OPERATION KREML: DECEPTION, STRATEGY, AND THE FORTUNES OF WAR

by

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Deception has been associated with war throughout history. Sun Tzu said all warfare is based on it. It has figured in literature from the *Iliad* on down. The ancient Greeks applauded it; the Middle Ages deplored it; the Renaissance ritualized it. Modern armies practice it, even though Clausewitz warned against it as an uncertain and too often unprofitable diversion of effort from real strategic concerns.

World War II was notable for, among other things, a vastly increased capacity of all parties to deceive and to be deceived. Sophisticated radio, high performance aircraft, elaborate intelligence establishments, and command of vast human and material resources provided means for deceptions and enhanced receptivity to them. The largest military operations—in fact, those in particular—could, borrowing Churchill's metaphor, be given massive, nerve-wrackingly compelling bodyguards of lies. Under the code names HARPUNE (harpoon) and HAIFISCH (shark), the Germans in the spring of 1941 converted the remains of a partial actual deployment made during the previous summer and fall into a feigned buildup for an invasion of the British Isles and a cover for BARBAROSSA, the attack on the Soviet Union. Three years later, to protect the Normandy invasion, the Allies put together in the BODYGUARD plan a galaxy of deceptions crafted to give the Germans a totally false but convincingly detailed picture of Allied strategy.

Such deceptions, elaborate as they might have been, have nevertheless generally been relegated to the footnotes of World War II history which, until the recent unlocking of the remarkable ULTRA secrets, has had to deal with so much "reality" as to have little room left for shadows. The effects of the deceptions, furthermore, are difficult to judge after the events have run their courses. This is particularly true of one of the less well-known members of the species, Operation KREML (Kremlin). It was conducted entirely within the confines of the mostly private war fought by Germany and the Soviet Union, and all that remain of it outside the inaccessible Soviet archives are wisps—a scattering of German documents and less than a half dozen references in Soviet accounts of the war. With so little to go on, KREML should, perhaps, be classified as nothing more than one of the war's many minor curiosities. On the other hand, like certain invisible interstellar phenomena, KREML could possibly help to explain a cluster of remarkable occurrences in the German-Soviet war during the months between the great Soviet defeat at Kharkov in May and the greater German defeat at Stalingrad in November 1942.

HITLER'S STRATEGY

The character of the German summer campaign on the Eastern Front in 1942 was set, for good, two days before Christmas,

