

# Operation bagration essay



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At the Tehran Conference, the first World War II conference amongst the Big Three: the Soviet Union, the United States, and the United Kingdom the final plan to defeat Nazi Germany was agreed upon in unison.

As promised at the Tehran Conference at the end of 1943, as the United States revealed the date for their Western offense, the Red Army began planning a powerful offensive to coincide with it. Operation Bagration, the main summer offensive of 1944 carried out by the Soviets on the Eastern front was to overshadow with the allied landing in Normandy set for the 6th of June 1944. (Axell p. 7) Its goal was to “ recover soviet territory, destroy German forces, liberate other European countries, and conduct strategic operations sequentially rather than simultaneously.

” (Connor p. 5) This research paper intends to discuss the often-overlooked importance of Operation Bagration in the demise of the Wehrmacht during the Second World War. I will concentrate on how Soviet military strategy and deception was able to hinder German forces. Moreover I will analyze the extent to which this military setback and demoralization of the German Wehrmacht aided the success of D-day that same month. I hope to bring to light the far-reaching achievements and contributions of this often forgotten operation, and its significance to the ultimate demise of Hitler’s Nazi Germany.

Taking place during the often-termed third period of the Second World War, the period between January 1944 and May 1945, Operation Bagration took place during the height of Soviet military superiority. At the launch of Bagration in 1944 the Red Army was superior of German forces both in

manpower and production. This allowed the Soviets for the first time since the start of the war to successfully take the initiative against the Germans. Germany had the upper hand between 1941 and 1943, as demonstrated by the Soviet's defeat at the Battle for Moscow, and their subsequent defeat by March 1943 in the Stalingrad campaign. By the end of 1944 however, the Russians had learned from their mistakes, and developed a mature military doctrine.

Furthermore, they also began to reap the benefits afforded them by their two powerful allies the United States and the United Kingdom. The Soviets were able to build up their manpower losses of the winter campaign. By the time of Operation Bagration the 2, 400, 000 men on battle alert for Stalin significantly exceeded the 1, 200, 00 men available to the German High Command. (Connor p. 13) The German shortage of manpower would continue to worsen as they lost territories to the Soviets, making their prospects for replacements more difficult.

The Soviets were also faring better than the Germans in production, due in part to the reinforcements they received through the Lend-Lease agreement with the United States. The United States greatest contribution to the Red Army was the “ trucks, of four and six wheel drive construction”. These trucks helped tank and mechanized corps by allowing large quantities of infantry to be motorized and therefore able to keep up with the tanks. The trucks also had cross-country mobility, making it easier to get supplies to those units beyond the reach of the railroads. Though German production also increased at this time it could never compete with the high quantity production of the Soviets and its allies.

The quality of certain machinery like tanks and trucks were also superior on the Soviet side, contributing to the Soviets ease in maneuverability. (Glantz and House p. 79- 181)The practice of deep battle, the formation of combined arms armies, and the flexibility afforded Soviet commanders further advantaged the Red Army. The Red Army organized its forces into assault groups made up of combined arms armies and mobile groups.

The assault group “ suitably reinforced and task organized” made the initial attack and tactical breakthrough, while the mobile groups served as the encircling force. Assault groups were organized with infantry, tanks, artillery, and engineer units. Mobile groups were composed of tank armies and/or “ cavalry mechanized groups”. These large Soviet force structures allowed them to penetrate deep into the enemy’s rear, while still fighting their way through the front tactical defenses. The depth of Soviet armies had the ability of overwhelming the German forces and crumbling German defenses.

(Connor p. 31-33) Commanders of the German forces were aware of the Red Army’s Deep Battle tactics but had their hands tied by Hitler’s orders. Hitler responded to the Soviet encirclement of towns by declaring the towns to be “ fortresses that must be defended to the last man. ” (Glantz and House p.

06)Therefore, retreat was not an option, and in towns with weak defense structures such as wooden buildings and no cellars this meant a dead end for German forces. Further, any counterattack by the Germans was also difficult because of Hitler’s no retreat policy, and the great length of their lines of defense. Hitler refused to allow the lines to be shorted. Long lines created over extended fronts, too spread out to allow for much of a counterattack

and easier encirclement. Operation Bagration was more than a numerical and material defeat, it was a strategic defeat: innovative, and mature in its tactics. Beginning in March 1944 the State Defense Committee (GKO) and the Soviet General Staff began considering the most strategic attack option for the summer offensive.

They had four options to choose from. First they could choose to continue south, advancing into southern Poland and the Balkans. This would drive several Axis satellites out of war yet run the risk of over extending the Red Army and leaving large portions of the Soviet Union unredeemed. Secondly, they could attack from the Ukraine northwestward through Poland to the Baltic Sea. Stalin was skeptical about the launch of a single massive thrust through Poland though, as he had learned through previous defeats that the Wehrmacht was still too strong to succumb to a single attack. A third possibility was to concentrate on defeating Finland in the North and completing the reconquest of the Baltic States.

