

AFTER THE BATTLE



THE FOUR BATTLES FOR KHARKOV



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Above: On February 16, 1943, the Red Army re-entered Kharkov. Here, T-34/76D tanks with infantry riding on the decks drive past the central block of the Gosprom complex. (Novosti) Below: A perfect comparison 58 years later.





Looking the other way down the great snow-covered expanse of Dzerzhinsky Square. The T-34s probably belonged to the 15th Tank Corps and the infantry to the 160th Rifle Division, both units of 3rd Tank Army. (Novosti)

Meanwhile, the Russians continued their envelopment of the city. In 40th Army's sector on the 14th, the 183rd Rifle Division seized Sokolniki on the northern outskirts and, by evening, had penetrated the city proper. The 340th Rifle Division with parts of the 25th Guards Rifle Division and armour support entered the north-western suburbs. The army's main force — 5th Guards Tank Corps, the 305th Rifle Division and 6th Guards Motorised Rifle Brigade — sliced southwards west of the city, cutting the railway and main road at Lyubotin. Coupled with 3rd Tank Army's advance to Osnovo, this left the Germans with only a narrow six-mile-wide corridor into and out of the city. Cooped up inside Kharkov's perimeter were the 'Grossdeutschland' (of Korps Raus), defending the western approaches; 'Das Reich' (minus one regiment) defending the northern suburbs; one reinforced panzer-grenadier regiment of the 'Leibstandarte' defending the eastern suburbs; and the 320. Infanterie-Division holding the south-eastern sector.

In the afternoon of the 14th, Hausser, the SS-Panzerkorps commander, received reports of armed civilians firing at his troops in Kharkov. Already faced with certain encirclement and now fearing a civilian uprising, at 1620 hours he notified Armee-Abteilung Lanz that unless Lanz would issue an order to abandon the city before 1630, he — Hausser — would do so himself. At 1645, not having heard from Lanz, Hausser gave the order to evacuate the city that night. Lanz reacted immediately: at 1725 he radioed Hausser that he was to obey the Führer's order and rescind his withdrawal orders. At 1800, he verbally repeated this to Hausser on the phone. Thus twice reminded of Hitler's order, Hausser changed his mind and at 2130 reported that he was determined 'to hold Kharkov to the last man'.

Right: Lieutenant-General P. Rybalko (second from right), commander of the 3rd Tank Army, in Kharkov. (Novosti)



The square was renamed Ploshchad Svobody (Freedom Square) after the war but when the Ukraine gained independence in 1991 it got a new name: Ploshchad Nezavisimosti (Independence Square).





A column of T-34s rolls up Sverdlov Street to the western exit of Kharkov to continue their winter offensive. However, the armies of Voronezh Front would soon grind to a halt west of

Kharkov, only to be hit full in the left flank by the swift and devastating counter-attack made by the SS-Panzerkorps the following month. (Novosti)



The propaganda painting on the wall on the right has disappeared, but otherwise this spot has seen remarkably little change.



Above: Looking the other way, back toward the city centre. These T-34s could belong to the 5th Guards Tank Corps of the 40th Army; the 15th Tank Corps of the 3rd Tank Army; the 137th Tank Brigade or the 292nd Tank Regiment of the 69th

Army; or even to the follow-up 2nd Tank Corps — all of which took part in the recapture of Kharkov in February 1943. (Novosti) Below: The junction of Sverdlov Street with Elizarov and Narimanov Streets today.

The next morning, February 15, Hitler set holding Kharkov as Lanz's sole mission, but it was too late. At dawn, the Soviets opened their final assault on the city. In 40th Army's sector the 340th Rifle Division and 5th Guards Tank Corps penetrated into western Kharkov. Heavy snow in the dense woods on the outskirts held up the tanks, but the infantry carried on. By noon, the German corridor out of the city to the south-west had shrunk to a width of little more than a mile and a half, and elements of 'Das Reich', against orders, had pulled out of the northern suburbs. The 69th Army advanced and occupied the positions vacated by the Germans. In 3rd Tank Army's sector the 15th Tank Corps and 160th Rifle Division entered eastern Kharkov, engaging in heavy street fighting with the SS panzergrenadiers. Not wishing to be trapped in the city, in

spite of Hitler's renewed directive, and disobeying Manstein's and Lanz's direct orders to hold on, at 1300 on the 15th Hausser ordered his divisions to pull out of Kharkov and withdraw through the corridor south-west to the Uda river.

On the morning of the 16th, 40th Army's 25th Rifle Division and one motorised rifle brigade of the 5th Guards Tank Corps advanced into the city from the west and the 183rd Rifle Division came in from the north-west. Meanwhile, the 62nd Guards Rifle Division (3rd Tank Army) penetrated the south-western part of the city. At 1000 hours, the 15th Tank Corps and 160th Rifle Division (3rd Tank Army) linked up with the 183rd Rifle Division (40th Army) on Dzerzhinsky Square. At the same time, other 3rd Tank Army spearheads met the 5th Guards Tanks Corps (40th Army) on

Sverdlov Street. By noon on February 16, Kharkov was back in Soviet hands.

Losing Kharkov which, like Stalingrad, had become a symbol was a blow to Hitler's prestige. Hausser's order to pull out of Kharkov, although a sound military decision, had clearly been in disobedience of a Führer's order. But Hitler was unwilling to punish or reprimand a commanding general of his favourite elite corps, the Waffen-SS. Manstein and Lanz had both shared Hausser's view that Kharkov was untenable but neither had dared to go against Hitler's order. In secret they probably approved Hausser's action, and both advised against him being relieved from command or the taking of other disciplinary action. Yet a scapegoat had to be found. On February 20, Hitler relieved Lanz and replaced him with General der Panzertruppen Werner Kempf.





Motor cycle troops of SS-Aufklärungs-Abteilung 1, the 'Leibstandarte's reconnaissance unit, in the same village. (BA)



Again, the bend in the road and the slope are the only indications that confirm the comparison.

Meanwhile, on the 22nd, the SS-Panzerkorps had committed the 'Totenkopf'. The division advanced on a parallel course left of 'Das Reich' but stayed north of the Samara, wheeling east on the 23rd too. By next day, both divisions had made another left turn and were advancing northward side by side, crushing the Soviet units in their path. East of Pavlograd the 6. and 17. Panzer-Divisions of XXXXVIII. Panzerkorps (General der Panzertruppen Otto von Knobelsdorff) moved in and began to push north alongside the SS-Panzerkorps, cutting the Russian supply lines.

As these battles were taking place, von Mackensen of 1. Panzer-Armee further east had attacked Mobile Group Popov, launching his XL. Panzerkorps (7 and 11. Panzer-Divisions, SS-Division 'Wiking' and 333. Infanterie-Division) in a wide pincer movement around it from the east. By February 24, the pocket had been closed and many of Popov's units trapped inside decimated, although a sizable number of tanks and troops had managed to escape north to Barvenkovo.

Elated by the initial success of his counter-offensive against South-Western Front, Manstein on February 25 directed his two panzer armies to strike north in preparation of an attack into the south flank of Voronezh Front. Mackensen's 1. Panzer-Armee on the right was to capture Petrovskoye and Izyum to eliminate the Red Army's Donetsk crossings, and Hoth's 4. Panzer-Armee on the left was to advance north-east to Lozovaya in anticipation of a thrust north along the railway to Kharkov.

