

# Forgotten Battles of the Great Patriotic War

The Soviet-German war was the fiercest, most brutal and most costly chapter in World War II. Since this conflict ended with the destruction of both Germany's Wehrmacht and Adolf Hitler's Third Reich, it was also the war's most decisive theater. It is unfortunate, therefore, that until very recently— for largely political, ideological and military reasons— the historical record of this struggle has remained woefully incomplete.

Newly released Russian and German archival sources now indicate that Soviet histories of the war overlooked or obscured as much as 40 percent of the Red Army's wartime military operations, primarily its failed offensives, in a deliberate attempt to conceal those defeats or to protect the reputations of defeated wartime commanders. Resurrecting many of these “ forgotten battles” enables us to recognize the contributions of the thousands of Red Army soldiers who fought, perished or simply endured for the sake of their Motherland, only to see history forget their sacrifices.

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German Operations Barbarossa in 1941 and Blue in 1942— interrupted by the Red Army's successful defense of Leningrad, Moscow and Rostov in late 1941 and its partially successful counteroffensive during the winter of 1941-42— dominated the first 18 months of war on the Eastern Front. Although the Wehrmacht retained the strategic initiative throughout much of this period, the Red Army managed to deny Hitler victory at Moscow, ensuring he could no longer win the war.

Histories have portrayed Barbarossa, which began on June 22, 1941, and ended on December 5, 1941, as a virtually seamless German advance from the Soviet Union's western frontiers to the gates of Leningrad, Moscow and Rostov, punctuated by occasional heavy fighting but unflinching until German forces reached Moscow. From late June through September 1941, however, Josef Stalin and his Stavka (High Command) deliberately and repeatedly tried to halt the German juggernaut by launching incessant counterstrokes and, in at least one case, a full-fledged counteroffensive.

As early as late June, the Red Army attempted to blunt the German advance with its large tank and mechanized force. In Lithuania the Northwestern Front's 3rd and 12th Mechanized corps struck back at German Army Group North at Kelme and Raseiniai; in Belorussia the Western Front's 6th, 11th and 14th Mechanized corps counterattacked against Army Group Center near Grodno and Brest; and in the Ukraine the Southwestern Front's 4th, 6th, 8th, 9th, 15th, 19th and 22nd Mechanized corps launched massive counterstrokes against Army Group South near Brody and Dubno. Poorly coordinated and supported, those assaults proved utterly futile and often suicidal, and they ultimately resulted in the destruction of most of the Red Army's tank and mechanized force. Only the massive attacks in the south, personally directed by army General Georgi K. Zhukov, the chief of the Red Army General Staff, had any appreciable effect on the overwhelming German advance.

In July the Red Army launched yet another series of heavy counterstrokes. The Northwestern Front struck the vanguard of Army Group North near Sol'tsy, delaying the German advance toward Leningrad for a full week. And in the center, the Western and Central fronts launched multiple unsuccessful

counterstrokes to contain Army Group Center's forces along the Dnepr River. These futile struggles included the spectacular destruction of the Western Front's 5th and 7th Mechanized corps near Lepel', Marshal Semyon Timoshenko's notorious but also pathetically weak "Timoshenko offensive" against General Heinz Guderian's Second Panzer Group along the Sozh River, and a counterstroke near Bobruisk, all of which were unable to stop Army Group Center's advance toward Smolensk. In the south, multiple counterattacks by the Southwestern Front near Korosten' slowed but failed to halt Army Group South's advance toward Kiev.

Undeterred by its July failures, the Red Army continued striking back against the advancing Germans in August. In the north, the Northern and Northwestern fronts assaulted Army Group North's vanguard near Staraia Russa, again delaying the German advance for a week. In the center, the Western Front assaulted Army Group Center east of Smolensk with five ad hoc shock groups to rescue its forces surrounded in the city. Although all of these Red Army attacks ended in failure, their ferocity persuaded Hitler to delay his advance on Moscow and instead engage "softer" targets around Kiev.

Finally, in late August, the Western, Reserve and Briansk fronts launched a massive counteroffensive in the Smolensk, El'nia and Roslavl' regions to prevent the Germans from continuing their advance on Moscow and Kiev. The ensuing bloody failure weakened the Red Army's defenses along the Moscow axis, contributed to its disastrous defeats at Viaz'ma and Briansk in early October, and led to the Wehrmacht's subsequent spectacular advance on Moscow during Operation Typhoon. Finally, during the initial stages of Operation Typhoon in late October, the Northwestern Front employed a special operational group (Group Vatutin) near Kalinin to halt the German Ninth Army's advance to the vital Leningrad-Moscow railroad line and ultimately prevent that army from participating in the final Wehrmacht drive on Moscow. These forgotten battles also explain why the Wehrmacht ultimately suffered defeat at the gates of Moscow in early December 1941.

