

CHAPTER 12

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

The Soviet Partisan Movement which was established in the wake of the German armies invading the USSR in 1941 was, in both conception and scope, the greatest irregular resistance movement in the history of warfare. It combined all the classic elements of resistance movements of the past with modern means of communication and transportation and modern weapons, and at its peak involved a far greater number of men than had ever before been drawn into an irregular force. The modern military planner should study both the Soviet experience in organizing and utilizing the partisan movement and the German experience in combating it if he is preparing an operational campaign and its logistical support or an occupation of conquered territory.

When the German military and political leaders drew up their plans for the invasion of Russia, they made a number of errors in relation to the control and administration of the rear areas of the armies. These mistakes had a very positive and direct effect on the rise and growth of the Soviet Partisan Movement.

The errors of the military planners were largely ones of omission. From the first they predicated all their preparations on a winning campaign of no more than four months' duration; they made no provision for unforeseen contingencies which might prolong the campaign; they made inadequate provision for control of their immediate rear areas and protection of their lines of communication. In fact the military never conceived of such a thing as a resistance movement. As a result, the partisans were able to gain an early foothold.

With the political planners, the errors were those of commission. The policy they set for the occupation, which was to take over in the wake of the Wehrmacht and continue on after the cessation of hostilities, was almost wholly one of repression and served to accentuate the deficiencies of the military planning. The Soviet Union was first to be dominated, then administered and exploited, and finally broken up and placed under tight Nazi control to the greater profit and glory of the German Reich. There was to be no real attempt to win the Russian natives over to collaboration. What they thought or felt was not to matter in the least. Force was to be used "in its most brutal form." Whether the people starved as a result of the exploitation was of no moment. In short,

German planning laid a very fertile basis for the birth and growth of a resistance movement. The deficiencies of the military planning gave the movement its initial impetus in the form of a chance to establish itself unhindered; the political planning, by antagonizing and driving away the anti-Soviet segment of the population, in effect guaranteed its continued growth and development.

The partisan movement was established behind the German lines after the invasion was launched, partly through the independent activity of NKVD personnel and Red Army officers and NCO's, and partly under a Moscow-directed national defense effort that attempted to utilize the vast reservoir of manpower that German advances in Russia had made unavailable for the Red Army. In the first months of the war the movement accomplished little of a positive nature as far as the German Army was concerned. The organization of the early bands was anything but good. Their morale was poor, and their leadership, too often political, left a great deal to be desired. There was little coordination of effort among them and there was no real centralized control. They seldom showed any aggressiveness; the paramount interest of the individual members seems to have been one of immediate personal survival. When they did operate, it was generally against the rail net, but they struck more often in areas where terrain and the absence of opposition gave them maximum protection than where elementary strategy indicated. Their only true value lay in their inherent potential, the military know-how of the Red Army personnel, and the fanaticism of the Communist Party and NKVD people. Taken *in toto*, their activity during 1941 did not materially hinder German offensive operations, although at times it hurt temporarily. In some areas they made the establishment of a smoothly functioning occupation difficult, especially in regard to the relationship between the occupation administration and the natives, and they caused the line armies some inconveniences. But they never exercised any positive influence on the course of events which led to the Wehrmacht's failure to achieve its 1941 objectives.

Still, considering that they started from scratch, these bands did make some progress. Being largely ignored by the German military, they were able in a small way to orient themselves strategically and tactically and to develop their organization and communications net relatively unhindered. Further, under a growing clandestine Communist Party control and abetted by the German occupation policies, they were successful in some areas in gaining at least the passive support of a portion of the Russian people and in throwing considerable doubt in the minds of others as to the wisdom of supporting or collaborating with the invader.

The 1941 pattern continued throughout 1942. Although the bands increased considerably in number and size and caused repeated disruptions to the German occupation and economic administrations, their

activity had no immediate effect on the operations of the Wehrmacht during the year. The Soviet counteroffensive which followed the failure to take Moscow breached the German front in the central sector and the right flank of the northern sector in a number of places, and opened the rear areas to widespread infiltration. This gave the Russians an excellent opportunity to improve the command structure of the individual bands and at the same time organize them into a more effective military instrument. Still, when summer came there was no visible organized or even disorganized attempt by the bands to upset either the German concentrations for the offensive toward Stalingrad and the Caucasus or the logistical support after the attack got under way, and no attempt to support the Red Army counteroffensive launched in late November.