Though it was agreed that it was time to eliminate the Finnish threat to the Leningrad and the Murmansk supply lines, such an attack would only require a fraction of the available resources and any extension of the attack westward into the Baltics would risk a prolonged frontal battle. Even if successful this option offered no strategic gains for the Soviets. An attack on Finland was ultimately embarked on as part of the Karelian operations during the first phase of the summer campaign. The attack on Finland served as a distraction driving German attention further south, away from Soviet preparations.

(Glantz and House p. 195-196) Operation Bagration emerged out of the final option to attack Army Group Center, which was concentrated in the “Belorussian balcony” that jutted eastward north of the Pripiat Marches. The “Belorussian Balcony” was of strategic importance to the Germans. The balcony protected the shortest routes to Germany and secured the Nazi forces’ mainlines of communication along the entire Eastern Front. It was also through Belorussia that military supplies and troops were moved to the front. (Glantz and House p.

195) Once the decision had been made to attack Army Group Center, a conference was summoned in Moscow the 22nd and 23rd of May to formulate the final outline for Bagration. The plan was to begin with two tactical encirclements on the northern and southern flanks of the balcony, and to encircle the cities of Vitebsk, Bobruisk, and Minsk. The commence date was tentatively set for 15-20 June 1944. Axell p. 99-100)

Maneuverability, surprise and initiative were the three conditions that most helped guarantee Soviet success. One of the most important aspects of the planning for Bagration was called maskirovka.

The Soviet emphasis on maskirovka, or operational cover and deception also implied the idea of having a “ positive or active control of the enemy. ” (Connor p. 22) Coordinated and integrated from the top to the bottom of the Red Army’s divisions it intended to take advantage of German stubbornness and predisposition. German commanders were convinced that the Soviet summer offensive would be launched from the south.

So hidden did Stalin hope to keep the location, intention and magnitude of the offensive that he assured the plan for Operation Bagration be only fully revealed to five people besides himself: Zhukov (Deputy Supreme Commander), Vasilevsky (Chief, General Staff), Antonov (Deputy Chief, General Staff), Shtemenko (Deputy Chief of Staff, Operations), and his deputy. (Glantz and House p. 195-196) Another strategic measure taken in keeping with maskirovka was the creation of diversionary, dummy concentrations of troops away from where Soviets intended the main point of attack to be. Between the 5-15th of June, the Soviets were able to convince the Germans by revealing strategic tank and troop formations in decoy areas. Deception was also achieved by having timed offensives such as the Crimea offensive in the south, and the Karelian offensive against the Finland. These timed offenses took German eyes away from Soviet preparations in the center.

The partisan forces in Belorussia tremendously aided maskirovka. They conducted reconnaissance or served as spies for the Soviets. They also led their own attacks on the Germans. Partisans organized themselves and were able to attack headquarters, to cut off railways helping to delaying Germans communication, resupply shipments... etc.

These offenses along with other precautions such as the use of wire or couriers as the primary means of communication and the limited use of radios were able time and time again to keep the location, strength, timing, and objective of Operation Bagration a surprise. (Connor p. 25-27) The Germans were not completely unaware of the looming summer offensive, especially among the corps level and below. Some form of attack was

anticipated but went ignored for the most part by higher headquarters, which thought the claims to be exaggerated. The German intelligence officers were aware of the forward- deployed Soviet infantry and artillery, but knew little of the strategic and operational forces located in the rear. They underestimated the strength of the enemy divisions and mobile forces facing them.

The Germans often came close to uncovering the locations of Soviet forces yet failed to account for their total strength, and numbers. The German higher headquarters chose to believe what they thought was true: that the Russians would concentrate their main forces on the Southern sector of the front. The Russians, taking advantage of the German's predisposition, tricked them by placing dummy field guns and tanks strategically in the south.

(Axel, p. 100-101) On the night of the 19-20 June, the partisans launched a wave of attacks against the railroad junctions, bridges, and other key transportation points making German retreat, resupply and lateral troop movements impossible. It was under these conditions that the Soviets decided to attack, beginning on the night of the 21-22 June with a massive bombing of the German rear areas.

It is speculated that it may not have been until three days in, that the Higher German Headquarters fully recognized the offensive threat of Bagration.

(Glantz and House p. 203) The Red Army began their series of attacks in the north and moved south. They followed the massive artillery and air barrage of the 22nd of June with their new penetration tactics.