Accounts of the Battle of Moscow and the Red Army's winter offensive of 1941-42 ignore Soviet counteroffensives in the Leningrad region, near Viaz'ma west of Moscow, near Bolkhov and Oboian' south of Moscow, and in the Crimea. In the north, the Leningrad and Volkhov fronts launched a massive Leningrad-Novgorod (Liuban') offensive in January 1942 to defeat Army Group North's Eighteenth Army and raise the siege of Leningrad. Although the Volkhov Front's forces managed to pierce German defenses, Army Group North struck back, encircling and destroying the Soviet 2nd Shock Army and 13th Cavalry Corps by early July 1942.

In the wake of the Red Army's successful January counteroffensive at Moscow, in February 1942 the Kalinin and Western fronts launched their Rzhev-Viaz'ma offensive to encircle and destroy Army Group Center. Spearheaded by cavalry and airborne forces, the two fronts penetrated German defenses northwest and southeast of Moscow and almost linked up in the Viaz'ma region. Although it created havoc in Army Group Center's rear area, this offensive also failed after months of fighting, leaving large Red Army forces isolated in Army Group Center's rear area until German forces liquidated them in midsummer.

Coincident with its January and February offensives, the Red Army's Briansk and Southwestern fronts also conducted a largescale offensive to eliminate a massive German salient jutting eastward from Kursk toward the Bolkhov and Oboian' regions. However, the so-called Orel-Bolkhov, Bolkhov and Oboian'-Kursk offensives also failed. Similarly, an unsuccessful Northwestern Front offensive in the Demiansk region and an offensive by the Crimean Front in the Crimea have also disappeared from the pages of history.

The Red Army also reacted far more aggressively while the Wehrmacht was conducting Operation Blue from June 28 through November 18, 1942. Rather than abandoning the strategic initiative to the Germans, in May 1942 the Soviets conducted major offensives at Khar'kov and in the Crimea. Even after those offensives failed and Operation Blue began, the Red Army struck back fiercely at the Wehrmacht as the Germans advanced toward Stalingrad.

During July and August 1942, the Red Army conducted numerous counterattacks against Wehrmacht forces advancing toward Stalingrad and against German defenses elsewhere along the front. Masked by the dramatic German advance, these forgotten battles include three major offensives near Voronezh, one in concert with an impressive counterstroke west of Stalingrad, and others near Siniavino, Demiansk, Rzhev, Zhizdra and Bolkhov.

The Red Army conducted its largest-scale attempt to defeat Operation Blue during July, August and September in the Voronezh region. Throughout July it employed its new 5th Tank Army and as many as seven tank corps numbering up to 1,500 tanks in this series of counterattacks. Moreover, Stavka coordinated the 5th Tank Army's assault west of Voronezh with major counterstrokes by the Stalingrad Front's 1st and 4th Tank armies along the approaches to the Don River west of Stalingrad.

The Red Army also timed its offensives in the Demiansk, Rzhev, Zhizdra and Bolkhov regions to coincide with operations near Voronezh and at Stalingrad. For example, the Western and Briansk fronts employed several tank corps and, later, the new 3rd Tank Army in their July and August offensives near Zhizdra and Bolkhov. On the other hand, the Western and Kalinin fronts' August-September offensive near Rzhev, which was orchestrated by Zhukov and achieved modest success, became a virtual dress rehearsal for an even larger counteroffensive in the same region later in the year (Operation Mars).

Although the Leningrad and Volkhov fronts' second offensive at Siniavino, east of Leningrad, in August and September 1942 failed disastrously, it prevented German forces from capturing Leningrad and tied down the German Eleventh Army. In the process, however, the 2nd Shock Army, which the Germans had already destroyed at Miasnoi Bor by early July, was destroyed once again in September near Siniavino.

The Red Army again seized the strategic initiative in late November 1942 by virtue of its twin offensives in the Rzhev and Stalingrad regions (Operations Mars and Uranus) and held it during its ambitious but only partially successful offensive in the winter of 1942-43. Quite naturally, the Red Army's victory at Stalingrad, its advance to Khar'kov and south to the Donbas region in early 1943, and Field Marshal Erich von Manstein's counterstroke in the south dominate accounts of the winter campaign. Those accounts, however, totally ignore three major Red Army offensives— Operation Mars, Operation Polar Star and the Orel-Briansk-Smolensk offensive — and severely understate the scope of its Donbas offensive, exaggerate its achievements at Demiansk and Rzhev, and distort Stavka's strategic intent in the late winter of 1942-43.

