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Use of Panzerfaust-Type Grenade Launchers by German and Soviet Soldiers during the Fighting for Pomerania in 1945

Summary: The mass use of anti-tank grenade launchers known as Panzerfausts (armoured fists) by the German Wehrmacht in the final phase of the Second World War in Europe made them an immediately formidable weapon. Faced with dramatic shortages of fuel needed for the mobility of armoured forces, as well as tungsten as a component for the production of steel plates and ammunition, new ideas were sought for fighting tanks. Thus, the combat-proven effectiveness of shaped-charge projectiles fired from a hand-held tubular launcher was exploited, together with the ease of their production and their low unit cost compared with tanks and other armoured vehicles, which they immobilised and sometimes outright destroyed. Mass training in the handling of this weapon was undertaken, and even improvised tank-destroyer units armed only with grenade launchers and equipped with bicycles were created. The successes achieved by the Germans in defensive fighting, thanks to the use of Panzerfausts, also galvanised the opponent. In the spring of 1945, the Red Army issued an order to recover captured weapons of this type and to provide instruction on their operation. Their employment in combat, however, looked different because Soviet troops readily used grenade launchers during assaults on fortified strongpoints, especially masonry structures. A specific adaptation of the Panzerfaust to fighting in urban areas was the construction of makeshift devices for firing salvos. At the same time, Soviet engineers attempted to develop their own grenade launchers with characteristics similar to the German ones, but they achieved satisfactory results only after the war.

Keywords: Panzerfaust, grenade launcher, shaped-charge projectile, improving combat, Pomerania, 1945

The development of individual anti-tank weapons during the Second World War was dynamic. Initially, long-barrelled anti-tank rifles and muskets using hardened-steel bullets were preferred, followed subsequently by various types of carriers for shaped-charge projectiles. In the German Wehrmacht, successive technical solutions were introduced — starting with Schiessbecher attachments for the Mauser infantry rifle, together with special projectiles for them.¹ Next came a series of hand-thrown anti-tank grenades and simple sapper charges magnetically affixed to tank armour. In the final stage of the fighting, one-man, recoilless tube launchers were preferred, including both single-use models called Faustpatrone (later *Panzerfaust*) as well as multi-shot Panzerschreck launchers (*Ofenrohr*).²

The action of the shaped-charge projectile employed in Panzerfausts relied on the strong concentration and direction of the jet of gas produced by the burning explosive material — in this case, a mixture of RDX and TNT — formed into a conically hollowed charge or having an insert of that shape made of soft metal. The gases, at a very high velocity and temperature, pierced the steel armour of an enemy tank or the concrete of fortifications. The striking power and penetration depended on the size of the main charge used, while the velocity and effective range also depended on the propelling charge and the diameter of the launcher tube employed. The shot was initiated by a small fuse, and the main charge was fitted with a percussion detonator.³

The design of single-use tube launchers emphasised simplicity of operation. Projectiles were slipped on from the front, with a wooden shaft with metal fins inserted into the tube to stabilise flight. Aiming was done with one lever, while a second formed a simple trigger mechanism. The system was protected by a rotating safety. When fired, a strong jet of propellant gases and flame escaped to the rear of the launcher, requiring particular attention to safety behind the operator. At the same time, this produced an almost recoilless shot, which facilitated an accurate strike on the target.⁴

In 1942, the Germans took notice of American Bazooka launchers used in North Africa and decided to copy the idea. In the test version of the Gretchen project, short launchers were created; these were followed by the short-range, low-power Faustpatrone 30 and 30 Klein, the latter being successfully produced from mid-1943 to the end of the war. The developmental version — Panzerfaust 60 — was already implemented in the autumn of that year. The next step was to design a launcher with

1 TsAMO, f. 973, op. 1, d. 359, list. 41.

2 See: Rościszewski L. 1993.

3 German operating manuals for the 30 Klein, 60, and 100 grenade launcher versions. Published in summer–autumn 1944, print runs: 100,000–150,000 copies. TsAMO, f. 500, op. 12451, d. 194.

4 Russian-language versions of grenade-launcher operating manuals aimed at soldiers of the Red Army. TsAMO, f. 1124, op. 1, d. 59, list. 7; f. 1676, op. 1, d. 71, list. 4–5; f. 208, op. 2511, d. 3135, list. 30.

even greater range and power, the Panzerfaust 100. This entered mass production at the end of 1944. In March 1945, the Panzerfaust 150, with further improved parameters — including a lighter, reshaped projectile, a fragmentation version, and a reusable launcher — went into production, but this weapon reached the front only in negligible numbers. In total, nearly 7 million Panzerfausts were produced in Germany. Quite a few test versions were also created, which were taken over by the victors and helped lay the groundwork for the development of Soviet anti-tank grenade launchers (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Panzerfausts began to be widely used on the Eastern Front in mid-1943. Photo from the spring of 1944 (Source: BA DB. Sign. 101I-710-0371-20)

In postwar Germany, new versions of grenade launchers have referenced their famous predecessors, bearing the designations Panzerfaust 44 and — the model still used today — Panzerfaust 3. Meanwhile, already in early 1945, Soviet special units tested the RPG-1 launcher, copied from the Panzerfaust, during the fighting for Tolkmicko, as well as in other places. This equipment, considered a secret weapon, was tested there by a detached special-purpose unit the size of an NKVD battalion, the forerunner of the later famous spetsnaz. After the war, the Panzerfaust 150, in turn, served as the basis for the next version, the RPG-2, with the development programme culminating in the RPG-7, produced from the 1960s onwards and used in various parts of the world to this day.⁵

⁵ See: Instruction manual for the most common variant of the Soviet RPG-7: *Наставление...* 1983.

