

The German Army after the Battle of Kursk

By Walter S. Zapotoczny

The Wehrmacht's strength and combat effectiveness in the east after the Battle of Kursk entered a period of steady decline. Sporadic arrivals of new conscripts and equipment, especially for the mechanized units and the Waffen SS, gave the German defenders the means to conduct local counterattacks. These attacks were steadily less effective, both due to the growing superiority of the Soviet troops and the steady decay in the level of German training and effectiveness. The German infantry formations were even more emaciated than their mechanized counterparts were. This period marked the full development of Soviet force structure, equipment, and operational and tactical concepts.

August 23, 1944 proved to be one of the decisive days of the entire war. With the Russian tanks on the Prut River and more racing south for the Focsani gap in Romania, the fate of the entire German Army Group South was uncertain. This was proof of the massive and effective Russian battlefield performance in Moldavia and Bessarabia. This alone, however, did not make this day so historic. What changed the fortune of Germany's entire southeastern theater was the coup carried out that day in Bucharest, when King Michael had the Antonescu brothers arrested and Romania ceased to fight alongside Germany. Rumanian troops were instructed to cease firing on the Red Army and King Michael surrendered unconditionally to the Allies. The Rumanian defection turned Germany's military defeat into a catastrophe, which made it felt far beyond the limits of a single Army Group. The remainder of two Rumanian armies fighting with Army Group South Ukraine laid down their arms. The Sixth German Army was being slowly strangled at Kishinev and was inside an encirclement ring. The whole of southern Bessarabia, the Danube delta, and the passes through the Carpathian Mountains lay wide open to the Red Army. Ahead of the Soviet armies lay the route to Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, and the collapse of the entire German defensive system in the southeastern theater.

The Chief of the General Staff, General Guderian, spent the first week in January 1945 on a tour of the Eastern army headquarters. What he learned from them and from his own observations was so alarming that he decided to make one last appeal to Hitler, this time both for more troops and for permission to make a pre-emptive withdrawal, which would allow a thinly defended buffer of land to take the first shock of the Russian attack. The Russians had accumulated such strength that it was no longer within the power of the Wehrmacht to stop them in their tracks. The only hope was, by ducking at the last moment then to fight a flexible battle across western Poland until exhaustion and the spring thaw would take the impetus out of the Russian advance. When Guderian presented Hitler with the revised estimates of Russian strength, Hitler lost his temper and declared that they were "completely idiotic" and "pure bluff." Hitler went on to order General Gehlen, who had drawn up the estimates, to be committed to an insane asylum. This Guderian managed to deflect, but he achieved little else. At the close of the interview, Hitler told him, "The Eastern Front has never before possessed such a strong reserve as now."

On January 12, the Russians began their attack from the Baranov bridgehead, and within thirty-six hours had broken clean through what was allegedly the strongest sector of the German line. By January 14, every Panzer division in Poland had been committed. The German's strongest reserve was situated in East Prussia consisting of two divisions. The Russian tanks were making thirty and forty miles a day, and on January 20, captured Hohensalza, celebrating their arrival on German soil with a shocking and violent sack of the town which went on for three days. By January 31, lead elements of the Russian 2nd Guards Tank Army had reached the Oder River near Kustrin, over 400 kilometers from its starting positions two weeks earlier. The following day, the 1st Guard Tank Army broke through the Meseretz Fortified Zone and reached the Oder River just north of Frankfurt. While the Wehrmacht offered fanatic resistance; the Russian advances could not be stopped. January 1945 was Germany's Black January.

Twice in his diary, General Guderian noted that the Russian Marshal Zhukov was taking greater and greater risk as his awareness of the German weakness mounted. It would not be the first time that invaders from the East who had the boldness to penetrate into Prussia would be routed by a combination of skill and leadership. With this in mind, the German high command conceived the idea that a complete new army group should be created for the north-central region. Army Group Center would be broken up and their units divided between Army Group North and the new command. The 6th Panzer Army would comprise a close reserve until the moment was right for a counterstroke. Guderian presented the plan to Hitler on January 24. As first, everything went smoothly to begin with and Hitler approved the new command zones. But when Guderian suggested Field Marshal Freiherr von Weichs to head the new command, Hitler refused to sanction his appointment and rambled on about how he was fed up with professional soldiers and how there was no end to their betrayals. After rambling on for some time, Hitler announced his decision to form an SS army. Here in this vital sector the Reich would be entrusted to the Party, and the Party soldiers, whose loyalty was never in question. Furthermore, Hitler himself would command the new force. Not only would Hitler command this new force but also he would assemble a staff comprised of SS officers. In the writer's opinion, this action by Hitler may have been the nail that sealed the coffin for the Wehrmacht. Given Hitler's propensity for declaring any proposal he did not like as more examples of the unreliability of his professional soldiers, it is difficult to see how Guderian could have convinced Hitler to stay out of the tactical decisions on the front. Had Hitler left those decisions to his professional soldiers, they just may have stopped the Russians short of German soil.

