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Demyansk 1941-1943 : a microscopic view of the German-Soviet conflict

Andrew K. Koch

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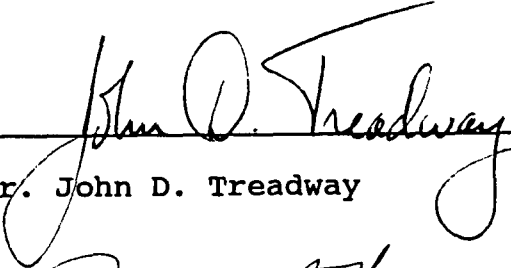
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Demyansk 1941 - 1943


A Microscopic View of the German-Soviet Conflict

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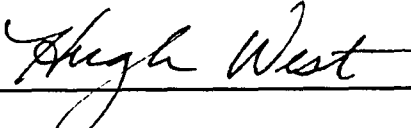
I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



Dr. John D. Treadway



Dr. William H. Thorn



Dr. Hugh A. West

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The words that comprise this thesis are my own. There are, however, many other people who have contributed to make this analysis possible. My thesis director, Dr. John Treadway, has offered me many words of encouragement and support while helping to shape this project. I shall not forget his patience, flexibility, and dedication. My second and third readers, Dr. William Thorn and Dr. Hugh West, also are to be thanked for their considerable efforts in refining my work. I would also like to thank the University of Richmond Graduate School of Arts and Sciences for supplementing my 1991 research trip to Germany.

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While I am indebted to all those who had input and/or have influenced this process, I assume full responsibility for any errors of fact or translation.

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Introduction

Weighed down with heavy cares, condemned to months of silence, the hour has at last come in which I can speak freely to you, my soldiers. At this moment, soldiers of the Eastern Front are executing a march that, for its extent, compares with the greatest the world has ever seen . . . German Soldiers! You are entering into a hard battle burdened with responsibility. The destiny of Europe, the fate and future of the Reich, and the existence of our people lies henceforth alone in your hands. May God aid us in this fight. — Adolf Hitler, Führer and Commander-in-Chief of the Wehrmacht, 22 June, 1941¹

At 03.30 hours on the dawn of Sunday, 22 June 1941, German troops stormed into the Soviet Union. The Wehrmacht advance consisted of seven infantry armies, spearheaded by four panzer groups.² "Operation Barbarossa" had begun, thus commencing the greatest struggle in the history of land warfare.

At the OKW Conference of 3 February 1941, Adolf Hitler bragged, "The world will fall silent and hold its breath when Barbarossa is mounted."³ The world did indeed hold its

¹ "Soldaten der Ostfront," in the Bundesarchiv - Militär Archiv, Freiburg, RH 19 III 661D. (Hereafter cited as BAMAF with document collection, individual identification and/or page numbers.)

² James Lucas, War On The Eastern Front, 1941-1945 (London: Jane's Publishing Company, 1979), VII.

³ Max Domarus, ed., Hitler, Reden und Proklamationen, 1932-1945 (Munich: Suddeutscher Verlag, 1965), vol. II, 1664.

breath. Military experts, influenced by the recent "lightning" victories that Germany had scored against Poland, Belgium, Holland, France, Denmark, and Norway, predicted a quick war. In Washington, the War Department's War Plans Division anticipated a Soviet defeat in one to three months. The British Joint Intelligence Committee, likewise, gave the Soviets a few months at the most.⁴ It appeared as if the Wehrmacht possessed the capability to subjugate the Soviet Union in a single summer's campaign.

The active German planning for the invasion of the Soviet Union had been conducted by various senior officers and Hitler. The final plan for "Operation Barbarossa" called for the division of the German forces into three Army Groups. Army Group North, led by Generalfeldmarschall Wilhelm von Leeb, was to commence its attack from East Prussia, advance through the Baltic States, and capture Leningrad. Army Group Center, the strongest of the three Army Groups, was under the leadership of Generalfeldmarschall Fedor von Bock. It was assembled on the Polish frontier east of Warsaw, and was assigned the responsibility of capturing Minsk and Smolensk en route to Moscow. Army Group South, led by Generalfeldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt, was responsible for the capture

⁴ Earl F. Ziemke and Magna E. Bauer, Moscow to Stalingrad: Decision In The East (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987), 3.

of the sector between the Pripet Marshes and the Black Sea. It was to advance to Kiev and the line of the Dnieper river.⁵

The whole invading force consisted of 134 Wehrmacht divisions, as well as 14 Rumanian and 21 Finnish divisions. Over three million German soldiers were assigned to carry out Operation Barbarossa. These troops were supported by more than 7,000 pieces of artillery, 3,300 tanks, 600,000 motor vehicles, 625,000 horses, and an air wing comprised of over 2,700 aircraft.⁶

The plan for Operation Barbarossa was based upon the perceived ability of the Wehrmacht and its allies to destroy the bulk of the Soviet military west of the Dnieper river. The Chief of Staff for the Eighteenth Army, Generaloberst (General) Marcks, was a senior officer involved in the planning of Barbarossa. He promoted a logical, but grossly inaccurate, premise in regard to the plan of attack — that the

Russians cannot avoid a decision as they did in 1812. Modern armed forces of one hundred divisions cannot abandon their sources of supply. It is anticipated that the Russian Army will stand to do battle in a defensive position protecting Great Russia and the Eastern Ukraine.⁷

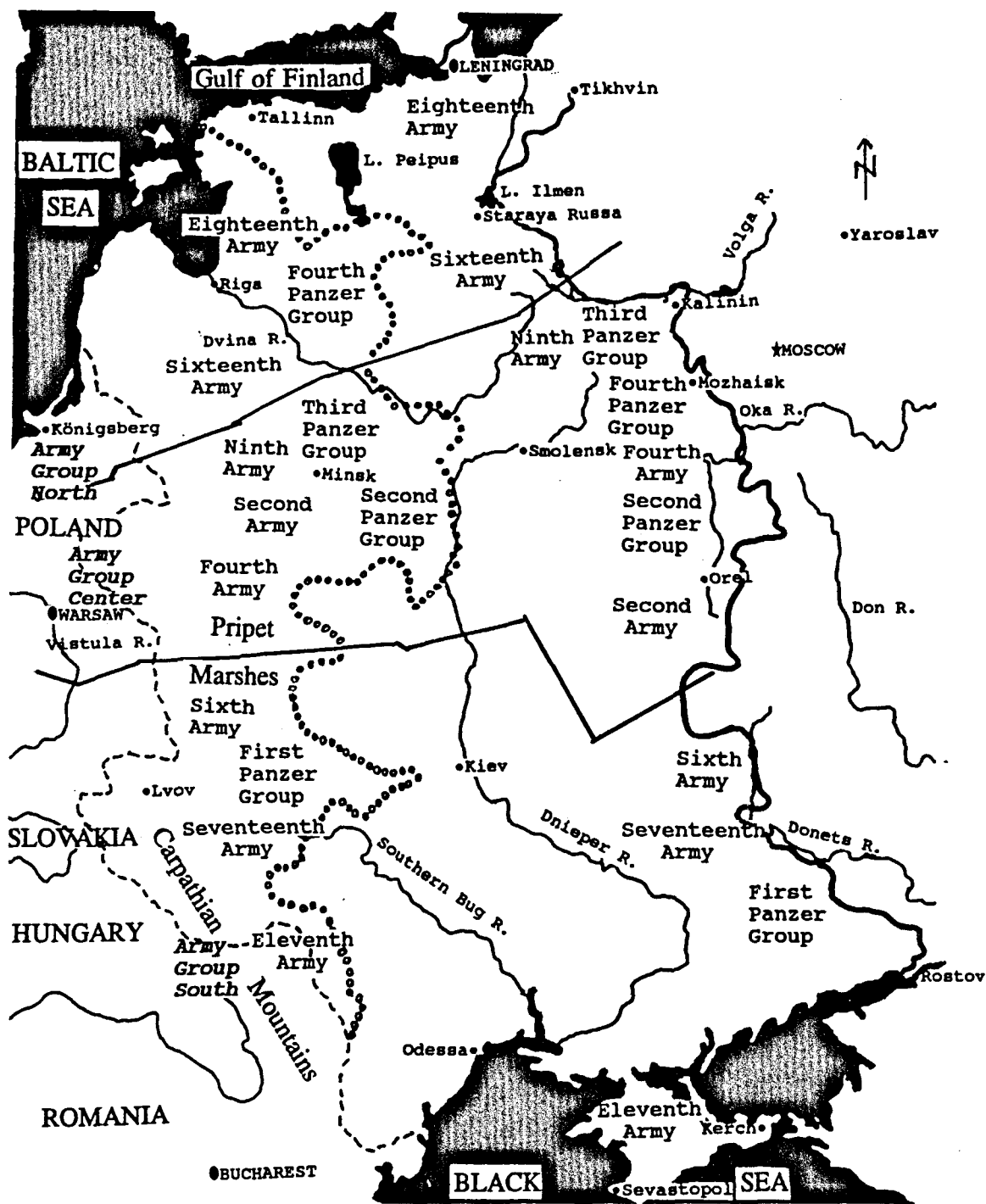
⁵ Ziemke, Moscow to Stalingrad, 5.

⁶ Lucas, War On the Eastern Front, 8-9.

⁷ Ibid., 6.

The German Advance 22 June - 12 November 1941

- Approximate Front, 21 Jun.
- Approximate Front, 10 Jul.
- Approximate Front, 12 Nov.



In accordance with this principle, the Wehrmacht committed the bulk of its forces to Operation Barbarossa, leaving little behind in Europe in the form of reserves for a second campaign.

Contrary to the belief of the senior German military planners, the Red Army did not allow itself to be destroyed west of the Dnieper. True, the advancing Wehrmacht destroyed or captured an astounding quantity of Soviet troops and materiel. The Soviets, however were always able to field more divisions to challenge the German advances. This was the nature of the Soviet opposition. It allowed the Germans to achieve great successes during the first months of the war, but gradually slowed the speed of the Wehrmacht's drive. As the war dragged on, the Germans were drawn closer and closer to a confrontation with the Russian winter in addition to the Red Army. The winter inflicted the first defeat on the Wehrmacht. The common soldier was subjected to a perpetual battle against an enemy who, according to the German generals, had already been defeated. The dwindling quantity of the German Army's own men was contrasted by the apparently ceaseless manpower of the Red Army. This produced an increasing depression among the Axis troops, which gradually gave way to the belief that victory in the Soviet Union was not possible.

Well over ten million men served in the Axis armies during the war, and over 70 percent of these troops fought on the Eastern Front. Each soldier has/had a personal story to tell — their fighting units are all worthy of mention and every battle they fought in should be appraised. It has been the habit of English-speaking historians studying the Second World War to concentrate almost exclusively on the European Theater of Operations. The events on the Eastern Front, with the exception of the battles of Leningrad, Stalingrad, and perhaps Kursk, are practically ignored. This study, however, will analyze a previously little known yet significant campaign of the Soviet-German war of 1941-1945 — the experiences of a portion of Army Group North in and around Demyansk from December 1941 through February 1943.

It is the aim of this analysis to help fill the void in the study of individual battles and operations on the Eastern Front. It is hoped that the work will assist English-speaking historians in the discovery of the individual engagements and operations that were fought there. The information shall be presented in a topical fashion that closely adheres to the chronological order of events. The research is based largely on primary source material, including captured German war documents and personal narratives obtained from the Bundesarchiv in Freiburg, from the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and from interviews with veterans of the campaign.

I must confess a personal motive for the undertaking of this analysis. My grandfather, Friedrich Stockburger, and my uncle, Karl Voessler, both fought on the Eastern Front. The former was with the Fifth Jäger Division, the latter with the SS Totenkopf Division. Both units played important roles in the Demyansk conflict. Somewhere in the vast expanse that was the Soviet Union, Karl was killed in action. The exact details of his death are not known, nor will they ever be. My grandfather was more fortunate. He survived the conflict with the Soviet Union and was blessed to be captured by the Americans at the conclusion of the war. Although my grandfather escaped with his life, he too lost an important part of himself — his innocence.

Chapter One: The Ring is Closed

At the onset of Operation Barbarossa, Army Group North was composed of the Sixteenth Army, led by Generaloberst Busch, the Eighteenth Army, under the command of Generaloberst Kuchler, and the Fourth Panzer Group, led by Generaloberst Erich Höpner. These forces were able to advance through the Baltic states during the summer of 1941. By the first week of August, Höpner's Panzer Group was approaching Luga, seventy miles south of Leningrad. Busch's Sixteenth Army was deployed on the right side of Fourth Panzer Army, in an effort to maintain contact with Army Group Center. Kuchler's Eighteenth Army had positioned itself to the left of Höpner's Panzer Army, and was clearing Estonia, the northernmost of the three Baltic states.¹ (See map on page xv.)

On 10 July, exactly nineteen days after the commencement of Operation Barbarossa, the Finnish Army initiated its own attack on the Soviet Union. Although the Finns were commanded

¹ BAMAF, RH 24-2/595, "Demjansk," dated May 14, 1943. This is a history of the Demyansk conflict prepared by the II Army Corps. It is incomplete, stopping mid-sentence on page twenty. The document includes written contributions from General Laux, the second commanding General of the II Army Corps, General Busch, the commander of the Sixteenth Army, Reich Propaganda Minister Goebbels, and the original commander of the II Army Corps, General der Infanterie Graf Brockdorff-Ahlefeldt.

independently by Marshal Carl Mannerheim, they essentially operated in concert with Army Group North, concentrating their attack on Soviet forces located east of Lake Ladoga under the command of General Popov.²

Army Group North's advance continued during the fall, although it proceeded at a slower pace than during the summer. On 6 September 1941, Hitler issued Directive Thirty-Five. This directive came at a time when the Führer's feud with Field Marshall Walther von Brauchitsch, the Commander-in-Chief of the Wehrmacht, became acute. It stated:

On the Central Front, the operation against the Timoshenko Army Group will be planned so the attack can be begun at the earliest possible moment (end of September) with the aim of destroying the enemy forces located in the area east of Smolensk by a pincer movement in the general direction of Vyazma, with strong concentrations of armor on the flanks. For this purpose mobile focal points are to be established with motorized units as follows: In the 9th Army sector, by bringing the strongest possible forces from the area of Army Group North.³

This directive symbolized Hitler's insistence on the use of his own strategy in the East, rather than that of his

² Ziemke, Moscow to Stalingrad, 32.

³ H. R. Trevor-Roper, ed., Hitler's War Directives (London: Sidgwick and Jackson Ltd., 1964), 97. This directive set the guidelines for Operation Taifun (Typhoon). However, the operation would not be given this codename until 19 September 1940.

generals.⁴ He called for the occupation of the Crimea in the south, and for the cutting off of Leningrad in the north. Following these actions, all available forces would be concentrated in an attack on the Timoshenko Army Group, which was opposing the Germans on the Central front.⁵

In accordance with this plan, Höpner's Fourth Panzer Group was placed under the control of Army Group Center during the last week of September. This left the Eighteenth and Sixteenth armies solely accountable for the northern area of operations. These two armies were given the responsibility of maintaining the German gains. They held a front that started in the north at Lake Ladoga, running south along the Volkov River until it reached Lake Ilmen. The front then bulged eastward south of Lake Ilmen. The eastern limit of this

⁴ Hitler had struggled against the "ruling class" of the German Army since he claimed power in 1933. He disliked the German generals and the professional mystique with which they surrounded themselves. His conflict with the generals reached its climax on 19 December 1941, when Brauchitsch resigned as Commander-in-Chief. At that time Hitler assumed the highest command of the army. See Ziemke, Moscow to Stalingrad, 78-85; and Alan Clark, Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-45 (New York: Morrow, 1965; New York: Quill Press, 1985), 82-8.

⁵ The Soviet Marshal Semyon Konstantinovich Timoshenko, a very able defensive commander, managed to delay Army Group Center's advance for ten weeks at Smolensk. The Germans were victorious after the ten weeks, but they were greatly weakened and they no longer possessed the strength to capture Moscow. See the article by I.D.W. Talmadge, "Moscow's Miracle Man," Asia, June 1942, 344-47; and C.L. Sulzberger, "The Blitz-Grinder," The New York Times Magazine, October 4, 1942, 36-7.

protrusion was the Valdai Hills, the home of the headwaters of the Volga River, where swamp-like conditions prevailed. The territory immediately south of the Valdai Hills was under the control of Army Group Center.⁶ (See map on page 6.)

On 2 October 1941, Army Group Center resumed its assault eastward, its strength enhanced by Höpner's Panzer Group. The codename for this onslaught was "Operation Taifun" (Typhoon), and its objective was the destruction of Army Group Timoshenko, to be followed by the siege of Moscow. Hitler had ordered that Moscow, like Leningrad, should not be attacked, but encircled, then starved into submission. He did not want a single German soldier to enter Moscow until it had been decimated by starvation and contagion.⁷

At the onset of Operation Typhoon the advancing Wehrmacht experienced immediate success. Within a week it had encircled six Soviet armies west of Vyazma, and three other Soviet armies in pockets southwest and northeast of Bryansk. The Vyazma pocket netted over 663,000 prisoners. The two pockets near Bryansk yielded another 100,000 prisoners.⁸ On 9 October, Dr. Otto Dietrich, the chief press spokesman for the

⁶ BAMAf, RH 24-2/595, "Demjansk," 11.

⁷ Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, *Kriegstagebuch*, vol. I, 1070.

⁸ Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (New York: Dutton, 1952), 238.

Reich, told the Berlin foreign press corps that the Eastern campaign was "decided."⁹ At the time it appeared as if his assessment was correct. Dietrich, however, had spoken too soon.

