

Stalin's Russia and World War II

- Stalin was warned repeatedly by the allies (i.e., the Americans and the British) that a massive invasion force was assembling along the U.S.S.R.'s western frontier. Stalin, in the end more wary of the “bourgeois powers” (again, the Americans and the British) than of fascist Germany, thought this was a ruse designed to get Stalin to attack Germany and thus trigger a fight to the death between the two dictators. Stalin, for his part, was not going to fall for it. Reports of German reconnaissance flights, sightings of tanks amassing—nothing seemed to change his mind. The evidence continued to build that the Germans were going to invade. Indeed, a Soviet spy claimed that an attack was “imminent.” Still, Stalin did very little, bolstering his forces along the border somewhat but refusing to order further mobilization. In some cases, Soviet forces were ordered not to fire back against the invading Germans unless given authorization from Moscow. For numerous scholars of the period, the facts speak to one conclusion: Stalin trusted Hitler. Some qualifications notwithstanding, this happens to be my personal view.

Operation Barbarossa, June 22, 1941



- The invasion came fast and hard. On June 22nd, 1941, a massive invasion force comprised of some 2 million soldiers—the largest invasion force ever assembled up until that period of time—began pouring across a long frontier running from the Baltic in the north to the Ukraine in the south. It was 129 years to the day since Napoleon made his ill-fated venture into Russia, and Hitler should have known better than to test history. Still, the initial advance was an unbelievable success. Already in early August, the German general in charge of the operation, Franz Halder, noted in his diary that, “one might say that this war had been won in the first two weeks.”

- As noted in the map below, German forces advanced north towards Leningrad, in the center towards Moscow, and south towards Kiev.



Russian forces were taken completely by surprise

- 300,000 Red Army soldiers were captured near Minsk, 600,000 near Kiev, and 600,000 on the way to Moscow. By September 13th, Leningrad was already under siege. By December 1st, German forces were nearing Moscow. Indeed, according to one account, scouting patrols could “see the golden domes of the Kremlin.” This may be mere legend, but the story speaks to the degree to which Moscow was threatened. The Soviets collapsed upon the German onslaught. Stalin had taken no precautions to repel the invasion. The Red Army’s communications were poor, its morale was low, and its organization poor. Entire Soviet armies were encircled and captured; most of the Soviet air force was destroyed while still on the ground. Indeed, from the Soviet perspective, this was one of the greatest military disasters in history.

