

= Battle of Prokhorovka =

The Battle of Prokhorovka was fought on 12 July 1943 near Prokhorovka , 87 kilometres (54 mi) southeast of Kursk , in the Soviet Union , during the Second World War . Taking place on the Eastern Front , the fighting was part of the wider Battle of Kursk , and occurred when the 5th Guards Tank Army of the Soviet Red Army attacked the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps of the German Wehrmacht in one of the largest tank battles in military history .

In April 1943 , the German high command began preparing for Operation Citadel , with the aim of enveloping and destroying the Soviet forces in the Kursk salient . The Soviet high command , Stavka , learned of the German intentions and prepared a series of defensive lines along the routes of the planned German offensive . The Soviets also massed several armies deep behind their defences as a reserve . This group , the Steppe Front , was to be used to launch their own counteroffensives once the German strength had dissipated . The 5th Guards Tank Army was the primary offensive formation of the Steppe Front . On 5 July 1943 the Germans launched their offensive . On the southern side of the salient , the German 4th Panzer Army , with Army Detachment Kempf on its eastern flank , attacked the Soviet defences of the Voronezh Front .

A week into the German offensive the Soviets counterattacked . On the southern side of the salient near Prokhorovka the 5th Guards Tank Army engaged the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps of the 4th Panzer Army , resulting in a large clash of armour . The 5th Guards Tank Army was decimated in the attack , but succeeded in preventing the Germans from capturing Prokhorovka and breaking through the third defensive belt to achieve operational freedom . The German offensive was later cancelled and their forces were withdrawn . The Red Army went on a general offensive and seized the strategic initiative on the Eastern Front , which it was to hold for the rest of the war .

= = Background = =

As the spring rasputitsa (mud) season came to an end in 1943 , both the German and Soviet commands considered their plans for future operations . The Soviet premier Joseph Stalin and some senior Soviet officers wanted to seize the initiative first and attack the German forces inside the Soviet Union , but they were convinced by a number of key commanders , including the Deputy Supreme Commander Georgiy Zhukov , to assume a defensive posture instead . This would allow the Germans to weaken themselves in attacking prepared positions , after which the Soviet forces would be able to reposture and go on the offensive . A similar strategy discussion occurred on the German side , with Field Marshal Erich von Manstein arguing for a mobile defence that would give up terrain and allow the Soviets to advance , while the Germans launched a series of sharp counterattacks against their flanks to inflict heavy attrition . But for political reasons Adolf Hitler insisted that the German forces go on the offensive , choosing the Kursk salient for the attack . On 15 April 1943 he authorised preparations for Unternehmen Zitadelle (" Operation Citadel ") .

The German offensive plan envisioned an assault at the base of the Kursk salient from both the north and south , with the intent of enveloping and destroying the Soviet forces in the salient . The two spearheads were to meet near Kursk . From the south , the XLVIII Panzer Corps and General Paul Hausser 's II SS @-@ Panzer Corps , forming the left and right wings of the 4th Panzer Army commanded by Colonel General Hermann Hoth , would drive northward . The III Panzer Corps of Army Detachment Kempf was to protect Hoth 's right flank from counterattack by the Soviet strategic reserves known to be located east of the salient . The 4th Panzer Army and Army Detachment Kempf were under Army Group South , commanded by Manstein . Air support over the southern portion of the offensive was provided by Colonel General Otto Deßloch 's Luftflotte 4 , whose major air formation , the VIII Fliegerkorps , was commanded by General Hans Seidemann .

Multiple delays by the Germans allowed the Soviets a great deal of time to prepare their defences . Employing defence in depth , they constructed a series of defensive lines to wear down the attacking panzer formations . Three belts made up of extensive minefields , anti @-@ tank ditches , and anti @-@ tank gun emplacements were created , with an additional three belts that were mostly unoccupied and less fortified backing the first three . The Voronezh Front , commanded by General

Nikolai Vatutin , defended the southern face of the salient . The Steppe Front , commanded by Colonel General Ivan Konev , formed the strategic reserve . It was to be held back until the time was right for the Soviet counteroffensive . This formation included Lieutenant General Alexei Zhadov 's 5th Guards Army and Lieutenant General Pavel Rotmistrov 's 5th Guards Tank Army .

= = = German advance leading up to Prokhorovka = = =

The Germans launched their attack on the morning of 5 July 1943 and met heavy resistance . There were far more Soviet anti @-@ tank guns , minefields , anti @-@ tank ditches than had been anticipated , making a breakthrough more difficult to achieve . Furthermore , from the outset they were subjected to frequent counterattacks from Soviet tank units . Despite this , by the end of 5 July the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps had advanced through the first defensive belt and reached the second , although the plan was to breach the first two belts and reach the third on the first day . Nonetheless , the panzer corps ' penetration caused great concern among Soviet commanders , compelling Vatutin to commit almost all of Voronezh Front 's operational reserves by the end of the first day .