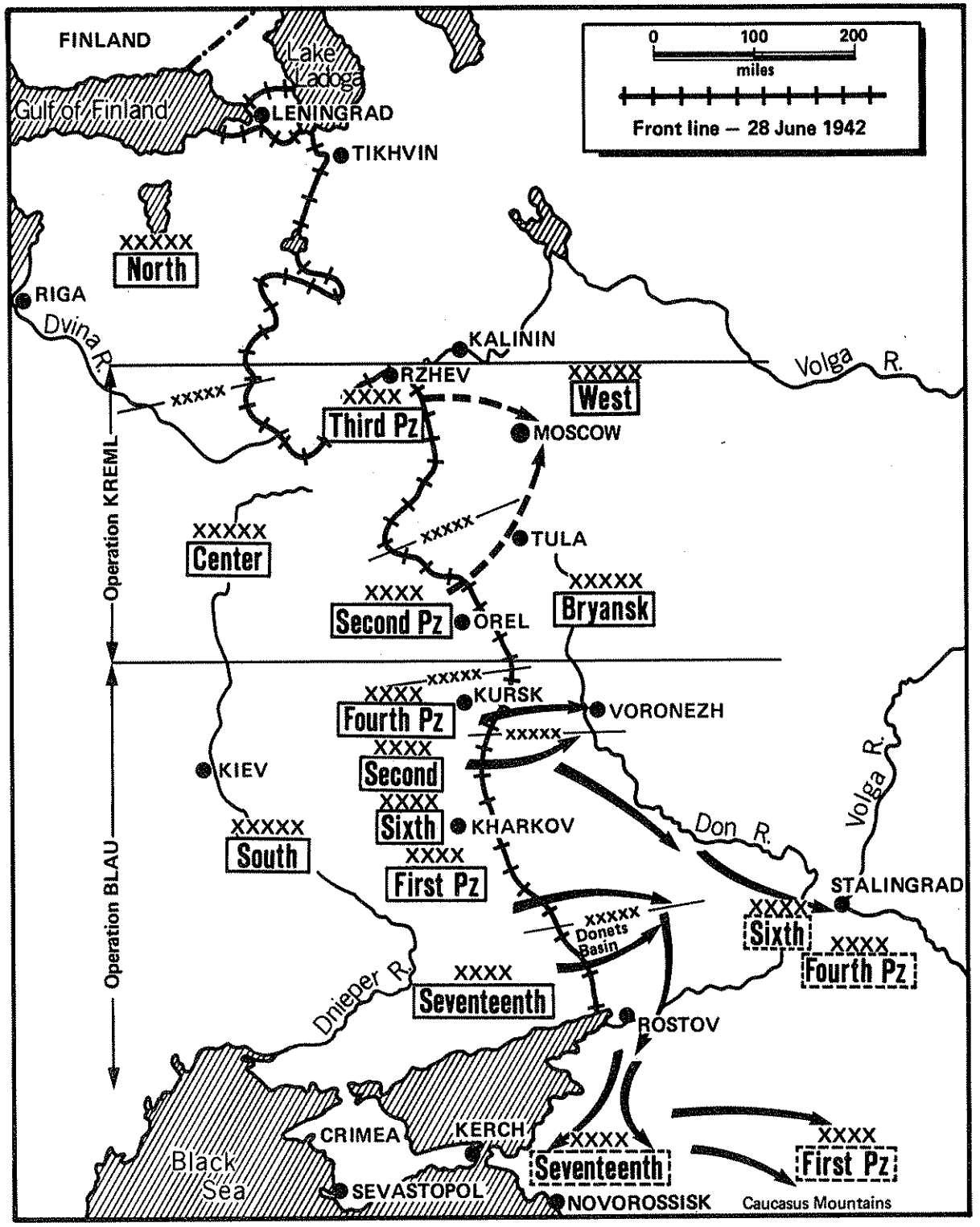
1941. While his armies around Moscow were buckling under the shock of winter and the weight of a Soviet counteroffensive, Adolf Hitler told Colonel General Erich Fromm that Germany would have to "clear the table" in the Soviet Union in the coming year. Hitler had recently appointed himself Commander in Chief of the German Army, and Fromm, as the Chief of Army Armament and the Replacement Army was the one who would have to provide the men and weapons. Fromm, knowing, as Hitler also did, that Germany would not be able to mount nearly as strong an effort in the East in 1942 as it had in 1941, suggested going over to the defensive for a year.[1] Since Hitler was not disposed to contemplate anything of the sort, the exchange with Fromm brought him face to face with the strategic problem that was going to dog him from that winter to the next, namely: How could one conjure a victory from a growing configuration of deficiencies?

It was a problem that, for the most part, Hitler had himself created. He had erred in the first place—along with most of his generals, it should be said—in his estimates of what would be needed to defeat the Soviet Union. Moreover, he had been so certain of winning the war in a single season that he had virtually stopped weapons and ammunition production for the army in July 1941.[2] By December, the factories had for five months been converting to navy and air force armaments for the final showdown with England that Hitler had expected to stage after finishing off the Soviet Union. Consequently, stockpiles were being depleted; some kinds of artillery ammunition had begun to run short in November; and less than a third of over 2000 tanks and self-propelled assault guns lost earlier had been replaced.[3] Hitler issued a directive, "Armament 1942," in early January 1942 that again reversed the industrial priorities. "Preference" was given to the "elevated requirements of the Army," which was to be guaranteed a stockpile of four months' worth of general supplies by the spring of 1942 and one basic load plus six times the total August 1941 consumption in all categories of ammunition.[4] But this was an overwhelming order, even for as talented an organizer as Albert Speer, who became Minister for Armament and Munitions in February 1942.

Campaigning in the Soviet Union another year was going to take men too, in the army and in industry. The work force in Germany had been cut in 1941 to get the nearly 3½ million men put into the war in the East. After five months of fighting, more than 25 percent were casualties and most of those had not been replaced. Infantry regiments had the strength of battalions and battalions that of companies. The army had expected to disband 50 divisions, return the men with skills to industry, and use the rest to fill the still-active divisions.[5] But if it were going to do what Hitler had in mind, the army would need more divisions, not fewer. Fromm told his senior generals in the Replacement Army: "We believed we would be able to put 500,000 men back into industry. Now we will have, instead, to take 600,000 men out."[6]

When Hitler talked to Fromm in December, he could still hope that the Soviet attacks around Moscow would be brought to a stop early in the new year, in time for the worst of the damage to be repaired by spring. The hope died in January, when the Soviet forces went over to a general offensive that for two months punched and tore at the German front from the Volkhov River southeast of Leningrad to the Donets River below Kharkov. As a consequence, the drains on German manpower, equipment, and ammunition continued unabated throughout the winter. Divisions that should have been resting and refitting had to stay in the line in weather and conditions of combat that made the fighting of the previous summer seem almost not worthy of the name.

