

The Kamenets-Podolsky Pocket: Hube's Great Escape

By Jeff Chrisman



Gen. Hube.



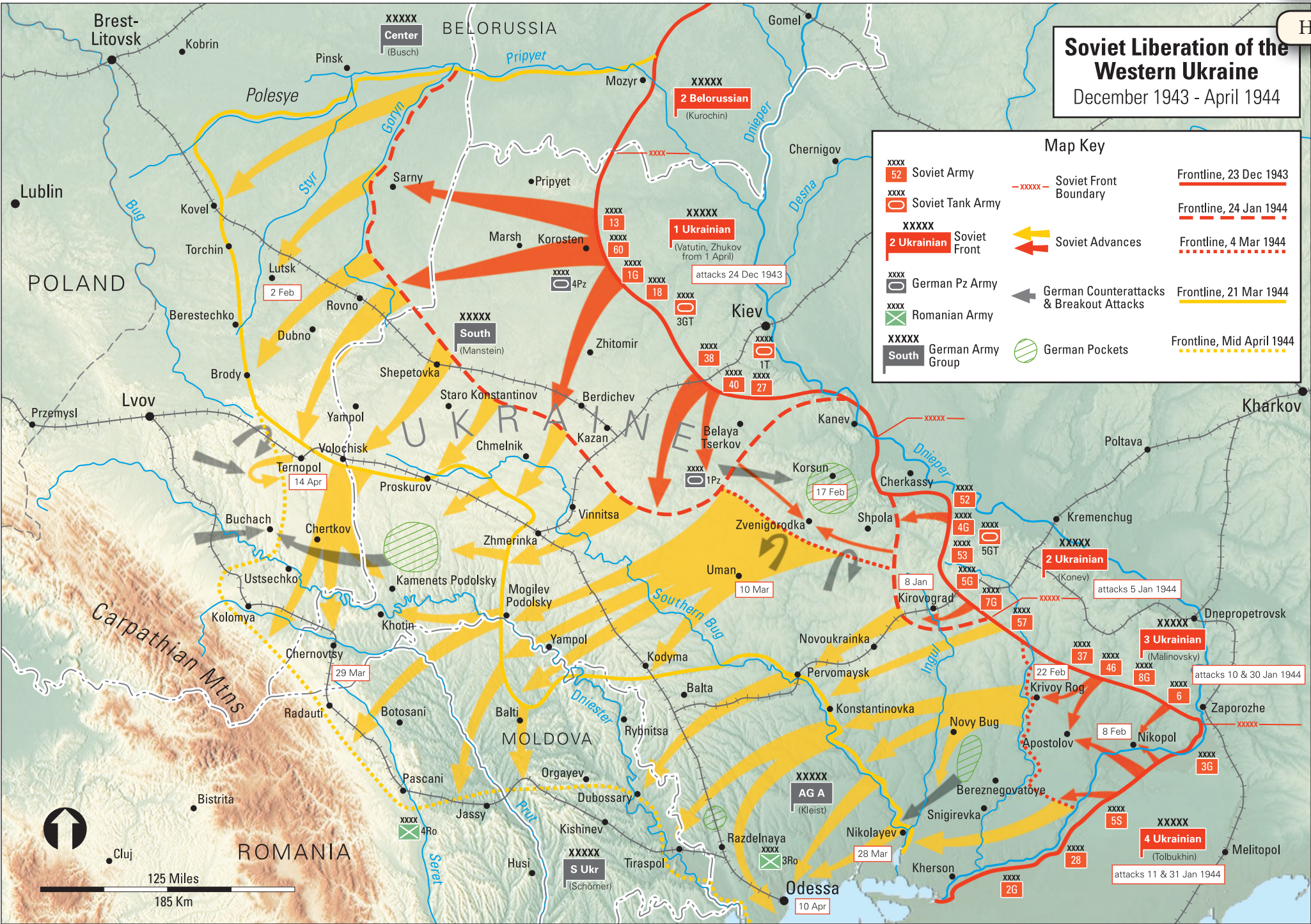
Gen. Raus.

