

TAC NEWS

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November–December 2018

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THE SIEGE OF CHOLM - 1942



The Soviet counteroffensive of December 1941 took the German High Command totally by surprise. The feeling was that the Soviets were incapable of offensive action, but this feeling was proved to be in error when they actually *attacked*. The Northern Front, south of Lake Ilmen, under General Pavel Knochkin was given the responsibility of breaking the siege of Leningrad. As part of this operation, he made a thrust toward Vitebsk with the 3rd and 4th Shock Armies, and also the 33rd Army, as a part of an attempt to encircle Army Group Center. This attack penetrated deeply into the German rear; this was accomplished in spite of a lack of tanks.

Yeremenko's 4th Shock Army only had the 171st Tank Battalion with twenty-one Lend-Lease British Matildas and Valentines, plus ten T-60s, and the 141st Tank Battalion with four KV-Is, six T-34s, and twenty T-60s.

As German units retreated south and west, the German High Command gave orders that Demyansk and the cross-roads at Cholm must be held—a very large area. Encircled were SS *Division Totenkopf* as well as 12th, 30th, 32nd, 123rd, and 290th Infantry Divisions, plus other smaller units; in all 90,000 troops and 10,000 auxiliaries. The Russians wanted to keep the front moving but the going was difficult, as the terrain was swampy, and the weather was bad.

Cholm (or Kholm) was the intersection of five roads and the terrain was also swampy and difficult. Holding it meant controlling both the east-west and north-south roads. The road junction was important for both sides, offensively and defensively. When the war started it was a town of 12,000 people, but most of them had left. The town was largely made up of wooden houses with masonry government buildings. It stood on the only high ground around at the junction of the Lovat and Kunya rivers.

The Germans had taken Cholm in the 1941 Offensive. Since it was far to the rear no defensive positions were created, so the retreating Germans found an almost undefendable town. The ground was frozen so trenches were almost impossible to dig.



On January 19, 1942 German Major General Theodor Scherer was ordered to go to Cholm and form what became *Kampfgruppe Scherer* by taking command of any, and all, combat and non-combat units in order to organize them to hold the town. At this point his command consisted of parts of: 218th Infantry Division (soon to arrive); Reserve *Polizei* Battalion 65; Infantry Regiment 553 of 329th Infantry Division; 123rd Artillery Regiment fighting as infantry; *JagdKommando* 8; III. Battalion of

Luftwaffenfeldregiment I; many small detachments of cooks; veterinary corps, medical staff, etc.; as well as some platoons from Machine Gun Battalion 10; combat engineers from Pioneer Battalion 656; and 2nd Battalion 386th Infantry Regiment. The force also had a smattering of heavy and light MG 34s, plus two small 75mm infantry guns, and some mortars.



On January 21—two days after Scherer arrived—the town was surrounded and cut off. As he was taking command, elements of the Russian 33rd Rifle Division, including 164th Infantry Regiment, and a reinforced platoon of the 73rd Infantry Regiment armed with Maxim heavy machine guns and 82mm and 50mm mortars, seized the west-bank side of Cholm. This force was supplemented by the depleted 164th Tank Battalion, with two T-34s, eleven T-60s, and three rocket launching vehicles on January 23.

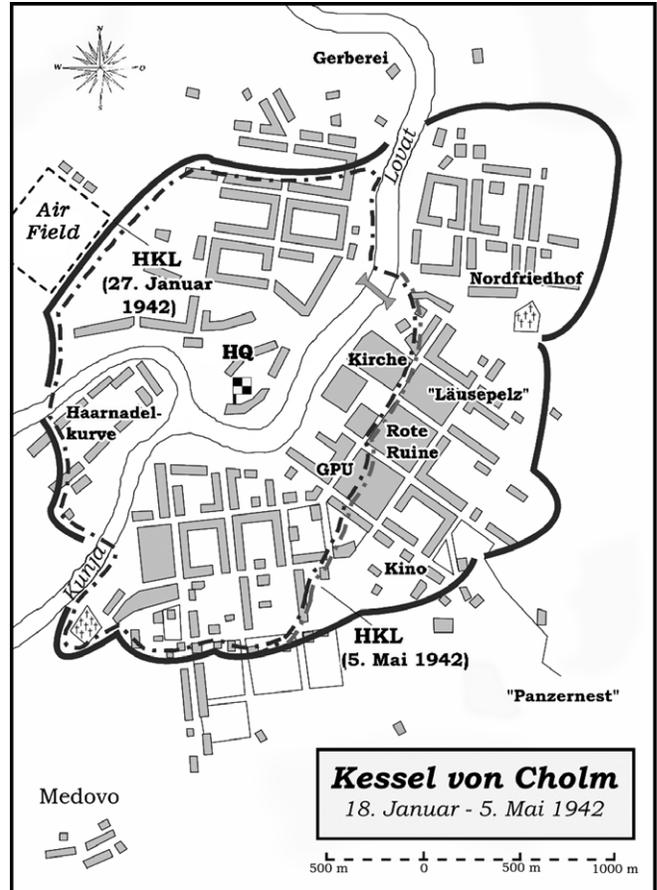
Scherer made a plan to counterattack on January 27. Fortunately, the 218th Division troops arrived. Their artillery forward observers called down fire from ten miles away with their division's 105mm guns. By late afternoon they had driven the Russians 800 yards beyond the town. This was extremely important because the western side of town was the only good area for the planned air strip for Luftwaffe supply; at this early stage in the battle, JU-52s could bring in critical supplies, and take out the wounded.

