

= Operation Winter Storm =

Operation Winter Storm ( German : Unternehmen Wintergewitter ) was a German offensive in World War II in which the German 4th Panzer Army unsuccessfully attempted to break the Soviet encirclement of the German 6th Army during the Battle of Stalingrad .

In late November 1942 , the Red Army completed Operation Uranus , encircling some 300 @, @ 000 Axis personnel in and around the city of Stalingrad . German forces within the Stalingrad pocket and directly outside were reorganized under Army Group Don , under the command of Generalfeldmarschall Erich von Manstein . Meanwhile , the Red Army continued to allocate as many resources as possible to the eventual launch of the planned Operation Saturn , which aimed to isolate Army Group A from the rest of the German Army . To remedy the situation , the Luftwaffe attempted to supply German forces in Stalingrad through an air bridge . When the Luftwaffe proved incapable of carrying out its mission and it became obvious that a successful breakout could occur only if launched as early as possible , Manstein decided on a relief effort .

Originally , Manstein was promised four panzer divisions . Due to German reluctance to weaken certain sectors by redeploying German units , the task of opening a corridor to the German 6th Army fell to the 4th Panzer Army . The German force was pitted against several Soviet armies tasked with the destruction of the encircled German forces and their offensive around the lower Chir River .

The German offensive caught the Red Army by surprise and made large gains on the first day . The spearhead forces enjoyed air support and were able to defeat counterattacks by Soviet troops . By 13 December , Soviet resistance slowed the German advance considerably . Although German forces took the area surrounding Verkhne @-@ Kumskiy , the Red Army launched Operation Little Saturn on 16 December . Operation Little Saturn defeated the Italian 8th Army on Army Group Don 's left flank , threatening the survival of Manstein 's entire group of forces . As resistance and casualties increased , Manstein appealed to Hitler and to the commander of the German 6th Army , General Friedrich Paulus , to allow the 6th Army to break out of Stalingrad ; both refused . The 4th Panzer Army continued its attempt to open a corridor to the 6th Army on 18 ? 19 December , but was unable to do so without the aid of forces inside the Stalingrad pocket . Manstein was forced to call off the assault on 23 December and by Christmas Eve the 4th Panzer Army began to withdraw to its starting position . Due to the failure of the 6th Army to breakout and the attempt to break the Soviet encirclement , the Red Army was able to continue the destruction of German forces in Stalingrad .

= = Background = =

On 23 November 1942 , the Red Army closed its encirclement of Axis forces in Stalingrad . Nearly 300 @, @ 000 German and Romanian soldiers , as well as Russian volunteers for the Wehrmacht , were trapped in and around the city of Stalingrad by roughly 1 @. @ 1 million Soviet personnel . Amidst the impending disaster , German chancellor Adolf Hitler appointed Generalfeldmarschall ( Field Marshal ) Erich von Manstein as commander of the newly created Army Group Don . Composed of the German 4th Panzer and 6th Armies , as well as the Third and Fourth Romanian Armies , Manstein 's new army group was situated between German Army Groups A and B. Instead of attempting an immediate breakout , German high command decided that the trapped forces would remain in Stalingrad in a bid to hold out . The encircled German forces were to be resupplied by air , requiring roughly 680 t ( 750 short tons ) of supplies per day . However , the assembled fleet of 500 transport aircraft were insufficient for the task . Many of the aircraft were hardly serviceable in the rough Soviet winter ; in early December , more German cargo planes were destroyed in accidents than by Soviet fighter aircraft . The German 6th Army , for example , was getting less than 20 % of its daily needs . Furthermore , the Germans were still threatened by Soviet forces which still held portions of the Volga River 's west bank in Stalingrad .

Given the unexpected size of German forces closed off in Stalingrad , on 23 November Stavka ( Soviet Armed Forces High Command ) decided to strengthen the outer encirclement preparing to destroy Axis forces in and around the city . On 24 November , several Soviet formations began to

entrench themselves to defend against possible German incursions originating from the West . The Soviets also reinforced the encircling forces in order to prevent a successful breakout operation by the German 6th Army and other Axis units . However , this tied down over ½ of the Red Army 's strength in the area . Planning for Operation Saturn began on 25 November , aiming for the destruction of the Italian 8th Army and the severing of communications between German forces west of the Don River and those operating in the Caucasus . Meanwhile , planning also began for Operation Koltso ( Ring ) , which aimed at reducing German forces in the Stalingrad pocket .