Elbląg (*Elbing*) — Effective Trials in the City

In the final phase of the war, during defensive fighting on German territory, Panzerfausts were employed on a massive scale and were often more readily available than classic small arms. A model example of their use in the defence of cities and river bridgeheads is Elbląg, which was located at that time on the border of East and West Prussia. On the evening of 23 January 1945, only a few days after the launch of the Red Army's winter offensive, several Soviet tanks from the spearhead of the 5th Guards Tank Army, advancing at the head of the 2nd Belorussian Front commanded by Marshal Konstantin Rokossowski, unexpectedly appeared on the city's streets. The German commandant of Elbląg, Colonel Eberhard Schöpffer, had to react instantly to this dangerous and unexpected Soviet move. In the presence of Wehrmacht generals visiting the garrison at the time, he ordered tank-destroyer groups equipped with Panzerfausts into action. He later reported that he had had to use them since the enemy was already in the streets. He ordered the Soviet vehicles destroyed as a matter of urgency and posts armed with grenade launchers to be set up at the river bridges to prevent the crossings from being seized. Schöpffer also mentioned another danger:

I was worried that enemy tanks might reach the area of the railway station, where there were columns of refugees that could make an excellent target for them.⁶

Soon a report arrived that one of the anti-tank groups had destroyed an enemy tank in the Old Market. In the commandant's office, the shots from the intruders' guns and the explosions of armoured fist rounds were distinctly audible. Shortly thereafter, further information came in that three more Soviet tanks had been hit. The remaining vehicles headed north and paused for a moment near the brewery, after which they left the city, still pursued by intervention groups with Panzerfausts in their hands. According to the colonel, it turned out that during the night yet another Soviet tank had become unfit for combat and was abandoned by its crew on the northern edge of the city. In his combat report, Schöpffer concluded that the successes of the first clashes were due to the alarm sub-units, who, armed with shaped-charge projectiles, drove the enemy from the streets and then resisted them in the suburbs:

The enemy's intention was undoubtedly to seize Elbląg by a surprise attack. Thwarting that intention, we owe it to the energetic action of a well-trained group of tank destroyers. Young recruits, still inexperienced in combat, under the command of good NCOs, carried out their task.⁷

6 Schöpffer E. 2005.

7 Schöpffer E. 2005.

Curth Günther, a lieutenant from the German garrison, confirmed that enemy armoured vehicles had opened fire in the city and, although there were no major losses in personnel, they had destroyed many horse-drawn carts belonging to civilian refugees along the crowded streets. According to him, two tanks were knocked out by shots from Panzerfausts, while the remaining five rolled along Browarna Street. They remained stationary until morning at the turnoff to Nowakowo, north of the Mudra barracks, blocking the road, the railway line, and the river's outlet to the Vistula Lagoon.⁸

Certainly present in Elbląg at that time were the tanks of the reconnaissance platoon of Junior Lieutenant Pavel Byeryegov, belonging to the battalion commanded by Captain Gennadiy Diachenko of the 31st Tank Brigade.⁹ The war correspondent Yevgeny Kriger quoted the accounts of their crews. For a change, they noticed only one vehicle lost in action:

We dash into the narrow streets of the Old Town. Lieutenant Aleynikov's tank rams the enemy's transport column. He is supported by the tanks of Isajev and Yefimyenko.¹⁰ We bypass the bridge, turning onto the first street. From the front, we received fire from anti-tank guns and Panzerfausts. The lead vehicle of our column is hit. The driver was burned alive. The rest of the crew quickly transferred to another tank. We leave the burning wreck and at full throttle, head for the northern edge of the city.¹¹

Walking home shortly after the tanks had passed through were Gertrude Tuschewska and a friend. The Old Town was dark, as the streetlights had been deliberately turned off. Under the Market Gate stood a sailor armed with a Panzerfaust, and another a little further on. In the Old Market, the girls saw a Russian tank burning noisily. The sky above it glowed red, and every so often, detonations and columns of fire erupted from inside.¹²

In the opening moments of the fighting for Elbląg, Colonel Schöpffer commanded a city garrison that was still inexperienced and poorly armed. However, the strength of the German resistance quickly solidified, and the chaotic initial clashes turned into three weeks of fierce fighting. The city commandant praised the willpower of his soldiers:

At this point, I want to mention a young boy from the Hitlerjugend, covered in dust. This sixteen-year-old youth — I forgot his name — was in a strike group that volunteered to recapture the Gallwitz barracks earlier seized by the Russians. Suddenly,

8 Günther C. 1954, 54–62.

9 See: Gliniecki T. 2021.

10 Incorrect surname; actually Yefimov.

11 Kriger E. 1968, 160.

12 Tuschewski G. 2007, 16.

he found himself alone facing one of the Soviet tanks that was heading toward our positions. He instantly decided to fire a Panzerfaust and blew the armoured colossus into the air. In the official communiqués, it was then stated that already more than 30 tanks had been destroyed during the fighting for Elbląg. The next morning the matter was reported officially and I awarded that boy the Iron Cross, 2nd Class.¹³

A report from the German 2nd Army at the beginning of February confirmed that in Elbląg many tanks had been destroyed in the first few days of fighting, and one of the first tanks was taken out by a Hitlerjugend youth using a Panzerfaust, for which he was awarded the Iron Cross.¹⁴ The name of the brave youth was probably remembered by a Luftwaffe officer, who noted in his account:

The youth perform best. Little Schmit hits three tanks accurately. The boys assault every house occupied by the Russians, often with only a Panzerfaust in hand.¹⁵