During Operation Mars, the second Rzhev-Sychevka offensive in late November and December 1942, which was directed by Zhukov, the Western and Kalinin fronts sought to destroy the German Ninth Army and, if possible, all of Army Group Center. Although Mars ended in bloody failure, it weakened the Ninth Army and ultimately forced Army Group Center to abandon the salient in February 1943. At least in part, the offensive was forgotten to preserve Zhukov's reputation.

The Western, Briansk and Central fronts conducted their massive Orel-Briansk-Smolensk offensive from early February through late March 1943 to collapse German defenses in central Russia and drive Werhmacht forces back across the Dnepr River. Although the Central Front's forces reached the Desna River west of Kursk, the offensive faltered in early March when the Western and Briansk fronts failed to dent German defenses around Orel, and Manstein's counterstroke recaptured Khar'kov and Belgorod. This offensive left the infamous bulge at Kursk.

The Northwestern, Leningrad and Volkhov fronts conducted Operation Polar Star in February and March 1943 to pierce Army Group North's defenses near Staraia Russa, liquidate the Germans' Demiansk salient, raise the siege of Leningrad, encircle and destroy the bulk of Army Group North, and commence the liberation of the Baltic region. This offensive faltered after the Germans voluntarily withdrew from their Demiansk salient, and Manstein's counterstroke forced Stavka to shift its strategic reserves to the south. Although a clear failure, Operation Polar Star served as a virtual dress rehearsal for Stavka's January 1944 offensive, which ultimately liberated the Leningrad region.

Finally, existing accounts of the Red Army's first Donbas offensive in February 1943 overlook a major portion of the Southwestern Front's offensive and the major role the Southern Front played in the failed effort to expel German forces from the Donbas region. Specifically, these accounts ignore the full context of the 8th Cavalry Corps' famous advance to Debal'tsevo by simply calling it a "raid" rather than a failed advance by several mobile corps.

THE RED ARMY'S SIGNAL VICTORY AT KURSK in July 1943 and its subsequent dramatic exploitation to and across the Dnepr in the battles for Gomel', Kiev and Kremenchug dominate existing histories of the summer-fall campaign of 1943. However, these accounts mask several bloody operational defeats spanning the entire front, from Siniavino in the north to the Taman' Peninsula in the south, most of which took place when an overly optimistic Stavka tested the operational limits of its forces completing successful offensive operations. Furthermore, contrary to continuing claims that Stavka routinely focused its offensive efforts along a single strategic axis, specifically in the Ukraine, in reality it ordered the Red Army to conduct strategic offensives along multiple axes and across a broad front throughout the campaign.

The only major forgotten conflict during the summer of 1943 occurred within the context of the Battle of Kursk, when the Southwestern and Southern fronts jointly attacked along the northern Donets and Mius rivers. Although the motives for this second Donbas offensive remain unclear, as Soviet sources claim, the offensive was probably designed to collapse German defenses in the Donbas and attract vital German armored reserves away from the Kursk region.

The most dramatic forgotten battles during this campaign began in early October, when the Kalinin (1st Baltic), Western, Briansk and Central (Belorussian) fronts drove into eastern Belorussia to capture Minsk; the Voronezh (1st Ukrainian) Front began operations to expand or seize new bridgeheads over the Dnepr north and south of Kiev; and the Steppe (2nd Ukrainian), Southwestern (3rd) and Southern (4th) fronts struggled to clear German forces from the Dnepr River bend from Kremenchug south to Nikopol'.

The Red Army's first Belorussian offensive, which began in early October and continued unabated through year's end, involved intense and costly fighting on the approaches to Vitebsk, Orsha and Bobruisk and along the Dnepr. Although existing histories describe small fragments of this massive

offensive, such as the Nevel' and Gomel'-Rechitsa operations, they studiously ignore the offensive's full scope and ambitious intentions.

The same accounts also routinely ignore the Voronezh Front's bitter struggle in October 1943 to seize a strategic bridgehead across the Dnepr River in the Kiev region. During three weeks of bloody but futile fighting, the Voronezh Front's 38th, 60th, 40th, 3rd Guards Tank, 27th and 47th armies, in conjunction with the Central Front's 13th and 60th armies, failed to dislodge forces from Army Group South's Fourth Panzer and Eighth armies, which contained Red Army bridgeheads in the Chernobyl', Gornostaipol', Liutezh and Velikii Bukrin regions. In this instance, the Voronezh Front's spectacular victory at Kiev in November erased these failed offensives from both memory and history. At the same time, existing accounts also largely ignore the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Ukrainian fronts' equally frustrating failure to clear Army Group South's forces from the lower Don region during their Krivoi Rog-Nikopol' offensive from November 14 to December 31, 1943.