As Operation Uranus concluded , German forces inside the encirclement were too weak to attempt a breakout on their own . Half of their remaining armor , for example , had been lost during the defensive fighting , and there was a severe lack of fuel and ammunition for the surviving vehicles , given that the Luftwaffe was not able to provide adequate aerial resupply . Feldmarschall von Manstein proposed a counterstrike to break the Soviet encirclement of Stalingrad , codenamed Operation Winter Storm ( German : Wintergewitter ) . Manstein believed that " due to the inability of the Luftwaffe to supply the Stalingrad pocket " it was becoming more important to relieve them " at the earliest possible date " . On 28 November , Manstein sent Hitler a detailed report on Army Group Don 's situation , including the strength of the German 6th Army and an assessment on the available ammunition for German artillery inside the city . The dire strategic situation made Manstein doubtful on whether or not the relief operation could afford to wait to receive all units earmarked for the offensive .

Stavka postponed Operation Saturn until 16 December , as Soviet forces struggled to clear German defenders from the lower Chir River . The Red Army 's offensive in the area commenced on 30 November , involving around 500,000 soldiers , which forced Manstein to use the 48th Panzer Corps in an attempt to hold the area . In response , the 5th Tank Army was reinforced by the newly created 5th Shock Army , drawn from existing formations of the South Western and Stalingrad Fronts ; the 5th Tank Army totaled nearly 71,000 men , 252 tanks and 814 artillery guns . The Soviet offensive succeeded in tying down the 48th Panzer Corps , originally chosen to lead one of the main attacks on the Soviet encirclement . The Soviets were forewarned of the impending German assault when they discovered the German 6th Panzer Division unloading at the town of Morozovsk , and as a result , held back several armies from the attack on the lower Chir River to prepare for a possible breakout attempt by German forces inside Stalingrad .

= = Comparison of forces = =

= = = Participating German forces = = =

The relief operation was originally scheduled to include the LVII Panzer Corps of the 4th Panzer Army , under the command of General Friedrich Kirchner , including the 6th and 23rd Panzer Divisions , and Army Detachment Hollidt , consisting of three infantry divisions and two armored divisions ( 11th and 22nd Panzer Divisions ) . In total , it was expected that four panzer divisions , four infantry divisions and three Luftwaffe Field Divisions were to take part in Operation Winter Storm . They would be tasked with temporarily opening a passage to the 6th Army . The Luftwaffe field divisions ? formed of non combat soldiers , headquarters staffs and unit less Luftwaffe and Heer personnel ? were poorly trained and lacked seasoned officers and enlisted soldiers , as well as sufficient anti tank and artillery guns . Many of the personnel promised for the relief effort never arrived , partly due to the poor transportation service to the front , while some units originally chosen to be transferred under the command of Army Group Don were retained by their original commands . Other units in Army Group Don were in no shape to conduct offensive operations , due to losses sustained in the past month of combat , while many new formations which had been promised did not arrive on time .

On the other hand , the 11th Panzer Division was one of the most complete German armored divisions on the Eastern Front since it had just been transferred out of the German Army 's reserve . The 6th Panzer Division was also complete because it had been transferred to Manstein 's control

from Western Europe . However , the usefulness of the 11th Panzer Division was compromised when the Soviets launched their offensive against forces in the lower Chir River area , as this tied Army Detachment Hollidt down on the defensive . Because of this , and because Manstein believed that a thrust originating from the position of Army Detachment Hollidt would be too obvious , the German field marshal decided to use the 4th Panzer Army and the XLVIII Panzer Corps as the main components of the relief operation . However , despite attempts by the Germans to build strength for the offensive , their position along the lower Chir River became tenuous ; the Soviet breakthrough was only blunted by the arrival of the 11th Panzer Division , which was able to destroy the bulk of two Soviet tank brigades . Consequently , the XLVIII Panzer Corps became embroiled in the defensive battles for the Chir River , as the Soviets pushed in an attempt to overrun the airfield at Tatsinskaya ( being used to resupply German forces in Stalingrad by air ) .

Although the LVII Panzer Corps was reluctantly released to Army Group Don , by Army Group A , the 17th Panzer Division was ordered back to its original area of concentration , and did not prepare to go back to Army Group Don until 10 days after it had been asked for . In light of the troubles in building up sufficient forces , and seeing that the Soviets were concentrating more mechanization on the Chir River , Manstein decided to launch Operation Winter Storm using the 4th Panzer Army . Manstein hoped that the 6th Army would launch an offensive of its own , from the opposite side , upon the receipt of the code signal Thunderclap . Manstein was gambling on Hitler accepting that the only plausible method to avoid the demise of the 6th Army was allowing it to break out , and assumed that General Paulus would agree to order his forces to escape the Stalingrad pocket . On 10 December , Manstein communicated to Paulus that the relief operation would commence in 24 hours .

