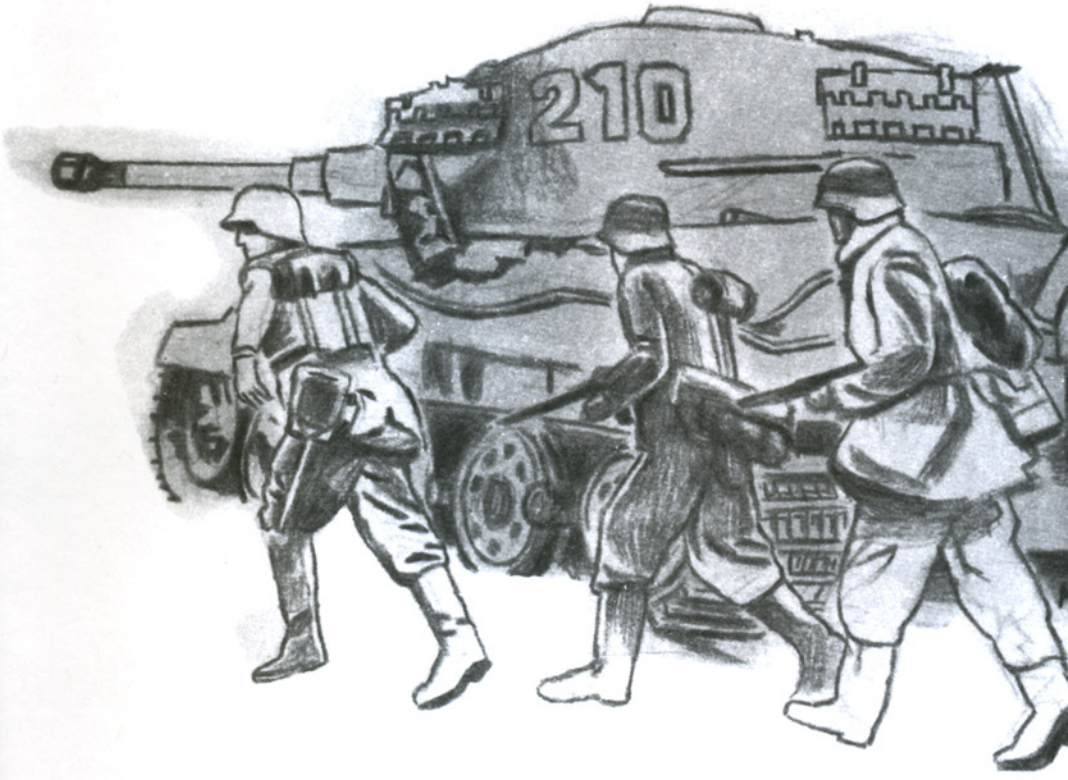
HISTORICAL STUDY

GERMAN DEFENSE TACTICS AGAINST RUSSIAN BREAKTHROUGHS



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GERMAN DEFENSE TACTICS against RUSSIAN BREAKTHROUGHS

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PREFACE

This study was prepared for the Historical Division, EUCOM, by a group of former German generals and general staff officers. The names of the contributors are not announced at this time. The principal author, who by the end of the war had attained the rank of general (*Generaloberst*), served on the Eastern Front throughout the Russian campaign and the subsequent retreat into the plains of northern Germany. He was successively commander of an infantry brigade, a panzer division (November 1941 to February 1943), and two different corps in the battles for Kharkov and Belgorod. Appointed commander of a panzer army on 1 December 1943, he participated in the withdrawal across southern Russia until the Germans reached the Carpathians. In August 1944 he was transferred to Army Group Center, and his last assignment was with Army Group Weichsel. During this final phase of his military career, he played an important part in the retreat from Lithuania, East Prussia, and Pomerania.

The reader is reminded that all publications in the GERMAN REPORT SERIES were written by Germans from the German point of view and that the procedures of the German Army differed considerably from those of the United States Army. Throughout this pamphlet the point of departure for tactical innovations was official German combat doctrine and authorized German tables of organization and equipment. Moreover, it must not be overlooked that a fundamental condition of German operations in Russia was the almost consistent German inferiority in both manpower and matériel. Various other factors colored the authors' thinking in ways unfamiliar to Americans. Every effort has been made to retain the point of view, the expressions, and even the prejudices of the authors.

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PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

By means of short narratives based on actual experience, this study endeavors to describe the characteristics of Russian break-throughs and the countermeasures employed by the Germans. No attempt has been made to present anything like a complete picture. Since these reports were written from memory, some of the dates and figures may be inaccurate. A few combat narratives contain other than strictly tactical details in an effort to convey some of the emotional factors which affected the actions of troop commanders and their men in different situations.

Each of the following chapters deals with one of the more frequently employed tactics to prevent or contain break-throughs. It should be pointed out, however, that only in rare instances was one single method used. Most often one tactical measure predominated in an operation, with two or three others, or even more, complementing it. During extended defensive operations even the predominant method changed occasionally. The use of a combination of defense tactics without preponderance of any one often proved effective. On many occasions the parent unit employed one specific defense method while its subordinate units had to use other tactics. No two situations were alike, and each had to be treated on its own merits. The selection of the type of defensive tactics depended on the intuitive perception of the commander in the field as well as upon the circumstances.

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PART TWO

ACTIVE DEFENSE

Chapter 1

FRONTAL COUNTERATTACK

One of the simplest methods of sealing off a break-through or eliminating a penetration is the frontal counterattack. Usually, such a counterattack can be launched only if the break-through is minor and can be localized, and if both shoulders are secure. Moreover, sufficient reserves must be available to close the breach by a quick counterthrust before the enemy is able to widen the gap. Once hostile preparations for a break-through have been clearly recognized, it is most effective to move the reserves close to the rear of the threatened sector. While the reserves must be close enough for instantaneous effective employment, they should be sufficiently removed from the front line so as not to forfeit prematurely their freedom of maneuver. In their assembly areas the reserves must be concealed from enemy observation and air attacks and must not be exposed to hostile preparation fire. Obviously, reserves should have maximum fire power and mobility; armored divisions come closest to these requirements because they combine tremendous striking force with concentrated fire power. Infantry supported by assault guns will often restore the situation so long as the break-through is local.

A counterattack is far more complicated if, before its effect is felt by the enemy, the shoulders begin to crumble, the breach is widened, and the enemy attack gains ground in depth. But even in this event, it is best to maintain the tactical integrity of the reserve so that upon commitment it can overrun the enemy infantry in one powerful thrust and regain the key positions of the former line. Only then should attempts be made to close the smaller gaps by flanking actions. As a countermeasure against the disintegration of the shoulders and as support to the flanking actions, it will prove effective to protect the open flanks of the break-through area with artillery and to assemble small local reserves behind them. Frequently one infantry company supported by assault guns will suffice for this purpose.

It would be a mistake to attempt to close an extensive breach across its entire width by overextending the attack frontage of the main reserve force. A counterattack delivered under such circumstances

would not have sufficient striking power and would be in danger of losing its punch and bogging down before it reached its objective. On the other hand, a delayed commitment of the reserves will result in an expansion of the breach; then, the counterattacking force will be faced with an entirely new situation with which it will be unable to cope alone. Such a delay often leads to heavy losses which can only be offset by committing additional forces.

Whenever the enemy achieves a major break-through that causes the collapse of a wide sector of the front (thirty miles or more), the local reserves will always be insufficient to close the gap by frontal counterattack. Piecemeal commitment of individual divisions in a gap of this width will simply lead to their engulfment by the advancing hostile avalanche. Only a strong force consisting of several corps will be able to stem the tide and halt the enemy advance in the depth of the defense or to close the gap by a counterattack. There will usually be a considerable time lapse, however, before a force of such strength can be released from other sectors and moved to the break-through area. Meanwhile, attempts must be made to narrow the breach by withdrawing to a shorter line and by strengthening the resistance in the sectors adjacent to the gap.

The German offensive to recapture Kharkov and Belgorod presents a good example of a frontal counterattack. By 23 November 1942 the Russians had closed the ring around Stalingrad and started the most powerful winter offensive of the war. Advancing rapidly, they annihilated in quick succession the Romanian, Italian, and Hungarian units along the Chir and Don Rivers and opened a 350-mile gap in the German front. This breach was equal to the total length of the western front in World War I. Initially, only isolated German divisions, committed in support of the allied and satellite forces, stood in the way of the Russians, like the stays of a corset. The bulk of the German reserves, including five fully equipped panzer divisions, were tied down in western Europe because of the invasion of North Africa by Allied forces. Some of these divisions later appeared on the eastern front. The German armies in the Caucasus, in danger of being cut off, were forced to withdraw. Their motorized units, mainly First Panzer Army, were committed along the Donets in order to strengthen the southern wing of Army Group Don. North of the gap, the Second Army was forced to evacuate Voronezh and the Don front, and its southern wing was pushed far back to the west. Gradually, two-thirds of the entire Eastern Front began to sway and crumble. Russian pressure mounted constantly and the only solution was to withdraw farther and farther to the west. The Russians poured in a never ending stream of hastily reorganized divisions and continued their drive. Three hostile armies converged on Kharkov and in mid-February 1943 succeeded in capturing this important traffic center by

a concentric attack. (Map 2) But their next thrust, aimed at Poltava, ground to a halt 30 miles short of the city because the Soviet troops were too exhausted to continue. Now they placed all their hopes in the Third Tank Army commanded by their most capable tank expert, General Popov. In mid-February Popov advanced practically without resistance in the direction northwest of Dnepropetrovsk with the apparent intention of reaching the Dnepr bend. His objective was to cross the Dnepr before the German forces were able to build up their defenses along the river, but it soon became obvious that his forces lacked the necessary drive. Meanwhile, the Germans were building up strength for a frontal counterattack.

The divisions arriving from the West detrained at Poltava behind a defensive screen established by Provisional Corps Raus. This corps held the line with three infantry divisions and the reconnaissance regiment of the 3d SS Panzer Division. Its other motorized elements, the Panzer Division Grossdeutschland and the Fuehrer Escort Battalion, were in rest areas west of Poltava, close to the front. They formed a mobile reserve to be committed in the event that the enemy attempted to capture Poltava by an enveloping thrust through the gap to the north. The Russians actually tried to outflank Poltava, but this danger was eliminated by German infantry supported by the reconnaissance regiment and tactical Luftwaffe units. During these actions the enemy showed definite signs of weakness and exhaustion, and the time for a major counterattack seemed to be approaching.

Quick action was indicated since the snow was beginning to thaw. Mud formed on the ground and soon all movements would become impossible. But deep down the soil was solidly frozen. Cold nights prevented a quick thaw and favored movements during the early morning hours. Meanwhile, the battle-weary German front-line troops were granted a short breathing spell and given the opportunity to integrate newly arrived replacements and equipment.

By 10 March 1943 the counterattack forces stood ready to jump off; their morale was excellent. The main effort was placed on the southern wing where terrain conditions favored the employment of armor. Here, the Grossdeutschland Division was assembled and given the mission of attacking toward Valki. Adjacent on the left, the 320th Infantry Division jumped off after a preparation from all guns of two divisions, supported by corps artillery. The infantry penetrated the enemy positions, mopped up a strong point on the main Poltava–Kharkov highway, and pushed the enemy beyond a flooded brook on the other side of the town. This normally insignificant watercourse had suddenly grown into a raging torrent which brought the attack to an unexpected halt after a gain of only one mile. The tanks of the Grossdeutschland Division attempted to overcome the swift current farther upstream and finally succeeded in crossing after

several hours. More than eighty tanks broke through the second enemy position on the east bank of the brook and rolled toward Valki. Soon an improvised bridge was thrown across the brook and the attack regained its momentum. In the sector adjacent to the north, the 167th and 168th Infantry Divisions penetrated the enemy positions after heavy fighting, captured a number of villages, and attempted to establish contact with the LI Infantry Corps on the left. The reinforced reconnaissance regiment, committed between the 320th and the 167th Divisions, closed in on the enemy positions situated in the woods and penetrated deep into the forest. Its tanks advanced along the railroad tracks running parallel to the woods. By afternoon Corps Raus was making progress along its entire front and kept the crumbling enemy forces on the move.

On the second day of the thrust the corps committed all its forces in a concentric attack on Bogodukhov. For this purpose the corps zone was narrowed to 10 miles. Its width had already been reduced from 60 to 25 miles by the end of the first day. The enemy forces holding Bogodukhov were unable to resist the onslaught of the German ground troops which were closely supported by the Luftwaffe. The city fell after brief house-to-house fighting. Corps Raus then established contact with the spearheads of the I SS Panzer Corps which had just entered Olshany, fifteen miles southeast of Bogodukhov. After annihilating strong enemy forces in the Olshany area, the panzer corps turned to the east to envelop Kharkov and cut off the enemy's route of withdrawal to the north.

While the main force of Provisional Corps Raus was to advance northward in an attempt to establish contact with the LI Corps and thereby cut off the enemy forces in the Akhtyrka area, the 320th Division was to screen the pivoting movement of the I SS Panzer Corps. Ever increasing mud and floods slowed the advance at every step. Although all bridges across the swollen Vorskla, Udy, and Lopan Rivers had been destroyed, the infantry and panzer units were nevertheless able to reach their daily objectives. Many motor vehicles and horse-drawn artillery pieces, however, bogged down along the way. On the other hand, the considerably lighter artillery of the Russians and their *Panje* [Ed.: Russian peasant] wagons pulled through everywhere and escaped the German advance.

The Grossdeutschland Division carried the main effort and reached the upper Vorskla, with the 167th Division following closely. Since the LI Corps on the southern wing of Second Army lagged far behind, no contact with that corps could be established and the enemy around Akhtyrka escaped encirclement. The continuation of the operation by a thrust on Tomarovka required the panzer forces to pivot to the east, changing the direction of their advance. They were replaced by elements of the 167th Division which were to hold a line facing north

to provide flank cover. The advance toward Tomarovka was delayed because territorial gains toward the east automatically led to an extension of the open flank.

By the second day of this eastward thrust, the strong 167th Division was almost entirely immobilized along the flank. The arrival of LI Corps had to be awaited before the eastward thrust could be resumed. The main reason for this delay was that the boundary between Army Groups Center and South ran along the Vorskla River. The Army High Command, responsible for co-ordinating the operations of the two army groups, was too far removed, and its decisions therefore were too slow to keep abreast of the fast-moving events at the front. Finally, the Army High Command ordered LI Corps to relieve the 167th Division. The advance continued and the Grossdeutschland Division entered Tomarovka. On its approach to the town, the division destroyed a considerable number of Russian tanks while many undamaged ones, which had bogged down in the mud, were retrieved and turned against the enemy.

It was in this action that Tiger tanks engaged the Russian T34's for the first time; the results were more than gratifying for the Germans. For instance, two Tigers, acting as an armored point, destroyed a pack of T34's. Normally the Russian tanks would stand in ambush at the hitherto safe distance of 1,350 yards and wait for the German tanks to expose themselves upon their exit from a village. They would then take the German tanks under fire while the Panthers were still outranged. Until now, these tactics had been foolproof. This time, however, the Russians had miscalculated. Instead of leaving the village, the Tigers took up well-camouflaged positions and made full use of their longer range. Within a short time they knocked out sixteen T34's which were sitting in open terrain and, when the others turned about, the Tigers pursued the fleeing Russians and destroyed eighteen more tanks. It was observed that the 88-mm. armor-piercing shells had such a terrific impact that they ripped off the turrets of many T34's and hurled them several yards. The German soldiers' immediate reaction was to coin the phrase, "The T34 raises its hat whenever it meets a Tiger." The performance of the new German tanks was a great morale booster.

Farther to the south, Kharkov was captured by the 1st SS Panzer Division after four days of street fighting during which Tigers again played a decisive role. The 2d SS Panzer Division turned north, advanced on Belgorod, captured the city, and linked up with the Grossdeutschland Division which had thrust beyond Tomarovka. The capture of the two cities secured the anchors of the new German line along the Donets. Between these two points two German divisions slowly struggled through the mud in their effort to reach the west bank of the river.

The Russian elements that were able to cross the Donets were badly mauled. German reconnaissance units, advancing beyond the river, met with little resistance. Even though the German attack divisions were fully capable of continuing their drive, the over-all situation and the prevailing mud made it inadvisable.

The objective of the frontal counterattack had been achieved. The breach, open for four months, was closed and the greatest Russian winter offensive was stopped. After suffering a defeat of gigantic proportions, the Germans once again held a continuous line anchored on the Donets River.

Chapter 2

FLANK ATTACK

The defender will often find it expedient to attack the flank of an enemy penetration with the objective of cutting off and destroying the hostile forces that have broken through. Such tactics are effective only when a secure shoulder provides the defender with a springboard for an attack which is launched straight across the gap to the other shoulder, or when a natural obstacle, such as a large body of water or a swamp, serves as an anvil against which he can crush the attacker. An effective flank attack requires a balanced force with adequate striking power whose strength need not necessarily exceed one-third of the total enemy forces committed in the break-through. The more powerful and mobile the force, the quicker the defender will attain his objective. Unsupported infantry is incapable of mounting a successful flank attack against an armored penetration. In such a situation infantry must always be supported by strong assault gun and armored units as well as sizable antitank forces.

The defender who attacks the flank of an enemy penetration runs the risk of exposing his own flank and must therefore take this factor into account when he plans the counterattack. The danger is usually less serious than anticipated because, during the initial stages of the break-through, the attacker usually commits his forces almost exclusively along the axis of advance without giving much attention to his flanks. These rush tactics are practical, however, only so long as the defender has neither the means nor the opportunity for immediate, effective counteraction. During their invasion of Russia in 1941, for instance, the Germans did not present the Russians with any such opening. On the other hand, during the Russian counteroffenses in 1942, the German command always had strong armored forces at its disposal, making it inadvisable for the enemy to be careless in exposing his flanks. Bitter experience was to teach the Russian that flanks must be protected until he finally made them so tank-proof that they could only be overpowered with heavy casualties. For this reason the German flank attacks gradually lost their sting after 1943 and were more often repulsed.

Flank attacks are particularly effective when employed to eliminate hostile river crossings. The forces which cross first can usually be shattered or wiped out without too much difficulty because they rarely have adequate defensive protection. This happened, for instance, along the Teterev in December 1943. (Chapter 3) The defender

will find it much more difficult, well-nigh impossible, to eliminate a strongly fortified enemy bridgehead which has adequate fire support from the far bank of the river.

At the beginning of April 1944, the Germans launched a flank attack which proved very effective in remedying a precarious situation. After heavy winter fighting in eastern Galicia and Podolia, the Fourth Panzer Army, with three corps, was on a line extending from Kovel in the north, through Brody, to Berezhany in the south. (Map 3) The Russian encirclement of Brody was imminent. There was a gap between that town and the army's left wing, and the army right flank was exposed. The so-called fortress Ternopol, 18 miles to the front of the south wing, had been encircled for ten days. The First Panzer Army, forming a roving pocket, was moving north of the Dnestr River toward the gap on Fourth Panzer Army's southern flank. Strong Russian forces were driving westward past the pocket on both sides of the river.

Although the over-all situation was far from satisfactory, the Fourth Panzer Army had at least stopped its retrograde movement. The army was intact after many critical battles and had inflicted heavy losses upon the enemy during the winter. Despite evident battle weariness, the Russians continued their attempts to take Brody in order to gain a route to Lvov. They did succeed in encircling the city on several occasions. The encirclements were broken each time by the provisional armored Task Force Friebe, made up of one battalion of Tigers and one of Panthers. This task force, augmented by a rocket projector brigade equipped with 900 late-type launchers, destroyed the enemy while he was still in his assembly area preparing for the final all-out attack. The Russians abandoned the siege of Brody and, in a most unusual change of tactics, used their newly arrived forces to form a continuous front line opposite the army center. The XIII Infantry Corps followed suit and linked up with the XLII Infantry Corps to the north, thus closing the gap north of Brody. The armored task force was now available for other missions.

The army's exposed right flank was under light attack. The Russians captured a few villages, but they were promptly retaken by local reserves supported by an armored battalion which moved freely along the flank. The army front was intact and the southern flank, though exposed, was secure.

Still, the Russian forces which had bypassed the roving pocket continued their westward drive. Their armored spearheads south of the Dnestr entered Stanislav, and those to the north of the river approached the fortified area around the Galich bridgehead. Quickly gathered German infantry, together with advance elements of the

Hungarian First Army, which was assembling in the Stanislav–Nadvornaya area, drove the enemy out of Stanislav after street fighting. North of the river, however, the enemy, hampered only by muddy terrain, reached the Zlota Lipa valley. His axis of advance pointed toward the Drohobycz oil fields.

The forward elements of the forces in the pocket had by now reached the Chortkuv area. The Fourth Panzer Army was given the mission of relieving the First Panzer Army by a flank attack, and it received strong reinforcements for the execution of this task. The flank attack was to be launched to the southeast from Berezhany, while a secondary thrust to the Dnestr was to pinch off and destroy the Russian infantry divisions which had penetrated as far as the Galich area.

As a preliminary step, the first elements of the 100th Light Infantry Division, detraining in the army rear area, were ordered to capture the terrain south of Berezhany. Elements of another infantry division were to take the area south of Rogatin. Both of these operations were designed to secure the unloading of II SS Panzer Corps, which had been transferred from Italy. Within a few days after detraining the corps was ready to jump off. Aware of the threat to their flank, the Russians used all their available air power to harass the assembly of the German forces which were restricted to the only two usable roads in the area. This enemy interference, however, was negligible compared to the difficulties presented by the muddy terrain.

The 100th Light Infantry Division was to clear the way for the decisive thrust, with the panzer corps following close behind. The only available all-weather road permitting major mechanized movements, led via Podgaytse to Buchach. The infantry had the mission of capturing heavily defended Podgaytse to open the road for the panzer thrust. Hardly had the enemy screening force been dislodged from the wooded heights south of Berezhany, when the infantry ran into huge snowdrifts which covered the entire road to a depth of several feet along 200- to 500-yard stretches. It was impossible to bypass these obstacles because of the rugged, snow-covered terrain on both sides of the road. Security guards were posted and the combat troops, equipped only with intrenching tools and a few locally procured shovels, began to clear the snow. After several hours of steady work, a single lane was opened and around noon it was possible to move up the artillery and tanks which were essential for the impending operation against Podgaytse.

Despite the delay, the infantry took the strongly organized high ground in front of Podgaytse the same day. The division's Tiger battalion knocked out the T34's and antitank gun positions which defended the entrance to the town, but in so doing completely blocked

its own advance. The main entrance alone was clogged by sixteen disabled Russian tanks and, as the infantry edged forward in house-to-house fighting, the wrecks were towed off, pushed aside, or blown up. By late evening the Tigers had thrust across the town, knocking out thirty-six additional tanks in their advance. The infantry mopped up during the night and on the next morning turned eastward toward the Strypa River to secure the left flank of the panzer corps and to make way for its advance.

The 10th SS Panzer Division now took the lead, with 100 tanks spearheading the movement. At the southern edge of Podgaytse the division ran into strong resistance from skillfully concealed antitank guns which were too well entrenched to be attacked frontally and could not be bypassed because of the deep water ditches, ravines, and swamps on both sides of the road. After close reconnaissance, the guns were finally knocked out one by one with concentrated panzer and artillery fire. The way cleared, the tanks rolled forward. To avoid further delay, the division commander decided to drive cross-country to Buchach, but the route taken for a short cut proved to be a quagmire. Only the division commander with five lead tanks got through. Although he was able to establish contact with the spearheads of the First Panzer Army, this achievement served no practical purpose as long as the highway from Podgaytse to Buchach was still in enemy hands. The hasty decision to leave this highway delayed the operation and cut off the division commander from his troops. Their tanks bogged down, the panzer troops, fighting as infantry under the corps commander, undertook the clearance of the highway. Hostile antitank fire interfered with their advance, and the Soviets offered strong resistance in the villages along the road. But, subjected to increasing pressure both from the panzer corps and the infantry division approaching from the Galich area, their efforts were in vain. That evening, near the bend of the road west of Buchach, the Russian infantry divisions fleeing eastward along the Dnestr were blocked off, hurled against the river, and destroyed with the help of newly arrived infantry forces. The attack units regrouped and then turned eastward. On 5 April Buchach was reached, and the axis of withdrawal of the encircled army was cleared. The Russians did not readily yield the prize which was being wrung from their grasp. In fierce pursuit they tried to cross the swollen Strypa to cut the escape artery, but they were no match for the liberating forces. Whenever they got across the river, they were immediately thrown back.

By mid-April the right wing of the Fourth Panzer Army had deployed behind the Strypa, and the front, anchored on the Dnestr to the south, included a bridgehead across the Strypa opposite Buchach. On this line fixed positions were organized. The objective of the flank attack—stabilization of the front in eastern Galicia—was attained

with the liberation of the First Panzer Army from encirclement and its reintegration into the German defense system.

In another instance, hostile armored forces opened a 20-mile gap through which the Russians poured reinforcements. The German command wanted to close the breach by a flank attack but had only one panzer division for this purpose. The division was much too weak for this mission, all the more since the enemy had committed strong forces to widen the gap and was protecting his southern flank with powerful armored and antitank units. The operation was therefore divided into several phases. As an initial step the crumbling shoulder south of the gap was strengthened, and then a preliminary panzer attack narrowed the breach to ten miles. Immediately after its replacement by infantry units, the panzer division was ready for the main phase of the operation—the closing of the gap. In a surprise night attack against the enemy flank, the mechanized infantry overcame the tank and antitank cover, and the German tanks, immediately following, succeeded in closing the gap. Furious enemy attacks against the newly established defense line were repelled, but now the northern anchor, held by a recently activated division, gave way in the face of heavily mounting pressure. Finally, this danger was eliminated by the timely arrival of reinforcements. This example clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of a well-executed flank attack even though it may have to be carried out with comparatively weak tank forces. The importance of securing the shoulders at the base of a break-through is only too obvious.

The flank attack is very frequently used in local counterattacks and is an integral part of many large-scale defensive operations. A break-through on a very wide frontage by overwhelmingly superior armor cannot be eliminated by a flank attack even though strong tank forces may be available to the defender, because the attacker usually protects his interior flanks with adequate armor and antitank gun fronts. But even if the flank attack should surmount this obstacle, the attacker still has sufficient time to shift strong tank units from his main effort to the threatened interior flank in order to eliminate the danger. Under the most favorable circumstances, the defender's armored units may be able to divert the attacker's main force by compelling him to establish a new defense line on his flank. This happened west of Kiev in November 1943 when the Germans first succeeded in thwarting the enemy's attack plan, but later saw their own plans frustrated. The result was an extension of their own front line which tied down the German reserves committed in the flank attack. Moreover, by leaving their own flank open, the Germans encouraged the Russians to press their attacks in that direction.