To the southeast , III Panzer Corps met with stiff resistance as well and had great difficulty creating and maintaining a bridgehead across the Northern Donets River . They eventually succeeded by the morning of 6 July , but the delay in their advance kept them from protecting the east flank of the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps .

Late on 6 July , the 5th Guards Tank and the 5th Guards Armies of the Steppe Front began moving up from their reserve position , travelling at night to avoid detection . The 5th Guards Tank Army covered the 390 kilometres (240 mi) over three nights , and arrived at the Prokhorovka area on the night of 9 July , and the 5th Guards Army 's 33rd Guards Rifle Corps arrived at the settlement on the night of 10 July .

Slow progress by the XLVIII Panzer Corps , caused Hoth to shift elements of the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps on 8 July to aid the XLVIII Panzer Corp 's drive toward Oboyan and Kursk . On the same day , the Soviets counterattacked the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps with several tank corps . These attacks did not destroy the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps as hoped , but slowed its progress . By the end of 8 July , II SS @-@ Panzer Corps had advanced about 29 kilometres (18 mi) and broken through the first and second defensive belts .

On the following day , 9 July , a meeting of the German commanders of the forces on the northern side of the Kursk salient concluded that a breakthrough in the northern side of salient was unlikely . Nevertheless , they decided to continue their offensive to maintain pressure and inflict casualties , thereby tying down the Soviet forces there . The success of Operation Citadel now depended on a breakthrough being achieved by 4th Panzer Army and Army Detachment Kempf . On the evening of 9 July , the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps was ordered to shift its own forward progress , from due north to the northeast toward the settlement Prokhorovka . Hoth had formulated this move , and had discussed it with Manstein since early May , as he expected large Soviet armoured reserve forces to arrive from the east , and he did not want his corps to be caught crossing the Psel when they arrived . The plan originally envisioned elements of XLVIII Panzer Corps and III Panzer Corps joining in the attack toward Prokhorovka , but this could not be realised . The Soviet command , however , interpreted the change in direction to be a response to the heavy resistance the Germans had faced driving toward Oboyan , and believed the change indicated the German panzer forces were weakening .

Soviet intelligence reports issued from 8 to 9 July reported that defensive works were being constructed by German infantry on the flanks of the 4th Panzer Army , and that German armoured formations were not present in these locations , despite the fact that Soviet armoured formations were situated opposite these flanks . Voronezh Front headquarters supposed the Germans must be reaching their limit , and on 10 July decided to set its counteroffensive to coincide with the Soviet counteroffensive in the northern side of the Kursk salient .

Starting on the morning of 10 July , the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps began its attack toward Prokhorovka . Its 3rd SS Panzergrenadier Division Totenkopf attacked across the Psel River and secured a bridgehead . The 1st SS Panzergrenadier Division Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler captured

Komsomolets State Farm and Hill 241 @. @ 6 . The 2nd SS Panzergrenadier Division Das Reich defended the panzer corps ' flank from Soviet armoured counterattacks .

The II SS @-@ Panzer Corps continued its attack toward Prokhorovka on 11 July . The advance of Leibstandarte was checked by the 2nd Tank Corps , which had been reinforced by the 9th Guards Airborne Division and 301st Anti @-@ tank Artillery Regiment , both from the 33rd Guards Rifle Corps . Totenkopf was resisted by the 31st Tank Corps , the 33rd Guards Rifle Corps ' 95th Guards Rifle Division , and 11th Motorized Rifle Brigade of the 10th Tank Corps . To the south of Leibstandarte , the 2nd Guards Tank Corps and the 48th Rifle Corps ' 183rd Rifle Division opposed the advance of Das Reich .

By day 's end on 11 July Leibstandarte had advanced deep into the Soviet third defensive belt . They had moved up the Psel corridor , cleared Soviet resistance at the Oktyabrsky (" October ") State Farm (Russian : ?????? ?????????????) , crossed a 15 @-@ foot (4 @. @ 6 m) -deep antitank ditch at the base of Hill 252 @. @ 2 and seized the hill itself after a brief but bloody battle , leaving them only 3 kilometres (1 @. @ 9 mi) south of Prokhorovka . To its north the panzergrenadiers of Totenkopf achieved a bridgehead across the Psel and tanks had been brought across , but they had yet to take Hill 226 @. @ 6 and there was a 5 @-@ kilometre (3 @. @ 1 mi) gap between Totenkopf and Leibstandarte . To the south Das Reich had also met stiff resistance and lagged behind some 4 kilometres (2 @. @ 5 mi) to the south . With its advance Leibstandarte ? ' s flanks were exposed both to the north and the south , placing them under sporadic counterattacks from the 95th Guards Rifle Division and the remnants of 2nd Tank Corps .

