



The Battle of Kursk: The History and Legacy of the Biggest Tank Battle of World War II

Charles River Editors

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“The Russians have learnt a lot since 1941. They are no longer peasants with simple minds. They have learnt the art of war from us.” – Wehrmacht Generaloberst Hermann “Papa” Hoth at Kursk (Healy, 1992, 90)

“On the German side, the reserves which will become so desperately necessary as the war situation develops [...] will be tied down and thrown away uselessly. I consider the operation that has been planned a particularly grave error, for which we shall suffer later.” – Colonel Reinhard Gehlen, Wehrmacht intelligence analyst, writing about Operation Citadel (Fowler, 2005, 66).

The vast expanses of southern Russia and the Ukraine provided the Eastern Front arena where the armies of Third Reich dictator Adolf Hitler and Soviet dictator Josef Stalin wrestled lethally for supremacy in 1943. Endless rolling plains – ideal “tank country” – vast forests, sprawling cities, and enormous tracts of agricultural land formed the environment over which millions of men and thousands of the era's most formidable military vehicles fought for their respective overlords and ideologies.

The winner could expect to reap very high stakes indeed. If Hitler's Wehrmacht smashed the Red Army, he could no longer hope for a lightning conquest, but the Fuhrer could expect the Soviet strongman to sue for peace on terms advantageous to Germany. If, conversely, the Red Army triumphed, Stalin could continue rallying the Soviet Union and move closer to expelling the loathed “Nemets” invaders from Russian soil – and perhaps carve out a Soviet empire in Central Europe.

Asserting that changes in the military leadership style of the two contending dictators explains the outcome of Kursk oversimplifies the actual situation. Logistics, the emergence of a body of experienced junior officers in the Red Army, American Lend-Lease shipments, German production problems, and other issues all contributed to the observed result.

However, the overarching factor tying everything together remained the changing approach of each leader to their army. At the start of the war, Hitler gave his commanders considerable initiative while Stalin fatally micromanaged his, and the Germans ripped vast hordes of Soviets to shreds with comparative ease. In late 1942 and moving into 1943, Hitler commenced micromanaging the Wehrmacht, and Stalin adopted a more “hands-off” approach permitting his commanders considerable initiative: “At the heart of the Red Army's lopsided tank losses was an amateurish and self-destructive style of decision imposed by Stalin [...] In November 1942 there was a subtle shift in the Red Army, as months of military disasters finally caused Stalin to reduce some of his interference [...] and allow quiet professionals such as Vasilevsky, Vatutin and Rokossovsky to prepare proper offensives.” (Forczyk, 2013, 257).

Though the Wehrmacht remained too formidable and professional to collapse as readily as the appallingly low-quality Red Army had in 1941 and early 1942, the Red Army slowly got the upper hand and achieved strategic offensive momentum. That the shift occurred at the moment when Hitler hamstrung his generals with his melodramatic obstructionism while Stalin gave his some operational breathing room probably represents no accident.

Kursk represented the transitional battle during which the Red Army first demonstrated its new capabilities. The Soviets possessed better commanders than at the start of the war, a numerous soldiery, good-quality equipment (in particular, the T-34 tank), and the beginnings of a professional officer corps. Nevertheless, it required personal, ham-handed intervention by Adolf Hitler to transform Kursk from a probable hard-won Wehrmacht victory into a marginal but highly significant defeat.

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