

NO STALINGRAD ON THE DNIEPER:
THE KORSUN-SHEVCHENKOVSKY OPERATION
JANUARY TO FEBRUARY 1944

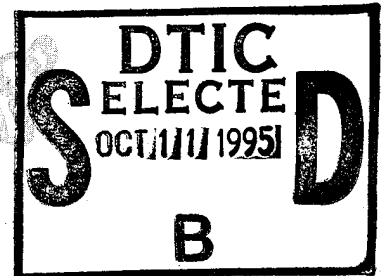
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Command and General Staff College in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

by

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B.S., U. S. Military Academy, West Point, New York, 1980
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Fort Leavenworth, Kansas
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This study investigates the Korsun-Shevchenkowsky Operation of World War II, an attempt by the Red Army to conduct another encirclement on the scale of Stalingrad. Its outcome, and the lessons learned from it, mark this a significant development in the Soviet art of war. Conducted 24 January to 18 February 1944, Korsun bore witness to increasing Soviet operational proficiency alongside the beginnings of German disintegration. Before Korsun, the Germans had been able, with greatest effort, to maintain a coherent front line; after their desperate breakout from the pocket, their entire defensive effort in the East began to crumble. The Soviets assembled two army groups to carry out the operation, which relied on an unusual degree of operational deception, diversionary attacks, and deep operations by two tank armies. The Germans, wanting to avoid a repetition of the Stalingrad disaster, desperately tried to thwart the Soviets, hastily assembling a relief force of eight armored divisions to extricate the encircled forces. Despite Soviet numerical superiority, most of the Germans managed to break out, though losing all of their equipment in the process. It was to be the last successful large-scale relief operation mounted by the Germans on the Eastern Front. Present throughout this operation were elements of Soviet operational design which would become standard elements of nearly every subsequent operation. Although Korsun Operation was far from being perfectly executed, it served as a signpost of the increasing operational capabilities of the Red Army.

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ABSTRACT

NO STALINGRAD ON THE DNIEPER: THE KORSUN-SHEVCHENKOVSKY OPERATION by
MAJ Douglas E. Nash, USA, 159 pages.

This study investigates the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation of World War II, an attempt by the Red Army to conduct another encirclement on the scale of Stalingrad. Its outcome, and the lessons learned from it, mark this as a significant development in the Soviet art of war. Conducted 24 January to 18 February 1944, Korsun bore witness to increasing Soviet operational proficiency alongside the beginnings of German disintegration. Before Korsun, the Germans had been able, with great effort, to maintain a coherent front line; after their desperate breakout from the pocket, the entire German defensive effort in the East began to crumble.

The Soviets assembled two powerful army groups to carry out the operation. The plan's success relied to an unusual degree on operational deception, diversionary attacks, and deep operations by two tank armies operating in concert. The Germans, wanting to avoid a repetition of the Stalingrad disaster, desperately tried to thwart the Soviets, hastily assembling a relief force of eight armored divisions to extricate the encircled forces.

Despite Soviet numerical superiority, operational skill, and tactical flexibility, most of the encircled Germans managed to break out, though losing all of their equipment in the process. It was to be the last successful large-scale relief operation mounted by the Germans on the Eastern Front. Present throughout this operation were elements of Soviet operational design which would become standard elements of nearly every subsequent operation. Although the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation was far from being perfectly executed, it serves as a signpost of the increasing operational capabilities of the Red Army which are still relevant today.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I had never seen, and never again saw, such a vast number of corpses in such a small area. The Germans had made a hopeless attempt to extricate themselves . . . we had not planned a bloodbath.

Zhukov, Battles Hitler Lost¹

The Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation, though touted by the Soviets as a great victory of major proportions, was no Stalingrad on the Dnieper.² Though little known in the West (where it is known as the Battle of Cherkassy,) this operation, carried out by two army groups (or fronts) of Stalin's Red Army from 24 January to 18 February 1944, provides a snapshot of the Soviet Union's evolving ability to carry out complex operations. Designed to eliminate a large German salient along the west bank of the Dnieper river, which posed a threat to the flanks of the two Soviet fronts as well as to the city of Kiev, the operation was only partially successful. Although the Red Army did achieve some of the operation's goals, it failed to totally annihilate the encircled German forces as Stalin's commanders promised.

The Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation was quite significant because it serves as a milestone in the evolution of Soviet operational art. The methods used to carry out the operation by the Red Army were to become standard for the remainder of the war in the East. These methods, which include multi-front operations, the use of tank armies to

conduct deep attacks, and the encirclement of large groupings of German troops, were commonly used during other large scale operations, such as Operation Bagration in June 1944, the Lvov-Sandomir Operation in July 1944, and the Jassy-Kishinev Operation in August 1944.

The Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation embodied many other doctrinal elements which remain standard in the contemporary Russian Army. For example, this operation relied to an unusual degree on operational deception, diversionary attacks, armor used in the deep attack, overwhelming force ratios at selected narrow breakthrough points, and synchronized operations between fronts which capitalized on the strength of all the combat branches—armor, artillery, infantry, signal intelligence, cavalry, and tactical aviation. By the summer of 1944, lessons learned from the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation facilitated the Red Army's attainment of strategic and operational mastery over the German forces in Russia. Prior to January 1944, such operations as Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi had occurred rarely and had produced only varying degrees of success (one example, of course, was the Stalingrad Operation). After Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi, successful execution of these operations became commonplace.

Launched in the middle of winter, the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation initially enjoyed overwhelming material and numerical superiority as well as tactical surprise. An intricate deception plan was used in an attempt to tie down the bulk of German armor so that it could not influence the operation. The Red Army quickly encircled the bulk of two German corps of 58,000 men and tore a hole 100 kilometers wide in Army Group South's main defensive line. Swift German reaction

inflicted considerable punishment upon the encircling forces, a sign that the Red Army had seriously underestimated enemy capabilities, still potent at this stage of the war, especially in the hands of master tacticians. Despite Soviet anticipation of an operational victory of major proportions, a "Stalingrad on the Dnieper" according to Red Army historian John Erickson, the effort fell short of expectations. Most of the encircled Germans escaped. Corresponding force ratios, especially as the Germans fed more panzer divisions into the attempt to relieve the encircled forces, caused the operation to evolve into a brutal slugging match which left both sides exhausted. Despite these obstacles, the Red Army eventually triumphed, though the scale of the victory was considerably less than Stalin announced to the world.

This thesis seeks to demonstrate that the outcome of the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation rested on a combination of circumstances, including the Red Army's underestimation of German capabilities, imperfect execution, and failure of the elaborate deception plan, a key element for overall success. That the Red Army still had lessons to learn was especially evident. Lessons learned and experience gained while fighting Nazi Germany's greatest master of the operational art, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, would serve the Red Army and its commanders well during the successive operations launched during the spring and fall of 1944, when the German Army in the East (the Ostheer) was effectively destroyed as a cohesive fighting force.

The execution of the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation was imperfect. Not only did the Red Army fail to annihilate the encircled German forces (in fact, over 40,000 Germans escaped), but it lost an

opportunity to destroy the entire southern wing of Army Group South, which would have brought about a catastrophic collapse of the German war effort in the East and the possible liberation of Eastern Europe by the summer of 1944. Instead, the Red Army and its commanders had to be content with the temporary removal of two army corps from the German order of battle, while exposing the Red Army to punishing counterattacks which sapped Red Army strength far out of proportion to the gains made. Nevertheless, the Red Army had learned important lessons.

Encirclement operations, especially when conducted on such a vast scale as they were in the Soviet Union, are extremely difficult and complex. The Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation is a case in point, especially since it involved large mechanized organizations operating along multiple axes. Despite the level of complexity, the Red Army during World War II became a master of this sort of operation and its leading practitioner. Following this operation, the Red Army conducted even larger operations, including Operation Bagration in June-July 1944, the Jassy-Kishinev Operation in August 1944, the Vistula-Oder Operation in January 1945, and the Berlin Operation in April 1945. All of these operations involved multiple fronts (army groups) and resulted in the successful encirclement of hundreds of thousands of Germans. Entire armies or army groups disappeared from the German order of battle. Once these encirclements were launched, there was very little the Germans could do to stop them.

The study of encirclement operations remains important for today's military professional. Since the modern Russian Army is the organizational and doctrinal heir of the Red Army, and perhaps one of

the few armies of the world that can still challenge those of the Western alliance, the United States Army needs to understand how Soviet encirclement doctrine developed and how it was executed under actual wartime conditions. Using the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation as a case in point, the reader can profit from an understanding of the planning and execution variables which make up modern encirclement operations.

Within this larger perspective, the intent of this thesis is to shed new light on Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi. Most past accounts suffer from a lack of objectivity. With the exception of the brief account of the operation presented in the U.S. Army official history of World War II, which presented war on the Eastern Front from a predominantly German perspective, existing treatment of the operation for the most part has been either pro-German or pro-Soviet. During the post-1945 period, the Cold War also poisoned the historical record with anti-communist feelings and attitudes. This caused many authors to be unusually critical of the Red Army. Many German accounts lay the blame for defeat either on Hitler or on a combination of Soviet numerical and material superiority, or on weather. German commentators seldom give the Red Army credit for becoming as skilled and professional as they themselves were. Even Field Marshal Erich von Manstein felt that the Battle of Cherkassy, as he called the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation, was a moral victory.³

Many Germans held the belief that they lost the war because they were simply outnumbered, never outfought. Standard German accounts of the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation/Battle of Cherkassy ascribe defeat to the irresistible numerical superiority of the Red Army, the so-called

"Russian Steam Roller." Many German military writers, including Paul Carell and Alex Buchner, cite statistics which show that the Soviets won because they outnumbered the Wehrmacht in certain operations by three-to-one (or greater) ratios. It is difficult to escape the conviction that the Germans were overwhelmed by the sheer mass of their opponents, who consistently pressed the attack despite suffering tremendous casualties which would give any normal (i.e., "Western") army pause.⁴ Never mind the fact that at the beginning of the German war against the Soviet Union, the Germans and their allies actually outnumbered the Red Army in many areas of the front. Meanwhile, over the first three years of the war, attrition exacted its toll on German forces. When the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation reached its climax, overall force ratios in armor had become roughly equal. At one point in the operation, one Soviet commander thought that he was outnumbered, so powerful was the German relief force.

The official Soviet versions of the Great Patriotic War, as the war on the Eastern Front is known as in the former USSR, are also uniformly biased. All depict a glorious victory, which confirmed the infallibility of Stalin, the Marxist-Leninist system, and the Red Army. Such history stemmed in part to the Soviet Union's use of a glorious past to justify the Communist Party's social/economic/political system. This approach to history frequently turns the intellectual pursuit of truth into a mind-numbing exercise in frustration. Nearly all Soviet accounts of these stories suffer from the tendency to inflate the results of battles and operations as well as the numbers of enemy dead, while purposefully avoiding mention of their own losses. These

"official" accounts often clash with the actual reports written after the battle.

The Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation is a case in point. The official accounts, ranging from the The History of the Great Patriotic War to those appearing in the Soviet Military Review, uniformly state that the operation was a complete success in every respect—the Fascists were crushed and the encircled grouping was "liquidated." According to one source, the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation:

was a model example of the encirclement and destruction of a large enemy grouping . . . the high level of the Soviet military art, the talent of Soviet military leaders and the moral superiority of Soviet fighting men were brilliantly displayed in these engagements.⁵

At the time, however, the outcome was not so certain, nor was Soviet performance so stellar. In fact, at certain points in the operation it appeared that the Germans would seize the initiative and destroy the encircling Soviet forces. Although the official Soviet sources are useful in determining Stalin's intentions, Red Army dispositions, and the overall course of the operation, they offer little in the way of illumination for day-to-day decisions, mistakes, lessons learned, and actual conditions on the battlefield. Only a detailed survey of material contained in the Soviet Army's archives will correct this deficiency.

Despite a limited amount of material found in Soviet military professional journals, the researcher must search patiently and diligently to find evidence of fault or analysis in official Soviet accounts. Likewise, the investigator must be wary of post-war German accounts which tend to gloss over defeats or blame everything on Hitler.

If one consults German accounts exclusively, the idea would emerge that the Germans could have won every battle had it not been for Hitler's meddling. This view is overly simplistic and does not adequately explain how the Red Army got to the gates of Berlin in April 1945. It also gives the Red Army little credit for its great achievements as well as its operational and strategic mastery over the Wehrmacht. Many times the Red Army bested the Germans at the tactical level as well. The result of this bias has been to obscure the significance of what actually occurred along the snow-blasted steppes on the west bank of the Ukraine in January and February 1944.

One of the pitfalls inherent in conducting analysis of events which occurred over 50 years ago is a tendency to be carried away by contemporary doctrinal concepts. This is difficult to avoid, especially since the author of this thesis has recently been exposed to intensive instruction on operational art and concepts of operational design at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff Officer Course. From time to time, contemporary concepts creep into the analysis, and, when guarding against anachronistic usage they serve as intellectual touchstones during assessment and writing. Current concepts of operational art can provide fresh insight into the issues discussed in this thesis. In this spirit, the writer seeks to introduce or allude to these issues as they appear throughout. While the Red Army of the 1930s and 1940s did not use today's terms or concepts, its leaders would probably have understood their meaning and would have agreed with the methodology used to conduct the analysis.

The primary method used to carry out this project is to analyze available primary and secondary sources which focus on actions at the operational and tactical levels, as well as other factors which influenced the outcome of the operation. Drawing on these sources, the researcher will combine older, more accepted material with newly-discovered or translated materials which offer different perspectives on the operation. Secondary sources are used to provide background and the overall context in which the operation occurred. But the emphasis is on a balanced account and analysis of the operation; therefore, primary sources which have not been available in the past or have been overlooked are referred to extensively.

This thesis also examines the role that encirclement doctrine played in the outcome of the operation. While the Germans led the world in application of blitzkrieg-style warfare, they were slow to develop doctrine to deal with encirclement of their own forces. Though they learned certain tactical lessons and developed standard operating procedures as a result of previous encirclements, they were increasingly unable to profit from them due to Adolf Hitler's stand-fast decree. Doctrinal development on conducting encirclements or escaping from them began to wither by late 1942 and had ceased altogether by the spring of 1944. In contrast, the Red Army approached encirclement operations from a firm doctrinal base. As the Red Army gained operational experience in carrying out this type of operation, it got increasingly better at them, so much so that most of its major operations carried out from mid-1944 to the war's end had the encirclement as their centerpiece.

In addition to evaluating operational and doctrinal flexibility, this thesis considers other criteria for evaluation. Any such analytical study should also concentrate on factors related to the conduct of large-scale mechanized operations on the Eastern Front during the late Fall of 1943 and Winter of 1944, including weapons systems, organizations, and leadership. A key instrument is the technique of campaign analysis, which highlights the importance of these factors and how they relate to one another. Campaign analysis methodology establishes an intellectual context for assessment of the operation. The method includes establishing the operational goals for each belligerent, an appraisal of doctrines in use, the forces structures of opponents, and a comparison of weapons systems. Campaign analysis establishes the chronology of the operational/tactical action. It also attempts to identify and evaluate in detail decisive operational and tactical actions, to show how decisive events combined to shape the outcome of the operation, and to deduce the implications of the operation for the war aims of the belligerents.⁶

Examples of this method include analysis of the relative level of experience of both German and Soviet forces in the conduct of large-scale encirclement operations, German and Soviet encirclement doctrine, organization of opposing forces, comparison of personnel and equipment, command and control, military intelligence, operational and tactical deception, conduct of joint operations, and the role played by logistics. The study of these and related factors explains why the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation was so significant.

This thesis relies on materials found in major research libraries which are not always readily accessible. For example, microfilmed copies of the German daily operational logbooks (known as Kriegstagebuche), from army group to regimental level, provide an account of the actions as they unfold throughout the operation. These microfilms, available from the U.S. National Archives, provide a catalog of unit status reports, reports from higher headquarters, analysis of military intelligence studies, and occasionally the private thoughts of unit commanders. They are excellent tools for tracking the operation from a German perspective as the action unfolds.

In addition, many unit after-action reports are available in these microfilm groupings. Remarkable for their frank and graphic nature, the reports filed by the units which broke out of the pocket provide the researcher with a rare view into the human element of this battle and highlight the importance of moral factors in the Germans' escape from the Soviet trap. These records, though available for study since the early 1950s, have rarely been used in subsequent accounts and shed new light on the events of over fifty years ago. They constitute perhaps the best available primary source on German actions and are relatively free of the post-war rationalization of many of the available German secondary sources.

Similarly, the detailed wartime Soviet after-action report of the operation, printed in the September-October 1944 edition of Collection of Materials on the Study of War Experience (Sbornik materialov po izucheniiu optya voiny) is a critical, unvarnished account which is often at odds with the official story presented by the former Soviet

Union. Interestingly, the tactical action depicted in this report parallels the German records quite closely. As one compares the Sborniki side by side with the German accounts, dates, places, and unit movements correspond almost exactly. Of course, the perceived outcomes of particular engagements may vary, but this phenomenon is common in tactical reports. This report, only recently retrieved and declassified by a dedicated group of Sovietologists, is but a fraction of the amount of material stored within Russian archives and gives a tantalizing glimpse of how glasnost may yet illuminate the "Great Patriotic War".⁷

Another particularly useful source is a series of art of war symposia held at the U.S. Army War College from 1984-1986. These symposia were conducted for the express purpose of teaching future brigade and division commanders the complexities of the operational art as practiced by the Soviet Union during World War II. The symposium proceedings volume most useful for this thesis is "From the Don to the Dnieper: Soviet Offensive Operations November 1943 to August 1944".⁸ Chaired by then-Lieutenant Colonel David M. Glantz, this particular symposium analyzed the relevant phases of the war in the East in great detail. Most notable was the symposium's use of actual participants in the operations to conduct presentations. Their testimony, coupled with the use of actual German and Soviet records, offered an extraordinary opportunity to analyze the various operations as they unfolded from the perspective of the belligerents. This effort still stands as a milestone in the study of the Russo-German War.

There are numerous postwar accounts of the operation by German participants. In addition to Manstein's account, the most noteworthy

are Tscherkassy by the commander of the ill-fated XXXXVII Panzer Korps, Nikolaus von Vormann, and Leon Degrelle's epic Campaign in Russia, which relates the experiences of the Belgian Waffen-SS legion in the operation. Numerous other German unit histories chronicle events from the fox-hole perspective, including materials from the 1st Panzer Division, the 1st SS Panzer Division "Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler", the 5th SS Panzer Division "Viking", and the 72nd Infantry Division. Although these sources suffer from weaknesses common to this genre (i.e., one-sidedness), they graphically depict the nature of the fighting from the German standpoint.

Reference has also been made to the accounts of the operation given by several of the key Soviet participants, such as those by Marshals G. K. Zhukov, I. S. Konev, and P. M. Rotmistrov. These are noteworthy in that they often contradict each other's version of events, an illustration of the role played by competing personalities. Another useful source is recently declassified documents concerning the operation, which provide translated versions of the actual front operations orders for Korsun-Shevchenkivsky as well as the order issued by the STAVKA (the Soviet Supreme High Command). These sources, coupled with a different perspective which seeks to objectively investigate all aspects of Korsun-Shevchenkivsky, allow the researcher to conduct an analysis of the operation to determine its overall significance.

Numerous secondary sources were used to provide additional background and context for the operation. Most important in this regard are the official U.S. Army history of the war in Russia already mentioned and Paul Carell's sweeping and dramatic work, Scorched Earth.

Touted as Germany's Cornelius Ryan, Carell blends veterans' interviews with official accounts, with emphasis on the human aspect of conflict. Another recent addition to this body of material is Alex Buchner's Ostfront 1944, which deals with the destruction of the Ostheer in 1944. Buchner devotes an entire chapter to the Battle of Cherkassy, providing a wealth of narrative accounts by German survivors of the encirclement.

Former Soviet secondary sources, while numerous, do not give detailed information on the actual day-to-day conduct of the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation. Nearly every official account provides identical descriptions and analyses of the operation, even down to the number of supposed German casualties, but do not report on movements of corps and divisions. Examples of this type of coverage are provided in the Official History of the Great Patriotic War, as already mentioned. In a sense, to read one is to read them all. Far more detailed and less biased are the various Soviet military publications, including the Soviet Military Review and Voyenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal.

This thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter I, the introduction, lays out the scope, framework, methodology, and research materials which support the analysis. Chapter II explains the background of the operation. It describes the events leading up to the encirclement, the factors used for conducting the battle analysis, and the encirclement doctrine then in use by the opposing forces. It also describes how Hitler's stand-fast directive of September 1942 effectively stymied the initiative of his field commanders by requiring that they gain his express permission prior to conducting a withdrawal. This diktat greatly hindered German field commanders' ability to conduct

a mobile defense, the only type of operation that had any hope of success against the growing strength of the Red Army.

Chapter III deals with the Soviet plan for conducting the encirclement and the deception operation. It covers the plan as it was envisioned by STAVKA, how it was to be carried out by the front commanders concerned, and the order of battle for both sides. Chapter III will also describe the ambitious deception plan, whose purpose was to deceive Army Group South as to the time and location of the anticipated operation. This plan, combined with the planned diversionary attacks, was to have allowed the seven armies initially taking part in the operation to rapidly carry out the encirclement and destruction of the German forces in the salient, which the Soviet leadership believed was a powerful force of great operational significance. The destruction of this force, or so the Soviets believed, would cripple any German plans for a counteroffensive and create conditions for further Soviet offensive operations. Although Soviet commanders did not discuss operational plans in terms used today, they probably would have agreed that the assembled German forces in the Kanev salient constituted what is now known as the German "center of gravity." Its destruction would be decisive. The Red Army would also be in the position to repel or destroy the expected German relief attack. For this to work, the deception plan and diversionary attacks had to delay the formation and movement of the relief force. The failure of these plans was to have great consequence for the attacking Soviets.

Chapter IV recounts and analyzes the actual conduct of the operation itself. It describes each phase of the operation as it unfolds, beginning with the initial breakthrough, followed by the encirclement, the relief operation, and the final desperate breakout of the German troops trapped in the pocket. As battles raged back and forth, it seemed at times that the German forces might succeed in encircling a large portion of the Soviet forces. Chapter IV also describes how the last-minute commitment of forces from STAVKA reserve illustrated the growing operational skill and tactical flexibility of the Red Army against the still-formidable Wehrmacht.

Chapter V, the conclusion, reveals why the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation was significant. It summarizes the methodology and criteria for analysis, sums up the results of the operation for both Germany and the Soviet Union, surveys lessons learned, and argues whether there is profit to be gained by encouraging military professionals to study this operation.

A delimitation of this thesis is that its chronological scope is restricted to the period of 12 January 1944 to 3 March 1944, that is, the period of the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation. Although the operation occurred during the course of the 1943-44 Soviet winter offensive, which saw both the liberation of Kiev and the German retreat from the Ukraine, Korsun-Shevchenkovsky occupies a distinct place in the Soviet strategic plan for this phase of the war and can be evaluated separately.

It is significant that both the former Soviet Army and the German Bundeswehr consider the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation still worth

studying. As late as 1984, the operation was cited numerous times in the Soviet military publication Encirclement Operations and Combat as an example of an encirclement operation worthy of emulation.⁹ The topic received similar treatment in a the 1987 edition of the Bundeswehr's professional publication Deutsche Soldatenjahrbuch.¹⁰ In contrast, the United States Army has historically paid little attention to the topic, since there seems little likelihood that its soldiers will be engaged in large-scale encirclement operations anytime in the near future. However, despite the current emphasis on operations other than war (OOTW), the experiences of both belligerents during the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation are still relevant to today's Army. As in World War II, an encirclement is still one of the most destructive and difficult operations for an army to carry out.

Endnotes

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- ²Sergei Sokolov, Battles Hitler Lost (New York: Jove Books, 1988), 91.
- ³Erich von Manstein, Lost Victories (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), 517.
- ⁴James Lucas, War on the Eastern Front (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), 31-33.
- ⁵Combat Studies Institute, Soviet Military History: The Red Army 1918-1945, Vol. I (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, 1984), 333.
- ⁶U.S. Command and General Staff College Text A501, Operational Warfighting (Fort Leavenworth: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994), 3-4.
- ⁷"The Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation, January - February 1944" in Sbornik materialov po izhucheniiu opyta voiny, No. 14 (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo Narodnogo Komissariata Oborony, 1945), 3-16.
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- ⁹Viktor A. Matsulenko, Encirclement Operations and Combat (Moscow: Progress Publishing, 1984), 93-95.
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CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND

The time for grand-style operations in the East is now past.

Adolf Hitler in Barbarossa¹

War Aims and Operational Priorities of the Belligerents

The road to Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi began at Kursk six months before with the failure of Hitler's Operation Zitadelle. It was here during the first two weeks of July 1943 that Nazi Germany's last attempt to regain the strategic initiative with carefully hoarded armored reserves stalled in the face of successive defensive belts and massive Soviet counterattacks during the first two weeks of July 1943. When Hitler called off the attack due to the Allied attack on Sicily combined with the offensive's lack of success, Stalin used this opportunity to launch his own counteroffensive. By 20 July, 1943, six Red Army fronts (a front was the equivalent of a German army group) had joined the attack, forcing the Germans to fall back. The middle of August saw von Manstein's Army Group South in full retreat towards the relative safety of defensive positions along the Dnieper river.

The Germans won the race, though only barely. Skillful handling of the remaining German reserves by von Manstein and his subordinate commanders avoided catastrophe repeatedly; by 30 September,

nearly all German troops had been successfully evacuated across the Dnieper.² Despite overwhelming superiority in tanks, men, guns, and aircraft, the fronts of Marshals Popov, Rokossovsky, Vatutin, Konev, and Malinovsky could not bring the Germans to bay.

The safety of the defensive positions in the so-called "Wotan Line" and "Panther" positions along the Dnieper proved illusory. By the first week of October 1943, the Red Army had established bridgeheads at several points along the river. Despite desperate German counterattacks, these bridgeheads could not be eliminated; they became springboards for future offensives to liberate the entire Ukraine.

Massive offensives from the Lyutezh bridgehead northwest of Kiev in the north, from Zaporozhye in the center, and from Melitopol in the south exploded in mid-October 1943. By the end of November, the German defensive positions along the Dnieper were in shambles and the future survival of Army Group South was in jeopardy (fig. 1). Army Group South's desperate counteroffensive from mid-November to early December 1943 succeeded only in slowing the Red Army's rate of advance.³

Following further Soviet gains in early January 1944 during the Zhitomir-Berdichev and Kirovograd operations, the only portion of the Dnieper positions still held by the Germans was a stretch that ran from Kanev in the north to a few kilometers northwest of Cherkassy, a total of roughly 80 kilometers. The frontline trace in the Ukraine for the Germans and Soviets in mid-January 1944 ran southeast from Rovno in the north, to Zhitomir, Kanev, Korsun, Shpola, Kirovograd, and to Nikopol, where the front line angled southwest towards Kherson on the Black Sea (fig. 2).

