SS Hell On The Eastern Front

The Waffen-SS War In Russia 1941–1945



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CHAPTER 1

THE IDEOLOGICAL WAR



Adolf Hitler, Chancellor of Germany, inspects an honour guard of the Leibstandarte in Germany in the late 1930's. To his right is Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler.

The troops of the *Waffen-SS* were ideologically motivated, especially those who first fought in Russia. But to understand this fanatical dedication to SS principles, one has to look at from its humble beginnings, the development of the organisation. The growth it achieved and the ideological indoctrination received from the hands of Eicke and the like. These members of the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* and the *SS-Verfügungstruppe* were to form the nucleus of the Waffen-SS. Hitler surrounded in the early days of Nazism, by the unwieldy *Sturmabteilung*, or SA who were mainly tough unemployed ex-soldiers who frequented München beer halls and were recruited by Röhm to

protect Nazi speakers. These *SA* bodyguards grew in number, acted under Röhm's orders rather than Hitler's, who realised the necessity of organising a more dedicated élite personal guard. It should not be large, but must consist of men of proven calibre, Nordic blood and good character, and act as bodyguard with an unequivocal allegiance to Hitler. They had to protect both Hitler and important members of his party, while they travelled the breadth of Germany furthering its cause. In March 1923 the embryo SS consisted of just two men - Josef Berchtold and Julius Schreck, who called themselves the *Stabswache* or staff guard. Two months later a new unit, the *Stosstruppe Adolf Hitler* and commanded by Josef Berchtold, was formed. After the München Putsch, which ended in a fiasco, resulting in the leaders being arrested, Hitler imprisoned and the *NSDAP* banned. Himmler escaped prosecution and returned to Landshut where he sold advertising space in the Völkischer Beobachter. He became General Secretary to Gregor Strasser, who, in February 1925, agreed to disband his party and assimilate it into the reformed NSDAP. Himmler now found himself a local party official with command over the tiny SS in his district. Strasser was appointed Reich propaganda leader of the *NSDAP* in September 1926 and Himmler accompanied him to party headquarters as his secretary.

In April 1925, Hitler ordered his chauffeur and personal bodyguard, Julius Schreck, to raise a new shock troop. A few weeks later it was named the *Schutzstaffel* or protection squad. The new *SS* was to be organised on a national basis; each major city was called upon to provide one leader and ten of its best men but by 1928 it had only 280 members.



Members of the Stosstruppe Adolf Hitler, the forerunner of the SS. Formed in May 1923, it was commanded by Josef Berchtold. His task was to protect Hitler at all times and serve him unswervingly. The unit was involved in the abortive Munich Putsch of 9th November 1923, in which Hitler made a farcical attempt to take over Bavaria.

Himmler's organising ability had not gone unnoticed and he was appointed Deputy *SS* Leader and then National Leader in January 1929, with the rank of *SS-Oberführer*, when he commanded approximately 1,000 men, but it was still a part of the *SA*. Himmler began gradually to assert the separation of the SS from the SA. Himmler brought in biological criteria and the concept of racial purity into new recruitment plans to trawl through the large number of applications from ex-Freikorps and unemployed bourgeois volunteers. The army, which perceived Röhm and his *SA* as a rival, took a favourable view to the *SS* as a force and with Himmler's organisational skills concentrated on the *SS's* breadth of function and growth in size, providing him with a

personal power base. By 1930 the *SS* numbered 2,727 men; in June 1932, when Brüning's decree banned the *SA*, the *SS* had grown to 30,000 or approximately 10% of the *SA's* strength.

The political situation in Germany was seen to degenerate and take on the guise of near civil war. The Socialists and the Communist Party fielded armed militia, to which the *SA* and *SS* replied with force. Ten *SS* men were killed with several hundred wounded during the violent street battles with the *Rötfrontkämpferbund*, or Red Front Fighters' Association. It suited the *NSDAP's* book to create the illusion that the country was on the slippery slope to all out anarchy, with the crucial 1933 elections approaching, and that the party held the key to the political problems that abounded. On 30th January, Hitler became Chancellor and the *SS* had secretly recruited 52,000 more members.

On the eve of the arson attack on the Reichstag, 27th February 1933, Diels reported to Hitler that the culprit, Marinus van der Lubbe, was in custody and it was the work of a single demented pyromaniac. Hitler blamed the communists and burst out in fury "This is a cunning plot! Every communist official must be shot. All communist deputies must be hanged this very night." Two days later Hitler issued a "Decree for the protection of people and State". This gave police powers to the *SA* and *SS*. 25,000 *SA* and 15,000 *SS* men were issued with firearms and deployed as *Hilfspolizei* or Auxiliary policemen. This also empowered the police presidents to take anyone into protective custody considered to be a political opponent in the broadest sense of the term. The Reichstag fire, this affront to democracy perpetrated by communists, permitted Hitler to flex his political muscle and the Parties left-wing protagonists began to be unceremoniously ushered into prisons and makeshift unofficial camps or 'wild man camps', so called due to the lack of supervision and the frightful stories of brutality which leapt from them.



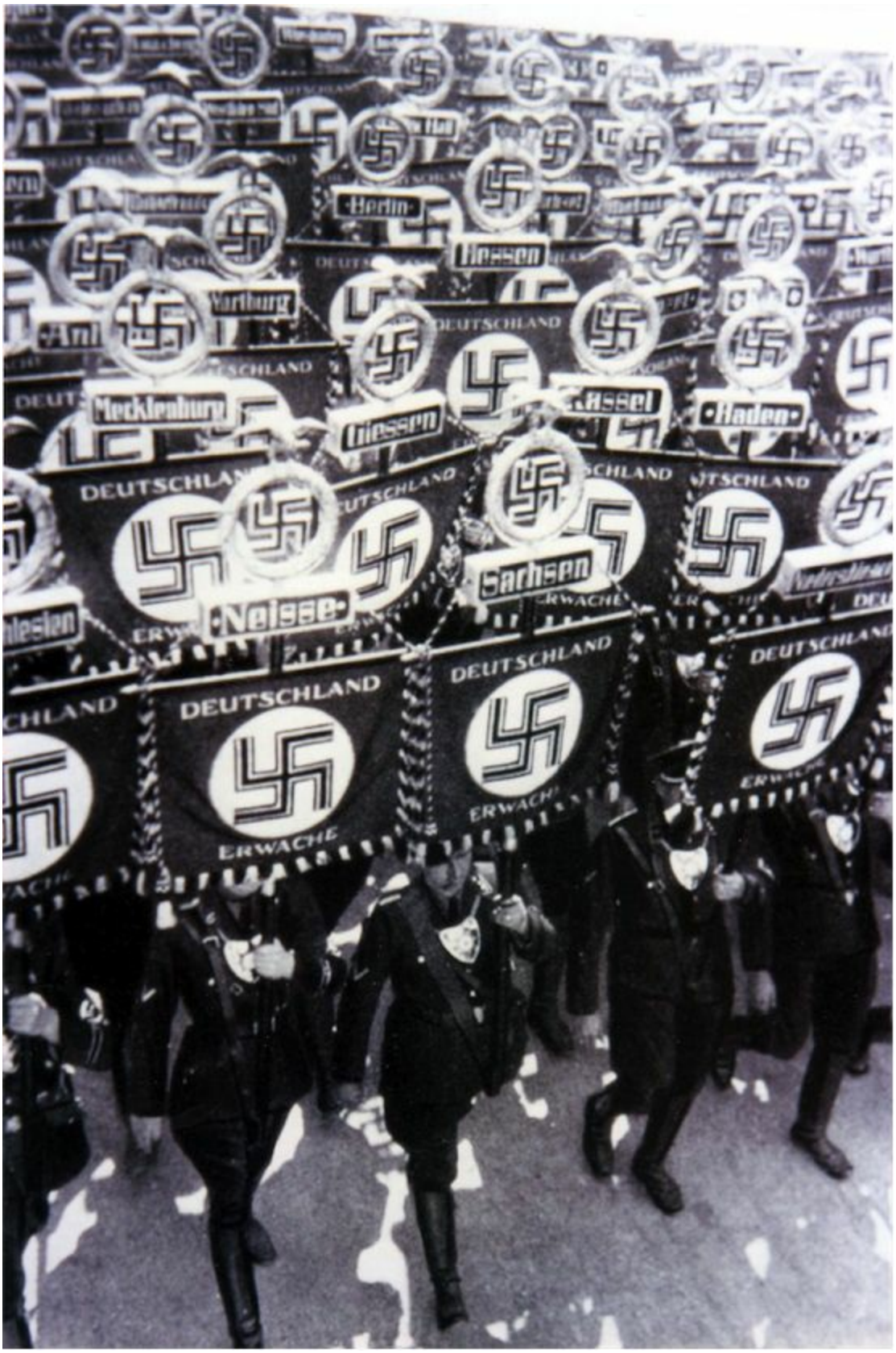
A rare photograph of the first SS volunteers, taken in 1925. In April of that year Hitler had ordered his chauffeur and personal bodyguard, Julius Schreck, to raise a new unit. It was called the Schutzstaffel – Protection Squad – and initially numbered eight men. What was to become the most infamous organisation in modern history was thus born.

A decree on 26th April 1933 established the *Geheime Staats Polizeiamt* (GESTAPA) which was later to be renamed *Geheime Staats Polizei* (Gestapo), as a new department of the Prussian state police affiliated with the minister of the interior, to be headed by Diels. The Gestapo became the target for Himmler, who was rising to power and desperate to control it, bringing Diels into conflict with him. Also the *SS* divided into two distinct groups: the *Allgemeine-SS*, which fulfilled a police function and was basically part time, and the newly emergent *Bewaffnete-SS* or Armed *SS* which was military in

appearance and full-time. The assassination of the chief of staff of the *SA*, Ernst Röhm, on 30th June 1934 and the decree of 26th July that recognised the part the *SS* had played in the purging of the *SA* and promoted it to the status of an independent organisation within the *NSDAP*, was the turning point in the struggle for supremacy over the *SA*. Himmler set about implementing his theories of a racially and ideologically élite force, devoting his life to the expanding of the *SS* and giving it many facets. Himmler concerned himself with the perfecting of a future German élite through the *SS*. Not only would they be of guaranteed Aryan stock, but would be encouraged to form the new race through the *Lebensborn* network of maternity homes. The *SS* entered its second phase of rapid expansion and by the outbreak of the Second World War the *Allgemeine-SS* numbered some 240,000 part time members, who were kept in readiness in case of an internal strife by a small regular staff. Members of the *Allgemeine-SS* were called up for service in the armed forces or the *Waffen-SS*, to such an extent that many *Allgemeine-SS* units survived in name only.

Himmler became Polizeipräsident of München after Hitler became Chancellor in January 1933. This modest post enabled him to gradually gain control of the German police network except in Prussia, where Göring was Minister of the Interior. But he finally achieved complete control in 1936. From the security point of view he took over the *Geheime Staatspolizei*, or Gestapo, and made it a Europe-wide organisation. Heydrich was brought to Himmler's notice, who found him appealing; his considerable organisational abilities, total ruthlessness, the intensity of anti-Semitism and his Nordic appearance were self-evident or were soon to be so. Himmler perhaps perceived the perverse view that Heydrich's fear of being considered Jewish, or partly Jewish, would be a means of controlling his talented associate. Through Heydrich and the *Sicherheitsdienst* or SD he formed an intelligence

service that covered internal and external operations.


Berlin
Hessen
Vorburg
Mecklenburg
Hessen
Kassel
Baden
DEUTSCHLAND
Sachsen
Neisse
ERWACHE
DEUTSCHLAND
DEUTSCHLAND
DEUTSCHLAND
ERWACHE
ERWACHE

Under Himmler's guidance the SS became an élite in Nazi Germany, which, in his own words, "hesitates not for a single instance, but executes unquestioningly any order coming from the Führer".

Himmler's man of steel was *SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Waffen-SS* Theodor Eicke, who was to play a key role in the liquidation of Röhm and his supporters. Röhm having refused to shoot himself, was dispatched by Eicke in his cell at Stadelheim prison at midday on 1st July. That summer most of the unofficial camps or 'wild man camps' were closed. The remaining *SA* camps were removed from the jurisdiction of the civil authorities and taken over by the *SS*. The first full time *SS Konzentrationslage*r, concentration camp, unit was recruited from members of the *Allgemeine-SS* and entirely under the overall command of the *SS* District South who made it a depository for its unwanted personnel. The conditions that the guards lived under were little better than the inmates. In June 1934 Eicke took command. He improved conditions, lifted the morale and discipline of his men and formulated service regulations for both guards and prisoners which remained virtually unchanged until the end of the war. In recognition Himmler appointed him inspector of concentration camps and head of the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* in 1934.

Within three hours of Hindenburg's death on 2nd August 1934 Göbbels announced the fusing of the two roles of Chancellor and President. The only barrier between Hitler and unrestrained power had fallen, he was now in the position to dictate and reward. In return for the services the *SS* had rendered in the Night of the Long Knives, the Army had to come to terms with the existence of an armed paramilitary force and its planned expansion. The chief of the three branches of the *Wehrmacht* were officially advised on 24th September 1934 of the creation of the *SS-Verfügungstruppe*. It was to be formed on a basis of three regiments modelled on infantry regiments of the

army, each to contain three battalions, a mortar company and a motor-cycle company as well as being supported by a signals battalion. It also provided for 3 officer cadet schools. The formation was to be under the personal command of the *Reichsführer-SS* except in time of war when it was to come under the control of the army.

Hitler decided that he was in need of a Praetorian Guard. The state provided protection rendered by the *Reichswehr* or Police elements could not in his eyes be entirely replied upon. Without delay Hitler decreed that there be formed a new full-time armed *SS* unit, who's primary rôle would be exclusively to escort him wherever he was in Germany. Sepp Dietrich, one of Hitlers closest associates, was entrusted with the formation of the unit. Hitler was later to describe Dietrich as "unique, a man who's simultaneously cunning, energetic and brutal".

Dietrich undertook the task with zeal and by the 17th March 1933 the embryo of a new Headquarters Guard named the *SS Stabswache "Berlin"* was founded. It comprised 120 hand picked volunteers, of whom some were former members of the *Stosstrupp Adolf Hitler* and who's loyalty to the Führer was unswerving. Two months later the unit was reformed as the *SS Sonderkommando Zossen* and enlarged with three training companies. The terms of engagement for the unit were expanded and the unit could now be employed for armed police and anti-terrorist activities as well as the guard duties it already undertook. There was another metamorphosis during the next months when a further three companies were formed as the *SS Sonderkommando Jüterbog*. A rally was held on 31st August 1933 to marked the Nazi accession to power. Known as the *Parteitag des Siegers* or Victor's Party Rally, it was a fitting occasion for Hitler to formally recognised the Adolf Hitler *SS* Standart and the dedication of the *SS Standarten* or regiments took place. This was formed from *SS-Sonderkommando Zossen* and *SS-*

Sonderkommando Jüterbog. SS-Grüppenführer Sepp Dietrich received the banner with the name Adolf Hitler on the box that surmounted it. The two *Sonderkommandos* were granted the honour and right to wear the name Adolf Hitler on a cuff band on the left arm. The merged formation was renamed the *Leibstandarte - SS "Adolf Hitler"* or LAH. The ceremonial consecration was formalised in front of the Feldherrnhalle on the occasion of the Commemoration of the München Putsch on 9th November 1933. Here the members of the *Leibstandarte* took a personal oath of allegiance to Hitler. This dispelled any thoughts that these men were anything but his personal cohort. Himmler theoretically had control over the unit, however in reality the ultimate director of its function was Hitler conjoined with the fact of his personal friendship with the Guard Commander Sepp Dietrich assumed an independence within the *SS* organisation for the *Leibstandarte* that no other unit enjoyed. This led Himmler to complain that it was "a complete law unto itself."

The *Leibstandarte* was used in the Röhm Putsch, employed in the arrests with the detainees being reposted in the Lichterfelde Barracks. It was also instrumental in many of the killings. The number of executions undertaken by the *Leibstandarte* firing squads is unknown, but it is reported that there were in the order of 40 executioners employed. The *Leibstandartes* "first blooding" was over when the shooting finally ended on 2nd July.



Theodor Eicke, Inspector of Concentration Camps and later commander of the Totenkopf Division. Tough, cruel and humourless, he indoctrinated his men with an unremitting hatred for everything non – Nazi.

For their loyalty and involvement, Dietrich was rewarded with promise by

Hitler that he would see that the *Leibstandarte* would become a fully equipped regiment. The *Leibstandarte* was further honoured in early October 1934 when it was decided that it should be fully motorised. At this time the *Reichswehr* in the main was still horse drawn and this decision led to hushed whispers of discontent in military circles. The Political Readiness Detachments were to be reorganised into battalions and then amalgamated within the *Leibstandarte* under Himmler's orders of 14th December 1934. The *Leibstandarte* now consisted:

1 Staff, 3 motorised infantry battalions, 1 motorcycle company, 1 motor company, 1 signals platoon, 1 armoured car platoon, 1 regimental band.

How were the recruits selected and indoctrinated in the *SS* generally and particularly the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* and the *SS-Verfügungstruppe*? Young university educated men, products of the national Youth Movement, were encouraged to join the *SS*. Many joined whose motivation was purely power and a fear of a return to the chaos and instability of the inflation years. Predominately lawyers and economists, these men tended to gravitate to the *Sicherheitsdienst* or the *SS-Hauptampt* which was to become later the *Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungshauptampt.* Some volunteered for the fledgling *SS-Verfügungstruppe,* however a greater proportion of the *SS-Verfügungstruppe's* officer cadres were middle class soldiers who transferred from the *Reichswehr,* the small standing army Germany was permitted under the terms of the Versailles Treaty. The officer classes were initially more difficult to persuade. Men from this background were unimpressed by the undisciplined rabble which comprised in the early days 90 per cent of *SS* membership. Revamping the *SS* with a new image of class and respectability required discreet political overtures being made to certain highly respected members of the old German aristocracy. Several of its prominent members, including the Grand Duke of Mecklenburg and the Princes of Waldeck and

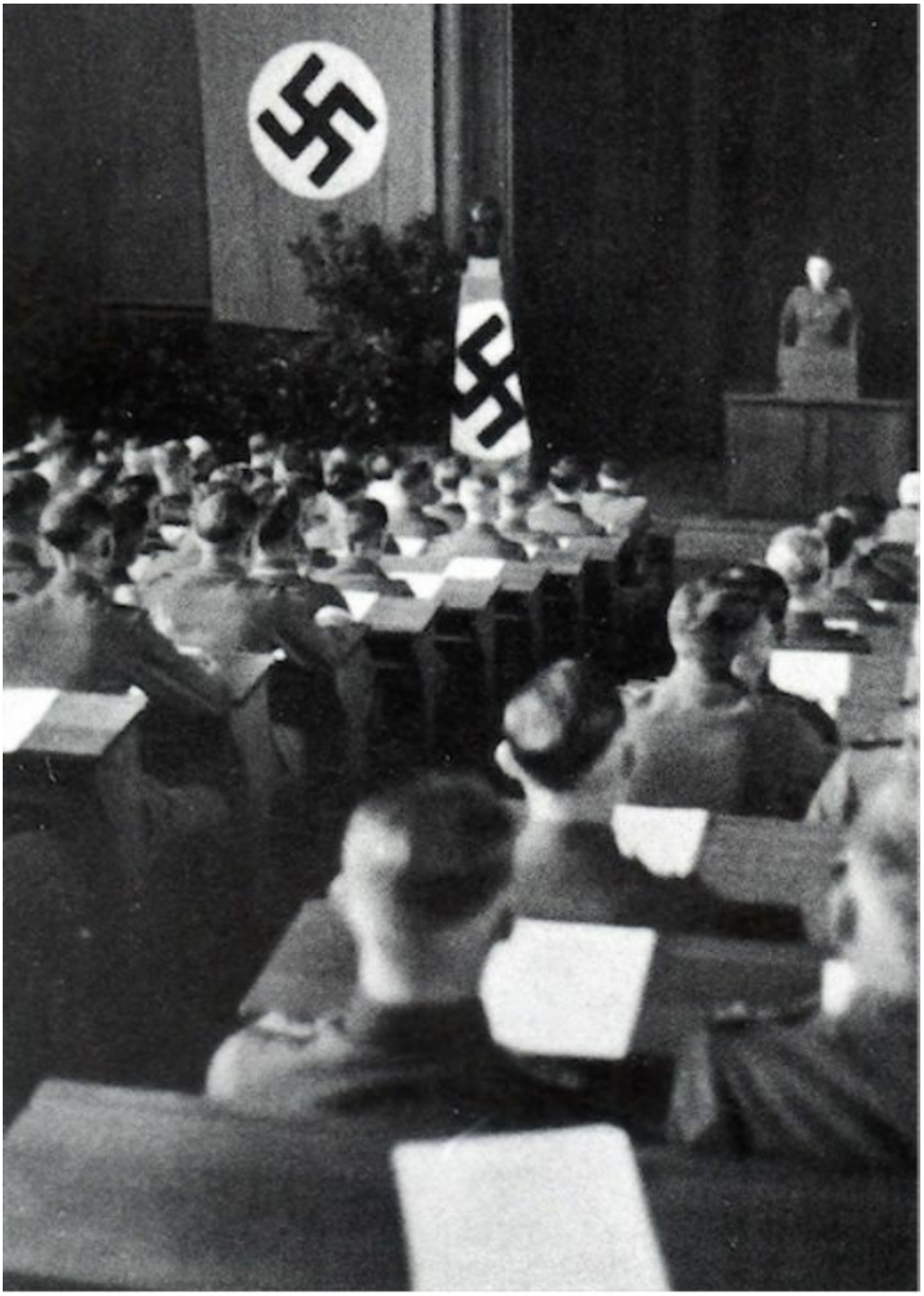
Hess, surprisingly responded favourably. In concert with the former political overtures went cleansing programs resulting in some 60,000 men being expelled from the *SS* between 1933 and 1935. Purging it of outright criminals, homosexuals, alcoholics, the “professionally unemployed “and anyone who could not prove he had no Jewish blood. Standards were tightened for admission, racial purity, physical fitness, height and the lack of a criminal record became prerequisites for acceptance. The *Leibstandarte* disbarred, at this period, a man from it’s ranks if he had a single tooth filled. The result of these two polices was that by 1938 12 per cent of *SS* officers holding the rank of *SS-Standartenführer* or higher came from the military aristocracy.



Reinhard Tristian Eugen Heydrich, Himmler's deputy and probably the most ruthless individual in the Nazi Party after Hitler. During World War II he organised the Einsatzgruppen in the East.

Another group whose recruitment into the *SS* was actively encouraged by

Himmler, with his quaint rustic ideals, was farmers' sons such as Walther Darré. He wrote a book, in which he advanced his philosophy that the Germans were both farmers and warriors.



Students attending a lecture on Nazi ideology at the SS officer training school at Bad

Tölz. The SS training schools were heavily influenced by the Inspector of the SS – Verfügungstruppe, the able Paul Hausser.

He recognised no clear division between nobility and peasantry. Every free man is noble in essence, since he can bear arms. He felt that Nordism was on the wane in Germany and he linked this with the decline among the peasants. He considered that it was fundamental to create a new nobility, composed not of individuals, but of families. He thus intimately linked the concept of blood and earth. For him there was no racism without roots. The earth is not made solely to feed people, but also to provide them with physical and moral health. He summed up his ideas in a formula, "The death of the peasant is the death of our people. It is not merely bread which grows in furrows; it is men also." Darré considered Christianity to be an evil influence, destroying the original concept of Germanism. Himmler embodied these thoughts into *SS* ideology and in fact the *SS* was never entirely to lose its rural flavour. Himmler tried but never succeeded to make the *SS* a religious body, however his anti-Christian policies deterred many men who would have volunteered and would have been found suitable. Under these conditions and the rigorous standards now employed the supply of acceptable recruits began to dwindle.