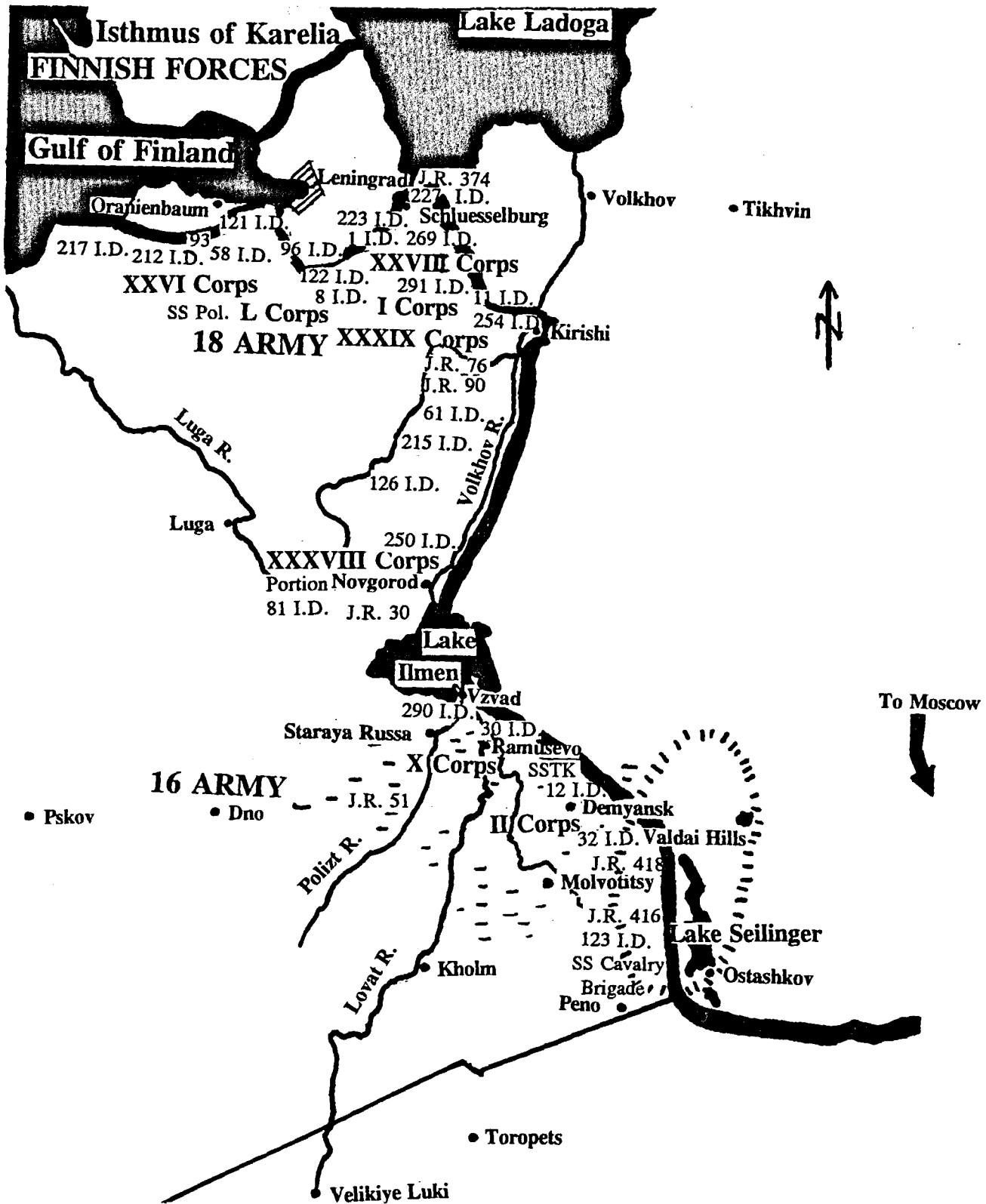
Army Group Center's advance had been brought almost to a standstill toward the end of October. The German Army was experiencing the Russian muddy season - the *rasputitsa* - for the first time. Snow fell on 6 October. Thereafter, alternating snow and rain dropped from the sky. The precipitation, combined with the pounding of tank tracks and truck tires, turned the roads into slimy morasses. The bad weather and road conditions were coupled with strong Soviet counterattacks. Because of the weather, Timoshenko's armies were able to meet the Wehrmacht on equal terms. Army Group Center's advance was confined to the muddy roads, and it could be confronted head on. The Wehrmacht was compelled to fight bitterly for every additional territorial gain.¹⁰

While Army Group Center advanced upon Moscow, Army Group North was executing its own advance. On Hitler's orders, Field Marshal Leeb, the commander of Army Group North, had directed his troops to advance east. The assault began on 14

⁹ Domarus, Hitler, vol. II, 1758-67.

¹⁰ Guderian, Panzer Leader, 233-44.

The Position of Army Group North - December 1941



October, and its goal was the city of Tikhvin. This drive was also slowed at the end of October due to the *rasputitsa*. In the first week of November the weather began to clear and the muddy ground began to freeze. This meant that the German armor could move again. Army Group North, though exhausted from its months of fierce fighting, mustered enough momentum to take Tikhvin on 8 November. It could not, however, advance any further. After months of advancement, Leeb's armies found that they no longer possessed the strength to continue.¹¹

During November 1941, the Wehrmacht was faced with the same scenario throughout the East. The German Army suffered over 686,000 casualties up to this time, which was slightly over 20 percent of its 3.4 million men in the Soviet Union. A third of their motor vehicles were completely worn out or destroyed, and only a third of those remaining were totally serviceable. The Panzer divisions possessed merely 35 percent of their initial tank strengths. The Wehrmacht rated the strength of their 136 Eastern divisions as commensurate to no greater than 83 full-strength divisions. These already grim conditions could only worsen if the German Army attempted to continue its advance.

¹¹ Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb, Tagebuchaufzeichnungen und Lagebeurteilungen aus zwei Weltkriegen (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1976), 381-89.

Since 22 June, the Wehrmacht had advanced nearly 1000 miles. The march eastward had placed enormous pressure on the railroads to supply the troops, a strain which would only increase as the winter approached. Because of a gauge difference, the German railroad equipment could not run on the Soviet tracks. This meant that the Wehrmacht had either to lay new tracks or use captured Soviet equipment. Up to November 1941 the Germans had managed to capture 500 Soviet locomotives and 21,000 cars. But this was barely one-tenth of what they needed to supply the troops.¹² For the Wehrmacht, the time for advancement in the East was over.

The Soviets recognized that the Germans no longer possessed the means to continue their advance. On 30 November 1941, General G. K. Zhukov, the commander of the Soviet *West Front*¹³ and later the Deputy Supreme Commander of the Red

¹² Franz Halder, Kriegstagesbuch (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1964), vol. III, 286.

¹³ At the outbreak of the Soviet-German war the highest level Red army field-commands were the military districts. In the event of a war the districts on the frontiers were converted into *fronts* (army groups). The *fronts* opposing the advance of Army Group North were (from north to south) *Leningrad Front*, *Volkhov Front*, and *Northwest Front*. Those opposing Army Group Center were *Kalinin Front*, *West Front*, and *Bryansk Front*. Army Group South was checked by *Southwest Front* and *South Front*. See Ziemke, Moscow to Stalingrad, 8 & 26; and Clark, Barbarossa, 38-40. In order to better differentiate between German and Soviet combat units, all Soviet units shall appear in italics throughout this analysis.

Army, presented to the Stavka¹⁴ a plan for a counteroffensive against the Wehrmacht north and south of Moscow. Zhukov's plan had essentially been determined by the defensive actions of the Red Army up to that point. Since 22 June 1941, the Soviets had adhered to a strategy that called for the allowance of the German advance into the interior of the Soviet Union. The Soviets felt that this would wear the Wehrmacht down while simultaneously allowing the Red Army to build up, thus creating conditions suitable for an eventual shift to the offensive.¹⁵ The name given to this plan was the "strategic defensive." Zhukov described the tactic:

Our forces went over to a strategic defense while making a forced withdrawal. The paramount objectives of our strategic defense at that time were to hold up the Nazi troops on the lines of defence for as long as possible, so as to gain maximum time, and to bring up troops from interior regions, build up new reserves, and deploy them along the main

¹⁴ The Stavka ("general headquarters") was a kind of High Command for the Red Army. It was introduced following the start of the German invasion in an attempt to resuscitate the Red Army from the listless and apprehensive lassitude which had overcome it following the great purges of 1937-38. The Stavka was comprised of eight army officers, and four commissars who kept an eye on the military men. Marshall Shaposhnikov controlled the administrative efforts of the Stavka. He was assisted by his deputy, General Zhukov. While the Stavka served as the Soviet High Command, it did not attempt to restrict Stalin's autocratic sovereignty. Stalin's word was final on all military matters. See Clark, Barbarossa, 32; and Ziemke, Moscow to Stalingrad, 25.

¹⁵ V. D. Sokolovskiy, "Die sowjetische Kriegskunst in der Schlacht vor Moskau, Wehr-Wissenschaftliche Rundschau," 1(1963), 87. As cited in Ziemke, Moscow to Stalingrad, 61.

sectors; to inflict the maximum losses on the enemy, to harry and exhaust him and thereby restore as far as possible the balance of strength.¹⁶

The plan that Zhukov presented the Stavka on 30 November set into motion the Soviet conversion from the defensive to the offensive. It was important for the Soviets to make this shift at the precise moment that would allow them the greatest chance for success. This moment, according to the Soviets, would occur when the Wehrmacht had stopped its advance, but was not yet able to place its troops on the defensive because of improper grouping and a lack of prepared defensive lines. The Stavka felt that the desired time had been reached by the end of November, and it established the date for its offensive as the night of 5 and 6 December.¹⁷

To provide a detailed account of the Moscow Offensive is beyond the scope of this analysis. Suffice it to say that the offensive eliminated the German threat to the capital, and achieved a majority of the original Soviet objectives. With this accomplished, the Stavka began to think on a grandiose scale. They instituted orders that would transform the Moscow Offensive into a general Winter Offensive.

¹⁶ Marshal of the Soviet Union Georgi Zhukov, "The War Begins: The Battle of Moscow," Main Front (London: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1987), 20-21.

¹⁷ Sokolovskiy, "Die sowjetische Kriegskunst," 92. As cited in Ziemke, Moscow to Stalingrad, 63-4.

On 12 December, the *Stavka* instructed General Leytenant M. S. Khozin, commander of *Leningrad Front*, and General Meretskov, the leader of *Volkhov Front*, to prepare a winter offensive against Army Group North, the main goal of which was to destroy the Wehrmacht forces around Leningrad and to encircle and crush the Sixteenth Army south of Lake Ilmen. The recently formed *Volkhov Front* was to be the primary force involved north of the lake. It consisted of two old armies, *Fourth* and *Fifty-second*, and two new armies, *Fifty-ninth* and *Second Shock*. *Leningrad Front* was to mount an offensive using *Fifty-fourth Army*. According to the plan, Meretskov was to send *Second Shock* and *Fifty-second Army* across the *Volkhov* river. These armies were supposed to break the German lines and then sweep in opposing directions. *Second Shock Army* was to advance north toward Leningrad and *Fifty-second Army* was to drive south to Novgorod and then turn west toward Luga. *Leningrad Front's Fifty-fourth Army* was supposed to advance toward Leningrad south of Lake Ladoga.¹⁸

The southernmost *Front* opposing Army Group North was *Northwest Front*, led by General Kurochkin. This *Front*, like the other two, would also be expected to mount an offensive against the northern Wehrmacht divisions, only it was to

¹⁸ V. Zhelanov, "Iz opyta pervoy operatsii na akru-zheniye," *Voyenno-istoricheskiy Zhurnal*, 12(1964), 20-22. As cited in Ziemke, Moscow to Stalingrad, 140.

shoulder the main burden of the fighting. . . Kurochkin, like Meretskov, had four armies for his offensive — two old and two new. *Eleventh Army* and *Thirty-fourth Army* were the veteran units. They would be accompanied in their advance by *Third* and *Fourth Shock Armies*. *Northwest Front* had three assignments. *Eleventh Army*, *Northwest Front's* northernmost legion, was supposed to advance westward along the southern shore of Lake Ilmen, continue past Staraya Russa (the German southern flank railroad center), and reach Dno. Then it was supposed to turn to the north and assist *Fifty-second Army* in its assault on Leningrad. *Third* and *Fourth Shock Armies* were ordered to break through the German lines near Ostakov. There they were supposed to make two extended drives to the west and south. *Third Shock Army* was to advance to Cholm and continue to Velikiye Luki. *Fourth Shock Army* was to drive past Toropets and Velizh to Rudnya. Sandwiched between the two thrusts would be the remainder of the Wehrmacht's Sixteenth Army. *Thirty-fourth Army* was given the task of annihilating this German legion, which had centered itself at Demyansk.¹⁹

Army Group North had been occupied with defending Tikhvin from Soviet assaults for a good part of December. Finally, on the day after Christmas, Leeb's troops had to surrender the city to the numerically superior Red Army. Following this

¹⁹ Ibid.

action, however, the Soviets halted their military activities in order to conserve force for their upcoming general offensive.²⁰

At the turn of the year, Army Group North's front was held in the north by the Eighteenth Army, whose 17 divisions were under the command of General Kuchler. The Eighteenth Army had maintained an encirclement around Leningrad whose position had not changed since September 1941. Another encirclement existed fifty miles west of Leningrad around Oranienbaum. East of Leningrad was the "bottleneck" — a ten-mile-wide landstrip south of Lake Ladoga that separated *Fifty-fourth Shock Army* from Leningrad. The front then ran south for a ten mile stretch, and then turned to the southeast where it intersected with the Volkhov river. Following that point came Eighteenth Army's territorial junction with Sixteenth Army. Under his Headquarters, Sixteenth Army, General Busch had eleven divisions. These divisions controlled a 200 mile long, eastward facing front that started on the Volkhov river, south of Kirishi. The front had essentially remained unchanged since November. It still followed the river to Lake Ilmen, and the eastward bulge south of the lake bordered by

²⁰ BAMAf, RH 19 III/664D, "Feldzug gegen die Heeresgruppe Nord: Kriegsjahr 1942 -Entwicklung der Lage bis 31.12.1941," 12. A chronological account of the actions of Army Group North in 1942. Written by the staff of the Army Group. Complete with maps.

the Valdai hills and ending at the Army Group's boundary near Ostashkov on Lake Seilinger also remained intact. Five of Sixteenth Army's divisions were positioned north of Lake Ilmen, and six were situated south of it.²¹

On 8 January 1942, *Northwest Front* began its awaited assault, employing nineteen divisions, nine brigades, and a multitude of tanks and ski battalions which were both specially outfitted for winter warfare.²² On the first day of the offensive, *Eleventh Army* crossed the Lovat River and advanced in the direction of Staraya Russa. The Soviets managed to crack the German flank protected by the 290 Infantry Division. *Eleventh Army* continued its assault, and in the days that followed was able to take Ramusevo.²³ In doing so, the Soviets managed to cut the sole supply road that existed for the II and X Army Corps.

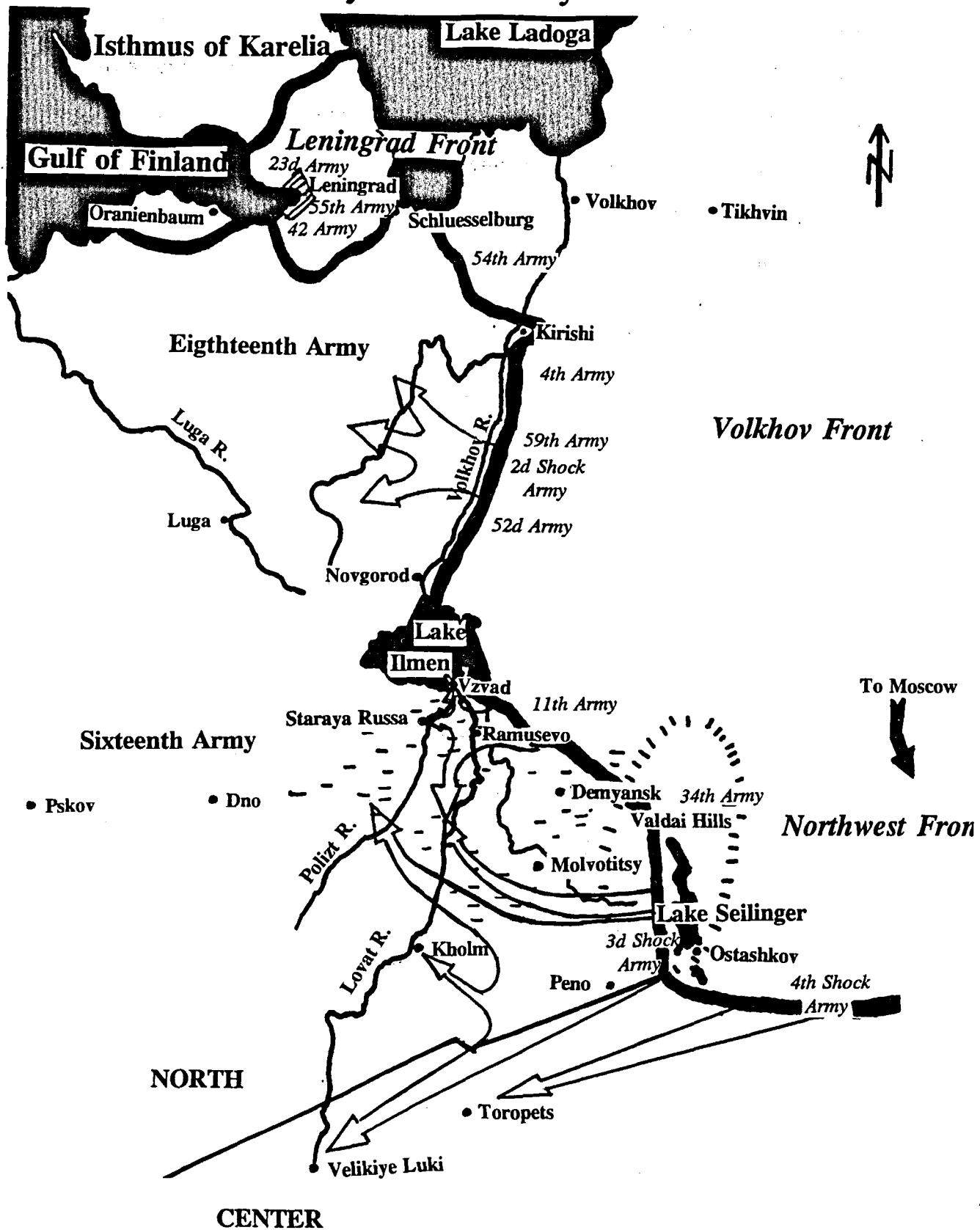
Before continuing with the summary of *Northwest Front's* advance during the Soviet 1942 Winter Offensive, it is necessary to provide the reader with a description of the organization of the Wehrmacht in order to avoid any possible confusion. In peacetime the organization of the German Army

²¹ Ibid., 12-14.

²² BAMAF, RH 24-2/595, "Demjansk," 13.

²³ BAMAF, RH 19III/664D, "Feldzug gegen die Heeresgruppe Nord: Kriegsjahr 1942 1. Januar - 12. Januar 1942," 13.

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was based upon the division of the nation into fifteen corps areas (Wehrkreise). Each corps area consisted of a headquarters and component divisions. The corps area also served as the main territorial echelon for the administration of Wehrmacht property, conscription, local defense, and practically all other military-related matters. The commander of the corps area was also the commanding general of the corps, and he was to lead the corps onto the field in the event of war. The corps areas and the corps were numbered with Roman numerals from I to XIII. In accordance with this custom, the I Corps was located in Corps Area I, and so on. Additional Corps Areas were added following the annexation of the Sudetenland and Austria and due to war-time expansion.²⁴

On 27 August 1939, the Wehrmacht had been split into two mutually exclusive parts that were to perform two distinct functions for the duration of the war. The Feldheer (Field Army) was solely concerned with military operations. The Ersatzheer (Replacement Army) was concerned with the training, administration, and procurement in the Zone of the Interior.²⁵

²⁴ Stephen E. Ambrose, Handbook on German Military Forces (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 41-2. The XVII and XVIII Corps were created following the annexation of Austria. In addition, three non-territorial Corps were created to respectively command the motorized, light, and Panzer divisions.

²⁵ Ibid., 43. The Feldheer was controlled by the operational portion of the old High Command, led by the Commander-in-Chief and the General Staff. The Ersatzheer was placed

When the corps took to the field they did so under their commanding generals. Meanwhile, their corps areas were placed under deputy commanders who reported to the Ersatzheer.²⁶

At the start of the war, the Corps of the Feldheer were organized into Armies. The Armies, in turn, were arranged in Army Groups, which were directly responsible to the Feldheer Headquarters for their operational conduct.²⁷ When the 1942 Soviet Winter Offensive began, Army Group North, as previously stated, was composed of the Eighteenth and Sixteenth Armies. The Eighteenth Army was comprised of five Corps groupings — I, XXVI, XXVIII, XXXIX, & L. These Corps had a total strength of seventeen divisions. Sixteenth Army consisted of three Corps groupings — II, X, & XXXVIII — with the strength of eleven divisions. The II and X Corps were located southeast of Lake Ilmen. These Corps had positioned the 290, 30, 12, 32, and

under the control of a Deputy-Commander-in-Chief, who was called the Chief of the Army Equipment and the Commander of the Replacement Army (Chef der Heeresrüstung und Befehlshaber des Ersatzheeres). This commander was responsible for the maintenance of the Feldheer through the issuing of replacements, the supply of material, the formation of new units, and the continuation of military activities at home.

