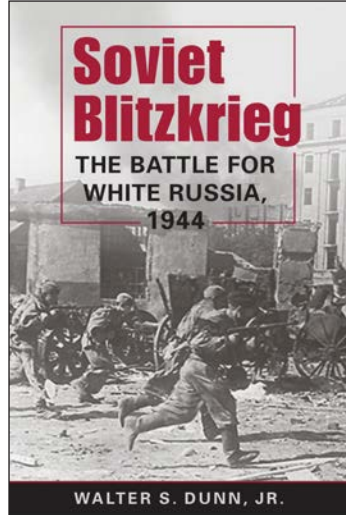


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Soviet Blitzkrieg:
The Battle for
White Russia,
1944

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INTRODUCTION

The Battle for White Russia erupted south of Vitebsk on the morning of 22 June 1944, when Russian artillery began a thundering barrage of over a thousand guns, mortars, and rockets that blasted away for 2 hours and 20 minutes in an 18-kilometer-long sector. At the same time a Soviet fighter corps, two bomber divisions, and a ground attack division pummeled the bunkers of General Pfeiffer's VI Corps with bombs and strafed any foolhardy German troops in the trenches with machine gun fire. The sheer weight of explosives that rained down on the German dugouts and bunkers paralyzed the defenders, especially the new replacements who had arrived during the previous few months. Even the older, experienced men had never suffered through such an intense pounding for so many hours. When the heavy artillery and rockets finally quieted the relentless air attacks intensified; *landsers* (German foot soldiers) leaving a dugout invited instant death. Finally, the rumbling of engines and the clatter of steel tracks signaled the approach of the dreaded Soviet tanks, sounds greeted with a sigh of relief, for at least the rain of death from the skies soon would cease.

However this bloody havoc was but a prelude to what was still to come. A torrent of tanks and riflemen from four divisions of General N. I. Krylov's 5th Army stormed the German trenches along the 18-kilometers sector, about 36,000 men, or two men for every meter. With the shouting Red Army riflemen came two tank brigades and five assault gun regiments with over 120 tanks and 100 assault guns, double the strength of a panzer division. The hurricane struck nine battalions of the German 299th Division and one regiment of the 256th Division with their 4,500 men against 36,000 Soviet soldiers. The Russians quickly overran all three trench lines of the first defense zone, and two more Soviet divisions rushed forward to add weight to the onslaught. Within hours a gap of 50 kilometers

opened in the German defenses, and Soviet mobile columns of tanks, assault guns, and motorized infantry poured through to exploit the success.

The crushing breakthrough by the 5th Army south of Vitebsk was but one of six major breakthroughs north and south of Vitebsk, north of Orsha, east of Mogilev, and east and south of Bobruysk. The six eruptions opened one of the biggest battles of all times in terms of the number of men involved, 2 million Russians and nearly a million Germans and their allies, one-third of all the troops on the Eastern Front. The destruction of fifty divisions imposed on the defenders altered the course of the war. After the first 2 weeks of the White Russian operation, Hitler had no chance to withdraw any troops from the east to check the British and Americans in France, and instead stripped the other German army groups in the east of their reserves to close the yawning void that had been Army Group Center. The gains of the first 2 weeks were accomplished with minimal Soviet losses—unlike the future bloodbath at Berlin. In that same 2-week period the number of Germans killed and captured far exceeded the number of Soviet casualties.

This greatest of all Soviet victories in World War II, except taking Berlin, came from the application of blitzkrieg tactics and strategy. Most Soviet victories were the result of overwhelming the Germans with superior numbers of men and machines in frontal attacks, which were demanded by the need for quick results; but the Red Army was capable of waging blitzkrieg-style warfare. The first phase of the Battle for White Russia ending in the destruction of the German Army Group Center is an outstanding case study of Soviet blitzkrieg.

Eight elements made up the successful execution of the White Russian operation: local superiority, deception, surprise, leadership, timing, use of terrain, training, and technology. The success of the elite armored spearheads resulted from an ideal combination of factors.