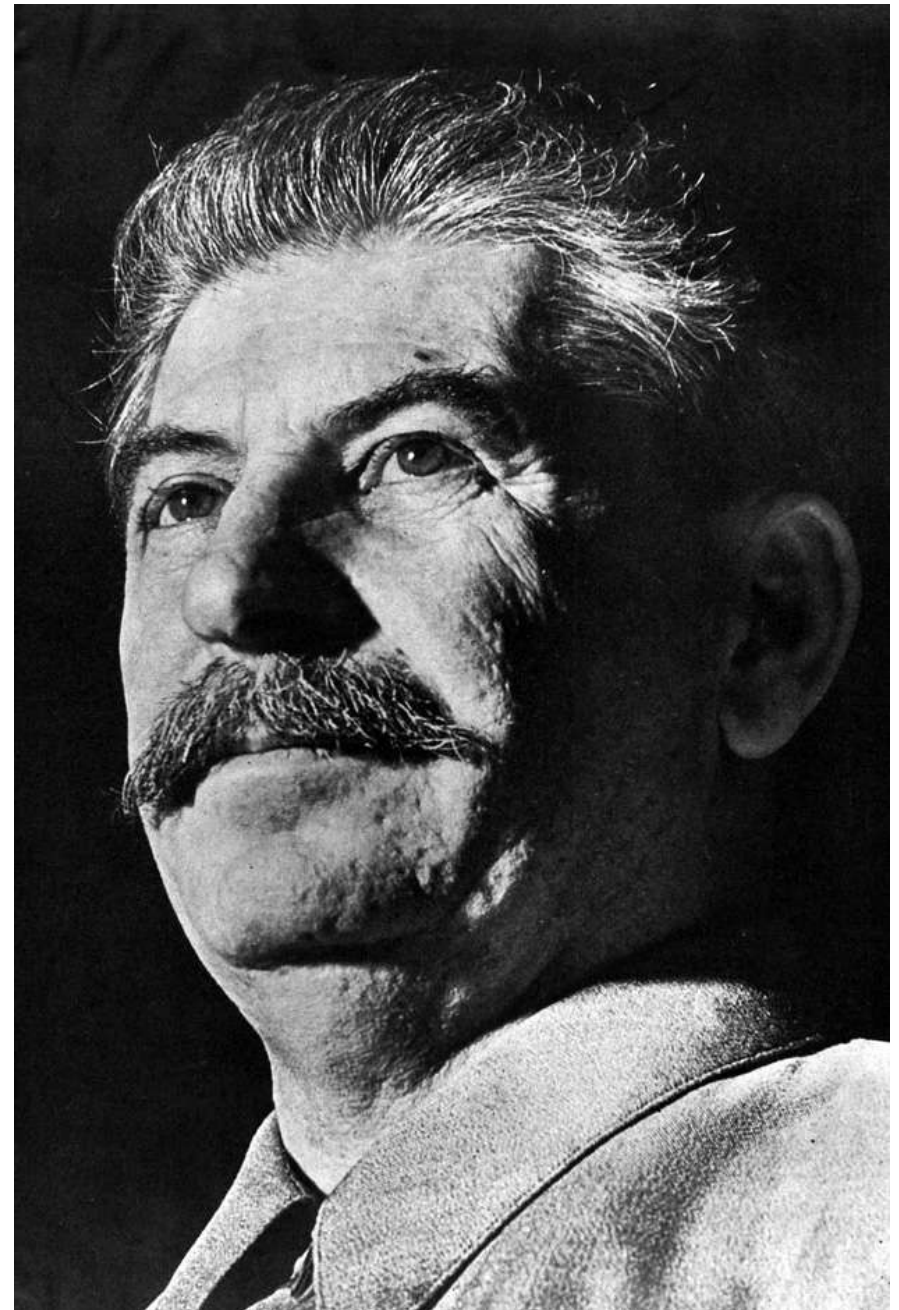
- If one looks carefully at the map below, one will note how certain arrows suddenly turn. These “turns” reflect the German army’s encirclements of Soviet forces. Part of the “Blitzkrieg” strategy, the German army advanced inwards, then turned to surround entire Soviet armies.



The collapse of the Soviet armies was astounding. The picture below exhibits a column of Soviet POWs being marched to an internment camp.



- Stalin, meanwhile, suffered a nervous breakdown. After arguing with Red Army commanders, he retreated to his estate outside Moscow and drank himself into a stupor. A few days later, Bolshevik colleagues went to find him, a broken man—hung over and helpless. One can imagine the scene. His colleagues insisted that he had to rise to the occasion. The Soviet Union needed leadership at this crucial juncture, and only Stalin could provide it. No one could replace him. He had to pull himself together! Somehow, Stalin seems to have done so. He made his way back to the Kremlin and issued—broadcast on Soviet radio—one of the most important speeches of his career. Here, he called for the people of the Soviet Union to rise up to defend “mother Russia”—a nationalist turn that characterized his speeches throughout the conflict.



Siege of Leningrad, September 1941-January 1944

- The siege of Leningrad, which lasted some 28 months, is one of the most terrible events of World War II and one of the least known. Upon approaching Leningrad, the first thing the Germans did was to bomb the city's main grain depository, destroying the food supply. Then, for more than two years, the Germans did everything possible to prevent food from entering the city. The consequences were dire. People ate sawdust to survive, bodies piled up in the streets, children died by the thousands, and cannibalism reared its ugly head. The winters of 1942 and 1943 were some of the coldest on record; many city dwellers either froze or were asphyxiated by poorly aerated stoves in which they burned furniture and anything else combustible that they could find. According to most statistics, the overall death toll neared one million.

Siege of Leningrad



→ Body of Leningrad civilian during the winter of 1943.



One supply route, across frozen Lake Ladoga, was opened during the second year of the siege. This allowed critical supplies of grain and other foodstuffs to enter the city. However, they were never enough to meet the needs of the city's millions of starving inhabitants.



