

CHAPTER 10

THE PARTISANS AND THE CAMPAIGN OF 1943

Beginning with the campaigns of the summer of 1943, the story of the partisan movement became in great part the story of the offensive and defensive moves of the Wehrmacht and the Soviet armed forces, and so continued as long as the fighting remained on Soviet territory. Before the opening of the German *ZITADELLE* offensive in July, the reorganization of the partisan movement was complete and the bands, greatly increased in numbers and operationally much improved over their 1941-1942 counterparts, were ready to take over with some authority the clearly defined role assigned them in the Soviet war effort. As in the previous two years, their operations were for the most part confined to the central and northern sectors where the terrain was favorable.

The Winter Period, January to May

Partisan Forces

At the beginning of 1943 the heaviest concentrations of partisans lay in three regions of the *Army Group Center Rear Area*, the wooded Orel-Bryansk area, the Pripyat Marshes, and the White Russian forests west of Mogilev-Orsha-Vitebsk.¹ In the rear of *Army Group North* there were several sizeable groups behind the *Sixteenth Army* west of the Dno-Nevel rail line along the army group boundary and straddling the Velikiye Luki-Rezekne railroad.² Other irregular units were scattered through the occupied areas from the region between Lakes Ilmen and Peipus behind the *Eighteenth Army* to the Yaila Mountains in the Crimea, but for the most part they were weak and ineffective.

Before the middle of February the concentrations in the Central sector had expanded considerably with the appearance of additional bands, a number of which had crossed over into the German rear through gaps in the front lines.³ By the end of March they constituted an almost solid block from Bryansk-Orel through Gomel and Bobruysk and thence north through the area west of Orsha and Vitebsk where they

¹ *Bandenlage im Bereich d. H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 28.II.43., Anl. 2, Bandenlisten, Februar bis September 43, H. Gr. Mitte.* 65003/4.

² *Feindnachrichtenblaetter, Bandenlage, usw., AOK 16, Tgb., Ic/AO z. KTB 5, Teil VI, 1.I.-31.III.43.* 36588/142.

³ *Feindnachrichtenblaetter, Bandenlage, usw., AOK 16, Tgb., Ic/AO z. KTB 5, Teil VI, 1.I.-31.III.43.* 36588/142; *201 Sich Div. Ia. KTB 4a, ueber grosse Bandenunternehmungen, SCHNEEHASE, 24.I.-12.II.43., Bericht 15.II.43.* 38204/2.

linked up with the bands behind the *Sixteenth Army* in the Nevel region.⁴

In the territory between Orel and Gomel the German security commands by 1 March had identified 34 separate partisan units totaling an estimated 28,000 men. Nine of these were of brigade size comprising more than 500 men each. In the Pripyat west of Gomel were 26 smaller bands totaling 7,500 men, and behind the *Third Panzer Army* in the Orsha-Vitebsk-Nevel region 37 bands totaling some 21,000 men. In the rear of the *Ninth* and *Second Armies* were smaller groupings totaling an estimated 2,900 in each case.⁵ West of the Dnepr in the southern edge of the Pripyat there were estimated to be some 12,500 additional partisans in units as yet unidentified.⁶ On 15 March according to German estimate the number of partisans in organized units totaled 77,800, of which 3,000 were east of the Dnepr in the more immediate rear of *Army Group South*, 57,800 behind *Army Group Center*, 4,500 in the rear of *Army Group North*, and 12,500 in that portion of the Pripyat Marshes just south of the *Army Group Center* boundary.

German Forces

Facing these, the Germans had a heterogeneous force of German security units, satellite security brigades and divisions, *Ostbataillone* or native security units, the *Einwohner Kampf Abteilungen* (EKA) or local volunteer units, the *Hilfswillige* (Hiwis) or foreign labor auxiliaries, and the *Volkswehr* or anti-Soviet people's defense units.

Although on paper such a force appeared rather formidable, in practice it fell far below the standards necessary to even contain the growing bands. This was true as regarded both the quantity and quality of the troops concerned. The strength of the security commands was built around the German security units, but where these had formerly been of division size, because of continued withdrawals to plug gaps in the front lines or furnish replacements for shattered line organizations, they now represented but a number of scattered and understrength *Landeschuetzen* battalions. Not only were they insufficiently trained and equipped for their missions, but their personnel were too old for the exacting physical task of all-weather operations in forests and swamps. There was no provision for regular replacement of losses, and combat strengths remained low. The satellite units were of very doubtful quality. The native units, made up variously of Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Russians, Ukrainians, Armenians, Azerbaijanians, Tartars, Cossacks, and others, as a whole represented a very low combat value.

⁴ *Bandenlage in Bereich d. H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 31.III.43., 28.II.43., Anl. 2, Bandenlisten, Februar bis September 43, H. Gr. Mitte.* 65003/4.

⁵ *Zusammenstellung ueber Bandenlage mit Stand vom 28.II.43., Okdo der H. Gr. Mitte, Abt. Ic/AO Nr. 2475/43 geh., 16.III.43. in Bandenlisten, Februar bis September 43, H. Gr. Mitte/Ic/AO (Abw.).* 65003/4.

⁶ *Entwicklung der Bandenstaerke (Ostfront), Anlage 5, z. Bandenlage im Osten, Anlagen, OKH/Gen.St.d.H./GenQu. Abt. II, g. Kdos.* H 3/749.

Not only were they poorly trained, armed, and equipped, but they were beginning to show definite signs of unreliability as the Red Army continued its offensive westward. Defections to the partisans were numerous.⁷ The *Kaminski Volkswehr Brigade* was an exception and almost to the end of the war continued to give a good account of itself. Of the German administrative units which might have been tapped for security service, only the personnel of the post office and veterinary service groups were available, all men of the supply services as well as railroad troops and engineers and medical unit personnel having been exempted from antipartisan work.⁸

Partisan Activities

The activity of the bands, which had been stepped up during the last weeks of 1942 as the coming of frost ended the fall muddy season, continued as the winter wore on and increased somewhat with the approach of spring. Objectives were much the same as before: attacks on the German lines of communication, terror raids on the native communities, recruiting among the local inhabitants, forage raids, espionage, and attacks designed to hamper the German economic program. At times the pressure they exerted was heavy, but never did it become in any sense overpowering, and in the aggregate it had little effect on the tactical situation at the front. Combined with the reorganization of the movement going on at the time, however, it did presage improvement in the partisan effort for the days to come.

The rail lines continued to be their primary target. The number of raids they made on them was not great, however, and taken in total never represented a really serious effort. During February they blew trackage in 24 places in the rear of the *Sixteenth Army* and in the central sector broke rails in 94 places in 170 attempts.⁹ On one single night, that of 15 April, they temporarily interrupted all rail lines leading out of Bryansk.¹⁰ They also struck rather sharply at rail bridges. During February they successfully damaged or destroyed 12 behind the *Sixteenth Army*, and in March in the Bryansk area on orders from the Central

⁷ *Bericht des ruckkw, Armeegebiets der Pz AOK 2, Br. B. Nr. 1100/43 geh., 20.V.43. 37075/91; Bericht, Unternehmen DONNERKEIL, 21.III.-21.IV.43., Anl. z. KTB 4a, 201 Sich. Div. 38204/2; Reichskommissar fuer die Ukraine z. Reichsminister Rosenberg, 25.VI.43. Footlocker 50, folder 4.; see also: entries for 6 Jan and 25 Feb 43 in KTB 3, Pz AOK 2, Ia, Band 1, 1.I.-28.II.43., 37075/11.*

⁸ *Pz AOK 2, Ia, KTB 3, Band 2, 1.III.-31.V.43. 37075/12.*

⁹ *Bericht z. Abwehroffizier beim Kdr. Gen. d. Sicherungstruppen u. Bfh. H. Geb. Nord. Abt. Ic/AO, Tgb. Nr. 226/43 g., 27.II.43., Anl. 1 z. KTB 1, H. Geb. Nord, 1.I.-31.III.43. 30809/1; Kdr. Gen. d. Sicherungstruppen u. Bfh. H. Geb. Mitte z. H. Gr. Mitte, Ia. Br. B. Nr. 2051/43 geh., 9.VII.43., Anl. z. Ktb, H. Gr. Mitte, Fuehrungsabt., Heft 10, 11.VI.-31.VII.43. 65002/22.*

¹⁰ *Entry for 16 Apr 43, in KTB 3, Band 2, Ia, Pz AOK 2, 1.III.-31.V.43. 37075/12.*

Staff attacked 5 in force (4 of them important ones) and successfully blew 3, one the span over the Desna River at Wygonitschi on the Bryansk-Gomel line.¹¹

The success of this latter-mentioned attack was attributable directly to the German practice of pulling troop units off security duty in the rear for commitment at the front. For some time a battalion of the 747th Grenadier Regiment had been guarding the section of track which included the Wygonitschi bridge with good success. The first part of March this unit was transferred to the front and replaced with the 974th Security Battalion, an understrength *Landesschuetzen* outfit new to the area. Before the latter had been in position two weeks the region was out of control and the bridge attacked and destroyed.¹²

Although these attacks interfered with the supply of the forward units for a time and at one point temporarily delayed the arrival of replacements, their over-all effect on the situation at the front was negligible. The *Second Panzer Army* which at the time was heavily engaged with the right wing of the Red Army drive on Kursk reported that while the interruptions were "disagreeable" they in no wise served to weaken the defenses of Orel, although such had been expected and the attacking bands had appeared well-organized, -armed, and -led.¹³ In the Vitebsk-Nevel sector the situation was similar. Despite increased pressure on the supply lines by the partisans, who were in radio contact with Sokolovski's West Front then attacking in the Velikiye Luki area, the German defenses were hampered little if at all.¹⁴

Taken all in all, during this period the bands seldom demonstrated any sustained aggressiveness. The relatively small number of raids of any size is witness to this. Although they had good communication with the Soviet rear and often with each other, and at times, at least, operated under directives from the Central Staff, their attacks were sporadic and

¹¹ Bericht z. Abwehroffizier, H. Geb. Nord, Ic/AO, Tgb. Nr. 226/43g., 27.II.43., Anl. 1 z. KTB 1, H. Geb. Nord, 1.I.-31.III.43. 30809/1; KTB 3, Band 2, Pz AOK 2, Ia, 1.III.-31.V.43. 37075/12; annex 1a to Bericht des Kdr. Gen. des Rueckw. Armeegebiets des Pz AOK 2, Nr. 1100/43 geh. z. Pz AOK 2, 20.V.43., Anl. 14. z. Anl. Bd. 78, Bandenlage II, Pz AOK 2, 11.VIII.42.-1.VII.43. 37075/91.

¹² Annex 1a to Bericht des Kdr. Gen. des Rueckw. Armeegebiets des Pz AOK 2, Nr. 1100/43 geh. z. Pz AOK 2, 20.V.43., Anl. 14 z. Anl. Bd. 78, Bandenlage II, Pz AOK 2, 11.VIII.42.-1.VII.43. 37075/91.

¹³ Anl. Bd. 77, Bandenlage, Pz AOK 2, Ia, Februar-Maerz 43. 37075/90; entries for 15-17 Feb 43, in Bandenlage, Pz AOK 2, Ia, KTB 3, 1.I.-28.II.43. 37075/11; Bandenlage, Maerz 43, Anl. Bd. 78, Bandenlage, Pz AOK 2, Ia, 11.VIII.42.-1.VII.43. 37075/91; Pz AOK 2, Ia, KTB 3, Band 2, 1.III.-31.V.43. 37075/12.

¹⁴ Bericht, der Feldpolizeidirektor beim Kdr. Gen. d. Sicherungstruppen u. Bfh. H. Geb. Nord, Tgb. Nr. 42/42. 11.I.43., Anl. 1 z. KTB 1, Bfh. H. Geb. Nord. 1.I.-31.III.43. 30809/1; 201 Sich. Div. Ia. KTB 4a, ueber grosse Bandenunternehmungen, "DONNERKEIL", 21.III.-2.IV.43. 38204/2.

scattered, and appeared to conform to no set pattern.¹⁵ And when they did strike, as in the case of the rail bridges in the Bryansk area, they attempted neither to follow up their advantage nor to exploit the confusion they created.¹⁶

There is no evidence that the Central Staff intended them to operate differently. Either too few of them had reached a level of training which Moscow thought high enough to successfully cope with the German defenses, or they were deliberately held back for bigger things, meanwhile operating only extensively enough to keep the Germans close to their supply axes and out of the partisan concentration areas where they might interrupt the reorganization still in progress. This latter seems the more logical explanation, for with the spring muddy season approaching, which would sharply curtail all movement—German and Soviet alike—there was little to be gained by operations which were certain to have few positive results and heavy casualties. All possible strength would be needed in the summer campaigns ahead, for the Red Army was sure to continue its heavy attacks all along the line.

Accordingly, the bands appeared to pay more attention to completing their reorganization and to feeding themselves than to anything else. They expended much time and energy on drafting and training recruits to fill out their ranks and form new units, and often gave recruiting drives precedence over all other activity.¹⁷ In addition, they foraged extensively. Whereas arms and ammunition were supplied by air from the Soviet rear, they were expected to live off the land. With their numbers increasing rapidly, the problem of feeding this force grew more acute daily, and as the winter wore on they more and more turned from sabotage to raiding for their own needs.¹⁸

¹⁵ 201 Sich. Div., Ia, KTB ra, ueber grosse Bandenunternehmungen, DONNER-KEIL, 21.III.-2.IV.43., Bericht 12.III.43. 38204/2; annex 1 to Bericht des Kdr. Gen. des Armeegebiets des Pz AOK 2, Nr. 1100/43 geh., Bandenlage II, Pz AOK 2, 11.VIII.42.-1.VII.43. 37075/91; Feindnachrichtenblatt ueber die Bandenlage im Bereich des Pz AOK 3, Stand: 1.IV.-1.VII.43. 35568/50; order to partisan Bn Cmdr, Troop No. 00105, signed Burkov, in 213 Sich. Div., Anl. z. KTB, Feindlagenkarten, 16.V.-31.VII.43. 35307/4.

¹⁶ See entries for 1 Mar-7 Apr 43 in KTB 3, Band 2, Pz AOK 2, Ia. 1.III.-31.V.43. 37075/12.

¹⁷ Feindnachrichtenblatt ueber die Bandenlage im Bereich des Pz AOK 3, Stand: 2.III.43. in Pz AOK 3, Ic/AO, Anl. Bd. E. z. Tgb. 8, 22.I-30.VI.43. 35568/50; Bandenlage im Bereich des AOK 16, Februar 43, in AOK 16, Ic, Tgb. Ic/AO z. KTB 5, Teil VI. 1.I.-31.III.43. 36588/142.

¹⁸ Bandenlage, Februar, Mai 43, Pz AOK 2, Ia, Anl. Bd. 77, 78, 11.VIII.43. 37075/90, 37075/91; Bericht, Korueck 532, Ic, Br. Tgb. Nr. 442/43 geh., 30.I.43., Feindlage im Korueck-Gebeit, Stand: 26.I.43., Anlagenheft 2, z. KTB Korueck 559, Ia. Unternehmen "KLETTE 2", 5.I.-19.I.43. 44404/3; Feindnachrichtenblatt ueber die Bandenlage im Bereich des Pz AOK 3, Stand: 1.VII.43., in Pz AOK 3, Ic/AO, Anl. Bd. E. z. Tgb. 8, 22.I-30.VI.43. 35568/50; Hq. H. Gp. Mitte, Ia, Nr. 6810/43, 23.VI.43., Anl. z. KTB H. Gp. Mitte, Fuehrungsabtl, Akte XXII, Heft 10, 11.VI.-31.VII.43. 65002/22.

German Countermeasures

Then too, the character of the opposition they faced cannot be overlooked. Although the German security commands were badly handicapped by a shortage of manpower, by making judicious use of what strength they did have they were able in large measure to curtail any offensive tendencies the bands showed. Keeping in view their primary mission, the uninterrupted supply of the field armies, they drew themselves in defensively on their lines of communication and installations and then mounted what offensive actions they could. When troops were available from the front lines, they launched large-scale drives. In between times they sent out a steady stream of raiding parties and small combat teams to probe for and strike at the bands and keep their concentration areas in a continual state of flux. They also employed "dummy bands," made up of Russian-speaking German officers and NCO's and native volunteers passing themselves off as partisan units, to seek out the more virulent pro-Soviet elements of the population and mark them for roundup and evacuation.¹⁹

As far as achieving permanent results was concerned, the larger-scale operations had little success. When attacked in force, the bands simply pulled back and dispersed and later regrouped in the same area. Time and again the security commands reported they had annihilated a large concentration or permanently cleared an area only to discover that their enemy had merely slipped away until the opposition lessened. But combined with the smaller actions which kept the bands under constant pressure and possibly deceived them as to the low level of German security strength,²⁰ these larger-scale operations gave good results and showed the security commands just what they could really achieve with the manpower available. Although reports of operations repeatedly carried the notation "band only dispersed," "partisans escaped encirclement," or "no contact made," the Germans saw that every raid brought some relief; that the temporary dispersion of a band meant that several weeks would pass before it could be operative again; and that even failure to make contact indicated that the band had gotten wind of the operation ahead of time and had left its normal stamping grounds and bases. They saw further that driving the partisans from an area gave an opportunity to destroy their cantonments, airfields, and defensive installations

¹⁹ Special appendix to *Nachrichten ueber Bandenkrieg*, Nr. 1. OKH/Gen.St.d.H. Fde H. Ost (II/Bd), Nr. 2460/43 geh., 3.V.43., in *Kdr Gen. d. Sich. Tr. Sued, Ia. Anl. Bd. 37*, 30.IV.-1.VIII.43. 39502/41; OKH/Gen.St.d.H./GenQu. Abt. Kriegsverw. (Qu. 4), 10.IV.43., to *Op. Abt. Fde H Ost. Gen. d. Osttruppen OKW/Wpr., Auszug aus SD-Bericht Ost*, Nr. 48, 2.IV.43. OKW 734.

²⁰ For operations of these smaller groups, see: annexes 3b and 3c to *Bericht des Kdr. Gen. des Rueckw. Armeegebiets des Pz AOK 2*, Nr. 1100/43 geh. z. Pz AOK 2, 20.V.43., *Anl. 14. z. Anl. Bd. 78, Bandenlage II*, Pz AOK 2, 11.VIII.42.-1.VII.43. 37075/91.

and to evacuate the natives if the sector had been a particularly troublesome one. Indeed, if enough pressure was applied the bands often burned their own camps and supply depots before withdrawing.²¹ Thus, with this strategy of keeping the irregulars off balance and forcing them to stay almost continually on the move, they were able, as they said, "to prevent the bands from gaining a foothold in the country and attracting sizeable numbers of the population, and at the same time to provide general protection for the movement of army supplies."²²

As a supplement to this expedient of doing what they could with what they had, which they admitted was no more than a half measure, the Germans modified their policy regarding the treatment of punishable offenses committed by civilians and the treatment of partisan deserters in an effort to loosen the hold of the bands on their personnel and on the natives. In the areas under Army jurisdiction the death penalty was retained for "serious" cases of rebellion and other "serious crimes" as attacks on German personnel or sabotage. But since public hangings for such offenses had not had the desired effect—in fact they were generally looked on as sensations by the natives—and had given the Soviets ready-made propaganda material, culprits were ordered shot rather than sent to the gallows. For less serious crimes persons might be confined at hard labor for a maximum of six months. Corporal punishment was prohibited.²³

In regard to partisan deserters, the 1942 policy of according them prisoner of war status was somewhat amplified. Following a directive by Hitler which ordered that all Red Army deserters were to be classed as enemies of the Soviet state and treated preferentially as such in special deserter camps with extra rations and certain luxury items, OKH passed the order that defectors from the bands, individuals or groups, were to be accorded similar treatment.²⁴ Although this was broadcast widely, it brought few positive results.²⁵ The partisans simply did not believe the

²¹ AOK 4, *Ic. Feindnachrichtenblaetter Nr. 6*, 6.VI.43., *Bericht, Mai 43.* 48448/6.

²² *Bericht des Kdr. Gen. des Rueckw. Armeegebiets des Pz AOK 2, Nr. 1100/43 geh. z. Pz. AOK 2, 20.V.43., Anl. 14. z. Anl. Bd. 78, Bandenlage II, Pz AOK 2, 11.VIII.42.-1.VII.43.* 37075/91; also see antipartisan actions in: *Bandenlage, Pz AOK 2, Ia, Anl. Bd. 77, 78, 11.VIII.42.-1.VII.43.* 37075/90, 37075/91; *Feindnachrichtenblatt ueber die Bandenlage im Bereich des Pz AOK 3, in Pz AOK 3, Ic/AO, Anl. Bd. E z. Taetigkeitsbericht 8, 22.I.-30.VI.43.* 35568/50; 201 *Sich Div. Ia, KTB, 4a, ueber gross Bandenunternehmungen, 24.I.-2.IV.43.* 38204/2; *AOK 2, Ia, Anl. 104, 106, z. KTB, Bandenbekaempfung, Apr-Jun 43.* 37418/107, 37418/109.