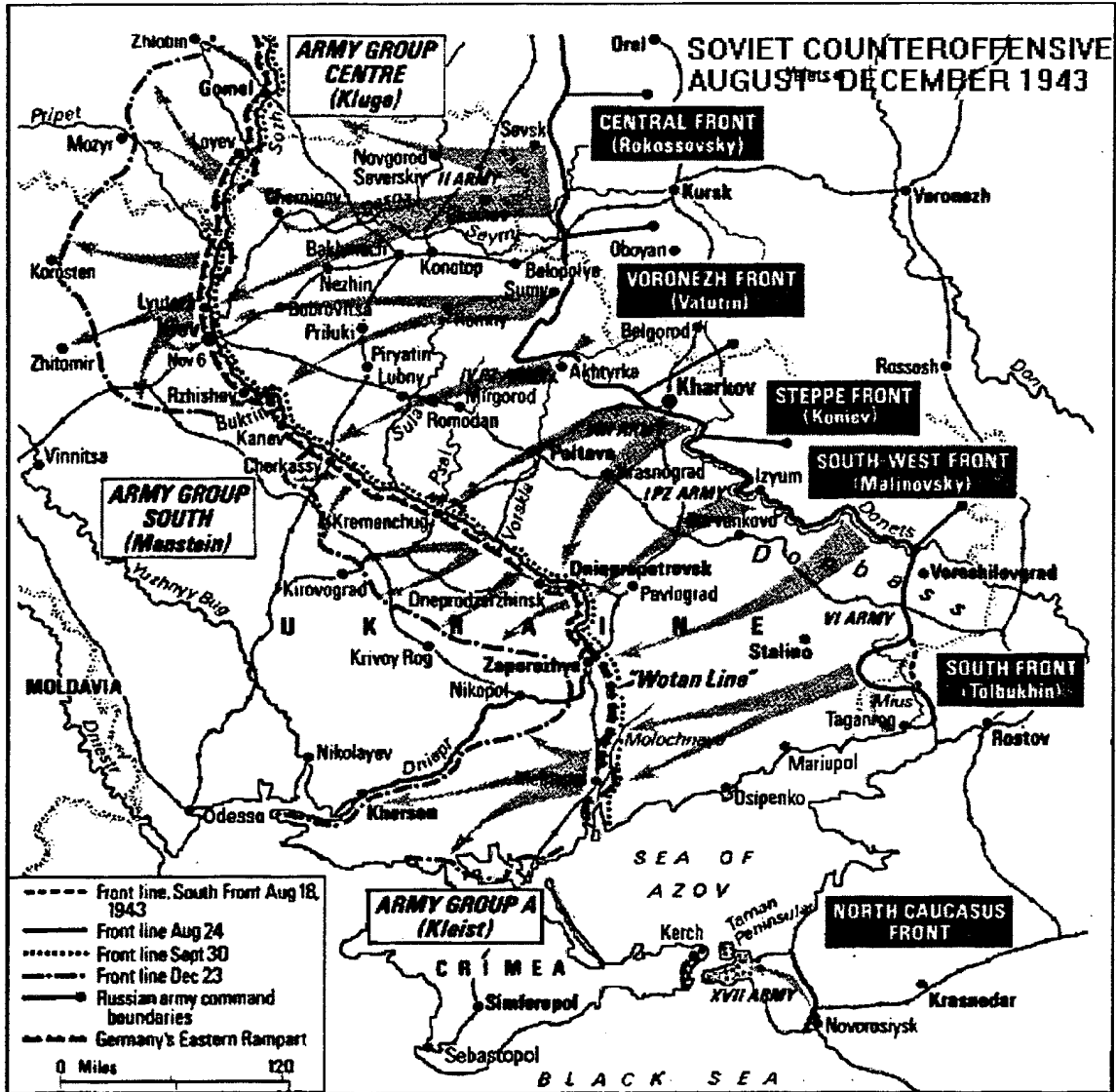


Figure 1. Source: Jukes, G, Kursk: The Clash of Armor, (New York, Ballantine Books, 1968) p. 140.



Figure 2. Adapted from: DA Pamphlet 20-234, Operations of Encircled Forces: German Experiences in Russia, (Washington, D.C.:US Government, 1952) p. vi.

The German Kanev salient which jutted out to the Dnieper was a by-product of constant battles along the length of the Dnieper from October 1943 to January 1944. The salient existed because the Germans simply had not been attacked yet in that particular part of their front. They could not withdraw from this vulnerable salient because of a stand-fast decree, which could only be countermanded by Hitler himself.⁴

However, Hitler, in his role as head of the OKH (Oberkommando der Heeresleitung, or German Army High Command), soon saw that this salient as an opportunity, rather than a risk. Poised as it was along the Dnieper, Hitler believed that the salient would serve as an ideal springboard for a renewed offensive aimed at retaking Kiev and throwing the Red Army back across the river. However, Army Group South did not possess the combat power to accomplish so grand a task. Even von Manstein's strenuous objections to such a plan had no effect. Hitler believed that superior willpower alone was sufficient to achieve his ends. The Kanev salient therefore remained.⁵

Inside the salient were two corps of Army Group South, XI and XXXXII Infantry Corps, with a total effective strength of six divisions. These formations had no standing forces in reserve, since all units were spread rather thinly in order to cover the huge frontage. Complicating matters was the fact that each corps belonged to a different army—XXXXII Corps in the west to the 1st Panzer Army, and XI Corps in the east to the 8th Army.

Moreover, by 12 January 1944 the salient, 125 kilometers wide and 90 kilometers deep, had also attracted the notice of Stalin and Marshal Zhukov as well, who saw it as both a threat between the inner flanks of

the two fronts concerned (the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts) and an opportunity to encircle and destroy the German forces occupying the salient.⁶ Both Hitler's and Stalin's decisions would soon significantly affect the conduct of operations of the entire southern front of the war in the East and the fate of thousands of men.

Evaluation of Forces Involved

By January 1944, the war in Russia had been going on for two and a half years. The Red Army had recovered from its initial defeats and enormous losses and no longer bore much resemblance to the poorly led, unmotivated, disorganized and untrained force it had been in June 1941. It had learned from many of its mistakes, filled the gaps in its ranks, and had begun to match the Germans in quality as well, especially with respect to leadership at the division level and higher.

The 18 November 1942 encirclement and subsequent annihilation of the German 6th Army at Stalingrad in February 1943, as well as the defeat of the long-awaited German counteroffensive at Kursk in July 1943, should have instructed Hitler that the German Wehrmacht was no longer facing the "clay-footed colossus" it had smashed during the summer of 1941. In fact, the Red Army faced by German soldiers in the Dnieper bend was a modern, well-equipped and lethal force that was capable of matching the Germans tank for tank, division for division, and most importantly, commander for commander, especially at the operational level involving armies and fronts.

Soviet Leadership

The Soviet forces designated to conduct the Korsun-Shenchenkovsky Operation were the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts, commanded by Marshals Nikolai Vatutin and Ivan Konev, respectively. Both were extremely capable commanders who had gained significant experience in carrying out large-scale mobile operations against the Germans during the previous year, as both held command positions at Kursk and in the pursuit to the Dnieper River line. Vatutin was known as a rash, excitable officer, yet was bold and daring as well. These qualities Marshal Zhukov, STAVKA's representative for the operation, felt were ideally suited for the commander of mobile forces.⁷

Marshal Konev, on the other hand, was known among Soviet circles as a ambitious, brutal leader who ruthlessly pushed his subordinates to their utmost. Nevertheless, he got results which, in Stalin's eyes, made any personal shortcomings forgivable. Konev was also extremely brave and would often visit front-line fighting positions to see the situation for himself. Another characteristic of Konev was that he preferred meticulous preparation for operations and methodical execution, with particular emphasis on using deception and overwhelming amounts of artillery.⁸

Once Konev set his eyes on an objective, rarely would he be diverted until he had carried his mission through to the utmost. A staunch communist, he had risen from the ranks since serving as a commissar in the Russian Civil War and embodied many of the ideological traits common to Soviet general officers of that time. To the Germans, he was both a feared and respected opponent, though Vatutin was viewed

as being the more unpredictable of the two men. Konev's tenacity and Vatutin's risk-taking would greatly affect the course of the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky operation.

Overall coordination for the operation was provided by Marshal Grigoriy Zhukov, the STAVKA representative for the USSR's southern war effort. Direct command was exercised by Stalin himself, though in practice each of the two front commanders were granted wide latitude in decision-making. In this peculiar command relationship, Zhukov could advise Marshals Vatutin and Konev, as well as pass on orders from STAVKA, but had no direct command authority over either of them. This situation would complicate the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation as it reached its most critical stage.⁹

German Leadership

The soldiers of the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts faced troops of Army Group South, led by one of Germany's most capable commanders, Field Marshall Eric von Manstein. Credited with saving the entire German southern flank by his brilliant campaign in the wake of the disaster at Stalingrad, he had masterfully conducted a fighting withdrawal to the Dnieper after Kursk. Von Manstein had repeatedly frustrated Soviet plans to exploit bridgeheads along the Dnieper River since October 1943.

Von Manstein's launched audacious counterattacks in late November and December with his 4th Panzer Army, which nearly succeeded in eliminating the Red Army's bridgehead near Kiev before his tanks were halted by massive counterattacks by Vatutin's 2nd and 3rd Tank Armies. A bold, innovative commander, he would willingly trade space for time in

order to develop opportunities to deal the Red Army crippling blows.¹⁰ Von Manstein was also one of Germany's few remaining practitioners of operational maneuver. Despite Hitler's admiration for him, von Manstein's outspokenness and frequent disregard of Hitler's stand-fast decree had begun to wear Hitler's patience thin by January 1944.¹¹ However, von Manstein was still in command during the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation (he would finally be relieved 31 March 1944), and his steadfastness in the face of Hitler's obstinacy as well as his willingness to take risks would become a significant factor contributing to the outcome of the operation.

Force Structure of Opponents

For the execution of the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation, STAVKA directed 12 January 1944 that the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts immediately conclude operations in their respective sectors and begin planning for a double envelopment to trap the German forces in the salient.¹² Each Front therefore did not begin the operation at full strength, since both had been continuously engaged against German forces in the Ukraine since mid-November 1943.

Vatutin's 1st Ukrainian Front would commit its 27th and 40th Armies, as well as the newly established 6th Tank Army. His front was established along an east-west axis running from the Dnieper river in the east to the town of Shepetovka in the west. The 6th Tank Army, commanded by General Kravchenko, consisted of two corps—the 5th Tank and 5th Mechanized—which had seen heavy fighting around Kiev during December. In the 6th Tank Army, Vatutin had an organization that hoped

to make up for its lack of numbers by experience and daring. In all, Vatutin's would commit nearly 90,000 men and 210 tanks or assault guns at the beginning of the operation.¹³ It would be assigned the mission of attacking the German salient from the west.

Konev's 2nd Ukrainian Front was by far the larger and more powerful of the two. In addition to the 52nd and 53rd Armies, the 2nd Ukrainian Front would commit the 4th Guards Army and the 5th Guards Tank Army. As a rule, Guards armies were allocated more manpower, more artillery and tanks, and possessed better morale, having proven themselves as fighting organizations during previous campaigns. The 5th Guards Tank Army in particular, commanded by General Pavel Rotmistrov, was an extremely well-led, capable organization, having proven at Kursk during the great tank battle at Prokhorovka, when it had stopped the II SS-Panzer Corps in its tracks.

The 2nd Ukrainian Front occupied positions from Cherkassy in the northwest to Kirovograd in the southeast, where it had attempted during the first two weeks of January, without success, to trap XXXXVII Panzer Corps of the 8th Army. Konev's Front would commit initially over 140,000 men and 323 tanks and assault guns for this operation.¹⁴ Its mission was to attack the German salient from the east.

The various elements of the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts, although flush with victory, had suffered considerably during the past several months. They had thrown the Germans across the Dnieper, carried out many river crossing operations and had liberated Kiev. Because of this, most of Vatutin's and Konev's armies, corps, and divisions were less than full strength. For example, when it was committed to the

Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation, one tank corps of the 1st Tank Army, which entered the battle after operations had already commenced, had only 30 tanks remaining out of 189 authorized.¹⁵

However, shortage of equipment was a minor problem when compared to a far more serious situation which had begun to arise during the pursuit to the Dnieper. By January 1944, the Red Army was extremely short of good quality manpower, a legacy of the tremendous losses suffered during the summer and fall of 1941, when it had lost over three million men killed, captured, or wounded.¹⁶ The shortage of manpower was particularly felt in the infantry, where many divisions were operating at less than half of their authorized strength.¹⁷

By this point of the war, the manpower shortage had grown so acute that advancing Red Army units would encircle entire villages, round up the able-bodied men (ranging in age from thirteen to sixty) and immediately impress them into their ranks.¹⁸ These so-called "booty" Ukrainians swelled depleted Soviet ranks and restored them to some level of their authorized strength. A disadvantage to this ploy, of course, was that these individuals were untrained and untested in battle. Many units of the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts were filled with these men whose lack of experience and training contributed to the desperate breakout of the Germans from the pocket, when their hastily prepared fighting positions were overrun.

On the German side, von Manstein's Army Group South consisted of three field armies—the 4th Panzer Army in the north, 1st Panzer Army in the center, and 8th Army in the south, adjoining Army Group A's 6th Army in the Dnieper Bend. The two armies involved in the encirclement were

the 1st Panzer and 8th Army, commanded by Colonel-General Hans Hube and General of the Infantry Otto Woehler, respectively. Both were experienced commanders and had led their troops well during the grueling withdrawals to the Dnieper the previous autumn.¹⁹

The 1st Panzer Army was the more powerful of the two, having two panzer corps and two infantry corps. The 8th Army was composed of one panzer corps, two infantry corps, and the panzer grenadier division "Grossdeutschland" occupying a corps-sized sector. A panzer corps differed from an infantry corps primarily due to the greater number of armored divisions assigned, amount of artillery, and other combat support troops, as well as the fact that most corps troops were motorized. This provided a panzer corps significantly more mobility than an infantry corps, which relied on horse-drawn transport to a greater degree.

After nearly seven months of continuous combat, both 1st Panzer and 8th Armies were on the verge of exhaustion. The individual corps and divisions of the two armies had suffered severe losses during the retreat and in the counterattacks which von Manstein had attempted to throw the Red Army back across the Dnieper. In the areas which would bear the brunt of the upcoming Soviet attack, the 1st Panzer Army and 8th Army had a total of 130,000 men deployed and approximately 100 combat-ready tanks.²⁰ Thus at the outset, the Red Army enjoyed a two-to-one superiority in men and a five-to-one superiority in tanks in the area of the Kanev salient. The odds for the encircled German divisions would worsen as the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation developed (figure 1).

Many of these divisions were operating at less than 50 percent strength. By the winter of 1943-44, the German Wehrmacht was no longer able to make good its losses. One symptom of this situation was the necessity of resorting to the creation of "corps detachments" (Korpsabteilungen). These organizations, created by the combination of two or three burnt-out divisions of regimental strength, was an attempt to provide corps commanders a unit that at least could carry out division level operations.²¹ One such organization, Korpsabteilung B, was assigned to 1st Panzer Army's XXXXII Corps. Its existence confounded the Red Army's enemy order of battle calculations, as will be seen.

Other divisions found themselves charged with defending wide frontages. For example, the 5th SS-Panzer Division "Wiking" (or Viking) had to defend a frontage along the Dnieper that was over 80 kilometers long.²² Hitler's decision to defend every inch of ground in effect dispersed combat power at a time when it was most badly needed. Worse, units were forced to occupy ground poorly suited for defense when a short withdrawal would have allowed them to make the best use of key terrain. The situation was further complicated by Hitler's refusal to allow von Manstein to evacuate the Kanev salient, despite numerous requests by von Manstein, Hube, and Woehler to OKH in early January to do so. Thus, by mid-January 1944, the 1st Panzer and 8th Armies were overextended, exhausted, and decimated.

Von Manstein had no reserves available to counter any Soviet thrust, unless he decided to denude other areas of the front to free units up for such a purpose. He had been forced to resort repeatedly to

FIGURE 3

CORRELATION OF FORCES

KORSUN-SHEVCHENKOVSKY OPERATION - 24 JANUARY 1944

<u>SOVIET</u>		<u>GERMAN</u>	
<u>1st Ukrainian Front (Vatutin)</u>		<u>1st Panzer Army (Hube)</u>	
27th Army	(28,350)	VII Corps	(25,000)
40th Army	(33,720)	XXXXII Corps*	(30,000)
6th Tank Army	(24,420)	8th Army (Woehler)	
2nd Ukrainian Front (Konev)		XI Corps*	(35,000) 40 Tks
52nd Army	(15,900)	XLVII Pz Corps (50,000)	60 Tks
4th Gds Army	(46,000)	(35,000 engaged)	
53rd Army	(54,000)	<u>TOTAL:</u>	<u>130,000 men, 100 Tks</u>
5th Gds Tk Army	(22,300)		
Other	(20,300)		
<u>TOTAL:</u>	<u>245,000 men, 513 tanks</u>		

FORCE RATIOS: Manpower 2:1, tanks 5:1, artillery 7:1, tactical aviation 4:1

Source: Glantz, D. 1985 Art of War Symposium, "From the Dnieper to the Vistula: Soviet Offensive Operations from November 1943 to August 1944" (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1985), p. 128.

this tactic for the past four months, but his army group could not conduct a static defense indefinitely. Thus, Army Group South was extremely vulnerable to the type of operation which Stalin and his generals were contemplating.

German morale was not as high as it had been. Reverses of the previous Summer and Fall had led to a sense of fatalism in the ranks. Belief in final victory was no longer certain. The so-called Untermenschen (subhumans) of the Soviet Union had turned out to be formidable opponents after all. The individual German soldier had come to fear the Red Army and had developed a great deal of respect for Ivan, their term for the individual Soviet soldier. What German soldiers feared most was becoming encircled and abandoned to their fate, as the 6th Army had been at Stalingrad. This crisis in confidence manifested itself during the Korsun-Shevchenkowsky Operation.²³

That the Red Army was becoming increasingly proficient at mechanized warfare and, in fact, was becoming nearly equal in ability to the Germans was recognized by 1942-43, but seldom mentioned publicly. Even a hard-bitten SS General, Max Simon, wrote admiringly of the Red Army's skill and tenacity, stressing that German toughness and self-sacrifice were not enough to guarantee eventual German victory.²⁴

The quality of the soldiers in the Ostheer was also no longer what it had been on 22 June 1941, when the Wehrmacht had been the world's finest army. The reality was that the German Army, after the first year of the war in Russia, where it suffered 800,000 casualties alone, could no longer make good its enormous losses in manpower. Even the Waffen-SS, Hitler's elite guard, was forced to accept ethnic Germans

from Eastern Europe as well as non-Germans to solve the manpower crisis.²⁵

Weapons Systems of the Belligerents

By 1944, both sides had developed combined arms formations which used some of the most modern weapons systems available. Both had lethal, effective main battle tanks such as the Russian T-34 mounting an 85mm gun and the German Panzer Mark V "Panther," mounting a high velocity 75mm gun. Both were widely recognized at the time as being the best fighting vehicles in the world. The only advantages the Germans had in tank battles against the Red Army was the superior training of their crews, quality of small unit leadership, and the fact that every tank had a radio, facilitating command and control at the platoon and company level.

However, the Germans had to rely on an equal number of older, less modern tanks such as the Panzer Mark IV, which had less armor and poorer maneuverability in comparison to the T-34 and Panther. The Red Army also fielded a variety of tanks, ranging from the newly-introduced Joseph Stalin II with a 122mm cannon to the lend-lease U.S.-made Sherman. The only truly decisive factor when considering armor in the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation was that the Red Army employed nearly five times as many tanks as the Germans did. Even the mighty German Panzer Mark VI Tiger I tank, with its deadly 88mm high-velocity gun and thick armor, could not redress the imbalance.

The story was the same with artillery. Although the Germans self-propelled artillery systems were far superior in quality and

responsiveness to anything the Red Army had, the Soviets had seven to twelve times as many guns. This is due in part to the Red Army's tendency to use artillery in mass as a substitute for the infantry which it had employed previously in the assault role and which it no longer had in abundance. The preferred Red Army tactic by this phase of the war was to fire at preplanned targets and use rolling barrages very similar to methods introduced in World War I.²⁶

Although this method was inefficient, it proved devastating against hasty field fortifications. It was also a simple system to use, requiring no detailed training. During the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation, artillery support was more than adequate, but the high rates of fire required to sustain the offensive could not be supported once the attacking echelons had advanced into the German's operational depth due to the condition of main supply routes. Consequently, the accustomed level of fire support was not as high as it had been in previous operations, which affected the tactical outcome of Korsun-Shevchenkovsky.²⁷

Air power, though employed heavily by the Soviets, was not decisive in the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation. Soviet air support, provided by the 2nd and 5th Air Armies, was poorly integrated into the overall concept of operations and did not support the scheme of maneuver for the two fronts, a sign that the Red Air Force had yet to develop proficiency in air-to-ground cooperation. German air support came from General Seidemann's VIII Air Fleet, which included both tactical aviation and airlift assets. Due to a number of factors, primarily weather and shortage of improved airfields, effective use of close air

support was limited for both antagonists. The Germans did make extensive use of airlift assets in support of the encircled corps. The Red Air Force conducted ground attacks whenever the weather allowed and carried out numerous night attacks with individual aircraft. The effect of these attacks were chiefly psychological, though the threat to the German aerial resupply operation was a constant danger, forcing the Germans at times to cancel air drops.²⁸

The German armored divisions did possess certain numbers of half-tracked armored vehicles for mechanized infantry, but these were relatively scarce. By January 1944, most panzer grenadiers (mechanized infantry) rode in trucks, many of which were of foreign design and lacked all-wheel drive capability. To make up for their near-total lack of half tracks, the Red Army relied on the expedient of placing their mechanized infantry on the back decks of their tanks. Although these units suffered grievous losses during combat owing to their vulnerability to small arms and artillery fire, it did allow the infantry to ride with the tanks into battle. For the most part, however, the infantrymen of both armies went into battle the old-fashioned way—on foot. The Red Army even used mounted cavalry units extensively and one unit, the 5th Guards Cavalry Corps, played a prominent role in the operation.

In regards to overall mobility, the Red Army had an advantage over the Wehrmacht. In 1944, there were few paved roads in European Russia. Most were dirt roads improved with a layer of gravel or log corduroy. During the summer, they were veritable dust bowls; in winter, they often became an endless morass. Both sides used thousands

of impressed civilian laborers, prisoners of war, and penal battalions to improve and maintain these roads.²⁹ Lines of communication were a significant planning factor whenever either side was preparing for an operation.

Not only did the Red Army's wide-tracked tanks have better trafficability in the mud, the Red Army had the additional advantage of possessing thousands of four-wheeled drive Studebaker and Ford 2 1/2-ton trucks, courtesy of the U.S. lend-lease program. These trucks, in comparison to the German two-wheel drive commercial vehicles, were far more rugged and durable, allowing Soviet combat service support units to keep up with mechanized forces even when terrain was unfavorable.³⁰

The Germans also overburdened their already strained logistics system. Another disadvantage suffered by the Germans was their reliance on what the Red Army would call "creature comforts." As did most Western armies of the day, the Germans devoted a great deal of their logistical infrastructure to mail, depots, field kitchens, repair shops, clothing, etc.—what we would call supply classes I, II, IV, VI, and VII today. Hauling this around placed an additional demand on the available transport and tended to clog the roads, with potentially disastrous consequences while conducting a retreat or shifting mobile forces from one threatened sector of the front to another.³¹

The Red Army, which was accustomed to doing without a lot of frills, focused their effort on providing fuel and ammunition. Their soldiers could and did live on the land for extended periods and were exhorted to use captured German food supplies as frequently as possible. Their ability to subsist on a bare minimum of rations amazed the

Germans, who often tied the degree of combat worthiness to the amount of bread their soldiers received in their daily ration.³²

Another expedient used by both sides to overcome transportation difficulties was the utilization of native horse and wagon (or sled) combinations. The so-called panje was used extensively to haul food, fuel, ammunition, wounded and nearly everything else, through roads that would hopelessly mire a truck or even a half-track. By the winter of 1943-44, both sides were using thousands of these small carts pulled by the shaggy little ponies.³³

Both sides used rail as much as possible to carry supplies as well as a means to shift forces from one part of the front to another. The advantages of rail transport, however, were limited. As in World War One, once a train arrived at the front, it had to be unloaded by hand. Mechanized units would have to conduct the remainder of their movement on muddy roads. Supplies proceeded to the units in the field from the railhead in trucks or panje wagons.

One notable characteristic of the Russian campaign was the use by both sides of armored trains as a tactical expedient. Such a train was used during the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation by the 8th Army to make up for the shortage of field artillery. It was not unusual for it to approach to within eight-to-ten kilometers of the front lines to provide badly needed fire support to the beleaguered German XXXXVII Panzer Corps, fighting to the southeast of the encircled forces.³⁴

Encirclement Doctrine

By the winter of 1943-44, both belligerents had gained considerable experience in the conduct of large-scale encirclement operations. The Germans had been the leading practitioners of this form of warfare, demonstrating it repeatedly in Poland, France, and the Balkans from 1939 to 1941. Their armor-led spearheads conducted numerous deep attacks into the operational depths of their opponents, dislocating command and control networks and lines of communications. Once the pincers of the encircling armored forces had met, they would then hand off the mission of reducing the encirclement to the hard-marching infantry corps in their wake.

The Germans used this recipe for success repeatedly against the Red Army during the opening stages of Operation Barbarossa. By September 1941, the Red Army in western European Russia had effectively been destroyed. The Red Army, which had pioneered its own deep battle doctrine in the 1930s which centered on the "expanding torrent" concept which anticipated numerous encirclement operations taking place, now found itself the victim of German encirclements, though it did not abandon its own encirclement concepts. It simply traded space for time until circumstances would be more favorable to launch counteroffensives. Trained and experienced leaders would soon be able to execute these types of operations.

