

First Battle of Kharkov

October, 1941

Why did the Germans choose Kharkov as one of the important targets in 1941?

Before the war, Kharkov was the one of the largest industrial center of the USSR. In terms of its industrial and people potential, Kharkov was the 3rd city after Moscow and Leningrad. Before the war, 901 thousand people lived in Kharkov. (in Kiev, only 846 thousand), and by September 1941 the population increased up to 1.5 million due to refugees and the wounded. Kharkov was also the largest junction of railways, highways and air routes. The Kharkov railway junction connected the central regions of the USSR with the Crimea, Caucasus, Dnieper and Donbass. That ensured the rapid transfer of troops both in the frontal and in the rocade directions.

From the end of July 1941, the city and the stations of the Kharkov railway junction were subjected to massive air raids. The main targets were railway and military installations, as well as warehouses of enterprises. The factories were practically not subjected to attacks - the Germans tried to keep the production base of the Kharkov industrial region intact.

Kharkov also is the largest city in the USSR occupied by the Wehrmacht during the war times.

How the events began?

Kharkov was part of the zone of operations of the Southwestern Front (SWF), which suffered two catastrophic defeats in July-September 1941 near Uman and near Kiev, where it lost almost all its forces. As a result of this, a gap was formed in the Soviet defense, practically not covered by the troops, which the Wehrmacht inevitably took advantage of. On September 18, Poltava (city half way from Kiev to Kharkov) was captured. Next on September 20, the Krasnograd town in the Kharkov region was captured. As result, the "ledge" in front lines was formed towards Kharkov (see pic.1).

In early October, Red Army units tried to recapture Krasnograd, but were unsuccessful. At the end of September, the Wehrmacht launched an offensive against the Bryansk and Southern fronts, with the aim of flanking armies of the SWF near Kharkov. German 1 Tank Group broke through the defense of the South Front in the Dnepropetrovsk region and entered the operational area. At the same time, 2 Tank Group, having broken through the defenses at the junction of the Bryansk Front and the SWF, launched an offensive in the direction of Orel city. As a result, the three armies of the Bryansk Front were encircled, and on October 3, German troops reached Orel, cutting off the railway and the Moscow-Kharkov highway.

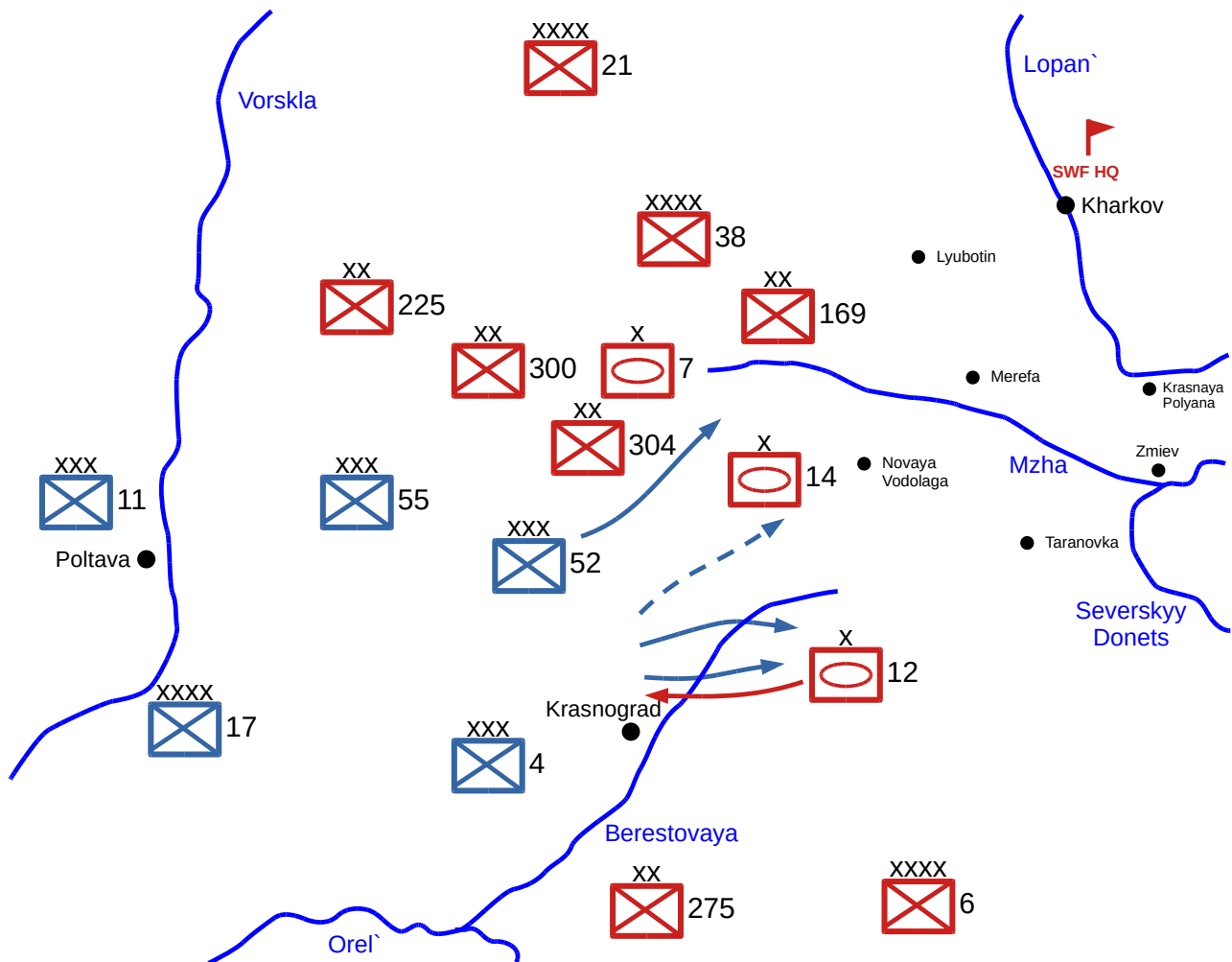
As a result of this offensive, the troops of the SWF were swept from both flanks to a depth of 60-200 km. On October 6, the HQ of SWF made a decision to withdraw the armies from the right flank 45-50 km to the Sumy-Akhtyrka line in order to cover Belgorod and the northern approaches to Kharkov. But the intended line of withdrawal was quickly occupied by the enemy (29AC captured Sumy, and 51AC captured Akhtyrka), and Soviet troops were forced to continue their further retreat to the east.