²³ *Ltr, OKH Nr. 5/43. g. Kdos., to Heeresgruppen, AOK's usw., 6.II.43., in Pz AOK 2, Ia, Anl. Bd. 94, 3.III.43.-16.VII.43.* 37075/107.

²⁴ *Ltr, OKH/GenStdH/Fde H Ost, "Deserter Propaganda in Partisan Infested Areas," 16 May 43.* H 3/746; also: *Basic Order 13, "Treatment of Deserters," OKH/GenStdH/Fde H Ost. Nr. 11/2310/43 geh., 20.IV.43.* H 1/403.

²⁵ *Pz AOK 3, Ic/AO, Anl. Bd. G. z. Tgb. 8, 22.I.-30.V.43.* 35568/52.

Germans and preferred to take their chances, dubious as they were, with the Soviets, whether they disliked the Bolshevik regime or not.²⁶

Preliminary Operations, May-June

With the end of the muddy season and the approach of good campaigning weather, the Red Army could be expected to continue its heavy attacks toward the west all along the eastern line. The most sensitive points in the front and those sure to feel the earliest brunt of the Soviet attack were the Kharkov-Belgorod area, which Von Manstein had retaken in his March counterattack, and the Bryansk-Orel sector. Both of these positions could be hit hard in the flank from the 60 x 110 miles salient the Soviets held about Kursk. A successful push to the southwest through the Kharkov area would turn the German defenses in the south, making the entire eastern Ukraine untenable, and open up the flat, treeless steppes to Soviet armor. At the same time, a reduction of the German-held Bryansk-Orel bulge by a two-pronged attack from Kursk and the smaller salient at Kirov just to the north would at once protect the Red Army drive to the southwest and unhinge the whole central sector. A strong secondary attack could be expected in the Velikiye Luki-Nevel sector where the Soviets had driven a deep wedge between *Army Groups Center and North*.

Partisan Concentration Areas and the Rail Lines

The Orel defenses were supplied for the most part over two rail lines, both of which passed through Bryansk: the Smolensk-Roslavl-Bryansk-Lgov link and the east-west Minsk-Gomel-Bryansk line. As of 1 May a 50 mile stretch of the Roslavl-Bryansk line was under constant pressure from five partisan brigades totaling some 7,000 men, the Bryansk-Lgov link between Bryansk and a point just south of Lokot, another 50 mile stretch, was continually threatened by six brigades totaling more than 6,500 irregulars, while some 5,000 additional partisans lay astride the Bryansk-Gomel link.²⁷ In equally great danger were the seven highly important temporary bridges built over the the Desna River south of Bryansk for use in the event of a forced withdrawal to the intermediate defense line west of the stream.²⁸ Further west the danger of paralysis of rail traffic was even greater. The Minsk-Gomel line, which carried much of *Army Group South's* supply traffic as well as that of the *Second Army* and *Second Panzer Army*, ran directly through the eastern portion of

²⁶ See statement of captured partisan battalion commander in *Amt Ausland/Abw., Befehlsstab Walli/Abw. III, Br. B. Nr. D 1138/43g (Ausw. 69). 23.II.43. in Abt. Wehrmacht Propaganda, I.XI.42-31.II.43. OKW 639.*

²⁷ *Bandenlage im Bereich d. Obkds, d. H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 30.IV.43. in H. Gr. Mitte Ic/AO (Abw.). Bandenlisten, Februar bis September 43. 65003/4.*

²⁸ See: *Lage Ost. Stand: 16.VI.43.* Oddly enough, these bridges were attacked by the bands.

the Pripjat and lay highly vulnerable to attack by more than 10,000 irregulars.²⁹

In the Velikiye Luki-Nevel-Vitebsk area, the situation was little better. To supply its defenses there, the *Third Panzer Army* and the *Fourth Army* had the east-west Velikiye Luki-Rezekne and Vitebsk-Polotsk-Dvinsk lines to Latvia and Lithuania and the lateral Nevel-Vitebsk-Orsha link connecting with the army group's major supply route, Brest-Litovsk-Minsk-Smolensk. The lateral line, being near the front, remained generally free of interference, but the two east-west lines ran through an area dominated by some 18 partisan units comprising more than 11,000 men and the Brest-Litovsk-Smolensk line was under continual pressure from another group of bands totaling 8,000 to 9,000.³⁰

A number of other bands were concentrated in the southernmost portion of the army group rear directly west of Kursk and north of the Kursk-Kiev rail line. Although they totaled more than 8,000 men, they were constrained by the more open terrain and remained generally quiet during the spring and early summer.³¹ As of 1 May by German estimate there were some 62,000 partisans in identified units in the central sector, with an additional 40,000 in bands as yet unidentified.³²

For the most part these were a far cry from the semi-independent bands of 1942 and early 1943. Under the leadership of the operations groups the organization and offensive potential of many of them had been vastly improved. Their loose concentrations had gradually been pulled together into tight-knit commands, with individual units assigned set areas as bases of operations, the operations groups exercising control through well-developed communications systems. This was especially true in the Bryansk and Nevel sectors. The organization in the Rosonno area west of Nevel had progressed to the point where the operations group there had divided the units under its control into two subcommands with separate staffs for each.³³

²⁹ *Bandenlage im Bereich d. Obkds. d. H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 30.IV.43.*, in *H. Gr. Mitte Ic/AO (Abw.)*, *Bandenlisten, Februar bis September 43.* 65003/4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Bericht Mai, Juni 43, Anl. 104 z. KTB, Bandenbekaempfung, AOK 2, Ia.* 37418/107.

³² These figures include the *Reichskommissariat Ostland*. See: *Entwicklung der Bandenstaerke (Ostfront)*. Anl. 5., z. *Bandenlage im Osten, Anlagen, OKH/Gen StH/GenQu. Abt. II, g. Kdos.* H 3/749; *Bandenlage im Bereich d. Obkds. d. H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 30.IV.43.*, in *H. Gr. Mitte Ic/AO (Abw.)*, *Bandenlisten, Februar bis September 43.* 65003/4.

³³ *Bandenlage im Bereich d. H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 30.VI.43., 30.VII.43.*, in *H. Gr. Mitte Ic/AO (Abw.)*, *Bandenlisten, Februar bis September 43.* 65003/4; *Stand: I.IV.-I.VII.43., Feindnachrichtenblatt ueber die Bandenlage im Bereich des Pz AOK 3*, in *Pz AOK 3, Ic/AO, Anl. Bd. E z. Taetigkeitsbericht 8, 22.I.-30.VI.43.* 35568/50.

Strategic Significance of the Concentrations

The strategic significance of these concentrations was plain. The disposition of the bands was such that their first action in the event of a Soviet general offensive would be to cut the rail lines, thus shutting off supplies to the German forward units and slowing the shifting of reserves and the arrival of replacements, and to then attack the Germans as they attempted to withdraw to the west over the inadequate road net. It is true that throughout the sector these concentrations largely conformed to the terrain, being heaviest where the cover was most favorable, but it also happened that the cover was most favorable behind the two most critical points in the sector—the Bryansk forests and the woods and swamps of White Russia. In the rear of the *Fourth* and *Ninth Armies*, where the terrain was anything but open, there were few bands in evidence. Once in their areas the bands were told to stay there in the face of all opposition,³⁴ and although they dispersed when hit they always returned within a matter of days.

Certainly the opportunity offered them was excellent. Their great increase in strength and improvement in organization combined with the Germans' strategy of pulling their security forces back to their supply lines had by the end of spring virtually turned the countryside, apart from the railroads and primary highways and the population centers, over to their control. The natives were badly demoralized and more and more looked to the bands for leadership. Some maintained a wait-and-see attitude, but many others became so convinced of the return of the Red Army in the near future or were so in terror of the bands that they dared not even report raids to the Germans. They became progressively susceptible to Soviet propaganda and rumor mongering and increasingly impervious to German counterpropaganda.³⁵ Even in the *Army Group South Rear Area* where the bands were almost nonexistent the morale of the people was low. Their belief in a German victory seemed completely shattered and their almost every act appeared to be determined by the feeling that the Red Army would return shortly. They were turning away from the Germans in increasingly large numbers, and many aided the Soviet cause in any way they were able.³⁶ This condition did much to facilitate the reestablishment of Communist Party control in these areas, and thus virtually assured a complete disintegration of all pro-German sentiment which the Wehrmacht, now on a desperate defensive, so badly needed.

³⁴ Entry for 7 Apr 43, in *Pz AOK 2, Ia. KTB 3, Bd. 2, I.III.-31.V.43.* 37075/12.

³⁵ *Stand: Mai-Juni 43, Feindnachrichtenblatt ueber die Bandenlage im Bereich des Pz AOK 3, in Pz AOK 3, Ic/AO, Anl. Bd. E z. Taetigkeitsbericht 8, 22.I.-30.IV.43.* 35568/50.

³⁶ *Bericht, Mai, Juni, Pz AOK 1, Ic, Tgb., AO, I.V.-31.VIII.43.* 36835/7.

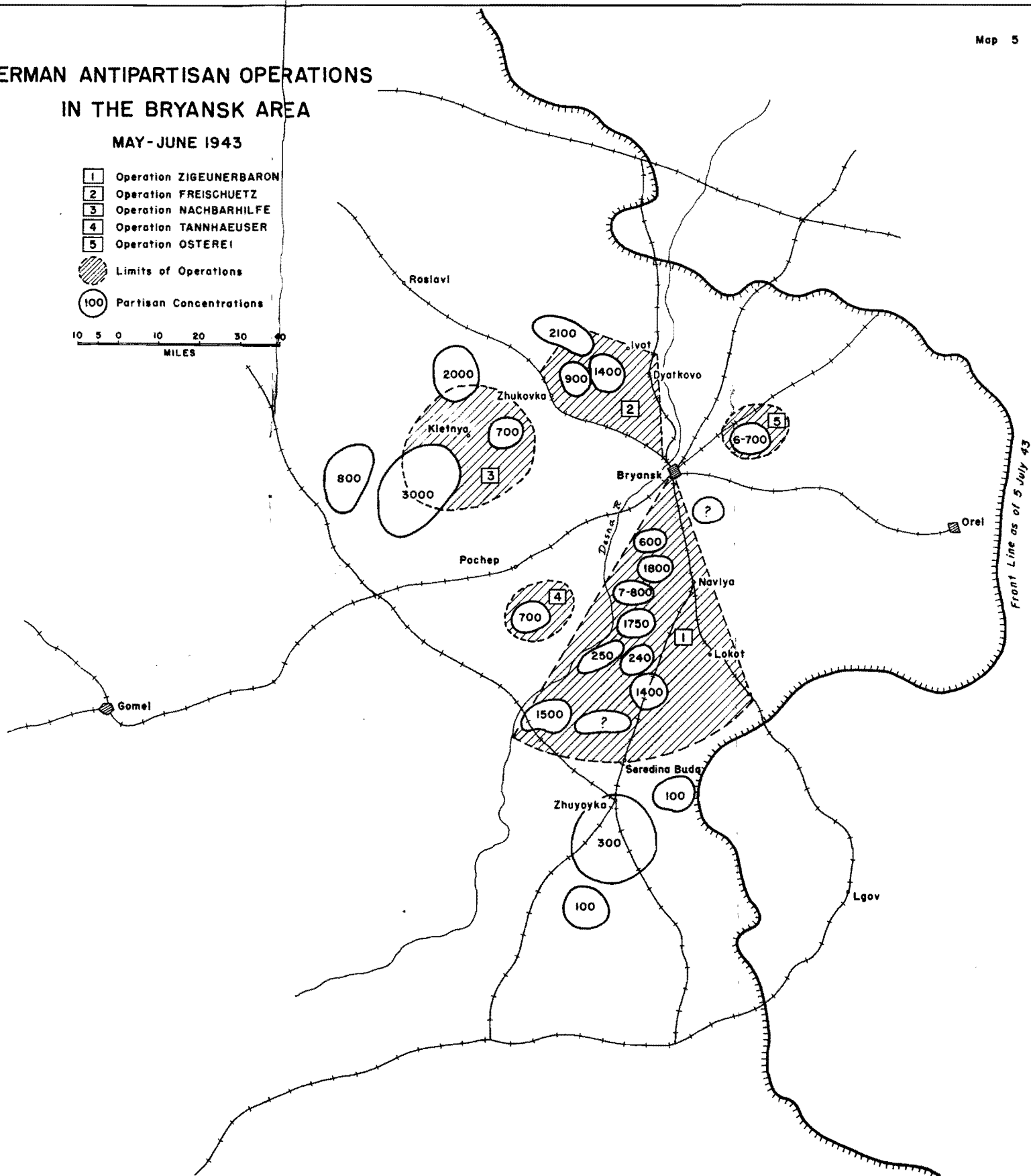
MAY-JUNE 1943

- | | |
|---|-------------------------|
| 1 | Operation ZIGEUNERBARON |
| 2 | Operation FREISCHUETZ |
| 3 | Operation NACHBARHILFE |
| 4 | Operation TANNHAEUSER |
| 5 | Operation OSTEREI |

Limits of Operations

100 Partisan Concentrations

A horizontal scale bar labeled "MILES" with markings at 10, 5, 0, 10, 20, 30, and 40.



Map 5. German Antipartisan Operations in the Bryansk Area, May-June 1943

Soviet Plans

The Soviet high command assigned the bands a prominent role in its plans for the 1943 campaign. The Germans had made no particular effort to conceal their buildup for Operation *ZITADELLE*; as a result the Russians knew what to expect and where and were well prepared. The Soviet strategy was to allow the German armored columns to batter themselves to pieces against the deep, prepared defenses of the Kursk salient and then launch a general counteroffensive when their strength had been spent.

The bands were to support this counterblow, and plans for coordinating their actions with the moves of the Red Army were made well in advance. The plan was to hold them in readiness until *ZITADELLE* had been stopped and the Germans were in the midst of a general withdrawal, and then order them to strike all the rail lines at once, blocking the *Second Panzer* and *Ninth Armies* in the forward areas without prepared defenses where they might be cut off and destroyed. The railroads were to be their principal target. Throughout the whole of the central sector they were to strike at the rail lines "simultaneously" on signal from Moscow and follow up "continuously" and "systematically." Individual bands were assigned specific sections of trackage and told how many rails they were expected to break in the first blow.³⁷ Special manuals on rail demolition technique were distributed and mines and bulk explosives were air-landed well in advance. Air supply was stepped up tremendously, for the first two weeks of May almost 1,000 percent over February.³⁸

German Counteraction

Although the Germans had no detailed foreknowledge of Soviet intentions, they were aided by their nets of native informers and their highly efficient signal intelligence³⁹ and were thus able to read the implications of the bands' dispositions correctly. Unless they could take effective preventive actions beforehand, they saw, the first move of the partisans in the event of a Soviet general offensive would be to cut their lines of communications and then attack from the rear.⁴⁰ At army level and

³⁷ Order of the Central Staff of the Partisan Movement No. 006, 17 Jul 43, in *KTB, General der Eisenbahntuppen*. H 14/14; see also: *Bericht Mai, Juni 43, Pz AOK 3, Ic/AO, Anl. Bd. E z. Tgb. 8, 22.I.-30.VI.43.* 35568/50.

³⁸ *Bericht Mai, Juni 43, Pz AOK 3, Ic/AO, Anl. Bd. E z. Tgb. 8, 22.I.-30.VI.43.* 35568/50; *Anl. 4 z. Bandenlage im Osten, Anlagen, OKH/Gen.St.d.H./GenQu. Abt. II.* H 3/749.

³⁹ See: MS # P-038, "German Radio Intelligence," (S), pp. 206-12. Foreign Studies Br. OCMH; *Bericht Mai, Juni 43, Pz AOK 3, Ic/AO, Anl. Bd. E z. Tgb. 8, 22.I.-30.VI.43.* 35568/50.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; *Feindnachrichtenblatt ueber die Bandenlage im Bereich des Pz AOK 3, Mai-Juni 43, Pz 3, Ic/AO, Anl. Bd. E z. Tgb 8, 22.I.-30.VI.43.* 35568/50.

below there were few illusions as to the possibility of regaining the initiative with Operation *ZITADELLE* or even of conducting a successful defensive along the front as it then stood. The lines of communication thus assumed added importance as routes of withdrawal, and the possibility of their loss at the same time the Soviets were attacking was a very real danger.

The answer was obvious: the concentrations had to be broken up and scattered by a series of large-scale offensive strikes by first-line forces prior to any moves by the Red Army.⁴¹ Here the Germans faced a dilemma. Antipartisan operations such as they had mounted during the winter could never hold the bands should they strike with their full strength, and, with the summer battles impending, they could not spare the manpower to clear the whole rear or even a good portion of it. Again they would have to do what they could with what they had, that is, make a concerted effort to clear at least temporarily the rear of the most critical point in the line, the Bryansk-Orel sector, where the first Soviet blow seemed sure to fall, and let the rest go for the present.

Accordingly, when a postponement of *ZITADELLE* gave promise of the loan of several line divisions, plans for clearing the entire Bryansk region with a series of offensive sweeps were drawn up for execution in late May and June. Priority was given to Operations *FREISCHUETZ* and *OSTEREI*, the actions north of Bryansk designed to secure the rear of the more thinly held northern flank of the *Second Panzer Army*. Operation *ZIGEUNERBARON*, projected to clear a large pocket south of Bryansk between the Desna River and the Bryansk-Lgov railroad which had been extremely active during the winter, was to follow. Operation *NACHBARHILFE* was to be another attempt to eliminate an exceptionally strong concentration between the Bryansk-Roslavl and Bryansk-Gomel rail lines. A smaller operation, *TANNHAEUSER*, was planned to eliminate a troublesome pocket southeast of Pochep on the Bryansk-Gomel line.⁴²

OSTEREI and *FREISCHUETZ* were launched almost simultaneously. The former, a relatively small-scale action by security units alone, had as its mission the destruction of an especially active partisan battalion of some 600 to 700 men just to the north and east of Bryansk which had been blocking the Bryansk-Dudorovsky rail line, a feeder link used to supply *LV Corps*. The mission was accomplished to the extent of dis-

⁴¹ See entry for 7 Apr 43, in *Pz AOK 2, Ia, KTB 3, Bd. 2, I.III.-31.V.43.* 37075/12.

⁴² See: *H. Gr. Mitte/Ia. 4875/43 g.K. Chefs. z. OKH, 7.V.43., H. Gr. Mitte/Ia. Anl. z. KTB. Besondere Bandenunternehmen, Mai-Juni 43.* 65002/26.

persing the irregulars.⁴³ *FREISCHUETZ* was conducted on a considerably larger scale by the *LV Corps*. The task force assembled for the operation, consisting of elements of the *Sixth Infantry* and *Fifth Panzer Divisions* and a miscellany of security and native volunteer units, had the mission of enveloping and destroying a group estimated at 4,000 to 6,000 men. The attack was carefully planned as an encirclement to be launched from blocking lines with phase lines set as limits for each day's progress. Starting on 21 May and concluded 10 days later, the operation was considered successful, although the partisans were driven from the area rather than annihilated. This was due, the task force commander believed, to the extremely heavy terrain, the weather (which was rainy throughout), and the relatively small force committed considering the size of the area to be covered.⁴⁴ Before the end of June 1,800 irregulars in three groups were reported back in the area.⁴⁵

ZIGEUNERBARON, which had been scheduled for early spring only to be canceled because of a shortage of troops, was mounted on 16 May under the direction of the *XLVII Panzer Corps*. The task force comprised elements of three infantry divisions, two panzer divisions, a Hungarian light division, and a number of security, *Ost*, and *Volkswehr* units, and faced an estimated 6,000 partisans in an extensive and deeply wooded area which they had had ample time to fortify. The action was launched as a driving operation with a majority of the task force units "beating" the area from east to west in an attempt to pin the bands against the Desna River held as blocking line by the remainder of the force. It was concluded on 6 June with the bands dispersed but nowhere destroyed. Partisan casualties were listed as 1,584 killed, 1,568 prisoners, and 869 deserters; 207 camps were destroyed along with 2,930 bunkers and dugouts. Captured armament included 1,128 small arms.⁴⁶

Although the task force command considered the action generally successful, it attributed the failure to destroy rather than disperse the bands to the insufficient number of men assigned the operation. The divisions, each comprising but seven infantry battalions (and these very probably under strength), had to comb sectors 20 miles wide, despite the fact that experience had shown that in dense forests and swamps one

⁴³ *Bericht, Mai 43, Pz AOK 2, Ia. Anl. Bd. 78, Bandenlage, 11.VIII.42.-1.VII.43., 37075/91. Stand: 30.V.43., in Bandenlage im Bereich d. Obkds. d. H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 28.II.43., Anl. 2, Bandenlisten, Februar bis September 43, H. Gr. Mitte. 65003/4.*

⁴⁴ Originally the 10th Div (*mot*) and a reinforced regiment of the 31st Div had been assigned to the force, but were pulled off at the last minute.