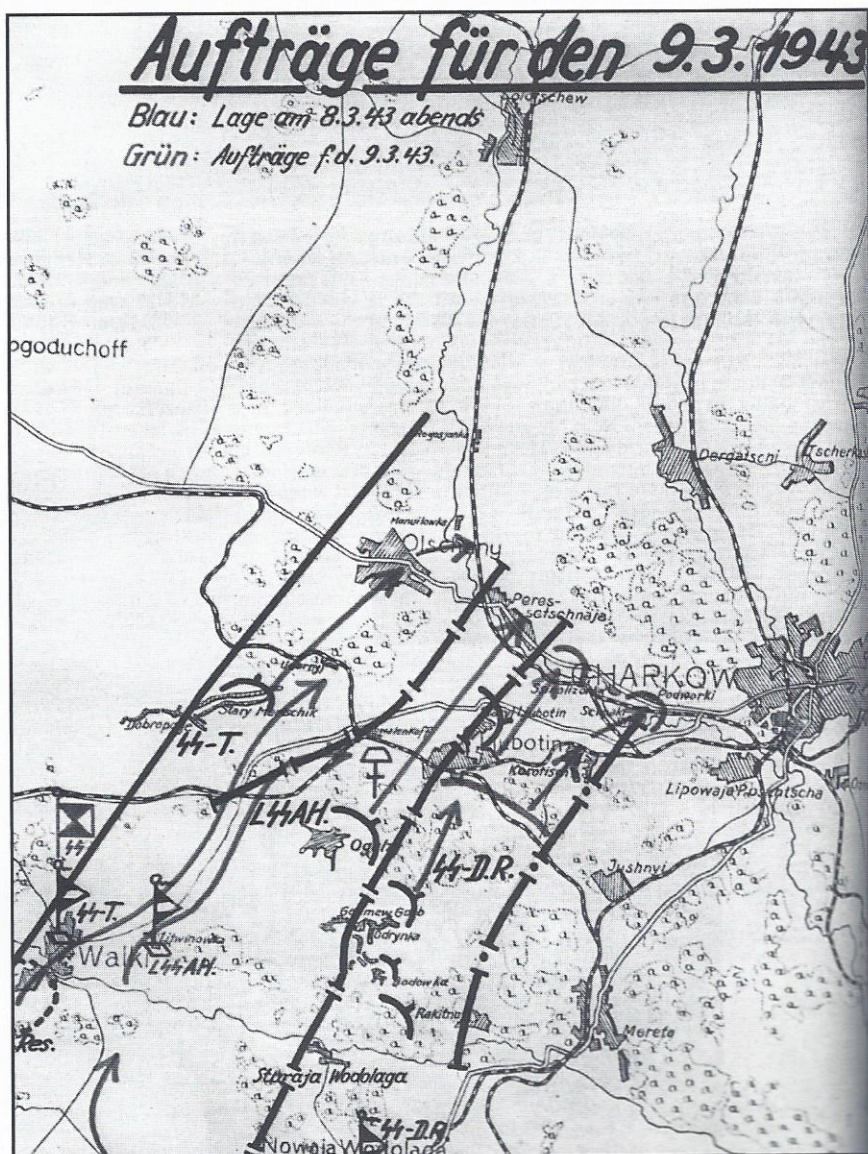
On February 26, 'Das Reich' took Lozovaya after heavy street fighting. 'Totenkopf' drew level on its left. Two days later, 17. Panzer-Division took Petrovskoye on the Donetsk. All these actions left units of 1st Guards Army badly mauled. Further east, XL. Panzerkorps of 1. Panzer-Armee met other units of the 1st Guards Army and the remnants of Mobile Group Popov — with less than 100 tanks between them, most of them immobilised for lack of fuel — near Barvenkovo. Forced to make a final stand, the Russian forces were cut to pieces.

On February 28, Manstein ordered Hoth to begin the push toward Kharkov and von Mackensen to drive to the Donetsk in the area east of Petrovskoye. Time was running short as daytime thaw had set in. Already the melting snow was making the roads soft and muddy, and in a few days' time they would become completely impassable.

In spite of the thaw, both armies made amazingly rapid progress. Starting on March 1, Hoth's 4. Panzer-Armee covered 50 miles in five days, reaching the Mosh river, ten miles south of Kharkov, on the 5th. Over most of the distance it was opposed only by

elements of the battered 1st Guards Army, but east of Krasnograd the SS-Panzerkorps — linking up with the 'Leibstandarte' on March 4 — trapped three rifle divisions (11th, 184th and 219th) and three tank brigades (52nd, 88th and 113th) of Rybalko's 3rd Tank Army, which the Stavka had ordered to counter-attack southward on the

28th. The following day, 'Totenkopf' liquidated this pocket. Next day, March 6, the 'Leibstandarte' gained a first bridgehead across the Mosh at Bridok. Further east, 1. Panzer-Armee had by then closed on the Donetsk along its entire line, leaving the Russians only small bridgeheads in the sharper bends of the still-frozen river.



German situation map showing the three SS divisions coming abreast of Kharkov.



At 1215 on March 10, the point of SS-Aufklärungs-Abteilung 1 (Kampfgruppe Meyer) reached the northern entry of Kharkov, where it halted to await orders. Kriegsberichterstatter King pictured the unit's Schwimmwagens stationary on the Belgorod main road, with the first buildings of Kharkov visible in the distance.

Shortly after, instead of entering the city, the unit would receive orders to carry on a few miles further east, to the next main road into Kharkov, the one from Volchansk. From there, Meyer was to launch his assault into the city on the morrow. The Belgorod road was assigned to Kampfgruppe Witt. (NIOD)

Manstein and Hoth now had to decide whether or not to continue to Kharkov at the risk of being halted by the thaw. As it appeared that the Russians were not going to offer much resistance north of the Mosh and as the weather turned colder again on March 7, they decided to carry on. However, in order not to lose contact with Armee-Abteilung Kempf, they decided to strike west of Kharkov instead of to the east of it. Their plan was to have the SS-Panzerkorps sever the Russian communication lines through Kharkov on the west and then sweep round the city from the north, thus encircling it.

Again, the advance went astonishingly well. On March 8, Hausser's SS-Panzerkorps broke away from the Mosh river on a broad front between Walki and Meref. Advancing in line abreast were (from west to east) 'Totenkopf', 'Leibstandarte' and 'Das Reich', with Division 'Grossdeutschland' of Armee-Abteilung Kempf moving alongside on their left. On March 9, the three SS divisions drew level with the western outskirts of Kharkov. Opposing them stood three Soviet armies: Kazakov's 69th Army north of the city, Moskalenko's 40th Army south of it, and Rybalko's 3rd Tank Army defending the city itself. Waiting inside Kharkov proper were the 1st and 2nd Guards Tank Corps and the 48th, 104th, 305th, and 307th Rifle Divisions.

Although they had orders to outflank Kharkov from the west, the SS divisions, out to avenge their humiliating defeat in February, were inexorably drawn towards the city. Manstein's and Hoth's initial orders of the 8th had been quite clear that the SS-Panzerkorps was to stay out of the city, but their

subsequent orders on this point were ambiguous. At 1215 on the 9th, 4. Panzer-Armee radioed the SS-Panzerkorps: 'If at all possible, Kharkov is to be taken by a rapid stroke'. Realising this was a change from previous orders, Hausser asked for clarification. However, without waiting for a reply, at 1730 he also issued orders for a surprise assault on the city to commence next day: 'Das Reich' was to come in from the west and the 'Leibstandarte' from the north, while 'Totenkopf' was to form a protective screen to the north and north-west.

Hoth immediately ordered Hausser to stick to the original plan, warning against a frontal assault against the city which would tie down tanks and troops in costly street fighting. Hausser's corps was to continue its northern envelopment of the city. However, Hoth's order to Hausser sent at 1920 again included a passage that left room for interpretation: 'The situation inside the city is to be reconnoitred. Possibilities for taking possession of the city in a rapid stroke are to be exploited'. This was all that Hausser needed to continue his preparations for a penetration of the city.

Although Hausser had his mind set on the assault, Soviet opposition and traffic conditions forced him to delay it by one day. 'Das Reich' needed it to manoeuvre into attack positions just west of the city. The 'Leibstandarte' needed all of March 10 to fight through the town of Dergatchi north-west of Kharkov and obtain jumping-off positions along the northern edge of the city.