Soviet Forces

The SWF consisted of four armies of the first echelon: 40A, 21A, 38A, 6A. 40A covered the Sumy direction (the city north-west of Kharkov), 21 and 38A covered the Kharkov direction, and 6A covered the southern part of the Kharkov region and Donbass direction. The Kharkov area was covered by the largest army of SWF 38A, under the command of Major General V.V.Tsyganov. It consisted of:

- 47th Mountain Division
- 76th Mountain Division

169th Infantry Division (Colonel S.M. Rogachevsky)
 199th Rifle Division (brigade commander D.V. Averin)
 300th Infantry Division
 304th Rifle Division
 7th Tank Brigade
 10th Tank Brigade (Lieutenant Colonel V.A. Buntman-Doroshkevich - it was already present in the game, during the March 1942 offensive in the Nepokrytaya area)
 14th Tank Brigade (Colonel S.I. Semennikov)
 132nd Tank Brigade



Pic.1 – Strategic situation at end of September 1941

The joint with 21A on the northern face was provided by 212 and 226RD from 21A. For the immediate protection of Kharkov, only the forces of the garrison were left, which included the 216RD (11 thousand), 57th special brigade NKVD, the Kharkov People's Defense Regiment, separate territorial battalions, as well as a separate armored detachment. The total number of troops in the garrison was 19,898 people, 120 guns and mortars, and 47 tanks. 216RD was formed at the beginning of October from conscripts and servicemen from rear units. The personnel of the division had no combat training, were not fired upon and poorly prepared for battles in the city, but they were sufficiently well armed.

Kharkov People's Defense Regiment and territorial battalions consisted of local residents who signed up as volunteers. They had a weak level of combat training and were armed only with small

arms (rifles). The separate armored detachment had 47 units of outdated or faulty armored vehicles: 25 T-27, 13 T-16, 5 T-26, 4 T-35. Subsequent battles showed that only the soldiers of the 57th special brigade NKVD and the Kharkov People's Defense Regiment fought staunchly, but the soldiers of the 216RD were subject to panic, often fled from the battlefield and deserted.