⁴⁵ *Stand: 30.IV.43., 30.V.43., 30.VII.43., Bandenlage im Bereich d. Obkds. d. H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 28.II.43., Anl. 2, Bandenlisten, Februar bis September 43, H. Gr. Mitte. 65003/4; H. Gr. Mitte, Abt. Ia. Anl. 2 z. KTB, Bericht Ueber Unternehmen FREISCHUETZ, Juni-Juli 43, Gen. Kdo, LV AK, Abt., Ia. Nr. 1560/43 geh. v. 7.VI.43. 65002/28.*

⁴⁶ *Gen. Kdo. XXXXVII Pz Korps, Ia. Nr. 2100/43 geh., 2.VII.43., in Pz AOK 2, Ia. Anl. Bd. 47. 7.V.-4.VI.43., ZIGEUNERBARON. 37075/60.*

battalion could cover and thoroughly search but 1.2 miles of front. Further, the command felt that that attack had been mounted on too short notice—three days—and had been pushed too fast from the start.⁴⁷ These appreciations were borne out by the rapid reconstitution of the partisan structure in the area immediately following the German withdrawal. By the end of June more than 3,000 irregulars were estimated to have returned and before the end of July had been reorganized into at least eight units under the control of an operations group.⁴⁸

Operation *NACHBARHILFE*, designed to relieve pressure on the Roslavl-Bryansk railroad by destruction of an estimated 3,700 partisans in the area south of the line, had the same general pattern of results. Launched on 19 May by the *98th Infantry Division*, reinforced by elements of the *221st Security Division* and *Ost* and *Volkswehr* units, the action was successful insofar as it dispersed the bands and forced them to destroy their camps, supply dumps, and air fields, but proved again, as one report stated, that an encirclement in heavily wooded terrain was seldom successful. In this case, a large number of the partisans withdrew to the west before the attack was launched, apparently forewarned of German intentions.⁴⁹

Operation *TANNHAEUSER* was concluded on 23 June without enemy contact, the partisans having retired with their organization intact.⁵⁰

The Germans obtained generally the same results from all five operations: the bands were dispersed or driven out of their camps and away from their bases and sources of supply. Nowhere, however, did these results give any promise of being permanent. Indeed, the Germans, because of their failure to destroy the bands and especially their staffs and their inability to garrison the areas cleared, expected no lasting benefit. Four of the five operations were unsuccessful in trapping and destroying the bands because of the inability of the army command to allot sufficient troop strength for the scope of the action. In two, the enemy was apparently forewarned and thus enabled to escape. Throughout all five operations the bands demonstrated their general reluctance to fight when they could avoid it as well as their ability to slip out of relatively tight encirclements. That Moscow was determined to keep the bands active in such critical areas was evidenced in a noticeable increase in air supply to the bands almost immediately following the opera-

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Stand: 30.VI., 30.VII.43., Bandenlage im Bereich d. H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 28.II.43., Anl. 2, Bandenlisten, Februar bis September 43. H. Gr. Mitte. 65003/4.*

⁴⁹ *AOK 4, Ic. Feindnachrichtenblaetter 16, 6.VI.43. 48448/6; Abschlussmeldung ueber Unternehmen "NACHBARHILFE", 19.VI.43., Anlagenheft 7 z. KTB Korueck 559, Ia. 13.V.-20.VI.43. 44404/8.*

⁵⁰ *Entry for 23 Jun 43, Pz AOK 2, Ia. KTB 3, Bd. 3, 1.VI.-13.VIII.43. 37075/13.*

BALTIC

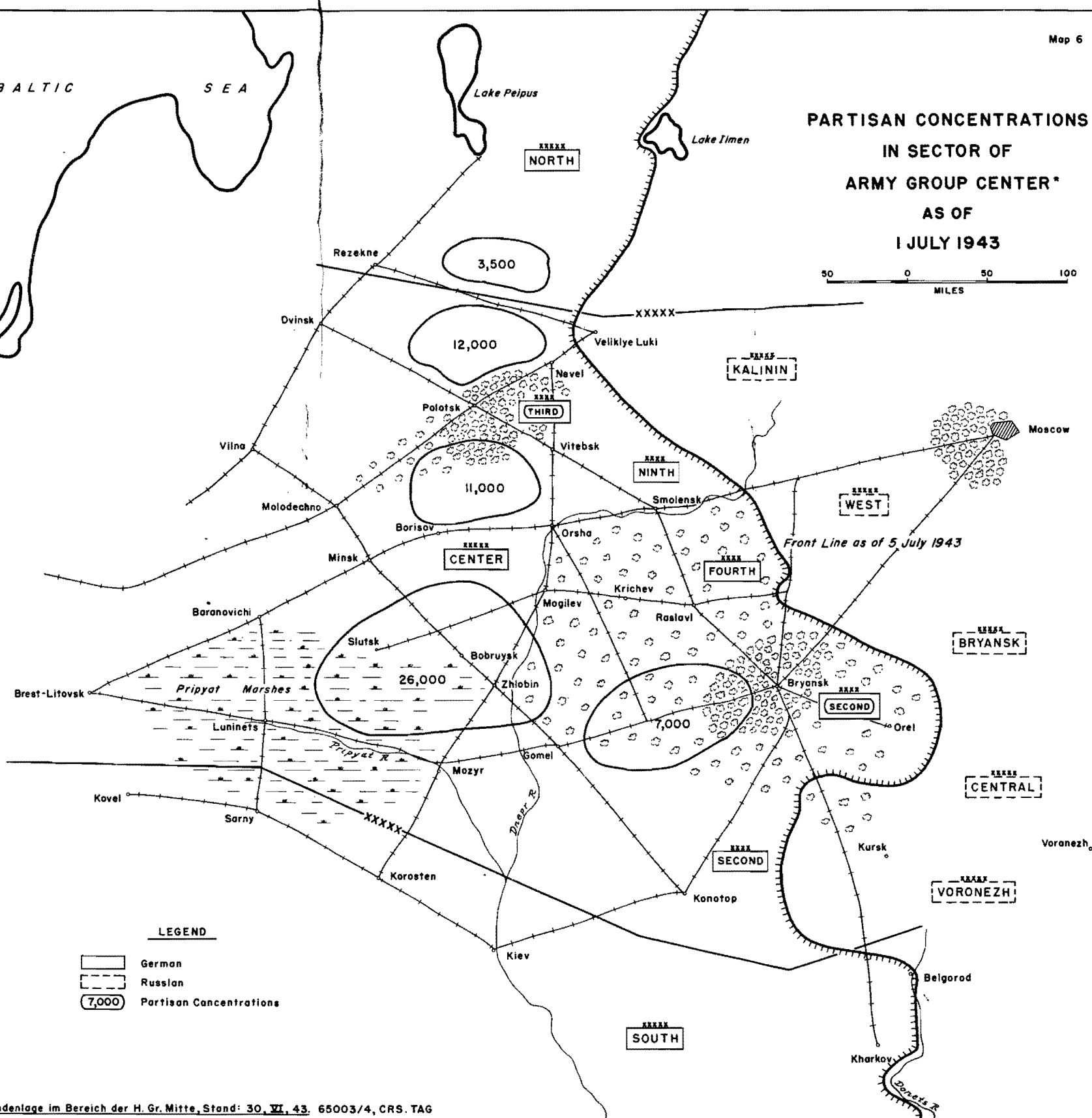
SEA

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**PARTISAN CONCENTRATIONS
IN SECTOR OF
ARMY GROUP CENTER*
AS OF
1 JULY 1943**

50 0 50 100
MILES



* Bandenlage im Bereich der H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 30. VI. 43. 65003/4, CRS. TAG

Map 6. Partisan Concentrations in Sector of Army Group Center as of 1 July 1943

tions.⁵¹ No effort was made to coordinate the operations or to tie them together tactically. Indeed, two were mounted on very short notice. Yet they did what they were designed to do: relieve the pressure on the supply lines when such relief was most needed.

In the Nevel-Vitebsk area, which the Germans believed to be of secondary importance in Soviet plans, only one antipartisan action was launched during this period. This was Operation *KOTTBUS* executed by a mixed force of Army, SS, SD, and native volunteer units under the command of the Higher SS and Police Leader of *Army Group Center* in the area west and south of Vitebsk. Launched in late April and not concluded until 21 June, the drive moved methodically through the forests and swamps and kept the partisans concentrated there in a constant state of flux. Similar to the actions in the Bryansk area, the operation did little beyond keeping the bands off balance for the duration of the drive and forcing them to scatter temporarily.⁵²

Despite these operations, which temporarily cleared the immediate Bryansk area and to some extent weakened the hold of the bands on the region west and southwest of Vitebsk, the partisans still remained strong in a number of areas. As of 1 July there were some 7,000 astride the Bryansk-Gomel line, some 26,000 in a number of units in the Pripyat generally centered about Bobruysk, 11,000 in the area west of Orsha-Vitebsk, and 12,000 west of Nevel, with an additional 3,500 just to the north of the Velikiye Luki-Rezekne line.⁵³

The Summer Battles in the Central Sector

Operation *ZITADELLE* was launched on 5 July. By 8 July the northern wing of the attack had been stopped cold with heavy losses and thrown back on the defensive. On 17 July the Soviets, having driven the German divisions back to their jumpoff line, launched their counterblow with two fronts, hitting concentrically from above and below Orel.

The bands did not react immediately to either the German attack or the Russian counter. On 4 July 300 partisans supported by Red Air Force planes had raided several points along the rail lines near Bryansk, and on 6 July a band raided Malzevo, again with air support. But these attacks were isolated and not followed up, and gave

⁵¹ *Bericht, Juni 43, Pz AOK 2, Anl. Bd. 78, Bandenlage, 11.VIII.42.-1.VII.43. 37075/91; Abschlussmeldung ueber NACHBARHILFE, 19.VI.43., Anlagenheft 7 z. KTB Korueck 559, Ia. NACHBARHILFE, 13.V.-20.VI.43. 44404/8; AOK 4, Ic. Feindnachrichtenblaetter Nr. 7, 9.VII.43. 48448/6.*

⁵² *Gefechtsbericht ueber das Unternehmen KOTTBUS, 28.VI.43., Anl. 53 z. KTB 286 Sich. Div., Ia. 1.I.-4.VII.43. 38424/2; Stand: 30.IV.43., 30.VI.43., Bandenlage im Bereich d. H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 28.II.43., Anl. 2, Bandenlisten, Februar bis September 43, H. Gr. Mitte. 65003/4.*

⁵³ *Bandenlage im Bereich der H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 30.VI.43., H. Gr. Mitte, Ic/AO (Abw.), Bandenlisten, Feb. bis Sept. 43. 65003/4.*

no evidence of any plan for concerted action.⁵⁴ Even the abrupt German switch to the defensive, which caused a considerable increase in troop movements through the Bryansk area, brought no untoward response from the irregulars, the *Second Panzer Army* reporting only a few widely spread rail demolitions in its rear.⁵⁵

Even further to the rear in the heavy terrain of the Pripyat there was little change in the sabotage picture from June. For the 20-day period ending 21 July the *203d Security Division* in the area about Bobruysk, which included the highly vulnerable Minsk-Bobruysk-Gomel line, recorded a total 101 demolitions which caused damage, 39 which resulted in no harm to trackage, and 140 charges removed prior to explosion, only a slight increase over the preceding 20 days.⁵⁶

By 27 July the Germans realized that the Bryansk-Orel salient was no longer tenable and passed the order to withdraw to a defense line just east of the Desna River. Almost coincident with this German decision the tempo of partisan activity changed abruptly.

On 22 July, bands which had been forced westward out of the forests south of Bryansk hit very hard at the north-south Bryansk-Konotop line, which was used primarily for shuttling troops between the central and southern sectors, and set off demolitions on the tracks at 430 places, blocking all traffic for 48 hours. In many of these demolitions and those which followed in the next weeks, they used a small, newly designed mine set in chains of up to 500 at one demolition site.⁵⁷ The same day, a mine which had been attached to a railroad car detonated in the station at Osipovich, on the main line between Minsk and Gomel, blowing up two ammunition trains and one fuel train as well as a trainload of badly needed "Tiger" tanks.⁵⁸ This increase in sabotage continued the remainder of the month, totaling 1,114 for the entire month (an average of 36 demolitions per day), and including over 400 raids on targets other than the rail lines and more than 30 bridges blown in the area of the *203d Security Division* alone.⁵⁹ Still, despite this increased interference

⁵⁴ See entries for 4 Jul-13 Jul 43 in *Pz AOK 2, Ia. KTB 3, Band 3, I.VI.-13.VIII. 43. 37075/13.*

⁵⁵ Actually the only report of rail demolitions was on 14 July when nine track breaks were recorded for the preceding 24 hours. See *ibid.*, entry for 14 July.

⁵⁶ *Anlagen 99, 100 z. KTB 203 Sich. Div., I.I-3.VIII.43., Zehntagebericht. 35950/2.* The respective totals for the preceding twenty day period were 75, 55, and 133. See *Anlagen 83, 87 in ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* See also: Hermann Teske, *Die Silbernen Spiegel* (Heidelberg, 1952), p. 192; Hermann Teske, "Railroad Transportation Operation ZITADELLE (1943)." MS # D-369. Foreign Studies Br., OCMH.

⁵⁸ Hermann Teske, "Railroad Transportation Operation ZITADELLE (1943)." MS # D-369. Foreign Studies Br., OCMH.

⁵⁹ Herman Teske, "Railroad Transportation Operation ZITADELLE (1943)." MS # D-369, Foreign Studies Br., OCMH; *Anlagen 99, 100, 101, z. KTB 203 Sich. Div., I.I-31.VIII.43., Zehntagebericht. 35950/2; Teske, op. cit., p. 192.* Actually the total of bridges and culverts blown in the *203d Security Division* area for the period 2 July through 3 August totaled 57, with 34 in the last 10-day period. However, this last period included the mass attacks of the night 2-3 August and thus only an estimated fraction of the 38 can be included for July.

on the rail lines and the attacks of the Red Air Force, the Germans successfully moved 2,932 troop and supply trains in the sector during the month.⁶⁰

This step-up in sabotage ahead of the northern wing of the Soviet attack was reflected only to a lesser degree in the rest of the sector. In the rear of the *Second Army*, which was defending along the western edge of the Kursk salient, there was no appreciable change during July, although a slight increase in partisan activity was noted for the latter half of the month. There were few bands of any size in the area, although several estimated to comprise as many as 500 men were dispersed attempting to infiltrate eastward from the Pripyat. A number of attempts to blow the rail lines were made using magnetic mines with time fuzes. These were apparently designed to detonate in the middle of a train, rather than under the flat cars loaded with rocks usually pushed ahead of trains. Few were effective.⁶¹ In the rear of the *Fourth Army* the bands for the most part were quiet, making but 28 attempts on the railroads mostly aimed at the Roslavl-Bryansk link.⁶²

The *Third Panzer Army's* rear remained similarly quiet until Soviet pressure forced the withdrawal of two line divisions which had been covering the Nevel-Vitebsk and Vitebsk-Smolensk rail links for commitment on the Orel front. Following their replacement by but three security battalions on 20 July, the bands almost immediately reappeared and began raiding throughout the countryside, setting several chain demolitions on both lines.⁶³ The area directly west of Vitebsk-Orsha remained the critical sector. There, despite the presence of the *223d Infantry Division*, the bands continued to concentrate to such an extent that the army command believed a complete clearing of the area prior to the fall muddy season necessary for a successful winter defense. It was estimated that six to seven line divisions would be necessary to do the job.⁶⁴

Early in August the real blows fell. Once the German withdrawal from Orel was well under way, Moscow ordered the bands to attack, and on the night of 2-3 August they struck, "simultaneously," as directed. During that one night they set 10,900 demolition charges and mines

⁶⁰ Hermann Teske, "Railroad Transportation Operation ZITADELLE (1943)," p. 16. MS # D-369. Foreign Studies Br, OCMH. This total includes supply trains carrying ammunition, fuel, and rations, hospital trains, troop trains for the army, Luftwaffe, railroad engineers, salvage platoons, and furlough traffic, and trains for the *Reichskommissariat* and the economic administration.

⁶¹ AOK 2, Ia. Anl z. KTB, *Bandenbekaempfung*, Juli 43. 37418/108. Korueck 580, Ic. Tgb. Nr. 2722/43 geh., 31.VII.43., KTB 26a, Teil 7, 37516/4.

⁶² Korueck 559, Ic. Tgb. Nr. 2952/43 geh., 31.VII.43., KTB Heft 3, Anl. 1-17. 45668/4.

⁶³ Pz AOK 3, Ia. Nr. 6592/43 geh., 16.VIII.43., in H. Gr. Mitte, *Bandenbekaempfung*, Akte XXII, Heft 11, 1.VIII.-30.IX.43. 65002/23.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*; Bericht, Juli, Pz AOK 3, Ic/AO, Anl. Bd. 2, Tgb. 9, 1.VIII.-30.IX.43. 40252/7.

on the rail lines of the central sector, 8,422 of which detonated, the Germans discovering and disarming the remainder prior to explosion. Many of these charges were set in chains.⁶⁵ Throughout the rest of the month, these attacks on railroads continued, but in no such volume as in the initial assault. The total for the 31-day period was 15,977 demolitions. Included in these were 345 set in chains containing more than 10 charges each. An additional 4,528 were removed by the Germans.⁶⁶

After the initial attacks the partisans expanded their sabotage to include all railroad facilities and installations. They damaged or demolished 266 locomotives and 1,378 cars, and destroyed extensive stocks of railroad construction and maintenance material, including 500,000 linear feet of spare rails and hundreds of ties. The loss of the latter, in view of the long sections of trackage rendered unserviceable by the chain demolitions, placed an added burden on the German repair crews. In many instances in order to get rails to repair one line, one set of tracks of a double track line had to be torn up.⁶⁷ They raided numbers of water towers, switching points, and stations, and in a number of instances attacked trains which had been blocked by broken rails.⁶⁸

The more concentrated chain demolitions seem to have been executed in large part by a number of specially organized Red Army engineer demolition teams flown into the German rear for this particular series of attacks. These teams comprising some 30 men and 1 officer were landed in the vicinity of particular bands with which they were to work and which were to furnish necessary reconnaissance and security details.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Hermann Teske, "Railroad Transportation Operation ZITADELLE (1943)," p. 12. MS # D-369. Foreign Studies Br, OCMH. These figures are for the combined Army Group Center Rear Area and the political occupation zone, the Generalkommissariat Weissruthenien. The Army Group Center Rear Area listed 6,519 successful and 2,086 unsuccessful for the same date. See: H. Gr. Mitte, Ia. Nr. 9842/43 g. Kdos., 5.IX.43., Anl. z. KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, Fuehrungsabt., Akte XXII, Heft 11, 1.VII.-30.IX.43. 65002/23. In this particular series of attacks the Germans listed demolitions by the partisans (literally "demolition sites"—*Sprengstellen*) as "successful" or "unsuccessful"; "successful" when the mine or charge actually detonated, irrespective of the damage done, "unsuccessful" when it was discovered and disarmed prior to detonation.

⁶⁶ See: H. Gr. Mitte, Ia, Nr. 9842/43 g. Kdos., 5.IX.43., Anl. z. KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, Fuehrungsabt., Akte XXII, Heft 11, 1.VII.-30.IX.43. 65002/23. Army Group Center Rear Area listed 12,717 successful demolitions and 3,011 charges deactivated in its rear for the same period.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*; Teske, *op. cit.*, pp. 194-95; Bericht, August 43, Pz AOK 3, Tgb. 9, Ic/AO. 1/0252/7.

