Panzerkampfwagen III

In the early years of World War II, the German *Panzerkampfwagen III* was the most important tank on the battlefield. From 1939 to 1941, before the appearance of the Soviet T-34, the PzKw III was the dominant weapon of every German offensive.

Pre-war German all-arms doctrine envisioned the primary weapon of the Panzer Division as a fifteen-ton tank with a 50mm armor-piercing gun. Between 1936 and 1939, the Daimler-Benz Company produced a series of prototype vehicles. *Ausfuhrung A* – "Ausfuhrung" is German for "model" – was followed by B and C in 1937, D in 1938, and E in 1939. Improvements during this trial period resulted in a more powerful engine, 30mm armor, a six-wheel suspension, and a weight increase to 19 tons. A smaller 37mm main gun was selected for ammunition standardization reasons. On September 27, 1939, the **PzKw III Ausf E** was accepted by the German Army.

The PzKw III possessed the qualities of mobility, communications, armor, and weaponry that armor theorist General Heinz Guderian had been insisting on for years. Compared to the PzKw III, the earlier PzKw I and PzKw II were mere training tanks. The PzKw III would now equip three of the four companies of the Panzer Battalion and serve as the German's main tank to attack enemy armor. The fourth company of the Panzer Battalion, equipped with the *PzKw IV* with its short 75mm low-velocity cannon, would serve in a support role to reinforce infantry units.

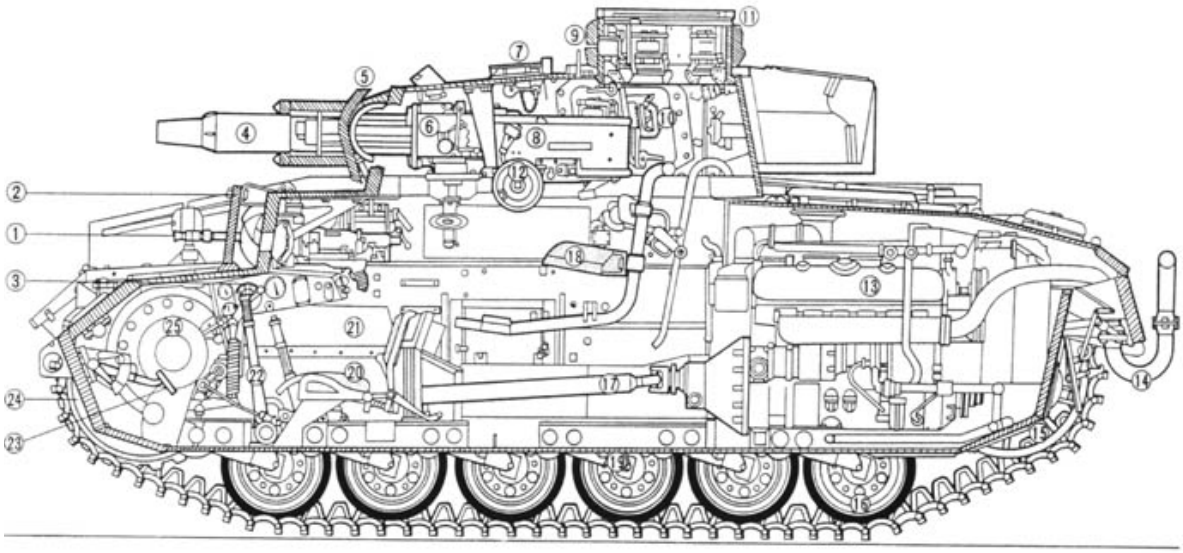
Small numbers of PzKw III participated in the invasion of Poland in September 1939. After Poland, the Panzer force expanded from six to ten divisions. In May of 1940, **349** PzKw III participated in the invasions of France, Belgium, and the Netherlands.

Based on battlefield experience, PzKw III Ausf F was armed finally with a 50mm gun. An equipment box was added to the rear of the turret. Ausf G was produced with special filters for service in North Africa. Ausf H had increased track width and a weight increase to 21.6 tons. **1,924** PzKw III Ausf F, G, and H with the short 50mm gun were produced. These tanks served primarily in North Africa and Russia.

In April 1941, the Germans invaded Greece and the Balkans. In June 1941, the Germans invaded Russia. The ruggedness of the Russian tanks surprised the Germans and immediate steps were taken to improve German tank capabilities. PzKw III Ausf J was fitted with a long (300 cm) 50mm main gun and heavier 50mm armor. PzKw III Ausf L increased both frontal armor and turret armor up to 70mm, and the weight up to 22.3 tons. Machinegun ammunition storage was upped from 2000 to 4950 rounds.

By 1942, the PzKw IV had superseded the PzKw III as the Panzer Battalions' main tank. PzKw III was then assigned to infantry support tasks, much like an assault gun. PzKw III Ausf M and Ausf N were the last models. Reflecting their assault gun role, they were fitted with a short, low-velocity 75mm main gun. After 1942, 5mm steel side aprons were added to the PzKw III for protection from anti-tank weapons. In August 1943, production of PzKw III was stopped. The PzKw III chassis continued to be manufactured as the chassis of the assault gun, *Sturmgeschütz III* (StuG III).

The strength of the PzKw III was its forward-thinking design. The three-man turret freed the tank commander to communicate and maintain situational awareness. This meant that the PzKw III, fighting with German tactics that emphasized all-arms coordination, was stronger than other tanks with heavier armor and weapons. The PzKw III design was versatile. It was progressively up-gunned, up-armored, and used for multiple vehicle variants. **5,800** PzKw III were produced during World War II. Over **15,000** PzKw III chassis were produced as both tanks and assault vehicles.



PzKw III Ausf N: 1943

1. 7.92mm Machinegun
2. 20mm Armor Plate
3. Driver's Gauges
4. L/24 75mm Gun
5. Gun Shield
6. 75mm Projectile Charging Section
7. Ventilating Device
8. Reaction Absorbing Plate
9. Look-out Window
10. Escape Hatch
11. Commander's Cupola
12. Gun-elevation Wheel
13. Engine
14. Exhaust Pipe
15. Rear Wheel
16. Road Wheel
17. Drive Shaft
18. Commander's Seat
19. Torsion Bar Suspension System
20. Driver's Seat
21. Transmission System
22. Control Lever
23. Clutch Pedal
24. Drive Sprocket
25. Disc Brake

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