Frequently, the threat of a flank attack by armored forces will alarm the attacker so much that he will halt his offensive in order to avoid

the annihilation of those of his forces which have broken through. He will be especially apprehensive if, only shortly before, he has suffered a severe blow by a flank attack or some other armored thrust. During the German relief thrust toward Stalingrad, for instance, panzer forces turned against the flank of the advancing Russian infantry, who fled panic-stricken. This was not surprising since earlier that month a Russian cavalry corps had been annihilated by a flank attack of a strong panzer division at Pokhlebin on the Aksay River and two Russian infantry divisions had been routed north of the river by similar methods. (See CMH Pub 104–12, Russian Combat Methods in World War II, pp. 69 ff.)

Chapter 3

SPOILING ATTACK

The spoiling attack—a surprise thrust into the enemy attack preparations—is a very effective, though rare, operation. Its purpose is to disorganize the enemy's assembly and thereby delay and weaken his offensive or to force him to launch his attack at a less vulnerable point.

Such an attack from the defensive can be undertaken only under certain conditions. The enemy assembly area must be easily accessible to a surprise thrust, and the defender must have strong armored reserves on hand. The terrain and road net must facilitate quick maneuver under cover of darkness. All attack plans must be concealed from the enemy, or he must be deceived with regard to the real intentions. For this reason, it is imperative that one act without delay.

These prerequisites existed only on rare occasions. However, the Germans were presented with a perfect opportunity to exploit them at the beginning of November 1943. (Map 4) The Russians had broken through north of Kiev, and there were indications that they intended to envelop the northern wing of Army Group South. The forces at the disposal of the First Ukranian Front were insufficient to attain this objective. The Soviets advanced sixty miles to the west, captured the important railroad junction of Fastov, neutralized Zhitomir, and encircled the LIX Infantry Corps in Korosten. But a German flank attack by armored units forced the Russians to pull back across the Teterev. Although Zhitomir was relieved, Fastov remained in enemy hands, and the siege of Korosten continued. The Fourth Panzer Army front, which had faced east before the Russian offensive, gave way and was now facing north. Both the German and the Russian flanks were open to the west. Because of their inability to close this gap, the Germans extended an open invitation to the Russians, to continue their offensive in order to exploit the success they had hitherto achieved. They had a unique opportunity to execute a wide envelopment out of their assembly area north of Zhitomir. Troop concentrations and road repairs performed behind the hostile lines indicated the imminent resumption of the Soviet offensive which would first threaten the Fourth Panzer Army and subsequently the entire army group.

The situation called for immediate action, and the Germans therefore decided to avert the threat by striking the flank of the hostile at-

tack preparations with strong panzer forces. The XLVIII Panzer Corps, with the 1st SS, 7th, and 1st Panzer Divisions, was withdrawn from the front and assembled behind the center of the army sector. Meanwhile the approach routes—some of which led through marshy wooded terrain—were reconnoitered, bridges repaired, and the partisan units rampant in the forests dispersed by the security division responsible for this area. Immediately afterward, the combat elements of all three panzer divisions moved out in broad daylight and marched along the main highway through Zhitomir in order to deceive the enemy into believing that strong forces were being shifted to another sector of the front. It was later established that this deception was completely successful. In any event, these preliminary steps were actually inevitable since the movements connected with them had to be executed to enable the Germans to strike deep into the open enemy flank. Without this attempt at deception, the movements would have required two nights, since the approach and assembly of such a strong panzer corps could not be effected in one night. By carrying out the movements by day, they could be timed so that the units reached their turn-off points along the main highway shortly after dusk. By that time half the itinerary had been covered and the movements continued without interruption. The enemy had no opportunity to observe the turning movements of the corps, first to the north, then toward the east.

The entire movement proceeded according to plan without enemy interference. On 4 December 1943, at 0600, all three panzer divisions were poised for attack along the Zhitomir-Korosten highway. At the same time all the GHQ artillery, a rocket-projector brigade with launchers of different calibers up to 320-mm., and an armored train, were moved into position behind the left wing of XIII Infantry Corps on the extreme end of the open flank. These preparations, as well as the concentration of strong reserves behind XIII Corps wing, were to lead the Russians into assuming that the German attack would continue on the army left wing, exactly where it had bogged down the previous month. The Russians were easily convinced of these intentions because their own reaction in similar situations was identical. When a heavy concentration was delivered in this sector at dawn and a German infantry division launched a frontal attack immediately afterward, the enemy felt absolutely certain that his estimates were correct. He shifted strong reserves to this sector and counterattacked, only to be stopped in his tracks by the concentrated fire of 300 rocket launchers. The Russians were still completely unaware of the impending flank attack. Only after they had moved all available forces and weapons close to the front line, did two German corps comprising five divisions simultaneously attack their right flank. The main thrust was executed by the three divisions of

XLVIII Panzer Corps which advanced east toward the Teterev River. Some 1st SS Panzer Division elements were to turn south and attack the Russian forces from the rear. The 7th Panzer Division was to cover the corps left flank and establish contact with LIX Corps, which was breaking out of encircled Korosten.

Completely surprised by this flank attack, the enemy offered little resistance during the first day. The mine fields emplaced by the Russians to protect their open flank were easily discovered from the air and bypassed. The entire flank was crushed and destroyed by the attack from the rear. Within a few hours the German tanks penetrated deep into the enemy artillery emplacements, overran batteries under cover of light ground fog, and destroyed the guns. Since the ground was frozen and covered by only a thin layer of snow, the tanks were able to move quickly and according to schedule. By the end of the first day, the panzer divisions had advanced fifteen to twenty miles into the enemy's flank, taken numerous prisoners, and captured all of his artillery. The LIX Corps had achieved its breakout and established contact with the panzer corps. The Zhitomir–Korosten highway and railroad line were once again in German hands. The completeness of the surprise achieved guaranteed the success of the operation. Only weak remnants of the enemy forces escaped to the east.

The thrust was continued during the second day. But its momentum was greatly impaired by heavy fog and a breakdown of the 1st SS Panzer Division supply system. Even though this division dropped out because of ammunition and fuel shortages, the other divisions advanced twelve more miles. The enemy resistance remained negligible. As the attack progressed, the elements of the XIII Corps gradually joined the panzer corps thrust along the sectors in which the flank attack had swept away all enemy opposition. Farther north, however, the LIX Corps was heavily engaged and progressed only step by step.

It was not until the third day that the first enemy countermeasures were felt, but the few Russian armored and infantry units thrown across the lower Teterev were incapable of withstanding the powerful drive of the panzer corps. The Russians' newly established defenses were quickly overrun and several Soviet tanks destroyed during this action. Armed points of the 1st Panzer Division reached the Teterev south of the railroad bridge. The 69th Infantry Division, operating on the right wing of XIII Corps, crossed the Teterev at Radomyshl and joined the panzer corps advance. On the other hand, the sizable Russian forces remaining in the swampy forests along the Irsha held out so tenaciously that the LIX Corps with its two infantry divisions was unable to overcome their resistance. West of the Teterev, the enemy troops were reduced to a few bridgeheads. During the night,

however, these were reinforced to a point where they nearly burst with personnel and equipment. A new enemy army attempted to reverse the tide at any cost.

During the fourth day, heavy enemy attacks struck at the XIII Corps and XLVIII Panzer Corps sectors. Most of them were checked and territorial gains were made by means of armored counterattacks. By the end of the day, however, the center of XIII Corps was in danger of being overrun.

The Germans now decided to eliminate the enemy bridgeheads. On the fifth day of the drive the 1st Panzer Division and the 1st SS Panzer Division formed the jaws of a pincers movement intended to annihilate all enemy forces remaining on the west bank of the Teterev. The weak 7th Panzer Division was to protect the north flank. Desperate enemy attempts to withstand the onslaught of 200 tanks were in vain. One bridgehead after another was crushed or reduced by the powerful drive of the panzer divisions. By noon armored points established contact within the perimeter of the fifth and last enemy bridgehead. The bridges were blown up and the bulk of the enemy equipment, together with many prisoners, fell into German hands. The day culminated in an all-out attack by all available panzer forces and strong elements of XIII Corps against those enemy units which had dented the German lines during the preceding day. It ended in their encirclement and annihilation.

Thus, the first objective of the operation was achieved. The surprise thrust from the defensive penetrated an area forty-five miles in depth and completely destroyed one Russian army and a second one suffered such heavy casualties that it was at least temporarily rendered ineffective. Enemy casualties numbered thousands dead, wounded, or prisoners; more than 200 enemy tanks were destroyed and approximately 800 artillery pieces captured. German losses were light. The front line was shortened and now faced east; it was held solely by German infantry divisions. The XLVIII Panzer Corps was available for another mission.

The second phase of the thrust had the objective of consolidating the German lines. In order to clear the swampy forests along the Irsha of hostile forces and establish direct contact between LIX and XIII Corps, the XLVIII Panzer Corps moved to the Korosten area and launched a pincers attack against the enemy forces in the swamps. Two panzer divisions and *Korpsabteilung* "E" [Ed.: a provisional unit of divisional strength formed by three weakened infantry divisions, each organized into one regiment] attacked from Korosten, north of the Irsha, toward the southeast, and the 7th Panzer and 112th Infantry Division thrust from positions south of the river toward the northeast. The northern spearhead, advancing in open terrain along the railroad to Kiev, initially made good progress, whereas the south-

ern thrust was slowed down by heavy fighting in the wooded terrain. Nevertheless, the two armored speadheads established contact by the second day. The marshy forests along the Irsha were still being combed when strong Russian tank formations suddenly launched a flank attack from the north. Soviet armor and infantry also moved up from Kiev. According to statements made by prisoners of war, the Russians anticipated a German offensive to capture Kiev and therefore committed all units available in the area. In view of their limited strength, the Germans had not planned such a large-scale operation, quite apart from the difficulties they would have had in getting through the marshy forests extending between the Teterev and the Dnepr. Actually, the objective of the surprise thrust had been fully achieved, and the intended creation of a continuous infantry front was well under way. In spite of the reckless expenditure of newly arrived armored and infantry forces, the Russian counterattack did not gain any ground. All enemy attacks were repelled after stubborn fighting. On the very first day of the clash, the enemy lost more than eighty tanks. During the following two days, 150 additional tanks were destroyed by the Germans, and the Russian counterattack bogged down eventually. Minor thrusts supported by tanks were directed against the XIII Corps sector but were equally futile.

The consolidating phase of the thrust accentuated the effects of the initial surprise attack. Two additional Russian armies were so badly mauled that they were incapable of offensive action. The acute threat in the area north of Zhitomir was thereby eliminated. A few weeks later the Russian Christmas offensive was launched at a less vulnerable sector of the front, an obvious indication that the enemy had been forced to change his plans.

The spoiling attack therefore achieved the dual purpose of relieving an encircled corps and enabling the Germans to build up a continuous front where previously there had been a wide gap. The annihilation of strong enemy forces was an incidental, though important result of this operation. A frontal counterattack would not have been successful in this case, quite aside from the heavy casualties it would have involved.

Frontal thrusts into enemy attack preparations can be employed only in minor operations. Their success depends on achieving complete surprise as, for instance, during night raids. A singularly well-executed frontal surprise thrust was launched at the beginning of March 1945, when a detachment of young German naval cadets carried out a raid from a bridgehead north of Stettin. Well equipped with *Panzerfausts* [Ed.: recoilless antitank grenade launchers], they struck at the center of the assembly area of a Russian tank brigade and destroyed all its thirty-six tanks.

Chapter 4

DEFENSIVE PINCERS

Since defensive pincers are the most effective countermeasure against an enemy break-through, they should be applied whenever the tactical situation permits and the necessary forces are available. If these forces have sufficient striking power and mobility, the application of defensive pincers will reverse an unfavorable situation very quickly and decisively. The immediate objective is to seal off the enemy penetration by flank attacks launched simultaneously from both shoulders. Ideally, this maneuver should lead to a "Cannae" —the encirclement and destruction of the enemy force which has broken through.

The jaws of the pincers must attack simultaneously, overcome the hostile flank protection, and link up before enemy countermeasures can become effective. If the jaws do not strike at the same time, the enemy will be given an opportunity to reinforce that interior flank which is not under attack and the maneuver may easily fail. A typical example for such a failure was the Russian pincers attack which was launched during the summer of 1941 in an attempt to eliminate the German bridgehead at the Porechye on the Luga. (See CMH Pub 104–12, pp. 42 ff.)

Another indispensable prerequisite for the success of defensive pincers is the close co-ordination of all participating units under one command. In minor actions the exercise of unified command will not meet with any particular difficulties. Complications arise during large-scale operations when some of the participating divisions are separated by long distances and belong to different armies or army groups. In such instances it is expedient to make a single army or army group command responsible for the entire operation. A similar procedure must be followed even in minor actions if the enemy attempts to break through at a sector boundary—a common practice with the Russians.

Defensive pincers can eliminate even comparatively major breakthroughs. During the course of such an operation several divisions or corps may regain their freedom of maneuver as, for instance, after the Russian break-through near Belgorod in 1943. At that time the armored wedge which the enemy had driven to a depth of 100 miles was pinched off at the base of the penetration, and his thrust was checked by a pincers movement carried out by two panzer corps, starting from the two opposite shoulders.

When the jaws of the pincers are too weak or the terrain too difficult to tie off the enemy forces that have broken through, protracted fighting involving many critical situations and the formation of curiously shaped front lines will result. In the Russian campaign this occurred for the first time during the battle along the Volkhov in the winter of 1941–42, when the city of Leningrad came close to extinction, one million civilians being starved or frozen to death. Even the Russian soldiers were inadequately fed and equipped and by the end of the winter half of them were dead.

Faced by this situation, the Soviet leaders decided that Leningrad must be relieved at all cost. For this mission a new command staff was formed under General Merezkov, and the Fifty-ninth and Second Assault Armies, moving up with strong, fresh forces, were integrated into the front line built up along the Volkhov River. (Map 5) At the same time six divisions from the Leningrad sector were shifted farther east to strengthen the Russian Fifty-fourth Army. After the German spearheads had been withdrawn from Volkhovstroy, fighting continued along a broad front extending from Novgorod to Lodva. Although the German forces dug foxholes and trenches in the frozen swampy forests and snowdrifts, they lacked adequately prepared positions and supply routes.

In this situation, between 10 and 13 January 1942, the Second Assault Army, led by General Vlassov, achieved a break-through across the Volkhov. Five divisions and one ski brigade reached the Novgorod–Chudovo highway and railroad line and pushed back the German screening force along a twenty-mile front. The Germans attempted to re-form their lines along the highway. Islands of resistance in encircled Mostki and in Spasskaya Polist prevented a German rout, but a fifteen-mile gap was opened in the German line, leaving the Russians free access to the rear of the Eighteenth Army. The Second Assault Army struck across no man's land through the forests to the northwest. The attack plan called for cutting the Tosno–Chudovo *Rollbahn* [Ed.: road designated as a main axis of motorized transportation] and the disruption of the other German supply routes in conjunction with frontal attacks along the Leningrad sector. If the Russians succeeded, most of Eighteenth Army would be lost with only a few remnants escaping to the west. The Russian spearheads advanced 50 miles, meeting virtually no resistance.

The German command and troops performed extraordinary feats during these weeks of extreme danger. Battalions, combat teams, even entire divisions were improvised and thrown into battle. No task was left undone; virgin territory was explored; new expedients were developed. All service forces were employed in combat, troops of other arms suddenly becoming infantrymen. This was a struggle for survival waged simultaneously against an enemy superior in

manpower and matériel and against the terrors of a fierce winter. Besides struggling against a cunning enemy, the Germans also had to steel and conquer themselves. Yet the impossible was accomplished. Only 12 miles separated the enemy spearheads from their objectives when they were suddenly stopped, repelled, and shattered. On 25 February one enemy force that had penetrated close to the *Rollbahn* west of Lyuban was cut off from its rear communications and annihilated. A new inner front extending over 120 miles was built up around the Volkhov pocket and connected with the outer front. It ran straight across the marshes north of Lake Ilmen, followed the course of the Oredezh and the railroad tracks connecting Divenskiy with Chudovo. The danger had not yet been overcome.

In view of the latest setback, the Soviet command reduced its objectives, but its new intentions presented an even greater danger. For several weeks the Russian Fifty-fourth Army had attacked the thinly held German line in the swamps south of Lake Ladoga. These attacks were repelled by the 269th Infantry Division and units of XXVIII Corps. The Fifty-fourth Army received additional forces and was given the mission of breaking through at Pogostye and thrusting toward Lyuban. At the same time the Second Assault Army in the pocket stopped its westward drive and assembled its forces south of Lyuban. Strong elements of the Fifty-second and Fifty-ninth Armies followed into the pocket to cover the rear and the flanks of the Russian forces. The Fifty-fourth and Second Assault Armies were to launch a pincers attack, cut off the German I Infantry Corps, and encircle and annihilate it. Once this was accomplished, the road to Leningrad would be open again.

By now the Volkhov pocket held fourteen Russian infantry divisions, supported by three cavalry divisions, seven cavalry brigades, one tank brigade, and five GHQ artillery regiments. The Fifty-fourth Army had reached a strength of twelve divisions. Its striking power centered in an armored force of 200 tanks, most of which were T34's capable of operating under winter conditions. The German defense forces had no equivalent matériel to oppose them. Jumping off on 9 March, the Fifty-fourth Army therefore had no difficulty in penetrating the German lines and widening the gap until it reached ten miles in width and twelve miles in depth. The German infantry formed a human wall in an attempt to stop the enemy. Although its number was at no time more than 3,500, it withstood the onslaught of 90,000 Russians. The German forces yielded ground, lost some engagements, but final victory was theirs because the Russians were denied the opportunity to exploit their local penetrations. The enemy was finally forced to discontinue the offensive three weeks after he had launched his first attack in this sector.

The encircled Second Assault Army was even less successful when

it hurled its forces against the German lines forming the northern boundary of the pocket. During several weeks of fierce struggle, the Russians were incapable of overcoming the German resistance. What finally paralyzed them was the disaster that took place to their rear.

On 15 March, elements of I Corps with the SS Police Division in the lead went over to the attack west of Spasskaya Polist and struck at the enemy supply routes. Elements of the XXVIII Corps converged from the south. After great hardships, the German spearheads linked up on 19 March. Even though this ring around the Volkhov pocket could not be fully maintained in the face of incessant counterattacks by superior Russian forces, the escape gap was kept down to approximately two miles. The Russians laid the tracks for two narrow-gage field railways through the gap, but their capacity was insufficient to supply the 180,000 men within the pocket.

When, after a series of attacks and counterattacks, the front was stabilized, the German lines formed a "finger" cutting across the Russian axis of movement. It was twelve miles long, but in no place more than two to two and a half miles in width. There was not a single point within this finger which could not be swept by enemy heavy weapons fire from the east or from the west.

At first the Soviets made some vain attempts to envelop the finger through the swamps in the rear and cut it off at its base. In April the Russians decided to make an extreme effort. On 29 April the Fifty-ninth Army threw seven infantry regiments and two armored brigades into an attack along a narrow front. Thrusting westward from positions north of Mostki, they were to link with four divisions attacking eastward. This Russian attack had to succeed. Two gaps, each two miles in width, were torn open on either side of the finger which was lacerated to the bone. During the next few days the fortunes of war changed frequently. Finally, undaunted courage and supreme devotion triumphed. By 13 May the Russian regiments which had penetrated the German lines were encircled and shattered, and the former main line of resistance was re-established.

The die was cast. The Volkhov pocket had become untenable for the Russians, and their withdrawal began about 15 May. The cavalry corps farthest to the northwest was withdrawn, the concentration south of Lyuban was dispersed, and medium artillery as well as supply units were pulled out. The Germans soon recognized the enemy intentions. On 22 May German forces launched the pursuit from north and west across mud and slush and reduced the pocket to a twelve-mile square by 30 May. On that day the Germans also sealed the small escape gap and established a blocking position across the Soviet supply route in the vicinity of Myasnoy Bor.

The struggle entered its final phase, a phase which was to last four more weeks. While the German spearheads steadily narrowed the

enemy-held territory, the Soviets, with courage born of desperation, furiously sought to extricate themselves from the pocket. In their quest for safety and escape from death, elements of eight divisions repeated their daily attacks in waves of four to six regiments. The Russians pinned their main hope on the Fifty-ninth Army which was to break through from the east. Without interruption this army attacked 2–26 June, delivering a crescendo of fire and hurling ever increasing masses of infantry and tanks into the battle. The carnage reached tremendous proportions. At times it seemed as if the Russians might achieve a break-through after all, but the Germans always succeeded in hurling them back. Only small groups escaped. The encircled forces were split into several smaller pockets, and all organized resistance of the Second Assault Army ceased by 25 June. The Russian casualties in the pocket amounted to 60,000 dead and prisoners, among the latter General Vlassov and numerous high-ranking commanders and staff officers. Six infantry divisions and six brigades were annihilated. Nine additional divisions were either totally or partially destroyed. The Soviets had suffered terrific losses, expended more than twenty divisions, and spent themselves in a vain, six-month effort to break the ring around Leningrad.

Another incomplete pincers movement led to curiously shaped front lines during the fighting near Rzhev in January 1942, where a German pocket separated the main body of enemy forces from a Russian pocket. In this instance the Russian forces in the pocket had only poor supply routes at their disposal, and more than 100,000 men had to subsist for several months under the most precarious circumstances. The Russian cavalry corps, trapped in the swampy forests southwest of Sychevka after its pocket was reduced by the Snail Offensive was in such a pitiful situation that the men first ate the meat and later chewed the hides of their horses to keep from starving. Despite their plight, the Russians refused to consider abandoning their pocket. (See CMH Pub 104–1, Military Improvisations during the Russian Campaign, pp. 7 ff.)

Two additional incomplete pincers movements are worthy of mention. In March 1944, First Panzer Army formed a roving pocket when its pincers attack failed to liberate the encircled German forces near Cherkassy. Finally, during the battle near Lvov in July 1944, the Germans were forced to hold simultaneously two parallel fronts, twenty-five miles apart. The forward front line had a gap which was narrowed to three miles by a pincers attack, whereas the other line was open on the flanks. This extraordinary synthesis of defense lines, as well as the interlocking pockets, were caused by German and Russian pincers, the jaws of which were not completely closed.

Defensive pincers are the preferred method of eliminating an enemy bridgehead. German experience shows that there are no safer tactics

for wiping out bridgeheads and inflicting heavy losses on the enemy. Chapter 3 contains a description of the elimination of five newly formed enemy bridgeheads across the Teterev which were wiped out in one day by a pincers attack executed by strong panzer forces.

The most effective pincers attacks are those which, instead of being directed against both flanks, simultaneously envelop the enemy's front and rear. However, the jaw of the pincers that is to strike the hostile rear area is in danger of being attacked in its own rear, as happened, for example, during the Russian defense against the German breakthrough of the Leningrad line. In this operation the Germans executed two simultaneous pincers attacks. The forward claws pinched off the Russian front line and shattered it while the rear pincers enveloped and inflicted heavy casualties on the armored reserves which had been thrown in to lend assistance. (See CMH Pub 104–12, pp. 62 ff.)

By some extraordinary circumstance it may occasionally be feasible to strike at both enemy flanks and simultaneously envelop his front and rear. This double pincers maneuver will nearly always lead to the complete encirclement and annihilation of the enemy forces. For instance, in March 1943 in the lower Dnepr bend, the pulverizing jaws of a double pincers movement destroyed the Third Russian Tank Army.

The success of pincers attacks is contingent upon the size of the forces available in a given situation. Whenever the tactical situation offers an opportunity for the use of defensive pincers but available forces are insufficient, it will prove more advantageous to assemble all available units and launch a powerful flank attack.

PART THREE

PASSIVE DEFENSE

Chapter 5

DEFENSE IN PLACE WITH MOBILE RESERVES

Even large-scale offensives can be stopped by a defense in place if a number of successive positions are available and the infantry holding the front line has strong artillery, tank, and assault gun support. The reserves must be mobile so they can be shifted from one sector to another in time to prevent or at least contain an enemy penetration. This can be achieved only if the road net is in good condition and sufficient transportation is available.

A conflict entailing simultaneous fighting in different theaters of war and at different fronts within each theater may easily produce a shortage of combat forces which can be overcome only by improvising reserves. In such a situation, security and supply troops, as well as other service units, may have to be committed along extensive, quiet sectors to release combat forces for the formation of reserves. A correct estimate of the enemy's intentions is essential for the timely withdrawal of units from apparently safe sectors.

In the operations near Orsha during the winter of 1943–44, the Germans employed defense-in-place tactics and denied the Russians the use of the Minsk–Smolensk *Rollbahn* for several months. In this instance, railroad and highway communications were excellent, and the mobility of the reserves, together with the construction of defensive positions in depth, prevented a Russian break-through. Used in other sectors, the same tactic proved ineffective when road nets were bad or when the Russians massed a thousand or more tanks to force a break-through, and the Germans had no adequate weapons to oppose them. Had the enemy used such a mass of armor at Orsha, the Germans would have been unable to hold with a defense in place.

Even at Orsha the general situation of Fourth Army was anything but favorable. (Map 6) By the end of September 1943, the army had just completed a strategic withdrawal from positions east of Smolensk under extreme difficulties. In accordance with orders from Army Group Center, the army was to occupy the Panther position east of the Dnepr in order to deny the Russians access to Orsha, the communication center on the Dnepr, where three railroad

lines and the Moscow–Minsk and Leningrad–Kiev highways intersect. The capture of Orsha would have jeopardized the position of Third Panzer Army adjacent to the north and Ninth Army to the south. The Fourth Army sector was seventy-five miles wide and ran from a point ten miles north of the *Rollbahn* to the southern outskirts of Chausy. The army had three corps with eleven divisions whose combat efficiency was greatly reduced by the hard fighting and the withdrawal they had recently undergone. With the exception of one reorganized division, the combat strength of the divisions had dropped to that of regiments, and their weapons and equipment were inadequate. At first the Panther position was very thinly held. With the arrival of replacements and the introduction of various expedients, the army gradually succeeded in building up a fairly adequate defense system.