⁶⁸ AOK 9, Anl. 2, KTB 9, Fuehrungsabt. II. Tagesmeldungen, 19.VIII.-15.X.43. 52535/2; Bericht, Korueck 559, Ic. Nr. 4313/43 geh., 30.VIII.43., in KTB Korueck 559, Ic, Heft 3, Anl. 1-17, 5.VII.-28.XII.43. 45668/4.

⁶⁹ Nachrichten ueber Bandenkrieg, Nr. 4, OKH/GenStdH. Fde H Ost (II/Bd), Nr. 2460/43 geh. 3.V.43., in Kdr Gen d. Sich. Tr. Sued., Ia, Anl. Bd. 37, 30.IV.-1.VIII.43. 39502/41; H. Gr. Mitte, Ia, Nr. 9842/43 g. Kdos., 5.IX.43., Anl. z. Ktb, H. Gr. Mitte, Fuehrungsabt., Akte XXII, Heft 11, 1.VIII.-30.IX.43., 65002/23; Korueck 559, Ic. Nachrichten, 15.X.43., in Anl. 1-17, der Abt. Ic. z. KTB Korueck 559/Ia. fuer die Zeit, v. 5.VII.-28.XII.43. 45668/4.

Much of the sabotage along the rail lines, other than the demolitions, was committed by native railroad employees and deserting members of Ost security units guarding the lines. On 17 August a native unit of 600 men went over to the partisans in a body, attacking a sizeable railroad station and doing considerable damage.⁷⁰

The effect of these interruptions, while never disastrous, was considerable, and only through an outstanding performance by the German railway personnel and the rail transportation command were both the continued supply of the troops and the successive withdrawal movements carried out. Through a series of expedients as shuttles over lateral lines, reductions in speed, travel by daylight only and then with trains operating within sight of one another, they were able to meet the demands made of them regarding supply and the shifting of reserves, as well as the evacuation of wounded and materiel. A total of 2,951 supply and troop trains was successfully moved during the month.⁷¹

This increase in successful raids on the rail lines was due, in part at least, to heavy pressure of the Red Army forcing *Army Group Center* to pull many of the German security battalions out of the rear and commit them in the line. When this practice was brought to a halt by an OKW directive, the chain demolitions decreased and the raids lost much of their sting although the number of single rail demolitions continued to rise.⁷²

The bands accompanied this campaign against the railroads with an increase in raids on other communication facilities. They mined a number of highways, especially in the Pripyat and repeatedly attacked truck convoys, raided German-occupied towns and supply depots in considerable strength, destroyed several telephone relay trains, and cut the important Minsk-Smolensk cable in a number of places. Their raids on economic installations increased and caused great damage. And they committed many deliberate acts of terror against the families of indigenous railway personnel and natives serving in the locally recruited security battalions which served to increase the already sizeable number of desertions from these units and further lowered native morale.

⁷⁰ Korueck 559, *Id. Nachrichten*, 15.X.43., in *Anl. 1-17, der Abt. Ic. z. KTB Korueck 559/Ia. fuer die Zeit. v. 5.VII.-28.XII.43.* 45668/4. Teske, *op. cit.*, p. 195; *KTB Heft 3, Anl. 1-17.* 45668/4; entry for 20 Aug 43 in *AOK 9, Anl. 2, KTB 9, 19.VIII.-15.X.43., Fuehrungsabt. II, Tagesmeldungen.* 52535/2.

⁷¹ Hermann Teske, "Railroad Transportation Operation ZITADELLE (1943)," pp. 13, 16-17. MS # D-369. Foreign Studies Br, OCMH.

⁷² No copy of this OKW directive appears to be extant. It is referred to as Fuehrer Order No. 9 in *H Gr Mitte, Ia, Nr. 9842/43 g. Kdos., 5.IX.43., Anl. z. KTB, H Gr Mitte, Fuehrungsabt., Akte XXII, Heft 11, 1.VIII.-30.IX.43.* 65002/23.

Soviet propaganda aimed at the civil populace increased both in volume and in quality.⁷³

Before the withdrawal to the positions east of the Desna was complete the Soviet attack shifted with such violence to the front of the *Fourth Army* defending the Smolensk sector and along the boundary between *Army Groups South* and *Center* in the area of the *Fourth Panzer* and *Second Armies* directly east of Kursk that a proper balancing of forces was found to be no longer possible. A new withdrawal became necessary, this time of the entire army group, to positions paralleling the line upper Dnepr-Orsha-Vitebsk-Nevel and some 30 miles to the east. This withdrawal continued throughout September and was completed on 1 October.

Throughout all of September the transport situation in the central sector remained serious due to partisan action, and, although the distance to the front grew progressively less and supply and troop movements from the Zone of the Interior decreased proportionately, the difficulties caused by the bands were greater than during the previous withdrawal because this time the whole army group was involved. In actual volume partisan activity decreased from the previous month, but was generally more effective. Although the rear area was slowly compressed and the total mileage of communication lines was steadily cut down by the retrograde movement, this was far more than offset by the continued heavy pressure of the Red Army and the fact that so many of the German security units were either fighting at the front or on the move to areas further west. As news of the succeeding German reverses spread the increasing number of desertions of local railway personnel and of whole companies and battalions of indigenous units (the latter units often killing the German cadres) added further difficulties. The general military and political situation drove increasing numbers of heretofore neutral civilians into the bands, and in some cases these civilians, incensed by rumors and Soviet propaganda, made heavy armed raids on German-occupied villages. Others withdrawing with the German divisions went over to the bands because of their fear of the forced labor draft.⁷⁴

⁷³ *Ibid.*; Bericht, Korueck 559, Ic, Tgb. Nr. 2952/43 geh., 31.VII.43., KTB Heft 3, Anl. 1-17. 45668/4. Hermann Teske, "Railroad Transportation Operation ZITADELLE (1943)," pp. 12-13. MS # D-369. Foreign Studies Br, OCMH.; AOK 9, Anl. 2, KTB 9, 19.VIII.-15.X.43., Fuehrungsabt, II, Tagesmeldungen. 52535/2.

⁷⁴ H. Gr. Mitte, Ia. Nr. 11822/43 g. Kdos., 17.X.43., Anl. z. KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, Fuehrungsabt., Akte XXIII, Heft 12, 1.X.-31.XII.43. 65002/24; Bericht, September 43, Pz AOK 3, Anl. Bd. 2, Tgb. 9, Ic/AO, 1.VII.-30.IX.43. 40252/7; Bericht, September 43, AOK 2, Ia, Anl. z. KTB Russland, Schriftwechsel Bandenbekämpfung III, 21.VI.-29.X.43. 60311/21; Hermann Teske, "Railroad Transportation Operation ZITADELLE (1943)," pp. 13-14. MS # D-369. Foreign Studies Br, OCMH. Teske, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-97.

Generally the situation remained fluid. Because so many partisan raids went unreported due to the natives' fear of the bands and because many mayors and village elders defected or were murdered and many of those remaining in office were afraid to carry out their duties, the Germans found it increasingly impossible to get a clear picture of just what was happening in their rear and of the extent of the disruption there.⁷⁵

During the first days of the month, there was a lull in the attacks, especially in the chain demolitions, due, as the Germans thought, to a shortage of explosives following the heavy sabotage of the preceding weeks.⁷⁶ The emphasis, however, remained on the rail lines, and by the middle of the month the bands again started operating on a large scale with chain attempts. On the night of 18-19 September they set 3,250 demolitions and on the night of 25-26 September 4,240, more than 50 percent of which were successful.⁷⁷ Raids on the lines in the army group rear area totaled 1,256 for the month with an aggregate of 4,257 successful demolitions, of which 72 were of the chain variety comprising 3,800, with nearly half again as many in the *Generalkommissariat Weissruthenien*.⁷⁸ In 255 cases lines were cut for more than 12 hours, in 18 cases for more than 24 hours.⁷⁹ Rolling stock continued to suffer heavily with 109 locomotives and 600 cars damaged or destroyed. Many water towers were demolished and some 30 miles of spare rails ruined. In addition, the Minsk-Smolensk "U" cable was cut 40 times in 14 days.⁸⁰

The focus of these September raids was in the northeastern edge of the Pripyat behind the *Second Army* and directly in line with the heaviest Soviet attack. Here, where the terrain was the most formidable in the eastern theater and for the most part had been in the hands of the bands for many months, travel became very difficult, with the partisans exerting extremely heavy pressure on the rail lines, mining the few roads, and striking at the bridges. The Minsk-Gomel and Mogilev-Zhlobin

⁷⁵ Dir. Hq. AOK 2, O. Qu/Qu 2, 29.IX.43., in KTB Russland AOK 2, Ia. Schriftwechsel Bandenbekaempfung, III, 21.VI.-29.X.43. 60311/21; Bandenlage im September, Korueck 559, Ic. Tgb. Nr. 3735/43 geh., 25.IX.43., in KTB Korueck 559/Ia fuer die Zeit v. 5.VII.-28.XII.43. 45668/4.

⁷⁶ Bericht Sept. 43, Pz AOK 3, Anl. Bd. 2, Tgb. 9. 40252/7.

⁷⁷ H. Gr. Mitte, Ia. Nr. 11822/43 g.Kdos., 17.X.43., Anl. z. KTB. H. Gr. Mitte, Fuehrungsabt., Akte XXIII, Heft 12, 1.X.-31.XII.43. 65002/24; Hermann Teske, "Railroad Transportation Operation ZITADELLE (1943)," p. 15. MS # D-369. Foreign Studies Br, OCMH.

⁷⁸ Ibid.; H. Gr. Mitte, Ia. Nr. 11822/43 g.Kdos., 17.X.43., Anl. z. KTB, Mitte, Fuehrungsabt., Akte XXIII, Heft 12, 1.X.-31.XII.43. 65002/24. Wehrmacht-befehlshaber Ostland, Ia. Nr. 2360/43 geh., vom 1 Okt, 43, Anl. 1, 19.IX.-27.IX.43. 65002/24.

⁷⁹ Teske, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

⁸⁰ Ibid.; H. Gr. Mitte, Ia. Nr. 11822/43 g.Kdos., 17.X.43., Anl. z. KTB. Mitte, Fuehrungsabt., Akte XXIII, Heft 12, 1.X.-31.XII.43. 65002/24.

lines continued to be the hardest hit in the whole central sector, the former suffering 643 demolitions in one 30 mile stretch between Zhlobin and Bobruysk, the latter 580 in 40 miles.⁸¹ Travel between Gomel and Zhlobin finally became so difficult that the Germans, in a desperate attempt to curb the raids, unloaded replacements along that particular stretch and placed them at 20 foot intervals as static track guards. Yet the demolitions continued.⁸²

For several days following the mass demolitions of 18-19 September, the majority of which occurred in the Pripyat west of Gomel, the rail traffic situation in the vicinity of that city was quite critical. Due to the large number of track breaks caused by the bands and raids by the Red Air Force and the unusually great traffic demands occasioned by the withdrawal, 130 evacuation trains became blocked in the marshalling yards there with the Red Army attacking but a few miles to the east. The failure of the bands to follow up their first assaults prior to 25-26 September, however, gave the transportation command an opportunity to bring the situation under control, and none of the 130 was lost.⁸³

OKH became so worried over these continued demolitions in the Pripyat area that *Foreign Armies East* for a while seriously considered entering the radio nets of the bands there and simulating orders from Moscow to halt the attacks. The Germans were very familiar with the partisan nets and had monitored their traffic for some time. The plan was finally dropped, however, in the fear that the bands might discover the subterfuge and alter their codes and procedures and thus deny the German command a valuable source of intelligence.⁸⁴

As the withdrawal progressed, the bands were gradually forced westward into new areas by the retreating Germans. But they went reluctantly, in some cases forcing Wehrmacht units to fight their way back to the new positions.⁸⁵

By 1 October the Germans had occupied their Dnepr line, and the pressure of the Red Army attacks began to ease as the Soviets paused to regroup. During September the transportation command successfully moved a total of 2,029 trains in the central sector, 713 of them evacuation trains. This brought the total of rail movements since the opening of

⁸¹ *Bandenanschlaege im Monat Sept. 43, Anl. z. KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, Ia. Nr. 11822/43 g.Kdos. 17.X.43. 65002/24; Hermann Teske, "Railroad Transportation Operation ZITADELLE (1943)," p. 15. MS # D-369. Foreign Studies Br, OCMH.*

⁸² Teske, *op. cit.*, p. 197.

⁸³ Hermann Teske, "Railroad Transportation Operation ZITADELLE (1943)," p. 15. MS # D-369. Foreign Studies Br, OCMH.

⁸⁴ *Funktaeuschung der Banden, Fde. H. Ost (I/Bd), Nr. 2488/43 g.Kdos., 4.X.43. H 3/193.*

⁸⁵ *Befehl, Hq, AOK 2, 1.X.43. 60311/21.*

ZITADELLE to 7,912.⁸⁶ During the same period the partisans had successfully set off some 21,348 rail demolitions in more than 26,000 attempts, in addition to other extensive sabotage. In spite of these efforts and the tremendous pressure exerted by the Red Army, the Germans had executed their two successive withdrawal movements on schedule, with a minimum loss of troop and supply trains, and at all times under their own control.⁸⁷

The Northern and Southern Sectors During the Summer and Fall

In the northern sector the partisans were not overly active. Due to the more stable situation along the front there, the rear area commands had not been weakened by withdrawals of security units for service in the line and were generally able to hold them in check by constant patrolling and occasional raids.⁸⁸

In the rear of the *Sixteenth Army* sabotage activity, especially on the rail lines, increased somewhat during August in connection with the Soviet assaults on the Staraya-Russa front, but never assumed any such proportions as behind *Army Group Center*. Although the partisans there set some chain demolitions, using as many as several hundred mines on occasion, the fact that their units were small and not well established in the area precluded their exercising any real effect on the tactical situation.⁸⁹ A similar situation existed in the rear of the *Eighteenth Army* between Lake Ilmen and Lake Peipus.⁹⁰ During September the partisans broke rails at but 81 places and damaged but 7 bridges in the whole sector, in addition to some small-scale raiding and pillaging and occasional clashes with security patrols.⁹¹

Under the surface of this comparative quiet, however, lay a definite threat for the future. All during the summer the natives in the sector had been growing increasingly hostile to the occupation, and by September they were no longer cooperating in reporting raids or the whereabouts of partisans. This deprived the security commands of a valuable source of information. To cap this, the bands were steadily growing in

⁸⁶ See: Hermann Teske, "Railroad Transportation Operation *ZITADELLE* (1943)," pp. 14, 16-17. MS # D-369. Foreign Studies Br, OCMH.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*; H. Gr. Mitte, Ia. Nr. 11822/43 g. Kdos., 17.X.43., Anl. z. KTB H. Gr. Mitte, Fuehrungsabt., Akte XXIII, Heft 12, 1.X.-31.XII.43. 65002/24; see also: *Lagen Ost* for the period.

⁸⁸ *Bandenlage, Kurze Beurteilung der Feindlage, OKH/Fde. H. Ost (I), 1.IX.-31.X.43.* H 3/204; *Bericht, September 43, AOK 16, Ia. KTB 5, Teil VII, Bandenakten, 1.VII.-31.XII.43.* 44185/69.

⁸⁹ *Bericht, August 43, AOK 16, Ia. KTB 5, Teil VII, Bandenakten, 1.VII.-31.XII.43.* 44185/69.

⁹⁰ *Banden, Sept. 43. in H. Gr. Nord. Ic/AO, KTB Bandenlagekarten, Jan. bis Sept. 43.* 75131/40; 285 *Sich. Div., Anl. z. KTB 3, Ic. u. IIa, 1.II.-30.VI.43., 1.VII.-31.XII.43.* 35155/4, 43060/4.

⁹¹ *H. Gr. Nord, Ic/AO, KTB, Bandenlagekarten, Jan. bis Sep 43.* 75131/40.

size and number, recruiting successfully among the more dissident elements of the population and being reinforced both from the Soviet rear and by desertions from the *Ost* units.⁹²

This situation was considerably worsened late in September when 150,000 civilians—men, women, and children—were ordered evacuated from the area between Lake Ilmen and Lake Peipus “on foot.”⁹³ The *Eighteenth Army*, in protesting, reported that there were no facilities for caring for the evacuees on the march and no camps suitable for housing them within 90 miles, and that even while the move was only in process of organization the details of the plan became widely known and large numbers of the natives began going over to the partisans in self-defense. Such open mistreatment, the report continued, presaged a great intensification of partisan activity and a complete breakdown of morale and discipline in the indigenous units with resultant disaffection and desertion to the bands.⁹⁴

In the southern sector, sabotage increased somewhat during July, but was not generally aimed at the German lines of communication. The few larger bands there remained quiet, but during the month a number of small units of 8 to 10 men, apparently under some sort of central control, appeared in the northern portion of the area hitting sharply at harvesting machinery and grain storage facilities.⁹⁵ Rather obviously the Soviet high command, if indeed it had control of these groups, did not intend that the Germans make any harvest or carry any surplus food stocks with them in their withdrawal.

In August coincident with the Red Army attack in the central sector, there was a considerable increase in partisan activity along the traffic arteries leading into Kiev, especially west of the Dnepr River. Although this caused a number of short interruptions in traffic and was generally “a great nuisance,” it caused no critical delays in supply for the front.⁹⁶ As the fighting moved steadily westward, most of the bands east of the Dnepr moved across the river into the lower edges of the Pripjat Marsh. This general westward movement of the whole war in the south brought

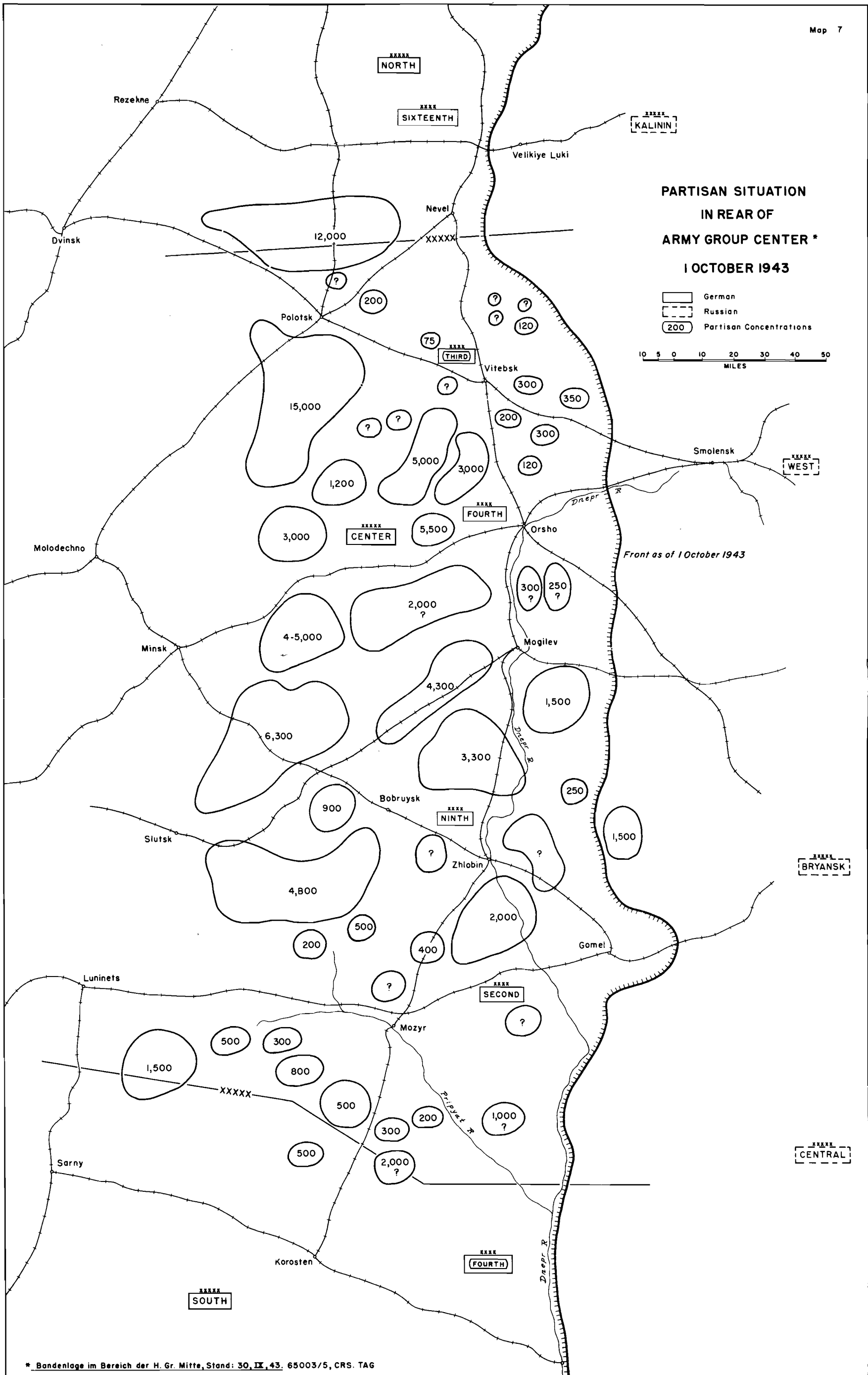
⁹² *Bericht, Sept. 43, AOK 16, Ia. KTB 5, Teil VII, Bandenakten, I.VII.–31.XII.43.* 44185/69.