Local Superiority

The first requirement was the concentration of force in the breakthrough sectors to secure a huge margin of superiority. This the Red Army achieved in June 1944. North of Vitebsk the elite 1st Tank Corps, commanded by General V. V. Butkov, had been completely refitted with 195 new T34/85 tanks and forty-two new assault guns in the spring of 1944 and was much stronger than a German panzer division. Butkov drove due west after the breakthrough in General Wuthmann's IX Corps sector, while the Soviet 6th Guard Army com-

manded by General I. M. Chistyakov supported by tank and assault guns equivalent to a tank corps turned south to cut off Vitebsk from the north.

South of Vitebsk, General I. I. Lyudnikov's 39th Army turned north after the breakthrough to cut off Vitebsk and the four divisions of General Gollwitzer's LIII Corps in Vitebsk from the south. General N. S. Oslikovskiy's Horse-Mechanized Group with the famous 3rd Guard Cavalry Corps, which had retaken Smolensk in the summer of 1943, and the 3rd Guard Mechanized Corps, equipped with sixty-five new Sherman M4A2 tanks with high-velocity 76mm guns in its tank brigade and forty-two assault guns, drove southwest to Senno.

North of Orsha, General A. S. Burdeyniy's 2nd Guard Tank Corps, at full strength with new T34/85 tanks, sped quickly to Borisov to close the escape route of General K. Tippelskirch's Fourth Army. Marshal P. A. Rotmistrov's 5th Guard Tank Army followed and played a major role in creating the pockets east of Minsk.

East of Mogilev, General I. T. Grishin's 49th Army with tank-supported infantry hammered away to hold Tippelskirch in place, while the Russian pincers closed behind from the north and south.

East of Bobruysk, General A. B. Gorbatov's 3rd, with General B. S. Bakharov's 9th Tank Corps, coming back from 6 months behind the lines with 195 new T34/85 tanks and forty-two assault guns, broke through General Freiherr von Lützow's XXXV Corps of General Jordan's Ninth Army and General Müller's XII Corps of Tippelskirch's Fourth Army. Bakharov plunged ahead to cut off Bobruysk from the north, while Gorbatov turned north to cut off Mogilev from the south.

South of Bobruysk, General A. A. Luchinskiy's 28th and General P. I. Batov's 65th Armies broke through General Weidling's XXXXI Corps. General I. A. Pliev's Horse-Mechanized Group plunged through the hole and dashed west toward Slutsk. (Two months earlier, Pliev's group had been awarded the Order of the Red Banner for its spectacular breakthrough to take Odessa in the Ukraine in April 1944.) General M. F. Panov's 1st Guard Tank Corps, another crack unit that had been refitted with 195 new T34/85 tanks and forty-two assault guns, turned northwest to cut off Bobruysk from the south. After surrounding Bobruysk, Panov joined Bakharov in the drive toward Minsk, the capital of White Russia.

Deception

A second blitzkrieg requirement was deception to minimize the availability of enemy reserves that could contain the armored spear-

heads once the breakthrough had been accomplished. The Russians cleverly diverted the German reserves in June 1944 by an elaborate deception plan that convinced Hitler that the main attack would come at Kovel to the south, leading him to retain his powerful panzer divisions there until his Army Group Center was annihilated. (In a previous example, in May 1940, the Germans had enticed the British and French to string out their forces through northeastern France and through Belgium all the way to the Dutch border, leaving the Germans' breakthrough sector at Sedan without adequate reserves.

Deception played a major role in the White Russian offensive. In view of the identified Soviet troop concentrations north and south of the Pripyat Marshes salient, neither Hitler nor the German OKH (Oberkommando des Heeres—Army High Command) could comprehend a frontal attack on White Russia. The Soviets had concentrated a number of highly visible offensive units, including tank armies, in the Kovel area, well to the southwest, in the spring of 1944. Even after the offensive began, days passed before the Germans were able to appreciate that the attacks were anything more than a ruse devised to draw German reserves away from the crucial points at Kovel and Ostrov far to the north. Hitler reasoned that pulling German reserves into the marshes would increase the size of the bag of captured Germans when the real attacks began and cut off the Pripyat salient with a gigantic encirclement with pincers from north and south. Given this interpretation of Soviet intentions, the pleas of the army and corps commanders in Army Group Center that a major offensive was about to erupt on the face of the salient were ignored.

The elaborate plan of deception was aimed at the higher German command levels. German front-line units were, of course, aware that something major was brewing across the barbed wire entanglements. To deceive the Germans, the Russians made an elaborate show of building defenses in depth to indicate a passive role for the Red Army units on the face of the Pripyat salient. However, the German front-line commanders detected the movement of units and the ever increasing density of Russian infantry, tanks, and artillery in front of them.

