

# THE BATTLE OF KURSK: AN APPRAISAL OF THE SOVIET AND GERMAN OPERATIONAL DOCTRINES

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Operation *Zitadelle* (Citadel), the German attack on the Kursk salient on 5 July 1943, constituted the final attempt by the German Army to retain its operational initiative on the Eastern Front.<sup>3</sup> The Russians knew that the Kursk salient was a great temptation to the German Army. The German General Staff's classic reaction to an enemy promontory, an enemy-held outpost stretching beyond the general run of the front line, had always been to pinch the promontory off by attacking each of its flanks simultaneously.<sup>4</sup> This was precisely what the Germans did at Kursk when Field Marshal HG von Kluge attacked the salient from the north, while Lieutenant-General FE von Manstein struck it from the south.

When the Germans attacked they did precisely what the Russians expected them to do and had wanted them to do. Marshall GK Zhukov had prepared the ground well for defence and had collected large forces for the counterattack. Zhukov knew he could defeat the Germans decisively if he allowed them to use up fuel and ammunition and generally exhaust themselves before he committed his own fresh troops and equipment. When Zhukov struck his first main blow the Germans had been fighting a week and the Russians were only just beginning. Thereafter the Russians were threatening the annihilation of seventeen out of the nineteen German armoured divisions on the eastern front.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this was what the Russians had in mind before the start of the German attack. By smashing the German armoured forces in the salient around Kursk, it would be far easier to defeat the German Army Groups "Centre" and "South".<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> E Bauer, *The history of World War II* (Galley Press, Leicester, 1966), p. 379.

<sup>4</sup> M Arnold-Forster, *The world at war* (Hamish Hamilton, London, 1973), p. 143.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 145 and 146.

<sup>6</sup> Bauer, p. 383.

The Russians had a number of strategic advantages even before the start of the German onslaught. For one, they had full knowledge of all the German plans to the last detail. As Bauer<sup>7</sup> explains: "And their confidence was all the greater because first-hand information and reports from partisans confirmed the radio messages of their conscientious informer in Lucerne." Secondly, the defensive potential of the Red Army surpassed the offensive potential of the *Wehrmacht* by far. Not only is the defensive generally considered to be the strongest form of war, but the Red Army's exploitation of their internal lines of communications within the Kursk salient also strengthened their defensive ability. Furthermore, Hitler's delay of the German attack allowed the Russians to prepare the battlefield by way of a number of in-depth defensive belts which included minefields, anti-tank strong-points and the massive use of artillery. From a Russian perspective the scene was set for a colossal battle of attrition.<sup>8</sup> The Russians also had the necessary material that was needed for such an operation. In the end, the Russians needed 3 600 tanks, 6 000 anti-tank weapons, and 400 000 mines to stop the 1800 German tanks.<sup>9</sup> The availability of such large quantities of material was indeed a very important strategic advantage to the Red Army, given the German logistical nightmare on the Eastern Front. The Russians benefited from the new and expanded factories in the Urals, as well as the support from their Western allies.<sup>10</sup> Given these strategic advantages the question can indeed be asked whether the German and Russian operational doctrines played any role in the outcome of the Battle of Kursk.

This paper aims at an assessment of the Soviet and German operational doctrines in order to determine whether it had any influence on the final outcome of the Battle of Kursk. The first part of the paper is a discussion of the Russian way of war and an analysis of their concept of "Deep Operations". The second part is an analysis of the German *Blitzkrieg* doctrine whereby specific attention is focused on important concepts that characterised the German way of war. The discussion attempts to highlight particular limitations of the *Blitzkrieg* doctrine that can be used as doctrinal explanations for the *Wehrmacht* not being successful at Kursk. The paper concludes with a brief comparison of the most salient aspects of the two operational doctrines.

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<sup>7</sup> **Ibid.**

<sup>8</sup> A Clark, **Barbarossa: The Russian-German conflict 1941-1945** (Hutchinson, London, 1965), p. 285.

<sup>9</sup> Bauer, p. 385.

<sup>10</sup> BH Liddell Hart, **History of the Second World War** (Pan Books, London, 1970), p. 508.