The construction of the Panther position began in August 1943. In some sectors the position consisted of two parallel trenches, in others of only one. A number of trenches had not been completed by the time the line was occupied and in these sectors the defense system was only a cordon of individual strong points. Tactical wire was strung intermittently and dugouts were few. Natural obstacles had been integrated into the defense line wherever possible. From a tactical point of view, some of the sites were not too well selected because they ran along unsuitable forward slopes. Enemy fire soon led to the abandonment of these positions and forced the Germans to dig in on reverse slopes. Observation was adequate and, though the position was far from perfect, it offered the weakened German forces the possibility of making a stand.

The Russians had followed the German withdrawal very closely. They assembled their forces in front of the position and made careful preparations for a break-through. They did not attack until 12 October and the German troops made good use of this delay to improve their defense area. The German command expected that the immediate objective of the impending Russian attack would be to take Lenino, cut the Orsha–Gorki highway, link up with strong partisan groups operating in the forests northwest of Gorki, turn toward Orsha, and advance along the *Rollbahn* to Minsk.

The reserves of the Fourth Army consisted of several assault gun battalions, some motorized antitank units, GHQ artillery, rocket projector regiments, and engineer and construction units. The success of the defense in place depended upon correctly timing the shift of the mobile elements of these reserves to threatened areas or sectors already under attack. No outside assistance was to be counted on, but the army intended to withdraw battalions, regiments, and even divi-

sions from quiet sectors and move them to critical points once the Russian attack was in full swing. In so doing, the army commander was ready to take great risks in stripping quiet sectors of the front.

The task of shifting these forces was greatly facilitated by the availability of excellent routes of communication. From the lateral highway and railroad line connecting Vitebsk with Orsha and Mogilev, routes branched off to each corps sector. Truck transportation, earmarked for supply functions, was diverted to troop movements. All roads and highways were clearly marked, and construction units maintained them in serviceable condition, a task which was especially difficult in spring and required a lot of manpower. Particular care was given to the marking and maintenance of panzer roads. Special bridges had to be constructed or fords provided for heavy tanks and assault guns because the existing bridges could not carry such loads. Railroad operations were conducted up to points immediately behind the front line.

Instead of giving the weak combat forces a well-deserved rest, the army commander was forced to issue strict orders that all front-line troops work without interruption on improving the forward positions. An exacting, at times even petty, control system had to be imposed by the army to find out where the construction work was lagging and how weak points could be reinforced. By this method the defense system gradually gained depth, and one obstacle after another was constructed. Finally, the Panther position consisted of two continuous trenches and a fortification system protecting the artillery gun positions. As soon as the Panther position was sufficiently strong, several other positions were constructed in the rear. The first two were spaced at six-mile intervals, and the third covered Mogilev, Shklov, Kopys, and Orsha on the Dnepr by the construction of perimeter defenses east of the river. These bridgeheads had a depth of three to five miles and were interconnected by a trench linking their most forward points. Numerous switch positions were built between the individual trenches and fortified lines so that, in case one sector was lost, contact between units would not be disrupted. Contrary to customary German technique, these switch positions connected the successive trenches diagonally and not vertically. Another position extending north beyond Orsha was built along the west bank of the Dnepr. During the winter the Germans also constructed a strong position farther to the rear along the Beresina.

The antiaircraft artillery, as well as the few available planes, were held in reserve to be committed in sectors under attack. The flexibility of the mobile antiaircraft guns greatly strengthened the defense system. Effective reconnaissance was of great importance. Information obtained from ground reconnaissance, sound ranging, and air

observation usually provided the Germans with sufficient intelligence to determine the scope and time of Russian attacks with exactitude. Thus, the army was able to introduce effective countermeasures even before the beginning of an attack.

The Russians launched altogether eight major thrusts against the German defense system. Their last attempt to break through was warded off at the beginning of April 1944. The Dnepr defenses were still intact after six months of bittle struggle. The Russians failed to force a break-through in the direction of Orsha and Mogilev despite a series of frontal, flanking, and enveloping attacks. An analysis of this German success shows that the Fourth Army was able to compensate for a one-to-ten inferiority in manpower and matériel only by exploiting all possibilities for defense and co-ordinating all its forces. For this purpose the army had to interfere in details of the command functions of its subordinate corps and divisions, a procedure altogether contrary to German doctrine, but one which proved necessary in this instance. Orders for the formation of reserves, the purpose of which could be understood only from the perspective of the over-all situation, frequently did not make sense to lower echelon commanders. The same may be said for some of the orders pertaining to improving positions, constructing roads, transferring stocks of ammunition, and similar demands.

The unusually good communications made it possible to shift reserves freely. When Russian attacks were at their heaviest, the rate of transfer was stepped up to two battalions per day. The withdrawal of an entire division from the front and its subsequent movement to another sector usually required several consecutive nights. During the first night one or two battalions were pulled out, and adjacent sectors extended. During the following night the width of the adjacent sectors was equalized and one or two more battalions were withdrawn in the same manner. This was continued at the same rate until the movement was completed. The transfer of forces would have been accomplished much faster had single battalions been withdrawn from different divisions, but the army avoided this procedure whenever possible since it attempted to maintain the organizational integrity of its divisions.

Before the first Russian thrust, the corps sector where the enemy onslaught was expected was widened by the inclusion of two additional divisional sectors. This was contrary to the established procedure of narrowing that defense sector where an attack was expected. The purpose of this measure was to enable the corps to form strong reserves from its own forces and shift them to the points where they were most needed. In this case, the widening of the defense sector proved effective since all Russian attacks were halted.

In another instance a motorized infantry division, which had but five organic battalions in line at the beginning of the fifth Russian thrust, was subjected to particularly heavy attacks. By the time the fighting abated on the fifth day, fifteen additional battalions had been brought into the divisional sector, and the front was held. At the same time, the German lines in quiet sectors were so overextended that one mile of frontage was occupied by only thirty men. The slightest attack would have penetrated the line in these sectors, but the Russians did not attempt to launch one.

To command and troops alike, the construction of reserve positions gave a sense of security which they ordinarily lacked in the Russian theater. At no time did their existence lower the resistance of the troops or induce them to withdraw before it became absolutely necessary. The infantry felt reassured by the effective tactics the army employed in massing its artillery. The army artillery commander held far-reaching authority over all organic artillery, giving full support to whichever corps was under attack and withdrawing units not needed in quiet sectors. He made all arrangements to provide an adequate supply of ammunition by diverting supplies slated for quiet sectors and using them where they were most needed. Supply movements were facilitated by the availability of the main highway and railroad leading from Minsk which, however, were frequently cut by partisan attacks. During lulls in the fighting, ammunition was saved for impending enemy thrusts.

The mass employment of supporting units such as assault gun, panzer, tactical air support, antiaircraft, and antitank elements was stressed by the army commander. These units were pulled out wherever they were not absolutely essential and shifted to sectors under attack.

The Russian offensive tactics during these operations varied little from those used earlier in the campaign. The infantry fought bravely, launching attack upon attack, often with only a few hours' interval. Manpower was no problem to the Russians. In seemingly never-ending waves, they came out of their trenches, advanced, withdrew, and returned to the attack. During the five thrusts along the Minsk–Smolensk highway, the Russians usually renewed their attacks at the identical spot where they had tried before. They persisted in their efforts to force a break-through at a particular point and entirely disregarded the cost. A more flexible command might have considered other solutions.

The Russian was capable of concentrating tremendous fire power and employing artillery effectively. During the first day of an operation, artillery fire was well coordinated, but thereafter its unity of

effort gradually disintegrated and its effectiveness decreased. During the second thrust he assembled approximately 800 pieces along a six-mile front and fired a quantity of ammunition which was hitherto unsurpassed in the Russian theater of operations. The number of German guns available for counterfire was approximately 250. On the first day of the thrust the Russians achieved a deep penetration between the Dnepr and the Minsk highway. An attempt to straighten out the salient was unsuccessful. The next day the Russians penetrated the German lines north of the highway and isolated an entire artillery battalion-group. In spite of the commitment of additional reserves, the German line had become so fragile that the army decided to withdraw to the second line of the Panther position. When the Russians renewed their attack, it seemed that their artillery lacked unity of effort and co-ordination. The Germans repelled all further assaults and prevented a break-through.

Russian camouflage and concealment were excellent. The enemy moved at night and disappeared from sight during daylight, hiding in villages and wooded areas. Although the Russians often regrouped their forces, their movements could rarely be observed.

The Soviet lower command echelons often lacked initiative. After having succeeded in pushing back the German line for instance, the Russians had difficulty in sustaining the momentum of the attack and in assembling their infantry and artillery forces for an attack on the next objective. On the other hand, the enemy showed extraordinary skill in exploiting even the smallest penetration with amazing speed. Because of these infiltration tactics, the Germans were forced to make every possible effort to immediately seal off penetrations, however small their own counterattack force. Otherwise, it would have been impossible or would have involved heavy casualties to ferret the Russian out of the break-through area. Once they had sufficient time to organize positions, even planned attacks by fresh units often failed to overcome the stubborn resistance offered by the Russians.

The enemy's zone of attack was usually strictly limited, almost as if it had been cut to measure. The German supporting weapons outside the attack zone proper were not neutralized. For instance, the flanking fire delivered by a German artillery battalion-group from an adjacent sector straight into the Russian attack waves was not interfered with in any way.

The Russian rarely launched diversionary attacks at points outside the main zone of attack. Considering the extent to which the Germans had weakened the quiet sectors of their front, such diversionary attacks would probably have caused some very critical situations.

The Russian proved once again that he was practically immune to

unfavorable weather conditions. Snow, rain, cold, and ice affected him but little. His winter clothing was of excellent quality.

Except for attacks against German infantry in the front line, the enemy air force was almost inactive, although German antiaircraft defenses were inadequate. Since the Russians never undertook strategic air operations, the Germans were able to move supplies without enemy interference.

Chapter 6

POSITION DEFENSE IN STRONG POINTS AND IMPROVISED FORTRESSES

The defender who decides to hold out in place in strong points and improvised fortresses usually employs emergency measures rather than defense tactics. The Germans were forced to resort to such measures because of the acute manpower and matériel shortages from which they suffered once the war had spread all over Europe and to North Africa. In Russia, the overextended front lines, the bitter struggle against a superior enemy, and the elements of nature led to an expenditure of forces for which German manpower resources and industrial potential were insufficient. The long duration of the war accentuated these deficiencies with the result that position defense in improvised strong points and fortresses became ever more frequent. Excessive losses, difficult terrain, and bad weather forced the Germans to anchor their defense system on inhabited localities along wide sectors and to use these defense areas as substitutes for a continuous front line. These tactics often proved effective because they helped to gain time and overcome critical situations. During the winter or during the muddy seasons, for instance, holding villages and towns was the only way to escape annihilation. Then, it was the weather and terrain that imposed the adoption of these emergency measures. During the summer and dry weather many an enemy break-through attempt was delayed and whittled down by the same tactics until the Germans were capable of containing the Russians along a continuous line prepared in the rear.

Service troops took a major part in the defense of inhabited localities. In most instances they built and improved fortifications in areas where they were stationed and made strong points of them. Frequently, supply elements were organized into alert units and committed as replacements in the most forward fortified areas. The system of mutually supporting strong points provided for defense in depth and maximum utilization of all available forces for combat purposes. Every soldier in a headquarters or service unit and in rear installations received combat training with emphasis on proficiency in the use of antitank weapons in close combat. Whenever the training schedule was rigidly adhered to, the results were favorable. In 1943, for instance, in Zolochev (near Kharkov) a divisional bakery company stopped Russian tank units which had broken through, destroyed several tanks, and forced the remaining ones to turn about.

The practice of defending strong points should, however, not be overdone or adopted as a standing operating procedure. It would be wrong to order all unit trains and supply trucks to stop in the midst of a withdrawal and make their service personnel fight to the last man. If such an order was obeyed to the letter, it would lead to the loss of all transportation facilities and disrupt traffic. This, in turn, would jeopardize the supply of the combat forces, greatly impair freedom of maneuver, and result in disaster.

During the battle for Lithuania in October 1944, the German defense based on fortified inhabited localities did not actually stop or even delay the Russians for long, but it achieved a certain continuity in the defense and checked the enemy advance by causing many delays and inflicting casualties. Since no new reserves could be formed or provided by army group, a number of service schools and headquarters units, all available trains and supply troops, as well as all other auxiliary units, had to be employed in the defense. They strengthened the resistance at crucial defiles and potential points of penetration. A tightly knit defensive network was built up which even strong enemy forces could penetrate or bypass only by a time-consuming process. The strongly defended towns usually withstood the enemy's daylight attacks. During the evening hours, however, the Russians bypassed or attacked these towns from all sides, and the German elements had to be withdrawn under cover of darkness to escape encirclement and annihilation. In the meantime, renewed resistance was organized along another line, which the German forces occupied by dawn and the process was repeated. The Russians did not advance more than five to six miles a day, even in the sector where they placed their main effort. They did not achieve a break-through or open a gap in the front. Once they reached the Memel River, the German forces, reinforced by other improvised units, brought the enemy offensive to a halt.

Chapter 7

IMPROVISED ZONE DEFENSE

A variant of zone defense was improvised by the Germans during the battles for the city of Lvov and for East Prussia in the final phase of World War II. Though similar to the doctrine of elastic defense in depth and the evacuation of forward positions introduced during the First World War, these defensive tactics are not identical with any others employed before 1944. The characteristics of this improvisation, as applied during the battle for Lvov, have been explained in CMH Pub 104–1, pp. 27 ff. Since the prerequisites for their successful application rarely existed, and since most German commanders in the field doubted their practicability and utility, these tactics were not employed on any other front. Besides, the over-all situation was so critical that there was a general reluctance to introduce experiments. By the second half of 1944 the Germans rarely had sufficient time for the construction of numerous positions or for the thorough indoctrination and training of troops. Only the most ardent faith in this improvisation could overcome all handicaps and achieve final success. During both battles improvised zone defense tactics helped to keep intact the combat strength of the German divisions subjected to terrific concentrations and to prevent the enemy from breaking through. On both occasions the Russians suffered heavy casualties and were forced to shift their main effort to other sectors.

In East Prussia the Third Panzer Army, with its 9 weak divisions, 50 tanks, 400 artillery pieces, and insignificant air support was opposed to 44 Russian divisions, 800 tanks, 3,000 guns, and strong air forces. The use of improvised zone defense tactics enabled the army to stop the Russian onslaught for one month, after which the collapse of the adjacent armies forced a withdrawal from this sector. During December 1944 special training in zone defense was introduced with the active participation of both command and troops. Army engineer and construction units supervised the paramilitary and civilian labor forces building position after position. Antitank obstacles, mine fields, and a system of local strong points and nests of resistance, fifty miles in depth, were built. (Map 7) The foremost fifteen-mile belt was fortified on the basis of the lessons learned at Lvov. Everyone, from corps commander to private, made strenuous efforts to improve the defense system. Strong points and pillboxes were to afford maximum protection and defensive power by the con-

struction of perimeter defenses. At the same time precautions were taken to prevent pillboxes or nests of resistance from becoming traps for their defenders. Tactical details and technical improvisations were carefully planned to preclude disagreeable surprises. All of East Prussia became one fortress with the zone defense area its strongest outpost. The morale of the troops was excellent, and they faced coming events with confidence.

The Russians attempted a war of nerves by announcing the start of their offensive at three different times and by telegraphing their punches in advance. The Germans did not take these announcements too seriously and refused to be intimidated by the Russian show of armored strength in front of their lines. They were more concerned about Russian preparations along a railroad embankment, a few hundred yards in front of the German lines, where the enemy brought up antitank guns and dug eight passages through a dam which his tanks were unable to surmount. These preparations were too close to remain unobserved, although the Russians tried to cover the noise of the nightly demolitions by heavy mortar fire and camouflaged the passages with boards and foliage. This was the line on which the Russians emplaced their most forward heavy weapons which were to eliminate any German interference by direct fire and cover the tanks advancing through the gaps in the embankment. Other indications of an imminent major offensive were the trenches dug by the Russians to facilitate the approach of infantry spearheads and the construction of positions connected by communication trenches to provide cover for the assembly of the first-wave infantry. Changes in the daily aerial photographs provided information on newly constructed emplacements and showed fresh tracks in the snow leading to ammunition dumps and battery positions. Reports from agents gave information on the arrival of new divisions, and a few radio signals, intercepted despite the enforcement of strict radio silence by the Russians, uncovered the location of forward command posts. These indications made it clear where the Russians intended to place their main effort and at what time and with which forces they planned to start the attack. The Russian attack preparations were methodical: enemy artillery observers occupied newly constructed observation posts; medium guns registered cautiously; enemy fighters suddenly swept the sky to stop German aerial reconnaissance; and dive bombers plastered approach routes, command posts, and towns behind the German front with machine gun fire and bombs. Together with heavy Russian troop movements toward the front, particularly during the nights of 9 and 10 January, these indications were closely observed and studied to enable the army commander to give the code word for the withdrawal to the main battle position at the right moment. It required steady nerves and expert evaluation of combat

intelligence not to exhaust the troops by repeated premature withdrawals or to suffer heavy casualties from the enemy's barrage because delayed withdrawal orders had jeopardized the defensive maneuver.

On 11 January there was a noticeable reduction in enemy combat activity and movements. The German troops were nervously waiting for the orders which were to spare them from the enemy's deadly fire, but they failed to receive any such order at the front line. Instead, the graduating class of the Luftwaffe Academy was to be conducted on a tour of the army sector. The young officer candidates watched demonstrations by the newly arrived 5th Panzer Division and inspected the fortifications of the battle position. Since the front was calm, it was possible to fulfill their request to visit some outposts and observe the enemy's positions and movements. Here and there an enemy machine gun fired a few rounds, breaking the silence of a sunny afternoon. Suddenly, some projectiles whizzed through the air and dug up the earth near a crossroads. Several mortar shells exploded near the outposts, and the platoon leader shouted the command: "Take cover." Detected by the enemy, the visitors quickly took cover in a deep dugout. After a few more rounds registered in the vicinity, two German artillery salvos hit back at the enemy observation posts and silence was restored. Proud of their front-line experience, the officer candidates returned unharmed to the rear.

The following day was even more peaceful. No new clues regarding the probable H Hour of the enemy attack were observed by the outposts. On the other hand, radio intercepts as well as the latest observations of night reconnaissance planes left no doubt that strong Russian columns were moving into their assembly areas, that the artillery emplacements were fully occupied, and that the armed units had moved up into the depth of the concentration area. The German army commander therefore decided to give the code word at 2200 on 12 January. The evacuation of the two forward lines went smoothly and the units moved into the battle position. Three hours later the movement was completed, the new command posts were occupied, and the signal communications functioned normally.

As usual before a major Russian offensive, several deserters arrived at German outposts; their statements agreed—a heavy artillery preparation at 0600 was to precede the launching of the attack on 13 January. The army commander immediately issued orders that the German artillery deliver at 0530 a concentration on the assembly areas of the enemy infantry and use the two basic loads set aside for this purpose. Thus, a heavy German preparation led off the second battle for East Prussia. At 0600 the enemy unleashed a hail of fire with more than 3,000 pieces pouring shells of all calibers on the two forward German positions evacuated only a few hours earlier. By then the German infantry and artillery occupied the battle position

which had its forward boundary in the third position. The area fire, covering up to three miles in depth, was scattered and damaged only evacuated towns and former command posts, the obvious targets of the Russian artillery. The German reserves were hidden in the woods and remained unharmed by the preparation fire. By 0800, after pulverizing the first position, the Russian fire concentrated on the second one, but with less intensity. Half an hour later the shells were scattered in the depth of the battle position, gradually diminishing to area or harassing fire without definite targets.

Following the first salvos of artillery fire, the Russian infantry had gone into action, carefully advancing through thick fog which covered the terrain until 1100. Only slightly delayed by the fire of German rear points left behind in the first position, the Russians soon rushed beyond this obstacle. But even before they reached the evacuated second position, they were pinned down by artillery and rocket fire. Their reports, announcing the capture of the first and second German positions to higher headquarters, failed to mention that they had taken no prisoners or booty. It was not until 1000 that they reached the forward line of the battle position. Pinned down by the fire of all German guns and the ladder fire of the rocket projector brigade, their advance came to a sudden halt. The Russian infantry sent out distress signals for immediate tank support. Poor visibility prevented the enemy from taking advantage of his superiority in fire power and in the air. Nevertheless, the Russian infantry succeeded in penetrating between individual strong points. When the fog lifted, these spearheads were cut off and annihilated.

The Russians directed their main thrust against the only elevation in this area, near Kussen, which they captured around noon after a strong armored attack. Their infantry, attempting to follow the tanks, was repelled with heavy casualties along the forward line of the main battle position. The Russian armored units, however, continued their thrust from the Kussen area because the German antitank guns were unable to cope with such masses of tanks. This threat was all the more serious since enemy planes appeared in great number and were initially unopposed. They bombed towns, roads, evacuated command posts, and artillery emplacements and attacked everything that moved on the ground. German planes, called to the rescue, attacked the low-flying Russian formations, shot down several planes, and dispersed the rest. This was the cue for the German counterattack. Leading the attack, 5th Panzer Division columns emerged from the protective cover of the forests and launched simultaneous thrusts against the flank and rear of the Russian armor in the Kussen area. The clash, in which the panzer division was supported by an assault gun brigade and rocket-firing planes, raged for several hours. After the Germans recaptured Kussen, Russian tank reserves made a

counterattack, but were turned back by assault guns and fighter planes.

The German infantry, supported by assault guns, tore gaps into the Russian attack columns which had been weakened by heavy artillery and rocket fire. Before long the entire enemy attack force wavered and fell back in confusion. During the evening the former main line of resistance was reoccupied by the German infantry. The booty was rich, aside from 122 burned-out tanks piled up on the slopes near Kussen. Improvised zone defense had saved the German forces from being annihilated and had stopped all enemy break-through attempts.

The Russians continued their assaults during the following days, feeding them with a constant flow of men and matériel. They were unable, however, to repeat the deadly preparation of the first day because they lacked the necessary ammunition. Despite tenfold superiority and extreme sacrifices, they made little headway and were unable to overcome the zone defense belt. The high ground near Kussen changed hands several times, and 200 additional enemy tanks met with destruction in that area. The enemy finally succeeded in penetrating some marshy woods to the south of the zone defense area and forced the panzer army to withdraw in order to escape envelopment.

Chapter 8

ISTHMUS DEFENSE—THE SEA AS FLANK PROTECTION

Military history offers many examples of the defense of an isthmus. This terrain feature affords a multitude of opportunities to deny the attacker access to large and usually important areas with a minimum expenditure of forces. The short frontage of an isthmus defense can be anchored on bodies of water, and the line can be quickly fortified and easily defended. Although the adjacent shore line has to be secured, this can often be achieved with small forces. An isthmus separating two oceans is an unsurmountable obstacle if the defender's flanks are protected by superior air and naval forces. Even with inadequate naval forces, the defender will be able to repel enemy landings with the help of artillery and air power or to destroy a beachhead with mobile ground forces. During World War I the British were unable to break through the Turkish line on the Gallipoli Peninsula, despite their overwhelming superiority on the sea and in the air.

An isthmus between lakes can also be of great tactical value. The Battle of Tannenberg in 1914 offers a valid example. In this battle the Germans took advantage of the fortified isthmus near Loetzen, in the East Prussian lake district, to delay the Russian First Army until the German Eighth Army had completed the encirclement and annihilation of the Russian Fourth Army.

Both during the Russian withdrawal in 1942 and that of the Germans in 1943, the swampy isthmus between Lake Peipus and the Baltic Sea proved a formidable obstacle. The German thrust on Leningrad was blocked along the isthmus near Narva until an envelopment from the south across the Luga forced the Russians to abandon their positions. The Russian offensive in 1943 encountered similar difficulties when it was stalled at the same isthmus.

In 1941–42 weak Russian forces delayed the German advance for a long time on the strongly fortified isthmus of Kerch in the Crimea. With the reversal of the tide in 1943, two German corps, blocking the Perekop and Kerch Isthmuses, succeeded in delaying the many-times superior Russian armies for six months. The story of the defense of the two Crimean isthmuses by the Germans shows how effectively break-through attempts can be frustrated by taking advantage of this geographic feature. The subsequent withdrawal to Sevastopol indicates the importance of the sea as flank protection. At the beginning of October 1943 the mission of defending the Crimea was as-

signed to the German Seventeenth Army. The forces available for this mission were constantly dwindling since one division after another was transferred to the Sixth Army which was trying to stem the Russian onslaught north of the Crimea. By mid-October Seventeenth Army had two corps with two German and four Romanian divisions at its disposal. One Romanian corps guarded the south coast of the Crimea. (Map 8)

The V Infantry Corps was to prevent an enemy landing on the Kerch Peninsula or throw the Russians back into the sea wherever they landed. If possible, the corps was to form mobile reserves. The area under the jurisdiction of the V Corps included the city of Feodosiya which, during the winter 1941–42, had been the target of an amphibious operation conducted by the Russian Black Sea Fleet, resulting in an extremely critical situation. The port of Feodosiya and the surrounding territory was held by Task Force Krieger, a motley unit composed of two weak battalions of limited service and over-age German personnel and one Azerbaijan and one Turkoman battalion. Three divisions—the German 98th Infantry Division and the Romanian 6th Cavalry and 10th Infantry Divisions—were available for the defense of the approximately 200-mile coast line of the Kerch Peninsula. The 6th Romanian Cavalry Division was good but numerically weak, whereas the Romanian infantry division was militarily and politically unreliable. Although there were many instances of individual bravery in the performance of these Romanian troops, they were subject to panic when faced by tanks and lacked stamina under heavy, continuous artillery fire. Under these circumstances it was obvious that the German 98th Infantry Division had to be committed in the most vulnerable sector around the city of Kerch, with Eltigen as boundary in the south and Cape Tarkhan in the north. Since the combat strength of the 98th Infantry Division had dropped to approximately 40 to 50 men per company, a continuous line of defense along the entire coast was out of the question. After one regiment had been designated as sector reserve, the remaining forces were just about sufficient to man strong points in the port areas and at the extreme end of the peninsula at Zhukovka, with security detachments patrolling the other parts of the coast.

