# Why did the USSR win the Battle of Kursk?

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## Section 1: Introduction

This investigation will answer the question: Why did the USSR win the Battle of Kursk? This question is important because the Battle of Kursk was a major battle in World War II which destroyed what a good portion of Germany's appearance of strength, even after the Battle of Stalingrad. Additionally, a great number of both German and Soviet men and *materiel* were lost at Kursk.

### 1.1 Evaluation of Guderian's Memoir as a Source

The first main source is a memoir written by German General Heinz Guderian named *Panzer Leader* in 1953–10 years after the Battle of Kursk. It can be considered a relatively primary source because, although it is ten years after the fact, it contains quotes spoken by the author during military meetings during World War II. But it can also be considered a secondary source in that it contains the Guderian's opinions. It is valuable in that its author was an authoritative figure and military leader during the war; that is, it is written by someone who knows exactly what he is talking about. in fact, it was well known that the author was the leading expert on German tanks at the time. However, the source is limited in that it was written a decade after the war, and thus, the author may have a confused memory of certain events. It is also limited in that, even ten years after his death, it was largely true that it was a negative social stigma to positively describe Adolf Hitler. So, Guderian likely self-censored some content or avoided describing times when he and Hitler agreed on certain topics. And, he likely avoided taking the blame for Hitler's successes.

Guderian wrote his memoir with the intention that it would be published; he wanted to preserve his knowledge regarding the war. Thus, it is valuable in that it contains great detail about topics that Guderian considers important. Likewise, the source is limited because of just that

reason–Guderian, a single, biased individual, decided what history is important and what is not. For example, Guderian would probably be more inclined to believe that the primary cause of the German loss at Kursk was the lack of war resources, simply because he spent his life leading *blitzkriegs* as a general. However, Guderian's memoir is valuable in that it contains several specific quotes, graphs, and charts that are useful as evidence in analysis.

### 1.2 Evaluation of a Military Report as a Source

The second main source is disclosed American military report titled *Soviet Operational Intelligence in the Kursk Operation* from July 1943 by David Glantz about the role of *razvedka* in the Battle of Kursk. Glantz is well-known as the foremost expert on the Battle of Kursk, giving the source reliability in that its author knew what the military would consider important. Also, it was not only likely heavily reviewed before being publicly disclosed, but it was also written by a nation that was not directly involved in the Battle of Kursk. However, as the information in the report is intended for military officials and not historians, its contents may be limited to strategic and tactical information.

## Section 2: Investigation

After Germany's failure at the Battle of Stalingrad against the Soviet Union, Germany suffered severe losses in both men and resources. The defeat brought hope to the people of the Allied Powers and made them realize that Germany was not undefeatable–but to Hitler, the defeat was incredibly humiliating. Hence, he desired to achieve swift and decisive revenge against the Soviet Union, both to reassert Germany's military prestige and to decrease the Soviet Union's offensive potential so that Germany could move its men and *materiel* west and focus on a single front. Germany's most valuable target was the 150-mile salient around the city of Kursk as the Soviet Union. Unfortunately for Germany, the Battle of Kursk was yet another failure for them–for multiple reasons that will be analyzed in this paper. But why was the Battle of Kursk a Soviet

victory?

First, it is necessary to establish criteria for determining the relative importance of each factor in terms of which had the most devastating impact on the German war effort. Of the most important factors, we must then analyze the root cause.

## 2.1 Lack of War Resources

The Germans were greatly outmanned and outgunned compared to the Soviet forces; the German forces were made up of 780,900 men, 2,928 tanks (Glantz, *The Battle of Kursk*), and 9,966 guns and mortars (Glantz and House), whereas the Soviets were made of 1,910,361 men, 5,128 tanks (Glantz, *The Battle of Kursk*), and 25,013 guns and mortars (Glantz and House).

On March 10, Commander Erich von Manstein first presented to Hitler a plan, Operation Citadel, which called for an attack on the Kursk salient after Spring to avoid *rasputitsa*, when the Russian roads were muddy. Hitler approved the plan on April 15 and ordered it to begin around May 3 (Citino). After Walter Model brought concerns regarding new reconnaissance information on the Soviets to Hitler, a conference took place on May 4 between Hitler and his senior advisors and officers.

In the meeting, Hitler presented Model's reconnaissance information. Manstein, the officer who had originally presented the plan, was in favour only of an early attack. Günther von Kluge and Guderian, however, were both strongly against Operation Citadel. Guderian argued that the operation went against the central tenets of the doctrine of a successful *blitzkrieg*: independence, mass, and surprise. He also knew that the *materiel* would soon be needed for defending European grounds. According to his autobiography, he asked Hitler:

> "Is it really necessary to attack Kursk, and indeed in the east this year at all? Do you think anyone even knows where Kursk is? The entire world doesn't care if we capture Kursk or not. What is the reason that is forcing us to attack this year on Kursk, or even more, on the Eastern Front?" (Guderian)

Despite all of his advisors' concerns regarding Operation Citadel, Hitler still chose to delay–but still execute–the operation. Because the Soviets knew about the pending invasion, they spent the time developing several layers of strategic defences.

Although the German military did produce *materiel* for use in the Battle of Kursk, the Russians were able to–and did–produce more arms, and much more quickly (Glantz, *The Battle of Kursk*).

So, the cause of the shortage of war resources is not because Hitler did not consult or consider the opinions of his advisors and other military leaders; rather, it is because Hitler opted to continue with the plans for the operation despite having heard the concerns of his advisors. It is not possible to know his true intentions, but it is likely because he felt like he needed to reassert Germany's military strength after the failure at the Battle of Stalingrad.