The Soviet leadership made a concerted effort to prevent the Germans from learning the true extent of the buildup. Assault units remained in the rear until the last few days, while the front continued to be occupied by the same divisions. Troop movements were made at night, and the units were concealed in forests during the day. Although the 5th Guard Tank Army moved from the Ukraine to the area south of Vitebsk, German intelligence maps still placed it in the south on 22 June 1944. The 11th Guard Army was moved by rail

from the Crimea to concealed training grounds in the forests around Nevel in May. The 11th Guard Army prepared for the upcoming offensive without being detected by German reconnaissance aircraft, which were kept away by special efforts of the Red Air Force.

Although scores of units, such as the 11th Guard Army or the 5th Guard Tank Army, were added to the four Soviet fronts, most did not have a high profile. The two newly assembled horse-mechanized groups, nearly as powerful as tank armies, went undetected. (The presence of tank armies usually signaled Soviet offensives, just as German offensives earlier in the war had been marked by the concentration of panzer corps.) Since German intelligence did not detect the presence of any tank armies opposing Army Group Center, Hitler and the OKH were convinced that no major offensive would take place in the area, and German panzer reserves were held opposite the Soviet tank armies that had been located. Even when the catastrophe was well under way, Hitler was reluctant to move the panzer divisions to help and instead sent a few infantry divisions and assault gun brigades.

Much of the Soviet buildup came in the form of independent tank brigades and regiments and new assault gun regiments from the Stavka (Army Headquarters) reserve and the Moscow Military District. Although these additions individually were minor and, if detected, aroused little interest, the sum total represented over a thousand tanks and assault guns, mostly of the latest types. During the opening weeks of the offensive, Soviet rifle divisions were amply supported by tanks and assault guns whenever needed. In the accounts of an advancing rifle division, the presence of a tank brigade or an assault gun regiment was usually noted.

Surprise

The third blitzkrieg factor was surprise. In June 1944 the Germans believed that the four fortified cities of Vitebsk, Orsha, Mogilev, and Bogushevsk effectively blocked the four good roads, the paths usable by armored forces. The Red Army broke through the German lines between the fortified cities in marshy sectors and caught the Germans by surprise. The Russians were able to sustain the breakthroughs with four-wheel-drive American-made trucks, a factor the Germans had not anticipated. Once through the German defense zones, the Russians were able to surround the four strongpoints and take them from the rear.

Similarly in France in May 1940, the Germans had come through the Ardennes, which the Allies believed impassable for armored

units. The German panzers were able to brush aside the weak French divisions guarding a supposedly safe sector and dash to the English Channel.

Leadership

Boldness was also a major component of a successful blitzkrieg. Russian division, corps, and army commanders risked everything as they dashed ahead, relying for protection on the speed of their advance and the disorganization in the German rear. Both the Red Army in June 1944 and the Germans in May 1940 acted boldly, although the destruction of the British army in 1940 was denied when Hitler stopped the advance short of Dunkirk.

Bolder leadership in the Red Army resulted from a vital change that had occurred by the spring of 1944 as the relationship between Stalin and his generals moved from their fear of him to working in harmony as Stalin came to trust his subordinates. In 1941 the Russian generals were more afraid of Stalin than the Germans (an army commander was shot for losing a battle) and were careful to make conservative decisions that would meet with Stalin's approval even though the decisions would cost many lives. As the war progressed, Stalin became more concerned about the loss of millions of soldiers. The Soviet generals came to strike a more equitable balance between fear of failure and that of losing men, and by 1944 the aim of the Red Army was containment of losses unless there was a worthy objective.

An example of Stalin's search for professional leadership was the career of General I. S. Lazarenko. In June 1941 Lazarenko commanded the 42nd Rifle Division in the 4th Army defending Brest. After a determined resistance the Germans finally drove the division out of Brest, but Stalin did not believe that Lazarenko had done enough and had him arrested for indecisive action, negligence, and surrendering his command to the enemy. Lazarenko was convicted and ordered to be shot, but the sentence was reduced to 10 years in prison. In 1943 he was released, and in June 1944 he was in command of the 369th Rifle Division of the 49th Army in White Russia. Unfortunately he was killed by a German land mine during the battle.