At the age of 18 a *Hitlerjugend* - Hitler Youth - became an *SS-Bewerber*, or applicant. On the Reich's Party Day of the same year he was accepted as an *SS-Anwärter* or candidate and given an *SS* identity card. After a short probationary period he took the oath of allegiance to Adolf Hitler.

At the age of 19 or 19½, depending on when his age group was called, he went into the Labour Service and then into the Armed Forces

He returned to the *SS*, still as a candidate, if he elected not to remain in the Armed Forces as a as a regular or non-commissioned officer candidate after his 2 years service. The candidate was given special philosophical training,

the principles of the *SS* being thoroughly explained, in particular the marriage order and code of honour of the *SS*. Subject to fulfilling all the special requirements, the *SS* candidate was finally accepted as an *SS* man. On 9th November, after his return from the Armed Forces, at a special ceremony he vowed that he and his relations would for ever observe the basic laws of the *SS*. The newly ordained *SS* man was given the right to wear the *SS* dagger and from that day forth it was his right and duty, as was law in the *SS*, to defend his honour, according to the code of honour of the Black Corp. He remained in the *Allgemeine-SS* on the active list until he was 35 years of age, when, upon application, he was placed on the *SS* Reserve list.

Pre-war there were different qualification standards for the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* recruits and those of the *SS-Verfügungstruppe*. To join the *Leibstandarte* or *SS-Verfügungstruppe* a recruit had to be at least 5ft 11" and later 6ft 0.5" tall and between the ages of 17 and 22. For the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* the height restriction was only 5ft 7.5" which was later reduced to 5ft 6.7" tall and the upper age limit was 26. Neither organisation insisted on educational qualifications and before 1938 40% of *SS* recruits had only received what could be termed primary school education. Insistence on being able to prove their Aryan decent, in good physical and mental condition and to have clean police records was crucial. Himmler boasted in 1937 that "we still choose only 15 out of every 100 candidates who present themselves." The result was inevitable, standards would have to be lowered to allow Himmler to continue expanding his empire. Gradually the religious standards and those pertaining to height and physical fitness were eroded together with the all important racial criteria. Service in the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* for non-commissioned officers and men was twelve years. Since this duty did not count as military service, Hitler ordered that volunteers be chosen from among those "who, as a rule, have served their

compulsory military duty in the army." Most of the men recruited for the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* before the issuance of the Führer Decree were youngsters between seventeen and nineteen, and this practice did not altogether cease after 1938.

Eicke aimed to create a hatred for the churches as enemies of National Socialism by initiating a vehement anti-religious campaign in the *SS-Totenkopfverbände*, and many individuals who clung to their beliefs were victimised mercilessly. *SS-Totenkopfverbände* personnel were pressured intensely to renounce their church affiliation which resulted in a substantial majority making official renunciations of Christianity by late 1936. Eicke's efforts had been rewarded, however these renunciations often left a legacy of unbridgable rifts between parents and their sons. Political fanaticism, élitism and camaraderie were Eicke's key doctrines and he made energetic efforts to infuse them into every members of the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* hoping that these tenants would give them a sense of their own uniqueness within the *SS*.



Felix Steiner, the progenitor of Waffen – SS tactics. A World War I veteran, he was instrumental in creating SS soldiers who were very fit, highly motivated and trained in the tenets of mobile warfare.

Eicke viewed that the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* as an élite within the élite structure of the *SS*. This concept grew from the fact that the most dangerous political enemies of the state were incarcerated in the concentration camps and Hitler had given sole responsibility for guarding and running the camps, to *the SS-Totenkopfverbände*. Eicke pressed home his principles habitually in orders, circulars and memoranda.



SS-Totenkopf recruits relax in the heady days just before the outbreak of World War II. By this time the formations of the armed SS had superb élan, and their officers had been taught to lead by example, which often resulted in their high casualties during the war. This was all part of the ethos of the SS, a close community with its rules and loyalties.

The whole of the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* training he based on élitism, toughness and comradeship together with a regime of ruthless discipline. The slightest infractions of *SS* rules brought harsh and often brutal punishment. Each month was split into three weeks in training, followed by one week of guard duty within the concentration camp. The training, both political and military, was designed to instil a state of mind, shape the attitude, and colour the outlook of the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* man. Participation in camp guard duty gave him exposure to the prisoners and conditions in the camps, this experience Eicke felt would underpin the lessons learned during his training, strengthening the resolve that the prisoners were inferior but implacable enemies of the German State. Eicke's fanatersium new no bounds, the *SS* had

to wage an unending struggle against them. The *SS-Totenkopfverbände's* behaviour suggests he created an atmosphere conducive to indoctrinated political fanaticism which gave rise to the excesses they perpetrated.

Political training was divided into three broad areas. The first dealt with the history of the Nazi party, and included an examination of the party program. The second involved the history and racial beliefs of the *SS* with special emphasis placed upon the *SS-Totenkopfverbände*. The third and most important part required a careful analysis of the enemies of National Socialism. In order of importance these were, 1 the Jews, 2 Freemasonry, 3 Bolshevism and 4 the Churches.

Eicke was appointed Inspector of concentration camps and head of the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* by Himmler in 1934. The inspectorate was established at Oranienburg, near Berlin, and the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* enlarged and reorganised into five numbered *Sturmbanne* or battalions, *I "Oberbayern"*, II "Elbe", III "Sachsen" IV "Ostfriesland" and *V "Thüringen"*. In 1937 the five battalions were again reorganised, this time into three *Standarten* which carried the designations *"Oberbayern"*, *"Brandenburg"*, and *"Thüringen"*. They were stationed in Dachau, Oranienburg and Frankenberg respectively. A few months later *Standarte "Thüringen"* was transferred from Frankenberg to the Buchenwald concentration camp in Weimar. After the Austrian Anshluß a fourth regiment bearing the name *"Ostmark"* was established at Linz later providing the guards for Mauthausen camp. As of 1st April 1938 the organisation of the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* was fixed at: 4 *Standarten* of 3 *Sturmbanne* with 3 infantry companies comprising 148 men, 1 machine-gun company comprising 150 men and medical, transport and communications units. By the end of 1938 Eicke's men had all received some basic military training. When the Second World War broke out he formed a division from the *Totenkopf* units, undergoing military training at

Obermünsigen Württemberg during the winter of 1939.



SS–Verfügungstruppe personnel on exercise somewhere in Germany". By the time World War II broke out, the SS contained soldiers who were both fanatical and disdainful of death.

On 16th March 1935 Hitler announced to the German parliament, in direct contravention to the Treaty of Versailles, that he had re-introduced military conscription and officially established the *SS-Verfügungstruppe*. The intention was always that the *SS-Verfügungstruppe* would benefit from the highest possible standards of training available. Two highly regarded former

army officers, Paul Hausser and Felix Steiner, were recruited for this purpose. Both were ultimately to become among the finest field commanders of the *Waffen-SS*. The *SS-Hauptamt,* or Main Office, established on 30th July 1935, was to organise all branches of the *SS* and a special Inspectorate of the *SS-Verfügungstruppe* was also created on 1st October 1936, to supervise administration and military training. The new inspectorate had the objective of moulding the mainly ill-trained and far flung units of the *SS-Verfügungstruppe* into an efficient fighting force. *SS-Oberstgruppenführer und Generaloberst der Waffen-SS* Paul Hausser, who was to become known affectionately as "Papa" Hausser to his men, was chosen as inspector of the *SS-Verfügungstruppe,* although he had only just been appointed inspector of the *SS-Junkerschule,* Officer Schools, at Bad Tölz and Brunswick. Once these two *SS* officer training schools had been established he began attracting increasing numbers of former police officials and *Reichswehr* NCOs into the fledgling *SS-Verfügungstruppe*. Hausser readily accepted the responsibility for the organisation and training of the *SS-Verfügungstruppe* which enabled him to formulate the directives and codes of practice it was to use. Few men brought the leadership qualifications with them as did Paul Hausser and under his guidance the inspectorate fused the *SS-Verfügungstruppe* into a formidable organisation. Hausser remained inspector until the outbreak of the Second World War, when he took command of the "Das Reich*" division* of the *Waffen-SS.*

Felix Steiner was the luminary when it came to the actual training programme of the *SS-Verfügungstruppe.* He was sixteen years Hausser's junior, with a charismatic personality. In 1935 he joined the *SS-Verfügungstruppe* and helped to develop the III battalion of the *SS-Standarte Deutschland,* stationed in München and the *SS* training camp at Dachau. He was promoted to command that *Standarte* in 1936. He applied his military

training to the men, instituting rigorous training schedules in application of his motto ‘sweat saves blood.’. Steiner held revolutionary ideas in comparison to the staid and traditional training with its emphasis on “Square bashing” given to army recruits. He believed strongly in the creation of élite, highly mobile groups whose training put the emphasis on individual responsibility and military teamwork rather than mindless obedience. He was diametrically opposed to the massed ranks of cannon fodder which still characterised most tactical thinking at the time. His ideas had been formulated and refined during the First World War, when he served as commander of a machine-gun company, witnessing the formation of “battle groups” which had greatly impressed him. They were made up from selected men, withdrawn from the trenches and formed into *ad hoc* assault groups. Specially trained for close-quarter fighting, usually carried out at night, they wreaked havoc in their trench raids, employing individualised weapons such as knuckle dusters, cluster grenades and entrenching tools sharpened like razors. The enemy’s customary notification of an impending attack, by means of an artillery barrage, was often dispensed with, with the result of heightening their fear when it came.

As their value became recognised, Steiner’s reforms gradually filtered throughout the *SS-Verfügungstruppe* hierarchy . In concert with his “battle group” ideology he promoted a strict physical program conjoined with a regime of cleanliness. He structured a recruits day with a rigorous hour’s PT beginning at 0600, with a pause afterwards for breakfast of porridge and mineral water. This was followed by intensive weapons training, target practice and unarmed combat sessions. The day was broken by a hearty lunch, then resumed with a comparatively short but intensive drill session. The afternoon was then punctuated by a stint of scrubbing, cleaning, scouring and polishing and rounded off with a run or a couple of hours on the sports

field. As a result of his men spending more time on the athletics fields and in cross country running than on the parade ground, they developed standards of fitness and endurance enabling them to perform such feats as to cover 3 kilometres in full kit in 20 minutes, feats which could not be matched by either army recruits or members of the *Leibstandarte.* The training program was interrupted three times a week by ideological lectures. In the classroom the recruits had to sit up straight with their hands on the table, but it has been reported that there was a marked lack of interest in ideological subjects and that racial policy instruction made little impact on the men.

One recruit in three failed basic training the first time round. However for the successful candidates there was a passing out parade where he took the SS oath, which was taken separately from members of the other *SS* branches, at 22:00 on the occasion of the 9 November anniversary celebrations.



A pre-war SS – Totenkopf recruit, one of thousands of SS soliers who believed that a war against the Soviet Union was the fulfilment of a dream: the beginning of the final battle against Bolshevism and Jewry.

These have been described as a “uniquely holy event on which the venerated

cadre of the survivors of the München Putsch silently re-enacted their march through the crowd-lined streets of the Bavarian capital in a bombastic travesty of the Passion Play". The finale was the torch-lit oath taking ceremony for candidates of the *SS-Verfügungstruppe*, which took place in Hitler's presence before the Feldherrnhalle and the sixteen smoking obelisks, each of which bore the name of the first fallen Party Faithful. The oath was a major ingredient in the *SS* mystique, binding each successful candidate in unswerving loyalty to Adolf Hitler, during the ceremony a voice intoned the sixteen names and after each one a thousand voices chanted "Hier".

The candidate now had to spend a year in one of the *SS* infantry or cavalry schools, before returning to München to swear another oath binding himself to obey Himmler's marriage laws. This was an attempt to replace the Christian rites of marriage, christening and death. Marriages no longer took place in churches but in the open under a lime tree, or in an *SS* building decorated with life runes, fir twigs and sunflowers. The proof of Aryan ancestry was designed to protect racial and physical purity. The recruit became a full fledged *SS* man and officers of *Untersturmführer* rank and above were given the *SS* dagger.

To be eligible for a commission in the *SS-Verfügungstruppe*, officer cadets had to have served for a minimum of two years in the ranks, which initially meant in the *Reichswehr*. Officers enlisted for 25 years, NCOs for 12 and privates for four, with basic training being the same for all groups. Officers had to undertake an intensive combat course, which included tests of courage such as having to dig a foxhole in front of an advancing tank. More significant were live firing exercises with machine guns, mortars and artillery which were designed to introduce men of the *SS-Verfügungstruppe* to genuine battlefield conditions and harden them to explosions.

An innovation introduced by Eicke and emulated by Steiner was designed to break down the rigid divisions between ranks which had always and still did exist in the army. Officers and NCOs were encouraged to talk and mix with their men to get to know them as individuals. They competed in teams against each other on the sports field. Off duty they addressed each other as *Kamerad,* rather than by rank.

On 17th August 1938 Hitler defined the *raison d'être* of the *SS-Verfügungstruppe* as being an armed force at his personal disposal, stating that it was not a part of the armed nor of the police forces already in existence. Therefore it was able to be legitimately trained by the *Reichsführer-SS* in Nazi theories of race and also to be manned by volunteers who had completed their commitment in the *Reichsarbeitsdienst,* the Reich Labour Service. The Führer decree also stated that in time of war elements of the *Totenkopfverbände* would reinforce the *SS-Verfügungstruppe.* If mobilised, it was to be used firstly by the Commander in Chief of the army under the jurisdiction of the Army, making it subject only to military law and order, but still remaining a branch of the *NSDAP* and owing its allegiance ultimately to that organisation. Secondly, in the event of an emergency within Germany, the *SS-Verfügungstruppe* would be under Hitler's control through Himmler. The army had always been suspicious of the *SS.* As the supposed sole arms bearers of the State they regarded the creation of armed units within the *SS* as a betrayal by Hitler. From these provisions emerged the first four of what were to become known in 1940 as the *Waffen-SS* divisions the *Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler, Reich, Totenkopf* and *Polizei,* plus the nucleus of a fifth *Wiking.*

The military consequences of this training was to dehumanise the troops to such an extent that the ideological motivation had totally convinced them that the Russians and other Eastern Europeans were *Untermensch* or subhuman,

they had no place in the National Socialist world. They also held their own lives in little value allowing them to undertake combat with scant concern for their own safety, but holding the life of their *Kameraden* as sacred. The *Waffen-SS* links with the infamous *Einsatzgruppen* or Special Action Squads was only a step away for such units as the *SS- Totenkopfverbände* who's training as has been seen engendered a blind faith in the orders and ideology they received.

CHAPTER 2

FIRST BLOOD



Grim-faced Waffen-SS soldiers aboard Krupp lorries towing 3.7 cm PAK anti-tank guns during the early stages of "Barbarossa". The tracked vehicle is a StuG III.

Hitler regarded the Nazi-Soviet pact, not to be a permanent feature of German strategic planning, a fact he never concealed from his Generals. He advised his Commanders in November 1939 that "We can oppose Russia only when we are free in the West. Russia "is not dangerous" for the moment he assured them. The victory in the West gave him the freedom of action he required to look Eastwards. Britain was the only country unsubjugated, but this militarily he chose to ignore or margenalise.

To attack the Soviet Union was a monumental decision that was only

paralleled by its rapidity. The failure to knock Britain out in a single stroke conjoined with the temptation, the power, and the sense of occasion gave this Herculean step a structure and reality all of its own. Years of brooding and moments of intoxication thus fused fiercely into what General Warlimont subsequently called “this ghastly development.” War with the Soviet Union was perhaps less baffling if viewed not as strategic or military rationality in the normal sense but as Hitler’s own brand of it.

Führer Directive No 21 was given on 18th December 1940, setting out the objectives of the campaign, planned to be launched in May the following year. This Directive stated:

“The bulk of the Russian army stationed in western Russia will be destroyed by daring operations lead by deeply penetrating armoured spearheads. Russian forces still capable of giving battle will be prevented from withdrawing into the depths of Russia. The enemy will then be energetically pursued and a line will be reached from which the Russian air force can no longer attack German territory. The final objective of the operation is to erect a barrier against Asiatic Russia on the general line Volga-Archangel. The last surviving industrial areas of Russia in the Urals can then, if necessary, be eliminated by the Luftwaffe.”

The battles in the Soviet Union heralded spectacular victories but also ushered in brutality of unimaginable depths with both sides giving and receiving no quarter.



As “Barbossa” unfolded, the Waffen-SS began to display those qualities it would bring to the Eastern Front: ferocity in attack, steadfastness in defence, and a fanatical pursuit of the ideolical struggle.

The crusade was now launched under cover of the codename “Barbarossa”,

taken from one of the of the heroes of German history, Emperor Frederic Barbarossa, who marched with his Knights at the close of the 12th century against the infidel in the Holy Land. The *Waffen-SS*, the Third Reich's military and ideological élite were to encounter a new kind of war based on a clash of ideologies which could be perceived as quasi religious. A Wagnerian struggle of the *Herrenvolk* or master race against the *Untermenschen* or sub-humans to bring about the subjugation of those the Party despised most the Jews, Slavs and Bolsheviks.

The Soviet Armed forces had been decimated by Stalins' purges which were named after the most prominent officer executed Marshal Mikhail Tukhachedsky. Between 1937 and 1939 Stalin carried out the systematic destruction of the Soviet High command, the primary motive being to secure his position as absolute ruler of the Soviet Union. Few events had more influence on the Soviet Red Army of 1941 than these, which resulted in, three out of five marshals of the Soviet Union, 11 deputy commissars of defence 13 out of 15 army commanders and all the military district commanders of May 1937 as well as the leading members of the naval and air force commands being shot or disappearing without trace. The same fate was suffered by the political apparatus which was supposed to advise the professional soldiers. During those two fearful years some 35,000 officers were either dismissed imprisoned or executed altogether. A purge which was to cause incalculable damage to the ability of the Soviet Red Army to resist the German invasion. The Tukhachedsky affair had been manipulated by Heydrich helped by *SS-Gruppenführer* Dr. Hermann Behrends and *SS-Sturmbannführer* Alfred Naujocks. Heydrich boasted he had destroyed the Soviet High command. The information gained helped colour the timing and content of Directive 21. However Stalin's dreaded secret police, the NKVD had achieved what the German military command and Heydrich's secret

service could never have done.

The Soviet Red Army, still euphemistically paralysed logistically and operationally by the loss of some of its ablest and lumanesant men had pitted against it eleven German armies four of them panzer and three air fleets. However the odds appears at first sight to be uneven with the Soviet Red Army fielding 230 divisions totalling some twelve million men supported by 20,000 tanks and 8,000 aircraft against approximately 3 million German soldiers accompanied by 3,330 tanks and 2770 aircraft. But the path of the *Wehrmacht* was obstructed by only about 130 Soviet divisions.

The *Waffen-SS* units were deployed among the various Army commands. Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt commanding Army group south, was allocated the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'*, and the *SS-Division "Wiking"* division, which were with General Edwald von Kleist's 1st Panzergruppe. Army group south comprised 5 Panzer, 3-4 motorised, 21-22 infantry, 6 Mountain and 3 security divisions conjoined with 14-15 Romanian, 2 Hungarian and 2 Italian divisions

Das Reich was allotted to General Heinz Guderian's 2nd Panzergruppe and formed part of army group centre which comprised 9 Panzer, 5 motorised and 31-35 infantry divisions as well as 2-3 security divisions, a cavalry division and the *Großdeutschland* Regiment under Field Marshal Fedor von Bock,

The weakest of the Army Groups, Army Group North with only 3 Panzer, 3 motorised and about 20 infantry divisions was commanded by Field Marshal Ritter von Leeb, had the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* assigned to it as part of General Erich Höppner's 4th Panzergruppe. The *SS-Polizeidivision* was part of army group north's reserves. While *SS-Kampfgruppe "Nord"* and *SS Infantry Regiment 9* were deployed as part of the Norway Mountain Corps under the command of Colonel General von Falkenhorst and committed to

the far northern sector of the front in Finland.

Army group south was allocated the initial task to cut off all the Soviet armies west of the Dnieper The capture Kiev, Kharkov and the Crimea were the territorial objectives before pushing on to the River Volga were stood Stalingrad. This City of incalculable psychological significance once taken left the way clear to the all important Caucasian oil fields.

In what was an over-ambitious plan, a force of some 46 divisions was to drive east, comprising sixth, eleventh and seventeenth armies and first panzer group. The *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* was assigned to XIV corps of First Panzer Group.

The First Panzer Group had the objective of breaking through the Russian lines south of Kowel and cutting off Soviet Red Army units to the south-west, restraining them until the infantry could eliminate them. An advance over 480 km had to be undertaken across difficult terrain. Hard metalled roads were not a common feature of the Russian landscape, thus speed was of the essence, the solid packed dirt roads would be transformed into deep quagmires once the rains started.



The initial phase of the war in Russia witnessed colossal Russian losses. In the air, for example, over 3000 aircraft were destroyed, and on the ground the Red Army lost some 89 divisions. The Nazi war machine seemed unstoppable, and in the ideological vanguard was the Waffen-SS, imbued with a hatred of the "sub-human" foe. It seemed the supermen were going to have another easy victory in Russia.

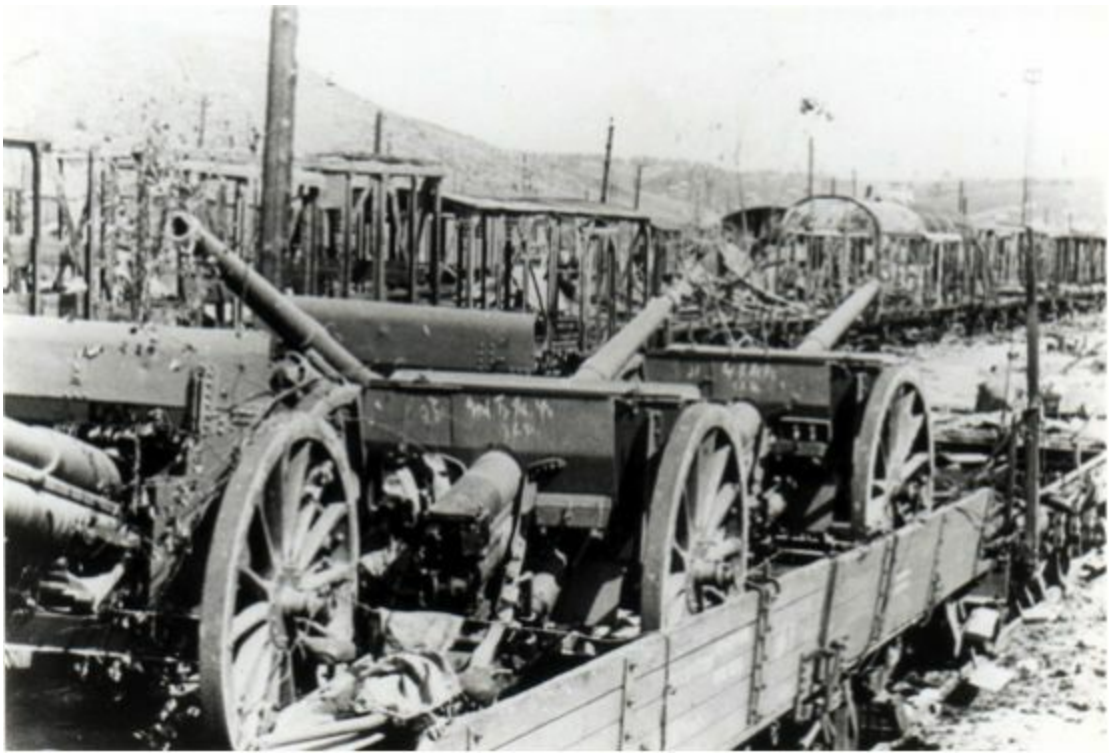
The Russians made full use of the natural obstacles of the rivers Pruth, San, Bug and Dnieper and deployed their lines of defences opposing army group south. The Soviet Red Army had a force of approximately 69 infantry, 11 cavalry and 28 armoured divisions under the command of General Kirponos and then Marshal Budyenni.

