

## = Second Battle of Kharkov =

The Second Battle of Kharkov , was an Axis counter @-@ offensive in the region around Kharkov ( now Kharkiv ) against the Red Army Izium bridgehead offensive conducted 12 ? 28 May 1942 , on the Eastern Front during World War II . Its objective was to eliminate the Izium bridgehead over Seversky Donets or the " Barvenkovo bulge " ( Russian : ?????????????? ?????? ) which was one of the Soviet offensive 's staging areas . After a winter counter @-@ offensive that drove German troops away from Moscow and also depleted the Red Army 's reserves , the Kharkov offensive was a new Soviet attempt to expand upon their strategic initiative , although it failed to secure a significant element of surprise .

On 12 May 1942 , Soviet forces under the command of Marshal Semyon Timoshenko launched an offensive against the German 6th Army from a salient established during the winter counter @-@ offensive . After initial promising signs , the offensive was stopped by German counterattacks . Critical errors by several staff officers and by Joseph Stalin , who failed to accurately estimate the 6th Army 's potential and overestimated their own newly trained forces , led to a German pincer attack which cut off advancing Soviet troops from the rest of the front . The operation caused almost 300 @, @ 000 Soviet casualties compared to just 20 @, @ 000 for the Germans and their allies .

## = = Background = =

### = = = General situation on the Eastern Front = = =

By late February 1942 , the Soviet winter counter @-@ offensive , had pushed German forces from Moscow on a broad front and then ended in mutual exhaustion . Stalin was convinced that the Germans were finished and would collapse by the spring or summer 1942 , as he said in his speech of 7 November 1941 . Stalin decided to exploit this perceived weakness on the Eastern Front by launching a new offensive in the spring . Stalin 's decision faced objections from his advisors , including the Chief of the Red Army General Staff , General Boris Shaposhnikov , and generals Aleksandr Vasilevsky and Georgy Zhukov , who argued for a more defensive strategy . Vasilevsky wrote " Yes , we were hoping for [ German reserves to run out ] , but the reality was more harsh than that " . According to Zhukov , Stalin did believe that the Germans were able to carry out operations simultaneously along two strategic axes , he was sure that the opening of spring offensives along the entire front would destabilize the German Army , before it had a chance to initiate what could be a mortal offensive blow on Moscow . Despite the caution urged by his generals , Stalin decided to try to keep the German forces off @-@ balance through " local offensives " .

### = = = Choosing the strategy = = =

After the conclusion of the winter offensive , Stalin and the Soviet Armed Forces General Staff ( Stavka ) believed that the eventual German offensives would aim for Moscow , with a big offensive to the south as well , mirroring Operation Barbarossa and Operation Typhoon in 1941 . Although Stavka believed that the Germans had been defeated before Moscow , the seventy divisions which faced Moscow remained a threat . Stalin , most generals and front commanders believed that the principal effort would be a German offensive towards Moscow . Emboldened by the success of the winter offensive , Stalin was convinced that local offensives in the area would wear down German forces , weakening German efforts to mount another operation to take Moscow . Stalin had agreed to prepare the Red Army for an " active strategic defence " but later gave orders for the planning of seven local offensives , stretching from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea . One area was Kharkov , where action was originally ordered for March .

Early that month , the Stavka issued orders to Southwestern Strategic Direction headquarters for an offensive in the region , after the victories following the Rostov Strategic Offensive Operation and the Barvenkovo ? Lozovaya Offensive Operation in the Donbas region . The forces of Marshal

Semyon Timoshenko and Lieutenant General Kirill Moskalenko penetrated German positions along the northern Donets River , east of Kharkov . Fighting continued into April , with Moskalenko crossing the river and establishing a tenuous bridgehead at Izium . In the south , the Soviet 6th Army had limited success defending against German forces , which managed to keep a bridgehead of their own on the east bank of the river . Catching the attention of Stalin , it set the pace for the prelude to the eventual offensive intended to reach Pavlohrad and Sinelnikovo and eventually Kharkov and Poltava .