While the Russians were becoming more concerned with retaining commanders who would contain losses, Hitler was moving in the opposite direction. The Germans had used defense in depth to reduce casualties by withdrawing from one defense zone to another as soon as the effectiveness of the first zone had been reduced—in

essence, ground being traded for reduced casualties. By 1944, however, Hitler had reversed this tactic and was demanding that ground be held regardless of casualties, as exemplified by his order establishing that fortress cities be held to the last man and the last bullet. Hitler's obsession with holding ground worsened the relationship between Hitler and his generals and gave the Russians an additional advantage in 1944.

Timing

Timing was essential because deception cannot last indefinitely. The Russians completed their deployment for this battle, including two armies that had been engaged in the liberation of the Crimea in May 1944, in about 6 weeks, in contrast to the 3-month buildup of Russian forces before the Battle of Kursk. German intelligence lost contact with entire Soviet armies and learned of their presence only when attacked.

Use of Terrain

The Red Army used the terrain to its advantage and overcame Army Group Center despite the German strategy of the fortified cities. In only 2 weeks the Red Army advanced over 275 kilometers, farther than the distance covered by Rommel from the Belgian border to the Channel coast in May 1940. Whereas in May 1940 the Germans had broken through third-rate territorial divisions holding poor defensive positions, the Russians broke through top-quality German divisions in well-prepared lines. Rommel's tanks, half-tracks, and trucks rolled over one of the best road networks in the world in bright sunny weather after emerging from the Ardennes Forest. In 1944 the Russians fought bitterly for the four good highways, and most of their advance was over rain-soaked, thinly surfaced gravel roads, and even dirt roads, churned up into rivers of mud by the heavy traffic. Rommel's advance had paralleled the course of major rivers and, because of poorly coordinated Allied defense, crossed bridges that should have been destroyed. The Russians moved against the grain of the terrain, encountering one rain-swollen river after another that had to be crossed first by infantry in small boats, then artillery on ferries, and finally tanks and assault guns on pontoon bridges because the Germans had blown most of the bridges.

The German army had held White Russia for 3 years, a vast expanse of wetlands intersected by numerous small rivers with pri-

marily north-south courses. Soviet offensives early in 1944, north and south of White Russia, had created a vast salient held by German Army Group Center. The Pripjat Marshes severely hampered rapid movement and limited heavy travel to the major highways and roads and the few railroads that crossed the marshes.

This densely wooded wet ground had provided an impenetrable haven for Soviet Partisans since 1941. Many Red Army stragglers left behind in 1941 had joined the local residents in partisan units that continued to harass the Germans despite several efforts to wipe them out. In attempts to control the partisans and protect the roads and railways, the Germans had assigned numerous security units to keep the supply lines open.

Based on the success of the strongpoints on the major roads that had blocked the Red Army counteroffensive during the winter of 1941–1942, Hitler and his generals had created heavily fortified areas with large garrisons of up to four infantry divisions on the four major roads crossing the marshes at Vitebsk, Orsha, Mogilev, and Rogachev.

The theory behind the German fortified regions was that although the Soviet infantry and possibly a few tanks might penetrate the weakly held sectors between the regions, German reserves would quickly counterattack with tanks, infantry, and artillery to drive back the unsupported Russians before they could create havoc in the rear of German forces. Before the arrival of American-built Lend Lease trucks, the combination of wetlands and forests made it difficult for the Soviet forces to bring forward enough heavy weapons, antitank guns, artillery, tanks, and assault guns to hold gains against German counterattacks.

The German appraisal of these limitations worked well for over 2 years; Soviet attacks were repulsed with heavy losses by German artillery and tank-supported counterattacks. The German theory worked so well that little serious effort was made to create and man reserve positions behind the first defense zone. Both German and Soviet defensive theories called for a succession of defense zones, each consisting of multiple trench lines. Should the first zone be penetrated, the troops were expected to withdraw to the second zone, and if the second zone was penetrated, the troops would fall back to the third. Especially sensitive areas would have additional zones. At Kursk, in 1943, the Soviets had seven defense zones protecting the shoulders of the salient, and the German attack was halted in the third zone. The Germans neglected their second and third zones in White Russia because of the shortage of troops, the difficulty of the terrain, and their confidence in the four strong points.