On the morning of 22nd June 1941 at 3.15 am, what was to be haled as the greatest continuous land battle history had ever witnessed erupted. The sudden flashes of thousands of artillery pieces seared the pale dawn, heralding the onset of operation "Barborassa". In this clash of Titans the *Wehrmacht* was to pour havoc upon the Soviet Red Army.

With the exception of the *SS-Polizeidivision* within the first few days of the campaign all the *Waffen-SS* formations under Army command were in action, the *SS-Polizeidivision* followed suit in early August. Russian troops bypassed during the main advance were dealt with by two brigades of Himmler's *Kommandostab RFSS, SS Infantry brigade 1* and *SS Cavalry brigade* who were deployed immediately behind the front.

On 27th June the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* was committed to battle, leaving its assembly area and joined the First Panzer Group reserves. It finally went into combat on 1st July when it crossed the river Vistula at a point south-west of the town of Zamosc. First Panzer Group's pincer movement had extended deep into Soviet territory by this time and General von Mackensen's III Panzer Corps had been cut off near Rovno. The first major task of the eastern campaign was re-establishing contact with General von Mackensen's III Panzer Corps which was tasked to the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'*. The German forward elements soon engaged Soviet tanks. While pushing through a densely wooded area a German column had two Soviet tanks who mistook it for a retreating Soviet unit attach themselves to it. The column came to a brief halt just outside Klevan as night began to fall. The Soviet tank crews realised the awful truth and broke away, speeding off into the night and the cover of darkness.

Klevan was quickly taken and the advance relentlessly moved on. A spot was reached a few kilometres to the east of the town by the forward elements of the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler's* reconnaissance battalion, here was discovered an empty, blood-soaked ambulance beside an abandoned German howitzer. A few hundred meters away the corpses of several German soldiers were discovered, their bodies mutilated and barbed wire bound their hands. Pronouncing that the Russians "must be slaughtered ruthlessly", the *Waffen-SS* replied to the atrocity in like manner.



Russian rolling stock carrying armaments and supplies being hit by a Luftwaffe attack. A key part of the Blitzkrieg was the prevention of the movement of enemy supplies and troop reinforcements. The complete air superiority of the Luftwaffe during the early stages of Barbarossa" greatly facilitated the advance of army and Waffen – SS units on the ground, and hindered Soviet force deployments.

Such rapid progress was being made by the armoured units that were attached to III Panzer corps, that great gaps began to open up between the widely dispersed German formations. The Soviets spotted these weakness and attempted to exploit them, attacking out of the Pripet marshes to the north. The primary target tasked by the Soviets was the so-called *Rollbahn* the main German supply rout. If this could be cut, the advancing and vastly extended German units would be denied supplies of ammunition, food and fuel.

Zhitomir and Kiev, became the objective of the first panzer group, who pushed forward, the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler''* providing the flanking cover. They soon encountered frenzied attacks from Soviet forces often

supported by armour, which they fended off stolidly.

On 7th July the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'''*s spearhead units breached the Stalin Line defences at Mirupol. Encountering stiff Soviet resistance they pushed eastwards towards Zhitomir. The heavy rain that lashed the country rendered many of the roads un-passable obliging the Germans to strike out across country. The spearhead units had been joined by the majority of the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler''* at Romanovka as night fell.

At this moment in time the situation at the front was so fluid, it was not the Soviet units alone that strayed. One incident in particular illustrated how deep the penetration could be with regard to the parent unit. *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Kurt Meyer who had already distinguished himself and his unit in Greece, had left the main body of his battalion behind when he discovered that his small group had unsuspectingly passed through a gap between two Soviet units. Their infantry quickly surrounded Meyer and his troops, then an officer stepped towards him. Meyer saluted, which was returned and the two men then shook hands The Soviet officer was offered a cigarette which he gratefully accepted. The Soviets were under the illusion that Meyer and his group wished to surrender. Meyer perceived the confusion and in his inimit manner demanded, via his interpreter, that it was indeed the Soviets who should surrender. Walking among the Soviet soldiers he indicated they should lay down their weapons and at the same time passed out cigarettes among them. The Soviet officer was not impressed or taken in by Meyer's theatricals. The ever perceptive Meyer asked his interpreter quietly, to play for time, as he hoped and expected at any moment other elements of the battalion would be arriving.



Infantry of the "Das Reich" Division engage Red Army troops in July 1941. The division was part of Field Marshal Fedor von Bock's Army Group Centre. After heavy fighting in August, it was temporarily rested.

The argument about exactly who should surrender to who continued with the Soviet officer was becoming irritated. Meyer's bluff it seemed had failed, when into view came a German armoured car, which was promptly hit by a Soviet anti-tank shell. Another armoured car appeared and returned the fire. At this point Meyer screamed to his troops to let lose with everything and a furious firefight developed. The balance was shifted in their favour with the arrival of German armour and the Soviets were neutralised.

The vital Keednov road junction stood just west of Zhitomir and was captured on 8th July by the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler''*in a battle principally fought by Meyer's battalion. His reconnaissance troops supported by 8.8cm artillery fire stormed across the river Teterev. The Soviets were proving to be more worthy opponents, at least on some occasions than the

Germans had accorded them credit. They were masterful at exploiting the gaps in the German lines that were continually forming between the fast-moving armoured units in the spearheads and the slower moving infantry divisions following behind.

The *OKW* the High Command of the German armed forces were of the oppion that Army group south had in essence achieved their primary objective and the bulk of the Soviet armies in the south-west had been destroyed. But the troops on the ground at the front did not share this optimism.

Contradicting *the OKW's* over optimistic view point a Soviet counter offensive began with a thrust once again that had the objective of cutting the main supply rout. Finally the Soviet attacks were repulsed in what often became ferocious hand-to-hand combat, were knife, bayonet and entrenching tool reigned supreme. Casualties were heavy on both sides with much of the fighting raging through wooded areas which gave rise to its own unique form of hell. Due to shells bursting in the tree which showered the combatants with lethal wood splinters. Neither side knew exactly who was out manoeuvring who, or who was gaining the upper hand due to the fluidity of the battle lines. The *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler''* captured Shepkova on 9th July relieving the enemy pressure temporally and allowing them to go onto the offensive.

On 10th July Hitler unexpectedly altered the attack in the south, a push in the direction of Kiev, to a drive towards Uman. The object of the alteration in thrust was the hope of cutting off the Soviet armies there and surround them. This resulted in this sector experiencing weeks of savage fighting.



Soldiers of the Leibstandarte Division in the city of Tagonrog on 17th October 1941. The division fought superbly during the opening phase of "Barbarossa", though by October its troops were suffering from a number of illnesses due to hard service in the field, including bronchitis and dysentery.

The XXXVIII Corps had the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* allocated to it and on the 31 July was ordered to push against Novo Archangelsk to close the Uman Pocket. This area saw the Soviets throw their whole weight in their attempts to break out of the German encirclement. These attacks sometimes comprised of massed Soviet infantry formations supported by concentrated armour who's combined strength caused them to be barely repulsed. The fearsome *Nebelwerfer* a Multi-barrelled rocket launcher which made a low groaning howl as it fired, was put to good use of by the *SS* troops. The SS lines held firm with the result that the Soviet breakthrough attempts ultimately weakened. When the Uman Pocket surrendered over 100,000 men were captured from the Soviet 6th and 12th armies

Special praise was expressed by General Kempf for the contribution made in

the Uman Pocket by the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'*: "The *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* has played a most glorious part in the encirclement of enemy forces around Uman. Committed at the height of the battle for the seizure of the enemy positions at Archangelsk, it took the city and the high ground to the south with incomparable dash. In a spirit of devoted brotherhood of arms, the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* intervened on its own initiative, in the desperate situation which had developed for 16th infantry division on their left flank, routing the enemy and destroying many tanks. Today, with the battle of annihilation around Uman concluded, I wish to recognise, and express my special gratitude to the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* for their exemplary efforts and incomparable bravery."

The *SS-Division "Wiking"* led by the *Westland* regiment moved forward on 29th June 1941 from its start point on the northern wing of army group south and advanced decisively through Soviet-occupied Poland. At Lemberg the Soviet 32nd Infantry division was encountered by Spearhead units on 30th June. Considerable pressure was placed on the *Waffen-SS* elements by the numerically superior Soviet-forces, who had to withstand repeated attempts to force them back. With the arrival of armour from the divisions reconnaissance battalion, the balance finally swung in the Germans favour, resulting in the Soviet counterattacks being repulsed. The commander of the *Westland regiment SS-Standartenführer* Hilmar Wackerle, while driving in his command car was fatally wounded by a single shot fired by a lone Soviet straggler. His death was a great loss to the regiment. Lead units from *SS-Division "Wiking"* forced a crossing of the river Slucz at Husyantin and together with other *Waffen-SS* troops were soon in the thick of the fighting once more. This formed part of the Stalin Line defences, were they encountered particularly strong Soviet forces who counterattacked immediately. For sometime things boded badly with the outlook for the

Germans looking bleak. The fighting raged back and forth until the Army's 1st Mountain division arrived on the scene and relieved the beleaguered force. On 8th July the *SS-Division "Wiking"* driving towards Kozmin became engulfed in a torrential down pour reducing the divisions speed to snails pace as the mud roads were now no better than a quagmire. The divisional HQ at Toratscha was all but over run, with the *Germania* and *Nordland* regiments being engaged in bitter fighting. The Westland regiment continued its push eastwards on foot undertaking a four day forced march through heavily wooded terrain to the river Ross. Vast quantities of abandoned Soviet war materials and vehicles were littered all around and the *SS-Division "Wiking"* was picking its way gingerly through these masses by 23rd July. Control of the division at this point was taken over temporarily by III Panzer corp, while the *Westland* regiment was diverted south to Talnze to assist in the Uman pocket closure.

Elements from *SS-Division "Wiking"* served from 7-16th August alongside the Luftwaffe's élite Hermann Göring regiment fighting to secure the northern flank of the First Panzer group around Korsun and Schandorovka. To help contain Soviet attacks a battle group was also despatched to Dnepropetrovsk from the *Westland* regiment.

The first panzer group moved on, when the Uman pocket surrendered, renewing its advance in the direction of Bobry. The town fell on 9th August, the Soviet defences soon crumbled and were over run. These defences consisted in the main of cavalry units which were no match for the Waffen-SS troops. The *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* moved on to Zaselye which was quickly taken. No sooner had it fallen than a furious counterattack was mounted by the Soviets. Grimly holding on to its positions the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* struggled for a whole week with the Soviets, who with equal determination tried to force them out. The attacks finally ceased on the

17th August with enemy losses totalling some 1,000 men either taken prisoner, killed or wounded.

The next objective for the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* was the large city of Cherson, situated in an industrial area. For the first time in Russia the *Waffen-SS* infantry would be forced to storm a sizeable City. Cherson was defended by Soviet naval infantry who contested every street then every house. Due to this bitter house to house fighting both sides incurred heavy casualties.



The ruins of Stalino, which fell to the Leibstandarte three days after the division had taken Tanonrog. By November 1941, Hitler's bodyguard had travelled some 1600km (1000 miles) since the start of "Barbarossa", though its supply lines were stretched as the end of 1941 approached.

The degree of fanaticism demonstrated in the defence off their homeland by some of the Soviet units became graphically apparent to the German as their

casualties mounted. Soviet troops exhibiting the qualities of fearlessness on a par to those demonstrated by the *Waffen-SS* in hand to hand combat were to cost the Germans dearly. After three days of fierce fighting, *the Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* took the city on the 20th August. A few precious days of rest and reorganisation was bestowed upon the division as a reward in corps reserve. Then the river Dnieper was crossed and the division struck out once again across the barren steppe.

To the north German units had established a small bridgehead over the river Dnieper at Dnepropetrousk. This area had been home to a Soviet artillery school. This had resulted in the entire district being expertly plotted by its cadets. The out come was the Soviets had little difficulty in pinpointing German targets with accuracy and bringing them under heavy concentrated artillery fire. *Nordland*, *Westland* and *Germania* crossed the river at the bridgehead, the former pushed north towards Mogila Ostraya, while the other two reinforced the units on the bridgehead's western edge and on the 6-7 September captured the heights at Kamenka, producing over 5,000 Soviet prisoners.

The Soviets' mounted a suprise counterattack once again in an attempt to exploit the gaps between the German units. The Soviet forces managed to penetrate to a depth of 32 km into German held territory. In the hope of eliminating this new Soviet threat the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* was hastily brought back over the Dnieper. On 9th September the Germans took Novya Mayatschka, and Novo Alexandrovka was being passed within a couple of days by the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* on its drive east.

Hitler once again changed his plans. Soviet troops had been withdrawing into the Crimea in large numbers. A narrow neck of land which had been heavily fortified and was well-defended provided the only access. Hitler decided that

rather than simply bypass the Crimea, this potential threat to the flank of the German advance had be eradicated.

The entrance to the Crimea, the Perkop isthmus was were the first attempt was taken by the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* to force its way through on the western side. Deep minefields blocked their path, together with well prepared fortifications and the added problem of heavily armed armoured trains. As the Perkop isthmus defences proved far to strong to be penetrated, the divisions next assault point was the eastern edge of the Crimean "neck". There under the cover of dense fog the enemy defences were penetrated in a dawn attack. The division stormed past Balykov to capture high ground at Genichek. From their vantage point the Soviets could be observed undergoing preparations for a counterattack which allowed the *Waffen-SS* troops to implement their defence strategy accordingly.



A brief pause before the next assault. In Russia in 1941 the Waffen – SS was driven by an unshakeable belief in their Füher and the inevitable victory of Germany.

Annoyingly, though, the Russians refused to give in.

The *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* having secured the entrance to the Crimea continued again this time pushing eastwards on the Russian "mainland" towards Melitopol . on reaching Rodianovka on 18th September it dug in. The German positions became the objective of numerous counterattacks which were successfully rebuffed. Subsequently the *Waffen-SS* troops were moved westwards, once again to another crisis spot.

The LIV Corps was attacking the Crimea, the Romanian troops holding a sector of the German lines indured Soviet counterattacks of such immense voracity. The Soviet units smashed deep into and virtually annihilated them.

Once again the *Waffen-SS* were in demand, with the élite troops of the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* forming the mainstay of the German defence. The Soviet attacks by 30th September had lost their head of steam and once more the first panzer group could continue advancing eastwards, with Rostov on the river Don firmly in its sights.

Army group north which was commanded by Field Marshal Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb had at the start of the campaign the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* under its control. It comprised on the left General Kuchler's eighteenth army, who's objective was to push east through Latvia and Estonia. In the centre General Erich Höppner's fourth panzer group which was to drive towards Leningrad. On the right General Busch's sixteenth army tasked with giving flank protection.

Höppner's fourth panzer groups principal units were XXXXI and LVI panzer corps, with the 269th infantry division and the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* in reserve. To keep the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* in reserve was a personal decision of Höppner's, who had a dislike of Eicke together with his division. This decision of Höppner's was much to Eicke's disgust

On the 22nd June the fourth panzer group smashed through the Soviet border positions with their first objective being the key bridges that spanned the river Dvina. The Germans would have to over come an excellent natural obstacle that was aforded by the river which ran from Vitebsk to the Gulf of Riga. Initial resistance encountered Höppner's troops was extremely light and they were able to cover 80 km in the first day alone. Nearly 320 km into Soviet-held territory lay Dvinsk which had been reached by the fourth panzer group on 26th June and the bridges over the Dvina captured. Outpacing the slower moving infantry divisions the spearhead units were obliged to halt at Dvinsk so that they might catch up.



SS-Brigadeführer und Generalmajor der Waffen Kurt Meyer - “Panzer – Meyer” – who as the leader of the Leibstandarte Division’s reconnaissance detachment bluffed his way out of a Soviet encirclement during the early part of Operation “Barbarossa”.

A considerable gap had appeared between the southern flank of General von

Manstein's LVI panzer corps and the northern flank of its neighbour the sixteenth army. The phenomenal rate of advance the Germans had achieved cut off Soviet stragglers in considerable numbers who were now active behind the German armies. The *SS-Totenkopfdivision* moved up to Dvinsk to join with the main force of the group during which time it was sent into action to mop up these stragglers. At first bewildered, the Soviet units, after they over the initial shock of the German attack began to reorganise and reform. As the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* progressed, it found resistance stiffening.

Even more determined resistance was encountered on 27th June when the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* was moving through central Lithuania. The division's reconnaissance battalion, its spearhead unit, was halted in its tracks when it ran into a sizeable enemy force with tank support. Eventually the tanks were repulsed but Soviet infantry attacks continued mounted by fanatical, almost suicidal soldiers.

They still tried to keep up the momentum of their advance but progress was being significantly slowed by these assaults. The moral of the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* troops was dramatically effected, they became vexed and exasperated but were still able to stave off the attacks. It was decided to send post-haste, in an effort to assist in repelling the Soviet counterattacks on LVI panzer corps at Dvinsk the *Panzerjäger* or tank-hunter battalion accompanied by one infantry battalion. While the remainder of the division followed behind, on reaching Dvinsk the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* became part of von Manstein's LVI panzer corps. It was joined here shortly afterwards by XXXXI panzer corps, followed by elements of the sixteenth army.

The *SS-Totenkopfdivision* next assignment was Protecting Manstein's flank and maintaining contact with the sixteenth army so as to prevent dangerous

gaps in the German line from opening. On 2nd July the fourth panzer group resumed its advance suitably prepared. The terrain being heavily wooded marshland, was ideal for straggling Soviet units to defend and proved extremely difficult for the *SS-Totenkopfdivision*, a motorised unit to traverse. A well prepared ambush by the Soviet 42nd rifle division at Dagda, caught the *SS-Totenkopfdivision,* by suprise killing or wounding over 100 *Waffen-SS* troops. With the arrival of Soviet reinforcements supported by armoured the whole division was brought to a grinding halt and under the weight of frenzied Soviet attacks the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* began to be forced back. The timely appearance of Luftwaffe Stuka dive-bombers the following day, relieved the situation. They devastated the enemy artillery and tanks allowing the initiative to be regained slowly by the *SS-Totenkopfdivision*. The advance got underway and the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* captured Rosenov on 4th July.

The *SS-Totenkopfdivision* smashed its way into the Stalin Line on 6th July and found the defensive network was particularly extensive in its sector. Heavy losses as a result were serstained by the division, but it still forced its way through establishing a bridgehead over the river Velikaya by nightfall. Fierce artillery fire rained down on the soldiers of the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* and Eicke's command car hit a mine and he was himself wounded.

On 12th July the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* moved, as part of the group reserve to Porkhov. A few days of welcome rest was all that was forthcoming. The LVI panzer corps had encountered trouble to the north-east of Porkhov, so it was back into action in support for the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* troops on 17th July. The LVI panzer corps' flanks had once again come under attack from the Soviet forces and the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* was sent to fend them off. The *SS-Totenkopfdivision* was retained by the LVI panzer corps, relieving the 8th panzer division, which went into reserve.

On 21st July the *SS-Totenkopfdivision's* advance began once again moving through the dark forests and swamps of the region to the west of Lake Ilmen. The Soviets had withdrawn to new defence position known as the Luga Line which ran along the Mshaga and Luga rivers. A period began on 8th August that was to sap the strength and moral of the *SS-Totenkopfdivision when the division began its assault on these positions. the Soviets would initiate coun*terattacks as soon as night fell uterlising the cover of darkness. Rest in any form was all nigh impossible as the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* troops had to use all of their efforts during the day to force the determined defenders back. A battle of attrition was emerging, Soviet losses could apparently be made good without delay, while the Germans saw their strength weakening considerablly, with fresh replacements taking time to acquire. Partisans who were already operating behind the German lines had been infiltrated the *SS-Totenkopfdivision's* rear areas. They had managed to tap into the field telephone lines and from the intercepted conversations they were able to glean where the *SS-Totenkopfdivision's* weak points were and their strategy of attacks could be planed accordingly. To add to the missery the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* troops were hit by friendly fire being mistakenly strafed by Luftwaffe aircraft.

The Soviet 34th Army was smashing into the German flanks in an attempt to counter this threat in mid-August a counterattack force was formed by amalgamating the 3rd motorised division and the *SS-Totenkopfdivision*. The two German divisions surreptitiously worked their way around to the flank and with devastating effect crashed into the unsuspecting Soviets. The 34th army's shattered remnants were rounded up, massive amounts of equipment as well as huge numbers of vehicles and numerous Soviet prisoners were taken, with over 1000 prisoners being snatched by the *SS-Totenkopfdivision's* military police troop alone. With eight Soviet divisions destroyed, this had

been an important victory for the Germans, however the attacking German units were significantly weakened due to the overall losses being heavy

On 22nd August the advance resumed as the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* crossed the Polist and pushed eastwards towards the rivers Lovat and Pola. For several days the drive continued almost unhindered, with POWs being rounded up in considerable numbers. However, this situation was not to last as the retreating Soviets had dug in and were waiting for the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* to reach the Lovat. The Luftwaffe had switched its efforts temporarily to other areas, giving the Soviets the advantage of considerable air support. Attempts to force a crossing of the river by the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* failed. The Soviet counterattacks were so powerful that the shelter provide by the woods near the river had to be sort by the Germans who were forced to withdraw giving cover from the Soviet ground forces as well as being out of sight of marauding Soviet fighters. The renewal of its attack was ordered on 26th August with the objective of ousting the Soviet's from their well prepared positions, once again the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* suffered considerable casualties in their endeavours. In fact the highest recorded casualty rate in the corps at this period in time. The skies over the Lovat once again became the Luftwaffe's domain on 27th August and it swiftly drove off the Soviet fighters and fighter-bombers.



The crew of a Waffen-SS 5cm PAK 38 Anti-tank gun engage Soviet targets during "Barbarossa". As the Germans penetrated deeper into Russia, enemy resistance stiffened, and the weather deteriorated.

The *SS-Totenkopfdivision's* advance continued with its reconnaissance

battalion reaching the Pola river at Vasilyevschina just as the rains came. Almost immediately the division's vehicles began to bog down in the mud. The Soviets hit the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* with determined assaults before it could prepare an attack which it then spent two days beating off.



Image 1



“Barbarossa” netted hundreds of thousands of Russian prisoners. These were a target for reprisals for atrocities committed against German prisoners, though some senior Waffen-SS leaders tried to prevent this.

The LVI panzer corps demanded that the the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* pressed home its advance and make crossing of the river Pola. These orders were recieved on 30th August by *SS-Brigadeführer und Generalmajor der Waffen-SS* Georg Kepple who temporally commanded the battered *SS-Totenkopfdivision* after the evacuation, due to his wound, of Eicke. Seeing that his new command was in no fit state to attack such a well defended line. Kepple, now appealed to von Manstein who agreed that the attack should be postponed for a few days. The Soviet attacks continued unabated so there was to be no respite for the *SS-Totenkopfdivision.*



A motorcycle team of the Totenkopf Division in northern Russia in August 1941. The division had started the campaign with 18,754 men: by the middle of July 1702 officers and men had been killed or wounded

On 5th September the weather briefly improved which allowed the *SS-Totenkopfdivision*, supported by the 503 infantry regiment, to throw itself over the river Pola. However, the rains had returned again before the day was done and furious counterattacks once again were being launched by the Soviet's. The roads began to dry out two days latter when the weather improved which afforded greater freedom of movement to the Germans. The

Soviet’s had planted booby traps and peppered the *SS-Totenkopfdivision’s* routs with mines to slow progress again. Due to the considerably stiffening of resistance and the ferocity of Soviet counterattacks the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* was once more forced onto the defensive by 12th September.

CHAPTER 3

THE FIRST WINTER



A Panzer Mk III and Waffen-SS soldiers during Operation “Typhoon”, the attack on Moscow. The first winter in Russia came as a shock to Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS alike.