The 6th Romanian Cavalry Division was responsible for guarding the south coast of the peninsula and the 10th Romanian Infantry Division covered the north coast from Cape Tarkhan to Ak-Monay. The Luftwaffe was extremely weak, with the shortage of reconnaissance planes a matter of real concern to the German command. At times only one reconnaissance plane was expected to cover the entire Crimea. As a result, the V Corps lacked information about the size of the Russian landing preparations, which doubtless were in progress on the other side of the Straits of Kerch. Any plan to delay these

preparations by air attacks was frustrated by the lack of intelligence on Russian concentrations on the Taman Peninsula. Obviously, the Germans had no clue as to the probable Russian landing points.

During the night of 19–20 October 1943, one Russian division landed at Eltigen which was defended by a company from the 98th Division numbering forty-six men. Immediately alerted, the German reserves were able to narrow down the Russian beachhead but were not sufficiently strong to eliminate it. While this fighting was under way, the Russians attempted to land in force near the city of Kerch during the night of 31 October–1 November. The landing parties in the port of Kerch proper and along the coast between Kerch and Zhukovka were repulsed. But immediately north of Zhukovka the Russians overcame the security detachment and moved in reserves, widening the beachhead in the course of a bayonet engagement. Soon the Russian pressure from the newly won beachhead increased so that a German counterattack was out of the question. After overcoming some critical situations, the German forces in this sector were barely able to hold the important heights northeast of the city of Kerch. Thus began a fierce struggle which was to seesaw in the immediate vicinity of the city for five long months.

The area which the Russians had chosen for their main landing had one great disadvantage. They had gained a toehold on the easternmost part of the peninsula on a comparatively narrow isthmus which protruded beyond the city of Kerch. The Russians were unable to deploy their forces or expand their beachhead until they had captured the city and the high ground north of it. The German defense could succeed only if the Russians remained hemmed in on the small isthmus. German defense tactics therefore called for blocking the Russians on Mount Mitridates, overlooking Kerch, and along the mountain range north of the city, denying them access to the rest of the peninsula.

This German plan succeeded although the Russians gradually built up their beachhead until it contained twelve divisions including many tanks. The 98th Division bore the brunt of the fighting against this superior force during the months of November, December, and January. It was assisted by one German infantry regiment which Seventeenth Army had moved across the Crimea from the Perekop area and by some Romanian battalions which were held in reserve and committed in emergencies. Elements of the only assault gun battalion in the Crimea repeatedly intervened at danger points. Toward the end of January 1944, when the weakened line of the 98th Division was at the point of breaking, the 73d Infantry Division was brought in by air without its artillery components.

On 7 December 1943 the 6th Romanian Cavalry Division, concentrating all its forces and assisted by the assault gun battalion, eliminated the Eltigen beachhead which menaced the German flank and

was close to the main landing. Although the operation was successful and resulted in the capture of 2,000 Russian prisoners, it led to an unexpected crisis. During the night, elements of the Eltigen force broke through the Romanian line and moved north to link up with the Kerch beachhead. This force overran several batteries which were zeroed in on the main Russian beachhead and before dawn attacked German artillery outposts on Mount Mitridates from the rear. From there some Russian elements infiltrated into the southwestern part of the city of Kerch. The Russian commander of the Kerch beachhead, who had launched an attack as soon as he knew about the German assault on Eltigen, recognized the favorable opportunity and redoubled his efforts to link up with the Eltigen force. Since there were no readily available German reserves, this critical situation had to be overcome by the forces on hand. Three assault detachments were formed by pulling combat-seasoned troops out of the line. They recaptured Mount Mitridates in one swoop and held on to it. Later on, elements of the 3d Romanian Mountain Division, moving up from the north coast of the Kerch Peninsula, annihilated the remnants of the Eltigen force.

The 98th and 73d Divisions, reinforced by Romanian troops, withstood four major Russian attacks launched from the Kerch beachhead. Individual heights and key trenches constantly changed hands during the weeks of bitter fighting. German counterattacks alternated with minor local withdrawals and corrections in the front line in order to save manpower and reduce casualties. All these actions were dominated by the primary consideration of holding the key position on Mount Mitridates and the area to its north. Another landing gave the Russians control over the northern mole of the port of Kerch and the eastern part of the city, but the Germans kept their hold on the western portion and the crucial mountain. The Russians also landed along the coast of the Sea of Azov near Cape Tarkhan, where they captured an important hill. German counterattacks restored the situation somewhat.

Two outside threats hovered over the fighting around Kerch: the Russian Black Sea Fleet and the impending defeat of the German Sixth Army defending the land communications with the Crimea. A large-scale landing, for instance at Feodosiya or Sevastopol, in co-operation with the Russian Black Sea Fleet, would have put the German forces in the Crimea in an untenable position because they were powerless to prevent any such attack. Actually, the Russians did not commit their fleet, not even for a deceptive maneuver. They seemed to attach more importance to keeping their fleet intact than to achieving a quick success in the Crimea. This was easily comprehensible since the offensive north of the Sea of Azov proceeded so well that there was every reason to expect that the Crimea would fall sooner

or later. While the Eltigen beachhead was being reduced by the Romanians, the badly shattered divisions of the German Sixth Army were driven back to Melitopol. At the time of the main enemy landing near Kerch, the Russian armies in the north crossed the Dnepr and achieved a break-through toward Krivoi Rog. By the beginning of November 1943, the Russian forces north of the Crimea were attacking the Perekop Isthmus which connects the Crimea with the mainland. The German forces in the Crimea were cut off and hemmed in. The Russians continued their advance on the mainland and by mid-December had reached the Kherson and Nikopol bridgeheads and the Kirovograd area. With the continuation of the Russian offensive in January 1944, all hope for a German counterattack from the Nikopol bridgehead had definitely vanished. Nikopol was evacuated on 8 February, Kherson on 13 March, and Odessa fell on 8 April 1944. The German units in the Crimea were isolated far behind the Russian lines without hope for relief.

By the end of March, the fourth major attack on Kerch was repelled by the Germans. On the morning of 5 April, a heavy artillery preparation preceded another attack, resulting in an insignificant penetration north of Kerch. This was sealed off by a German counterattack on the next day. For the first time the Russian attack was coordinated with simultaneous assaults against the XLIX Mountain Corps on the Perekop Isthmus. There, the situation was similar to that at Kerch. So long as the weak and gradually tiring German forces were able to contain the Russians on the narrow isthmus, they had a chance of putting up a successful defense. Once the Russians got through this bottleneck and penetrated into the open terrain of the northern Crimea, Germans had no means of stopping them. The so-called Gneisenau position had been constructed in an arc around Simferopol, but this position was incomplete and could serve only as immediate protection for the city proper. The Russians were free to bypass it to the west or east. The distance from Krasnoperekopsk to Simferopol is 60 miles by air, that from Kerch to Simferopol 110 miles. In the event that the Russians should break through at the Perekop Isthmus, Seventeenth Army planned that the XLIX and V Corps join forces in the Simferopol area. In view of the disparity in the distance to be covered, it seemed questionable whether V Corps, withdrawing on foot, would be able to reach Simferopol in time.

If the Crimea was to be evacuated, Sevastopol was the only possible port of embarkation for crossing the Black Sea to Romania. The port of Yalta was much too small, inaccessible, and surrounded by mountains. The Russians knew this only too well and there was every reason to believe that, once they had broken through the Perekop Isthmus, they would bypass the Gneisenau position with their armored and motorized units and thrust straight toward Sevastopol.

Although there was a close similarity between the situations at Kerch and Krasnoperekopsk, the latter had one peculiarity. This was the flat, shallow, muddy island and lagoon region of the Sivash east of the isthmus. The Russians had built some causeways over this almost impassible area; German planes occasionally succeeded in damaging the causeways, but were unable to destroy them. Shortage of ammunition prevented their destruction by artillery fire, as in general the scarcity of ammunition had become an ever-present problem after the separation of the Crimea from the mainland. On 8 April the Russians launched an all-out offensive in the XLIX Corps area and achieved major penetrations in the Sivash region and on the isthmus. The next day V Corps was warned that the situation in the XLIX Corps sector was tense and that the withdrawal to Simferopol might be ordered for the following day. Several plans for the withdrawal had been studied and prepared for the event of a voluntary or forced German evacuation of the Crimea. As one of the first measures, the assault gun battalion, some of the artillery, and all the Luftwaffe elements in the V Corps area were to be transferred to XLIX Corps. On the morning of 10 April, V Corps received orders to start its withdrawal to Sevastopol via Simferopol by 1900.

During the winter the so-called Parpach position had been constructed across the narrowest isthmus of the Kerch Peninsula and strengthened by a continuous wire obstacle, an antitank ditch, and emergency shelters. But the infantry could not possibly reach this defense line in a one-night march from Kerch. An intermediate position was therefore to be established between Kerch and Parpach on either side of Murfovka and this line was to be reached before dawn and held during the day. The withdrawal to the Parpach line was to be completed during the following night. The first units to be withdrawn from the front were to secure the most important roads and terrain features ahead of the intermediate position and cover the withdrawal of the main body. Upon completion of this mission, the security detachments were to fight a rear guard action, withdraw behind the intermediate position, and form a reserve force. This plan could not be carried out because the critical situation in the Perekop Isthmus necessitated the immediate transfer of these elements. As a result, the covering positions were inadequately manned and the corps was without reserves.

Except for a reconnaissance in force, the Russians in the Kerch beachhead were inactive on 10 April. After the V Corps had transferred all its fighter planes to the XLIX Corps area, the Russian air force reigned supreme and became extremely active. Since the Russian forces in the north crossed most of the Perekop Isthmus and the Sivash flats, the enemy command at Kerch felt certain that the with-

drawal of the V Corps was imminent. Any attempt at deceiving them as to the German intentions was futile.

Nevertheless, the disengagement carried out during the night of 10–11 April proceeded without unforseen incident. Just before midnight the Russians entered the German positions, held by rear guards. A few Russian tanks, followed by motorized infantry, took up the pursuit of the German units moving toward the intermediate position. This line was not fortified and followed the so-called Tartar Wall, an ancient wall leading from Lake Uzunlarskoye via Murfovka to the Kasantipskiy Bay on the Sea of Azov. The 6th Romanian Cavalry occupied the sector between the lake and Murfovka, the 73d Division the central one on both sides of the Kerch–Feodosiya highway, and the 98th Division the northern sector up to Kasantipskiy Bay. The average strength of the German companies varied between 30 and 40 men. Despite the fact that the Crimea had been cut off from the mainland since November 1943, fourteen-day furloughs were granted to all soldiers who had not been on leave for a year or more. Although this was an excellent way of boosting morale, the German units in the Crimea gradually lost their battle-tested cadre because few of the men returned to their outfits. Upon returning from furlough, Army Group A intercepted them at Odessa while they were waiting for transportation, organized them into battalions, and committed them on the mainland.

The Kerch Peninsula is a rolling treeless steppe. Trees are so rare that the four high ones standing west of the village Libknekhtovka were a landmark which served as a point of orientation for the entire area. Outside the inhabited places there is no cover or concealment in the open terrain. The forests of the Yaila mountains began at Stary Krym, west of Feodosiya. There, too, began the territory of the partisans. Firmly entrenched, strong partisan forces had intercepted the traffic along the Feodosiya—Simferopol highway for many months, forcing the Germans to travel in armed convoys.

Shortly after 0700 on 11 April, even before front-line reports could be evaluated, the Russians launched a powerful thrust in the 73d Division sector north of the Kerch–Feodosiya highway. After suffering heavy casualties, the Germans succeeded in stopping the Russian tanks and supporting infantry about one mile behind the intermediate position. While the Germans were struggling to get this situation under control, a fierce Russian attack hit the 6th Romanian Division sector. The lack of reserves made itself felt. During the early afternoon, Russian tanks broke through at Murfovka, thrust deep into the rear area, wrought havoc with the Romanian trains, and reached Arma-Eli, twenty-five miles behind the intermediate position. Russian infantry poured through the gap opened by the armor.

This was a full-fledged break-through with no German reserves to stop it. The original intention to hold the intermediate position till dusk and withdraw to the Parpach position under cover of darkness could no longer be carried out under the prevailing circumstances. It was altogether doubtful whether the German infantry and the horse-drawn artillery would reach the Parpach position before the Russians. If the Russians exploited the break-through and moved up strong motorized forces behind their armored spearheads at Arma-Eli, they could easily penetrate and outflank the position held by weak security detachments. Once the Russians captured the Parpach position, the V Corps faced certain encirclement and destruction on the Kerch Peninsula.

The Russians recognized this possibility and moved up motorized forces behind their armored force at Arma-Eli. In addition, they went over to the attack along the entire front. Nevertheless, they did not overrun the Parpach position although some individual tanks succeeded in crossing the antitank ditch along the Feodosiya road where the Germans had delayed the demolitions too long. It is difficult to determine in retrospect exactly how the Germans were able to hold the Parpach position. The weak security detachments were reinforced by troops shifted from one danger spot to another, and the Russians also seemed to show some reluctance to throw their full weight against the line they had themselves so successfully defended during the winter 1941–42. Undoubtedly, the lower echelon commanders of the Russian spearhead units were diverted from their objective by the extraordinary spectacle which unfolded in front of their eyes: fleeing supply columns, rows of vehicles in the distance, horse-drawn artillery, long lines of trucks, and small detachments of troops stumbling northwestward in wild disorder. The Russians could not resist the temptation to attack such easy prey and, destroying many columns of vehicles, forgot about the more important objective—the Parpach position.

The daylight retreat from the intermediate to the Parpach position over a distance of thirty miles led to bitter fighting on 11 April, causing more casualties than any one of the long defensive engagements around Kerch. Russian fighter and fighter-bomber formations met with no opposition in the air and could lend their full support to the Russian ground forces. The steppe, with its lack of cover, provided the Russian fliers with a variety of targets. The Russian fighters seemed to concentrate on prime movers and draft horses pulling heavy weapons and artillery as well as on infantry units on the march, while the fighter-bombers attacked horse-drawn and motorized convoys. As a result the Germans lost most of their horse-drawn artillery in the steppe since they had to blow up the pieces after the horses had been killed from the air. Light and medium

howitzers and antitank guns fared only slightly better. The retreating infantry forces faced many difficulties in the steppe. Subjected to continuous air attacks, their plight was worsened by frontal and flank attacks on the ground while individual Russian tanks blocked their route of withdrawal. The approach of darkness brought some relief, although the Russians continued their air attacks on roads, towns, and communication centers.

The V Corps had suffered a major defeat on 11 April. The 6th Romanian Cavalry Division was wiped out except for small remnants which reached the Parpach position and were assigned to a small sector on the right wing. The last elements of the 73d and 98th Divisions did not arrive in the position until the morning of 12 April, after fighting their way back step by step. The casualties were heavy—one regiment of the 73d Division was reduced to 200 men, its reconnaissance battalion to 50. Available forces were no longer sufficient to man the Parpach position in its entire fifteen-mile length. Artillery and antiaircraft personnel had to be used as infantry in order to occupy the most important points. Despite their exhaustion and the enemy's numerical superiority, the German troops repelled all attacks throughout the day and eliminated minor penetrations in hand-to-hand fighting.

Nevertheless, there was no doubt this weak defense force would have to give way to the mounting Russian pressure before long. Since the German artillery which had escaped the carnage was too weak to counteract, let alone crush, Russian attack preparations and armored concentrations, the Germans had to defend the Parpach line with small arms and machine guns.

There were other reasons for a change in the planned withdrawal schedule. Signal communications between V Corps and Seventeenth Army were disrupted on 12 April. No reliable information regarding the situation on the XLIX Corps front was available but, according to rumors, Russian tanks had captured the railroad junction at Dzhankoy, twelve miles south of the Perekop Isthmus. Around noon the first reliable reports received from service units traveling from Feodosiya to Simferopol were anything but reassuring. At Zuya, twelve miles northeast of Simferopol, they had encountered Russian tanks and had also been intercepted by partisan units emerging from the forests. A motorcycle messenger returning from Karasubazar reported that another column was fired on by Russian tanks in the same vicinity.

The significance of this information was that armored Russian elements had broken through or bypassed the Gneisenau position. The distance from the Parpach position to Zuya was sixty miles by air. The question was whether the V Corps would be able to reach Simferopol in time to join forces with the XLIX Mountain Corps. In

any event, it seemed certain that the corps would have to fight its way back while holding off the Russian divisions fanning out of the Kerch beachhead. If the Russian tanks at Zuya and Karasubazar were not just advance detachments but elements of a strong force thrusting from the Perekop Isthmus, the continuation of the V Corps withdrawal toward Simferopol was no longer feasible. In this event, the only way out of the trap was to turn south at Saly, six miles west of Stary Krym, and to reach Sevastopol by the coastal road across the Yaila and Yalta Mountains. The distance from Simferopol to Sevastopol is 40 miles by air, that from the Parpach position to Sevastopol 105 miles. If the Russians had actually reached Zuya or the area west of Simferopol in force, the V Corps would probably arrive in front of Sevastopol after its capture by the Russians.

No matter whether the V Corps withdrew via Simferopol or along the coastal road via Sudak, it had to take immediate steps to secure and hold the area around Saly where the road branches off the main Simferopol highway to the south. If the Russians got there first they would deprive the corps of both routes of withdrawal. Since the corps had no reserves, it could only use the troops fighting in the Parpach position. This meant that the position would have to be evacuated immediately after dusk on 12 April and that the troops withdraw to the Saly area in one night. The remnants of the 6th Romanian Cavalry Division and the 73d Division received orders to move to the Sudak area and the 98th Division was to occupy the high ground north and west of Saly.

The events which took place on the afternoon of 12 April complicated the implementation of these orders but, instead of changing their scope, speeded up their execution. During the early afternoon a strong Russian armored column drove past the northern anchor of the Parpach position near the Sea of Azov and penetrated into Ak-Monay, but was stopped in that town. Immediately afterward, at 1530, Russian motorized units broke through at the boundary between the 6th Romanian Cavalry Division and the 73d Division along the road to Feodosiya.

At 1615, when the fighting for the Parpach position reached a decisive stage, telephone communications with army were re-established for a short period. Army confirmed that the Gneisenau position was lost and that the Russians exercised strong pressure in the Simferopol area. A link-up with the XLIX Corps at Simferopol was no longer feasible. The V Corps was to attempt to reach Sevastopol via the coastal road. This decision did not modify the orders issued by the corps. Once again the Germans had to evacuate their positions during the daylight hours. The withdrawal of the 98th Division was further complicated by the fact that it had to take place over open terrain, between Ak-Monay, and Vladislavovka, where there is no

cover. The exact location of the XLIX Corps was still unknown. Moreover, here were conflicting reports about a Russian advance from Karasubazar toward Saly. Stary Krym, a town in the foothills of the Yaila Mountains situated along the route of withdrawal of the 73d Division, was suddenly attacked by partisans who descended from the surrounding woods disguised as peaceful civilians. The 73d Division was faced with a difficult situation since it had to ward off the pursuing enemy forces on its front while partisans blocked its route of withdrawal at Stary Krym. The division tried to clear a path in hard house-to-house fighting, gained temporary possession of a few city blocks, and was thus able to detour the vehicular traffic which had to pass through the town. Except for brief intervals, the fighting in Stary Krym continued all through the night of 12–13 April.

On the morning of 13 April the 73d Division, its line facing east, held the high ground on either side of Stary Krym. Enemy forces in hot pursuit attacked the German positions and linked up with the partisans in the town. The 73d Division, joined by the remnants of the 6th Romanian Cavalry Division, was ordered to hold the high ground west of Stary Krym until the 98th Division had passed through Saly on the march to Sudak. Upon completion of this mission, the 73d Division was to withdraw immediately to the wooded heights south of Saly and block the enemy advance toward Sudak.

These movements went according to plan because the corps concentrated all its remaining forces within a narrow area despite continuous Russian air attacks. This was contrary to established doctrine but the heavily wooded mountainous terrain provided good cover for the corps troops and hid their sudden pivoting movement to the south. The Russians were deceived by German reconaissance in force west of Saly which led them to believe that the bulk of the V Corps was retreating toward Karasubazar. The Russian reaction was to throw all available forces into a westward drive from Stary Krym. The 98th Division reached the Sudak area without meeting resistance and the 73d Division had no particular difficulty in warding off the un-coordinated Russian attacks against its blocking position on the high ground two miles south of Saly.

Romanian demolition parties along the winding road between Feodosiya and Sudak had prepared a number of charges to be blown up after the last vehicles from Feodosiya had passed the demolition points, closing the road to a Russian advance. While the successful pivoting maneuver to the south constituted a minor success, the objective of reaching Sevastopol by the coastal route through the Yaila Mountains before its capture by the Russians was much more difficult to attain. Russian news broadcasts announced the capture of Simferopol and reported fighting southwest of the city. A quick glance at the map indicated only too clearly the difficulties the V Corps would

have to face. The obstacles presented by the terrain of the long mountainous route were considerable. The I Romanian Corps had been unsuccessful in dislodging the partisans from the Yaila Mountains. If the partisans blew up one single turn in the road, they could jeopardize the entire withdrawal. A Russian landing at Alushta or Yalta would have the same effect. Aside from the Saly–Sudak road, firmly held by the Germans, no less than seven usable roads branch off to the south across the mountains from the Saly–Karasubazar–Zuya–Simferopol–Bakhchisaray highway, and most were in Russian hands. At least three of these are improved roads, suitable for all types of troop movements. The Russians therefore had a variety of possibilities to block the V Corps withdrawal and they also had the necessary forces at their disposal. Twelve divisions with many tanks advanced from the Kerch Peninsula with an equal number thrusting across the Crimea from Krasnoperekopsk. A joint drive of these powerful forces in the direction of Sevastopol would crush the weak German forces. On the other hand, most of the Russian divisions were infantry units marching on foot and their link-up was bound to take some time. If the V Corps plan was to succeed, it could only be achieved by outrunning the Russians. The only possible solution was to provide motor transportation for the weak German units which had suffered such heavy losses during the withdrawal from the Kerch Peninsula. The corps and GHQ troops as well as the flak artillery had organic truck transportation and it was therefore a matter of providing motor transportation for the infantry units, horse-drawn artillery, and horse-drawn supply columns. Most of the trucks needed were taken from army motor pools and supply depots. They were commandeered, unloaded, and used for the movement of troops. The naval coast artillery, which had to blow up its fixed batteries near Feodosiya and along the coast, supplied a certain number of trucks. The tractors belonging to German agricultural organizations in the Crimea and the normally untouchable trucks of the well-equipped Organization Todt [Ed.: paramilitary construction organization of the Nazi Party, auxiliary to the Wehrmacht] units were also put into service.

In Sudak, the corps suddenly ran into several Romanian battalions without any transportation. Although this addition to the corps strength was welcome, the presence of the Romanians was bound to slow down the withdrawal of the now motorized V Corps. Despite unrelenting Russian air attacks, the bulk of the Romanian units was loaded on Navy landing craft in the small harbor of Sudak and taken to Sevastopol by sea. The rest rode along the coastal road to Alushta on German trucks with their horse-drawn service units following.

The simplest and quickest way to reach Sevastopol was to drive from Sudak during the following night, from 13 to 14 April. It

turned out that this was impossible, not because of enemy interference, but because more Romanian units were encountered between Sudak and Alushta. Some of them were withdrawing to Alushta to embark in that port, while others blocked the roads against a Russian advance through the mountains. The withdrawal of the German forces slowed down until all the Romanian units along the coast were embarked in Alushta and Yalta.

Russian pressure on the 73d Division front increased during the afternoon of 13 April. Fighting a delaying action, the division withdrew step by step southward from Saly. It was planned that the 98th Division move to Alushta at dusk. The 73d Division was to follow at a one-hour interval and, acting as rear guard, occupy the high ground west of Uskut. But the enemy cancelled all these plans. As soon as dusk set in, firing began east and north, and very shortly thereafter, also southeast of Sudak. At first it was small arms fire, but then heavy machine guns and antitank guns opened up, and finally there were sharp reports of tank fire. Since the V Corps had no tanks, these could only be Russian. It was never determined how these tanks suddenly appeared in the Sudak area, but it was believed that they might have come from Feodosiya along side roads.

This surprise attack was particularly inopportune because it separated the 98th Division from the 73d. Moreover, it cut the only highway along the coast leading to Uskut. No detours for motor vehicles were available. A counterattack conducted by the 98th Division during the night established that the opposing forces were mainly partisans. No sooner was contact re-established between the two German divisions, than a second enemy raid began and Russian tanks penetrated into the center of Sudak. This new threat was finally eliminated by another German counterattack.

The withdrawal of the 98th Division was thereby delayed until after midnight. Direct enemy interference was negligible during the night march which, however, turned out to be full of adventures because most of the drivers were inexperienced. The road leading through the Yaila Mountains was very poor and many steep turns were without guard rails. At several steep gradients the roadbed was as slippery as soap. Artillery pieces with long barrels had to back up several times before they could negotiate some of the narrow turns. There were endless traffic jams all along the road. Since the drivers were not allowed to use headlights, a number of vehicles plunged into the abyss. Fire signals on the mountain tops and burning farm houses along the road revealed that the partisans were never far off.

During 14 April the 98th Division reached the area northeast of Alushta, while the rear guards of the 73d Division covered the withdrawal west of Uskut. The demolitions were set off according to plan

and no Romanians were left behind. The over-all situation continued to be uncertain all through the day since wire communications with army were interrupted most of the time. Atmospheric conditions made it impossible to establish radio contact. The V Corps commander believed that, after the capture of Simferopol, the Russian command would drive straight to Sevastopol. If the Russians entered the city on the heels of the XLIX Corps, the Seventeenth Army was doomed. The V Corps commander was therefore not surprised to find that there was no strong enemy pressure along the roads leading across the mountains toward the south coast. He expected the Russians to block the seven mountain roads and attack via Bakhchisaray toward Yalta or Foros.

Reports from German reconnaissance patrols confirmed these suspicions. Some Russian units advanced along the Bakhchisaray–Yalta road which had been mined and was blocked by a Romanian battalion, while stronger forces thrust southward in the direction of Foros. Midway between Bakhchisaray and Foros some hastily assembled German units were digging in, but it was difficult to predict how long they would be able to withstand the Russian pressure. Every possible step had to be taken to move the V Corps troops into Sevastopol before the escape route was closed.

