
The Round Tablette

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Happy New Year and Welcome to the January session of the Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Roundtable.

It seems only fitting in the cold Minnesota winter that, once again, we will be discussing the Soviet Union. Tonight's guest speaker is Dennis Showalter, author of *Hitler's Panzers*, accompanied by Russian war veterans. The focus of tonight's discussion will be on Soviet operations from the Battle of Kursk through Operation Bagration.

The German "Citadel" offensive with the Battle of Kursk proved to be a massive failure for the German army, consuming most of their replenished reserves and armored forces. Citadel became the last important German offensive in Russia. After this the Soviets seized the initiative with a series of attacks along the entire eastern front. Unlike the Germans, who used deep penetrations and double envelopments, the Soviets used thrusts to push the Germans back. If the Soviets found resistance on one part of the front they would thrust at another point, using their air forces in close ground support with massive preparatory artillery fire.

The first Soviet move came in July 1943, shortly after Kursk against the Orel salient, Field Marshal Walther Model held off the Soviet advance. His success was due in part to Hitler's willingness to allow him to retreat, because troops were needed in Italy to prop up Mussolini's government, which fell on July 25th. Throughout the fighting on the eastern front Hitler's stubborn refusal to allow for retreat led to unnecessary and costly losses.

During this same time the Soviets also engaged Field Marshal Erich Von Manstein's Army Group South. He needed reinforcements if he was going to hold his territory. While Hitler remained undecided about retreat, the northern part of Army Group South dissolved, and Soviets were able to move eighty miles before German forces were able to stabilize the line.

The 1943 summer and fall battles on the eastern front became the first phase in the German collapse. Constant Soviet attacks and thrusts, effectively using armor, infantry and artillery, overwhelmed the German forces. From October 1943 to March 1944 the Soviets continued to push the *Wehrmacht* back along all parts of the front. The Soviets were even able to relieve the siege of Leningrad.

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During the Teheran Conference in November 1943, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin decided that the Allies would coordinate their attacks for the coming year. The United States and Britain planned the cross-channel invasion and the Soviets would launch a major offensive at the same time, Operation Bagration. It was named after Imperial Russian Infantry General Pyotr Bagration, who helped to defeat Napoleon's forces in 1805-1812. There were to be two phases of this attack against the German's Army Group Center. First, the Red Army would envelop German forces at Vitebsk and Bobruisk, and then encircle German units east of Minsk. Launched on 22 June 1944, two weeks after the Normandy landings the Soviets accomplished their mission and drove the Germans back over 200 miles in a month, until finally outrunning their supply lines.

During this operation, Hitler also escaped the attempt on his life on July 20th, which led to immediate executions and to even more distrust of his officer corps. By early September 1944, the Germans were able to stabilize their defenses but the Soviets forces would not be stopped.

Further Readings:

Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010)

Steven Zaloga, *Bagration 1944: The Destruction of Army Group Centre* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 1996)

Prit Buttar, *Battleground Prussia* (New York: Osprey Publishing, 2010)

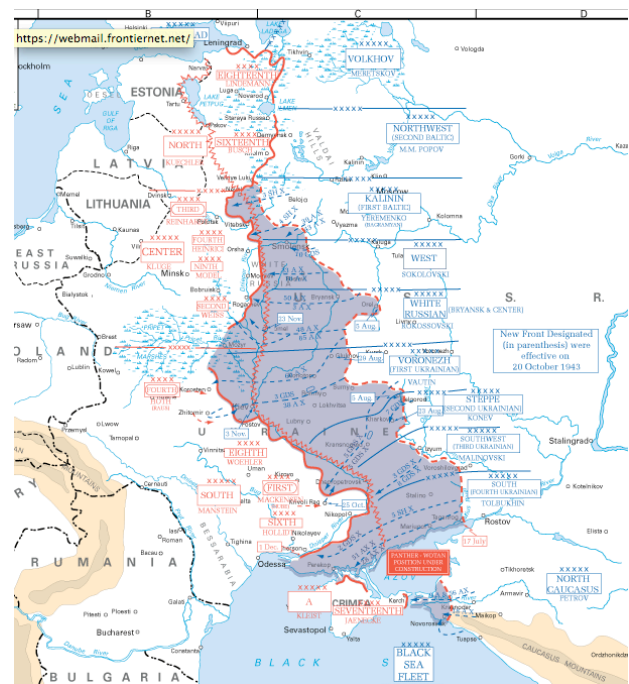
Benoit Lemay, *Erich von Manstein: Hitler's Master Strategist* (Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2010)

Dennis Showalter, *Hitler's Panzers: The Lightning Attacks that Revolutionized Warfare* (New York: Berkley, 2009)

Dennis Showalter, Harold Deutsch, & Bill Fortschen, *If the Allies Had Fallen: Sixty Alternate Scenarios of World War II* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2010).

Round Table Schedule 2010-2011

Feb. 10, Relief of the Philippines
 Mar. 10, Coast Guard Role In Naval Ops
 Apr. 14, Battle of Cassino
 May 12, Bombers Over Germany



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