

Chapter 2

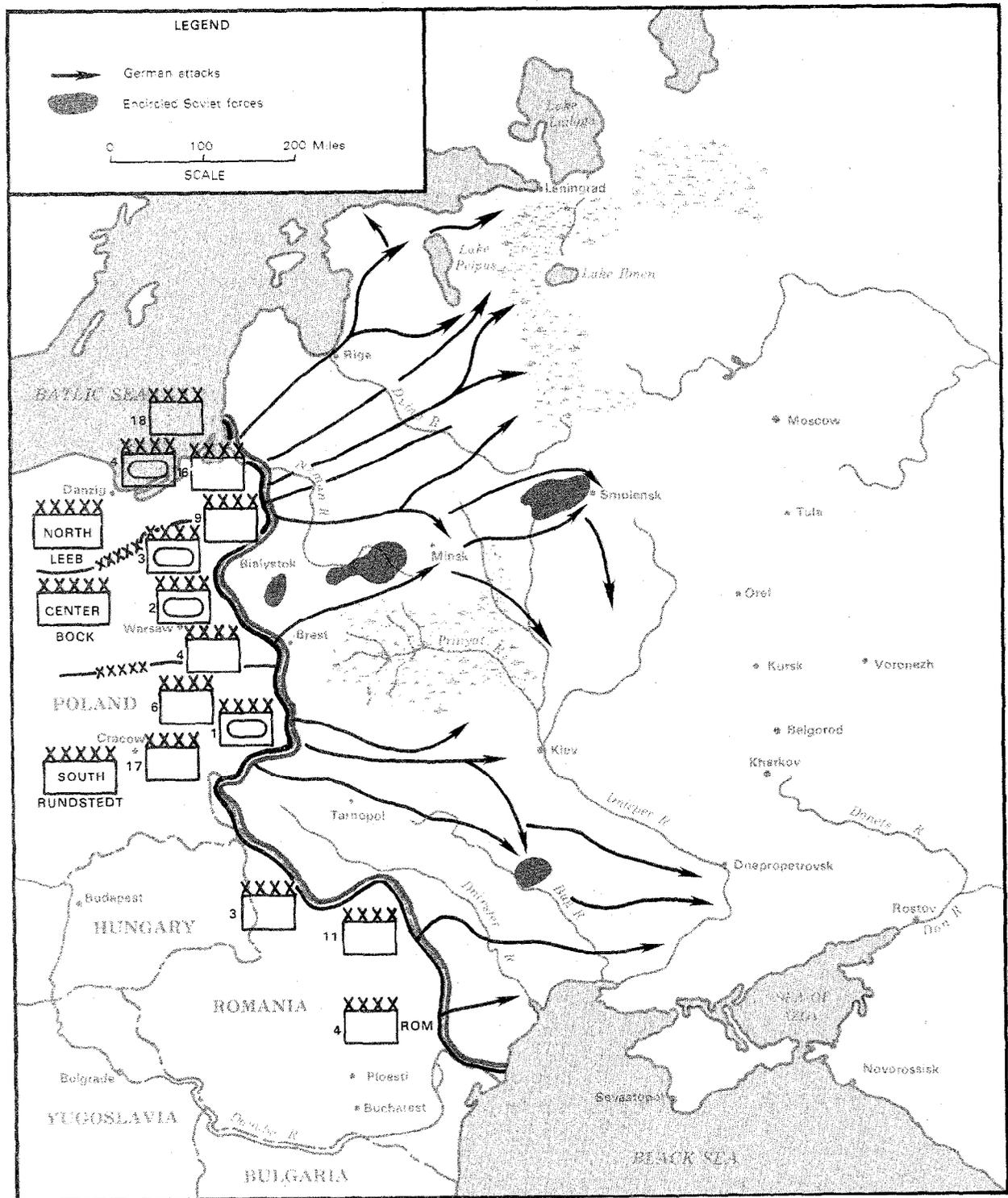
Barbarossa—The German Initiative

The greatest land campaign of World War II began on 22 June 1941 when Adolf Hitler ordered German armies eastward against the Soviet Union. Confident that Operation Barbarossa would result in a rapid offensive victory over the Russians, the Germans were unprepared for the prolonged, savage conflict that followed. Germany's unpreparedness showed in a variety of ways. Strategic planning was haphazard, logistical support was insufficient, and given the magnitude of both the theater and the enemy, the number of committed German divisions was wholly inadequate.

The first year of the Russo-German War consisted of two separate phases. The first phase—the German initiative—lasted from 22 June until the first week of December 1941. During that period, three German army groups, numbering more than 3 million men, marched toward Leningrad, Moscow, and Rostov. The second phase—the Soviet initiative—began at the end of 1941, as the final German attacks ground to a halt short of Moscow. From early December until the following spring, the Soviets lashed back at the Germans with a series of furious counteroffensives.

German defensive operations played a major role in each phase. The accounts of the spectacular early successes of Barbarossa tend to obscure the fact that those offensive victories frequently required hard defensive fighting by German units. Once the Soviet winter counteroffensives began, German military operations were, of course, almost entirely defensive.

In both phases, the German Army was largely unable to execute the defensive techniques prescribed by German doctrine. As the German armies advanced from June to December 1941, the deployment posture of German divisions was governed by offensive rather than defensive considerations. Consequently, German units seldom had the time or the inclination to organize the sort of careful defense in depth described in their training manuals. Likewise, German defensive operations during the Soviet winter counteroffensives seldom conformed to the procedures in *Truppenführung*. Limitations imposed by terrain and weather; critical frontline shortages of men, supplies, and equipment; and Hitler's reluctance to allow any withdrawals by forward elements prevented a general implementation of the Elastic Defense. Instead, embattled German divisions resorted to expedient defensive methods dictated by the exceptional conditions in which they found themselves.



Map 1. Operation Barbarossa German offensive operations, 22 June—25 August 1941

The Defensive Aspects of Blitzkrieg

To avoid the dissipation of a two-front war, the German High Command expected to "crush Soviet Russia in a lightning campaign" during the summer of 1941 (see map 1). The key to this rapid victory lay in destroying "the bulk of the Russian Army stationed in Western Russia . . . by daring operations led by deeply penetrating armored spearheads." To achieve this goal, the Germans planned to trap the Soviet armies in a series of encircled "pockets."¹ Not only would this strategy chop the numerically superior Soviet forces into manageable morsels, but it also would prevent the Soviets from prolonging hostilities by executing a strategic withdrawal into the vast Russian interior.

In the campaign's opening battles, the Germans used *Keil und Kessel* (wedge and caldron) tactics to effect the encirclement and destruction of the Red Army in western Russia (see figure 5). After penetrating Soviet defenses, rapidly advancing German forces—their *Keil* spearheads formed by four independent panzer groups—would enclose the enemy within two concentric rings. The first ring would be closed by the leading panzer forces and would isolate the enemy. Following closely on the heels of the motorized elements, hard-marching infantry divisions would form a second inner ring around the trapped Soviet units. Facing inward, these German infantry forces would seal in the struggling Russians, containing any attempted breakouts until the caldron, or pocket, could be liquidated. Meanwhile, the mobile forces in the wider ring faced outward, simultaneously parrying any enemy relief attacks while preparing for a new offensive lunge once the pocket's annihilation was complete.²

Generally, in offensive maneuvers, the Germans sought to place their units in a position from which they could conduct tactical defensive operations.³ This way, the Germans could enjoy both the advantages of *strategic* or *operational* initiative and the benefits of *tactical* defense. True to this principle, the encirclement operations conducted during Barbarossa contained major defensive components. Once a *Kessel* was formed, the temporary mission of both the panzer and the infantry rings was defensive: the inner (infantry) ring blocked enemy escape, while the outer (armored) one barred enemy rescue. The defensive fighting that attended the formation and liquidation of these pockets revealed serious problems in applying German defensive doctrine, however.

Fearsome in the attack, German panzer divisions were ill-suited for static defensive missions due to their relative lack of infantry.⁴ Prewar German defensive doctrine had envisioned using infantry for defensive combat and reserving panzer units for counterattacks, a role commensurate with their supposedly offensive nature. Panzer divisions were neither trained nor organized to fight defensively without infantry support. However, during the deep, rapid advances of Barbarossa, the German panzers routinely ranged far ahead of the marching infantry and were therefore on their own in defensive fighting.

During their deep encirclements, panzer divisions found even their own self-defense to be a problem. Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, when describing his experiences as a panzer corps commander in Russia during the

