

Operation Citadel and the Battle of Kursk



Operation Citadel was the last great German offensive on the Eastern Front during World War II. It turned into the Battle of Kursk, the greatest tank battle in history. Due to stubborn Russian resistance and Hitler's indecision, it was a costly failure for the German Army.

By the winter of 1942-43, German advances into the Soviet Union had stalled. In late December, the Russians launched their own offensive, driving back the Germans. Consternation and argument among the German command were rife. Hitler, who had little grasp of military strategy, wanted the German troops to cling stubbornly to every inch of ground. Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, commanding Army Group South, wanted a war of movement and maneuver.

After much debate, Hitler grudgingly let Manstein fight in his own way. By March of 1943, the Russian winter offensive had been halted through Manstein's use of movement and counterattack. One problem remained-the Kursk salient-a section of Russian-held territory that projected noticeably into the German lines.

The Germans looked for a way to regain the initiative. They came up with Operation Citadel. Citadel was a bold plan but simple in its conception. The Germans would launch a pincer movement from the opposite sides of the salient, coordinating attacks from hundreds of kilometers apart. From the south, the 4th Panzer Army under General Hoth would pierce the Soviet lines and head

northeast. From the north, the 9th Panzer under General Model would drive south. The aim was to cut off the Soviet troops in the salient and trap them there. If it worked, they could destroy over a third of the Russian forces in a single blow. Hitler believed that a victory here would reassert German strength and turn the tide of battle once again in their favor. Manstein and the other senior commanders believed the Operation should have been launched quickly. Ignoring them, Hitler delayed several times. Hitler believed the deployment of new weapons, principally the new Panther tank, the Elefant tank destroyer, and greater numbers of the Tiger heavy tank, were the key to victory. British intelligence reports had given the Soviets foreknowledge that a German attack would fall on the neck of the Kursk salient. Hitler's delays would give the Marshal Georgy Zhukov and the Russians time to build strong defenses and establish a large reserve of forces to counterattack. They constructed a massive network of defensive belts. Using field shields, mines, and anti-tank guns, the entire system was hundreds of kilometers deep.

Despite his own reservations, Hitler was committed to the offensive. Finally, on July 5, 1943, the Germans launched their attack. They had amassed huge resources for Operation Citadel. 65% of the aircraft and 70% of the tanks on the entire Eastern Front were deployed for the offensive. 50 divisions, totaling 900,000 troops, accompanied 2,700 tanks and assault guns as they rolled toward the Soviet lines. The massive Tiger tanks gave them extra firepower to punch through the armor of the Soviet tanks. It was a massive, carefully planned operation.



The legendary Tiger I heavy tank was a formidable weapon on the Eastern Front. The impenetrable armor, powerful 88mm gun, and huge size of the Tiger made it a legend in its time. The frontal armor was 100 mm thick, making it virtually impervious to Soviet guns.

Between the efforts of British intelligence and their own observations in the field, the Soviets knew the attack was coming. As the Germans prepared, their opponents unleashed a tremendous artillery barrage, smashing German forces as they waited. At 5 AM, on July 5, the advance began. Wedges of Panzers charged into the fire of the waiting Soviets, with infantry following behind. The skies were filled with the roar of engines and weapons as opposing aircraft attempted to eliminate each other.

By July 12, Hoth's 4th Panzer Army had pushed over 30 kilometers through the Russian forces, piercing line after line of defenses. Near the village of Prokhorovka, they tried to break through once more. There the German spearhead, led by the heavy Tiger I tanks, encountered an opponent who stopped them in their tracks-General Rotmistrov's 5th Guards Tank Army.



German troops and Tiger I tank of the German 2nd SS Panzer Division 'Das Reich' on the move near Kursk.

Beneath a sky darkened by thunderclouds, the two armies clashed. 1,200 to 1,400 tanks were in the area, and 850 of them fought in a single engagement around Prokhorovka. 250 German tanks, including 100 of the fearsome Tigers, faced 600 lighter Soviet tanks, primarily T-34s. The Soviets rushed forward to minimize the effects of the Tiger tanks longer range and greater stopping power. General Guderian, one of Germany's greatest innovators in tank warfare, said later he had never seen such a display of Soviet strength and determination.

As the Russians tried to win by the weight of numbers, the Germans countered with their technology and training. The result was a stalemate of staggering proportions. The fields around Prokhorovka were littered with the burning shells of vehicles, the casings from their ammunition, and the bodies of the men who had operated them. Never before had such staggering mechanical destruction been unleashed. Swarms of T-34s careened into the German tanks. From

overhead, Soviet IL-2 ground-attack planes ravaged the German armored formations.



Soviet troops attacking behind T-34 tanks at Kursk.



The Soviet IL-2 Ilyushin planes wrecked German tanks at Kursk.

Inevitably, this brutal encounter near Prokhorovka was the last German advance. Faced with deep defenses and batteries of anti-tank guns, the German Panzer divisions had not achieved the breakout they needed. General Model had advanced 13 kilometers in the north, Hoth 32 kilometers in the south. The gap they needed to close stretched over 200 kilometers, and they had run out of steam. A Russian counterattack also began in the north. The tables were about to turn.

General Manstein still believed that Operation Citadel could succeed. Hoth's Panzers had penetrated so far through the Russian defenses that he believed a breakthrough was imminent. If they kept pushing, they could have a much-

needed victory in the East. Manstein implored Hitler to allow him to continue the attack.

Hitler, however, was disillusioned. Not only had the Operation not been what he hoped, but while it was faltering the Americans and British had invaded Sicily on July 9. Fearing the Allied advance in Italy, Hitler called off Operation Citadel after only one week and immediately started diverting troops south to Italy.

Over the next month, the Russians pushed the Germans back on both fronts around Kursk. By August 18, they had not only taken back the territory seized during Citadel but had the Germans in full retreat on either side of the salient.

Over 2 million men took part in the Battle of Kursk. For the first time in the war, a major German offensive had been stopped before achieving a breakthrough. The Soviet victory was costly, with the Red Army losing considerably more men and materiel than the German Army. Soviet casualties at Kursk were estimated to be about 600,000 compared to about 165,000 German casualties. The Red Army reported 7,000 tanks and assault guns destroyed. German losses were about 1,200 tanks and assault guns. The Soviet Union's massive industrial potential and virtually limitless pool of manpower, however, allowed them to absorb and replace its losses and mount a formidable counterattack. Hans Guderian wrote:

With the failure of Zitadelle we have suffered a decisive defeat. The armoured formations, reformed and re-equipped with so much effort, had lost heavily in both men and equipment and would now be unemployable for a long time to come. It was problematical whether they could be rehabilitated in time to defend the Eastern Front ... Needless to say, the Soviets exploited their victory to the full. There were to be no more periods of quiet on the Eastern Front. From now on, the enemy was in undisputed possession of the initiative.

With the failure of Operations Citadel, the last chance for Hitler to defeat Russia fell by the wayside. With victory, the initiative firmly passed to the Red Army. For the remainder of the war, the Germans were never able to regain the initiative or launch a major offensive on the Eastern Front. The Red Army would advance into Germany and on to Berlin.



German Tiger tank destroyed by anti-tank bombs from an IL-2 Ilyushin.



Battle of Kursk, 1943

- Front line July 4
- ■ ■ ■ Front line July 10
- ● ● ● Front line July 12
- ➔ German forces