The German war machine that had smashed over the Soviet Union’s borders and steamrollered its way into her heartland during June had run out of steam by early December 1941. The winter of 1941-1942 was a hard time for the Germans in Russia. With the onset of colder weather the muddy roads began to firm up once again and for a few weeks allowed the German units to achieve a much better degree of mobility. This was only to change when winter proper set in.

On 10th October the *SS-Division "Wiking"* was transferred from the III Panzer corps to XIV Panzer corps, their objective was to overtake fleeing Soviet units and cut them off. They advanced along the Melitopol to Stalino railway line towards Wolnowacha in an attempt to achieve this. Progress was slowed dramatically as a result of torrential rain which once again turned the roads into seas of mud. For more than a fortnight the rain fell relentlessly allowing the Russians time to reassemble their scattered units and regroup. The *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* reached Taganrog on 11th October after driving eastwards aggressively for almost 400 km over inhospitable terrain. The assault on the city could only begin when the river Mius had been crossed which was achieved under heavy fire. After six days were fighting raged continuously, Taganrog was taken and three days latter Stalino sercumed. A new kind of Baptism of fire was bestowed upon the *Westland* regiment at the beginning of November. For the first time it was subjected to a barrage from Katyushas the effect psychologically was shattering upon the *Waffen-SS* troops. A salvo of these projectiles landing among unprepared and unprotected infantry units caused near panic which was only narrowly averted.

When the majority of III Panzer corp had caught up with the spearhead units the assault on Rostov began during mid-November. The capture of this essential communications link by the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* was assured by the taking of a vital bridge over the river Don. The rail bridge was set with demolition charges, but was still intact. Its imminent destruction, it appeared, was being considered by Soviet engineers.



German troops in Rostov in November 1941. The capture of this communications centre was facilitated by the Leibstandarte's panzergrenadier regiment, which seized a vital crossing over the River Don.

A locomotive was espied standing by the bridge, seemingly having a full head of steam. *SS-Haupsturmführer* Springer the CO of the *3rd Company, SS-Panzer Grenadier Regiment* of the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* ordered his men to open fire with every weapon available, resulting in the locomotive being peppered and high pressure steam released from countless holes. The ensuing confusion provided the cover required and the bridge was stormed. Springer and his men went on to remove the demolition charges ensuring the bridges safety. Frenzied attempts to dislodge the *Waffen-SS* troops were undertaken by the Soviets to no avail. They held on tenaciously until reinforcements arrived. For this action Springer was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross on 12th January 1942.

The Russian summer conferred upon the troops scorching heat with choking

dust and with the rain quagmires were produced every where making roads into impassable rivers of mud. These were the pleasures the Germans had experienced up to this point in the campaign. But nature had stored up the worst horror of all, this was about to be unleashed upon them, the full furry of the Russian winter. As the temperature began to plummet the Germans were caught totally unprepared. No warm winter clothing was forth coming, still garbed as at the beginning of the campaign in June, they had to face the winter in summer uniforms. The mechanisms of their guns began to freeze, while vehicles had the oil in their engines and sumps solidify. To thaw their vehicle engines out enough to be started small fires had to be light under them. But worse was if moisture formed in the barrels of the machine guns turned to ice when they fired again it split their barrels.

The Soviets encountered few problems with the winter weather having an abundance of fur-lined winter clothing for their troops. To a great extent the Russian weather conditions determined the design of their vehicles which would function when the cold weather rendered German vehicles all but neigh useless.

Numerous senior army commanders had extolled the virtues of the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* during this first phase of the war on the Eastern front. They praised both offensive and defensive actions it had been involved in. *Reichsführer-SS* Heinrich Himmler was to receive an unsolicited letter from General von Mackensen in which he comment that, in his opinion, the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* was 'a real élite unit'

The *SS-Division "Wiking"* had bean allotted a new objective, Schachty, which lay further to the north and it was imperative that this be taken before winter finally closed in. The advance began on 5th November, however though a brief unexpected thaw once again the roads turned into swamps. In

order to reach the road to Astoahowo, the river Mius had to be crossed and the *Waffen-SS* troops struggled towards the higher ground in the direction of Perwomaisk-Oktjabrisk. The conditions became so bad that the troops were obliged to disembark. Instead of trucks carrying the troops they then had to push the trucks through the thick mud.



SS-Hauptsturmf ü hrer Heinrich Springer, who was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross for leading the assault which captured the crossing over the Don in the face of heavy Russian fire.

In an area between the 14th and 16th panzer divisions the German forces had

become dangerously over stretched. Oktjabrisk was reached on 7th November, the division then diverted a battle group south into it. The German positions during this period found Soviet units continually probing them in attempts of seeking out weak spots. *Germania* as a result seemed to be in almost constant combat, while the *Waffen-SS* troops doggedly attempted to thrust forward. In the meanwhile, *Nordland* continued north-east undertaking its advance towards Alexandrovka.

Soviet resistance was hardening, T-45 tanks were being deployed in ever increasing numbers. The German tank crews, on encountering them, found they were a hard nut to crack. This came as a nasty shock, a fact that was also shared by the anti-tank gunners, for up until then, anything in their path had been swept aside. During the opening phase of the campaign they had encountered mainly obsolete light, thinly armoured vehicles such as the BT-5 which had easily cercumed to the Germans. The T-45 was an animal to be feared, fast, reliable, well armoured, and into the bargain its 76 mm gun delivered a decisive punch. Unless used at extremely close range the 3.7 cm anti-tank guns which equipped most German units in 1941 proved ineffective against them.

The XIV panzer corps was forced onto the defensive when it was subjected to a counterattack by powerful Soviet forces on 23rd November. The SS infantry were without adequate winter clothing and temperatures hit 20ºC and many of them were soon crippled by frostbite. Conditions generally were worsening and the Soviet 9th and 37th armies gradually pushed the SS back to defensive positions on the river Tusloff. The inadequacy to perform an effective defence of the river was due to lack of numbers of SS troops, conjoined with the length of the line which was exacerbated by the rivers many loops and curves. The Germans were once again forced to withdraw as it was considered almost impossible to hold these positions. They fell back

further west to the river Mius and dug in around Amurosjewka.



Fierce fighting rages on the outskirts of Rostov in Novermber 1941. When the city fell, some 10,000 Russian troops went into German captivity, most never to see their homeland again.

By the middle of the month, the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* had been assigned the job of clearing the Soviet stragglers that had now infested the forests north of Demyansk. Eicke returned to the front, were he resumed command once again of the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* on 21st September, in time to learn a major Soviet thrust in that area was predicted by intelligence. Soviet strength was bolster by the arrival of fresh units. To feel the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* strengths and weaknesses probing attacks soon got underway, then at noon on 24th September the offensive began in ernest. Soviet infantry with armoured support began to smash the German lines. In reply the *SS-Totenkopfdivision's* artillery, firing over open sights, discharged round after round of high explosive. Courtesy of the *SS-Totenkopfdivision's* anti-tank gunners nine enemy tanks were knock out. The *SS-Totenkopfdivision's* troops by the close of that day had forced the Soviets back out of Lushno. For Eicke and his men

the out look seemed bleak once more as the attacks continued unabated and were pressed home with even greater ferocity on 26-27th September. The strength of the equivalent of three divisions, support by 100 tanks was now pitted against the *SS-Totenkopfdivision*. Such was the plight of the situation they had to weather. Eicke, acompanied by all his staff officers and other non-combatant personnel proceeded to the trenches after having availed themselves of weapons and joined their comrades in the fight. Weakened as they were, but demonstrating almost superhuman endeavour, the *SS-Totenkopfdivision's* troops repeatedly threw back an attacking force three times their own strength. As a result the Soviet attacks eventually petered out.



As the train travels farther east into the Soviet Union, this Waffen-SS NCO grabs some sleep. The vast expanses of Russia came as a nasty shock to the average German frontline soldier. This resulted in depression engendered by the realisation of Russia's vastness. For the Waffen-SS divisions in the East, though, this sentiment came second to the savage thirst for winning the ideological struggle against the hated Jewish-Bolshevik enemy.

The phenomenal determination of the soldiers of the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* when faced with such overwhelming odds cojoined with the esprit de corps of the *SS* is demonstrated by this episode. *SS-Unterscharführer* Fritz Christen was a gunner with 2nd company *SS*-Antitank Detachment of the *SS-Totenkopfdivision*. His battery was located just north of Lushno, taking the full brunt of the first Soviet armoured assault on the morning of 24th September 1941. Christen was the only member of the battery to survive. He stayed at his post firing feverishly until he had driven off the attacking tanks, and scoring six destroyed. Christen remained alone in the emplacement for the next two days. He repeatedly repulsed Russian infantry and tank attacks with his 50mm cannon while exposed to a continual hail of artillery, mortar and machine gun fire. Christen hung on grimly, cut off completely from the rest of his unit and the division. He refused to abandon his post, he carried shells to his gun from the disabled batteries around him during the hours of darkness and blazed away at enemy infantry and tanks by dawn. On 27th September the Russians were finally driven out of Lushno, his astonished SS comrades found him still crouched behind his anti-tank cannon. In 72 hours he had killed nearly 100 enemy soldiers and knocked out 13 Soviet tanks. For this feat he was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross; he was the first and also the youngest enlisted man from the ranks of the *Waffen-SS* to be so honoured. He was flown to the Hitler HQ at Rastenburg and received the decoration from Hitler himself.



A wounded Waffen-SS soldier is evacuated by his comrades. By mid-November 1941, the Waffen-SS has lost 407 officers and 7930 men killed in Russia, plus a further 816 officers and 26,299 men wounded.

On 8th October the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* resumed its march eastwards

towards the Waldai Heights with the objective of pursuing the retreating Soviets. Samoskye, set amid densely wooded terrain had skirting it well constructed defences, in places 10 km deep. These they encountered eight days latter. The SS-*Totenkopfdivision* and the 30th infantry division, launched on the following day an offensive which almost immediately foundered. Both divisions soon were on the defensive, when in retaliation the Soviets launched frenzied attacks. Almost 9000 men had been lost alone by the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* since the start of the campaign. It soon became clear, particularly with regard to the onset of winter, most other German divisions, would be unable to progress any further in their weakened state. The decision was therefore taken to dig in. All along this sector of the front the Germans did just that and spent the rest of the year holding off Soviet attacks and fighting partisans in the rear areas.

Army group centre had included in it the fourth and ninth armies and the second and third panzer groups. The *Das Reich* division was allocated to General Heinz Guderian's second panzer group, serving together with the army's 10th panzer division the elite *Großdeutschland* regiment in XLVI panzer corps.

The *Das Reich* was not committed to the fray in the first few days of the campaign, however on 28th June it was tasked with forcing a river crossing between Citva and Dukova. The *Das Reich* was then to guard the northern flank of the German advance along the main road from Minsk to Smolensk. The division's engineers had constructed a temporary bridge over the river Beresina which *Das Reich* reached and crossed by 4th July.



SS-Oberscharf ü hrer Leo Wilm of the Totenkopf Division negotiates his motorcycle through thick mud as Army Group North heads for Leningrad. The poor weather slowed the advance to a crawl.

The contribution the SS-engineer units played in the early phases of the

campaign in the east cannot be overstated. enabling the *Waffen-SS* to accomplish the fetes of rapid progress it did. Without the efforts of these men, often under heavy fire and other torturous difficulties, constructing temporary bridges, clearing mines and other obstacles, it would simply not have been possible for the SS units to maintain the rate of advance they were able to achieve. The armoured or infantry units were feted with glory, their comrades in the engineers were unrewarded, but in combat attrition terms their missions were no less hazardous and costly. A graphic illustration of the awful situation these units endured occured while 2 company of the engineer battalion of the *Das Reich* division was repairing a bridge over the river Pruth, ambushed by Soviet forces, 72 of its compliment were killed, with the result the entire company was all but wiped out.

The small town of Yelnya situated on the river Desna had an important road junction which stood on the high ground to east. Advancing along the main Minsk-Moscow road *Das Reich* set off on 22th July to take this objective. The assault was made by the *Deutschland* and *Der Führer* regiments, together with armour from the 10th panzer division. On the left wing *Deutschland,* with support of army tanks and on the right *Der Führer* without the benefit of artillery support made its initial attack. The first ridge of the heights had been secured by nightfall. By the end of the day good progress had been made by *Der Führer* who had penetrated the Soviet defensive lines. On the following day the Soviets relinquished the high ground after the Germans continued their push. The Germans were considerably weakened, as much by climactic conditions as the losses to the enemy A searing hot sun relentlessly beat down from an unforgiving sky, baking the terrain. Being open ground little respite or welcome shade was provided added to which supplies of water were low. Corps realised that these units, in the state that they were now in, could not be expected to continue the advance against a

stiffening enemy resistance. The *Waffen-SS* troops were allowed to go temporarily on the defensive. Vicious Soviet counterattacks soon followed which the SS infantrymen were hard pressed to repulse, Corps decision proved correct.

When the German positions were penetrated, fierce hand to hand fighting often occurred being the only method to driven out the Soviets. Before the *Waffen-SS* troops regained complete control, positions changed hands two or three time in some instances. When their ammunition began to run low, only clearly defined targets were chosen by the *Waffen-SS* gunners to fire upon, having received orders to that effect. The attacks eventually subsided making it possible to relieve the *Waffen-SS* troopers. In the second week of September *Das Reich* was moved south so that it could participate in the drive to Kiev. It was still part of the second panzer group and had been tasked with operating on the right flank of XXIV panzer corps.

During the opening phases of operation ‘Barbarossa’ the advance through Russia had been marked by the rapid progress achieved by the German forces both to the north and south of the great Pripet Marshes. A formidable natural obstacle was formed by them which caused a huge salient to be created by September into German held territory. At least five Soviet armies comprising around 50 divisions were within the salient. In a massive pincer movement they now had to be cut off and destroyed. The south-west end of the salient was to be attacked by the Sixth army which was to swing up for the purpose and draw the Soviet armies defending that area. In the north, the second army with the second panzer group and in the south the seventeenth army with the first panzer group, would produce the arms of a great pincer trapping the Soviet armies when it closed to the east of Kiev.

During the rapid drive south *Das Reich* division was ordered to take the vital

bridge that spaned the river Desna at Makoshim with the Luftwaffe’s Stukas giving air support. On reaching the approaches to the river *Das Reich* could see the opposite bank was well defended. The *Waffen-SS* commanders awaited their air support in vain and then decided to attack without it. Motorcycle troops from the reconnaissance battalion made a high speed dash over the bridge thaking the defenders compleatly by surprised and engaged in close combat. Meanwhile, the wires to the demolition charges were frantically being cut by other units on the bridge. This audatious move resulted in it being captured completely intact. As the SS troops who were securing their bridgehead against potential counterattacks, belatedly, the Luftwaffe’s Stukas arrived and began to dive-bomb the bridge, killing 40 *Waffen-SS* soldiers into the bargain..

Das Reich vacated the bridgehead over the river Desna, to begin driving south in the direction of Priluki, Borsna and the crossings at the river Uday. On 15th September Kiev was completely encircled and the SS infantry having successfully seized their previous objectives.



In Russia the wet season usually began during October and lasted for a month. Roads disappeared and men and horses sank in a sea of mud. Horses died from heart strain brought on by hauling kit through mud.

The Soviet Red Army units made frantic attempts to break out of the encirclement, but the Germans beat back all of their entrapped victims efforts.



When the winter began in earnest the ground froze over, allowing the movement of vehicles. These German tanks are heading for Moscow during ”Typhoon”, in which elements of Das Reich reached the city’s outskirts.

Losses in the Kiev pocket amounted to a staggering tally of over one million Soviet troops either killed or captured.

On 4th October the attack on Moscow codenamed Operation ‘Typhoon’, began with progress initially being excellent. *Das Reich* accompanied by the 10th Panzer Division advanced but with the advent of the autumn rains the division was rapidly bogged down, the roads being quickly transformed into swamps, only reaching Gzhatsk on 9th October. Temperatures dramatically plummeted bringing about the first of countless numbers of frostbite cases. The Russian winter climate was now a major factor as the troops were wholly inadequately protected against it. By mid-October, meeting fierce resistance, *Das Reich* was on the move again, pushing along the main road to Moscow. On 18th October after crossing the river Moskva, the town of Mozhaisk fell

to the division.

The Germans concentrated on consolidating their gains during late October until mid-November. Supplies of ammunition were running low, impeding offensive operations which were reduced conjoin with another major factor the weather conditions had worsened. XLVI panzer corps was ordered on 18th November to continue its advance making a thrust towards Istra. The town, after fierce fighting, was finally penetrated on 26th November by the remaining tanks of 10th panzer division and *Das Reich*.

The division still held the hope of pushing on towards Moscow itself, but with every day that passed, the weather conditions were becoming more severe. Day-time temperatures hovered around -30° while those at night could fall as low as -50°. Both the *Deutschland* and *Der Führer* regiments had to be regrouped, due to the loss in manpower being so great, one battalion from each had to disbanded and the men redistributed. The freezing temperatures were not just taking a toll on men, vehicles suffered to. All but seven of the tanks of the 10th panzer division had been rendered inoperable due to arctic conditions and the enhanced mechanical wear and tear it caused.

The great German assault in the first dreary days of December against Moscow marked a high watershed for German achievement. Momentum ground inexorably and slowly to a standstill. Driven by six months of continuous fighting, mounting casualties, horrendous weather and supply lines which were over stretched, the Germans were close to the brink of collapse. Although the very gates of Moscow itself had been rattled by the Germans, the Soviet Red Army, albeit having been pushed far back, was able to establish a reserve to the east of the Soviet capital. The Moscow city tramcar system terminus was reached on 4th December 1941. This was achieved by troops of the *Das Reich's* reconnaissance battalion before the

weather closed in and forced a pause in the attack. This was to be the furthest point reached in the assault on Moscow. On 6th December 1941, in the region of one and a half million Soviet troops, numbering 17 whole armies, hurled themselves against an exhausted German force. The Soviet winter offensive began. The order to retreat was given on 9th December, the long weary treck westwards had started, *Das Reich* began to retire.

The winter's first blizzard blew its icy breath, numbing the Germans who now found themselves locked in the deadly embrace of the first major Soviet counteroffensive. They tore huge gaps in the front when they smashed into the German lines. In what was soon to be called the Demyansk Pocket, the *SS-Totenkopfdivision,* together with five other German divisions, was destined to find themselves imprisoned in.

On 5th December the Soviet Red Army's fresh, well-equipped divisions were poised to be unleashed by Marshal Zhukov against Army Group centre. The lines buckled and the exhausted German soldiers began to crack almost immediately. A withdrawal to Smolensk was favoured by the German front-line generals, in the hope of forcing the Soviet Red Army to fight in deep snow at the end of a long supply line. Every German soldier was to stand firm, was Hitle'sr adamant responce, bluntly refusing to countenance any other tatic. Any form of withdrawal whatsoever was out of the question. Hitler's orders were not to be disregarded and those senior officers who did, found themselves quickly demoted and transferred. Those who would obey without question were placed in charge. Hitler's inflexibility helped to avert a total rout of the German armies before Moscow, in this particular case, with the German defences firming up gradually. The front stabilised by the end of January in the central sector, the Soviet offensive having exhausted itself. However, Hitler's view of never countenancing the possibility of retreat would take the live of countless thousands of German soldiers in later years.

His determination to defend what were known as ‘fortress areas’ when any strategic value had long ceased was to substantially added to that death toll.

Reconnaissance flight reports alerted German intelligence of large-scale Soviet troop movements and in the north the Soviet forces building up had also been detected The objective of Soviet strategy was to encircle and annihilate the German sixteenth army. Army Group North and Army Group Centre would then have a vast space between them, which would permit the Soviet Red Army to flow through. The southern shore of Lake Ilmen was the intended advance route for the 11th and 34th Soviet armies, and the 1st Shock Army who were intent on levelling one attack. Aiming to sweep around the lower edge of Lake Seliger the 16th Shock Army also advanced to join the other thrust.

German forces in the north were permitted the advantage of arranging their defence strategies with the benefit of the knowledge that they were about to experience heavy pressure too. The Germans concentrated their efforts during December on strengthening and firming up their defence lines. Two German corps, II corps and X corps were positioned in the area between Lake Ilmen and Lake Seliger, and to the west along the Lovat river. The *SS-Totenkopfdivision* under the command of *SS-Obergruppenführer* Theodor Eicke formed part of the strength, and had dug itself into the natural defensive position of the Valdai Hills during December.

Under cover of a fierce blizzard the second phase of his winter counter-offensive was launched by Zhukov, during the night of 7-8th January 1942. The Soviet Red Army’s attack was along the whole of army group north’s southern flank. The *SS-Totenkopfdivision’s* neighbours, the 30th and 290th infantry division, received the full brunt of the 11th army, 34th army and 1st shock army, who smashed their way into them. The German lines in places

were pierced by up to 32 km and the Soviet forces all but annihilated the two divisions.

A plan put into action that, if the Soviets succeeded, would trap the German sixteenth army. The 11th army chosen Staraya Russa as the point at which to turned south into the rear of II corps and by 9th January they had advanced that far. From the shores of lake Seliger, driving its way west with intentention of linking up with the 11th army and 1st shock army, the 16th shock army then turned north along the line of the river Lovat.

The *SS-Totenkopfdivision* on the orders of sixteenth army was divided up and deployed at various crisis points piece meal.



A Totenkopf soldier in typical attire in the Demyansk Pocket. Eick's men fared better than their army counterparts with regard to winter clothing, as they received cloths from huge SS warehouses in Riga.

With the objective of strengthening the sixteenth army's flanks two infantry battalions were sent to Demyansk. the *SS-Totenkopfdivisions* reconnaissance battalions of infantry were deployed at Staraya Russa, which they were order to hold at all costs. These segregated deployments of the division were much to Eicke's displeasure.

The situation had become so critical by 12th January 1942, Field Marshal

Leeb perceived the best course of action was to withdraw both his corps over the river Lovat and form a new defensive line. The worried Field Marshal was certain it would be akin to a death sentence if the sixteenth army was to stand firm. Leeb asked permission to with draw, Hitler outrightly refused, ordering his troops to hold fast. An outraged Leeb asked to be relieved of his command, a request Hitler readily acquisced to with the appointment of the former commander of the eighteenth army, Colonel-General Küchler, who replaced Leeb on 17th January.



Shivering soldiers in the Demyansk Pocket. For Eicke's Totenkopf soldiers, encirclement was not a matter for concern. Their F ü hrer had ordered them to stand

and fight - which they would do.

Meanwhile the situation had continued to deteriorate, resulting in the two German corps's being constricted slowly into a pocket centred around Demyansk On 20th January a setback occured for Colonel-General Küchler's command, by now only three days old, when the Soviet armies had broken through along the river Lovat. The German units were now separated on the west and east banks of the river. At Staraya Rsusa the Soviets took heavy losses at the hands of the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* elements and the army's 18th motorised division, who held the position.

Given Soviet strength and Hitler's orders, it was only a matter of time before the encirclement of a major portion of the Sixteenth Army became inevitable, despite the determined resistance of the German divisions in the Valdai region. For another three weeks heavy fighting continued as the Soviets gradually closed the ring. About twenty five miles west of Demyansk units of the Soviet Eleventh and First Shock armies linked up on the river Lovat on 8th February; the Soviet ring had closed firmly around II and X corps, trapping the 12th, 30th, 32nd, 123rd and 290th infantry divisions, plus the remainder of the *SS-Totenkopfdivision.* The Soviets had to hand the equivalent of 15 fresh infantry divisions, well equipped, supported by an assortment of armoured units and. independent ski battalions pressing in on the exhausted and badly battered Germans. Inside the pocket there were 95,000 men and 20,000 horses. With the total collapse of the supply lines, Hitler was assured by Göring that the pocket could be supplied by air, this the Luftwaffe would take responsibility for. Hitler reiterated his orders once again forbidding any attempt to break out to the west. No withdrawals from the Demyansk area would be contemplated. The trapped German divisions were instructed to hold their positions and stand firm until a new front west of the river Lovat was built and a relief attack launched to rescue them.