⁹³ The origin of this order is unknown. See: *Bericht, AOK 18 to Gen. der Ostruppen, H. Gr. Nord. 7.X.43., AOK 18, Ia, Nachreichungen d. Abt. Ic/AO, 43–45.* 64847. This is not the directive, but a report by the *Eighteenth Army* giving the provisions of the order and protesting.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *H. Geb. Sued, Ic. Nr. 182/43g., 4.VIII.43., KTB, H. Geb. Sued, Juli 43.* 39502/1.

⁹⁶ “The German Military Transport System in Southern Russia, Romania, and Hungary from 24 November 1942 to 25 March 1945,” p. 14. MS # D-139. Foreign Studies Br, OCMH; *Bandenlage, August 43, Korueck 585, Anl. z. KTB. 10.IX.–17.X.43.* 44172/3; *OKH/Fde. H. Ost (I), Kurze Beurteilung der Feindlage, 1.IX.–31.X.43.* H 3/204.



* Bändenlage im Bereich der H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 30, IX, 43. 65003/5, CRS. TAG

Map 7. Partisan Situation in Rear of Army Group Center, 1 October 1943.

out a number of Ukrainian nationalist bands in force, and in the Sarny-Korosten area they fought several pitched battles with partisan units.⁹⁷

The same pattern continued throughout the fall months. Although the bands showed some increase in size and numbers, for the most part they remained inactive, avoiding clashes with the German security units and steering clear of the increasing number of line divisions in the region. In September, a typical month, they blew the rail lines at but 36 places, with no mass demolitions, and attacked economic installations but 40 times.⁹⁸

As in the central and northern sectors, popular morale took a sharp drop during the summer as the Wehrmacht withdrawal continued. In the areas still in German hands panic mounted over fear of a scorched-earth campaign. Many natives went over to the bands, and in some areas, for the first time since the invasion in June 1941, the Germans became the object of unconcealed hatred because of the general devastation of the civilian property that the war had occasioned.⁹⁹

The Central Sector, October–December

On 1 October, the eastern front ran, at least momentarily, from Melitopol on the Sea of Azov to the head of the Dnepr bend at Zaporozhe and thence up the west bank of the river, continuing on in the central and northern sectors generally from the confluence of the Dnepr and Pripyat Rivers through Gomel north along the prepared defenses just east of the line upper Dnepr-Orsha-Vitebsk-Nevel, and thence to Lake Ilmen and down the course of the Volkhov River to the old Lenin-grad perimeter.

Partisan Concentrations

Despite the presence of an increasing number of bands behind the length of this line, the focus of the partisan effort remained in the rear of *Army Group Center*. There the areas of heaviest partisan concentration, with the exception of the territory abandoned during the summer withdrawals, remained unchanged from the spring and summer, albeit considerably reinforced by local levies and bands forced westward by the retrogression of the front. In the Rossono area west of Nevel and north of Polotsk were approximately 12,000 irregulars; in the Senno-Lepel-Ushachi area, some 60 miles west of Vitebsk-Orsha, above 30,000; and in the general region bounded Minsk-Orsha-Gomel-Slutsk and centered about Bobruysk, 28,000. In addition, there were a number

⁹⁷ OKH/Fde. H. Ost I, *Kurze Beurteilung der Feindlage*, 1.IX.-31.X.43. H 3/204.

⁹⁸ Kdr. d. H. Geb. Sued, Ic. Nr. 395/43g., 3.X.43., KTB, Ia. Kdr. G. d. Sich. Tr. Sued. Monat Okt. u. Nov 43, mit Anl. 39502/4.

⁹⁹ Bericht, Sept 43, Pz AOK I, Beilage 6 z. Tgb., Ic/AO, 1.IX.-31.XII.43. 45393/19.

of bands concentrated in the Pripyat south of the Gomel-Luninets railroad whose strength the Germans had not determined.¹⁰⁰

The Security Commands

The sector, including the *Generalkommissariat Weissruthenien*, at this time comprised something more than 90,000 square miles, roughly twice the size of the state of Pennsylvania. In the area were 2,300 miles of railroads and 1,700 miles of roads which the Germans considered important enough to require security. For all security tasks, including the coverage of these lines of communication, the combined Wehrmacht and political security commands had an assigned strength of 163 miscellaneous battalions, of which two-thirds were German, two were French and the remainder Hungarian and native.

On the basis of experience which had shown that one German security battalion with a strength of 350 men could "barely" provide static security for 25 kilometers of railroad or 50 kilometers of road, 210 German security battalions were required for these traffic routes alone, making a paper deficit of 47. The actual deficit, however, was much greater, for the 163 needed more than 14,000 replacements to bring them up to a strength of 350 per unit, 15 of the total were in the front lines, and the Hungarian and indigenous units were of such poor quality that their combat effectiveness was considered to be less than one-half that of their German counterparts. The aggregate effect was to reduce the true strength of the combined security commands to no more than 100 battalions, enough for static security of one-half the roads and rail lines, and nothing for anything else.¹⁰¹

This critical shortage of security forces was due in no small part to the widespread defections of the personnel of the native volunteer units. The morale of these natives had never been of the best, and during the summer months they had proved unable to withstand the psychological effects of the continuing German reverses and the terror campaign waged by the partisans against their families. The upshot of it was that all indigenous units became suspect and most were removed from partisan-endangered areas.

In September the whole question of the reliability of the *Osttruppen* was reviewed by OKH¹⁰² and the decision was made to exchange *Ost* units from the east for German units in France on the basis of two *Ost*

¹⁰⁰ *Bandenlage im Bereich der H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 30.IX.43., H. Gr. Mitte, Ic/AO (Abw.), Bandenlisten, Sept. bis Dez. 43.* 65003/5.

¹⁰¹ *Bandenlage, Okt. 43, H. Gr. Mitte, Ia. Nr. 13097/43 g. Kdos., 9.XI.43., Anl. z. KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, Fuehrungsabt., Akte XXIII, Heft 12, 1.X.-31.XII.43.* 65002/24.

¹⁰² See: Folder, *Osttruppen, OKH/Org. Abt., Nr. II/12593/43, II/12595/43.* Foreign Studies Br, OCMH.

battalions for one German battalion.¹⁰³ During September and October about 45 were transferred to the west. In October the continued Red Army pressure caused a modification of the original ratio to the advantage of the eastern theater. At that time it was planned to exchange 32 additional *Ost* battalions for 26 German battalions.¹⁰⁴ There is no evidence that these German battalions were to be utilized in security roles rather than in the tottering front lines. Contrarily, OKH's announcement that 25,000 additional *Osttruppen* would be trained in November and December would seem to indicate that such was not the case.¹⁰⁵

In any event, the problem of desertions from the *Ostbataillone* was not solved as far as those remaining in the east were concerned, for the basic causes of defection were not removed.¹⁰⁶ Desertions continued, often by platoon and company, and ceased only when the units were transferred. The newly activated units appeared to be more trustworthy, especially when committed in danger spots, but the German unit commanders reported that it would be some time before they could accurately estimate their reliability and combat worth.¹⁰⁷

Sabotage in October

Both the increase in partisan strength and this manpower shortage were evidenced in continued raids and sabotage by the bands, proportionate to be sure to the decrease in the extent of the rear. As in previous months, they concentrated their efforts against the German communications. During October they hit railroad installations with 1,093 raids and set off demolitions along the tracks at 5,456 places. In addition, they destroyed or damaged sizeable stores of railway construction and maintenance materials and a number of engines and cars. They also paid special attention to signal communication facilities, breaking the Orsha-Minsk-Brest-Litovsk cable more than 100 times and cutting down 1,472 telephone poles.¹⁰⁸ Often they waited in ambush in the vicinity of these breaks for the German repair details and caused them heavy casualties over a period of time.¹⁰⁹ So heavy did the attrition of signal

¹⁰³ OKW/WFSt. KTB 1, 1.IX.-31.XII.43., 25.IX.43., quoted in Gordon A. Harrison, *Cross Channel Attack in UNITED STATES ARMY IN WORLD WAR II* (Washington 1951), p. 146.

¹⁰⁴ OKH/Op. Abt., *Kraefte Westen, Allgemein, Band III*, 24.VII.42.-1.XI.43., quoted in Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 146.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ For these causes, see: Folder, *Osttruppen*, OKH/Org. Abt., Nr. II/12593/43, II/12595/43. Foreign Studies Br, OCMH.

¹⁰⁷ Bericht, Oktober 43, AOK 16, Ia. KTB 5, Teil VII, Qu. 1. Bandenakten, 1.VII.-31.XII.43. 44185/69; Bericht, Oktober 43, 2.XI.43., AOK 2, Ia. Bandenbekaempfung IV, 1.IX.43.-30.I.44. 52701/107; Korueck 559, Ia. Nr. 5891/43 geh., Heft 2, Anl. 94-126 z. KTB Korueck 559, Ia. fuer die Zeit v. 5.XI.-30.XII.43. 45668/3.

¹⁰⁸ Bandenlage, Okt. 43, H. Gr. Mitte, Ia. Nr. 13097/43 g. Kdos., 9.XI.43., Anl. z. KTB. H. Gr. Mitte, Fuehrungsabt., Akte XXIII, Heft 12, 1.X.-31.XII.43. 65002/24.

¹⁰⁹ MS # P-038, "German Radio Intelligence" (S). Foreign Studies Br, OCMH.

facilities become that before the end of the year the copper requirements to rebuild lines destroyed by the partisans had risen 700 percent over those of 1942.¹¹⁰

They also continued to mine the roads, both primary and secondary, although with much less success than in the case of the rail lines. The *Second Army*, whose rear was particularly harassed, reported that it was able to locate and disarm two-thirds of the charges, so poorly were they laid, and recommended to its security command that details of civilians drafted from nearby villages be forced to plow and grade the roads with their own horses in an effort to neutralize the remainder of the mines.¹¹¹

The focus of these raids hit much deeper into the German rear than ever before, spilling well over into the extreme western portions of the political occupation zone, which heretofore had suffered little damage, and even on occasion across the Polish border. Raids on the Brest-Litovsk-Baranowicze line increased 50 percent, on the Volkovsk-Lida 200 percent; the Gomel-Luninets-Brest-Litovsk link bisecting the Pripyat suffered 1,600 demolitions during the month, over 1,200 west of Luninets. Conversely, attacks on the much assaulted Gomel-Zhlobin-Minsk line, now close to the front, dropped more than 300 percent.¹¹²

Much of this rise in sabotage in the Generalkommissariat was attributed by the political occupation authorities to the vicious methods of the police and SS units securing the sector. Villages were burned without cause; cattle were ruthlessly shot lest they fall into the hands of the partisans; and in many cases adults were forcibly evacuated and their children left to fend for themselves. The natives became so antagonized that Organization Todt¹¹³ found itself unable to operate due to an almost complete refusal of the people to work.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ *Entwicklung der Bandenlage, Bandentaetigkeit u. Auswirkungen auf die Wirtschaft, 1.IX.43.* H 3/519.

¹¹¹ *Monatsbericht Okt. 43, Korueck 580, Ic. Nr. 4307/43 geh., KTB 28a, Korueck 580, 16.X.-31.X.43.* 41217/2; *Befehl, AOK 2, O. Qu/Qu 2, 29.IX.43., Anl. z. KTB Russland, AOK 2, Ia. 21.VI.-29.X.43.* 60311/21.

¹¹² *Bandenlage, Okt. 43. H. Gr. Mitte, Ia. Nr. 13097/43 g. Kdos., 9.XI.43., Anl. z. KTB. H. Gr. Mitte, Fuehrungsabt., Akte XXIII, Heft 12, 1.X.-31.XII.43.* 65002/24; *Eisenbahnsprengungen, Monat Sept. 43, Anl. z. Fde. H. Ost (I/Bd.), Nr. 2488/43 g. Kdos., 4.X.43.* H 3/193; *Bandenanschlaege im Monat Sept., Okt. 43, Anl. z. KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, Ia. Nr. 11822/43 g. Kdos. 17.X.43.* 65002/24.

¹¹³ The Organization Todt was a paramilitary organization of the Nazi Party Auxiliary to the Wehrmacht. Named after its founder, Dr. Todt, it comprised a cadre of engineers and was expanded as necessary by the use of hired, conscript, or foreign labor.

¹¹⁴ Sit rpt, *Reichskommissar Ostland* to Reichsminister for the Occupied Eastern Territory, 14 Oct 43. EAP 99/62; Oral testimony of Von dem Bach-Zolewski in *I.M.T., op. cit.*, IV, pp. 475-96.

The Pressure Eases Momentarily

During the latter half of October the security commands, by literally scraping the bottom of the manpower barrel and by abandoning the protection of several roads and population centers and the construction of one section of railroad,¹¹⁵ were able to mount several medium-scale antipartisan operations, thus causing a noticeable drop in sabotage before the first of November.¹¹⁶ A sharp decrease in airborne supply from the Soviet rear was also a material factor in this drop, flights shrinking from the high of more than 2,000 for the first two weeks of May to 315 for the last two weeks of October.¹¹⁷

Also affecting the volume of raids and sabotage during this period was the need for the bands to stockpile food supplies for the coming winter. With their numbers constantly increasing, they more and more were forced to turn their energies to extensive foraging and looting of civilian stores. Too often mindful only of their own requirements, they indiscriminately struck in any locality where food was to be had, irrespective of the political sentiments of the inhabitants, seizing quantities of grain and large numbers of cattle, sometimes as many as 200 in a single raid.¹¹⁸

The looting finally assumed such proportions and created such ill feeling among the natives against both the bands and the Soviet high command that the Central Staff issued a directive that food could be requisitioned only in daylight and then through negotiation with the village elders, and that all taken was to be signed for. Pillaging and foraging at night were forbidden and all caught so doing were ordered to be shot.¹¹⁹

Despite the cut in air supply, Moscow made it clear that the bands were in no wise being abandoned and showed itself both willing and able to aid them when the occasion demanded. During October one German antipartisan unit succeeded in isolating the 2,500-man *Polk Grischin* in the Pripyat Marshes behind the *Ninth Army*. This *Polk*

¹¹⁵ H. Gr. Mitte, Ia, Nr. 13097/43 g. Kdos., 9.XI.43., *Bandenlage*, Okt. 43, Anl. z. KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, *Fuehrungsabt., Akte XXIII, Heft 12, 1.X.-31.XII.43.* 65002/24.

¹¹⁶ *Monatsbericht*, Okt. 43, *Korueck 580, Ic, Nr. 4307/43 geh., 28.X.43., KTB 28a, Korueck 580, 16.X.-31.X.43.* 41217/2; *Bericht*, Okt. 43, AOK 2, Ia, *Bandenbekämpfung IV, 1.XI.43.-30.I.44., 52701/107*; see also: *Bandenlage im Bereich der H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 30.IX.43., Anl. z. KTB H. Gr. Mitte.* 65002/24.

¹¹⁷ See: Anl. 4 z. *Bandenlage im Osten, Anlagen.* H 3/749; *Feindeinflüge vom 1.X.-15.X.43., H. Gr. Mitte, Ia, Nr. 13097/43 g. Kdos., Anl. 4.5 z. KTB, H. Gr. Mitte.* 65002/24.

¹¹⁸ *Monatsbericht*, Okt. 43, *Korueck 559, Ic, Nr. 4424/43 geh., Heft 3, Anl. 1-17 z. KTB, Ic, Korueck 559, 5.VII.-28.XII.43.* 45668/4.

¹¹⁹ *Bandenlage*, Okt. 43, im Bereich des *Korueck 585, Anl. z. KTB, Korueck 585, 11.X.-1.XII.43.* 44172/4; captured partisan directive, Anl. z. KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, *Bandenmeldungen, Nov. 43-Maerz 44.* 65002/69.

since early 1942 had been one of the most aggressive and effective partisan units in the central sector, and was something of a favorite with the Central Staff. When Grischin saw the critical nature of the situation, he radioed for additional arms and ammunition, which Moscow promptly dispatched in 10 Soviet cargo aircraft.¹²⁰

Cooperation With the Red Army Again

Then in the first days of November the partisan effort, especially behind the *Third Panzer* and *Second Armies*, appeared to take on more purpose. When the Red Army had resumed its offensive in the middle of October, it had placed its heaviest pressure on the wings of the sector. In the Nevel area the Red divisions had struck hard along the boundary between *Army Groups Center* and *North* and by 15 November had driven a sizeable salient in the German line north of Vitebsk. At the same time in the south they had pushed the *Second Army* back across the Dnepr west of Gomel and forced a breakthrough in the Pripyat Marshes which threatened to parallel the Soviet successes against *Army Group South*.¹²¹ Although both penetrations were eventually contained, they gave added impetus to the activity of the bands, especially those west of the points of Soviet main effort, and in large measure dictated their offensive actions for the remainder of the year.

Sometime prior to the attack on the northern wing of the sector, Moscow had ordered the bands in the area west of Nevel-Vitebsk to hold the region for the arrival of the Red Army and, if possible, to force a breach in the rear of the German defenses in conjunction with the Soviet attack, withdrawing only if faced by superior German forces.¹²² A copy of this directive fell into German hands prior to the attack, and OKH, seeing the danger of a breakthrough in an area where freezing weather would in large part overcome any terrain difficulties and thus turn it into a gateway to Lithuania, quickly organized a large antipartisan operation as a preventive measure. The action was to be launched in late October by two *Kampfgruppen* (task forces) of police and SS units from the *Reichskommissariat Ostland* totaling 29 battalions. This was Operation *HEINRICH*.¹²³

Before these units could do more than move into position, however, the critical nature of the Red Army penetration there forced them over to the defensive under army group command. As a result, although the mere presence of German troops in the area caused a number of the

¹²⁰ Entry for 11 Oct 43, in *Anl. 2 z. KTB 9, AOK 9, Fuehrungsabt. II, Tagesmeldungen*, 11.VIII.-15.X.43. 52535/2.

¹²¹ For these operational developments along the front, see *Lagen Ost* for the period.

¹²² Referred to in *Bandenlage im Bereich des Pz AOK 3, Nov. 43, Pz AOK 3, Anl. Bd. z. Tgb. 10, Ic/AO, 1.X.-31.XII.43.* 49113/37.

¹²³ *Ibid.*; *Lagen Ost* for period 20 Oct-16 Nov. 43.

bands to withdraw to the west, a good portion of the partisans were able to breach the German line from the rear, and only aggressive action by the *Kampfgruppen* averted a really serious breakthrough toward Dvinsk.¹²⁴

Behind the *Second Army* the partisans, spurred by the Red Army successes, reinfiltated the areas from which they had been driven by the German actions of October and regrouped under the leadership of a number of regular officers dropped into the area for the purpose, forming a solid block of some 7,000 men directly in the path of the Soviet penetration.¹²⁵

Somewhat farther to the west and south of the Pripyat River, where the partisan situation had not previously been clear, a large block of bands extending longitudinally toward Brest-Litovsk appeared under a headquarters the Germans believed to be on the level of an army command.¹²⁶ This latter development forced the security command to pull a number of Hungarian units out of the threatened area southwest of Gomel and spread them out as far west as the Polish border to protect the Gomel-Luminets-Brest-Litovsk rail line.¹²⁷

Sabotage Continues

Despite a further drop in air supply, 167 supply flights for November as against 886 in October, the partisans continued their attacks on the supply lines throughout the sector. Although some of the damage in the area west of Vitebsk, especially on the Vitebsk-Polotsk line, was obviously done by Red Army units before the penetration there was contained, the bands generally maintained the pace they set the previous month. Demolitions were set off on the tracks at 5,290 places and railway installations were hit with over 900 damaging raids. Fifty-six bridges were damaged.¹²⁸ In the central and southern portions of the sector the emphasis of the attacks continued to shift to the west. Demolitions on the Luninets-Baranovichi and Lida-Baranovichi lines rose 100 percent

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*; H. Gr. Mitte, Ia, Nr. 14550/43 g. Kdos., 8.XII.43., Anl. z. KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, Fuehrungsabt., Akte XXIII, Heft 12, 1.X.-31.XII.43. 65002/24.