²⁶ Ibid. The deputy commanders were given the title Deputy Commanding General and Commander of the Corps Area (Stellvertretender Kommandierender General und Befehlshaber in Wehrkreis). The Deputy Commanding General had the responsibility for all matters pertaining to troop units of the Wehrmacht, specifically the operation of the replacement system. In addition he was to execute all territorial functions of the corps.

²⁷ Ibid.

123 Infantry Divisions, as well as the SS Totenkopf Division and various Jäger Regiments, along the front with the Soviets. These units were expected to repel *Northeast Front's* winter thrust.²⁸

Following the Soviet capture of Ramusevo, the 290 Infantry division was forced to pull its left flank to the southeast, in order to avoid encirclement. By this maneuver, *Eleventh Army* was able to surround *Sixteenth Army's* troops that remained in Vzvad, a village on the southeastern shore of Lake Ilmen.²⁹ *Eleventh Army* inflicted heavy losses upon the 290 Infantry Division. This resulted in the deployment on 9 January of five SS Totenkopf Division battalions in order to assist the 290th in defending the area. The SS units at Staraya Russa were placed under the command of SS Gruppenführer Eicke, while those SSTK troops left at their original front were placed under the leadership of Brigadeführer Max Simon.³⁰

²⁸ BAMAf, RH 19 III/664D, "Feldzug gegen die Heeresgruppe Nord: Kriegsjahr 1942 - Entwicklung der Lage bis 31.12.1941," 9.

²⁹ Ibid., "Feldzug gegen die Heeresgruppe Nord: Kriegsjahr 1942 1. Januar bis 12. Januar 1942," 13.

³⁰ Bundesarchiv-Militär Archiv Koblenz (Hereafter cited as BAKO.), NS/19-345, "Abschlussmeldung über die Abwehrkämpfe des II A.K vom 8.1.42-8.2.42," a report from Eicke to SS Brigadeführer Hans Jüttner, his supervisor, dated 9 February 1942. See also Charles W. Sydnor, Jr., Soldiers of Destruction (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 213-16.

On 9 January, *Third Shock Army* attacked the wide German front in the area near Ostaschkov, which was defended by the 123 Infantry Division. Concurrently, *Fourth Shock Army* attacked Peno and *Thirty-fourth Army* began to apply pressure on the Wehrmacht divisions situated near Demyansk (30, 12, & 32 Infantry Divisions). On 11 January, *Fourth Shock Army* captured Peno, and *Third Shock Army* made advances north of Peno, in the process cutting off portions of the 123 Infantry Division and the 416 Jäger Regiment. The cold, the snow, and the lack of maneuverability led to a rapid diminishing of the fighting strength of this portion of the German front.³¹

Third and Fourth Shock Armies continued their harassment of the Sixteenth Army's troops. On 12 January, the 416 Jäger Regiment was forced to abandon its position and it retreated to Cholm. The remaining divisions of the II Corps were involved in hard-fought attempts at countering the Soviet advance. The 123 and 12 Infantry Divisions were forced by the actions of their numerically superior opponent to withdraw gradually in a northwest direction. On 16 January, these Divisions managed to stabilize their retreat at a hastily created defensive front in the vicinity of Molvotitsy, between Pergino and Novaja. The Wehrmacht was able to check the Soviet advance along this newly constructed defensive line.

³¹ Ibid.

Meanwhile, *Eleventh Army* continued its advance east of Staraya Russa at the expense of the 290 Infantry and the SS Totenkopf Divisions.³²

Field Marshall Leeb, commander of Army Group North, viewed the circumstances encountered by the Sixteenth Army as critical. He felt that the encirclement of the Busch's troops was near, and thus he attempted on 12 January to avoid disaster by appealing to Hitler for permission to withdraw the II and X Corps behind the Lovat River. Hitler rejected Leeb's request, regarding it as preposterous. Instead, he ordered Sixteenth Army to remain where it was. Outraged and distressed by Hitler's response, Leeb asked to be dismissed. On 17 January, Leeb was relieved for "reasons of health." He was replaced with General K uchler.³³

The situation south of Lake Ilmen grew worse on 20 January 1942. On that date, the Soviets managed to cut off all land communication with the Sixteenth Army, although the Germans were not yet encircled. The Luftwaffe was forced to

³² BAMAf, RH 19 III/644 D, "Feldzug gegen die Heeresgruppe Nord: Kriegsjahr 1942 -13. Januar bis 17. Januar 1942," 15.

³³ Alfred Philippi and Ferdinand Heim, Der Feldzug gegen Sowjetrussland: 1941 bis 1945 (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1962), 112-13. See also Ziemke, Moscow to Stalingrad, 147-48.

begin air drops of supplies and ammunition to the Wehrmacht Divisions east of the Lovat River.³⁴

On 22 January, *Third Shock Army* encircled Cholm. Approximately 3,500 German troops, 1500 of which belonged to the 416 Jäger Regiment, were encircled in the city. The rag-tag group was led by General-major Scherer.³⁵ Scherer's troops controlled a one and one half square kilometer area. This position could only be supplied by air drops. The Germans at Cholm resisted all Soviet attempts to capture the area. Their defense lasted for 105 days until the Soviet encirclement was finally broken.³⁶

Meanwhile, *Thirty-fourth Army* was anything but inactive. Between 25 and 31 January it continued to exert pressure on the segments of Army Group North situated north of Molvotitsy. The defending German divisions included the 12, 32, and 30 Infantry Divisions and the portions of the SS Totenkopf Division under Max Simon. The 32 and 12 Infantry Divisions were under almost constant Soviet attack, during both the day and the night, yet they managed to hold the line. The SSTK

³⁴ National Archives (Hereafter cited as NA.)/T-312/567/8-180592, "Feindlage vor 16. Armee, stand vom 24.1.42," as cited in Sydnor, Soldiers of Destruction, 214.

³⁵ BAMAf, RH 19 III/664 D, "Feldzug gegen die Heeresgruppe Nord: Kriegsjahr 1942 -18. Januar bis 24. Januar 1942," 14.

³⁶ Werner Haupt, Demjansk 1942: Ein Bollwerk im Osten (Bad Neuheim: Podzun-Palls-Verlag GmbH, 1971), 59.

and 12 Infantry Division were under similar duress. They experienced an enemy breakthrough on the 26 of January, but were able to counterattack, encircle the Soviet forces, and wipe them out.³⁷ This minor setback, however, had little effect on the Soviet advance. The Soviet divisions were executing movements that would result in the encirclement of a sizable portion of Sixteenth Army's troops. Hitler, however, refused to allow the German forces to withdraw. In essence, Army Group North did not have the means to oppose the Soviet encirclement of the II Corps, nor did it have the permission to escape from it. For the Soviets, the completion of the encirclement became a mere technicality.

During the first few days of February 1942, Army Group North reported very little Soviet activity. The Soviet offensive appeared to be disintegrating into a series of haphazard attacks. In the midst of this calm, the Soviets activated two new units — *I and II Guards Rifle Corps*. The two new corps were deployed on 6 February, attacking southward from the Soviet positions east of Staraya Russa. *Third Shock Army* advanced simultaneously northward. The idea was for the

³⁷ BAMAf, RH 19 III/664 D, "Feldzug gegen die Heeresgruppe Nord: Kriegsjahr 1942 -25. Januar bis 31. Januar," 14.

two Soviet forces to continue their drives until the II Corps had been successfully encircled.³⁸

On 8 February 1942, General Graf Walther von Brockdorff-Ahlefeldt, the commander of the II Corps, was speaking on the telephone with General Busch, the commander of the Sixteenth Army. Suddenly, the on-duty telephone operator broke off the exchange with the words: "I interrupt. The enemy is in the wire!" This declaration was followed by long period of static buzzing to which Brockdorff-Ahlefeldt could only respond by hanging up the receiver. "I have just conducted the last telephone conversation with Sixteenth Army until further notice," stated Ahlefeldt to his adjunct. "Then the ring around us is closed, Herr General?" asked the adjunct. "Certainly," responded the General, to which he added: "The current situation is clear. The rest we shall see!"³⁹

On that day, the Red Army managed to close its pincer movement around the six German divisions located east of the Lovat river. The encirclement was centered on the city of Demyansk, and inside it were slightly over 96,000 men and

³⁸ Heeres Gruppe Nord, Ia Kriegstagebuch, 10 February 1942, H. Gr. Nord 75128/6 file; as cited in Ziemke, Moscow to Stalingrad, 152.

³⁹ BMAF, RH 24-2/595, "Demjansk," 18.

20,000 horses.⁴⁰ After 8 February, all of the six divisions in the pocket fell under the control of II Army Corps, giving general Graf Brockdorff-Ahlefeldt the responsibility for the troops.⁴¹

Brockdorff-Ahlefeldt was the stereotypical embodiment of the old-style Prussian military officer. The fifty-four year old general projected the image of an energetic and hard-willed man. While he was opposed to the Nazi party, he was fiercely loyal to the Wehrmacht, and thus found himself as the commanding officer of the nearly 100,000 German troops encircled at Demyansk. According to the German historian Werner Haupt, Brockdorff-Ahlefeldt's personal expectations, and the expectations that he placed on his men could be summed up by the simple formula: "Fulfill your duty."⁴²

The area held by the II Corps in and around Demyansk measured approximately 3,000 square kilometers. The distance between the opposing fronts ranged from 50 to 70 kilometers.

⁴⁰ BAMAf, RH 24-2/120, "Beurteilung der Lage am 16.2.42," 1. A transcript of a radio conversation between General Graf Brockdorff-Ahlefeldt and General K uchler, the commander of Army Group North.

⁴¹ Ziemke, Moscow to Stalingrad, 154.

⁴² Haupt, Demjansk 1942, 30.

The six divisions were responsible for a front that was over 300 kilometers long.⁴³

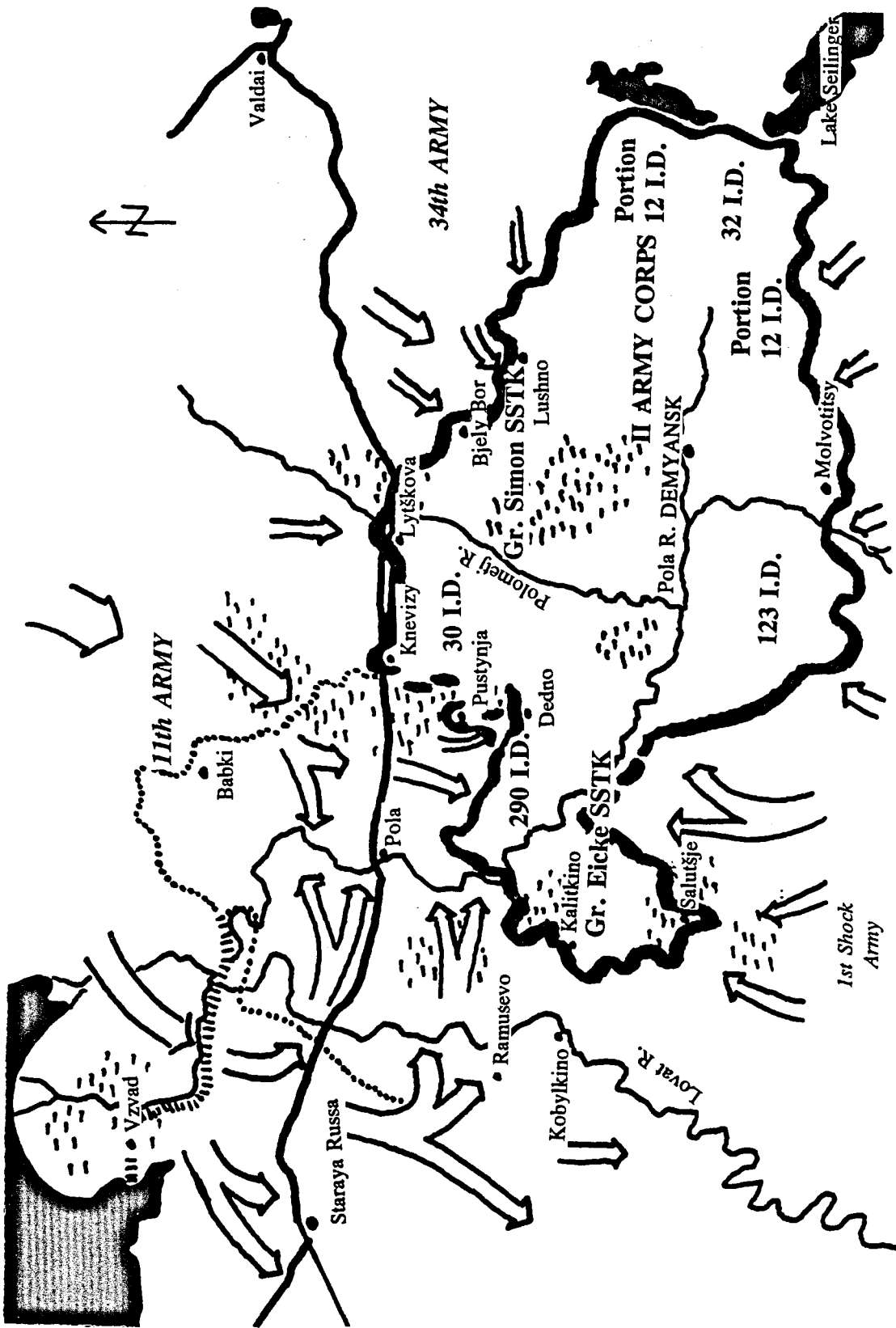
On 22 February, Hitler labeled the Demyansk pocket a *Festung* (fortress).⁴⁴ The next *Festung* like it would develop at Stalingrad, and following that ill-fated confrontation there would be many others. In the winter of 1942, however, the expression was new. It implied an unalterable position. A *Kessel* (encircled pocket) was a misfortune suffered during war. A *Festung*, however, was a deliberate creation. The Führer's vanity made him unwilling to associate the Wehrmacht with any term that sounded negative — to do so would be to concede a setback, which he had been telling the German people could not happen. In order to forestall even the slightest hint that the situation at Demyansk was a breakdown of the Wehrmacht, the OKH would laconically mention actions occurring there in its daily announcements, vaguely referring to region "south of Lake Ilmen."⁴⁵

Despite this lack of public disclosure there were still 96,000 men to whom the scenario was all too well-known. These were the men of the six encircled divisions. In an attempt to bolster the morale of his beleaguered troops, General Graf

⁴³ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁴ Ziemke, Moscow to Stalingrad, 154.

⁴⁵ BAMAf, RH 24-2/595, "Demjansk," 12.



The Demyansk Encirclement

Brockdorff-Ahlefeldt issued an order on 18 February that was read to all the troops of the II Army Corps:

Soldiers! For some time the Russians have managed to break through our front east of Staraya Russa and advance south, thereby cutting off the supply line of the II Army Corps.

Strong forces will be called upon in order to annihilate the Russians.

You know that during the summer we were able to annihilate innumerable Russian divisions by cutting their supply lines and encircling them. However, do not compare the situation facing the II Army Corps to that, and namely for the following reasons.

The Führer, I can assure you, knows the situation facing the II Army Corps in full detail. He himself has ordered that the II Army Corps should stand still, despite the danger of being cut off, so that it can act as a battering ram to break down the enemy assault.

Our supplies and ammunition will be successfully provided by air. The Führer has ordered that a strong transport squadron be sent for this purpose. We must be frugal with our ammunition and supplies. Our supplies will be adequate. Should they temporarily run short, I have ordered that the soldiers at the front receive preference, while simultaneously the staff will receive less. This holds especially true for bread.

When thirty or forty thousand German soldiers encircled 100,000 Russians then the destiny of the latter was predetermined.

We are 96,000 men. The Russians may never manage to penetrate our position! We shall endure! I repeat what I have often said, and what is constantly reconfirmed: The German soldier is far superior to the Russian! This is the decisive factor!

Hard weeks may come. We shall endure them like we endured the hard weeks of the past!

If we are bound like iron to this purpose, then the Russian assault on this — the last position of the whole eastern front —

will fail with bloody losses. Herein are we one: We will fight hard and determined until victory is gained for the Führer and the people.⁴⁶

Brockdorff-Ahlefeldt did not know how accurate a picture he had painted in regard to the bitter conflict that was to ensue. It would be hard indeed. Tens of thousands of German soldiers would remain behind once the II Corps withdrew — having found their final resting place south of Lake Ilmen near the Valdai Hills. Brockdorff-Ahlefeldt himself would be a casualty of this theater, not as a result of any wound suffered in battle, but because of disease, which was a heavy contributor to the German casualty list. The general, however, did not benefit from the all-powerful tool of hindsight. His order embodies the futile determination that would characterize the German effort in the Soviet Union.

⁴⁶ BAMAf, RH 24-2/120, "Generalkommando II. Armeekorps K.G.St., den 18. Februar 1942," dated 18 February 1942. Author's translation of the original document.

Chapter Two: Supply By Air

An army moves on its stomach. This statement may seem a cliché, but for anyone who has ever served in a war, where supplies were at a minimum and living conditions were appalling, the phrase speaks a horrible truth. Such was the experience of the six divisions of the II Corps cut off from the rest of Army Group North in February 1942. Hitler's refusal to allow the II Corps to pull back meant only one thing — the encircled units would have to be supplied by air or perish. This supply method had never before been attempted on such a massive scale, and its effectiveness remained to be seen.

On 18 February 1942, Oberst Friedrich Morzik, the Air Transport Commander (Luftransportführer) assigned to the VIII Air Corps with Army Group Center at Smolensk, received orders from the Chief of Supply and Administration of the Army to transfer his headquarters and all his units into the area of the First Air Fleet with Army Group North. He and his units were given the mission of moving supplies by air to the German elements east of the Lovat.¹

¹ Generalmajor Friedrich Morzik, "Supply by Air of the Demyansk Fortress During the Encirclement from 15 February to 19 May 1942," National Archives Publication M1035, Fiche 0175, Foreign Military Studies, D-Series 0262, 5, microfiche.

All units of the German Air Force (Luftwaffe) were organized into tactical and territorial commands known as Luftflotten. A Luftflotte controlled all operations of flying units and supervised the activities of all ground service units within its area. The assigned area of operation was not essentially permanent. A Luftflotte could be moved, at any time, from one area to another, under the direction of the Air Ministry — the highest administrative and operational authority of the Air Force. If an Air Force unit was used in concert with Army or Navy units, then all the forces involved came under a single operational control, as called for by the German doctrine of unity of command. When this occurred, a commanding officer was chosen from the primary service branch involved in the operation.² Accordingly, Oberst Morzik received his orders from the Wehrmacht, as it was the dominant service branch on the Eastern Front.

Morzik and his staff flew to Ostrov on 18 February. They reported to the headquarters of the First Air Fleet, where they were provided with further details pertaining to the mission. Morzik's planes were to begin immediately transporting 300 tons of miscellaneous supplies daily to the encircled divisions.³ The Air Transport Commander knew that his 220

² Ambrose, Handbook on German Military Forces, 591.