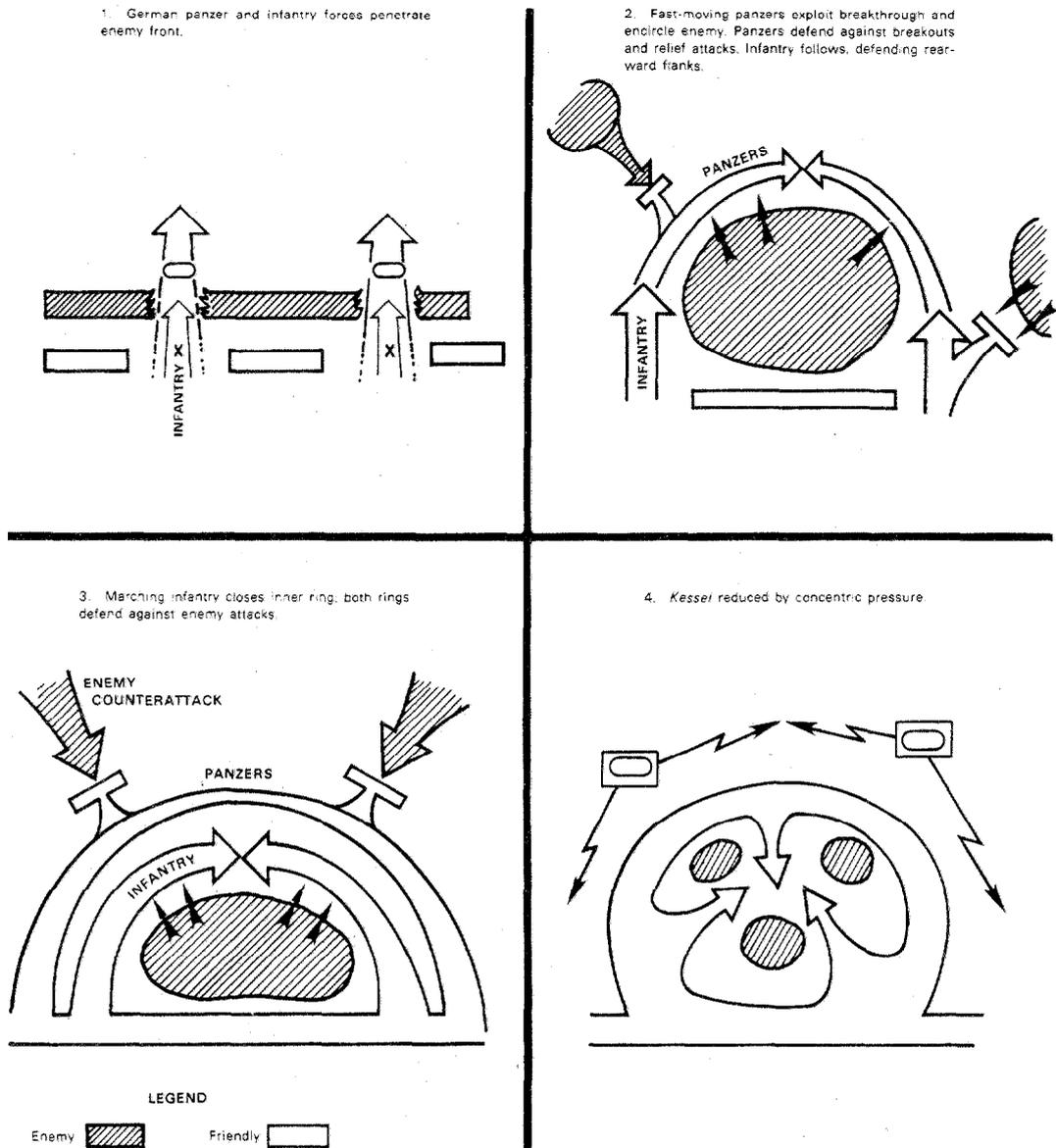


Figure 5. German *Keil und Kessel* tactics, 1941

summer of 1941, observed that “the security of a tank formation operating in the enemy’s rear largely [depended] on its ability to keep moving. Once it [came] to a halt, it [would] be immediately assailed from all sides by the enemy’s reserves.” The position of such a stationary panzer unit, Manstein added, could best be described as “hazardous.”⁵ To defend itself, a halted panzer unit would curl up into a defensive laager called a hedgehog. These hedgehogs provided all-around security for the stationary panzers and were used for night defensive positions as well as for resupply halts.⁶

The panzer hedgehogs solved the problem of self-defense but were not suitable for controlling wide stretches of territory. The German *Keil und*

Kessel offensive tactics, however, required that enveloping panzer divisions control terrain from a defensive posture: first, until the following infantry could throw a tighter noose around the encircled enemy and then as a barrier against relief attacks by enemy reserves. Not surprisingly, the panzer divisions often had difficulty in performing these two tasks. On at least one occasion, for example, an encircling German panzer unit actually had to defend itself from simultaneous attacks on both its inner and outer fronts. The 7th Panzer Division, having just closed the initial ring around the Smolensk pocket, faced such a crisis on 1 August 1941. General Franz Halder, the chief of staff of the Army High Command, glumly wrote in his personal diary that "we need hardly be surprised if 7th Panzer Division eventually gets badly hurt."⁷ Ideally, German motorized infantry divisions should have assisted the panzers in defensive situations. However, in 1941, the number of motorized divisions was too few and the scope of operations too great for this to occur in practice.⁸

Until relieved by infantry, German panzer divisions were hard-pressed to contain encircled enemy forces. As Red Army units tried to escape from a pocket, the German panzers continually had to adjust their lines to maintain concentric pressure on the Soviet rear guards and to block major breakout efforts. Containment of such a "wandering pocket" required nearly constant movement by the panzer divisions, a process that prevented even the divisional infantry units from forming more than hasty defensive positions.⁹ Even so, until the following infantry divisions closed up, the panzer ring around a *Kessel* remained extremely porous.¹⁰ As a result, many Soviet troops avoided German prisoner-of-war cages by simply filtering through the hedgehog picket line. Although the panzer divisions did their best to disrupt this egress with artillery fire and occasional tank forays, German commanders conceded that large numbers of Russians managed to melt through the German lines.¹¹

Soviet relief attacks posed problems of a different sort for the German panzer units. While the Germans devoted themselves to forming and digesting a particular *Kessel*, Soviet units outside the pocket often had time to gather their operational wits and organize a coordinated counterblow. When delivered, these counterattacks fell heavily on the outer ring of the German armor. The panzer units fared better in these circumstances, since they could often use their own mobility and shock effect to strike at the approaching Soviets. However, the German defensive problem was greatly compounded when the Soviet counterattacks included T-34 or KV model tanks, both of which were virtually invulnerable to fire from German tanks.¹² The predicament of the German armor in these circumstances might have been truly desperate had it not been for the support that attached *Luftwaffe* anti-aircraft batteries provided to most of the panzer divisions. Originally assigned to the spearhead divisions to protect them against Soviet air attack, these *Luftwaffe* batteries—and especially the 88-mm high-velocity flak guns—had their primary mission gradually altered from air defense to ground support.¹³ Although German armored units were thus generally successful in repelling counterattacks, the sheer weight of these coordinated relief attempts—especially when supported by the heavier Soviet tanks—hammered the panzer divisions as no other fighting in the war had yet done.



German infantrymen march forward along a dusty Russian road, July 1941

The German infantry divisions, tramping forward in the wake of the motorized vanguards, had the double responsibility of providing timely support for the armored spearheads and of concurrently guarding the flanks of the German advance against Soviet counterattacks. General Halder described the marching infantry as a "conveyor belt" defensive screen along which successive units passed en route to the *Kessel* battles at the front.¹⁴ The German infantry advanced at a forced-march pace in order to catch up with the mobile forces as quickly as possible. (Those infantry divisions marching immediately to the rear of the panzer groups were especially abused by being shunted onto secondary roads in order to avoid congesting the supply arteries of the far-ranging panzers.¹⁵)

Like the panzer forces, the German infantry units had defensive difficulties of their own. The lathered haste of the infantry advance reduced defensive

efficiency, since there was little time for organizing defensive positions. In accordance with published German doctrine, infantry units tried to site their emplacements on the reverse slopes of hills and ridges and stood poised to eject penetrating enemy forces with immediate counterattacks.¹⁶ As a rule, however, only hasty defensive positions could be prepared during halts, and even then, infantry units remained deployed more in a marching posture than in the alignments specified by the Elastic Defense.¹⁷

Even though the infantry advance was rapid, infantry units did not receive the same kind of protection from Soviet counterattacks that mobility provided for motorized units. From the beginning of the campaign, Soviet counterblows were almost a daily occurrence for German infantry units. An early Soviet High Command directive ordered Red Army counterattacks at every opportunity. This directive continued to animate Soviet tactics throughout the summer and autumn of 1941.¹⁸

To supply additional protective fire for German infantry units on the march, artillery batteries of various calibers were spaced throughout the march columns. By providing responsive fire support to nearby units, these batteries simplified the otherwise complex problem of fire control for scattered, moving, and occasionally intermixed infantry forces.¹⁹ In some units, improvised flak combat squads, consisting of two 88-mm and three 20-mm antiaircraft guns, were also distributed among the ground infantry forces to bolster defensive firepower.²⁰ Moreover, the dispersal of artillery and antiaircraft units throughout the divisional columns reduced the vulnerability of the guns to ground attack—an important consideration in the chaos of June and July 1941 when bypassed or overlooked Red Army units often appeared unexpectedly along the march route.

The posting of artillery and flak units in the infantry march columns also lent additional antitank firepower to the foot soldiers. As with the panzers elsewhere, the infantry found its *Pak* antitank guns and antitank rifles ineffective against any but the lightest Soviet tanks. The result, as one German commander wrote, was that “the defense against enemy tanks had to be left to the few available 88mm Flaks, the 105mm medium guns, and the division artillery.”²¹ Although the use of artillery in a direct-fire, antitank role was consistent with German doctrine in *Truppenführung*—and was, for that matter, in keeping with the German practices of 1917 and 1918—the anti-tank experience was unpleasant for German gunners. The German artillery pieces and their caissons were cumbersome, had high silhouettes, and were too valuable to be risked in routine duels with Soviet tanks.²²

Given the anemic firepower of the German *Paks* and the reluctance of the artillerists, the German infantryman often became the antitank weapon of last resort. German combat reports frequently spoke of Soviet tanks being knocked out in close combat by German infantrymen using mines and grenade clusters.²³ Such heroism exacted a high price, and heavy infantry casualties often resulted when Soviet tanks actually overran German positions. On 10 July, for example, the German Eleventh Army reported that elements of its 198th Infantry Division had been caught without antitank support and mauled badly by a heavy tank attack.²⁴ Not surprisingly, such incidents caused some German infantry units to be skittish in the face of tank assaults. Experience proved to be the best tonic for this condition: German division commanders