However, as the Soviets tightened the ring around Cholm, it became too expensive in JU-52 losses to continue the landings. They were replaced by Gotha 242 glider flights. These flights generally were made around dawn or sun-down. They had several advantages: silent entry; large cargos; and the ability to bring in anti-tank guns. Unfortunately, these were all one-way trips meaning the grounded pilots became soldiers, and the wounded could

no longer be evacuated, which became a serious problem. Eventually, even *these* flights were stopped and replaced with parachute drops, many of which landed in Russian-occupied areas because the drops had to be made from a high altitude due to the anti-aircraft fire. (This was the same set of scenarios that later plagued the French at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.)

The Germans were expecting to be relieved in Cholm in two weeks. This didn't happen. In fact, it took 105 days before Cholm was relieved. General Scherer set about creating defensive positions as fast as he could. Cholm occupying the only high ground in the area and being mostly surrounded by 800-1000 meters of open, flat, ground with great visibility was a major advantage. Also, several large buildings, including the Orthodox church and the Synagogue, were ideal observation positions for calling in artillery fire from 218th Division batteries 10 miles away.

As the siege wore on, Russian reinforcements were brought in. The 391st Division attacked the east, south-east, and southwest suburbs on February 14. On February 20, the 37th Tank Brigade supported an attack on the north side of Cholm. On February 26, the 33rd and 391st Rifle Divisions captured several buildings in the town, and so it went as the siege continued.



On the German side, the training of non-combatant units added strength to the defense. A long row of dead vehicles created towards the airfield offered cover for retrieving air-dropped supplies. Trenches created in the deepening snow covered movements and concealed positions, even if they didn't offer protection from fire. More artillery was added to the main force salient 10 miles away, and more artillery observers for these new units were brought in on JU-52s, and later, Gotha 242s.

As the siege continued, the German artillery observers plotted barrages accurately for all areas surrounding the town. If an assault was made, it was met by devastatingly accurate high explosive fire that stopped the tank-borne infantry, and often destroyed tanks with direct hits. Defense in the town attempted to channel attacks to ambush areas where anti-tank guns were placed. Improvised explosive devices (IEDs), as we know them today, were employed (as well as close assaults) to destroy tanks. Without infantry support, tanks were easier targets for veteran soldiers in strong defensive emplacements using close assault with explosives. Snow trenches, built up to over "head-height," were constructed everywhere and were extremely effective in concealing troops against both artillery fire and snipers.

On the Russian side, artillery was greatly increased over time. However, they lacked good observation because of their low terrain positions, and they relied on huge bombardments—typical of Russian artillery tactics. They were most effective destroying wooden homes which had been set up by the Germans as hospitals because they were easier to keep warm. Eventually the buildings were all destroyed.

As the siege played out over 105 days both sides were worn down. Cholm was *not* given the highest priority by either side. As difficult as the supply situation was for the Germans, it was also very difficult for the Russians: the terrain and winter weather were just as bad for them. Massive Russian artillery fire petered out as winter, and later, the mud season came on. On the German side, artillery fire from the 10-mile distant salient was subject to interruption due to these factors, as well as partisan attacks on supply convoys. Three attempts were made in January, March, and May by

German forces to break through the siege. The last one on May 5, 1942 was spearheaded by a battalion-sized unit supported by one Sturmgeschütz that met up with a battalion-sized unit from Cholm.