During the night of 14–15 April, the V Corps established telephone communications with Seventeenth Army at its new command post in Sevastopol. The XLIX Mountain Corps had succeeded in stalling the Russian advance at the ramparts of Sevastopol, but army doubted whether the weak German units on the Bakhchisaray–Foros road could hold out throughout 15 April. The arrival of the V Corps was essential for the defense of Sevastopol which was indefensible without immediate reinforcement. If the V Corps was unable to reach the city, Seventeenth Army had no other choice but to form a beachhead at some favorable point along the coast and wait for evacuation by the sea.

A rough estimate by the corps commander indicated that the corps could not possibly arrive in Sevastopol on 15 April unless it started its withdrawal from Alushta no later than 1000, since this was not just a drive over normal terrain but over a rugged mountain road across partisan-infested territory. The chances of reaching Sevastopol before regular Russian troops or partisans cut the road were slight. Was this sufficient reason to give up trying to reach the city? After all, the corps was strong enough to fight its way back to Sevastopol. If it stayed put and formed a beachhead at Alushta or Yalta, the corps would lose all heavy weapons and trucks should the troops be evacuated by sea. In addition, this desperate expedient could still be tried after all efforts to reach Sevastopol had failed.

The corps commander therefore issued orders that all German units move out of Alushta during the morning of 15 April immediately after the Romanians had completed the embarkation of their forces. The 98th Division, acting as advance guard, was to be ready at 1000. The 73d Division was to follow at a one-mile interval. The town commander of Alushta was instructed to hold a position north of Alushta with two Romanian infantry battalions until the evening of 15 April and to embark under cover of darkness. He was allotted the necessary landing craft and a German staff was put in charge of the final loading operations.

While the corps commander issued these orders during the early morning hours, the Russians suddenly attacked the two Romanian infantry battalions blocking the road to Alushta. German liaison officers attached to the two battalions reported that some of the companies were falling back. Soon afterward, individual soldiers were seen running through the streets of Alushta toward the boats. It was not without difficulty that these stragglers were returned to their outfits which had continued to resist and had meanwhile repelled the Russians.

The 98th Division started moving out of Alushta by 1100 and the other troop movements took place according to plan. At Yalta, the Germans were joined by Romanian troops which had secured the road to Bakhchisaray. The Russian air force was ineffective because thick fog rose from the Black Sea and hid the coast line around Yalta, forcing the planes to drop their loads at random. The coastal road out of Yalta is modern and of excellent construction. Interference by partisans was broken up by immediate countermeasures and none of the many road turns were blown up by them. One such demolition placed at the right point, might have blocked the entire mountain road and cut off the corps.

After the last truck had gone through, the extensive demolitions prepared by the Germans were set off. The rocky defile at Foros collapsed in a cloud of dust and a short distance from there a steep turn, including the buttress, rolled down the mountain slope. None too soon, the V Corps marched into Fortress Sevastopol. Two hours later the Russians cut off the last approaches by land.

PART FOUR
RETROGRADE MOVEMENTS

Chapter 9
DELAYING AND BLOCKING ACTIONS

One of the frequently tried and always effective methods of defense against break-throughs consists of delaying and blocking a main enemy thrust with the help of strong reserves. Like most others, these defense tactics presuppose the existence or early availability of adequate reserves. Compared to the enemy attack forces these reserves may be much weaker without necessarily being at a disadvantage. During the Russian Christmas offensive in 1943, for instance, the enemy wedge had a five-to-one superiority over the German blocking forces. In such a case the block must be sufficiently resilient to withstand the terrific impact of hostile tank forces and must be absolutely shockproof. The block should be placed in favorable terrain if it is to prevent the enemy advance or divert its axis.

Whenever a blocking force fails in its mission, it must be withdrawn to another line farther to the rear. Its essential task is to disable as many hostile tanks as possible in order to weaken the enemy's striking power and re-establish the balance of forces. An attack by infantry without the assistance of armor will rarely constitute a threat to tank-supported units.

Eventually, the block will form the nucleus of the new defense line that is to be built up. The line must be extended on both wings as soon as possible and be strengthened by forces moved up from other sectors which are not under attack. Tactical expedients, dictated by momentary needs, often lead to confusion in the disposition of units. The command must attempt to eliminate these deficiencies at the earliest possible moment. The methods used and sequence observed in closing any remaining gaps will depend upon the situation and local conditions. Overextended frontages and shortage of manpower will often prevent a further extension of sectors. Along the German front in Russia in 1944, quite a few gaps remained open for weeks or even months—for instance the so-called Wehrmacht Gap in the Pripyat marshes. Ground and air reconnaissance had to be constantly on the alert since the Russians rarely failed to take advantage of such gaps by some surprise move.

It is extremely important to recognize the exact time at which the enemy finally abandons his attacks against a blocking force, only to renew them with fresh troops on the flank, at some other gap, or in a different sector. Often the destruction of his last remaining tanks and the fading of his infantry assaults will indicate the change in the enemy's intentions. Whenever the Germans observed any such indications, they immediately withdrew all their tanks from the blocking force in order to build up strong reserves. This was all the more necessary since they could not count on the arrival of reinforcements, except in rare instances.

Whenever towns or major natural obstacles such as rivers are situated within the break-through area, it will prove advantageous to integrate them into the defense system. Towns should be organized for all-around defense and, in accordance with their characteristics, obstacles should be used to strengthen the block. If extensive marshes or other impassible areas are close behind the front line, the routes for bypassing them in case of a withdrawal must be determined in advance. Efficient guides, road repairs, bridges, corduroy roads, secure defiles, and timely orders for withdrawal are some of the numerous elements for the success of such difficult retrograde movements.

The duration of each delaying action by a blocking force, the number of successive withdrawals, and the depth of a retrograde movement depend upon the over-all situation, the terrain conditions, and the distribution of forces, and therefore vary in each instance. Three co-ordinated withdrawals to a total depth of sixty miles were necessary during the Russian Christmas offensive in 1943. Additional intermediate movements of minor significance were performed by individual units whenever they were under particularly heavy pressure. Strong resistance in every position was essential to accomplish the delaying mission. Partial withdrawals were permitted only with the approval of the army commander. The retrograde movement of the entire blocking force was contingent upon his personal orders.

The Russian offensive followed the operations described in Chapter 1. Even during the fighting in the Teterev–Irsha triangle, German aerial reconnaissance reported increasing rail traffic from the northwest in the direction of Kiev. (Map 9) Day and night, enemy troop transports including hundreds of tanks moved across the Dnepr bridges toward the west. Doubtless the Russians transferred strong armored and infantry units into the Kiev area. They either intended to commit them in an effort to regain the terrain they had lost northeast of Zhitomir, or they planned a new operation. Since no new units were identified along the Teterev front, everything seemed to indicate that preparations for a new major offensive were under way. It was not until the last days before Christmas that the Russians started local probing attacks along and to the south of the Kiev–

Zhitomir highway in order to find some weak points in the German dispositions and to acquire advantageous jump-off positions. Air photographs, taken daily, indicated a steady increase in the number of enemy artillery emplacements which at first remained unoccupied. New batteries moved into the emplacements and adjusted their fire. These were clear indications of an impending enemy offensive. Russian tank movements, conducted simultaneously on the right army wing near Kanev along the Dnepr, did not fit into the general picture and were carried out so clumsily that they were immediately recognized as feints. Even though radio intercepts indicated no change, the heavy truck traffic which started to roll toward the front every night after 20 December left no doubt that the Russian attack was imminent. German reconnaissance planes sighted between two and three thousand loaded trucks rolling from Kiev to the front during several successive nights with just as many returning empty. This was the best indication that the enemy would soon launch his attack in this sector. The sudden calm descending upon the front on 23 December deceived nobody. On the contrary, it indicated that the Russian offensive could start at any moment, especially since the Russians liked to launch large-scale operations on Christmas Eve, believing that the German soldiers could be caught off guard on this important religious festival.

The Germans took a number of precautionary steps to absorb the initial shock of the first enemy assaults and to add to the depth of their defense. The fully motorized artillery division, which had arrived only two weeks earlier and had been committed on a quiet sector in accordance with specific orders issued by Hitler, was now moved to Zhitomir. This division was equipped with 60 light and 40 medium pieces and 24 assault guns, and was therefore particularly capable of shattering mass attacks. In addition, the XLVIII Panzer Corps was pulled out and assembled in the vicinity of Korosten. A motorized infantry division, undergoing rehabilitation in rest areas west of Berdichev, was to form a regimental combat team with all those elements which were ready for commitment. This combat team actually consisted of two motorized infantry battalions, one light artillery battalion, and one signal company. The weak local reserves near the Kiev–Zhitomir highway were reinforced with forty tanks. Although the formation of reserves was of vital importance, army was unable to relieve any other units because its front was so greatly overextended. Army group could not help at this time, and the Fourth Panzer Army therefore had to face the Russian onslaught with very meager reserves.

An antitank ditch was dug approximately ten miles behind the main line of resistance. Its eastern section lay behind an unfordable stream. The important railroad junctions at Zhitomir, Berdichev,

and Kazatin were protected by fortifications for the defense of which, however, only alert units formed by service troops were available. All nonessential rolling stock and supplies were evacuated to the west.

As expected, the Russian offensive began on 24 December south of the Kiev–Zhitomir highway. After a heavy one-hour preparation, the enemy succeeded in breaching the positions held by two understrength panzer divisions. But the two divisions continued to defend their main line of resistance although they were completely encircled. By noon this Russian force reached the antitank ditch and crossed it at some points. A second powerful armored thrust penetrated the overextended front in the central sector during the morning. Only slightly delayed by local resistance, several hundred enemy tanks rolled in an endless stream toward Berdichev. Here too, the antitank ditch caused little delay because the Germans lacked sufficient manpower for its effective defense. By the end of the first day the enemy force forming the main effort reached the Kiev–Zhitomir railroad line.

Another enemy thrust, carried out farther north in the direction of Zhitomir proper, initially made slow progress in the swampy forests south of the highway because of the strong German antitank fronts. During the night the two encircled panzer divisions, ordered to break out to the west, attacked the enemy from the rear and disorganized him so completely that he was incapable of continuing the attack on the next day.

In an effort to stem the Russian advance, the XLVIII Panzer Corps was withdrawn from the Korosten area and committed in a counterattack south of the Teterev. The corps commander had orders to block the hostile advance behind the undulating terrain between Kazatin and Berdichev and to delay the Russians as long as possible. Up to this time some 800 enemy tanks had appeared in this area. When the panzer corps arrived south of the Teterev at dawn, enemy tank columns, many miles long, suddenly came into view. The corps commander could not resist the temptation and, instead of following his instructions, he decided to make an immediate surprise attack against the open enemy flank. But this flank attack had no chance of succeeding because 150 German tanks could not combat or even deflect the axis of the mass of Russian armor which had meanwhile grown to 1,000 tanks. As expected, the enemy quickly recovered from his initial surprise and held off the panzer corps with one-fourth of his armor and some antitank weapons. Although the panzer corps disabled seventy-eight tanks, it was unable to overcome this obstacle. The bulk of two Russian tank armies rolled on to the area north of Kazatin which was defended by a regimental combat team of the 20th Panzer Division, the twenty-four assault guns of the artillery division, and the alert units stationed within the city limits. If this

unforeseen threat was to be met and a break-through in depth to be prevented, the other elements of the artillery division which had just moved into the Zhitomir area had to be pulled out immediately and transferred to Kazatin. Traffic bottlenecks, created by the simultaneous use of the Zhitomir–Kazatin road by units of the panzer corps traveling in the same direction, were unavoidable. The excellent condition of the asphalt road made it possible to pour enough reinforcements into Kazatin at the last moment, enabling the Germans to withstand the impact of the Russian onslaught.

The other enemy thrusts in the Berdichev area and east of Zhitomir were also brought to a halt. Thus, the XLVIII Panzer Corps was afforded sufficient time to comply with its original orders and take up positions between Kazatin and Berdichev. The corps arrived on 26 December, just in time to see the Russians streaming into Kazatin. Their next objective was to cut the Zhitomir–Vinnitsa highway. The German tanks repelled the enemy spearheads and retook the ridge east of the highway. The Russians then split their attack forces and attempted to find a weak point for a break-through to the west, but the panzer units took advantage of the good road net and always reached the critical point in time to block the advance of the hostile armor. Well concealed by terrain and brush, they let the Russian tanks approach and scored direct hits before they were discovered. On one day alone, 26 December, more than 200 enemy tanks succumbed to these tactics. By the third day of the thrust the break-through area of the attacking Russian tank armies was blocked by the panzer corps which constantly received infantry reinforcements. For five days the Russians tried to break through this blocking force. The only visible result they achieved was their mounting losses of armor. When the enemy realized the futility of his efforts, he changed the direction of his thrust and attempted to unhinge both flanks of the blocking force by outflanking Zhitomir in the north and bypassing Kazatin on the south. To counteract this move, the LIX Corps was withdrawn from Korosten to Novograd-Volynskiy and the XIII Corps evacuated Zhitomir in order to take up new positions south of the swampy forests along the Teterev. In addition, all available elements of two divisions were moved closer to Kazatin to extend the front of the blocking force. A local withdrawal of the XLVIII Panzer Corps completed these measures and helped to build up a new, integrated defense system. On the other hand, Hitler refused to permit the withdrawal of the two right wing corps in position along the Dnepr bend although these forces were in imminent danger of being cut off. A light screening force maintained contact between these two corps and the rest of the heavily engaged Fourth Panzer Army. For the time being the Russians probed this screening force without realizing their opportunity. Before long, however, the pres-

sure on the VII Infantry Corps front increased, the salient was overextended, and the front line was breached. The enemy poured more and more troops into the gap north of Uman without meeting any opposition. There was still a possibility of extricating the two corps from the tightening noose, although they were seriously threatened from the rear. Had they been allowed to use detours or to break through, they could have re-established contact with the Fourth Panzer Army and would have been integrated into the second blocking line put up by the army. But the two corps were ordered to stay in place despite increasingly emphatic requests addressed to Hitler. By the time the German command fully realized the danger, the enemy had assembled one army north of Uman with a second one following close behind. The staff of First Panzer Army—and two battle-weary panzer divisions—was quickly relieved in another sector, shifted to Uman, and put in charge of the two corps cut off in the north.

In the meantime, heavy fighting continued for weeks along the Fourth Panzer Army front. In the center, the XIII Corps was weakened by the heavy losses of equipment it had suffered during its withdrawal across the swampy woods south of Zhitomir. Realizing this weakness, the Russians concentrated their armor opposite the sector held by this corps. They anticipated that the break-through they had hitherto been denied could be achieved by attacking the sector. During this phase of the fighting they attained several small penetrations. These were quickly eliminated with the assistance of XLVIII Panzer Corps units, but the divisions of XIII Corps were gradually reduced and crushed. Their remnants held out among the panzer units and, to unify the command, they were subordinated to the panzer corps and the staff of XIII Corps was withdrawn. In a last desperate attempt to break through, the Russians massed all available tanks and penetrated the German lines. But in the subsequent melee all seventy tanks that had gone through were put out of action. Thus ended the attacks along this sector during the last days of January.

The Russian armored thrust on Vinnitsa failed at about the same time after enemy spearheads had come within reach of Zhmerinka, the important railroad junction from which the double-track lines branch off to Odessa. The XXVIII Infantry Corps, recently transferred from the northern front, launched a powerful counterattack with one panzer and three strong infantry divisions, repelled the hostile tank army, and cut off those elements which had advanced as far as Zhmerinka.

The last major enemy thrust against the extreme west wing of Fourth Panzer Army was directed against the Shepetovka railroad station. One weak infantry division held Shepetovka against vastly

superior enemy forces, but this Russian attack also failed. A subsequent attempt to cut off the LIX from the XLVIII Panzer Corps by an enveloping thrust via Polonnoye was equally unsuccessful. An additional infantry division transferred from the northern front was detrained in Shepetovka in time to launch a counterattack. The division recaptured Polonnoye, sealed the gap, and re-established contact with the adjacent panzer corps.

This brought the Russian Christmas offensive to its end. After five weeks of hard struggle, Fourth Panzer Army with its four corps and some 200 tanks had scored a major defensive success against six enemy armies with 1,200 tanks. Although the Russians forced the Germans to withdraw their front lines by about sixty miles, they did not achieve a strategic break-through with far-reaching objectives. Their plan had been to crush Fourth Panzer Army, unhinge the two army groups in the Ukraine, and nail them against the Black Sea or push them into Romania. This plan failed and, in view of its proportions, the territorial gains obtained by the Russians were really insignificant. The Fourth Panzer Army remained intact and held a continuous front line. This defensive success was achieved because, after the third day of the Russian offensive, a strong panzer corps was employed as blocking force. At that time the center of the army sector had been broken through and gaps up to ninety miles in width extended on its flanks. But the blocking force formed the steel clamp that held together the isolated infantry corps and preserved the army from disintegration. The Russians were unable to split this solid army front of twelve divisions. By fighting three successive delaying actions, the blocking force had prevented a break-through and stabilized the situation sufficiently to permit the formation of a continuous front.

Chapter 10

DELAY ON SUCCESSIVE POSITIONS

In a situation where enemy infantry attempts to break through without much armored support, a delaying action in successive positions may be the most promising defensive tactic. The underlying principle of this maneuver is to inflict casualties upon the enemy without becoming too closely engaged. By offering limited resistance on successive positions, the defender attempts to weaken the enemy until his forces are too disorganized to mount a sustained offensive. After the hostile attacks have lost their momentum, strong resistance may be offered on a permanent position or a counteroffensive may be launched. Delaying actions are therefore temporary expedients to prevent a break-through by trading a minimum of space for a maximum amount of time to allow the defender to move up new forces.

Complications arise when the flanks of a weak delaying force are open to attacks by strong hostile armor supported by ample reserves. In August 1943, during the delaying action south of Belgorod, the Germans reached Kharkov after co-ordinated withdrawals from eight successive positions which they held during daylight and evacuated under cover of darkness. (Map 10) The distance covered by each withdrawal varied between five and six miles. Kharkov was held for a week and then the delaying operation was continued by a withdrawal via Poltava toward the Dnepr. During this phase, however, the unfavorable situation in the Kiev area compelled the German commander to accelerate the withdrawal, forcing him to abandon 120 miles of terrain within twelve days. During the retrograde movement from Belgorod to Kremenchug on the Dneper, the enemy was never able to break through or push by the flanks. The entire delaying force, consisting of twelve divisions, crossed the Dnepr and established a permanent defense line on the west bank of the river.

The auspices for this delaying action were not favorable. After the failure of Operation ZITADELLE, the German pincers attack on Kursk in July 1943, the Russians held the initiative. They launched the pursuit with powerful reserves, while the Germans withdrew to the positions they had held before the ill-fated offensive. The XI Infantry Corps moved into the heavily fortified defensive system anchored on Belgorod and repelled all enemy attacks across the Donets River. The Fourth Panzer Army, adjacent to the northwest, tried to offer resistance in open terrain and was overrun by strong Russian armored forces. Remnants of one of its infantry divisions sought

refuge behind the left wing of the XI Corps. An attempt by Fourth Panzer Army to close the gap by an armored counterattack was unsuccessful. The Russian tanks advanced without much interference and reached Bogodukhov on 6 August. This enemy thrust endangered the XI Corps north of Belgorod. Russian armored spearheads advanced toward Poltava and Akhtyrka fifty miles to the rear, while other enemy forces attacked the front and flank of the corps to encircle and annihilate it. The corps front formed a deep salient into enemy territory which might have disintegrated with complete encirclement its final destiny. This would have meant a widening of the gap from 15 to 50 miles and the immediate loss of 5 divisions. To prevent such a disaster the corps had to withdraw from Belgorod, but the retrograde movement was to be gradual in order to gain time for the preparation of countermeasures. In view of the limited strength of the corps, it would have been a mistake to attempt to close the gap by widening the corps sector nor was any such plan feasible since the enemy kept up his pressure on the entire front. On the contrary, the corps had to keep its forces together and form a solid block against the superior enemy forces.

These considerations determined the conduct of operations. The corps commander decided to fight a delaying action in successive positions until the corps reached Kharkov and then to hold the city. The corps had to build up a front facing north and protect its left flank against an enemy envelopment, while the right flank was anchored on the Donets River. Elements of two infantry divisions were reinforced by an assault gun battalion, an antitank battalion, and twelve Tiger tanks to provide cover for the left flank.

During the night from 5 to 6 August, Belgorod was evacuated after heavy street fighting and the next position, prepared on the high ground immediately south of the city, was occupied. Luftwaffe and service troops defended the road crossings in the swampy lowlands along the Lopan River against enemy spearheads threatening the deep flank. The greatest danger, however, loomed along the Belgorod–Kharkov *Rollbahn*, where the enemy massed his forces in an attempt to break through to Kharkov. A full-strength assault gun battalion, with forty-two self-propelled guns, moving up from Kharkov, was to protect the highway. Its mobility and fire power were to enable the battalion to stop any possible armored break-through.

The position south of Belgorod was held for one day and abandoned after the enemy had deployed his forces. Continued resistance in one position would have led to heavy casualties and the annihilation of the isolated corps. Constant enemy attempts to outflank the left wing submitted the command to a severe nervous strain and made extreme demands on the physical endurance of the troops. However great the sacrifices, they had to be made if worse disaster was to be

averted. On 9 August the limits of endurance seemed to have been exceeded when, after an all-night evacuation, the Germans failed to reach the new phase line by dawn. Enemy spearheads broke through along the *Rollbahn* and the whereabouts of an entire division, the 168th Infantry Division, was uncertain. News from the Donets and Lopan sectors was no less alarming. Enemy armor had broken out of the Donets bridgehead, other Russian forces had crossed the Lopan, and the assault gun battalion from Kharkov had failed to arrive. Low-flying hostile planes in great numbers dropped fragmentation bombs and machine gunned troops on the march. Suffering heavy casualties, the German forces grew restless. A few division commanders came over to the corps command post, which by then was situated close to the front line, and requested authorization for an immediate speedy withdrawal to Kharkov in view of the critical situation and the low morale of their forces. Suddenly several trucks loaded with stragglers came tearing down the highway, ignoring all stop signals. When the trucks were finally brought to a halt, the stragglers explained that they had become separated from their 168th Division unit and had been seized by panic when they were subjected to an armored assault farther up the road. Their intention was to drive straight through to Kharkov, at that time forty miles behind the German front. They reported that their division had been wiped out and added that the 88-mm. antiaircraft batteries, detailed to block the highway, were no longer in place.

Every experienced combat commander is familiar with this sort of panic which, in a critical situation, may seize an entire body of troops. Mass hysteria of this type can be overcome only by energetic actions and a display of perfect composure. The example set by a true leader can have miraculous effects. He must stay with his troops, remain cool, issue precise orders, and inspire confidence by his behavior. Good soldiers never desert such a leader. News of the presence of high ranking commanders up front travels like wildfire along the entire front line, bolstering everyone's morale. It means a sudden change from gloom to hope, from imminent defeat to victory.

This is exactly what happened. The corps commander stood at a crucial point along the *Rollbahn*, orienting unit commanders and assigning them a mission in the new defense system which he attempted to build up. Self-propelled antitank guns arriving at this instant were immediately committed to block the highway against an armored break-through which seemed imminent as the fire from approaching tanks came ever closer. The corps commander quickly drove past the newly established line toward the din of battle to find out for himself whether the antiaircraft guns were holding out. Driving around a corner, he suddenly witnessed the destruction of a Russian tank by the improvised antitank front. He counted eleven more disabled

tanks and saw the remaining enemy armor withdraw straight into an extensive mine field where one tank after another was blown up.

Shortly afterward, German fighter planes appeared, and shot down more than a dozen enemy aircraft, clearing the air over the corps front. German heavy weapons and artillery pinned the enemy infantry to the ground when they advanced on a broad front. The threat of a break-through along the *Rollbahn* was eliminated and the German lines held.

The 6th Panzer Division on the left flank faced a difficult situation when, in addition to its own sector, it had to take over the one previously held by the missing 168th Division. The enemy exerted heavy pressure and the panzer division requested immediate antitank support. The corps commander dispatched twelve antitank guns and arranged for an air strike on the Russian tank column advancing east of the Lopan River. These combined efforts prevented the immediate collapse of the German flank cover.

Delayed by traffic jams, the long-awaited assault gun battalion did not arrive until noon. After refueling in some gullies covered with underbrush, it was committed in a counterattack against the enemy tanks threatening the left flank. The massed attack of the forty-two guns surprised the enemy and hit him hard. The assault guns destroyed all enemy tanks and antitank guns on the east bank of the Lopan, shattered the Russian bridgehead, and drove the remaining enemy forces across the river. By early afternoon the situation was under control. Reports from the Donets sector indicated that the enemy was unable to enlarge his bridgehead in the face of stubborn resistance from German infantry units supported by assault guns.

Even though an entire division was missing, the corps had scored an initial defensive success. The enemy's intention to annihilate the German forces by a concentric attack from three sides had failed. Heavy Russian losses in personnel and matériel, including sixty disabled tanks, resulted from the day's operations.

During the night to 10 August, the corps made an unobserved withdrawal to a hastily prepared position about six miles to the south, the salient points of which were occupied by advance detachments. Weak rear guards, left behind in the former position, led the enemy to believe that the line was fully occupied. The next morning, when Russian infantry attacked the position after a heavy concentration, they found only the rear party maintaining contact. The German troops, exhausted by the previous day's fighting and the night march, were able to recuperate during the morning hours. By noon the first enemy patrols cautiously approached the new position. Its gun emplacements and strong points were well camouflaged, and enemy ground and air reconnaissance therefore failed to locate them. Three

divisions held the line; one of them had left its positions along the Donets to join the corps.

The Russian attacks resumed during the afternoon with increasing violence. The most dangerous Russian arm was not the badly mauled armor or the tactical air support, but the powerful artillery. In this instance, the effect of the heavy artillery fire was not so devastating since the excellent camouflage of potential German targets forced the Russians to deliver flat trajectory fire. But whenever German machine guns or heavy weapons fired from open terrain, they were spotted by hostile observers and quickly neutralized. If they were to escape destruction, they had to use well-concealed and readily accessible alternate and dummy positions.

By the evening of 10 August, the enemy attacks had lost some of their sting. In view of the experience of the last few days, the Russians made probing thrusts after dusk to maintain contact with the corps in case of another German night withdrawal. The enemy infantry was given a hot reception and, after all attacks had been repulsed, the corps withdrew to the next prepared position. By the time the infantry occupied the new line, the bulk of the artillery and antitank guns were ready to fire. Forming a solid block, the corps was unshaken by renewed enemy onslaughts.