Note: Soviet units are in plaintext; German units are in *italics*.

Background

By April 1944, Hans Valentin Hube was a highly decorated leader of the German panzer force. He'd risen from the rank of colonel at the beginning of the war to lieutenant general. Lt. Hube had lost his right arm in combat during the First World War, and he was the only handicapped officer to be retained in the army afterward. In 1941 he commanded *16th Panzer Division* in its advance across the Ukraine and then to the banks of the Volga at Stalingrad the next year. Along the way he earned the Knights Cross and subsequently Oak Leaves to go with it. In September 1942 Hube was promoted to command *XIV Panzer Corps*, and he became the first corps commander to receive Swords to the Knights Cross when Hitler personally bestowed them in December. Hube

was one of the few generals Hitler respected, so when the situation in Stalingrad became bleak in January 1943 the dictator insisted the general fly out of the pocket to avoid capture. Hube felt he would be deserting his troops if he left the pocket, and he at first refused to go. Hitler then flew in Gestapo agents to bring out Hube, under arrest if that proved necessary, but Hube agreed to voluntarily leave with them. He was made commander of *First Panzer Army* in October 1943, shortly before it was shifted into the middle of the *Army Group South (AGS)* front in the southern Ukraine. By late February 1944 AGS was trying desperately to build a solid front diagonally across the southern Ukraine: from *Army Group Center (AGC)* near Kovel southeast to Dubno, Jampol, Shepetovka, Kazatin, north and east of Vinnitsa, and just south of Zvenigorodka and Shpola, joining *Army Group A* near Kirovograd. The troops had been withdrawing westward through the



Ukraine since mid-summer and had mostly retreated beyond their best natural defensive barrier, the Dnieper River, in January. The Soviets were meanwhile consolidating the territory they'd regained and were regrouping for their next offensive. The front on the southern flank of AGS ran about 50 miles west of the Dnieper and 50 miles east of the next natural barrier, the Southern Bug River. The Dniester River, another 50 miles beyond the Bug, was the next

and last natural barrier before the Carpathian Mountains. The Germans' main supply line across the area was the double-track railroad from Lvov to Odessa, which bisected the plain between the Bug and the Dniester. On the AGS north flank those distances became compressed, and that's where its commander, Field Marshal Erich von Manstein, expected the Soviets would focus their next effort. He saw they could achieve the greatest success by penetrating the

German front at the 40-mile land bridge between the Pripyet Marsh on the north and the Carpathians to the south, then exploiting through it into the heart of Poland. That area was where the north flank of Manstein's AGS joined AGC. *Fourth Panzer Army* held that flank, but in its depleted state it was able to maintain only intermittent contact with AGC on its left, at the southern edge of the Pripyet Marsh. *Fourth Panzer's* commander, Gen. of

Armored Troops Erhard Raus, was a decorated panzer leader who'd risen from regimental command through brigade, division and corps levels to his army command in just four years. On AGS's southern flank was the weak *Eighth Army*, in equally intermittent contact with *Army Group A (AGA)* west of Kirovograd. *Eighth Army* commander, Gen. of Infantry Otto Woehler, was also in his first army-level command and was also highly decorated. He had, however, held only



A recent photo of modern-day historical reenactors, taking part in a reenactment of the final breakout fighting.

staff positions through most of the war, including serving as Manstein's chief of staff at *Eleventh Army* in 1941. In the middle of AGS was Hube's *First Panzer Army*, still trying to regroup after the recent encirclement and rescue of two corps west of Cherkassy while building a new front in the western Ukraine.

All the troops in AGS were exhausted. Infantry divisions were constantly falling back for fear of encirclement, while the motorized units raced from sector to sector trying to blunt enemy penetrations, seal off gaps or rescue units that had become encircled. None of the armies in AGS could withstand

much more pressure, but Manstein knew he had to reinforce that north flank. He'd been lobbying Hitler for weeks to bring in another full army in order to better cover the gap between AGS and AGC, whether by pulling back to shorten his own south flank, or transferring in formations from *Army*

Group North (AGN), or by evacuating *Seventeenth Army* from the Crimea.