As the pounding of East Prussia proceeded, Marshal Zhukov was pushing his right flank at top speed towards the middle of the Oder. During the last week in January five Russian armies were either astride or across the Oder River. By January 29, the advancing Russians captured the Silesian industrial region. German units falling back to the southwest towards the Oder were caught by Soviet tanks and riflemen. As the Soviet forces thrust across Poland German resistance began to stiffen some. In the north, German garrisons bypassed by advancing Soviet forces stubbornly held out in Torun and Schneidmuhl, and Army Group Vistula's Eleventh SS Army began assembling in Pomerania, although this was never a significant force.

Soviet operations in late fall and early winter 1944-1945 had cut away at the German strategic flanks and reached the Baltic coast and the Budapest region. The Wehrmacht forces sent to meet the crisis on the flanks were barely able to stem the Soviet surge. In less than two months, German defenses in Poland and East Prussia were disintegrated, and the Soviet forces advanced up to 700 kilometers to the west, to within 60 kilometers of Berlin. In the process, German Army Groups A and Center were decimated. After German sent reinforcements to the Oder front to defend Berlin, in February and March, the Soviets again struck the flanks, battering Army Group Vistula and consuming Army Group South, Germany's last strategic reserve. By mid-April, Soviet forces had reached the Oder-Neisse River line on a broad front from Stettin in the north to Gorlitz on the Czech border.

By March 26, the Russian had crossed and established footholds on the west bank of the Oder River. At Hitler's insistence, on March 27, the 9th German Army launched a four-division counterattack from Frankfurt-am-Oder northward toward Kustrin. The 20th and 25th Panzer-Grenadier Divisions, the Fuehrer Escort Division, and the ad hoc Panzer Division Munchenberg caught the Soviets by surprise and advanced to the outskirts of Kustrin. The attack, however, rapidly lost momentum, and the Germans were decimated in open terrain. At 0730 on April 14, 1945, reinforced Russian rifle battalions began reconnaissance-in-force actions on main attack axes to Berlin. In other sectors, first-echelon regiments joined the attack. In two days of combat, some of the forces succeeded in wedging up to five kilometers deep into the German defenses. The Soviet air offensive began on the evening of April 15, 16 and artillery complemented the air effort on April 16 with a furious 30-minute bombardment. It took two days for the 1st Belorussian Front forces to penetrate the Seelow Heights defenses and achieve its initial objectives. Situated around the town Seelow, about 60 miles east of Berlin, this fighting was some of the most intense of the war. On April 20, while Zhukov's forces continued their advance, long-range artillery opened the first fire on Berlin. The following day, intermixed units penetrated into Berlin's suburbs and began days of difficult urban combat. As Allied forces linked up along the Elbe River, Soviet forces penetrated German defenses on the western bank of the Oder River and pinned down the 3rd Panzer Army, depriving it of the opportunity to deliver a counterblow from the north against Soviet forces encircling Berlin. This was the long-anticipated attack, which Hitler hoped in vain would save Berlin.

Now, even Hitler realized that the war was lost, although he continued to issue hopeless orders for the 9th Army to the east and the 12th Army to the west and the already pinned down 3rd Army to break through to the capital. Lacking any effective command and control structure, the remnants of the Wehrmacht fought on in block-to-block battles and with fanatic resistance. On April 29, Russian troops began the symbolic struggle for the Reichstag. By April 30, the Soviet forces had cut the defending German forces into four isolated pieces and began smashing them in piecemeal fashion. That same day Hitler committed suicide. Soviet forces captured the Reichstag building on May 1 and on the evening of May 2, German resistance had finally ceased and the Berlin garrison surrendered. While the Reichstag was still under assault, between May 1 - 6, Soviet forces regrouped to launch an offensive of overwhelming proportions against German Army Group Center. The attack was in conjunction with General George C. Patton's U.S. Third Army, which poised to enter Czechoslovakia from Bavaria. On the evening of May 8 -

9, Stalin ordered two tank armies to make a dash for Prague. They captured the city and the war finally ended on May 11, when advanced Russian elements linked up with units of the U.S. Third Army east of Pilsen, ending the wartime field operations of the Red Army.

References

Clark, Alan. *Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-45*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1965

Erickson, John. *The Road to Berlin*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983

Fritz, Stephen. *Frontsoldaten: The German Soldier in World War II*. Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 1995

Glantz, David M. and House, Jonathan. *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995

Copyright © 2015 Walter S. Zapotoczny