The defenders of Elbląg did not lack anti-tank grenade launchers, but they could not compensate for the lack of other necessary types of weapons. Alfred Neubert noted this when writing about the final period of the fighting, just before the German garrison withdrew beyond the river:

On 9 February the situation in particular sectors was no longer tenable. Our losses and lack of ammunition proved impossible to make up for. Heavy weapons fired only sporadically. The soldiers had no ammunition for the last few machine guns. Only small arms and Panzerfaust grenade launchers remained to them.¹⁶

Similar combat results were reported by the commandant of the Poznań fortress between 13 January and 1 February, who informed of the destruction of 56 Soviet tanks, including 14 destroyed by Panzerfausts. Inside the city, of the seven vehicles destroyed in the streets, five were eliminated with these uncomplicated launchers.¹⁷

Gdańsk — Tank Destroyers Perfect their Skills

From 26 January 1945, after another reorganisation of the Wehrmacht's defensive forces, the formation of the so-called Panzer-Jagd Division began on threatened sectors of the front. These were improvised units divided into small groups, mainly of youths

13 Schöpffer E. 2005.

14 CAW. T311, 7219069.

15 *Die Kämpfe um Elbing...*

16 Neubert A. 2009.

17 CAW. T311, 7218856.

and old men conscripted into the *Volkssturm* (Fig. 2), armed with single-use grenade launchers mounted on bicycles, because no other means of transport were provided for them.¹⁸ Lieutenant Hans Schäufler described such a group in his account of the defensive fighting in Pomerania around Gdańsk:

One day a company of tank destroyers was attached to the 12th Panzergrenadier Regiment: fourteen members of the Hitlerjugend from Gdańsk, equipped with bicycles and Panzerfausts. The boys tried to make a very manly impression, being under the influence of the importance of the task assigned to them. Great seriousness was written on their childish faces. The grenadiers fed them, discreetly took away the Panzerfausts, and allowed them a long sleep at the defensive positions. And then they sent them home, to their mothers, where they belonged.¹⁹

Also, within armoured units, composite sub-units called *Panzervernichtungskompanie* were formed in armoured units from the crews of vehicles already unserviceable or deprived of fuel. In the 35th Panzer Regiment of the 4th Panzer Division, such a company was commanded by the one-armed Second Lieutenant Klaus Schiller. Having just recovered from wounds, he voluntarily returned to the front and, at Jasień (*Nenkau*) near Gdańsk, personally engaged Soviet tanks with Panzerfausts, later describing the extreme emotions that he experienced:

The approaching clatter of tracks suddenly broke off with a short creak. We clearly made out a T-34 standing at the edge of the street, which menacingly raised its gun and rotated it, seeking a target. In that state, the steel colossus was least dangerous for us. Despite careful observation, we noticed no Soviet infantry in the area. So — to work!

We crept cautiously ever closer to the steel monster: 50 meters... 40... 30... and we found ourselves in a shell crater. From this perspective, the armoured opponent stood out clearly against the background of the paling night sky.

The fiery tail of our Panzerfaust sharply lit up the darkness... Then two seconds during which my heart literally froze motionless! And then a bright flash and a hard impact. A perfect hit!

A few screams, a hatch cover flung open violently, and several figures tumbled from the interior into the surrounding void, only to disappear limping into the night's darkness a moment later. We did not fire after them. Flames appeared in the tank; a moment later it burned, shaken by shells exploding inside it.²⁰

18 TsAMO, f. 500, op. 12451, d. 499, 1–4.

19 Schäufler H. 2010, 83.

20 Schäufler H. 2010, 90.

In the Gdańsk Fortified Region, the German anti-tank fortifications consisted mainly of anti-tank ditches, barriers, and barricades. In some places, reinforced-concrete partitions were also erected.²¹ Near these fortifications, numerous positions were prepared for Panzerfaust operators, as the weapon represented the simplest and most accessible means of defence.²² The second weapon tasked with the bulk of anti-tank combat was the 8.8 cm anti-aircraft gun, which was employed against ground targets. For Soviet tanks, this was a very dangerous opponent, because the coastal hills covering the approaches to the ports and shipyards were heavily saturated with anti-aircraft batteries, and the high velocity of projectiles fired from the long-barrelled guns easily penetrated the armour of even the most durable enemy vehicles.²³



Fig. 2. Training in the use of the launcher for members of the German militia — the *Volkssturm*. March 1944 (Source: BA DB. Sign. 146-1973-001-36)

Grenade launchers were also used to provide anti-tank protection on the edges of cities. In Oliwa (*Oliva*), every house located on the outskirts was defended and equipped with heavy machine guns and Panzerfausts, which were most often fired from basement windows and attics.²⁴ The sector along the anti-tank ditch running

21 TsAMO, f. 46, op. 2394, d. 1613.

22 TsAMO, f. 46, op. 2394, d. 1526, 30.

23 TsAMO, f. 11122, op. 1, d. 27, list. 262.

24 TsAMO, f. 404, op. 9711, d. 555, dok. 99OP, 68–73, 124.

along the highway and railway line between Wrzeszcz (*Langfuhr*) and Oliwa, defended by a battalion of the 7th Infantry Division, was attacked simultaneously by almost 30 Soviet T-34 tanks. The grenadiers destroyed a significant number of them with Panzerfausts, but when heavy JS-2 tanks joined the attack, there was no chance of stopping them with projectiles from hand-held launchers. The unit commander, Colonel Karl Brassert, then ordered a withdrawal toward the centre of the locality.²⁵