Late on 11 July the 5th Guards Tank Army prepared for its forthcoming counterattack . Leibstandarte 's advance had disrupted Rotmistrov 's preparations , as the assembly areas he intended to use for the tank army 's 18th and 29th Tank Corps were in German hands by the end of the day , forcing him to hastily revise his plans and select new positions . The late arrival of the 5th Guard Tank Army was impactful in two major ways . The tank unit commanders did not have an opportunity to reconnoiter the terrain they would be traveling across . Equally , if not more importantly , the supporting artillery was unable to site and spot their fire . Thus the artillery fire which the tankers depended upon to sweep their path of advance and suppress German anti @-@ tank gunners was not adequately present .

= = Planning = =

= = = German plans for 12 July = = =

Late on the evening of 11 July , General Paul Hausser , the commander of the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps , issued orders for a classic battle manoeuvre for the following day 's advance on Prokhorovka . It was known that the Soviets had dug in many anti @-@ tank guns on the west slopes of Prokhorovka , making a direct attack by Leibstandarte very difficult . The plan was for Totenkopf to capture Hill 226 @. @ 6 , and advance northeast along the Psel River to the Kartash?vka @-@ Prokhorovka road , and then strike southeast into the flank and rear of Soviet forces at Prokhorovka . Leibstandarte was ordered to nudge forward and secure Storozhevoe and Lamki just outside Prokhorovka , then it and Das Reich were to wait until Totenkopf 's attack had disrupted the Soviet positions , after which Leibstandarte was to attack the main Soviet defences on the west slope of Prokhorovka . To Leibstandarte 's right , elements of Das Reich were also to advance eastward to the high ground south of Prokhorovka , then turn south away from Prokhorovka to roll up the Soviet defences opposing the III Panzer Corps ' advance and force a gap . The VIII Fliegerkorps was to make its main effort in support of the advance of the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps , with the XLVIII Panzer Corps to the west assigned limited air resources .

Unbeknownst to Hausser , on the night of 11 July Rotmistrov had moved his 5th Guards Tank Army to an assembly area just south of Prokhorovka in preparation for a massive armoured attack the following day . Throughout the night , German frontline troops could hear Soviet tank engines as the 18th and 29th Tank Corps moved into their assembly areas . A battalion from Leibstandarte ? ' s

2nd SS @-@ Panzergrenadier Regiment situated on the reverse slope of Hill 252 @. @ 2 had been listening to the engines of the Soviet tanks and were uneasy about the impending attack it implied .

= = = Soviet plans for 12 July = = =

The 5th Guards Army and 5th Guards Tank Army of the Steppe Front had been brought up from reserve and reassigned to the Voronezh Front on 8 and 11 July respectively . On 11 July Vatutin ordered the armies of the Voronezh Front to go over onto the offensive on the following day . This counterattack was planned to coincide with the Soviet offensive on the northern side of the Kursk Salient , Operation Kutuzov . Vatutin ordered Rotmistrov to destroy the German forces near Prokhorovka with his 5th Guards Tank Army , without allowing the Germans to withdraw southward .

For the battle , Rotmistrov ordered his tanks to move forward at high speed to engage the German armour in order to nullify the advantages the Tiger tanks had in the range and firepower of their 88 mm guns . He believed the more manoeuvrable T @-@ 34 would be able to quickly close in and obtain effective flanking shots against the German heavy tanks . In fact , Soviet intelligence had greatly overestimated the numbers of Ferdinands and Tigers possessed by the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps . In actuality there were no Ferdinands with the 4th Panzer Army or Army Group South , as they were all deployed on the northern side of the Kursk salient with the 9th Army . Soviet tank @-@ crews frequently mistook the versions of Panzer IV tanks that were armed with the KwK 40 anti @-@ tank gun , which also had extra armour added to their turret , for Tigers ; therefore Soviet reports tended to overestimate the number of Tigers employed by the Germans during the Battle of Kursk .

Soviet air support in the southern part of the salient was provided by the 2nd Air Army and the 17th Air Army , commanded by Lieutenant General Stepan Krasovsky and Lieutenant General Vladimir Sudets , respectively . However , the bulk of the air support was committed in support of Soviet units attacking XLVIII Panzer Corps to the west of Prokhorovka and the III Panzer Corps to the southeast , and only limited numbers of aircraft were available to support 5th Guards Tank Army 's attack .

Rotmistrov 's plans for a counterattack were threatened by events to the south . III Panzer Corps managed to cross the Northern Donets at Rzhavets on the night of 11 July , and were about 18 kilometres (11 mi) southeast of Prokhorovka , and advancing northwards . This threat jeopardised Rotmistrov 's entire plan by threatening the rear of the 5th Guards Tank Army . Early on 12 July , Vatutin ordered Rotmistrov to send reinforcements to the Soviet 7th Guards and 69th Armies facing the III Panzer Corps . He organised a task force under the command of his deputy , Major General Kuzma Trufanov , which consisted of the 26th Guards Tank Brigade from the 2nd Guards Tank Corps , the 11th and 12th Guards Mechanized Brigades from the 5th Guards Mechanized Corps , and the 53rd Guards Tank Regiment of the 5th Guards Tank Army . Other units of the Voronezh Front also joined the group on its way south . In doing so Rotmistrov committed over half of his army 's reserves before the Battle of Prokhorovka had begun .