³ Morzik, "Supply by Air of the Demyansk Fortress," 5.

planes (JU 52's), which were badly in need of repair and maintenance, were not capable of the task. In addition, Morzik knew that such an operation required special technical materials and a flexibility of command. For these reasons, he made three requests that he labeled as "prerequisites for a successful mission."⁴

Morzik asked that at least 300 more Ju 52's be brought in. This would increase the number of available planes to slightly above 500. The Air Transport Commander believed that this number would allow for the daily requirement of 300 tons of material to be delivered, despite the anticipated difficulties faced by the supply group — bad weather, lack of spare parts, enemy attacks, and a deficiency of technical crews. Morzik also requested that the air facilities be improved. This, according to his estimates, meant that more ground personnel needed to be brought in, technical equipment and material supply for the units improved and increased, air-traffic safety facilities installed, and signal, radio, and wire communications apparatus provided. In addition, the Oberst asked that regular military channels be eliminated, so that he could issue orders directly to the ground installations and the technical supply organizations, as well as to be

⁴ Ibid., 6.

able to place his requisitions directly. The Chief of Staff agreed to these requests.⁵

Following the meeting with First Air Fleet at Ostrov, Morzik and his staff flew to Pskov, where they set up their headquarters. On the night of 18/19 February, orders were sent to VIII Air Corps, Army Group Center, calling for the transfer of Special Duty Units 9, 600, 700, 800, 900, & IV,1 to the area of the First Air Fleet.⁶ The fully operational planes took off from their bases on 19 February. They were loaded with supplies, which they flew to Demyansk and then they landed at their new bases. Planes that were not fully operational, but that could still fly, were utilized in the transportation of personnel and equipment to their new bases. By the evening of 19 February, most of the elements had been successfully transferred.⁷

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Morzik, "Supply by Air of the Demyansk Fortress," 3, Special Duty Units, known in German as Kampfgeschwader zur besonderer Verwendung (K.G.z.b.V.), included over two thirds of the German Air Force's supply aircraft and were the backbone of the Luftwaffe's transport organization. They were flexibly organized, so as to allow a greater range for their services. Special Duty Units usually numbered fifty-three aircraft. These were arranged in squadrons wings (Staffeln) of twelve planes, and a headquarters wing (Gruppen Stab) of five planes. See Ambrose, Handbook on German Military Forces, 602.

⁷ Ibid., 7-8.

The relatively smooth transfer of men and materiel at the onset of the operation was a high point in what was to be an otherwise problem-filled beginning. Already on 20 February, the commanding officers reported that technical equipment, such as ground equipment for winter operations, was totally inadequate. Essentials like engine heater trucks, workshops, auxiliary starter machines, and technical personnel were all grossly deficient. What spare parts and technical equipment were present had been claimed exclusively by the bomber units stationed at the airfields — who had assumed that their long-established presence at the bases granted them sole right to the matter.⁸ Due to the lack of equipment there was a decrease in operational effectiveness. If, for instance, 150 aircraft were reported ready for duty, only 75 could take off as a result of inadequate ground equipment. Even if there had been enough ground equipment, the lack of technical personnel assigned to the operation at its onset would have also limited the number of supply missions. For weeks flight crews had to prepare their own planes, under the guidance of a maintenance foreman.⁹

The materiel problems confronting the supply units were minimal in comparison to those caused by the winter weather.

⁸ Ibid., 8.

⁹ Ibid., 8-9.

The Germans were eventually able to furnish enough equipment for the operation, but they could not control the climactic situation. The winter of 1941-42, marked by an unusually immense quantity of snow, buried the western Soviet Union under a blanket averaging 1.2 meters in depth. Heavy snow is common to this region, but never again during the German-Soviet conflict did it reach the proportions that it did during the first winter. Even the German troops accustomed to the harsh winters of Eastern Prussia were not prepared for the bitter-cold climate that suddenly confronted them.¹⁰

The hardest hit of Morzik's men were the technical crews. Since they lacked suitable tools and winter clothing, they could only work in the open for a maximum of two hours — even when improvised windbreaks of canvas and boards were erected to protect them against the biting wind.¹¹ Technicians worked in temperature as low as minus forty degrees Celsius, all the while handling the cold metal parts with their bare hands, as a mechanic could not wear gloves when repairing a delicate engine. Their flesh stuck to the cold metal. To combat this adversity the mechanics would coat their hands with grease to

¹⁰ General der Infanterie Gustav Hoehne, "In Snow and Mud: 31 Days of Attack Under Seydlitz During Early Spring of 1942," National Archives Publication M1035, Fiche 0032, Foreign Military Studies, C Series 0034, 3, microfiche.

¹¹ Morzik, "Supply by Air of the Demyansk Fortress," 20.

prevent adhesion, and they would frequently warm their hands over the flame of a near by stove.¹²

The cold not only diminished the efficiency of the men, but also that of the machines. Plane tires frequently cracked, as the rubber did not tolerate the icy temperatures well. Oil pipes and tanks froze, meaning that the engines ran only on the oil in the casings, which was used up in twenty minutes and resulted in piston seizure. An engine that normally had 200 hours of running time was operable for only 40 hours before it had to be replaced. The instrumentation in the planes froze, and it would begin to function only after a substantial period of flying time. In addition, the hydraulic systems in many aircraft lost pressure, and water condensed in radio sets and converters. These cold-weather defects resulted in, on a good day, a ten to fifteen plane decrease from the authorized strength of the Special Duty Units.¹³

Morzik's men enacted special measures in an attempt to protect their equipment from the cold. Gasoline filters, oil filters, and pumps were encased with felt as were the oil tanks. Wing covers were installed on the planes to protect them against the snow, and non-freeze grease was used for

¹² Russell Owen, "Fifty Below Zero — the Sufferings of the German Soldiers in Russia," The New York Times Magazine (Sunday, 11 January 1942): 23.

¹³ Morzik, "Supply by Air of the Demyansk Fortress," 22-3.

starters, armaments, and radio equipment. The radio batteries were removed and placed in a heated room overnight.¹⁴ When an airplane landed at a field where the temperature was below freezing, its oil was immediately drained in order to avoid the solidification of the lubricant in the motor. Before the plane was started again, the engine was warmed, as was the oil prior to its being poured in. The plane engines were placed in specially constructed warm housings to facilitate the heating procedure.¹⁵

All of the obstacles that confronted Morzik and his men caused the unit's effectiveness to drop below 25 per cent. Morzik implored the General Staff to provide more planes, equipment, and technical crews. Unfortunately, nothing happened for weeks. The General Staff insisted that it was doing the utmost to remedy the deficiencies, but nothing was changing. Morzik informed the higher headquarters that under the circumstances the success of the airlift to Demyansk was being seriously jeopardized.¹⁶

Not only was the success of the airlift being jeopardized, but the lives of the 96,000 soldiers of the II Corps hung in the balance as a consequence of the deficiencies.

¹⁴ Ibid., 21-2.

¹⁵ Owen, "Fifty Below Zero," 23.

¹⁶ Morzik, "Supply by Air of the Demyansk Fortress," 8.

General Graf Brockdorff-Ahlefeldt, commanding general of the II Corps, radioed his distress over the lack of air supply:

The main problem is supply. In order to complete its mission, the Corps requires the supply of 300 tons per day. The Corps has been dependent on air supply. A daily average of eighty tons has been flown in. For the last fourteen days the Corps has been practically living from its own substance. If the volume of air supply does not immediately increase — meaning within the next three to four days — so that the required tonnage gets delivered, then it will only be a question of time as to when the Corps collapses as a result of a lack of munitions. Even the best soldier cannot fight without munitions.¹⁷

Only through the great persistence and determination of the II Corps and Morzik's supply group, were the encircled divisions able to hold out until the supply problems were resolved. Enough cold-weather equipment was at hand by the end of March in order to assure the successful fulfillment of the air lift, but the arriving Spring, with its improved weather, greatly diminished the need for it. Many lives could have been saved had the equipment and personnel arrived at the onset of the operation, as opposed to a month later.¹⁸

Aside from equipment and meteorological obstacles, Morzik and his men had to work around the renovation of existing airfields, or, where it was necessary, the construction of new

¹⁷ BAMAf, RH 24-2/120, "Funkspruch — Generalkommando II. Armeekorps, 19.2.1942," 1. Author's translation.

¹⁸ Morzik, "Supply by Air of the Demyansk Fortress," 9.

air fields, to meet the supply mission's need. The old landing fields at Pskov, Riga, and Dunaburg were utilized from the start of the airlift until the pocket was opened. The units that flew in from Riga or Dunaburg had to land at Pskov to refuel. From Pskov the planes would fly over 150 kilometers of Soviet-held territory. After 17 May, a new airfield, located at Tulebyla, was used to supply Demyansk. Units would fly there in the morning from their bases of operation, and, following two or three missions, they would return to their bases in the evening.¹⁹

The first crews who returned from Demyansk reported that there was little in the way of an air strip there. With the equipment and personnel situation that existed in those weeks improvements were made only with painstaking difficulty. By early March, however, the improvements were made that could facilitate the large number of planes bound for the encirclement.²⁰ The runway was constructed of firmly packed snow, and it measured 50 meters in width and 800 meters in length. It was capable of handling up to thirty transport planes at a time.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., 11-13.

²⁰ Ibid., 9.

²¹ Haupt, Demjansk 1942: Ein Bollwerk im Osten, 36.

The runway at Demyansk, while not small by the standards of the time, was limited in its ability to meet the supply needs of the six divisions of the II Corps. For this reason a second air field was constructed within the encirclement, at the village of Pyesky. This landing field was smaller than the one at Demyansk. It measured 600 meters in length and 30 meters in width.²² The Pyesky air strip was given the nickname "Handtuch" by the transport pilots (which in German means hand towel), because of its small size. Only three planes could be handled there at the same time,²³ and only the most experienced crews were able to cope with the difficult conditions for take-offs and landings.²⁴ Despite its shortcomings, the Pyesky field, allowed for a more substantial flow of supplies to reach the store-needy troops.

The Germans knew that when the thaw arrived, their snow-constructed landing strips at Demyansk and Pyesky would be transformed into useless bogs. Thus, prior to the thaw, they cleared the snow and slush from strips near the existing runways. It was, however, possible to keep the packed-snow runways operational well into the thaw period — even into April. This meant that by the time the winter runways were no

²² Morzik, "Supply by Air of the Demyansk Fortress," 10.

²³ Haupt, "Demjansk," 36.

²⁴ Morzik, "Supply By Air of the Demyansk Fortress," 10.

longer useable, the newly constructed strips were free from mud and quite service-ready.²⁵

Ground radio stations were constructed so that the progress of the supply operations could be monitored. The planes were ordered to maintain radio silence, but the command plane of each group was authorized to send transmissions. These messages were concerned with topics such as the execution of the mission, changes in the enemy situation, lack of fighter protection, runway congestion due to accidents, or sudden weather changes. In the event of a sudden weather change, such as fog, units were guided to their destinations through the use of radio direction finders. Under these conditions, flights were talked in and guided by the air safety control center, located in Pskov. Whenever possible, bad-weather missions were manned by crews skilled in instrument flying.²⁶

The weather reports, so very important to the flying operations, were available from several sources in order to provide the most current information. A meteorological center existed at the headquarters in Pskov. There were also additional stations, less sophisticated in nature, at the

²⁵ Ibid., 19.

²⁶ Ibid., 17-18.

The Demyansk Airlift

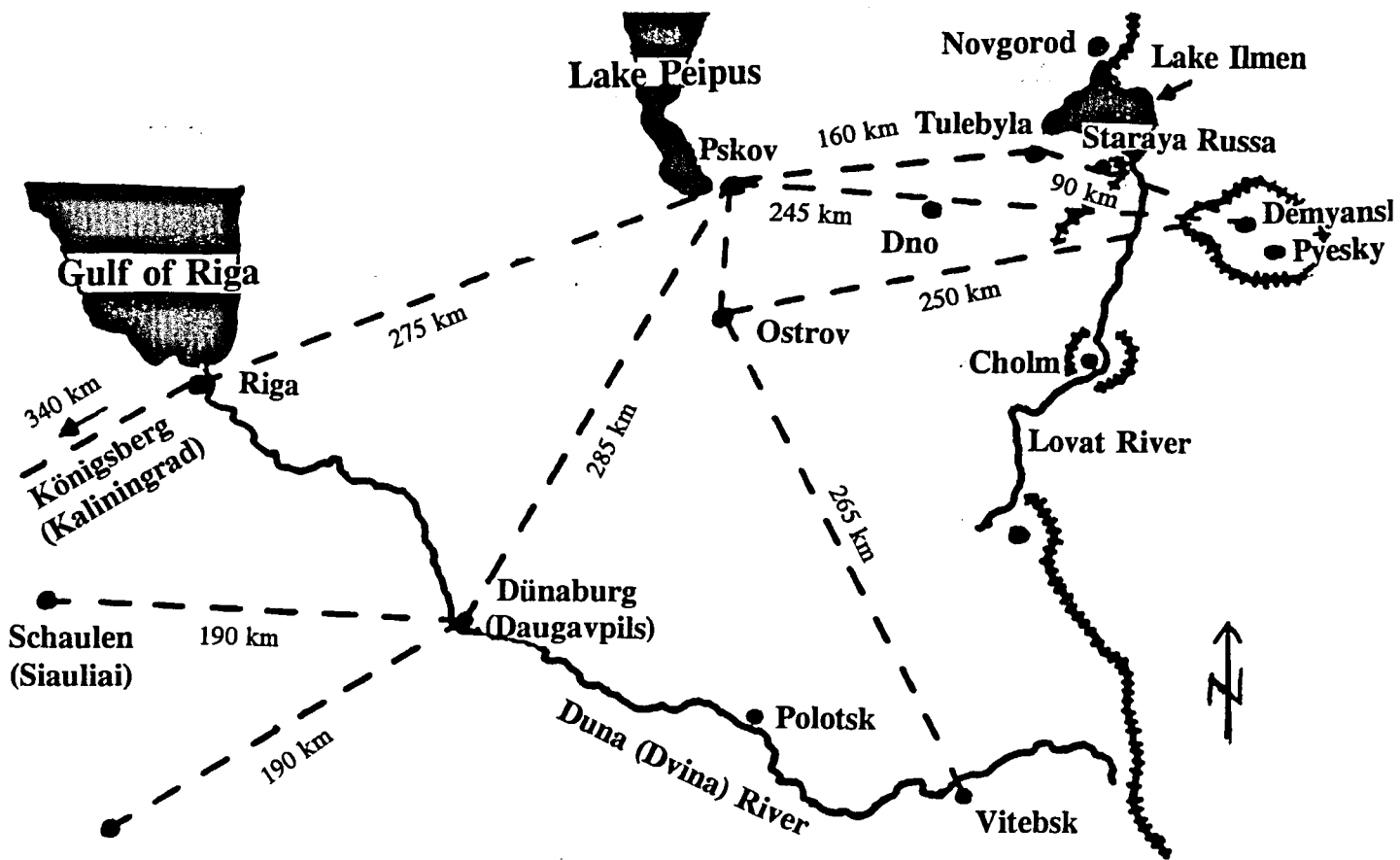


Table #1: Flight Distances

CITIES		DISTANCE
Dunaburg	— Pskov	285 kilometers
Pskov	— Demyansk	245 kilometers
Pskov	— Pyesky	250 kilometers
Pskov	— Tulebyla	160 kilometers
Riga	— Pskov	275 kilometers
Tulebyla	— Demyansk	90 kilometers

respective landing fields. First Air Fleet also had a weather station and a weather reconnaissance squadron at Ostrov. If the reports were uncertain, Morzik's headquarters also had a plane (He 111) that it could use for weather reconnaissance. A local weather station was constructed at Demyansk as well, but it was limited in its abilities. Mission procedure, in regard to the weather, adhered to strict standards. Two hours prior to the initial take-off, Morzik and all units received from the advance fields a weather survey based on the reconnaissance of the day. Additional reports were transmitted from Demyansk every thirty minutes up to the time of take-off, and every hour after the planes had left their initial points of departure. If the weather suddenly took a turn for the worse, the change was reported to Morzik's headquarters and this information was relayed to the formations in the air.²⁷

The air supply could not have occurred had there not been the planes capable of carrying out the operation. Three plane models were used as transports — Ju 52's, Ju 290's, and He 111's. Built by Junkers, the Ju 52 was a low-wing monoplane of single engine design.²⁸ It was responsible for the lion's share of the supply transportation work-load. The Ju 52 had a loading capacity of two tons of materiel, or eighteen

²⁷ Ibid., 18-19.

²⁸ Ambrose, Handbook on German Military Forces, 606.

soldiers with equipment. Twenty wounded soldiers could be loaded on the plane on return flights. If a Ju 52 was headed for Pyesky, however, it carried only 1.5 tons because of the adverse landing conditions at that field.²⁹ The Ju 52 was an old plane, yet it was preferred over other transports because it was very adaptable to the varied tasks associated with the Demyansk airlift, and it operated well under the difficult conditions so prevalent to the operation.³⁰ The Ju 290 was a four-engine transport plane. It had a larger cargo capacity than the Ju 52, but production of the Ju 290 was very limited, and consequently its use at Demyansk was limited as well. The He 111 was originally intended for use as a multi-engine bomber, but because the superior maneuverability of allied fighters virtually nullified the plane's bombing mission value, it was adapted extensively as a freight carrier.³¹

For the first few weeks the planes flew single missions, or as part of a two- or three-plane formation at very low altitudes. They were met at the landing fields by sleigh convoys which transported the delivered materials to the troops. The planes would take off in five-minute intervals and fly in a corridor, twelve to fifteen kilometers in width,

²⁹ Morzik, "Supply by Air of the Fortress Demyansk," 13.

³⁰ Ambrose, Handbook on German Military Forces, 601.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 601 & 606.

that had been assigned to them that day. The Soviets began to oppose the supply planes soon after the mission began. Every type of weapon was used, from fighter planes down to submachine guns. The German losses, in terms of planes and dead or wounded crew members, increased on a daily basis. Flight crews that were forced down without being wounded attempted to fight their way back to the German lines for fear of being captured by the Soviets, or worse, by the partisans. A scheme to neutralize the enemy fire entailing the strafing of the enemy with short, concentrated bursts of fire prior to approach or departure had to be abandoned, because the location of the front was not always clear and losses were incurred from friendly fire.³²

Morzik's unit began to average a loss of two aircraft per day. These losses, added to the grounding of planes for mechanical difficulties caused by wear and the weather, seriously hindered the supply operation. It was decided that losses could only be reduced by flying at high altitudes (2,000-2,500 meters) in escort formation. After 1 March, formations of twenty to forty aircraft, protected by fighter squadrons (Staffeln) 51 and 54,³³ carried out the supply

³² Morzik, "Supply by Air of the Demyansk Fortress," 14-15.

³³ The Staffeln (Squadrons) were the smallest Luftwaffe operational units. They generally had an organization of nine aircraft, and were commanded by a captain or lieutenant known

missions for the encircled II Corps. Aircraft destined for Pyesky flew with the formation to Demyansk, and then made the quick trip to the smaller field. They rejoined the formation on the return flight. Unfortunately, the fighter escorts were not always available because of a shortage of planes, but their mere presence was generally enough to prevent any serious form of Soviet action.³⁴ Despite the protective measures adopted by the German supply units, losses continued to occur. When the supply operation finally ended, 2 group commanders and 385 flight crew members had been killed or wounded as a result of Soviet ground and air defenses, weather, and accidents.³⁵

The price in human life was high, yet the results were impressive. The Demyansk airlift operation transported over 64,800 tons of supplies — a daily average from 15 February to 19 May of 267.9 tons. The supplies included weapons, ammunition, fuel, clothing, medical rations, mail, etc. Over 30,500 soldiers were flown into the encirclement, and 35,400 wounded soldiers were evacuated. Not a day passed between 15 February

as the Staffelkapitän. See Ambrose, Handbook on German Military Forces, 595.

³⁴ Morzik, "Supply by Air of the Fortress Demyansk," 15-17.

³⁵ Ibid., 24.

and 19 May 1942 that a supply mission was not flown, which accounts for the total number of missions exceeding 33,000.³⁶

Prior to the supply operation at Demyansk there had been no opportunity for any element of the Luftwaffe, or any other air force for that matter, to gain experience in the movement of supplies by air, under winter conditions, to troops in an encircled pocket. A survey at the onset of the operation would have revealed the ground personnel totally unprepared for what was to come, technical supplies completely lacking, and a deficiency of overall general organization. The successful accomplishment of the supply mission was due to the tireless contributions, made night and day, by the air crews, the men of the ground organization, the technical crews, and the staff officers. Without the self-sacrifice of these men, the encircled divisions at Demyansk would have been lost.