## 2. THE RUSSIAN WAY OF WAR: REINVENTING THE COMBINED ARMS DOCTRINE

Doctrine can never be divorced from its historical, political and geostrategic context. From a Russian perspective there can be no question that the ideas that underpinned the Deep Operations doctrine were influenced by a number of underlying factors. Without presenting a complete list, it is clear that these factors included inter alia the strategic depth and vastness of the Soviet Union from a geographical point of view, as well as its huge manpower potential. The Russian national character is known for its hardened soldiers who are able to exist and fight with the absolute minimum. As far as its political system, the military purges and the influence thereof on the military are concerned, one is reminded of Voltaire's opinion that chopping off heads is not such a bad policy, since it tends to encourage the remaining leaders.<sup>11</sup> The centralised Bolshevik political doctrine and the war-fighting experience of the Soviet forces against the reactionaries after the revolution should also be taken into account.

"Doctrine," according to *Webster's Third International Dictionary*, is the body of principles in any branch of knowledge. Thus, the best indication of the nature of an army's doctrine ought to be its underlying principles. The Red Army adhered to ten so-called principles of war:

- ◆ advance and concentration;
- ◆ offensive;
- ◆ concentration;
- ◆ economy of force;
- ◆ manoeuvre and initiative;
- ◆ combined Arms;
- ◆ adequate reserves;
- ◆ surprise and deception;
- ◆ morale;
- ◆ annihilation.<sup>12</sup>

Nobody will argue against the view that this list contains a balance between the principles that underpin both attrition and manoeuvre warfare. Within armed forces, doctrine is however more than mere principles. Doctrine is supposed to teach soldiers *how to fight* and more importantly, also educate soldiers on *how to think*

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<sup>11</sup> TR Fehrenbach, **This kind of war: The classic Korean War history**, (Brassey's, Washington DC, 1994), p. 258.

<sup>12</sup> DA Starry, "Principles of war", **Military Review**, September 1981, p. 6.

*about how to fight*.<sup>13</sup> The Red Army's fort  has always been the ponderous set-piece attack, in which firepower, in particular artillery, was relied upon to smash the enemy, support the other arms and prevent the enemy from bringing up reserves. Artillery was seen as Stalin's 'god of war' and was concentrated in artillery divisions or even corps.

Marshal P Rotmistrov, commander of the 5 Guards Tank Army at Kursk, however emphasised that armoured and mechanised forces had become the Red Army's main striking and mobile force at the time of the Battle of Kursk. The Red Army's doctrine was indeed an interesting combination of both the attritionist and manoeuvrist approaches to warfare. Jones,<sup>14</sup> for example, argues that the Germans had to rely on their skills to offset Russian predominance in artillery and tanks, as the Russians had added to their traditional passion for large quantities of powerful artillery an enthusiasm for armoured forces. McInnes and Sheffield<sup>15</sup> further argue that the Red Army used armoured forces in accordance with the principles of 'operational art' by treating individual 'battles' as part of an integrated operational plan.

Leonard emphasises that the doctrinal focus of the Red Army was on deep operations and therefore had a natural emphasis on the operational level of war. He notes that the notion of deep operations "(is) not related to tactical events at all, except to the degree that tactical events support deep operations, not vice versa".<sup>16</sup> The primary purpose of the Red Army's Deep Operations doctrine was to cause the theatre-wide collapse of enemy morale. The secondary purpose was to seize terrain and neutralise key enemy units in order to sustain a deep operation.<sup>17</sup> In this sense the Red Army's doctrine was the focused expression of classical manoeuvre theory. It represented a fine balance between 'out-fighting' and 'out-thinking' the enemy. From a doctrinal perspective the Battle of Kursk was therefore only part of the Red Army's larger offensive operational effort on the eastern front.

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<sup>13</sup> For a detailed discussion on the meaning of the word 'doctrine', see the introduction to the following chapter: JA Blackwell, "Professionalism and army doctrine: A losing battle" in LJ Matthews, **The future of the army profession** (McGraw-Hill Primis Custom Publishing, Boston, 2002), p. 103.

<sup>14</sup> A Jones, **The art of war in the Western World** (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987), p. 549.