= = Opposing forces = =

= = = Disposition of German forces = = =

The German forces involved in the Battle of Prokhorovka were from the three Waffen @-@ SS divisions of the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps : Leibstandarte , Das Reich , and Totenkopf . On the evening of 11 July , the serviceable armour strength of the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps was 294 tanks and assault guns , which included 15 Tigers . The armoured strength of Leibstandarte , Das Reich , and Totenkopf were 77 , 95 , and 122 tanks and assault guns respectively . Ten of the Tigers were to the north of the Psel River with Totenkopf , four were with Leibstandarte , and Das Reich had just one .

Leibstandarte had advanced the most deeply toward Prokhorovka and was situated in the centre of

the German position . A railway line , with a 30 @-@ feet high railbed , divided the area of Leibstandarte division north and south . The bulk of the division was positioned to the north of the rail line , including the division 's 1st SS @-@ Panzer Regiment and 2nd SS @-@ Panzergrenadier Regiment , as well as its reconnaissance , artillery and command units . To the south of the rail line was Leibstandarte 's 1st SS @-@ Panzergrenadier Regiment , along with the division 's 1st SS @-@ Panzerjäger battalion . Das Reich was positioned to the southeast of Leibstandarte , and it protected the southern flank of the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps . Totenkopf was positioned to the northwest of Leibstandarte . The division 's 3rd SS @-@ Panzer Regiment had largely crossed over the Psel in preparation for the assault . Leibstandarte placed its lightly armed 1st SS @-@ Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion in the 5 @-@ kilometre (3 @. @ 1 mi) gap between it and Totenkopf to provide some flank protection . The unit was later buttressed by the division 's four remaining Tigers , commanded by SS @-@ Second Lieutenant Michael Wittmann .

= = = Disposition of Soviet forces = = =

The main Soviet armoured formation involved in the battle was the 5th Guards Tank Army , which controlled five corps by 12 July : the 2nd Guards , 2nd , 5th Guards Mechanized , 18th and 29th Tank Corps . All together they fielded 793 tanks and 37 to 57 self @-@ propelled guns for a total of approximately 840 armoured fighting vehicles . About two @-@ thirds of these tanks were T @-@ 34s , while the remainder were T @-@ 70 light tanks , with some 31 to 35 Churchill heavy tanks as well . Not all of the 5th Guards Tank Army was present in the Prokhorovka area during the battle , as part of the formation had been sent south to check the advance of the III Panzer Corps . The Soviet armour of the 5th Guards Tank Army ? including the newly attached 2nd Guards Tank Corps and 2nd Tank Corps , as well as the 5th Guards Mechanized Corps held in reserve ? that faced the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps on 12 July was about 616 tanks and self @-@ propelled guns . In addition , five artillery regiments , one artillery brigade , and one anti @-@ aircraft artillery division were attached to the 5th Guards Tank Army for the assault .

The main attack of the 5th Guards Tank Army was conducted against Leibstandarte by its fresh 29th and 18th Tank Corps that had been brought up from the Soviet strategic reserve . These two Soviet tank formations together provided the greatest number of tanks in the attack , with the 18th Tank Corps fielding 190 tanks and self @-@ propelled guns , and the 29th Tank Corps fielding 212 tanks and self @-@ propelled guns . Infantry support to the 18th and 29th Tank Corps was provided by the 9th Guards Airborne Division . A portion of the 18th Tank Corps was directed against the eastern flank of Totenkopf 's 6th SS @-@ Panzergrenadier Regiment Eicke . On the southeastern wing of the 5th Guards Tank Army , Rotmistrov deployed the 120 surviving tanks of the 2nd Guards Tank Corps ; later on 12 July during the battle , the tank corp 's 26th Guards Tank Brigade with its estimated 40 tanks were sent south to face the III Panzer Corps . The 2nd Guards Tank Corps , supported by the remnants of the 2nd Tank Corps , was to attack Das Reich . Their infantry support was provided by the 183rd Rifle Division . The western flank of the 5th Guards Tank Army , which faced Totenkopf , was defended by the 33rd Guards Rifle Corps ' 42nd and 95th Guards Rifle Divisions , which were supported by the remnants of the 31st Tank Corps and the heavily depleted 23rd Guards Rifle Corps ' 52nd Guards Rifle Division . The forces of the 5th Guards Mechanized Corps that were not sent south were held as reserve northwest of Prokhorovka , and they numbered about 113 tanks and self @-@ propelled guns .