After mid-March, the battles at last subsided somewhat as the front settled into the mud brought on by the spring thaw, and Hitler was able to turn in earnest to plans for the coming summer. On 5 April, he signed a strategic directive, much of which he had also drafted, in which he set two objectives for the summer: to destroy the Soviet defensive


FINLAND
Lake Ladoga
Gulf of Finland
LENINGRAD
TIKHVIN
XXXXX
North
RIGA
Dvina R.
KALININ
Volga R.
RZHEV
XXXXX
West
XXXX
Third Pz
MOSCOW
Operation KREML
XXXXX
Center
TULA
XXXXX
Bryansk
XXXX
Second Pz
OREL
XXXXX
KURSK
XXXX
Fourth Pz
VORONEZH
XXXXX
XXXX
Second
KIEV
XXXX
Sixth
KHARKOV
Don R.
Volga R.
XXXXX
South
XXXX
First Pz
STALINGRAD
XXXXX
Donets Basin
XXXX
Sixth
XXXX
Fourth Pz
Operation BLAU
XXXX
Seventeenth
Dnieper R.
ROSTOV
CRIMEA
KERCH
XXXX
Seventeenth
XXXX
First Pz
Black Sea
SEVASTOPOL
NOVOROSSISK
Caucasus Mountains
0
100
200
miles
Front line — 28 June 1942

strength "conclusively" and to deprive the Soviet Union of the resources necessary to its war economy. He proposed to accomplish those objectives in two operations: One, given the code name BLAU (blue), would be an advance in the south to and across the Don River to the Caucasus oil fields; the other would be the capture of Leningrad, which had been brought under siege in September 1941. Since he would not have enough strength to start both at the same time, the attack on Leningrad would be left in abeyance.[7]

Essentially, then, the final victory, or as much of it as the somewhat ambivalently worded objectives required, would have to be accomplished by Operation BLAU. Since Hitler had from the very first regarded the resources of the Ukraine and the Caucasus as the richest prizes in the Soviet Union, the southern strategy was for him a preference at least as much as it was a compromise with necessity. In early December, when he closed down the 1941 campaign, he had put the Caucasus at the top of the agenda for the spring.[8] A month later, he had told the Japanese Ambassador, Hirosi Oshima, that in the Soviet Union he did not contemplate any more offensives in the center (that is, toward Moscow) and would direct his effort henceforth to the south.[9] And, he was probably not overly stretching the truth when he told Joseph Goebbels in March 1942 that he had always believed the Caucasus to be the Soviet Union's most vulnerable point.[10]

On the other hand, Hitler knew that in undertaking an offensive, even only in the south, after the battering his forces had undergone during the winter, he was going to be skirting mighty close to the limit of his military capability. True, Army Group South, which would conduct the offensive, was in better condition than his other two army groups, Center on the Moscow axis and North on the Leningrad axis, both of which had great holes in their fronts; but, like the others, South had not been able to make good the wear and tear of the 1941 campaign and had sustained more during the winter just past. Moreover, it did not have nearly the strength it would need to make a drive all the way to the Caucasus. In his first estimate to Hitler on Operation BLAU, the Commanding General of Army Group South, Field Marshal Fedor von Bock, said he would need 85 divisions, 39 more than he had.[11]

Hitler took the estimate, and Bock did get the divisions, and more, 90 in all by June; but 25 of them were Italian, Rumanian, or Hungarian and not trained, equipped, or motivated to fight on the Eastern Front.[12] The German divisions Bock had were rebuilt too, but mostly right where they stood, in the front, and many corners were cut. There were not enough NCOs and junior officers to go around, and every division had to take unseasoned replacements, the larger part of them recently conscripted 18- and 19-year-olds with no more than eight weeks of training. The panzer and motorized divisions had fewer tracked personnel-carrying vehicles, but also fewer men to move, since their infantry battalions were reduced from five to four companies. They could be brought to about 80 percent of full mobility, but 20 percent of that was secured by using ordinary commerical trucks, which reduced cross-country capability.[13]

Looking at the result, Army Group South concluded:

> Owing to diverse composition, partial lack of battle experience, and gaps in their outfitting, the units available for the summer operations in 1942 will not have the combat effectiveness that could be taken for granted at the beginning of the campaign in the East.[14]

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Since Hitler would not change his plans and could not improve the condition of his forces, he had, as he saw it, to convince the troops that they were every bit as good as they had been in the previous year. Above all, he could not tolerate any loss of confidence. He told his Chief of the General Staff, Colonel General Franz Halder, "The operation must start with success: young troops cannot be exposed to setbacks. Setbacks must not occur."[15]

STALIN'S STRATEGY

Joseph Stalin, as Supreme Commander of the Soviet Armed Forces, had his first taste of victory in December 1941, and it was a generous one. After having lost vast stretches of Soviet territory in the summer and nearly being driven from Moscow in October, he saw his armies stop the Germans and turn them back at Rostov on the Black Sea, around Moscow, and at Tikhvin, southeast of Leningrad. Overextended at all three places, caught on the march, and unprepared for the cold of an unusually early winter, the German veterans were mauled by recently formed Soviet reserves who were more appropriately outfitted for the season.