But, ironically, their survival inadvertently contributed in a way to the death of many others elsewhere. The success at Demyansk led Hitler to believe, erroneously, that — on a grander scale — supplies could be moved by air to Paulus' Sixth Army at Stalingrad. The Führer's inability to comprehend the difficulties entailed in supplying Demyansk, and that these difficulties would be even more compounded with an air supply operation at Stalingrad, led to the reckless expendi-

³⁶ Ibid., 24.

ture of hundreds of thousands of men and thousands of tons of supplies.

Chapter Three: The Circle is Broken

The deep snow that fell during the winter of 1941-42 created serious problems for the II Army Corps. While the snow made the life of the encircled divisions difficult, it was a kind of blessing in disguise in that it protected them from annihilation. Even the Soviet infantry, which was used to the harshness of the climate, was unable to pose a serious threat in the deep snow. The lack of enemy activity allowed the Germans to supply the II Corps successfully by air. The Wehrmacht command knew that this means of supply, despite its early achievements, would nevertheless prove to be inadequate once the winter had passed. At that point the Red Army would be able to bring its full fury to bear on the German forces. There was only one solution to the dilemma. The Wehrmacht would have to relieve the pressure on the II Corps by breaking the Soviet encirclement, and they would need to do it prior to the arrival of the spring.

The plan for this operation was approved during the 2 March conference at the Führer Headquarters. It called for five, basically full-strength divisions to strike east from the X Corps line to the Lovat River. When they reached the Lovat, they would be approximately five miles from the encirclement. The codename given to this advance was Brückenschlag (to throw a bridge across a river). With the success-

ful completion of Brückenschlag, the II Corps would launch their own offensive, code named Fallreep (gangway), consisting of a drive west to the Lovat, thus linking the two forces. During the conference Generaloberst (general) Franz Halder, the chief of the German Army's General Staff, concluded that the II and X Corps commanders were "not sufficiently firm personalities" to lead such an operation. He successfully managed to persuade the General Staff to shift the control of Brückenschlag away from the Sixteenth Army, and instead create a separately commanded combat group that communicated directly with the General Staff. Command of this group was given to Generalmajor (brigadier general) Walther von Seydlitz-Kurzbach. The command of the secondary force in the pocket was given to Generalmajor H. Zorn.¹

Seydlitz was well known to the soldiers. The Prussian-born general was the recipient of the iron cross with oak leaves² for the bravery he had previously exhibited as an

¹ Heeres Gruppe Nord, Ia Kriegstagebuch, 13.-31.3.42, 2-16 Mar 42, H. Gr. Nord 75128/8 file. As cited in Ziemke, Moscow to Stalingrad, 192.

² There were various German decorations for bravery. The Knights Cross of the Iron Cross was the highest, and therefore most revered, decoration. It too had various grades: Knights Cross; Knights Cross with Oak Leaves; Knights Cross with Oak Leaves and Swords; Knights Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords, and Diamonds; and the Knights Cross with Goad Oak Leaves, Swords and Diamonds. The Iron Cross was worn at the neck, making the decoration earner's easily identifiable. See Ambrose, Handbook on German Military Forces, 557-58, 588.

infantry division commander.³ It was not uncommon for Seydlitz to put on his skis and reconnoiter the terrain and the enemy situation for himself. The men respected him, for in him they saw an officer who demonstrated laudable courage on the front lines in even the most difficult of situations. General Gustav Höhne, commander of the Eighth Jäger Division, regarded Seydlitz as a very able commander in whose presence

. . . even the youngest officer could voice his opinion with absolute frankness, since von Seydlitz was fully acquainted with every terrain feature and knew the hardships confronting the soldiers. Combined in his person were an ability for quickly grasping a situation, an acute sense of responsibility, and a disposition towards giving unequivocal support to measures he deemed necessary.⁴

Given these personality traits, it was no surprise that the soldiers who served under Seydlitz placed an infinite trust in him, and the Brückenschlag designated units were happy to see him arrive at the front.

The attack force, given the name Gruppe Seydlitz (Group Seydlitz), was essentially comprised of the Fifth and Eighth Jäger Divisions. Prior to Brückenschlag, these two divisions had undergone a complete reorganization in France, during which they were outfitted with motorized equipment and pack animals for warfare in moderate-level mountainous terrain.

³ Haupt, Demjansk: Ein Bollwerk im Osten, 63.

⁴ Höhne, "In Snow and Mud," 27.

This type of equipment would prove quite satisfactory in the snow and mud-filled conditions that the group would experience.⁵ The Jäger Divisions were to be given additional support by the 18, 122, and 329 Infantry Divisions.⁶

The plan of attack called for Group Seydlitz to break through 25 kilometers of Soviet-held territory, in order to establish contact with Zorn's group that was making its way west from the encirclement. The thrust was targeted at the narrowest part of the Soviet front, not only because the distance was shortest, but also because the number of German troops were limited and the longest span of the Staraya Russa — Demyansk road ran through this area. The road which would be captured as a result of the advance was paved up to the Lovat river. The paved roadway would mean greater success for future German supply efforts to Demyansk, especially during the oncoming thaw period.⁷

⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁶ Haupt, Demjansk: Ein Bollwerk im Osten, 63-4.

⁷ The Russian thaw period crippled both the Wehrmacht and the Red Army. Unpaved roads were quickly turned into deeper and deeper quagmires by the pounding of tank treads and truck tires. At the height of the thaw, panje wagons, the Russian peasant's horse drawn carts, had to be used to transport men and supplies. While this method was glacially slow, it was the only means of supplying the troops during the mud-filled season. Information gained from Fritz Stockburger, interview by author, Notes, Villingen-Schwenningen, Germany, 31 July 1991.

The divisions were to be aligned in the following manner. The Eighteenth Motorized Infantry Division, the northern-most of the attacking units, was to protect Group Seydlitz's left flank. The 329 Infantry Division was assigned the same responsibility on the right flank. The Fifth and Eighth Jäger Divisions were to bear the lion's share of the eastward advancement responsibility, while the 122 Infantry Division was to follow the two Jäger Divisions and executed clean-up operations.⁸

Before Brückenschlag could begin, however, the full eastward transportation of the newly-refurbished Fifth and Eighth Jäger Divisions had to be achieved. As the trainloads of troops entered the area, they found a hostile climate with little along the lines of prepared billeting. Yet, they had to secure some form of shelter while they waited for the arrival of their comrades, or they would freeze to death. The rural landscape surrounding the German units was sparsely settled, and what did exist in the way of farm buildings was very limited for Russian farms in this area consisted of only one common structure — shared by man and beast alike. Because of the scarcity of lodging, large numbers of German troops were quartered in the same structures that housed the peasants and their livestock. This practice resulted in numerous cases

⁸ Haupt, Demjansk: Ein Bollwerk im Osten, 63-5.

of typhus, transmitted by lice in the cramped quarters.⁹ Walter Körner, a surgeon assigned to the Fifth Jäger division at the time of the assault, related the following account regarding the transportation and billeting of the German troops prior to Brückenschlag:

It was very cold as we once again came to Russia — with temperatures at minus 40 and 45 degrees Celsius. We were very frustrated during the ride from France to Russia, because we knew we were going back into the eastern zone (Ostzone). There was one with us, who once was a communist, or he was still one, who, when he learned that we were going back to Russia, brought a great deal of liquor, French liquor, with him — out of spite. He drank every day while we were under way, and he was always drunk. In his car were seven passengers, and these seven had to get out at Volot (about 30 kilometers west of Staraya Russa), and they were all put up in the same house. Of these seven, all contracted typhus (Fleck Fieber), with the exception of one. The one who did not get typhus was the one who was drunk from France to Russia — he did not get sick. As for the others, one died from the illness — a bicyclist named Körberkottle — and the others never were totally healthy again. The fever came from lice. We all had lice — we already had them during summer of 1941. At our main medical station we had more soldiers that died during the winter as a result of typhus and the cold than we did as a result of battle. There were days where we had twenty to thirty typhus deaths¹⁰

⁹ Höhne, "In Mud and Snow," 5.

¹⁰ Walter Körner, interview by author, Tape recording, Stuttgart, Germany, 3 August 1991. Author's translation.

Despite the hardships that the troops assembling for Brückenschlag were forced to endure, the concept of delaying the offensive until their condition improved could not be entertained. The 100,000 men encircled at Demyansk were engaged in a struggle against time. If the spring arrived, and their encircled condition still remained, then the demise of the II Corps was inevitable. The surrounded divisions and the units of Gruppe Seydlitz were well aware of this detail, thus on 21 March 1942, the two Jäger divisions went over to the attack.¹¹

The troops drove forward with almost no artillery support. The snow stopped the shell fragments of any caliber smaller than 150 mm., rendering mortars useless. Gruppe Seydlitz did have some 210 mm. pieces, but these were too few, and too heavy in the deep snow, to provide the needed artillery support. There was, however, an ample number of combat aircraft — Stukas — that could be used to drop heavy bombs on the Soviet positions. Thus, the Luftwaffe functioned as artillery support for the operation.¹²

The Eighth Jäger Division quickly swept their Soviet opposition out of the town of Ivanovskoye, and then rolled up the enemy positions east of the Polist River as well. The

¹¹ Höhne, "In Mud and Snow," 12.

¹² Ibid.

attack then proceeded in the direction of the village of Poche-Poche. Approximately three miles east of Ivanovskoye, however, the smooth flow of the attack was interrupted. The deep snow made it difficult for the Eighth Jäger Division's troops to attack the carefully prepared Soviet batteries in this area. Given the depth of the snow, a continuation of the drive in this direction would have been suicidal.¹³ A decision was made to build a winter road¹⁴ from Ivanovskoye to the east, in order to better ferry troops and material to the point of attack. The Eighth Jäger's engineer battalion was reinforced with 1,000 additional infantry men for the purpose of constructing the road, which it completed in less than 24 hours.¹⁵

Meanwhile, the Fifth Jäger Division began its assault in the north. It benefited from attacking an open terrain, which permitted for easy identification of the Soviet winter roads from the air, followed by Stuka attacks. This meant that the Fifth Jäger could easily strike at key points. Its force was

¹³ Ibid., 12-13.

¹⁴ Several practices were used in the building of a winter road, these included the use of tanks to pack down the snow, and the pouring of water on the prospective road surfaces to help pack down the material as well. The roads needed to be wide and clear enough to move the necessary equipment and men when needed, thus peasants were conscripted to clear snowdrifts. See Höhne, "In Snow and Mud," 10.

¹⁵ Höhne, "In Mud and Snow," 14.

divided into two regimental teams. The northern regiment advanced practically to the Staraya Russa — Demyansk Highway before its attack was stopped, while the southern regiment easily captured Svinushovo, and then continued on towards Bol Gorby on the Redya River where it was temporarily bogged down.¹⁵

At that time, the Soviets launched an attack on the Eighth Jäger Division, near Sokolovo. The Soviets were just as incapable as the Germans when it came to maneuvering in the heavy snow, and their attack was easily repulsed. Owing to the availability of troops and assault guns on the Cholm-Staraya Russa Highway, the German commander of the Eighth Jäger's southernmost regiment ordered an immediate counterattack. The Germans encountered very stiff resistance, but the counterattacking elements were nevertheless able to advance to Velikoye Selo and Onufrievka — two adjacent villages on the Redya River.¹⁶

The Eighth Jäger's northernmost division carried on the attack on Poche-Poche, via the newly built winter road. This attack reached the Redya River with little delay. At this

¹⁵ Ibid., 15.

¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

point it became bogged down by a large Soviet position two kilometers to the east of the river, at Mal Gorby.¹⁸

Thus ended the first phase of Brückenschlag. The Germans had captured a succession of tiny villages, their importance lying only in their use as reference points in the trees and snow. Ahead lay the Lovat River, but before reaching it the Fifth and Eighth Jäger Divisions had to penetrate a dense forest, that was unbroken by roads and blanketed by underbrush. No German tank that was present could penetrate this area, and the Stukas were just as useless, as it was impossible to spot the Soviet positions through the trees and brush. The imposing thicket was not the only problem the Germans had to contend with. The spring thaw started, covering the ice on the Redya with a foot and a half of water, and threatening to turn the entire wooded region in front of Group Seydlitz into a swamp.¹⁹ Seydlitz's men were weary, and he knew that they needed some rest before they attempted to cross this foreboding region. Thus, on 30 March, the general informed the General Staff that he was stopping to regroup.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., 17.

¹⁹ AOK 16, Ia Kriegstagebuch, Band III, 21-30 Mar 42, AOK 16 23468/4 file. As cited in Ziemke, Moscow to Stalingrad, 193.

²⁰ Ibid.

Brückenschlag resumed on 4 April. While Seydlitz was regrouping his units, the Soviets had been regrouping and reinforcing as well. They had brought up a number of T-34 tanks, which could move on the softening ground. The Germans countered this Soviet advantage through the use of a new weapon, called the Panzerfaust (tank fist).²¹ This weapon was essentially an antitank grenade launcher. It had a range of 30 to 50 yards and could be fired from a standing, kneeling, or prone position.²² A direct hit by a Panzerfaust could knock out a T-34, but manning this weapon required a combination of luck and nerve, as it required the operator to be within close range of the tank.

Seydlitz wanted to concentrate his forces on an all-out attack on Ramusevo, where the group would meet with Zorn's troops fighting their way out of the encirclement. The Führer, however, had another idea. He ordered the southernmost regiment of the Eight Jäger Division to alter its original line of attack. Instead of accompanying the rest of the division in its assault on Ramusevo, as Seydlitz had proposed, Hitler wanted this regiment to drive to the southeast, capture the village of Cherenchitsi, and continue on to

²¹ Heeres Gruppe Nord, Ia Kriegstagebuch, I — 30.4.42, 3 Apr 42, H. Gr. Nord 75128/9 file. As cited in Ziemke, Moscow to Stalingrad, 195.

²² Ambrose, Handbook on German Military Forces, 318.

Kalitkilo. Seydlitz was opposed to the plan, but after voicing his disagreement to the General Staff, he was told that Hitler wanted to capture and hold this strongpoint, and to carry out the plan as ordered.²³ The only possible benefit that could have arisen from the capture of Cherenchitsi would have been the seizure of a Soviet winter road that could have been put to use. The muddy season, however, had already begun, and the winter road was already impassable.²⁴ Hitler, however, wanted to hear nothing of this. He wanted his orders blindly executed, or so the General Staff asserted.

The attack on Cherenchitsi challenged a Soviet defense that had dug into the forest and was augmented by T-34's. The underbrush concealed the Red Army's defensive maneuvers, and even if it had not, the Germans would have not been able to use the Stuka air support because the opposing troops were often intermingled, and thus they would have been dropping bombs on their own forces.²⁵ These factors, when combined with the intensifying thaw, were responsible for heavy German casualties. Luckily, the General Staff had sent Major Below to the area as an observer.

²³ Walther von Seydlitz, Stalingrad — Konflikt und Konsequenz: Erinnerungen, (Hamburg, Germany, Verlag Gerhard Stalling AG, 1977), 137.

²⁴ Höhne, "In Mud and Snow," 18.

²⁵ Ibid., 19.

Following several days of hard, but unprofitable, combat, Seydlitz was able to convince the major of the futility of the attack on Cherenchitsi, and in turn, Below managed to get the General Staff to reverse the orders. On 11 April, the regiment was instructed to change its focal point back to Ramusevo. The regiment was forced to pay a heavy price for the unsuccessful, and misguided attack on Cherenchitsi — over 1,000 dead and wounded.²⁶

When, on 4 April, the southern regiment of the Eighth Jäger Division began its attack on Cherenchitsi, the remaining regiment, as well as the Fifth Jäger Division to the north, began their individual drives on Ramusevo. The German units, borrowing a technique from their Finnish allies, utilized ski troops to penetrate the woods. They succeeded, with great difficulty, in capturing terrain. These positions were then

²⁶ Seydlitz, Stalingrad, 138-9. While the Germans suffered heavy losses in their bid to link the encirclement with the X Army Corps line, the Soviet losses were even greater. The Soviets constantly threw new units against the beleaguered Germans, in hopes of wearing them down. The reckless abandonment with which the Red Army fought was commented on by Seydlitz. The general was making his way towards Demyansk, following the opening of the encirclement, when he came across what he called a "Totenfeld" (Field of death). Seydlitz stated that he had "never seen anything like in either of the World Wars. A large, open field literally strewn with fallen Russian infantry, corpse on top of corpse. A Russian commander must have driven his troops in an attack on a German machine gun nest here, without the support of artillery. An unimaginable sight!" See Seydlitz, Stalingrad, 139.

quickly occupied by the rest of the Jäger units that were following behind the ski troops.²⁷

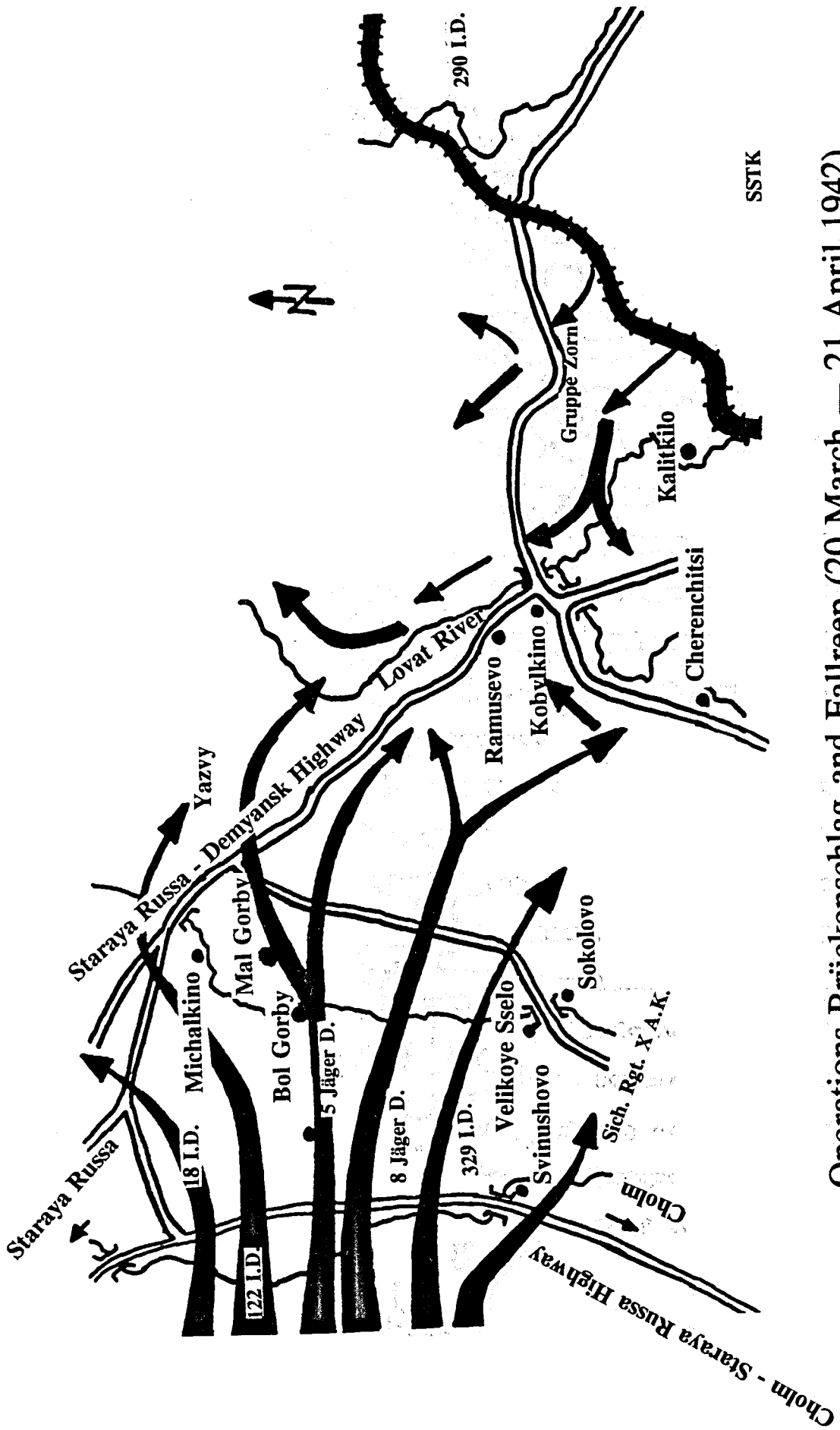
The Fifth Jäger Division concentrated its effort on the town of Yazvy, north of Ramusevo on the Staraya Russa — Demyansk highway. The attack took the Soviets by surprise, and the village was quickly captured. This could not be said about the remaining stretch of road that lead from Yazvy to Ramusevo, upon which the Fifth Jäger then focused its efforts. The advance bogged down three kilometers south of Yazvy, and it would go no further. The Soviets had established several strong lines of defense along the highway through which the Germans were not able to pass. There remained one option. The northern regiment of the Eighth Jäger Division would have to come to the aid of the stalled Fifth Jäger division.²⁸ The regiment managed to battle through the forest east of Mal Gorby, and it reached the highway two kilometers northwest of Ramusevo. It then successfully cleared away the Soviet positions that barred the Fifth Jäger Division's advance.²⁹

By this time, the thaw was reaching its height, and there were few places that were not inundated by water. As a

²⁷ Höhne, "In Snow and Mud," 21.