The same delaying tactics were employed during the following days. The withdrawal to successive positions was exhausting, but the casualty rate remained low. The enemy suffered disproportionately high losses, which forced him to gradually relax the pressure on the German lines. The corps front was shortened and strengthened by units no longer needed for flank protection, and reserves were formed. The 168th Division, missing for several days, was found in a well-concealed area when the corps commander made a reconnaissance trip north of Kharkov. The division commander explained that he had understood his unit was to act as corps reserve and that he had therefore withdrawn to the forests twenty-five miles behind the front. After his conduct had been castigated in no uncertain terms, he was told to commit his division as covering force in the next position to be occupied. This made it possible to pull out the 6th Panzer Division, designate it corps reserve, and move it to the forest area for a well-deserved rest.

The XLII Infantry Corps, adjacent to the right, was forced to join the XI Corps withdrawal during the night of 11–12 August because its defense line along the Donets formed a deep salient in Russian-held territory. The infantry division on the left wing of this corps had not previously been engaged in a tank battle; it offered little resistance to strong Russian armored forces, which broke through without difficulty and suddenly appeared in the rear of the XI Corps front outside Kharkov. The situation became even more critical

when the recruits of a newly arrived regiment, overcome by fear of the approaching Russian tanks, ran for their lives until they were stopped at the bridges in the suburbs of Kharkov. Strong enemy infantry poured through the wide gap to exploit the initial break-through achieved by the tanks. The 6th Panzer Division was immediately alerted and its spearheads intercepted the enemy in the southeastern outskirts of Kharkov where he had occupied the big tractor plant. The division counterattacked, dislodged the enemy from the factory after fierce fighting, destroyed many tanks, dispersed the Russian infantry, and closed the gap. The danger was eliminated for the time being.

Tank fright is frequent among newly activated infantry divisions when training in antimechanized defense has been neglected. Combined arms training with armored or assault gun units is essential in order to give each soldier the experience of being overrun by a tank while in his foxhole and to acquaint him with the use of antitank weapons.

A recently arrived panzer division strengthened the corps flank and blocked the approach routes to Kharkov. The battles for Kharkov proper have been analyzed in CMH Pub 104–12, pages 53–56. The evacuation of Kharkov by the Germans became necessary because of unfavorable developments on the southern front. It was carried out without difficulty on 18 August, and a previously prepared position a few miles to the west was occupied by the corps. The new position was situated on high ground protected by a swampy valley cutting across the approach roads. It was considerably shorter than the position skirting Kharkov and could therefore be held very effectively.

During the withdrawal of the German rear guard, the only bridge across the marshes which had been left intact collapsed under the weight of some Hornets (88-mm. tank destroyers). One infantry battalion reinforced by eight Hornets was thereby cut off on the east bank. The enemy attempts to annihilate this small rear guard were frustrated by German units supporting the bridgehead from the west bank. The rear guard held out for twenty-four hours until the bridge was repaired and it could cross under cover of darkness.

In its new position, the corps had to ward off some fierce attacks by enemy forces trying to envelop both flanks. Several local penetrations were sealed off by armored counterattacks. But even this strong position had to be evacuated after a short while since it formed a dangerous salient to the east after the adjacent units were forced to pull out. The next withdrawal led the corps into exposed, flat terrain where it had to extend its wings until the sector covered the forty-mile stretch between the Kolomak and the Berestova Rivers.

In the meantime the over-all situation forced general withdrawal behind the Dnepr River. The XI Corps was given the mission of organizing and covering the withdrawal of twelve divisions across the highway and railroad bridges at Kremenchug. (See CMH Pub 104–1, pp. 82 ff.) During this retrograde movement, the same delaying tactics were employed which had been so successful during the withdrawal from Belgorod to Kharkov. Again and again, delay on successive positions forced the enemy to make time-consuming preparations for battle and to suffer heavy casualties, leading to the gradual exhaustion of his forces. The Russians recognized these intentions and tried every day to force the issue by achieving an armored break-through. Above all, the enemy wanted to capture major cities commanding the road net needed for speedy maneuver. In view of the rainy weather, the possession of hard-surface highways became a decisive factor to both sides since the mud prevented any movement off the roads. The Germans took this factor into account and concentrated their antitank defenses in and around important towns. During this phase, cities were therefore far more important than during the fighting in the area north of Kharkov. The enemy achieved only one armored break-through when he blocked the German withdrawal across the Orchik River near Karlovka. A critical situation developed because of additional delays in the river crossing caused by floods, mud, and the steepness of the west bank. There was a grave danger that enemy tanks might reach the weakly held west bank before the arrival of the German units which were forced to take devious routes. The densely populated suburban area of Karlovka near the river was set ablaze by enemy artillery fire, which meant a further delay in the crossing. Demolitions of factories, railroad installations, depots, and supplies, ordered by higher headquarters in line with a German scorched earth policy, caused still more delays. A major enemy break-through at this point seemed certain, when suddenly the Russian tanks were forced to slow down because of mud, and the danger subsided.

With a change in the weather the ground dried; the infantry divisions were able to move faster and the daily rate of withdrawal was stepped up to twenty to thirty miles. The Russian tanks did not renew their pressure until the corps halted for several days at the Kremenchug bridgehead. Russian striking power was impaired by several weeks of German delaying actions on successive positions. The enemy counteroffensive had spent itself.

PART FIVE

DEFENSE AGAINST BREAK-THROUGH— A COMBINATION OF DEFENSE TACTICS

Every protracted defensive engagement requires the application of a combination of tactics which correspond to the changes in the situation. During the Russian campaign several defensive methods were employed simultaneously or successively with no single one exercising a predominant or, even less, a decisive influence on the outcome of the operation. Even within one action, subordinate units sometimes applied tactics differing from those used by the main body. At the beginning of August 1944, for instance, during the fighting along the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains, six infantry battalions blocked the enemy advance while the two divisions to which they belonged carried out a simultaneous flank attack. As a rule, defensive actions are designated by the tactical measure which predominates. During the battle for East Prussia, for instance, the Germans at first used improvised zone defense tactics. Subsequent Russian break-through attempts were frustrated by defensive pincers, flank attacks, delaying and blocking maneuvers, and attacks with reversed fronts, but the outcome of the battle was determined by the employment of zone defense tactics.

On the other hand, a combination of defense tactics stopped the major offensive in which the Russians drove from the Volga to the Dnepr in the winter of 1942–43. Delaying and blocking maneuvers by panzer and infantry units, combined with pincers, flank thrusts, and the encirclement of an armored corps prevented a Russian break-through to Rostov in December 1942. This would have endangered the German troops in the Caucasus and south of Stalingrad. In another instance, rigid defense by infantry combined with mobile maneuvers of armored units stopped a Russian break-through attempt toward the Sea of Azov during January and February 1943. Delay on successive positions during the withdrawal toward the Dnepr in the summer of 1943 slowed down the enemy's thrust to the west and made it possible to move up German reinforcements. The pincers attack following that retrograde movement crushed the Russian armored wedge in the Dnepr bend and broke the backbone of the offensive.

During the fighting near Kirovograd in January 1944, the Germans employed delaying and blocking tactics, defensive pincers, flank attacks, envelopments, and break-through maneuvers which were of equal importance and followed each other in quick succession. For this reason the Kirovograd operation is a typical example of the application of combined defense tactics.

Toward the end of 1943, the Russian operations in the south seemed to indicate that the Soviet command planned to break through the German front in several places, split the forces of Army Groups A and South, and drive them into the Black Sea and toward the Romanian border. In line with these plans the Second Ukranian Front launched a major offensive in December 1943 in order to break through in the Kirovograd area. The Russians opened a breach in the Eighth Army front, but this initial attempt was frustrated by swift counterattacks of German motorized units. During the first days of January 1944, German ground and air reconnaissance as well as radio intercepts indicated Russian concentrations and attack preparations. Strong artillery forces were assembling in the rear of the Russian lines. While only about sixty Russian tanks were discovered in the concentration areas close to the German front, intelligence estimates assumed that strong armored forces were located in rest areas farther to the rear.

The Eighth Army front was overextended and few reserves were available to conduct an active defense. It seemed unlikely that any sizable units could be shifted from sectors not under attack because all the divisions were understrength and the enemy exercised pressure along the entire front. The armored elements of two panzer divisions committed along the front line were held back as corps reserves. Eight GHQ artillery battalions were available to strengthen the two potential centers of gravity. Artillery ammunition on hand was abundant, a fact which partly compensated for the German inferiority in number of guns.

The Russians launched their attack at 0600 on 5 January, jumping off from their two principal concentration areas. Preceded by half an hour's artillery preparation and several air strikes, massed infantry poured through the gaps in the German front in an attempt to break through to the Kirovograd area. Following closely, additional infantry and some antitank units widened the areas of penetration and secured the interior flanks for the advancing Russian armor. In conjunction with the two main thrusts the Russians conducted holding attacks in varying strength along the entire army front. By the time the infantry assault got under way, the heavy preparation, in which two-thirds of the enemy's batteries participated, had neutralized most of the German artillery and inflicted extremely heavy casualties. The combat strength of some divisions dropped even lower—even before

the start of the offensive the 2d Parachute Division held a twelve-mile sector with 3,200 men and the 10th Panzer Grenadier Division covered eleven miles of frontage with 3,700 men. The Russian infantry forces, six to seven divisions strong and supported by armored groups of varying strength, achieved deep penetrations during the morning hours. At the southern point of main effort they advanced 6 miles on a 4-mile front, and in the XLVII Panzer Corps sector 13 miles on a 10-mile front. (Map 11A)

When the Russian armored forces attempted to exploit the initial break-through, the German corps reserves launched small-scale flank attacks. Supported by antitank units, they destroyed altogether ninety-three enemy tanks, mainly in the southern sector. Nevertheless, it became evident that the Eighth Army forces alone would be unable to seal the gaps in the front. As requested by army, the 3d Panzer Division was transferred during the late morning and committed in the XLVII Panzer Corps sector. In the southern break-through area, approximately 200 Russian tanks were held up by diversionary flank attacks before they could reach the Ingul River. In the northern area of penetration, however, the counterthrusts carried out by elements of 11th Panzer Division failed to stop the armored forces driving toward the southwest. There, the enemy threatened to envelop Kirovograd from the north and west and cause its fall by cutting the German lifelines.

On this first day of the Russian offensive the Germans destroyed 153 enemy tanks and caused heavy casualties, but their own losses were proportionately high. The 10th Panzer Grenadier Division, for instance, lost 620 men in one day. By the end of the day the situation was confused since, despite a German withdrawal to Adzhamka and a corresponding shortening of the line, the Russian penetrations were not adequately sealed off.

During the night the enemy moved strong infantry forces into the newly captured terrain. Approximately twenty-two infantry divisions were equally divided between the two areas of penetration. These divisions had been hastily reorganized and their replacements consisted of inadequately trained troops; nevertheless, the over-all ratio of infantry strength was eight to one in favor of the Russians.

The Russian infantry protected the interior flanks of the penetration by a quick build-up of antitank gun fronts echeloned in depth. Lacking centralized fire direction and flexibility in forming points of main effort, the Russian artillery did not make its overwhelming superiority properly felt. This was partly due to transportation and supply difficulties which delayed the arrival of many Russian artillery units. Not until the capture of Kirovograd was the enemy able to mass his artillery effectively. The German artillery played an important part in the defense, delivering well-co-ordinated concentrations

with high expenditure of ammunition. During the first day of the offensive the Germans expended six to seven times more ammunition than the enemy, firing approximately 177,000 rounds against 29,000. This enabled them to inflict extremely heavy casualties and break up Russian attack preparations. In view of the high casualty rate suffered by the German infantry, the artillery was in some sectors, especially along the shoulders of the gaps, the sole obstacle confronting the Russians.

Statements by prisoners of war and captured documents permitted the Germans to estimate the Russian armor at 620 tanks. Against these forces the Germans could assemble only 56 tanks and 109 assault guns. The enemy regrouped and reinforced his armor in the northern penetration area during the night of 5 January. His mobile units were deployed in accordance with German doctrine but lacked concentration of effort in one direction and paid too much attention to flank cover. The latter fact was probably due to the relentless local flank attacks which the Germans conducted even when they only had a few tanks on hand. During these small-scale actions the German tank crews proved their superiority over and over again. Moreover, this type of active defense deceived the enemy as to German strength.

When the enemy renewed his attack on the morning of 6 January, the Germans were able to tie down strong forces by active defense and to delay the advance of some Russian armored units by hit-and-run tactics. In the north, however, the 3d Panzer Division counterattacks failed to close the gap and in the south the enemy tanks thrust toward Kirovograd without much obstruction, reaching the southern suburbs of the city by evening. The other jaw of the Russian pincer crossed the Ingul River at Severinka, cut the Kirovograd–Novomirgorod highway, and threatened Kirovograd from the north.

Since German resistance east of the Ingul had crumbled, the army commander intended to block any further break-through attempts to the west by moving up new forces which were to annihilate the enemy spearheads west of the river. For this reason he urgently requested reinforcements from army group. Even a further withdrawal and shortening of lines would not have led to the formation of counterattack forces since every man was needed up front. The army group replied that advance units of Panzer Division Grossdeutschland were to arrive in the area southwest of Kirovograd during the evening of 7 January in order to close the gap south of the city. Until then the German forces had to gain time and contain the enemy in a series of quickly changing seesaw actions. East of the Ingul, a reinforced panzer battalion made an enveloping thrust, attempting to cut the enemy's rear communications. After initial success the attack bogged down against strong resistance by antitank guns. When the three divisions holding out in the sector between the two areas of penetra-

tion were pulled back to defend the perimeter of Kirovograd, one of them—the 14th Panzer Division—was given the mission of closing the southern gap. But during the night, while the preparatory movement took place, strong Russian infantry and armored forces penetrated into Kirovograd from the south and hit the assembly of 14th Panzer Division. In stiff house-to-house fighting the enemy advanced to the railroad tracks and breached the perimeter defense. The two other divisions were fighting their way back north of the tracks when they were suddenly attacked by enemy forces from three sides, squeezed into Lelekovka, and isolated. In its withdrawal from Kirovograd, the 14th Panzer Division succeeded in establishing contact with the Lelekovka force after some bitter fighting. After withdrawing to the west bank of the Ingul, the 3d Panzer Division attacked the Russian armored concentrations but met with little resistance when the enemy sidestepped the attack. (Map 11B)

Southwest of Kirovograd, the newly arrived units of the Grossdeutschland Division were thrown piecemeal against strong Russian forces advancing unobstructed toward the southwest and succeeded in delaying the enemy advance.

The attempt to block the Russian advance in front of Kirovograd had failed. The isolated force at Lelekovka, forming the last anchor of the German position in this area, held out and tied down strong enemy forces, thereby preventing a junction between the two areas of penetration. But on each side the enemy's motorized and armored forces poured through the gaps, crossed the Ingul, and assembled on the west bank for a major break-through. During the night of 8–9 January, a strong armored force advanced as far as Malyye Viski, overran the command post of the XLVII Panzer Corps, and threatened rear communications.

In this situation it was imperative that the army stabilize the front wherever possible and then close the gaps. Since the available forces were inadequate for a co-ordinated effort, it was necessary to resort to local expedients. Above all, the blocking forces had to pin down strong enemy units by vigorous resistance. Then, those Russian forces that had broken through had to be weakened by limited objective attacks and armored thrusts so that they would be incapable of breaking through to the west in strength. This was achieved by a series of local actions. By the evening of 9 January, the Grossdeutschland Division pounced on the flanks of the enemy forces advancing southwest of Kirovograd and turned them back. The gap in the sector adjacent to the right was temporarily closed by a frontal counterattack of newly arrived improvised units.

The closing of the gap to the left of the Grossdeutschland Division was accomplished by a pincers attack which cut off two Russian infantry divisions and some armored units. After their annihilation

the Germans recaptured the high ground near Karlovka and restored the front line southwest of Kirovograd by a frontal counterattack.

In the northern sector, elements of the 3d Panzer Division were given the mission of restoring the situation at Malyye Viski. After heavy fighting the enemy's tank losses were so high that he was forced to withdraw his troops from this area. The isolated German forces holding out at Lelekovka were in a precarious situation. Unrelenting Russian ground attacks, supported by waves of fighter bombers, left no doubt about the outcome of this unequal struggle. The shortage of ammunition was only partly relieved by air drops. A relief thrust by the 11th Panzer Division did not materialize because the division was unable to free itself from a holding attack by superior Russian forces. As a last resort, a motorized infantry battalion was reinforced with a few tanks and assembled in the Bolshay Vyska area. After overcoming stiff resistance, the task force advanced across enemy-held territory via Gruznoye to Oboznovka. During the night of 9 January, the pocket force in Lelekovka broke out, linked up with the relief force, and withdrew to Gruznoye. The defense in place at Lelekovka had delayed and finally prevented an enemy break-through to the west. The XLVII Panzer Corps front was consolidated along the line Karlovka—west of Gruznoye—Vladimirovka and the XI Corps, adjacent to the north, was aligned with the panzer corps. This withdrawal permitted the transfer of the 282d Infantry Division to the panzer corps, which held the division in reserve against any further Russian break-through attempts in its sector. Despite the heavy tank losses they had suffered, the Russians were expected to renew their attacks after regrouping their forces.

By 11 January the enemy launched a new attack in the Gruznoye–Vladimirovka area after an artillery preparation lasting half an hour. (Map 11C) His armor was organized into several strong attack formations which were to pave the way for the infantry. The German blocking forces were unable to hold the line which was breached in several places. During the following day the penetrations were partly sealed off by local counterattacks. After the arrival of several infantry divisions from other sectors, the enemy, on 15 January, resumed his attacks with a heavy artillery preparation. Eleven infantry divisions, supported by tanks, breached the German line between Gruznoye and Vladimirovka, opening a seven-mile gap to a depth of three miles. The three German divisions holding this sector were split up and isolated. Resisting stubbornly, they fought their way to the shoulders of the area of penetration and, by clinging to their positions, made it possible to close the gap on the next day.

On 16 January, while the Russians concentrated all available ground forces and air support for an all-out attack, the newly arrived 3d SS Panzer Division made a spoiling attack into the enemy's offensive

preparations. The three German divisions holding the shoulders joined the panzer forces and closed the gap.

The Russian break-through attempts had failed after twelve days of bitter fighting in the Kirovograd area. The thirty-one Russian infantry divisions used during this operation were weakened to such an extent that many regiments were reduced to 300–400 men. By 17 January only about 120 Russian tanks were available for commitment. Throughout the entire operation the German army commander was handicapped by the low strength of his units which dropped at an alarming rate under the pressure of the Russian offensive. Unable to echelon his forces in depth, he had no means of preventing the enemy from exploiting local penetrations in the German front. Intermediate and lower commands were rarely in a position to form reserves. The weak corps reserves, usually consisting of small armored units, succeeded in delaying the enemy and inflicting slight losses, but were incapable of turning the tide. The complete lack of general reserves forced the army commander to resort to improvised tactics. During the entire struggle in the Kirovograd area, the army commander was under strict orders prohibiting retirement to shorter lines, otherwise he might have regained his freedom of maneuver and would have been able to form reserves in divisional strength. Finally, after having received reinforcements, the German Eighth Army frustrated all further Russian break-through attempts. During this ten-day period the Germans had demonstrated extraordinary flexibility in the use of different defense tactics.

PART SIX

CONCLUSIONS

The dynamic offensives executed by the German Army during the first part of the Russian campaign ground to a halt in front of Moscow and at Stalingrad. During the following months of bitter struggle against a tenacious enemy who cleverly exploited the vast space and climatic conditions of his homeland, German strength declined so much that the subsequent Russian counteroffensives could no longer be repulsed. It was Hitler's worst mistake not to have recognized the impending disaster in time or, if he did realize it, to have dismissed it in his peremptory manner. This obstinate denial of obvious facts forced the German Army to fight a series of defensive actions against breakthroughs along overextended front lines during the second part of the Russian campaign. Every time the Germans succeeded after extreme sacrifices in closing one gap, the line gave way at another point. Resolutely they went to their doom in a long succession of exhausting battles and withdrawals. The disintegration of the German forces was speeded up when corps, and even entire armies, under orders to hold critical cities and areas, were cut off from the main force. The perfection of defense tactics and the superhuman efforts of the field forces were insufficient to turn the tide so long as the Germans were unable to restore a balance of strength essential to an eventual victory over the Russians. Under the prevailing circumstances an equilibrium in the fields of manpower and matériel was beyond expectation. But it was within the realm of possibility that the German military performance in the field first equal and later outdistance the Russian. As a prerequisite, the German potential should have been brought into the proper relationship with the elements of time and space to compensate for the Russian superiority in manpower and matériel so that victory could eventually have been achieved through the application of superior strategy. At no time should the German Army have expended its strength as recklessly as it was required to do in front of Moscow and at Stalingrad. The Russians thereby gained a superiority which enabled them to hold the initiative. Contrary to Hitler's concepts, a timely halt in the offensive or a temporary withdrawal would not have undermined the confidence of the field forces, but would have led to additional successes, the sum total of which might have brought the war with Russia to a favorable conclusion.

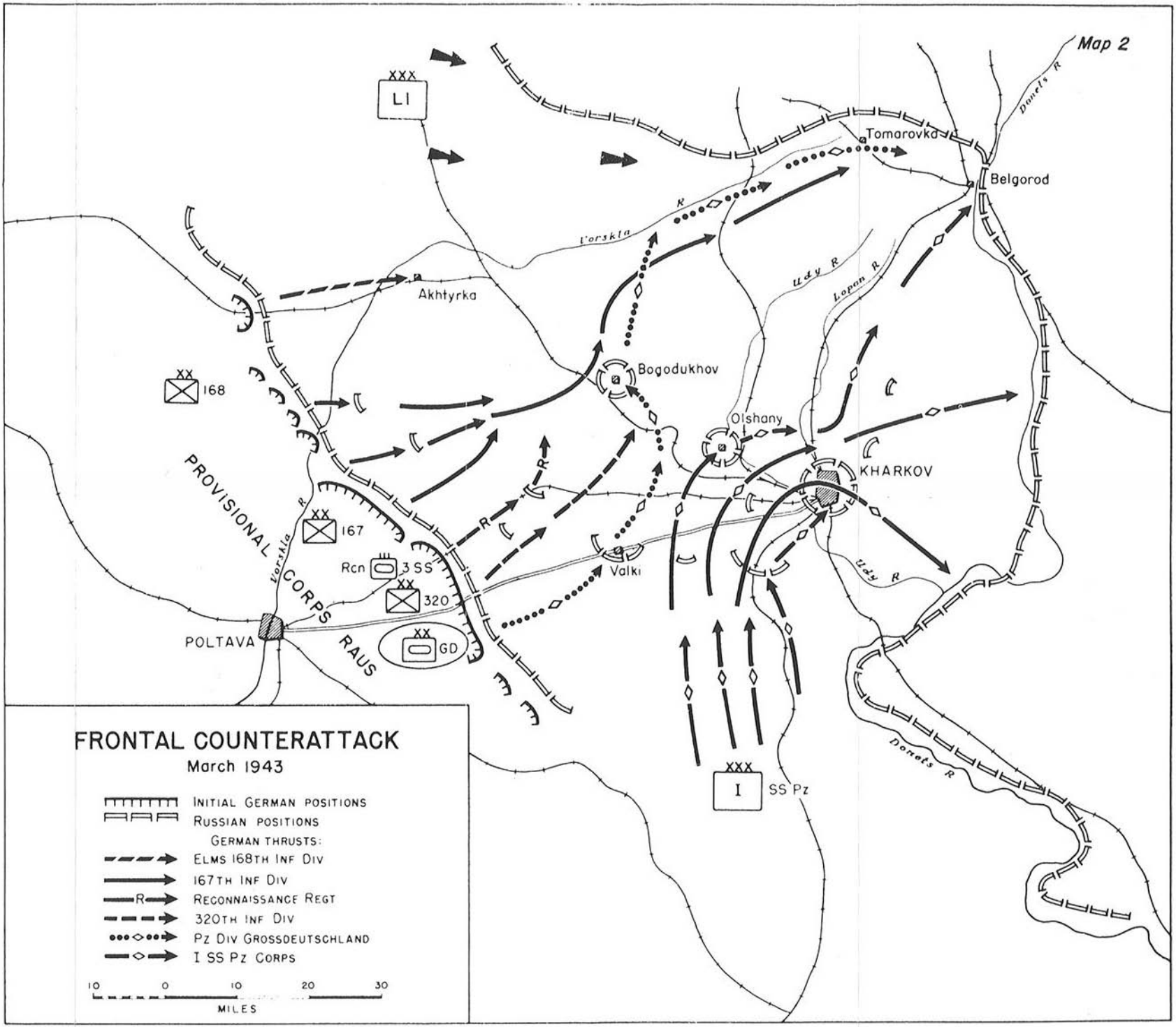
After the Stalingrad disaster the Germans fought delaying actions along a 1,000-mile front for a four-month period. Even then they succeeded in sealing off the wide gaps and stabilizing the front and achieved a defensive victory by March 1943. However, the German lines were overextended and the panzer forces, reconstituted during a lull lasting three months, were still too weak to withstand the renewed onslaught of the forces which the Russians had meanwhile moved up. Once again the enemy broke through the German front, but this time the eleven best, fully reorganized panzer divisions which were assembled in the Kharkov–Poltava area were able to frustrate the Russian intentions by a determined counterattack. Even so, the time had not yet come to seize the initiative. The Russians still had to suffer heavier casualties. If necessary, the Germans should have abandoned more terrain and shortened their lines to establish a balance of strength which would have prevented other break-throughs. Only then could a decisive German counteroffensive have assured a German victory in Russia before the Allies landed in France. Defeat of the western powers was contingent upon Russia's being driven out of the war.

The German defense against Russian break-throughs, as presented in this study, was only a means toward attaining this over-all objective. In 1943 the German Army in Russia almost succeeded in putting an end to enemy break-throughs by adroitly combining various defense tactics. Victory was once again in the offing, but it turned out to be a Russian one. Before the eleven panzer divisions could come to grip with Russian reserves and annihilate them, the German armor was thrown into Operation ZITADELLE in July 1943 and bled white when it ran into a fortified system of hitherto unknown strength and depth. Hitler thereby fulfilled the enemy's keenest hopes and presented him with the palm of victory. The subsequent Russian counteroffensive, conducted with powerful reserves which were fully intact, broke through the German line. The enemy break-throughs started anew not only in this sector but also in others, where no adequate reserves were available.