Terrain played a major role in limiting German movement and

therefore deceived the Germans, who expected the attack at the south shoulder of the salient, rather than against well-established German defenses on the salient's face. Even though the dry weather in May and early June firmed up the marshlands, a heavy rain at any time would confine movement to the roads and limit the operations of Soviet aircraft, further reinforcing the German conviction that an attack would not come on the face of the salient.

The weather combined with the terrain, in fact, did make the Soviet attack more difficult. More time was needed for the Soviet 5th Guard Tank Army to complete its move from the south, the original date of the attack being postponed for 9 days. The delay had serious consequences: 22 June marked the point when the days began to shorten, and even a slight variation in temperature increased the likelihood of heavy rain.

White Russia stands on the border between the movement of cold air southwest of the cold air mass over the northern Urals meeting the warm air moving northeast from North Africa that picks up moisture from the Mediterranean Sea. The collision of the cool dry air and the warm moist air produces the heavy rainfall that created the Polesian Marshes and the Dnieper Lowland that form the southern and eastern sides of the White Russian salient. The heaviest rain usually falls in late June and July, and the 9 days' delay increased the expectation of heavy rain during the crucial early days of the offensive. Heavy rain did fall the first few days and greatly impeded the advance of Rotmistrov's 5th Guard Tank Army.

The Germans assumed that the Russians would be unable to penetrate the marshlands and that the strongly fortified towns of Vitebsk, Orsha, Mogilev, and Rogachev would block the main highways, especially because Soviet forces had failed to take Vitebsk in the winter of 1943–1944 after a determined effort. The terrain west of Vitebsk was heavily forested, and the Ulla River was a formidable barrier. However, once over the Ulla, there was a good corridor to the town of Molodechno, and the Obol River to the north provided a barrier to flank attacks by Army Group North.

North and south of Orsha the terrain was favorable for offensive action, and these paths were used successfully by the Russians. West of Mogilev, the Berezina and Drut Rivers were extremely difficult to cross, especially when the marshes on both banks were flooded by the heavy rain. These two rivers were serious obstacles to the advancing Russians.

Bobruysk was surrounded with marshlands, but once the Russians crossed the River Ptich and cleared the lowlands, the ground was favorable all the way to Slutsk and Baranovichi. This path was taken by Pliev's Horse-Mechanized Group.

Although the heavy rain on the first few days limited their movements, the Red Army units took advantage of the difficult terrain to surprise the Germans by moving through the wetlands and bypassing the roadblocks. After a few days, the roads had dried and the Soviet armored columns were able to move ahead swiftly, leaving the fortified cities behind.

The southern flank of the Pripyat Marshes was even more treacherous with very little dry land, more numerous rivers, denser forests, and no significant north-south roads. The impassable nature of this sector affected both sides. Earlier in the year the Soviets had been able to assume a secure northern flank when driving to Kovel, using only a thin screening force as they advanced westward. Similarly, the Germans had little fear that the Red Army would try to widen the breadth of the advance to Kovel to the north and felt confident in leaving the defense in the hands of a few scattered German and Hungarian units.

In June 1944 the Germans maintained only a light screen of forces on the line from Zhlobin in the east to Kovel in the west. Again the terrain appeared to dictate the next Soviet offensive, an advance northwest from Kovel with the ultimate goal of linking up with a drive south from the Baltic states, trapping most of Army Group Center. The salient dictated a strategy of hitting from both the north and the south. The strategic situation seemed obvious to the Germans, particularly after the Soviet offensive south of Leningrad had established an excellent startline for the northern pincer to match the position at Kovel for the southern pincer.

Training

The Red Army's use of terrain was only possible if its troops and commanders were specially trained to make the fullest use of new techniques. Liaison between the ground and air forces had to be developed and the commanders schooled in the use of air support. Additional training of Soviet units was possible because the Red Army had sufficient reserves to pull entire armies out of the line to be carefully taught about the special problems expected in crossing multiple rivers and establishing bridgeheads complete with antitank guns, assault guns, and tanks. Soviet units were trained to quickly fortify the bridgeheads before the Germans could launch tank-supported counterattacks.

