instructions from the headquarters of the Stavka (Soviet Supreme High Command) in Moscow, several Soviet field armies had simply ceased to exist during the initial German advance of July–August.

Nowhere were these losses more serious than in Stalingrad itself. Between 14 September and 26 October 1942, nine Red Army divisions and five separate brigades crossed the Volga River into the ruined city, yet by 1 November, Chuikov had no more troops—perhaps 50,000 on a good day—under his command than he had possessed two months before. All the reinforcements had simply melted away in the crucible of warfare, leaving behind only a handful of men in each regiment. Small wonder, then, that the shrunken bridgeheads in the northern part of the city appeared to be on the verge of destruction when Sixth German Army also ran out of troops in early November.25

Despite the continued weakness of front-line forces, however, the overall Soviet force structure and combat capability were, if anything, stronger in November than they had been in July. Through a miracle of dedicated effort, the Soviets had first moved hundreds of arms factories east of the Ural Mountains during 1941 and then brought those factories back to mass production in the following spring and summer. This phenomenal mobilization allowed the Red Army to absorb huge materiel losses while still fielding
new units, a situation their opponents could only dream of. Of course, creating new units rather than reequipping existing ones carried a price when inexperienced new formations entered combat. However, during 1942, the People’s Commissariat of Defense (NKO) mastered the technique of using the headquarters from shattered units to provide the nuclei for new, more sophisticated formations.

Following Soviet doctrine as well as the experience of 1941, the Soviet government continued to generate new or reconstituted armies and other units on a grand scale, holding many of these formations in the Stavka general reserve (RVGK) until the Axis invaders had exhausted themselves. On 23 October, for example, the Stavka formed the 1st and 2nd Guards Armies in its strategic reserve and earmarked them for employment in the Southwestern and Western Fronts, respectively. For the first time since July 1941, the Red Army began creating two full-strength field armies, each with two rifle corps (of three divisions each) and one mechanized corps, as well as artillery and combat support units. These forces represented a conscious decision that at least some Soviet commanders and staffs could integrate a complex mixture of combat arms and services in combat.

The mechanized corps themselves were the latest step in the process of constructing mobile forces capable of dealing with the Germans on almost equal terms. The initial invasion of 1941 had shattered the huge but poorly equipped and poorly trained armored forces of the prewar Red Army. For the remainder of 1941, the Stavka had concentrated the few available tanks in infantry support brigades, some of them numbering only 46 tanks, and separate tank battalions of even fewer tanks. During the desperate battles before Moscow, however, some of these tank brigade commanders had survived and learned how to lead their units. Such men became the leaders of the next generation of mechanized forces, the so-called tank corps of 1942. Despite their designation, each of these corps was in fact the size of a slightly understrength German division. By July 1942, a typical tank corps consisted of 7,200 to 7,600 men and 146 to 180 tanks.

The father of these new units was Lieutenant General Iakov Nikolaevich Fedorenko, chief of the Red Army’s Main Auto-Armored Directorate. Fedorenko used the vast new production of Soviet arms factories, supplemented by limited amounts of British and American Lend-Lease equipment, to build 28 tank corps during 1942. When the first units proved too weak to sustain prolonged combat operations, Fedorenko began to organize a related formation, the mechanized corps, which included one or two tank brigades as well as three mechanized brigades, with each of the latter including 39 medium tanks and trucked infantry. Depending on the specific table of organization, a mechanized corps varied between 175 and 204 tanks.

At first, these new tank and mechanized corps experienced a number of
teething problems, some due to a shortage of specialized equipment such as tracked armored personnel carriers, recovery vehicles, and radios. Worse still, although there were many competent corps commanders, these corps were often yoked with conventional infantry and cavalry units in an unwieldy structure known as a “tank army,” four of which the Soviets fielded in the summer of 1942. Not only did these armies have to deal with the uneven mobility and armor of their subordinate units, but the staffs and commanders were in many ways unprepared for the task of orchestrating such a large and clumsy formation. As a result, some of the early tank corps suffered heavily in the fighting of the summer and fall of 1942, and the first tank armies fell apart under the German offensive. Again, however, the harsh school of combat experience helped develop commanders and technicians capable of operating mechanized forces.