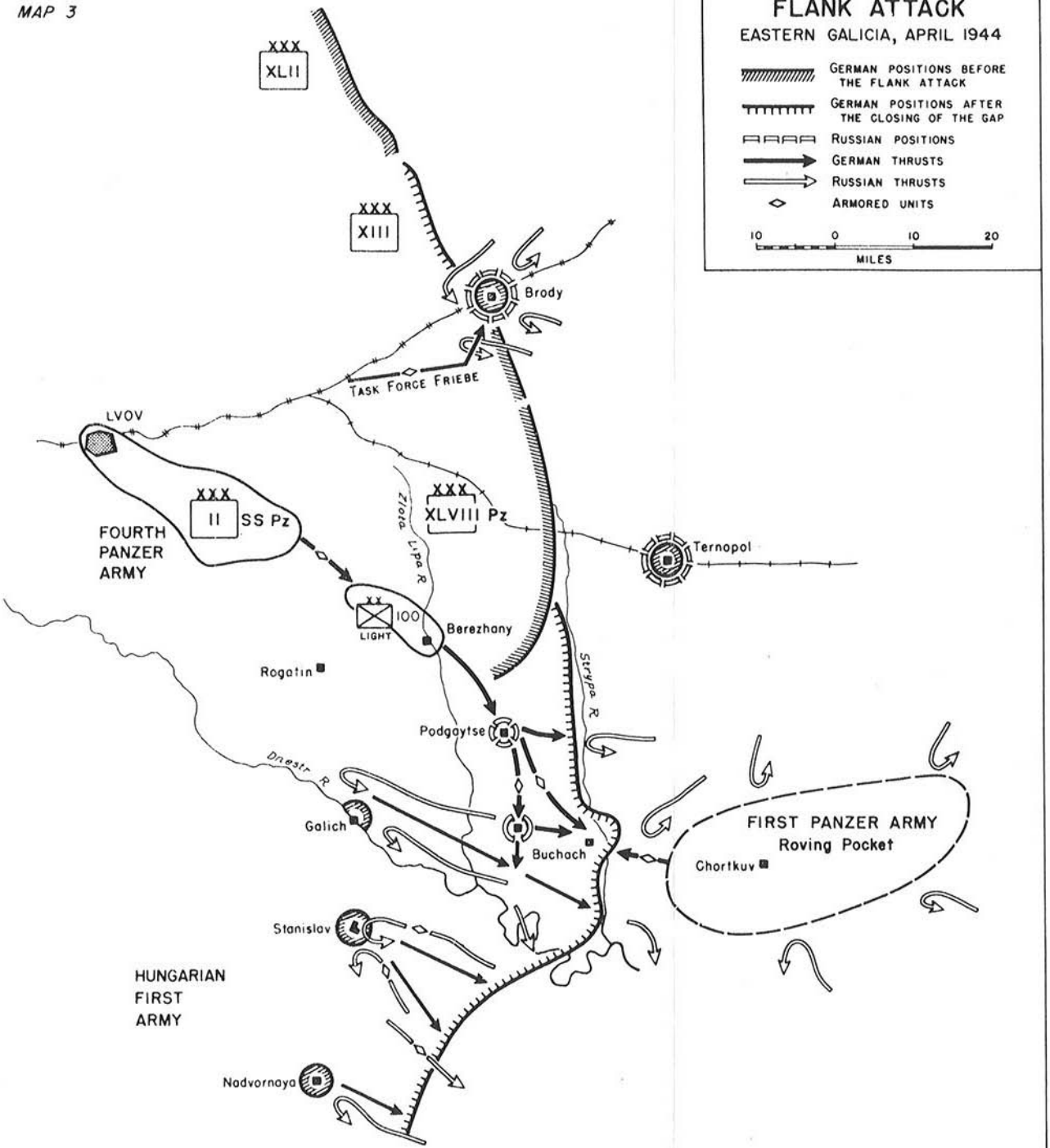
At best, skillful defense tactics and supreme personal sacrifices were instrumental in producing local, temporary relief. The German strategy of self-sacrifice precluded the possibility of stabilizing the front along a line which by then had been shortened by the course of events. Finally, a suggestion to shift all German forces from the West to the East in order to stop the Red Army's invasion of Germany and prevent the territorial expansion of communism was turned down by Hitler. While he belived his principal enemies to be in the West, the German military leaders, for all their antagonism toward the western powers, considered Russia their irreconcilable enemy.

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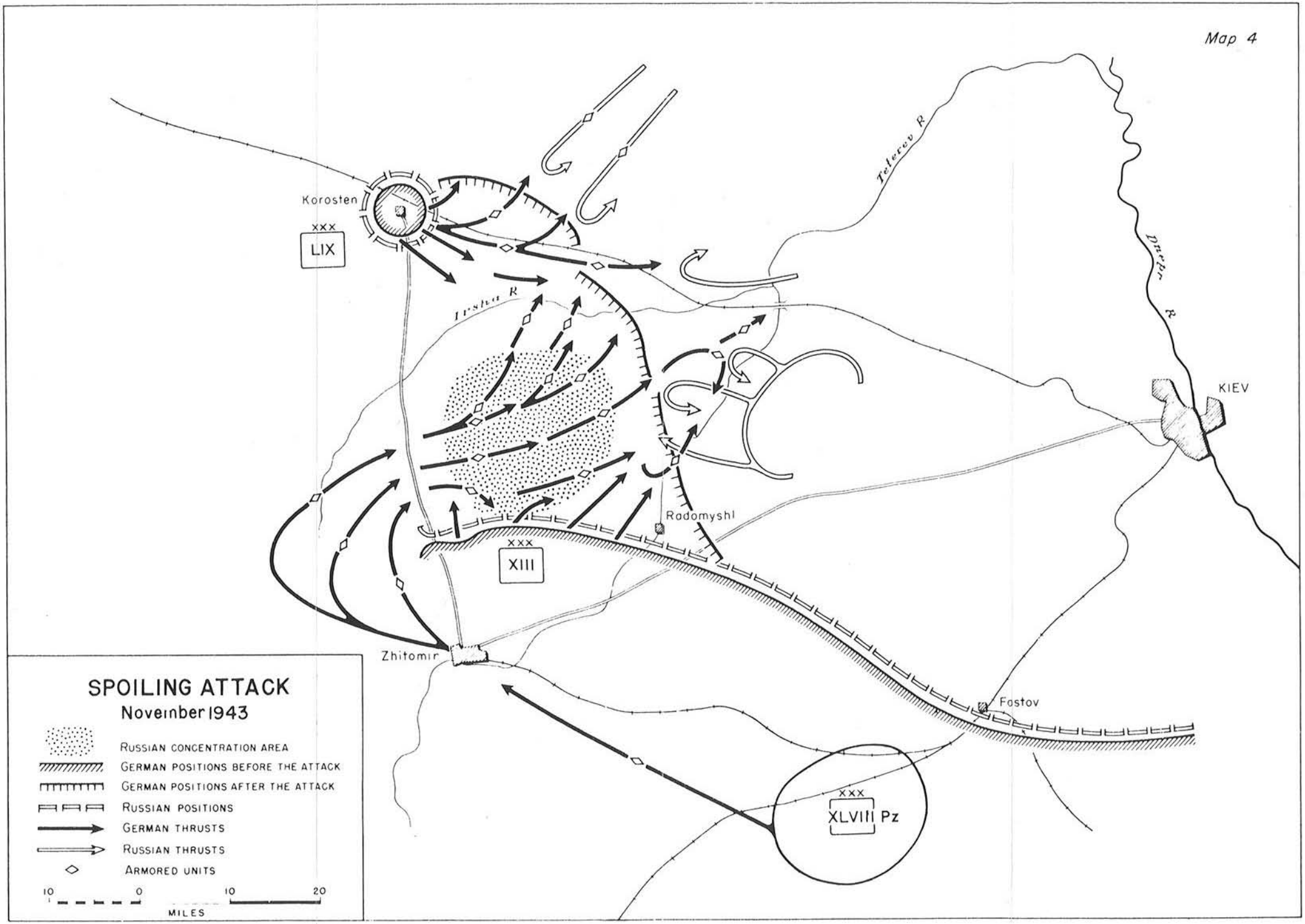

MAP I
GENERAL REFERENCE MAP
100 50 0 100 200
MILES
FINLAND
LAKE LADOGA
LENINGRAD
BALTIC SEA
Narva
Porechye
ESTONIA
LAKE PEIPUS
Luga R
Volkhov R
LAKE ILMEN
LATVIA
LITHUANIA
Memel R
EAST PRUSSIA
Volga R
MOSCOW
Vyazma
Orsha
Smolensk
U. S. S. R.
Minsk
Niemen R
PRIPYAT MARSHES
Pripyat R
POLAND
Voronezh
Belgorod
Kharkov
Don R
Lvov
Tetereu R
KIEV
Dnepr R
Cherkassy
Poltava
Kremenchug
Donets R
Chir R
Stalingrad
Volga R
Aksay R
Pokhlebin
Kirovograd
Krivoi Rog
Nikopol
Rostov
Melitopol
Kherson
SEA OF AZOV
Kerch
CRIMEA
CARPATHIAN MTS
ROMANIA
Sevastopol
BLACK SEA


Map 2
XXX
LI
Tomarovka
Belgorod
Donets R
Vorskla R
Akhtyrka
Udy R
Lopan R
Bogodukhov
168
Olshany
KHARKOV
PROVISIONAL CORPS
167
Rcn
3 SS
320
Valki
POLTAVA
RAUS
GD
XXX
I
SS Pz
FRONTAL COUNTERATTACK
March 1943
INITIAL GERMAN POSITIONS
RUSSIAN POSITIONS
GERMAN THRUSTS:
ELMS 168TH INF DIV
167TH INF DIV
RECONNAISSANCE REGT
320TH INF DIV
PZ DIV GROSSDEUTSCHLAND
I SS PZ CORPS
10 0 10 20 30
MILES

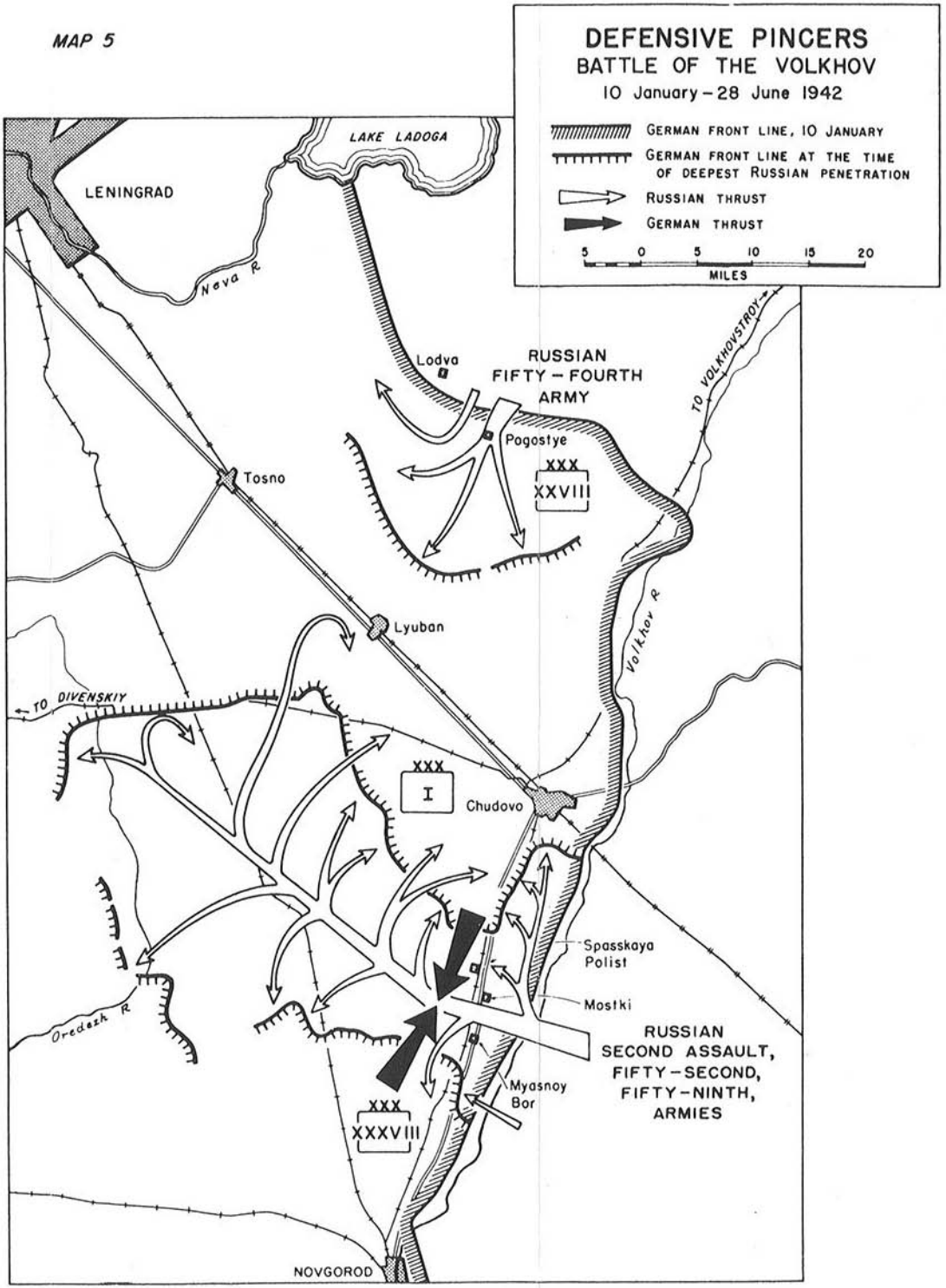
MAP 3

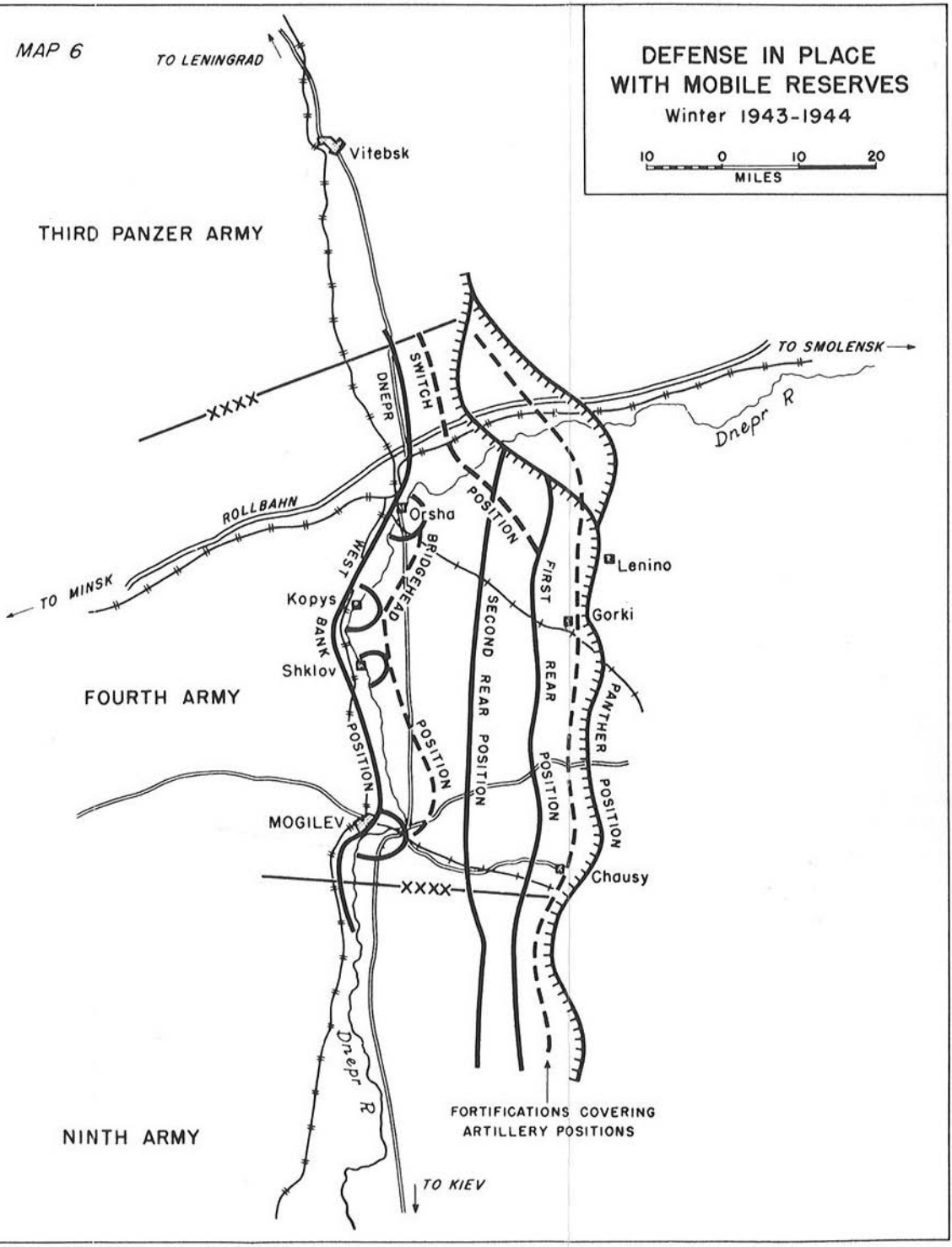

FLANK ATTACK
EASTERN GALICIA, APRIL 1944
GERMAN POSITIONS BEFORE THE FLANK ATTACK
GERMAN POSITIONS AFTER THE CLOSING OF THE GAP
RUSSIAN POSITIONS
GERMAN THRUSTS
RUSSIAN THRUSTS
ARMORED UNITS
10 0 10 20
MILES
XXX XLII
XXX XIII
Brody
TASK FORCE FRIEBE
LVOV
XXX II SS Pz
FOURTH PANZER ARMY
XXX XLVIII Pz
Zlota Lipa R.
Ternopol
XX 100 LIGHT
Berezhany
Rogatin
Strypa R.
Podgaytse
Dnestr R.
Galich
Buchach
FIRST PANZER ARMY
Roving Pocket
Chortkuv
Stanislav
HUNGARIAN FIRST ARMY
Nadvornaya

Map 4


Korosten
XXX
LIX
Teterev R
Dnepr R
Irshen R
KIEV
Radomyshl
XXX
XIII
Zhitomir
Fastov
XXX
XLVIII Pz
SPOILING ATTACK
November 1943
RUSSIAN CONCENTRATION AREA
GERMAN POSITIONS BEFORE THE ATTACK
GERMAN POSITIONS AFTER THE ATTACK
RUSSIAN POSITIONS
GERMAN THRUSTS
RUSSIAN THRUSTS
ARMORED UNITS
10 0 10 20
MILES

MAP 5


DEFENSIVE PINCERS
BATTLE OF THE VOLKHOV
10 January – 28 June 1942
GERMAN FRONT LINE, 10 JANUARY
GERMAN FRONT LINE AT THE TIME OF DEEPEST RUSSIAN PENETRATION
RUSSIAN THRUST
GERMAN THRUST
5 0 5 10 15 20
MILES
LAKE LADOGA
LENINGRAD
Neva R.
Lodva
RUSSIAN FIFTY – FOURTH ARMY
Pogostye
XXX
XXVIII
TO VOLKHOVSTROY
Tosno
Lyuban
Volkhov R.
TO DIVENSKIY
XXX
I
Chudovo
Spasskaya Polist
Mostki
Oredezh R.
RUSSIAN SECOND ASSAULT, FIFTY-SECOND, FIFTY-NINTH, ARMIES
Myasnoy Bor
XXX
XXXVIII
NOVGOROD


MAP 6
TO LENINGRAD
Vitebsk
THIRD PANZER ARMY
DEFENSE IN PLACE
WITH MOBILE RESERVES
Winter 1943-1944
10 0 10 20
MILES
TO SMOLENSK
Dnepr R
XXXX
DNEPR
SWITCH
POSITION
ROLLBAHN
Orsha
WEST
BANK
BRIDGEHEAD
Lenino
FIRST
REAR
POSITION
TO MINSK
Kopys
Gorki
Shklov
SECOND REAR POSITION
PANTHER
POSITION
FOURTH ARMY
MOGILEV
Chausy
XXXX
Dnepr R
FORTIFICATIONS COVERING
ARTILLERY POSITIONS
NINTH ARMY
TO KIEV

IMPROVISED ZONE DEFENSE IN EAST PRUSSIA

January 1945

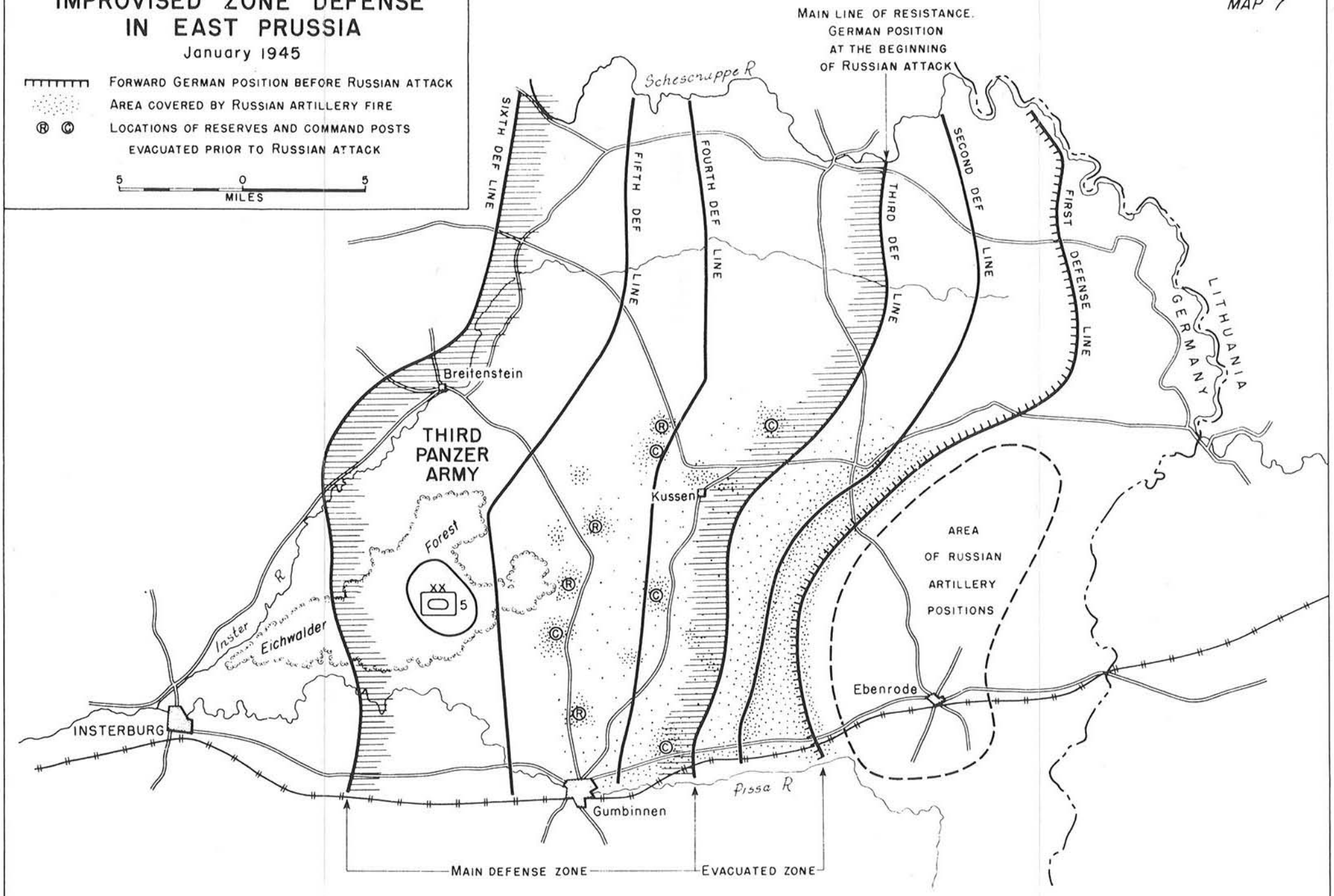
FORWARD GERMAN POSITION BEFORE RUSSIAN ATTACK