= = = Participating Soviet forces = = =

For the purpose of Operation Uranus , Soviet Marshal Georgy Zhukov deployed eleven Soviet armies . In an effort to bolster the offensive capabilities of the Stalingrad Front , over 420 tanks , 111 @, @ 000 soldiers and 556 artillery guns were shipped over the Volga River in a period of three weeks . The Red Army and Red Air Force were able to amass over one million soldiers , 13 @, @ 500 artillery guns , 890 tanks and 1 @, @ 100 combat aircraft , organized into 66 rifle divisions , five tank corps , 14 tank brigades , a single mechanized brigade , a cavalry corps , and 127 artillery and mortar regiments . As the encirclement closed and the Soviets continued with secondary operations , the 51st Army was positioned on the edge of the outer encirclement with 34 @, @ 000 men and 77 tanks . South of them was the 28th Army , with 44 @, @ 000 soldiers , 40 tanks and 707 artillery guns and mortars . Concurrently , the Red Army began building its strength for Operation Saturn , in which it would aim to isolate and destroy German Army Group A in the Caucasus .

= = German offensive = =

On 12 December 1942 , Hoth 's Fourth Panzer Army 's LVII Panzer Corps began its north @-@ eastward drive toward German forces trapped in the Stalingrad pocket . The 6th and 23rd Panzer Divisions made large gains , surprising the Red Army and threatening the rear of the Soviet 51st Army . The German drive was due to be spearheaded by the 503rd heavy tank battalion ( Germany ) of Tiger I heavy tanks , but the unit did not reach the Don front until 21 December . Initial progress of the offensive was rapid . Some units were able to travel up to 50 km ( 31 mi ) in the first day . The Germans were aided by the element of surprise , as Stavka had not expected the German offensive to begin so soon , while General Vasilevsky was unable to detach the 2nd Guards Army to use it as a blocking force against Manstein 's spearheads . The initial advance had been so quick that the 6th Panzer Division was able to capture Soviet artillery equipment intact . Soviet resistance decreased noticeably after the 6th and 23rd Panzer Divisions had overrun the main body of Russian infantry . In fact , the 302nd Rifle Division of the 51st Army was overrun by the end of 12 December . Although Soviet infantry quickly reinforced villages in the path of the German drive , the Red Army 's cavalry in the area was exhausted from weeks of combat and was incapable of putting up serious

resistance against the German offensive . Despite early gains , the LVII Panzer Corps was unable to achieve decisive results . There were also reports of heavy pressure building against the 23rd Panzer Division , despite headway made on the first day of the German offensive .

On 13 December , the 6th Panzer Division made contact with the Soviet 5th Tank Army , which was engaged in the reduction of German defenses around the Chir River . German forces were able to engage and defeat Soviet armor , as the former forced the crossing of the Alksay River . At this point , a major armored battle began around the village of Verkhne @-@ Kumskiy . Although they sustained heavy losses , the Soviet forces were able to push German forces back to the banks of the Alksay River by the end of the day , while failing to retake the town . However , the losses sustained by the Red Army in the vicinity of Verkhne @-@ Kumskiy allowed the 6th Panzer Division to enjoy a brief superiority in tank numbers thereafter . Fighting for Verkhne @-@ Kumskiy continued for three days , as the Red Army launched a series of counterattacks against the German bridgeheads across the Alksay River and German defenders in the town . German defenders were able to pin Soviet tanks in Verkhne @-@ Kumskiy and destroy them using well emplaced anti @-@ tank artillery guns . With heavy support from the Luftwaffe , the Germans were able to achieve a local success and began to push toward the Myshkova river . The 6th Panzer Division took heavy losses during its drive , and took a brief respite after the battle to recondition . Minor damage to surviving tanks was repaired and the majority of the tanks incapacitated during the fighting at Verkhne @-@ Kumskiy were brought back to serviceable conditions .

= = = Soviet response : 13 ? 18 December = = =

The Fourth Panzer Army 's offensive forced Stavka to recalculate its intentions for Operation Saturn , and on 13 December Stalin and Stavka authorized the redeployment of the 2nd Guards Army from the Don Front to the Stalingrad Front , where it would be ready to be used against German forces on 15 December . This army had a strength of roughly 90 @,@ 000 soldiers , organized into three guards rifle corps ( the 1st , 13th and 2nd ) . Operation Saturn was redesigned into Operation Little Saturn , which limited the scope of the attack to breaking through the Italian 8th Army and then engaging Army Group Don in the rear . The offensive was also changed from a southward push to a drive in a southeastern direction , and the start date was pushed back to 16 December . In the meantime , the 4th Mechanized and 13th Tank Corps continued to counterattack against German forces in the vicinity of the Alksay River , trying to delay their advance in anticipation of the arrival of the 2nd Guards Army .