The newfound wealth of weaponry was not confined to tanks or tank units. Across the board, more weapons permitted the creation of more specialized Soviet units. During 1942, for example, the NKO formed 192 new tank destroyer (antitank) artillery regiments, a key component in the Soviets’ growing ability to wear down and contain German mechanized advances. Despite losing 31 of these regiments in combat during 1942, by the end of the year, the NKO had increased its antitank strength more than 500 percent, adding 4,117 antitank guns to the inventory.29 Field and rocket artillery grew apace. Although the Red Army did not increase the number of artillery pieces permanently assigned to each division until 1944, it continued to create huge numbers of nondivisional artillery, rocket, and antiaircraft formations. On 31 October, the NKO prepared for the coming counteroffensive by combining many separate RVGK regiments into 18 new artillery divisions and a like number of antiaircraft artillery divisions. Each of these artillery divisions initially included three howitzer regiments, three gun regiments, and either three antitank or two antiaircraft regiments, for a total of 168 or 144 gun tubes, respectively. Command and control of such units suffered many of the same problems that had plagued mechanized units, but the creation of these divisions marked another key step in enabling senior Soviet commanders to employ their vastly expanded forces.30

While Hitler was losing faith in his generals, Stalin was gaining confidence in at least some of his subordinates. As the 1942 campaign progressed, the Soviet dictator retained overall control but increasingly trusted the professionalism of senior Red Army staff officers and commanders. Even commanders who lost battles escaped the kind of draconian punishment that had characterized the peacetime purges and the early battles of 1941.31

Stalin’s renewed confidence in his commanders took many forms, from the creation of new medals and awards to distinctive uniforms for the
officers. Perhaps the most significant sign of this increased trust in Soviet commanders was NKO Order No. 307 of 9 October 1942, which ostensibly restored unity of command [edinonachal'stvo] in the armed forces. Soviet commanders at all levels regained full control of their units, with commissars and other political officers being reduced to “Members of the Military Councils” at front and army levels or deputy commanders for political affairs [zampolits] at lower command levels. This action was a clear indication that Stalin trusted his professional officers both militarily and politically. In the words of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet decree that justified the NKO order: “The system of war commissars which was established in the Red Army during the Civil War was based on mistrust of the military commands. . . . The present patriotic war against the German invaders has welded our commands together and produced a large corps of talented new commanders who have gathered experience and who will remain true to their honor as officers to the death.”

In addition, on 16 October the Stavka published Order No. 325 regarding the combat employment of large tank formations. Although signed by Stalin, this was, in fact, a digest of lessons learned in previous battles, lessons that would now be applied to all future operations. Improvement did not come overnight, but under Order No. 325, tank and mechanized corps would be employed as independent formations designated for maneuver warfare, rather than broken up into penny-packet units to support the infantry. Armor commanders were to engage German armor only when the Soviets had clear numerical superiority. The coming winter battles would be the first opportunity to test such ideas, but these decisions clearly demonstrated the growing combat effectiveness of the much-maligned Red Army.

SOVIET FIELD COMMANDERS

There were many competent leaders in this army, and more would earn their spurs during the coming campaign. At least five senior officers had already made their mark prior to the new offensive, and all would burnish their reputations in the ensuing combat.

Georgii Konstantinovich Zhukov, age 45, was Stalin’s favorite general. Having served with distinction in the Red Army’s cavalry forces during and after the Russian Civil War, Zhukov won a signal victory over the vaunted Japanese Kwantung Army at Khalkhin-Gol, Manchuria, in August 1939. In recognition of his distinguished service, Stalin appointed him commander
of the Kiev Special Military District in June 1940, a post he occupied until January 1941, when he became chief of the Red Army General Staff and first deputy commissar of defense.

A charter member of Stalin’s wartime Stavka, Zhukov became the dictator’s favorite “fixer,” traveling to many threatened areas to coordinate local defenses and counterstrokes in 1941. In particular, he earned lasting fame for his tenacious defense of Leningrad in September 1941 and Moscow in October and November 1941. He then planned and conducted the Red Army’s first great counteroffensive in the Moscow region from December 1941 through April 1942. Despite his single-minded and often ruthless conduct of the campaign, his forces saved Stalin’s capital but failed to achieve the Stavka’s more ambitious strategic aims.