That opportunity came on a grand scale in November 1942, when the Red Army encircled the German 6th Army at Stalingrad. The 6th Army, bogged down in futile street fighting in that city, had entrusted its flank security to Italian, Rumanian, and Hungarian armies. The

overextended Axis flanks collapsed readily in the face of massive Red Army tank attacks. The poorly equipped allied armies were destroyed in rapid succession, exposing the entire German effort in the south to an enormous envelopment operation.

The Red Army encircling force then turned about and began the reduction of the German pocket, while the follow-on second echelon continued to drive the German flanks back. Striking deep into the German operational depths, this echelon of forces nearly reached Rostov-on-Don, almost severing the German Army Group A in the Caucasus and thwarting von Manstein's desperate relief of Stalingrad and his desperate attempt to cobble a front line together in the path of the Soviet onslaught.

The Red Army doctrine then in use and continuously refined since Stalingrad dictated that armored forces were to make the initial encirclement. Once the pincers were closed, these forces were to form the inner ring of encirclement and carry out the task of splitting up and reducing the encirclement. The task of pushing back the enemy flanks and defending against relief attempts fell to the outer ring, which was to be conducted by infantry formations supported by mounted cavalry and tanks. This doctrine relied on a great deal of preparation time, deception, massed fires, flexibility and initiative at all levels of command.³⁵

The doctrine in use during the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation was embodied in the 1944 Field Service Regulations, which had been refined during the Fall and Winter of 1943. It incorporated the lessons learned not only from Stalingrad but from the Battle of Kursk and the

pursuit to the Dnieper. It devoted an entire chapter (Chapter 11—Battle of Encirclement) to the conduct of encirclement operations either as a separate operation or as a component of an operational deep attack.³⁶

The 1944 regulation outlined the reasons for conducting encirclements and how commanders were to carry them out. It described the steps necessary to execute each stage of the operation and emphasized the need for speed, decisiveness, daring, and resolution. The regulation also emphasized the moral aspect as well. Article 292 of the Red Army Field Regulations stated that:

Encirclement and subsequent capture or destruction of enemy troops, with equal or inferior forces, is a matter of honor, valor, and heroism of troops and a display of high skill by the commanders and should be considered as the highest military exploit.

During the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation, Red Army commanders at all levels appeared to have taken this particular adage to heart. Perhaps they placed far too great an emphasis on it, at the expense of greater operational gains, as this thesis will show.

According to the regulation, an encirclement operation consisted of three phases or stages. The first phase was the penetration of the enemy's flanks on either side of the salient. This task was to be conducted primarily by infantry formations, with tanks and artillery support, which would overcome the enemy's tactical defense network.

The second phase was the encirclement itself and would be carried out by mechanized units, preferably corps-sized or larger. Once free of the enemy tactical defenses, they would drive into the enemy's operational depth up to a distance of 100 kilometers. They would then

link up with mobile units coming from the opposite direction, severing the enemy's lines of communication in the process.³⁷

The third phase was the destruction of the encircled enemy forces. Once the encirclement had been effected, the mobile unit would then form an inner ring of encirclement. They would then attack into the flank and rear of the encircled enemy, splitting up his defensive formations and destroying him piecemeal. The cavalry and infantry formations, which had conducted the initial penetration, would take their place on the outer ring of the encirclement. Their mission would be to defend against enemy relief attempts or, if conditions permitted, to continue to push deeper into the enemy's rear. This formula had been tried and tested at Stalingrad.

Article 298 of the regulation emphasized the point that any encirclement operation should be thoroughly planned, with particular emphasis being placed on the need for the coordination of all combat arms, including air power, to the destruction of the encircled grouping and the defeat of relief forces. The need for thorough command and control measures was repeatedly stressed, since the general staff recognized that such operations were characterized by rapid movement and a fluid enemy situation.

However, Red Army doctrine was not as restrictive and unimaginative as many in the West think. It did allow for variation by commanders according to the circumstances. Initiative was encouraged whenever possible (Article 300). There are many examples, in the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation and elsewhere, where commanders varied from doctrine to suit the situation. Inadequate training at lower

levels of command (regiment and lower), due in part to the need to quickly rebuild the Red Army officer corps after the disasters of 1941, was perhaps more to blame for missed opportunities or defeats than the doctrine in use at that time.

Red Army doctrine traced its roots to the development of the theory of deep operations by Marshal Tukhachevsky and various theorists in the early 1930s. These visionaries foresaw the role mechanized forces would play in future operational level deep attacks and even anticipated developments then occurring in Nazi Germany. Distilled in the seminal work Field Regulations of 1936, these concepts were to guide the evolution of the style of operations which still inspires the Russian Army of today.³⁸

One of the first concepts described in the regulations was that the "enemy should be pinned down through the entire depth of his deployment, encircled, and destroyed."³⁹ Follow-on echelons would expand the breach in the enemy's defenses and continue the push into greater operational depth, the so-called "expanding torrent," or conduct an operation jointly with an adjacent corps or army. Subsequent operations would press on into greater depth, disrupting the enemy's entire command and control network, logistics system, and reserves. Thus, encirclement operations have played a prominent role in the development of Soviet operational art since the mid-1930s.

Defensive thinking briefly held prominence. Following the appearance of the 1936 regulations, the 1939 edition placed greater emphasis on conducting mobile defense operations, in view of the threat posed by the growing strength and aggressiveness of Hitler's Germany,

when many Soviet military thinkers realized that their deep battle doctrine did not make sufficient allowances for other types of operations which could be expected to take place on a modern, fluid battlefield.⁴⁰

The Soviet General Staff Academy was the primary vehicle for the inculcation of this doctrine into the minds of future general staff officers. This made up somewhat for the lack of operational instructions or official handbooks on operational art, which were not published until the German invasion of the Soviet Union had already been underway. Most commanders of armies and fronts were graduates of the General Staff Academy and were given the opportunity to put into practice what they had learned.⁴¹ A notable exception was Marshal Zhukov, who perfected his operational style on the basis of combat experience.

The purge of the Red Army by Stalin in 1937 temporarily slowed the development of deep battle doctrine, as well as varying perceptions about the utility of deep attacks during the Spanish Civil War. These developments contributed substantially to the disasters suffered in 1941 and early 1942. However, by the summer of 1942, deep battle was once again in favor, as Stalin began to realize that the only way to defeat the Germans and liberate the conquered regions was to fight them using the blitzkrieg methods they had used. The Stalingrad counteroffensive and ensuing encirclement of the 6th Army was but one sign of the Red Army's return to Tukhachevsky's concepts.

The doctrine of encirclement was further influenced by aspects of Bolshevik thought, which placed great emphasis on the total destruction

of the Communist Party's ideological foes. This concept, understood as a principle of war, was called unichtozhenie, or annihilation. This concept did not necessarily mean physical destruction, but did mean total eradication of any form of opposition.⁴² However, the 1936 Field Regulation formalized this principle into military doctrine with special relevance to conducting encirclement operations. It stated that

Combat actions of the Red Army will be carried out to annihilation. Attainment of decisive victory and complete destruction of the foe is the basic aim in war. Annihilation is the fundamental, basic, and decisive aim of Soviet combat operations.⁴³

The importance of annihilation was continually stressed not only in the military schools system, but was often repeated by unit political officers. Although it is not mentioned in any memoirs by Red Army participants as being uppermost in their minds, the doctrine of annihilation no doubt influenced Red Army officers in their thinking. For soldiers such as Marshal Konev, who began his career in the Red Army as a kommissar during the bitterly fought Russian Civil War, the concept of unichtozhenie probably had great military as well as political significance. This, coupled with the Bolshevik concept of do kontsa, or "to the very end", meaning total and absolute destruction of the enemy, could have influenced Red Army commanders to place undue emphasis on the physical annihilation of encircled foes.⁴⁴ The revenge factor was also an intangible that undoubtedly contributed to the Red Army's desire to completely annihilate its mortal enemy.

Thus, by the time of the Korsun-Shevchenkivsky Operation, the Red Army had a well-developed, practical doctrine for conducting encirclements. Commanders and staffs at division level and higher

trained according to their doctrine and followed it consistently. Their combined arms fronts, armies and corps were experienced, equipped with modern weapons, organized according to their doctrine, and had repeatedly scored successes against a weakened, though still dangerous, opponent.

German Doctrine

As has been mentioned, the German Army led the world in the implementation of the concept of operational deep attack or blitzkrieg. While the Red Army may have developed the major components first, it was Hitler's Wehrmacht that put these ideas into practice. During Operation Barbarossa, the German Army's mechanized forces had encircled and destroyed numerous large Soviet formations. By 1942, however, the tide of the war began to shift, and it was Germany's turn to experience encirclement firsthand.

Setbacks before Moscow during the Red Army's December 1941 counteroffensive had inflicted heavy losses on both the Wehrmacht's troops and equipment. This Red Army operation led to the encirclement of a large grouping of German forces at Demyansk, where 100,000 men of the 16th Army were encircled for nearly six months and in the smaller pocket at Kholm, both of which held out successfully until relieved.⁴⁵ Defensive doctrine for encircled troops had to be improvised, using these two encirclements as examples, since the German's concept of mobile warfare had not foreseen such a situation. After considerable experimentation, methods were developed at Demyansk and elsewhere which

effectively countered the Red Army's first clumsy attempts to trap and destroy German forces.

Central to this developing doctrine was the realization that contact had to be restored immediately from outside the pocket. Failing this, the encircled forces would form an all-round defense and await the anticipated relief attack. Once the encircled units were relieved, the area concerned would be reinforced or evacuated, depending on the situation. It was understood that encircled units could not hold out indefinitely, since aerial resupply could not be expected to provide enough material to allow the units to maintain combat power. Speed was therefore essential. This improvised doctrine was put to use successfully in several operations. Although no formal doctrinal work emerged during the war, the school of experience led many German commanders to follow the same methods or techniques to avoid or escape from encirclements.

The evolution of this ad hoc doctrine is best described in a U.S. Army pamphlet published after World War II. This document, DA Pam 20-234, Operations of Encircled Forces, was written in the late 1940s by a team of captured German officers in an effort to distill their experiences against the Red Army for U.S. Army consumption, in case the need ever arose for the Americans to fight their former ally.

The pamphlet describes the German operations in the Klin, Velikiye Luki, Cherkassy (Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi), and Kamenets-Podolskiy pockets. These operations involve some form of encirclement, relief operations, breakouts, or a combination of all three. Evidently, the lessons learned from the operations were widely disseminated among units

of the Ostheer. The pattern of German techniques and procedures, developed during the winter of 1942-43, were followed with little variation to the end of the war.⁴⁶

Essentially, the German experiences stressed the use of special operating procedures (SOPs) to cope with encirclements. The most important listed were the need for discipline, unity of command, proper communications, and command and control of tactical units. The Germans stressed the necessity for an early breakout decision, special logistical preparations (including the need to arrange aerial resupply), aggressive tactical operations both within and without the pocket, organization of the relief force, and, if necessary, the conduct of a breakout by the encircled forces.⁴⁷ The evidence suggests that the German commanders in the pocket were familiar with these SOPs. One quote, by the commander of XXXXII Corps, General Theo Lieb, mentions that two of his three division commanders leading the breakout had been in similar situations and would know what to expect.⁴⁸

The German Fuehrer, or supreme leader, Adolf Hitler, singlehandedly brought the development of encirclement doctrine to an end. The magnitude of the Red Army's Stalingrad Operation which began 19 November 1942 stunned and caught the Germans completely by surprise. The situation demanded immediate action, or the entire 6th Army would be lost. Nearly every German field commander believed that the army should immediately break out and reestablish contact with other armies on its flanks.

However, Hitler denied von Paulus' request to break out for three reasons. First, he had ordered Army Group Center to hold fast before

Moscow in the face of the December 1941 Soviet counteroffensive. In this rare instance, he was proven correct, since it probably saved the army from disintegrating. Second, he did not believe in giving up ground, especially if it had psychological significance, such as Stalingrad, which bore the Soviet leader's name. Lastly, he believed Hermann Goering's (the head of the German Air Force) assertion that the Luftwaffe could keep the entire 6th Army supplied by air.⁴⁹ This proved to be mere wishful thinking that had disastrous consequences, though the successful resupply of less than half that many men at Demjansk had raised false expectations of what airlift could do. By 2 February 1943, the 6th Army had ceased to exist, having frozen and starved to death, with the remainder shuffling into oblivion in Siberia as prisoners of war. Von Manstein's desperate relief attempt miscarried in December due to von Paulus' reluctance to break out and disobey a Fuehrerbefehl.

From Stalingrad onward, German doctrinal thought and development began to stagnate. Everything was subordinated to Hitler's leadership and superior will, including tactical reality. His contempt for the German general staff, never far below the surface, began to affect his relationship with his field commanders, whom he began to relieve of their commands with increasing frequency.

The situation began to become more pronounced after he dismissed Field Marshal Halder as Chief of the German Army High Command's General Staff in October 1942.⁵⁰ He had already assumed the title as head of the OKH himself since December 1941, when he dismissed Field Marshal von Brauchitsch for his failure at the gates of Moscow. Now Hitler would contrive to force the situation on the battlefield to conform to his

vision. After Stalingrad, German operational art revolved increasingly around Hitler's "stand fast" directive.

Although Hitler considered himself a brilliant strategist and tactician, the evidence suggests that he possessed middling talent as a strategist at best and that his tactical concepts dated back to World War I.⁵¹ In fact, his first "stand fast" directive, which was a tactically sound measure that prevented the rout and destruction of German armies before Moscow during the winter of 1941-42, was fast becoming doctrine by the third winter of the war in Russia.

Essentially, the "stand fast" order, formalized 8 September 1942 as a "Fuehrer Defense Order," recognized the growing numerical superiority of the Red Army and sought to defend and retain as much terrain as possible by emphasizing reliance on static defensive positions. Units were not to abandon positions until they had exhausted all ammunition, in effect dooming them to fighting to the last man or certain encirclement, long after any chance of success. According to one noted authority on the subject:

What Hitler really wanted . . . was a return to the rigid, terrain holding linear defense that the Germans had practiced before the adoption of the Elastic Defense during the winter of 1916-17.⁵²

Hitler's increasing interference in operational and tactical decisions meant that German commanders could ignore the stand fast order at their own peril. Despite the disaster at Stalingrad, where an entire German army was lost because its commander, von Paulus, adhered to Hitler's stand fast policy rather than yield to his conscience, Hitler continued to believe in his military infallibility.

By January 1944, movements of individual divisions from one sector to another on the Eastern Front were tracked personally by Hitler. Commanders who withdrew troops from the front without permission due to overwhelming pressure from the Red Army could expect immediate relief of command or worse. As this thesis will show, the stand fast policy had enormous repercussions for German forces during the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation. At a period in the war when speed, flexibility, and initiative were most needed, German commanders found themselves figuratively bound hand and foot. It took a commander of great personal and moral courage such as von Manstein to stand up to or disobey the Fuehrer, but officers such as he were becoming a dying breed.

Summary

In summation, the belligerents facing off prior to the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation each possessed strengths and weaknesses that would materially affect the outcome. The German forces had a slight technological edge which was being rapidly eroded by similar developments within the Red Army. Although the Wehrmacht had an advantage in the skill, experience and training of its small-unit leaders, this was becoming increasingly irrelevant in the face of superior force ratios of its opponent and the improving skill of its commanders.

Similarly, legendary German tactical initiative and imagination began to give way to the straitjacket restrictions of Adolf Hitler's stand fast policy, forcing them to fight for every inch of ground when a

mobile defense would have far better suited the tactical and operational realities of the third year of the war in Russia. Even a genius such as von Manstein could only delay the inevitable.

Soviet encirclement doctrine, which had been developed in the 1930s and given a successful trial during the Stalingrad Operation, would now be tested in the Ukraine under the guidance of superb leadership in the form of Marshals Zhukov, Konev and Vatutin. In order to insure the elimination of the German Kanev salient, these factors had to be brought together in a well thought-out operational plan.

The plan would have to capitalize on the Red Army's greatest strengths at this stage of the war—its fledging tank armies, artillery, and superior numbers. To tie down German reserves, especially armor, the plan would also have to incorporate deception operations, as well as diversionary attacks. To further confuse the Germans, the operation would have to be launched quickly, since the Germans were accustomed to lengthy Soviet delays between major operations. Shortly after the conclusion of the Kirovograd Operation on 10 January 1944, Stalin ordered Marshal Zhukov, as the designated STAVKA representative for this operation, to draw up a plan to eliminate the Kanev salient in the shortest possible time.

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CHAPTER 3

THE PLAN

It was about this time that we began to hear a new name: Grigory Zhukov. Whenever things were going badly for us, whenever we felt the presence of a powerful and flexible opponent, our commanders gave a knowing smile: Zhukov.

Kern in Dance of Death¹

The Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation would incorporate elements of Soviet operational design which had been tried in various forms in previous operations, but which had not been synchronized to such a degree as this operation would demand. The operational plan would rely for its success on a combination of operational deception, diversionary attacks, and deep attacks by the STAVKA operational reserve—the tank armies of the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts. The Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation would also incorporate the use of massive artillery concentrations on narrow sectors to totally disrupt the German tactical defenses, close air support, echelonment of attacking elements, and military intelligence to determine German capabilities and intentions. The incorporation of all of these elements would require an unprecedented degree of command and control by front and army commanders, as well as initiative at lower levels of command where the fighting would actually take place. Whether the Red Army possessed the capability to carry out such a complex operation remained to be seen.

Origins of the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation

The Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation's origins can be traced to recommendations made to the Soviet Supreme Headquarters (STAVKA) by Marshal Zhukov during the second week of January 1944, immediately following the completion of Zhitomir-Berdichev and Kirovograd operations.² Zhukov and the commanders of the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts, Vatutin and Konev, whose operations had created the German salient, saw the German grouping south of Kanev as a potential threat to their flanks, especially Vatutin's, which extended 250 kilometers west from the Dnieper river.³ The German salient additionally threatened the Red Army's freedom of action, in that its size and depth prevented close cooperation between the two Fronts.

Of more concern to STAVKA was the possibility that the salient could be used to conduct deep attacks into the rear of Vatutin's Front or into the flank of Konev's Front, with the goal of retaking Kiev and Kirovograd, respectively.⁴ The fact that von Manstein's army group did not have the strength to conduct such a large scale operation, despite Hitler's grand designs, seems to have eluded the Soviets. STAVKA's thoughts on the issue were probably influenced by the powerful counterattacks that von Manstein had launched during his Korosten-Zhitomir counterattack in December, where the Germans had inflicted considerable destruction on Vatutin's strung-out armored formations. Perhaps von Manstein could repeat this performance; at any rate, STAVKA was not going to take any chances. Zhukov flew to the Ukraine, where he briefed Vatutin and Konev on the concept of the plan and gained their approval and agreement. Zhukov passed their recommendations to the

STAVKA, where the chief of the General Staff, Marshal Vasilevsky, quickly gained Stalin's approval.⁵

The Soviet field commanders were in agreement. Zhukov quickly concurred with Vatutin's and Konev's assessment of the threat posed to their flanks by the German salient at Kanev. Furthermore, Konev saw what he believed to be far more than an opportunity to straighten out the front line. Based on Soviet intelligence reports, Konev believed that the bulk of the German 8th Army was in the trap that was about to be sprung. Rather than bag a few divisions, the Soviet marshal believed that he could achieve another victory on the scale of Stalingrad and decisively tip the balance in the Ukraine in the U.S.S.R.'s favor.⁶

Konev's beliefs were based on information which indicated, from a variety of sources (including POWs, radio intercepts, etc.), that ten German divisions and a motorized brigade lay within the Kanev salient. Since Soviet military intelligence habitually estimated German units at their full authorized strengths, Konev, as well as Vatutin and Zhukov, believed that there was at least 100,000 Germans in the objective area.⁷

To Konev, this represented, the bulk of the combat power of the 8th Army, which occupied a considerable portion of the area in question. According to one source, Colonel Kvach, a staff officer at STAVKA,

The German 8th Army under General Woehler is in the pocket near Kanev. It comprises no fewer than nine of the best motorized divisions of the Wehrmacht as well as a division of the Waffen SS and the "Wallonia" motorized brigade. Another Stalingrad is in the making.⁸

It was therefore not surprising that the Red Army would soon dedicate so much effort towards this operation. If it were successful, the German

defensive effort in the Ukraine could collapse, bringing the Red Army to the Rumanian border.

There is no evidence to suggest that Zhukov and the Front commanders considered striking deeper into the German defenses. The Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation's plan envisioned shallow penetrations aimed at cutting the salient off at its base. This is puzzling, since Red Army doctrine since 1936 stressed deep battle concepts with particular emphasis on large-scale envelopment operations. Even the 1944 Red Army Field Regulations emphasized striking into the operational depth of the enemy. Yet in this case the Red Army's leaders, with STAVKA's approval, chose not to.

To have been true to established doctrine, the operation should have been targeting towards the linkup of the two Fronts at Uman or Perwomajsk (fig. 4). Both towns were 75 and 100 kilometers further south, respectively, of Zvenigorodka. Both were major rail and supply centers for Army Group South and Army Group A. Either would have been a suitable operational objective for a deep attack by the two Fronts. Their seizure would have jeopardized Manstein's entire right flank and would have encircled or at least threatened the rear of both the German 8th Army and the 6th Army. Subsequent operations launched from Uman or Perwomajsk could have been directed at the port city of Odessa, where supplies for the beleaguered 17th Army in Crimea were shipped. Certainly upon first inspection, this appears to have been a logical and obtainable goal. However, the Red Army's experience with deep operations in the previous two years had been overwhelmingly negative.

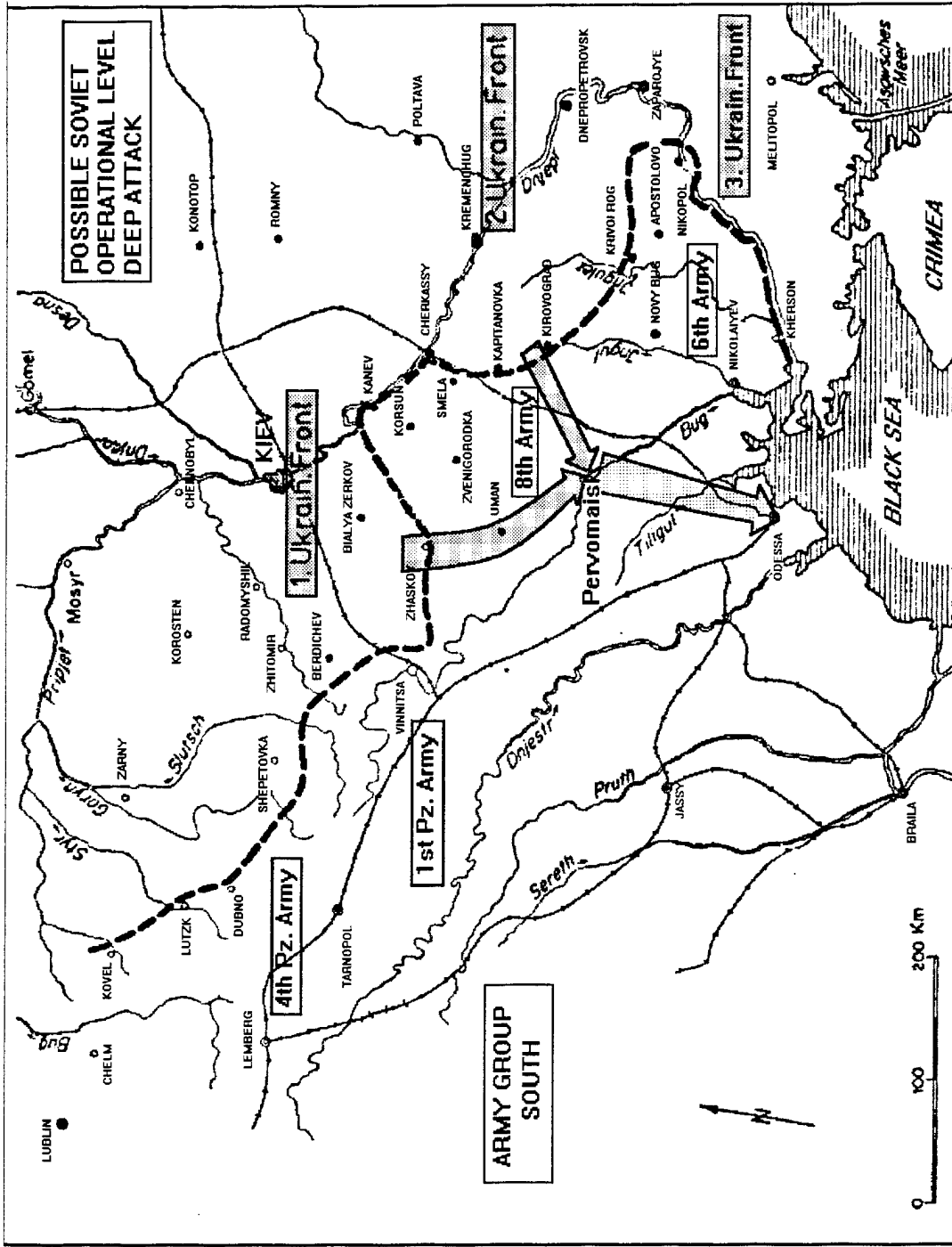


Figure 4. Adapted from: Roehricht, Probleme der Kesselschlacht, (Karlruhe, Germany:Condor Verlag, 1958)

Two unsuccessful deep operations serve as excellent examples. The first was the Spring 1942 counteroffensive near Kharkov. In this operation, the Red Army's Southwest Front, using three armies, attempted to strike deep in order to encircle the German 6th Army near Kharkov. Due to a variety of reasons, most predominantly the poor planning by inexperienced staffs, poor supervision by Marshal Timoshenko, and stiff German resistance, the offensive failed. A determined German counterattack by Army Group Kleist sealed off the Soviet penetration. By 28 May 1942, the Red Army had lost over 240,000 men and 1,200 tanks. Such a massive defeat one month prior to the German 1942 summer offensive contributed substantially to the subsequent Soviet defeats that followed in its wake. The loss of the carefully built up Soviet armor reserve (two tank corps were annihilated) would not be made good until four months later.⁹

Another example of a Red Army deep attack gone awry was the counteroffensive in the wake of the encirclement of the German 6th Army at Stalingrad. Believing that German defenses in the Donets Basin were finished, STAVKA urged the Southwest Front, now under Marshal Vatutin and Voronezh Front under Marshal Golikov, to drive to the Dnieper on 30 January 1943, a distance of over 200 kilometers. Having just rescued Army Group Don from the Caucasus, its commander, Erich von Manstein, was faced with a crisis. Instead of holding ground, von Manstein conducted a classic mobile defense. Drawing the Red Army formations deeper into the German operational depths, he counterattacked 19 February 1943 with hastily assembled reserves. In four weeks of heavy fighting, he not only threw back the Red Army offensive, but cut off and destroyed the

army-sized "Popov" Group.¹⁰ This was reason to instill caution in even a bold commander as Vatutin. After this disaster, few Red Army commanders wanted to risk another similar deep operation.