<sup>15</sup> C McInnes and GD Sheffield, **Warfare in the Twentieth Century: Theory and practice** (Unwin Hyman, London, 1988), p. 75.

<sup>16</sup> R Leonard, **The art of manoeuvre: Manoeuvre-warfare theory and airland battle** (Presido, Novato, 1991), p. 160.

<sup>17</sup> **Ibid.**

The Red Army and the *Wehrmacht* shared some doctrinal communalities, which developed from their co-operation before the war.<sup>18</sup> One of these was an understanding and recognition of the operational level of war. What was however unique in the Red Army's understanding of the operational art, was its focus on the relationship between mass, firepower and mobility.<sup>19</sup> Theorists like Marshal V Triandafillov and Marshall MN Tukhachevskii worked on a grand scale in their theoretical projections of future war before Stalin's military purge in the 1930s. Though the Red Army was still lacking the technological means, future war was projected as massive, mobile and decisive, driven by growing contingents of manpower, fuelled with ever more resources and powered by advancing technology.<sup>20</sup>

The theory of Deep Operations was a well thought out idea within the Red Army, but due to Stalin's purges within the officer corps, it was shelved before the beginning of the Second World War.<sup>21</sup> The initial setbacks of the Red Army at the beginning of the war led to its renewed discovery. The idea of Deep Operations first called for a mass assault over a wide front. This assault was underpinned by the principle of simultaneity, which could best be attained by establishing the greatest possible contact area between own and enemy forces in order to neutralise the enemy's entire tactical depth. It was thought that the best way to attain simultaneity was through an attack on a broad front with a combined arms force. The enemy had to be pinned down over a broad front, and probed hard enough to breach the forward edge of its defences.<sup>22</sup> To succeed, a sufficient density of troops over the whole front was needed in order to pin the enemy down, to achieve a favourable ratio of attrition rates, and to achieve decisive superiority at a critical time and place for a break-in. The so-called 'Shock Army', so far held in reserve, was then to be inserted into the breach for an operational breakthrough.<sup>23</sup> The role of mass through the use of artillery, infantry and tanks acting in concert was an essential ingredient of the attack over the whole frontage of the offensive.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> C Rice, "The making of Soviet strategy" in P Paret, **Makers of modern strategy from Machiavelli to the nuclear age** (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1986), p. 666.

<sup>19</sup> J Erickson, "The development of Soviet military doctrine: The significance of operational art and the emergence of deep battle" in J Gooch (ed.), **The origins of contemporary doctrine** (SCSI Occasional Paper No. 30), p. 82.

<sup>20</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 91.

<sup>21</sup> Rice, p. 669.

<sup>22</sup> R Simpkin, **Deep operations: The brainchild of Marshal Tukhachevskii** (Brassey's Defence Publishers, London, 1987), p. 34.

<sup>23</sup> **Ibid.**

<sup>24</sup> Simpkin, **Race to the swift: Thoughts on Twenty-First Century warfare** (Brassey's Defence Publishers, London, 1985 (1994)), p. 38.

Three fundamental notions underpinned the idea of deep operations. The first was that the breakthrough was to be attained at a predetermined point.<sup>25</sup> An attack on such a chosen point should then be developed into a thrust line for the breakthrough and mobile forces. The idea of a predetermined point for the breakthrough was attritionist in itself. A predetermined thrust line for these forces however ensured that once they broke through, they operated in geographical areas that allowed for operational manoeuvre. The second conception was the echelonisation of all forces, irrespective of what level a force is operating on. The 'Shock Army' for example is characterised by a three echelon pattern consisting of an advance echelon for the break-in, a main echelon to complete the penetration and a reserve echelon, usually the front's mobile group known as the "shock group", to be launched well beyond "operational depth". Operational depth was defined as the depth at which a manoeuvre would force the enemy to react at the operational level.<sup>26</sup> A last, but very important, concept was the centrality of combined-arms warfare within the Red Army's doctrine. Leonard<sup>27</sup> emphasised that each echelon of the Red Army, irrespective of what level it operated on, was made up of a combined-arms force to allow for a sustained combined-arms effort.