Max Simon, who commanded a battle group of the Totenkopf Division in the Demyansk Pocket. He latter went on to become an SS-Gruppenführer and lead the 16th SS Panzergrenadier Division Reichsführer-SS.

An estimated supply of nearly 200 tonnes would be required as the minimum daily drop. Weapons, ammunition, food and medicines, in fact all needs had to be brought in by air. A total of just under 300 tonnes was actually reached at its peak, by the Luftwaffe's transport squadrons Initially at least, Göring's supply operations, were able to more than match the Pocket's defenders daily requirements. These drop achievements were not sustainable and they gradually dropped off, with the Luftwaffe finally struggling to meet even half the estimated requirements. An ample supply of warm winter clothing had been procured though SS channels by the *SS-Totenkopfdivisions* supply officers for their troops before the supply lines were cut. This was one thing that was greatly in the *SS-Totenkopfdivision's* favour.

Once the Soviet ring around Demyansk finally closed, General Graf Brockdorff-Ahlefeldt took command of the troops within the pocket. The remaining *SS-Totenkopfdivision* units within the pocket were split into two battle groups, which were constructed from the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* and army personnel. This decition further infuriated Eicke, although being given command of the larger group. He was ordered to defend the south-west sector of the pocket, which involved the protection of a large network of villages and their interlinking roads. Eicke and his command were entrusted with the principal task of holding firm in their sector. The German units on the eastern and western banks of the river Lovat had had a corridor driven between them which had to be prevented from being widened by the Soviets at all costs. *SS-Oberführer* Max Simon commanded the second battle group which was positioned, facing the Soviet 34th army, on the north-eastern edge of the pocket.

Incendiary bombs were dropped wherever a building stood by the Soviet air force to deny any form of shelter to the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* troops. They were fighting in snow well over one metre deep and in temperatures going

down to -30°. Eicke's battle group was subjected to intense pressure from all quarters, as it tried to hold its line of scattered villages. In a number of places the Soviet forces had penetrated the German lines by late February. These penetrations had produced their own little pockets as individual villages were cut off and surrounded. The artillery of the Soviet Red Army had incessantly pounded Eicke's men, with losses mounting dramatically for *SS-Totenkopfdivision*, but it still held doggedly to its objective. The situation on the ground had become so confused that the *Waffen-SS* troops were strafed by their own side as Luftwaffe aircraft dropped supplies right into the laps of the Soviet attackers.

The frenzied assault on the German positions was undertaken by even more fresh Soviet divisions. This involved prolonged and bitter fighting, with both sides giving no quarter. Eicke appealed directly to Himmler for replacements, now fearing for the very survival of his fragmented and mauled division. When Himmler was eventually able to muster several hundred replacements that could be flown into the pocket, the Luftwaffe insisted that its supply flights had not the capacity to carry them.

Soviet troops had so widely infiltrated Eicke'e sector that all contact with neighbouring German units had been lost by the end of February. Feeling that everything was hopeless and the annihilation of his battle group imminent as it now only numbered some 1,460 officers and men Eicke signalled his desperate situation to II corps.

In this period the Soviet attacks became even more desperate because the spring thaw would turn the frozen battleground into a muddy quagmire which would bog down their operations, disadvantaging the attackers far more than the defenders. Every effort therefore had to be made to crush the Demyansk Pocket before this happened.

The dire situation the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* now found itself in was brought to Hitler's notice when Himmler intervened and spoke personally to him. The replacements procured by Himmler, Hitler gave the orders to have them flown in as soon as possible. The Luftwaffe, due to an improvement in weather conditions, was permitted to make a substantial drop to the beleaguered defenders of essential ammunition, food and medicines and on 7th March the fresh *SS-Totenkopfdivision* troops finally arrived at Demyansk.

In mid-March as the spring thaws set in, the Soviet attacks began to tail off. In their attempt to annihilate the Demyansk Pocket the Soviet's had suffered well over 20,000 casualties, while during the same period, the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* had lost around 7,000 men. The Soviets never had a problem of shortage of manpower, as their losses could quickly be made good. For the German side this was not an easy matter, as in the case of the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* losses were 7,000 replaced by only 5,000 men.

Lieutenant-General Walter von Seydlitz-Kurzbach assembled under his command a relief force. On the west bank of the river Lovat from the beginning of March 1942 there had been under way a build-up of German forces which he was now to employ, these being the 5th and 8th light divisions, and 122nd, 127th and 329th infantry divisions. Their objective was to drive eastwards over the river Lovat towards the pocket, while Eicke's battle group would wait to be given a signal to make a corresponding push to the west when the time was ripe. The codenamed Operation 'Fallreep' was employed for the relief of the Demyansk Pocket.

Supported by massive air power the offensive began on 21th March and good progress was made for the first two days. Progress slowed as the Soviet resistance began to stiffen with the enemy frantically battling to prevent a link up between the German forces. It was not until two weeks after the push

eastwards had begun that Seydlitz-Kurzbach felt confident enough to give Eicke his orders to begin his attack westwards. The delay meant the spring thaw would once more turn the ground into boggy marshland through which Eicke's troops would have to trudge yet again. The Soviets were attacked with a frenzied determination by the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* infantry with vicious hand to hand combat often resulting. Due to stiff Soviet resistance and the horrendous conditions, a rate of advance of only around 1.5 km per day was managed to be achieve by the *SS-Totenkopfdivision.*

The east bank of the river Lovat was reached by a company from the *SS-Totenkopfdivision's* tank-destroyer battalion on 20th April and on the following day it was joined by the remainder of the battle group. The bridgehead over the river Lovat was sufficiently secured after 73 days to start moving into what had now become the Demyansk salient and Seydlitz-Kurzbach dispatched the first troops and supplies into it on 22th April.

However, the *SS-Totenkopfdivision's* ordeal was far from being over. The remnants of Eicke's once mighty division, it was hoped, would be pulled out of the front, to be given the chance to convalesce, as they were now in a dreadful physical state, also that it might undergo extensive rebuilding and refitting. Hitler, with scant regard for their condition, ordered that they remain in the salient. Their task was to see that the German corridor was held open, for it was thought this would soon come under renewed enemy attack. The *Waffen-SS* had shown it could fight and match anything the German army could field during this the Eastern Front's first campaign. Few in the military hierarchy would now question the value of a *Waffen-SS* man as a combat soldier. However though, resentment and grave suspicions concerning the 'political' nature of Himmler's troops was still harboured by many. The *Waffen-SS* had speedily acquiring a reputation for fanatical endeavour and heroism few other units could equal and this fact was beyond

all doubt. The incautious attitudes of many *Waffen-SS* officers were still a cause for concern for it was felt that this led to excessive casualties in their units.



Totenkopf soldiers on patrol in the Demyansk Pocket. Eicke's men fought in chest-deep snow and sub-zero temperatures while resisting the Red Army. Russian efforts reached their zenith in February 1942, when SS battle groups and units became isolated and casualties soared – but the Waffen-SS held its ground.

CHAPTER 4

REORGANISATION AND EXPANSION



Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS in northern Russia, June 1942. Note the MP 40 submachine gun, complete with metal stock, slung over the shoulder of the SS grenadier.

1942 witnessed the growth and reorganisation of the *Waffen-SS*, seeing the birth of the *Waffen-SS panzer* and *Panzergrenadier* divisions. They were all immensely powerful, being reconstructed and reformed. The *Waffen-SS*, cadre divisions had been motorised by 1942, but as each had an *SS-Panzer-Regiment* they were *Panzer Divisions* in all but name. Before the end of 1942, however, they were redesignated as *SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Divisionen* or armoured grenadier divisions. Their infantry regiments were soon after designated similarly *SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Regimenter*. The general

background to the origins of the first divisions of the *Waffen-SS* and how they were created early in the Second World War from the full-time para-military formations of the SS already in existence gives an insight into the development and expansion that now occurred.

The nucleus of the first of these divisions was the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* Hitler's personal bodyguard. The second was provided by the *SS-Verfügungstruppe* or SS-Special Purpose Troops, having at first passed through the transitional stages of being named *SS-V.T. Division (mot), SS-V.-Division, SS-Division "Deutschland", SS-Division "Reich",* and finally being baptised *"Das Reich"*. The third was provided by elements of the *SS-Totenkopferbände* or *SS-TV,* the SS Death's Head Regiments, with the German Police forming the fourth. The Death's Head Regiments which had not been used for the creation of the third division became the base for others, such as *6. SS-Gebirgs-Division "Nord", 8. SS-Kavallerie-Division "Florian Geyer"* and *18. SS-Freiwilligen- Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Horst Wessel"*. Those resident outside the Reich of German blood, who were known as *Volksdeutsche* volunteered for service in the *Waffen-SS.* Numbers were such that whole divisions were constructed around them with probably the best known being *SS-Freiwilligen-Gebirgs-Division "Prinz Eugen"*. With the German conquests in the western and northern Europe, volunteers from the so-called "Nordic" countries signed up for service, being grouped, after some time, into *"Germanic"* Divisions of the *Waffen-SS*. Eventually "Non-Germanic" western Europeans were also grouped into divisions. The grandiose racial requirements for SS membership were finally reduced by the demands of war and now whole SS divisions were created from what was formally believed to be, by the Nazi theorists, "inferior races". Chapter 6, Himmler's Foreign Legions, covers the reasons why these personnel were prepared to risk life and limb for the Hitlers self styled "crusade against

bolshevism", together with how and where they were recruited.

Considerable structural changes within the divisions of the *Waffen-SS* were produced by the fortunes of war, acquisition of foreign volunteers as well as other factors. Therefore there was a continual change in the divisional orders of battle. Changes in the organisation of the *Waffen-SS* itself, in addition to these factors, had their own effect. Redesignation of units during their comparatively short lives, especially when the parent divisions were first partially, and then fully motorised. A regiment could find itself at first designated as a *Schützen-Regiment* or rifle regiment then an *SS-Infanterie-Regiment* or infantry regiment, next a *SS-Grenadier-Regimennt* or grenadier regiment and finally an *SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Regiment* or armoured grenadier regiment. Other units were transferred from one division to another and therefore redesignated, whereas others were reclassified *en masse* through out the *Waffen-SS* and *Wehrmacht*. Another factor was the often very thin continuity, for in the West new elements would be created while in the East remnants of the old ones still remained.

Although the *Waffen-SS* was a military force of the Third Reich, it never technically attained the position of the fourth branch of the *Wehrmacht*. It paralleled the German Army in almost every respect, and was subordinate to the Army High Command *O.K.H*. or Armed Forces High Command *O.K.W* in time of battle. Its divisions could be grouped into corps, in similar manner to the Army, which if necessary could then be formed into an army. The *Waffen-SS* established during the Second World War a number of *SS- Korps* headquarters. These had their respective corps troops, to provide for its field divisions, the necessary tactical leadership. At first, to make up each corps, specific SS divisions were allocated. The rule was two divisions per corps, but in reality however, they were made up of whatever was available. With the constant movement of mobile divisions and the demands of war, *SS-*

Korps could be found comprising troops that were purely SS, a combination of SS and army or just army elements. The number of corps troops varied from corps to corps, and generally those corps formed first were more richly endowed. Some *SS-Korps* in addition had other units designed for the immediate use of the corps itself rather than for detachment to divisions. These also varied from one corps to another.



This Totenkopf motorcyclist grabs a quick drink in the Demyansk Salient in the summer of 1942. The stick grenades tucked into his belt were useful in close-quarter combat, especially for halting enemy attacks.



Waffen-SS on the Eastern Front, summer 1942. Himmler believed that the ideological conviction of his troops enabled them "to hold on in the instant that they would normally break down".

However, the fortunes of war provided that the *SS-Totenkopfdivision's* ordeal was far from being over. It was hoped, the remnants of Eicke's once mighty division, would be pulled out of the front. They were now in a dreadful physical state and should be given the chance to convalesce. Also it would provide the opportunity to undergo extensive rebuilding and refitting. Hitler, ordered that they remain in the Demyansk salient. The German corridor was to be held open at all costs and this was to be their objective, for it was thought this would soon come under renewed enemy attack. The *SS-Totenkopfdivision*'s condition was held in scant regard by Hitler. All SS and army troops, within the western part of the salient were to be combined into a new 'corps' and come under Eicke's command. The total strength of this

formation in reality had around only half that of a single fully manned division. Eicke, made his pessimism concerning the *SS-Totenkopfdivision*'s situation known to Colonel-General Busch. Busch was very sympathetic, having first-hand knowledge of the appalling condition of countless numbers of the members of the *SS-Totenkopfdivision*. Personally interceding, he stated that an immediate intake of at least 5,000 fresh troops must be found to augment Eicke's exhausted corps if it were to continue with its allotted tasks. All that was to be sent in the end was a further 3,000 replacements by *Reichsführer-SS* Himmler.

The Soviet Red Army once again went over to the offensive in May 1942, the new corridor was only held open with great difficulty when it came under attack. The Soviet actions through the month and into early summer grew in determination and strength as their build-up continued. Now fully exhausted, the SS troops, were denied any chance or form of rest. Eicke's corps was significantly weakened by the frequency of Soviet attacks and constant attrition through these defensive actions. The commander was also now physically exhausted himself.

Temporary command of the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* was given to *SS-Oberführer* Max Simon in mid-June when Eicke was ordered to take a period of rest. At the end of this spell of leave, Eicke was ordered to report to the Führer Headquarters at Rastenburg, where he was decorated with the Oakleaves to his Knight's Cross, by Hitler personally becoming the eighty-eighth recipient. Eicke took this opportunity to described plainly the appalling state of his remaining troops in private conversation with Hitler. Hitler, expressing his sympathy refused, to allow the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* to be withdrawn from the Demyansk salient just yet. However, when the division was eventually withdrawn, he promise Eicke that it would become a fully rebuilt and reformed *Panzergrenadier* or armoured infantry division,

complete with its own tank battalion. Eicke was further ordered that until such time as the division was withdrawn from the front, he was to remain on leave.

By early July severe Soviet pressure was being exerted on the *SS-Totenkopfdivision*, which once again was building up in the areas it defended. *SS-Oberführer* Simon desperately pleaded for the removal of the division before it was destroyed, as the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* total annihilation, in his opinion was now only a matter of time. But all this was to no avail. Eicke, after having seen Simon's reports, pleaded for the withdrawal of his division once more. The remnants must stand firm and would not be released, Hitler insisted, until such time as the salient had been sufficiently strengthened, to withstand future attacks by the enemy. It was estimated that the German X corps would take at least a further six to eight weeks to achieve this. On 17th July massive Soviet assaults were once more unleashed upon the exhausted *SS-Totenkopfdivision* troops. They smashed into the SS units who sustained considerable losses from these attacks only holding them back by their fanatical determination. The *SS-Totenkopfdivision* defenders of Vasilyevschina were wiped out to a man when it was captured on 18th July by the Soviet Red Army. In flagrant contradiction to direct orders from his army superiors, *SS-Oberführer* Simon in a mind-boggling act of insubordination flatly refused to launch an immediate counterattack. If the army required the task to be done, he suggested instead, that they should do it themselves. The poor condition of the Waffen-SS troops must presumably have been appreciated by the corps command, for no repercussions were levelled at *SS-Oberführer* Simon for his refusal to obey the order to assault. The army sent in its own troops and the attack was indeed carried out. The 8th light division replaced the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* for the mission but still failed to oust the Soviets and in the process suffered heavy losses.

In weather conditions that might be lightly described as atrocious attempts continued to crush the salient by the Soviets. In thigh-deep flutinous mud, men of both sides fought for several days until eventually on 30th July the Soviet attacks eased off. An exhausted standstill had now been reached by both sides which found the SS troops literally on their last legs. The results of long periods of fighting in what can only be described as swamp conditions was taking hold on Simon's exhausted troops. Among the shattered remains of the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* diseases spread like wildfire, the soldiers succumbing easily to dysentery, pneumonia and many others racking complaints.



The Demjansk Shield. Ground forces were eligible for the award after serving for 60 days in the garrison, having been wounded while serving there, or gaining a bravery award while in the garrison.

In an attempt to register his anger, Eicke once again presented himself to Hitler. He demanded that the division be withdrawn from the Demyansk salient and not to be allowed to wallow in these conditions. His division should be relieved in order that it could rest and undergo a complete refit, if not he should be allowed to return to the front, where if necessary he might die with his men. Hitler, not surprisingly, refused. Instead Eicke was ordered

to take long-term convalescent leave.

On 6th August both the northern and southern edges of the corridor came under heavy attacks launched by the Soviet 11th army and I guards corps. The *SS-Totenkopfdivision* once again suffered debilitating casualties. The freedom of the skies had been conferred upon the Soviet Red Army air force by a conspicuously absent, Luftwaffe. The Soviet's could now strafe and bomb at will, while massed artillery barrages were poured on the SS troops. No reserves whatsoever were left by 12th August. The *SS-Totenkopfdivision* non-combatant personnel all who had been duly armed filled the trenches. Clerks, medics, military police and even the cooks now joined their comrades.

The *SS-Totenkopfdivision* was saved from the very real likelihood of being overrun by the Soviet Red Army when the heavens opened delivering torrential rains. For two days all military operations ceased due to the fact that the weather was so atrocious this also afforded a brief time to regroup. Over the next week or so the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* soldiers were now able to summon up enough strength to keep the enemy at bay. *SS-Oberführer* Simon, now in total despair suggested that the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* be written off as a division, as he felt there was hardly anything left worth saving. A mere 7,000 or so men, most of them non-combatant troops now made up the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* 'corps'

On 25th August, massive attacks were mounted by the 7th guards division, 129th, 130th, 364th and 391st infantry divisions and the 30th rifle brigade. The corridor was once again the target, here they hurled themselves at the Germans, bludgeoning their way into their positions. The *SS-Totenkopfdivision* was separated into numerous isolated pockets. All Soviet attacks were fought off successfully, Simon's command determinedly held its

positions, but in just a few hours over 1,000 men were lost. The battered *SS-Totenkopfdivision* now had its old commander back, but each week Eicke had to return to Germany to oversee preparations for its rebuilding.

The *SS-Totenkopfdivision* was at last finally withdrawn in October 1942, and this was achieved only when German counterattacks had finally driven the Soviets far enough back from the salient to ensure that it was secure.. Also troop movement could be made in and out of the salient out of the range of Soviet artillery. Now only 6,400 SS troops still remained alive



Paul Hausser, the hard-bitten commander of I SS Panzer Corps, known as “Papa” to his men. He fought in Poland in 1939 and went on to serve in France and Russia. He lost an eye on the Eastern Front, the black eye patch he wore subsequently becoming his trademark. He abandoned Karkov in February 1943 in contravention of Hitler’s

orders, but redeemed himself with the brilliant counterattack in March which retook the city. Hausser was instrumental in creating the fighting prowess of the Waffen-SS, being the inspector of the SS-Verfügstruppe before the war. His awards included the Knight's Cross with Oakleaves and Oakleaves with Swords.

On 25th April 1943 Hitler authorised the institution of a special campaign decoration to commemorate the defence of the town of Demjansk by the Second Army Corps. Also serving with this corps were several non-army units, including personnel of the *Reichsarbeitsdienst, organisation Todt,* police, Russian auxiliary volunteers as well as the *SS-Totenkopfdivision*, all of whom were to be eligible. The defence of Demjansk tied down eighteen Russian divisions for over fourteen months, for the loss of 3,335 German personnel killed and in excess of 10,000 being wounded from a garrison strength of 100,000 men. General Walter Graf Brockdorff-Ahlefeldt returned from the Demjansk pocket a broken man and died on 9th May 1943. The defenders were supplied by air and the Luftwaffe crews who were engaged in these operations were eligible for the award. It is interesting to note that the shield was to be worn over the SS arm eagle, in the case of award to those units. Each recipient was entitled to up to five examples of the shield. In the case of posthumous awards, one example of the shield, together with the permission certificate, was sent to the next of kin. Regulations stated that this was the responsibility of the fallen soldier's company commander.

The Criteria for the Award were;

Ground Forces

1) To have served for 60 days in the garrison.

2) To have been wounded whilst serving there.

3) To have gained a bravery award whilst serving in the garrison.

Luftwaffe Personnel

1) To have flown 50 combat missions over the garrison and surrounding area.

2) To have flown and landed in the garrison 50 supply missions.

Company commanders were responsible for submitting lists of those in their units who qualified for the award by 31 December 1943. Awards ceased on 1 April 1944. Approximately 100,000 awards of this shield were made and these were rendered by the garrison commander, General der Infanterie Graf Brockdorff-Ahlefeldt. Many photographs of *SS-Totenkopfdivision* members show them proudly wearing this proof of their participation in one of the most costly battles in the division's history.

The campaign decoration comprises a shield with a pointed bottom and undulating sides being produced initially in silver washed zinc. On the top is a box with the name in raised capitals, 'DEMJANSK'. Above the box, at either edge, are two pill boxes with a gun port in each. Between these pill boxes is an eagle with downspread wings, clutching a swastika surrounded by a wreath in its talons. In the main body of the shield, at the top, is a single-engine observation plane, with a single bladed propeller, which is straight across the shield in line with the wings of the plane.. Surmounting this aeroplane are large, crossed, double-edged swords, with downswept cross guards. Beneath these is the date, '1942'. The badge was placed on a backing cloth of the colour of the service to which the recipient belonged.

Another point worth noting is that several *SS-Totenkopfdivision* members were decorated for gallantry during the battles at Demyansk with the prestigious Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross:

SS-Obersturmführer Wilfried Richter, *SS- Obersturmführer* Erwin Meierdrees, *SS-Sturmbannfürher* Karl Ullrich, *SS-Sturmbannführer* Franz

Kleffner, *SS-Oberscharführer* Ernst Staudle, *SS-Sturmbannfürher* Dr. Eduard ‘Eddi’ Deisenhofer, *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Georg ‘Schorsch’ Bochmann; *SS-Oberscharführer* Otto Baum, *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Max Seela.



Grenadiers of the Leibstandarte Division fighting in Alexeyevka in February 1943. The division fought superbly in and around Kharkov at the beginning of 1943, inflicting heavy losses on the Red Army.

The Demyansk Pocket held a total of around 100,000 German soldiers who were totally cut off. The tenacity of the men of the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* was in no small measure an important factor that the pocket held and the survivors were eventually relieved. Mention should also be made of the crews of the Luftwaffe’s transport planes, for they managed to supply the beleaguered defenders of the pocket with over 64,000 tonnes of essential ammunition, food and medicines while at the same time evacuating over 35,000 sick and wounded German soldiers. It was not just the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* that had made sacrifices, the Luftwaffe had too. Soviet aircraft and ground fire had claimed over 250 Luftwaffe transport aircraft shot down.

The headquarters for this Corps *SS-Generalkommando (mot)* was ordered by Hitler on 13 May 1942 and authorised on 28th May. The Corps itself was ordered on 9th July 1942 and formed in Germany. It was transferred to northern France later that month to control the SS infantry divisions reforming as armoured divisions after having been on the eastern front. Its HQ was redesignated as *SS-General-Kommando (Panzer)* on 1st June 1942. The corp was formed from the *Leibstandarte*, *Das Reich* and *Totenkopf* divisions. They were all immensely powerful, being reconstructed and reformed as *Panzergrenadier* divisions. This new corp was transported with all the speed it could muster to the eastern front during the second week in January 1943. This was at Hitler's express order. Top priority was given to the SS divisions regarding transport by rail and road to the front. *Der Führer* regiment from the *Das Reich* division was the first unit to reach its destination.



SS-Obergruppenführer “Sepp” Dietrich, personal friend of Hitler and commander of the Leibstandarte Division. Totally devoid of any knowledge of military theories, he was nevereless an inspirational leader.