Defense preparation

By this time Kharkov was already preparing for defense. The evacuation of the main industrial facilities was completed on October 20. 320 echelons with equipment from 70 factories were sent to the rear. A defensive area with continuous lines of trenches with a total length of up to 40 km was created along the outer circumference of the city. Over 250 artillery and about 1 thousand machine-gun bunkers and dugouts were prepared, up to 3 thousand AT hedgehogs and bunkers were installed. In the city itself, several hundred barricades with a total length of 16 km were erected. 43 city bridges were mined, more than 10 bridges were destroyed. Also, several mansions in the city center were mined using radio-controlled mines, where the deployment of German HQs was supposed.

On November 14, a radio signal from Voronezh blew up the mansion where the commandant of the city, General von Braun, was.

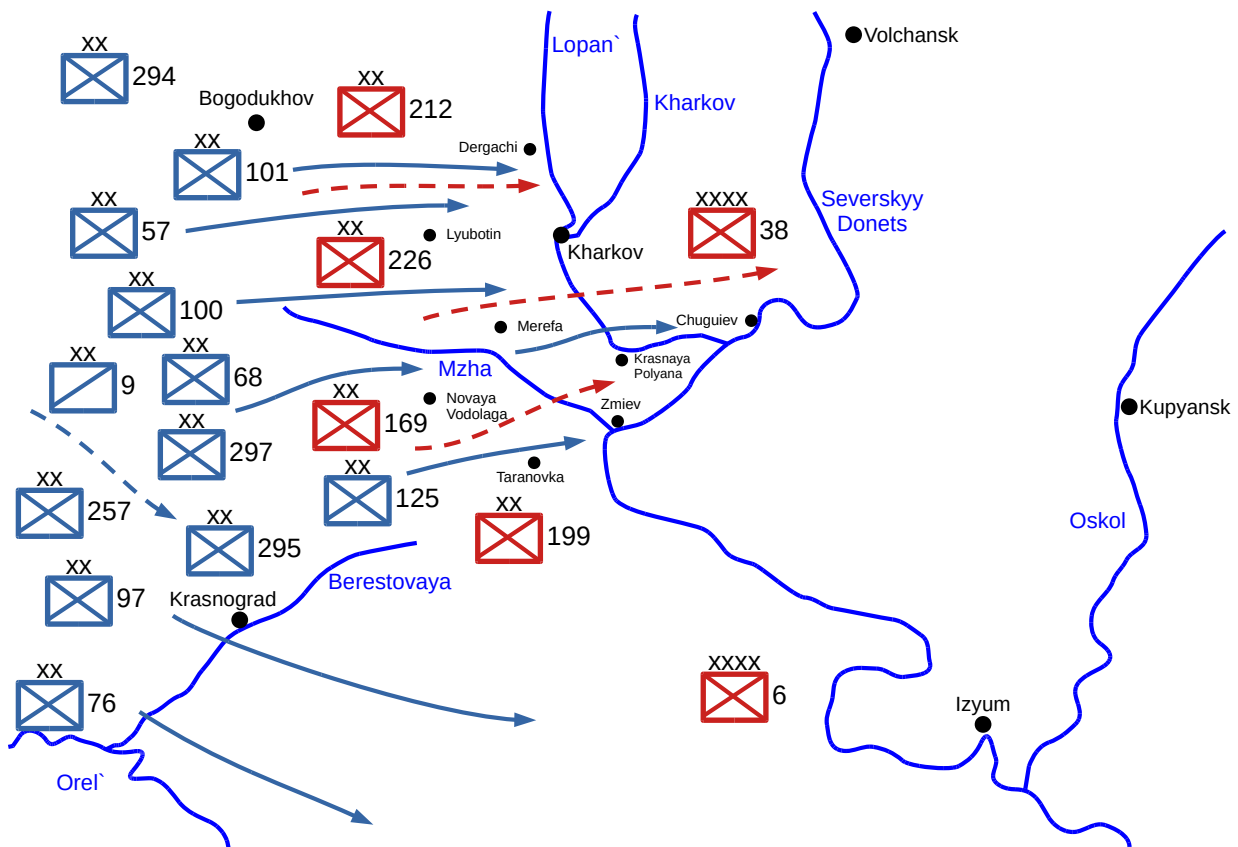
In the Kharkov region, more than 30 thousand AT and AP mines were installed, about 2 thousand delayed-action mines, about 1 thousand booby traps and over 5 thousand false mines. Bridges, highways, railways, and airfields were mined. In the city itself, the following were destroyed: the central telephone exchange, power plants, water supply and sewerage networks, the city central heating system, workshops and premises of all large enterprises in the city were destroyed, and the remaining equipment was damaged or mined.