By 15 March , Soviet commanders introduced preliminary plans for an offensive towards Kharkov , assisted by a large number of reserves . On 20 March , Timoshenko held a conference in Kupiansk to discuss the offensive and a report to Moscow , prepared by Timoshenko 's chief of staff , General Lieutenant Ivan Baghramian , summed up the conference , although arguably leaving several key intelligence features out . The build @-@ up of Soviet forces in the region of Barvenkovo and Vovchansk continued well into the beginning of May . Final details were settled following discussions between Stalin , Stavka and the leadership of the Southwestern Strategic Direction led by Timoshenko throughout March and April , with one of the final Stavka directives issued on 17 April .

= = Prelude = =

= = = Soviet order of battle = = =

By 11 May 1942 , the Red Army was able to allocate six armies under two fronts , amongst other units . The Soviet Southwestern Front had the 21st Army , 28th Army , 38th Army and the 6th Army . By 11 May , the 21st Tank Corps had been moved into the region with the 23rd Tank Corps , with another 269 tanks . There were also three independent rifle divisions and a rifle regiment from the 270th Rifle Division , concentrated in the area , supported by the 2nd Cavalry Corps in Bogdanovka . The Soviet Southern Front had the 57th and 9th armies , along with thirty rifle divisions , a rifle brigade and the 24th Tank Corps , the 5th Cavalry Corps and three Guards rifle divisions . At its height , the Southern Front could operate eleven guns or mortars per kilometer of front .

Forces regrouping in the sector ran into the rasputitsa , which turned much of the soil into mud . This caused severe delays in the preparations and made reinforcing the Southern and Southwestern Front take longer than expected . Senior Soviet representatives criticized the front commanders for poor management of forces , an inability to stage offensives and for their armchair generalship . Because the regrouping was done so haphazardly , the Germans received some warning of Soviet preparations . Moskalenko , the commander of the 38th Army , placed the blame on the fact that the fronts did not plan in advance to regroup and showed a poor display of front management . ( He commented afterwards that it was no surprise that the " German @-@ Fascist command divined our plans " . )

= = = Soviet leadership and manpower = = =

The primary Soviet leader was Marshal Semyon Timoshenko , a veteran of World War I and the Russian Civil War . Timoshenko had achieved some success at the Battle of Smolensk in 1941 but was eventually defeated . Timoshenko orchestrated the victory at Rostov during the winter counter @-@ attacks and more success in the spring offensive at Kharkov , before to the battle . Overseeing the actions of the army was Military Commissar Nikita Khrushchev .

The average Soviet soldier suffered from inexperience . With the Soviet debacle of the previous year ameliorated only by the barest victory at Moscow , most of the original manpower of the Red Army had been killed , wounded or captured by the Germans , with casualties of almost 1 @,@ 000 @,@ 000 just from the Battle of Moscow . The typical soldier in the Red Army was a conscript and had little to no combat experience and tactical training was practically nonexistent . Coupled with the lack of trained soldiers , the Red Army also began to suffer from the loss of Soviet industrial areas and a temporary strategic defence was considered necessary .

The General Chief of Staff , Marshal Vasilevsky , recognised that the Soviet Army of 1942 was not ready to conduct big offensive operations against the well @-@ trained German army , because it did not have quantitative and qualitative superiority over the Wehrmacht and because leadership was being rebuilt after the defeats of 1941 . ( This analysis is retrospective and is an analysis on Soviet conduct during their strategic offensives in 1942 , and even beyond , such as Operation Mars in October 1942 and the Battle of Târgul Frumos in May 1944 . )

= = = German preparations = = =

Unknown to the Soviet forces , the German 6th Army , under the newly appointed General Paulus , was issued orders for Operation Fredericus on 30 April 1942 . This operation was to crush the Soviet armies within the Iziurm salient south of Kharkov , created during the Soviet spring offensives in March and April . This task was given to the 6th Army and the final directive issued on 30 April gave a start date of 18 May .