In August and September of 1943, following the failure of the German attempt to reduce the Kursk salient in the ill-starred Operation *ZITADELLE*, the Red Army launched a general assault in great force, and at the same time the partisans mounted their first large-scale offensive against the Wehrmacht rear in direct support. On the face of it, this offensive seemed highly successful: more than 20,000 demolitions set off on the rail lines behind *Army Group Center*, which was bearing the brunt of the Soviet attack; extensive sabotage to railway installations other than trackage, to highways, and to signal facilities; and a propaganda and terror campaign that resulted in widespread defection among the German native auxiliaries.

In analysis, however, the picture is not so bright. The plan had been for the partisans to paralyze the Germans' supply and troop movements by destroying the rail lines, cut them off from the west by blocking their axes of retreat, and help crush them in an east-west pincer. But the results fell far short of the original design. Throughout the period the German withdrawals proceeded smoothly and almost on schedule, with a low percentage-wise loss of troop and supply trains. The bands never paralyzed the rail lines; they never blocked the German axes of retreat; and the withdrawals never became a rout, remaining rather under German control throughout.

There are several reasons for the partisans' failure to accomplish their mission during these two months. First, they had been ordered to follow up "continuously" and "systematically." This they did not do. If their heaviest attacks had been made on successive nights, or even no more than several days apart, the blows might well have proven fatal. But instead the attacks were spaced far apart, and the German traffic continued to move. Second, the demolition techniques they used were generally poor. Many of the rail demolitions listed as successful must have done slight or no damage at all; otherwise the Germans simply could not have operated the volume of traffic they did following the

attacks. As far as can be told from the record, the Germans listed as successful any demolition charge or mine which was actually set off, irrespective of damage, and as unsuccessful any charge removed or disarmed prior to detonation. Third, the strategic placement of demolitions left much to be desired. If the Central Staff worked out the specific sections of trackage to be hit, and there is reason to believe that they did, at least in the early phases of the offensive, the bands simply did not carry out the directives issued them. As before, they appear to have hit where the natural cover was the heaviest and the opposition the lightest, not where they might have done the Germans the most damage.

The German security units were weak throughout the occupied areas, and with one exception there were no regular units guarding communication facilities during this period. The bands had a superiority in numbers in their areas of concentration and ample time for thorough preparation. Yet in many cases they wasted demolitions and hit important lines only lightly. There were over 15,000 attempted rail breaks in the sector during August, yet the most vital artery in the whole area, the Brest-Litovsk-Minsk-Smolensk line, suffered but 903 demolitions of all sizes in more than 400 miles of double track and only 4 mass demolitions. The most heavily hit lines were the Minsk-Gomel in the Pripyat and the Polotsk-Molodechno deep in the broken forest country behind the *Third Panzer Army* in White Russia. Certainly the Minsk-Gomel was a most important line during the withdrawal to the Desna, and later in the retrograde movement to the Dneper. The bands hit it hard, but they never knocked it out for an appreciable length of time, even though it ran through terrain so difficult as to make it almost impossible to protect. Instead they wasted over two thousand demolitions on small feeder lines, demolitions which set on the tracks between Gomel and Minsk would have doubled the destruction where it would have hurt the Germans the most.

The operations of the partisans in the rear of the *Eighteenth Army* during January and February 1944 were something else again and exercised a very definite influence on the course of the battles along that portion of the front. From the opening of the Soviet offensive there on 14 January to the stabilizing of the German line south of Pskov early in March the bands set off demolitions on the rail lines at but 1,564 spots. Yet with these they "completely paralyzed" one of the two tactically most important rail connections in the sector during the highly critical period of the initial Red Army breakthrough, forcing a badly needed reinforcing division off the rails and so delaying it that it never arrived as a unit and had to be committed piecemeal. They so continually interdicted the major rail axis of the sector that another reinforcing division, an armored one, was too late to join the biggest battle of the campaign and

finally had to be committed elsewhere because a third reinforcing division, similarly forced off the rails and continually harassed as it moved cross-country on foot, was days late. In addition, they interdicted highways and swamp tracks with demolitions and road blocks; cut wire communications; laid mine fields; scouted for the Red Army; and on occasion engaged the Germans in showdown combat.

These were considerable contributions; still it cannot be said that they were in any wise decisive. The Soviet offensive could hardly have failed to succeed, with or without the efforts of the partisans, because of the overwhelming superiority of the Red Army units and the thinness of the German line and its lack of reserves. The partisans neither won the campaign nor prevented the Germans from winning it. The Red Army was simply too strong at the points of main effort and the Wehrmacht too weak. That the bands did much to speed up the expulsion of the Germans from the area between Lake Ilmen and Lake Peipus, however, is obvious. Certainly they did much to prevent the Germans from stabilizing the situation in the Luga area by paralyzing the Dno-Soltsy line when they did.