²⁸ Ibid., 21-2.

²⁹ Ibid., 23.



Operations Brückenschlag and Fallreep (20 March — 21 April 1942)

consequence of the saturated conditions, the Soviets decided to withdraw to the high ground of Ramusevo, where a better defensive line could be established. The Germans responded by bringing up additional units that, although weak, would aid in their assault on the town.³⁰ Seydlitz's forces could now hear the rumble of battle that emanated from the German troops defending Demyansk. The din, that became louder as the eastward advancing units got closer to Demyansk, was a sign to the men involved in Brückenschlag that their goal — the breaking of the encirclement that had caged nearly 100,000 of their comrades — was within reach.³¹ All that Seydlitz's men needed to do was to capture Ramusevo.

Because of the thaw, and the town's proximity to the Lovat river, Ramusevo was almost completely surrounded by water. A narrow strip of land in the north connected the town to the rest of the German-won territory, but this bridgehead was held by the Soviets. Seydlitz concluded that his forces were far too weak to capture both the bridgehead and the town at the same time, so he designated the former as the group's first objective. With somewhat surprising ease, the Germans captured this target on 12 April. Two factors contributed to their success. First, the disappearance of the snow allowed

³⁰ Ibid., 23-4.

³¹ Haupt, Demjansk, 72.

their artillery to be effective once again; and second, the Red Army troops defending Ramusevo were just as exhausted as their German opposition, so that the mere presence of the German artillery tipped the scales in the Wehrmacht's favor.³²

The next obvious move would have been to attack Ramusevo from the captured bridgehead. That is exactly where the Soviets expected the group to attack, and for that reason Seydlitz chose another course of action. Reconnaissance had informed the general of the existence of a stream to the southwest of the town. Although the stream had overflowed its banks, the banks were not very steep, meaning that the flooding in the area could not be very deep either. The general ordered strong units to assemble in the woods to the southwest of Ramusevo for an attack on the town. The plan called for the German forces to storm across the shallow flood plain and take Ramusevo by surprise.³³

Two days after the capture of the bridgehead, Seydlitz radioed II Army Corps and informed them that they should begin Fallreep. Group Zorn had been anxiously waiting for the signal to start its assault. At 11.00 hours on 14 April, Fallreep was launched.³⁴ The II Corps had collected elements

³² Ibid., 24.

³³ Ibid., 25.

³⁴ NA/T-312/570/8184384-4389, 4391, 4396. As cited in Sydnor, Soldiers of Destruction, 225.

from the various units under its charge, and assembled them in the western tip of the pocket to carry out the offensive. The majority of the troops, however, came from the SSTK, as this unit originally occupied the area from which the relief attack was to be launched.³⁵ The Fallreep designated units attacked their Soviet opponents with a vengeance. These men had been corralled by the Red Army for over two months. During this time they possessed only the bleakest outlook for survival. When their chance for liberation was at hand, they showed no mercy to their enemy. Fallreep, like Brückenschlag, occurred at the height of the spring thaw. Like the men of group Seydlitz, group Zorn was forced to fight through chest-deep swamps, and travel on slime-covered roads in order to reach their objective. The mud and water added an extra dimension to the already brutal confrontation.³⁶

Meanwhile, outside of Ramusevo, Seydlitz's troops prepared for their final assault. On 20 April (the Führer's birthday), having moved up through snow water and swampy forest, the Jäger Divisions set their offensive in motion. A small attack was directed at the bridgehead, where the Soviets had focused their defense. This attack preoccupied the Red

³⁵ Halder, Kriegstagebuch, 417-18, 422.

³⁶ NA/T-312/570/8184411, radio message from II Army Corps to Sixteenth Army describing the difficulties faced by group Zorn in the swollen swamps. As cited in Sydnor, Soldiers of Destruction, 225-6.

Army defenders, while the bulk of the German forces successfully swept into the town from the southwest.³⁷

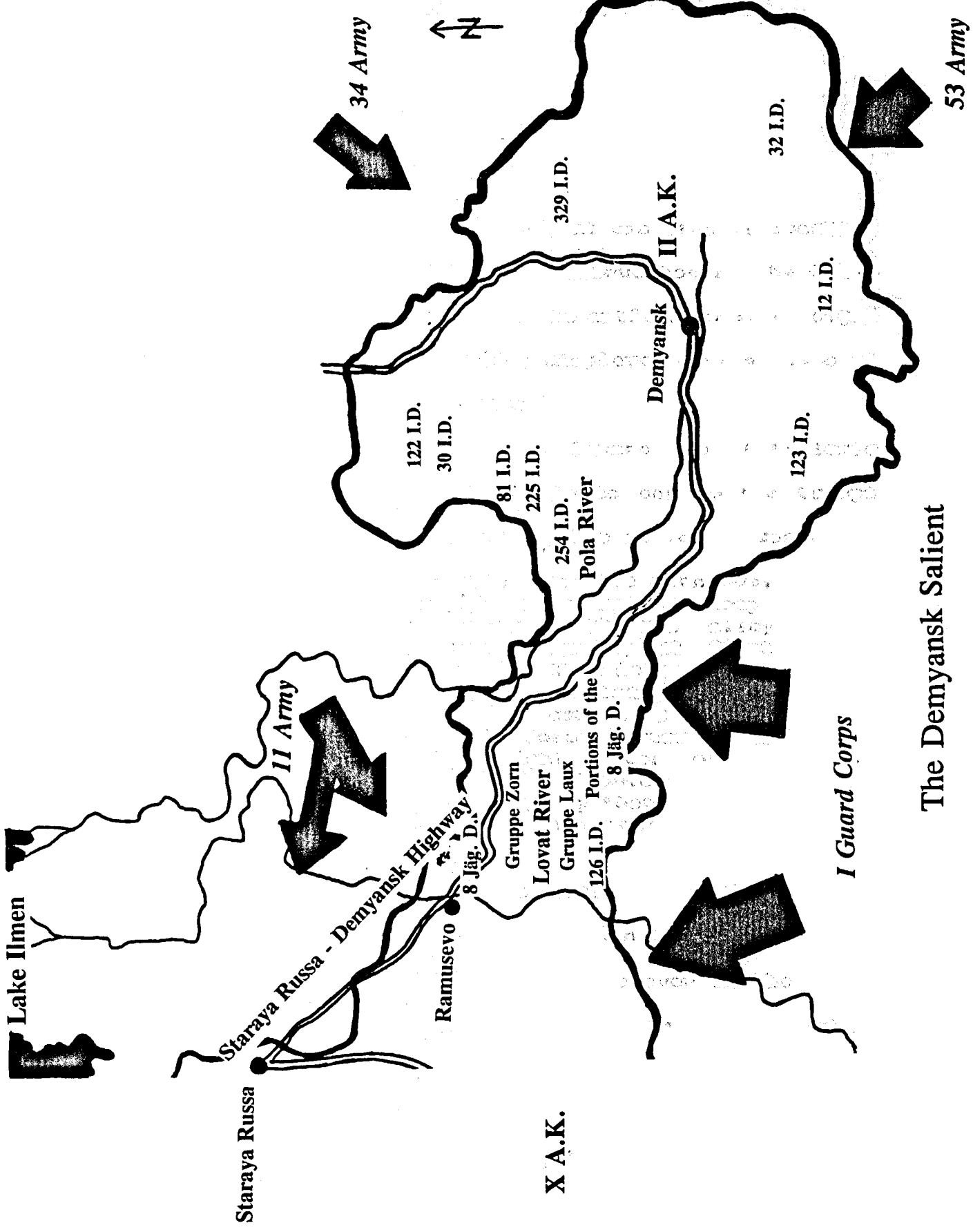
On the same day, a company from the SSTK tank-destroyer battalion, incorporated into group Zorn, penetrated the last Soviet defensive line and made contact with troops from the Eighth Jäger Division at Ramusevo.³⁸ During the subsequent day, additional units, on both sides of the flood-swollen river, cleared out the remaining Soviet strong points.³⁹ Demyansk was once again part of the German line.

The encirclement was broken on its seventy-third day of existence. Five days later, on 26 April 1942, a cable was strung across the Lovat River by which wounded and supplies were transported back and forth. From this point on, the II Corps would be supplied by land, as well as by air. The Landbrücke (land bridge) between the X and II Army Corps measured twelve kilometers in length, and it had a width of four kilometers at its widest point. It was quickly dubbed the "Schlauch" (hose) by the German troops who became all-too-familiar with the linkage — as it would supply the salient for eleven months

³⁷ Höhne, "In Snow and Mud," 26.

³⁸ NA/T-312/570/8184505, radio message from Seydlitz to II Army Corps confirming link-up at Ramusevo. As cited in Sydnor, Soldiers of Destruction, 225.

³⁹ Höhne, "In Snow and Mud," 26.



until the projection of the German front was finally evacuated.⁴⁰ As if in a contest for some dubious honor, the Wehrmacht units stationed in the Landbrücke artfully crafted signs to adorn the "Schlauch" that boldly displayed such slogans as "The arse of the world starts here."⁴¹

The commander of the X Corps, General der Artillerie (lieutenant general) Hansen, had this to say to the troops following the capture of Ramusevo and the relief of Demyansk:

For more than four weeks, you have torn away at the enemy, through snow meters deep, through impassable forests, through slimy swamps and soaking wet pathways; at first having to bear the icy cold, then being soaked to the bone. The enemy was constantly throwing new battalions, with countless tanks, against you, and his air force harassed you with bombing attacks night after night. Despite the enemy's multiple advantages, you remained the victor. We can say that the most important mission is over, now that we have captured Ramusevo, and reached the Lovat.⁴²

Unfortunately, Hansen's assertion that the most important mission at Demyansk was over, soon proved to be erroneous. This mission was yet to come. The next eleven months would witness innumerable Soviet attacks, many of which appeared as if they would once again cut off the II Corps. Finally, at

⁴⁰ Haupt, Demjansk: Ein Bollwerk im Osten, 82.

⁴¹ Friedrich Stockburger, interview by author, Notes, Villingen-Schwenningen, Germany, 1 August 1991.

⁴² Haupt, Demjansk: Ein Bollwerk im Osten, 82. Author's translation.

the end of these eleven months, the II Corps would have to be evacuated.

Chapter IV: The Evacuation

Immediately following the successful encirclement-breaking operation at Demyansk, General von Seydlitz was ordered to report to the "Wolfsschanze"¹ (Wolf's Lair). This compound was located east of Rastenburg, in Prussia's remote Görlitz Forest. It consisted of painstakingly camouflaged bunkers and buildings, constructed mainly of steel-reinforced concrete, that were sealed off from the outside world by rings of steel fences, palisades, and earthworks. Hitler felt that the Wolfsschanze placed him physically closer to the troops in the east, thus allowing him greater control over them and their command hierarchy. The Führer lived and worked in the compound, accompanied by his most intimate military and political advisors.² Seydlitz had been ordered to the compound so that he could attend a conference at which the future plans for the Demyansk salient were being discussed.³

¹ Seydlitz, Konflikt und Konsequenz, 139. For further information on the Wolfsschanze, see R. Raiber, "FHQ Wolfsschanze," After the Battle, no. 19 (London: Battle of Britain Prints, Ltd., 1977).

² Percy Ernst Schramm, gen. ed., Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht (Frankfurt: Bernard & Gräfe, 1961-1965), vol. IV, 1752-53; as cited in Ziemke, From Moscow to Stalingrad, 4.

³ "Führer conferences" were held daily, and were the means by which the German war was run, and their war directives circulated. Hitler liked the conference-mode of operation because it allowed for him to be at the center of

Other officers attending the conference were Halder, Keitel, and Jodl, all high-ranking members of the High Command of the German Armed Forces (OKW), as well as representatives from Army Intelligence, Supply, and the Luftwaffe.⁴

Hitler had conceived the idea of using the newly created "Kampfraum" (battle area) as a springboard for a future offensive. His plan called for the creation of a large panzer army inside the salient, that would drive southeast to Ostashkov, continue onto Rzhev, and then turn east toward Moscow. General K uchler, the leader of Army Group North, almost immediately expressed his opposition to the plan. He felt that the salient should be evacuated, in order to gain desperately needed reserve strength for the Army Group. In addition, K uchler told Hitler that the geographic conditions between Ostashkov and Rzhev did not provide favorable conditions for the type of mission that the F hrer called for.⁵

Seydlitz's views on the removal of the troops from the salient, and on Hitler's proposed offensive, were identical to

the strategic administration of the German military. Stenographers faithfully recorded the words of every conference participant, thus granting the historian an opportunity to realize how the German decisions shaped the outcome of World War II. See Alan Clark, Barbarossa: The Russian-German Conflict, 1941-45 (New York: Morrow, 1965; New York: Quill Press, 1985), 236.

⁴ Seydlitz, Konflikt und Konsequenz, 139-40.

⁵ Ibid., 140.

for which tanks were completely ill-suited. He utilized photographs and intelligence reports, obtained during his recent ordeal in the area, to bolster the plea for the evacuation of the salient. Hitler, however, could not be swayed. He ordered the troops to remain in the salient, and claimed that following the successful completion of the summer's operations in the Caucasus and at Stalingrad, all available forces would be utilized to create his panzer army.⁶

From hindsight it is clear that Hitler's decision to keep the troops in the Demyansk salient was a mistake. No fewer than twelve German divisions were forced to maintain this difficult-to-defend position against their numerically superior Soviet foe. Had the German troops been able to withdraw at the time when it was first proposed by Kuechler, they would have been able to bolster the Wehrmacht forces at Stalingrad, where they could have quite possibly changed the result of that battle. This, however, was not the case. The Soviets repeatedly poured men and machines at the Demyansk-based forces — who miraculously managed to hold onto their position despite the heavy casualties. According to General-leutnant (Major General) Gustav Hühne, who served with Seydlitz during the spring of 1942 and later as commander of the troops in the Landbrücke,

⁶ Ibid., 140-41.

the fighting in the so-called land-corridor resulted in serious German losses, because the Russians launched one major attack after another. Almost every month, and sometimes twice a month, it appeared as if a new encirclement was unavoidable, and it is indeed a miracle that the German units fighting around Demyansk did not suffer the fate of those at Stalingrad.⁷

Although the II Corps managed to maintain its position, it was not able to keep its commander. General Brockdorff-Ahlefeldt had been in command of the II Corps from the start of the encirclement. He was a tireless leader. Members of the II Corps had become accustomed to the sight of his Fiesler Storch⁸ flying over the area, so that the general could obtain a first-hand view of a situation. Few of the men knew that their leader flying overhead was suffering from a severe case of rheumatic fever, an illness that forced him to relinquish his command and return to Germany in the autumn of 1942, where he died a few months later. Brockdorff-Ahlefeldt was replaced as commander of the II Corps by General der Infanterie (Lieutenant General) Laux. Generalleutnant (Major General) Höhne took command of the German troops in the Landbrücke.⁹

⁷ Höhne, "In Snow and Mud," 26.

⁸ The Fiesler Storch was a standard Army cooperation and reconnaissance aircraft. It was light weight (2,250 lbs.), and it only had a maximum speed of 110 miles per hour. Due to this it was very vulnerable to modern fighters and anti-aircraft fire. See Ambrose, Handbook on German Military Forces, 606, 615.

⁹ Haupt, Demjansk 1942, 95, 136.

While the II Corps was receiving new leadership, Paulus' Sixth Army, which had made considerable gains during the summer of 1942, was being encircled at Stalingrad. Of all the battles fought on the eastern front, the most well-known contest in Western historiography is that for the city of Stalingrad. That campaign, which began in the summer of 1942 and ended in the early winter months of 1943, resulted in the significant turning point in the German-Soviet war. Twenty-two German and Rumanian divisions were surrounded, and then liquidated, by the combined efforts of the Soviet *Don*, *Stalingrad*, and *Southwest Fronts*. On 2 February 1943, Field Marshal von Paulus surrendered, marking the end of the last German opposition in Stalingrad. While the total personnel cost of the German defeat at Stalingrad is hard to pinpoint, one estimate claims that the German losses, in dead and captured men, numbered over 330,000. One must also take into account the materiel captured by the Soviets when assessing the consequences of the Stalingrad campaign on the German military.¹⁰

The defeat at Stalingrad shook the foundations of the German military machine. It clearly signaled the end of the Wehrmacht's initiative on the eastern front. Certain German

¹⁰ Louis C. Rotundo, ed., Battle for Stalingrad: The 1943 Soviet General Staff Study (London: Pergamon-Brassey International Defense Publishers, Inc., 1989), 1-20.

officers had previously questioned the reckless abandon with which they were being given orders, but the at-any-price attitude displayed by the OKW and Hitler in the campaign for Stalingrad caused even the most faithful of Nazis to question the Führer. The Soviets, on the other hand, were instilled with a greater sense of confidence by the Stalingrad victory. This confidence would only increase with the Red Army's success in the years that followed.

It was in this environment that Zeitzler, who had replaced Halder as Chief of the Army General Staff less than five months prior to the surrender at Stalingrad,¹¹ attempted to take up with Hitler the question of evacuating the troops from the Demyansk salient.¹² Zeitzler told Kückler of his plans on 19 January. Both generals agreed that evacuating the pocket was the only way to avoid a catastrophe at Demyansk similar to that which was occurring at Stalingrad. In addition, Zeitzler and Kückler agreed that recent setbacks suffered in the Leningrad area were due to a shortage of

¹¹ Henry Pickler, ed., Hitler's Tischgespräche (Bonn: Athenaem-Verlag, 1951), 166.