At 1900 that evening, an order from Manstein repeated the instruction to outflank Kharkov to the north, but again left room for interpretation by adding: 'If enemy

resistance dwindles, Kharkov is to be taken'. Another order from Hoth sent at 2230 also specified that an attack on Kharkov was to come in from the east (i.e. after completion of the encirclement). Hausser chose to disregard these orders and to proceed with his own plan of attack.

At 0400 on March 11, the 'Leibstandarte' (SS-Obergruppenführer Sepp Dietrich) launched two regimental groups in four assault columns each down a different road leading into the city.

Advancing from the north-west was the 2. SS-Panzer Grenadier Regiment (SS-Standartenführer Georg Wisch) which had split up in two columns, one on either side of the Belgorod-Kharkov railway that runs into the city from the north. Right of the railway, the II. Bataillon (SS-Sturmbannführer Rudolf Sandig) attacked down the road from Dergatchi and at 0530 penetrated the north-western city district of Severnyi Post. Here its right wing met heavy resistance from enemy entrenched on higher ground. Sandig's battalion fought itself forward from strong point to strong point, but by the end of the day it had only got as far as the Severnyi railway yard.

On the other side of the railway, the I. Bataillon (SS-Sturmbannführer Hugo Kraas) at 0310 stormed the northern suburb of Alexeyevka. The attack failed, a Russian counter-attack with T-34 tanks even throwing one company back out of the city. In the early afternoon, after a Stuka attack on the enemy positions and additional shelling by the four StuGs supporting the battalion, the infantry slowly battled its way back in against fierce opposition. A T-34 knocked out one of the StuGs and a concealed anti-tank gun a



March 11, and Kampfgruppe Witt has started the assault on Kharkov down the Belgorod road (see the town plan on pages 22-23). For most of the day, the advance down this axis was held up by road-blocks and fierce Russian resistance on the outskirts of the city. The armour supporting Kampfgruppe Witt — II. Bataillon of Panzer-Regiment 1 — spent long hours waiting for the road-blocks to be cleared. The commander of Panzer III '555' and Panzer II '558' scout the horizon with their binocu-

lars, while a crew member of '559' in between takes time off to read a newspaper. Note the different styles of painting the tank numbers: whereas the light Panzer IIs have repainted theirs in red on the snow-camouflage white coating, the Panzer III has kept the white lettering on a dark background. This picture was taken by the other Kriegsberichterstatter assigned to the 'Leibstandarte', Cantzler, at a spot just a few yards back from the previous photograph. (BA)



New apartment buildings have sprung up on the horizon, but this is the same spot on the Belgorod-Kharkov road.



A couple of hundred yards closer to Kharkov, men of SS-Panzergranadier-Regiment 1 and SS-Pionier-Abteilung 1 labour to clear the obstacles blocking the road. A PaK 40 anti-tank gun stands ready to defend against a possible Russian counter-attack. Another picture by King. (NIOD)



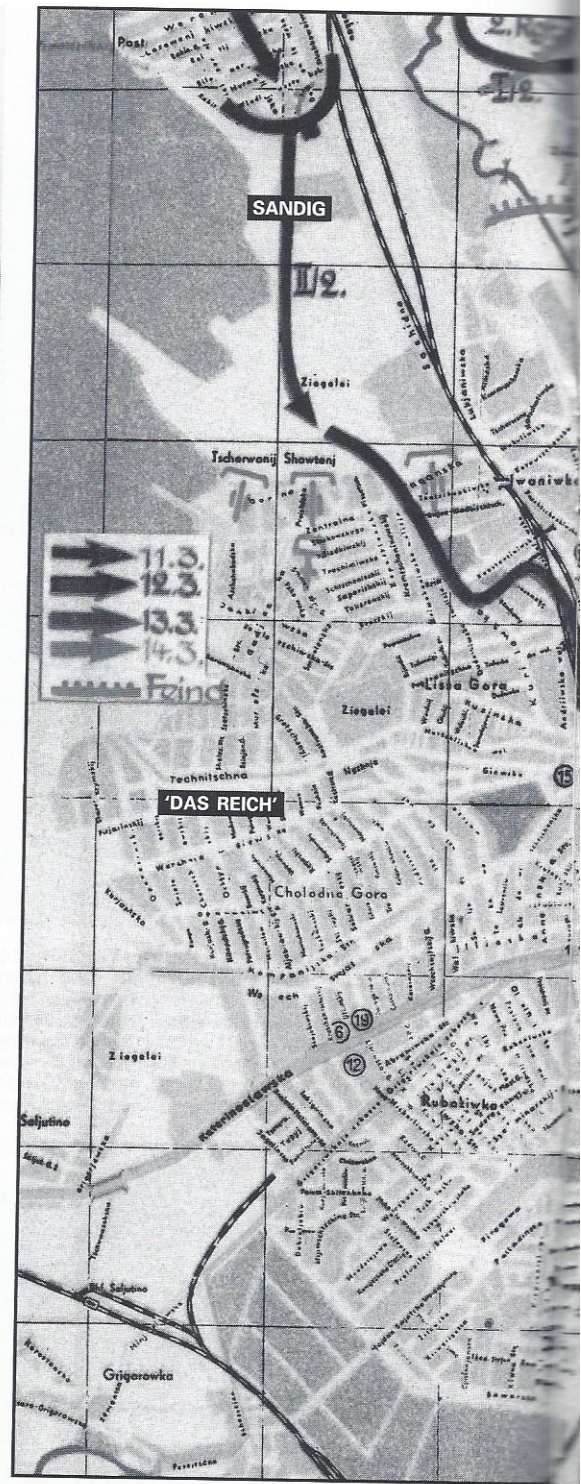
The prominent buildings on the left have made way for new housing blocks, but the lay of the land has remained the same.

supporting 37mm flak wagon. Finally, a small group of panzergrenadiers outflanked the Russian forward positions from the west and attacked them from the rear, thus gaining a first foothold in the built-up area.