Within the Red Army the development or contemplation of "defensive questions on an operational scale" before the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 was "considered somehow improper". The study of the offensive conduct of war i.e. moving military operations to the enemy territory, overshadowed consideration of the concept of the army on the defensive at both the Frunze and the General Staff Academies. When the defence was considered, it was done within the framework of the defensive operations of a particular army and not that of a whole front.<sup>28</sup>

Erickson<sup>29</sup> divides the war between Germany and the former Soviet Union, the so-called Great Patriotic War, in four strategic operational phases. Relentless battlefield experimentation and innovation marked each phase. The Battle of Kursk forms part of the third phase, which is seen as the attritionist phase of late 1942-1943. The Battle of Kursk was the Red Army's last major strategic defensive battle of the war. The defence was conducted by means of deep echeloning and fortification to a depth of more than 100 kilometres, simultaneously assembling the greatest strategic reserve of the entire war. Thus, the groundwork for the counteroffensive had already been laid while preparing the defensive battle. The concentration of forces in great depth, massive engineering and anti-tank preparation, good intelligence and skilful deception measures were combined to

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<sup>25</sup> **Ibid.**

<sup>26</sup> **Ibid.**, pp. 39-40.

<sup>27</sup> Leonard, p. 160.

<sup>28</sup> Erickson, pp. 97-8.

<sup>29</sup> **Ibid.**, pp. 97-8.

frustrate German attempts to the north and south of the salient to achieve any significant operational penetration. Through the Battle of Kursk the strategic initiative was passed irreversibly to the Red Army. The Red Army's strategy of strategic defence was now transformed to one of a "strategy of destruction".<sup>30</sup>

Although the Red Army did not place a high premium on the development of a defensive doctrine, the nature of its offensive doctrine contains all the elements for a sound defensive doctrine. Indeed the attritionist underpinning of the Red Army's offensive operational doctrine was conducive for the development of a successful defensive doctrine. Hence, the development of a successful defensive doctrine, as was illustrated at the Battle of Kursk, was made possible by the presence of elements like the escheloning of forces, the combined arms battle and predetermined areas for offensive (or defensive) operational manoeuvre in the offensive doctrine.

### 3. **BLITZKRIEG: AN OFFENSIVE TACTICAL OPERATIONAL DOCTRINE**

From a German historical, political and geostrategic point of view, the development of the *Blitzkrieg* doctrine was definitely influenced by the Treaty of Versailles, the prohibitions on the German military machine, the National Socialist political doctrine and system, and above all the German war-fighting experiences of the First World War. Then there are also the more traditional factors of which Germany's central locality and the need to avert a war on two fronts, i.e. the necessity for a quick victory on at least one front, is probably the most important. One can however not but get the feeling that most of these factors had a negativity to it.

Some authors try to explain the failure of *Blitzkrieg* at the Battle of Kursk by only considering variables such as Hitler's direct influence on operations, the lack of German resources, the vastness of the Russian theatre and the war on two fronts that Germany had to fight. The content of the *Blitzkrieg* doctrine is however seldom studied critically.<sup>31</sup> It is therefore important to understand the conceptual roots of the German *Blitzkrieg* doctrine and to focus on the way the Germans conducted operations in order to understand the limitations of *Blitzkrieg* in comparison with the systematic nature of the successful Russian deep operations doctrine.

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<sup>30</sup> **Ibid.**, p. 98.

<sup>31</sup> M Geyer, "German strategy in the age of machine warfare, 1914-1945" in Paret, p. 593.

A study of Guderian's<sup>32</sup> account of developments in the formulation of *Blitzkrieg* concepts indicates that the process proceeded in random fashion and involved mostly the younger generation of senior officers.<sup>33</sup> The older traditionally professional generals such as Beck were critical of the tactical underpinnings which culminated in *Blitzkrieg*.<sup>34</sup>

The *Blitzkrieg* doctrine can be described as the exploitation of tactical breakthroughs by armoured forces "...driving deep into the operational depths of the enemy and shattering the coherence of his defence by encirclement...".<sup>35</sup> This definition highlights the fact that *Blitzkrieg* was a predominantly armour-centred approach focused on the encirclement of enemy forces irrespective of whether operational disruption was achieved. The question however is whether the over-reliance on armour limited the German forces to achieve success in operational depth. Such an approach was after-all a deviation from the principle of combined operations. During the early stages of the Battle of Kursk, Model committed his Panther armoured forces prematurely and advanced them beyond the support of infantry.<sup>36</sup> The poorly armed Porche Tigers<sup>37</sup> also struggled and were left vulnerable against entrenched Russian infantry and suffered high losses. The German infantry was unable to exploit the breakthroughs that were achieved by the armoured forces. This was one of the primary flaws of the *Blitzkrieg* doctrine.