Why did the partisan effort in the northern sector in January and February of 1944 to a large degree realize its potential while that in the central sector the previous summer fail? There are several possible answers to this question. Admittedly the areas were not comparable except as to terrain, which was extremely difficult in both cases, thus adding to the partisans' advantage; the *Eighteenth Army* rear comprised but a fraction of that of *Army Group Center*; trackage in the central sector totaled thousands of miles, that in the northern but a few hundred; behind the *Eighteenth Army* there were some 13,000 partisans in something less than 20 units; in the central sector there were some 70,000 in a large number of organizations; and finally there were probably more security troops per square mile in the northern sector. In the northern sector the critical targets were more concentrated geographically and there were fewer of them. But there were fewer partisans there and the defenders also were more concentrated in the vicinity of the targets. Even more important, the targets lay close to the front lines and thus more subject to defense by line troops than they had been in the central sector. In other words, neither sector could be said to have had all the advantages.

In large part, however, the answer lies in the difference between the partisan units in organization, training, and leadership. It seems obvious that the Central Staff had seen the mistakes committed in the past and by 1944 had passed on to the bands in the north the fruit of experience in other sectors. This showed very definitely in the overall direction of the campaign, the selection and priority of the targets, and the like. But more important was the relative efficiency of the bands in the two

areas. The partisans in the north had remained relatively undisturbed to organize and develop as they might, in their own home areas, almost since the beginning of the war. Their numbers had always remained small, so that the problem of control never became a really difficult one. And they had never expanded past the point where they could be adequately trained and provided with competent leaders. The results speak for themselves. Where this over-all leadership was furnished them, unit leadership and discipline were vastly improved, and an aggressiveness, heretofore absent, became evident throughout. The bands showed little hesitation in working close behind the front lines and even in facing the German regulars in show-down fights. The incidence of such clashes was high. The tactically and strategically important targets were picked and attacked. The attacks were well timed and were boldly followed up. The rail lines were hit until the Germans were forced into the swamps and forests where they were hit again. Percentage-wise, the number of bridges blown was higher than ever before. Demolition techniques showed vast improvement.

In attempting to evaluate the irregulars' part in the Soviet offensive of June-July 1944, there is far less evidence to go on. Just what they added to this, the greatest of the Red Army assaults, is a difficult question to answer. Obviously, the Soviets would have swept through the Wehrmacht defenses even without the partisans' blows at the rail lines. They were simply too strong at every point and the Germans too weak. The plan for the support of the offensive by the bands, on paper at least, was a sound one. But it was obviously far too complex for the command organs which were to execute it, demanding as it did a degree of precision and tightly centralized control which would have taxed the capacities of an experienced regular staff. It demanded a skill and doggedness in execution which the irregulars did not and could not have. And it appears to have been drawn up without reference to possible countermoves by the Germans. The dispositions of the bands under the plan were badly upset on the northern flank, where they were supposed to be the strongest and do the most damage, by the three German large-scale antipartisan operations there; and they were weakened in the lower Pripyat when the bands there were shifted westward to aid in the investment of the Kovel-Brest-Litovsk area in January and February and then driven back again by German pressure several months later. As a result, the German flank units, the *Third Panzer Army* on the north and the *Second Army* in the south, when forced to withdraw, were successful in brushing aside what opposition the bands offered and pulling back to the west in relatively good order and without undue losses.

In the center of the sector, as far as the *Ninth Army* was concerned, the plan was made superfluous by the rapid Soviet advance. In the

case of the *Fourth Army* the plan simply did not work because the bands had neither the skill nor the strength to cope with the German line divisions, preoccupied as they were. The canalizing positions nowhere forced the Germans into the communications corridors, and the bands which were to block these corridors further to the west were left without a definite mission. Until it was cut off by the Russian armor, the army's withdrawal was orderly.