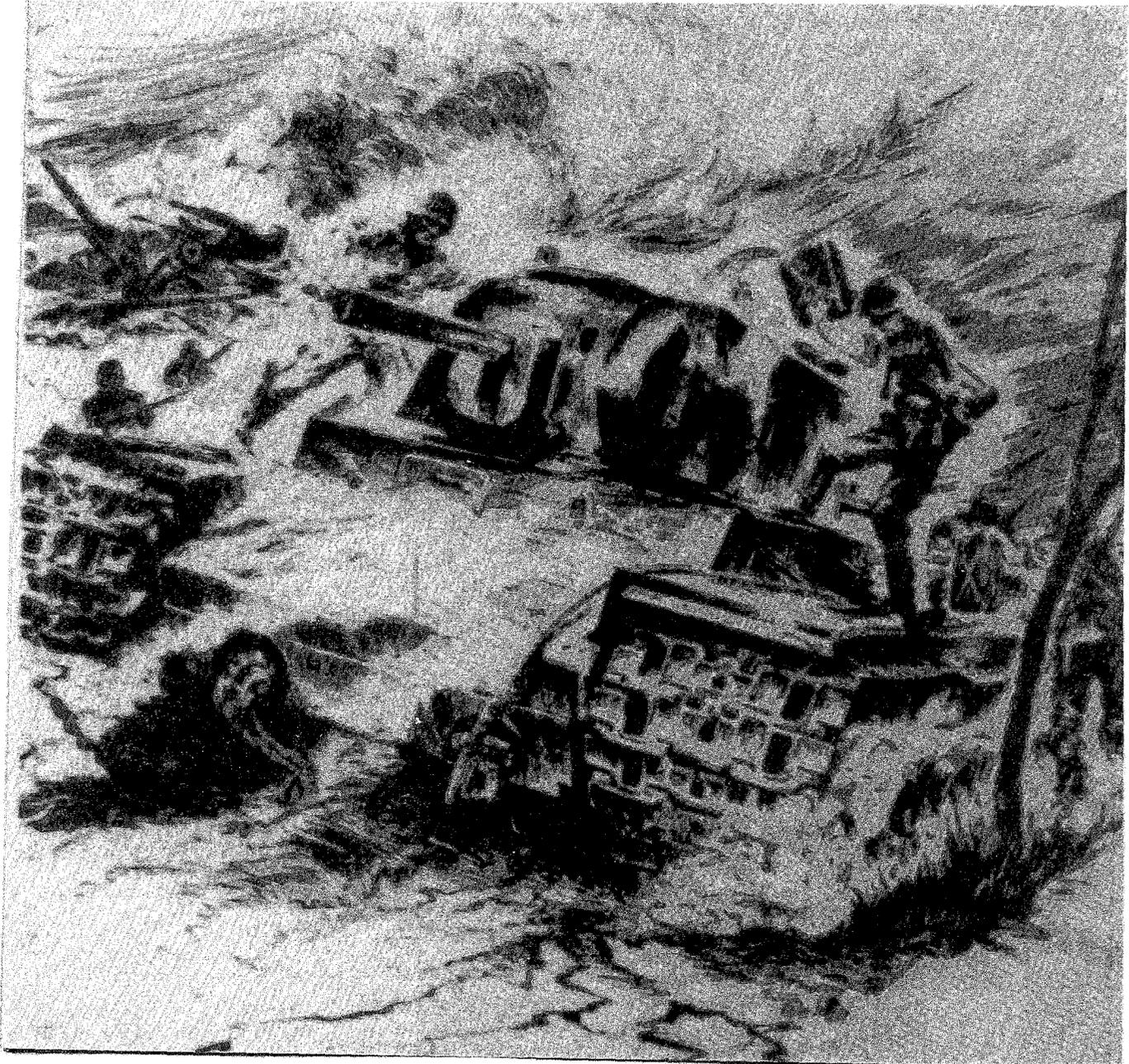
reported that any lingering tank fear disappeared following the first successful defeat of a Russian tank onslaught.²⁵

One of the first set-piece antitank actions fought by German infantry in World War II occurred on 25–26 June near Magierov. There, the German 97th Light Infantry Division hastily deployed its own infantry and artillery forces in depth to defeat a division-strength Soviet tank attack. In this engagement, the Russian tank and infantry contingents were separated and then annihilated in a textbook application of the German antitank technique.²⁶

During the first months of Barbarossa, German infantry waged some of its heaviest defensive combat while containing encircled Soviet units. *Keil und Kessel* tactics required that the German infantry divisions reduce pocketed Russian forces by offensive pressure and also block the frenzied Russian attempts to break out.

One of the campaign's first defensive engagements to be widely reported by the German press illustrated the tactical difficulty of these battles. While

A German newspaper sketch showing German troops destroying a Soviet tank with grenades and gasoline





German infantrymen in hasty defensive positions face encircled Soviet forces, June 1941

barring the eastward escape of Red Army units from the Bialystok *Kessel* during the night of 29–30 June, the 82d Infantry Regiment (31st Infantry Division) was subjected to successive attacks by Russian infantry, cavalry, and tank forces. This German regiment had been unable to establish a defense in depth or even a continuous defensive line due to the extreme width—more than ten kilometers—of the regimental sector. Furious Soviet assaults conducted throughout the night penetrated the German line at several points, and some German units found themselves attacked simultaneously from front, flanks, and rear. In fact, the situation became so critical that regimental headquarters staff and communications personnel had to fight as infantry to prevent the German lines from being completely overrun. Although the Germans managed to prevent a large-scale rupture of their defensive front, they could not block the escape of small bands of Soviet troops who, abandoning their heavier weapons and equipment, stole through the German lines during the chaos of combat.²⁷

Luckily for the Germans, Russian counterattacks during the early weeks of Barbarossa were frequently uncoordinated and lacked tactical sophistication. The surprise German onslaught had caught the Red Army in a state of disarray, and the speed and depth of the German advance prevented the Russians from regaining their operational equilibrium.²⁸ As a result, Soviet



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A German antitank gun crew faces Soviet counterattack, 1941

counterattacks often lurched forward in piecemeal fashion, with little effective cooperation between supporting arms or adjacent units. Units attacking in the first week of July against the infantry-held flanks of German Army Group South, for example, used tactics that were “singularly poor. Riflemen in trucks abreast with tanks [drove] against our firing line, and the inevitable result [was] very heavy losses to the enemy.”²⁹ One German general, in reporting his frontline observations to General Halder, described the Russian attack method as “a three minute artillery barrage, then pause, then infantry attacking as much as twelve ranks deep, without heavy weapon support. The [Russian] men [started] hurraing from far off. [There were] incredibly high Russian losses.”³⁰

By the end of July, the German Army had triumphantly concluded the encirclement battles designed to destroy Soviet forces in western Russia. While shredding the Soviets with blitzkrieg offensive operations, German units had fought a large number of tactical defensive engagements. The German forces had generally been successful in these actions, although combat conditions had rarely allowed them the full use of standard German doctrine.

Instead of being decisively smashed, however, Soviet military resistance continued unabated. Despite the destruction of several Russian armies in encirclements at Bialystok, Minsk, and Smolensk, as well as in lesser pockets elsewhere, Halder conceded that “the whole situation makes it increasingly plain that we have underestimated the Russian Colossus. . . . At the outset of the war we reckoned with about 200 enemy divisions. Now we have already

counted 360. These divisions indeed are not armed and equipped according to our standards, and their tactical leadership is often poor. But there they are, and if we smash a dozen of them, the Russians simply put up another dozen.”³¹ As the entire German strategy for Barbarossa had gambled on shattering Soviet resistance in a few battles of encirclement, continued Soviet pugnacity confounded German planning and provoked a strategic reassessment by the German High Command. This strategic reassessment shaped the next series of defensive battles fought by German soldiers in Russia.

German Strategy Reconsidered

In late July 1941, the German leadership was perplexed at the strategic situation on the ground. Barely five weeks into the campaign, the German armies were beginning to flounder in the vastness of Russian space. The Russian theater was so immense—and ever widening as the Germans pushed eastward—that concentrated German force could only be applied in a few areas. The overall ratio of German force to Russian space was so low, in fact, that a continuous German front line could not be maintained. Instead, sizable gaps routinely yawned between major German units. Too, substantial geographic obstacles divided the German army groups: the Pripyat Marsh region lay between Army Groups Center and South, while forests, streams, and poor roads reduced lateral movement within and between Army Groups North and Center.

German units became dangerously separated in depth as well as in width. The mobility differences between the motorized and nonmotorized elements of the *Wehrmacht* caused the Germans to advance, in effect, in two distinct echelons. During the frontier battles of encirclement, the Germans had managed this disparity through their *Keil und Kessel* tactics. However, the extended distances over which the Germans now operated aggravated this problem, opening larger gulfs between the advanced panzers and the following infantry. Increasingly, the German forces not only advanced separately but fought separately as well.³²

The open areas between German units were, of course, populated by bypassed Red Army units, and these gaps constituted weak points that could easily be exploited by Soviet counterattacks. Already in the campaign, bypassed Red Army forces had waylaid the German 268th Infantry Division, stampeding the German troops. This incident had resulted in the capture of some of the division's artillery and had caused consternation within the German High Command.³³

The awkwardness of the German position was not lost on the Soviets. On 19 July, Army Group Center reported the capture of a Russian order “indicating that the Russian High Command [is] aiming at separating the German armor from supporting infantry by driving attacks between them.” Halder dismissed this as “a very pretty scheme, but in practice it [is] something that [can] be carried out only by an opponent superior in number and generalship.” Halder could not picture the Russians applying such a technique against the Germans.³⁴



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General Heinz Guderian (second from right), commander of Panzer Group 2, discusses operations with officers of the 197th Infantry Division in late July 1941. German tanks and infantry became dangerously separated during the rapid advance into Russia.

Hitler was less sanguine than Halder in his evaluation of the vulnerable German position. In July, to the despair of General Halder and Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch, commander in chief of the German Army, Hitler began to renew the meddlesome interference in tactical operations that he had practiced in the French campaign. He directed the diversion of German units to "tidy up" and secure the German flanks against lurking Red Army contingents.³⁵ Hitler carried this idea further in mid-July, de-emphasizing large-scale operations in favor of smashing the enemy "piecemeal by small tactical operations."³⁶ Explaining the Führer's concept during a visit to Army Group Center headquarters on 25 July, Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel of the German High Command announced that, for the time being, German operations would concentrate on small-scale mopping-up actions. These actions would complete the destruction of those Red Army elements that had escaped encirclement and destruction in the *Kessel* battles and would secure the German flanks for future operations. Furthermore, Keitel explained that the smaller scope of these operations would reduce the distance between the German tanks and infantry, thereby reducing the heavy combat losses inflicted on unsupported panzers by Soviet counterattacks.³⁷

Brauchitsch, Halder, and other senior officers vehemently disagreed with Hitler's designs, arguing that such policies violated the principles of concentration and decisive maneuver. They urged, instead, an immediate march on Moscow, which they regarded as the military, political, and economic jugular