No understanding of the *Blitzkrieg* doctrine is possible without an understanding of the concepts that underpinned its execution on the tactical level. According to English,<sup>38</sup> surprise was central to German doctrine and the Germans glorified surprise to such an extent that every action had to be based on surprise. The *Wehrmacht* also strongly emphasised mobility and manoeuvre, from small unit actions to the large-scale attacks.<sup>39</sup> The outflanking manoeuvre was always attempted by using mobility and manoeuvre. German tactics were also based on infiltration tactics and outflanking centres of resistance. *Blitzkrieg* focussed on single and double envelopments. These notions were central in the execution of the

<sup>32</sup> Guderian held several prominent appointments in the German army, among other: Commander XIX Corps in August 1939, Commander Panzer Group Guderian in June 1940 and Inspector General of Armoured Troops in March 1943. Source: H Guderian, **Panzer Leader**, translated from the German by C Fitzgibbon, (Michael Joseph, London, 1952), p. 469.

<sup>33</sup> S Naveh, **In pursuit of military excellence: The evolution of operational theory** (Frank Cass, London, 1997), p. 110.

<sup>34</sup> M Geyer, p. 572.

<sup>35</sup> JJ Schneider, "Theoretical Implications of operational art", **On Operational Art**, (Center of Military History United States Army, Washington DC, 1994), pp. 28-29.

<sup>36</sup> H Guderian, p. 311.

<sup>37</sup> The ninety Porche Tigers of Model's army had no secondary weapons (co-axial machine guns) and they lacked sufficient ammunition for the gun (main weapon). Source: Guderian, **Panzer Leader**, p. 311.

<sup>38</sup> JA English, **A perspective on infantry** (Praeger, New York, 1981), p. 91.

<sup>39</sup> **Ibid**, p. 93.



*Blitzkrieg* doctrine. The targeting and dislocation of the enemy's command system through deep penetrations were however a new doctrinal development in the German Army.

The notion of a *Schwerpunkt*, elsewhere translated into either a "focus of main effort"<sup>40</sup> or a "centre of gravity",<sup>41</sup> is central in the execution of the *Blitzkrieg* doctrine. Its generally accepted definition is the "principle effort or concentration of force aimed at seeking out the weakest point of enemy resistance".<sup>42</sup> The concentration of forces was stressed by the Germans, Guderian, in particular, in order to offset an enemy's numerical superiority in one location.<sup>43</sup> In this sense, Guderian<sup>44</sup> referred to attacking en masse with all available forces at a decisive point in the whole frontline. Strong points were by-passed and avoided, by infiltrating around its flanks, fighting only where there was no other choice.<sup>45</sup>

The *Schwerpunkt* in the German context was not a predetermined focus of the main effort; the focus of the main effort could be changed constantly during the attack in seeking the line of least resistance.<sup>46</sup> According to Guderian,<sup>47</sup> the attack of enemy lines first had to produce a breakthrough, then the armoured forces could start their pursuit by using their mobility and firepower to achieve deep penetration. Momentum was of vital importance for the attack; the quick movement of forces behind enemy positions was greatly emphasised by the Germans.<sup>48</sup> The deployment of Russian forces in depth at Kursk, however, limited operations in depth. The concept of *Schwerpunkt* was not only applied on the tactical level, but also on the operational level. Its use on the operational level was clearly indicated in Operation Barbarossa, where the Germans executed several breakthroughs with pincer movements in the Russian defensive lines with armoured breakthroughs.<sup>49</sup>

After a gap had been punched in an enemy's line of defence, the *Blitzkrieg* doctrine made provision for the clearing up of the breakthrough area through the concept *Aufrollen*.<sup>50</sup> *Aufrollen* was aimed at securing the flanks of units at the breakthrough areas and behind the front. It dislocated enemy communications and disorganised

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<sup>40</sup> British understanding and translation of *Schwerpunkt*.