The Germans had made a big effort to reinforce Army Group South and transferred Field Marshal Fedor von Bock , former commander of Army Group Center during Operation Barbarossa and Operation Typhoon . On 5 April 1942 , Hitler issued Directive 41 , which made the south the main area of operations under Case Blue the summer campaign , at the expense of the other fronts . The divisions of Army Group South were brought up to full strength in late April and early May . The strategic objective was illustrated after the victories of Erich von Manstein and the 11th Army in the Crimea . The main objective remained Caucasus , its oil fields and as a secondary objective , the city of Stalingrad .

The plan to begin Operation Fredericus in April led to more forces being allocated to the area of the German 6th Army . Unknown to the Soviet forces , the German army was regrouping in the center of operations for the offensive around Kharkov . On 10 May , Paulus submitted his final draft of Operation Fridericus and feared a Soviet attack . By then , the German army opposite Timoshenko was ready for the operation towards Caucasus .

= = Soviet offensive = =

= = = Initial success = = =

The Red Army offensive began at 6 : 30 a.m. on 12 May 1942 , led by a concentrated hour @-@ long artillery bombardment and a final twenty @-@ minute air attack upon German positions . The ground offensive began with a dual pincer movement from the Volchansk and Barvenkovo salients at 7 : 30 a.m. The German defences were knocked out by air raids , artillery @-@ fire and coordinated ground attacks against German fortifications . The fighting was so fierce that the Soviets inched forward their second echelon formations , preparing to throw them into combat as well . Fighting was particularly ferocious near the Soviet village of Nepokrytaia , where the Germans launched three local counter @-@ attacks . By dark the deepest Soviet advance was 10 kilometres ( 6 @. @ 2 mi ) . Moskalenko , discovered the movement of several German reserve units and realised that the attack had been opposed by two German divisions , not the one expected , indicating poor Soviet reconnaissance and intelligence @-@ gathering before the battle . A captured diary of a dead German general alluded to the Germans knowing about Soviet plans in the region .

Next day Paulus obtained three infantry divisions and a panzer division for the defence of Kharkov and the Soviet advance was slow , achieving little success except on the left flank . Bock had warned Paulus not to counter @-@ attack without air support , although this was later reconsidered , when several Soviet tank brigades broke through VIII Corps ( General Walter Heitz ) in the Volchansk sector , only 19 kilometres ( 12 mi ) from Kharkov . In the first 72 hours the 6th Army lost 16 battalions conducting holding actions and local counter @-@ attacks in the heavy rain and mud . By 14 May the Red Army had made impressive gains , several Soviet divisions were so depleted that they were withdrawn and Soviet tank reserves were needed to defeat the German counter @-@

attacks , German losses were estimated to be minimal , with only 35 ? 70 tanks believed to have been knocked out in the 3rd and 23rd Panzer divisions .

= = = Luftwaffe = = =

Hitler immediately turned to the Luftwaffe to help blunt the offensive . At this point , its close support corps was deployed in the Crimea , taking part in the siege of Sevastopol . 8th Air Corps under the command of Wolfram von Richthofen was initially ordered to deploy to Kharkov from the Crimea , but the command was rescinded . In an unusual move , Hitler kept it in the Crimea , but did not put the corps under the command of Luftflotte 4 ( Air Fleet 4 ) , which already contained 6th Air Corps , under the command of General Kurt Pflugbeil , and Fliegerführer Süd ( Flying Command South ) , a small anti @-@ shipping command based in the Crimea . Instead , he allowed Richthofen to take charge of all operations over Sevastopol . The siege in the Crimea was not over , and the Battle of the Kerch Peninsula had not yet been won . Still , Hitler was pleased with the progress there and content to keep Richthofen where he was and withdraw air support from Fliegerkorps VIII in order to prevent a Soviet breakthrough at Kharkov . The use of the Luftwaffe to compensate for the German Army 's lack of firepower suggested that the OKW saw the Luftwaffe primarily as a ground support arm . This angered Richthofen who complained that the Luftwaffe was treated as " the army 's whore " . Now that he was not being redeployed to Kharkov , Richthofen also complained about the withdrawal of his units to the region , arguing that the Kerch and Sevastopol battles were ongoing and owing to the transfer of aerial assets to Kharkov , victory in the Crimea was no longer guaranteed . In reality , the Soviet units at Kerch were already routed and the Axis position at Sevastopol was comfortable .

