

## TWILIGHT FRONT

By BERNHARD GRAMLICH

*Never before has a war been fought in regions beyond the polar circle. It is a fantastic war in which, for almost three years, German and Red troops have been facing each other in this sector, known as the Murmansk Front. The author has visited the German positions. His description is especially topical at a time when Finland has refused the Soviet armistice terms submitted in February, Point I of which demanded the internment of the German troops.—K.M.*

**T**HE front at the Arctic Ocean is a twilight front. Beyond the polar circle, on the shadowy side of the Continent, washed by the waters of the northern Arctic Ocean and the Barents Sea, in the twilight of the unknown, this region leads a life independent of that of the other theaters of war. Its unusual situation is shown by the fact that it is as far north as central Greenland, northernmost Alaska, and the northernmost parts of Eastern Siberia.

On their journey to the north, the German mountain infantry troops—who form the bulk of the defenders of this remote front—have a unique opportunity to discover the changes in vegetation and climate from south to north. The wealth and variety of the vegetation gradually decline, becoming more and more uniform till finally the bare rock gains the upper hand. The world becomes inhospitable and empty. The harsh air of the Arctic Ocean is hostile to growth of any kind, and all life freezes under its icy breath.

### THE SURGE OF WAR

During the Finno-Soviet winter war of 1939/40, northern Lapland and the regions bordering on the Arctic Ocean had already been a war theater. The Soviets overran the Fisher Peninsula, the smaller part of which had belonged to Finland since the peace treaty of Dorpat in 1920, and thrust across the Petsamo Fiord toward the Arctic Straits. They operated along the Finnish border from well-prepared bases whose backbone was formed by the Murmansk Railway and a

road system that had been feverishly developed during the last few preceding years. The winter seemed the most favorable time to the Soviets. Frost had built firm bridges across the lakes and marshes, and snow filled in the deep gulleys and leveled the impassable terrain. The tragedy of this winter war was that, in spite of having won the battles, the Finns lost the war in the peace treaty of March 1940.

Now a German mountain infantry division way beyond the polar circle can look back almost three years to its successful break-through of the Soviet defense line near the banks of the Titovka. Since 1941 this front has been standing far beyond the border of 1940, holding a line favored by the nature of the country. While forests reach well beyond the polar circle, the symphony of changing green breaks off with a shrill discord at the coast of the Arctic Ocean. Cold and brutal, the primitive rock dominates the scene, corroded by the action of storm, snow, and rain: a tossing sea turned into stone by some sudden whim.

From the luxuriant vegetation of the short summer, every kilometer eastward on the Russian road took us further into the treeless tundra. The green of shrubs and grass turned into the brown of thin layers of peat and the gray of lichen and moss. The granite peaks rose in mighty waves, growing higher and wider. The mirrors of little lakes appear like windows in the countryside, and remains of snow lie strewn about like white skins laid out on the rocks to dry. We drove for hours

and knew in advance what the world would look like behind the next hills. The camouflage, which framed the road like screens and crossed it in narrow garlands, confined the view. But behind the thin network the undulation of hill and dale seemed to go on into eternity.

#### ROCKS

We stood in a battery position on the right wing of the Liza River front. Looking through binoculars, we could see the Soviet positions three to four hundred meters away in the foothills of a vast, primitive mountain range. The thrusts of the Soviets, forming the northernmost threats to Europe, were stopped here before they could achieve their object. Behind trenches, breastworks, and dugouts, the diverse ranges of hills flow together in the direction of Murmansk to a majestic scene whose severity is emphasized by its warlike foreground. Single shots rang out on both sides, shells clattered against the summits, and behind us fountains of snow rose up and collapsed after every hit. It was hard to say whether the great silence amplified every sound or whether every sound emphasized the stillness. The unreality of this war beyond the limits of ordinary conception does not become reality until one has reached the foremost lines where—always invisible but none the less dangerous—it lies in wait with bated breath.

The soldier has blasted his dugouts and trenches into the tough rock. He has piled up the rocks into long walls to hide his movements, and in the cliffs he has built his machine-gun nests and observation posts. He has learned to handle the rock and the thin peat that covers the rock in such places where the wind cannot blow it away. Wood is scarce and precious, as it has to be brought up over hundreds of kilometers. Nevertheless, the dugouts do not lack comfort and warmth and, in addition to radio sets, even books and newspapers have found their way into the front lines. Here, more than on any other front, the dugout is the soldier's real world: during

the endless nights of winter it is the limited sphere of his existence, and in the summer's flood of light which betrays every movement it is his refuge.

#### WEIRD CLASHES

Now we were on our way to the left, the outermost wing of the Murmansk Front. Our cross-country motorcar leapt tirelessly over the boulders on the road. At our side, the Liza River became wider and wider, turning into the Titovskaya Bay which joins the Motovsky Bay behind blue cliffs. The scenery became even more grandiose, the cliffs more fantastic. Like a wave of surf, the rocks rose up for the last time before hurling themselves upon the sea. Here the Continent comes to an end in a heroic finale. One feels the elemental breath of a primeval world.

Open to enemy observation, the road led on to the front. One felt as if one were under the spell of an invisible eye. The car drove slowly to avoid raising dust; then the broad shadow of a range of hills covered road and car and protected both till they reached their goal. In the valley, the road led around a mined marsh. A mosaic of splinters indicated the range of the Soviet artillery. The vastness of the landscape disappeared,



all that remained being the battle emplacements. A few huts and observation posts clung to the rear slopes of the range like a Tibetan village. They were hardly visible to the naked eye. Passing them at long intervals, we drove up onto a height. The irregular design of our camouflage coats made us look like part of the countryside, which was torn up and strewn with splinters. A white seagull sailing along a gray rockwall without moving its wings enhanced the fantastic atmosphere. Then the weird silence was broken by a howling whistle. The Soviets had started to fire at the height.