<sup>41</sup> US understanding and translation of *Schwerpunkt*.

<sup>42</sup> **Ibid.**

<sup>43</sup> Simpkin, *Race to the Swift...*, p. 19.

<sup>44</sup> H Guderian, *Achtung-Panzer! The development of armoured forces. Their tactics and operational potential*, translated by C Duffy, (Arms and armour, London, 1992), p. 190.

<sup>45</sup> JF Deighton, *Blitzkrieg: From the rise of Hitler to the fall of Dunkirk*, (Jonathan Cape, London, 1979), p. 185.

<sup>46</sup> English, p. 93.

<sup>47</sup> Simpkin, *Race to the Swift...*, p 19.

<sup>48</sup> Deighton, p. 181.

<sup>49</sup> MJ Lyons, *World War II, A short history* (Prentice Hall, New Jersey), p. 118.

<sup>50</sup> English, p. 95.

its rear areas with attacks parallel to the front and sideward. To make this possible, German tactics were characterised by a series of minor actions with attacking teams that functioned independently and decentralised. These tactics were called *Flachen und Luckentaktik* or *tactics of the space and gap*.

*Kesselslacht* was another important German concept, which means striving constantly for a decision on an enemy's flanks or rear.<sup>51</sup> The *Kesselslacht* engagements in essence meant making breakthroughs for infantry formations by neutralising strong-points such as artillery and anti-tank positions from the rear or flanks. Tank formations played an important role in the *Kesselslacht* role against French 105mm artillery, by passing their flanks and attacking them from the rear.<sup>52</sup>

*Auftragstaktik* was the way the Germans decentralised command and made the exploitation of tactical opportunity possible for small and large formations<sup>53</sup>. This concept, translated into English as mission tactics, made it the responsibility of German leaders and troops to do whatever the situation required within the context of the next higher commander's intention. Inactivity and indecision was considered worse than wrong choices. *Auftragstaktik*, the use of own initiative on the lowest possible levels in the German Army, was characteristic of the *Blitzkrieg* doctrine and although it created room for exploiting tactical opportunities on the battlefield, it also created competition<sup>54</sup> between German commanders for favour. Needless to say that such competition eroded the coherence of the German military command structure.

The central theme of German tactical excellence was limited to "fighting power", or *Kampfkraft* and was reflected in their training priorities as well.<sup>55</sup> The *Blitzkrieg* doctrine stressed mobility and speed as being more important than firepower.<sup>56</sup> It did however stress concentration of firepower by dive bombers, tanks, anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons. Air power was used offensively and defensively in support of armour operations.

Although the Germans realised the importance of operating on the scale of the operational level (as Barbarossa and Citadel indicated), they failed to conduct successful operations on this level in Russia. The above concepts of *Blitzkrieg* were merely the application of old German military principles to modern weapon

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<sup>51</sup> **Ibid**, p. 94.

<sup>52</sup> Jones, p. 525.

<sup>53</sup> English, p. 94.

<sup>54</sup> Geyer, p. 583.

<sup>55</sup> Naveh, p. 111.

<sup>56</sup> Geyer, p. 585.

systems.<sup>57</sup> The application of these concepts were aimed at attaining eruption or a break out, to create the flanking movements that could establish a decisive battle. These concepts only described tactical patterns of how to achieve breakthroughs to pave the way for exploitation on the enemy's rear. It did not have a theory or logical way of describing how these tactical concepts had to be used on the operational level, or how operations in an enemy's rear had to produce victory. *Blitzkrieg* became a mechanistic way of conducting operations. *Blitzkrieg* tactical patterns of attack were therefore predictable to the Russians by the time of the Battle of Kursk.<sup>58</sup>