As Hitler’s Wehrmacht conducted Operation Blau across southern Russia in July 1942, Zhukov’s Western Front launched multiple counterstrokes in a vain effort to divert German attention and forces from their primary objective in the south. After Stalin rewarded Zhukov by anointing him deputy supreme commander in August 1942, the general launched a series of spectacular counteroffensives against German Army Group Center’s defenses in and around the Rzhev-Viaz’ma salient west of Moscow. Although this major effort failed before achieving its ultimate objective of destroying German forces in the salient, it severely damaged German Ninth Army. Zhukov had also tied down German operational reserves in the central portion of the front, reserves desperately needed to achieve victory in the Stalingrad region. Then, replicating the feat he had performed roughly a year earlier when he saved Leningrad and Moscow, Zhukov sped south in September to the Stalingrad region, where he orchestrated the Stalingrad Front’s multiple counterstrokes against German panzer forces in the Kotluban’ region northwest of Stalingrad. Though genuinely bloody and costly defeats, these magnificent suicidal thrusts decisively unhinged German Sixth Army’s plan to seize Stalingrad by a panzer coup de main and ultimately transformed Stalin’s namesake city into Sixth Army’s grave. Thus, by the middle of fall 1942, the ruthless, calculating Zhukov remained Stalin’s most trusted field commander and played a major role in planning the series of ambitious Red Army counteroffensives in November and December 1942.35

Forty-seven-year-old Colonel General Aleksandr Mikhailovich Vasilevsky, the chief of the General Staff, was equally important to the Soviet conduct of war. Vasilevsky was one of the few soldiers who enjoyed Stalin’s trust, in part because he was a key staff officer and had remained in Moscow during the 1941 defense of the capital, when most of the government had evacuated the city. He was a protégé of Marshal of the Soviet Union Boris Mikhailovich Shaposhnikov, the “father” of the Red Army General Staff. Vasilevsky was arguably the most skilled member of the Stavka and Stalin’s
second most trusted general, after Zhukov. A former infantry officer who did not enjoy the benefits of belonging to Stalin’s “cavalry clique,” Vasilevsky had advanced through merit alone and had joined the General Staff after his graduation from the General Staff Academy in the purge-truncated class of 1937.

Rising from colonel to colonel general in four years, Vasilevsky became deputy chief of the General Staff’s Operations Directorate in May 1940, where he played a vital role in developing the Red Army’s defense and mobilization plans during the last few months of peace. In the wake of the German invasion, Stalin appointed Vasilevsky as chief of the General Staff’s Operations Directorate and deputy chief of the General Staff in August 1941. While he helped plan most of the major operations the Red Army conducted in 1941 and 1942, Vasilevsky also served as a “representative of the Stavka,” or Stalin’s troubleshooter in the field, during many of these operations. He would reprise this role numerous times during the counteroffensives of late 1942.36

Andrei Ivanovich Eremenko was another member of the Red Army’s cavalry clique during the Russian Civil War. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union, he advanced rapidly to the senior commands of the army and earned the sobriquet the “Russian Guderian.” Known for his audacity and tenacity in combat, he temporarily headed the Western Front during the intense fighting in the Smolensk region in July and August 1941, and he led the Briansk Front in its futile attempts to contain Guderian’s famous southward advance toward Kiev in September 1941 and during its defense of the southwestern approaches to Moscow in October 1941, when he was severely wounded. Because of his reputation as a fighter, the Stavka appointed Eremenko to command the Southeastern Front in the defense of Stalingrad during the climactic stages of the Germans’ Operation Blau. In these positions, Eremenko suffered not only several wounds in battle but also much verbal badgering from Stalin. Yet, at various times, Eremenko, together with his political officer Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev, controlled not only his own front but also the neighboring Stalingrad Front. His retention in such critical positions indicates that the 50-year-old general had earned Stalin’s trust as a methodical if not necessarily brilliant commander.37 Eremenko justified Stalin’s trust by becoming the chief architect of the forthcoming Red Army counteroffensive in the Stalingrad region.

