

Freeing the Ukraine – OFFENSIVE

On March 4th, 1944, the First Ukrainian Front under the direct command of G. Zhukov commenced offensive operations towards Proskurov as the opening move to the next in the long series of Soviet offensives in the south bridging the years 1943/1944. German intelligence and Erich von Manstein had been fooled into thinking the Soviet point of main effort would be further south, nearer the coast, as it had been previously. As was somewhat usual for the war in Russia, the Germans had completely missed the movement of three entire tank armies and an infantry *army group* northward into the Proskurov area during the weeks preceding the attack (quite a feat of “maskirovka” indeed). However, even German intelligence eventually noticed that 600,000 men were missing in the south and alerted von Manstein to the northward movement. He immediately gave orders for his most powerful mobile striking force, 1st Panzer Army, to move north to counter any Soviet move. Unfortunately, the Soviets launched their offensive (the first of four in a staggered series along the entire line) before the 48th Panzer Corps lead elements had even entered the area. The German frontline infantry units were shattered by the Soviet attack and Russian formations began pushing west on the first day of the attack.

Zhukov, who had taken over from Vatutin after he was injured in the leg by Ukrainian partisans during the move northward, committed his first two tank armies almost immediately. As they neared Proskurov three days later, (March 7th) the German 3rd and 48th Panzer Corps counterattacked these units. The Germans were able to halt the Soviet advance, on this axis, in very heavy fighting. However, in less than two weeks, the Soviets had regrouped and again smashed through this new line on March 21st. Soviet forces sped deep into the German rear, often advancing at night with headlights on and sirens wailing. In three days (by March 24th) they had reached and crossed the Dnestr river, moving to cut the rail link to First Panzer Army. By March 27th, the entire First Panzer Army was encircled and cut off (21 divisions). Manstein ordered First Panzer Army to abandon its positions and fight its way west on March 25th, and, in conjunction with a counterattack by 2nd SS Panzer Corps, First Panzer Army was able to break out to the west in the first week in April, much reduced in strength.

The scenario presented here compresses in time and space the opening assault and drive on Proskurov by the Russians, and the movement of 48th Panzer Corps to halt them. While 48th Panzer Corps at this time consisted of 17th and 7th Panzer Divisions, the Artillery Division, and the Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, the two full strength panzer divisions and artillery units used in the scenario accurately represent the total aggregate fire power of the real 48th Panzer Corps which in reality was under strength. A full strength German infantry division represents the German units holding the front line in the assault sector. Interestingly, and as was their custom, the Soviets had ended their previous offensive by grabbing bridgeheads across the major river in the area (something the Soviets regularly did, the Western allies did sporadically, and the Germans rarely did).

Similarly, Soviet forces are represented here by elements of two tank armies only. The line rifle formations that would have opened the attack have been removed (in part to

make the game more playable and in part to represent Zhukov's early commitment of his mobile forces to the breakthrough). Although the Germans have blown the river crossings, the Soviets have constructed several heavy tank-capable pontoon bridges and identified areas for several more. The option for the Russians to bridge the river under fire is here represented by river hexes representing shallow water. These hexes are mined in order to force the use of engineers for several turns, this delay representing what would in actuality be the time spent constructing pontoon bridges across the river.

The tactical and operational situation is extremely fluid once the front lines are broken and the options are almost limitless.

Notes on weather and crops. At this time of year, this part of the Ukraine sees a fairly high degree of mixed snow and rain days (about ½ of all days in March see snow or rain). The average temperature each day is cold but above freezing so most snow melts during the day. In view of this you will see that the ground is considered soft for movement during the scenario. Also, as the Ukraine's primary crop is winter wheat, by the time this scenario takes place the stalks are substantial but not high enough to block vision for game purposes. During the actual combat, this part of the offensive is sometimes referred to as "the mud offensive" because conditions for movement were so difficult compared to normal circumstances.

There are numerous options open to both sides – should the German try to hold fast as long as he can at the front line? Fight a rear guard action? Withdraw into the hills hoping to eventually make it to Proskurov and the rescuing panzer divisions? Should the Russian bridge the river, force the line en mass, soften the line up with artillery first? Should armor and mechanized forces make a dash for Proskurov, or mop up before heading west?

A note on the map. In order to maintain playability the actual location represented by the map would be "J" shaped on real maps and liberties have been taken with the drainage patterns as well. Overall, it does not appear to detract from the scenario in any way, at least according to prior play testing. For previous play testers, you will notice some changes. The map has been expanded to the west allowing Soviet flanking of Proskurov (if they so wish, and which took place in actuality). The Hungarian 201st Light Division is moving through the area and can be commandeered and ordered into battle by Army Group South. You will also see some supply dumps, fuel dumps, trains, and the air field in the vicinity that need protection. Unfortunately, the airfield was primarily a maintenance depot and this, coupled with fuel shortages, prevent the combat use of these aircraft (nevertheless, the Germans have combat aircraft available from off-map airfields). You will also find Eric von Manstein available in the game as well (sorry, the photo is not him). At the beginning of the Soviet offensive he and HQ Army Group South (also represented) were in Proskurov, and hence here they are. Army Group South HQ is represented by a collection of Corps HQs under an Army HQ unit as East Front has no army group level units. Their unit names identify them however (i.e. F2 will show you AGS HQ designations). Manstein's horribly misleading memoirs place his command post elsewhere at this time, but a check of the "LageOst" maps in the national

archives for the date of the offensive clearly show his HQ located in Proskurov and I chose to use this untainted source (the LageOst maps were the daily east front situation maps prepared at OKH/OKW and are very revealing and interesting sources). Both sides also have on-map air recon available. Knock yourselves out!

For the play testers: as always, your studious insight and commentary are greatly valued and appreciated. Thank you for taking the time; I hope it was a at least a little fun.

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