General K. N. Galitskiy's 11th Guard Army spent weeks practicing with engineers to develop techniques for the construction of temporary roads through the wetlands and forest. The troops also

worked with the engineers in constructing pontoon bridges over rivers and streams. The artillery units rehearsed their role in preparatory barrages and support fire for the advancing infantry.

In addition the troops were trained to use the new weapons available to the assault armies, including the Model 1943 76mm gun, the PPSH machine pistol, the SU-152 assault gun, and other weapons. Thousands of new replacements arrived from the infantry replacement regiments, and these new inductees, along with veterans returning from hospitals, had to be integrated into the rifle companies. (The combat-experienced veterans sharpened the skills of the younger men.) These well-trained replacements were superior to the raw recruits who had been drafted to fight in the Battle of Kursk the previous year.

Technology

Technological factors completely disrupted the German command's assumptions based on a defensive theory grounded in strongpoints on the major roads. The first factor was the breakdown of the rail system. The movement of the panzer divisions by rail to threatened areas was delayed by the limited rail network in White Russia and persistent Partisan attacks on the rail lines. Because of these attacks, the Germans were forced to use the roads despite the fuel shortage caused by air attacks on the synthetic fuel factories in Germany. Although the detonation of a few kilograms of explosive by the Partisans did relatively little damage, repairable in a matter of hours, hundreds of these incidents created a nightmare for the German repair crews. Should the Partisans be courageous enough to wait for a passing train and blow the charge under the locomotive, the effect was devastating, although the Partisans risked serious danger from the reaction of the German troops on the train. Removing a wrecked train was a lengthy process and, depending on the extent of the damage and the number of cars damaged, returning the track to use could take several days.

German logistical problems were the second technological factor. Once the trains arrived at a station close to the front, the trains had to be unloaded and the supplies moved to the combat divisions. The weak link was between the railhead and the front. In 1941 and 1942, both the Germans and Russians had relied heavily on horse-drawn wagons and roadbound rear-axle-drive trucks to transport weapons and supplies to the front from the railhead. Incoming troops marched from the railhead, while tracked vehicles were unloaded from flatcars at the railhead and used some of their pre-

cious limited track life to move from the railhead to the front. All units depended on the wagons and trucks to carry to the front the daily quota of rations, fuel, fodder, munitions, and other supplies.

The wagons could travel up to 30 kilometers from the front in 1 day and return loaded the following day. Advancing German and Soviet armies increased the distance from the railhead to the front and soon exceeded 30 kilometers. Any greater distance necessitated stables for the horses at a halfway point, and the round-trip was lengthened to at least 3 days, assuming the horses were able to pull the empty wagons a longer distance on the return-trip from the front. When the front was more than 60 kilometers from the depot the trip was lengthened to 4 days, increasing the need for wagons and horses. But additional wagons were seldom available, nor were stables and other facilities to care for more horses. As a result the advancing troops were inadequately supplied with fuel, food, fodder, and munitions, effectively halting the offensive more conclusively than enemy action until the railroad was repaired and the depots moved forward. To place these distances in perspective, Senno (south of Vitebsk), one of the first objectives of the Soviet 5th Army, was 50 kilometers from the original front. The West Dvina River, the first objective of the Soviet 6th Guard Army, was more than 30 kilometers from the original front. Had the Red Army also depended on horsedrawn supplies, the offensive potential of both the 6th Guard and 5th Armies would have been seriously reduced and the German counterattacks would have been far more successful, validating the German defensive theory of holding the four fortified cities.

On a good improved road with sufficient gravel for adequate drainage the rear-axle-drive trucks could supplant the horsedrawn wagons. Trucks were flexible and more easily moved to a sector needing supplies, and required less daily maintenance than horses and could travel longer distances. However, such roads were rare in the Soviet Union, and all the more so in the Pripjat Marshes. Even in the prosperous Kursk region in 1943, the roads were so poor that a moderate rain reduced them to bogs. There, the inability of the German ammunition trucks to move forward in July 1943 caused severe shortages for the artillery at a crucial point in the Battle of Kursk. The poor roads also had constrained the German ability to transfer units by truck from one sector to another. Given this fact, the German denial of the Red Army's use of the four good roads crossing the wetlands on the face of the White Russian salient was practical and had been successful for several years.