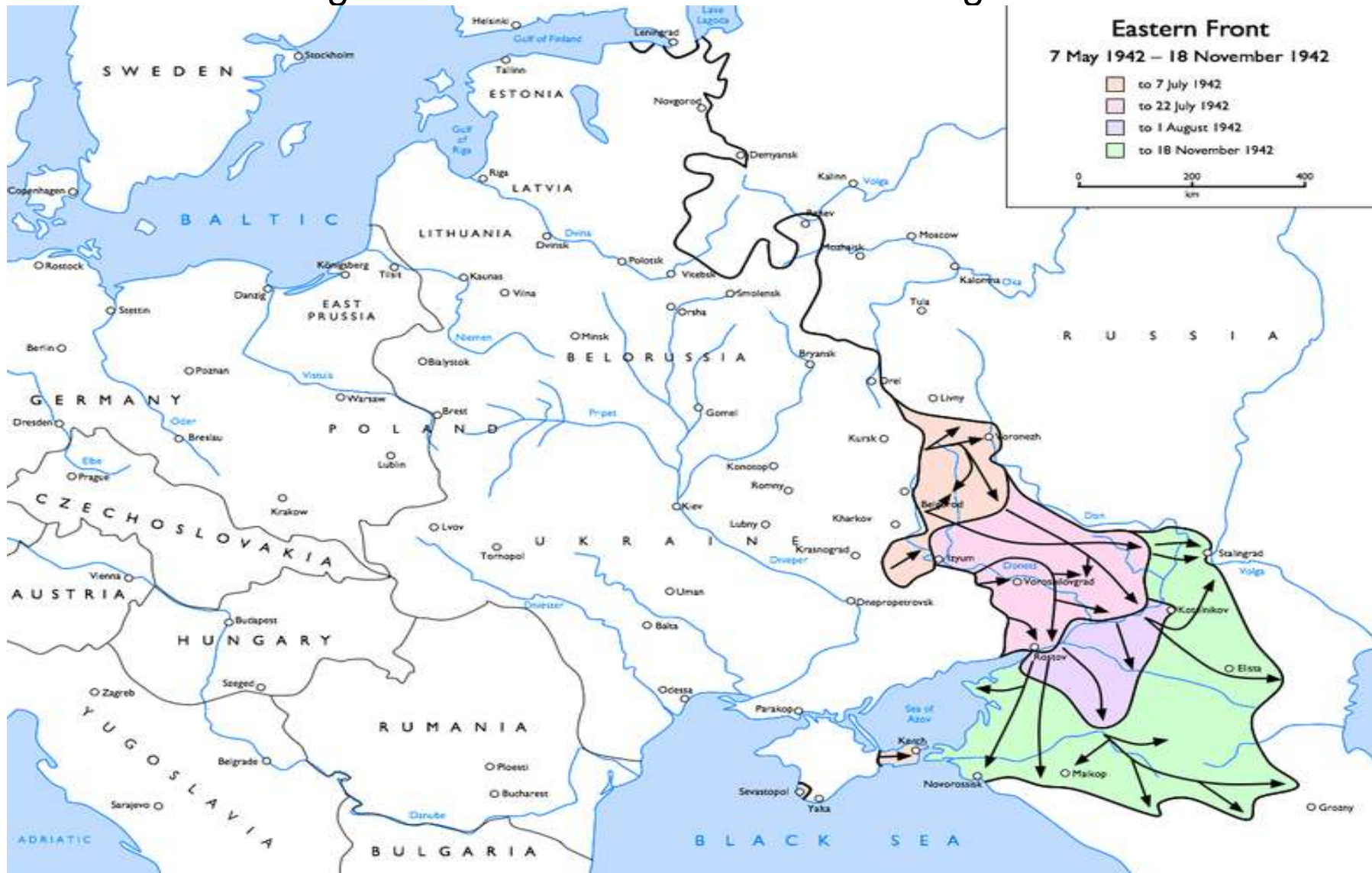
Soviet Counteroffensive, Dec. 5

- As suggested by the reference to Halder's diary entry, German commanders, as well as Hitler himself, firmly believed they had won the war in the first months, even weeks, of the invasion. Entire armies had been captured, millions of soldiers killed or imprisoned—how could the Soviets keep fighting? The problem was that they did. It was as if everyone knew that the Red Army had lost, except the Red Army itself. As the harsh cold of November and December fell upon the German Wehrmacht, commanders became worried. They hadn't brought enough anti-freeze; the soldiers' uniforms were meant for the spring and summer; supply lines were extended. Then, on December 5th, the Soviets launched a huge counter offensive against German lines about twenty miles from Moscow. The counteroffensive took the Germans completely by surprise. This was a "phantom" army, the existence of which the Germans had no idea. The Soviets struck hard and in tremendous numbers. The Germans were pushed back 100 miles along a broad front. Contrary to Halder's suggestion, this war was by no means over. His words would come back to haunt him.