#### 4. THE CLASH OF DOCTRINES: DEEP OPERATIONS AND *BLITZKRIEG*

The success of *Blitzkrieg* in the early stages of the Second World War can be explained on the basis of German tactical excellence, experience and use of surprise on the one hand, and the poor performance, or as Miksche argues it, 'tactical inferiority'<sup>59</sup> of their opponents on the other.<sup>60</sup> The *Blitzkrieg* doctrine started to show its cracks since the launch of Operation Barbarossa, because despite the tactical successes of the operation, it did not result in strategic successes<sup>61</sup>. At Kursk, Manstein made some tactical breakthroughs in the south, but they could not be exploited to operational breakthroughs.<sup>62</sup> The mere sum of battles could not ensure success in any of these operations. According to Thompson,<sup>63</sup> *Blitzkrieg* failed when confronted with the following scenarios or a combination thereof:

- a. When the enemy had defensive positions in depth ;
- b. where terrain presented difficulty;
- c. if ground forces had to operate without local air superiority;
- d. during slow rates of penetration, which allowed the enemy to strengthen his position with reserves.

These factors that Thompson identified were not the sole reasons for *Blitzkrieg*'s operational failure. They do however indicate the weaknesses of *Blitzkrieg* when it had to face an enemy that started to counter the *Blitzkrieg* offensive systematically by planning on the operational level. *Blitzkrieg* did not fail because of the Soviets' industrial capacity. It also failed because the Germans had to contend with Soviet

<sup>57</sup> English, p. 96.

<sup>58</sup> Guderian, **Panzer leader**, p 311.

<sup>59</sup> Naveh, p. 111.

<sup>60</sup> **Ibid**, p. 105.

<sup>61</sup> Geyer, p. 591.

<sup>62</sup> R Brett-Smith, **Hitler's generals** (Osprey, London, 1976), p. 228.

<sup>63</sup> KP Thompson, "Blitzkrieg and the operational level of war", **Armor**, Vol CVII, No. 4, July-August 1998, p. 55.

planners that kept their military system functioning while being actively engaged with German forces and in the end still launched counter-offensives.<sup>64</sup>

Although *Blitzkrieg* was executed with tactical excellence, it lacked the basis of an operational theory that could be applied in both offensive and defensive operations.<sup>65</sup> *Blitzkrieg* was successful on the tactical level, though in *Barbarossa* it failed in translating tactical success into operational victory. *Barbarossa* was a clear indication that *Blitzkrieg* lacked a coherent theory that could relate tactical excellence in an orchestrated way to the accomplishment of success on the operational level of war. The Germans made little effort to conceptualise *Blitzkrieg* into a coherent operational theory. *Blitzkrieg* consequently lacked theoretical definition and was never accepted as an operational theory by the *Wehrmacht*.<sup>66</sup>

The *Wehrmacht* never wrote an operational manual for the *Blitzkrieg* doctrine. Indeed, not even after two great victories with the *Blitzkrieg* doctrine was an attempt made in this regard.<sup>67</sup> It is therefore understandable why, according to Vigor,<sup>68</sup> not all the German generals necessarily understood the theoretical underpinnings of *Blitzkrieg* as a holistic military doctrine. He also went so far as to speculate that not all the generals of the German Army had faith in it. The younger generation German officers who promoted *Blitzkrieg* were considered reckless by some of the older senior officers and were criticised for maximising the use of weapons instead of evaluating operations within the context of a coherent strategy.<sup>69</sup>

Tukhachevsky's well-conceptualised operational theory of Deep Operations enabled the Russians to improve their tactical and operational techniques during the Second World War.<sup>70</sup> The conceptual nature of the Deep Operations doctrine served as a theoretical starting point or framework for the development of sound tactics in the execution of the doctrine. The Germans however could not recover from their doctrinal dilemma with the failure of Operation Barbarossa and Citadel, because they had no theoretical foundation in their approach to warfare; therefore they lacked an understanding of warfare on the operational level.<sup>71</sup> The operational concepts of the *Blitzkrieg* doctrine were all born within and developed from tactical actions.

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<sup>64</sup> Geyer, p. 591.

<sup>65</sup> Naveh, p. 111.

<sup>66</sup> H Strachan, **European armies and the conduct of war** (Routledge, London, 1983), p. 163.

<sup>67</sup> Naveh, p. 106.

<sup>68</sup> P Vigor, **Soviet blitzkrieg theory** (Macmillan, London, 1983), p. 24.

<sup>69</sup> Geyer, p. 572.