Hitler expected the spring mud would soon immobilize both sides equally, as it had done in springs past, and that would provide the respite his eastern armies so badly needed. Unfortunately for the Germans, that remained true only for them, as the Soviets were increasingly enjoying superior mobility thanks to their US-built four- and six-wheel drive lend-lease trucks. The Soviets were benefitting not only from that enhanced operational mobility, but also from the superior logistical effort it was allowing them to make.

Even further, though official German policy in their retreat across the Ukraine had called for a total "scorched earth" withdrawal—with everything and everyone of military value that couldn't be taken away destroyed in place—it hadn't worked out that way. In their hectic rush west, it's estimated they only managed to destroy or evacuate about 20 percent of those resource and manpower totals. In that way, every mile of liberated territory yielded thousands of conscripts for the Red Army as well as vast acreages of crop land.

In late January, two infantry corps, one from *First Panzer Army (XLII)* and one from *Eighth Army (XI)*, were surrounded by the Soviets in a pocket near the town of Cherkassy on the Dnieper River. Though substantial parts of the two units were rescued on 17 February, in the end the larger engagement still represented another defeat for AGS.

On 22 February, *III Panzer Corps*, the force that had broken through to the units surrounded at Cherkassy, was dispatched to Proskurov to guard against a Soviet attack expected northwest of there. The *1st SS Panzer Division*, another of the units that had been involved in the Cherkassy rescue, was also sent northwest, to the Ternopol area, and assigned to *XLVIII Panzer Corps* with the same mission.

The following day Hitler finally sent Manstein a few units to reinforce his northern flank. The newly formed *357th* and *359th Infantry Divisions*, along with the veteran *68th Infantry Division*, were ordered to join *Fourth Panzer Army* at Ternopol. That was far short of the entire army for which Manstein had been pleading, but it was also better than nothing.



Two German infantrymen dug in on the perimeter of the newly formed pocket.

On 27 February, Manstein got more good news: *Fourth Panzer Army's XLVIII Panzer Corps*, with the *7th* and *8th Panzer Divisions*, had recaptured Lutsk, and by the end of the month the gap on the north flank of the army group, between AGC at Kovel and *XIII Infantry Corps* near Dubno, was fully closed. Unfortunately for Manstein, there remained a 40-mile gap between the south flank of *XIII* and *LIX Infantry Corps* near Shepatovka.

On 1 March, Manstein shifted all his armies' boundaries north by one corps. So *Eighth Army's LII Infantry Corps* was transferred to *Sixth Army* (*Sixth Army* had itself been transferred to AGA in early February). *First Panzer Army's VII Infantry Corps* was transferred to *Eighth Army*, and *Fourth Panzer Army's LIX Infantry Corps* went to *First Panzer Army*. That last shift made the gap west of Shepatovka the shared responsibility of *Fourth Panzer* and *First Panzer Armies*. The overall AGS front was then organized as follows.

- *Fourth Panzer Army*, with *XIII Infantry* and *XLVIII Panzer Corps*, from Kovel south to near Dubno, then east to Shepatovka: a distance of approximately 125 miles.
- *First Panzer Army*, with *III Panzer Corps* at Proskurov, *LIX Infantry Corps* near Shepatovka, *XXIV Panzer Corps* south of Berdichev, and *XLVI Panzer Corps* northeast of Vinnitsa: a distance of approximately 130 miles.
- *Eighth Army*, with *VII Infantry Corps* north of Uman, *XLVII Panzer Corps* south of Shpola, and *XL Panzer Corps* south of Kirovograd: a distance of approximately 135 miles.

Soviet Attack

Against that 400-mile front the Soviets were bringing to bear a massive force. Facing AGS was, from



Lt. Col. Franz Baeke.