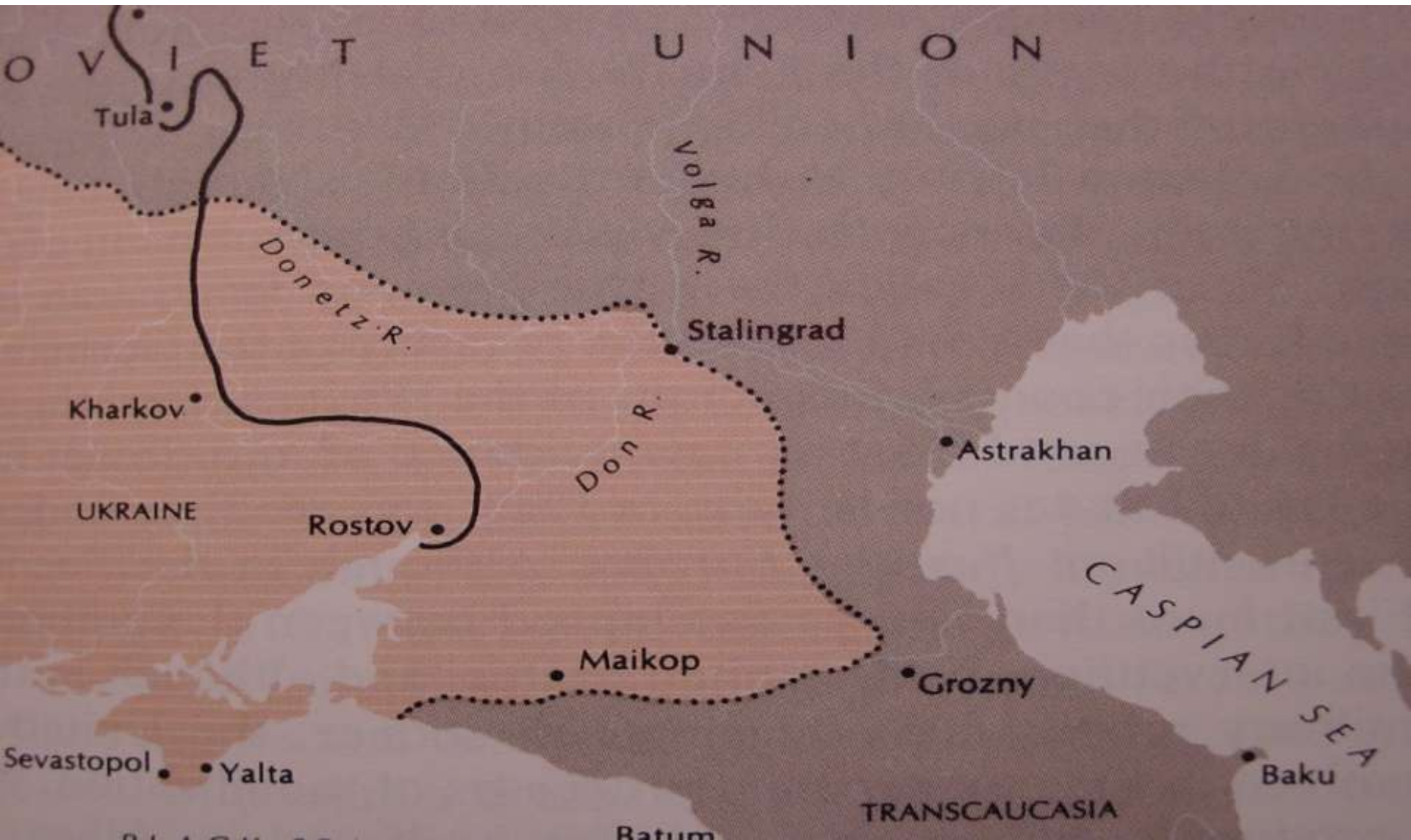
Dressed in warm winter camouflage uniforms, the Red Army soldiers that attacked in December were much better prepared to deal with the Russian winter than the Germans. “General Winter” has always been the Russians’ greatest commander.