Vatutin directed Soviet air assets to make their primary effort in attempting to check the III Panzer Corps ' drive northward , and in supporting the attack against the XLVIII Panzer Corps . Missions were flown in support of the attack of the 5th Guards Tank Army as well , but to a limited extent . The 2nd Air Army had some 472 aircraft operational on 12 July , while the 17th Air Army had 300 operational aircraft .

= = Battle = =

At 05 : 45 on 12 July , Leibstandarte 's headquarters started receiving reports of the sound of many

tank engines as the Soviet tanks moved into their assembly areas for the attack . At around 06 : 50 , elements of Leibstandarte 's 1st SS @-@ Panzergrenadier Regiment nudged forward and drove the Soviet infantry out of Storozhevoe , while elements of the division 's 2nd SS @-@ Panzergrenadier Regiment fanned out from the October State Farm . The Soviets began a preparatory artillery barrage at around 08 : 00 , and as the last shells fell at 08 : 30 , Rotmistrov radioed the code words " Stal ! Stal ! Stal ! " (" Steel , Steel , Steel ! ") ? the order to commence the attack . With that the Soviet armour of the 5th Guards Tank Army began their advance .

= = = Ground engagement = = =

In total , about 500 tanks and self @-@ propelled guns of the 5th Guards Tank Army attacked the positions of the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps on 12 July , doing so in two massive waves , with 430 tanks in the first echelon and 70 more in the second .

Down from the slopes in front of Prokhorovka , the massed Soviet armour charged with five tank brigades of the 18th and 29th Tank Corps , firing as they came at Leibstandarte 's positions . As the Soviet tanks rolled down the slopes , they carried the men of the 9th Guards Airborne Division on their hulls . The troops of Leibstandarte were not slated to go into action until later in the day . Exhausted from the previous week 's fighting , many were just starting their day at the outset of the attack and were largely taken by surprise . As the Soviet armour appeared , German outposts all across the corp 's frontage began firing purple warning flares signaling a tank attack . Obersturmbannführer Rudolf von Ribbentrop , commander of a panzer company under the 1st SS @-@ Panzer Regiment , stated that he knew at once a major attack was underway . He ordered his company of seven Panzer IVs to follow him over a bridge across an anti @-@ tank ditch . Crossing the bridge they fanned out on the lower slope of Hill 252 @. @ 2 . On the crest of the hill , Sturmbannführer Joachim Peiper 's 3rd Panzergrenadier Battalion of the 2nd SS @-@ Panzergrenadier Regiment were being overrun . As Ribbentrop 's tanks spread out , he and the 1st SS @-@ Panzer Regiment were suddenly confronted by Soviet tanks of the 29th Tank Corp 's 31st and 32nd Tank Brigades : " About 150 ? 200 meters in front of me appeared fifteen , then thirty , then forty tanks . Finally there were too many of them to count . " The Soviet armour , firing on the move , charged down the western slopes of Hill 252 @. @ 2 into the panzer company , and a hotly contested tank battle ensued . Four of the Panzer IVs under Ribbentrop were destroyed by the time their position was overrun . The three surviving tanks rode along with the advancing Soviet armour unnoticed , and they reported that they destroyed 14 Soviet tanks from close range . Rotmistrov 's tactic to close at high speed disrupted the control and co @-@ ordination of the Soviet tank formations and also greatly reduced their accuracy . In a three @-@ hour battle , the 1st SS @-@ Panzer Regiment engaged the attacking Soviet tanks and repulsed them , reporting that they destroyed about 62 Soviet tanks . Later that afternoon , tanks from the 31st Tank Brigade and the 53rd Motorized Brigade overran elements of the 1st SS @-@ Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion and reached Komsomolets State Farm , threatening Leibstandarte 's lines of communication and the division command post , located at Hill 241 @. @ 6 . The Soviet tanks attacked the division 's 1st SS @-@ Panzer Artillery Regiment , killing a number of the crews before they themselves were destroyed by direct fire and anti @-@ tank teams .

Wittman 's group of four Tigers supported the reconnaissance group in its effort to protect Leibstandarte 's left flank , and faced the 18th Tank Corps ' advancing 181st Tank Brigade . In a three @-@ hour battle the Tigers engaged the Soviet tanks at ranges from 1000 meters down to point @-@ blank , inflicting heavy losses on the Soviet tankers and successfully repelling their attack . Later , elements of the 170th Tank Brigade engaged the 1st SS @-@ Panzer Regiment , which was already fighting the 31st and 32nd Tank Brigades . Despite losing its commander and about 30 tanks in the fight , by early afternoon the 170th Tank Brigade had forced the 1st SS @-@ Panzer Regiment back to the October State Farm and reached the position of the 1st SS @-@ Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion . At around 18 : 00 , the 170th and 181st Tank Brigades penetrated the German line connecting Totenkopf and Leibstandarte . Assault guns and panzers supporting Totenkopf 's Eicke regiment repelled the Soviet attack and re @-@ established the line ,

forcing the Soviet tanks to withdraw to the village of Andreevka .