In the morning hours there was a minor clash in a neighboring position. The reverberations of excitement still made themselves felt in sudden hammerings of machine guns. The Soviets had tried to capture a post, but the watchfulness of the mountain infantry had prevented this. There were wounded on both sides, and the enemy left a few prisoners behind. It is the devil of a job to creep up to an enemy position in this glaring light and complete lack of cover. The Bolsheviks take their time. They can lie without stirring for hours to creep on another few inches at a given opportunity. They do not mind taking ten to fifteen hours in order to cover a few hundred meters.

Through binoculars we could see the network of the enemy's position. Trenches, barbed-wire entanglements, pillboxes, and artillery positions could be clearly made out. There was no visible movement, and yet everyone knew that behind this façade hundreds of eyes were watching and searching. The two main front lines run irregularly, meeting for a few hundred meters, separating, and meeting again.

#### FRONT BETWEEN THE SEAS

Running at right angles to the Murmansk Front, the German position on the isthmus to the Fisher Peninsula effectively cuts off the latter. The positions face the sea as well as the land, and it is probably the strangest front among all

the strange battle fronts of this war. Militarily and politically, it has turned the Fisher Peninsula into an island which must rely entirely upon the sea for its rearward communications. The exclusion of the Fisher Peninsula as a base of operations against northern Finland and northern Norway is the work of the mountain infantry. Being the last and northernmost battle post, the Fisher Isthmus is at the same time a part of the multiform system of the Atlantic wall, which runs out here into the northern Arctic Ocean.

There has rarely been a partial front so clearly defined in a geographical sense as the Fisher Isthmus. Enclosed by the Petsamo Fiord and the Barents Sea, it drops away to the north across the Soviet lines toward the Fisher Peninsula, while in the south it joins up with the primitive mountain base of the tundra. In contrast to the Murmansk Front, and even more in comparison with the forest fronts in Karelia and near Lake Onega, the battle positions and outposts are so dense here that they form a solid front which offers no possibility of seeping through. Rock, water, and a fantastic sky form the backdrop to the warlike foreground. The rocks are absolutely barren. While along the Liza River there is still a suggestion of green birches, a breath of vegetation, to enliven the gray aspect, here the totality of dead rock places the countryside into a region cut off from all life.

#### UNEXPLORED COUNTRY

Our motorcar worked its way up from the valley of the Titovka to the headquarters of a regiment. The fact that there is a road—blasted out of the rock here for many kilometers—is as amazing as any human achievement can be in such circumstances. The roads bring us to the crucial problem of warfare in desolate areas. For without roads there can be no supplies, and without supplies no front can be held, much less an attack carried forward. The land to the east of the North Cape was uninhabited and unexplored; and, if in spite of this, the

German advance in the summer of 1941 gained so much ground and threw the Soviets back on their own soil, this is due solely to the German mountain infantry. Added to the unexplored nature of these northern regions, there is the tundra, whose sea of undulating hills and cliffs places an almost insurmountable obstacle in the way of all movement, especially during the summer months. The lakes and rivers and, in the valleys, marshes and bogs, as well as a primeval wall of rock, lie like a vast barrier between the forested zone and the Arctic Ocean. It is only the winter, which levels out the country with ice and snow, solidifies the swamps, and throws bridges across the lakes, that enables large-scale movements.

A small group of soldiers was descending toward the valley with a burden, silently, like emissaries from another world. As they passed us, we saw that the heavy burden was a stretcher. "They got him up there," one of the men said and pointed up to the black mountain.

On the Fisher Isthmus, the fronts face each other with a minimum of distance, and from the elevated German positions one can look into the Soviet dugouts. One can look across the entire sector. Over here on the left wing the Varanger

coast in the distance forms the horizon. To the left lies the entrance to the Petsamo Fiord. Behind the Soviet positions the land rises again toward the flat plateau of the Fisher Peninsula. The terrain in front of us was strewn with obstacles. There was a deceptive silence in the cliffs covering a tension which every now and then exploded in sudden bursts of fire. Three or four Soviets were carrying wood across a slope. A machine gun barked. The figures disappeared.

By midnight the light seemed, if possible, to have become even brighter. The sun had been hidden for some time, but now it broke through the clouds again and shone with the penetrating force peculiar to the midnight sun. The bank of clouds, which came to a halt over the coast, covered half of the sun, and it seemed as if its whole illuminating force were concentrated in the other half. It blazed and glowed, flamed and flashed, burned and flared, as if it contained all the fires of the world. The edges of the clouds were torn open, and the sun cast its torches deep into the gray mass. The sky was aflame. The night was enchanted. Heaven, earth, and sea ran riot in an ecstasy of colors and reeled through every shade from burning red to palest blue and ethereal green.

## APRIL FOOL IN PALESTINE

*April 1, 1944, will go down in Palestine as one of the crucial dates in the history of that country. The significance and background of this date are explained in the following article from Ankara.—K.M.*

**“U**NREST in Palestine” — “In Palestine the extremists among the Arabs and the Jews are secretly preparing a war” — “In Palestine the smuggling of arms is flourishing; its underground channels reach as far as Cairo” — “In Haifa two torpedoes were stolen recently, probably because their content of explosives was needed for the manufacture of bombs.”

This is a selection of news items sent out by British correspondents in Jeru-

salem, Haifa, and Cairo during the last few months. The reason for this unrest and increasing tension between Jews and Arabs was the approach of April 1, the date set by the British mandate authorities for the complete stoppage of Jewish immigration into Palestine.

### FAILURE IN 1938

In order to understand this situation with all its underlying causes it is necessary to throw a glance at the last five