The German army was shocked, but by no means beaten. Indeed, the following spring, in May, it was the Germans who once again went on the offensive, this time attacking towards the southeast—into the oil-rich Caucasus region and the industrial hub of Stalingrad.

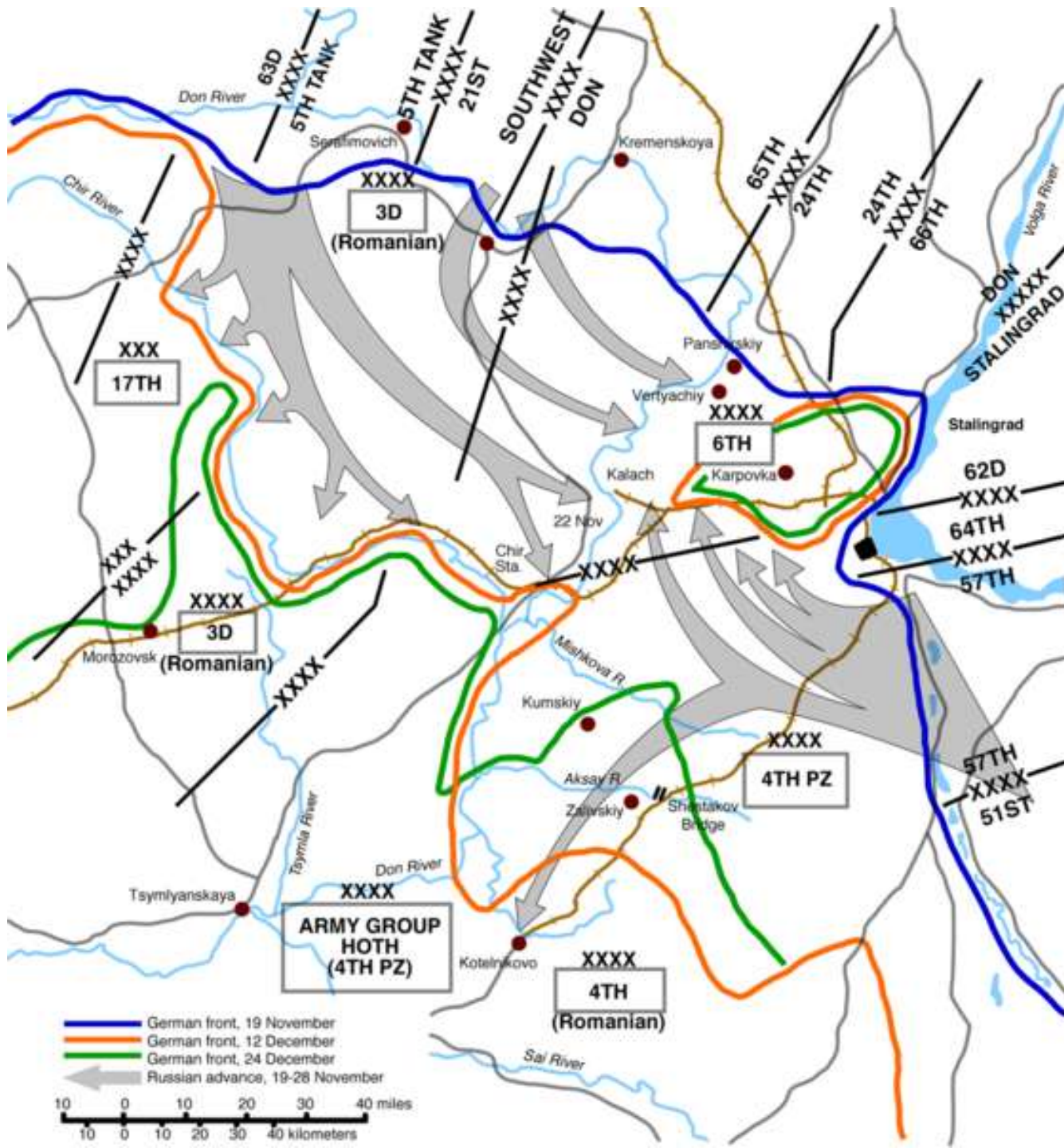


Territories occupied by the Germans during the “spring offensive” of 1942



Stalingrad (fall/winter, 1942-1943)