Beginning urban fighting in the southern districts of the port cities, the Wehrmacht based its defence on fortified facilities and massive buildings, from whose basements and attics it effectively eliminated Soviet tanks with Panzerfausts, but it also realised the necessity of fighting against the enemy's superior forces.²⁶ Therefore, composite alarm units were hastily formed, into which were drafted convalescents from military hospitals, soldiers on leave unable to return to their units, and finally representatives of various militarised professions such as policemen and railwaymen. The soldiers were equipped with any small arms still available in depots. From prisoners' testimonies and documents captured by Red Army soldiers, it was revealed that the enemy was hastily throwing into battle reserves from Gdańsk and Tczew, because it was precisely there that the rapid formation and training of composite battle groups, including tank-destroyer units, was being carried out.²⁷

One such reserve sub-unit was initially the 3rd Battalion of the 68th Infantry Regiment of the 23rd Infantry Division, which was located in the Orunia (*Ohra*) area. It was later transferred to Ujeścisko (*Wonneberg*) with the task of defending the highway leading toward Gdańsk. In this battalion, there were four companies of about 40–50 men each; each received three light machine guns and 15–20 Panzerfausts.²⁸

Similarly, in Western Pomerania, where the German units defending the bridgehead near Szczecin (*Stettin-Altdamm*) were reinforced by the 108th Assault Gun Brigade, five battalions of large-calibre artillery, and an anti-tank unit which, in addition to thirty-six 7.5 cm guns, had three companies of tank destroyers armed with Panzerfausts.²⁹

German soldiers improved their use of grenade launchers in combat. Special badges were increasingly awarded for destroying a tank with handheld weapons. Five such silver distinctions, signifying the personal destruction of the same number of Soviet armoured vehicles, resulted in the award of the badge in gold. Second Lieutenant Schiller claimed that during the last days of the fighting for Gdańsk, in the course of street clashes, his men had become proficient in an effective tactic of group destruction of enemy vehicles:

25 *Der Danzig-Einsatz...*, 2–3.

26 Dieckert K., Grossmann H. 2011, 284.

27 TsAMO, f. 309, op. 4073, d. 812, 7, 9.

28 TsAMO, f. 309, op. 4073, d. 844, 415–418.

29 Zavyalov A., Kalyadin T. 1960, 200.

Through attics and lofts connected with one another for anti-aircraft defence reasons, we approached covertly right up to the Soviet armoured vanguards. As security, at a little roof window, we left a gunner with a submachine gun. Then, through the smoke outlets, with our Panzerfausts we took the enemy tank under fire. When some T-34 unexpectedly flew into the air, it usually made a stunning impression on the Soviets. Next, we exploited the opponent's confusion to disappear unnoticed and look for a new target. In this way, we forced the Soviets to move more slowly and cautiously. Every hour, every day won, was unbelievably important for the refugees. Fortunately, we did not lack Panzerfausts. They could literally be found everywhere. It was worse, however, with provisions.³⁰

In the spring of 1945, the use of Panzerfausts to hold back enemy forces became the norm in German anti-tank operations. In infantry units, even every third rifleman was equipped with a launcher for shaped-charge grenades. In the case of operating Panzerschrecks, combat teams of three (*Trupp*) or six men (*Gruppe*) were formed.³¹ Another commonly used method of fighting Soviet tanks was to lay roadside improvised explosive devices made from unused artillery ammunition.³²

A Wehrmacht intelligence report summarising the fierce clashes of 25 March stated that in Gdynia and Gdańsk, and along the coast of the Vistula Lagoon, an exceptionally large number — as many as 153 — of Soviet tanks had been destroyed. On a single defensive sector of the 73rd Infantry Division, 24 vehicles were eliminated at that time through the use of Panzerfausts.³³

Colonel General Erhard Raus, commanding the 3rd Panzer Army, after the March fighting in Western Pomerania — despite the defenders' defeat — enthusiastically reported to Adolf Hitler the results of employing the launchers:

As for particular facts from the Pomeranian battle, I can report that of the 580 enemy tanks destroyed so far, 380 — i.e., two-thirds — were destroyed with Panzerfausts, that is, thanks to the courage of individual soldiers. Never before has an army achieved such great successes thanks to the use of this weapon.³⁴

'It was a pity about those brave soldiers', General Heinz Guderian — an armour specialist and at the time Chief of Staff of the Army High Command (OKH), responsible for German operations on the Eastern Front — summed up briefly the shocking blood toll.

30 Schäuffler H. 2010, 92.

31 TsAMO, f. 500, op. 12451, d. 157, letter 40 and ff.

32 TsAMO, f. 233, op. 2356, d. 771, 9–10.

33 TsAMO, f. 500, op. 12454, d. 556, 63.

34 Raus E. 2007, 226.

Those looking at matters soberly knew that too often the price for destroying tanks was the life of the launcher operators, who by necessity had to approach very close to the target and were thus exposed to effective enemy fire.³⁵

Red Army Soldiers with Captured Weapons

At the start of the 1945 offensive, the Red Army was surprised by the large scale of Panzerfaust use, as well as by their effectiveness, combined with the extreme fanaticism exhibited by the youngest and oldest Germans alike. It was not insignificant for Soviet armoured commanders that many users of anti-tank grenade launchers were thoroughly imbued with the anti-Soviet propaganda of the Third Reich and were ready to die in defence of a homeland threatened by the enemy. It was not a coincidence that every German leaflet instructing operators of 'armoured fists' referred to the figure of the sixteenth-century knight Götz von Berlichingen, who fought with a steel prosthetic hand.³⁶ All this gave rise to fears of a loss of combat capability in attacking tank and self-propelled artillery units. The problems were noted by Marshal Ivan Konev, commander of one of the forces striking central Germany:

For the first time in the entire war, we encountered enemy defences densely saturated with anti-tank fists, for which methods of combat had not yet been sufficiently developed.³⁷

Marshal Konstanty Rokossowski, whose 2nd Belorussian Front was attacking Pomerania around Gdańsk, had already, in February, ordered tanks to be particularly protected. In Directive no. 4283–4285/sz, dated 21 February 1945, the Front command stated:

The high density of buildings in the northwestern regions of Poland favours the operation of tank destroyers and creates the need for more thorough protection of the vehicles. Above all, tanks and self-propelled guns should cooperate with fusiliers, and the latter must protect the vehicles by neutralising the operators of Panzerfaust launchers. Therefore, fusiliers should operate in small groups, be placed under the command of tank and self-propelled gun commanders. As often as possible, sub-machine gunners should be treated as a landing party and carried on the hulls of vehicles. Do not allow enemy operators closer than 40 m. Establish simple signals of communication between the vehicle and the landing party on it. Use riflemen

³⁵ Guderian H. 2024, 320.

³⁶ Popularized in the drama by Goethe J.W. 1877.

³⁷ Koniew I. 1968, 74.

from armoured and mechanised units primarily to protect the vehicles. Teach the crews simple ways to extinguish vehicle fires using water, earth, or soldiers' capes.³⁸

During the fighting for Pomerania in March, Red Army soldiers became increasingly aware of the Germans' widespread use of grenade launchers, leading to improved protection of vehicles against such threats. Approaches to bridges, forest edges, street intersections, and city alleys, where anti-tank teams might hide, were carefully checked. Soviet infantry rode on the hulls of tanks as mounted detachments, protecting the vehicles from German launcher operators. A makeshift shield for the armoured vehicles involved hanging screens on the vehicles that triggered earlier detonation and diminished the effectiveness of the shaped charge fired from the launchers. Ingenious tank crews used fence mesh, mattress springs, and even metal beds for this purpose. Tests with wire-mesh screens demonstrated that the armour of a heavy JS-2 tank, when protected in this way, remained unperforated despite four hits from Panzerfaust projectiles.³⁹

The Red Army also quickly utilised captured equipment for its own use. Above all, in the occupied territories, a large number of serviceable launchers were seized, and the simplicity of their operation favoured the training of Soviet soldiers to fire them. In preparation for the fighting for Gdańsk, in just one of the dozen-odd rifle corps participating in these battles, training was provided to 170 men from the 193rd Rifle Division, 85 from the 44th Guards Rifle Division, and 90 from the 354th Rifle Division. In total, this amounted to thousands of soldiers familiar with the weapon — mostly serving in engineer-sapper battalions. Anticipating urban combat, considerable stocks were collected: 600–700 'armoured fists' per division. In the 295th Rifle Division, during two weeks of fighting, 2,300 captured Panzerfausts were collected, 1,700 of which were used for training and initial engagements. Another 100 were handed over to the corps, leaving 500 units for the division's own sub-units.⁴⁰

From 12 to 27 March 1945, the engineering battalions of the 2nd Shock Army prepared for the assault on Gdańsk, conducting exercises with newly formed assault groups, as well as instructing general-purpose sub-units how to handle Panzerfausts and captured submachine guns (Fig. 3). The assault teams consisted of four assault troops and four flamethrower operators, including two reserves. Three operators of 'armoured-fist' launchers also operated with each group. Sappers did not belong to the groups trained as infantry. Destroyed buildings and captured fortifications served as assault training objectives. These exercises demonstrated that captured grenade launchers could serve as effective weapons for taking localities. Typically, an assault group approached the

38 TsAMO, f. 1131, op. 1, d. 45, list. 60.

39 TsAMO, f. 3168, op. 1, d. 31, list. 29.

40 TsAMO, f. 896, op. 1, d. 414, list. 86.

objective to within 50–60 m. From that distance, on a predetermined signal, several armoured fists were fired and, taking advantage of the effect of surprise, resistance points were quickly attacked, with hand grenades thrown into windows and doors, fire delivered from submachine guns, and the objective set alight with flamethrowers. During the exercises, the experience gained in the fighting for Elbląg and Grudziądz was maximised. Each session ended with a discussion of actions and an indication of strengths and weaknesses. In addition, the entire personnel of the battalions familiarised themselves with the specifics and operation of Panzerfausts, including test firing. Those who belonged to the assault groups as launcher operators conducted daily firing drills to develop automaticity and accuracy. At the same time, salvo fire was tested, and devices allowing the simultaneous firing of up to ten grenades were constructed. For this purpose, several metal and wooden boxes were built. Training salvo firing clearly confirmed the advisability of such use of Panzerfausts in city assaults and the need to collect specimens of captured weapons.⁴¹

Flamethrower operators and sappers from the assault group, when coming under fire from strongpoints or when the fighting moved inside buildings, fought like the other assault troops—with submachine guns and hand grenades—and only rarely using Panzerfausts and flamethrowers. However, in fighting for entire city blocks, the role of support weapons increased. Then the sappers advanced 100–200 m ahead and, with Panzerfausts, neutralised or suppressed strongpoints that blocked the approach to the objective.⁴²

The launchers were used in combat quite often, and each day the groups expended a total of 200–250 rounds. They proved to be an effective weapon in close combat, at a distance from the enemy of no more than 200 m. Models with the greatest explosive power were usually used. Accuracy was limited, but usually two or three shots were enough to eliminate enemy strongpoints. Reduced effectiveness was noted when firing at an opponent occupying positions in trenches. In some cases, Panzerfaust operators were transported to the forward edge of the battle line on tanks and then advanced on foot to positions from which they could strike strongpoints inaccessible to tank gun fire. The device for salvo fire at longer distances, with rapid changes of position and with the use of a larger number of tanks, was not used very often, but this did not exclude its use in the future. However, it was necessary to improve the portability of the position and to make it possible to fire from it from occupied trenches.⁴³ The conclusions were also that in the future exercises should be conducted for the full complements of assault groups and that training in the operation of grenade launchers should be expanded to all personnel.⁴⁴