Why the Germans held Cholm

If the Germans had not had the artillery support from the 218th Divisional artillery they would have been overrun. The Germans' ability to call in accurate indirect artillery fire during virtually the whole siege caused incredible casualties among the attacking Russian infantry. Tanks without infantry do little damage to men in heavy defensive positions and become vulnerable to close assault attacks with Teller mines and other explosives.

During the siege, Germans suffered over 100 assaults, over 40 of which were supported by tanks, but Russian attacks were generally very predictable. They approached from 800-1000 meters over open terrain. German forces had time to shift to defend against the attack, particularly with the extensive network of concealing snow trenches.

The Luftwaffe did a creditable job of supplying Cholm from the air. At first with JU-52 landings, then with gliders (Gotha 242s), and finally, after anti-aircraft fire made that too dangerous, with parachute drops. German morale remained relatively high. General Scherer did his best under the circumstances to look after his men. On Easter, for instance, Easter eggs were dropped in for the men, and tobacco was a priority! The wounded were always a high priority to him. Towards the last stages of the siege wounded were moved into the same building as Scherer's headquarters.

The Russian forces took heavy losses during the siege and became less effective as time wore on. It was only the 33rd Rifle Divisions, with occasional tank support through the early stages, which allowed the Germans time to organize forces, defensive tactics, and artillery support.

Later, other Russian units including 391st Rifle Division, and tanks from the 37th Tank Brigade arrived.

After the siege ended all German participants, including those evacuated out, as well as JU-52 and Gotha 242 pilots, received Cholm shields for their service under extraordinary circumstances.



German forward observers used the Synagogue to plot indirect artillery fire.

Some conclusions for wargamers about the siege of Cholm

Besides being a very interesting part of the war on the Russian front, there are things to take to heart about the 105-day siege. Most important is understanding the powerful effect preregistered indirect artillery fire can have on attacking infantry or a mixed force of tanks and infantry.

At Cholm this fire came in from ten miles away. Of course in a fluid battle situation it would take time to register this fire as I'm sure it did at Cholm, since the siege started only ten days after General Scherer arrived to take over. I'm sure that as soon as the attacks started the artillery started firing for effect and plotting the firing. A good set of wargame rules must handle this aspect of warfare correctly.

Secondly, after the infantry was largely eliminated by artillery fire, the tanks became vulnerable to close-assault tactics by enemy infantry. The Cholm forces even without many anti-tank guns could knock out tanks by close assaults with clusters of grenades and Teller mines. In fact, in most cases on a battlefield, dug-in infantry in trenches or building rubble or dense woods are more or less invulnerable to attacks by tanks alone, contrary to the way many wargame rules play.

Morale played a big role in the Cholm siege. In spite of the cold and the length of the siege, the Germans were well-supplied and fed under the circumstances. Meanwhile, given the awful casualties taken by the Russians, their morale was probably pretty bad. In order to have realistic and interesting wargaming, all these factors should be handled well by a good set of rules.

When we all started wargaming WWII we were all fascinated by tanks and thought they were the be all and end all of warfare. As a broader interest in WWII takes over and we start studying it, we want a more sophisticated game. Hopefully by examining a siege like Cholm, where the Germans had no armoured vehicles, tanks, self-propelled guns, or direct-fire artillery, and yet held out for 105 days (supplied solely from the air until relieved) we can see that there are more interesting possibilities for wargaming than two massive tank forces banging away at each other endlessly. I say this as the owner of a company that supplies massive forces of tanks, but also a full range of equally important pieces of military hardware.

— Gregg Scott

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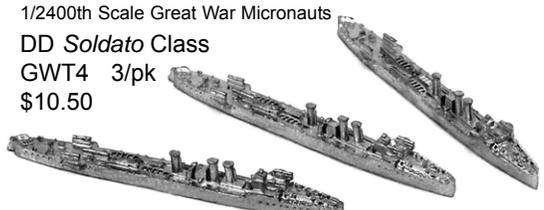
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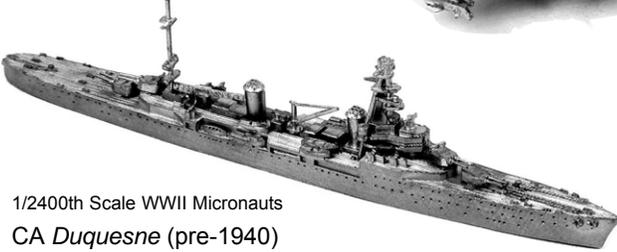
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