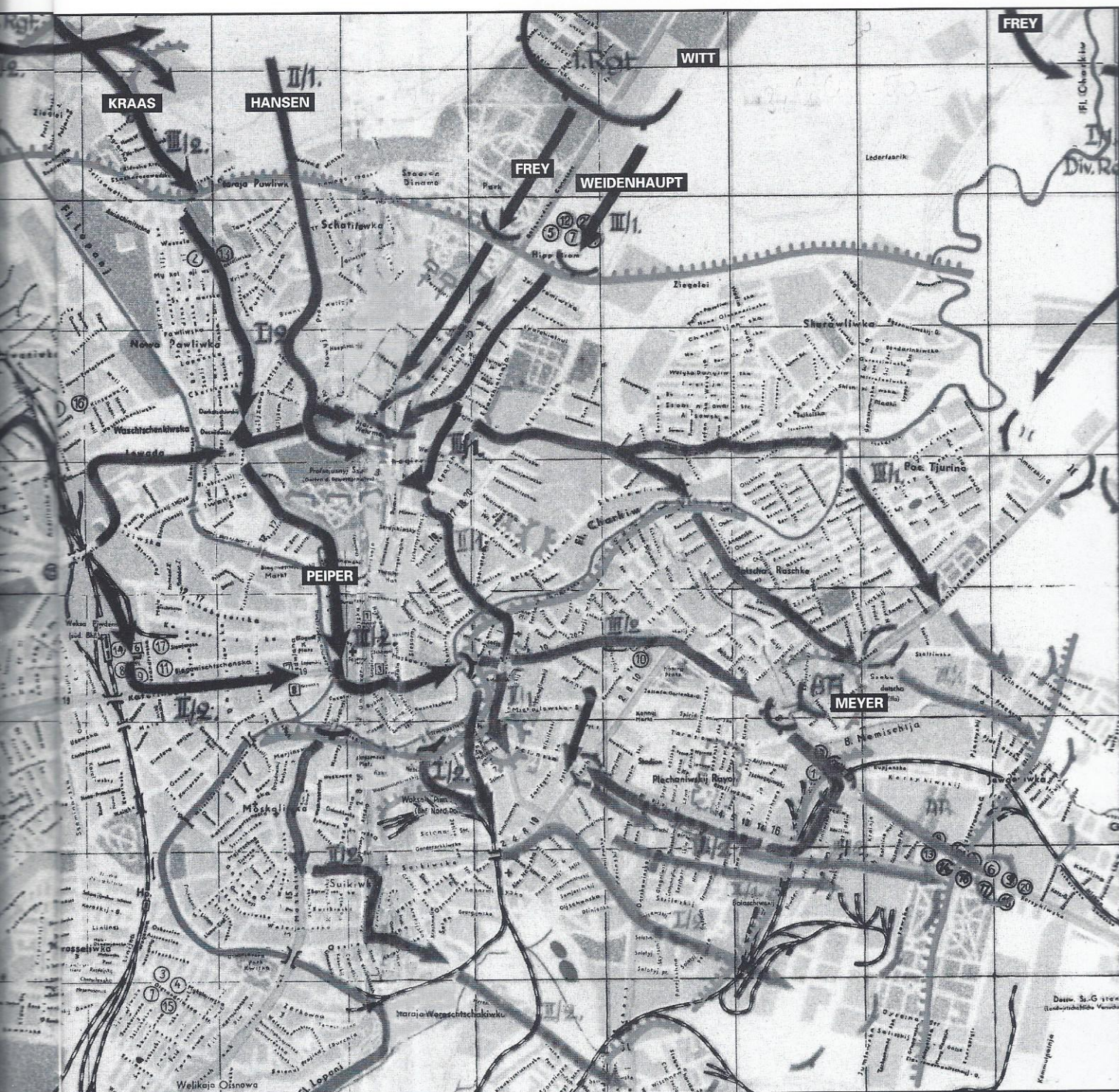
The division's main effort was from the north down the main road from Belgorod. Attacking here were SS-Panzergranadier-Regiment 1 (SS-Standartenführer Fritz Witt) backed up by tanks of II. Abteilung (SS-Sturmabführer Martin Gross) of SS-Panzer-Regiment 1. Before reaching the city limits they had to answer a Russian counter-attack across the wide open space of the Kharkov airfield on their left. Entering the city at 0750, and knocking out several T-34s, by the afternoon Kampfgruppe Witt had fought its way into the northern suburbs.

On the far left flank, coming in from the north-east down the road from Zirkuny, was

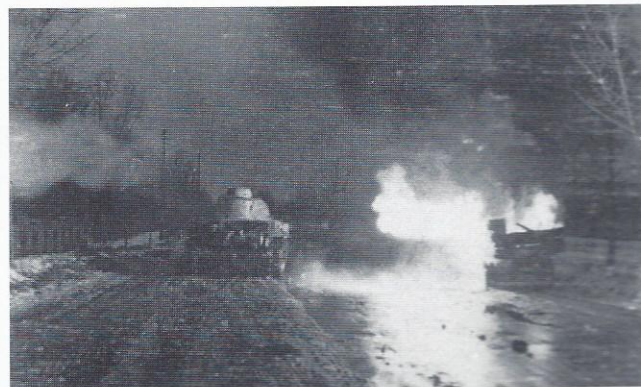
Kampfgruppe Meyer, consisting of the Aufklärungs-Abteilung (the divisional reconnaissance unit) under SS-Sturmabführer Kurt Meyer and I. Abteilung (SS-Sturmabführer Max Wünsche) of SS-Panzer-Regiment 1 plus two SP guns of SS-Panzerjäger-Abteilung 1. Its specific task was to seize the city's eastern exit road to Rogan and Chuguyev. Shortly after moving out, the force's lead panzer was knocked out as was Meyer's command half-track. Two T-34s were accidentally knocked out by their own troops. Gaining speed, the Kampfgruppe pushed deep into Kharkov, reaching the cemetery along the main road in the city district of Imeni Kirova. Here, with the armour running low on fuel, the force entrenched in a perimeter position, defending itself against numerous attacks by Russian troops trying to force their way out to the east.



German wartime plan of Kharkov showing the advance of the various 'Leibstandarte' spearheads into the city. The division attacked from the north and north-west with its two infantry regiments divided into various Kampfgruppen, each one supported by a few tanks, assault guns and self-propelled anti-tank guns, with support from artillery, Nebelwerfer mortars and Stuka dive-bombers on call. The deepest penetration on the first day was made by Kampfgruppe Meyer, the divisional Aufklärungs-Abteilung (AA on the plan), which however put it in a completely encircled and isolated position in the eastern part of the city from which it could only be relieved on the third day of the battle. We have added the names of the various Kampfgruppe commanders.



The advance into Kharkov gets under way. (BA)



Smoke from a burning vehicle darkens the daylight sky. (BA)



Meanwhile, SS-Panzer Grenadier-Division 'Das Reich' attacked Kharkov from the west. This series of pictures — included in every publication on the battle of Kharkov — was one that we very much wanted to find. The visibility of the Gosprom complex on the horizon gave a clue that it was somewhere in the western or south-western outskirts of Kharkov, but we still spent hours driving up and down pot-holed streets and lanes in our hired taxi before we finally found it in Gievskaya Ulitsa

(Kiev Street), a short cobble-stoned piece of road leading out of Kharkov in the Kholodnova Gora district. This location firmly dates these pictures to March 12, the second day of the assault, as the tanks are already across the anti-tank ditch at Zalyutino which held up Kampfgruppe Harmel on the first day. This Panzer IV belongs to 5. Kompanie of SS-Panzer-Regiment 2 'Das Reich'. (BA) Below: Today traffic from Kiev enters Kharkov via a new road, and Gievskaya is a quiet backstreet.



Another Panzer IV with mounted panzer-grenadiers descends down the same lane. Kampfgruppe Harmel was made up of the following units of 'Das Reich': SS-Panzer Grenadier-Regiment 'Deutschland' (minus its II. Bataillon), III. (gep.) Bataillon of SS-Panzer Grenadier-Regiment 'Der Führer', SS-Pionier-Bataillon 2, SS-Artillerie-Regiment 2 (minus one battery), SS-Flak-Abteilung 2, one battery of SS-Sturmgeschütz-Abteilung 2, and what few tanks remained of SS-Panzer-Regiment 2. To increase his tank strength, Harmel was also given 1. Kompanie of the Panzer Abteilung of the SS-Division 'Totenkopf'. Three Kriegsberichter accompanied the force — Friedrich Zschäkel, Paul Neumann, and PK Schaer — and all three took pictures in this lane. This one is by Neumann.



Meanwhile, over on the west side of Kharkov, 'Das Reich' (SS-Oberführer Herbert Ernst Vahl) had joined the attack. At 0800, its reinforced SS-Panzer Grenadier-Regiment 'Deutschland' (SS-Obersturmbannführer Heinz Harmel) started out from Sino-lisovska down the Poltava road. Meeting fierce resistance, by 1600 Kampfgruppe Harmel had reached the suburb of Zalyutino, where it was halted by a deep anti-tank ditch covered by anti-tank guns, artillery and troops entrenched in houses on the far side. A Russian counter-attack from Rychoff railway station was repulsed in bloody fighting. Further south, in a supporting attack, reinforced SS-Panzer Grenadier-Regiment 'Der Führer' (SS-Obersturmbannführer Otto Kumm) fought its way south of the city and cut the Merefa road.

However, at 1505, an order from 4. Panzer-Armee arrived which initiated a sharp controversy between the army commander and the commander of the SS-Panzerkorps. Hoth ordered Hausser to immediately break off the attack from the west, have 'Das Reich' leave only a security screen there, and to move the division round the north to east of the city — as intended in the original plan — in order to cut the Soviet escape route to Chuguyev.