- The epic battle that would, in many respects, decide World War II was Stalingrad. This was the largest single battle of World War II. It was the most brutal; it was the most deadly; it was the most decisive. Here, the essential might of both the Soviets and the Germans fought to the death in the winter of 1942 and 1943. And it would be the Germans who would die. Stalingrad was chosen by Hitler as a focus of occupation because, as he said, “it had enormous industrial significance.” In discussions with his associates, Hitler spoke repeatedly of the amount of “iron ore,” “steel,” “coal,” and “finished industrial products” that passed therethrough. But the city had great symbolic significance as well. It was here that Stalin had made his name as a commander by defending the city against the whites (at the time it was known as Tsaritsyn). If Hitler could take this city named after Stalin, he would serve a great moral defeat to the Red Army and Stalin himself. The initial siege proved more difficult than the Germans anticipated. The Red Army fought tenaciously as the Germans approached. By November, however, the Wehrmacht had taken the city. Thinking that the battle was over, the Germans began to let down their guard. Just then, the Soviets launched a renewed offensive from both the north and the south—the work of additional “phantom armies,” the existence of which the Germans had no idea--against the Germans’ flanks and supply lines. Breaking through from both directions and then joining together at Kalach, in the city’s suburbs, the Soviets thus closed a broad band around the city and encircled the Germans. The mighty German sixth army—the best of the Wehrmacht’s fighting capacity—was now trapped. The besiegers were now the besieged. Through December and January, the Soviets bombarded the city and wore the Wehrmacht down. German soldiers starved, died from exposure to the cold, were crushed by artillery fire, or shot by Soviet snipers. In early February, the German commander in charge, Friedrich von Paulus, surrendered.



- At left, the Soviet attack against and breakthrough of (noted via gray arrows) the German flanks, which were guarded by the Germans' weaker Romanian allies.

- 260,000 dead Germans
- 110,000 captured Germans
- An entire German army annihilated



Friedrich Von Paulus (left center) and his commanders
after being captured.



Battle of Kursk (July 1943)



- The Germans' last major offensive against the Red Army during World War II occurred at the Soviet city of Kursk. Here, the Germans assembled the largest number of tanks ever in an effort to encircle Red Army forces west of Kursk. German forces attacked from both the north and south, hoping to join together east of the city and thus entrap Soviet forces to the west (see the map on the following slide). Although the Germans had initial successes, Soviet defensive lines, including anti-tank ditches, proved too much for them, slowing the German advance from both directions. Soviet reinforcements soon launched their own counteroffensive, pushing the Germans back to their start lines. There would be no major effort on the part of the Germans to push the Soviets back ever again in World War II.

In planning the Battle of Kursk, German commanders noted a “bulge” in Soviet lines. This was the protrusion off to the west of Kursk noted in the map below. The plan was to encircle the Soviet forces therein via rapid offensives from the north and south employing more than one thousand tanks. The arrows below note the extent of German advances, which bogged down in July 1943.