Another factor which influenced the thinking of the Soviet commanders, besides an aversion to risking another deep attack, was the belief that they would need all available forces to encircle and annihilate the large German grouping trapped in the salient. Any forces diverted to push the Germans further back would not be available to fight the main battle. As the operation was to prove, this would be an accurate assumption. Although committing more reserves from the STAVKA pool could have influenced the outcome of the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation, evidence suggests that these assets were being withheld for subsequent operations. In sum, there is no evidence to suggest that Zhukov even considered penetrating further and cutting off the entire southern wing of Army Group South by pushing to the Black Sea at Odessa, a mere 200 kilometers from Zvenigorodka.¹¹

The Fundamentals of the Operation

On 12 January 1944, STAVKA sent the order to the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts which assigned the tasks of encircling and destroying the German forces in the Kanev salient in the shortest possible time.¹² This order, signed by Stalin himself, stated that in order to accomplish this task, the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts would link up somewhere in the vicinity of the Ukrainian towns of Shpola and Zvenigorodka (fig. 5).

It was envisioned that the destruction of the German forces in the salient would improve the operational position of the Front's

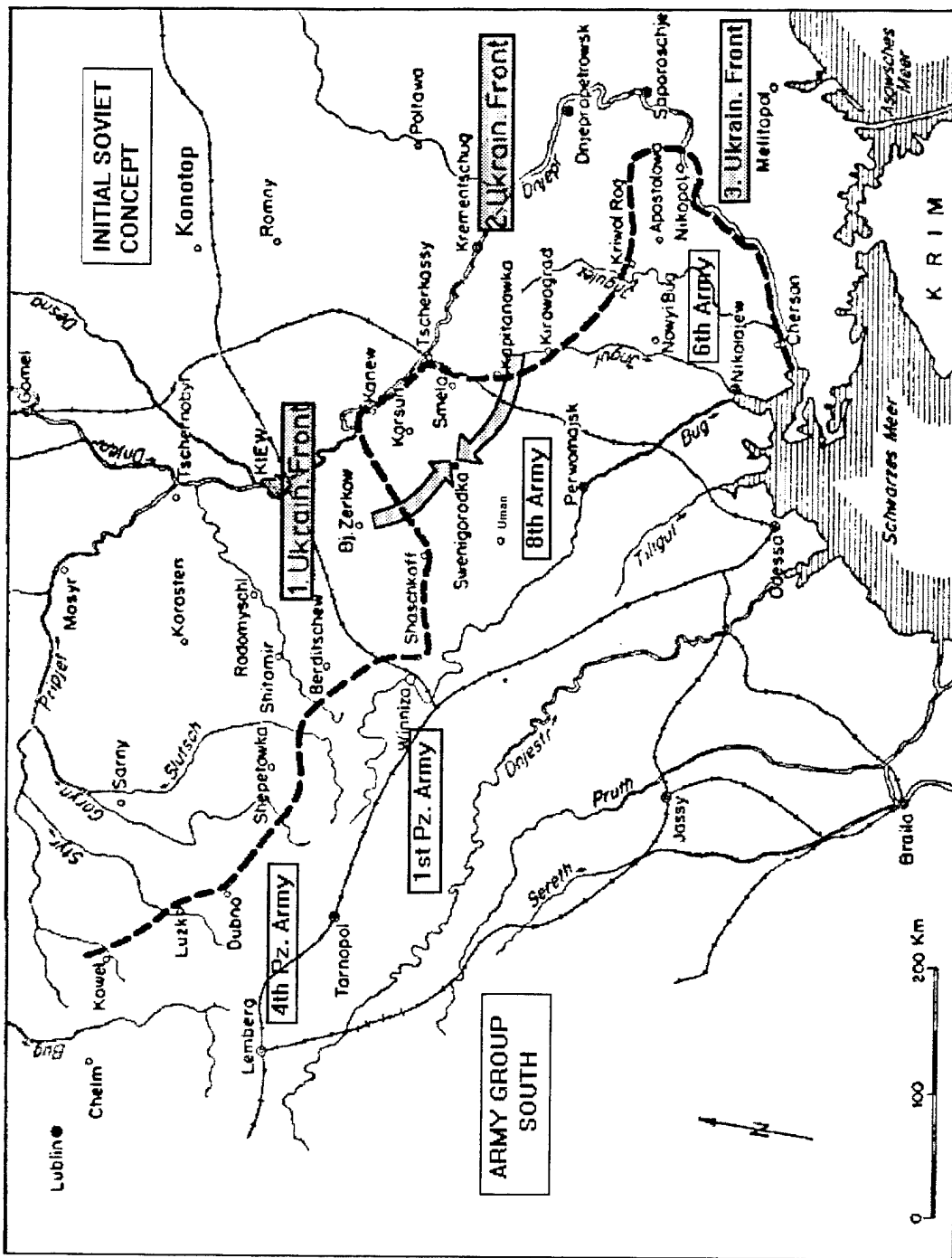


Figure 5. Adapted from: Roehricht, Probleme der esselschlacht, (Karlruhe, Germany: Condor Verlag, 1958)

boundaries, as well as shorten the overall frontage, making more troops available for subsequent operations. It would also remove the threat to Kiev and Kirovograd. Following the completion of this operation, Soviet forces would then have the opportunity to develop an assault force for breaking out of the Ukraine and reaching the southern Bug River.¹³

The plan itself was quite straightforward. The operation would begin with an attack in the east on 24 January by Konev's 2nd Ukrainian Front. Using the 5th Guards Tank Army as his spearhead, Konev planned to pass them through the attacking infantry armies whose mission was to tie down and destroy the German positions in the vicinity of Kapitanovka (fig. 5). Once clear of the German front line, this army would drive to the base of the salient and seize the towns of Shpola and Zvenigoradka, cutting the German lines of communication to the salient. The 5th Guards Tank Army would then link up with the 6th Tank Army from Vatutin's 1st Ukrainian Front attacking from the west near Tinovka.¹⁴ The plan made no mention of striking into the operational depths of the defending Germans. In this respect, it lacked the subsequent deep operations which characterized the Stalingrad Operation of the previous year.

Phases of the Operation

Zhukov passed on STAVKA's insistence that the operation should begin by 24 January 1944, which gave Vatutin and Konev a mere two weeks to prepare. This was quite unusual, since heretofore the Red Army normally required a great deal of planning and preparation time (usually one to two months) before launching an operation of this magnitude.

This preparation time normally allowed the front commanders to train and position units, stockpile ammunition, and conduct detailed rehearsals.

Vatutin and Konev would not have this luxury. In essence, the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi operation would not have sufficient time for commanders to make thorough preparations. According to one source, in many respects this operation fell into the category of an operational-level hasty attack.¹⁵ The fact that this operation took place on the heels of the just-completed Zhitomir-Berdichev and Kirovograd operations meant that the forces of the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts were considerably understrength. Troops were exhausted, losses in infantry and armor had been high, and tanks as well as other systems were in need of maintenance.¹⁶ The Soviets apparently believed that despite these shortcomings, the operation would be concluded quickly.

The operation would unfold in three distinct phases. The first phase involved the penetration of enemy defenses in the tactical zone on the first day. The second phase consisted of the encirclement of the enemy in the course of the next three to four days, followed by the third phase, which involved the liquidation, or unichtozhenie of the surrounded enemy.¹⁷ The belief that this operation would be accomplished so quickly was probably due to the overpowering combat power which would be brought to bear at the points of penetration and to carry out the encirclement itself. The plan also assumed that the Germans would not be able to react quickly enough to influence events should they assemble a relief effort.

Zhukov expected the encirclement phase to take two or three days to complete. The destruction of the encircled forces was expected to

take an additional three or four days as specified by the doctrine laid out in the 1944 Field Service Regulations. In the first instance, Zhukov was to prove correct. The second assumption was to prove wildly optimistic, evidence that the Soviets had greatly underestimated German capabilities. In any case, Zhukov, Vatutin, and Konev wanted to act quickly to take advantage of the German's exposed condition before they realized the danger and withdrew from the salient.¹⁸

As previously mentioned, one possible explanation for the optimism that this was going to be a short and decisive operation was Zhukov's and the Front commanders' confidence that they possessed sufficient combat power to quickly complete the operation.¹⁹ Another reason was that they expected the deception plan and planned diversionary attacks to tie down German mobile reserves to such an extent, that if they were able to free themselves and move to relieve the encircled units, it would be too late.²⁰

As it developed, the attack could not be launched on the date indicated and was postponed to the 25 January. The reason for this last-minute change was due to 2nd Ukrainian Front's 53rd Army's inability to pinpoint the German main line of resistance at the points of penetration. Konev asked for and received permission to use January 24th to conduct a reconnaissance in force to locate the outpost line and identify the German main line of defense. This was successfully completed by the evening. The attack would begin as scheduled the following morning, 25 January, 1944.²¹

Individual Front Missions

In general, the operation consisted of shattering, simultaneous concentric attacks by the 1st Ukrainian Front attacking from the west and the 2nd Ukrainian Front attacking from the east. Strong shock groups from the two adjacent Front's internal flanks would deliver powerful blows to the weakest sector of the German front. The link up point of the encircling forces would be in the vicinity of the town of Zvenigorodka, which would sever the German main supply route to Uman.²² Following the completion of this phase, the Fronts would then create an external ring of encirclement to ward off any relief attacks and an internal ring of encirclement to destroy the encircled German forces and prevent them from breaking out.

The 2nd Ukrainian Front, attacking first, would use the 4th Guards Army and 53rd Army to penetrate the German defenses in the Verbovka-Vasilevka region, a width of 19 kilometers. These adjacent armies would use a total force of 14 infantry divisions to create conditions favorable for the commitment of the Front commander's operational reserve, the 5th Guards Tank Army, from the vicinity of Krasnossilka. After penetrating the German defenses, the tank army was to drive rapidly in the general vicinity of the town of Zvenigorodka, where it would link up with the advancing units of the 1st Ukrainian Front.²³

To achieve the breakthrough, Konev would rely on massive amounts of artillery preparation to flatten the German fighting positions, assembly areas, and wire entanglements located in the breakthrough sectors. From STAVKA reserves, Konev received ten artillery brigades

and eleven mortar regiments, including several regiments of multiple rocket launchers, the dreaded Katyushka.²⁴ Known by the German as Stalinorgel (Stalin's organs), these weapon systems could launch thirty-six 120mm rockets in less than ten seconds. Their impressive firepower, plus that of the tube artillery, gave the attacking armies a density of over 100 barrels per kilometer, or an artillery force ratio of fourteen to one.²⁵

The 5th Guards Tank Army, scheduled to conduct the deep attack after the breakthrough had been achieved, consisted of three tank corps—the 18th, 20th, and 29th. Each corps consisted of two or three tank and mechanized infantry brigades, giving the army a total strength of 197 tanks.²⁶ Although at only 50 percent strength, the tank army still possessed considerable offensive striking capability. Its tank corps were equipped primarily with the T-34/85 medium tank, though the Soviets possessed a number of assault guns as well, such as the SU-85 and SU-100 models.

Once the tank army had reached Zvenogorodka, it would then face south, where it would block anticipated German relief attempts from the Novy-Mirgorod area. The 4th Guards Army and the 52nd Army would follow the tank army and build the inner encirclement ring. They would be aided by the 5th Guards Cossack Cavalry Corps, which would exploit its speed and maneuverability to break up and splinter the German pocket piecemeal, hastening its destruction. The 53rd Army in the south would protect the left flank of the tank army as it advanced and reinforce the outer ring.²⁷ All of the armies scheduled to conduct the operation

received attachments from other armies of the 2nd Ukrainian Front to increase their combat power.²⁸

The 1st Ukrainian Front, attacking one day after Konev's Front on the 26th, would attack using the 40th and 27th Armies from the area of Tinovka. Unlike Konev's Front, which used infantry armies to achieve the penetration, Vatutin would place his operational reserve, the 6th Tank Army, in the front lines, intermingled with units of his infantry armies. Vatutin was forced to do this because his overall combat power was low, due in part to the losses his Front had suffered during the previous two weeks.²⁹ Even as the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation was taking place, his 38th Army and 2nd Tank Army would be heavily engaged in the Vinnitsa region, forcing Vatutin from time to time to direct his attention to his far right flank.³⁰

Despite this distraction, Vatutin would still be able to amass sufficient combat power to achieve favorable force ratios in the breakthrough sector, but not nearly as much as Konev had in his. Once the German defenses had been breached in the Tinovka area, the 6th Tank Army would drive to Zvenigorodka. The tank army's right flank would be guarded by the 40th Army. Both armies would form the outer encircling ring oriented towards the southwest, where a relief attempt was expected from the Uman area. The 27th Army, on the left, would form the internal ring, seeking to push the defenders out of Boguslav and away from the Ross River.³¹ Much would hinge on the ability of the 6th Tank Army to maintain the outer ring of encirclement.

The 6th Tank Army, though impressive on paper, had only been in existence for five days. Organized on 21 January 1944, the army

consisted of only two corps—the 5th Guards Tank Corps and the 5th Mechanized Corps—one corps short of what was authorized. It was not even provided a headquarters staff or support organizations. General Kravchenko, who was commander of the tank corps, was named army commander, and thus was "dual hatted," since he still had to control the 5th Guards Tank Corps. The shortage of infantry was partially made up by the attachment of the 27th Army's 47th Corps, as well as by the forcible impressment of untrained "booty Ukrainians."³² Despite the attachments from STAVKA reserve, the 1st Ukrainian Front could only muster 210 tanks and self-propelled guns. Still, that gave Vatutin a marked advantage over the German defenders.³³

Situation of German Forces

The German forces in the Kanev salient consisted of XI and XXXXII Corps. Each answered to a higher headquarters, a factor which would initially complicate the mission of defending the pocket. XI Corps, commanded by General of the Artillery Wilhelm Stemmerman, was the leftmost corps of General Otto Woehler's 8th Army. XXXXII Corps, temporarily commanded by Lieutenant General Theo Lieb, was the rightmost corps of General Hans Hube's 1st Panzer Army. Stemmerman's XI Corps would bear the brunt of Konev's assault, while Lieb's XXXXII Corps would defend against Vatutin's.³⁴

Both corps had taken up defensive positions in the Kanev salient during the first two weeks of January, in the wake of the Zhitomir-Berdichev and Kirovograd operations. The only part of the Dnieper River still in German hands was the 80-kilometer stretch that had been held

since early October. However, the units of both corps had worked feverishly to prepare their defensive positions against the Red Army offensive they knew would come. The Soviet after-action report described German defenses as being extremely well constructed, with many dugouts, bunkers, artillery firing positions and communications trenches. Key terrain was used effectively, as well as the many small rivers and streams which reinforced the power of the defense.³⁵ The men of XI and XXXXII Corps had been forced to rely on field fortifications as a substitute for manpower.

Both corps were seriously understrength, by an average factor of 50 percent. XI Corps consisted of four divisions—the 57th, 72nd, and 389th Infantry Divisions, and the 5th SS Panzer Grenadier Division Viking, itself reinforced by the SS-Volunteer Brigade "Walloon", consisting of Belgian volunteers.³⁶ Stemmerman's infantry divisions were seriously depleted, though the Viking Division was at nearly full strength. It also possessed 25-30 tanks, thus making it the only division in the corps with any offensive punch. However, that division was arrayed along the Dnieper River defensive line, well away from the Red Army's point of main effort.³⁷

The unit holding that dubious honor was the 389th Infantry Division. Although it was well led and occupied excellent defensive positions, it had fewer than one man for every 15 meters of front. It had no tanks, and except for a few antitank guns, was ill-prepared to defend against a tank army and the 14 infantry divisions arrayed against it.³⁷ On its right was XXXXVII Panzer Corps' 3rd Panzer Division; on its left the 72nd Infantry Division.

Overall, Stemmerman had approximately 35,000 men and 50 tanks and assault guns against the 2nd Ukrainian Front. Konev's attack would slice into the corps boundary on the 389th Infantry Divisions right flank and the 3rd Panzer Division's left flank.³⁹ Stemmerman had no reserves. His only advantage was that Konev's units did not know exactly where the German main line of resistance lay, forcing them to conduct a reconnaissance in force the day prior to the attack.

Facing Vatutin's 1st Ukrainian Front was XXXXII Corps, consisting of three battered divisions. General Theo Lieb, its acting commander, had only 30,000 men and no tanks. In the northern portion of the salient, from Kanev on the Dnieper to the town of Boguslav was Korpsabteilung B. As previously described, this force was composed of the remnants of three shattered infantry divisions—the 112th, 255th, and 323rd—grouped under a corps standard, though employed as a division. The center infantry division, the 88th, was located to the south, facing west.⁴⁰ It would face the brunt of Vatutin's attack, which would roll up its left flank and the right flank of the 198th Infantry Division, which bordered on the neighboring VII Corps. The 88th Infantry Division would face the bulk of two armies.

This melange presented a bounty of information to the Red Army's military intelligence specialists whose job was to construct the German order of battle in the salient. In addition to the forces described above, there were numerous elements from other divisions attached to the two corps in various capacities. These included battalions or regiments from three other divisions, as well as various army troops, such as artillery, engineers, assault gun units, and railway units. Due to a

number of means—prisoners, radio intercept, aerial reconnaissance, etc.—the Red Army was able to paint a fairly complete picture of what lay in the objective area. Its intelligence officers were even able to obtain a German map detailing XXXXII Corps' defensive positions.⁴¹

The intelligence specialists counted 10 divisions in the salient, as well as the Walloon brigade, instead of only six that were there. They labeled each division as being present and in full strength, a common technique which attests to the Red Army's extreme caution when calculating necessary force ratios to launch an operation. Due to this conservative method, the Red Army estimated that the Germans fielded in the salient over 130,000 men, over 1,000 artillery pieces, and 100 tanks, an amount that was nearly twice again as much as what the Germans actually had.⁴² Paradoxically, though the Soviets had overestimated the number of Germans in the salient, they had underestimated their ability to withstand an encirclement as well as German capability to quickly launch a relief effort. This was a clear-cut case of Soviet military intelligence forming an erroneous estimate of the German situation. Nevertheless, to the Soviets, this appeared to be a dense and powerful grouping, which had the capacity to threaten Kiev or Kirovograd and must therefore be eliminated. The truth was quite different.

Despite Hitler's desire to retake Kiev, the forces arrayed in the salient were barely enough to defend it, much less conduct an offensive. Forced to defend a frontage of over 200 kilometers, the two corps were hard-pressed to man a continuous screen line. Gaps between adjacent units were covered by foot patrols during the day. Local reserves of

company or battalion size were used to counterattack breakthroughs and restore the front.⁴³

Adding to these difficulties were the already mentioned shortage of manpower, plus the added shortages of heavy weapons, (especially tanks and self-propelled guns), motor vehicles, fuel, ammunition, and signals equipment. Ukrainian partisans roamed the steppes, attacking both German and Soviet alike. The only bright spot in this otherwise gloomy litany was the fact that the German occupation authorities had stockpiled tons of food at the airfield in the town of Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi. At least if the German Landser had to die, he could do so with a full stomach.⁴⁴

Another problem was that the German defense lacked depth. Such was the reality, that once the Red Army broke through the German defenses, there was nothing to keep them from driving to the Bug River, the Black Sea, or even the Rumanian frontier. The Black Sea port of Odessa, lifeline to the marooned 17th Army in the Crimea, was only 200 kilometers from the 2nd Ukrainian Front's headquarters at Kirovograd. Army Group South possessed few reserves; all available armored or mechanized formations were committed to ongoing defensive operations.⁴⁵

In fact, the Red Army's failure to drive to the Black Sea baffled von Manstein, since he stated that was what he would have done had he been in the Red Army's place. In the event of a major deep attack by the Red Army, there would be little he could do to stop them.⁴⁶ The Red Army's concentration on the annihilation of the troops trapped in the Kessel at the expense of far greater gains would be a source of relief and puzzlement to the hard-pressed Germans.

Terrain and Weather

The terrain of the Kanev-Zvenigorodka-Cherkassy area on the right or west bank of the Dnieper river was hilly, with considerable swampy and forested areas. The terrain was strongly cut with gorges (balkis) and streams which aided the defense. These topographical features created numerous commanding heights, which provided excellent observation and fields of fire for five to ten kilometers when weather permitted.⁴⁷ The rather broken terrain and lack of improved roads posed numerous challenges for the attackers, who would rely on armored and mechanized units to create the encirclement.

In addition to the hilly terrain, numerous small rivers flowed within the region, most of which flowed from the west to the east, to empty into the Dnieper. The most significant of these were the Ross River, in the northern part of the salient, the Olshanka River, at the east of the salient, and the Gnilyo Tikich, which flowed from north to south, before it angled back towards the Dnieper, at the southern boundary of what was to become the German pocket. During the winter, all of these rivers would be sixty to one hundred meters wide, 0.6 to 2 meters deep, and swiftly flowing.⁴⁸ If defended, these rivers would prove major obstacles to offensive action. These rivers would prove to be a double-edged sword. Not only could they slow a Red Army attack if bridges were not seized intact, but could also be used as obstacles to block the anticipated German relief attempt.

The entire area was farmland, dominated by collective farms with wide-open fields where wheat and sunflowers were grown during the summer. Most streams and rivers were bordered by dense shrubbery. The

few forest were normally located on hilltops. Most roads were mere farm tracks which disappeared during the winter when they were covered by snow. The only roadway which could be considered "all weather" were the two rail lines which crisscrossed the area.⁴⁹ The region was also densely populated, presenting a rich bounty of potential recruits to fill the gaps in the ranks of the advancing Red Army. Numerous villages were scattered throughout the entire area, and their inhabitants were constantly utilized to clear or repair roadways by both the Germans and the Red Army.

The roadways deteriorated rapidly in winter due to the weather conditions at this time of year in the Ukraine. It was not uncommon for the region to receive several feet of snow each winter, followed by a rapid thaw which turned the roads into an endless morass, known as the rasputitsa. Temperatures could hover below freezing for months; overnight, a thaw could set in and reduce a frozen yet passable road into a quagmire, severely restricting movement by armor. Only the panje wagon with its sturdy little horses could get through.

What made winter in the Ukraine during the beginning of 1944 so unusual was that the spring thaw would begin nearly two months early, catching both Germans and Soviets by surprise. Still, when the plan was drafted, weather and trafficability was not considered to be a serious problem for the upcoming operation. Weather forecasts predicted that the weather would be clear and temperatures hovering below freezing, with periodic snow storms during late January and early February.⁵⁰

The Deception Plan

In order for the operation to succeed, Army Group South had to be deceived about the time and place of the attack. Von Manstein could not be allowed to have the time or the ability to switch his powerful mobile units from his flanks to relieve his encircled units in the pocket. This was absolutely vital to the Soviet plan, since the Red Army did not have an appreciable number of armored units in STAVKA reserve during this period of the war.⁵¹ If von Manstein was able to quickly move one or more panzer corps to the threatened area, he would be able to inflict wholesale punishment upon Vatutin's and Konev's forces. Despite the heavy fighting that had raged throughout the Ukraine, Army Group South still mustered 18 of the 25 panzer or mechanized divisions then operating on the entire Soviet-German front, an impressive force to be reckoned with, even though most of these divisions mustered barely 50 tanks each.⁵²

To achieve this aim, Konev's Front implemented a massive deception plan designed to prevent German armor from relieving their soon-to-be encircled comrades. It consisted of two components. The first involved the use of diversionary attacks in the area south of Kirovograd. The other would use classic maskirovka procedures to make German military intelligence analysts believe that the 2nd Ukrainian Front's main effort would be elsewhere.

Maskirovka, or operational deception, involves the use of a variety of measures designed to conceal the true location of the Red Army's forces, as well as means to simulate the presence of forces elsewhere, thus misleading the enemy as to the actual location and size

of the attacking forces. Ideally, maskirovka would also lead to gaining complete surprise over the enemy, thus dealing him an important psychological blow.⁵³ To achieve this, Konev's Front created dummy radio nets, false troop concentrations using mannequins and loudspeakers, dummy tanks and artillery firing positions and field fortification. The bulk of these were located to the southwest of Kirovograd, immediately in front of the German 8th Army's XXXXVII Panzer Corps.⁵⁴ To the uninitiated observer, it appeared as if Konev's operational reserve, the 5th Guards Tank Army, was preparing a major attack from Kirovograd towards Uman in the west.

Meanwhile, the real 5th Guards Tank Army was shifted 19-23 January from the Kirovograd area nearly 100 kilometers north to its assembly area for the upcoming attack in the Krasnosilka area.⁵⁵ Movement was conducted at night under stringent radio silence. Units moved into camouflaged assembly areas and remained hidden until the start of the operation.⁵⁶ To prevent German aerial reconnaissance from detecting the move, the Red Air Force carried out aggressive counter-reconnaissance missions throughout Konev's sector.

To further tie down 8th Army's mobile forces, Konev ordered his 7th Guards and 5th Guards Armies (both infantry formations) to carry out feints against German defenses in the Kirovograd region on the 23rd of February.⁵⁷ Konev's intent was that Woehler would commit his available armor, as well as any other units von Manstein might bring up, to this attack, tying them down and denying them the flexibility to react when the real offensive began farther to the north. This, combined with

surprise, was judged by Konev to be sufficient to carry out his part of the operation.⁵⁸ But what about Vatutin's deception plan?

Vatutin's Front, from the sources available, does not seem to have used maskirovka in the design of its operational plan. Apparently, Vatutin did not have as great a need to mount a deception plan, since his forces were still conducting operations near Vinnitsa in contrast to Konev, whose forces had halted 15 January after liberating Kirovograd. Vatutin's 2nd and 3rd Tank Armies were engaged in bitter fighting with the 1st Panzer Army's III and XXXXVI Panzer Corps, over 150 kilometers to the west from where he would initiate his part of the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation. The evidence indicates that Vatutin hoped that the eyes of the 1st Panzer Army would be looking to the west, rather to the east where the main blow would fall against Lieb's and Stemmerman's corps.⁵⁹

Another facet of Vatutin's plan was his creation of a new tank army, the 6th, in an area not expected by the Germans. The appearance of this army would surprise the Germans, since they believed that all available Soviet tank armies of Vatutin's Front were committed far to the west, as well as the bulk of 1st Panzer Army's armor. Vatutin knew that Lieb's corps had no armor to speak of and would be relatively helpless to stop him. Besides, Vatutin's and Konev's Fronts would not be the only ones involved in the deception plan.