¹²⁵ Bericht, Nov. 43, AOK 2, Ia. Bandenbekämpfung IV, 1.XI.43.-30.I.44. 52701/107; Bandenlage im Bereich der H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 30.XI.43., H. Gr. Mitte, Ic/AO (Abw.) Bandenlisten, Sept. bis Dez. 43. 65003/5.

¹²⁶ Bandenlage im Bereich der H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 30.XI.43., H. Gr. Mitte, Ic/AO (Abw.) Bandenlisten, Sept. bis Dez. 43. 65003/5; H. Gr. Mitte, Ia, Nr. 14550/43 g. Kdos., 8.XII.43., Anl. z. KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, Fuehrungsabt., Akte XXIII, Heft 12, 1.X.-31.XII.43. 65002/24. Evidence indicates that the Germans were mistaken in this, and that the command organization believed to be an army headquarters was merely an operations group heretofore unidentified.

¹²⁷ See *Lagen Ost* for this period.

¹²⁸ H. Gr. Mitte, Ia, Nr. 14550/43 g. Kdos., 8.XII.43., Anl. z. KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, Fuehrungsabt., Akte XXIII, Heft 12, 1.X.-31.XII.43. 65002/24; Bandenanschläge im Monat Nov. 43, Anl. 7 z. Schreiben Gen. d. Trspw., in KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, Ia, 1.X.-31.XII.43. 65002/24.

over the previous month, and for the first time there were demolitions west of Lida, Brest-Litovsk, and Vilna.¹²⁹

The incidence of other sabotage went up. There was a large increase in damage to signal facilities: the Orsha-Minsk "U" cable was broken in 296 places, an increase of 195 percent, and 7,163 telephone poles representing a length of more than 200 miles of line were cut down. Valuable ration and agricultural stocks were destroyed in raids or by arson, one dump of 300 tons of rations and another containing 1,800 tons of potatoes and 170 tons of grain being burned. Deserters from the indigenous units aided the bands in many of these raids.¹³⁰

German Attempts To Curb the Sabotage

With the German manpower situation what it was, only an extraordinary effort by the security commands and a number of protective innovations held the damage to this level. The replacement battalions of the *1st Ski Brigade*, totaling 3,000 men, were temporarily pulled out of the pipeline and committed as track guards along the Minsk-Brest-Litovsk line west of Baranovichi with an immediate reduction in sabotage. Listening posts tied in with an alarm system were set up for trial in one area. The use of searchlights along especially endangered stretches of road reduced mine laying, as did the resumption of armor-guarded convoys maintained on a frequent schedule, the vehicles running with bright lights. Antipersonnel mines were laid along trails known to be used by partisans with emergency warning systems attached. In the protection of signal facilities, alarm signals and "protective strip illumination" attached to the lines themselves proved of great value. Demolition charges were attached to telephone poles and were rigged to explode when the partisans attempted to cut them down. These proved very effective until the partisans forced women and children to do the actual cutting for them. Bicycle "trolleys" were constructed for patrolling along the rail lines and the more rapid commitment of offensive units. Whenever the manpower was available, even temporarily, "alert" forces were organized to deal with sudden emergencies and vigorous patrolling was the order of the day for all security commands that could scrape together a handful of men over

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *H. Gr. Mitte, Ia, Nr. 14550/43 g. Kdos., 8.XII.43., Anl. z. KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, Fuhrungsabt., Akte XXIII, Heft 12, 1.X.-31.XII.43. 65002/24; Korueck 559, Ic. Tgb., Nr. 5103/43 geh., 27.XI.43., Korueck 559, Ia, 5.VII.-28.XII.43. 45668/4; Anl. 99, 6.XI.43., KTB Korueck 559, 5.XI.-30.XII.43. 45668/3.*

and above their static guard commitments. At night native scouts were widely employed, but with limited success.¹³¹

The need for such innovations was clearly emphasized when in late November the continued Red Army pressure on the flanks of the sector and a newly opened assault on Orsha forced *Army Group Center* to draw off more and more units from the security commands for service at the front. The quieter portions of the rear were especially hard hit in this respect. The *Fourth Army Rear Area*, where the bands were less active for the moment, lost a total of 4,366 men, all Germans and all combat troops, to army and corps units during November alone.¹³² Accentuating this was the loss to security command control of the SS and police battalions originally committed in Operation *HEINRICH*. Before the end of the month the situation became so bad that *Army Group Center* advised OKH that it could mount no antipartisan operations until the situation at the front warranted returning these troops to their parent commands or they were replaced from the Zone of the Interior.¹³³ The indigenous units which had been recruited to replace those transferred to France were of little help in this situation. Although they were proving more reliable than their predecessors, due, so the Germans believed, to the Wehrmacht success in the defensive battles, they still could not be trusted on other than the most routine security assignments in quiet areas.¹³⁴

The Long-Range Partisan Strategy

Although during the last weeks of the year the bands continued their raids on the roads and railroads and especially on the telephone and cable lines, the attacks lacked cohesion, and on the whole they appeared more intent on expanding and consolidating their areas of concentration than disrupting the German supply axes. In the country paralleling these axes, they worked steadily at forming continuous, solid areas where they might completely dominate every phase of the situation; they no longer conformed their dispositions to billeting and forage possibilities or to the proximity of other bands. More and more their primary aim seemed to be a strategic redistribution of their centers of strength. This became so marked before the end of the year that the Germans believed they were subordinating all activity to preparations for a coordinated attack on

¹³¹ H. Gr. Mitte, Ia, Nr. 14550/43 g. Kdos., 8.XII.43., Anl. z. KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, Fuehrungsabt., Akte XXIII, Heft 12, 1.X.-31.XII.43. 65002/24. MS # P-132, "Signal Communications in the East," pp. 219-20. Foreign Studies Br., OCMH; Bericht, Korueck 559, Ia, Nr. 5216/43 geh., KTB, Korueck 559, Ia, 5.XI.-30.XII.43. 45668/3.

¹³² Bericht, Korueck 559, Ia, Nr. 5216/43 geh., KTB, Korueck 559, Ia, 5.XI.-30.XII.43. 45668/3.

¹³³ H. Gr. Mitte, Ia, Nr. 14550/43 g. Kdos., 8.XII.43., Anl. z. KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, Fuehrungsabt., Akte XXIII, Heft 12, 1.X.-31.XII.43. 65002/24.

¹³⁴ Korueck 559, Ia, Nr. 5216/43 geh. 29.XI.43., Bericht, Korueck 559, Ia, Nr. 5216/43 geh., KTB, Korueck 559, Ia, 5.XI.-30.XII.43. 45668/3.

German communications and routes of withdrawal in support of a general Red Army offensive.¹³⁵

The bands lacked neither the manpower nor the popular support to execute this mission. As of 1 January 1944 the number of men in bands in the central sector that had been identified by the Germans was slightly in excess of 140,000,¹³⁶ nor was there any dearth of fillers for the expanding ranks. With the critical nature of the German situation an established fact, the natives flocked to them in such numbers that all could not be armed and many had to be sluiced eastward through gaps in the front for duty with the Red Army.¹³⁷

In like manner the Soviets extended their political control. As the partisans consolidated their hold on the countryside, the Communist Party advanced side by side with them, conforming closely to their lateral administrative organization and establishing itself in such a manner as to be able to throw its whole weight into the fight when needed.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Korueck 559, *Ic. Tgb. Nr. 5899/43 geh.*, 28.XII.43., Heft 3, Anl. 1-17, *Ic. z. KTB Korueck 559/Ia. 5.VII.-28.XII.43.* 45668/4; Korueck 559/Ia. Nr. 5891/43 geh., 30.XII.43., Heft 2, Anl. 94-126 z. KTB Korueck 559/Ia. 5.XI.-30.XII.43. 45668/3; *Meldung, Dez. 43, 3.I.44., AOK 2, Ia. Bandenbekaempfung IV, 1.XI.43.-30.I.44.* 52701/107; *H. Gr. Mitte, Ia, Nr. 279/44 g. Kdos., 8.I.44., Anl. z. KTB H. Gr. Mitte, Akte XXII, Heft 13, 1.I.-31.III.44.* 65002/48; *H. Gr. Mitte, Ic/AO (Abw.) Nr. 63/44 geh., 3.I.44., Anl. z. KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, Bandenmeldungen, Nov 43-Mar 44.* 65002/69.

¹³⁶ *Bandenlage im Bereich der H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 1.I.44., Bandenlisten, H. Gr. Mitte, Ic/AO (Abw.), Sept.-Dez. 43.* 65003/5.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*; *H. Gr. Mitte, Ia, Nr. 279/44 g. Kdos., 8.I.44., Anl. z. KTB H. Gr. Mitte, Akte XXII, Heft 13, 1.I.-31.III.44.* 65002/48.

¹³⁸ *H. Gr. Mitte, Ic/AO (Abw.), Nr. 63/44 geh., 3.I.44., Anl. z. KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, Bandenmeldungen, Nov 43-Mar 44.* 65002/69; "Nachrichten ueber Bandenkrieg Nr. 6," *OKH GenStdH. Fde H. Ost.* H 3/738.

CHAPTER 11

THE DECISIVE MONTHS: JANUARY-JUNE 1944

The Northern Sector

In the *Army Group North Rear Area* the partisan situation had steadily worsened toward the end of 1943. Throughout the year the bands there had increased in size and especially in strength, although to no such degree as in the central sector. In many areas they reigned almost supreme, and in at least two *rayons* behind the *Sixteenth Army* operated a wholly Soviet administration.¹ Despite their improved position, however, they were not overly active, and throughout the sector seemed more interested in biding their time and hoarding their strength than in raiding German installations. Although only 250 of the 1,200-odd miles of railroad in the 60,000 square mile sector² had German security units permanently stationed along them, they set off but 439 rail demolitions in 575 attempts during December.³

Whether they refrained from more extensive operations on orders from the Central Staff, conserving their strength until the Red Army should launch a general offensive, or whether they were held in check by the security commands is unknown. Their reaction to subsequent Soviet moves, however, seemed to indicate Moscow's guiding hand.⁴

At the beginning of 1944 these bands comprised some 27,000 partisans, in sharp contrast to the 140,000-plus behind *Army Group Center*. Roughly 14,000 were in the rear of the *Sixteenth Army*, for the most part concentrated in the area west and northwest of Nevel. The remainder were in the *Eighteenth Army* rear between Lake Ilmen and Lake Peipus.⁵ The terrain definitely favored their operations. Almost the entire sector was covered with dense forests and swamps interspersed with numbers of small lakes, and was passable for heavy traffic only

¹ *Meldung*, Nov. 43, Korueck 584, AOK 16, Ia, Anl. Bd. IV, Allgemein, 4.XI.43.-24.V.44. 54321/6.

² This was exclusive of the Baltic States which were under a political administration and where the partisans had never been a factor.

³ *Sicherungstruppen und Bandenlage im Bereich der H. Gr. Nord. Dezember 43; Bandenanschläge auf Eisenbahnen und wichtige Strassenbruecken, Dezember 43, im Bereich der H. Gr. Nord.* Both in OCMH files.

⁴ See: KTB, H. Gr. Nord. Ia. 12.I.-10.II.44. 75128/31, 75128/32, 75128/34.

⁵ OKH/Fde.H.Ost/Abt. (I/Bd.). 29.II.44. H 3/361; *Bandenlage im Bereich der H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 1.I.44., H. Gr. Mitte, Ic/AO (Abw.), Bandenlisten, Sep.-Dez. 43.* 65003/5; *Bandenlage, Dez. 43, H. Gr. Nord, Ic/AO, KTB, Bandenlagekarten, Dez. 43.* 75131/41.

over the rail lines and one primary highway, the Dvinsk-Pskov-Luga-Leningrad. The secondary net consisted of unimproved roads and trails.

The Offensive Against the Eighteenth Army⁶

The 13,000-odd partisans in the *Eighteenth Army* sector were rather evenly distributed on either side of the Pskov-Luga-Leningrad railroad and highway, with the heaviest concentrations just west of Lake Ilmen and Novogorod and south of the Narva-Gatchina rail line.⁷ The army saw this latter concentration as the greatest danger to its rear should the Soviets launch a full-dress offensive. Since the beginning of the war the bands had remained in the swamp wastes east of Lake Peipus, lying undisturbed and free to develop as they wished, and since early January the army had been looking for the means to clear them out. No concern was expressed over the bands grouped west of Lake Ilmen.⁸

On 14 January the Red Army launched its drive to free Leningrad and clear the area between the lakes, striking with a two-pronged attack out of the Gulf of Finland beachhead and across the ice on Lake Ilmen below Novogorod. Following on the heels of the Army in a series of closely coordinated moves, the bands descended on selected sections of the German lines of communication.

The offensive seemed to have been planned as a double envelopment to trap the *Eighteenth Army* against the Russian defenses before Leningrad and the Volkhov River, with the bands complementing the attack by interdicting the principal north-south traffic axes. This latter would not only make a withdrawal by the Germans doubly difficult, but would cut them off from reinforcement and resupply and at the same time cover the exposed Soviet left flank.

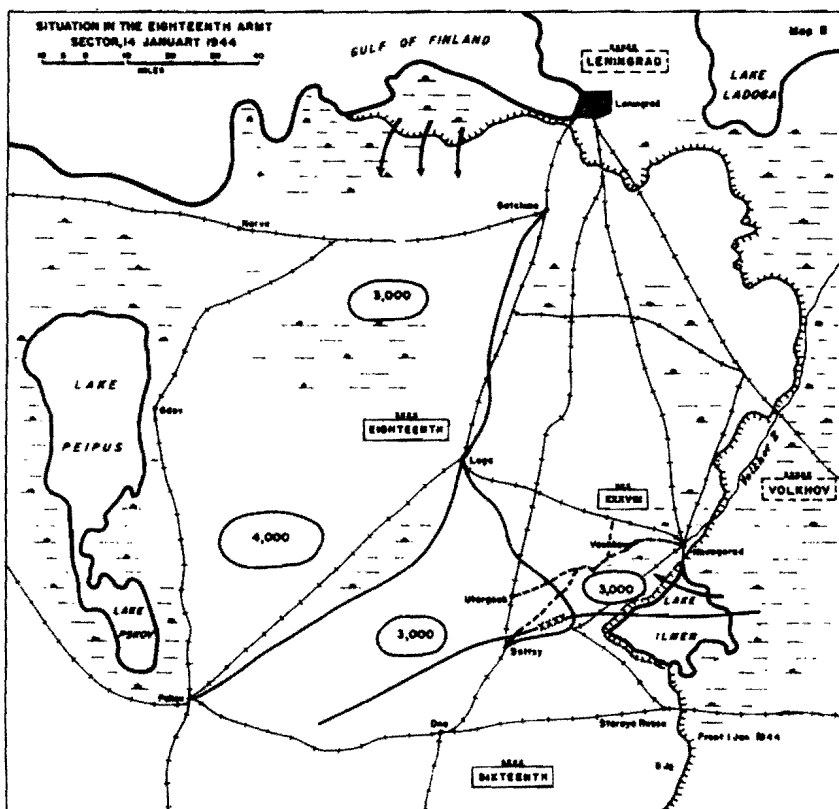
The partisans struck after the initial assaults of the regular units when the situation had become somewhat clarified and the necessity for security had passed. By thus delaying their attacks, they induced the Germans, in the face of the heavy Russian assaults, to commit many of their security units in the front lines almost immediately, leaving sizeable portions of the rear undefended.

Contrary to German expectations, the partisans concentrated south of the Narva-Gatchina railroad made no major effort to disrupt the immediate rear of the divisions defending against the northern wing of the Red Army drive. Rather, almost directly after the attack started,

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is taken from *KTB, H. Gr. Nord, 12.I.-28.I.44., 24.I.-31.I.44., 1.II.-10.II.44.* 75128/31, 32, 34.

⁷ *Bandenlage, Dez. 43, H. Gr. Nord, Ia/AO, KTB, Bandenlagekarten Dez. 43.* 75131/41.

⁸ See entries for 2, 3, 6, 7, and 8 Jan 44 in *KTB, H. Gr. Nord, Ia, 1.I.-11.I.44.* 75128/30.



Map B. Situation in the Eighteenth Army Sector, 14 January 1944.

they moved to the south and threw their weight at the primary axis of the sector, the Pskov-Luga-Leningrad rail line and highway, while those just west of Lake Ilmen moved against the Dno-Soltsy-Leningrad line and the lateral feeders into Novogorod and the Volkhov area. They made themselves almost immediately felt by the German defenses. As early as 15 January both the security units and the local reserves shifting to meet the attacks were running into heavy firefights with "superior" partisan organization; by noon of the 16th *Army Group North* reported to OKH that all security units in the *Eighteenth Army* sector had been committed and requested immediate reinforcement by six security battalions from *Army Group Center* which were badly needed in a "partisan situation [even then considered] very dangerous." Then came the demolitions.

On the evening of the 16th a large band struck a railroad station and switching point some 20 miles north of Luga, destroying all station installations and blowing a number of difficult to replace switches while inflicting heavy casualties on the defending force. This attack was followed on the night of 17-18 by a general assault on all rail lines in the sector and by open attacks on security strong points and garrisons. The Dno-Soltsy-Leningrad line, which was feeding reinforcements into the *XXXVIII Corps* defending against the assaults across Lake Ilmen, was blown in more than 300 places in a 25-mile stretch on either side of Soltsy, while the Pskov-Luga line was broken in 157 places in 15 miles.⁹ By the evening of the 19th all reinforcements sent into the Lake Ilmen sector were forced to move to the front on foot because of the "tense railroad situation." More demolitions followed in the next 24 hours, and repair operations were repeatedly interrupted by attacks on repair crews. By noon of the 20th the Dno-Soltsy line was "completely paralyzed." Additional attacks elsewhere throughout the sector were executed so aggressively and in such strength that all forces available for security duties were forced over to a static defensive, and several regiments of reinforcements had to be halted in transit and retained in the rear, even though they were badly needed at the front, in order that supply traffic move at all. When on the 20th the Red Army started to exploit the penetrations it had made in the German line, the partisans stepped up their raiding against the rail lines "tremendously." As a result, supply and troop movements for the whole army were curtailed almost immediately.

The double assault by the Volkhov and Leningrad Fronts could hardly have failed either with or without the virtual isolation of the battle area by the partisans. The Germans were simply too weak at the points of attack and had no strategic reserves in the sector. Yet these attacks

⁹ *Banden-Einzelkarte, Januar 1944, H. Gr. Nord, Ic/AO, KTB Bandenlagekarten. 75131/42.*

by the bands played particular havoc with all operational and logistical movement in the whole army area and had the effect of at least hastening the decision by some days. The attempt to reinforce the Novogorod sector is illustrative.

In a desperate attempt to seal off the penetration below that anchor of the line and reinforce the garrison there, OKH on 17 January ordered the *8th Jaeger [Light] Division* from the left flank of the *Sixteenth Army* to the aid of the hard-pressed *XXXVIII Corps*. The route of travel for the division was by rail from Staraya-Russa west to Dno and thence north over the Dno-Soltsy line, a total distance of 110 miles of which no more than half was subject to partisan attack at that time. Excerpts from the *Army Group North* war diary tell the story:

18 Jan 44

- (1800) Chief of transportation reports that *8th Jaeger Division* is being transported in nine trains. Four leave today and will arrive Novogorod area tomorrow if track stays open. Remaining will arrive 24 hours later if everything goes smoothly.
- (2400) *Korueck 583* reports attack by strong partisan bands on line Bateskaya-Soltsy north and south of station at Utorgozh. [11 miles north of Soltsy] About 140 demolitions.

19 Jan 44

- (1100) Arrival of *8th Jaeger Division* cannot be predicted due to numerous demolitions.
- (1245) Forces in Novogorod can only get out to the southwest. Unless *8th Jaeger Division* is committed now, enemy tanks will be in Luga [54 miles west of Novogorod] tomorrow. G-3 says that *8th Jaeger Division* is moving by truck but will arrive at earliest tomorrow.
- (1347) *Eighteenth Army* reports to OKH that *8th Jaeger Division* much delayed by railroad demolitions. Numerous demolitions on other rail lines.
- (1800) CG, *Army Group North* reports that *8th Jaeger Division* arriving in army group sector only in small increments due to extensive railroad demolitions.

