

20. Panzer-Division

Created October 15, 1940 from the 19. Infantry-Division the 20. Panzer-Division was formed in response to Adolf Hitler's call for doubling the number of panzer divisions in the Wehrmacht. The 20. Panzer-Division would see itself spending the entirety of the war on the Eastern Front battling against the Communist forces of Soviet Russia. Made up almost entirely of Hessians the 20. Panzer was headquartered in Gotha, an ancient city and ironically the birthplace of the German Socialist Party a Communist organization. The Division's first combat was during Operation Barbossa the initial German invasion of the Soviet Union and participated in the failed assault on the city of Moscow. From there the division saw near constant action and suffered heavy losses during the Kursk campaign in the summer of 1943.

In 1944 the 20. Panzer-Division saw itself assigned to Army Group Centre, a massive force comprised of several divisions and around 500,000 soldiers. Along with two other divisions, the 20. Panzer found itself in the unenviable position of making up the army group's reserve. The division was under strength having only 71 Panzer IV tanks in its single panzer battalion. The division's other battalion was in the process of being re-equipped with Panthers when Operation Bagration erupted all along the Eastern Front during the summer of 1944. A tide of Soviet divisions smashed through German defenses all along Army Group Centre. As part of the reserve group, the 20. Panzer-Division was sent to Bobruisk in an effort to diminish the Soviet breakthrough that occurred there.

While enroute the Soviet 65th army achieved an even larger breakthrough south of Bobruisk and the 1st Guards Tank Corps was soon committed to exploit the breach further. The 20. Panzer-Division moved as quickly as possible to the area but movement was slow due to poor road conditions which were further compounded by retreating soldiers and fleeing refugees. The PanzerGrenadier Regiments of the division were the first to encounter Soviet forces followed quickly by the panzers. A series of skirmishes near Slobodka, south of Bobruisk further hampered the division's movement. These skirmishes resulted in over 60 Soviet tanks destroyed but they came at a high price, almost half of the 71 Panzer IV tanks taking part were knocked out of action as well.

The Soviet 3rd Army realized the opportunity they had and committed their own reserves to the battle in the form of the 9th Tank Corps. On the 26th of June the 20. Panzer-Division had been forced into withdrawing to the outskirts of Bobruisk unable to aide the German infantry divisions still trapped on the Westside of the Berezina River. The next day the remaining German defenses collapsed and a Soviet cavalry-mechanized group consisting of the 1st Mechanized Corps and the 1st Guards Cavalry Corps was sent west to encircle the 20. Panzer-Division and the remaining German defenders.



The situation near Bobruisk was critical; nearly 40,000 German troops were trapped in a pocket east of the city. Several break-out attempts were made as the Germans attempted to reach Bobruisk and friendly troops. Massive artillery strikes and constant attack from the Red Air Force made these breakout attempts futile. The 12. Panzer-Division arrived in the area on the 27th of June and a decision was made within Bobruisk to attempt a massive break-out with the tanks of the 20. Panzer-Division in the lead.

While Soviet infantry began pouring into the city, the remnants of the 20. Panzer-Division spearheaded the breakout attempt. The German tanks ruptured the Soviet lines north-west of the city. At dawn the next day the fleeing Germans again found themselves being attacked from all sides by Soviet troops. After two days of constant battle the first elements of the 20. Panzer-Division reached the Svisloch River and the 12. Panzer-Division on the other side.

The breakout had succeeded in saving nearly 15,000 soldiers but the men who made it across the Svisloch were a shattered force at best. Many of the men were wounded; others had been forced to leave their weapons behind or were simply too fatigued to be of any use in immediate defensive operations. Bobruisk was completely overrun by the Red Army on 29, June 1944.