<sup>70</sup> Simpkin, p. 36.

<sup>71</sup> Naveh, p. 115.

The Russian defences at Kursk neutralised the two primary characteristics of *Blitzkrieg*: surprise and the exploitation of the enemy's linear deployment by means of battles of encirclement.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, even before the war in 1937 the Red Army theorist, Tukhachevsky, had foreseen that a *Blitzkrieg* would only work against:

"...an enemy who doesn't want to and won't fight it out. If the Germans meet an opponent who stands up and fights and takes the offensive himself, that would give a different aspect to things. The struggle would be bitter and protracted . . . In the final resort, all would depend on who had the greater moral fibre and who at the close of operations disposed of operational reserve in depth."<sup>73</sup>

The Russians did stand up and fight at the Battle of Kursk. The Russian doctrine was indeed favoured by the deliberate, set-piece nature of the Battle of Kursk. On the other hand, a higher ratio of force to space which was not typical of the eastern front, made armoured breakthroughs and envelopments virtually impossible and thus worked against the success of the *Blitzkrieg* doctrine at the Battle of Kursk.

According to Liddell Hart,<sup>74</sup> the vastness of space allowed the Russian operational doctrine to play out itself. There was ample room for manoeuvre on the eastern front and the Russian High Command had become skilled in choosing soft spots in the German outstretched front. The room for manoeuvre was further expanded where the Russians combined their equipment superiority at any sector of the front with a concentrated thrust and a breakthrough.

The biggest difference between the *Blitzkrieg* and Deep Operations doctrine was however its conceptual starting points. Deep Operations is in essence a doctrine of 'strategic re-engineering'. Conceptually it starts off within the "deep operations area" - the enemy's operational rear where the success is to be achieved. From that rear area the focus is brought closer to where the tactical breakthrough is to be achieved. The deep operations area determines where the tactical breakthrough ought to take place. The focus is therefore shifted from the operational to the tactical spheres of war. Looking at the Deep Operations doctrine from this perspective, it reflected a top-down approach to war. *Blitzkrieg* on the other hand is a search for a tactical breakthrough, the gap in the surface that can be translated into an operational breakthrough. It starts off on the tactical level and shifts the focus as the action progresses towards the operational depth. Thus, in contrast to the Deep Operations doctrine, *Blitzkrieg* reflected a bottom-up approach towards

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<sup>72</sup> McInnes and Sheffield, p. 70.

<sup>73</sup> J Erickson, **The road to Stalingrad** (Panther Books, London, 1985), p. 17.

<sup>74</sup> Liddell Hart, p. 510.

war, starting on the tactical level and shifting the focus towards the operational level of war.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the paper was to assess the Soviet and German operational doctrines in order to determine whether it had any influence on the final outcome of the Battle of Kursk. In assessing the two doctrines and the role that it played, one has to admit that doctrine does play an important role, although in the case of Kursk it may not have been the primary influence on the outcome.

A successful operational level outcome is a requirement for winning a war. The Russians had a doctrinal understanding on how to plan and use their forces on this level. The outcome of the Battle of Kursk clearly indicated it. The Russian Deep Operations doctrine was well developed and understood by the time of the Battle of Kursk and it made provision for how echelons in tactical battles had to contribute to success at the operational level. The *Blitzkrieg* doctrine on the other hand had strong tactical underpinnings in its theoretical foundation. Although the Germans achieved good results on the tactical level, the *Blitzkrieg* doctrine was limited in scope and the Battle of Kursk exposed many of its shortcomings. It is also true that the Red Army during the Battle of Kursk never allowed the German Army to unfold the *Blitzkrieg* doctrine to its full extent.

Whether the Russian success during the Battle of Kursk resulted from their ability to keep the German *Blitzkrieg* doctrine at bay or whether it resulted from the sound operational foundation of the Deep Operations doctrine, is however not clear. The difference between the two doctrines and the success that was achieved with both of them, once again opened up the debate of whether modern armed forces should base their doctrine on tactical experience or theoretical conceptualisation. The truth is probably somewhere between these two opposing views. The Battle of Kursk is however an example of the latter, where it was proved that doctrine based on theoretical conceptualisation can be successful.