To further confound the Germans, STAVKA ordered the 3rd Ukrainian Front to launch a limited offensive in the vicinity of Krivoi Rog. This operation, scheduled to begin the 31st of January, would hit the boundary of the German 8th and 6th Armies in the south. The regroupment

of forces necessary to launch the operation would contribute further to the confusion of German military intelligence.⁶⁰ Thus, the overall plan would make the Germans look to the far south and western portions of their Ukrainian defenses, instead of the center where the encirclement operation would actually take place. But was the deception plan, the use of operational maskirovka, successful?

Effectiveness of the Deception Plan

The deception plan, for all the effort that went into it, was not successful. Ironically, the Germans saw the coming attack from the direction where maskirovka had been most heavily employed in Konev's 2nd Ukrainian Front sector and had begun to shift reserves before the blow fell. Vatutin's attack on the other hand, using his 6th Tank Army in the first echelon of the breakthrough formations, was to prove an almost total surprise. Despite this initial success, Vatutin's units were to suffer the most from the failure of the planned diversionary attacks. What accounted for this less than successful outcome?

Although Army Group South did not know the time and place of the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation, its intelligence analysts had deduced that a large operation against their exposed forces in the Kanev salient would probably take place sooner rather than later. Indeed, von Manstein and his subordinate commanders had requested repeatedly to OKH (and by extension, Hitler) that their forces be withdrawn immediately, but to no avail.⁶¹ They knew from bitter experience that the salient was a lucrative target that the Red Army would not pass up. The question was when would they attack.

This belief was buttressed by a general assessment prepared by Fremde Heer Ost, the German intelligence agency for the Russian Front. On 15 January 1944, it stated that the Red Army's main effort for the remainder of the season would be Army Group South. The Red Army's goal would be pushing towards the Black Sea and the Rumanian border, encircling and destroying German units isolated farther to the east.⁶² On the heels of this assessment was another one performed by the 8th Army on 21 January, four days prior to the beginning of the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation.

This assessment stated that 8th Army should expect a fresh Russian offensive designed to envelop and encircle the troops deployed in the Kanev salient. It went on to predict that the attack would probably be directed in the Zvenigorodka-Uman area, remarkably similar to the actual Soviet intentions. German sources state that although this estimate was correct in general terms, it was not as specific as the commanders required.⁶³ A shortage of signal intelligence capabilities, aerial reconnaissance aircraft, and human intelligence would continue to deny Army Group South the specific details regarding Red Army capabilities and intentions at the operational level. However, at the tactical level, units were making preparations for the coming attack.

At 1930 hours, 20 January 1944, 8th Army signal intelligence discovered the presence of a tank army in the Krasnossilka area. The following day, it was confirmed that this was the 5th Guards Tank Army, which had indeed moved north from the Kirovograd area. Due to inadequately supervised radio listening silence, the movement of

Rotmistrov's Army had been detected anyway.⁶⁴ Radio reconnaissance had also detected signs depicting the installation of dummy tank concentrations west of Kirovograd. The intelligence estimate for the 8th Army that day concluded:

In the Kirovograd region we noticed today a shifting of the main attack north to the area east of Novo-Mirgorod. Therefore, in a resumption of offensive operations here we would expect first of all to see an introduction into operations of strong units for a penetration to Novo-Mirgorod . . . the staff of 5th Guards Tank Army and sapper units are displacing northward . . . mine removal is occurring in the central sector of XXXXVII Panzer Corps and on the internal flanks of the Panzer Corps and XI Corps.⁶⁵

General Hube's 1st Panzer Army intelligence section was also busy. On 23 January 1944, it had detected Soviet offensive preparations on the internal flanks of XXXXII and VII Corps near Tinovka. These took the form of local Red Army attacks to seize favorable jumping-off positions for a large scale attack. Patrols had detected movement of additional elements of the 1st Ukrainian Front into assembly areas close to the front lines.⁶⁶ First Panzer Army's VII Corps also had its hands full eliminating a division-sized Soviet force encircled two weeks previously in its rear area. Whether this buildup was designed to rescue these units or was part of a much larger plan could not be determined. However, deserters from the 5th Guard Tank Corps and 5th Mechanized Corps were picked up the same day. The significance of their presence was apparently missed. The 6th Tank Army remained undetected.

From 21-24 January, both German armies detected increasing Red Army activity indicating further offensive preparations. Tanks were seen moving up in greater numbers, along with the first sightings of multiple rocket launchers, a sure sign of offensive preparations. The

8th Army issued warning orders to its 11th and 14th Panzer Divisions to prepare to displace north to counter any Soviet move to break through from the Kapitanovka area.⁶⁷ The 1st Panzer Army, concerned with its two-corps counterattack east of Vinnitsa, sent only a tank destruction detachment (infantry with bazookas) to VII Corps opposite Tinovka.⁶⁸

XXXXVII Panzer Corps' commander, General von Vormann, did not await the upcoming attack passively. On 24 January, the same day Konev launched his reconnaissance in force a few kilometers to the north, he had his 3rd Panzer Division carry out a spoiling attack in combination with German Luftwaffe reconnaissance aircraft. The tanks of the 3rd Panzer destroyed a large Red Army assembly area west of Krasnossilka.⁶⁹ Without a doubt, the Germans had solid evidence that Konev was preparing to conduct an attack within the next two or three days. Von Vormann ordered his corps on full alert.

To Konev's surprise, when he launched his reconnaissance in force on January 24th, he found the German defenders fully prepared and awaiting the attack. Stemmerman had already begun moving the armored battle group from the 5th SS Viking Division to reinforce the 389th Infantry Division, where the main blow would fall. The two panzer divisions previously placed on alert by General Woehler were already displacing north. A third was pulled out of line west of Kirovograd with orders to move north as soon as possible.⁷⁰ The 8th Army was reacting quickly to meet the offensive they knew was coming with what seemed an adequate countermeasure. The only thing the men of XI Corps and XXXXVII Panzer Corps did not know was how powerful it would be.

As powerful as that attack was, the successful outcome of the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation hinged to a large degree on a deception plan which employed both maskirovka and diversionary attacks. Neither achieved results to the degree intended. Konev's offensive preparations, despite his elaborate deception plan, were detected by the 8th Army five days prior to his Front's attack. General Woehrlinger had begun to move two armored divisions and parts of two others to the threatened area so that they would be present when the operation commenced. Their arrival would have a significant effect on the 2nd Ukrainian Front's timetable.

Vatutin's Front, which relied on ongoing operations to the west to divert the 1st Panzer Army's attention, used little, if any, maskirovka in its operational plan. Due to the employment of the newly-raised 6th Tank Army, the 1st Ukrainian Front surprised the defenders, who had expected small-scale attacks. Both Fronts surprised the Germans with the scale of their assaults, who had thought the Red Army incapable of launching such a large-scale operation so soon after the Zhitomir-Berdichev and Kirovograd Operations.

The diversionary attacks lacked the offensive punch necessary to tie down German armored reserves and confuse the Germans as to the true location of the main attack, especially in the 1st Panzer Army's area. The evidence suggests that Army Group South was not overly concerned by these diversionary attacks, thus enabling von Manstein to rapidly shift units to come to the aid of the encircled forces. Third Ukrainian Front's attacks at Krivoi Rog and Nikopol, though serious, did not prove to be anything that would keep the 6th Army under General Schoerner from

sending two panzer divisions to von Manstein's aid. The chief result of the deception plan's failure on the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation was that the operation would last three times longer than its planners had anticipated and would require far more hard fighting than desired to achieve the goal of encircling and annihilating the trapped units.

Preparations for the Operation

Logistics would play an important role in the upcoming operation. The short preparation period gave Vatutin's and Konev's staffs little time to devote their attention to this most important aspect of Red Army offensive operations. Mother nature also hampered preparations. Konev, in his report of the operation, described the weather and terrain as being "exceptionally unfavorable" for conducting preparations.⁷¹ In his words, sudden thaws and muddy roads "made it difficult to move troops and supply them with fuel and ammunition." Zhukov, as STAVKA representative for the operation, stated that the Fronts were unable to fully build up material reserves (troop strength, combat vehicles, fuel, ammunition, and food) needed to conduct the operation in the manner they were accustomed. However, due to the perceived nature of the German threat, he believed that the operation could not be delayed any further.⁷²

According to the Soviet after action study of the operation, all troop movements and logistical preparations were carried out on time, despite the pressure to adhere to the timetable.⁷³ This feat deserves recognition, in that Konev's and Vatutin's Fronts were able to carry out this tremendous task in less than half the time than usual. This

contributed to the German surprise when the operation commenced. Although the Germans had expected the operation and had predicted its location, they could not believe that the Red Army could recover so quickly from the two operations mentioned previously.

Great effort was expended in making the forces ready. Both Konev and Zhukov mentioned that preparations continued night and day under conditions of great secrecy. Regrouping of assault units continued up to the day the operation commenced. Reconnaissance of German positions was conducted continuously, with the aim of identifying which units lay on the opposite side of the battle front. Patrols penetrated the German lines to gather intelligence and take prisoners, which further helped flesh out the enemy order of battle. This technique, of course, partially explains how the Soviets believed so many German divisions were in the salient.

As mentioned previously, some of these reconnaissance efforts were poorly conducted. In the 2nd Ukrainian Front sector, Konev had to postpone his assault by one day, so he could launch a reconnaissance in force along his front to determine exactly where the German defenses were. This, in fact, did occur and succeeded. Although the Germans were forewarned, Konev had sufficient time to shift forces to reflect the new information.⁷⁴

Engineers and sappers were also busy in the days and weeks leading up to the operation. In terrible winter conditions, Red Army troops laid 135 kilometers of lateral roads in the 2nd Ukrainian Front area alone. Mine clearing efforts continued apace up to the point the assault units began their attack. The after-operations study states

than 20,000 mines were cleared in front of the 4th Guards and 53rd Armies alone.⁷⁵ Engineers were also busy erecting dummy frontline positions, part of the maskirovka plan. In addition, they repaired 475 kilometers of road, repaired or reinforced 24 bridges and cleared 180 passages in German wire obstacles, usually under fire.⁷⁶

Thus, in record time, the Red Army units slated to prepare for the upcoming operation had conducted a thorough, if hurried preparation phase. As the war progressed, it was able to match this record of preparation time repeatedly, much to the consternation of the Ostheer, which had taken slow and deliberate Soviet preparations as a matter of course. The speed with which this task was completed for the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation impressed and amazed the Germans.

Conclusion

Due to a number of factors, the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation had every chance of achieving success. The relatively simple concept of operations, utilizing tank armies to conduct deep attacks to achieve the encirclement, allowed the Front commanders to concentrate enormous combat power at two selected points to ensure that the encirclement could be achieved quickly and the entrapped Germans wiped out. It included an intricate deception plan that utilized both maskirovka and diversionary attacks. Preparations, though hastily executed, were adequate.

The Red Army possessed other advantages for this operation as well. It enjoyed an overall superiority in numbers of tanks, guns and troops. Knowledge of German order of battle and terrain were complete

(in fact, in the case of the number of defenders, they had greatly overestimated German strength). The Red Army also held the initiative and could dictate both the time and the place of the attack. The Germans, tied down to an overextended front line, could only await the overpowering attack that they knew would come sooner or later.

The Germans were extremely vulnerable in the Kanev salient due to Hitler's stand fast decree which prevented a timely withdrawal, an exposed salient inviting a double envelopment, thinly held flanks, and overall exhaustion and weakened condition of German units. The XXXXII Corps had no tanks or assault guns at all. Von Manstein's armored forces were busy elsewhere. The eyes of Hitler and the OKW were so directed towards the Anzio beachhead in Italy and the fighting around Leningrad that little attention was paid to what was about to occur along the Dnieper.

The Germans, however, did possess some advantages that would threaten the successful completion of the Soviet operation. They were von Manstein's willingness to disobey Hitler, still-superior tactical ability (especially at the corps level and below), and their ability to rapidly switch units from one part of the front to another. Soviet underestimation of still-powerful German capabilities would markedly affect the operation as it developed, much to the Red Army's surprise. The German's detection of the actual movement of Konev's 5th Guards Tank Army and 8th Army's discovery of the deception plan five days prior to the offensive gained enough time to begin moving the few armored formations out of the line elsewhere to ward off the upcoming attack. Certainly, the Red Army would not find this operation to be an easy one.

The Red Army, in the lead-up to this operation, made several mistakes that would be to their disadvantage later. Their ambitious deception plan, though doctrinally sound, was hastily implemented. Troops were poorly trained or disciplined to practice proper radio listening silence, thus tipping off the Germans as to the location of the attack. The Red Army, perhaps due to Stalin's urgings, was eagerly seeking a repeat of their victory at Stalingrad by totally annihilating a large grouping of German forces. They lacked sufficient infantry and armor to simultaneously reduce the pocket and ward off relief attacks. Their reliance on artillery would receive a blow when insufficient ammunition could be brought forward due to the mud. The Red Air Force would prove that it was not yet capable of close cooperation with ground forces. The Soviet command structure left no one in overall command at the scene of the operation. Zhukov, though serving as the STAVKA coordinator, could allocate reinforcements and advise the front commanders, but could not direct their actions.

One puzzling aspect of the operational plan was that it directed no action beyond the immediate annihilation or unichtozhenie of the encircled forces. The initial deep attacks that would encircle the German salient would not be followed up by subsequent deep attacks to continue pushing the German front line further back. This concentration on total destruction of the enemy, at the expense of greater gains, was a persisting feature of Bolshevik-influenced Red Army doctrine. It not only demanded destruction of the German forces in the Kessel, but the death or captivity of every one of its defenders.⁷⁷ Their single-minded dedication to this goal (known as do kontsa or "to the very end") may

have caused the Red Army commanders to overlook the greater gains that were possible had they sent their armored spearheads deeper where there were no defenses. All that lay beyond Zvenigoradka were postal and supply units and 200 kilometers of empty space stretching to the Black Sea.

Thus the stage was set not for a neat, clean, and decisive operation concluded in a week's time, but rather one that was drawn out and costly to both sides. The plan drafted by STAVKA and the front commanders utilized several operational concepts which, although impressive on paper, would reveal weaknesses that would materialize when put to the test of battle. The use of the tank armies to conduct deep strikes was well planned, but the 6th Tank Army was a new, untested organization. The deception plan and use of diversionary attacks in support of an operation this size would prove to be beyond the capability of the Red Army to execute at this stage. Artillery, which was becoming increasingly critical for smashing German tactical defenses in lieu of infantry, would not be able to keep up with the advancing tank spearheads. Soviet military intelligence would prove to be far too conservative in its analysis of the German order of battle and too limited in its assessment of German capabilities. All of these elements of the Soviet operation would show the need for greater synchronization during the planning stages and better command and control during the conduct of operations. This plan, which required rapid and violent maneuver, combined with an effective deception operation, evolved into a slugfest where both sides fought to exhaustion and neither totally achieving their stated objectives, as the following chapter will show.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER 4

THE CONDUCT OF THE OPERATION

You can rely on me like you would on a wall of stone. You will be freed from the ring.

Hitler in Zhukov's Reminiscences¹

There is no need to worry, Comrade Stalin. The encircled enemy will not escape.

Konev in Battles Hitler Lost²

As described in the previous chapter, Zhukov and the commanders of the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts planned to conduct the Korsun-Shevchenkivskiy Operation in three distinct phases. The first phase, the creation of the breakthrough, was to begin on 25 January 1944, when Konev's Front attacked in the east. The following day, Vatutin's Front would begin its attack in the west. The second phase was the actual encirclement operation itself, which was accomplished by the deep attacks launched by the two tank armies on 28 January 1944, though an unbroken line of encirclement would not be formed until February 4th. The third phase, the destruction or unichtozhenie of the encircled German forces, would take until February 18th.

The failure of operational maskirovka and the diversionary attacks would complicate the execution of the operation. As will be seen, although the initial phases would go according to plan, the German's refusal to conform to Soviet expectations would force the Red

Army to redeem the operation by combat. In addition, as the operation unfolded, key elements, such as artillery and close air support, would not keep pace with the movements of the tank armies. Without their accustomed numerical advantage and fire support, the Soviet commanders would be forced to confront the Germans on nearly even terms, where German tactical ability was still telling. The lack of synchronization of key combat elements would further contribute to Soviet difficulties, though in the end the situation would be for the most part redeemed by the versatility and flexibility of the STAVKA representative and the front commanders.

As each phase unfolded, the Soviet commanders confronted various efforts by the trapped Germans to break out of the encirclement or efforts to effect their relief from the outside. These efforts to relieve the German forces in fact constituted a separate and distinct phase which the Soviet commanders had to contend with, occurring simultaneously with the phase dedicated to the destruction of the encircled forces. At times, the Germans came within a hair's breadth of not only escaping with all their forces intact, but accomplishing the encirclement and destruction of the Red Army forces carrying out the operation. The outcome of this operation was not a certainty for either side. This chapter will seek to highlight each phase of the operation and evaluate the actions of the belligerents as they struggled to achieve their objectives.

The Fronts Break Through the German Defenses

The 2nd Ukrainian Front attacked first at dawn 25 January 1944, after firing lengthy artillery barrages on the Germans. The 4th Guards and 53rd Armies, having determined the previous day where the defensive positions of the German 389th Infantry Division lay, concentrated their forces along a 19 kilometer-wide front.³ As waves of Soviet infantry surged forward, they encountered determined German resistance, which limited the gains that day to two to four kilometers, much less than Konev had specified. In addition to the enemy's stubbornness, the Red Army's infantry formations suffered from a lack of tank support and perceived insufficient artillery support (despite the fact that they possessed nearly 100 guns for every kilometer of front).⁴

This posed a dilemma for Konev, who planned on penetrating the German front line by the evening of the first day, followed the next morning by the commitment of his operational reserve, the 5th Guards Tank Army. To reestablish momentum, he shifted the 20th and 29th Tank Corps from Rotmistrov's 5th Guards Tank Army to the first echelon of the attacking infantry armies (fig. 6). They were to create their own penetration. Once this had been done, Konev would commit the 18th Tank Corps as the army's second echelon. This switch would take place 26 January.⁵

Meanwhile, the Germans, who had been expecting the attack, were surprised by its power. After all, the German 8th Army thought it had exhausted Konev's forces during the previous two weeks and that he could not possibly launch an offensive this large and powerful so soon. The Germans were wrong, but the 8th Army had units en route to attempt to

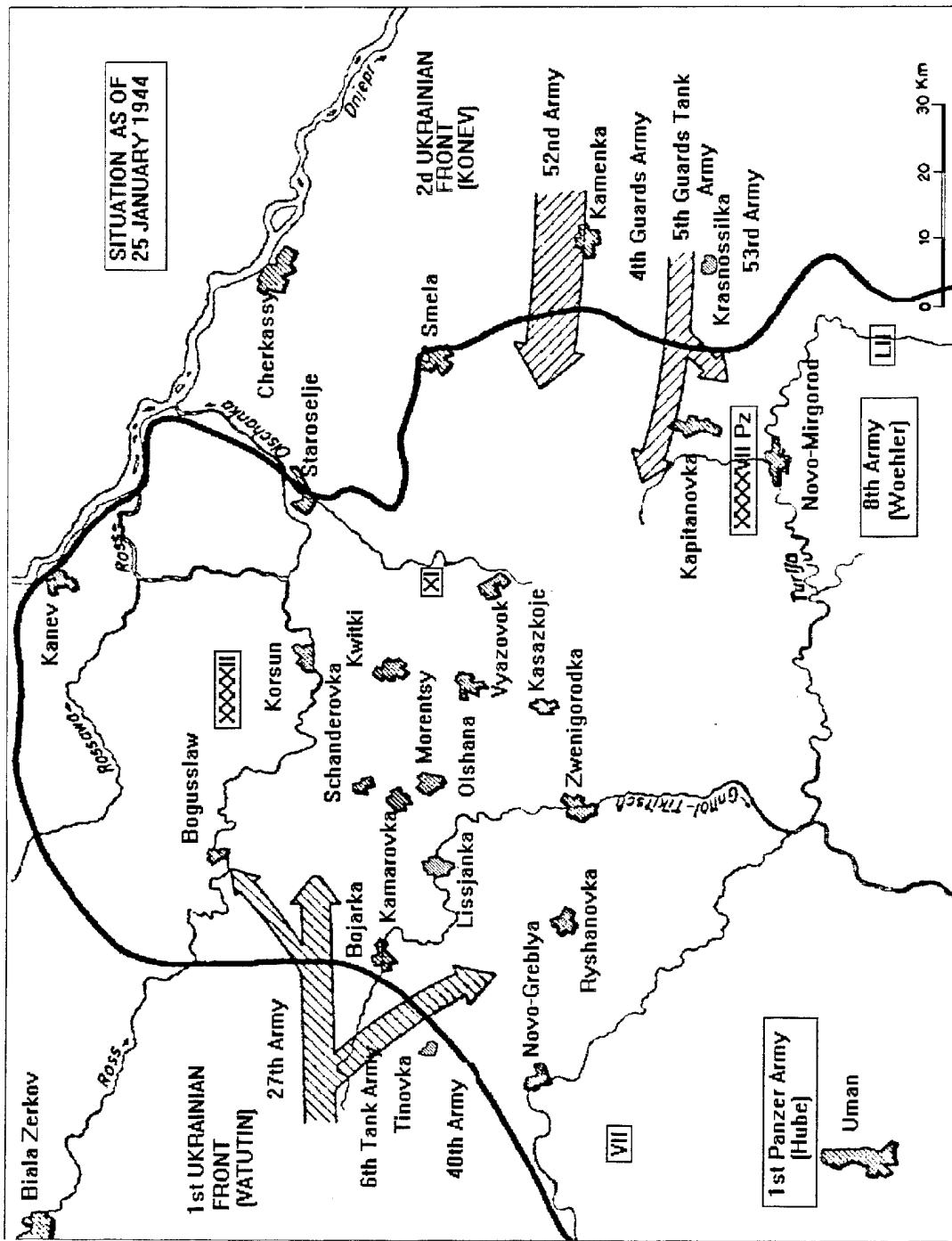


Figure 6. Adapted from: Roehricht, Probleme der esselschlacht, (Karlruhe, Germany: Condor Verlag, 1958)

stop the Red Army. These forces, the 11th and 14th Panzer Divisions, soon followed by a third, established blocking positions on 26 January astride the avenues of approach leading to the west. These forces soon encountered spearheads of the 5th Guards Tank Army.⁶ Tank battles raged into the night, when the two Soviet tank corps finally broke through.

The follow-on infantry armies, however, were still hung up on the German defenses. To make matters worse, on the morning of 28 January, XXXXVII Panzer Corps' counterattack from the south and an attack from the north by the Viking Division's battlegroup succeeded in closing the breach in the German line.⁷ However, Konev's tank army commander, Rotmistrov, did something doctrinally uncharacteristic. Instead of stopping to reestablish contact with the following main body of the 2nd Ukrainian Front, he continued his drive westwards, disregarding his flanks and not stopping until he reached Zvenigorodka. To the amazement of the Germans, hundreds of Soviet T-34s thundered past their defensive positions. Although the 3rd, 11th, and 14th Panzer Divisions attempted to stem the flood, the Red Army tanks kept moving, losing dozens of tanks to German fire.⁸ XXXXVII Panzer Corps, with fewer than 50 tanks, was simply overrun. However, it was able to regroup the following day for another attempt at cutting off Rotmistrov.

That same day, the follow-on infantry armies of the 2nd Ukrainian Front resumed their attack, pushing the German defenses back. The outcome hung in the balance for the next two days, as the German 8th Army frantically tried to seal the breach. Simultaneously, the Red Army began to widen its attack and sought to reestablish contact with the tank corps which had broken through. Savage fighting swirled about the

towns of Kapitanovka and Onitnyazhka, which changed hands several times. Slowly, the German XI Corps and XXXXVII Panzer Corps, their strength ebbing, began to give way. On 28 January, the 20th Guards Tank Corps, acting as the advance element of the 5th Guards Tank Army, reached Zvenigorodka, where it would await the other arm of the pincers coming from the 1st Ukrainian Front in the west.

The 8th Army ordered its corps to reestablish contact with each other, and tried to carry this out from 28 to 31 January, but without success. On 28 January, a battlegroup from the 14th Panzer Division broke through to the north during the course of a counterattack, then found itself encircled with the rest of XI Corps.⁹ Its commander, Stemmerman, welcomed the addition to his shrinking force, though his position was grew worse with each passing hour. To eliminate the Soviet breakthrough to his south, he had denuded the rest of his northern front of troops. His front along the Dnieper could no longer be held if attacked there. By 31 January, Stemmerman had used up most of his remaining offensive combat power and would have little to defend with during the next phase of the Red Army's operation.

The other component of the Soviet offensive design, the 1st Ukrainian Front, began its attack on the morning of 26 January. Its spearhead, the newly-raised 6th Tank Army, attacked in the first echelon, and its two corps were immediately bogged down in frontal battles with the German 34th and 198th Infantry Divisions. Soviet records speak of the Germans fighting stubbornly all along the front, causing the Red Army's offensive in the west to develop more slowly than anticipated.¹⁰ By the end of the day, the attack had ground to a halt,

having made gains of only two to three kilometers, except for the 47th Rifle Corps, which had gained seven or eight kilometers against the German 88th Infantry Division, a few kilometers to the north of the main effort. To take advantage of this promising development, Vatutin switched 6th Tank Army's 5th Tank Corps on the morning of the 27 of January from Tinovka, where it was having little success, to the north. It launched its attack that afternoon, quickly penetrating the German defenses north of Bojarka (fig. 6).

Vatutin's ploy paid off. While his forces had been stymied elsewhere, the 5th Tank Corps rapidly drove through Medvin and Lissjanka on the 27th. Enroute it relieved the trapped Red Army units which had been encircled two weeks before. These forces joined Vatutin's spearhead, lending it some of the infantry strength it sorely lacked. The 5th Tank Corps resumed its drive on the following day, and by 1300 hours the 233rd Tank Brigade of the 6th Tank Army linked up in Zvenigorodka with the 20th Guards Tank Corps from the 5th Guards Tank Army.¹¹ The Soviets announced to the world that they had encircled the bulk of the German 8th Army, a force of nearly 100,000 men. The main supply route to the two corps in the Kanev salient had indeed been severed, but the Germans were not yet truly encircled. The next phase of the operation would see to that.