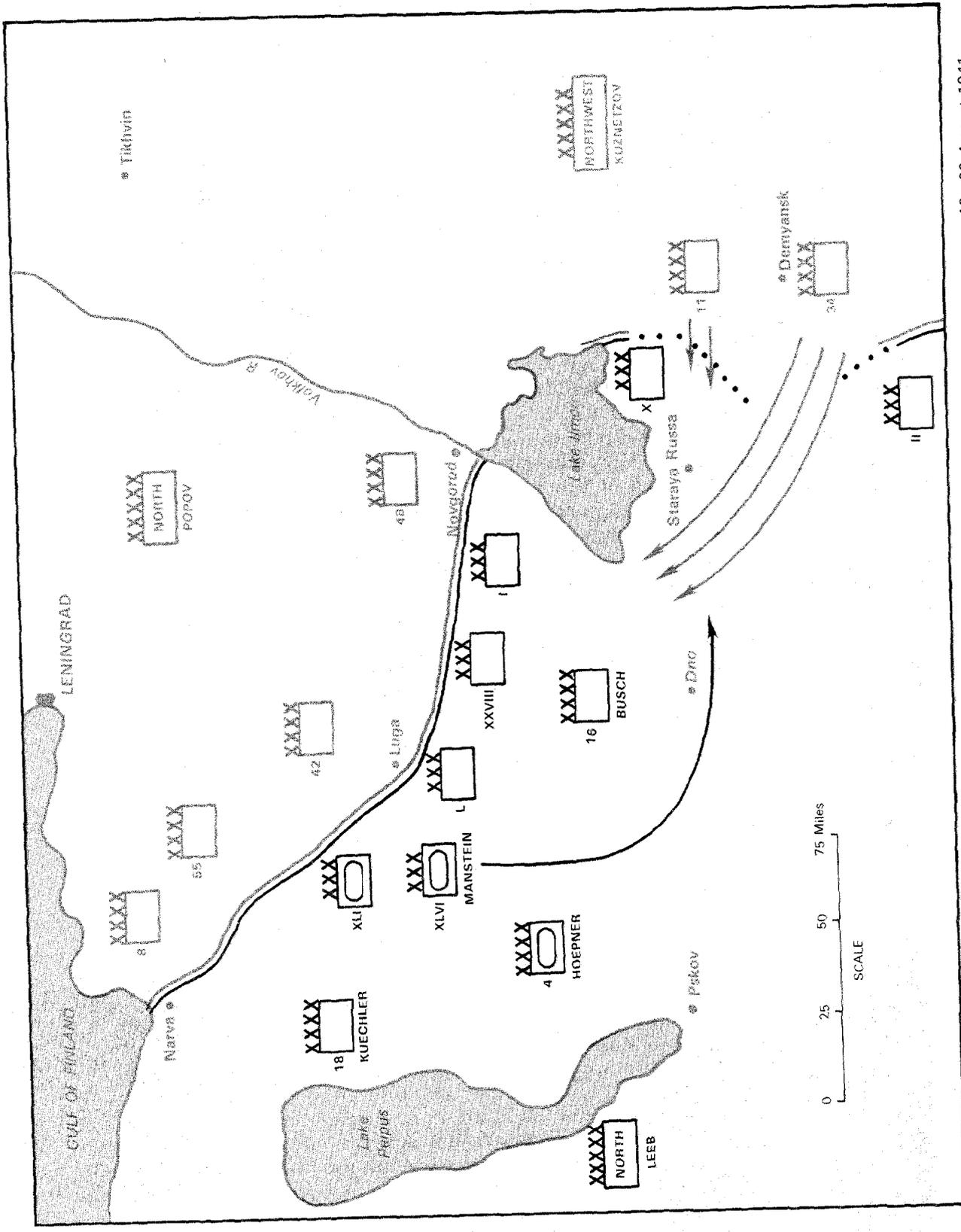
of the Soviet Union. Such strong and nearly unanimous opposition caused Hitler to waver temporarily, and as a result, he issued a series of conflicting strategic directives between 30 July and the latter part of August.³⁸

While the Germans argued strategy, the Soviets demonstrated that they could, in fact, exploit the fissures in the German front. During the second week of August, strong Russian forces (the Thirty-Fourth Army and parts of the Eleventh Army) thrust into a gap between the German X and II Corps south of Lake Ilmen (see map 2). Driving north and west from the area south of Staraya Russa, the Russians advanced nearly sixty kilometers by 14 August and threatened not only the flank of the German X Corps but the entire rearward communications of the Sixteenth Army and Army Group North.³⁹ Locked in desperate defensive combat, the divisions of the German X Corps were unable to establish an elastic defense in depth due to extended frontages and a severe shortage of reserves.⁴⁰ Furthermore, since Army Group North's motorized elements were concentrated in the Panzer Group 4 area north of Lake Ilmen, no panzers were available to counterattack enemy penetrations as had been envisioned in *Truppenführung*. Field Marshal von Leeb, commander of Army Group North and author of prewar articles on defensive operations, gave a grim situation report to the Army General Staff on 18 August. Halder wrote in his diary: "Very gloomy picture of the situation in X Corps. The last man has been thrown into the fighting; the troops are exhausted. The enemy keeps on pushing north of Staraya Russa. Only the engineer companies are left for commitment. The Commanding General, X Corps, and Commander-in-Chief, Army Group [North], think they are lucky if this front holds another day."⁴¹

Hitler was extremely agitated by this Soviet blow and created a stir within the German High Command by frantically ordering mobile units stripped from other sectors to deal with this new emergency.⁴² Manstein's XLVI Panzer Corps (the 3d Motorized Infantry Division and the *Waffen SS Totenkopf* Motorized Division) was detached from Panzer Group 4 and brought on a circuitous rearward march to strike the enemy's western flank on 19 August. This surprise counterstroke quickly caused the Soviet offensive to collapse.⁴³

Although the Germans could thus claim victory in this battle—the first substantial defensive crisis on the Russian Front—it bore little resemblance to the neat Elastic Defense of German doctrine. The width of the front and the scarcity of forces had robbed the Germans of their desired defensive depth and ready reserves. Consequently, the German defensive line had stood in imminent danger of collapse until saved by the counterattack of Manstein's mechanized posse. Even this use of German mobile forces had more correctly been a counteroffensive rather than a counterattack, since it had been marshaled and delivered apart from the defensive battle per se.

On 21 August, Hitler clarified German strategy by ordering new offensive drives on both wings of the Eastern Front. In the Army Group North area, German forces would strike toward Leningrad to isolate that city and link up with the Finns east of Lake Ladoga. Farther south, even stronger elements would advance southward from the right flank of Army Group Center to encircle and annihilate the Soviet armies facing Army Group South in the Kiev salient. This latter action would open the way to the Crimea, the Don



Map 2. Soviet counteroffensive against open flank of Army Group North and counterattack by Manstein's panzer corps, 12-22 August 1941

Basin industrial area, and the Caucasian oil-producing regions. Army Group Center, which since the second half of July had been primarily engaged in defensive fighting while attempting to consolidate and refit its divisions, would assume an outright defensive posture with the rump of its forces⁴⁴ (see map 3).

Hitler justified this controversial new strategy on dubious economic and political grounds, thereby overruling the purely military views of his senior officers. The recent Soviet offensive near Staraya Russa probably had helped Hitler make his decision by demonstrating the danger of leaving intact Soviet forces on either flank of Army Group Center. In this respect, Hitler's decided course of action—much criticized by German officers in later years as perhaps the decisive mistake of World War II—seemed militarily prudent since it eradicated, once and for all, the threats to the German flanks.⁴⁵

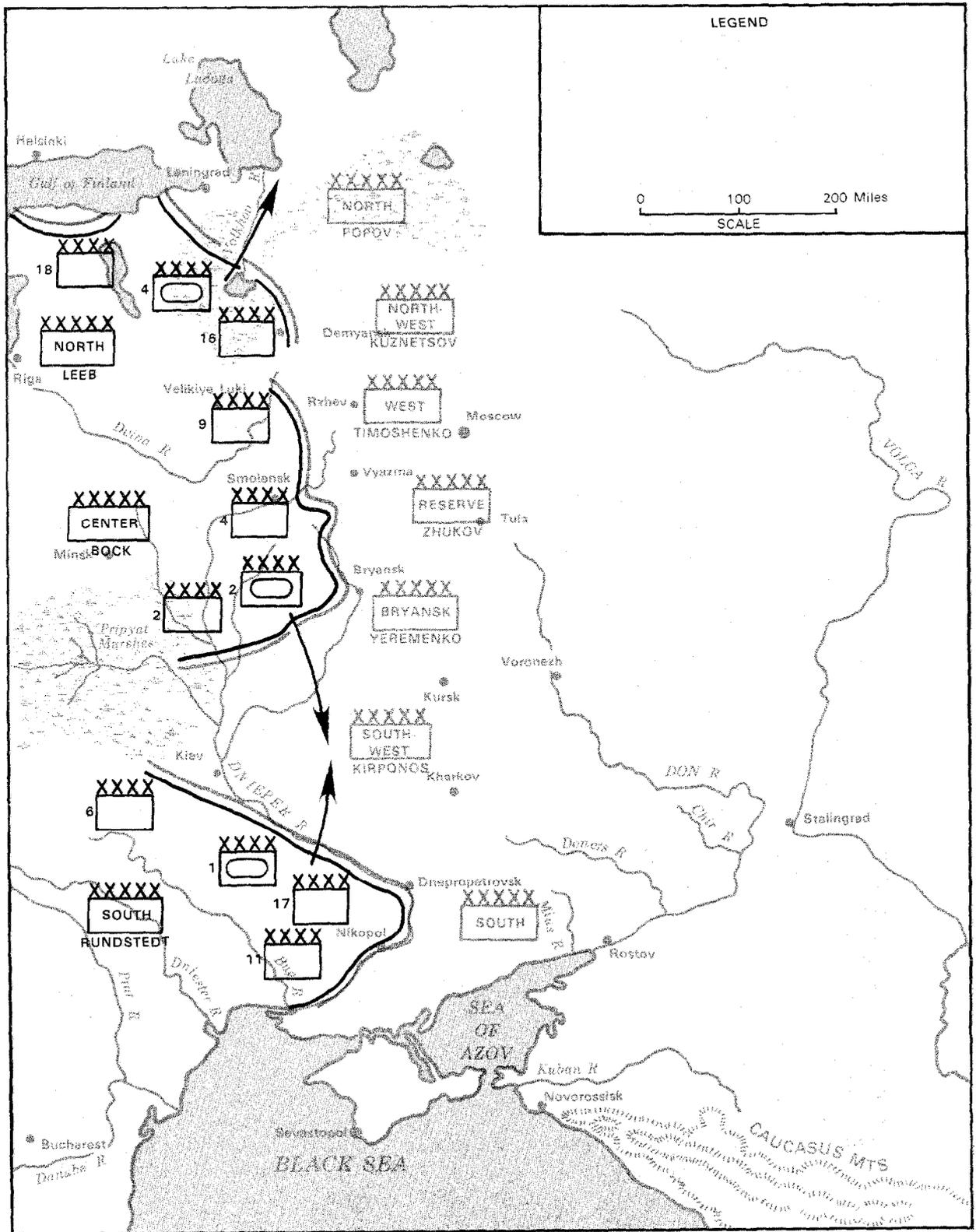
Conducting offensives to the north and south meant that any drive on Moscow would have to be postponed indefinitely. Two months earlier at the beginning of Barbarossa, the concentration and power of the German forces had been sufficient to allow simultaneous offensives on all parts of the front. By late August, however, German units were too dispersed and their combat potential too diminished to repeat such a feat.