Andrey Vlasov

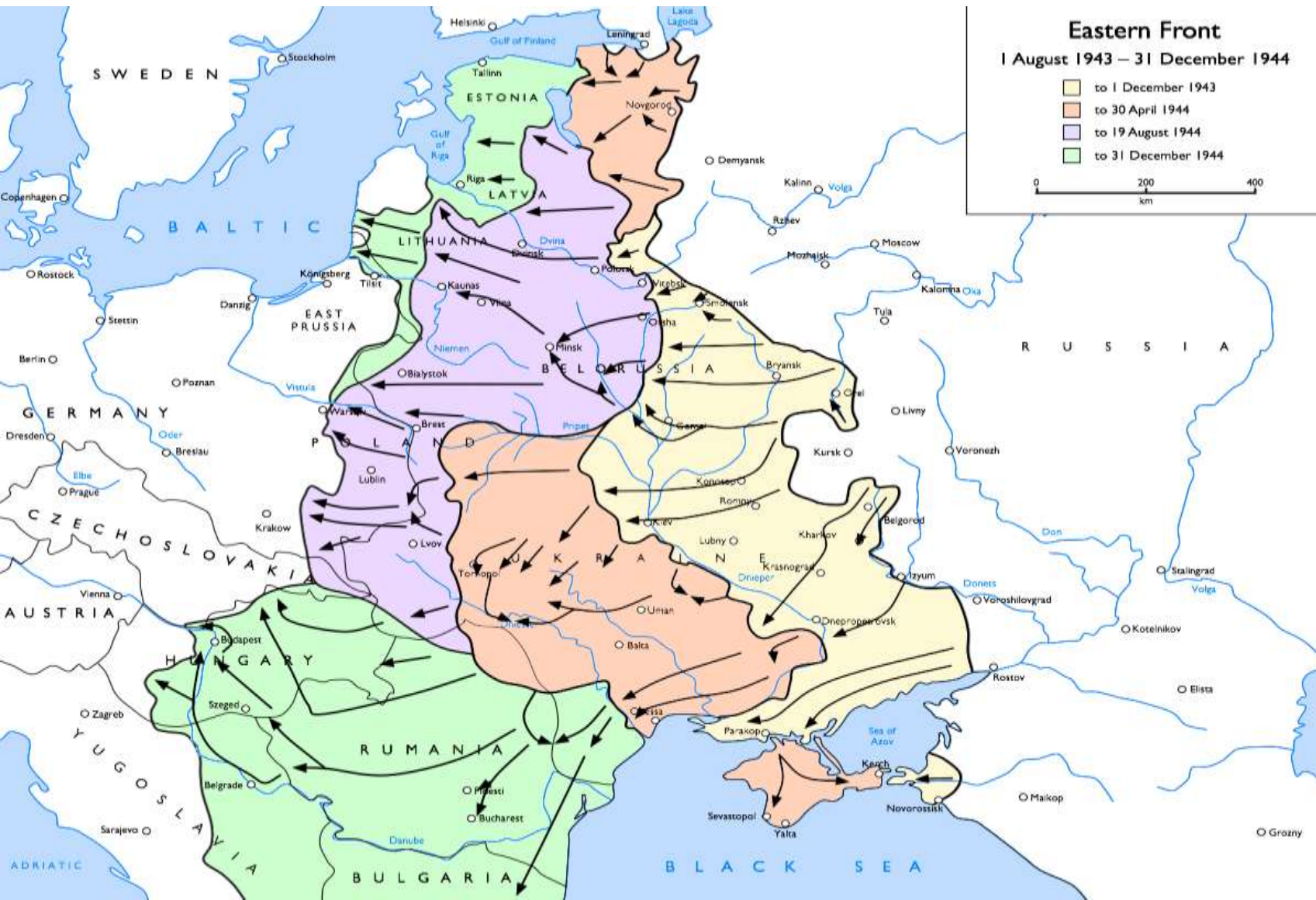
- Demonstrating the degree to which there was resistance to Stalin in the Red Army, one of the generals captured by the Germans, Andrey Vlasov, helped organize a Russian army to fight *against* the Soviets in the latter part of the war. Although this army never had real military significance, it did symbolize the degree to which Stalin was disliked by broad swathes of the Russian officer corps. At the end of the war, Vlasov was handed over to the Soviets, who summarily executed him. Every year, Russian relatives of Vlasov, as well as relatives of soldiers who fought in this “anti-Stalin” contingent, meet to commemorate his efforts against Stalin.



“Red Storm on the Reich”: The Soviets Advance West

- Following the Battle of Kursk, the Soviets began a slow, but steady advance towards Berlin. It was as if a “red star” had been placed on the capital, and Stalin’s armies began moving towards their target. But nearly two years more of dying remained for Soviet soldiers, since the German Wehrmacht would fight tenaciously to slow their advance. Initially, German commanders sought to build long defensive lines all along the eastern front, which were supposed to prevent any further advance on the part of the Soviets. As the Americans and British landed first in Sicily (July 1943) and then in Normandy (June 1944), the Germans, however, lacked the manpower and materiel needed to defend this vast eastern frontier. Soviet pressure on German lines mounted, and they quickly gave way in parts, allowing Red Army forces to pour through. Time and time again, the Germans retreated to new defensive lines. Time and time again, these lines, too, collapsed under Soviet pressure.

Soviet Advances Following the Battle of Kursk



The Final Soviet Push on the Reich



- By mid April 1945—nearly two years after the Germans' last offensive in the east at Kursk—the Red Army was bombing the streets of Berlin. With Soviet shells destroying his beloved Reich chancellery above, on April 30, 1945 Hitler took his life. Three days later, Soviet soldiers climbed to the top of the German Reichstag (parliament building) and raised the Hammer and Sickle flag. Although the formal surrender to the Soviets would not occur until May 9th, the war in the East was over. Stalin had done the impossible: He had defeated Nazi Germany.