¹² Of the original six divisions in the encirclement, only five remained, as the SSTK had been removed in October 1942, see Sydnor, Soldiers of Destruction, 251-54. The additional units that were brought into the area included the 58, 122, 126, 254, & 329 Infantry Divisions, as well as the 5, & 8 Jäger Divisions. See Weg und Schicksal der bespannten 290 I.D. (Schwertdivision) (Marburg, Germany: Podzun-Pallas-Verlag, 1965), 126; obtained at the Bundesarchiv - Militärarchiv Freiburg.

troops, and that the forces freed from Demyansk could bolster their comrades to the north.¹³ Zeitzler's request encountered bitter resistance from Hitler at first, but on the night of 31 January, following a week-long debate, and with the obvious defeat at Stalingrad merely moments away, the Führer gave into the general's demands. Zeitzler had OKW inform Kückler of the decision. The order stated:

All men, instruments, material, etc., are to be pulled back into storage areas located in the rear, in order to regain the mobility of the troops.¹⁴

The Operations Section told general Kückler that the struggle to receive Hitler's authorization had been extraordinarily difficult, and that he should get his troops out of the pocket quickly, before the Führer changed his mind.¹⁵ Kückler, however, was not willing to lose the enormous quantity of equipment and supplies that had been sent into the salient over the previous thirteen months, so he decided to develop a careful plan for the orderly removal of men and material

¹³ Heeresgruppe Nord, Ia, Kriegstagebuch, 19 Jan 43, H. Gr. Nord 75128/18 file, as cited in Earl F. Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin: The German Defeat In The East (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), 112.

¹⁴ NA/T-314/144/435, "Kriegstagebuch (KTB) 2, Band 3," dated 31 January 1943.

¹⁵ Heeresgruppe Nord, Ia, Ferngespräch des Chefs des Generalstabes der Heeresgruppe mit Generalmajor Heusinger, 31.1.43, H. Gr. Nord 75129/52 file, as cited in Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin, 112-13.

before giving the Corps the order to withdraw.¹⁶ Kuchler assigned the task of organizing the withdrawal, which was given the codename "Ziethen,"¹⁷ to Major von Rosenthal, of the 225 Infantry Division.¹⁸

Rosenthal immediately began issuing orders that would help facilitate a smooth evacuation process. Many divisions lacked the number of horses necessary to execute the withdrawal.¹⁹ To compensate for this, Rosenthal ordered divisions that were comparatively well equipped with horses to give up some to those units that lacked the essential draft animal

¹⁶ Heeresgruppe Nord, Ia Nr. 13000/44, Der Feldzug gegen die Sowjet-Union der Heeresgruppe Nord, Kriegsjahr 1943, 24.12.44, H. Gr. Nord 75884/I file, as cited in Ziemke, Stalingrad to Berlin, 113.

¹⁷ NA/T-314/144/437, "KTB 2, Band 3," dated 1 February 1943.

¹⁸ NA/T-314/144/438 "KTB 2, Band 3," dated 2 February 1943.

¹⁹ Both sides depended heavily on horses as a means of troop/supply transportation. The Germans utilized 625,000 horses when they first attacked the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. During the winter of 1941-1942 the Germans lost nearly 200,000 animals, which greatly hindered their ability to maneuver. During the spring of 1942 a quarter million horses were requisitioned in Germany, but they were not enough to compensate for the numbers previously lost and for those required to substitute for destroyed motor transports. In addition, these horses were lighter and less powerful than those that had been used in the past. The decrease in horse quantity and quality greatly hindered the German war effort. See Ziemke, Moscow to Stalingrad, 7, 293, 295.

strength.²⁰ Rosenthal also issued an order that called for the evacuation of only valuable equipment. Guidelines were set to establish what constituted valuable equipment, and controls were instituted to make sure that the guidelines were followed.²¹

On 7 February, Höhne, Laux, and the commanding generals of the salient-stationed divisions met with Major Rosenthal to discuss the evacuation. Rosenthal presented the commanders his plan for the "Frontverkürzung" (front shortening).²² The planning of operation Ziethen called for the evacuation of the most eastern positioned divisions first. The troops on the northern and southern lines of the salient were to protect the evacuating body as it gradually made its way westward. Every day the front would diminish in size, and the troops that were removed would be immediately sent elsewhere to bolster the defenses of Army Group North.²³ Two weeks were allotted for the successful completion of the plan. In addition to the evacuation of all personnel, 8000 tons of miscellaneous

²⁰ NA/T-314/144/443, "KTB 2, Band 3," dated 3 February 1943.

²¹ NA/T-314/144/449, "KTB 2, Band 3," dated 6 February 1943.

²² NA/T-314/144/449-451, "KTB 2, Band 3," dated 7 February 1943.

²³ Haupt, Demjansk 1942, 150.

equipment, 5000 horse-drawn panje wagons, and 1500 motorized vehicles were to be withdrawn from the salient as well.²⁴

In accordance with the plan, the most eastern located units, the entire 32 and 329 infantry divisions as well as parts of the 122, actively prepared to evacuate their positions. The evacuation, however, could not commence until the weather was more cooperative. On 7 February, a bad snow storm rendered the roads impassible. The routes had to be cleared before the divisions could even attempt to move. The Soviets were quick to interpret these actions as signs of a planned withdrawal.²⁵

In response to the German movement, the Soviets began to assault the Landbrücke in hope of once more encircling the Wehrmacht troops. On 8 February, approximately 750 Soviet troops assaulted various positions defended by the 122 and 30 infantry divisions. The Red Army forces were supported by brief, but heavy, artillery fire. The attacking bodies were quickly beaten back, but despite the favorable outcome the Germans were left with an unsettled feeling — it was obvious that the Soviets were not going to allow them to withdraw without a fight. From this day forward, until the completion

²⁴ NA/T314/144/474, "KTB 2, Band 3," dated 16 February 1943.

²⁵ NA/T-314/144/451, "KTB 2, Band 3," dated 7 February 1943.

of the evacuation, Red Army units attacked the Landbrücke on a daily basis, with increasing force and determination.²⁶

During the afternoon of 11 February, Kuchler met with Zorn and Höhne. The Army Group commander demanded that the plan be accelerated to respond to the increasing Soviet pressure. He wanted the process started no later than 15 February. Zorn and Höhne were able to convince the general that the earliest possible starting date, code named Z-Tag, would be 17 or 18 February. Kuchler reluctantly agreed.²⁷

The next day, the German divisions in the salient were told that the evacuation would begin on 17 February 1943. The units were assigned the varying times at which to begin the extraction, and they were assigned their specific withdrawal routes. In addition to this, the 32 and 329 Infantry Divisions were ordered to begin the removal of heavy weaponry that was not completely necessary for battle.²⁸ The removal of heavy weapons was merely a precursor of the events that would follow in four days.

During the evening of 17 February, the 32, 329, and parts of the 122 Infantry Divisions withdrew from their positions.

²⁶ NA/T-314/144/453, "KTB 2, Band 3," dated 8 February 1943.

²⁷ NA/T-314/144/459, "KTB 2, Band 3," dated 11 February 1943.

²⁸ NA/T-314/144/462, "KTB 2, Band 3," dated 12 February 1943.

The Soviets attempted to hinder the German effort with strong attacks, but their attempts were forcefully repulsed by rear guard actions.²⁹ The German historian Werner Haupt described the repulse of the Soviet attacks:

Everywhere there were munitions dumps in which the many shells that could not be removed remained. For the very first time the German batteries were able to fire at the Soviets whatever their barrels could put forth, without any regard to their ammunition reserves. As a result of this, the enemy pressure diminished, and for four days there was little noticed in the form of enemy pursuit.³⁰

Strong snowstorms hindered the German evacuation effort as well. The weather made the roadways difficult to follow, and resulted in the abandonment of 30 percent of the 32 and 329 divisions' vehicles, as well as large quantities of medical supplies. These materials were all destroyed to prevent their falling intact into Soviet hands.³¹

Meanwhile, the Red Army launched an attack on the Landbrücke. The 290 Division was challenged by potent Soviet air attacks, which were coordinated with ground assaults conducted by large infantry units and approximately 30 tanks. A portion of the 32 Infantry Division, which was in the area

²⁹ NA/T-314/144/478, "KTB 2, Band 3," dated 18 February 1943.

³⁰ Haupt, Demjansk 1942, 151. Author's translation.

³¹ NA/T-314/144/475, "KTB 2, Band 3," dated 16 February 1943.

due to its evacuation route, was called on to bolster the 290 Division's defenses. The combined force succeeded in defending the region, thus protecting the units from being re-encircled, and allowing them to continue their evacuation.³²

The 30, parts of the 12, and the remaining portions of the 122 Infantry Divisions left their positions during the night of 19 and the early morning of 20 February.³³ The removal of troops and equipment was running smoothly. There were no major traffic back-ups, and the problems that did arise were quickly dealt with by the operations staff.³⁴

On 20 February, the city of Demyansk, which had functioned as the operational center of the German encirclement/salient, was evacuated. The Germans placed high explosives with time-delayed fuses in key buildings, so as not to let the Soviets capture them intact. What was not blown up was destroyed by fire. Only ruins were left behind for the advancing Red Army, a tactic the Germans had learned from their Soviet counterparts during the summers of 1941 and 1942. The animals that could not be transported were slaughtered,

³² NA/T-314/144/478-80, "KTB 2, Band 3," dated 18 February 1943.

³³ NA/T-314/144/481 "KTB 2, Band 3," dated 19 February 1943.

³⁴ NA/T-314/144/485, "KTB 2, Band 3," dated 20 February 1943.

the foodstuffs were either consumed or destroyed, and bridges were demolished.³⁵

The 12 Infantry Division left its last positions during the early morning hours of 22 February.³⁶ All that now remained of the former Demyansk salient was the Landbrücke. On the same day, Generalleutnant (Major General) Höhne relinquished his leadership responsibilities for the troops in the Landbrücke, and turned their command over to X Army Corps. This was done to help facilitate their absorption into the X Corps defenses in the days that followed.³⁷

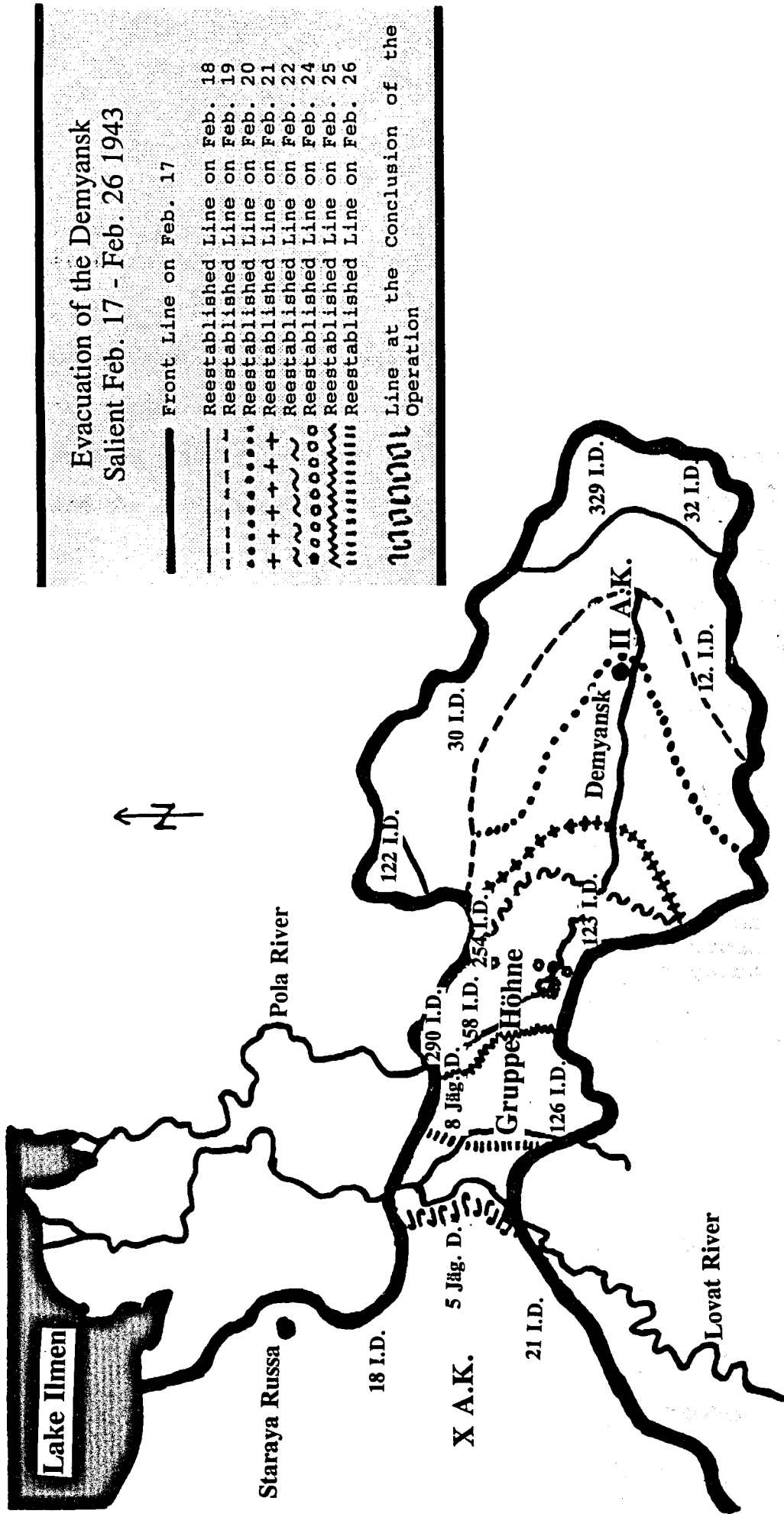
With the evacuation of the 12 Infantry Division, the II Army Corps' fourteen month mission at Demyansk had ended. In the days which followed the X Corps divisions remaining in the land bridge also relinquished their positions, so that by 26 February 1943 all units had been withdrawn and reassigned elsewhere.³⁸ The complete evacuation process took ten days — four days less than called for by Rosenthal's original plan.

³⁵ NA/T-314/144/493-4, "KTB 2, Band 3," dated 22 February 1943.

³⁶ NA/T-314/144/488, "KTB 2, Band 3," dated 21 February 1943.

³⁷ NA/T-314/144/491, "KTB 2, Band 3" dated 22 February 1943.

³⁸ Haupt, Demjansk 1942, 154.



The Evacuation of the Demyansk Salient

While the Soviets regained a 300 square kilometer area, they were able to capture only a limited quantity of spoils. The Germans were forced to abandon 300 tons of munitions, 700 tons of medical supplies, 1000 tons of miscellaneous equipment, and 500 vehicles. These remnants, however, were destroyed, almost without exception, before the Soviets could capture them. The Germans, however, were forced to pay a heavy price for their fourteen-month stay in the region. Over 10,000 German troops lost their lives due to the conflict.³⁹ Unlike their evacuating comrades, they would remain forever in the area "Südlich des Ilmensees."

The OKW briefly mentioned the evacuation action in its report of 2 March 1943:

The salient at Demyansk, against which the Soviets have fruitlessly smashed themselves for the past fourteen months, with enormous losses in men and materials, was evacuated according to plan.⁴⁰

The German Armed Forces occasionally created medals for troops who participated in notable campaigns. On 25 April 1943, Zeitzler ordered the creation of such a medal for all the officers and enlisted men who served at Demyansk. It measured nine centimeters in length, and five in width, and

³⁹ Haupt, Demjansk 1942, 156.

⁴⁰ Bericht des Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, dated 2 March 1943, as cited in Haupt, Demjansk 1942, 156.

was called the "Demjansk Schild" (Demyansk badge).⁴¹ This badge was worn on the upper arm of the left sleeve, and clearly identified a veteran of the campaign.⁴²

The battle for Demyansk was over. The troops of the Waffen SS, the Wehrmacht, the Luftwaffe, and the other miscellaneous units that fought there, displayed determination and courage in the face of a numerically superior and, ultimately, better equipped foe. Despite their tenacity, the Germans were forced to surrender the Demyansk salient to the increasingly successful Red Army. While the Germans would claim that they were not routed from the region by the Soviets, it can be stated that Soviet success elsewhere, in combination with their pressure at Demyansk, forced the Germans to evacuate. From this point forward, the German military would experience one retreat after another, until its ultimate demise in 1945.

⁴¹ Haupt, Demjansk 1942, 157.

⁴² Ambrose, Handbook on German Military Forces, 557.

Conclusion

This thesis has attempted to describe the experiences of the II Army Corps in and around Demyansk from December 1941 through February 1943. The author's purpose has been to present the reader with the little-known information pertaining to the activities that occurred at Demyansk. Despite the limited focus, there are some major parallels that can be drawn between the Demyansk campaign and the entire German-Soviet conflict. The parallels enable the reader to garner a better understanding of the war in general.

Army Group North's actions/condition in the late fall of 1941 were similar to those of Army Group Center and South, in that all were reaching the limit of their operational capabilities. The Army Groups were exhausted, and they were being hindered by two great opponents — the Red Army and the Russian winter.¹

While the German military was desperately attempting to complete its Eastern Front mission, the Red Army mounted its first successful offensive — the battle for Moscow. This contest cost Army Group Center more than half a million men, 2,500 cannons, 1,300 tanks, and over 15,000 miscellaneous motor vehicles. The persistent and numerically superior

¹ Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb, Tagebuchaufzeichnungen, 381-89.

Soviet military machine, the natural impediments, the breakdown of the German supply network over the vast Russian expanses, the unpredictable climate, and the inability of Hitler to realize that the culmination point of Operation Barbarossa had already passed: all contributed the Wehrmacht's failure at the Soviet capital.² Just as Army Group Center was routed at Moscow, so the II Corps was routed in the area south of Lake Ilmen. The major difference between the two failures was that at Moscow the Germans were driven back to hastily prepared, yet effective, winter lines, whereas at Demyansk the II Corps was encircled and was constantly confronted with the threat of annihilation.

During the spring of 1942, the Wehrmacht sought atonement for its lackluster winter performance. It concentrated forces in the area controlled by Army Group South, with the goal being the capture of Stalingrad and the Caucasus.³ Similarly, Army Group North returned to the offensive during the spring of 1942, although it did so three months prior to its southern counterpart. During the northern thrust, forces of Army Group North, under the leadership of generals Seydlitz and Zorn, were able to break the encirclement at Demyansk, thus greatly diminishing the danger that the Red Army had imposed on the II

² Janusz Piekalkiewicz, Moscow 1941: The Frozen Offensive (London: Arms & Armour Press, 1985), 274.

³ Ziemke, Moscow to Stalingrad, 289.

Corps. There was no time, however, to celebrate the positive results of the offensive.

The winter of 1942-43 was a time of great strife for the Wehrmacht. The culmination of events at Stalingrad led to the deaths of 175,000 men, and the capture of 125,000 troops — including 2500 officers, 24 Generals, and one Field Marshal.⁴ While the men of the Demyansk salient were not similarly encircled (or re-encircled) during this time period, they did suffer immensely as a result of the repeated bludgeoning administered by the Red Army, exacerbated by Hitler's emphatic command for the II Corps to stand its ground.

It was apparent following the Stalingrad debacle that the Soviet military was gaining momentum while the Wehrmacht was quickly losing it. The Germans would mount one last great offensive on the Eastern Front — at Kursk during July 1943.⁵ The Kursk offensive (code named Zitadelle), however, was crushed by the Red Army, and the military initiative was snatched away from the Wehrmacht for the last time. The long

⁴ John Bradley, Ivan V. Hogg, Anthony Preston, and Douglas Lee Welsh, The Russian War Machine (London: Bison Books Ltd., 1977), 132-3; No German Field Marshal prior to Paulus had ever been captured or surrendered. Hitler knew this, and had elevated Paulus to the rank as an "act of inspiration." The Führer expected Paulus to commit suicide rather than surrender, but the Field Marshal, as most psychologically sound individuals, preferred the latter to the former.