The picture looked extremely bleak for the Germans on the eastern front,

southern sector. They found the Soviet winter offensive of 1942 hit them like an express train, crushing a number of Hungarian, Italian and Romanian divisions. The sixth army's remnants at Stalingrad were also liquidated. The bludgeoned divisions of the Axis were forced to fall back in the direction of the Dnieper. The Soviet 2nd guards tank army crashed its way Southwest at the same time. Russian armies were pouring onto the Donetz basin and threatening the German forces with another "Stalingrad". In January 1943 the *SS-Polizei-Division,* was situated south of Lake Ladoga, becoming the subject of fierce Soviet counter attacks which punched a hole in the German defences. The breakthrough occurred south of Schlüsselburg, near the 170th Infantry Division. By early February 1943, the retreating *SS-Polizei-Division* took over its newly assigned position west of Kopino where it had to repulse a number of fierce Soviet onslaughts. The German summer offensive against Russia had been launched in the Kursk-Karkow sector in July 1942, with as Hitler's goal the all important Caucasian oilfields. Kleist's Panzer Army broke through the Russian defences and poured onto the Caucasus. Within six weeks the entire Don river region was in German hands with one of the deepest penetrations being made by the *SS-Division "Wiking"*. Here in the Caucasus during the winter of 1943/1943 and the spring of 1943, the *SS-Division "Wiking"* remained on the defensive.

In the depth of the Russian winter the newly created *1 SS-Panzer-Korps.* was committed to battle. The eastern front, southern sector, had to be stabilised and it was on this immensely powerful force that Hitler was relying and the military prowess of *SS-Obergruppenführer* Paul 'Papa' Hausser who was given command of the *1 SS-Panzer-Korps.*

An area close by the city of Kharkov, was chosen as the concentration site where the corp could be formed up. Between Volokomovka on the river Oskol and Kupiansk on the river Donetz was the area that had been assigned

for the *1 SS-Panzer-Korps* to hold. A sector over 70 miles long was detailed to the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'*, that centred at Chegavayev and it was here that they went into the line. Numerous Italians, Hungarians and disjointed German units retreated past them flowing westwards, while the division held the line fast. The Soviets mounted numerous attacks during the first week of February, which were successfully repulsed with serious losses being borne by the Soviets. SS units this strong were an unpleasant surprise.

Kharkov now came under the scrutiny of the Soviet Red Army. An enormous pincer movement was employed for the push on the city. The *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'*, and army's 320th infantry division held their ground firmly and it was through them that the southern claw of the pincer had to push. The northern claw was to smash its way through the army units holding the region to the north-east of Belgorod on the Donetz. The Soviet advance now made it plainly obvious that in the foreseeable future Kharkov was in danger of being taken. This now posed a dilemma: should the city be defended with the possibility of the *1 SS-Panzer-Korps* being annihilated, or the unthinkable evacuation, enabling a regroup giving time to prepare a counterattack? On 9th February, in snow waist deep and during blizzard conditions the *Das Reich* began a slow withdraw westwards.

The blizzards proved useful cover for the Soviet troops, by cloaking their movements when they frequently ambushed the *SS-Grenadier*. Deep snowdrifts entrapped their vehicles. A new defensive line was intended to be built by the division on the Donetz, but when they reached their objective it was only to find the Soviets were there first. This forced the *Das Reich* to withdraw even further west, to the east of Kharkov.



Directly disobeying Hitler's orders, Hausser abandons Kharkov in mid-February 1943. The action saved I SS Panzer Corps, and paved the way for the spectacular counterattack which retook the city in March.

The *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* and the 320th infantry division found that they had been parted by the Soviets, who were speedily driving westwards. The *Waffen-SS* mounted a strong counterattack and it was perceived that the Soviet flanks were weak, thus enabling a possible cut through the salient formed by the Soviet advance, with the objective of meeting the 320th infantry division to the south.

SS-Obergruppenführer 'Sepp' Dietrich formed a battle group for this purpose, which he commanded. The plan was to undertake a three-pronged attack. *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Kurt Meyer with his *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler's* reconnaissance battalion would take the right flank. The *Der Führer* regiment and the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler' 1st SS-Panzergrenadier Regiment* would take the left flank. The *Leibstandarte SS*

*'Adolf Hitler'*s reconnaissance battalion, under the covering mantel of a blizzard, approached the village of Merefa. Off-road travel due to the snowdrifts covering the terrain was almost impossible. The forward armoured personnel carriers being employed like snowploughs, Merefa was entered by the battalion and after fierce fighting the occupying Soviets were driven out and the battalion took the village.

Borki had been captured by the *Der Führer* regiment with the Soviet salient being penetrated by almost 50 km and resulting in the Soviet VII guards cavalry corps having their spearhead units severed from them. Within the Soviet salient a bitter confrontation was taking place for supremacy and the SS Battle Group quickly lost contact with. *1 SS-Panzer-Korps.* The Germans in the north were not faring so well and had to fall back towards Kharkov. The city was looking as if it might be surrounded. To the south-west of Merefa stood Zmiyov, which the Germans had to relinquish to the Soviets due to the mounting pressure in the south.

Scattered stronghold now were the order of the day for German defences which now did not form a continuous line and posed the real danger of encirclement by the Soviets.

Powerful Soviet attempts to eject the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* from Rogan failed and the SS troops stood firm, with each side losing and retaking ground in the prolonged and bitter fighting that ensued. Both sides took heavy casualties, especially in the action where the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* lost Rogan airfield and then counterattacked to retake it.

The *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* was quickly surrounded after they had captured Alexeyevka on 13th February. The Soviets determination to eliminate this, the most easterly point still in German hands around Kharkov, was pronounced and they launched vicious attacks which were repulsed for a

length of time with heavy losses being the result. The bravery and self-sacrifice is well illustrated by the German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop's son who was shot through the lung by a Soviet sniper. *SS-Obersturmführer* Rudolf von Ribbentrop, wishing that privileged of background or rank should not be seen to be taken into consideration, determinedly refused to be evacuated to hospital. Knowing the conditions for evacuating himself were impossible, he stated that he would go after all wounded NCOs and file had been so treated. This amplifies the feeling SS officers had for their charges and resulted in him being held in high regard by his men as a respected and popular officer.

In a drive to help their beleaguered comrades *SS-Sturmbannführer* Max Wünsche, commanding an armoured relief column, was smashing his way encountering strong resistance.

Hitler, in his inimitable manner gave the order that Kharkov was to be held at all costs. In the city *SS-Obergruppenführer* 'Papa' Hausser received the order and took defensive actions. In order to be effective the defence lines had to be shortened, as at the time they were far too widely spread. Kharkov was a city doomed, a fact that Hausser full well knew and his previous move would be of limited effect.

To avoid helping the Soviets and affording them any comfort Hausser ordered the destruction of all military installations so they did not fall into their hands when the city eventually fell. Enemy attacks on the eastern and southern defences of the city were putting escalating pressure on the defenders and their collapse was imminent. A pointless defence of an undefendale city to Hausser who was a realist, and the destruction of his command in the execution of his orders was unthinkable. He held his breath.

Beteka was captured in the meantime by *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Kurt

Meyer with considerable loss of life by the Soviet forces. He continually launched counterattacks at the Soviet units he came into contact with. Meyer had no alternative than to bring his troops back to Alexeyevka in an attempt to defend it when it became in danger of being stormed. The Soviets penetrated the town but his group had sufficient strength to repulse their incursions. His small group was the object of a major assault planed by the Soviets and *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Meyer had become well aware of their intentions. He was of the opinion that at best they would succeed in pushing them out of the town, and at worst crush his small command. These Soviet units formed up in the east he decided would be best dealt with by launching a pre-emptive strike against. His men, hungry and tired with many casualties and now low on ammunition would rally better than defend.

The Soviet forces little expected an attack to be launched from the garrison of Alexeyevka. When this beleaguered force erupted it engendered panic among the Soviet troops and in disarray they took to their heels and fled. This success could not be exploited however due to the fact that *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Meyer's battered battalion was far too weakened. Wünsche's relief column finally arrived just at the time that Meyer's troops were pulling back into Alexeyevka. The breakout of the city was now made possible by this reinforcement and together they rejoined the *1 SS-Panzer-Korps.*

Kharkov's suburbs had been probed and penetrated on the evening of 14th February by the Soviet forces with the *1 SS-Panzer-Korps* rear area being infiltrated during the next 24 hours.

The Soviet drive was temporarily stemmed when to the north-west of Kharkov a counterattack was launched by elements of *Das Reich*, which inflicted heavy casualties on the Soviets.

Permission to withdraw from the city was sort once more by Hausser in order that he might regroup his corps. This was placed around mid-day on 15th February with no reply being forthcoming by 12:50. Hausser unilaterally took the precaution of breakout and informed army group headquarters at 13:00 of his decision. The expected order to hold Kharkov at all costs was received at 16:30. Hausser was adamant that he would not consider the annihilation of his corps in the hopeless endeavour to save Kharkov.

His reply was blunt, that the order was too late to be heeded: “It is already settled, Kharkov is being evacuated.”

CHAPTER 5

TRIUMPH AND DESPAIR



Leibstandarte soldiers on the edge of Kharkov in March 1943, just prior to the German retaking of the City – one of the Waffen-SS's greatest victories in Russia.

Hitler flew into one of his uncontrollable rages when he learned that his personal order had been disregarded. Possibly the realisation that the decision Hausser had taken was correct was more catalytic in bringing on his fury than that his order had been directly disobeyed. When he gained some measure of composure Hitler demanded to be flown to Field Marshal von Manstein's Army Group South headquarters at Zaporozhye for an explanation. In order

to escape to German held ground further west, *SS-Obergruppenführer* Hausser and his troops had to go along the “Kharkov corridor” that had now contracted to a mere mile wide at the most. The action was carried out in the nick of time. This important strategic city now having been freed from the Nazi hordes gave the Soviets a sense of achievement Their forces were exhausted, which lead the momentum of their offensive to falter. A countless loss of life had been brought about by a German defence that had been so tenacious. This loss of man power had to be replaced. The Soviet’s sense of achievement was soon tempered by these realities.

Hitler in grand manner ordered that Kharkov must be retaken. The Soviets could easily be ejected and an immediate counterattack could and should be launched he stated. The *1 SS-Panzer-Korps* would soon be suitably reinforced by the imminent arrival of the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* and could then undertake the task. The *1 SS-Panzer-Korps* was to be used for other purposes, for Field Marshal von Manstein had other plans to deploy it as the upper claw in a large pincer movement. The objective of which was the encircling and isolating of the Soviet armies who were moving towards the river Dnieper.

The *XLVIII Panzer-Korps* pushed towards the river Samara from its position east of Dnepropetrovsk with the task of securing bridgeheads across it. Once this was achieved their objective was to make themselves ready for an attack into the area to the rear of the Soviet 6th army, which was to be accomplished by a strike northwards. The unexpected German push completely took the Soviet troops by surprise and they retreated northwards in near panic. German morale soared, the troops were pleased to be on the attack again. Vacating their positions around Poltava, the *Totenkopf* and *Das Reich* divisions were on the move once more, pushing towards the south-east. In appalling conditions, the terrain mantled with deep snow, conjoined with the

added hindrance of being shrouded in fog, that formed a damp clinging veil, the rear of the Soviet 6th army was presented a hammer blow by them.

The lower claw of the pincer would be formed by the army's fourth Panzer army under the command of General Hermann Hoth. The retaking of Kharkov was the first objective, Hitler commanded. He was not going to be swayed from his point of view and von Manstein perceived that this would be a fruitless task to attempt. Just as von Manstein was about to bow to the inevitable, Hitler's plan was to be thwarted.

The fly in the ointment was to be the *SS-Totenkopfdivision's* inability to movie off the main roads and travel across country, due to an unexpected thaw that had completely bogged them down. Thus delayed the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* could not be employed in Hitler's plan. Progress had, up until this time, been excellent, but to improve on this and get to their destination faster, it was thought that their heavy vehicles would travel faster over the rock-hard frozen ground. The division picked up speed proving the decision to be correct at first, but the temperature rising unexpectedly caused the frozen soil to thaw and within a short time span their axles were covered in deep mud. Eicke and his division were now wallowing in this thick treacle-like substance, making progress virtually non-existent.

Hitler now begrudgingly approved Field Marshall von Manstein's alternative plan. The German counterattack was almost immediately undertaken. Krasnograd's surrounding area was the objective of *Das Reich* during the overture of the counterattack in which it was to drive west and south-west in an attempt to fulfil its allotted task. Their next target was Peretschepino which was quickly taken. The division's morale was much heightened when they received a personal message from Hitler on 20th February in which he detailed their next objective.

On 22nd February *Das Reich* punched towards Pavlograd supported by Luftwaffe Stuka ground attack aircraft. Refitted with state of the art weaponry and now fully motorised, the division, they fell upon Soviet cavalry units that lay in their path. The German infantry, defenceless against such mediaeval attacks, could well have been struck with horror by the appearance of these formidable characters.



Well-wrapped Waffen-SS grenadiers trudge through a Russian village towards Kharkov and victory, vindicating Hitler's belief in the military prowess of the newly created I SS Panzer Corps.

However, with no armoured cover at all, and only carrying *Schashas*, the

Cossack sabre,. the *Waffen-SS* found them no contest, sweeping them aside like matchwood, inflicting horrendous losses upon them as their push slid inexorably onwards. The might of the *Waffen-SS* proved to much for Pavlograd which succumbed on 24th February. The territorial gains achieved by the Germans were so fast that numerous 'friendly fire' actions occurred. This is graphically illustrated when elements of the *Das Reich* came under the *Totenkopf*'s Panzer regiment guns, whose fire caused numerous casualties.

After the two divisions, *SS-Totenkopfdivision* and *Das Reich* joined forces, they swung to the north-east and drove parallel to the retreating line of Soviets. The enemy, now fleeing, found their flanks were being hammered. Where the Soviet units became short on fuel, the *Waffen-SS* troops found that they simply abandoned their vehicles, all in full working order, causing long immobile columns of tanks, trucks and assorted means of transport.

The demoralised Soviet forces endured in the ensuing days, what can at best be described as little more than slaughter. *SS-Totenkopf Panzergrenadierregiment* 1, commanded by *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Otto Baum and accompanied by elements from *Das Reich* division, had been dispatched to block their escape route. They race forwards and this immensely strong SS unit wreaked havoc on the panic-stricken enemy. The Panzers were joined by dive-bombers of the *Luftwaffe* whenever Soviet troops were observed taking their toll in the course of events. The success was measured by the head count of the destruction of two complete Soviet armies. They destroyed, captured or immobilised enemy tanks that numbered in the region of 600, of which the majority were the T-34 models, the Soviet latest design. The haul was so immense that a full tank detachment of recovered T-34s was able to be employed by the *Das Reich Panzerregiment*. A further 600 anti-tank guns and in excess of 400 artillery pieces had to be added this catalogue of success. The number of Soviet prisoners that went

into the bag however was not so impressive: approximately 9000 were captured and 23,000 killed. The reason for this was that the Soviet troops abandoned their heavy equipment and made good their escape on foot, finding gaps in the German encirclement that they were able to squeeze through. The Germans also suffered casualties that were not inconsiderable. Possibly the most notable was the loss of the former concentration camp inspector *SS-Obergruppenführer* Theodor Eicke. This brutal man, had formed a school of many enemies throughout his career, both from the SS itself and the army. Few in either service were endeared to him due to his very abrasive and uncouth manner.



Fighting in Kharkov in March 1943. I SS Panzer Corps had spearheaded the operation to retake the City, prompting Hitler to remark: "The SS Panzer Corp is worth 20 Italian divisions."

However he was popular with the men of his division. He set an example by eating the meagre rations they were served and living in the same conditions

in the field of filthy, damp and cold trenches or foxholes beneath the division's transport. The manner of his death is indicative of his manner with his troops. The divisional HQ had temporarily lost contact with its panzer regiment on 26th February. Eicke, feeling apprehensive at not being able to contact the regiment by radio, decided to investigate the situation personally. A Friesler Stork, one of the division's scout planes, was made ready and went on a reconnaissance mission. After a period of scouring the terrain Eicke spotted elements of the regiment holed up in a small village. He ordered the pilot to land, but the next village was still held by the Soviets, a fact Eicke had not observed. Landing between the two villages, the Soviets welcomed it with a hail of bullets whereupon the plane crashed and was engulfed in an inferno of flames. Attempts were immediately made to rescue Eicke by the Panzer regiment but these were beaten off. The following morning, Eicke's, his adjutant's and the pilot's charred bodies were rescued by a specially formed assault group, supported by armour, but it took several attempts on the part of his men, who eventually succeeded with the loss of several lives. His men were deeply saddened by the loss of their commander and he was accorded a Viking style burial at a divisional cemetery near Orelka, Russia. His memory was further honoured when *SS-Totenkopf Infantry Regiment 3* was named *Theodor Eicke* and permitted to wear a cuffband with the former divisional commander's name embroidered onto it to perpetuate his name honourable. Later this regiment was redesignated *SS-Panzergrenadierregiment 6*.

In order to block any pushes towards Kharkov by the Germans, the Soviet High Command or STAVKA, deployed more troops into the sector with the area south of the city receiving an armoured corps, all despite the hammering its units were undergoing. A trap had been set by the Germans so that these fresh Soviet troops could moved straight in to it.

The Soviet Red Army units were facing to their south, and the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* and *Das Reich* suddenly discovered any retreat was now impossible as the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* had been moved into their rear by Hausser. The *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* had quickly established defensive positions and it was towards these northwards the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* and *Das Reich* levered the Soviets. The enemy was totally annihilated by *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* infantry, who had the benefit of armoured support which was considerably strengthened by the new heavy battalion who were equipped with the mighty Tiger tanks.



Elated with their victory at Kharkov, Hitler insisted that the "SS gets the necessary personnel." The Leibstandarte, Das Reich and Totenkopf Divisions also got the latest heavy tank – the Tiger – for the Kursk Offensive.

The gates of Kharkov now lay open to the Germans, with this last hurdle removed. The *1 SS-Panzer-Korps* and Fourth Panzer army joined forces on 4th March and from its step-off point at Staroverovka began the assault on

the city. With the objective of forcing a bridgehead across the river Mscha, the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* drove to Valki which was situated on it. 9th March was a good day for the *Waffen-SS* Forces on the battle field. The *SS-Totenkopfdivision*, stood on the left flank of the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* and had taken Stary Mertschyk, then drove on to Olshany which fell on 9th March. *Das Reich* was on the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'*s right flank, which found that it had to battle against atrocious terrain, slowing its progress, although its advance unit still reached the outskirts of Kharkov on 9th March. Peretdinaga and Polevaya were taken on the eve of 9th March by the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'*.

The original plan, promulgated by Hausser, was that Kharkov was to be taken by a three-pronged assault. *SS-Totenkopfdivision* was to have attacked from the north-west. The north of the city was saved for the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* while *Das Reich* drove around to the north and attacked Smiyev down the eastern side. Scrapping this move, an attack on Kharkov from the west was now the new objective the *Das Reich* was ordered to undertake. The defence encountered was light when *Das Reich* penetrated the outskirts of the city first, but stiffened dramatically thereafter.

To the north, pushing down the main Belgorod-Kharkov road, *SS-Panzergrenadier Regiment 1*, under the command of *SS-Standartenführer* Fritz Witt, and smashed its path into Kharkov on. Witt's right was *SS-Panzergrenadier Regiment 2*, commanded by *SS-Standartenführer* Theodor 'Teddi' Wisch. The left flank was taken by *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Kurt Meyer. The road from Kharkov to Liptsy, north of the city, had been allocated to "*Panzermeyer*" who was tasked with its cutting. He decided that it was a better bet to travel through the woods that stood there so he ordered his reconnaissance battalion off the road and into the great forest, but his armoured vehicles began to make heavy weather of the new terrain, and

Meyer began to have second thoughts when he discovered sled tracks and decided following them might be a better option, but further problems raised their ugly heads. He had committed his force to the tracks that soon narrowed, now permitting his vehicles to be turned around. On many occasions the column was forced to halt, to enable the vehicles, which were in danger of becoming stuck, to be manhandled through the obstacles. Meyer decided that he must catch up with *SS-Obersturmführer* Gerd Bremer, who commanded the forward element of his command. Leaving all the navigational problems to his subordinates to overcome he set off, where he finally came across Bremer and his men in a large clearing where they had taken cover. This clearing sloped away and at its foot stood a main road on which Soviet Red Army soldiers were massed in their thousands, complete with tanks and artillery. It was clear that they had to remain well covered as Meyer had only a handful of light vehicles and a command of just over 20 men.

All he could do was cross his fingers, send back messages to warn the oncoming column so that they would know what lay before them, and await its arrival. The German then heard planes, a sound they knew well heralded the arrival of Stuka dive-bombers. The planes bombed and strafed the Soviet column, which was cast asunder. Seeing this God-given opportunity Meyer ordered his minuscule force immediately into the attack at the same time as the lead tanks came into view. The Soviets, fearing they had walked straight into a well-planned German ambush panicked. Some tried unsuccessfully to flee, while many others decided to put up their hands to surrender. Hundreds of prisoners fell into the Germans' hands, and Meyer's column, hoping to maximise the element of surprise, drove to Kharkov with all the speed they could muster, leaving a handful of men to guard their prisoners.



Though the Tigers and Panthers stole the limelight at Kursk, the older German tank designs, such as the Panzer III, also played their part in the greatest armoured clash in history, and were used by the Waffen-SS.

They reached the city's northern outskirts without encountering further incident. Their rapid progress was maintained until they came to the edge of the city where Meyer called a halt for his column at a disused brickwork's. Meyer and his command retraced their steps to the earlier engagement battleground where the countless Soviet prisoners, who seemed relieved to be out of the conflict, were being supervised by a handful of Grenadiers. The other members of Meyer's battalion arrived during the next few hours. The full force was again regrouped by dawn the following day and with Kharkov their next port of call, their advance was resumed. The brickwork's were revisited and the Soviet tanks nearby on this occasion were all destroyed or driven off, being no match for the Germans. The order to dig in was given by Meyer on 11th March as the major problem of a shortage of fuel rendered

further progress impossible. Meyer's unusual choice was a graveyard, but unbeknownst to him the main escape route out of the city was situated alongside his force. During the next few hours the ¬*Waffen-SS* troops repulsed numerous attempt by the Soviet to overrun their positions over the next few hours. The Soviets had cut the road to the north of the city, when a fuel tanker was able to get through to his group they imparted this intelligence to him.. His escape route was now eradicated, if this should become necessary at any point. This was tempered with excellent intelligence: the centre of the city had been penetrated by Fritz Witt's regiment who had seized the propaganda sensitive Red Square. No other course of action presented itself to Meyer other than to drive onwards into the city itself.

Now caught by the impending German advance, the Soviet units in the city, put up a fanatical opposition in their attempts to break out to the north. Meyer was stridently trying to hold on the other hand the Soviet units who were frantically trying to evade capture. The *Das Reich* division penetrated the city's western side and on 12th March at the very heart of Kharkov, although having to overcome strong opposition, the main railway station was reached. Meyer and his reconnaissance group situated to Kharkov's north received welcome relief from *SS-Sturmbannführer* Peiper and his *Panzergrenadier* battalion. Together they smashed a path to the east and south-eastern sectors with the objective of flushing out what remained of the Soviet defenders. Now Kharkov was in the Germans' hands. Peiper and his battalions fixed Belgorod firmly into its sights. Racing helter skelter towards their objective which fell on 18th March 1943 to his command, this enabled the Waffen-SS to link up with the army's élite *Großdeutschlanddivision*.

The *Totenkopf* Panzers confronted Soviet units which had cut the Kharkov-Belgorod road and destroyed them. Their swing round the north of the city

was continued south-east to Tshuguyev where they captured the Donetz crossing. During the next few days the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* had to repulse Soviet units fleeing from Kharkov as well as having to cope with counterattacks launched upon them by fresh Soviet formations to the east. The Soviet High Command took cold comfort from all this effort, for during these actions they saw the annihilation of the Soviet 25th Guards Rifle Division.