The advance of Soviet armour down Hill 252 @. @ 2 was disrupted abruptly when they reached the anti @-@ tank ditch at the base of the hill . A number of tanks crashed into the 15 @-@ foot deep ditch while others moved along the edge looking for a way to cross . Heavy fire was exchanged between the Soviet tanks and two companies of a panzergrenadier battalion on the opposite side of the ditch . Peiper 's surviving panzergrenadiers engaged the Soviet infantry and attacked the Soviet tanks with magnetic anti @-@ tank grenades . Twenty of his battalion 's half @-@ tracks were lost in the fighting , some destroyed in ramming the much heavier Soviet tanks in an effort to stop them . Eventually , due to heavy Soviet pressure and dangerously exposed flanks , Leibstandarte tactically withdrew from the October State Farm and established firmer defensive lines 1 kilometre (0 @. @ 62 mi) to the south .

= = = Air combat = = =

The 2nd and 17th Air Armies flew 893 sorties compared to the VIII Fliegerkorps 's 654 sorties over the southern part of the salient . Of note , most of the Soviet sorties flown that day were flown against the XLVIII Panzer Corps to the west and the III Panzer Corps to the south . Low clouds in the morning and thunderstorms in the afternoon inhibited air operations in Prokhorovka for both sides . Over the Prokhorovka battlefield the Luftwaffe gained control of the air . Formations of Stukas , including a small number of G @-@ 2s experimentally equipped with 3 @. @ 7 @-@ centimetre (1 @. @ 5 in) BK 37 cannon that were commanded by Staffelkapitän Hans @-@ Ulrich Rudel , attacked the Soviet formations , along with Fw 190 fighter @-@ bombers and Hs 129 ground @-@ attack aircraft equipped with 3 @-@ centimetre (1 @. @ 2 in) anti @-@ tank cannon . The 31st Tank Brigade reported : " We suffered heavy losses in tanks through enemy artillery and aircraft . At 10 : 30 our tanks reached the Komsomolets State Farm , but due to continuous air attacks , they were unable to advance any further and shifted to the defence . " The tank brigade also reported : " our own air cover was fully absent until 13 : 00 . " The 5th Guards Tank Army reported : " the enemy 's aircraft literally hung above our combat formations throughout the entire battle , while our own aircraft , and particularly the fighter aviation , was totally insufficient . "

= = = Result of the engagement = = =

By the end of the day , Leibstandarte still held Hill 252 @. @ 2 , but had been exhausted by the effort of turning back five tank brigades . To its left , Totenkopf had succeeded in capturing Hill 226 @. @ 6 and had advanced along the northern bank of the Psel River to reach the Karteshevka ? Prokhorovka road , 8 kilometres (5 @. @ 0 mi) northwest of Prokhorovka . It was in position to outflank the Soviet forces at Prokhorovka , but was under pressure from Soviet attacks and its hold on the forward ground was tenuous . Das Reich had been unable to push forward at all . Forced onto the defensive by the attacks of the 2nd Guards and 2nd Tank Corps , Das Reich was unable to conduct its planned offensive maneuvers .

On the Soviet side , all the tank units under Rotmistrov 's 5th Guards Tank Army involved in the battle on 12 July suffered heavy losses . Rotmistrov later wrote that the 29th Tank Corps lost 60 percent of its armour and the 18th Tank Corps lost 30 percent on 12 July . A Soviet General Staff report recorded : " Thus on 12 July , the 5th Guards Tank Army failed to accomplish its assigned mission . As a result of the frontal attack , the army 's corps fought heavy battles against large enemy tank forces during which they were forced to assume defence . " Rotmistrov was forced to shift the 18th and 29th Tank Corps over to defence and reinforce them with infantry . They dug more trenches , dug in some of their tanks , laid new minefields , prepared anti @-@ tank strong points and massed artilleries . The 10th Guards Mechanized and 24th Guards Tank Brigades of the 5th Guards Mechanized Corps made preparations to push back Totenkopf the next morning . On the evening of 12 July , Stalin dispatched Zhukov to Vatutin 's headquarters as Stavka representative , in order to coordinate the Voronezh and Steppe Fronts ' operations .

= = Following the main engagement = =

On the night of 12 July , Vatutin ordered Soviet forces to prevent any further German advance on Prokhorovka , destroy German forces that had advanced along the northern bank of the Psel River , and stop the III Panzer Corps from making further progress . Orders issued by the Germans for 13 July instructed Totenkopf to consolidate its gains of the previous day and then attack into the flank and rear of the Soviet forces around Prokhorovka . Leibstandarte was to strengthen its front line and co @-@ ordinate its attack on Prokhorovka from the south with Totenkopf 's attack from the northwest . Das Reich was to consolidate and strengthen its front line and prepare for an offensive operation to link up with the III Panzer Corps .