On 3 June, the 1st Belorussian Front opened its offensive on Bobruisk. With their armies breaching the enemy's defenses the tank corps aimed to cut the road west of Bobruisk and encircle the enemy along the Beresina south of Bobruisk. Simultaneously armies in the 1st Baltic Front secured bridgeheads over the Dvina and expanded the breakthrough. In the 2nd Belorussian front, an attack on Mogilev was underway. By the 26th of June the Red Army had the first encirclement of Vitebsk closed, and mobile groups were racing for the Beresina River and Borisov. These movements strategically led to the interception and halting of communication between Orsha and Minsk.

Only after this occurrence did the first German reinforcements arrive for Army Group Center. As of the 28th of June Mogilev and Bobruisk had been encircled, opening up more opportunities for the Red Army to pursue. The Red Army decided on a " wide encirclement of Minsk, with strong mobile formations holding the shoulders and gaps northwest of Molodechno and southwest at Baranovichi". (Glantz and House p. 208-210) On the 2nd of July only a handful of under strength German regiments were in and around Minsk, the Germans had lost nearly 200, 000 men killed or taken prisoners, and four eastern fortresses had fallen: Vitebsk, Orsha, Mogilev, and Bobruisk.

The capture of Minsk exemplified the use of Soviet forward detachments and tank corps exploiting the break through. (Connor p. 57-60) The city was simultaneously seized by mechanized forces and encircled by rifle units in one morning. With out a pause in the exploitation, tank corps arrived from the south completing the occupation of the town, followed by the rifle units of the 3rd and 31st Army.

Throughout this Soviet domination, German commanders repeatedly pleaded to be allowed to pull back or withdrawal. (Parker p. 177) Hitler refused to listen to his commanders, actually issuing yet another order on 27th June, Operation Order No. 8, ordering the reconstruction of a front with troops that were already surrounded. Operation Bagration had finally slowed by the end of the month, feeling worn down after three weeks of non-stop fighting.

Between 22 June and 4 July Bagration had succeeded in greatly damaging the forces of Army Group Center and the German moral. Hitler's losses at the end the operation can be estimated to 2, 000 combat aircraft, two Army Groups-Centre and Northern Ukraine, 2 dozen divisions destroyed, and up to a 70 % of the manpower of other divisions. (Axell p. 103) The Soviet summer offensive was not over yet, unfortunately so for the Germans. Capitalizing on the Belorussian success, Stavka ordered on 28 June the general advance of all four fronts- 1st Baltic and the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Belorussian. The four fronts were joined on 13 July by Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front south of the Pripiat Marshes to commence the L'vov Sandomierz offensive.

Stavka, in accordance with earlier plans ordered Konev to destroy elements of Army Group North Ukraine and in the L'vov and Rava-Russkaia regions. The objective of the offensive was for Marshal Konev's 1st Ukrainian Front to occupy L'viv and clear the German troops from Ukraine and then capture a series of bridgeheads on the Vistula River. (Glantz and House p. 210-215) The Lublin-Brest region was used, on 9-10 July to draw German attention away from Soviet offensive preparations for the Lvov-Sandomierz Offensive. After the success of that offensive, clearly visible in the first days, Konstantin Rokossovsky's started a serious push westwards in the Lublin-Brest area.

During the offensive bringing the 1st Belorussian Front closer to the Vistula River, the Polish Home Army staged an insurrection in Warsaw.

The Poles were counting on Soviet support yet wanted to secure their capital independently, as part of the Operation Tempest. Claiming not to have been informed of the insurrection, the Soviets did not aid the Poles until it was too late. Some argue that the Soviets could have taken Warsaw and aided the insurgents, but that they chose not to because this would have required diverting efforts from attempts to secure bridgeheads south and north of Warsaw, involved the Soviets in costly city fighting and gained them less optimal positions for further offensives. Others argue that it was politically advantageous for the Soviets to have the Germans and Poles kill each other off, leaving Warsaw open for the taking.

(Axell p. 103-104) Operation Bagration, in conjunction with the L'vov Sandomierz and Lublin-Brest operations proved to be one of the most effective Soviet offensive of the war, and an overwhelming and devastating military assault for the German forces. Catching the Wehrmacht completely by surprise, with less than half the size of its typical forces defending the central section of the Belorussian Front present, the attack instilled panic on the German forces. Within days the Red Army encircled the cities of Vitebsk, Bobruisk and Minsk. Hitler's no retreat policy and the lack of reinforcements allowed in only a few weeks the Red Army's extension to the Gulf of Riga and the edge of Warsaw.

The success of the Soviet summer offensive set the stage for Soviet superiority over the Eastern Front for the rest of the war and following it.

Another contribution of Bagration often overlooked was its design to take the pressure off the Allies as they opened the Second Front, at the same time.

Because of Bagration, there were fifty German divisions occupied in Belorussia and only nine in Normandy. In the end Operation Bagration most notably succeeded in dramatically turning the tide of war against the Third Reich.