After the three days of fanatical close-quarter fighting in the city which gave the prize to the *Waffen-SS* , but claimed a great majority of them. A great victory had been won with the retaking of Kharkov by the *Waffen-SS* but at a great price, over 11,500 of its members having been killed. Hitler now perceived his political warriors in an even more invincible light. The Kharkov victory forged the reputation of fearless heroism in attack and steadfastness in defence for the *Waffen-SS.*



The Waffen-SS just before the Kursk Offensive – confident, cocky and equipped with

some of the best equipment available. II SS Panzer Corps was the spearhead of Germany's last great offensive in the East.

Hitler was convinced that the *Waffen-SS* could undertake the most dangerous and difficult missions with impunity and during the remainder of the war they would be increasingly be relied upon by Hitler to deliver the victories he desired and thought possible. They in return tried to deliver the undeliverable without question of personal sacrifice.

Following the retaking of Kharkov, the situation stabilised somewhat on the southern sector of the Eastern Front. The Germans set about consolidating their positions. However, it soon became apparent that the Red Army had established a huge salient between Kharkov and Orel in the north. This salient extended into German territory and almost invited attack. Hitler was transfixed by this salient, and soon preparations were under way to eradicate it. The subsequent battle, suffice to say that once again the *Waffen-SS* would be called upon to try and regain the German initiative on the Eastern Front. But the retaking of Kharkov had blinded Hitler to what was really happening on the Eastern Front: that despite his vaunted *Waffen-SS*, he was losing the war in the East, a fact that would be confirmed at Kursk.

In the summer of 1943 one of the monumental clashes of the Second World War took place on the eastern front: the Battle of Kursk. Like the Moscow and Stalingrad conflicts it was terrible in its intensity and vast in scale. Armies holding millions of men on each side were locked in a fierce and stubborn struggle which raged unabated for 15 days. The tank battles which took place were the largest in the war and in fact the greatest clash of armour in history. The eastern front was overshadowed by a huge salient around the city of Kursk that was occupied by the Soviets in July 1943.

Hitler, as ever, based his ideas on what he perceived as Nazi ideological

thought. He saw that the Germans had to gain the initiative in the east and by liquidating the Kursk salient that bulged into the German line this would be achieved. His east European allies who were flagging would receive a most welcome shot of morale boosting. Turkey, Germany's old First World War ally, had declared her neutrality and this action could swing her into the war against the allies. The German front would be dramatically reduced, as the bulge measured across its base, to a mere 100 miles. The military advantages not only reduced the pressure on the number of men required to defend the line but also, with the anticipated invasion of southern Europe by the allies, it would release a great number of troops from the eastern front to counter it. It would have the added advantage of destroying up to 15 Soviet armies if the offensive was successful. The



The lull before the storm. A German 10.5 cm le FH 18/40 field gun waits for orders to pound Soviet positions in the Kursk Salient. The Germans deployed 10,000 artillery pieces to support the offensive.

German war effort would also be greatly enhanced by the countless numbers of Soviet prisoners who would go into the bag and could be exploited as forced slave labour.

Field Marshall Erich von Manstein and General Heinz Guderian put forward a plan suggesting that the Soviets be allowed to go onto the offensive and the Germans withdraw gradually with the result that the Soviets would over-extend themselves. The Kharkov story all over again, then smash into the Soviets with full force.

Hitler was unimpressed by the plans, albeit promulgated by what could best be termed as two of Germany's finest military brains. Hitler's enthusiasm for his offensive likewise found few of his generals wishing to give their approval and endorse the scheme. Hitler was adamant, and insisted that the offensive be planned for and undertaken with all speed. It was to be codenamed *'Zitadelle'* or operation 'Citadel'. The Chief of Staff of OKW, Field Marshall Keitel, expressed this view openly when he said, at one of the conferences in the Reich chancellery, 'We must attack on political grounds.' Germany's military and political leaders also assumed that successes in the east would rattle the very foundations of the allied coalition, causing it to disintegrate by increasing the dissatisfaction of the Soviet government and the whole of Soviet society at American and British delays in opening a second front in Europe. Hitler wholeheartedly believed that 'the sooner a heavy new blow is struck at the Soviet Union the sooner the coalition between east and west will fall apart.'

After the plan had been considered from all these angles at the highest level, Hitler issued an order on 15th April 1943 for an offensive in the Kursk salient. The order stated, "This offensive is of decisive importance. It must end in swift and decisive success. On the axis of the main blow the better

formations, the best weapons, the better commanders and a large amount of ammunition must be used. Every commander, every private soldier, must be indoctrinated with awareness that the decisive importance of this offensive victory at Kursk will be a beacon for the whole world."

According to the plan, the main blows at the Soviet forces were to be struck from south of Orel by IX army of army group centre and from north of Kharkov by IV Panzer army and operational group 'Kempf' from army group south. By striking in the general direction of Kursk the German High Command reckoned to surround and destroy the forces of central and Voronezh fronts defending the salient, to straighten the front line and in the event of success to develop their offensive into the rear of the southwest front - plan 'Panther'. Nor did they exclude the possibility of a subsequent strike to the northeast, to outflank Moscow and come out behind the whole of the Soviet forces in the centre of the front.

Since such special importance was attached to the forthcoming battle, OKH reviewed and revised the citadel operational plan several times and Hitler stated more than once that 'there must be no failure.' Divisions which were to take part in the offensive were rested and made up to full strength in men and material. Particular attention was paid to the Soviet defensive system in the salient and to the terrain. Every square metre, according to General Mellenthin, was photographed from the air.

The German forces were faced by Soviet forces of massive and powerful might. General Kokossovsky commanded the Soviet Red Army on the central front while General Vatutin commanded the Voronezh front. Air Marshal Rudenko commanded the 2nd, and Air Marshal Krasovski the 16th Air armies, which were to supply airborne support. 11 complete armies were positioned in the salient itself, while held in reserve was a massive further

force commanded by Colonel General Konev and was the Steppe front. Colonel General Goryunov's 5th air army provided reserve air support. The Soviets could call on over 1,300,000 men, 3,300 tanks, 20,000 artillery field pieces and some 2,000 aircraft. Indeed an array of unsurpassed magnitude.

In reply to this Herculean force stood one of Germany's greatest Field Marshalls, Erich von Manstein, who commanded army group south. This comprised Panzer group *Kempf*, commanded by its namesake General Kempf, and was made up of XI corps, commanded by General Raus and comprising the 106th and 320th infantry divisions; XLII corps, commanded by General Mattenklott, comprising 39th, 161st and 282nd infantry divisions; and finally III Panzer corps, commanded by General Breith, comprising the 6th, 7th and 19th Panzer divisions and 168th infantry divisions. The fourth Panzer army, commanded by Colonel General Hoth, was the other portion of army group south. It comprised II SS Panzer corps, commanded by *SS-Obergruppenführer* Paul 'Papa' Hausser and formed by *1st SS-Panzerdivision Leibstandarte*, 2nd *SS-Panzerdivision Das Reich* and 3rd *SS-Panzerdivision Totenkopf*; XLVIII Panzer corps, commanded by General von Knobelsdorf, formed by the 3rd and 11th Panzer divisions, 167th infantry division and the *Ehre Panzergrenadierdivision Großdeutschland*; finally their was LII corps, commanded by General Ott and formed by the 57th, 255th and 332nd infantry divisions. General Dessloch's air fleet IV provided the air support.



Grenadiers of II SS Panzer Corps show a swastika flag to Luftwaffe aircraft to designate friendly areas during the opening of the Kursk Offensive. The corps fielded some 350 tanks for the assault.

Field Marshal Günther von Kluge was a traditional Prussian officer showing considerable aptitude for his chosen profession. But it was stated of him that he was also marked by a 'vacillating character and weak-minded opportunism.' His sharp mind recognised the monstrosity of the Nazi Régime, but he also saw considerable personal and professional advantages in co-operating with it. He was one of the few German general who had favoured the invasion of the Soviet Union. His command was army group centre, whose forces consisted of Colonel General Model's 9th army, XLI Panzer corps, commanded by General Zorn, XXIII corps, commanded by General Freissner and XLVII Panzer corps, commanded by General Lemelsen. Colonel General Ritter von Greim's air fleet VI was to provide air support.

The German could field all in all some 900,000 men, 2,700 tanks and 10,000 artillery field pieces. Air cover would be supplied by approximately 2,000 *Luftwaffe* aircraft. This too was a catalogue of awesome might. These two forces that now were opposing one another tacticians might perceive as reasonably matched when viewed in comparison to Kharkov, when a Soviet force eight times the size of the Germans' had been engaged and defeated. The *Waffen-SS* would play a disproportionately large part in the campaign, considering Hausser's command formed under 10% of the total strength the Germans fielded. Kharkov had been won using updated versions of the old Mk III and the newer Mk IV tanks although a few of the more powerful Mk VI Tigers had seen service. Kursk was to have these tanks with more Mk VI Tigers becoming available, but the operational debut of the Mk V Panther medium tank was where the Germans' greatest hopes lay. The Ferdinand assault guns were also to be employed. The Soviet detection of the German build-up was hardly an intelligence coup, so great were the movements required for the massive offensive which the Germans had to undertake to assemble their respective forces. The physical movement of equipment and men, combined with the dramatic increase in radio activity told all. General intelligence gathering provided further proof. The British passed on information gathered from the code-breaking activities at Bletchley Park.

The Soviet position, from Stalin's point of view, was that the Soviet Red Army should take the offensive. His general in the field and the High Command promulgated the idea that to prepare first-class defensive systems, the German armies should be encouraged to attack, to be drawn into the salient. In attempting to smash through the Soviets extensive defence obstacles they would bleed themselves to death. Then would come the time to launch a savage counterattack. Stalin was persuaded by their point of view; his, of course, would have found favour in the eyes of von Manstain and

Guderian.

300,000 local civilians were employed by the Soviet Red Army to help in the production of the defences. Elaborate steps were taken to prevent a German breakthrough. The front were reinforced with large numbers of guns, tanks and aircraft, the greatest concentration being made on the most likely axes of attack. On the sector held by the 13th army, for example, covering the most vulnerable axis along the Orel-Kursk railway, almost half the artillery regiments of supreme command reserve allotted to the front were placed. The army was also given the 4th breakthrough artillery corps, which had 484 guns, 216 mortars and 432 field rocket launchers. This made possible a hitherto unprecedented concentrated artillery defence of about 155 guns and mortars of calibre exceeding 76mm, per mile of front, one and a half times the density established by the Germans for the coming offensive. As the Germans hoped to attain their objectives by massed use of tanks, the front commanders took special care over anti-tank defences, based on anti-tank strongpoints and areas and systems of minefields. Artillery reserves were allocated and trained in good time, as were mobile obstacle detachments. The strongpoints, as a rule, were allocated between three to five guns each, up to five anti-tank rifles, two to five mortars between a section and a platoon of sappers and a section of submachine-gunners. On the most important axes, the anti-tank strongpoints had up to 12 guns each. Anti-tank and anti-personnel obstacles were widely employed.

The depth of defence of central and Voronezh fronts on the axes of probable attack reached 95-110 miles. Adding the defence line of Steppe front and the defence line along the river Don came to 160-180 miles and comprised eight defence belts and lines. To picture the scale of the work done in the preparatory period, it is enough to mention that on the central fronts sector more than 3,100 miles of trenches and communication lines were dug,

approximately enough to reach from Moscow to Irkutsk. On the same front the engineers laid about 400,000 mines and ground bombs and the average density of minefields on central and Voronezh front reached 2,400 anti-tank and 2,700 anti-personnel mines per mile of front, six time that of the defence of Moscow and four times that of Stalingrad.



Kursk yielded the usual crop of Russian prisoners, but the Red Army soldiery in general fought well and inflicted heavy losses on the Germans. The Leibstandarte lost 97 killed on the first day.

The Soviets considered that the northern part of the salient would be where the Germans would concentrate their maximum efforts. But this was a mistake. A spearhead formed from the *Waffen-SS, Leibstandarte, Das Reich* and *Totenkopf* division's armoured formations was to lead the German offensive that was to be launched on the southern side of the slient. The northern sector witnessed a massive artillery barrage, which started on 5th July at 0430, which heralded the beginning of the offensive. It had been launched by army group centre with the intention of softening up the enemy

positions. The Soviet defences had not suffered as badly as expected when the barrage stopped and in the ensuing German assault they encountered Soviet Red Army units ready and willing for action. Gun and heavy mortar fire was the Soviets' immediate response to the assaulting German troops who tried to conceal themselves in the tall grass. The anti-personnel mines that had been so liberally laid now wreaked havoc with very heavy losses being suffered by the Germans. On the western flank the German push was beginning to bog down, with an advance of only a few kilometres having been achieved by the end of the first day. The 20th *Panzerdivision* and the 6th Infantry division, situated a little to the east, were having more success at the Soviet defences. The German armoured units penetration into the salient was about 8 kilometres, a slightly better showing. The Soviet Red Army air force was able to mount effective air attacks, despite the *Luftwaffe* having air superiority over the area, in which the Germans took heavy casualties in men and equipment.

The German armour suffered badly as well, not due to the lighter Soviet T-34s which had death and destruction wreaked upon them y the Ferdinand tank destroyers and Tiger tanks, but from the Soviet minefields.

The Germans had to come to the realisation of a very unpleasant shock, that the Soviet defenders were responding with a tenacity and strength that they were not prepared for. Army group centre was greeted with a resistance that was far greater than had been anticipated, for the Soviet troops had concentrated in the north due to their assumption that the main push would be delivered by the Germans there. During the whole offensive on the northern sector the furthest penetration was only 16 km. The objective, Kursk, lay 80 km from the front line.

Over 600 Soviet guns delivered an artillery barrage in the south. Intelligence

gleaned from the POWs that they had interrogated caused them to launch the pre-emptive attack as there was the likelihood of a German attack looming. Along the front's entire length the German artillery opened fire with a ferocity unseen as yet. The weight of munitions left off during this inferno surpassed that used during the Polish and French campaigns in total by the German artillery.



A Waffen-SS sniper searches for targets in a Russian village during the Kursk Offensive. Mopping-up operations were an essential part of any large assault to ensure secure supply and communications lines.

German radar detected the approach of Soviet aircraft when they targeted German airbases in an attempt to deliver a pre-emptive strike, so that the *Luftwaffe* intercepted them. In part this action was instrumental in making the *Luftwaffe* more effective in the south.

The town of Oboyan was Horth's fourth Panzer army's first objective and

initial progress was good. The XLVIII Panzer corps had the task of protecting the left flank of the assault. By the close of the first day the *Panzergrenadierdivision Großdeutschland*, in the company of 3rd and 11th Panzer divisions, were in the vicinity of Cherkasskoye and quickly overcame the first lines of defence around it. But this was at a cost - when an extensive Soviet minefield was encountered by 10 Panzer brigade, it had 36 of its new Panther tanks destroyed.

So as not to endanger the right flank of the Germans' advance, Horth's decision was that the Soviet reserves had to be neutralised as a priority, rather than leaving them for later. With this purpose in mind he ordered an attack to be launched in the direction of the northeast after the Soviet defence lines had been penetrated. II SS Panzer corps, commanded by Hausser, was given the mission of eliminating the Soviets' reserves. In the German arsenal, II SS Panzer corps was one of the strongest elements that could be unleashed on the enemy. It had an enormous spearhead of armour which comprised 200 self-propelled guns and in the region of 350 tanks. An integral Tiger unit was attached to each of the SS divisions.

The SS engineers had busied themselves and swept the first set of minefields dextrously aside, allowing easy passage through them for Hausser's troops, who began their assault at 0400 on the 5 July.

The *Panzerkeil* or armoured wedge was deployed to cut through the Soviet defences, which it managed like a knife through butter. The point was made up of Tiger tanks, flocked by Panthers, which were only marginally lighter. Standard Mk IV and Mk III models with *Sturmgeschützen*, or assault guns, flanked the Panthers. This formed the point of the German advance and by the close of the first day had penetrated into the salient by up to 19km; Hausser's men had done well.

II SS-Panzer-Korps' right flank was guarded by the *SS-Totenkopfdivision*, its objective being the Soviet 52nd Guards division, which it drove into and after tenacious combat on both sides the Soviets were overcome. The Soviet 69th army command post, which housed numerous high-ranking staff officers, was situated in the village of Yakovlevo. All were captured by the close of the first day.

The salient was penetrated by almost 32 km as the rapid advance of the division continued with the main Belgorod-Oboyan road being crossed by the end of the second day. Progress began to be stemmed when Soviet resistance stiffened.

The following day the *SS-Totenkopf* plodded on with its slow but relentless progress, severing many important rail and road links with the slient being penetrated by a further 16 km. The *Luftwaffe*'s ground attack wing 2 Immelmann Stuka's, which had a 37mm anti-tank cannon fitted under each wing, rendered valuable assistance to the *SS-Totenkopfdivision*.

The Soviet 6th Guards army, at this point in the conflict, had been divided into two forces. The mission of covering the *II SS-Panzer-Korps'* flank had to be lifted off the shoulders of the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* and placed elsewhere if the drive were to continue. It was the army's 167th infantry division's shoulders that were chosen to fulfil the *SS-Totenkopfdivision*'s rôle, who spent the majority of 8th July waiting for their replacements to arrive.

The Germans were to be subjected to a counterattack that was to be launched from a spot northeast of Belgorod. This was to be carried out by II Guards tank corps and had been ordered by General Vatutin. This powerful force was to use this line of attack and would have smashed into the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* and *II SS-Panzer-Korps'* flanks. The Germans became aware of the move however and before the Soviets could reach the *SS-*

Totenkopfdivision's position they were subjected to a massed onslaught by bombers and fight bombers of the *Luftwaffe* that completely annihilated them.

More Soviet defence line were attacked by the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* on 9th July and under their savage onslaught the Soviet defences began to crumble within hours and on the following day they had reached the river Psel.



Tiger tanks of the Das Reich Division rumble forward at Kursk. Ironically, the slow-moving Tiger was more suited to defensive warfare, where from good positions it could wreak havoc with its 8.8cm gun.

The extent of the advance was now causing deep concern to the Soviet commanders, who decided it was now time to commit the 5th Guards tank army and two tank brigades to crush the German armoured spearhead. They were now to be moved from northeast of Prokhorovka, where they were being held in reserve.

On the 5 July the *Leibstandarte*, who were positioned to the south of the *SS-Totenkopfdivision*, pushed on with progress, at first being extremely successful. The first line of the Soviet defences were penetrated but the division's progress began to be stifled by the heightened Soviet resistance. They took stock of the situation and discovered the depth of determination, for nothing was going to stand on the path of the *crème de la crème* of élite political warriors. These were the men of Hitler's bodyguard division, no less.

During the days that formed the overture to the battle of Kursk, the *Waffen-SS* divisions and possible the *Leibstandarte* in particular showed many acts of heroism and leadership. But this was not without a monumental loss. The *Leibstandarte*, on the first day of the offensive, suffered 522 wounded and 97 killed in action. This rose on the second day to 906 wounded and 181 killed, representing a 10% casualty rate for the division in the space of 48 hours combat. On the other hand the Soviet Red Army was suffering casualty rates far in excess of those suffered by the *Waffen-SS*. Some units were to all intents and purposes virtually wiped out.

From the Soviets point of view, although the losses were appalling, they kept filling the gaps with replacements from what appeared to the Germans as a

limitless manpower pool. The Germans did not have such great manpower resources to call on, trained reserves becoming scarcer. German army units became bogged down to the flanks on Hausser's II SS Panzer corps, but in contrast the *Waffen-SS*'s advance continued despite their losses. But the close of play on the third day another problem was rearing its ugly head for the corps - tank losses were critical. 160 Panthers had been lost from its initial total of 200. However Soviet tanks were falling foul of the Tiger tanks, which knocked them out before they could close the range, where their guns would be of use against the massif armour that cloaked the Tiger. The Tiger was indeed a formidable opponent. Teething troubles of the mechanical type bedevilled the Panther, its newer companion. But it showed immense promise for the future. The Ferdinand had, through a design oversight, not been equipped with a machine-gun for close-quarters defence. This small but critical oversight had left this monster, larger than the Tiger, with a destruction capacity that was unbelievably defenceless in these situations. For once they had penetrated the Soviet positions, these mammoths became very vulnerable to the satchel charges and Molotov cocktails of the Soviet 'tank destruction' teams. Their crews were left with little else but their personal side arms to defence themselves and their beasts shooting hopelessly at the Soviet troops as best they could.

The towns of Teterevino and Oboyan being the main objectives of the *Leibstandarte,* on the 7 July it began to push forward in their direction once more. Untersturmführer Michael Wittman proved his worth once more, adding to his rocketing score with seven further tanks and 19 anti-tank guns of the Soviet 29th anti-tank brigade. Wittman and his crew had already knocked out eight enemy tanks on the first day of the offensive. He was to become known as the most famous tank killer, with his first kills being achieved with an assault gun. It was not until early 1943 that he received his

first Tiger tank on the eastern front. The secret of his success was patience, often waiting for his victim to come within very close range. By June 1944 he was accredited with 138 tanks and 132 vehicles destroyed. But it was the battles round Kursk that brought him first into the limelight and by the conclusion of the offensive he had destroyed 30 enemy tanks and 26 anti-tank guns.

Psyolknee was next in the sights of the *Waffen-SS*, who pushed inexorably towards it, where a powerful armoured counterattack was mounted and it was during this that between 50 and 60 T-34s were manoeuvring in an attempt to gain the rear of the *SS-Panzer Regiment 1*. Finding himself faced with this formidable destructive force a 20 year old Tiger tank commander, *SS-Oberscharführer* Franz Staudegger, engaged the enemy without a second thought. Staudegger and his crew, labouring to fire and reload at a satanic speed, blew massive gaps in the enemy ranks with their tank's deadly 8.8 cm cannon. On the battlefield he had accounted fro 22 T-34s destroyed, while the remaining T-34s were beating a hasty retreat to avoid the attacks that were being levelled at them by German troops equipped with Teller mines. An immediate recommendation for the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross was made for Staudegger which was confirmed on 10th July 1943. A veritable graveyard of T-34s had been established in the area that surrounded Toterevino, for in the meanwhile approximately 90 more of these Soviet tanks had been knocked out by the 2nd Battalion of Panzer Regiment 1, under the command and watchful eye of *SS-Sturmbannführer* Martin Gross, in the space of just 3 hours, while *SS-Panzergrenadier* 'tank destroying' units had accounted for a further 30 enemy tanks.



A Waffen-SS MG 34 machine-gun team searches for enemy aircraft during the Battle of Kursk. The weapon is mounted for the anti-aircraft role, while in the background is a downed Russian MiG-3 fighter.

Stiff resistance was again levelled at *Das Reich*, which at this time was positioned on the right flank of the *Leibstandarte*. Before the launch of the offensive assault troops from the division had wormed their way into the enemy's first line of defences, which they were quickly able to immobilise. However serious casualties were suffered by the division's second wave when they were caught in the Soviet barrage which the initial German advance had engendered. The rain again played a major part, for the ground had once again been turned into a quagmire and it was through this that the Panzergrenadier's had to struggle. They were also without any tank protection, the rain-soaked ground having effectively delayed their heavy support vehicles.

The village of Beresov was the major objective on the first day of the

offensive for *Das Reich*. The *Luftwaffe*'s Stukas supported *Das Reich*, who was tasked with the attack and capture of the village, which they accomplished by rushing past and then swinging round and attacking the enemy at the rear. A ridge of high ground beyond the village was also taken as the division rattled on. Its objective achieves, the order to drive forward was given, so that the success would be exploited. There was an extensive belt of minefields at Bey and Beresov, and when they encountered this the momentum evaporated from the assault. The Soviet lines were breached the following day, albeit the troops had to struggle through the mud. *Das Reich*'s armour now flowed through the gap. Also the main road to Lutscki lay open.

The *SS-Totenkopfdivision*, leading the *II SS-Panzer-Korps*, carried on with their drive northwards and to the west of Prokhorovka the Soviet forces were forces aside. The 5th Guard tank army was positioned a little way to the east of the town. This, the main reserve of the Soviets, was getting ready to spring its own offensive, with the objective of bringing the *II SS-Panzer-Korps* to a standstill. However the Soviets preparations were rudely interrupted with the appearance of Hausser's command, which turned smartly eastwards with *SS-Totenkopfdivision* taking the left flank, *Leibstandarte* the center and *Das Reich* the left flank.