41 Photographs of devices for salvo firing from ten Panzerfausts in: TsAMO, f. 404, op. 9711, d. 555, dok. 99OP, 122.

42 TsAMO, f. 309, op. 4073, d. 812, 53.

43 TsAMO, f. 421, op. 6562, d. 183, 9–10.

44 TsAMO, f. 309, op. 4073, d. 812, 54.

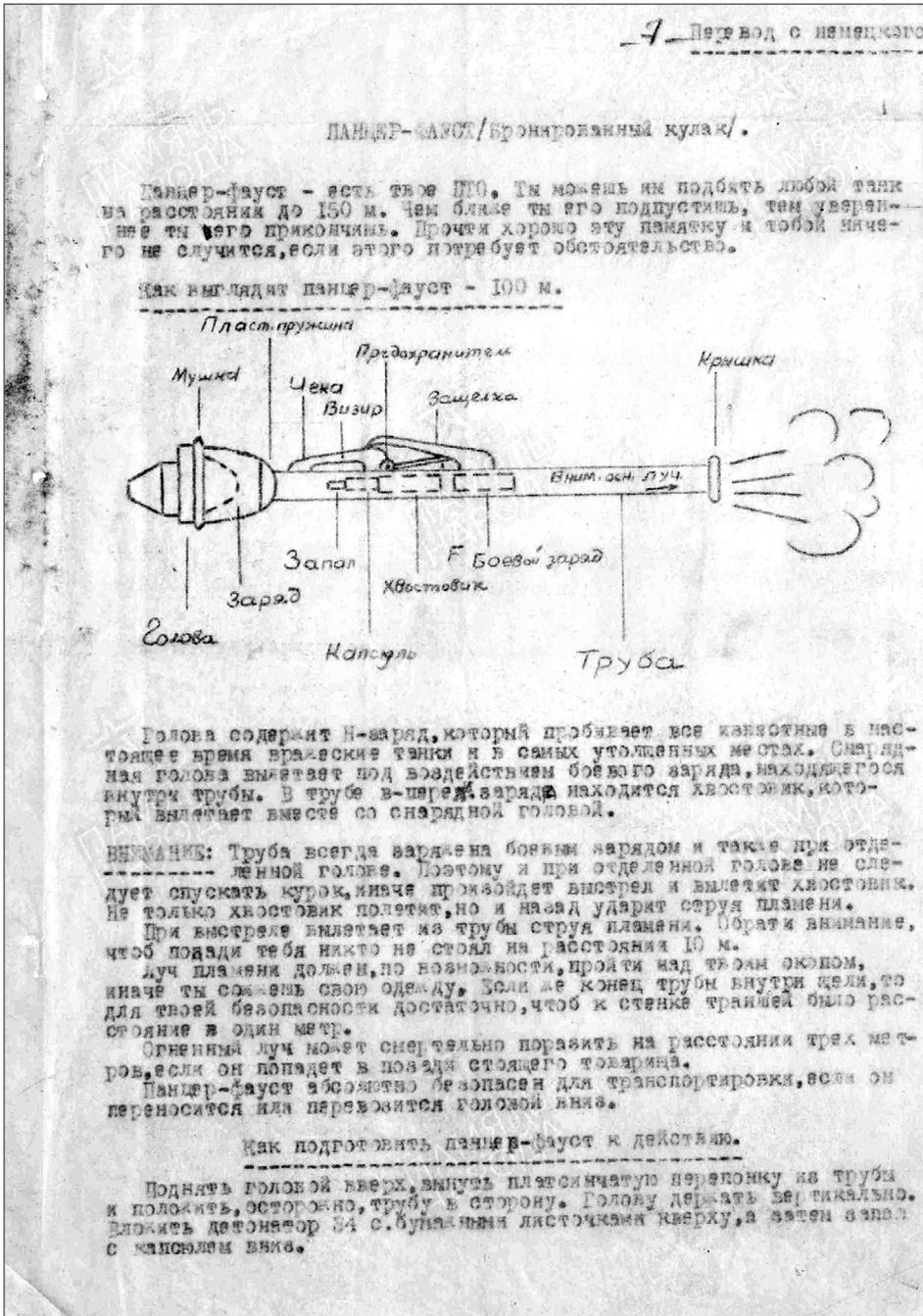


Fig. 3. Panzerfaust operating manual translated for the needs of Red Army soldiers (Source: TsAMO)

Typically, a defended building had a garrison of about thirty men equipped with two machine guns. For example, an assault group of the 636th Infantry Regiment of the 193rd Rifle Division, supported by one gun and a heavy machine gun whose fire was coordinated to sustain the attack continuously, moved toward the building. The enemy responded with little accuracy, which allowed a close approach. The walls were breached with Panzerfausts, whereupon the group burst inside and, after 40 minutes of fighting, seized the objective.⁴⁵ Reports from the 193rd Rifle Division also noted problems caused by Panzerfausts fired by German soldiers from narrow street manholes. They were only neutralised by firing guns at nearby structures, thereby hitting the launcher operators with fragments of falling bricks and tiles.⁴⁶