While Hitler, at the turn of the year, was looking longingly ahead toward the spring and the next summer, Stalin's concern was to exploit the opportunities the winter had made for him, because they were certain to fade when the weather again changed. On 7 January 1942—ignoring the misgivings of his Chief of the Army General Staff, Marshal Boris M. Shaposhnikov, and other members of the *Stavka* of the Supreme High Command, particularly Marshal Georgi K. Zhukov—he ordered a general offensive. (The *Stavka*, or staff, roughly comparable to the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, made its decisions by consensus pronounced by Stalin, its chairman.) The general offensive, ambitious to say the least, had these objectives: the destruction of German Army Group Center by encirclement of its main forces west of Moscow; the relief of Leningrad; and, on the south, the liberation of the entire Donets Basin and the Crimea.[16]

In the snow and bitter cold of January and February, the general offensive battered the German lines and in places rolled through. By late February, the Soviet armies had driven great bulges into what had been German-held territory: one southeast of Leningrad, two on the flanks of Army Group Center, and another west of the Donets south of Kharkov. On the Crimea, they had reoccupied the Kerch Peninsula in the east and reinforced Sevastopol in the west. But they had not achieved their final objectives anywhere and were not likely to do so with winter on the wane. The effort had been too ambitious from the start. Stalin and the *Stavka* had underestimated the requirements of men and material and overestimated their own and their field commands' abilities to organize and execute offensive operations.[17]

The fighting was unmistakably turning in the Germans' favor by early March, and, as Marshal A. M. Vasilevskiy obliquely put it years later, the Soviet Army General Staff then "faced the question of having to plan for the coming full year."[18] The General Staff, expecting its forces' chief concern in the coming months to be survival, projected an "active defense" to wear down the enemy and buy the time during the spring and summer in which reserves could be accumulated for offensives later in the year. But when Shaposhnikov presented the General Staff's view to the *Stavka* at the end of March, Stalin complained about "idling away time" and demanded "pre-emptive blows over a wide front."[19] Subsequently the *Stavka* scheduled seven offensives for the spring and early summer along the whole line from the Arctic coast west of Murmansk to the Crimea.[20] In doing so, it virtually reestablished all the original objectives of the general offensive and added several others.

Of the spring offensives, only two materialized fully: one in the Murmansk-Kestenga area and one aimed at Kharkov. The others either could not be made ready in time or failed in the first stages. In the Crimea area, the German Eleventh Army struck first and destroyed the Soviet attack

force, taking 170,000 prisoners.[21] The Murmansk-Kestenga operation ran through almost the whole month of May in the lingering Arctic winter without affecting a stalemate that had already prevailed in the sector since the previous summer.

The Kharkov operation, however, was different. Marshal Semen K. Timoshenko, who had command of the whole southern flank, had the time and resources to get it ready, and it fitted well in the longer-range strategic plan, which projected a "decisive" offensive on the south flank in the summer.[22] Consequently, the operation was attractive enough to obscure two very dangerous weaknesses: It would be practically a solo performance against an enemy who had recovered his equilibrium, and it depended in the main on a breakout and advance from the confined quarters of a salient (left west of the Donets from the earlier general offensive).

Begun on 12 May as a massive tank and infantry assault, the Kharkov venture collapsed totally 16 days later with a loss of 240,000 Soviet troops and 1500 tanks.[23] With it collapsed the hope of keeping the initiative into the summer. The shock must have been immense: After the battle turned, on the seventh day, Stalin made practically no attempt to relieve his beleaguered troops.[24] The Germans had shown a flash of their old form; their best campaigning season had arrived; and they still had a front just 80 miles west of Moscow.

KREML AND BLAU

After Kharkov, the strategic initiative everywhere clearly reverted to the Germans; any doubts that might have lingered on that score were settled. Welcome as this was to Hitler for its effects on his own troops' and the enemy's morale, by presumably putting the Soviet south flank on the defensive alert, it could also have impaired BLAU's chances for a smooth start in the south. Surprise was going to be less easy to achieve—and more essential. On one hand, Hitler could congratulate himself on having seen to it in person that the deployment for BLAU was carried out in the greatest secrecy. All new headquarters and units were billeted well away from the front in scattered locations and disguised as elements of the permanent rear echelon. At the height of the Kharkov battle, to prevent giving their presence away, Hitler had refused to put in any reinforcements although he had plenty available. On the other hand, the new troops were still untested, and the losses and wear on men and equipment in the veteran units that had fought at Kharkov were not going to be made good in time for BLAU. The objective still was to destroy the Soviet main forces, but having them on the scene at the start would be very inconvenient.