More important, the attack on the rail lines itself, obviously made on Moscow's signal, was either badly timed in relation to the general assault, or the bands' reserves of demolition material were grossly miscalculated by the logistics people responsible for their supply. Whatever the case, the error was one of command. The Red Army had such a superiority that there was no great need to depend on the element of surprise for the success of its first blow. The Germans were woefully weak, and at this stage of the war the Soviets could not have been ignorant of the fact. It seems too obvious that they could have afforded to indicate an imminent assault in exchange for a 72-hour period of concentrated attacks on the enemies' communications. The first blow, delivered four days before the general assault, which was launched on 23 June, totaled 9,600 successful demolitions; the second, delivered one day later, some 90 percent fewer. There was no blow delivered the next night, and none in the hours immediately preceding the general attack. The bands did not lose heart over night, and the Germans did not have the manpower to drive them off. Obviously, they ran out of explosives. As a result, the Germans were given a period of some forty-eight hours to recover somewhat. Either this recovery was phenomenally rapid or the demolitions were poorly executed, or both, for on 27 June the Dvinsk-Molodechno, Minsk-Orsha, and Minsk-Bobruysk lines, all primary trunks, were still open and reinforcements were moving over them from other sectors. Such a one-shot blow should have been delivered either simultaneously with the general assault or after it. In short, in this instance the movement did not accomplish what it might have, and had the strength of the German units been more nearly equal to that of the Red Army, this circumstance might well have been the deciding factor.

Conclusions

The Soviet Partisan Movement had a certain measure of success, perhaps as much as a resistance movement can have when opposed by a first-class military power. But this success was definitely limited. A war waged by a "regular" army has been defined as an attempt to take, hold, or deny terrain to an enemy; one waged by "irregular" forces as an attempt to prevent or avoid exploitation of terrain by an enemy. The partisans were never regulars, but rather irregulars, and as such

were never able to stand up against the regulars of the German Army even in areas and in circumstances of their own choosing, and they were able to "deny" only that terrain which was tactically unimportant to the Germans at a particular time or which because of manpower limitations the Germans were unable to occupy or clear. Despite the fact that the bands as they were in 1943 and 1944 were often extremely difficult to combat, whenever the Germans saw the need to clean up a sector of their rear and were not too heavily committed at the front, they were always equal to the task. Certainly the bands hurt the Wehrmacht. Every rail break, every piece of rolling stock damaged or destroyed, every German soldier killed, wounded, or diverted from other duties to guard against the bands hurt. But the damage was never decisive. As far as preventing German exploitation of the terrain, as irregulars they were more successful, although more so in relation to the occupation and economic administrations than to the German Army itself. Since the occupation as planned was never put into operation, this again was never decisive.

In 1943 and 1944 the strength of the partisan movement lay in the following factors: The movement had a wealth of manpower available, manpower innately tough, frugal, and inured to hardship, and often intimately familiar with the area in which it operated; a majority of the Russian people were at least neutral, and these grew progressively more openly sympathetic as the war progressed; and the Wehrmacht, a seemingly irresistible force in 1941 and 1942, was, after Stalingrad, a losing army, sapped of much of its former strength, and attempting only to avoid defeat.

But the two great weaknesses of the movement, its basic "irregularity" and the problem of over-all control, far more than offset these positive qualities and clearly mirrored the limitations inherent in any partisan force. Irregularity is the great universal weakness of all resistance movements, and the Soviet movement was no exception. The partisans were irregular in almost every sense of the word. Because of the conditions under which they were formed they could never be integrated into the Red Army, and thus they could never be organized, equipped, trained, and controlled to the extent that they would ever approach the level of or be utilized as a "regular" force. Taken as a whole, the majority of their units, despite a hard core of Communist fanatics and Red Army personnel, were little better than third-rate militia. For the most part the rank and file were poor and unenthusiastic soldiers in ill-disciplined units. Most of the volunteers had joined to escape the German forced labor draft, while the forcibly enlisted generally had little heart for the whole business. Furthermore, unit leadership in the bands was almost universally poor, and it was probable that there were far fewer Red Army men in their ranks than the Germans thought.

The problem of control was perhaps an even greater weakness. A company or battalion of infantry is often extremely difficult to control from a distance of no more than several hundred yards. In comparison, the problem of effectively ordering 60,000 to 80,000 irregulars in a number of loose-knit units a hundred miles or more beyond the enemy's lines, even with dependable communications which more often than not were unavailable, was almost insurmountable. The difference in operational efficiency between the 60,000 to 80,000 deep in the central sector and the handful, by comparison, close in behind the rear of the *Eighteenth Army* was an excellent example. If a resistance movement is ever to become a decisive instrument in a regular war, these weaknesses must be eliminated or at least minimized to a large degree.