Since the beginning of the campaign, the line of contact with Russian forces had stretched by nearly 50 percent, yet few reinforcements had been added to the German order of battle. German combat units were fatigued from the combination of rapid advance and heavy combat experienced thus far. On 24 August, for example, Halder estimated that the combat strength of the German infantry divisions averaged 60 percent of full capacity and the panzer divisions only 50 percent.⁴⁶

German combat power was adversely affected by logistical considerations as well. Available stocks of fuel, food, and ammunition had sunk to dangerously low levels in many units, and supply deliveries were becoming more erratic as distances increased. The execrable Russian roads were claiming a heavy toll on the mobile units so that German tanks and other motor vehicles desperately needed extensive maintenance. (Incredibly, through July, Hitler

German troops advance on foot, bicycle, and horse cart during the summer of 1941. Russia's poor roads and incompatible rail network disrupted German supply operations.





Map 3. Situation and revised German strategy, 22 August 1941 (Army Group Center defends in place while flank offens proceed)

had ordered that replacement tanks be withheld from the east in order to build new divisions for later use elsewhere. This policy compounded the already difficult maintenance and equipment replacement problems of the panzer divisions.⁴⁷ German personnel replacements—originally gauged for a short campaign—were running low.⁴⁸ Too, the replacement of lost weapons and other equipment was proceeding slowly: the German war economy had not been geared up for Barbarossa, and current production lagged behind consumption. Indeed, in anticipation of a rapid victory in Russia, German armaments production was already shifting emphasis away from army materiel. In fact, by December 1941, monthly weapons output had declined by 29 per cent from earlier peak production.⁴⁹

With German forces dissipated, the diverging operations that Hitler had ordered to the north and south dashed the Army High Command's hopes of a climactic advance on Moscow. To lend weight to the attack on Leningrad and the great envelopment at Kiev, Army Group Center had to relinquish most of its armor and a large share of its infantry. General Hermann Hoth's Panzer Group 3 had to hold a portion of Army Group Center's static front with nonmotorized infantry divisions inasmuch as both its XXXIX and LVII Panzer Corps were sent to assist Army Group North. General Heinz Guderian's Panzer Group 2 (less one corps) and General Freiherr von Weichs' Second Army were ordered south to fall on the rear of the Soviet Southwest *Front* guarding Kiev.

Shorn of its offensive cutting edge, Army Group Center thus had to remain on the defensive until the operations on its left and right concluded. The defensive battles waged by Army Group Center from the end of July through September 1941 are instructive for being the first German attempt in World War II to sustain a large-scale positional defense.

Defense by Army Group Center, July—September 1941

In late July, Army Group Center concluded a successful offensive by closing a large pocket at Smolensk. While this *Kessel* was being liquidated, the German forces endured the predictable Soviet assaults against their inner and outer encircling rings. Although hard-pressed at several points, the German lines remained generally intact.⁵⁰ Desperate to spring open the trap around Smolensk, the Soviet High Command released fresh Red Army forces to reinforce the counterattacks. Particularly ferocious were the relief attacks that Marshal Semën K. Timoshenko's Western *Front* hurled against the German lines north of Roslavl and near Yelnya.⁵¹ The Soviet thrust from Roslavl misfired as forces of Panzer Group 2 deftly swallowed the attacking Russians into a new *Kessel* at the beginning of August. However, the Red Army attacks on the narrow, exposed German salient at Yelnya began a bitter six-week battle for that town.

Seized by the XLVI Panzer Corps of Guderian's panzer group on 20 July, the Yelnya salient enclosed a bridgehead over the Desna River and high ground valuable for the continuation of German offensive operations toward Moscow. If Yelnya had strategic value as a foothold from which future offensive operations might be launched, it also offered tactical liabilities: it was surrounded on three sides by powerful Soviet forces, its rearward communica-

tions were clogged with German units fighting to subdue the Smolensk *Kessel*, and it was also some 275 miles from the nearest German supply dumps.⁵² Since other German forces were initially distracted by the Soviet attack from Roslavl, the motorized units (the 10th Panzer Division and the SS *Das Reich* Motorized Division) that had captured Yelnya had to hold it until Guderian could bring up marching infantry. As with the containment of surrounded pockets during encirclement battles, this sort of independent defensive action by panzer and motorized forces had not been envisioned in German prewar manuals on defense.

The two German mobile divisions fought at a severe disadvantage. Both units were fatigued and understrength from their earlier offensive efforts. Ammunition and fuel were in short supply, and the confining terrain within the salient nullified their mobility and shock effect. The 10th Panzer Division suffered from the shortage of infantrymen endemic to such units and therefore was poorly suited for positional defense.⁵³ To offset these handicaps, Guderian requested that the *Luftwaffe* concentrate close air support in the Yelnya area.⁵⁴ To Guderian's annoyance, German air support over Yelnya was abruptly withdrawn after only a brief appearance: its operating strength depleted by wear and a shortage of advanced airfields, the *Luftwaffe* began husbanding its resources for use in operations of "strategic" significance. In preference to the "tactical" defense at Yelnya, the *Luftwaffe* chose instead to concentrate its planes in the Second Army sector to protect the southern flank of Army Group Center.⁵⁵

Timoshenko continued to concentrate forces opposite Yelnya and began a new series of attacks on 24 July. For two weeks thereafter, Soviet attacks battered the German lines at Yelna virtually without interruption. On 30 July, for example, the German defenders threw back thirteen separate attacks on their positions.⁵⁶ One measure of the growing German peril came on 3 August when Guderian ordered his last available reserve—the guard company for the panzer group headquarters—into the fighting at Yelnya.⁵⁷ In a telephonic report to General Halder on the same date, Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, the commander of Army Group Center, worried aloud about his lack of reserves against the costly Russian attacks. Bock further commented that, with present resources, he could not guarantee against a "catastrophe" at Yelnya.⁵⁸

The catastrophe feared by Bock was averted through the timely arrival of infantry reinforcements, which became available as Russian resistance in the Smolensk *Kessel* died on 5 August. Guderian quickly moved infantry divisions into the Yelnya salient, hoping that their greater defensive capacities would repel the Russian assaults. Also, flak batteries of the *Luftwaffe*'s I Anti-aircraft Artillery Corps were brought up to bolster the Yelnya defenses.⁵⁹ By 8 August, all Guderian's mobile units—including those previously holding Yelnya—had been withdrawn from combat and had commenced refitting.⁶⁰ This earliest phase of the Yelnya fighting had shown, however, that operational requirements would not allow the Germans the luxury of using their mobile panzer forces only in offensive roles. Moreover, this fighting had again demonstrated the unsuitability of using infantry-poor panzer units in static defensive operations.

Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, commander
of Army Group Center during Barbarossa



As German infantrymen dug in along the Yelnya perimeter, the character of the fighting changed. Hitler, during a conference with Brauchitsch and Bock at Army Group Center headquarters on 4 August, confirmed the necessity of holding Yelnya.⁶¹ Consequently, the German defense at Yelnya was no longer an expedient holding action awaiting offensive thrusts to be renewed. Instead, the newly arrived infantry deployed as best it could into a deliberate defensive posture. Acknowledging this, Halder noted on 6 August: "At Yelnya, we now have regular position warfare."⁶² The Soviets, too, shifted their stance somewhat. With the capitulation of the trapped Red Army forces at Smolensk and Roslavl, a breakthrough by Timoshenko's forces no longer had any major strategic purpose. Therefore, on 8 August, Soviet attacks temporarily subsided as the Russians awaited the Germans' next move.⁶³

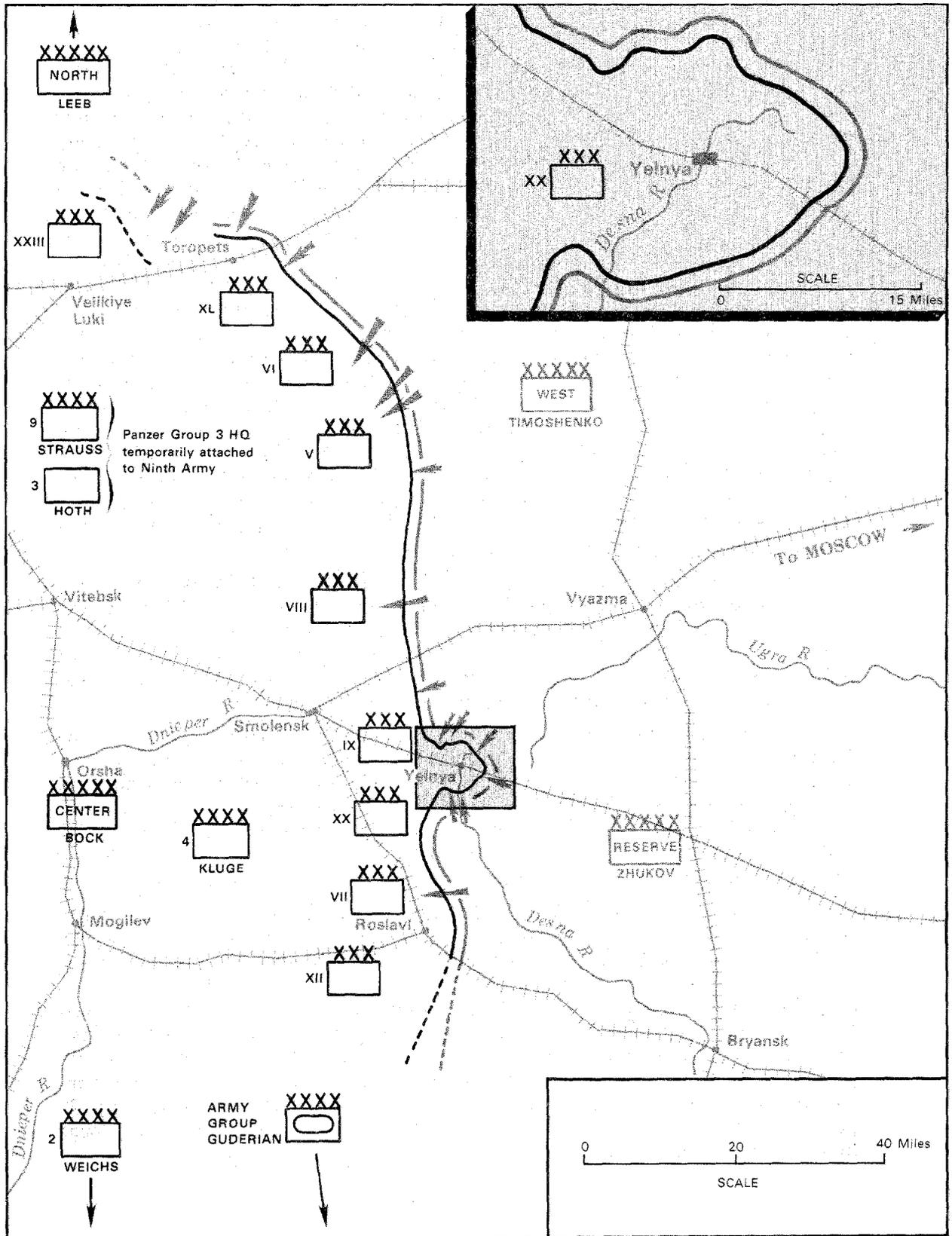
When the Russians realized that the Germans were not going to follow their Smolensk triumph with an immediate drive on Moscow, Soviet attacks again flared up along the central front. The German passivity offered the Russians the unique opportunity of battering an entire German army group under conditions of Soviet choosing. Therefore, Marshal Timoshenko's Western *Front* pressed new attacks between Velikiye Luki and Toropets against the German Ninth Army, which was holding the northernmost portion of Army Group Center's sector. Meanwhile, General Georgi K. Zhukov's newly assembled Reserve *Front* was ordered to renew attacks on the inviting Yelnya salient. These assaults began during the second week of August and continued with unprecedented intensity for nearly a month.⁶⁴