⁵ Alexander Werth, Russia at War 1941-1945 (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1964), 679.

and costly westward retreat had begun.⁶ The II Corps at Demyansk was also forced to retreat from its lines of operation. It was not repelled with the devastating force that had been used to dislodge the Wehrmacht troops at Stalingrad, and later at Kursk, but the results were essentially the same — terrain had been relinquished back to the Red Army, and the divisions that made up the II Corps took the first step in what was to become their bitter retreat from the Soviet Union.

By the start of 1945, the Red Army had thrown the bulk of the Wehrmacht out of the Soviet Union. The exception to this was the beleaguered remnant of Army Group North that had been totally cut off in the Latvian peninsula on the Baltic Sea. The Soviet military had engulfed most of Hungary and all of Rumania, they were positioned outside of Warsaw, and they were poised on the borders of East Prussia. At this time, the Soviets held an 11:1 superiority in infantry, a 20:1 advantage in both aircraft and heavy guns, and a 7:1 superiority in

⁶ Werth, Russia at War, 684; for more on the Battle of Kursk see Joseph E. Thach Jr., "The Battle of Kursk July 1943: Decisive Turning Point on the Eastern Front" (Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 1971). The height of the Battle of Kursk witnessed the greatest tank fight in history. On 12 July 1943, 273 tanks and assault guns of the SSTK clashed with 850 Soviet tanks and self-propelled guns at the village of Prokhorovka. Despite being outnumbered almost four-to-one, the Totenkopf Division's armor managed to fight the Soviets to a standstill. The Soviets could claim victory, however, because they were able to replace their losses, while the Germans could not. See Werth, Russia at War, 685; Sydnor, Soldiers of Destruction, 288-90.

tanks.⁷ While the German military displayed a stubborn resistance in these final days, it consisted of little more than young boys and old men who were thrown into makeshift units, and who fought the Russians out of fear rather than for military purpose. The time for Stalin's sweet victory — the victory that Zhukov and the Stavka had planned for, and the Soviet people and soldiers had sweated, bled, and died for — was at hand.

Thus, the actions of the II Corps at Demyansk are, in essence, a miniature of the entire German Eastern Front Experience. They include a successful advance in the summer of 1941 that ended in exhaustion in the early winter of 1941/42. This was followed by an effective Red Army offensive that thwarted the German effort, but that did not dislodge them from the Soviet Union. Tenacious fighting ensued for the duration of 1942, and the start of 1943. During this period of combat both sides experienced successes and suffered losses, but the combined pressure of the Soviet military, the strain of the extended German supply lines, and the harsh climate, forced the 12 divisions to retreat from their position in February 1943.

It is only fitting that the epitaph for the struggle at Demyansk, and perhaps all the Eastern Front, be written not by

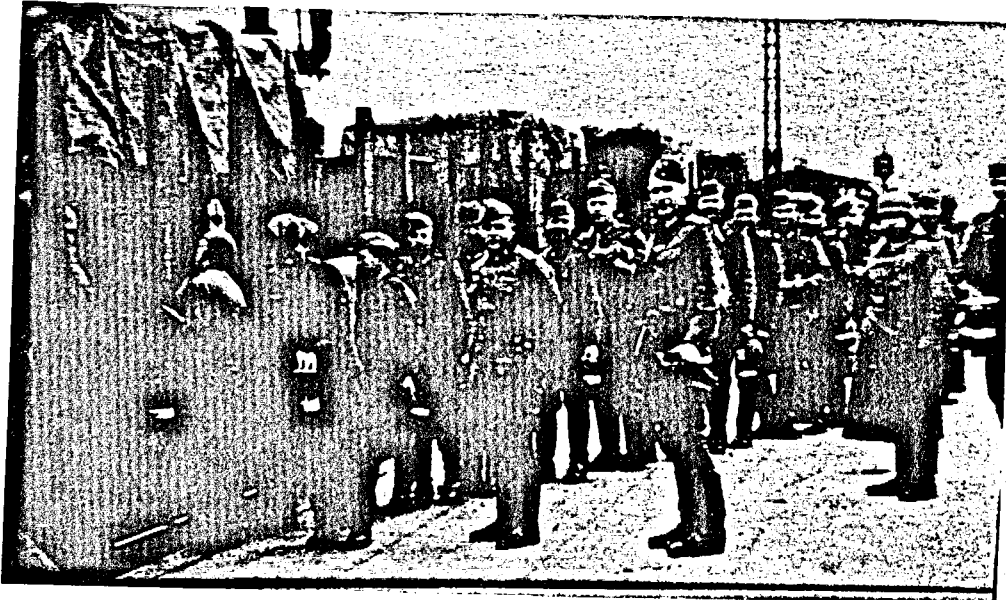
⁷ John Bradley, The Russian War Machine, 214-5.

an individual nestled safely behind the glowing screen of his word processor, but rather by an individual who had personally endured the hardships of the conflict. The words of a Styrian pastor, who fought beside his parishioners throughout the prolonged years of the war as part of a Gebirgsjäger unit, best serve this purpose:

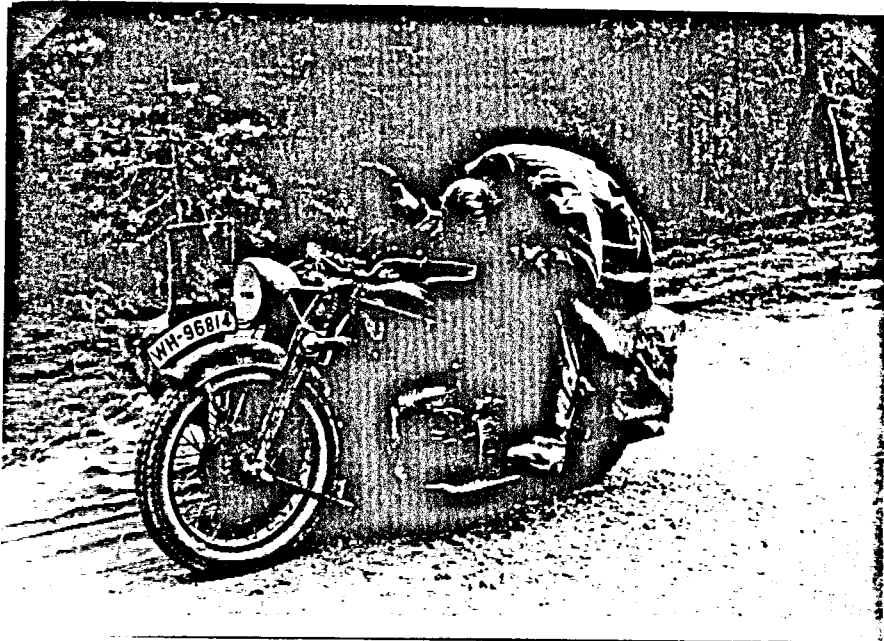
Today I buried some more of my former parishioners, Gebirgsjäger, who have died in this frightful land. Three more letters to write to add to the total of all those which I have written already in this war. The deleted names of the fallen are now more numerous in my pocket diary than the names of the living. My parish is bleeding to death on the plains of this country. We shall all die out here.⁸

⁸ James Lucas, War On The Eastern Front 1941-1945: The German Soldier In Russia (London: Jane's Publishing Company, 1979), 207.

Appendix



1. Troops of the Fifth Jäger Division board a train in France during the first phase of their advance into the Soviet Union (March 1941).



2. Exhausted motorcycle troops of the Fifth Jäger Division rest during a lull in Army Group North's 1941 advance into the Soviet Union.



3. German troops encounter the rasputitsa (the Russian muddy-season) during their 1941 advance into the Soviet Union.



4. A medical unit of the Fifth Jäger Division conducts its business while JU 52's, laden with supplies for the II Corps, fly overhead.



5. Wounded German troops await treatment at a German Army field hospital unit.



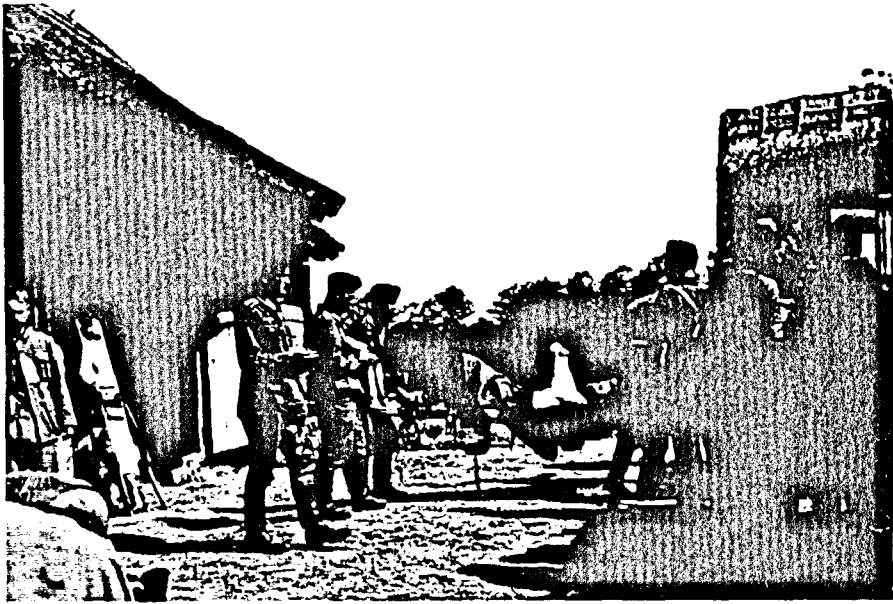
6. Members of the Fifth Jäger Division's medical corps sterilize instruments utilizing an empty ammunition case.



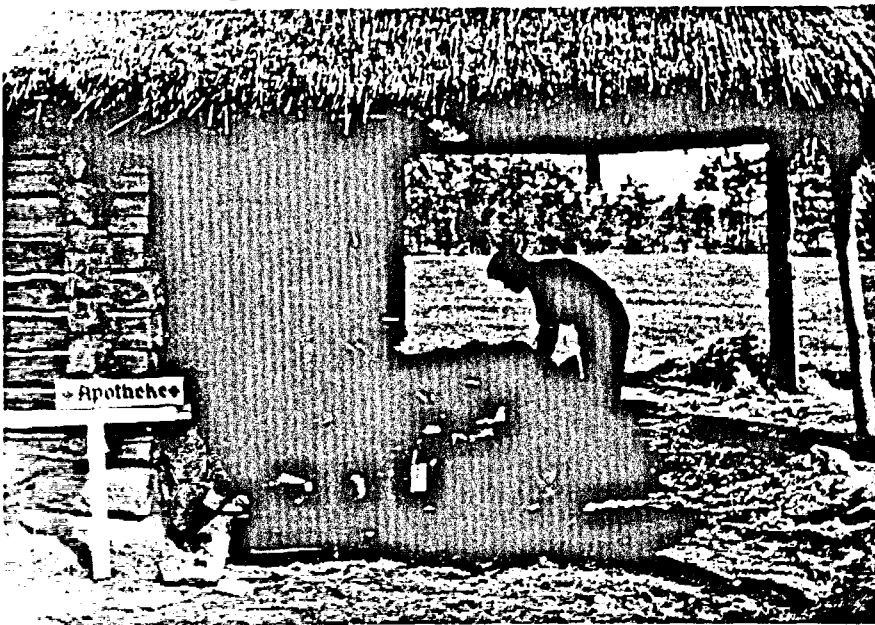
7. Wounded members of the Fifth Jäger Division being transported on a tank to a field hospital during fighting south of Lake Ilmen. Tanks were utilized to transport wounded when the terrain and situation merited.



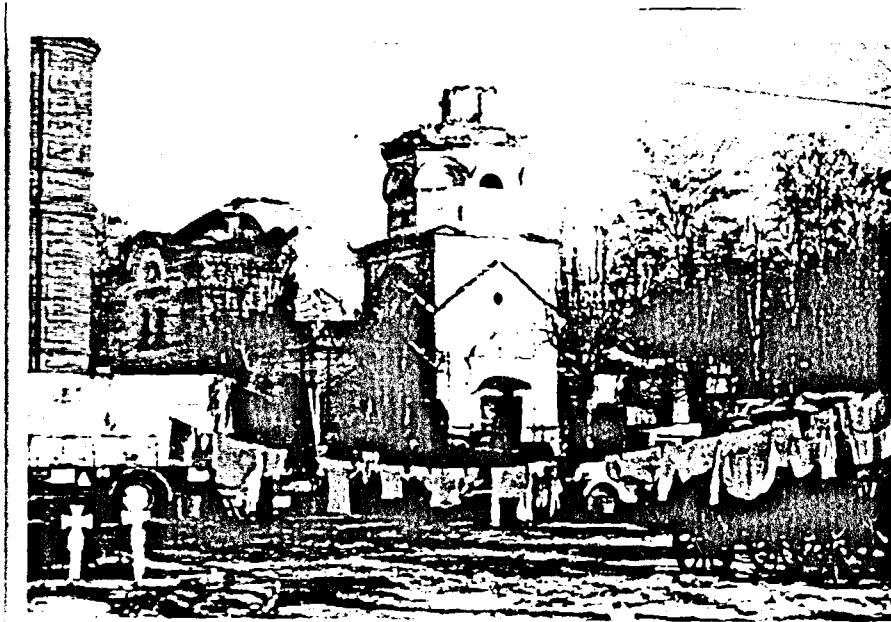
8. A German soldier receives dental treatment during a lull in the fighting around Demyansk.



9. The Fifth Jäger Division's surgical unit set up in a Russian peasant dwelling (Summer 1941). The soldier second in from the left (wearing glasses and no cap) is the author's grandfather.



10. The Fifth Jäger Division's apothecary set up in a Russian peasant dwelling (Summer 1941).



11. An image of Staraya Russa (Winter/Spring 1942). Note the German graves on the bottom left.



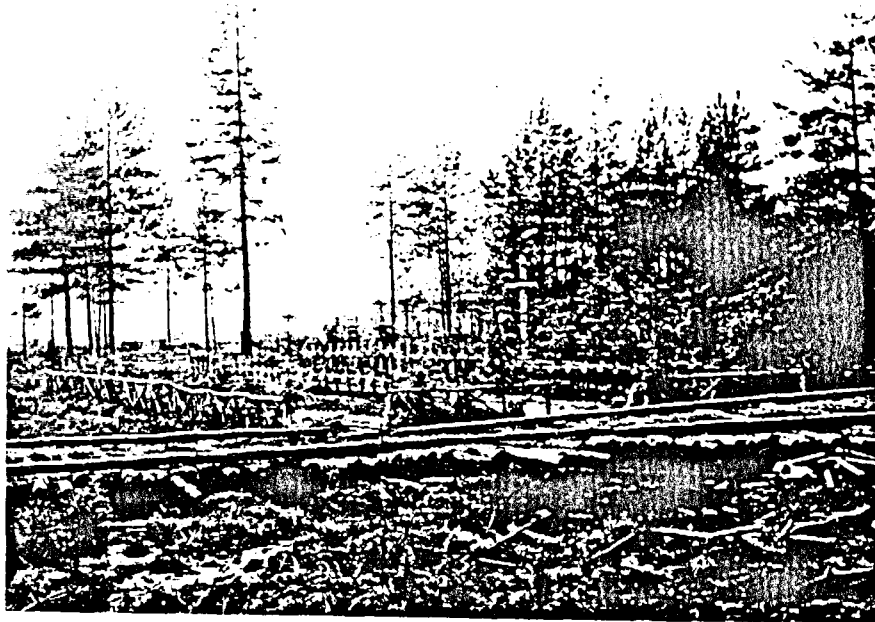
12. A building in Staraya Russa burns following a Soviet bombardment (Winter/Spring 1942).



13. A German supply wagon, carrying hay for the horses of the II Corps, gets bogged-down in the mud of the spring thaw (Spring 1942).



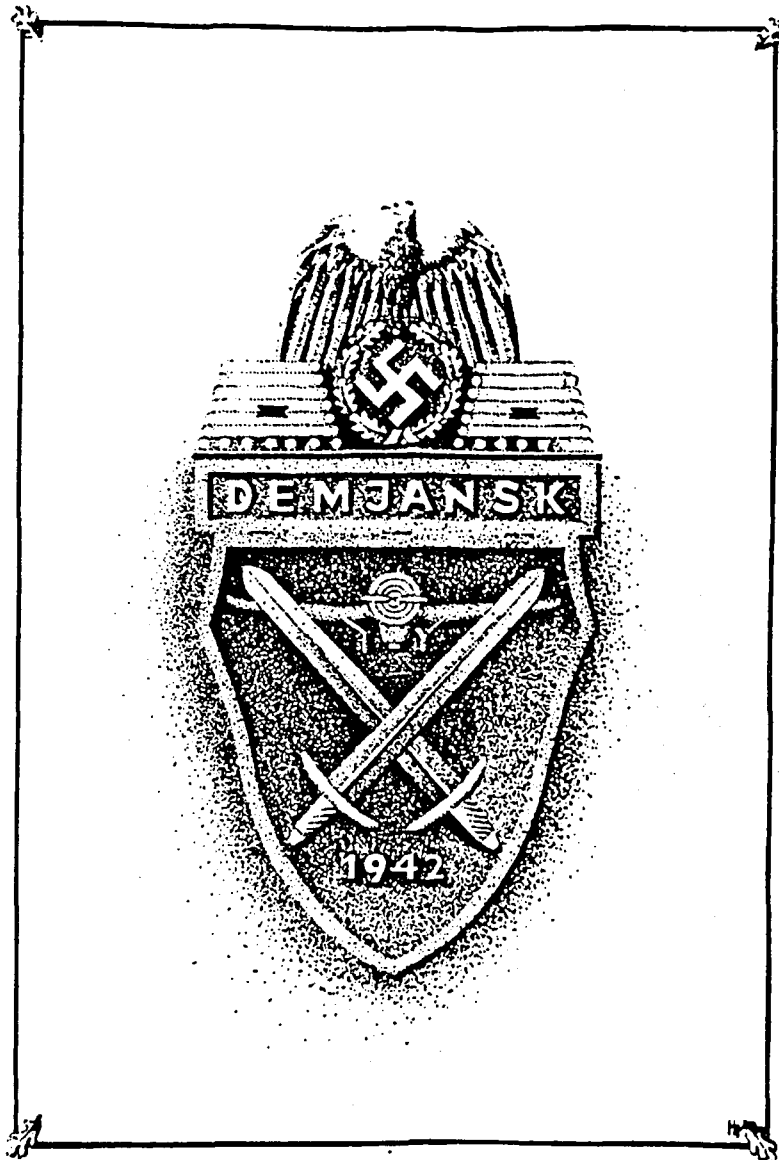
14. & 15. Images from a mud covered Soviet road (Spring 1942).



16. A corduroy road, built by the Germans to assist in the transportation of troops and supplies during the muddy-season (Spring 1942). Note the German cemetery in the background.



17. The Landbrücke (Schlauch) and one of the many signs that adorned it.



18. The "Demjansk Schild"



19. View of the Fifth Jäger Division's cemetery, south of Lake Ilmen (Winter/Spring 1942).



20. View of the Fifth Jäger Division's cemetery, south of Lake Ilmen (Winter/Spring 1942).

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About the Author

Andrew (Drew) Karl Koch was born on 11 March, 1968 in Elizabeth, New Jersey. The son of German immigrants, Koch grew up in an environment where the German language, culture, and history were emphasized. In May 1990, he received his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Richmond, where he majored in German and History. The following fall, Drew began the Master of Arts program at the same institution, while simultaneously working on secondary education certification in Social Studies and German. At present, Andrew is a candidate for the Masters Degree in Education with an emphasis in Higher Education Administration at the University of South Carolina.