Also in other formations, for example, in the 49th Army, the engineer battalions trained in the specifics of combat before entering the city streets. Captured Panzerfausts were used for exercises, with instruction in their operation.⁴⁷ After the battle, it was concluded that infantry sub-units cooperated skilfully in the city with their own tanks and self-propelled guns, clearing the way for them and protecting them from launcher operators on the German side. The tanks, in turn, eliminated enemy firing points that halted the advance of the infantry.⁴⁸

In cooperation with two rifle corps of the 49th Army, on 13 March, the vehicles of the 1st Guards Tank Corps entered the fighting near Sopot. At the beginning, the Germans held them back on a line running along the edges of the forested massifs. Tanks were then used only in small groups, and their manoeuvrability, because of the thaw, was limited to the main roads. On many occasions, the assigned route could be traversed only in one direction, and attempts to return resulted in vehicles bogging down in the mud. Some vehicles attempted to break straight through the forest, but there they became easy targets for operators of shaped-charge grenade launchers.⁴⁹

Similarly, the poor results of the 8th Guards Tank Corps were also attributed to the effects of the spring thaw and by operating in hilly terrain, where armoured manoeuvre was limited. The tanks were forced to use only the paved roads, and any attempt to leave them resulted in becoming stuck in the mud. This not only reduced the pace of the attack but also led to losses, because immobilised tanks were excellent targets for the enemy. Soviet infantry did not neutralise Panzerfaust positions in time, which also led to the loss of tanks.⁵⁰

When the 8th Guards Tank Corps was introduced into the fighting, the 3rd Guards Detached Assault Engineer-Sapper Battalion was assigned to secure the tanks' route.

45 TsAMO, f. 46, op. 2394, d. 1549, 1-3, 22-23.

46 TsAMO, f. 997, op. 1, d. 320, list. 210.

47 TsAMO, f. 309, op. 4073, d. 844, 324-325, 414.

48 TsAMO, f. 404, op. 9711, d. 555, dok. 99OP, 152.

49 TsAMO, f. 46, op. 2394, d. 1186, 269-280.

50 TsAMO, f. 309, op. 4073, d. 812, 18-19.

On the approaches to Gdańsk, the corps was additionally assigned the 27th Guards Engineer-Sapper Battalion. Due to an insufficient number of motor vehicles, some of the sappers were seated on tank hulls. The rest moved on foot and could not be fully utilised. Despite the difficulties, they cleared 78 km of roads of mines, removed 800 mines, dismantled 40 blockades and barriers, and eliminated 41 Panzerfaust operators.⁵¹

The fighting for Gdańsk demonstrated the uselessness of employing large numbers of tanks and self-propelled guns in a major city. Narrow streets, which were blocked by barricades, barriers, and collapsed buildings, favoured the operations of anti-tank forces, including a large number of soldiers armed with hand-held grenade launchers. It was impossible to manoeuvre and to use a larger number of vehicles at one time. Fighting in the city also resulted in numerous fires and smoke, which prevented tank crews from properly observing the battlefield.⁵²

Even during the clashes for the outer defensive ring of Gdańsk and Gdynia, tanks were allocated by armoured brigades to particular infantry divisions. There was ample time to prepare the cooperation of units, specify tasks, and plan actions. Yet this was not done, leaving matters at the stage of telephone conversations and map markings. The results of such merely formal cooperation were lamentable. Uncoordinated movements of troops led to unprecedented losses of tanks destroyed by enemy Panzerfausts. One of the armoured brigades supporting the 70th Army at that time had to strike eight destroyed vehicles from its rolls and bury 68 men killed in action.⁵³

It even happened that the vehicles of the 8th Guards Tank Corps assaulted suburban hills without rifle protection and thus became easy targets for Panzerfausts fired from ambushes.⁵⁴ More serious problems arose when German armoured weapons — especially the heavy Königstiger tanks — and tank-destroyer groups with grenade launchers ambushed entire columns of Soviet T-34s, which, confident of easy victory, moved in a marching formation without security and engineering reconnaissance. Sapper Lev Sverdlov recalled this when describing the end of a tank column purchased with donations from the inhabitants of Uzbekistan:

In the vicinity of Sopot I remember a certain terrible sight. Lined up on the road stands an entire column of our tanks, about 20 machines, burned by German Panzerfaust operators. On the tanks, the inscription '20 years of the Uzbek SSR'. The column was a 'gift'...⁵⁵

51 TsAMO, f. 309, op. 4073, d. 812, 48.

52 TsAMO, f. 46, op. 2404, d. 29, 24, 41.

53 TsAMO, f. 427, op. 11105, d. 462, 70–75, 171.

54 TsAMO, f. 46, op. 2404, d. 30, 14–15.

55 Koyfman G. 2011.

Most Soviet armoured units were halted before the assault on the central districts of the cities. During street fighting, within the assault groups, vehicles participated only in subgroups of two or three, providing infantry with cover from fire while gaining protection themselves from launcher operators. The effect was a reduction in the number of vehicles lost.⁵⁶ After the clashes, the installation of anti-aircraft machine guns was recommended, for example, on the ISU-122 self-propelled guns, which had performed poorly in urban combat, to give them better protection against Panzerfausts and other simple anti-tank weapons.⁵⁷

Conclusion

Much of what happened in Pomerania occurred along the entire German-Soviet front. To familiarise their own troops with captured equipment, texts under the heading “Learn the Enemy’s Technology” described combat properties, parts of the launcher, and preparation for firing. They indicated how to make the launcher safe and how to fire it lying down, standing, and from a trench. They discussed the actions of a sub-unit during an operation, safety measures, and the choice of position.⁵⁸ German leaflets *Die Panzerfaust* were translated into Russian, and diagrams of the weapon were disseminated.⁵⁹