Field Marshal von Bock discerned the threat that these attacks posed to Army Group Center. Bock had no desire to see his units ground up piecemeal in battles of attrition and preferred instead to resume the fluid battles of maneuver that had earlier characterized the campaign. When the Soviet attack at Staraya Russa produced the mid-August crisis in the Army Group North area, Bock scorned Hitler's panicky orders to shift mobile forces there from Army Group Center. On 15 August, Bock argued to Halder that the best course of action against the numerically superior enemy facing his army group was an early return to the offensive. Any transfer of armored striking power away from Bock's command to support the offensives on the German wings would probably destroy the basis for such a general advance by Army Group Center. A prolonged defense, Bock continued, was "impossible in the present position. The front of Army Group [Center], with its forty divisions sprawled over the 130 kilometer front, is exceedingly overextended, and a changeover to determined defense entails far-reaching planning, to the details of which no prior thought has been given. The present disposition and line is in no way suited for sustained defense."⁶⁵ In doctrinal terms, Bock recognized that the width of the front held by the army group precluded the use of the Elastic Defense, since insufficient forces were available to create defensive depth and reserves ready for counterattack. Also, Army Group Center's front-line trace was defined by its recent offensive advances and therefore was unlikely to provide many terrain advantages for defense. Furthermore, Bock's warning that no logistical provisions had been made for a prolonged defense were shortly affirmed in battle: German forces lacked the stockpiles of supplies and ammunition necessary for sustained positional warfare.

Bock's worst fears came to pass on 21 August when Hitler stripped Army Group Center of most of its mobile divisions in order to support the attacks toward Leningrad and Kiev. While bulletins hailed new German victories on both flanks, Army Group Center manned a thin defensive dike against a tide of Red Army attacks. As Bock had warned, the weak forces and improvised defensive posture of his army group virtually invited disaster.

General Adolf Strauss' Ninth Army manned the northern half of Army Group Center's stationary front. Marshal Timoshenko's new attacks against Ninth Army benefited not only from heavy artillery and rocket bombardments, but from local Soviet air superiority as well.⁶⁶ The German divisions here were overextended and lacked depth: divisional frontages often exceeded twelve miles in width, and the German defenses normally consisted of a string of strongpoints rather than a continuous defense in depth⁶⁷ (see map 4).

From 11 August onward, Soviet attacks created local crises along the Ninth Army front on an almost daily basis. On Strauss' right, for example, heavy Russian attacks in the VIII Corps sector repeatedly punctured the front of the 161st Infantry Division. On 17 August, this German front was held only by counterattacks by the 161st Division's last few reserves. Renewed Russian assaults in the same sector broke open the front on succeeding days and captured some of the 161st Division's artillery on 19 August. Its line penetrated again on 21 August, the 161st Division was withdrawn from combat altogether on 24 August. At this time, it was reported to be at only 25 percent strength—a measure of the punishment that the entire VIII Corps had received during this period.⁶⁸



Map 4. Soviet attacks on Army Group Center, August–September 1941

Farther north, tank-supported attacks against the Ninth Army's V and VI Corps also endangered the German front, achieving many small break-ins. Under enormous pressure and in an attempt to tighten its defensive grip, the V Corps withdrew its lines to better defensive terrain on 25 August.⁶⁹ Even this measure proved to be unavailing, for on 28 August, Bock reported to Halder that it was doubtful whether the V Corps sector could be held for even five more days.⁷⁰ On 27 August, the Soviets made a deep penetration into the front of the German 26th Division (VI Corps).⁷¹ The German counter-attacks to drive back this threat were so narrowly successful that Bock and Halder discussed diverting the entire LVII Panzer Corps (which was en route to Army Group North for the Leningrad operation) to the threatened front of Ninth Army.⁷²

While Ninth Army warded off these blows, General Zhukov's Reserve Front was pummeling the German salient at Yelnya. In spite of earlier German attempts to fortify the Yelnya position, that sector of the German front remained short of the Elastic Defense ideal.

As with Ninth Army, first among the German problems at Yelnya was the chronic shortage of men. Even after infantry divisions relieved the panzer forces in the salient in the first week of August, the German forces there were not sufficient to organize an elastic defense in depth. Two General Staff officers, reporting the results of a Yelnya fact-finding trip to General Halder, flatly described the German units there as "overextended."⁷³ When the German Fourth Army took control of the Yelnya sector from Guderian's headquarters on 22 August, conditions there appalled General Günther Blumentritt, Fourth Army's chief of staff. As he later wrote: "When I say that our lines are thin, this is an understatement. Divisions were assigned sectors almost twenty miles wide. Furthermore, in view of the heavy casualties already suffered in the course of the campaign, these divisions were usually understrength and tactical reserves were nonexistent."⁷⁴

With manpower in such short supply, German defenses in the Yelnya area generally consisted of a single trenchline instead of the multizoned Elastic Defense. No advanced position or outpost zone stood in front of the main line of resistance, since troops for these posts could not be spared. Without adequate forward security, many units even had to abandon the reverse-slope defensive deployment that the Germans preferred for protection from enemy observation and fire.

An example is that of the 78th Infantry Division. During a forward reconnaissance on 19 August, while preparing to relieve another division at Yelnya, officers of the 78th discovered that the German front consisted mostly of a thin line of disconnected rifle pits. No rearward positions had been prepared, and due to a shortage of mines and barbed wire, only a handful of obstacles stood in the way of any Soviet attack. The German lines were poorly sited, being almost entirely exposed to enemy positions on higher ground. As a result, any daylight movement within the German lines invited a rain of enemy artillery and mortar shells. In fact, the Soviet fire was so dominant that German casualties had to remain in their foxholes until after dark before they could be evacuated.⁷⁵ Despite good intentions, leaders of the 78th Division found it virtually impossible to improve the defensive situation after

occupying their sector on 22 August. A battalion commander in the 238th Infantry Regiment noted that the strength and accuracy of Soviet fire precluded all efforts to extend German entrenchments by day, while the necessity of guarding against Soviet infiltration at night prevented the formation of nocturnal work parties. Also, adequate reserves could not be found to reinforce threatened sectors; after manning its twelve-mile-wide sector, the entire 78th Division held less than one full battalion in reserve.⁷⁶

Unable to rely to any great extent on the Elastic Defense principles of depth and local counterattack, the Germans were also hampered in their attempts to shrivel Russian attacks with firepower. German small-arms fire was diluted by the wide unit frontages, and an enduring shortage of artillery ammunition around Yelnya diminished large-caliber fire support.⁷⁷ With artillery rounds in short supply, the Germans could not afford to conduct counterbattery fire or even counterpreparations against suspected enemy attack concentrations. In sharp contrast, the Russians hammered the German lines unrelentingly. The Soviet bombardments included not only artillery and mortar shells of all calibers, but also the fearsome new Katyusha rockets and strikes by Russian planes.⁷⁸ German prisoners taken by the Soviets at Yelnya confessed that the heavy shelling—especially in comparison to the miserly German response—badly hurt German morale.⁷⁹ More directly, since bombardment always plays a major role in positional warfare, the greater weight of Soviet artillery fire probably caused a proportionately higher German daily casualty rate.

German troops defend captured Russian village, summer 1941



At the beginning of the renewed Yelnya battles, the German defense conformed to established doctrine in one important respect: panzer units were held in reserve to the rear of the German front. Although theoretically available for counterattack, these forces—the XLVI Panzer Corps, which had been relieved earlier on the Yelnya perimeter—with one exception did not intervene in the fighting. Through late August, the XLVI Panzer Corps (the *Grossdeutschland* Motorized Infantry Regiment, 10th Panzer Division, and SS *Das Reich* Motorized Division) was belatedly refitting and therefore was exempt from counterattack use. Even before these units had completed refitting, Guderian was badgering Bock to release them to reinforce the offensive drive on Kiev. After a series of heated arguments between Guderian and his superiors, *Grossdeutschland* and *Das Reich* were finally ordered south.⁸⁰ By that time, however, Bock judged that Fourth Army's deteriorating defensive front could only be salvaged by a major panzer counterattack and therefore detached the 10th Panzer Division from the XLVI Panzer Corps and assigned it to the Fourth Army. Thus it was that the 10th Panzer Division was the only one of the available mobile reserves that finally plunged into the fighting on 30 August.⁸¹

In its general outline, Fourth Army's battles for the Yelnya salient followed the same sequence as the fighting in the Ninth Army area. Prodigious Soviet bombardments and local attacks eroded the defending German divisions, and as German reserves were exhausted, the Russians exploited minor break-ins to pry open the German defensive front.⁸² A major break occurred on 30 August when the Soviets drove a ten-kilometer wedge into the Fourth Army's 23d Infantry Division. (It was this serious penetration, which carried to a depth on line with the VII Corps headquarters, that prompted the commitment of the 10th Panzer Division.⁸³) Although the panzer counterattack temporarily stabilized the situation, Brauchitsch, Bock, and

German infantrymen await Soviet counterattack, August 1941



Author's collection

Halder agreed on 2 September that Yelnya was no longer tenable in view of the strained condition of the Fourth Army. Consequently, on 5 September, German troops abandoned the Yelnya salient in a planned withdrawal.⁸⁴

Russian attacks against Ninth Army broke off on 10 September, and the assaults against the Fourth Army ceased six days later. In both areas, the Soviets could point to limited territorial gains as the fruits of their efforts.⁸⁵ Indeed, the operational withdrawal from Yelnya was the first imposed on the German Army in World War II. However, the full significance of Army Group Center's defensive battles during August and early September could not be measured solely in real estate lost or won.

