The challenge facing the Soviet Union remained daunting in the spring of 1943. The Germans had been halted at Moscow in 1941 and defeated decisively at Stalingrad in 1942, but the front line remained deep in Soviet territory and the residual combat power of the Wehrmacht forces there promised a long and bitter struggle to free the USSR. Nor did Soviet operations in the first two years of the war bode well for their ability to expel the invaders rapidly. The winter counteroffensive of 1941, considered as a large-scale offensive operation, had been a disaster, although it had achieved its main purpose. It was the failure of another Soviet offensive in early 1942 that had facilitated the German advance across Ukraine. And even as Soviet forces were trapping and then destroying the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad in Operation Uranus, another massive concentration of Red Army units was suffering an embarrassing defeat to the north in Operation Mars. Before the Soviets could confidently expect to drive the Germans out, they would have to learn how to conduct modern large-scale armored offensive operations.

The timing of the Red Army purges in the late 1930s could not have been worse from the standpoint of the development of Soviet military theory and practice. The Red Army had held a commanding lead in developing a framework within which to understand and conduct armored war before that time, and the theory of deep battle and successive operations was light-years ahead of the armored warfare doctrine of any other state in the