The news that powerful air support was on its way to bolster the 6th Army boosted German morale . Army commanders , such as Paulus and Bock , placed so much confidence in the Luftwaffe that they ordered their forces not to risk an attack without air support . In the meantime , Fliegerkorps VI , was forced to use every available aircraft . Although meeting more numerous Soviet air forces , he achieved air superiority and limited the German ground forces ' losses to Soviet aviation , but with some crews flying more than 10 missions per day . By 15 May , Pflugbeil was reinforced and received Kampfgeschwader 27 ( Bomber Wing 27 , or KG 27 ) , Kampfgeschwader 51 ( KG 51 ) , Kampfgeschwader 55 ( KG 55 ) and Kampfgeschwader 76 ( KG 76 ) equipped with Junkers Ju 88 and Heinkel He 111 bombers . Sturzkampfgeschwader 77 ( Dive Bomber Wing 77 , or StG 77 ) also arrived to add direct ground support . Pflugbeil now had 10 bomber , six fighter and four Junkers Ju 87 Stuka Gruppen ( Groups ) . Logistical difficulties meant that only 54 @.@ 5 per cent were operational .

= = = German defence = = =

German close air support also began to take its toll , forcing units such as the Soviet 38th Army onto the defensive . It ranged over the front , operating dangerously close to the changing frontline . Air interdiction and direct ground support damaged Soviet supply lines and rear areas , also inflicting large losses on their armoured formations . General Franz Halder remarked the air attacks went a long way to breaking the Soviet offensive . The Soviet air force could do very little to stop these air attacks . Not only did the Luftwaffe attack the enemy , it also carried out vital supply missions . Bombers dropped supplies to encircled German units , which could continue to hold out until a counter @-@ offensive relieved them .

On 14 May , the Germans continued to attack Soviet positions in the north in localised offensives and by then , the Luftwaffe had gained air superiority over the Kharkov sector , forcing Timoshenko to move his own air assets forward in order to effectively counter the bolstered Luftflotte 4 . The Luftwaffe won air superiority over their numerically superior , but technically inferior opponents . The air battles depleted the Soviet fighter strength , allowing the German strike aircraft the chance to influence the land battle even more . Nonetheless , the Soviet forces pushed on , disengaging from several minor battles and changing the direction of their thrusts . However , in the face of continued

resistance and local counterattacks , the Soviet attack ebbed , especially when combined with the invariably heavy air raids . By the end of the day , the 28th Army could no longer conduct offensive operations against German positions .

Ironically , the Soviet southern pincer did not suffer as terribly as had the shock groups in the north . They achieved spectacular success the first three days of combat , with a deep penetration of German positions . Although intensive fighting also marked the battles in the south , the Red Army routed several key German battalions , including many made up of personnel of foreign descent , including some Hungarian units . The success of the Southern Shock group , however , has been attributed to the fact that the early penetrations in the north had directed German reserves there , thus limiting the reinforcements to the south . But , by 14 May , Hitler had briefed General Ewald von Kleist and ordered his 1st Panzer Army to grab the initiative in a bold counteroffensive , setting the pace for the final launching of Operation Friderikus .