The Germans, who had predicted the Soviet offensive, had reacted quickly, but actions were limited to those of an immediate tactical nature, involving the movement of units within corps, such as when Stemmerman moved the SS Viking battlegroup and the 57th Infantry Division from the north to the vicinity of Kapitanovka. However, if

more effective measures were to be taken to eliminate the Soviet penetration and restore the front line, they would have to be coordinated by Army Group South. This was necessitated by the fact that the offensive affected elements of two neighboring armies (the 1st Panzer and the 8th) and that any effective German countermeasures had to be controlled by the army group, which had access to more resources than either army possessed. Unfortunately for the Germans, Army Group South's commander, Field Marshal von Manstein, was at a conference at Hitler's headquarters in East Prussia, where he had been summoned 27 January 1944.¹² Thus, at a critical time when Army Group South needed its commander, he was at Hitler's "Wolf's Lair," where he and other army group commanders received a harangue on national socialism. In his absence, von Manstein's chief of staff, Major General Friedrich Schulz, could only authorize local measures to be taken by corps commanders. Hitler's stand-fast decree prohibited any wide-ranging decisions without his approval.

The Encirclement of the Kanev Salient

The first phase of the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation had gone according to plan. Although the penetration had taken two days more than expected to carry out, the German defensive line had been cleanly ruptured by the two tank armies which had disregarded their flanks and had driven on to effect their linkup on 28 January 1944 at Zvenigorodka. Although the spearheads of the two Fronts had indeed met, the Germans in the salient were far from being encircled (fig. 7). True, the German main supply route leading through Zvenigorodka had been cut, but many

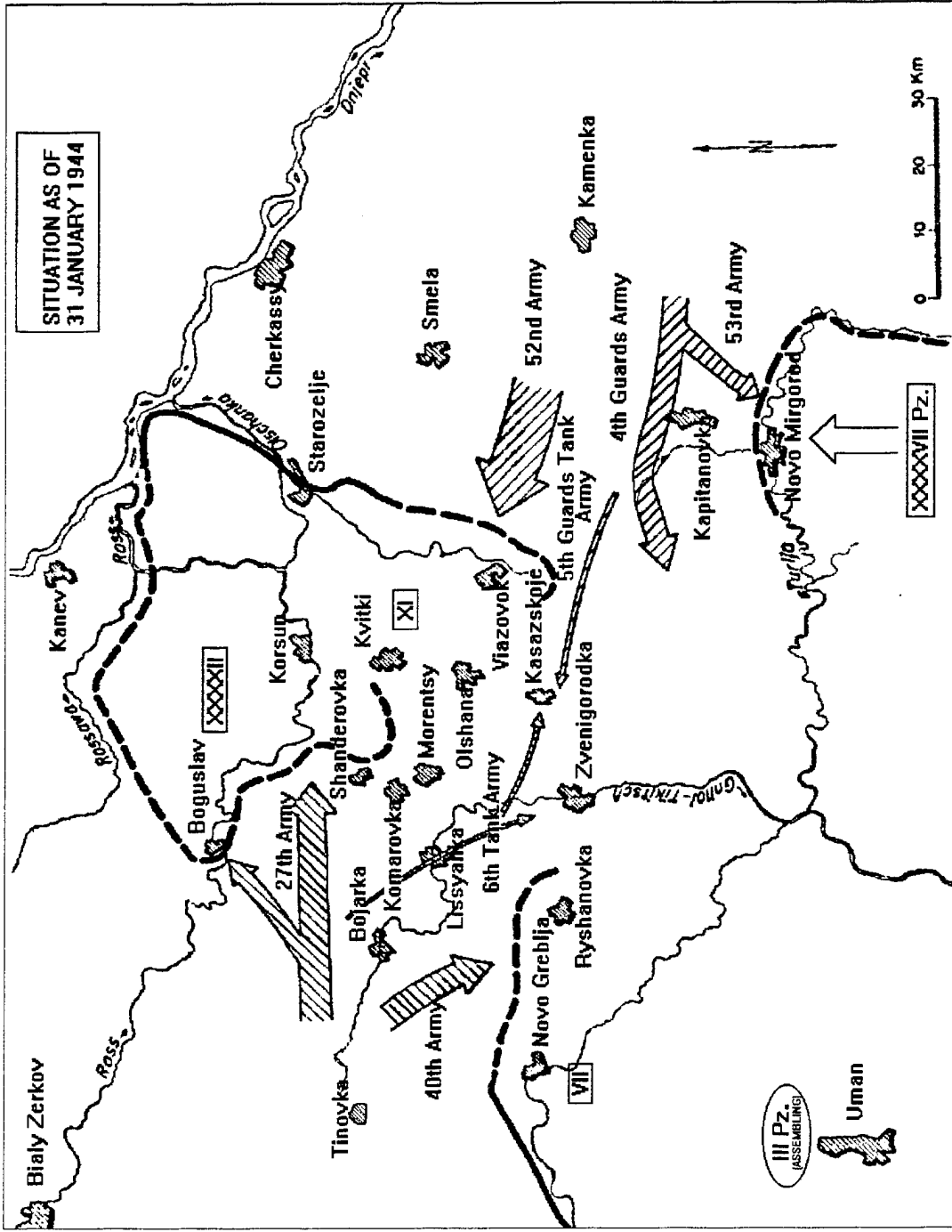


Figure 7. Adapted from: Roehricht, Probleme der Kesselschlacht, (Karlruhe, Germany: Condor Verlag, 1958)

lesser routes to the south still lay open. In fact, the service and supply elements of the encircled German forces had begun to make their escape. Until the ring around the Germans was unbroken, the threat of a breakout was still a possibility. The second phase of the operation, the encirclement, would completely seal the ring around the Germans.

After the penetration of the German defenses, follow-on infantry armies in the east and west moved to widen the breach in order to push back the Germans and make it more difficult for a relief attempt to reach the beleaguered forces in the salient. Simultaneously, other armies attacked into the rear of the trapped German forces to form an inner ring of encirclement, as well as to try to prevent them from forming a new front in the south. Ideally, according to doctrine, the Soviets would carry out attacks to splinter German forces in the pocket. The Soviets could then reduce and destroy each part at their leisure. However, as the situation developed, the inner ring of encirclement lacked the armored formations doctrinally required to do this.

Konev's Front, which had begun its segment of the operation first, aggressively sought to complete the encirclement of the German forces in the eastern portion of the salient. In the outer ring, the 4th Guards and 53rd Armies fanned out to the south and southwest. In the northern part of the penetration, the 52nd Army pushed to widen the breach to the west and form the inner ring.¹³ The 5th Guards Cavalry Corps, acting as the STAVKA Front reserve for Konev, followed in the wake of the 5th Guards Tank Army. Its mission was to penetrate into the German rear and break up any attempt to form a continuous front in that direction. However, the encirclement formed much more slowly than Konev

had anticipated, due to stiffening German resistance and worsening weather.

In the west, Vatutin's infantry armies were experiencing similar difficulties. Although the 6th Tank Army's spearheads had broken through on 27 January, the infantry of the 40th and 27th Armies had not kept pace, and had been drawn into heavy fighting with bypassed German units of the 88th Infantry Division. The 6th Tank Army could do little to help, since it was short of infantry itself. It needed all that it had to establish defenses southwest of Zvenigorodka to ward off the expected German relief attempt. The advance of the 40th and 27th Armies was further slowed by the terrain on the western side of the salient and the fact that the German defensive positions were far more developed than they were opposite Konev's troops. However, Vatutin and Konev quickly realized that the Germans in the salient were not going to pull back from the Dnieper. A stationary pocket would make their job of destroying the encircled German forces much easier. Hitler's stand fast directive had done its work.

When von Manstein returned the evening of 28 January from his visit to Hitler's headquarters in East Prussia, he faced a crisis. Early news was not encouraging. Two of his corps had been encircled by two tank armies. Follow-on forces were attempting to push back the German front line, increasing the distance between the encircled forces and the rest of Army Group South. Von Manstein acted quickly. First, he ordered that XXXXII Corps be transferred immediately from the 1st Panzer Army to the 8th Army.¹⁴ This would simplify command and control. Second, he authorized the limited withdrawal of the northwest corner of

the salient and the northeast corner of the salient. This move freed up troops to be used as a reserve to form a new front facing south. Third, he ordered both the 8th Army and 1st Panzer Army to immediately assemble forces to be used for a relief attempt. His request to pull the front back from the Dnieper was denied by Hitler, who stated categorically that the salient was needed for an attack to retake Kiev. Hitler's appreciation of the situation from a headquarters over 1,000 miles from the front had no connection with reality. Von Manstein realized that the only way to rescue the two corps was to be granted complete freedom of action. Hitler refused.¹⁵

Meanwhile, the German units in the salient raced against time to build a new front facing south. They succeeded, though just barely. The crisis was greatest in XI Corps area, where Stemmerman rapidly switched units back and forth to block Soviet attempts to get into his rear areas. His right flank gave way, causing him to lose contact with XXXXVII Panzer Corps. On 28 January, the city of Smela was given up. A threat to the town of Olshana, the pivot for the new front being formed in the south, was posed by the 5th Guards Cossack Cavalry Corps. This attack was stopped by a counterattack on 31 January by the Viking Division's armored battlegroup, which was rapidly being switched from one hot spot to another.¹⁶ On the outside, von Vormann's XXXXVII Panzer Corps was carrying out constant counterattacks. On the 28th of January, its panzer divisions temporarily sealed the breach and restored contact between the two corps. However, an attack by Konev's 4th Guards and 53rd Armies the following day shattered the German attempt and widened the shoulders of the penetration.

In the west the situation was the same, only XXXXII Corps had no panzer corps to ride to its rescue. Slowly, Vatutin's 27th and 40th Armies forced the Germans in their path to give way. Kanev was given up on 31 January, as was most of Mironovka. Hand to hand fighting raged in the city of Boguslav, which formed the cornerpost of the salient's western flank. Vatutin's and Konev's Fronts slowly began to spread out. The inner ring of encirclement was thickened, as more infantry formations caught up with the armored spearheads. The armor itself was positioning itself in the outer ring of encirclement, to forestall the relief attack (fig. 8). The shortage of armor was being acutely felt by the inner ring of forces, who normally relied on independent tank brigades to conduct attacks in support of the infantry. This employment of armor to form the outer ring of encirclement was against established Red Army doctrine, since tank corps had previously been used on the internal ring of encirclement (as in the Stalingrad Operation). At the time, this seemed to have caused some controversy within the Red Army, as borne out by contemporary Soviet sources.¹⁷ Because they had fewer tanks than they were accustomed to, both front commanders made the decision to use what they had on the outside, where they saw the greatest threat from German armor coming to the relief of the troops in the pocket. It was to prove a sound decision.

To make matters more difficult for the commanders of the 27th and 52nd Armies, whose units formed the inner ring of encirclement, the Red Army's artillery had not kept up with the advance thanks to increasingly poor road conditions. Although the first week of the operation had witnessed freezing weather, a warm front moved in at the turn of the

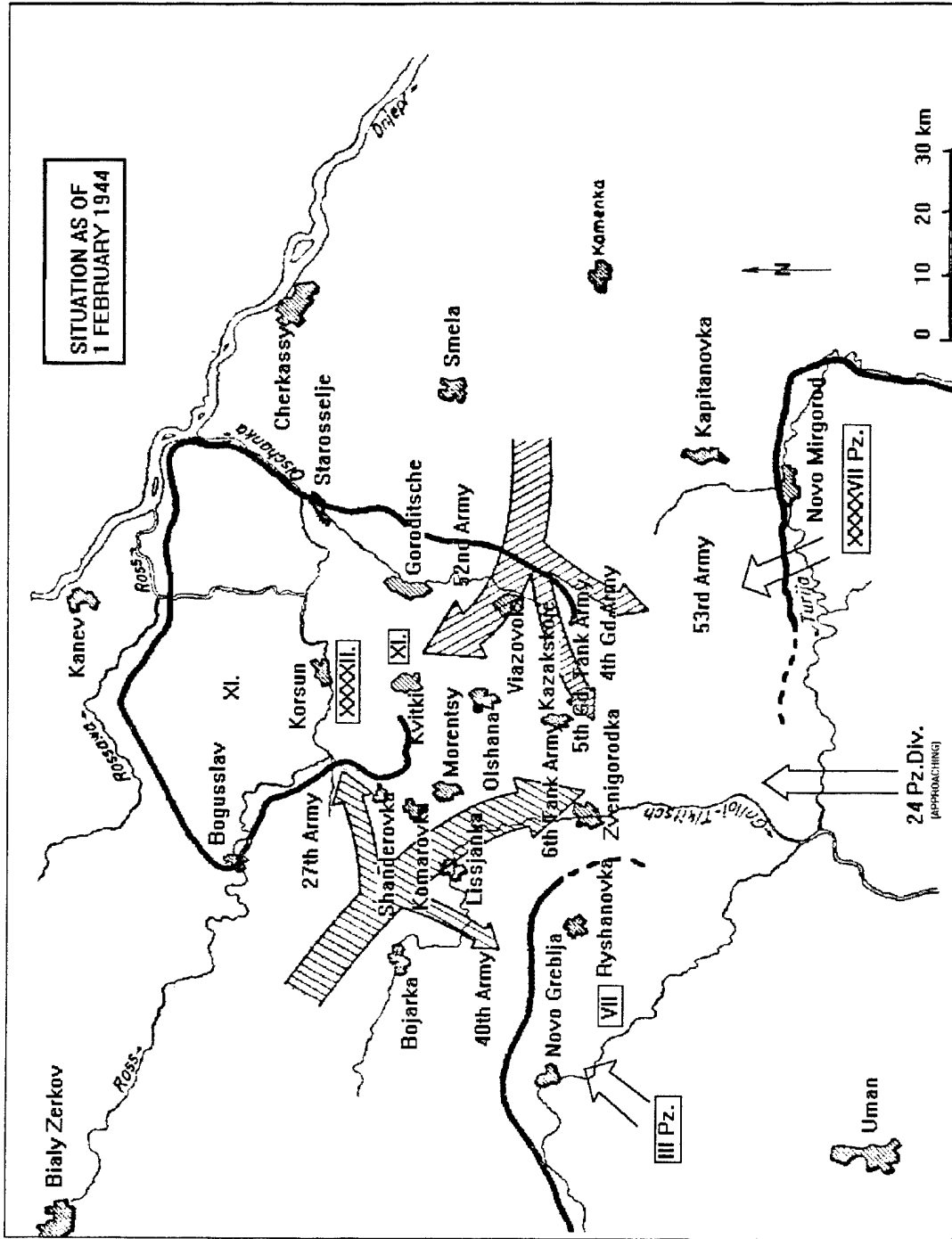


Figure 8. Adapted from: Roehricht, Probleme der Kesselschlacht, (Karlsruhe, Germany: Condor Verlag, 1958)

month, causing the deep snow to melt. Without the accustomed artillery support to make up for the shortage of infantry, the advance proceeded slowly.¹⁸ German entries in the daily journals frequently mention that Soviet infantry attacks, unsupported by artillery, were usually repulsed quickly by reaction forces. However, by 4 February, a continuous inner ring was built up around the Germans, who now found themselves literally and figuratively in a Kessel (cauldron.)

This development posed several problems for von Manstein, not least of which was the fact that two of his corps, totaling over 58,000 men, (including Russian auxiliaries) were trapped and could not, at the moment, be ordered to break out. An even more ominous development was that a hole had been torn in the German front line over one hundred kilometers wide. Contact between the 1st Panzer Army and 8th Army had been broken.¹⁹ There was absolutely nothing between Zvenigorodka and the Black Sea, a mere 200 kilometers distant, to block the Red Army, had its commanders the urge to keep heading south. After all, the bulk of the 5th Guards and 6th Tank Armies were massed in the vicinity of Zvenigorodka and Shpola and could easily have done so. Nor did von Manstein have reserves to throw at the Soviets, except the 2nd Parachute Division, which was in the process of being pulled out of the line preparatory to being shipped to France for reconstitution. From 28 to 31 January, things looked black indeed for the desperate troops of Army Group South.

An indication of Soviet intentions began to emerge when German reconnaissance observed Red Army engineers laying minefields in the outer ring of encirclement. Aircraft observed tanks being dug in and

wire entanglements being erected in an arc stretching from Medvin in the west, to Zvenigorodka in the south, and to Shpola in the east.²⁰ These were indicators that the Vatutin and Konev were not driving further south after all, but instead were preparing a deliberate defense. The Soviet after-action report even details these preparations and describes them as preventative measures taken to prevent enemy penetrations from the south to the north.²¹ From the evidence, there is nothing to suggest that Zhukov and the Front commanders had any intention of continuing their advance. Von Manstein and his commanders could not believe their good fortune.

One can only speculate as to why the Red Army ignored this opportunity. Perhaps STAVKA's general staff was not willing to reinforce what it saw as a relatively minor operation in order to begin to amass strategic reserves for subsequent operations. Zhukov certainly did not mention this possibility in his memoirs. Another reason could be that Soviet generals were leery of driving too deep into the German operational depths and being cut off in the manner described in the previous chapter. Von Vormann, commander of the XXXXVII Panzer Corps, stated in his account of the operation that Stalin's generals still held a healthy respect, even a fear of, German offensive capabilities which in von Vormann's opinion no longer existed.²² At any rate, the Soviet armies, corps, and divisions forming the outer ring of the encirclement began to dig in with a vengeance.

The German's fear that the Red Army was intent on encircling both the 8th and 6th Armies could be stilled for the time being. This simplified the German situation tremendously. Instead of having to face

a disaster which involved all of Army Group South, von Manstein was faced simply with the problem of how to restore the situation in the Kanev salient. This would prove to be a greater challenge than it seemed at the time.

To von Manstein, the remedy was obvious. He felt that what was needed was to order the encircled forces to break out to the south and be reincorporated into a new defensive line. This would both rescue two complete corps and free up reserves to be used for subsequent defensive operations. Of course, Hitler turned down this proposal immediately and ordered instead that an operation be launched to restore the front on the Dnieper and retake Kiev. The German response to the Soviet offensive would then incorporate elements of two different types of operations—a relief attempt and a counteroffensive.²³ The fact that the units Hitler expected to carry out these ambitious goals were seriously depleted does not seem to have been taken into the dictator's calculations. To Hitler, flags on a map indicated ideal strengths and capabilities, when in fact many of the units represented no longer existed except as remnants. Still, von Manstein began to craft an operational plan.

The German Relief Attempt

Whatever the Germans decided, it would have to happen quickly. The situation inside the Kessel was worsening rapidly. The two corps commanders in the pocket worked tirelessly, constantly switching the few combat-capable units back and forth to eliminate penetrations made by Red Army units of the inner ring of encirclement. Despite these

efforts, the perimeter of the pocket shrunk daily. Aerial resupply was begun on 28 January. Although the operation was disrupted occasionally by weather, enemy fighter aircraft, and muddy airfields, it continued until 17 February. The Luftwaffe not only flew in or airdropped enough ammunition and fuel to satisfy the minimum daily requirements, its transport aircraft flew out over 4,000 wounded.²⁴ The main airfield in the pocket at the town of Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi thus became the lifeline of the encircled forces. It was therefore imperative that the pocket be kept large enough so as to prevent the Red Army from striking the airfield with artillery. It would have to be held at all cost. For their part, the Soviets tried repeatedly to shut down the airfield and disrupt the airlift with the Red Air Force, with occasional success. On one night alone, it succeeded in shooting down several Ju-52 transport aircraft loaded with wounded. Fortunately, most Soviet air attacks were poorly conceived, haphazardly executed, and not coordinated with ground operations.²⁵

Meanwhile, the Soviet units in the outer ring of the encirclement continued to improve their defensive positions. Elements of the 5th Guards and 6th Tank Armies were pulled out of the front line and placed in assembly areas a few kilometers to the rear, where they prepared to counterattack the expected German relief attempt.²⁶ However, except for the uncoordinated attempts by the XXXXVII Panzer Corps to restore the front line in the east, by 31 January the German relief attempt appeared to have stalled. Both the Germans in the pocket and the Red Army began to wonder where von Manstein's tanks were. They would soon find out.

From the beginning, von Manstein ignored Hitler's demand that a counteroffensive towards Kiev be launched. He, better than anyone at OKH, knew what his forces were capable of doing. He was chiefly concerned with rescuing the forces in the pocket, but he saw an opportunity to deal a blow to the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts. His plan was simple. Army Group South would order the 1st Panzer and 8th Armies to prepare armored spearheads which would attack simultaneously from the west and east to encircle and destroy the forces surrounding the pocket (fig. 9). Von Manstein would encircle the Soviet forces that had encircled his men.²⁷

To carry this out, on 28 January 1944, von Manstein ordered the 1st Panzer Army's III Panzer Corps, with four panzer divisions, to disengage from the Vinnitsa area, where it was still carrying out operations, and hand its sector over to XXXXVI Panzer Corps, which had to extend its front to the west. This Panzer Corps, under the command of General Hermann Breith, was to shift to the far right flank of the army and attack in a northeasterly direction towards the town of Medvin. The 8th Army would disengage XXXXVII Panzer Corps from its positions around Novo-Mirgorod, hand its old sector over to an infantry corps, and extend its front to the west. With four panzer divisions, (it would be joined by the 13th Panzer Division from LII Corps) it would attack north towards Zvenigorodka in order to link up with the eastern perimeter of the pocket in the vicinity of Morentsy. The operation would begin as soon as the forces were assembled, no later than 3 February.²⁸

The assembly of the forces slated to take part in the relief attempt was repeatedly delayed. These delays were caused primarily by

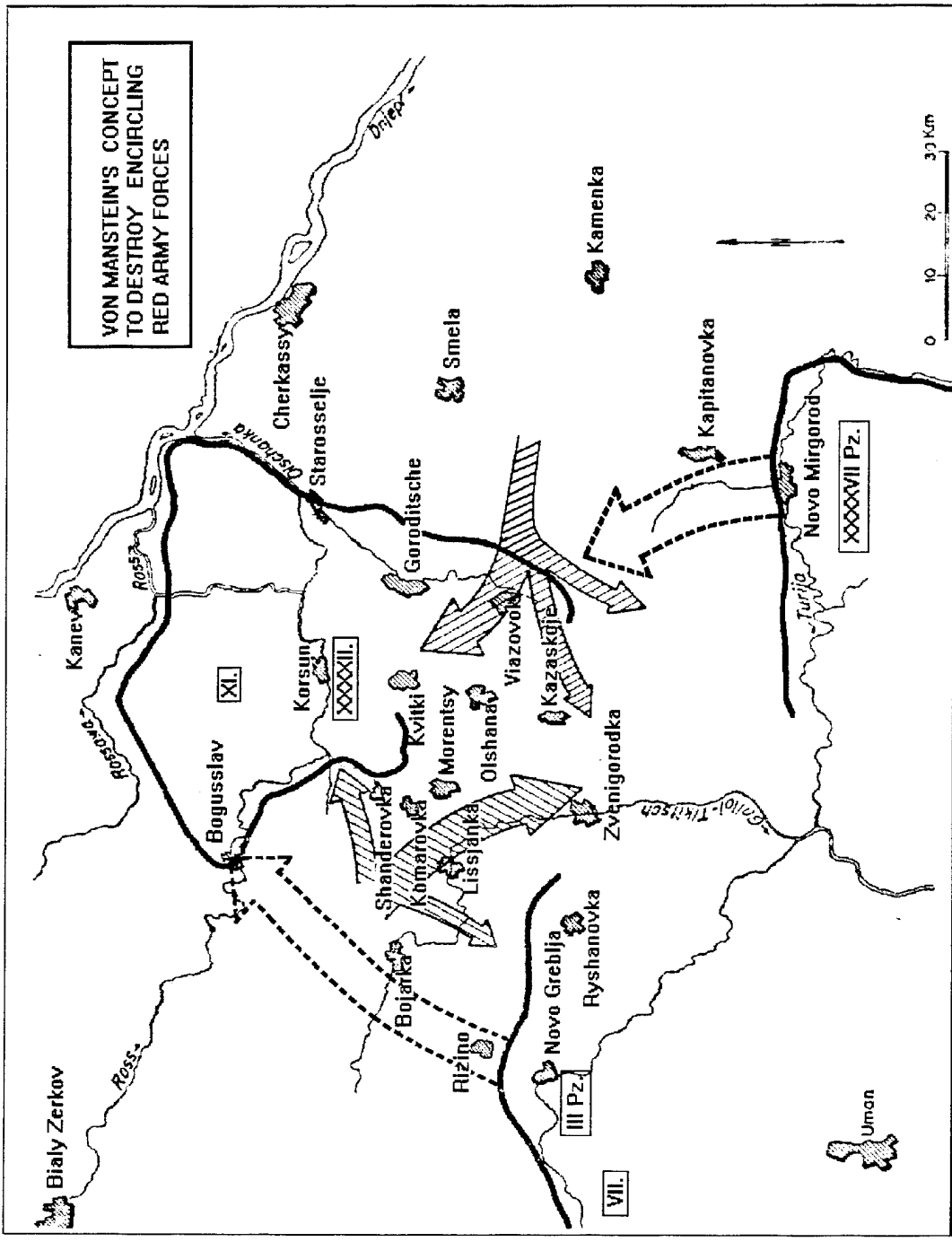


Figure 9. Adapted from: Roehricht, Probleme der Kesselschlacht, (Karlruhe, Germany: Condor Verlag, 1958)

worsening weather and the need to rail-load the III Panzer Corps for its 150-kilometer trip from Vinnitsa to its assembly areas near Uman, as well as by the fact that von Vormann's XXXXVII Panzer Corps had to scrape together additional units to lengthen its front to the west by 50 kilometers. The Red Army troops in the outer ring were strangely passive, although action around the pocket, now referred to as the Kessel von Cherkassy (the Cherkassy Pocket), was intensifying. The units of Breith's corps began arriving on 31 January, and with the exception of the 1st Panzer Division, closed on their assembly areas by 2 February. Things were going better than expected. The relief attempt, codenamed "Wanda" by 1st Panzer Army, appeared to promise success.²⁹

German hopes were dashed when, on 2 February, the weather broke. The icy conditions which prevailed during all of January began to give way to an early thaw. The dirt roads, which were trafficable when frozen, turned into rivers of mud which caused trucks and halftracks to bog down. The road marching columns of III and XXXXVII Panzer Corps were delayed and often immobilized. The 1st Panzer Army requested that the scheduled attack for 3 February be postponed to the 4th.³⁰ In the east, XXXXVII Panzer Corps attack began as originally scheduled. For the troops in the pocket, the thaw not only temporarily closed the airfield at Korsun, it made the switching of its few mobile reserves back and forth within the pocket much more difficult.