The third technological factor was the arrival of thousands of American-built four-wheel-drive trucks, weapons carriers, and jeeps

that overturned the German assumptions. There are few mentions of U.S. Lend Lease trucks in Soviet writings, but German intelligence reports contain extracts from captured Soviet documents that reveal the widespread use of such vehicles. In November 1943 the 17th Tank Destroyer Brigade used Studebaker 2.5-ton trucks to tow the 76mm guns in the 389th Regiment, Soviet ZIS trucks for the 76mm guns in the 478th Regiment, and Willys Jeeps for the 45mm guns in the 712th Regiment.¹ In January 1944 the 1071st Tank Destroyer Regiment had all American-built vehicles and towed its 76mm guns with Willys Jeeps.² In March 1944 the Soviet 615th Howitzer Regiment was armed with M38 122mm howitzers. The official table of organization called for Soviet vehicles: one automobile, 18 GAZ-AA trucks (the Soviet version of the Ford Model A truck of the 1930s), 29 ZIS-5 trucks, 12 special trucks, and 35 tractors for towing howitzers. In fact the regiment had 7 Russian GAZ-AA trucks but the rest were from the United States: 1 Willys Jeep replacing the automobile, 21 International Harvester 2.5-ton trucks, and 14 Studebaker 2.5-ton trucks. The 35 Lend Lease trucks replaced both the tractors and the 59 trucks.³

Material from the United States was arriving despite the German success in stopping the summer Atlantic convoys to Murmansk and Arkhangelsk. In March 1944 a Soviet prisoner informed the Germans that six U.S. ships had arrived in Arkhangelsk (presumably from one of the four convoys that slipped past the Germans in the winter of 1943–1944 during the almost continuous darkness of the winter nights). The cargoes included 50 Hurricane and Airacobra fighter planes (from Britain and the United States, respectively), 100 medium tanks, 50 Ford 1.5-ton trucks, 40 tractors, some 155mm howitzers, spare parts for tanks, and food including sugar, bacon, rye flour, and dried white beans. The ships then were loaded with lumber in Arkhangelsk for the return journey.⁴

The American-built trucks could travel over practically impassible country as well as muddy roads. Even if mired down, many trucks were equipped with winches on the front that could pull the truck or other trucks from impossible situations with only a slight delay. Given this capability, the Soviet divisions were no longer roadbound and could advance across open country. With the help of engineers, rough trails were cut through the woods immediately behind the advancing troops to facilitate the movement of antitank guns, mortars, and artillery to fend off the German counterattacks. Jeeps carried heavy mortars and their crews. Chevrolet and Dodge weapons carriers pulled 57mm and 75mm antitank guns. Studebaker 2.5-ton trucks pulled heavier guns and carried supplies.

The trucks carried pontoons and bridging equipment that enabled the Soviet engineers to quickly bridge a river once the infantry had established a slender bridgehead. By the time the Germans were able to react with a tank-supported counterattack, the bridgehead bristled with Soviet antitank guns, mortars, and heavy weapons, while well-supplied artillery was in position immediately behind the front.

The Soviet philosophy of the field army service units delivering the supplies to the front-line divisions made full use of the flexibility of the American-built trucks. By contrast, the Germans had horse-drawn wagons from divisional service units to fetch supplies from the railhead.

A fourth technological factor was the margin of air superiority achieved by the Red Air Force. Most of the German fighter aircraft were in Germany defending the Reich and, particularly, the armaments industry from British and U.S. air raids. With few German fighters to harass them, even the relatively slow and vulnerable Sturmovik ground-support aircraft were free and unhindered to attack German tanks, artillery positions, and troop columns. The Sturmoviks were a valuable addition to the antitank resources of the Red Army and were used to break up German tank-supported counterattacks. German panzer divisions could no longer rove at will around the battlefield crushing Soviet breakthroughs. Only at night could the German troops and tanks move safely; during the day the roads were the province of the Red Air Force. When vehicles of the retreating Germans clogged the road leading to the bridge over the Berezina River, Soviet aviators were able to devastate the German forces.

Adding to German distress was the length of the days: 22 June is the longest day of the year in the northern hemisphere, and Minsk at about 55 degrees latitude is nearly two-thirds the distance from the equator to the North Pole, where the sun shines 24 hours a day in mid-June. There were over 18 hours of daylight during the Soviet offensive, giving the Germans only a few hours of darkness to avoid the Soviet air attacks. At the same time, the long days gave the Red Army ample daylight hours to press their crushing attacks.