Hausser was unwilling to concur: 'Das Reich' was now fully engaged and he judged the risk of pulling out under combat conditions too great. Furthermore, he argued that, with the worsening road conditions and the large woods north of Kharkov, moving the division round the north would take more time than if the division continued in the corps effort to open a road straight through the city. At 2100 that evening he informed Hoth of his opinions, telling him that he intended to continue his assault on the city with the same two divisions; instead



of moving 'Das Reich' to east of Kharkov, he would instruct 'Totenkopf' to send a force thereto.

Thus 'Das Reich' continued its attack on the city. During the night of March 11/12, a pioneer assault group of Kampfgruppe Harmel sneaked across the anti-tank ditch and broke into the houses on the other side, surprising the Red Army defenders. By 0440, all Russian anti-tank guns had been captured and a bridgehead won, enabling armour to cross the ditch. By 0525, the Kampfgruppe was rolling towards the city centre. Shortly before noon, its lead troops were approaching the Kharkov main railway station.

This was as far as 'Das Reich' would get.

At 0115 that night Hoth had sent Hausser a repeat of his earlier order to move 'Das Reich' round to the east. Hausser's reply — not sent until 1135 — only elaborated on his earlier arguments for not carrying out the ordered move. At 1150, exasperated with his subordinate's pig-headedness, Hoth radioed Hausser a very sharp order to immediately comply with his instructions and send 'Das Reich' round the north. This time, Hausser obeyed. That evening, having made contact with the 'Leibstandarte' in north-western Kharkov, 'Das Reich' arranged to pass through that division's sector inside the city, giving it not only a short cut to the east but also better-surfaced roads for its columns.



A Panzer III of 'Das Reich' (note the divisional emblem) in the same lane, pictured by Schaer. Earlier publications have iden-



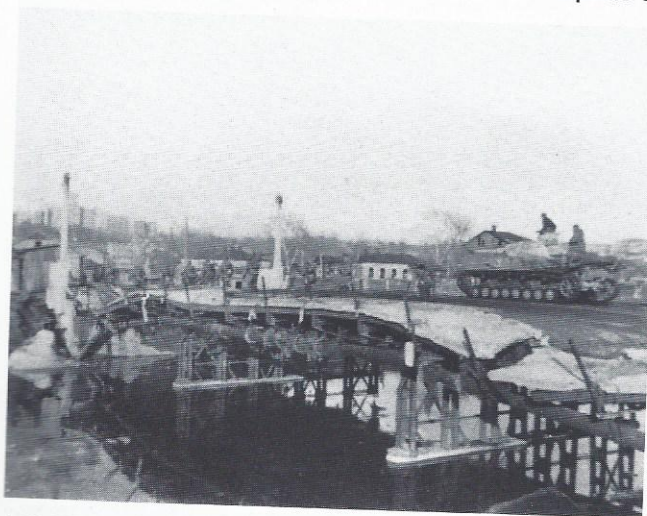
tified these images as showing the 'Leibstandarte', but this shot and our establishment of the location prove otherwise. (NIOD)



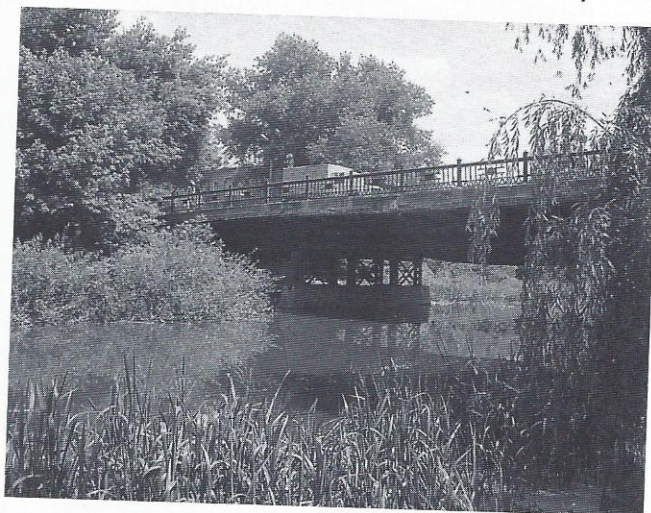
Left: At the bottom of the slope, Kampfgruppe Harmel reached the deep cutting of the railway yard just north of Kharkov main station. Here a machine-gun team of 16. Pionier-Kompanie of



SS-Panzergranadier-Regiment 'Deutschland' has set up its MG42 on the edge of the cutting. Picture by Neumann. (BA) *Right:* The view across the Kharkov shunting yard today.



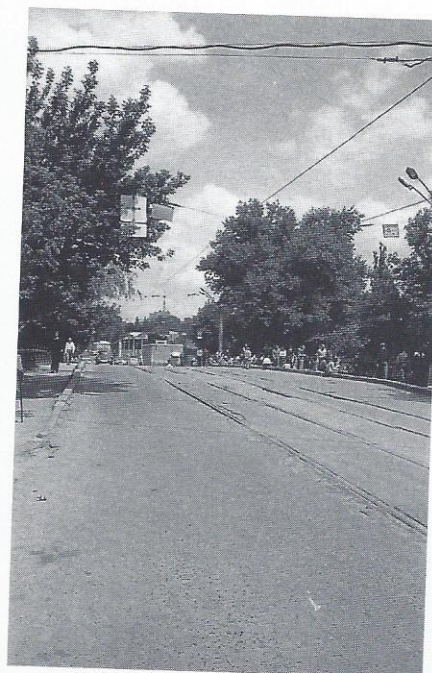
Left: With their advance halted by a direct order from 4. Panzer-Armee shortly after noon on the 12th, Kampfgruppe Harmel broke off the fight. Next morning, ordered to move to north-east of Kharkov, they passed through the sector already



cleared by the 'Leibstandarte'. PK Neumann pictured men and armour of the Kampfgruppe crossing the Lopan river via the bridge on Pistinsky Street. (BA) *Right:* The damage to the bridge has been repaired.



Left: Zschäkel photographed panzergrenadiers crossing the same bridge. The Gosprom looms high on the horizon. (NIOD)



Right: Tram lines still cross the river via this bridge today. Unfortunately, the trees hide most of the Gosprom.



The Russian defenders had built road barricades at nearly every intersection in Kharkov centre. This one blocked Sumy Street, the main road into town from Belgorod, and the major axis of attack for Kampfgruppe Witt. Two Soviet tanks were knocked

out in the fighting which reached this point on the second day, March 12. The Russians used large numbers of T-34s in the street battle — the 'Leibstandarte' alone reported 19 knocked out on the first day. Picture by Kriegsberichtler Panzner. (NIOD)

The 'Leibstandarte' meanwhile had made good progress on the 12th. At mid-morning, Kampfgruppe Sandig on the right finally broke through the field fortifications on the north-western outskirts and, advancing against snipers and trajectory fire, reached the northern end of the Kharkov main railway station yard at 1015. Just before night-fall, Sandig's battalion captured the railway station itself (where it linked up with Kampfgruppe Harmel of 'Das Reich').

Sandig's left-hand neighbour, Kampfgruppe Kraas, renewed its assault on Alexeyevka. After hammering the enemy with artillery and Nebelwerfer rockets, the panzergrenadiers penetrated the city proper in pursuit of the retreating Red Army troops. In bloody close-quarter fighting in the urban districts of Lisaya Gora and Pavlovka, several Russian battalions were ripped apart, and 155 prisoners taken. By the end of the day, the two Kampfgruppen of SS-Panzer-grenadier-Regiment 2 occupied a defensive line along Katerinolvaska Street.

SS-Panzer-grenadier-Regiment 1 overcame the resistance in the northern suburbs. In company groups, each one supported by a few panzers, its I. Bataillon (SS-Sturm-



The barricade stood just half a mile north of where Sumy Street reaches Dzerzhinsky Square. Because of the trees we have taken our comparison from the pavement.

fürer Albert Frey) and III. Bataillon (SS-Sturm-bannführer Wilhelm Weidenhaupt) fought their way forward from one apart-

ment complex to the next. As darkness fell, they had reached a line just two streets north of Dzerzhinsky Square.