All in all, it was worthwhile to do whatever still could be done to divert Soviet attention away from the south flank. The mission fell to Army Group Center, which was low on muscle, but—because of its proximity to Moscow—high in potential for attracting Soviet notice. On 29 May, Headquarters, Army Group Center issued a Top Secret directive. The first sentence read, "The OKH [Army High Command] has ordered the earliest possible resumption of the attack on Moscow." All subsequent correspondence regarding the operation was to go under the code name "KREML."[25]

KREML was a paper operation, an out-and-out deception, but it had the substance to make it a masterpiece of that highly speculative form of military art. In particular, the premise—to simulate a repeat of the late 1941 drive on Moscow—was solid; in fact, it made better strategic sense than did that of BLAU. The front, though badly eroded, was almost exactly where it had been in mid-November 1941, and Second and Third Panzer Armies, which had been the spearheads then, were in relatively the same positions southwest and northwest of Moscow that they had held when the fall rains stopped and the advance resumed. The army group directive, which assigned the two panzer armies the identical missions they had received in the previous fall, could have been taken for the real thing even by German officers who were not told otherwise, and most were not.

In the first week of June, the army group distributed sealed batches of Moscow-area maps down to the regimental level with instructions not to open them until 10 June. On the 10th, army, corps, and division staffs began holding planning conferences on KREML with a target readiness date of about 1 August. Security was tight, and only the chiefs of staff and branch chiefs knew they were working on a sham. At the same time, the air force increased the reconnaissance flights over Moscow and its surroundings; prisoner of war interrogators were given lists of questions to ask about the city's defenses; and intelligence groups sent out swarms of agents with missions pinpointed on Moscow and on Tula and Kalinin, the two major way stations on the routes the panzer armies supposedly would be taking.[26] The object was to let Soviet intelligence and counterintelligence "find" the pieces and assemble the picture themselves. Since very few German agents sent across the lines in the past had been heard from again, it could be assumed that Soviet counterintelligence did its work thoroughly. That the prisoner of war camps were loaded with Soviet agents and that almost every civilian in the occupied territory was at least an indirect informant for agents or partisans could be taken for granted. The barest trickle of information would be plenty.

KREML acquired a last, wholly unpremeditated twist on 19 June, when a Major Reichel, the operations officer of one of Army Group South's panzer divisions, broke a cardinal security regulation and took some BLAU plans with him on a flight to a front-line unit in a light airplane. The plane went down a mile and a half inside Soviet territory. The next morning, a patrol found it intact except for a bullet hole in the gas tank. Reichel, the pilot, and the papers had disappeared. Another patrol, sent out two days later, found a body that could not be identified for certain, but no trace of the papers.[27] If the Russians had them, as it seemed they must have, they knew a good deal about BLAU and could deduce more, because Reichel's division was to be in the lead element of the first phase of the offensive. If they had Reichel alive, they probably knew everything. In either case, KREML, it could be assumed, was useless—unless the Russians mistook the Reichel incident for the deception. And so—probably a farce but maybe, just maybe, more valuable than it could possibly have been before—KREML continued. And the Russians did have the papers, but, apparently, they did not also have Reichel. When the Commanding General, Southwest Front, Marshal Timoshenko, in whose area Reichel's plane had gone down, described the papers' contents to Stalin over the telephone, Stalin remarked that very likely the enemy had similar plans for other places as well.[28]

A "COMPLEX OF DESINFORMATION"

The Soviet war literature has little to say about KREML. The *History of the Second World War* describes it as an item in a "varied complex of desinformation [*sic*]" designed to mislead the Soviet Command and says, "However, Operation KREML did not achieve its aim."[29] The *Great Patriotic War*, edited by the Soviet Army's long-time chief military historian, General P. A. Zhilin, states that "the Fascists miscalculated" and that all of their plans "were uncovered in good time."[30] According to both, the Soviet Army General Staff had in hand by 23 March 1942 an intelligence estimate pinpointing the Caucasus oil fields as the primary German objective for 1942. The Zhilin work also quotes the following from the estimate: "The main effort of the spring offensive will lie in the southern sector, with a secondary thrust in the north and a simultaneous feint on the central front toward Moscow."[31] A more accurate prediction could hardly be imagined, particularly since this was more than a week and a half before Hitler's own thinking reached the stage of being put into writing.