## 2.2 Superior Soviet Intelligence

Military intelligence is simply the knowledge of an enemy's intentions, and counterintelligence is the effort to prevent the enemy from gaining intelligence. But knowledge of an enemy's intentions in itself is not useful unless a military acts on it to gain an advantage.

It is well known that the intelligence failures of the Soviet Union in early battles such as Operation Barbarossa in June 1941 were largely responsible for the Soviet losses (*Fundamentals of Soviet 'Razvedka'*). However, by the summer of 1943, the Soviets had developed a military intelligence agency, the *razvedka*, which used much more complex and effective intelligence and counterintelligence techniques than in prior battles. By the time of the Battle of Kursk, the Soviet military had greatly invested in both intelligence and counterintelligence compared to the Germans. In fact, not only did the Soviets have great knowledge of the German offensive intent in the Kursk salient several months before the invasion, but, according to a declassified American military report by David M. Glanz, their military deception engagements also brought a considerable amount of success:

> "Simultaneously, razvedka provided requisite information for implementation of an effective strategic deception plan ... [which was] absolutely vital for [the] plan to succeed. ... At Kursk the Soviets successfully detected German strategic, operational, and tactical intent, while masking to a considerable degree their own counteroffensive intent" (*Soviet Operational Intelligence in the Kursk Operation* 70)

### *2.2.1 Soviet Intelligence*

Soviet reconnaissance efforts also discovered German troop concentrations around Orel and Kharkov. Later, Soviet intelligence received untrusted reports of the upcoming German offensive in the Kursk salient through the Lucy spy ring, which were later confirmed by a spy named John Cairncross at the Government Code and Cypher School at Bletchley Park after he gave the Soviet Union all information decrypted in the Tunny intercepts–including detailed German battle plans.

Had the Soviets not received this intelligence information, they would likely not have known of the malicious intentions of the German military. Although they likely would have continued to produce war resources, they would not have built strategic defences around the Kursk salient. They also would not have been able to employ counterintelligence against the Germans.

### *2.2.2 Soviet Counterintelligence*

The Soviet military used *maskirovka*, a military doctrine that uses deception to trick the enemy, to conceal the movements of men and arms, confuse German intelligence, and create fake military targets. They put a heavy focus on camouflage to make sure German intelligence could not identify useful information regarding the Red Army.

For example, the Soviet military only carried out decisive movements at night. Tanks were usually dug into the ground in all but the rotating head such that not only is the attack surface minimized, but also, it is more difficult to spot them (Glantz, Orenstein, and Soviet Union).

According to Major-General Fomichenko:

> "[German reconnaissance pilots] reported that they observed nothing. As a matter of a fact there was an augmented regiment entrenched there ... Before the offensive [the Germans] did not believe there was a quarter of what the Russians actually had there" (Garthoff)

The Germans were unable to accurately identify the amounts of Red Army *materiel*. Had the German *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* (OKW) been aware of the true number of Soviet troops, they likely would have called off Operation Citadel before it ever began.

As a part of *maskirovka*, the Soviets built 1,500 fake trenches, guns, and observation posts, 200 dummy airplanes (Garthoff), 900 dummy tanks, and 300 fake airfields. Often, the Soviets would switch around false and true resources to further confuse the enemy. In fact, out of the 35 major Kursk-sector air raids executed by the Luftwaffe, 29 were against false Russian airfields (Glantz, Orenstein, and Soviet Union).

They were often unable to distinguish between true and false defences, and hence, they spent much time planning around them. Additionally, the *razvedka* intentionally spread false rumours regarding the movement of troops to the Soviet army and Russian civilians with the intention of misleading people who commit espionage (Glantz, Orenstein, and Soviet Union).

Because the Germans gave into Soviet *maskirovka*'s counterintelligence, they misinterpreted the strategic intentions of the Soviets and were unable to predict or prepare for the Soviet counteroffensive at Prokhorovka. But the Soviets were only able to employ counterintelligence because of the intelligence information they received. Had they not known of the pending invasion which was intended to be a surprise, they would likely not have known to build fake trenches, guns, observation posts, tanks, and airfields. And, at the same time, had the Germans had more effective intelligence operations, they could have identified the fake troops and realized the Soviets knew of Operation Citadel.

## Section 3: Reflection

Through my investigation, I realized that historians must search to find primary sources to get information from for building analysis; all secondary sources I cited are based on primary source accounts and journals. Although historians must actively search for primary sources to base conclusions off of, mathematicians typically already have a conclusion and spend their time trying to prove it by drawing smaller conclusions. Scientists, however, are like historians in that they try to find evidence, find discrepancies, and build analysis.

The difference between the three is that, unlike history and science, in mathematics, knowledge is purely axiomatic and based on truths; that is, true knowledge in mathematics is true regardless of if it is proven. As history is more subjective, proof is required for an analysis to be historically correct. For example, an analysis of a fictitious story may be a true and valid analysis, but it is not true history. If a historian has a preconceived notion of history without having analyzed true, past events, then the analysis is valid but not based on history, and most people would criticize the historian's work. But mathematics does not require a basis.

When I first approached my topic, I had the preconceived notion that the Soviet victory was purely caused by the intelligence information the Soviets received of Operation Citadel from Bletchley Park. I had already drawn a conclusion because I began researching. I now realize that, although it is a faulty approach to begin researching a topic having already drawn a conclusion, it is something that all historians do–whether or not they realize. Even outside of history, everyone has preconceived notions of everything–based on their experiences. A person cannot be alive simply not think. There is no way to approach any topic with absolute objectivity, regardless of if it is history, mathematics, or science. It is more acceptable in mathematics than any other category to approach a topic with a preconceived conclusion because the process of gaining mathematical knowledge is inductive. But because of methods of historians (e.g. citing sources, analyzing primary sources), it is possible to eventually reach reasonable, evidence-based conclusions.

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