Two streets further north, another barricade blocked off Chernischevski Street, a side street of Sumy.



The crossroads of Chernischevski and Sumy Streets now. Kharkov centre is to the left and Belgorod to the right.



Early on the second day, Kampfgruppe Hansen of the 'Leibstandarte' reached Pravdy Prospekt, the wide avenue circling round the rear of the Gosprom complex. From here Hansen launched the attack on Dzerzhinsky Square, sending one force



round the south (towards the camera) and another round the north. Here a Marder III 7,5cm self-propelled gun of SS-Panzerjäger-Abteilung 1 stands guard on Pravdy Prospekt (Avenue of the Truth) in the shadow of the Gosprom. (BA)



SS-Kriegsberichter King followed the northern pincer of Kampfgruppe Hansen as it attacked up Pravdy Prospekt toward Sumy Street on the morning of March 12, producing some of the best combat images of the battle for the city. Here,

two Panzer IVs and one Marder stand three abreast firing away at buildings in which the Russian defenders have entrenched themselves. The time is about 1100, as can be deduced from the shadows. (BA)



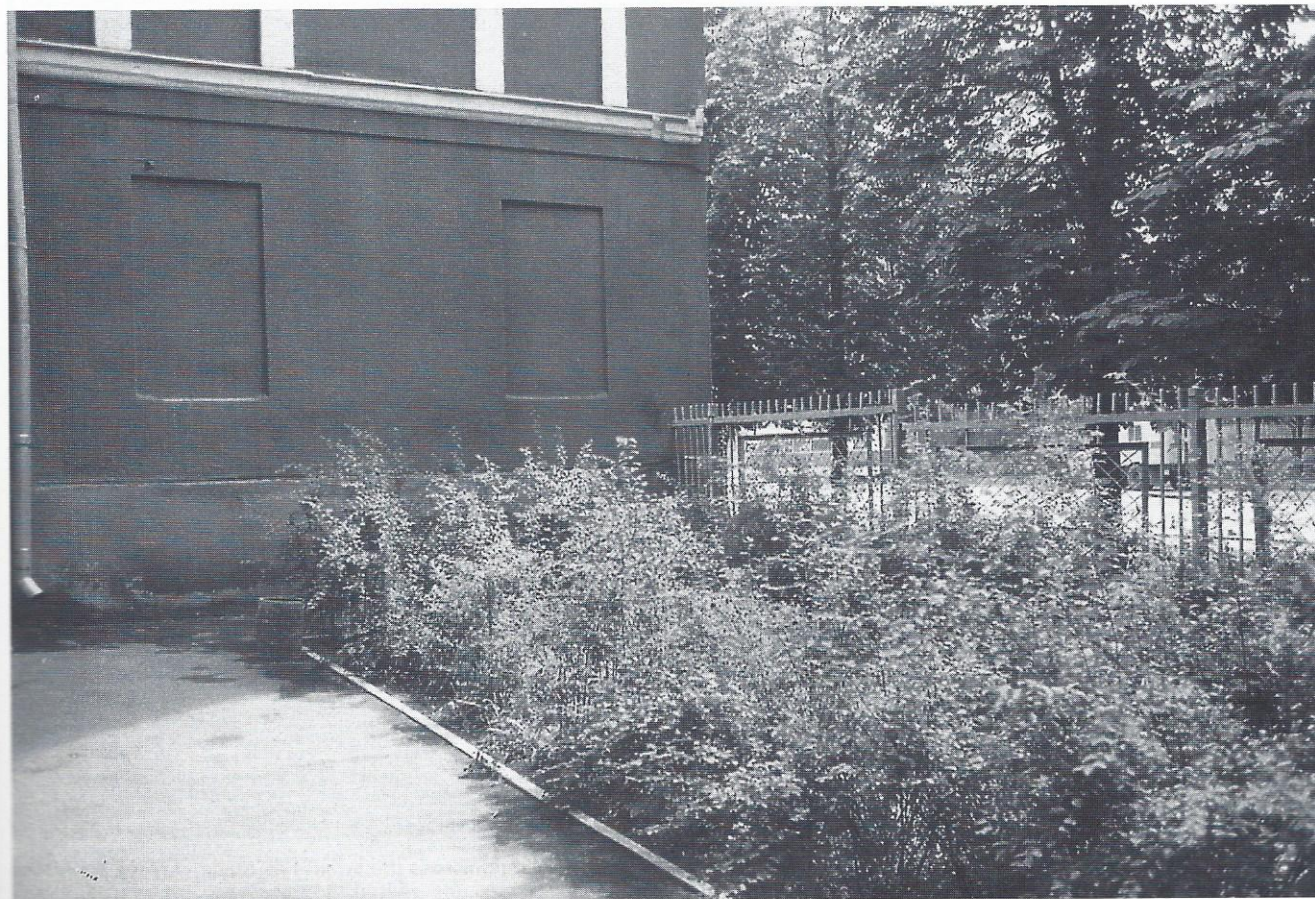
Meanwhile, on the regiment's right wing, the II. Bataillon (SS-Sturmabführer Max Hansen), with support from 7. Kompanie of SS-Panzer-Regiment 1, had sneaked through the Russian lines and reached the western end of the Dzerzhinsky Square, where snipers firing from the high buildings of the Gosprom complex caused casualties. For the assault on the square itself, Hansen called forward the panzers and contacted Frey's I. Bataillon on his left. Splitting his force, Hansen sent one half round the right, through the big city park and Zoo to the Shevchenko Memorial on Sumy Street, and the other half round the left, down the broad avenue which lines the northern side of the square, also toward Sumy Street. Slowly Kampfgruppe Hansen battled its way forward, enveloping the square. By evening he had reached the eastern end, linking up with the rest of Kampfgruppe Witt on Sumy Street. The heavily-contested square, symbol of Kharkov for both sides, was renamed 'Platz der Leibstandarte'.

A sunny Sunday morning 57 years later.



Panzergrrenadiers of Hansen's battalion take cover in the shadow of the next building. This spectacular series of pictures — often published, but never properly identified as to where in the city it was taken — eluded finding until the very last morning

of our visit to Kharkov. It was only when Karel spotted the two 'blind windows' in this shot (from the rear seat of a driving taxi) that everything fell in place. In the one hour left to us before departure to the airport we matched the whole series. (BA)