Presumably, then, KREML was a futile exercise for the Germans. On the other hand, the *Stavka* appears clearly not to have based its strategic plans for the coming spring and summer on the 23 March estimate. Both Zhilin and the *History of the Second World*

War state that Stalin believed the Germans would be able to launch two strong thrusts simultaneously, one toward the Caucasus, the other toward Moscow; and they say he was most concerned about Moscow.[32] Vasilevskiy, who was at the time the operations chief and would before long be the Chief of the General Staff, says that the positions the Germans held and their strength gave the *Stavka* reasons to assume they would make their "decisive" attack "in the central direction."[33]

The *History of the Second World War* and Zhilin have almost nothing more to say on defensive strategy, and both leave the impression that the Soviet leadership was wholly preoccupied from late March until the German attack came on 28 June with the so-called "active defense" and preparations for a summer offensive. As the *History of the Second World War* puts it, the *Stavka* "decided" at the end of June to abandon plans for a big offensive and "take up planning" for an extended reversion to a "strategic defensive."[34] The *History of the Great Patriotic War*, however, and the Vasilevskiy memoirs indicate that the "active defense" and the idea of a summer offensive had died already in the Kharkov debacle at the end of May and that the *Stavka* from then on knew the Germans would retake the initiative.[35] Since these accounts agree on Moscow as being the presumed German objective, the discrepancy would be hardly worth a mention were it not for one divergence; specifically, the *History of the Great Patriotic War* and Vasilevskiy indicate that the Soviet estimate of German intentions had been refined by the end of June and that the main German attack toward Moscow was expected to come from the south, via Tula.[36] Whatever the reason may have been—and perhaps it was no more than coincidence—Soviet thinking, as given in these two accounts, conformed exactly to the impression KREML was designed to create.

In the last days before 28 June, the day on which BLAU began, after several 24-hour postponements caused by heavy rain, the Soviet focus narrowed to a single stretch of approximately 150 miles of front held by one command, Bryansk Front (army group), under Lieutenant General F. I. Golikov. Golikov's right flank curved westward around Orel, facing Second Panzer Army and covering the Tula-Moscow route. His left flank straddled the Kursk-Voronezh line and had before it the German Second Army and Fourth Panzer Army, the latter recently transferred from Army Group Center in secret to open BLAU with a thrust to Voronezh. According to an account by Golikov's former chief of staff, Golikov had received transcripts of the Reichel papers from his neighbor on the south, Timoshenko, on the day the major's plane was downed and had, in the next four days, twice reported heavy traffic and concentrations of enemy armored and motorized units around Kursk. On the 26th, however, Stalin had summoned him to Moscow, told him to forget about BLAU, which was a pipedream "concocted by the intelligence people," and ordered him to concentrate on preparing an attack toward Orel. That Golikov was doing on the morning of the 28th, when Fourth Panzer Army smashed through his left flank.[37]

RETREAT AND ATTACK

On 6 July, Fourth Panzer Army took Voronezh, completing the first phase of BLAU. Next, in what was called BLAU II, was to come a turn south to envelop the right flank of Soviet Southwest Front, then strikes by First Panzer and Seventeenth Armies further south on the line to complete the encirclement of Southwest Front and also South Front. But Southwest Front would not be there. In another day, it was headed south and east in full retreat and would be joined shortly by South Front. For the first time in the war, Stalin and the *Stavka* were allowing Soviet forces to undertake a voluntary strategic retreat. Although no Soviet account elaborates on the decision, Zhilin indicates it authorized Southwest and South Fronts to evacuate the entire Soviet-held territory west of the Don River and to do so fast.[38]

Very likely, however, from the *Stavka* point of view at the time, an even more crucial decision was made on 6 July, namely,

to hold fast at Voronezh at all costs. On the 7th, the *Stavka* activated a new army group headquarters, Voronezh Front, and Golikov, leaving Bryansk Front temporarily to his deputy, took command under orders to hold "every inch" of the line around the city. To make certain he did, he had with him as *Stavka* representatives, Lieutenant General N. F. Vatutin, the deputy chief of the General Staff, Colonel General Y. N. Fedorenko, the army's chief of tanks, and the chief air force political officer, P. C. Stepanov.[39]

The Soviet literature portrays the 6 July decisions as responses to defensive necessities associated with BLAU. Those were, in fact, compelling enough. Nevertheless, the record of events after 6 July as well as before establishes a pattern of Soviet actions significantly inconsistent with the strategic problems directly posed by BLAU.