Like a great winded beast, Army Group Center had stood stolidly in place for more than six full weeks while the Russians stormed against its front. The Russians had been able to choose the times and places of attack and had possessed advantages in quantities of men and materiel. The Germans had waged an improvised defense on unfavorable ground, and because of the extended unit frontages and inadequate combat resources, a doctrinal Elastic Defense relying on depth, local maneuver, firepower, and counterattack had been impossible.

As a result of these conditions, Army Group Center paid an extraordinarily high price in blood. Whereas the Elastic Defense had been designed to minimize personnel losses in positional warfare even in the face of enemy superiority, the improvised methods that the German units were compelled to use in the central front battles resulted in heavy casualties. In the Ninth Army sector, the entire 161st Division had been temporarily disabled, while all of the divisions in the V and VIII Corps had their combat strength seriously diminished. For the Fourth Army, the hardest fighting had occurred in the Yelnya salient, where nine German divisions had seen combat since the end of July. In these divisions, infantry losses had been particularly high. The 263d Infantry Division, for example, had taken 1,200 casualties in only seven days of combat at Yelnya. The 78th Infantry Division reported the loss of 1,155 officers and men in just over two weeks, while the 137th Infantry Division lost nearly 2,000 in the same amount of time.⁸⁶ These losses probably represented 20 to 30 percent of the total infantry strength of these divisions at the time the defensive battles began.

These personnel losses permanently diminished the combat power of Army Group Center, and as General Halder had foreseen earlier, German personnel replacements were running out. The chief of the General Staff noted on 26 September that convalescents returning to duty constituted the only remaining short-term source of replacement manpower.⁸⁷ Although a few replacements trickled down to Bock's tired divisions during September, Army Group Center still reported a net shortage of 80,000 men on 1 October. Since most of these unreplaced losses were infantrymen, the German ability to seize and hold terrain was seriously eroded.⁸⁸ Furthermore, growing shortages of frontline officers and noncommissioned officers also affected the combat worthiness of German units. For example, the war diarist for Army Group Center noted that, two and one-half months after its near destruction by Timoshenko's forces in August, the luckless 161st Division continued to suffer needless casualties due to the division's lack of experienced junior leaders.⁸⁹

The continuous defensive fighting also prevented Army Group Center from building up any appreciable stocks of ammunition. In fending off the attacks on the Ninth and Fourth Armies, the Germans had consumed ammunition almost as quickly as the overtaxed supply columns could deliver it. This meant that Army Group Center would either have to await the stocking of forward supply dumps before it resumed the offensive or continue to operate on an ever-lengthening logistical thread. As events turned out, Army Group Center eventually did a little of both.⁹⁰

Army Group Center's positional battles left other less-visible scars. Timoshenko's attacks on Ninth Army disrupted the timetable for shifting mobile units northward to support Leeb's attack on Leningrad. A degree of command antagonism also developed between Bock and Leeb as the two field marshals, their nerves fraying, haggled over the availability of these forces. Also, the command relationship between Field Marshal von Bock and General Guderian was permanently soured by arguments over the control and use of mobile reserves in the Yelnya area. This growing friction between senior commanders would scarcely have mattered had it not been for the decline in health and influence of Field Marshal von Brauchitsch, the German Army's commander in chief. (Brauchitsch finally suffered a heart attack on 10 November.) Without Brauchitsch's firm and steady hand to adjudicate disputes, coordination between German armies increasingly fell to the dilettantish Hitler. Consequently, the strenuous defensive battles of August and September helped bring these problems to a boil.

Prelude to Winter

In the overall context of the Barbarossa campaign, the German thrust toward Leningrad and the Kiev encirclement overshadowed Army Group Center's defensive stand. The successful execution of these operations, which pulverized Russian concentrations on both flanks of the front, seemed at the time a reasonable return for Army Group Center's ordeal.

Reinforced by panzer elements stripped from Army Group Center, Leeb's Army Group North advanced to the Lake Ladoga-Volkhov River-Lake Ilmen-Valdai Hills-Demyansk line. This drive drained the German tank and motorized infantry forces, whose progress was slowed by marshy, forested terrain and desperate Soviet resistance. Relentless Soviet night counterattacks denied rest to the exhausted German assault troops, and even soldiers of the elite *Waffen SS Totenkopf* Division grumbled that the grueling routine of attacking by day and defending by night was becoming unendurable.⁹¹ Nevertheless, by early September, the German advance had cut Leningrad's land communications, and Leeb's units stood poised to capture the city. At this point, however, Hitler again asserted his strategic prerogative by ordering that Leningrad not be stormed. Instead, the Führer ordered German troops merely to invest Leningrad and allow it to fall of its own weight.⁹²

In the south, the encirclement of Soviet forces in the Kiev salient produced the most spectacular *Kessel* victory to date: 665,000 prisoners, 824 tanks, and 3,018 artillery pieces fell into German hands by 26 September.⁹³ Until the Kiev caldron could be liquidated by the infantry units of the German Second

and Sixth Armies, the usual difficult defensive battles were fought by the panzer and infantry divisions forming the encircling rings. In describing Soviet breakout attempts, General Halder wrote on 17 September that "the encircled enemy units are ricocheting like billiard balls within the ring closed around Kiev."⁹⁴

Even as the strangulation of Leningrad and the reduction of the Kiev pocket were underway, Hitler, flushed with success, on 6 September ordered German forces to reconcentrate in the Army Group Center sector for a belated attack on Moscow.

Adolf Hitler's turnabout decision to attack Moscow did not stem from any last-minute conversion to the strategic views of his military advisers. Rather, the impending victories at Leningrad and Kiev had fired Hitler's imagination, prompting him to envision a renewed grand advance into the Russian depths. The centerpiece of this effort was to be a new series of *Kessel* battles by Army Group Center that would destroy the Soviet armies ranged before Moscow. In the south, Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt's Army Group South would drive into the void created by the Kiev victory, aiming toward Kharkov, Rostov, and the Don Basin industrial area. Leeb's Army Group North would continue to throttle Leningrad while protecting the northern flank of Army Group Center.⁹⁵ In Hitler's mind, these strategic projections constituted the final, triumphal phase of Barbarossa: the crushing of the last Red Army field forces, the capture of the enemy capital, and the plundering of Russian economic wealth.

Most German commanders endorsed the concept of an attack on Moscow, though they regarded it to be a far more precarious operation than did the ebullient Führer. Their concern stemmed from the reduced combat and logistical capacity of German forces, the continuing resistance of the Red Army, and the approach of the autumnal rainy season, all of which lengthened the odds against a successful offensive. Weakened by the defensive battles against Timoshenko and Zhukov, Army Group Center, in particular, was incapable of early offensive action unless heavily reinforced. Since nearly all German divisions in Russia were already committed, reinforcements could only be mustered by disengaging units from other parts of the front and redeploying them into the Army Group Center area. Such a reshuffling of German forces would cause tremendous logistical and command difficulties and would fritter away most of the remaining good weather as well. Hitler, however, discounted these difficulties, remarking airily on 5 September that the Moscow attack "should if possible be launched within 8-10 days." (This estimate was so impossibly optimistic that Halder promptly dismissed it as "impossible.")⁹⁶

As Hitler remained adamant in his demands for immediate action, the second half of September was spent moving German forces into position for Operation Taifun, the name of the Moscow attack. In all, more than twenty-five divisions joined, or rejoined, Army Group Center. This maneuvering further snarled German communications as units crisscrossed each other's supply lines. Not all units earmarked for the Moscow attack could even be concentrated by the 2 October start date: Guderian's Panzer Group 2 had to be given an independent, more southerly axis of advance in order to shorten its return march from the Kiev battles, while some panzers returning from



General Hermann Hoth (center) directs advance of Panzer Group 3 toward Moscow

Army Group North arrived too late to participate in the opening phases of the attack.⁹⁷ So confused was the shifting of units that Hoth's Panzer Group 3 and General Erich Hoepner's Panzer Group 4 actually swapped their entire commands during the month of September.⁹⁸

Luckily for the Germans, the Soviets did little to interfere with these offensive preparations. Red Army forces facing Army Groups Center and South were themselves weakened from the battles of August and early September, and they used this time to restore their own strength.

Only on the Army Group North front did the Russians remain active, launching a series of sharp attacks in the hope of breaking the German grip on Leningrad. Between 18 and 28 September, for example, a flurry of Soviet attacks buckled the thin lines of the *Waffen SS Totenkopf* Division south of Lake Ilmen. German losses in this fighting were so heavy—one SS battalion lost 889 men, including all of its officers, between 24 and 29 September—that the division commander warned on 29 September that the continued combat worthiness of his unit was in doubt.⁹⁹ The 30th Infantry Division, dug in on the left of the *Totenkopf*, likewise defended itself against seemingly endless waves of Russian tanks and infantry. Effective defense was plagued by the same ailments as existed elsewhere: an excessively wide division frontage (over thirty kilometers for the 30th Infantry Division), defensive positions consisting of only a single trenchline without depth or obstacles, and no reserves. After German artillery successfully crushed several Russian breakthroughs, the Soviets switched their tactics to create shallow penetrations of great width.