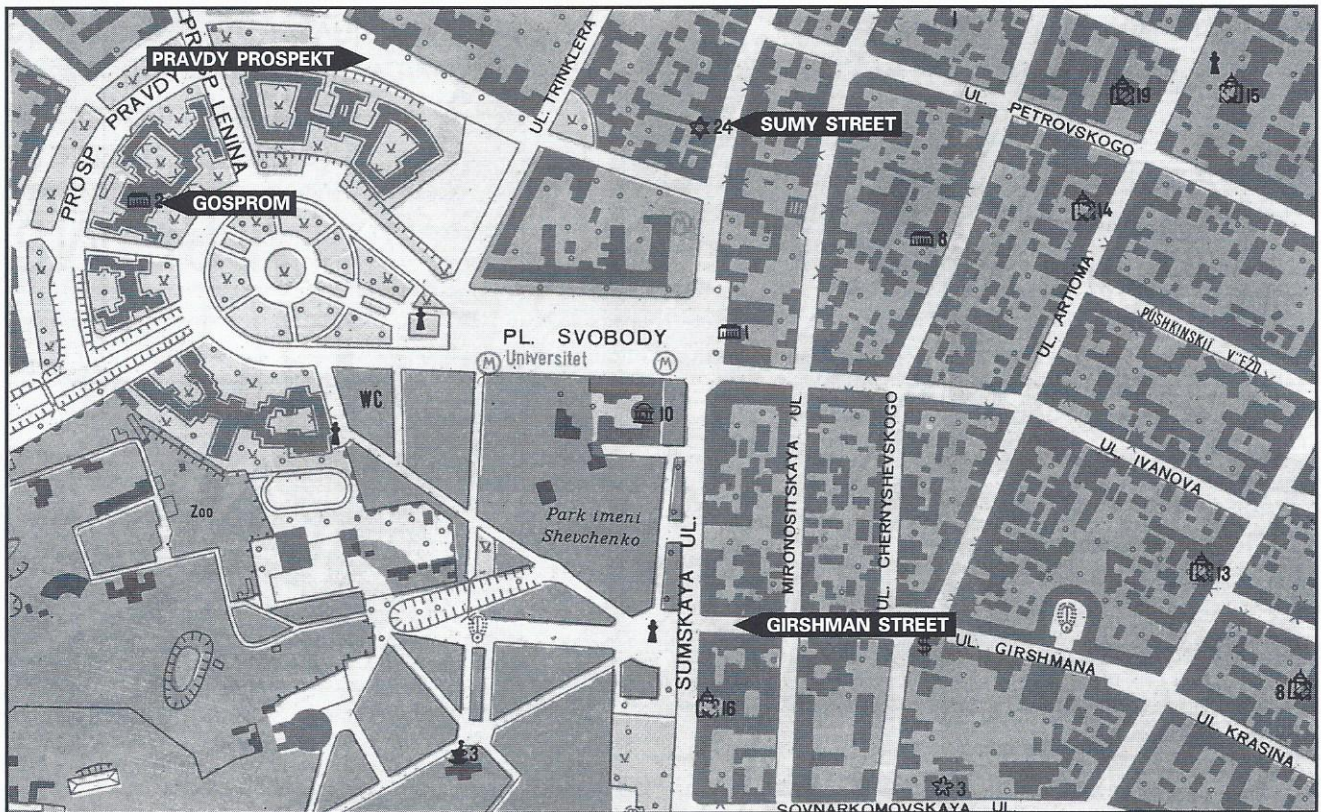




Left: Moving forward beside a half-track, King photographed the point men crouching behind trees and bushes. PK photographers were renowned for their front-line coverage, but even among their ranks operating so close to the forward line was



exceptional. This is the sharp end, where bullets are really flying. (BA) Right: No bullets, only the sound of birds singing in the small park at the intersection of Pravdy Prospekt and Trinkler Street (see the plan below).



Having reached the cover of the building seen in the previous shot, King turned around to picture the panzers moving up. (BA)



The low building across the street has made way for a modern replacement.



Sloshing through mud and melting snow, the Kampfgruppe approaches the junction with Sumy Street. The tanks supporting Hansen's infantry were those of 7. Kompanie of SS-Panzer-Regi-

ment 1, as can be seen from Panzer IV '704'. The commander of this company was SS-Obersturmführer Rudolf von Ribbentrop, son of Nazi foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop. (BA)



Incredibly, in the very heart of Kharkov, the old courtyard gate on the left remains exactly as in 1943.



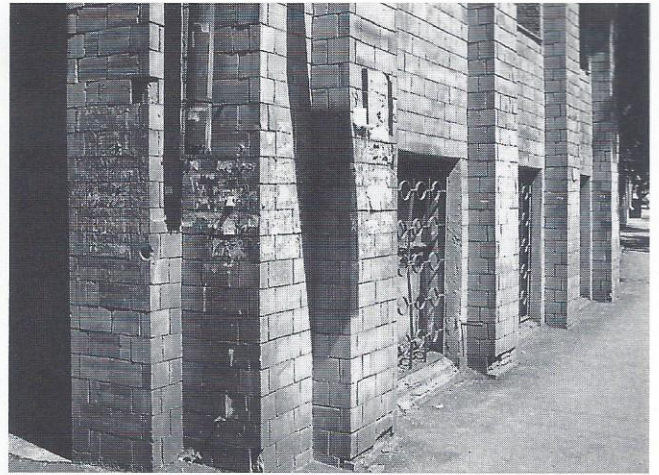
Panzer '728' rattles forward. In the background, behind the building in the park, lies Dzerzhinsky Square. Kampfgruppe Hansen's advance enveloped the square from two sides. (NIOD)

Below: No melting snow or debris on Pravdy Prospekt today. Our comparison was taken from closer in to give a better view of the palace under the trees.





Left: Retracing his steps, King bumped into SS-Sturmabführer Max Hansen, the Kampfgruppe commander (and the commander of II. Bataillon of SS-Panzergranadier-Regiment 1), directing the fighting from close behind. In this shot he is talking to SS-Unterscharführer Paul Klose, one of his infantry section commanders. Hansen, wounded in the face later in the



battle (his fourth wound), would be awarded the Knight's Cross for his actions at Kharkov. (BA) **Right:** A comparison which appeared impossible beforehand. The prize for having spotted it goes to Martin Bogaert, Karel's Belgian companion and interpreter on the Kharkov trip. This is in fact the corner of the building visible in the picture at the top of page 32.



Left: Members of Hansen's Kampfgruppe command group aiming their rifles at what appears to be aircraft flying overhead.



The man on the right has a telescopic rifle. (BA) **Right:** Martin enjoys standing in for the rifleman.

Meanwhile, at 1030, SS-Panzergranadier-Regiment 2 had launched its III. (gep.) Bataillon, the regiment's armoured infantry battalion under SS-Sturmabführer Jochen Peiper. Rolling into town in its half-tracks, Peiper linked up with Hansen on Dzerzhinsky Square and then carried on south-eastward another mile and a half where he snatched an intact bridge across the Kharkov river leading into Moscow Avenue.

The division's left-wing force, Kampfgruppe Meyer, had meanwhile pushed forward and reached the all-important junction of the Volchansk and Chuguyev exit roads in the eastern part of Kharkov. The force occupied a hedgehog position around the junction.

tion, desperately fighting off fierce Russian counter-attacks all day long, out of physical contact with the rest of the division, except for a patrol of three half-tracks from Kampfgruppe Peiper which established a short contact in the afternoon.

Below left: Red Army prisoners assembled on Dzerzhinsky Square, pictured by Kriegsbericht Ludvig. (BA) **Below right:** The building across the street has disappeared, but the Gosprom serves to align the comparison.



Kampfgruppe Hansen has linked up with the rest of Kampfgruppe Witt on Sumy Street. It is now March 13, the third day of the battle. This can be deduced from the fact that this picture was taken by SS-Kriegsbericht Neumann, who reached this point with Kampfgruppe Harmel of 'Das Reich' as it traversed the city on its way out to the north-east on the morning of the 13th. Panzer '731' and another panzer of 7. Kompanie wait to resume the advance through the maze of streets that lie east of Dzerzhinsky Square with Kampfgruppe Witt's III. Bataillon. (BA)



Next day, March 13, the battle continued. From its position around Dzerzhinsky Square, Kampfgruppe Witt pushed toward the line of the Kharkov river, Weidenhaupt's III. Bataillon going due east, and Hansen's II. Bataillon fighting south toward Peiper's bridgehead. The going was slow. Everywhere, the Russians resisted fiercely with machine guns and anti-tank guns, and each block of buildings had to be cleaned out separately. Russian tanks lured in side streets and courtyards. Russian artillery held the bridges across the Kharkov under constant shelling.

Meanwhile, Frey's I. Bataillon of SS-Panzer Grenadier-Regiment 1 had moved out from the area of Kharkov aerodrome, crossed the Kharkov river just north of the city, and begun to push back into the city down the Volchansk road in an attempt to trap the Red Army units fighting in the city centre.

In the southern half of town, in the sector of SS-Panzer Grenadier-Regiment 2, the struggle was equally bitter. By 1230, Peiper's III. Bataillon had enlarged its bridgehead sufficiently for a break-out along Moscow Avenue. Half an hour later, his armoured infantry column linked up with Kampfgruppe Meyer at the Volchansk/Chuguyev road junction, relieving this force from its precarious situation. At 1530, Kraas' I. Bataillon, using Peiper's bridgehead, attacked southward across Michailovsk Street. On its right, Sandig's II. Bataillon was fighting to gain its own crossing at Torgovchi Street.