For instance, on 5 July, three of West Front's armies and a heavy array of tank corps hit Second Panzer Army with a suddenness and fury that took the Germans completely by surprise. West Front was executing the mission Stalin had assigned to Golikov in June.[40] When Second Panzer Army, with luck, managed a defense that could have been taken for a display of greater strength than the army actually had, the offensive stopped a week later as suddenly as it had begun.[41] But the sequel was remarkable. A month later, believing the Soviet armor would surely have been drawn off to the south by then, Second Panzer Army tried an attack of its own and ran into a solid belt of fortifications 20 miles deep and all of the tank corps it had encountered in July.[42]

In the second and third weeks of July, Voronezh Front and Bryansk Front launched a succession of hastily constructed, hence expensive, thrusts around Voronezh. After the first one failed, Vatutin replaced Golikov in the Voronezh Front command. The *History of the Second World War* described those attacks as tactically unsuccessful but worthwhile because they tied down German divisions that could otherwise have gone south after Southwest and South Fronts.[43] It is difficult to conceive, however, how the effect of the objective, which is given as having been to retake Voronezh, could have justified the effort. One would think there must have been a larger consideration involved. Vasilevskiy suggests one when he says, in another context, that the *Stavka* took into account in its June estimates the possibility of an enemy thrust to Voronezh, but "nevertheless" believed the Germans would still turn north.[44]

Throughout the late summer, while German armies were closing in on Stalingrad and ranging beyond the lower Don into the Caucasus, the attention of the *Stavka* and Stalin never wavered from the central sector, particularly not from two points, Rzhev and Voronezh. They were by then hundreds of miles from the main action, but they bracketed Moscow. In mid-July, the *Stavka* ordered an offensive against the Army Group Center north flank at Rzhev. It began at the end of the month and ran at full tilt into September with Zhukov, the Army's crack general, in command until the last week of August, when he was called away to supervise the close-in defense of Stalingrad.[45] In late July, Voronezh Front took to the offensive twice more in the Voronezh sector, and in mid-August, Stalin called in Vatutin and Lieutenant General Konstantin K. Rokossovskiy, who had taken over Bryansk Front, and charged them with a joint operation to retake Voronezh.[46] The *Stavka* provided four "very well equipped" infantry divisions from its reserve. The divisions had to be diverted to Stalingrad in early September because German Sixth Army was then driving a wedge into the center of the city; nevertheless, the offensive went ahead on 15 September and ran to the end of the month before the *Stavka* allowed it to be discontinued.[47]

INTO THIN AIR

The Germans were extraordinarily slow at discerning the strategic significance for themselves of the moves put in train on the Soviet side on and after 6 July. Bock came

close in a teletype message he sent to Halder on the afternoon of the 8th. In it he said BLAU II was "dead," and if the armies maneuvered as they were required to under the existing plans they would "most likely strike into thin air."[48] Halder, however, could not bring himself to believe that Southwest and South Fronts would abandon positions they had worked on for half a year, and Hitler was only "inclined" to think the Russians might be "attempting an elastic defense."[49] In a few more days, as the Soviet retreat picked up speed, Hitler and Halder convinced themselves that the fault was Bock's for having put too much of his Army Group South armor into the drive to Voronezh and thereby delaying its turn to the south and southeast. Having found the reason he would later use to explain most of what subsequently went wrong in the campaign, Hitler summarily relieved Bock.[50]

By the fourth week in July, the German armor practically cleared the line of the Don River, a magnificent accomplishment in ground covered; but, as Bock had predicted, it was a strike into thin air in terms of permanent damage inflicted on the Soviet forces. The prisoner count was small, insignificant when compared with that of 1941. Encirclements perfectly executed had turned up empty. True, Southwest and South Fronts had been ripped to pieces, but the greater parts of their troops had made it to and across the river.

On 23 July, declaring all the objectives previously set to have been reached and expecting only weak resistance from then on, Hitler split his forces, sending two armies south toward the Caucasus and two east toward Stalingrad and the Volga River.[51] Once more, the results were spectacular. First Panzer Army was in Maikop, 180 miles south of Rostov, on 9 August. Two weeks later, on the 23d, Sixth Army reached the Volga River just north of Stalingrad.

By the end of the month, though, the momentum had dropped. Under orders now to stand fast, the Russians had dug in at Novorossisk, on the approaches to Tuapse, on the Terek River, and at Stalingrad. The two German forces, separated by more than 200 miles of open country, could not support one another but were competing for supplies coming over the same few taut lines. The summer was almost gone; in another two weeks the first snow would fall in the passes of the Caucasus; and victory was nowhere in sight.