Considering what the partisans did accomplish, however, the effect they would likely have had on a permanent occupation is something else again. Had the Wehrmacht been able to force a military decision which left sizeable portions of the USSR in German hands to occupy and administer on something approaching a permanent basis, the 100,000-plus partisans, supported as they were by a large proportion of a population antagonized by German occupation policy and practice, would have made the establishment of a workable administration extremely difficult and perhaps prevented it entirely. Considering the extent to which the movement had grown as early as mid-1943 and the tremendous expanse and difficult terrain of European Russia, to make such an occupation successful the Germans would have had to devote a far larger number of line divisions to the task of policing and protecting the lines of communication and population centers and openly battling the partisans and garrisoning their concentration areas than the state of their strategic position on other fronts would have made feasible. Anything less would have left at least a part of the bands intact and operational, and merely scattered or driven underground the remainder, with the result that the cancer would have remained.

Lessons Learned

There are many sound lessons to be learned from this Soviet experiment in rebellion and the German experience in combating it.

1. For a resistance movement to come into being and to grow to maturity, certain conditions must exist:

a. The people must favor it;

b. The terrain in which its units operate must be difficult enough to give security to its bases and cloak its operations and to discourage continued pursuit;

c. The regular army at which it strikes must not be overly strong.

2. Individual irregular units operating independently can be destroyed by timely action of line troops, but an organized resistance move-

ment, once well started, is extremely difficult to combat. Therefore the surest way to combat a resistance movement is to strike at its roots, that is, never let it get started.

3. The best preventive measures are:

a. Proper detailed occupational planning executed prior to the occupation;

b. A clear understanding of the people themselves with whom the occupation must deal, psychological, ethnological, and ideological characteristics;

c. A unified and centrally controlled administration of the areas occupied; and

d. A firm but fair occupation administration combining, as Jomini saw it, courtesy, gentleness, severity, and just dealing. If the mass of the people can be won over, or at least induced not to aid the partisans, the movement will die on the vine.

4. If an army in the midst of an operational campaign should find itself confronted by a resistance movement in its zone of communications, it should:

a. Never allow the partisans to divert it from its primary mission of front-line combat to the extent of weakening that front.

b. Rather view the situation in its proper perspective, remembering that partisans as such have a very limited combat value, and react accordingly.

c. Strike hard with sufficient first-line troops or, if such should not be feasible at the time, pull itself in on its major communication axes and let the rest go for the time being, confident that it possesses the organization and strength to clear the rear if it later becomes necessary.

In the field of antipartisan tactics the following basic principles should be applied:

1. The objective of an antipartisan operation should always be complete annihilation of the enemy in the attacked area, not expulsion from the area.

2. Command should always be unified under an experienced frontline commander no matter how diverse the composite elements of the force.

3. Preparation for an antipartisan operation should be made by a General Staff operations section and as carefully as in the case of an operation at the front.

4. The most complete and up-to-date information possible should be obtained prior to the operation and should be kept current during the course of the operation.

5. The most complete security possible should be maintained during the planning and the assembly of troops in order to preserve the element of surprise.

6. In view of the difficult terrain generally encountered in this type of operation, the units comprising the attack force should be provided with ample signal equipment.

7. Encirclement of the entire area to be cleared should be closely followed by a surprise attack.

8. The area should be carefully combed during the course of the operation.

9. Following the completion of the operation, the area cleared should either be secured by strong garrisons or, if such should not be feasible, all buildings in the area should be completely destroyed and all persons evacuated from the area in order to dissuade the partisans from returning.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

The Soviet Partisan Movement, 1941-1944 is based almost entirely on documents now in the custody of the United States Government. These comprise the voluminous collection of German Army records, including the Rosenberg and Himmler files, now located in the Captured Records Section of The Adjutant General's Office and the records of the various trials of war criminals following World War II which are now in the National Archives.

Specifically the German Army records used were those portions pertaining to German planning and operations and to partisan organization and operations. These included army war diaries (KTB's) and their supporting papers, operations and intelligence reports, minutes of conferences, telegrams, and transcripts of telephone conversations, and the like, from division level through army group and army group rear area to include the High Command of the Army (OKH) and the Armed Forces High Command (OKW). They were supplemented by manuscript histories prepared after the war by more than two hundred German officers working under the direction of the Historical Division, EUCOM. Limited use was made of German naval and air force records, for the most part in relation to the political aspects of the decision to attack the Soviet Union. For the period to September 1942, the most valuable single source for over-all guidance and general information was "The Private War Journal of Generaloberst Franz Halder." For the political aspects of both the planning for the invasion of Russia and the political occupation as far as it was put into effect, the Rosenberg and Himmler files and the records of the war crimes trials were used extensively.

Secondary sources were used only for orientation and general background material. No Soviet secondary sources were used because of their general unreliability. A selected bibliography of secondary sources is appended.

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