Soviet Gen. Vatutin.



Marshal Konev.



Another view of some German infantry on the pocket's perimeter.

north to south: First Ukrainian Front (equivalent to a German army group), with six combined arms (primarily infantry) and three tank armies, and Second Ukrainian Front, with five combined arms and three tank armies.

First Ukrainian Front had a new commander, but he was far from inexperienced. Nikolai Vatutin had become its commander in October 1943, and he orchestrated the liberation of Kiev in December. In late February 1944, while touring Sixtieth Army units behind the front northwest of Shepatovka, his motorcade was ambushed by anti-Soviet Ukrainian nationalist insurgents. Vatutin was badly wounded and died of infection six weeks later at a hospital in Kiev. His replacement, Marshal Georgi Zhukov, came straight from lifting the siege of Leningrad.

Second Ukrainian Front was commanded by Marshal Ivan Konev. He'd led that front since its creation in October 1943. He was one of Stalin's favorites: the dictator admired Konev's ruthlessness (which was a remarkable perspective given the dictator's own lack of compassion).

On Saturday, 4 March, Zhukov's forces struck. First Guards Army

attacked toward Staro Konstantinov from Lyubar, and Sixtieth Army surged south from west of Shepatovka. The Sixtieth's advance was virtually unopposed, allowing the exploitation force, Fourth Tank and Third Guards Tank Armies, to advance almost immediately. Fourth Tank Army attacked toward Ternopol, while Third Guards Tank Army's objective was Proskurov. The Soviet offensive fell just where Manstein had anticipated, but most of his reinforcements, meager as they were, had just begun to arrive.

With its 28 Tiger tanks, the 509th Heavy Panzer Battalion was the only armored covering force of LIX Infantry Corps on the north flank at Staro Konstantinov. That town was about halfway between the main German positions at Proskurov and the Soviets at Shepatovka. The battalion's new commanding officer, Capt. Heinrich Radtke, had only arrived to take command a week earlier, and he'd yet to lead his unit in battle.

When the Soviet attack came, the 509th moved out to meet it with infantry and artillery support from 96th Infantry Division. In a classic meeting engagement 15 miles north of Staro Konstantinov near Gritsev, they hit the

enemy's spearhead. The Soviets overran the leading infantry and unleashed withering artillery fire that killed many, including Radtke and the infantry and artillery commanders with whom he was conferring outside his tank.

Hube, realizing the large-scale nature of the enemy attack, had the commander of LIX Infantry Corps, Lt. Gen. Friedrich Schulz, recall the Tiger battalion and attach it to 6th Panzer Division, which was concentrating at Proskurov.

The only one of the reinforcing units that had arrived and was ready for action on 4 March was 1st SS Panzer Division. It had been diverted from Ternopol to Proskurov, and began arriving there on 29 February after a two-day train trip.

Late in the afternoon on 4 March, 1st SS was ordered to move in force to the Baziliya area, 30 miles northwest of Proskurov, to scout for the enemy and determine the situation. After having to push their trucks through some deep mud, the grenadiers reached Baziliya about noon on 5 March, making contact with enemy armored forces two hours later.

The other XLVIII Panzer Corps elements, 68th Infantry Division and the

understrength 7th Panzer Division, were approaching from the Ternopol area. Late in the day on 5 March another veteran of the Cherkassy relief operation, the 503rd Heavy Panzer Battalion, with 13 operational Tigers, was attached to the 7th at Podvolocyska, astride the Ternopol-Proskurov highway and railroad 18 miles southwest of Baziliya.

Also on the 5 March the other shoe dropped for AGS when Second Ukrainian Front attacked Eighth Army near Uman. Twenty-Seventh Army, Fifty-Second Army and Fourth Guards Army made an assault from near Zvenigorodka. That was followed up by Second Tank Army, Fifth Guards Tank Army and Sixth Tank Army. Fifth and Seventh Guards Armies made subsidiary attacks from near Kirovograd. The five over-extended infantry divisions of VII Infantry Corps bore the brunt of the attack and were soon scattered.