= = = Second phase of the offensive = = =

On 15 and 16 May , another attempted Soviet offensive in the north met the same resistance encountered on the three first days of the battle . German bastions continued to hold out against Soviet assaults . The major contribution to Soviet frustration in the battle was the lack of heavy artillery , which ultimately prevented the taking of heavily defended positions . One of the best examples of this was the defense of Ternovaya , where defending German units absolutely refused to surrender . The fighting was so harsh that , after advancing an average of five kilometers , the offensive stopped for the day in the north . The next day saw a renewal of the Soviet attack , which was largely blocked by counterattacks by German tanks ; the tired Soviet divisions could simply not hold their own against the concerted attacks from the opposition . The south , however , achieved success , much like the earlier days of the battle , although Soviet forces began to face heavier air strikes from German aircraft . The Germans , on the other hand , had spent the day fighting holding actions in both sectors , launching small counterattacks to whittle away at Soviet offensive potential , while continuously moving up reinforcements from the south , including several aircraft squadrons transferred from the Crimea . Poor decisions by the 150th Rifle Division , which had successfully crossed the Barvenkovo River , played a major part in the poor exploitation of the tactical successes of the southern shock group .

= = = 1st Panzer Army counterattacks = = =

On 17 May , supported by Fliegerkorps VI , the German army took the initiative , as Kleist 's 3rd Panzer Corps and 44th Army Corps began a counterattack on the Barvenkovo bridgehead from the area of Aleksandrovka in the south . Aided greatly by air support , Kleist was able to crush Soviet positions and advanced up to ten kilometres in the first day of the attack . Many of the Soviet units were sent to the rear that night to be refitted , while others were moved forward to reinforce tenuous positions across the front . That same day , Timoshenko reported the move to Moscow and asked for reinforcements and described the day 's failures . Vasilevsky 's attempts to gain approval for a general withdrawal were rejected by Stalin .

On 18 May , the situation worsened and Stavka suggested once more stopping the offensive and ordering the 9th Army to break out of the salient . Timoshenko and Khrushchev claimed that the danger coming from Wehrmacht 's Kramatorsk group was exaggerated , and Stalin refused the withdrawal again . The consequences of losing the air battle were also apparent . On 18 May the Fliegerkorps VI destroyed 130 tanks and 500 motor vehicles , while adding another 29 tanks destroyed on 19 May .

On 19 May , Paulus , on orders from Bock , began a general offensive from the area of Merefa in the north of the bulge in an attempt to encircle the remaining Soviet forces in the Iziium salient . Only then did Stalin authorize Zhukov to stop the offensive and fend off German flanking forces . However , it was already too late . Quickly , the Germans achieved considerable success against Soviet defensive positions . The 20 May saw more of the same , with the German forces closing in

from the rear . More German divisions were committed to the battle that day , shattering several Soviet counterparts , allowing the Germans to press forward . The Luftwaffe also intensified operations over the Donets River to prevent Soviet forces escaping . Ju 87s from StG 77 destroyed five of the main bridges and damaged four more while Ju 88 bombers from Kampfgeschwader 3 ( KG 3 ) inflicted heavy losses on retreating motorised and armoured columns .

Although Timoshenko 's forces successfully regrouped on 21 May , he ordered a withdrawal of Army Group Kotenko by the end of 22 May , while he prepared an attack for 23 May , to be orchestrated by the 9th and 57th Armies . Although the Red Army desperately attempted to fend off advancing Wehrmacht and launched local counterattacks to relieve several surrounded units , they generally failed . By the end of May 24 , Soviet forces opposite Kharkov had been surrounded by German formations , which had been able to transfer several more divisions to the front , increasing the pressure on the Soviet flanks and finally forcing them to collapse .