Despite significant efforts to restore infrastructure, the Germans were able to restore the Kharkov transport hub only in the beginning of 1942, and the industrial infrastructure for the repair of military equipment, only in May 1942.

But all this defense preparations will be practically not in demand.

In the evening of October 15, the SWF HQ received directive No.31 of the Supreme Command Headquarters, in which the front was tasked with withdrawing troops to the line Kastornaya - Stary Oskol - Novy Oskol - Valuyki - Kupyansk - Krasny Liman on October 17-30 and withdrawing to the front reserve at least 6 RDs and 2 CC. This meant that the troops of the SWF had to retreat to the east by 80-200 km and leave Kharkov, Belgorod and the Donetsk industrial region. This decision was caused by the catastrophic situation in the defense zone of neighboring fronts in connection with the rapid pace of the German offensive in the Moscow direction. In order to prevent the troops in the Kharkov region from being encircled, were ordered to conduct only rearguard battles, if possible holding back the enemy until October 25, and then leave the city and withdraw beyond the Seversky Donets and Oskol Rivers.

According to the plans of the SWF HQ, 38A was supposed to hold its positions at a distance of 30-40 km from Kharkov until October 23. But on October 20, parts of the Wehrmacht 55AC captured the key point of 38A defense - Lyubotin, and the forward parts of the corps reached the western suburbs of Kharkov. Over the next day, due to uncoordinated actions on the withdrawal of formations 38A, the Dergachi village was lost to the north of Kharkov (occupied by units of the 101LID). In the Kozachya Lopan` (northern of Kharkov) area 226RD were hit, suffering losses of 500 people, most of whom were captured. Then parts of the German's 11AC task force captured Zmiev town south of Kharkov. As result Kharkov was in a semi-encirclement (pic.2).



Pic.2 – German offensive to Kharkov in 1941

However, there was no complete encirclement as under Kiev before. The basis of the Soviet defense (detering the German offensive) was the tank brigades of 38A, which had significant mobility, which made it possible to transfer them to the threatening directions of the German breakthrough. At the same time, the rifle divisions were practically defeated and lost almost all of their heavy weapons in previous battles. This was exacerbated by transport problems due to the onset of the autumn thaw (although this also affected the German side). The Soviet rifle divisions retreated to a new line of defense across the Severskyi Donets River, they were pursued by German army corps. This was hampered by Soviet tank brigades, allowing Soviet units to break away from their pursuers.

German 55AC, which was part of 6A, attacked directly on Kharkov. To the Corps was reassigned the 101LID and 239ID from of the neighboring 17AC, as well as heavy artillery units (210mm mortars and 150mm howitzers). The offensive was to be conducted by the forces of three divisions, one division was in reserve. The main attack was delivered by 57ID from the western direction, supported by units of 101 and 100LID, advancing from the north and south. On the south, 11AC was advancing, consisting of two divisions 68 and 297IDs, in the rearguard of which 125ID was moving. This group bypassed Kharkov from the south, pursuing 38A's rifle divisions, and trying to reach the crossings on the Severskyi Donets River before the Soviet troops.

What was happening in the city itself?

German troops on October 19, advancing from the western direction, occupied the suburban defense line. To eliminate this breakthrough, 216RD received an order to move out of the city to Peresechnaya area (west outskirts of Kharkov). Making a march at night, the division lost its combat effectiveness, and one of the regiments got lost and was found only a day later. During the marches, up to 30% of the personnel deserted. After the first order to advance, a few hours later another order was received - to return to their base positions. As a result, the 216RD, without occupying the lines in the suburbs, returned to its base positions.

On the evening of October 20, German troops reached the outskirts of Kharkov, and the Soviet units did not have a continuous line of defense. 38A HQ takes command over the city's defense. In practice, this led to the fact that the units defending the city received sometimes conflicting orders simultaneously from two command centers - the army headquarters and the headquarters of the Kharkov garrison.

On October 22, Soviet troops launched a counterattack with the forces of the 57th NKVD brigade and two regiments of the 216RD in the direction of Kuryazh-Pesochin (south-west outskirts of Kharkov). Throughout the day, protracted battles continued, but by evening the Soviet troops withdrew to their base positions.