Conclusion

The general trend in German military literature is that the catastrophic defeat of Army Group Center was Hitler's fault by his requiring that Vitebsk, Mogilev, Orsha, and Bobruysk be held to the last man. However, Hitler's faulty strategy was not the full reason

for the German failure. Much of the blame can be attributed to the German headquarters intelligence officers who were hoodwinked by the Soviets and who refused to accept data from the front line that indicated an attack was imminent. The movement of four to six panzer divisions from the south to Army Group Center would have given the Germans one or two panzer divisions on each of the four major axes of the Soviet attack. This would have entailed the return of the four panzer divisions removed from Army Group Center in the weeks before the attack plus a few more, not a major reshuffle. These additional panzer divisions would have been able to respond in the same fashion as Russian tank units at Kursk, in the summer of 1943, when the Russian tanks counterattacked continuously after the Germans broke through the first zone of defense, giving the Soviet units time to occupy the second zone.

In the White Russian operation in June 1944, the Soviet forces were able to burst through the second and third zones of defense within the first few days in true blitzkrieg fashion, unhampered by serious German counterattacks, and the first zone defenders were to have no time to occupy the reserve positions.

Russian trickery and deception had encouraged the Germans to expect the attack at Kovel on the south shoulder of the salient and led them to hold their panzer divisions in that area even after the offensive was well under way. The broad-front offensive came as a surprise to the German high command.

Because of the deception, the Germans believed that the attacks were feints to draw reserves into the salient and that the strong attack would then be launched from Kovel, cutting off the salient by driving north toward Lithuania. Had the Germans at Kursk launched a feint at the face of the bulge and tricked the Red Army into committing the two tank armies to counterattack, the German attacks from the north and south shoulders would have had greater success. In contrast, during the summer of 1944, the Russians were able to conceal their troop movements to the face of the bulge and still have powerful forces at Kovel to support the German fear that the main attack would come from there.

The first 2 weeks of fighting in White Russia gave a classic demonstration of the Russian theory of deep penetration or blitzkrieg through the use of highly mobile balanced combat teams that pressed on regardless of their open flanks, relying on the supporting infantry to move up before the Germans had time to react. The success of the White Russian offensive by the Red Army in June 1944 is shown in a net result of a 275-kilometer advance in 2 weeks through difficult terrain and on a limited road network. During this period the Russians experienced minimal losses and captured over

50,000 German prisoners. However, without the element of surprise and the time needed to concentrate an overwhelming force, future blitzkriegs against the German army were seldom possible. Given Stalin's desire to occupy as much territory as possible before the end of the war, the Red Army had few opportunities for deception and resorted to costly frontal attacks.

If one or more elements are missing in an attack, it quickly bogs down because the enemy will have time to move in more reserves to block the exploiting armored units before they make any significant progress. Logistics gave the Germans the needed time after 3 July 1944, when they reestablished a continuous front with reserves transferred from other sectors. Then the deadly process of grinding away with frontal attacks resumed and Soviet losses escalated. To advance the remaining 325 kilometers to Warsaw would take 8 more weeks and cost the Red Army most of the 180,000 permanent losses and 590,000 sick and wounded in the White Russian operation from 22 June to 29 August 1944.⁵

As the paths of the Red Army mobile columns are traced in the first phase of the White Russian operation, we will see ample evidence of the application of all elements of blitzkrieg. By 1944, with the output of the Soviet arms industry and Lend Lease imports of trucks, Stalin had the tools to implement the blitzkrieg theory to the fullest. The crushing victory in White Russia was possible because the Soviets had the men, weapons, training, and experience to execute the blitzkrieg.

Notes

1. *Fremde Heer Ost*, Captured German Records (Washington, D.C.: National Archives), Roll 549, Frame 217.
2. *Ibid.*, Roll 549, Frame 201.
3. *Ibid.*, 11 March, 1944, Roll 549, Frame 84.
4. *Ibid.*, H3/811, Roll 578, Frame 346.
5. G. F. Krivosheev, *Grif Sekretnosti Snyat', Poteri Vooruzhenikh Sil SSSR v Voinakh, Boevikh Deistviyakh i Voennikh Konfliktakh* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1993), p. 145.