

Stalin's Secret Weapon: Is This the Tank That Saved Russia from Hitler?

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A forgotten World War II story--and tank.

Finally recognizing these crushing defects, Soviet factories followed up with the lighter KV-1S, which selectively trimmed armor down to seventy-five millimeters, while fixing the transmission and vision slits. The more reliable vehicle could keep pace at twenty-eight miles per hour.

In the first six months of Operation Barbarossa, the brutal Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, Panzer tanks overran hundreds of miles of Soviet territory and reached the outskirts of Moscow before winter weather and reinforcements from Siberia brought a halt to their advance. In a period when the Red Army seemed on the verge of collapse, a lumbering forty-eight-ton heavy tank that could absorb German tank shells like so many spitballs was one factor that bought it badly needed time.

(This first appeared last year.)

The Red Army was an early practitioner of mechanized warfare, with thousands of light T-26 and BT tanks in its operational units when Germany invaded. It also also developed huge T-28 and T-35 multiturret heavy tanks to punch through enemy

defenses. However, these hulking “land battleships” proved ill conceived: they had great difficulty negotiating rough terrain, and their large hulls were surprisingly poorly armored.

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Therefore, in the late 1930s, designer Josef Kotin rushed into production the simpler, more densely armored Kliment Voroshilov, named after the Soviet defense minister. The early-model KV-1s boasted an extraordinary seventy to ninety millimeters of armor, rendering them impenetrable to the standard thirty-seven- or forty-five-millimeter antitank guns of the day. By contrast, early war German Panzers ranged in armor from ten to thirty-five millimeters and weighed less than half that.

For armament, the KV-1 had a single short-barrel seventy-six-millimeter L11 gun in the turret, as well as 7.62-millimeter machine guns in the hull and turret. There was even a third machine gun in the rear of the turret to fend off ambushing infantry.

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The KV-1 debuted promisingly against the Finnish during the 1939–40 Winter War, with only one lost in action. The Soviets busily iterated, and the 1940-model KV-1s added higher-velocity seventy-six-millimeter F32 guns to that could bust Panzers with ease, and caked on even more armor. The KVs were organized into small sixteen- to twenty-two-vehicle battalions which served alongside T-34 mediums tanks in mixed brigades. The T-34 was cheaper and faster, had similar armament, and was also quite tough—but still not as tough as the KV-1.

The Soviets also produced over three hundred KV-2 tanks, which had a huge boxy turret mounting a massive 152-millimeter howitzer for swatting concrete bunkers. Though its shells could annihilate anything they hit, the fifty-seven-ton KV-2 was so unstable it couldn't fire when on uneven terrain or while moving, and it did not reenter production after nearly all were lost in 1941.

Roadblock at Raseiniai

The Soviets Union only disposed of 337 KV-1s and 132 KV-2s in the Western military district when the Nazis invaded. German intelligence somehow failed to identify the threat they posed. However, the Wehrmacht should have had an inkling of its heavy tank problem from its experiences in the Battle of France, when Panzers faced heavily-armored Matilda II and [Char B1](#) tanks that their guns could not penetrate. Unfortunately, the Allied heavies lacked the combined arms and logistical support to capitalize on initial battlefield success.

German commanders had also countered with heavy antiaircraft guns or howitzers in direct-fire mode to penetrate heavy armor. This was not ideal for an army on the attack, however, as the artillery had to be towed into position by soft-skinned vehicles

and required minutes of setup time. Deploying them in front of advancing enemy tanks bristling with firepower was a risky business.

The shortcomings of this approach became evident in the Battle of Raseiniai, in the opening days of Operation Barbarossa. On June 23, German tankers in Czech-built 35(t) tanks were startled when KVs of the Second Tank Division rolled straight through their regiment, unperturbed by ricocheting thirty-seven-millimeter shells, to rampage amongst the infantry behind them. The 35(t)s had to wheel around and chase after the Russian heavies, eventually immobilizing some with hits to the tracks and driving off the rest.

However, one of the KVs penetrated far behind German lines before running out of fuel directly in the supply lines of the Sixth Panzer Division on June 24. When a fuel-and-ammunition convoy attempted to pass the seemingly abandoned tank, it opened fire and set twelve of the trucks ablaze. A battery of fifty-millimeter antitank guns began smacking the tank with high-velocity shells, but the Russian behemoth wiped it out with cannon fire.

Then the Germans tried setting up a more powerful eighty-eight-millimeter flak gun seven hundred meters away to destroy the Russian tank, but it too was knocked out before it could land a shell on target.