It also affected Konev's and Vatutin's forces as well. Both Zhukov and Konev have described the tremendous difficulty their forces encountered trying to bring up supplies to the fighting units. The

bottomless mud slowed movement to a crawl and forced the Soviets to impress civilians into labor gangs to repair roads and carry supplies, often by hand. It seemed that the only things that moved freely were tanks and the ever-present panje carts. The snow which had lain up to one meter deep throughout the area seemed to melt overnight. Fighting positions were flooded and infantrymen fought a constant battle against the dampness and cold. Making matters worse, it often fell below freezing at night. Tanks which had stopped on the roads had to be freed from the frozen mud with blowtorches.³¹ Soldiers found their battledress frozen to their bodies. Both sides suffered equally from the miserable weather.

As bad as the conditions were, they had greater consequences for the Germans, who, after all, had to attack. The Soviets simply had to defend, a task for which they had nearly a week to prepare. To further strengthen his defensive belt in the outer ring, Konev was essentially stripping bare the other armies in his Front of artillery, infantry, and armor.³² This entailed little risk, since the German forces opposite his forces in the south near Kirovograd were incapable of carrying out any offensive action.

With each passing day, the start-up date for the relief attempt was postponed, and the Soviet forces in the outer ring became stronger. Recognizing that von Vormann's corps was still too weak to have much success in its part of the operation, von Manstein was able to borrow the 24th Panzer Division from the 6th Army to the south. This division, moved without Hitler's permission, would have effectively doubled the offensive power of XXXXVII Panzer Corps, since this division was nearly

at full strength. However, by the time it had reached its assembly area south of Zvenigorodka on 3 February, it was recalled by Hitler hours before it was to cross the line of departure. It was then forced to march over 310 kilometers back to the 6th Army, which had in the meantime come under attack by the 3rd Ukrainian Front in the Nikopol bridgehead. It got there too late to do any good.³³ Thus this capable unit had been unable to contribute decisively to either army's efforts.

With or without the 24th Panzer Division, von Manstein's attack began on 3 of February, with von Vormann's corps seizing a bridgehead across the Shpolka river at Irennskoye. Faced by concentrated counterattacks by Rotmistrov's armor, the attack stalled (map 9). Lacking sufficient combat power to continue their advance, von Vormann's panzer divisions, with fewer than sixty tanks and assault guns remaining, could only tie down Soviet armor and prevent it from aiding Vatutin's Front in the west, where the really decisive battles would be fought.³⁴ Operation "Wanda" began favorably in the 1st Panzer Army's sector, with Breith's corps finally beginning its advance with three of its four panzer divisions and the heavy tank regiment "Baeke" on 4 February. Altogether, Breith would have approximately 175 tanks with which to carry out his attack, an impressive number at that time.³⁵

The evidence suggests that Zhukov, Konev, and Vatutin were surprised by the sudden German reaction. The diversionary attacks which were supposed to tie up von Manstein's armor had been slow to develop. This part of the elaborate maskirovka plan was a dismal failure in the sector opposite the 1st Panzer Army, where Vatutin's 2nd Tank Army and 38th Army were supposed to have prevented III Panzer Corps from

disengaging. Not only was Breith able to move his own units out, but XXXXVI Panzer Corps was able to deal with the diversionary attacks quite easily. On von Manstein's right flank, however, the diversionary attacks launched by the 3rd Ukrainian Front against General Schoerner's 6th Army near Krivoi Rog were more successful, though they did not begin until 2 February, four days later than anticipated. Despite the transfer of the 24th Panzer Division to the 8th Army, the German 6th Army was able to withdraw in good order from its bridgehead at Nikopol.³⁶

Sensing the power of the assembling relief force near Uman, Zhukov ordered Vatutin to transfer the bulk of the 2nd Tank Army under Bogdanov on 4 February with the utmost speed to an assembly area west of Tinovka. This force, with 108 tanks, would be used to counterattack Breith's panzer corps on its left flank. Bogdanov closed into his assembly areas by the evening of 5 February and would be ready to attack the following day.³⁷ Although this army, with one tank and one mechanized corps (one corps had been left behind near Vinnitsa), was just as depleted and worn out as the rest of Vatutin's force, it was nonetheless a significant addition to the forces awaiting the relief attack.

Breith's corps gained fifteen to twenty kilometers from 4 to 8 February (fig. 10). Fighting as much against the mud as against the Red Army, his divisions inflicted wholesale punishment against Vatutin's men, knocking out hundreds of tanks. The armored wedge, with Baeke's Heavy Tank Battalion 503 (with Tiger tanks) leading the way, sliced through the 40th Army and decimated the 47th Corps of Kravchenko's 6th

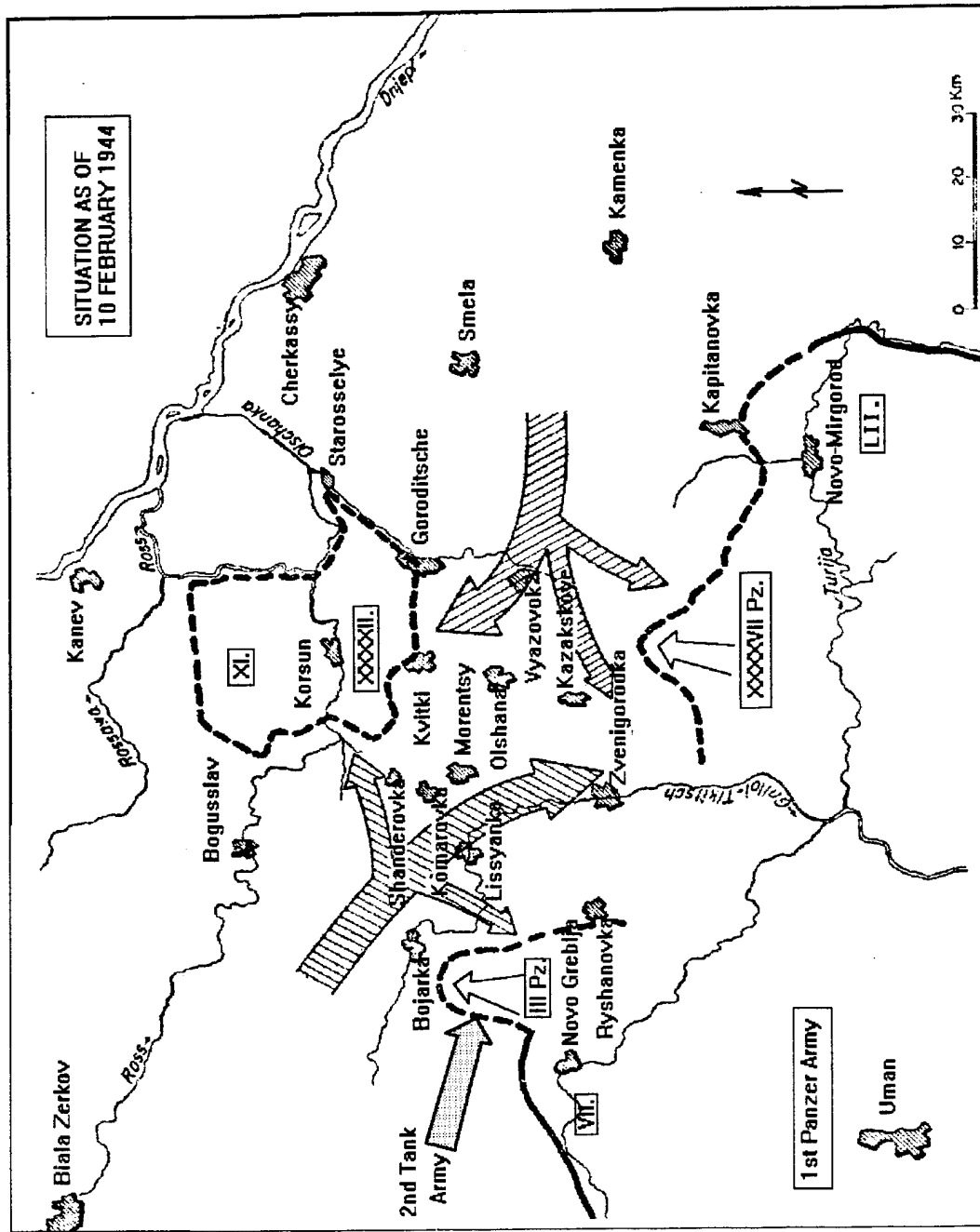


Figure 10. Adapted from: Roehricht, Probleme der Kesselschlacht, (Karlsruhe, Germany: Condor Verlag, 1958)

Tank Army.³⁸ One Soviet post-war study of the operation faulted the 47th Corps for a number of mistakes which contributed to its defeat. Its defensive positions were described as weak, with no depth, too great a frontage, and no prepared subsequent battle positions. The significantly low manning of the subunits and units was also to blame, as well as the loss of a large part of its artillery due to German artillery counterbattery fire and attacks by close air support units of the Luftwaffe, led by the legendary Stuka ace Hans Ulrich Rudel.³⁹ The 47th Corps did, however, stubbornly delay the German advance, thus buying time for the STAVKA reserve to be employed.

The counterattack of the 2nd Tank Army on 6 February stopped Breith's attack the following day, forcing a German withdrawal in front of Antonovka. Another problem facing Breith was that his tanks had outrun his supplies, forcing a halt while fuel drums and ammunition crates were airdropped in the mud along his line of advance.⁴⁰ Third Panzer Corps resumed its advance on 8 February, though by this time the Soviets had recovered and brought this attack too to a halt. Unfortunately, Breith, sticking to the original plan, had continued his attack in a northerly direction, with the intent of encircling Vatutin's forces between the relief column and the forces in the pocket. Events had overcome von Manstein's original plan.

By the time Breith's corps had reached its most northerly limit of advance on 6 February, von Manstein realized that it was going in the wrong direction. The pocket, under pressure from Vatutin's 27th Army, had been forced to move over 60 kilometers to the east. Sensing the danger of his attack's culmination, von Manstein made a change in plans.

This change was dictated by two realities, which he had discerned that same day. The first was that von Vormann's attack was getting nowhere and only served to tie down Konev's armor. Although this was serving a useful purpose, it would not free the troops in the pocket. The other factor was the realization that von Manstein's plan to trap the Soviets was now impossible, since his forces no longer possessed the strength to both encircle the enemy and rescue the troops trapped in the pocket.⁴¹

Consequently, he sent out an order 6 February which changed the German scheme of maneuver entirely. XXXXVII Panzer Corps would continue its attack towards Zvenigorodka in order to divert as much of Konev's armor as possible. III Panzer Corps would withdraw to its original line of departure on 8-9 February and attack eastwards to Lissyanka, a route which was shorter and better suited for the employment of armor.⁴² Von Manstein also admitted for the first time that the relief force no longer had the strength to carry out its attack by itself. The encircled forces would now have to attack in a southwesterly direction to effect a linkup with Breith's armor (fig. 11).

Weather and mud delayed the start of this new attempt until the morning of the 11th. In the meantime, the bulk of the 1st Panzer Division had finally arrived, bringing a relatively fresh unit with over 85 tanks to the effort.⁴³ Breith now had four panzer divisions, including the 1st SS Panzer Division, to make one last try. The attack from the direction of Rizino seemed to have caught the Soviets by surprise. Even Zhukov, in his memoirs, mentioned that "the enemy was able to dent our defenses." By nightfall, Breith's forward elements had seized the town of Bushanka and had reached the outskirts of Lissyanka.

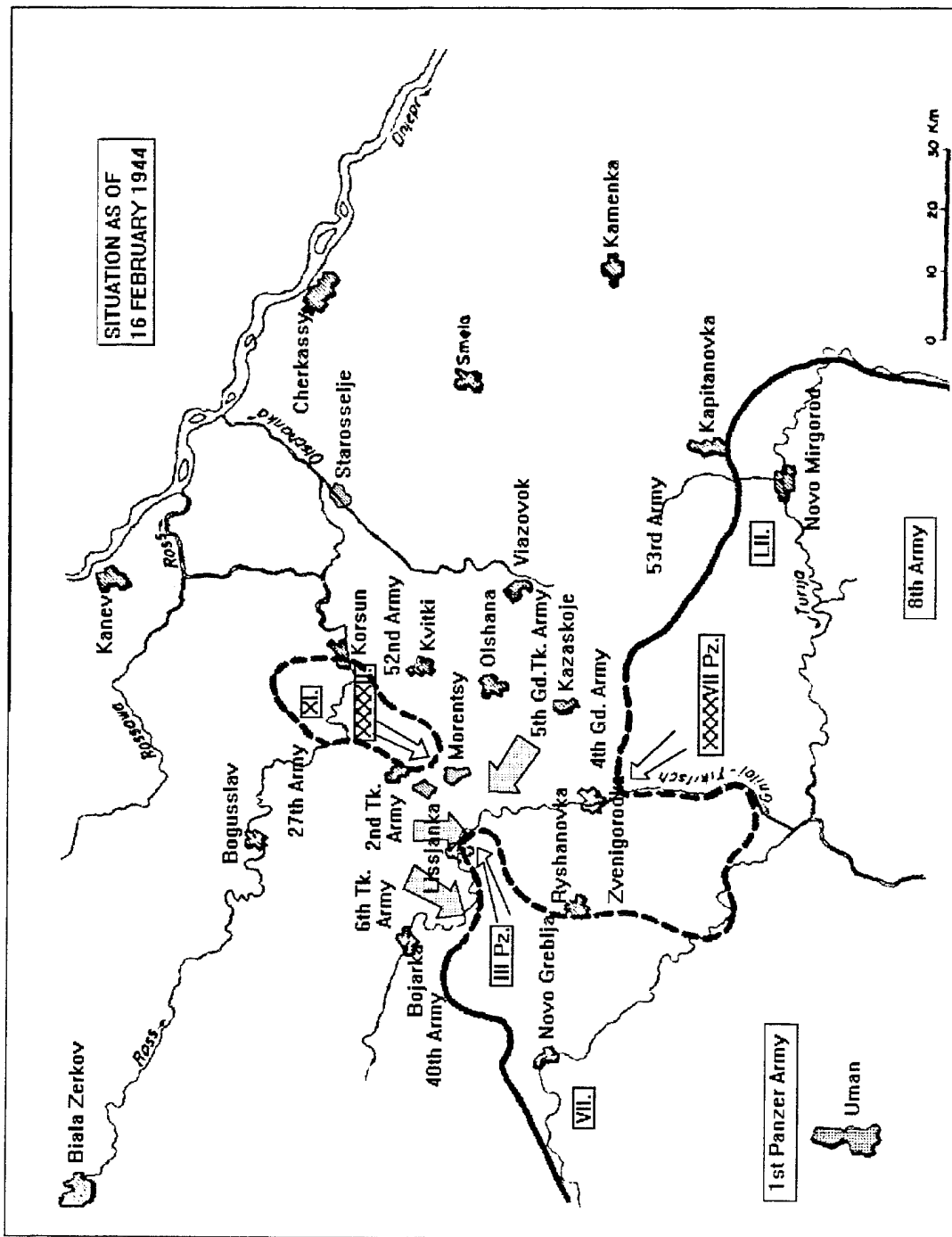


Figure 11. Adapted from: Roehricht, Probleme der Kesselschlacht, (Karlsruhe, Germany: Condor Verlag, 1958)

The relief force was now less than 30 kilometers from the troops in the pocket.

Conditions in the Kessel

Meanwhile, conditions in the pocket continued to worsen. By 8 February, it had shrunk to less than one quarter of its original size. The Dnieper river positions were finally given up on 7 February with Hitler's grudging permission. This freed up more forces for the final stage of the relief operation. To aid command and control, on 6 February 8th Army renamed the encircled force "Group Stemmerman", placing both corps under the control of the XI Corps commander.⁴⁴ Despite the desperate situation, the German commanders were able to keep their units under control. Supplies from the airfield were distributed and wounded flown out whenever the condition of the landing surface allowed it. Food was still sufficient, thanks in large part to the decision taken in early January to withdraw the large food stored across the Ross river to Korsun.⁴⁵

The troops, however, were totally exhausted. They had been fighting nonstop since 26 January, and losses in officers and noncommissioned officers had been high. Leaders had to resort to brutal methods to keep their men in line. Some units withdrew prematurely from their defensive positions, permitting breakthroughs by the encircling Soviets.⁴⁵ Each day, Stemmerman sent out radio messages 8th Army detailing his plight and wondering where Breith and von Vormann were. A phenomenon, known as Kesselpsychose or "encirclement psychoses" had begun to grip some of the more demoralized men. Many gave up hope

entirely and simply ceased to obey orders. Yet the number of desertions and surrenders were rare, despite a propaganda blitz by the "Free Germany Committee," a group of turncoat German officers captured at Stalingrad, who promised warm meals and an easy captivity if they only crossed the lines.⁴⁷ Zhukov also sent an emissary to Stemmerman on 8 February, promising good treatment to officers and men if they stopped their heroic resistance. Stemmerman refused. To add to his problems, Stemmerman was informed by Radio 6 February that he would have to fight his way out in order to meet the relief column halfway.⁴⁸

This was a difficult assignment, in view of the fact that the encircled troops would now have to retake ground in the southwest that they had only given up two days before. Additionally, ammunition was beginning to run low and Stemmerman had only three divisions that could still be considered combatworthy—the 72nd, Korpsabteilung B, and the SS Viking Division. Regrouping for a breakout would take several days to accomplish. Mud, constant Soviet attacks, and lack of transport were slowing actions to a crawl. Despite all of these difficulties, the attack towards the relief column got off to a good start. On 10 February the town of Steblev in southeast corner of the pocket was retaken. During a night attack on 11 to 12 February, the 72nd Infantry Division seized the towns of Shanderovka, Nova-Buda, and Khilki. Komarovka was taken the following day.⁴⁹ Stemmerman's men were now only 15 kilometers from Breith's troops in Lissyanka—relief finally was in sight.

Soviet Reactions

The German successes of 11 to 12 February posed the greatest crisis experienced by the Red Army during the entire operation. Not only had the German relief column, despite desperate counterattacks by Vatutin's forces, been able to penetrate to Lissyanka and seize a bridgehead, the encircled forces had broken through the inner ring formed by the 27th Army.⁵⁰ Konev claimed this came about because of a shortage of artillery and infantry, as well as the fact that the Germans had more tanks which caused the force ratios (1.3 to 1) to be in their favor. Somehow, Stalin had learned of this development and had telephoned Zhukov, Konev, and Vatutin on 12 February, demanding to know what happened. Apparently, Stalin was quite surprised and angry that the Germans seemed about to get away.⁵¹ Since Stalin had already let it be announced for the world to hear that the Germans in the Korsun-Shevchenkivsky were already wiped out, it would be a great embarrassment to have them suddenly escape.

For his part, Zhukov was quite annoyed. He telephoned Vatutin to ensure that the foregoing indeed were the case. When Vatutin replied that the Germans had broken through the inner ring, Zhukov called Stalin back to brief him on the details.⁵² In the meantime, however, Konev had called Stalin and made suggestions that would poison his relationship with Zhukov until their deaths decades later. Konev essentially blamed Vatutin and indirectly implicated Zhukov for not properly controlling the forces in the west and allowing the German forces to approach one another. He suggested that Stalin switch the 27th Army to the 2nd Ukrainian Front and allow Konev to wipe out the encircled forces. What

else he told Stalin is not known, but Stalin subsequently called Zhukov back with a new plan.⁵³

The plan effectively removed Vatutin from command of his forces in the Korsun area, ordering him to move his headquarters back to the west, where he could supervise the actions of his remaining armies in the Vinnitsa area. Vatutin, who had fought stubbornly and skillfully, was enraged. Zhukov called Stalin to protest Vatutin's removal and the subordination of the 27th Army to Konev. Zhukov believed that the elimination of the encircled Germans was only a matter of a few days and that this change would create confusion. He tried to assure Stalin that the situation was under control, but to no avail. Zhukov was told not only would this stand, but Zhukov himself would be placed in command of the forces on the outer ring of the encirclement, effectively replacing Vatutin.⁵⁴ This change of command at a critical point in the operation could only have increased the difficulty that the Soviets faced. While the Soviets shuffled their command structure, events on the battlefield were about to reach a climax.

The Breakout

Von Manstein now felt that the proper conditions had been created for a successful breakout and ordered Stemmerman to be ready to do so by 12 February. It was now or never.⁵⁵ Even though von Manstein felt that, at best, the encircled troops would probably lose all of their heavy weapons in the process, he felt that getting the bulk of the men out would be a victory of sorts. At least, he would be able to demonstrate that to his men, that he would allow no more Stalingrads to

happen while he was command. Stemmerman replied that he would not be able to do so by that date, since his troops were having trouble disengaging on the pocket's eastern perimeter. Mud and poor roadways were slowing movement to a snail's pace. XXXXII Corps' commander, General Lieb, stated that the movement of infantry under these conditions was less than one kilometer per hour. It would take two or three more days to position the forces for the breakout.⁵⁶ Stemmerman's troops were also burdened by over 2,000 wounded—since 13 February, no more evacuation aircraft had been able to land at Korsun due to the poor condition of the airstrip. Breith was ordered to intensify his effort.

Despite truly heroic efforts, the troops of III Panzer Corps could advance no farther. Their attack had culminated along the Gniloy Tikich river. Infantry battalions were reduced to fewer than 150 men. The 1st Panzer Division, which had entered the battle with over 80 tanks, now had fewer than a dozen operational.⁵⁷ Many had been knocked out by the Soviets, but many more had been left stuck in the mud along the route of advance, victims of mechanical failure. The once proud 1st SS Panzer Division, Hitler's namesake, was reduced to a regiment-sized battle group.⁵⁸ Many troops, tanks, guns, and trucks were stuck on the road between Lissyanka and Uman, victims of the bottomless mud. Since seizing the bridgehead over the Gniloy Tikich river at Lissyanka, Breith's forces had repulsed dozens of determined Soviet counterattacks. The relief force occupied a narrow salient, less than five kilometers wide, that pointed like a finger towards the troops in the pocket. Despite their best efforts, the relief force could only crawl meter by meter towards Stemmerman's group from 12-15 February.

Zhukov, for his part, was doing everything in his power to insure that the Germans would not link up from the outside. Konev would do the same on the inside. In fact, on 12 February Konev promised Stalin that no Germans would escape.⁵⁹ To stop Breith, Zhukov not only ordered the 2nd Tank Army to continue attacking west of Lissyanka, he also ordered the bulk of the 5th Guards Tank Army shifted from Zvenigorodka to attack Breith from the east. It was now safe to move these units, since von Vormann's last effort on 13 February to punch through had been easily stopped. Additionally, Stalin approved Zhukov's request to move the 11th Guards Tank Corps from the 1st Guards Tank Army out of STAVKA reserve. Once it arrived, it too would be thrown at the German column preparing to drive northeast out of Lissyanka.⁶⁰

From 13 to 16 February, the fighting raged. Despite destroying literally hundreds of Soviet tanks, antitank guns, and artillery pieces, Breith could advance no further. Von Manstein believed that the only option left was for Stemmerman to break out on his own and attack towards the bridgehead at Lissyanka. However, to do so would violate Hitler's order that troops could break out only with his expressed permission. Although on 12 February Hitler had granted von Manstein tentative approval to order the breakout, Hitler was notoriously reluctant to make quick decisions. Consequently, on 15 February, von Manstein, on his own authority, ordered Stemmerman to break out on the evening of the following day. The password for the escaping forces would be "freedom."⁶¹

The breakout order, code-named "Operation Spring Vacation" was greeted with relief by the encircled forces. They would not be

abandoned to their fact as the old 6th Army had been at Stalingrad. Stemmerman quickly drafted a plan that was simple and within the capability of his force to accomplish. He would attack with his 48,000 remaining troops at 2300 hours 16 February 1944 in the direction of Lissyanka. The attacking force would consist of three divisional columns who would attack with fixed bayonets. No artillery preparation would announce the breakout. The rearguard consisted on the remnants of two divisions. Nonambulatory wounded would be turned over to the Red Army with sufficient medical personnel to care for them.⁶² This was to be wishful thinking on Stemmerman's part, since the Soviets in the past had shown little consideration for enemy wounded. However, the German commander had no choice. Stemmerman requested air support along his flanks, since his flanks would be vulnerable to tank attack.⁶³

That same day, Konev was preparing his forces for the final attack, scheduled to take place on 17 February. He planned to attack the German pocket, now shrunk to a radius of less than 6 kilometers, from the northwest with elements of the 5th Guards Tank Army and from the southeast with the 4th Guards Army and 5th Guards Cossack Cavalry Corps.⁶⁴ The Red Air Force was increasingly active. Although it had conducted numerous air attacks throughout the operation, it was ordered to launch all-out attacks, including at night, in support of Konev's forces. Some airmen bombed the town of Shanderovka, Stemmerman's headquarters, with incendiaries, lighting up the target area for waves of follow-on strikes. This particular action on the part of the Red Air Force was the best example during this operation of what it was capable of if it coordinated its activities with ground troops.⁶⁵ About the

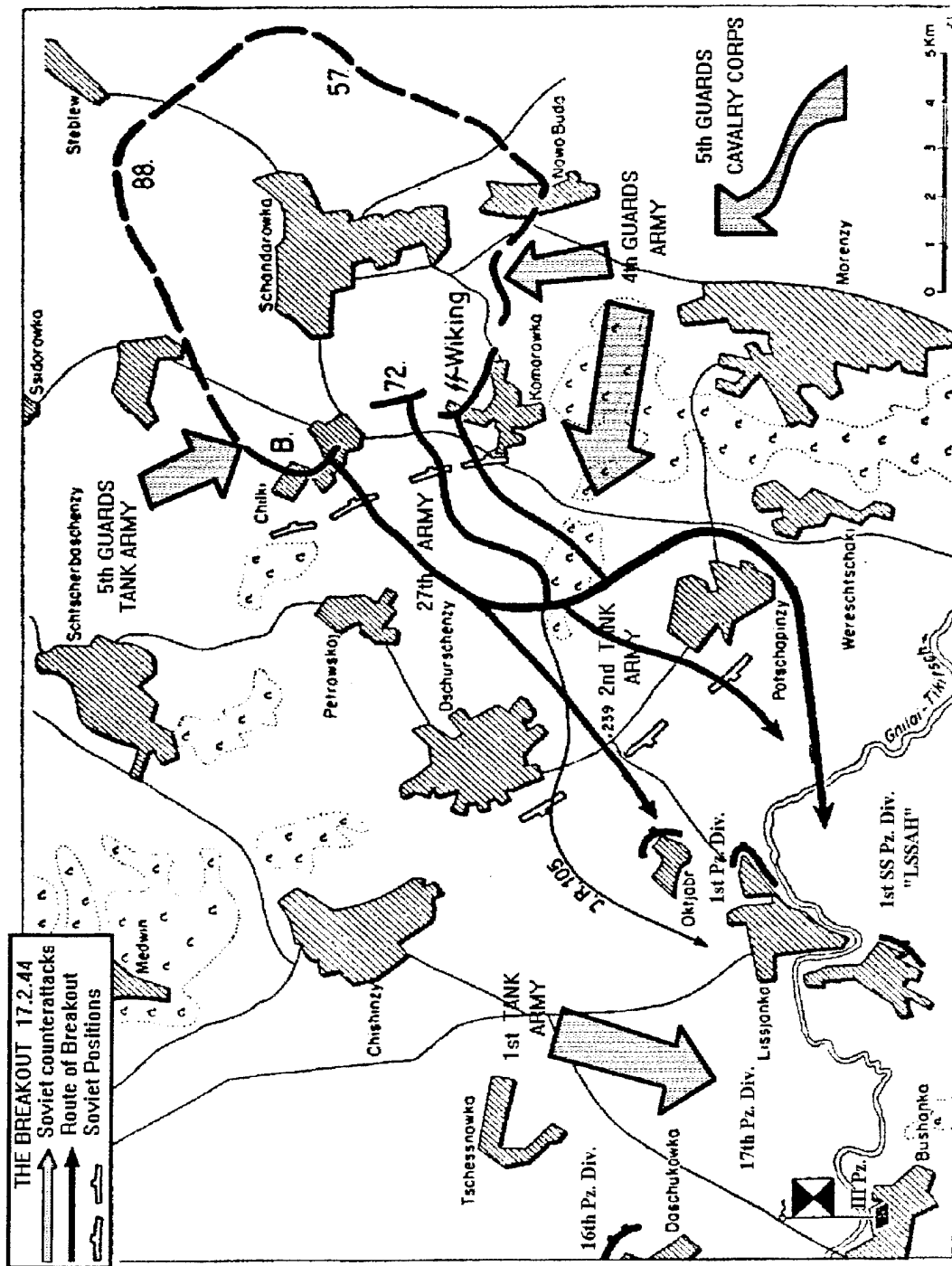


Figure 12. Adapted from: Roehricht, Probleme der Kesselschlacht, (Karlsruhe, Germany: Condor Verlag, 1958)

only thing in the German's favor was that a snowstorm had set in, reducing visibility to several hundred meters and hampering Soviet air activity.