20 Jan 44

- (0040) Staff of *8th Jaeger Division* arrives in *Eighteenth Army Area*.
- (0945) *8th Jaeger Division* has to detrain in Utorgozh due to railroad demolitions. Arrival still uncertain. [Entry of 19 Jan at 1925 states: Arriving units have to go on foot from Utorgozh (to *XXXVIII Corps* sector) via Medved to Vashkovo. (Thirty-eight miles over unimproved roads.)]

(1205) Only one battalion of *8th Jaeger Division* has arrived in army sector; another by tonight via foot and truck. The railroad is completely paralyzed.

21 Jan 44

(0010) The Novogorod garrison withdrew, fighting its way out.

(1235) Only one battalion of *8th Jaeger Division* has reached Vashkovo. Another is expected.

(2400) Numerous demolitions by partisans, especially on all supply routes of *Eighteenth Army*. Partisans attacked railroad stations and installations.

22 Jan 44

(2400) Many partisan attacks against railroads, especially the Dno-Soltsy Line.

Other reinforcements moving in to bolster the line were similarly delayed by rail demolitions and convoy ambushes when they were most needed at the front. The *12th Panzer Division*, which had been ordered north from *Army Group Center*, became stalled in transit when its advance elements were halted at Luga on 23 January by chain demolitions north of the city, and more than 24 hours later was still immobilized there by additional attacks on the rail line. It was not until the 28th that sufficient of its elements had arrived for it to join the battle above the city and then it had to swing to the southeast to plug a gap developing between the *Eighteenth* and *Sixteenth Armies* because another reinforcing unit, the *58th Infantry Division*, did not arrive due to blocked rail lines and raids on convoys.¹⁰ This latter division, which had been routed north through Estonia to Narva because of the state of the Pskov-Luga line, was forced to move southward on foot through the frozen swamps east of Lake Peipus where it was constantly under direct partisan attack. Often it had to fight its way through, and, forced to furnish security for its own line of communications, it lost heavily in transport. At one point the partisans had so wrecked the route by blowing bridges and destroying corduroy roads that the column was forced to go across country in very difficult terrain.¹¹ Then as the *12th Panzer Division* was moving up to its jumpoff position, partisans made a night raid on its column as it moved forward through forest and swamps and destroyed a number of vehicles, halting the entire division on the road for some time.¹²

As the Germans continued their withdrawals to the south and west, the bands shifted their areas of operations accordingly. A number of

¹⁰ Entries for 24, 28, and 30 Jan 44 in *KTB, H. Gr. Nord. 24.I.-31.I.44.* 75128/32.

¹¹ Entries for 30, 31 Jan and 5, 7 Feb 44 in *ibid.*

¹² Entry for 8 Feb 44 in *ibid.*

them, holding to their sectors east of Lake Peipus, were overrun and absorbed by the advancing Soviets, while others, greatly strengthened by large numbers of civilians evading forced evacuation by the enemy, moved south of Luga into the heavy terrain on either side of the Pskov-Luga rail line and highway whence they increased their pressure on the few avenues of march left to the German units. To add to this, several large bands moved northward from the *Sixteenth Army* rear and brought additional pressure to bear, especially on the Pskov-Dno and Pskov-Ostrov lines.¹³

At the end of the first week in February, by German estimate there were some 10,000 irregulars astride or in close vicinity to the Pskov-Luga connections, with another 3,000 close enough to be dangerous. In addition, there were 5,000-6,000, just below the Pskov-Dno line.¹⁴ The Germans considered the combat effectiveness of these to be 40 percent that of Wehrmacht line units, which when added to their familiarity with the terrain and their ability to move through it almost at will made them a formidable force to contend with in a withdrawal.

To make matters even more serious, by the end of January these bands were working in much closer cooperation with the Red Army than ever before, and were operating almost exclusively according to specific directives from the Soviet rear under the supervision of a number of Red Army and NKVD officers newly sent to them to improve liaison. In the area west of the Pskov-Luga line, the cooperation was especially close, with the partisans scouting for advancing Russian units and passing to them a steady stream of information on German movements and dispositions. In several instances they gave direct aid by massing in fortified villages astride the German line of retreat.¹⁵

As a result of this increased aggressiveness, the German transport situation continued to deteriorate, and the supply of the Army suffered accordingly. Although the partisans were never able to completely paralyze the few lines remaining, on several occasions they did knock out sizeable sections of trackage for as much as 24 to 48 hours. Such blows as these combined with the normal traffic demands finally made it almost impossible to evacuate rolling stock. To make the situation even worse, as the battle area became more restricted the bands began hitting at the few roads capable of carrying motor traffic. The Pskov-Luga artery, the only primary highway in the army sector, was cut for 40 hours when the partisans blew 5 bridges, just at the time the Germans were trying to stabilize a line south of Luga. In a number of instances convoys found themselves stopped on the road by log road blocks manned by partisans and protected by mine fields. One regiment of reserves mov-

¹³ *Bandenlage, Januar 1944, H. Gr. Nord. Ic/AO, KTB, Bandenlagekarten. 75131/42.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Anl. 43 z. KTB, H. Gr. Nord. 14.II.-10.III.44. 75128/48.*

border area, and some scattered lootings and dynamiting of public buildings which the Germans attributed more to Communist Party agents than to organized partisan action.²⁴

From the first days of March following the occupation of the positions along the Baltic States border the quiet in the rear of the sector continued. There were few bands of any size in evidence except behind the right flank of the *Sixteenth Army* in the vicinity of Polotsk and in the woods in the Opochna area. Even in the region north of Polotsk where the partisans had once been so strong there was little open opposition. But there were indications that the bands scattered by Operation *HEINRICH*, and rescattered in late December, were moving back into the area south of the Polotsk-Dvinsk rail line and were rebuilding their strength by recruiting and training. Probing attacks by small anti-partisan units kept many of these on the move, however, and served to keep the supply lines relatively clear. Still, their mere presence there constituted a very real threat, especially with the certainty of a continuation of Red Army attacks with the coming of dry weather.²⁵

Almost immediately on settling themselves in their new positions²⁶ the Germans, determined to have no repetition of their experience of January and February between Lake Ilmen and Lake Peipus, increased their efforts to neutralize any attempt of the Soviets to build up a new partisan front behind them. Constantly prodded by army group headquarters the security commands made good use of the increased number of security units available following the shortening of the line and the activation of new native units. They constantly patrolled the supply axes and probed the wooded areas, meanwhile keeping sharp watch against infiltration from the Soviet rear. SS-recruited native units destroyed several bands attempting to enter northern Estonia via Lake Peipus, one of which included over 200 Red Army officers and enlisted men apparently intended as cadre personnel for bands to be raised.

To intensify the antipartisan effort, early in April OKH opened a school for antipartisan warfare for all the armed forces and civilian agencies in the east. Although the school introduced nothing new in the way of operations against the bands, the greatest emphasis in the course was placed on uniformity of method and the utilization of all possible sources of manpower in case of a widespread irregular outbreak.

During April and May the quiet continued, partisan activity being restricted to small-scale ambushes in the southern part of the sector and sporadic forage raids in the center and north. Even behind the *Sixteenth Army* where the partisan units were more numerous, there was

²⁴ Anl. 240, 344, z. Anl. 42 z. KTB, H. Gr. Nord. 11.I.-13.II.44. 75128/47; Anl. 498, 617 z. Anl. 43 z. KTB H. Gr. Nord. 14.II.-10.III.44. 75128/48.

²⁵ Anl. 374 z. Anl. 44 z. KTB, H. Gr. Nord. 11.III.-30.IV.44. 75128/49.

²⁶ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is taken from: KTB, H. Gr. Nord. 1.III.-15.III.44. 75128/38; KTB, H. Gr. Nord. 1.IV.-14.IV.44. 75128/41a.

little sabotage. Here, the bands working on orders from the Central Staff,²⁷ carried out no raids in force, but confined themselves to making felt the silent threat of their presence in strength. They continued to be amply supplied with weapons and ammunition by air, while food and clothing were obtained from the population.

Even more dangerous than the threat to the supply lines was the very active espionage net which the partisans had set up during the winter. For the first time the Germans found themselves faced with a situation where they believed all their dispositions and movements were regularly reported to the Red Army, and, although they saw it as a danger which could have the most serious consequences for them in the coming campaigns, they felt helpless to combat it.²⁸ These fears were further confirmed in May by an almost complete cessation of sabotage of the highly vulnerable signal facilities, due, the Germans thought, to the fact that the lines were being tapped and the traffic monitored.

In late May and June the bands appeared to give up sabotage almost entirely and confined their efforts to general reconnaissance and espionage. In this work they operated through and with Soviet strategic intelligence teams, the latter directing the efforts and utilizing the agent nets previously established. The largest percentage of these agents was concentrated behind the junction of the northern and central sectors.²⁹ The information thus gained was supplemented by reconnaissance by small partisan groups working up close to the front, and the whole forwarded to the Soviet rear either by the intelligence teams direct or via the partisan radio net.³⁰

The raids which were made against the rail net were confined almost exclusively to the southern flank of the army group. They were infrequent and unconcerted and made no serious inroad on German supply. The demolition techniques used were poor, and 50 to 75 percent of the charges placed were disarmed by security patrols.³¹ The morale of the population had been lowered by the expectation of a continuation of the Red Army offensive with the coming of dry weather and the continued forced labor drafts, but there was no open anti-German feeling, rather a strictly neutral wait-and-see attitude.³²

²⁷ One such order issued by the Lepel Partisan Brigade Stalin on 4 March directed the unit to continue its expansion and organizational efforts in order to tie down as many German troop units as possible on security missions and to hold and expand its area of influence until the arrival of the Red Army. See: *Bericht, April 44, I.V.44., AOK 16, Ic/AO, Fnb., Bandenlage, I.IV.-15.VII.44.* 54323/8.

²⁸ *Bericht, April 44 in AOK 16, Ic/AO, Fnb., Bandenlage, I.IV.-15.VII.44.* 54323/8.

²⁹ See: *Schwerpunkte des Sowj. Agenteneinsatzes im Operationsgebiet Ost. Februar 1944.* OKW 1941b.

³⁰ *Bericht, Mai 44 in AOK 16, Ic/AO, Fnb. Bandenlage, I.IX.-15.VII.44* 54323/8; *Bericht, Juni 44 in ibid.*

³¹ *Bericht, Mai, Juni 44 in ibid.*

³² *Bericht, Mai 44, 22.VI.44., OKH Gen.St.d.H./GenQu. Abt. Kriegsverw (Qu4).* H 3/476.

During June continued small-scale antipartisan operations in the area about OPOCHKA and north of Polotsk kept some of the bands on the move, but because of their restricted scope they achieved no permanent results. Further north the sector remained quiet with only scattered small bands in evidence.³³

The Southern Sector³⁴

Following the shattering of the German front along the Dnepr in the late fall of 1943, the Soviets for the first time began making an effort to build up a partisan front behind the retreating German divisions in the western Ukraine. This effort never assumed sizeable proportions and it never exercised any real effect on what was left of the German occupation or on the main course of Wehrmacht operations. But the manner in which it was done and the varied missions given the bands in the attempt are interesting.

The rapid Soviet advances in the lower Pripyat area during December, January, and February freed considerable numbers of partisans who were concentrated in the area south of the Pripyat River as far west as Brest-Litovsk for activity in other areas. Some of these moved directly to the west along the line Kovel-Lublin, even into Poland, in what was obviously an attempt to build up an irregular ring about the Brest-Litovsk rail hub, while others, under the leadership of several experienced commanders including Sidor Kolpak, Fedorov, and Naumov³⁵ moved to the south and southwest. The majority of these latter concentrated in the Lwow-Kovel-Vinnitsa sector behind the *Fourth Panzer Army* rather than farther south where they had much less maneuver room and stood the chance of being pinned against the Carpathians.

Communication between these bands and the Soviet rear was consistently good, and their varied operations took form along ordered lines. Kolpak, who was one of the most experienced and successful of the partisan commanders³⁶ and whom the Germans had identified as the leader of several large irregular units, kept his command generally behind Von Manstein's left flank in the Kovel-Dubno area. He com-

³³ See entries for period 6 May-19 Jun 44 in *KTB, H. Gr. Nord. I.V.-31.V.44., I.VI.-15.VI.44.* 75128/44a, 75128/45b; *AOK 18, KTB, Teil Ag, Zusammenfassungen I.I.-15.VII.44.* 52614/1.

³⁴ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is taken from notes compiled and translated by 1st Lt. Larry Wolff, "The Partisan Situation in Army Group South, 1 January to 30 June 1944." OCMH files.

³⁵ These three partisan commanders had been known to the Germans for some time, although the record gives no details of their previous operations. See: *Pz AOK, Ia, KTB 2, Teil 5, I.X.-31.XII.42.* 28499/5; *Bandenlage im Monat Februar 1944, Pz AOK 4, I.III.44.* 52981/28.

³⁶ According to Soviet sources, Sidor Kolpak (Kovpak) was a major general and twice a Hero of the Soviet Union. See: *USSR Information Bulletin* (Washington, D. C.) 9 Dec 49. He was frequently mentioned in German situation reports.

mitted some of his units in the front line alongside Red Army organizations. Others he sent against the rail lines radiating out of Kovel. Federov operated farther to the south, having moved across the Soviet rear and through the front line via a gap between the German *XIII* and *LIX Corps*. He was under orders to set up his base of operations in the Gaisin area some 60 miles southwest of Vinnitsa with the mission of developing a partisan concentration area there and working against German communications. Naumov moved into the Tarnopol region and began to operate against the Lwow-Odessa railroad. All three bands were reported well armed with light artillery and automatic weapons and to have Red Army officers among their officer personnel. Several other bands were identified in the line alongside the Russian I and VI Guards Corps opposite the *Fourth Panzer Army*. Additional units were occasionally reported operating exclusively against the Ukrainian nationalist organizations, others were recruiting civilians for the Red Army ranks and waging local terror campaigns to dissuade the natives from working for the Germans on their defensive positions.

Taken all in all, the efforts of these groups had little effect on German operations. During February in the rear of the *Fourth Panzer Army*, which was holding the most critical sector of the line, they carried out but 49 raids, clashed with security units 65 times, and set demolitions on the rail lines at but 113 places.

With the fight moving south and west into the sub-Carpathians and Galicia, the various groups of anti-Soviet Ukrainian separatists, organizations again came into the picture, but without visible effect on the tactical situation. Many of these groups appeared hesitant to declare their sympathies, seeming content to await developments at the front. Although some had their doubts as to the efficacy of opposing the high-riding Soviets, all of them appear to have had one common goal, the expulsion of all ethnic Poles from the Ukrainian nationalist stronghold in Galicia. One group, the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (*Ukrainska Povstancha Armia*—UPA) attacked the partisans almost as soon as they moved in from the northeast, and suffered such heavy losses initially that it was forced to withdraw from the picture for a time. One unconfirmed rumor had the UPA ordering several of its smaller units into the Soviet rear to attack Red Army communications.

During this period the Soviets made a curious move in an attempt to undermine a part of the German security command. Behind the left flank of *Army Group South* and the extreme southern wing of *Army Group Center* there were elements of nine Hungarian security divisions in two corps. The morale and combat efficiency of these units was low and the Germans consistently felt that they could be counted on for little effective action, even against the partisans. Perhaps knowing this and hoping to even further lower their fighting spirit and induce them to

defect as units, the Soviet high command sometime after the first of the year issued a directive to both the Red Army and those partisan organizations currently in the area that the Hungarian units were not to be attacked. If fired on by them, the Soviets were to bypass them and return fire only if faced with unusually strong and persistent resistance.⁸⁷ As far as is known, no such order regarding the Romanian units with the Wehrmacht was ever issued.

By the end of March, there was evidence of a considerable increase in the size of several partisan units and of a much closer tie-in of their operations with those of the Red Army. Four bands totaling some 8,000–9,000 men and united under a central command appeared in the rear of the *Fourth Panzer Army*, which was defending in the Tarnopol-Lwow area where the Soviet pressure was very heavy, carrying out tactical reconnaissance for the Red Army, attempting to prevent the destruction of important traffic installations by the retreating Germans, and striking at the supply lines. When the fighting moved in on Tarnopol, this force moved to the south, possibly to aid the Red Army in its attempt to destroy the *First Panzer Army* which had been surrounded and was attempting to fight its way out to the west.

In April the Naumov band, grown to some 1,500–2,000 men, reappeared, now operating against the rail line running east from Lwow. Due to the large number of German troops in the area, however, they had little success, and were continually badgered in their operations by UPA units, which had increased considerably in size and had grown very aggressive. A miscellany of a number of smaller bands was equally ineffective.

In May the Red Army pressure eased somewhat and the Germans were able to move more actively against these bands in a series of local actions. These combined with the growing strength of the UPA, which now fighting in its avowed homeland was successfully recruiting increasing numbers of native Galicians into its ranks, and the logistical difficulties the partisans were having because the number of Germans in the area precluded adequate supply by air drop, gradually scattered the remaining bands. Thus the partisan movement in the south, which had never been a factor in the fight there, faded out of the picture.

The Final Blow—The Central Sector

The Realignment of Partisan Strength

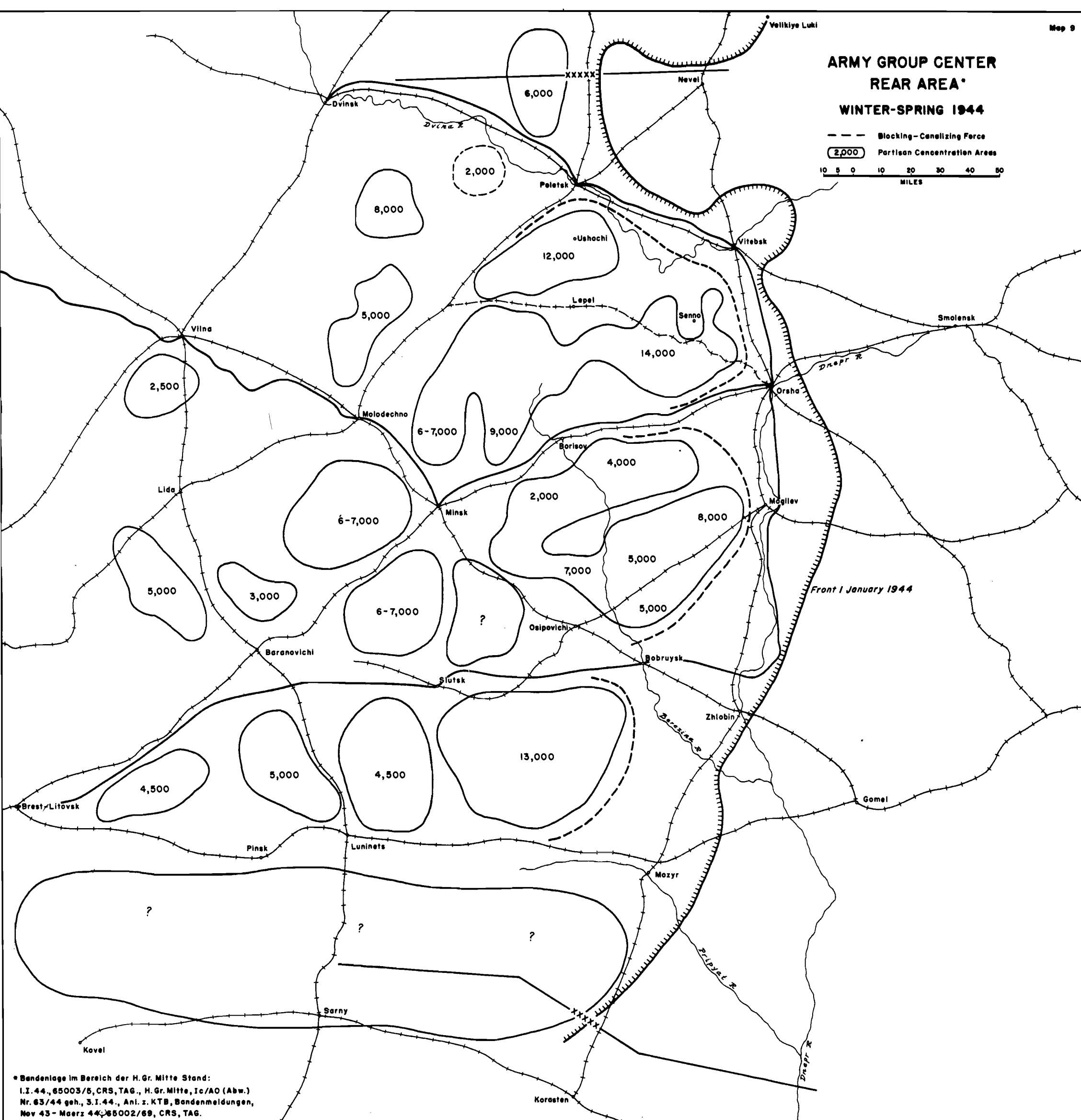
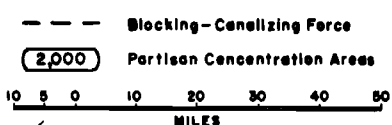
Before the end of January it had become obvious that the start the partisans in the central sector had made toward expanding and con-

⁸⁷ Rpt, GFP 704, quoted in memo, *Abt. Frd.H.Ost*, 16.II.44., *Frd.H.Ost*, *Vortraege und Notizen*. H 3/193.