The fourth member of this panoply of leading Red Army generals was 46-year-old Konstantin Konstantinovich Rokossovsky, who became the Red Army’s most accomplished army commander by mid-1942. Rokossovsky had earned his spurs commanding cavalry battalions and regiments during the Civil War and a cavalry brigade, division, and corps during the 1920s and 1930s. Despite being caught up in Stalin’s great purges, with Timoshenko’s
and Zhukov’s help, he was exonerated and assigned to command the Kiev Special Military District’s 9th Mechanized Corps on the eve of the German invasion in June 1941. Thereafter, amidst the Red Army’s catastrophic defeats in Operation Barbarossa, Rokossovsky earned recognition as the Red Army’s premier “fireman” by successfully leading 9th Mechanized Corps in the border battles of late June 1941, Special Group Iartsevo during the two-month struggle in the Smolensk region, and 16th Army in the battle for Moscow. Where countless other senior officers failed, Rokossovsky succeeded. Unlike many other Red Army generals of this era, he earned the respect of his troops for his reluctance to cavalierly sacrifice their lives for the sake of uncertain victory. The Stavka rewarded Rokossovsky for his prowess by appointing him to command the Briansk Front in July 1942 and the Don Front three months later.38

Finally, Colonel General Nikolai Fedorovich Vatutin, already recognized for his brilliance as a senior staff officer, would prove himself an able field commander during the Red Army’s counteroffensive at Stalingrad. An experienced General Staff officer and veteran of the Russian Civil War, this infantry officer commanded at the company level before rising through various key staff positions to become the Kiev Special Military District’s chief of staff in 1940 and then chief of the Red Army General Staff’s Operations Directorate and first deputy chief of the General Staff on the eve of the Great Patriotic War. A 40-year-old protégé of Vasilevsky, Vatutin, while serving as the Northwestern Front’s chief of staff during the initial stages of Operation Barbarossa, won high praise from the Stavka for orchestrating major counterstrokes against German Army Group North in the Sol’tsy and Staraia Russa regions in July and August 1941. Although both these actions ended in defeat, they surprised the Germans, inflicted severe damage on several key German divisions, and delayed Army Group North’s advance on Leningrad for as much as four weeks, ultimately facilitating Zhukov’s successful defense of that city in September 1941. Vatutin further burnished his reputation as an audacious and skilled fighter in October 1941, when he organized and led a special operational group that thwarted German Army Group Center’s advance on Kalinin, thereby preventing the Germans from severing Soviet communications between Moscow and Leningrad.39

By virtue of these accomplishments, the Stavka appointed Vatutin, who was chomping at the bit for a field command, to head the Red Army’s Voronezh Front in its defense against German forces conducting Operation Blau. Vatutin, displaying characteristic audacity and ever-increasing skill, mounted multiple counterstrokes in the Voronezh region during July and August 1942, materially slowing the German advance toward Stalingrad and posing a deadly threat to Army Group B’s northern flank. As the German tide crested and then ebbed in the rubble of Stalingrad during October 1942, the
Stavka appointed Vatutin command of the new Southwestern Front, which would play a vital role in the forthcoming Stalingrad counteroffensive.

In addition to these five distinguished front commanders who had already earned recognition as effective fighters prior to the battle for Stalingrad, the heated and often desperate struggle in the Stalingrad and Caucasus regions in the fall of 1942 produced an entire generation of effective battle-tested, combat-hardened leaders at the army, corps, and division levels within the Red Army. At the same time, 18 months of war saw other generals emerge with branch expertise. Like General Fedorenko, the Red Army's expert on the formation and employment of armored forces, new experts emerged within the Red Army's force branches, including General Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Novikov for the air forces, General Nikolai Nikolaevich Voronov for the artillery, General Mikhail Petrovich Vorob'ev for engineer and sapper forces, and General Andrei Vasil'evich Khrenov, the army's chief logistician. Some of these experts, along with other senior General Staff officers and former front commanders such as Vasilevsky and Marshal Timoshenko, later served as Stavka representatives tasked with planning and coordinating major operations that required their expertise.40

Thus, if success in the Stalingrad counteroffensive required the leadership and expertise of front and army commanders who had already proved themselves in combat, the ensuing offensive would produce an entirely new generation of capable and experienced army, corps, division, and brigade commanders. These men, forged, tested, and hardened in the fighting at Stalingrad, would lead the Red Army to ultimate victory in the war.