= = = Soviet encirclement = = =

The 25 May saw the first major Soviet attempt to break the encirclement . German Major General Hubert Lanz described the attacks as gruesome , made en masse . By 26 May , the surviving Red Army soldiers were forced into crowded positions in an area of roughly fifteen square kilometers . Soviet attempts to break into the German encirclement from the east were continuously blocked using tenacious defensive manoeuvres and German air power . Groups of Soviet tanks and infantry that attempted to escape and succeeded in breaking through German lines were caught and destroyed by Ju 87s from StG 77 . In the face of determined German operations , Timoshenko ordered the official halt of all Soviet offensive manoeuvres on 28 May , while attacks to break out of the encirclement continued until 30 May . Nonetheless , less than one man in ten managed to break out of the " Barvenkovo mousetrap " . Beevor puts Soviet losses in terms of prisoners as 240 @,@ 000 ( with the bulk of their armour ) , while Glantz ? citing Krivosheev ? gives a total of 277 @,@ 190 overall Soviet casualties . Both tend to agree on a low German casualty count , with the most formative rounding being at 20 @,@ 000 dead , wounded and missing . Regardless of the casualties , Kharkov was a major Soviet setback ; it put an end to the successes of the Red Army during the winter counteroffensive .

= = Analysis and conclusions = =

Many authors have attempted to pinpoint the reasons for the Soviet defeat . Several Soviet generals have placed the blame on the inability of Stavka and Stalin to appreciate the Wehrmacht 's military power on the Eastern Front after their defeats in the winter of 1941 ? 1942 and in the spring of 1942 . On the subject , Zhukov sums up in his memoirs that the failure of this operation was quite predictable , since the offensive was organized very ineptly , the risk of exposing the left flank of the Izium salient to German counterattacks being obvious on a map . Still according to Zhukov , the main reason for the stinging Soviet defeat lay in the mistakes made by Stalin , who underestimated the danger coming from German armies in the southwestern sector ( as opposed to the Moscow sector ) and failed to take steps to concentrate any substantial strategic reserves there to meet any potential German threat . Furthermore , Stalin ignored sensible advice provided by his own General Chief of Staff , who recommended organising a strong defence in the southwestern sector in order to be able to repulse any Wehrmacht attack .

Additionally , the subordinate Soviet generals ( especially South @-@ Western Front generals ) were just as willing to continue their own winter successes , and much like the German generals , under @-@ appreciated the strength of their enemies , as pointed out a posteriori by the commander of the 38th Army , Kirill Moskalenko . The Soviet winter counteroffensive weakened the Wehrmacht , but did not destroy it . As Moskalenko recalls , quoting an anonymous soldier , " these fascists woke up after they hibernated " .

Stalin 's willingness to expend recently conscripted armies , which were poorly trained and poorly supplied , illustrated a misconception of realities , both in the capabilities of the Red Army and the

subordinate arms of the armed forces , and in the abilities of the Germans to defend themselves and successfully launch a counteroffensive . The latter proved especially true in the subsequent Case Blue , which led to the Battle of Stalingrad , though this was the battle in which Paulus faced an entirely different outcome .

The battle had shown the potential of the Soviet armies to successfully conduct an offensive . This battle can be seen as one of the first major instances in which the Soviets attempted to preempt a German summer offensive . This later unfolded and grew as Stavka planned and conducted Operation Mars , Operation Uranus and Operation Saturn . Although only two of the three were victories , it still offers concise and telling evidence of the ability of the Soviets to turn the war in their favor . This finalised itself after the Battle of Kursk in July 1943 . The Second Battle of Kharkov also had a positive effect on Stalin , who started to trust his commanders and his Chief of Staff more ( allowing the latter to have the last word in naming front commanders for instance ) . After the great purge in 1937 , failing to anticipate the war in 1941 , and underestimating German military power in 1942 , Stalin finally fully trusted his military .

Within the context of the battle itself , the failure of the Red Army to properly regroup during the prelude to the battle and the ability of the Germans to effectively collect intelligence on Soviet movements played an important role in the outcome . Poor Soviet performance in the north and equally poor intelligence @-@ gathering at the hands of Stavka and front headquarters , also eventually spelled doom for the offensive . Nonetheless , despite this poor performance , it underscored a dedicated evolution of operations and tactics within the Red Army which borrowed and refined the pre @-@ war theory , Soviet deep battle .