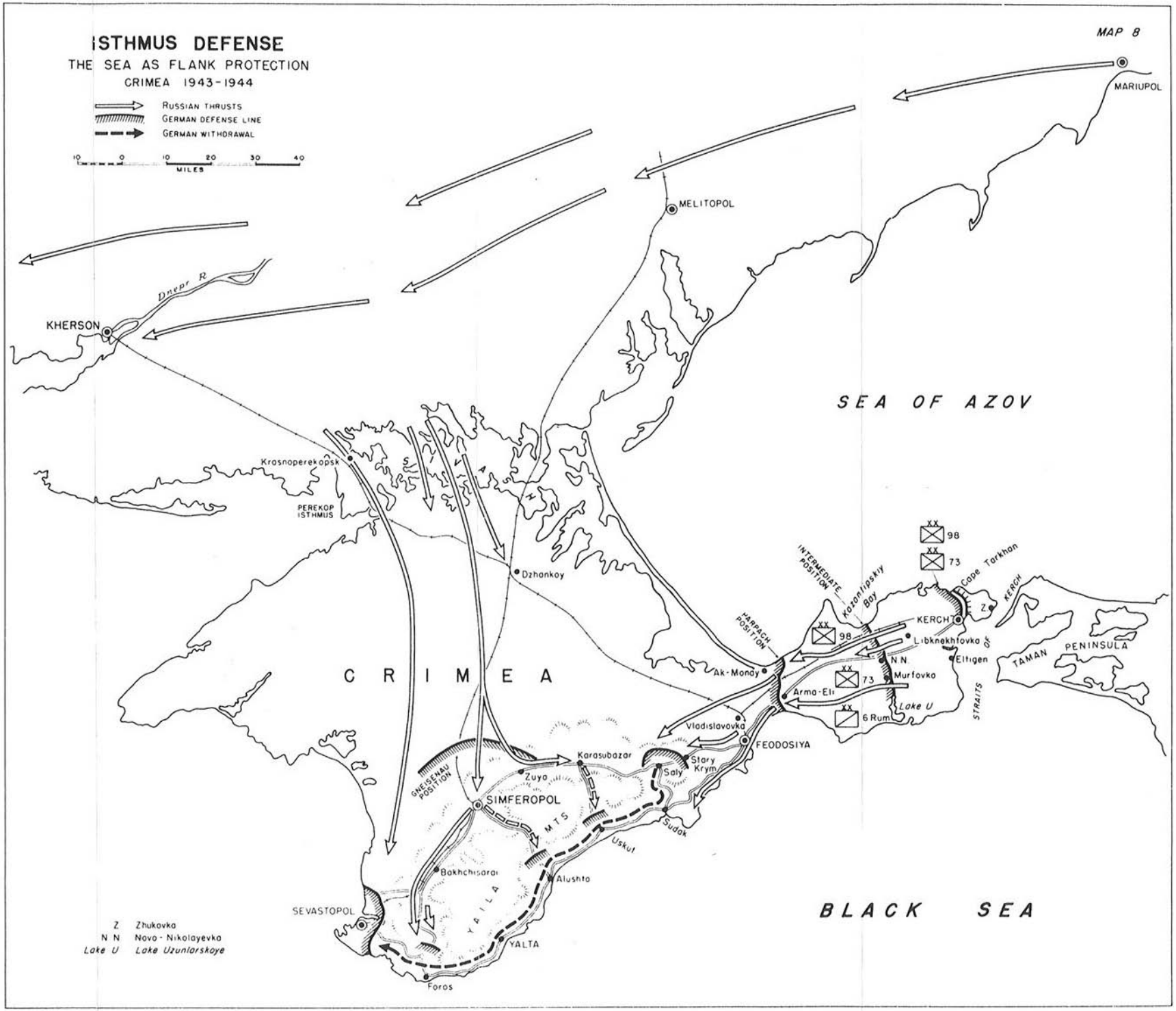
AREA COVERED BY RUSSIAN ARTILLERY FIRE

Ⓡ Ⓒ LOCATIONS OF RESERVES AND COMMAND POSTS EVACUATED PRIOR TO RUSSIAN ATTACK

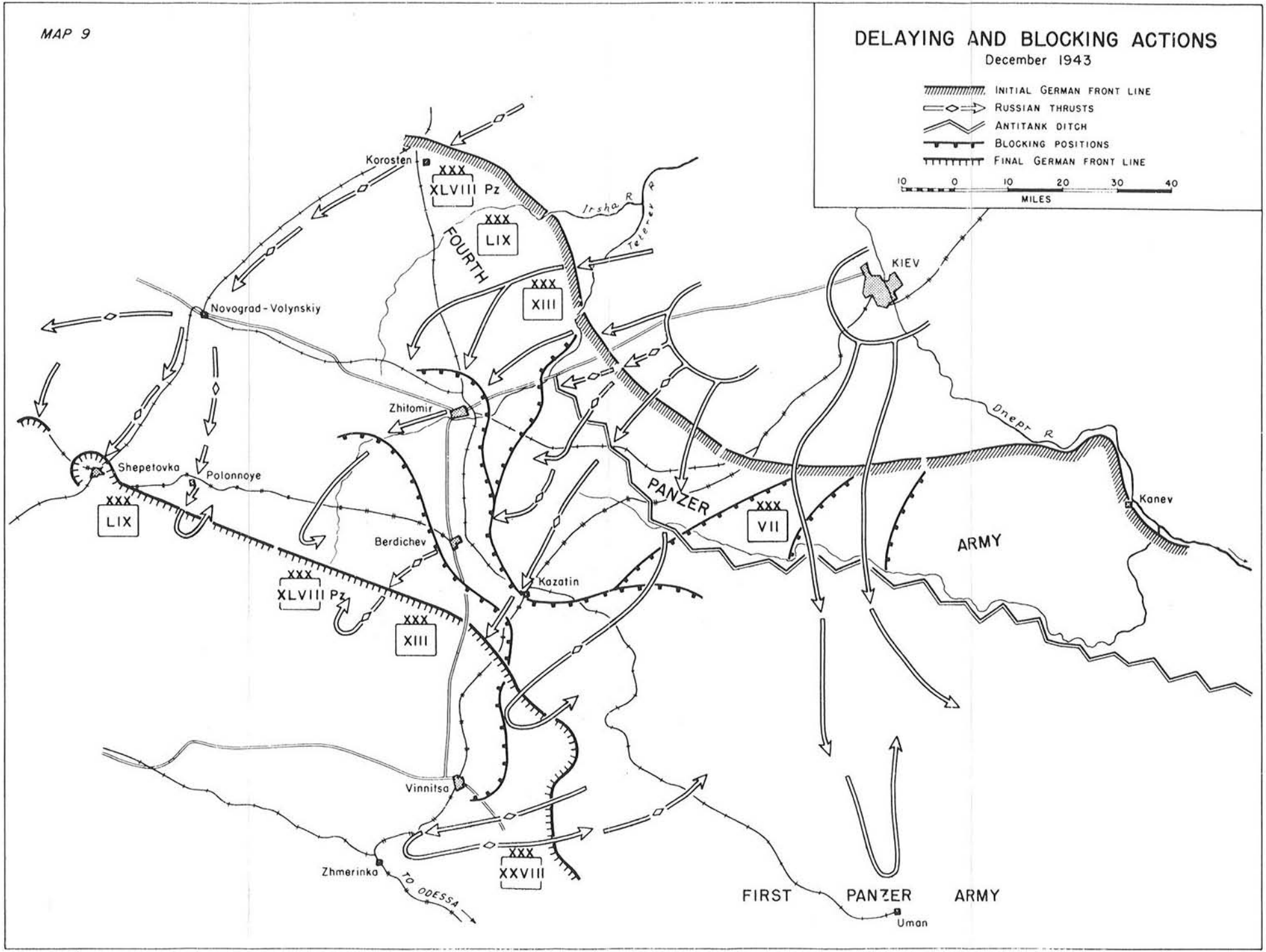
5 0 5 MILES

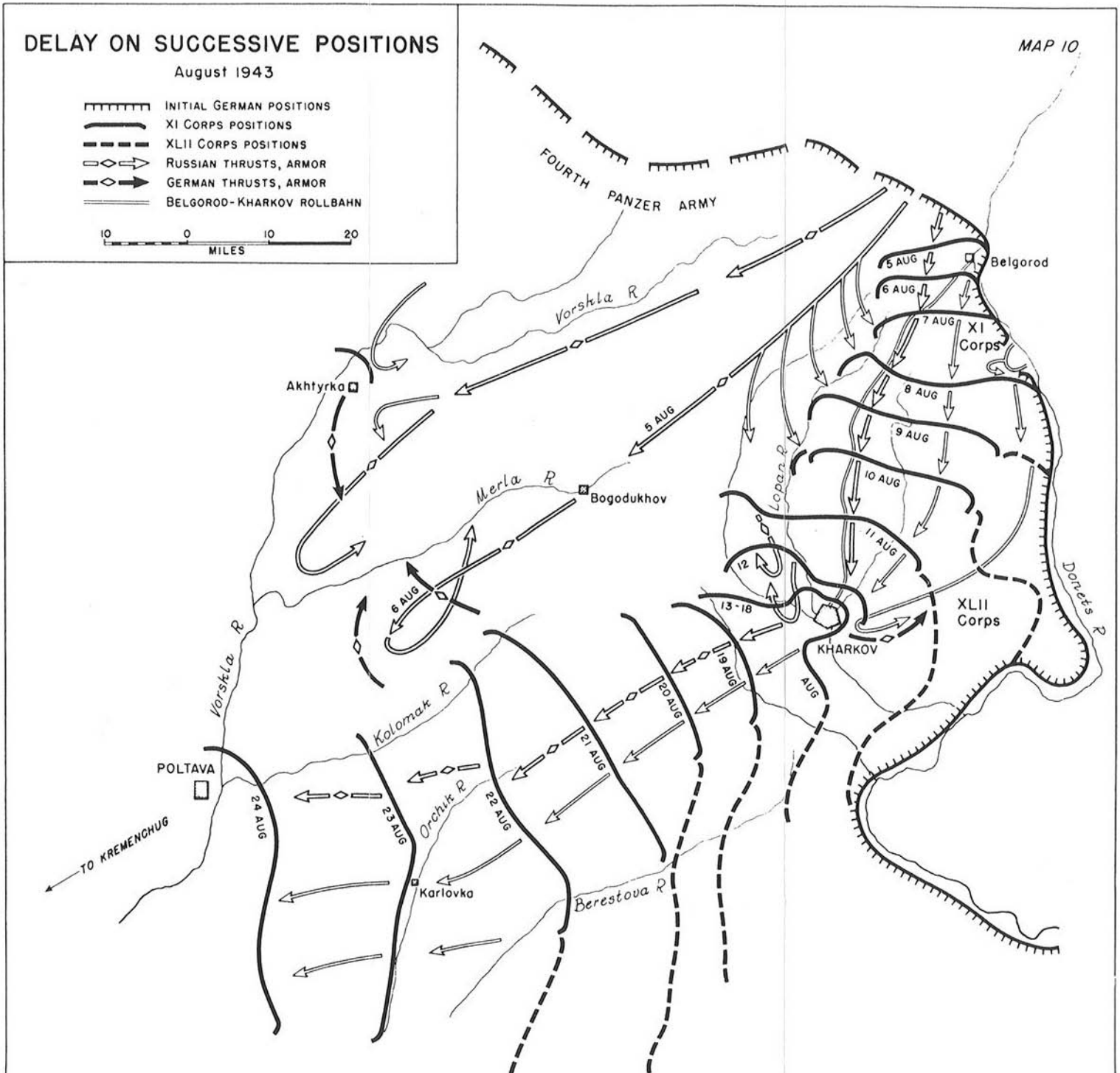
MAP 7

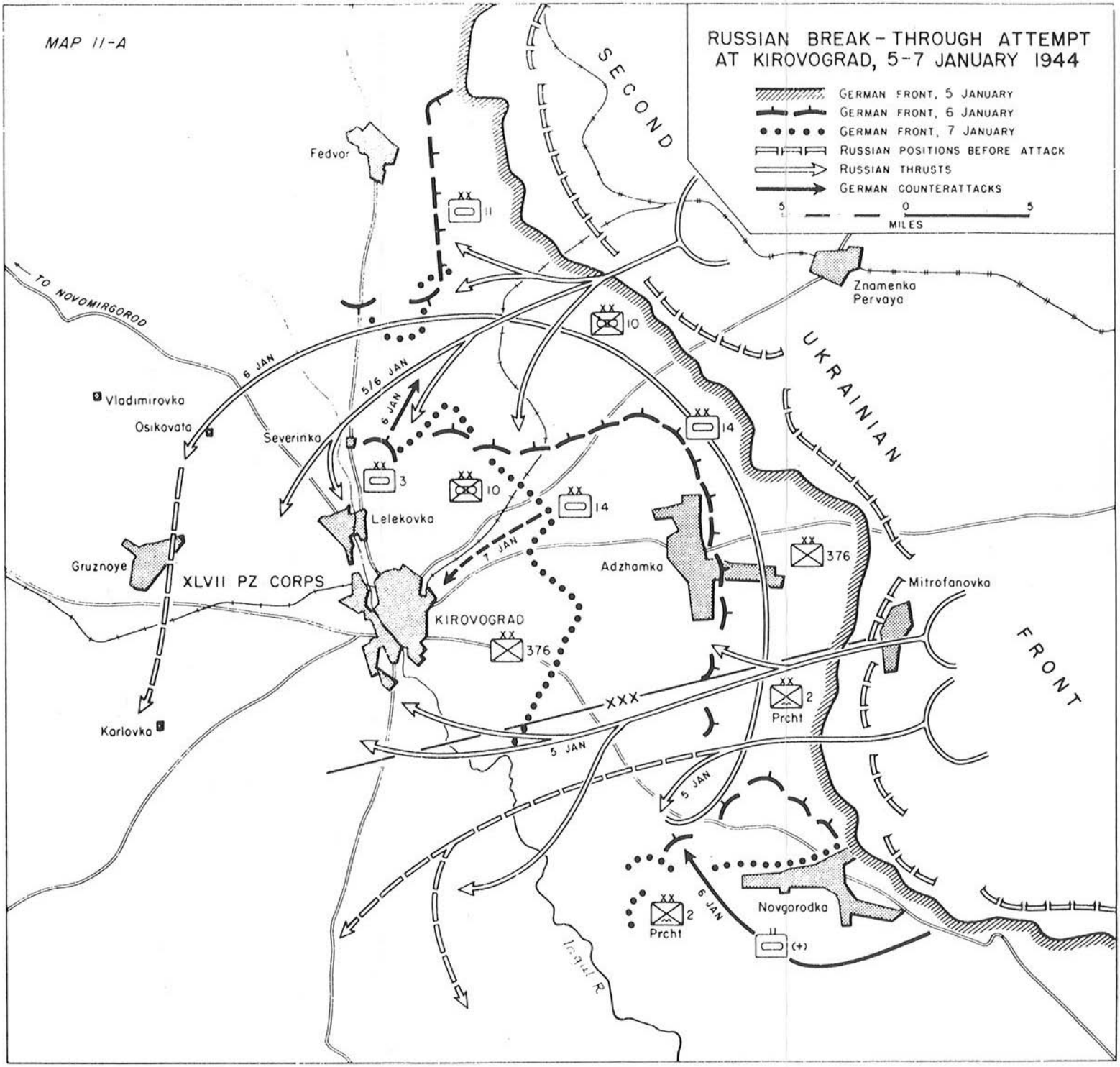


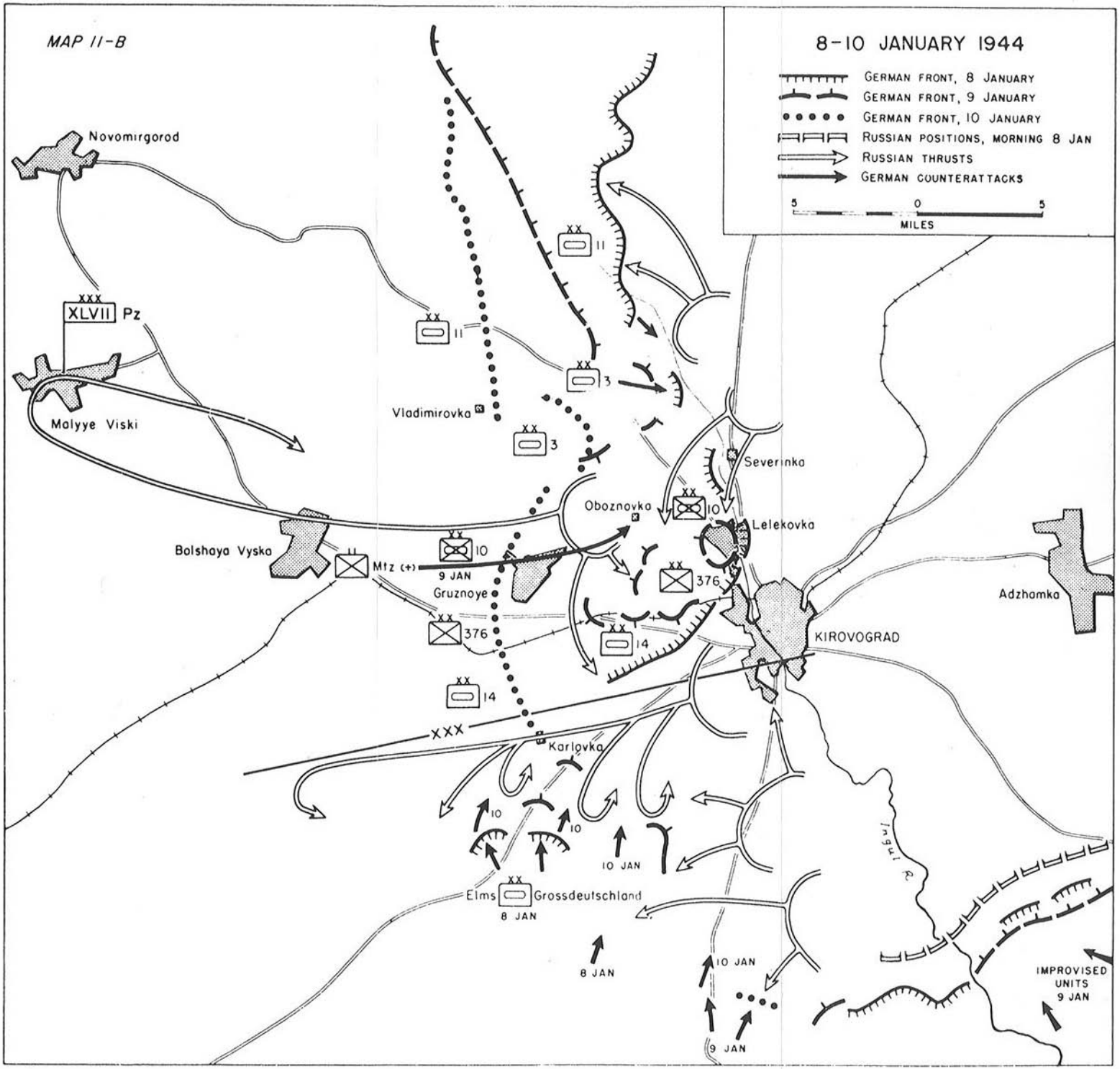

ISTHMUS DEFENSE
THE SEA AS FLANK PROTECTION
CRIMEA 1943-1944
RUSSIAN THRUSTS
GERMAN DEFENSE LINE
GERMAN WITHDRAWAL
10 0 10 20 30 40
MILES
MAP 8
MARIUPOL
MELITOPOL
Dnepr R.
KHERSON
SEA OF AZOV
Krasnoperekopsk
PEREKOP ISTHMUS
Dzhankoy
CRIMEA
INTERMEDIATE POSITION
Kazantipskiy Bay
Cape Tarkhan
KERCH
TAMAN PENINSULA
STRAITS OF
Libknekhtovka
Eltigen
N N
Murfovka
Arma-El
Lake U
6 Rum
98
73
PARPACH POSITION
Ak-Mondy
Vladislavovka
FEODOSIYA
Karasubazar
Stary Krym
Saly
Zuya
GNESENAU POSITION
SIMFEROPOL
M T S
Sudak
Uskut
Bakhchisarai
Alushta
YAILA
SEVASTOPOL
YALTA
Foros
BLACK SEA
Z Zhukovka
N N Novo - Nikolayevka
Lake U Lake Uzunlarskoye

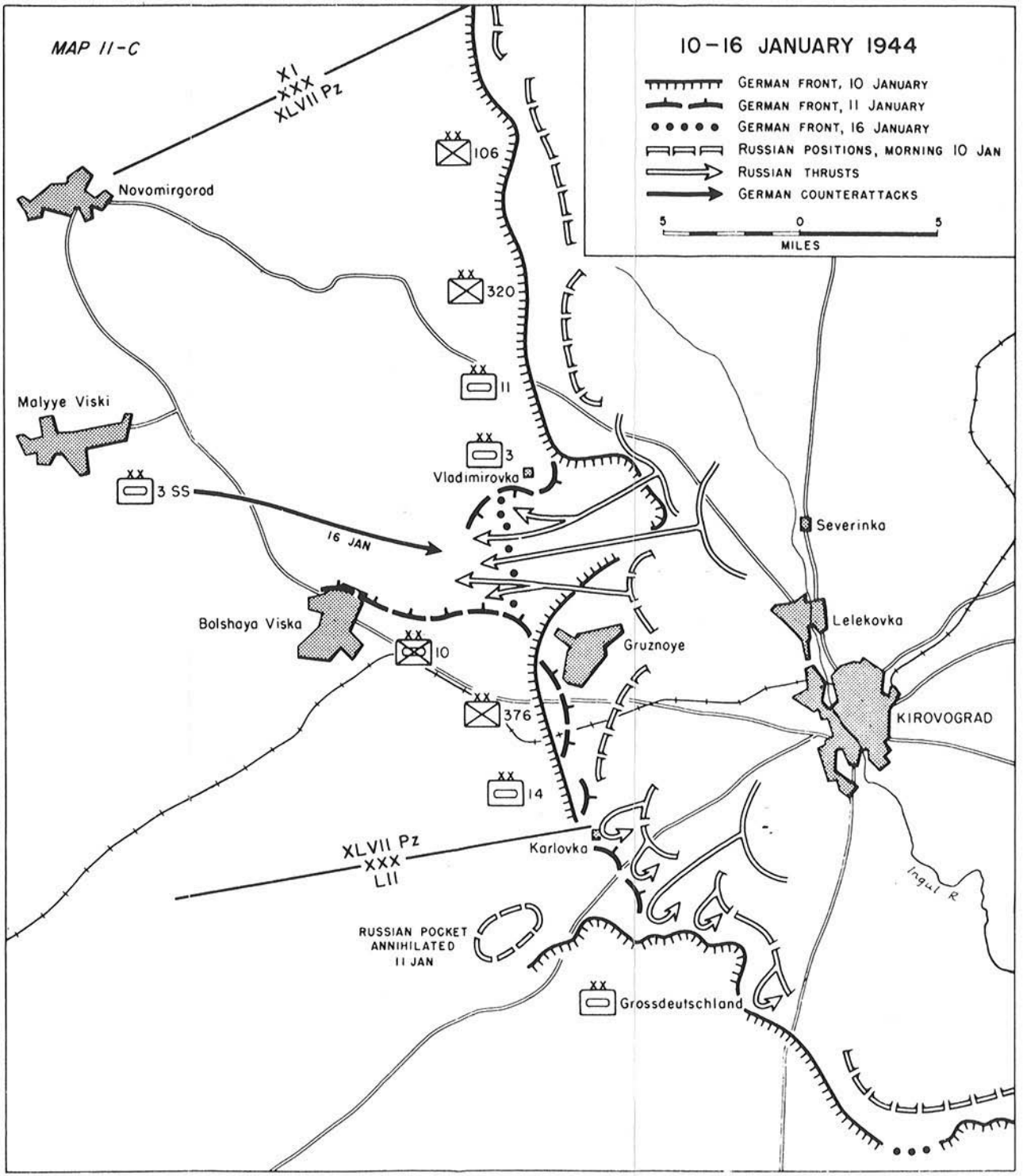
MAP 9


DELAYING AND BLOCKING ACTIONS
December 1943
INITIAL GERMAN FRONT LINE
RUSSIAN THRUSTS
ANTITANK DITCH
BLOCKING POSITIONS
FINAL GERMAN FRONT LINE
10 0 10 20 30 40
MILES
Korosten
XXX XLVIII Pz
XXX LIX
FOURTH
Irsha R
Teterev R
XXX XIII
KIEV
Novograd - Volynskiy
Zhitomir
Dnepr R
Shepetovka
Polonnoye
XXX LIX
PANZER
XXX VII
ARMY
Kanev
Berdichev
Kazatin
XXX XLVIII Pz
XXX XIII
Vinnitsa
XXX XXVIII
Zhmerinka
TO ODESSA
FIRST PANZER ARMY
Uman


DELAY ON SUCCESSIVE POSITIONS
August 1943
INITIAL GERMAN POSITIONS
XI CORPS POSITIONS
XLII CORPS POSITIONS
RUSSIAN THRUSTS, ARMOR
GERMAN THRUSTS, ARMOR
BELGOROD-KHARKOV ROLLBAHN
10 0 10 20
MILES
MAP 10
FOURTH PANZER ARMY
Vorskla R
Akhtyrka
5 AUG
Merla R
Bogodukhov
6 AUG
Belgorod
6 AUG
7 AUG
XI Corps
8 AUG
9 AUG
10 AUG
11 AUG
12
13-18
Lopan R
XLII Corps
KHARKOV
Donets R
19 AUG
20 AUG
21 AUG
22 AUG
23 AUG
24 AUG
Kolomak R
Orchik R
POLTAVA
TO KREMENCHUG
Karlovka
Berestova R


MAP II-A
RUSSIAN BREAK-THROUGH ATTEMPT AT KIROVOGRAD, 5-7 JANUARY 1944
GERMAN FRONT, 5 JANUARY
GERMAN FRONT, 6 JANUARY
GERMAN FRONT, 7 JANUARY
RUSSIAN POSITIONS BEFORE ATTACK
RUSSIAN THRUSTS
GERMAN COUNTERATTACKS
5 0 5
MILES
SECOND
UKRAINIAN
FRONT
Fedvor
Znamenka Pervaya
TO NOVOMIRGOROD
6 JAN
5/6 JAN
6 JAN
7 JAN
5 JAN
5 JAN
6 JAN
Vladimirovka
Osikovata
Severinka
Lelekovka
Gruznoye
XLVII PZ CORPS
KIROVOGRAD
Adzhamka
Mitrofanovka
Karlovka
Prcht
Prcht
Novgorodka
XXX
XX 11
XX 10
XX 14
XX 3
XX 10
XX 14
XX 376
XX 376
XX 2
XX 2
(+)


MAP II-B
8-10 JANUARY 1944
GERMAN FRONT, 8 JANUARY
GERMAN FRONT, 9 JANUARY
GERMAN FRONT, 10 JANUARY
RUSSIAN POSITIONS, MORNING 8 JAN
RUSSIAN THRUSTS
GERMAN COUNTERATTACKS
5 0 5
MILES
Novomirgorod
XLVII Pz
Malyye Viski
Vladimirovka
Severinka
Oboznovka
Lelekovka
Bolshaya Vyska
Mtz (+)
9 JAN
Gruznoye
Adzhamka
KIROVOGRAD
Karlovka
10 JAN
Elms
Grossdeutschland
8 JAN
Ingul R.
IMPROVISED UNITS 9 JAN
9 JAN


MAP II-C
10-16 JANUARY 1944
GERMAN FRONT, 10 JANUARY
GERMAN FRONT, 11 JANUARY
GERMAN FRONT, 16 JANUARY
RUSSIAN POSITIONS, MORNING 10 JAN
RUSSIAN THRUSTS
GERMAN COUNTERATTACKS
5 0 5
MILES
XI
XXX
XLVII Pz
Novomirgorod
106
320
11
Malyye Viski
3
Vladimirovka
3 SS
16 JAN
Severinka
Bolshaya Viska
10
Gruznoye
Lelekovka
376
KIROVOGRAD
14
XLVII Pz
XXX
LII
Karlovka
Ingul R.
RUSSIAN POCKET
ANNIHILATED
11 JAN
Grossdeutschland