Manstein Reacts

Manstein still considered the First Ukrainian Front attack in the north to be the greatest threat. The XIII Infantry Corps was under extreme pressure at Dubno, while LIX Infantry Corps had been dealt a heavy blow at Shepatovka and was in danger of being encircled. In between, units of XLVIII Panzer Corps were effectively turned into islands surrounded by a Soviet flood surging south between Staro Konstantinov and Ternopol.

Manstein visited LIX Infantry Corps at Staro Konstantinov and later credited its steadfast stand for allowing the successful disengagement and pull-back that saved those units from encirclement. (That, and the timely arrival of the first units of 1st Panzer Division in Staro Konstantinov on 5 March.)

On 6 March, 6th Panzer Division joined the combat north of Staro Konstantinov with the attached Tigers of the 509th. The LIX Infantry Corps had 1st and 6th Panzer Divisions to the north and northwest covering its withdrawal, as well as 19th Panzer Division withdrawing from Lyubar and covering the northeast approach. Over the next few days the corps withdrew south in phases, consolidating positions north of Proskurov and east toward Letikov. At the same time units of Fourth Panzer Army's XLVIII Panzer Corps began finding some success launching hit-and-run attacks against Soviet infantry units as they



Another reenactment photo.

followed their own armor south.

On 9 March the situation on the AGS southern flank became dangerous when Eighth Army troops were overwhelmed at Uman, leaving wide open the Soviet path to the Bug River south of there. Manstein had no choice but to order Eighth Army to bend back its left to avoid encirclement.

As it was, Second Ukrainian Front reached the Bug on a wide front on 15 March and crossed unopposed. Three days later they reached the Dniester at Yampol. The right flank corps of First Panzer Army, XLVI Panzer, had been split by that attack from its left flank neighbor, so it struggled south toward the Dniester without friendly contact on its right or left. The other corps of First Panzer Army, and former left flank neighbor of XLVI Panzer Corps, XXIV Panzer Corps, bent its open right flank south while trying to maintain contact on its left with LIX Infantry Corps near Chmelnik.

By the second week in March the LIX Infantry Corps front north of Proskurov had been stabilized and infantry relieved the armored units, which then concentrated in Proskurov for a counterattack into the flank of the First Ukrainian Front forces pouring south between there and Ternopol. The III Panzer Corps, commanded by Lt. Gen. Hermann Breith, would spearhead the effort. Its primary strike force was Heavy Panzer Regiment Baeke (named for its commander Lt. Col. Franz Baeke) of 6th Panzer Division. Baeke was also the commander of the 6th's armored

regiment, which was reinforced with a battalion of tanks from 1st Panzer Division and the 509th Heavy Panzer Battalion with 28 operational Tigers.

Breith launched his attack west from Proskurov down the highway to Ternopol at first light on the morning of 16 March in a driving snow storm. By midday on the 17th they contacted elements of 1st SS Panzer Division near Vidva, in that way reestablishing contact between First and Fourth Panzer Armies and bringing Zhukov's advance south to a temporary halt. Zhukov later characterized the combat at that time as having been as bitter as any in the war.

On the north flank of Fourth Panzer Army, XIII Infantry Corps was again being forced out of Dubno and Lutsk, but the infantry reinforcements promised by Hitler had begun arriving and were stabilizing the front in the Ternopol area, allowing the Germans to hold on to that road and rail hub. On balance those were encouraging developments for the north flank of the panzer army, but Hube held no illusions: on the 20th he ordered his main supply base at Kamenets-Podolsky to begin evacuating to the south, over the Dniester at Khotin. The pontoon bridge built there early in the war was the only one standing between Mogilev-Podolsky and Ustsechko.

Encirclement

With XLVI Panzer Corps drifting south, there was a hole in First Panzer Army's eastern flank and it didn't take