By now, the main force of 'Das Reich' had vacated the city. At 0745 that morning, having arranged a route through the 'Leibstandarte's' sector, Kampfgruppe Harmel began moving via Dzerzhinsky Square and the city districts of Litvinovska and Danilovka to a position north-east of Kharkov. By late afternoon it was engaged in fighting outside the city, attacking southward alongside Kampfgruppe Baum of SS-Division 'Totenkopf' toward the Kharkov-Chuguyev road. The



Looking north on Sumy Street, at the intersection with Girshman Street (see the plan on page 32).

only 'Das Reich' unit now remaining inside Kharkov was II. Bataillon (SS-Sturmabführer Bissinger) of SS-Panzer Grenadier-Regiment 'Deutschland', which had the task of clearing the south-western part of the city.

The few Russian troops remaining in this isolated corner offered little resistance and were quickly mopped up. By the evening of March 13, two-thirds of Kharkov was in German hands.



Left: Almost at the same spot but looking the other way. Activity in the city park across the street causes a Panzer IV to aim its gun in that direction while a panzergrenadier watches



through his binoculars. (BA) Right: The neo-classical building across the street, hidden by the trees in this comparison, is the Lysenko Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre.



Standartenführer Fritz Witt, the commander of SS-Panzer-grenadier-Regiment 1, passes the Girshman Street intersection



under cover of an SdKfz 251. Picture by Zschäkel who, like Neumann, reached this point with Kampfgruppe Harmel. (BA)



Meeting of smiling commanders in the heart of Kharkov. Witt (in riding breeches) with SS-Sturmabannführer Jochen Peiper (left), commander of the III. (gep.) Bataillon of SS-Panzer-grenadier-Regiment 2, and SS-Sturmabannführer Heinz von Westernhagen (behind), commander of the 'Leibstandarte's Sturmgeschütz-Abteilung. (BA)



Two SdKfz 251 Schützenpanzerwagen (SPW, armoured personnel carriers) stand nearby. *Emil*, with the tubular radio antennae frame, is Peiper's Befehlswagen (command vehicle). An SS panzergrenadier division had only one of its six infantry battalions mounted in half-tracks, the rest being lorry-borne or moving on foot. This was used as a fast mobile striking unit. On February 13-14, during the second battle for Kharkov, Peiper's battalion had carried out a daring rescue operation into the sector of the 320. Infanterie-Division, bringing out 1,500 wounded men. As for this picture, it appears that all the photographers covering the battle congregated on Sumy Street that morning, for it was taken by yet another SS-Kriegsbericht, Willi Merz. (BA)





Above: A cine cameraman films Panzers '713' and '731' of von Ribbentrop's 7. Kompanie as they venture into Girshman Street. Note the dead Russian in the doorway across the street. A glimpse of the ferocity of the fighting in Kharkov emerges from letters written by Sturmabannführer von Westernhagen, commander of the StuG-Abteilung, to his family back in Germany: 'Nobody will forget the street-fighting in Kharkov. We drove to

within 30 metres of fortified houses and fired into them with assault guns. The comrades then worked us over from the upper floors with explosive charges, and when the brick dust and smoke from the explosions lifted the scoundrels fired at us again. From 100-metre range we fired artillery into them and at places we beat the brothers to death with Cossack sabres.' (BA)

Below: Martin Bogaert stands in for the cameraman.





After taking the previous shot, and with his own 'Das Reich' column having moved on, Zschäkel climbed aboard a panzer and joined a 'Leibstandarte' column that had orders to proceed south

down Sumy Street to 'Peiper's Bridge' on Moscow Avenue to reinforce the infantry fighting there. Visible in this picture are a Panzer IV, a Marder, and several SPW half-tracks. (NIOD)

With 'Totenkopf' and most of 'Das Reich' now fighting north-east of Kharkov, the task of capturing the remainder of the city fell solely on the 'Leibstandarte'. On March 14, the division pushed east on a broad front, with Witt's SS-Panzer Grenadier-Regiment 1 clearing the area north of the Chuguyev road, Wisch's SS-Panzer Grenadier-Regiment 2 the area south of the road and Meyer's Aufklärungs-Abteilung pushing down the road itself. Throughout the day furious street fighting and house-to-house combat raged, but by late afternoon the last residential areas had been cleared. On the eastern edge of the city, Peiper's battalion now stood just west of the Kharkov agricultural experimental establishment, and Meyer's reconnaissance unit was approaching the Kharkov tractor works. All of Kharkov city was now in German hands.

That afternoon, in a special bulletin, the German radio broadcast the news that 'Waffen-SS units, with powerful Luftwaffe support, after days of bitter struggle and in a pincer attack from north and east had reconquered Kharkov'.

However, the battle was not quite over. On March 15, the 'Leibstandarte' cleared the last enemy pockets in the factory district to the south-east. That same day, Kampfgruppe Kumm of 'Das Reich' assaulted the Kharkov tractor works from the south — the huge factory complex would not be finally cleared until the following morning. A few miles further east, Kampfgruppe Harmel awaited the link-up with units of XXXXVIII. Panzerkorps which were sweeping round Kharkov from the south. And SS-Division 'Totenkopf' took Chuguyev, finally closing the ring around Kharkov and cutting 3rd Tank Army's escape route across the Donetz.

However, a considerable number of Russ-

ian forces had by then managed to escape encirclement at Kharkov. In the lightning campaign south of Kharkov Hausser's SS-Panzerkorps had stopped the Soviet offensive spearheads and destroyed two and a half Soviet armies — a miracle achievement indeed — but his subsequent frontal attack on Kharkov itself had merely pushed the

Red Army units back, allowing them a withdrawal out of the city eastward. The Russians fought tenaciously to keep the escape route open, repeatedly counter-attacking 'Das Reich' and 'Totenkopf' with tanks. The latter two divisions — immobilised for much of the 14th for lack of fuel — had been slow in closing the trap east of the city.



While Karel was taking this comparison, a police car stopped right behind him. The policemen inside were however so taken aback by this unusual sight of a foreigner taking pictures in the middle of the road that they fell silent and drove on perplexed.



*Left: With Kharkov again in German hands, the Germans renamed Dzerzhinsky Square. Previously they had colloquially referred to it as the 'Roter Platz' after Moscow's Red Square, but now they baptised it 'Platz der Leibstandarte' in honour of the division that had borne the brunt of the fighting. Division photographer King pictured the huge sign hung above the Gosprom entrance to the square. (NIOD) *Right: Careful comparison shows that this is the northern one of the two identical passage-ways. Below left: Signs were put up at every entrance to the square, like here on Sumy Street. (NIOD)**

After Kharkov fell, the resistance west of the Donetz collapsed. On the morning of March 18, the SS-Panzerkorps attacked along the railway running north out of Kharkov, covered the 30 miles to Belgorod and wrestled the city from Kazakov's 69th Army in four hours. Voronezh Front withdrew behind hastily-built defences on the east bank. The Soviet winter offensive was over. Manstein's brilliant counter-offensive had closed the 110-mile gap in the front, mauled the Russian armies and regained the

Donetz-Mius river line. Kharkov was again in German hands.

The recapture of Kharkov was celebrated by the Germans as a major victory. The battle fought by the SS-Panzerkorps received huge publicity in the German press and newsreels. A spate of decorations was handed out to the men of the SS divisions. However, few failed to note that Hausser, the corps commander, was left out — Hitler had not forgotten his act of disobedience during the earlier battle for the city.

Lying six miles east of Kharkov proper, along the road to Chuguyev near Losovo, the Kharkov tractor works was not cleared by Kampfgruppen Kumm and Meyer until March 16. Even though the Russians had evacuated most of the factory's equipment to behind the Ural in 1941, it was still used as a tank repair workshop by both sides. The Germans found numerous abandoned T-34s when they recaptured the site. (BA)