The North Caucasus Front conducted its Taman' offensive from early April through August 1943 to clear German forces from the northern Caucasus region. Directed for a time by Zhukov, this offensive included a prolonged series of unsuccessful assaults against the German Seventeenth Army's fortified defenses around the towns of Krymskaia and Moldavanskoe, which anchored Hitler's bridgehead in the Taman' region. Finally, the Leningrad Front's sixth Siniavino offensive in mid-September 1943 was a furious, bloody, but ultimately successful attempt to overcome Army Group North's defenses on Siniavino Heights, a target that had eluded Soviet capture for more than two years.

The Red Army retained the strategic initiative from January 1, 1944, until war's end. During this period, the Soviets conducted simultaneous and successive offensives on an unprecedented scale, and often without pause, in the Baltic region, the Ukraine, Belorussia, Poland, the Balkans and finally Germany proper, culminating in the final victory at Berlin in May 1945.

Accounts of the winter campaign of 1944 focus exclusively on the Red Army's successful offensives in the Leningrad region, the Ukraine and the Crimea. While doing so, however, they ignore frequent Red Army offensive failures, most of which took place during the waning stages of successful offensives in hopes of taking advantage of apparent German weakness. These forgotten battles include major failed Red Army offensives into the Baltic region, Belorussia and Romania.

The Leningrad Front, joined later by the 2nd and 1st Baltic fronts, conducted their Narva, Pskov-Ostrov and Pustoshka-Idritsa offensives along the eastern borders of the Baltic states during March and April 1944 to capitalize on Army Group North's previous defeat south of Leningrad, penetrate the vaunted Panther Defense Line, and begin the liberation of the Baltic region. During this period, three Leningrad Front armies tried repeatedly but unsuccessfully to destroy German forces defending Narva and thrust deep into Estonia, while three other Leningrad Front armies wedged into German defenses between Pskov and Ostrov on the northeast border of Latvia but were unable to seize either city despite six weeks of heavy fighting. To the south the massed forces of the 2nd and 1st Baltic fronts repeatedly battered the Sixteenth Army's defenses from Pustoshka southwest of Demiansk to Idritsa, but they only were able to achieve limited success.

During the period from January 1 through the end of March, the 1st Baltic, Western and Belorussian fronts continued their first Belorussian offensive to overcome Army Group Center's defenses in eastern Belorussia, during which the fronts suffered more than 200,000 casualties in seven distinct offensives.

Attacking north and east of Vitebsk, the 1st Baltic Front severed communications between German forces in Vitebsk and Polotsk and advanced into the western suburbs of the former. The Western Front assaulted German defenses southeast and south of the city, trying in vain to encircle it from the south. In southern Belorussia, the Belorussian Front captured Kalinkovichi north of the Pripiat' River in January, drove German forces back to Rogachev and almost severed communications between Army Groups Center and South along the river.

At the southern extremity of the front, the 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian fronts tried to capitalize on their successful March offensive in the Ukraine by mounting the first Iasi-Kishinev offensive to breach German and Romanian defenses in northern Romania and capture those two vital cities in April and May 1944. The 3rd Ukrainian Front's repeated failed attempts to breach German defenses along the Dnestr River in April and early May concluded with German counterstrokes that nearly destroyed many of the 3rd Ukrainian Front's Dnestr bridgeheads. During the same period, the 2nd Ukrainian Front launched two major offensives, culminating on May 2 with an assault by almost 600 tanks from its 2nd, 5th Guards and 6th Tank armies. After four days of intense but totally forgotten fighting (called the Battle of Targul-Frumos by the Germans), counterattacking German panzer forces brought the offensive to an abrupt halt with heavy losses to the attackers.

Because they were so successful, the Red Army's offensives during the summer and fall of 1944 in Belorussia, Poland and Romania sharply reduced the number of smaller battles in this campaign. However, although the Red Army achieved far more than it anticipated during those massive offensives, in at least two instances Stavka could not resist attempting to achieve even more, this time in failed offensives in eastern Prussia and eastern Hungary.