Foreign Armies East, the branch of German General Staff intelligence concerned with Soviet forces, submitted its forecast for the coming fall and winter on 29 August. In doing so, it provided the epitaph for the summer's campaign. The best outcome the Soviet Command could have looked for, the forecast assumed, must have been to preserve enough manpower and materiel to sustain another winter offensive, and it would have had to reckon with losing the Caucasus and Stalingrad—possibly Leningrad and Moscow as well. Since none of the latter had yet happened, the summer was almost certainly going to turn out better from the Soviet point of view than had been expected, and the Soviet losses would be "on an order leaving combat-worthy forces available for the future."[52] Events at Stalingrad gave the confirmation 10 weeks later.

The Germans never knew how far Operation KREML influenced Soviet strategy for the summer of 1942, and no one outside the Soviet Union knows to this day. This much is certain: Stalin and the *Stavka* would not have ordered a strategic retreat on the south flank or anywhere unless they had believed they were backed to the wall at one place and only one, Moscow. There, by their lights, they would have had to accept the decisive battle, and, until late in the summer, they believed it would be offered there. In his official biography, published in 1949, Stalin is still credited with having seen through the German plan, which was to use the strike toward the Caucasus as a subsidiary to the main offensive, the advance on Moscow.[53]

Very possibly, the Soviet thinking was so fixed that they did not particularly need either the stimulus or the reinforcement of KREML. To whatever extent KREML

confirmed that thinking, however, it did so to the eventual Soviet advantage. Most probably, no other strategy Stalin and the *Stavka* could have devised to deal with Operation BLAU would have served them better; almost certainly, if they had read Hitler's intentions more accurately, they would not have responded as they did.

As for the Germans, they may possibly have devised the most effective deception of the war. If they did, the result for them was the war's most disastrous irony.

NOTES

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2. *OKW, WFSt, Abt. L (II Org.) Nr. 441219/41, Weisung 32b, 14.7.41* (Hitler's directive shifting war production from the army to the navy and air force), in Walter Hubatsch, *Hitlers Weisungen fuer die Kriegfuehrung, 1939-1945* (Frankfurt: Bernard & Graefe, 1962), pp. 129-33.
3. Klaus Reinhardt, *Die Wende vor Moskau* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1972), p. 114.
4. Willi A. Boelke, *Deutschlands Ruestung im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Frankfurt: Athenaion, 1969), pp. 61-64.
5. *Chef H. Ruest. und BdE, Stab OKH, Nr. 1441/41, Notizen ueber Vortrag beim Fuehrer am 23.12.41, 28.12.41* (Notes on Fromm's December 23d interview with Hitler.)
6. *Chef H. Ruest. und BdE, Tagebuch* (See note 1 for full citation), 5 January 1942.
7. *OKW, WFSt Nr. 55616/42, Weisung 41, 5.4.42* (Hitler's strategic directive for Operation BLAU), in Hubatsch, pp. 185-88.
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10. Louis P. Lochner, ed., *The Goebbels Diaries* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1948), p. 136.
11. *Der Oberbefehlshaber der H. Gr. Sued, Ia Nr. 276/42, Betr: Fortfuehrung der Operation im Sommer 1942, 19.2.42* (Bock's February 1942 plan for a summer offensive), in M.S. P-114c, Vol. III, Appendices.
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13. *Ibid.*
14. *H. Gr. Sued, Ia Nr. 820/42, Anlage 2, Richtlinien fuer die Kampffuehrung, 30.4.42* (Army Group South guidelines for the conduct of operations), in Pz. AOK 1 25179/7 file.
15. Franz Halder, *Kriegstagebuch* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1964), III, 420.
16. Institut Marksizma-Leninizma, *Istoriya Velikoy Otechestvennoy Voyny Sovetskogo Soyuza 1941-1945* (Moscow: Voyennoye Izdatel'stvo, 1961), II, 317-20. Hereafter cited as *IVOVSS*.
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29. *IVMV*, V, 121.
30. P. A. Zhilin, ed., *Velikaya Otechestvennaya Voyna* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoy Literatury, 1970), p. 138.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 199; *IVMV*, V, 112.
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34. *IVMV*, V, 142.
35. *IVOVSS*, II, 417.
36. Vasilevskiy, p. 219.
37. M. Kazakov, "Na voronezhskom napravlenii letom 1942 goda," in *Voyenno-istoricheskiy Zhurnal* (No. 10, 1964), 27-43.
38. Zhilin, p. 148.
39. *IVMV*, V, 151-52.
40. Kazakov, p. 32.
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42. *Pz. AOK 2, Ia Nr. 92/42, Beurteilung der Lage am 22.8.42* (Second Panzer Army operational estimate of the situation on 8 August 1942), in Pz. AOK 2 28499/48 file.
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45. *IVMV*, V, 244; Zhukov, p. 377; and *AOK 9, Ia Kriegstagebuch Nr. 6*, 29 July-20 September 1942 (Ninth Army war diary), in AOK 9 31624/1 file.
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