The breakout began on schedule (fig 12). The first attacking wave easily overran the defensive positions of the Red Army troops in the inner ring. Most were bayoneted while they slept in their shallow fighting positions; others were taken prisoner and joined the column as it advanced. The lead column of the 72nd Infantry Division, the 105th Grenadier Regiment, nearly walked out without firing a shot and reached the forward line of the 1st Panzer Division at 0300 hours 17 February.⁶⁶ The same happened with the lead regiment of Korpsabteilung B. However, the SS Viking Division and the following echelons were not so lucky. Running into a barrier of tanks along hill 239, which they had believed were in German hands, the rest of Group Stemmerman veered to the south to avoid the tanks. To make matters worse, as dawn approached, Soviet artillery began to pound the Germans with increasing accuracy. The seven remaining tanks of the SS Viking Division were either knocked out or blown up by their own crews when they got stuck or failed to negotiate the many steep hills along the route of advance.⁶⁷

Meanwhile, III Panzer Corps was busy repelling numerous Soviet counterattacks along its entire front. The Red Army could easily have broken through and entrapped the panzer units, though to the German's great fortune, the Soviets chose to focus their attention on Stemmerman's troops. The 1st Panzer Division tried several times during the day to capture hill 239 and provide cover for the breakout, but each time was forced back down the hill by Soviet tank-led counterattacks.⁶⁸

After the first wave of the breakout forces had passed, dozens of T-34s rumbled directly into the columns of escaping Germans, many of whom were from combat service support units and were relatively defenseless.

Panje wagons loaded with wounded were crushed by tanks. It was sheer chaos. Somehow, the desperate Germans kept moving.

The climax for the escaping Germans occurred on the banks of the Gniloy Tikich. Unaware that a bridge had been built for them at Lissyanka three kilometers upstream, many swam the river under a hail of tank and artillery fire. Hundreds drowned before improvised bridges could be built. Many troops crossed the river without weapons or equipment. The freezing weather caused their clothing to turn to ice as they tramped their way to Lissyanka. Nearly all their heavy weapons were lost or abandoned. Troops continued to stream out of the pocket during the 17th until the following day when the rear guard made its way out in good order. Survivors commented on the fact that they had encountered no Soviet infantry, only tanks. The 5th Guards Cavalry Corps was committed at 1700 hours on 17 February, though the fighting for the most part was over. Stemmerman did not make it out.⁶⁹ He was killed when a Soviet antitank gun hit his command car. To participants, the breakout seemed to be a total disaster.

In all, 36,262 men, including over 1,000 Russian auxiliaries, made their way out of the 48,000 or so who took part in the breakout. Over 4,000 wounded had been flown out before the airfield at Korsun was abandoned; thus, approximately 40,000 out of the original 58,000 made it out of the trap.⁷⁰ Von Manstein was happy to have rescued that many. He was already reconciled to the fact that they would escape with little

more than their skins. The spearhead of Breith's corps stayed in Lissyanka awaiting more stragglers and gave that up too on 19 February. By 22 February, III Panzer Corps had withdrawn to its original starting point where it had started with so much hope two weeks before. Once the survivors of Group Stemmerman were withdrawn to reception areas near Uman, German efforts for the remainder of February were devoted towards reestablishing contact between the 1st Panzer and 8th Armies. This was accomplished with relative ease, for a calm had settled over this part of the Russian front.⁷¹

Aftermath of Breakout

Both sides were quick to announce their version of the outcome. The Soviets, for their part, offered up immense body counts as proof of their success. They claimed that they had killed 55,000 Germans and had captured more than 18,000, as well as destroying over 600 tanks in the relief force.⁷² When added up, these figures are significantly more than were physically present in the pocket. Zhukov and Konev initially claimed that no Germans had escaped, though in their memoirs they admitted that in fact a few had made their way out. In Moscow, the results of the operation were hailed as a great victory.

It was a great victory, though not without cost. The Red Army did not release casualty figures during the war, though one reliable source has indicated that the Soviets suffered at least 50,000 killed during this particular operation.⁷³ The 1st Panzer and 8th Armies claimed to have destroyed over 700 tanks. This incredibly high figure is borne out by tallying daily totals listed in both armies' daily

battle logs for their two attacking corps.⁷⁴ German tank losses had been high, probably around 100 to 150 destroyed, with many others temporarily unserviceable. The German relief force had 20,000 to 25,000 casualties as well. Both sides had indeed suffered inordinately during this three week struggle.

Whatever its losses were, the Red Army had achieved its operational goals—the elimination of the threat to the flank of the 1st Ukrainian Front and destruction of the encircled forces. Though the Germans in the pocket had not been annihilated do kontsa, they had been destroyed as effective organizations. Von Manstein would surely miss them in the coming months. For his part, von Manstein was satisfied that he had kept his word and prevented another Stalingrad. He had proven to the soldiers of the Ostheer that the German Army would move heaven and earth to rescue them if they were encircled.

This little moral victory was a considerable boost at least to the encircled troops, who had, after all, escaped from certain death. However, these units would not be fit for action for quite some time. The remnants were shipped back to Poland, where the 57th, 72nd, 88th, and 389th Divisions would be reconstituted.⁷⁵ The various remnants composing Korpsabteilung B were disbanded and merged with other formations. As for the SS Viking Division, which more than any other of the encircled units had prevented the pocket's dissolution, its short rest was interrupted when it was ordered to reinforce the garrison at Kovel in eastern Poland, then threatened with encirclement. It would prove to be more of the same for the survivors of the Viking Division.

The men of the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts also drew a brief reprieve, though it was to be much shorter than that of the German survivors of the encirclement. Both Fronts were brought back up to strength not only in troops, but in tanks, artillery, and other equipment. Without the German salient between them, both Fronts could now work in close cooperation. After a three week lull, in mid-March the Soviet forces began a subsequent operation whose goal was to drive the Germans out of the Ukraine forever.

The Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation was a success in more ways than one. Not only had it forced von Manstein to use up the rest of his armor, it had caused Army Group South's front to become dangerously overextended. The gap caused by the loss of two experienced infantry corps could not be made good. On top of all of that misfortune, Hitler continued to insist that von Manstein and Army Group A to his south hold on to every square inch of Ukrainian soil. This blind stupidity on Hitler's part would bring about the collapse of the German front in the Ukraine, the temporary encirclement of the 1st Panzer Army, the destruction of the 17th Army in the Crimea, and the advance of the Red Army to the Rumanian border in April 1944.

The operation had also validated Red Army encirclement doctrine. Not only had the forces of the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts successfully encircled a large grouping of German forces, they had fought to a standstill a powerful relief force consisting of eight of Hitler's best panzer divisions. Generals and historians could argue about the number of Germans who had escaped. The important thing was that the Red Army had fought the best the Germans had on nearly even terms and had won.

Zhukov and Konev benefited as well. Following the operation, Konev was promoted to the rank of Marshal of the Soviet Union, the highest rank in the Red Army and went on to become one of Stalin's most capable and ambitious commanders.⁷⁶ Zhukov succeeded Vatutin permanently when the latter was killed by Ukrainian partisans in late March 1944. Both Zhukov and Konev went on to greater successes during the summer of 1944, when their fronts helped crush Hitler's Army Group Center and in the race towards Berlin, when their rivalry reached its wartime climax.

Most importantly, it demonstrated that the Red Army could carry out complex mobile encirclement operations which required the greatest amount of coordination between multiple fronts. It gained great experience in conducting operational maskirovka, deep attacks, and echelonment of attacking forces. The Red Army had relearned the importance of maintaining continuous artillery support, the need to synchronize close air support with ground operations, and how to time diversionary attacks. In many respects, this operation was a laboratory where existing concepts and doctrine were revalidated and new tactics, techniques and procedures were developed. Most importantly, it taught Soviet commanders the importance of not underestimating their opponent. Broken and shattered, the Wehrmacht would still be able to deal powerful blows as late as April 1945. To the people of the Soviet Union, Korsun was to go down in Soviet history as the first of the "Year of the Ten Great Victories." Lessons learned and doctrine validated would be perfected by the summer of 1944, when the Red Army was to carry out numerous large-scale encirclement operations that would dwarf the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation.

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CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

West of Cherkassy contact was made with further elements of the freed battle group, in spite of numerous enemy counterattacks, which were repulsed, and extremely difficult terrain conditions.

OKW communique, Ostfront 1944¹

In carrying out your order, the troops of the front on 17 February 1944 completed routed, destroyed, and partially captured the surrounded enemy grouping consisting of nine infantry divisions, one tank division, and one motorized brigade.

Konev to Stalin, VIZ²

Both sides claimed victory in the aftermath of the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation. The Germans claimed a victory (though a Pyrrhic one, at best) because they had extricated the bulk of the encircled forces. The Red Army claimed that not a man had escaped. In fact, it was a significant Soviet victory. Two German corps had been shattered. All their equipment lay abandoned on the battlefield. The Red Army claimed to have killed over 55,000 Germans and to have captured another 18,000, although it later admitted that a few had managed to escape. The Red Army inflicted heavy casualties upon the German relief force as well, claiming to have knocked out over 800 German tanks. Although this number, too, was exaggerated, XXXVII Panzer Corps was

reduced to an empty shell and III Panzer Corps was crippled as an effective offensive force. Both sides suffered nearly equally in terms of men killed, wounded, and missing—approximately 50,000 to 75,000 men.

But what was more significant than these casualty figures, as impressive as they are, is the fact that the flanks of the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts were now secure and that the remaining German armored forces in Army Group South had been crippled permanently. This lack of strong panzer divisions, combined with Hitler's continued insistence on holding ground at all cost (despite the demonstrated failure of this doctrine during the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation), made the subsequent Soviet clearing of the Ukraine relatively easy. Launched on 4 March 1944 (two weeks after the completion of the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation), the Proskurov-Chernovtsy Operation forced the German 1st Panzer and 8th Army out of the Ukraine by 30 March.³ Although an ambitious encirclement scheme was attempted, both German armies managed to escape to the west, due in part to the serious depletion of Soviet armor strength resulting from heavy losses suffered during the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation. By 17 April 1944, all German forces had been cleared from the Ukraine and Black Sea coast, and the Red Army stood on the border with Rumania.

The Korsun-Shevchenchovsky Operation made this and other subsequent operations possible. The operation's success flowed from a number of factors. First, as mentioned in the second chapter, force ratio trends had begun to favor the Soviet Union. The overall quality of equipment had also improved substantially. The mobility of the Red Army was superior, due in part to its fleet of lend-lease trucks.

Increasing reliance on massive artillery preparations was beginning to make up for the shortage of Red infantry. Evolving operational and tactical doctrine, coupled with more experienced commanders and staff, had begun to surpass the German level of effectiveness, which had begun to decline. Hitler's stand-fast decree also helped the Red Army achieve success, because it forced the Germans to fight the kind of battle they could not win with the meager resources available during the third year of war with the Soviet Union. In nearly every category, the Red Army was becoming increasingly powerful. Against this, German operational mastery, as practiced by von Manstein, could no longer achieve the victory which Germany so badly needed.

The Soviet plan, though not brilliant, was thoroughly prepared and adequately executed. Although the situation offered the opportunity to fight a set-piece battle of encirclement `a la Stalingrad, Zhukov and the front commanders amassed the force ratios required to quickly encircle and eliminate the German grouping. This departure contrasted with Stalingrad, where nearly three months were required to wipe out the encircled 6th Army. A combination of dense grouping of attacking forces, massive artillery preparations, and two tank armies launching deep attacks practically guaranteed success, at least on paper. An ambitious deception operation, coupled with diversionary attacks, was designed to mislead the Germans as to the actual date, location, and size of the attack. Although this aspect of the plan was not as successful as hoped, the size of the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation did succeed in surprising the Germans.

The offensive phase of the operation, launched with great vigor, quickly succeeding in encircling the Germans in the Kanev salient. Efforts to split up the pocket failed, as the encircled forces rapidly formed an all-round defense and warded off Red Army attempts to break in. Hitler's stand-fast order helped the Soviets, since it prevented the encircled forces from withdrawing from the Dnieper river line and attacking to link up with the German relief force. The Germans, for their part, reacted quickly and organized a powerful force designed to both restore contact with the forces in the salient as well as encircling and destroying the besieging Soviet forces. Each side continued to feed more troops into the battle, especially armored formations. As force ratios inside and outside the pocket gradually became equal, weather intervened to slow the tempo of operations on both sides, forcing the combat to degenerate into a slugging match. Finally, when it became apparent that the relief force could not penetrate into the pocket to effect its relief, the encircled forces broke out through a ring of Soviet armor. Despite panic and confusion, as well as frightful loss of life, the bulk of the entrapped Germans, some 36,000 men, fought their way to freedom. Both sides covered themselves with glory and proved without a doubt that they were capable of awesome feats of dedication and bravery. But other than this, what had the operation proven?

Examination of the planning and execution of the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation reveals many elements of Soviet operational design that were to become standard for the remainder of the war and echo operational concepts which are practiced by the U.S. Armed Forces

today. Most notable were the Red Army's use of deep attacks by armored forces, deception operations, diversionary attacks, echelonment in depth, and the use of artillery to create the conditions for a tactical breakthrough. The operation also witnessed application of Soviet tactical aviation in support of ground operations. Not all of these operational elements were executed effectively, though they were tried with varying degrees of success.

The deep attack by the two tank armies which carried out the initial encirclement was extremely well executed. Without regard to their flanks, Rotmistrov's and Kravchenko's spearheads were used to punch a hole in the German defenses and penetrate into the German operational depths, cutting the lines of communication to the two corps in the salient. Previously, Soviet armor had been reluctant to attack deep without close cooperation with advancing infantry formations. Using armor to punch a hole was also a new departure from previous experience, since the infantry armies, with tank support, usually did this. At Korsun, infantry armies lacked their own organic armor support, proving that they no longer possessed the power to create the initial penetration by themselves. This use of armor to create its own penetrations violated the stereotype, thereby confusing and surprising the German defenders, who were accustomed to Soviet armor keeping pace with the infantry.

The deception plan practiced by Marshal Konev was very ambitious and would have worked had his troops been sufficiently trained and disciplined to carry it out. Its failure led the Germans to anticipate the time and place of the attack. Failure also enabled the

Germans to move mobile reserves to the area, which significantly slowed the creation of the outer encirclement ring. For subsequent operations, the Red Army perfected its use of operational maskirovka, as demonstrated by its overwhelming success during Operation Bagration during June to July 1944, when strategic and operational surprise were achieved, contributing directly to the annihilation of the German Army Group Center.

The diversionary attacks, poorly synchronized, allowed the Germans to divine true Soviet intentions, which included the encirclement and destruction of the German corps in the Kanev salient. The diversionary attacks launched by the 1st and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts were either easily warded off by the Germans or dealt with by yielding ground in the face of encirclement, as the 6th Army had done in the Nikopol area. Thus, von Manstein was able to move his armor freely without having to worry about another serious attack. Subsequent diversionary operations launched by the Soviets during the summer of 1944 were planned and executed so thoroughly that the Germans believed they were main efforts or initial phases of a main effort. These diversions caused Hitler and OKH to focus their attention on where they believed the next attack would take place rather than the actual location. Examples of the use of diversionary attacks were the attacks against Finland and the clearing operation in the Crimea, both of which occurred in May 1944. These attacks caused the Germans to believe that the main effort for the summer of 1944 would occur either in the south Ukraine, or further to the north, where Army Group North was threatened by a attack to pin it against the Baltic. The unforeseen offensive

against Army Group Center resulted in complete strategic and operational surprise, leading to the total destruction of German forces in Byelorussia.

Another area in which the Soviets were found wanting during the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation was in their underestimation of German capabilities, still formidable even during the third phase of the Russo-German War. Zhukov, Konev and Vatutin clearly believed that the Germans would not be able to react quickly enough to the encirclement to respond decisively. By the time the Germans had gathered sufficient forces to relieve their encircled corps, so the Soviets thought, it would be too late. Here, they were clearly wrong. Von Manstein figuratively moved heaven and earth to effect Stemmerman's relief with eight panzer divisions. Von Manstein correctly read the true nature of the diversionary attacks and threw everything he had into the relief attempt. Furthermore, he flatly disregarded Hitler's order to attack towards Kiev, concentrating instead on the bulk of the Soviet forces attacking the pocket. It would be an interesting exercise to see how the German relief attack would have fared had the weather been more cooperative. Stalin and his marshals were great concerned by von Manstein's operation "Wanda," forcing Stalin at least once to personally intervene in the conduct of operations. By the summer of 1944, however, German tactical and operational expertise had become irrelevant. Generals of the caliber of von Manstein had been replaced by other more obedient and unimaginative men. Hitler's stand-fast decree had been further augmented by the "fortified locality" concept, which carried the

stand-fast doctrine to its ultimate mindless culmination. This doctrine contributed greatly to the Soviet successes of 1944.

The Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation saw a further refinement in the Red Army's use of echelonment in depth. Here, vast stretches of the Soviet front line were nearly denuded of troops, enabling the 1st and 2nd Ukrainian Fronts to build up staggering force ratios with divisions closely echeloned behind one another. This echelonment applied especially to the tank armies, whose positioning of tank and mechanized corps allowed Soviet commanders to continually feed fresh units into battle, pressing the attack's momentum. Faulty or delayed commitment of these echelons often led to gaps or loss of momentum, which the Germans exploited whenever possible. In Operation Bagration, the echelonment of forces, especially tank and mechanized corps, was handled extremely well, permitting the German defenders no breathing space whatsoever, an indicator that Soviet staffs had become very competent in this complex type of operation. Subsequent developments also indicated that the Red Army had perfected the command and control techniques required to mount such operations. During Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi, the commitment of the 1st and 2nd Tank Armies into the flanks and path of the German relief attack surprised the Germans and indicated that the Red Army was attaining an ability already possessed by the Germans.

The use of artillery to blast a narrow hole through the German defenses, followed by the commitment of tank formations to exploit the gap, was also used with great success during Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi. The inability of the artillery to keep up with the advancing tank and mechanized formations, mainly due to the poor conditions of the road

network, led to accusations that a scarcity of artillery prevented the quick dispatch of encircled German forces. This shortcoming would be dealt with in the future by devoting more attention and resources to the preparation of the fire support aspect of operations. More engineer and transportation assets, as well as more time to carry out preparations, would also occur in subsequent operations.

The support provided by Soviet tactical aviation during the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation was not very effective. Lack of coordination meant that most air support was planned independently of ground operations and was wasted on shooting up German supply routes in the Korsun pocket instead of attacking German defensive positions or the attacking armored spearheads of the relief force. For future operations, Soviet tactical aviation was more closely integrated into the ground operation. During Operation Bagration, for example, German survivors recounted numerous instances of front line positions being obliterated by well-executed air attacks and of tank columns being ravaged by air as they tried to stop the Soviet advance through Byelorussia.⁴

Finally, one last lesson was relearned during the course of the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation. Because the Soviets had underestimated German capabilities, the Red Army failed to roll back the German main defensive line during the course of the encirclement. This lack of foresight eased the Germans' task considerably, in that the distance from the new front line near Uman, the direction from which III Panzer Corps launched its attack, was only 40 kilometers from the pocket. Although it was a hard 40 kilometers, the Germans got close enough to

Stemmerman's beleaguered force that his troops were able to fight their way through. This development contrasted with Stalingrad, where the relief column had to fight its way through over 150 kilometers of Soviet defenses and never got closer than 50 kilometers to Paulus' army. Zhukov's failure to repeat his performance at Stalingrad, where he had also been Stalin's STAVKA representative, is inexplicable, leading the historian to conclude that Zhukov thought the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation would be over quickly. Far more effort was devoted to annihilating the Germans in and around Korsun do kontsa than was necessary. The spearheads of Rotmistrov and Kravchenko should have kept pushing the German front line further back. At any rate, in subsequent operations, the Red Army would push far deeper with its tank and mechanized formations into the German's operational depths, leaving the reduction of any remaining enemy pockets to the following infantry armies, as demonstrated during Operation Bagration, when tank, mechanized, and cavalry corps focused strictly on carrying out their assigned deep attacks.

Thus, it can be said that the Korsun-Shevchenkovsky Operation was significant because it validated existing Soviet operational concepts, taught new ones, and allowed the Red Army to perfect techniques which it would master during subsequent operations in the summer of 1944 which would witness the Red Army's complete mastery over the Wehrmacht. Many of these operational concepts still apply today and deserve closer study by Western military professionals, since encirclement operations and the search for a modern battle of Cannae remain prominent features in contemporary military history and thought.

A study of how the operational concepts that produced the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation and other subsequent operations compare with modern concepts of operational design is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, a brief analysis of how the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation embodies the tenets of current U.S. doctrine as embodied in the current U.S. operational doctrinal manual, FM 100-5, Operations, is instructive.⁵ All of these tenets—initiative, agility, depth, synchronization, and versatility—are present in one form or another throughout the planning and execution of the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation.

The Red Army showed initiative by choosing the place and time for its initial attacks, which limited the number of opposing options at the German's disposal. Zhukov and the front commanders anticipated German reactions, though not their severity, and were able to react quickly to counter them. The Soviets constantly sought to force the Germans to conform to the Red Army's operational plan.

The Red Army displayed considerable agility throughout this operation, as demonstrated by its ability to rapidly shift the front's operational reserves, the tank armies and corps, from one axis to another. Rapid concentration of these forces astride the path of the German relief effort caused it to culminate, or reach its peak, just several kilometers short of the encircled forces, leaving them to break out on their own at great cost.

Although the Soviets did not strike as deeply as they could and should have, the attack by the two tank armies towards their link-up point at Zvenigorodka, even while disregarding their flanks, proved that

the Soviets had judged the most vulnerable part of the German defensive effort correctly. The seizure of this town not only caused the collapse of the German front line in the Ukraine, but nearly brought about the rapid dissolution of the encircled German forces. Only skillful leadership by generals Lieb and Stemmerman, as well as the slowness of the Soviet infantry armies, allowed the Germans to create an all-around defense in the pocket. Soviet tactical aviation could have been used to augment this deep attack with attacks of its own, but was poorly integrated into the operational plan. These tactical air assets, had they attacked in depth to shatter the German relief operation or the command and control nexus at Uman, might have brought the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation to a rapid conclusion.

The synchronization of the operation, though well planned, proved difficult to achieve once the German front line had been breached. Soviet artillery failed to keep pace with the tank armies, as did the bulk of the infantry armies. Soviet tactical aviation operated nearly independently. All of these shortcomings slowed the execution of the operation and permitted the Germans time to recover their balance. However, once the German relief attack had commenced, Zhukov, Konev, and Vatutin were able to quickly organize a defense that integrated all of the available Red Army combat elements and coordinated their actions. This effort worked to a great degree. Although the opposing armor force ratios became nearly equal, the two German panzer corps could not break through, despite the fact that they destroyed two to three times the number of tanks that they lost. Even Soviet tactical aviation was used

effectively to illuminate the battlefield with incendiary bombs during the course of the German night breakout.

Finally, the growing versatility of the Red Army was proven beyond a doubt. Though this attribute had been a hallmark of previous German operations, the Soviets too demonstrated their ability to shift forces rapidly, tailor them to circumstances, and switch from one role or mission to another rapidly and efficiently. The transition of the 5th Guards Tank Army from the deep attack to a deliberate defense near Zvenigorodka in the path of the attacking XXXXVII Panzer Corps is a case in point.

The planning and execution of the Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Operation stands up well to modern analysis. The operational concepts that were tried and revalidated were employed for the remainder of World War II on the Eastern Front, with great success. These operational concepts continue to retain validity and are still considered to be relevant by today's Russian Army. That the Russians still value experience with encirclement doctrine and operations, despite current problems (as demonstrated by the Russian Army's poor performance in Chechnya in 1995), is a fact which those of us in the West ought to keep in mind.

Endnotes

¹Buchner, Alex, Ostfront 1944: The German Defensive Battles on the Russian Front 1944 (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 1991), 69.

²Voyenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal, No. 2 "Documents on Korsun-Shevchenkivskyi Givn", (Moscow: Voenno-Istoricheskiy Zhurnal, Feb. 1984), 40.

³Matsulenko, Viktor A., Operatsii i boi na Okruzheniye (Encirclement Operations and Combat), (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1983), 143-144.

⁴Buchner, 172-173.

⁵U.S. Army Field Manual 100-5, Operations (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, June 1993), 2-6 to 2-9.

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