This left the Germans no choice but to close these gaps by counterattack, suffering heavy casualties in doing so. In this way, the 30th Division lost 31 officers and 1,440 enlisted men in three weeks of nightmarish defensive fighting.¹⁰⁰

The German drive on Moscow began on 2 October and immediately developed "on a truly classic pattern."¹⁰¹ Three German panzer groups smashed through the Soviet defenses and enclosed more than six Soviet armies in two great caldrons at Vyazma and Bryansk. Though made purposely shallow in order to spare the panzer forces the agony of prolonged defensive fighting, these pockets yielded more than 550,000 prisoners by the third week of October.¹⁰² As in previous *Kessel* battles, German units fought many extemporaneous defensive engagements in order to contain trapped Red Army divisions.¹⁰³ Soviet relief attacks from outside the pockets failed to materialize, however. The German pincers had enclosed the bulk of the combat-worthy Russian units guarding Moscow, and the few that remained outside of the pockets were busy forming a new defensive line in front of the Soviet



German troops enter Kharkov, October 1941



Autumn rains turned the Russian roads into quagmires, stalling the German attack on Moscow.

capital.¹⁰⁴ These successes so heartened General Halder that the chief of the Army General Staff predicted in his diary on 8 October that "with reasonably good direction of battle [that is, no fatal interference by Hitler] and moderately good weather, we cannot but succeed in encircling Moscow." Halder's optimism was echoed by Otto Dietrich, the Reich press chief, who announced on 9 October that "for all military purposes, Soviet Russia is done with."¹⁰⁵

The optimism following the battles of Vyazma and Bryansk was premature. Heavy rains began on 7 October and continued through the remainder of the month, turning the Russian countryside into a quagmire and stifling Army Group Center's offensive operations. German forces continued to slog ahead here and there, with tactical progress being made with great difficulty. However, the mud paralyzed the German logistical system, which depended entirely on motorized and horse-drawn vehicles to draw supplies overland from the rearward railheads. While the muddy season also dampened Soviet operations, the Russians enjoyed two important advantages over their enemies: a shorter line of communications and a nearly intact rail net. The rain-induced pause that suspended major operations for five crucial weeks in October and November thus worked greatly to the Soviets' advantage. When German attacks over frost-hardened ground resumed on 14 November, the way to Moscow was again barred by fresh Red Army forces and formidable defensive works.

On the southern portion of the front, Field Marshal von Rundstedt's Army Group South successfully sustained its offensive drive. General Ewald von Kleist's First Panzer Army* formed the cutting edge of the southern attack and advanced rapidly along the Azov coast toward Rostov. Rain, mud, and Soviet counterattacks slowed the advance of the Seventeenth Army and Sixth Army ranged on Kleist's northern flank, which resulted in the German armored spearhead virtually losing contact with the infantry forces echeloned to its rear. Despite his progress, Rundstedt doubted the German ability to crush the remaining Red Army forces facing him and to reach the far-flung

*1st and 2d Panzer Groups were redesignated panzer armies on 5 October 1941.

territorial objectives demanded by Hitler. Rundstedt unsuccessfully urged that German operations on the southern front be curtailed.¹⁰⁶

The German III Panzer Corps seized Rostov on 20 November, capturing intact a bridge over the Don River leading to the Caucasian oil-producing regions coveted by Hitler.¹⁰⁷ Immediately, Russian counterattacks began to tear at the German salient at Rostov from three sides, while other Red Army forces swept down into the gap between the First Panzer Army and the Seventeenth Army. On 28 November, with Army Group South's offensive energies exhausted and with no strategic purpose to be served by holding Rostov in a risky defensive battle against superior Soviet forces, Rundstedt ordered First Panzer Army to withdraw to the Mius River where a winter defensive line could be consolidated.¹⁰⁸ This proposal was militarily prudent and conformed to the German defensive tradition of conserving combat power while not holding terrain for its own sake.

Hitler, however, did not regard strategic problems in traditional ways. In the German dictator's mind, the prestige value of holding Rostov outweighed any risk that German forces might have to endure in order to hold it. On 30 November, after a vitriolic conversation with Brauchitsch, Hitler countermanded Rundstedt's withdrawal order by directing that German forces stand and fight on the Don. Affronted at this interference in his command, Rundstedt asked to be relieved. Hitler promptly granted Rundstedt's request and named Field Marshal Walter von Reichenau as the new commander of Army Group South.¹⁰⁹

The change in army group leadership, however, did not alter the tactical situation around Rostov. Russian pressure against First Panzer Army over-

Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt, commander of Army Group South





Soviet troops counterattack in the streets of Rostov, November 1941

whelmed Reichenau's attempts to hold forward defensive positions, and on 1 December, Hitler allowed Army Group South to fall back to the Mius defensive line, which was the position that had been advocated by Rundstedt earlier. Of Hitler's obstinacy and interference, Halder noted with grim satisfaction that "now we are where we could have been last night. It was a senseless waste of time, and to top it, we lost Rundstedt also."¹¹⁰

First Panzer Army's defensive efforts at Rostov and during the withdrawal to the Mius line were harrowing. In fact, the fighting retreat of the German southern wing might have ended disastrously had it not been for heavy *Luftwaffe* attacks against the advancing Soviets.¹¹¹ Kleist's panzer army was composed almost entirely of armored and motorized infantry formations which, as previously explained, were inherently less able to hold ground than were German infantry divisions. This problem was exacerbated by the increasing appearance of new Soviet T-34 tanks, against which the German tank and antitank guns made little impression. In one case, the German 60th Motorized Infantry Division had some of its *Paks* literally "rolled flat" by T-34s during defensive fighting within Rostov itself.¹¹²

In addition, the German forces held an excessively broad defensive front and did so with units that were badly depleted in strength. The III Panzer Corps, for example, initially held its 100-kilometer-long perimeter around Rostov with only one panzer and two motorized divisions.¹¹³ Russian attacks, characterized by Halder as "well-led" and "numerically far superior," inflicted heavy casualties on these thinly spread German units.¹¹⁴ On 22 November, for example, the 16th Panzer Division could muster only 350 riflemen in its

defensive positions guarding the German flank north of Rostov. Heavy Soviet assaults cost one of the 16th Panzer Division's weakened infantry battalions seventy men in one day, a loss that decimated that unit.¹¹⁵ The temperature, which dipped to more than -20°C , diminished the obstacle value of streams and rivers by freezing them solid and rendered the ground so hard that defensive positions could only be gouged out with explosives.

Finally, the smooth withdrawal of German forces to the Mius line was interrupted by Hitler's temporary "stand and fight" order. This order reached German forward units after the retreat had already begun, thus resulting in considerable confusion during the following two days as combat forces and rear-echelon service units became entangled in marches and countermarches.¹¹⁶

By the end of the first week of December, Army Group South had established a winter defensive line running generally from the Mius River north along the Donets River. Likewise, the Army Group North positions had stabilized in a vast salient extending from Leningrad eastward to Tikhvin and then south to Lake Ilmen and the Valdai Hills. The lines of Leeb's army group fell short of the goal set by Hitler of linking up with the Finns, but no further offensive actions could be expected. Only on the central portion of the front did the Germans cherish hopes of further offensive success.

Bock's Army Group Center had surged forward on 15 November in a last, desperate grab for Moscow. This attack had immediately collided with prepared Soviet defenses manned by newly reinforced Russian armies. Dogged by a deficient logistical system, severe shortages in personnel and equipment, and the onset of harsh winter weather, the German offensive made slow progress. Although Hitler wildly urged Bock to undertake deep envelopments, the fact remained that the armies of Army Group Center had so dwindled in strength and mobility that only frontal attacks could be mounted.¹¹⁷ By the end of the month, German units had reached the extreme limit of their endurance. Although the maps in Hitler's headquarters still portrayed a great offensive, at the front the scattered and feeble thrusts by German units increasingly resembled the reflexive spasms of a dying animal.¹¹⁸

Even before their hopes of capturing Moscow totally died away, German planners hastened to assess the requirements for extended defensive operations through the Russian winter. Whatever the outcome of the Moscow battles, the German armies in Russia would be unable to conduct new offensive operations until the following spring. Consequently, as it became apparent that no final Soviet collapse or capitulation was going to occur, German staff officers bent their efforts to planning for a winter defense on the Russian Front.

As early as 19 November, with Operation Taifun still in full swing, Hitler conferred with his military advisers on the building of an "east wall" defensive line, but the dictator put off any decision until a later date. Four days later, Halder discussed the construction of a rearward defensive line and fortifications with General Hans von Greiffenberg, Army Group Center's chief of staff. On 29 November, after a review of the situation on the Eastern Front with the head of the General Staff's Operations Section, Halder authorized the preparation of orders for a general winter defense.¹¹⁹ Drafted over the next week, this order became Führer Directive 39, which Hitler signed on 8 December.

Taken at face value, Führer Directive 39 resembled the shrewd 1917 plan to withdraw to the Hindenburg Line that had inaugurated the German Elastic Defense. Although framed in strategic terms, Führer Directive 39 (and the Army High Command's implementing instructions that accompanied it) generally followed the traditional principles of the elastic defense in depth. Brauchitsch, the German Army's commander in chief, was directed to designate a winter defensive line. At his discretion, this line could be located to the rear of current German positions, although rearward fortifications were to be prepared prior to any tactical withdrawals. (Significantly, in light of subsequent events, this showed an initial willingness even on the part of Hitler to relinquish terrain that did not contribute materially to German goals.) The defensive line itself was to be held with minimum forces, allowing combat units—and especially panzer and motorized divisions—to be refitted in reserve positions farther to the rear. These rehabilitation and reserve areas were to be located fairly close to the front lines to facilitate rapid reinforcement of threatened sectors. Defensive positions were to be sited for optimum defensive effectiveness and comfortable troop quartering. Moreover, to provide additional defensive depth, the order emphasized the construction of rearward defensive positions, using whatever manpower could be scraped together.¹²⁰

Führer Directive 39 was historically significant because it implicitly conceded that the German armies had failed to achieve Barbarossa's strategic objectives. The Soviet Union, though suffering enormous losses in the summer and autumn battles, had not been conquered in a "single, lightning campaign." Moscow, belatedly named the climactic operational objective, remained beyond the German reach. Führer Directive 39 blamed these failures on the premature winter weather and resultant supply difficulties. More crucial, however, was the vastly depleted German combat power. The offensive exertions of the previous five months had so sapped German strength that German units had become unfit for combat of any sort, whether offensive or defensive.

In a situation analogous to that encountered by the Allies in 1918 following the Ludendorff offensives, Soviet counterattacks revealed that German units were scarcely able to hold the ground they had recently won. Red Army soldiers, testing German lines outside of Moscow with local counterattacks, discovered to their surprise that German resistance was spotty. Exploiting tactical successes, these Soviet counterblows gradually swelled in scope and intensity. By the beginning of December, the Soviet High Command had recognized the frailty of the German position and threw all available forces into a general counteroffensive. Beginning on 6 December, this counterstroke tore open the German front and created the greatest strategic crisis yet faced by the Germans in the war.

Thus it was that Führer Directive 39, though significant in reflecting German defensive intentions, failed to have any real effect on the conduct of winter operations by the German Army. Whereas the German winter defensive order assumed a smooth, deliberate transition to positional defense, Soviet counterattacks were already forcing battle-weary German units into headlong retreat. Belatedly issued on 8 December, the German defensive order had already been made obsolete by events. As in the defensive battles during Barbarossa's drive eastward, German winter defensive tactics were to be dictated more by local conditions than by doctrinal prescription.