On the morning of October 23, German troops launched an offensive again from the west and established themselves in residential areas of the Novaya Bavaria region. At noon, the main forces of the 57ID went over to the offensive. The assault groups of the division, moving along the streets, overcoming barricades, ditches and minefields, reached the Kharkov main railway station in the evening. Attempts by individual German units to bypass the city and break into it from the north along the Belgorod highway were repelled by militias on the defensive lines in Sokolniki.

As a result of the first day of fighting, German troops managed to capture the western part of Kharkov and reach the railway, and in some areas overcome it, reaching the Lopan` River. Fearing of encirclement, the commander of the 216RD decided to withdraw his units to the eastern bank of the Lopan` River, occupying the second line of defense. But the 38A HQ canceled the order to withdraw and ordered the next day to knock out the enemy at the western part of Kharkov with a counterattack. However, the Soviet troops had already withdrawn across the river by this time.

The first day of the fighting showed that the organized defense of the city did not work out. Lacking combat training, Soviet units immediately after the enemy managed to break into the western outskirts of Kharkov, succumbed to panic and began to retreat to city center. Due to the lack of communication and poorly organized interaction between division and subunits, the 38A command and defense HQ almost completely lost control of troops in the first hours.

On the morning of October 24, German troops occupied the city blocks between the railway and the Lopan` River, and also reached the area of the Balashovka and Levada railway stations and the adjacent industrial factories. Crossing the Lopan` River north of the railway station, the 101LID units launched an offensive towards the aircraft plant and Dzerzhinsky Square in the city center. For more than five hours, groups of the people's militia held the defense against the superior forces of the enemy. Units of the 57th NKVD brigade also stubbornly defended in the area of the Osnova r/w station on the southern outskirts of Kharkov. 15:00, the central regions of Kharkov city were captured by German troops (pic.3). The resistance of the Soviet troops began to be of a locally.



Pic.3 – German troops in Kharkov

On October 24, the Red Army also left Belgorod (city northern of the Kharkov), and by the evening the German units also reached the eastern outskirts of Kharkov. The remnants of the city garrison, by order of the 216RD commander began to retreat to the east. Since the HQ of 216RD had no connection with the headquarters of 38A, Commander 216RD still continued to lead the division (he was removed from command by 38A HQ for showing cowardice on the first day of fighting in the city), and until October 27, the division was actually controlled by two commanders. The new commander of 216RD, managed to find and reassign only two battalions.