The Soviet 1st and 3rd Guard Armies , in conjunction with the Soviet 6th Army , launched Operation Little Saturn on 16 December . Despite early troubles due to stubborn resistance from Italian troops , the Red Army was able to partially overrun the Italian 8th Army by 18 December . The breakthrough -even if small and quickly contained- proved a possible threat to Army Group Don 's left flank , while the city of Rostov was threatened by the 3rd Guards Army . This , and mainly heavy losses sustained by the German armor divisions forcing their way to the Myshkova river , forced Manstein to reconsider continuing the offensive . The German field marshal decided that he could not defend his left flank while also sustaining the attempt to relieve the 6th Army . Although the 6th Panzer Division was able to cross the Myshkova River by the night of 19 December , the LVII Panzer Corps had still not made major advances against increased Soviet opposition , despite the arrival of the 17th Panzer Division ; in fact , it seemed as if the corps would have to go on the defensive . Furthermore , the Soviet raid on Tatsinskaya managed to destroy the airfield and several dozen aircraft being used by the Luftwaffe to resupply forces inside the Stalingrad pocket , forcing Manstein to order the XLVIII Panzer Corps on the defensive , instead of reserving it to bolster his forces directed toward the breakthrough to Stalingrad . To make matters worse for the Germans , on 18 December Hitler refused to allow the German 6th Army to begin a breakout operation towards the rest of Army Group Don , despite pleas from Manstein .

= = = Collapse : 19 ? 23 December = = =

On 19 December , Manstein sent his chief intelligence officer ? Major Eismann ? into Stalingrad to give General Paulus an accurate image of the strategic situation which had befallen Army Group Don . Paulus was not impressed , although he agreed that the best option continued to be an attempted breakout as early as possible . The 6th Army 's Chief of Staff ? Major General Arthur Schmidt ? argued that a breakout was unfeasible and instead suggested that Army Group Don take steps to better supply entrapped Axis forces by air . Despite agreeing with Eismann earlier , Paulus then decided that a breakout was out of the question given the 6th Army 's incapability to conduct it and Hitler 's express orders against it . Although that day the LVII Panzer Corps managed to breakthrough the Alksay River and drive within 48 km ( 30 mi ) of the southern edge of the 6th Army 's front , the entrapped German forces made no attempt to link up with the relieving forces . Adam makes the point the 6th Army tanks only had fuel to go 30 km , after which they would need fuel and ammunition flown in to go any further . Thereafter , the 6th Army simply did not have the strength to attempt a breakout , operating less than 70 serviceable tanks , with limited supplies , while its infantry were in no condition to attempt an attack in the blizzard which had developed over the past few days .

Manstein ordered the 6th Panzer Division to end its offensive and redeploy to the southern Chir River , to bolster German defenses there against the continuing Soviet offensive , on 23 December . By 24 December , the Fourth Panzer Army was in full retreat , returning to its starting position . The inability to breakthrough to the 6th Army , and the latter formation 's refusal to attempt a breakout , caused Operation Winter Storm to collapse on 24 December , as Army Group Don returned to the defensive .

= = Aftermath = =

With the German relief effort defeated , Stavka was free to concentrate on the destruction of Axis forces in the Stalingrad pocket and the westward expansion of the Red Army 's Winter offensive . The Red Army was able to bring to bear almost 150 @, @ 000 personnel and 630 tanks against the retreating 4th Panzer Army and although Volsky 's 4th Mechanized Corps ( renamed 3rd Guard Mechanized Corps on 18 December 1942 ) was withdrawn to be refitted , the 51st Army , the 1st Guards Rifle and 7th Tank Corps struck at German units withdrawing between the Mushkova and Aksai Rivers . In three days , the attacking Soviet units broke through the Romanian positions guarding the LVII Panzer Corps ' flank and threatened the 4th Panzer Army from the south , forcing the Germans to continue withdrawing to the southwest . All the while , the XLVIII Panzer Corps ? led mainly by the 11th Panzer Division ? strove to maintain its position along the Chir River . Despite success , the XLVIII Panzer Corps was rushed to the defense of Rostov as a Soviet breakthrough seemed imminent after the partial collapse of the Italian 8th Army . As the Red Army pursued the 4th Panzer Army toward the Aksai River and broke through the German defense on the banks of the Chir River , it also began to prepare for Operation Ring ? the reduction of the forces in Stalingrad .

German forces in Stalingrad soon began to run out of supplies , some soldiers were forced to live on horse meat . By the end of 1942 , the distance between the German 6th Army and forces outside of the encirclement was over 65 km ( 40 mi ) , and most of the German formations in the area were extremely weak . Hitler 's insistence in holding Stalingrad to the last risked the existence of the 6th Army . The end of the German offensive also allowed the Red Army to continue in its efforts to cut @-@ off German forces in the Caucasus , which would begin in the middle of January . On the other hand , the encirclement of the 6th Army and the operations to destroy it tied down a considerable number of Soviet troops , which affected Soviet operations on other sectors .