Marshal Georgy Zhukov, commander of the 1st Belorussian Front, also issued a special order on the necessity of learning the operation, collection, and use of the Panzerfaust as an effective weapon:

In the recent fighting, the enemy has used a significant number of Panzerfausts, and not only old models but also new ones. These grenades have great destructive power; they pierce the steel plates of tanks and other vehicles, crush bunkers, and break walls of brick, concrete, and stone. Lightness and simplicity of operation, the possibility of accurate fire up to 50 m, and significant destructive power mean that they are a convenient weapon for street fighting at short distances. Consequently, captured ‘Panzerfaust’ launchers in the hands of a well-trained Red Army soldier can be effectively used in fighting the enemy’s tanks, in street battles for larger localities with dense buildings, and in neutralising fortified areas saturated with permanent fortifications, from caponiers to forts. I order the collection of all Panzerfausts found and their transfer to the authority of the divisional artillery commander, who will distribute them further to sub-units. In each company, training in the operation

56 TsAMO, f. 404, op. 9711, d. 555, dok. 99OP, 172 and following pages.

57 TsAMO, f. 46, op. 2404, d. 29, 6–8.

58 Vladimirov A. 1945.

59 TsAMO, f. 1124, op. 1, d. 59, list 7; f. 1676, op. 1, d. 71, list. 45; f. 208, op. 2511, d. 3135, list. 30.

of the launchers is to be organised, to be completed within ten days. To train and command the group of launcher operators, designate one of the company's officers. In training, use the leaflet issued by the Operations Department of the Front in 1945. During training, practice firing at armoured vehicles and at fortification walls.⁶⁰

In the divisions of the 1st Belorussian Front, further instructions were prepared on the basis of this order, mainly on forming groups of operators and providing several days of training in the handling of the weapon.⁶¹ Shortly thereafter, the 96th Infantry Regiment of the 274th Rifle Division reported that Panzerfaust training had been provided to 56 men in the first battalion and 48 in the second, 63 in the fusilier company, 11 scouts, and 9 sappers. In total, 187 soldiers in the regiment became acquainted with the new weapon.⁶² In mid-March, in each rifle company of the 89th Rifle Division, groups of operators were organised, consisting of eight men each. A two-day training for commanders was conducted. Thirty people were trained, including ten officers. For ten days, meanwhile, the operation of the launcher was practised, with the training cycle concluding in live firing on the front line. After this training, however, only a few weapons remained in particular regiments.⁶³

Red Army soldiers operating the launchers were a valuable asset, because the grenades they used detonated with great force, causing not only equipment losses but also a decline in German morale, as they were struck by a weapon that had until recently been their own. When striking at short range, there was no sound of shots, and the explosions took the defenders by surprise. Thus, on 17 April, scouts from the 362nd Rifle Division captured a serviceable mortar battery after its crew had fled following a salvo fired simultaneously from 12 Panzerfausts.

However, the weak points of the captured launchers were also noted. They revealed the operator's position because, at the moment of firing, they emitted flame and smoke. In addition, the shooter often had to leave cover so that the backblast would not endanger other soldiers. Sometimes, aiming was inaccurate, and as a result, the grenades failed to hit the target.⁶⁴

Reports increasingly mentioned the Germans' use of launchers with fragmentation projectiles. In the 61st Army of the 1st Belorussian Front, it was ordered to collect and send to the army's combat training department, as quickly as possible, two specimens of each type of launcher. The department, immediately upon receiving them and testing their operation, was to prepare recommendations for use by Red Army

60 TsAMO, f. 1684, op. 1, d. 144, list. 285.

61 TsAMO, f. 7617, op. 70036, d. 1, list. 63.

62 TsAMO, f. 1569, op. 1, d. 103, list. 38.

63 TsAMO, f. 1251, op. 1, d. 27, list. 120.

64 TsAMO, f. 1682, op. 1, d. 177, list. 353.

soldiers.⁶⁵ Soviet units began to use them, noting the greater effectiveness achieved at night and the need for precise aiming. In the press and in leaflets, the dimensions and technical descriptions of the weapon were published.⁶⁶ It was also observed that among the Germans, one operator was designated from each platoon, or several-person groups were created in companies.⁶⁷

Sometimes, however, too broad a dissemination of the launchers captured from the enemy was refused. The command of the 22nd Army responded to a request from the 94th Rifle Corps, stating that it did not agree to the additional publication of instructions for their operation in the army bulletin. 'If you want, print it at your own expense', subordinates were advised.⁶⁸

In sum, the German hand-held launchers for shaped-charge grenades of the Panzerfaust type were very quickly disseminated within Wehrmacht units during the final period of the war as simple and effective anti-tank weapons. They proved particularly useful during fighting in densely urbanised terrain, where close-range fire and the element of surprise were effectively exploited. The armoured units of the Red Army immediately introduced methods of protection against shaped-charge grenades, regarding the use of their own infantry as riding detachments to eliminate enemy launcher operators as the best. Soviet troops also made extensive use of captured Panzerfausts as an offensive weapon in urban assaults, training sappers in the operation of the new equipment. The use of this weapon by both sides during the fighting for Pomerania in 1945 was primarily associated with clashes in cities and along lines of communication. It was characterised by the rapid application of the personnel's acquired experience, ingenuity in use, and improvements in the operation of the launchers. The skills gained were also used in the postwar period in introducing developmental projects for individual anti-tank launchers.

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65 TsAMO, f. 973, op. 1, d. 257, list. 561.

66 TsAMO, f. 402, op. 9575, d. 921, list. 553.

67 TsAMO, f. 208, op. 2511, d. 3135, list. 29–30.

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