= = = Further fighting around Prokhorovka = = =

On the morning of 13 July , the 10th Guards Mechanized and 24th Guards Tank Brigades , in cooperation with the 95th and 52nd Guards Rifle Corps , launched attacks against Totenkopf . These Soviet attacks preoccupied Totenkopf and prevented it from attacking south toward Prokhorovka . Around noon , Leibstandarte 's 1st SS @-@ Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion was ordered to attack northward toward the Psel River to consolidate its front line with Totenkopf , while the division 's panzer units were to attack toward Soviet positions northeast of the October State Farm toward Prokhorovka . The 1st SS @-@ Panzer Reconnaissance Battalion attacked the defensive positions held by the 42nd Guards Rifle Division and the remaining armour of the 18th Tank Corps , while the panzer units attacked the defences of 9th Guards Airborne Division and the 29th Tank Corps . These German attacks were repelled by massive anti @-@ tank artillery fire . The 29th Tank Corps followed up with a counterattack and penetrated German lines , reaching Komsomolets State Farm before being beaten back by direct fire from German artillery . That afternoon , Totenkopf was ordered to abandon their positions northwest of Prokhorovka and return to more defensible positions around Hill 226 @.@ 6 . Soviet attempts to sever the narrow salient were unsuccessful , and Totenkopf completed its withdrawal by nightfall .

= = = German decision = = =

On 13 July Hitler summoned Manstein and the commander of Army Group Center Field Marshal Günther von Kluge to his headquarters , the Wolfsschanze in East Prussia . The Allied invasion of Sicily on the night of 9 ? 10 July , combined with the Soviet counteroffensive of Operation Kutuzov against the flank and rear of General Walter Model 's 9th Army in the northern side of the Kursk salient on 12 July , and the violent attacks by strong Soviet forces at Prokhorovka the same day had caused Hitler to stop the offensive and shift forces to the Mediterranean theatre . He ordered his generals to terminate Operation Citadel .

Kluge welcomed the decision , as he was already in the process of withdrawing units of the 9th Army from the northern side of the Kursk salient to deal with Soviet attacks on his flank . But Manstein was greatly disappointed . He argued that his forces were now on the verge of achieving a major breakthrough in the southern side of the salient . As he saw it , with his III Panzer Corps about to link up with the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps at Prokhorovka , and with the XXIV Panzer Corps available as his operational reserve , they would be halting the offensive just at the moment when victory was in hand . With an eye toward the west , Hitler was unwilling to continue the offensive . Manstein persisted , proposing that his forces should at least destroy the Soviet reserves in the southern Kursk salient before Citadel was finally terminated , so the Soviet fighting capacity in the sector would be depleted for the rest of the summer . Hitler agreed to continue offensive operations in the southern salient until Manstein 's goal was achieved .

= = = Operation Roland = = =

Manstein hastily put together the plans for Operation Roland , realizing that he only had a few days

to conduct the operation before he lost the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps . The plan called for Das Reich to attack east and south and link up with III Panzer Corps , which would attack to the northwest . Totenkopf and Leibstandarte were to anchor the western and northern flanks of Das Reich , respectively . Once the link was achieved and the Soviet forces encircled , the Soviet defence would be crippled and Prokhorovka would likely fall shortly thereafter to the combined forces of the two panzer corps . The goal of the operation was to destroy the Soviet armoured reserves massed in the southern sector of the Kursk salient , and thereby check Soviet offensive capacity for the rest of the summer .

The orders for Operation Roland were issued in the closing hours of 13 July 1943 . However , after Hitler 's meeting with Manstein , Hitler countermanded the XXIV Panzer Corps ' deployment to the Kursk salient , sending them on 14 July to support the 1st Panzer Army to the south . The assault began at 04 : 00 on 14 July . Following a brief artillery barrage , the 4th SS @-@ Panzergrenadier Regiment Der Führer of Das Reich struck out for the high ground south @-@ west of Pavorot , evicting the remnants of the 2nd Guards Tank Corps from the village of Belenikhino following violent house @-@ to @-@ house and hand @-@ to @-@ hand fighting . Das Reich 's 2nd SS @-@ Panzer Regiment fought off a series of counterattacks and forced the Soviets to withdraw eastward to a new line . Zhukov ordered the 10th Guards Mechanized Brigade of the 5th Guards Mechanized Corps to reinforce the line . The 7th Panzer Division of the III Panzer Corps made contact with Das Reich , but Trufanov , commanding the Soviet forces in the gap , was aware of the threat and conducted a fighting withdrawal . The link @-@ up failed to trap the Soviet forces , though they abandoned a substantial number of their anti @-@ tank guns . Operation Roland failed to produce a decisive result for the Germans , and Totenkopf began withdrawing from its positions north of the Psel , following orders issued late on 15 July , as the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps assumed a defensive stance along its entire front .