THE 3RD BELORUSSIAN FRONT INVADED EASTERN Prussia immediately after the 1st Baltic and 3rd Belorussian fronts completed their successful Memel' offensive in mid October 1944. By this time, attacking Red Army forces reached the Baltic Sea, separating Army Group North's forces in Courland from Army Group Center's in East Prussia. Capitalizing on this situation, the 3rd Belorussian Front launched its first East Prussian offensive on October 16 by attacking westward toward Konigsberg with its 5th and 11th Guards armies and, later, its 31st, 39th and 28th armies and 2nd Guards Tank Corps. However, this offensive faltered with heavy losses after nearly a week of intense fighting when Red Army forces encountered deeply fortified defenses and intense counterattacks by hastily regrouped panzer reserves.

During the East Carpathian offensive, which took place in the Carpathian Mountain region and eastern Hungary, elements of the 1st, 4th and 2nd Ukrainian fronts attempted to envelop the First Panzer Army's mountain defenses, disrupt communications between Army Groups Center and South, and encircle German and Hungarian forces defending eastern Hungary. The 1st Ukrainian Front's 38th Army and 4th Ukrainian Front's 1st Guards and 18th armies attacked through the mountains into eastern Slovakia to link up with the 2nd Ukrainian Front's 6th Guards Tank and 27th armies and 1st Guards cavalry-mechanized group attacking northward through eastern Hungary. This offensive failed to achieve its ambitious aims when the 38th Army's attack bogged down in the Dukla Pass, the 4th Ukrainian Front's attack ground to a halt in the mountains, and the 2nd Ukrainian Front's cavalry-mechanized group was itself encircled and badly damaged at Nyiregyhaza north of Debrecen by counterattacking German panzer forces.

Most accounts of the offensive operations the Red Army conducted during the winter and spring of 1945 focus on its massive offensives in East Prussia and Poland and, to a lesser extent, in Hungary. In so doing they ignore two other forgotten battles: the Berlin offensive, which was planned but not conducted until April; and the Western Carpathian offensive, which failed to achieve its ambitious goals.

After the 1st Belorussian and 1st Ukrainian fronts reached the Oder River, 60 kilometers east of Berlin, in late January 1945, Stavka ordered their forces to mount a final assault to capture Berlin by the end of February or early March. Within days after both fronts began this new offensive, however, on February 10 Stalin ordered them to stop. The most probable explanation for his change of heart was his desire to shift the axis of the Red Army's main advance from Berlin to western Hungary and Austria so that it could occupy the Danube basin before hostilities ended. Stalin reached this decision while Allied leaders were meeting at Yalta, shortly after Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill assured him that the Red Army could capture Berlin and advance to the Elbe River. Ultimately, the Soviets began their Berlin offensive on April 16, the day after Vienna fell to the Red Army.

During the same period, the 1st, 4th and 2nd Ukrainian fronts launched the West Carpathian offensive to overcome stiff German resistance in the western Carpathians in northwestern Slovakia. The 1st Ukrainian Front's 60th and 38th armies attacked southward through Moravska-Ostrava toward Brno in conjunction with the 4th Ukrainian Front's 1st Guards and 18th armies to link up with mobile forces from the 2nd Ukrainian Front, which were attacking northward toward Brno. The 1st Guards cavalry mechanized group and 6th Guards Tank Army, which spearheaded the 2nd Ukrainian Front's northward thrust, suffered heavy losses when this offensive failed.

The Red Army's climactic offensives against Berlin and Prague in April and May 1945 crushed the remnants of the Wehrmacht and shrank the theater of military operations to such an extent that Soviet intentions were quite obvious. The only exceptions to this rule were a series of Red Army offensives in Courland that were obscured by the dramatic fighting in Poland and at Berlin.

After isolating Army Group North in the Courland Peninsula in mid-October 1944, the 1st and 2nd Baltic fronts besieged this German force until it surrendered on May 9, 1945. Although existing histories accurately describe the Courland siege in general, they obscure the heavy fighting that occurred when Red Army forces attempted to reduce the pocket: for example, the concerted offensives the fronts conducted in late October 1944; from November 20-24 and December 21-22, 1944; and in late February and mid-March 1945.

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This brief survey identifies many but not all forgotten battles of the Great Patriotic War. An accurate history will emerge only after those battles have been returned to their proper place in the vast mosaic of wartime operations. Only then will we completely comprehend the military strategies and operational techniques of the participating armies. Only then will we be able to fully appreciate the contributions of the Red Army's soldiers.

[Source: [www.Historynet.com](http://www.Historynet.com) | David M. Glantz | November 22, 2016 ++]