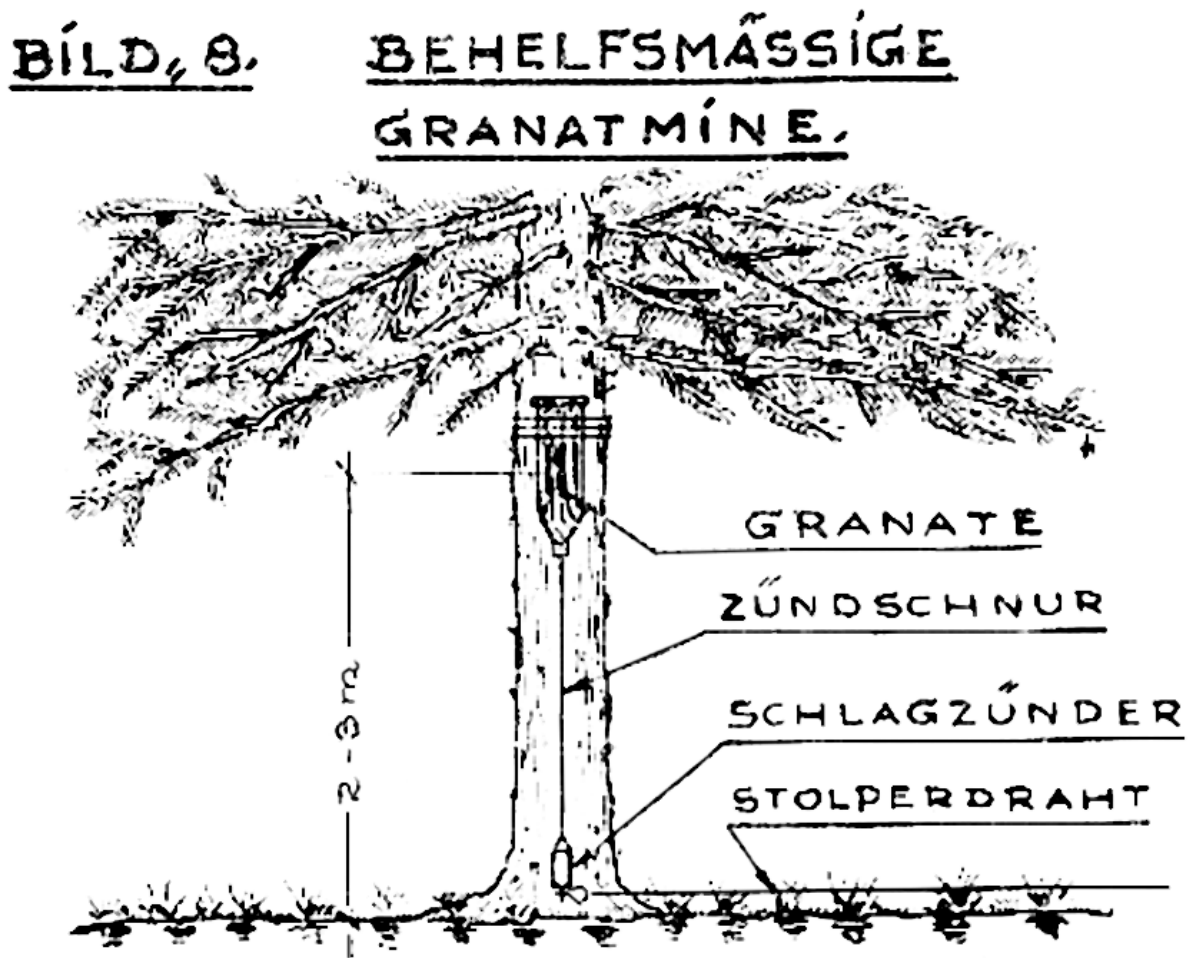
Let's go back to divisions of the 38A

The withdrawal of 38A took place in the beginning of a thaw. On the night of October 25, the commander of the Kharkov garrison and the new commander of the 216RD organized several "barrage detachments" were deployed on possible routes of withdrawal of the Soviet troops, whose duties were to detain the troops leaving the city.

By the morning, units that was detained at night (approx two regiments), were occupied the defense lines in the area of the Kharkov tractor plant (the eastern outskirts of Kharkov). While 38A elements held back the enemy in the Kharkov direction, the rest of the SWF armies (21 and 6A) continued to withdraw, and by October 27, the main forces of the SWF took up defenses along the Seversky Donets River. 38A took up the defense (from north to south): 76Mnt RD, 300RD, 57th NKVD Brigade, 47Mnt RD, 199RD, 304RD. The rest of the units were withdrawn for reorganization and replenishment to the rear.

German troops, having created several bridgeheads on the eastern bank of river, also went over to the defensive. The enemy stopped active operations against the SWF, the front command also decided to stop further withdrawal of troops and take up the defensive positions in the line Tim - Balakleya - Izyum and further along the Seversky Donets River. This configuration of the front line made it possible to prepare for further operations in order to liberate Kharkov. And already in January 1942, the first offensive of the Red Army against Kharkov area was began.

57 ID shows how to properly attach a grenade to a Christmas tree (pic.4)



Pic.4 - How to properly attach a grenade to a Christmas tree (from docs of 57 ID)

Combat use of T-35 tanks

5 T-35 tanks that were located throughout Eastern Ukraine at that time. One (model 1936) was abandoned due to technical malfunctions on the eastern outskirts of Kharkov (pic.5) and did not participate in the battles, one was probably not operate and was under repair, where it was captured and did not participate in the battles.



Pic.5 – Abandoned T-35 tank on the eastern outskirts of Kharkov near Kharkov Tractor Plant

Another one (model 1936) was thrown on Voroshilov Street bld #40, near the headquarters of 216RD, apparently also did not participate in the battles. One, the oldest model 1934, was abandoned on the western outskirts of Kharkov in the village of Grigorovka between houses 14 and 16 and it could have taken part in battles (pic.6).



Pic.6 – Abandoned T-35 tank on the western outskirts of Kharkov

And one more about which nothing is known at all. In total, 2 tanks remain, which were probably sent to battle. It is the same number that 57ID declares. One was hit, the second was damaged and captured in the Novaya Bavaria region (pic.7).



Pic.7 – T-35 tank damaged and captured in the Novaya Bavaria region.

There is no documentary evidence of the damaged T-35 in battle. Only those that were thrown for technical faults (of which there are a lot), which again adds ambiguity and unanswered questions. Well, as usual, basically T-26 tanks took part in the battles, not T-35.