On 17 July the Soviet Southwestern and Southern Fronts launched a major offensive across the Mius and Donets Rivers against the southern wing of Army Group South , pressing upon the 6th and 1st Panzer Armies . In the early afternoon of 17 July , Operation Roland was terminated with an order for the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps to begin withdrawing from the Prokhorovka sector back to Belgorod . The 4th Panzer Army and Army Detachment Kempf anticipated the order and began executing it as early as the evening of 16 July . Leibstandarte 's tanks were distributed between Das Reich and Totenkopf , and the division was hastily redeployed to Italy , while Das Reich and Totenkopf were dispatched south to meet the new Soviet offensives .

= = Casualties and losses = =

Losses are difficult to establish for either combatant . Tank losses attributed to the Germans vary , in part due to the Wehrmacht 's methodology for counting and reporting equipment losses . Only equipment that could not be repaired or that had to be abandoned were counted as losses , but damaged equipment that could be recovered and repaired were simply listed as such . Likewise , reliable figures for tank and personnel casualties for the Soviets in the Battle of Prokhorovka are difficult to establish .

= = = German = = =

The II SS @-@ Panzer Corps reported 842 men killed , wounded , or missing for 12 July . Since the Germans controlled the Prokhorovka battlefield until 17 July , they were able to recover most of their disabled armoured vehicles . German historian Karl Frieser attributed three to five permanent tank losses to the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps for 12 July , while a study by the US Army 's Center for Strategy and Force Evaluation attributed six permanent tank losses , not counting Panzer I and Panzer II light tanks or German assault guns .

Archival data of the II SS @-@ Panzer Corps shows that the corps had 294 operable tanks and assault guns on the evening of 11 July , and 251 on the evening of 13 July . Allowing for the possibility that some repaired tanks were returned to service on 13 July , these numbers indicate

that at least 43 tanks and assault guns became inoperable during the battle of Prokhorovka , which includes all ten Tigers belonging to Totenkopf and one belonging to Leibstandarte . However , all of the inoperable Tiger tanks were repairable , and none were write off . An estimated total of between 60 and 80 tanks and assault guns of the II SS Panzer Corps were damaged or destroyed in combat on 12 July . By the end of 16 July , the II SS Panzer Corps had 292 serviceable tanks and assault guns , almost the same number it had at the beginning of the battle on 12 July . On 12 July , Schlachtgeschwader 1 of the VIII Fliegerkorps and its attached squadron of Stukas reported eleven aircraft damaged , of which six were total write off , all by Soviet anti aircraft artillery .

== Soviet ==

A document prepared on 17 July 1943 by the 5th Guards Tank Army headquarters summarised the combat losses incurred by the formation from 12 to 16 July inclusive for all of its five corps , as well as smaller units directly subordinated to the army headquarters . The document reported the following irrecoverable losses : 222 T 34s , 89 T 70s , 12 Churchill tanks , 8 SU 122s , 3 SU 76s , and 240 support vehicles . The document reported damaged vehicles still under repair as 143 T 34s , 56 T 70s , 7 Churchill tanks , 3 SU 122s , and 3 SU 76s , with no figures for support vehicles . The document reported personnel casualties as 2 , 940 killed in action , 3 , 510 wounded in action , and 1 , 157 missing in action . This totals 334 irrevocable losses in tanks and self propelled guns , with another 212 tanks and self propelled guns under repair , and 7 , 607 casualties .

Soviet personnel losses at Prokhorovka for 12 July were estimated by the historian Christer Bergström to have been as high as 5 , 500 men . For equipment damaged or destroyed , David Glantz and Jonathan House estimate that the whole 5th Guards Tank Army lost at least 400 tanks in its attacks on 12 July . The Soviet historians Grigoriy Koltunov and Boris Soloviev estimate about 300 tanks and self propelled guns of 5th Guards Tank Army were damaged or destroyed on 12 July . The study by the US Army 's Center for Strategy and Force Evaluation reports that the 2nd Guards , 18th and 29th Tanks Corps altogether permanently lost 144 tanks on 12 July , not including self propelled guns . George Nipe estimates that between 600 and 650 tanks of the 5th Guards Tank Army were damaged or destroyed while fighting the II SS Panzer Corps on 12 July .

== Outcome ==

Debate exists over the significance and outcome of the battle . The Germans destroyed many Soviet tanks and temporarily degraded the striking power of the 5th Guards Tank Army , but they were unable to take Prokhorovka or break through into open ground . For the Soviets , the massive armoured attack of 12 July failed to destroy the II SS Panzer Corps or throw it onto the defensive , but succeeded in exhausting the Germans and eventually contributed to checking their advance . Thus , neither the 5th Guards Tank Army nor the II SS Panzer Corps accomplished their objectives for the day . While the battle is generally considered a tactical success for the Germans due to the high numbers of Soviet tanks destroyed , ultimately there was no German breakthrough at Prokhorovka , and with the end of Operation Citadel the strategic initiative permanently swung over to the Red Army .