ARMY GROUP CENTER

REAR AREA*

WINTER-SPRING 1944



* Bendenlage im Bereich der H. Gr. Mitte Stand:
I.I. 44., 65003/5, CRS, TAG., H. Gr. Mitte, Ic/AO (Abw.)
Nr. 63/44 geh., 3.I. 44., Anl. z. KTB, Bendenmeldungen,
Nov 43 - März 44, 65002/69, CRS, TAG.

Map 9. Army Group Center Rear Area, Winter-Spring, 1944

solidating their areas of concentration during the last weeks of 1943 was part of a series of Moscow-directed steps to improve the operational efficiency of the movement and realign its mission more closely with that of the Red Army. Certainly the partisan support of the drive from Orel into White Russia had not been overly impressive. True, with their raids and sabotage the bands had hurt the Germans, but with a strength in excess of 60,000 men, with good support from the Soviet rear, and in terrain which heavily favored them, they had failed in their mission of cutting off the supply of the German units at the front and trapping them in the forward areas by blocking their axes of retreat. And this was against an enemy preoccupied with staving off literal disaster. Because they lacked experienced and aggressive leadership at the unit level and tight, centralized control from the top, they had dissipated much of their effort on areas and targets of lesser strategic significance where the opposition was light or nonexistent and had failed to follow up any advantages gained.

With the German rear now very shallow, the problem of correcting these deficiencies was simplified considerably. Especial emphasis was placed on tightening the regional and central command structures. Operations group commanders in key areas were replaced with Red Army officers of combat experience and proven aggressive leadership, and command channels between the partisan staffs and the Soviet rear were improved to the point where by the end of January almost every move and change in disposition of the bands was dictated by the Central Staff and subordinated to the future operational intentions of the Red Army.³⁸ At the same time the expansion and linking up of the concentration areas continued until the bands were spread in almost continuous blocks through the countryside just off the supply corridors. By 1 March this realignment of strength was virtually complete with hardly a portion of the army group rear area or the *Reichskommissariat Weis-sruthenien* outside the larger population centers where the partisans were not either dominant militarily or poised in considerable numbers along all the highways and railroads or which was not under a Communist Party administration. Although the Germans still maintained a few strong points in these regions, the garrisons were so heavily outnumbered

³⁸ H. Gr. Mitte, Ic/AO (Abw.), Nr. 63/44 geh., 3.I.44. in KTB, H. Gr. Mitte Bandenmeldungen, Nov 43—Maerz 44. 65002/69; H. Gr. Mitte, Ia. Nr. 1620/44 g.Kdos., 8.II.44. in *ibid.*; H. Gr. Mitte, Ia, Nr. 14550/43 g.Kdos., 8.XII.43., Anl. z. KTB. H. Gr. Mitte, I.X.—31.XII.43. 65002/24; H. Gr. Mitte, Ia. Nr. 279/44 g.Kdos., 28.I.44., KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, 1.I.—31.III.44. 65002/48; 1st Lt. Larry Wolff, "The Partisan Situation in Army Group Center, 1 January to 31 December 1944," pp. 1-8. OCMH files.

and the posts themselves were so isolated that they were almost valueless tactically or in an administrative sense.³⁹

The Soviet Plan

Once the bands were realigned and under tight control, the Central Staff turned its attention to their utilization in the months to come. As before, they were to operate in direct support of the Red Army when it resumed the offensive with the coming of summer, striking the German supply axes concurrently with the assault from the east. In this offensive, however, their operations were carefully planned not as a series of isolated blows but as an integrated whole fitted far more closely into the over-all battle picture than in previous campaigns.

This was the plan. They were to hold tightly to their newly aligned areas in the face of all attacks, all the while strengthening them, until the Red Army struck the Dnepr line in a general offensive. Then, after making the Germans' withdrawal on a broad front slow and difficult, they were to split the front and drive the Germans into the narrow corridors along the roads and railroads now dominated by the concentration areas where they might be blocked or successively checked until destroyed from the east. The bands disposed closest to the front, entrenched in extensive field fortifications, constituted the blocking-canalizing force (*Sperriegel*) which was to turn them into the east-west axes; the remainder comprised the interdiction group.⁴⁰

As such, the plan was well adapted to the German situation. *Army Group Center* lay pressed back against the dense forests of White Russia and the Pripyat barrier with its divisions far below strength and with few reserves. The road and rail net available to it was sparse. There was only one heavy capacity, double-track line traversing the sector and five of medium capacity, plus three highways, only one of which might be classed as primary in the American sense. The secondary roads were so poor that they could be interdicted with little effort. Thus with the terrain precluding cross-country movement on other than a small scale, almost all ordered German movement and supply would have to go over the rail lines and the three highways. And these were the partisans' targets.

³⁹ 1st Lt. Larry Wolff, "The Partisan Situation in Army Group Center, 1 January to 31 December 1944," pp. 1-8; *Bandenlage im Bereich der H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 1.I.44., Anl. z. KTB H. Gr. Mitte, Ic/AO (Abw.)*. 65003./5; *H. Gr. Mitte, Ic/AO (Abw.)*, Nr. 63/44 geh., 3.I.44. in *KTB, H. Gr. Mitte Bandenmeldungen*, Nov. 43-Maerz 44. 65002/69; *H. Gr. Mitte, Ia, Nr. 1620/44 g.Kdos.*, 8.II.44. in *ibid.*

⁴⁰ This was the estimate of the situation made by *Army Group Center* in January and was borne out by subsequent intelligence reports and the situation maps for the period. See: *H. Gr. Mitte, Ic/AO (Abw.)*, Nr. 63/44 geh., 3.I.44. in *KTB, H. Gr. Mitte Bandenmeldungen*, Nov. 43-Maerz 44. 65002/69; *Bandenlage im Bereich der H. Gr. Mitte, Stand: 1.I.44., Anl. z. KTB H. Gr. Mitte, Ic/AO (Abw.)*. 65003/5. See also: Extract from Order of the Day 48, *Lepel Partisan Brigade Stalin*, 4 Mar 44, in *AOK 16, Ic/AO, Fnb., Bandenlage, 1.IV.-15.VII.44.* 54323/8.

Operations During the Winter and Spring Months ⁴¹

Once the bands had become established in their concentration areas, there were few changes in their dispositions. The rear of the *Second Army* in the middle and lower Pripyat area was an exception, with the westward shift of emphasis that had started before the turn of the year to conform with the progress of the Red Army divisions driving into the western Ukraine continuing through the month of March. The heavy concentrations in the Ushachi-Lepel-Senno region west of Orsha-Vitebsk received a number of reinforcements, and several sizeable bands were fed into that area just north of Polotsk which the Germans had cleared in late December to increase the pressure in the Polotsk-Dvinsk line.

Throughout the remainder of the winter the partisans launched no sector-wide campaign of sabotage. Within their particular areas they continued their raiding and demolitions, but the attacks were sporadic and generally uncoordinated, as they had been in the fall, and bore no relation to their strength of some 130,000. They most frequently hit the roads and signal facilities away from the communication corridors and attacked German-occupied villages and strong points within their own areas. In some regions they burned all villages that they were forced to evacuate or that they thought might furnish shelter for their enemies. They continued to place pressure on the railroads; in March they set off 1,837 demolitions out of approximately 3,300 attempts, damaging 237 locomotives and 824 cars. The lines radiating out of Brest-Litovsk received the heaviest attention, especially during the latter half of the month when a number of German units were being shifted south to the Kovel sector to reinforce *Army Group South*. The total sabotage was roughly equivalent to that of the two preceding months. Their demolition techniques showed no improvement, however, for all during the winter the general supply of the German armies remained unaffected. Local supply, which often had to be funneled through areas controlled by the bands, was hindered somewhat by a lack of control of the secondary road net, portions of which were so endangered that maps were issued indicating the roads safe for single vehicle travel, safe only for convoy travel, or unsafe for all travel.⁴²

For the most part the bands confined themselves to building up their own strength and combat readiness and to constructing fortifications both for local protection and to reinforce their strategic position for the coming campaign, while their staffs and intelligence sections concentrated on espionage. This latter had been given a high priority by the Central Staff, and intercepts by the Germans indicated that it had

⁴¹ Unless otherwise noted, the material in this section is taken from Wolff, "The Partisan Situation in Army Group Center, 1 January to 31 December 1944." OCMH files.

⁴² *Strassenverkehrslege, Stand: 1.III.44., Anl. 5 z. Pz AOK 3, Ia. Nr. 2327/44 g.Kdos., 2.III.44., KTB, H. Gr. Mitte, Nov. 43-Maerz 44.* 65002/69.

become very efficient and was passing an increasing volume of accurate and up-to-date information across the front to the east.

German Counteraction

Throughout most of the winter the security commands were haunted by their old nemesis, shortage of manpower, and in the face of the numerical superiority of the partisans they were able to offer little more than token resistance to their consolidation of the countryside. Lacking sufficient troops to perform even routine functions, any offensive moves they undertook always had to be at the expense of fundamentally necessary static security. Occasional operations of battalion or regimental scope accomplished little of permanent military value when they were launched. In most such instances the bands followed their old tactics of refusing battle and slipped away deeper into the forests and swamps where they merely waited for the enemy to retire before they returned, knowing from experience that their enemy had too few troops to garrison any region cleared. Only when a probing force penetrated too near one of their primary bases would they react positively; then they resisted fiercely from prepared positions. For the most part the security commands confined their active efforts to maintaining contact with the bands for reasons of intelligence and to attempting to curtail the partisans' espionage activities which were causing more and more concern at army group headquarters. As a result, the bands had things very much their own way.

With the coming of the spring thaws indicating the nearness of the operating season, the Germans became increasingly conscious of the bands concentrated along the army group's life lines to the west. They correctly deduced the plans of the Soviet high command for the use of the partisans and realized that, if they were to mount any sort of effective defense against the Red Army attacks which were sure to come or withdraw as an integrated force should the pressure prove too great, they would have to regain at least a modicum of control over their rear.

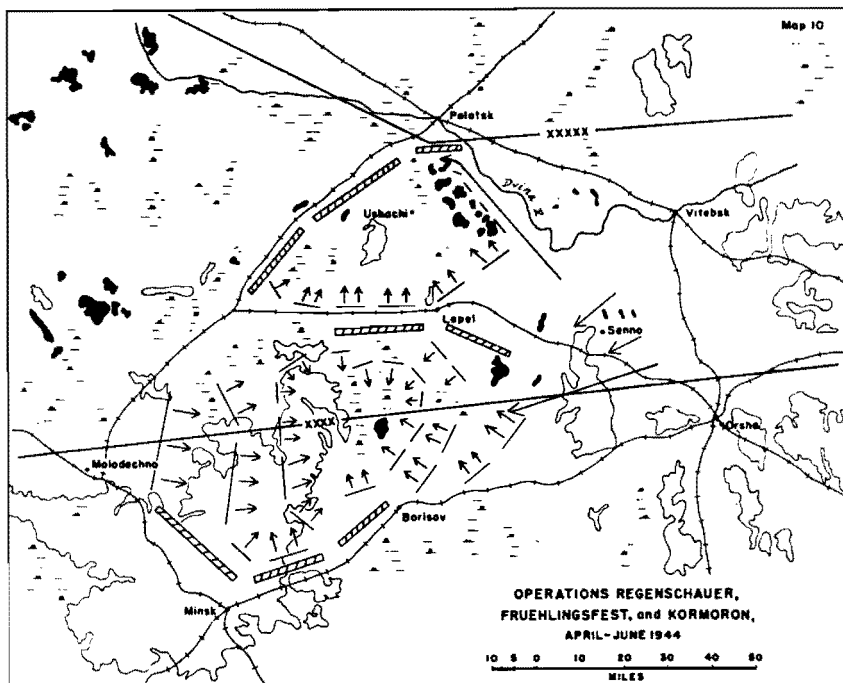
Since the partisans in the rear of the *Second Army* had shifted much of their strength and the majority of their operations well to the west, the most critical portion of the army group rear in terms of partisan strength and strategic importance for German defense was that behind the *Third Panzer Army* and the left wing of the *Fourth Army*, the region comprising the territory about the towns of Ushachi, Lepel, and Senno west of Vitebsk and Orsha. This area dominated the two major east-west corridors. In view of the large number of divisions the Soviets had massed opposite it, at least one arm of the Red Army main effort seemed sure to come through it. The Germans knew that the Soviets

had been strengthening the bands in this area for some months, probably to the exclusion of all others, and had kept them well supplied by air. This, combined with frequent attacks on garrisons and the increasingly stubborn resistance offered patrols and probing actions on the fringes of the region, convinced them that this was the most formidable block in their rear and that it was manned by units whose training and leadership had brought them almost to the level of regular Soviet troops, with a high morale and an excellent will to fight. In view of all this, the area had to be broken or at least neutralized. Consequently, late in March the army group command projected a series of major anti-partisan sweeps through the entire area in a final attempt at a solution.

This series of clearing actions began on 11 April and continued almost uninterruptedly until the opening of the Soviet general offensive on 23 June. The Ushachi region, considered the strongest of the concentrations because of its tight-knit command structure, was attacked first. As the opening move, elements of the *Third Panzer Army* attacked westward down the left bank of the Dvina River, where bands disposed as the left wing of the blocking-canalizing force had built up a formidable defense line, cleared it, and drove on into the lake region just south of Polotsk. Contrary to expectations, the partisans there, caught by surprise and mistakenly believing that the Germans would withdraw after the operation, pulled back across the lake line and into the depths of the Ushachi area with hardly a fight, despite orders to the contrary. The attacking force consolidated its gains and dug in. This was Operation *REGENSCHAUER*.

In Operation *FRUEHLINGSFEST*, which followed almost immediately, the units which had executed *REGENSCHAUER* remained in place along the lakes as a blocking force, joined on the north and west by elements of the *Sixteenth Army*. Attacking in close order from the south and southeast and supported by three *Stuka* squadrons, additional elements of the *Third Panzer Army* and a large force of police and SS units drove into the area as the hammer against the anvil of the blocking line.

From the start of this second attack, the partisans resisted stubbornly all along the line, fighting doggedly from positions prepared in depth and protected by abatis and extensive mine fields. Aided by close-in tactical support from the Red Air Force as well as reinforcements brought in by glider, the bands forced the Germans to advance slowly from position to position, giving ground grudgingly and frequently counterattacking. Attesting to the importance Moscow accorded the area, the Red Army went so far as to launch a limited offensive against the right wing of *Army Group North* in an attempt to pull some of the weight off the beleaguered bands. When the attack groups were joined by elements



Map 10. Operations *REGENSCHAUER*, *FRUEHLINGSFEST*, and *KORMORON*, April-June 1944.

of the 95th Infantry Division, however, the pressure became too heavy, and the partisans began a series of attempts to break out to the south. By the middle of May the operation was essentially complete with the area cleared and the bands badly scattered. Partisan casualties were listed at slightly in excess of 14,000, with an estimated 3,000-4,000 escaping to the south and southwest.

At the conclusion of the two operations the Ushachi area lay free of the bands and the Orsha-Lepel rail line—extended, which the *Third Panzer Army* felt so vital to the defense of the Orsha-Vitebsk sector of the front, secured at least momentarily from partisan interdiction. The threat of the partisans in the Senno area and south of Lepel remained, however, and to consolidate the gains of the earlier sweeps and to prevent reinfiltration, the army group first garrisoned the area just cleared and then mounted a third drive designed to clear the entire region north of Molodechno-Minsk-Borisov. This was Operation *KORMORON*.

The operation opened on 22 May with elements of the *Third Panzer Army* striking westward through the Senno area, and police and SS units attacking to the east and northeast from the vicinity of Molodechno. To prevent a mass escape of bands to the north and south, additional elements of the *Third Panzer Army* had set up a blocking line on the north-

ern fringe of the region while police and SS units under the *Wehrmacht-befehlshaber Weissruthenien* and elements of the *Fourth Army* had established similar positions along the rail lines to the south and southwest. Unlike the partisan units in the Ushachi battles, which had fought as a unified command under the leadership of a single operations group, the bands resisting the *KORMORON* drive operated under at least two headquarters, one headed by a Red Army general officer, the other by a Communist Party functionary, and were unable to offer a coordinated defense. While they fought stubbornly at times, their resistance lacked cohesion, and they were slowly pressed into a small swampy area and cut to pieces. The fight was brought to a premature conclusion by the opening of the Red Army summer offensive and a number of small groups of partisans escaped. OKH considered the area cleared and listed partisan casualties as 7,697 dead, 5,286 taken prisoner, and 342 camps and 900 bunkers destroyed.

While these operations were in progress, there was a steady increase in all types of partisan activity throughout the rest of the army group rear. Not concerted enough to represent a "softening up" effort, it seemed rather to be a deliberate attempt to make life miserable for the Germans and whittle away at their strength while waiting for the Red Army to strike. The bands not only increased the number of their raids and the volume of their sabotage, but struck at larger and more critical targets. Often supported by heavy weapons, they hit, beside the lines of communication and signal facilities, at strong points, German-occupied villages, and troops billets, and burned all settlements which might be developed by the enemy into additional strong points. They ceased withdrawing except in the face of overwhelming odds and offered stubborn resistance to patrols, both of which were indicative of heightened morale. Their supply by air was stepped up appreciably, especially during the first three weeks of June,⁴ and additional specialists and Red Army officers were air-landed or parachuted in to them. Late in May a number of the bands in the *Second Army* rear which had moved west in March to aid in the Red Army drive on Kovel were driven back by a German counterattack to their old concentration areas astride the supply corridors through the Pripyat. There they reorganized in their old positions under the original blocking-canalizing plan. Such was the picture when the storm broke.

The Final Blow

On the night of 19-20 June the partisans opened the preparation for the long-expected Soviet offensive with their greatest single blow of the war against the German lines of communication. That night,

⁴ *Bericht, Mai, Juni 44, AOK 16, Ic/AO, Fnb. Bandenlage, 1.IV-15.VII.44, 54323/8.*

surpassing even the mass attacks of 2-3 August 1943, they successfully set off demolitions on the rail lines at 9,600 places in some 14,000 attempts and followed up with an additional 892 the next night. The demolitions were well planned and executed and carried out under the protection of strong covering parties to the accompaniment of heavy attacks on German security posts.⁴⁵ The lines Minsk-Orsha and Mogilev-Vitebsk were especially hard hit and almost completely paralyzed for several days. There were no demolitions reported for 21-22 June or for 22-23 June. Of other sabotage committed those first nights or of rail demolitions on succeeding nights nothing is known.

On 23 June, the Red Army struck, with masses of artillery fire and attack units of the Red Air Force adding to the havoc the bands had created. The main efforts were launched on both sides of Vitebsk and south and east of Bobruysk, generally in the direction of Minsk. As the fighting swept through their concentration areas, the partisans worked in close cooperation with the regular units. For the most part they held their formations and hit at their targets with a good degree of precision. In a number of instances they were identified fighting in the line as units under direct Red Army control.⁴⁶ As the advance neared the Polish-White Russian border, however, their units slowly fell apart. Many were absorbed into the line divisions, while others broke off in small groups in an effort to avoid induction into the Regular Army. Some few held their ranks and moved westward into the *Generalgouvernement* in the van of the fight.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Lft. Kdo, 6, Ic. Nr. 8000/44 geh., 20.VII.44., Anl. z. KTB, H. Gr. Mitte.* 65002/8. Actually, with the exception of the *Second Army* rear, few of the details of this partisan offensive are known. All the records of the *Fourth* and *Ninth Armies* were lost when those units were destroyed in July and only one *KTB* of the *Third Panzer Army* has survived. The number of attempts on the night of 19-20 Jun—14,000—is an approximation based on the known number of successful and “prevented” demolitions behind the *Second Army* on that date. See also: Genmaj Alexander Ratcliffe, “Lessons Learned from the Partisan War in Russia,” pp. 5-6. MS # P-055a. Foreign Studies Br., OCMH.

⁴⁶ This was the experience behind the *Second Army*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*