The Germans were just held to the west of Prokhorovka, but this was touch and go for the Soviets and involved desperate counterattacks being launched by them. They also had to endure constant air attacks from the *Luftwaffe*, which was pulverising the defenders.

The Soviet command was posed a problem requiring the wisdom of Solomon, with regard to the German advance. Their counterattack, if stayed, to allow all their units to become fully deployed, would allow reinforcements to be acquired by the Germans. The III Panzer corps was driving northwards

along Hausser's men's' right flank. The tactical balance would move in the Germans' favour with the arrival of this force in the area around the town with their 300 plus tanks.

The Soviets decided to delay would be to invite disaster so they implemented a two part plan. A force of two mechanised brigades, a mechanised guards corps, an armoured brigade and a Guards rifle division were dispatched with the objective of intercepting the III Panzer corps and halting it at best, and if not then at least slowing down its rate of progress, with the remaining force undertaking an immediate attack on the II SS-Panzer corps, meeting it square on.

All Soviet positions that could be located were subjected to an enormous *Luftwaffe* bombing raid when the German attack started once more on the 12 July. The *Panzerkeil* was again used by the *Waffen-SS* divisions. To complete the softening up process a tremendous artillery barrage was laid down on the Soviet positions in concert with the *Luftwaffe* contribution.

With the advantage of the sun at their backs, which was to dazzle their enemies, the Soviets broke cover and at full speed drove straight at the amazed Germans as the German artillery barrage ceased. The German gunners, experienced in their art, gave a good account of themselves and many Soviet tanks were knocked out. The German tank lines were reached by a considerable number however and battle commenced at virtually point-blank range. This favoured the Soviet T-34's lighter 76 mm gun and now the effect of the smaller calibre could be disastrous. Tanks on both sides were taking direct hits and being blown asunder. Herculean and often suicidal bravery was demonstrated by many Soviet tank crews, who, once the ammunition was spent, deliberately rammed the enemy. A T-34 travelling at top speed, weighing 30 tons, has a sobering effect on an enemy tank and its

crew.

The *SS-Totenkopfdivision*, positioned on *II SS-Panzer-Korps'* left flank, was engaged by XXXI Guards corps and XXIII Guards corps, who halted the *Totenkopf*'s advance and forced it onto the defensive. II Guard tank corps was meting out stiff opposition to *Das Reich*, who found their weight was too much to casually shake off.



Waffen-SS grenadiers under fire at Kursk. By 12th July 1943, the German offensive had been halted. The Russians had suffered 50 per cent tank losses, but they had wrested the initiative in the East from the Germans.

The high point of the battle was reached by the afternoon but the outcome hung by a thread and could swing either way. The Soviet blocking force had achieved its objective and halted III Panzer corps which was battling to advance toward *II SS-Panzer-Korps*. This was a blow for Hausser.

In a desperate attempt to redress the situation and influence the result in their

favour, the *Leibstandarte*re grouped. The very last vestments of the Soviet reserves were now committed to the fray as the Soviets had successfully anticipated the *Waffen-SS*'s divisions move. By nightfall, with both sides utterly exhausted due to the fierce fighting that had raged all day, the battle was reduced to all but a handful of small individual skirmishes. 300 German tanks had been destroyed during the course of the day. Also for the Germans, should a tank suffer a major mechanical defeat or be severely damaged it was to all intents and purposes destroyed, while the Soviets could recover theirs and wherever possible repair or cannibalise them. They took fearful casualties but on the battlefield were in command of the situation. Hitler decided to suspend operation Citadel on 13th July officially, albeit the fighting continued until 15th July. Nothing could come out of the battle, not the smallest vestiges of a limited success. Field Marshal von Manstein made the argument that the offensive could be seen to have some chance of limited success if it were relaunched with the objectives scaled down and it would continue the pressure on the Soviets. The final nail in the coffin for operation citadel was that Hitler was adamant the *Leibstandarte*, *Das Reich* and *SS-Totenkopfdivision* be withdrawn from the eastern front. The allied invasion of Sicily, which had begun on the 10 July, and the result this may have in the Mediterranean theatre, pressed on Hitler's mind during the next 3 days, caused him to become increasingly concerned. The strengthening of the Italian front, in his opinion, could only be achieved by his élite *Waffen-SS* divisions. The soft under belly of Europe was potentially where Germany's greatest danger lay. Hitler gravely reduced the strength in the Kursk region to such a point where it was unlikely to sustain a Soviet counterattack. The offensive's territorial gains would all have to be sacrificed to the Soviets, which was to be the case and by 23th July it had all been retaken by them.

The battle had inflicted resounding losses on both sides, losses which were

never to be really overcome. The German losses were catastrophic in both men, which was estimated at around 100,000, and tanks. The *Wehrmacht* was never to recover from this disaster. The eastern front now was to drain the German forces through attrition, the initiative had been lost and would never be retaken. The Soviet catalogue was even more horrendous, to such an extent that it was concealed from the country until the collapse of the communists. They suffered over 250,000 killed and 600,000 wounded, and of their entire tank strength 60% had been destroyed. But for them the battle marked the turning point of their war. In Hitler's view once again the *Waffen-SS* had proven without doubt their superiority, which had to be down to Nazi ideology, in his view. For army units in their flanks were being thrown back or at best held. His political warriors were even up to the last second when the offensive was halted they were advancing.

Before the *Waffen-SS* divisions could be transferred to the west they were transported for a short period of rest to an area near Kharkov. On 25th July General Malinovsky ordered a counterattack to be launched against the German forces that were deployed in the Donetz basin. The German positions along the Mius river were attached and Field Marshal von Manstein's troops were overrun. On 30th July the army's 16th and 23rd Panzer divisions were moved south with all hast in the company of the *Totenkopf* and *Das Reich* divisions. When they reached Stalino they were committed to the conflict. The front was stabilised, which involved three days of merciless butchery, and the Soviet push had been halted.

The German situation was still very perilous and they were soon to suffer two attacks delivered by three complete Soviet fronts around Belgorod and in the direction of Orel. The German lines had mammoth holes gouged into them. To cover Field Marshal von Manstein's forces left flank once more, the *Totenkopf* and *Das Reich* divisions were now hastily dispatched northwards.

It was obvious that the situation in the Soviet Union was so volatile that not all the *Waffen-SS* division could be released from service and it was only the *Leibstandarte* which was transported to Italy from the eastern front.

CHAPTER 6

HIMMLER'S FOREIGN LEGIONS



Léon Degrelle, the Leader of Walloon volunteers on the Eastern Front and winner of the Knight's Cross. Hitler told him: "If I had a son, I would wish him to be like you."

The thought of men fighting for Germany, whose country had been overrun and conquered by her army let alone volunteer for service with the SS who had delivered a vicious and crushing blow to the populace of these countries seems incredible. Incredible from two standpoints, firstly why should these men accept military service with the German armed forces, let alone the SS with all its connotations. Secondly why would the SS recruit them and having done so, trust them in battle, surely they could be a Trojan horse. Ironically and in contradiction to logic, the final battle of Berlin was predominantly

undertaken by these Foreign Volunteers, who died heroically defending the last bastion of the Third Reich from the Soviet hoards. An obvious question is begged, “what was their contribution to the war in Russia and was it worth it?”

The ability to raise these legions lay before the war and were a direct result of Himmler’s quest for a pan German Europe. Himmler had decreed in 1938 that non-German of suitable “Nordic” origin could enlist in the *Allgemine-SS*, for at that point in time the distinction between the civilian “General” or *Allgemeine-SS* and “Military” or *Waffen-SS* did not exist.

Norway, Denmark, Holland and Belgium had their individual Fascist Parties, who in some cases modelled themselves on Germany while others took their inspiration from Rome. Spain and Italy of course had their own ruling Fascist regimes. France must be seen in a different context as she had fought with the Allies against Nazi Germany, only to be vanquished and humiliated. The octogenarian Philippe Pétain, Marshal of France and “Victor of Verdun”, was called upon by President Lebrun to form a government on 17th June 1940. The 84 year old Marshal consented, signing on 22nd June, an armistice with Germany. Under the terms of this agreement, the only one Hitler ever signed with a defeated enemy, only part of France was to be occupied, the rest would be free of the enemy’s presence. But in both occupied and unoccupied zones the authority of French government would apply. Vichy in the Unoccupied Zone, became the seat of the new government after it had established itself in the city. The expression “Vichy France” is often used as though there were some distinction between “Vichy” and “the real France”. In historical fact, there was no distinction.



Himmler in conversation with Anton Mussert, the Leader of the Dutch Nazi Party, the NSB, whose members formed their own SS in September 1940. The Dutch SS, though, had to take an oath of loyalty to Hitler.

The Germans mounted a simultaneous invasion of Norway and Denmark, which strangely did not involve SS forces, codenamed *Fall Weserübung* or operation Weser Exercise, and began in the early dawn of the 9th April 1940. The operation was characterised by lightning speed, meticulous planning and total secrecy. Norway was the first Western European country to be overrun by the Nazis and also held the dubious distinction of spawning the most notorious of all Collaborators Vidkum Quisling, albeit not the most accomplished. Norway unlike other occupied countries had only one collaborative political party of any significance, which Quisling founded in May 1933, soon after Hitler came to power in Germany, the *Nasjonal Samling* or *N.S.* which translates to the National Unity movement. The organisations of the *N.S*, parallelled those of Nazi German The *N.S.* did not in

anyway assist the invaders however, contrary to popular belief held at the time..

Immediately after the German invasion, Quisling attempted to assume power, however one week later, Hitler ordered him to step-down. He was appointed “Minister President” of Norway by Hitler on 1st February 1942, becoming the only leader ever to achieve such high office in a German occupied country.

Denmark was overrun and occupied with virtually no resistance on the part of the Danes. Two German planes were shot down, a few armoured cars were damaged. Thirteen Danish soldiers were killed and twenty three wounded. It was nothing more than a skirmish. Before the Danes had had breakfast, it was all over. There was no “fifth column”. The *Volksdeutsche* and the pro-German Danes were as taken aback as any by the fate which literally fell from the sky upon them. It was the first example in any war of a successful airborne operation. Once they had recovered from their shock, the North Schleswig Germans welcomed the arrival of “their” army. They offered hospitality, directed traffic and in some cases even took it upon themselves to round up and guard Danish prisoners of war. But nowhere did any Danish citizen indulge in an act of premeditated sabotage. Before the invasion the Germans had dispatched a small commando unit to Pagborg to ensure that the Danes did not try to impede their advance by blowing up the important bridge there - an unnecessary precaution, as the Danes had not even mined it.



Recruits of the Freiwilligen Legion Niederland on parade. The unit's cuff band can clearly be seen, as can the special arm shield in the Dutch colours of red, white and blue. The Nazis viewed the Dutch as a particularly valuable stock of "Nordic Blood", and many of them joined the Westland Regiment of the Wiking Division. The

formation of a purely Dutch unit seemed the next logical step. However, the poor handling of recruits by the German training staff resulted in some disgusted volunteers resigning. The legion was sent to the northern sector of the Eastern Front in January 1942, but after heavy engagements with the Russians only 20 per cent of its strength remained in the field by March. It was reformed and committed to the fighting once again near Leningrad in the spring of 1942, again suffering heavy losses. The unit was disbanded in May 1943.

Denmark had several pro-nazi political parties because no one emerged, who could weld them all together, rather than fascism abounded in that country. Vidkun Quisling had no Danish equivalent and entrusting political power to the Danish Nazis never seem to have been considered by the Germans. Founded in November 1930, the *D.N.S.A.P* Denmark's *National Socialistiske Arbejder Parti,* was the largest of the Danish Nazi parties. A three man committee formed the leadership initially, but Frits Clausen took over in 1933. It was highly organised, to administer it, it had its own Corps of political leaders, and to protect it its own Storm Troopers - *Storm Afdelinger* or SA.

The Dutch are related both linguistically and racially to the Germans' and are their "next door neighbours". Holland was home and place of work for some 52000 Germans before the 2nd World War, therefore, it is not to surprising that during Hitler's years of triumph, a number of imitation Nazi movements emerged. Anton Adriaan Mussert, founded the *Nationaal - Socialistische Beweging* or more commonly *NSB* on 14th December 1931, a strictly nationalistic Dutch fascist movement, which was to prove ultimately the most successful.

Holland was invaded by the Germans on 10th May 1940, surrendering after only four days, which saw only panic and confusion. Under the leadership of

Arthur Sey-Inquart Holland was declared to be a *Reichskommissariat* on 18th May. Being the most significant advocate of collaboration the *NSB* came to the forefront. It was professionally structured and it also had its own Storm troopers the *Weer Afdeelingen* or *WA*.

The *NSB* made a bold move on 11th September 1940 by establishing its own SS within its frame work. The initiative came from J Hendrik Feldmeyer the former leader of the *Mussert Garde*, envisaging it as the counterpart to the German *Allgemeine - SS* , it was at first simply known as the *Nederlandsche SS*, which was replaced by the more general term *Germaansche SS en Nederland* or the Germanic SS in the Netherlands on 1st November 1942. It had been unquestionably one of the para-military sub-formations of the *NSB*, up till this time. Now under Himmler's orders, it was part of a greater Germanic SS, Mussert's control of it was greatly circumscribed, with an oath of Loyalty to Adolf Hitler having to be take by the Dutch SS men. Voluntary enlistment into the *Waffen-SS* constantly depleted its membership which stood, nominally at 3727, with a strength of five regiments plus an SS Police Regiment on paper. There was possibly as many as a further 7000 Dutch volunteers in the *Germaische Sturmbann*, a General SS formations, raised from the large force of Dutch and other "Nordic" workers in Germany. Seven battalions were formed in the industrial cities of Berlin, Brunswick Dresden, Düsseldorf, Hamburg, Nuremberg , and Stuttgart. The *Germanische Sturmbanne* were never anything other than recruiting agencies for the *Waffen-SS*.

As yet no official position was tendered to Mussert. A new Nationalistic movement, the Netherlands Union, which almost unbidden, sprung into being seemingly challenging his authority briefly. It suggested a "Loyal" attitude towards the occupying power be adopted. It claimed 800,000 members within seven months of its inception. The party's growth was meteoric, but its

decline was equally spectacular. Its success initially was due to misconceptions by both sides, the Dutch mistook it for a “patriotic” rallying point, the Germans for a collaborative movement. The Germans suppressed it and the Dutch deserted it, when it turned out to be neither. The *NSB* on the 10th anniversary of its foundation, was granted an exclusive political monopoly in the Netherlands, by the Germans. All other parties were faced with merger or disbandment.

Belgium is really two countries and a German region, joined as a single political unit. One part, Flanders is Germanic in language and race. The other Wallonie is French speaking and of racially mixed Celtic and Romanic origin. The only strong bond is common religious faith, Roman Catholicism. The quiet town of Eupen, only six miles from the German boarder where almost all the 17000 citizens were ethnic Germans, is the capital of German speaking Belgium, a region where about 65000 people lived. Control of the territory has shifted many times between France, Germany and Belgium. After escaping the clutches of the Burgundian Dukes, it was a German princedom, before being annexed by France after the revolution. It reverted to German control after the Napoleonic war’s, switched back to Belgium in 1919 as part of the War settlement. After the invasion of 10 May 1940 it was declared part of the Reich by Hitler. A clear distinction was always drawn between the two ethnic peoples of Belgium by the Nazis, initially favouring the Flemings their racial “cousins”, but eventually appreciating the Walloon leader, Léon Degrelle, was a more valuable disciple. A feeling of resentment had been born by the people of Flanders against the French speaking state created in 1830 and dominated by the Walloons.



Personnel and vehicles of the Wiking Division (note the divisional insignia on the mudguard.), the best foreign unit in the Waffen-SS. Composed mainly of west Europeans, it became an élite panzer division.

The German occupation of Belgium in the First World War gave Flemish Nationalism, which until then had been mainly intellectual, to become a political movement in its own right. Under German patronage, a Council of Flanders was set up in Brussels in February 1917. It consisted of some 200 Flemish autonomists' and was granted the status of a provisional Government of Flanders. The *Frontbeweging* or Front movement, an influential separatist faction sprung up, this later became the *Front partij* or Front Party. The Leaders of the Council of Flanders were tried for high treason after the war, none was executed and all were set free by an act of Clemency in March 1929. The ranks of the *Front partij* began to rupture in the early 1930's, fascism, a new element entered into the demand for autonomy and manifested itself with the formation of a break-away party known as the

Verbond van Dietsche Nationaa - Solidaristen or the Union of Netherlandish National Solidarity in October 1931. This was abbreviated to *Verdiaso* or simply *Dinaso*. Joris van Severen, a young lawyer, was the leader of *Dinaso.* A former army officer, stripped of his commission when his nationalist sympathies became apparent. The Flemish part of Belgium joining Holland in a Greater Netherlands community, at first was *Dinaso's* demand but in 1934 van Severen discovered that the Walloons were of common Frankish descent. There was a complete reorientation of policy with him now favouring the continued existence of the Belgian state. *Dinaso* had its own storm troopers known as the *Dinaso Militie* until 1934 when they were re-named the *Dinaso Militanten orde* or *DMO*.

Belgium was attacked on 10th May 1940, overrun and occupied within little more than a fortnight. Scores of "Fifth column" suspects were arrested and transported by the Belgian police to Northern France. The German advance, due to its speed, had caused a panic. Without the benefit of trial, 22 of these were shot dead at Abbeville on 20th May. Joris van Severen was among the victims, thus dealing *Dinaso* a mortal blow, as no successor could be found of his calibre. The question of how far, if at all, it should co-operate with the Germans deeply divided party.

The *Vlaamsch Nationaal Verbond* or *VNV*, was to emerge as the leading exponent of working with the Germans. Those who favoured collaboration were obliged to do so within the frame work of this party. Gustave de Clercq became the leader, after a number of Flemish National parties banded together to form the party in October 1933. Broadly its political aspirations, at the time, were similar to those of *Dinaso*, the establishment of a greater Netherlands which would embrace all peoples of Dutch / Flemish stock from French Flanders in the South to German Friesland in the North.



Norwegian recruits of the Freiwilligen Legion Norwegen. The SS opened a recruiting office in Oslo soon after Norway fell to the Germans. When trained the legion was sent to northern Russia, where it was annihilated.

Attitudes towards religion was where the *VNV* differed from *Dinaso.* The *VNV* was devoutly Catholic while Van Severen was passionately anti-clerical. The *VNV*'s uniformed militia, the *Dieische Militle* or *DM* was probably the most important part. It was brought into being by an amalgamation of the *VNVs Grijze Werfbrigade* or Grey Defence Brigade and the *DMO* of the disbanded *Dinaso*

On the surface a harmless "cultural" body dedicated merely to fostering greater artistic contacts between Flanders and Germany was founded in 1935. This small faction called itself the *Duitschen-Vlaamsche Arbeidsgemeenschap* or German-Flemish working community, a title that conveniently abbreviated to *Devlag* the flag. The reality was quite different, it was led by a fanatical apostle of Adolf Hitler, Jef van de Wiele. He envisaged

himself as the Führer of a National Socialist Flanders under the benevolent protection of the Germans. The wholesale incorporation of Flanders into the German Reich in fact became *Devlag's* aim. A decree that "all authorised political parties in Flanders" must merge with the *VNV* or be dissolved was made by the German occupation authorities on 11th May 1941. Collaborationist parties only were, "authorised" so in effect this meant all pro-nazi factions now were under one umbrella. However an exception was made for "cultural" bodies which allowed *Devlag* to escape the net. Although, before the war it was only on the outer fringe of politics, under the occupation it was to drop its "cultural" camouflage and emerge as a serious rival to and even an enemy of the *VNV*.

In Antwerp, two pro-German Flemings Ward Herman and René Lagrou, formed in September 1940 the equivalent of the German *Allgemeine-SS* which began by enrolling 130 supporters of the New Order. There were 1580 members with a further 4000 "sponsoring members" by November 1941. The Corps original title was *Algemeene Schutsscharen Vlaanderen* but was simply referred to as the *Vlaamsche SS* or as the *SS Vlaanderen*. Having attained regimental strength by September 1941 it was then known as *1. SS - Standarte Flandern*; becoming the *Germaansche SS in Vlaanderen* or Germanic SS in Flanders, in October 1942, with Himmler's policy of bringing all non-German General SS formations within a single German orbit. The cautious attitude of the *VNV* was very much at odds with the policy of the Flemish SS. Jef van de Wiele the *Devlag* leader held an honorary commission in its ranks. *Devlag* maintained a close relationship with the Flemish SS and was like it, openly pro-nazi advocating much greater control in Flanders.



The very distinctive "Trifos" collar patch identifies these soldiers as being members of the Freiwilligen Legion Flandern, a Flemish SS unit. Like most of the indigenous legions raised by the SS, it was sent to the Eastern Front after being trained. It was committed to battle near Leningrad in the autumn of 1941. It fought well, being cited for gallant conduct, but took heavy casualties.

In Wallonie the Germans discovered a far more dependable and charismatic collaborator, Léon Degrelle, than could be found anywhere in Flanders. He founded in 1935 a spectacularly successful political movement *Christus Rex* popularly known as the Rexist Party. Their fortunes, however, were in steep decline in the months immediately preceding the Second World war. The German conquest and occupation was the catalyst for their revival. The only authorised political party in Wallonie was declared to be the Rexists in May 1941. Rexism was a "one man show" unlike the *VNV* and enjoyed a much narrower base of popular support in Wallonie than the *VNV* had in Flanders. Rex had its own storm troopers known as the *Formation de Combat*.

Before the outbreak of war only a handful of fanatical Nordics had offered themselves for service with the *Allgemeine-SS* . These in the main were devoutly anti-Communist and saw the Red Menace as a reality, an ominous threat to their homelands and ways of life. The Communist threat gave rise to a strange British stance and on 14th February 1940 the British Government announced that volunteers would be permitted to go from Britain to Finland to fight in the Finnish Army. Sir John Anderson the Home Secretary answered a question tabled in the House of Commons by Mr D.N. Prill on the position of volunteers under the Foreign Enlistment Act 1870. This act had been quoted when volunteers went to Spain at the time of the Spanish Civil War. Under the act, King George VI, by Order in Council, issued a decree permitting British subjects to take part in a conflict in another country if they wished to volunteer. It was this machinery that enabled men to go to Finland under a scheme organised by the Finnish Legation in London. They were to go as private citizens and be formally enlisted when they arrived in Finland. As the League of Nations resolution on the Russo-Finnish war makes it clear that Russia was the aggressor, British help for Finland would not violate international law. Male applicants over the age of 27 were to be granted exit permits by the Foreign Office. It was stated, “in view of the cabinets decision, it is expected that the office in Westminster, near the Finnish Legation, which deals with those wishing to volunteer, will be kept very busy during the next few weeks.” Some volunteers arrived in Finland and fought and in some cases were actually under German orders during the war.

It was possible to recruit directly among the “Nordic” peoples with the conquest of Norway, Denmark, Holland and Flanders. The collaborative parties were the instrument that would provide the man power of the correct type, so special units were set up to absorb volunteers from these racially approved regions. *SS Standarte Nordland* was established within weeks of

Norway and Denmark being occupied, so that young men from these two countries could ostensibly train “for police duties” in their respective homelands.



Some of Degrelle’s Walloon volunteers on parade. Originally the legion was in the German Army as the Wallloons were regarded as an “inferior” race. Himmler soon changed his mind when he saw their conduct in battle.

After the defeat of France, Alsace-Lorraine was re-incorporated into Germany. Sennheim in Alsace housed a French army barracks which the SS took over for the initial selection and basic training of the Norwegians in common with other western European volunteers. Those who passed were then posted on for more advanced instruction elsewhere, in the case of the Norwegians to Austria. In January 1941 recruitment intensified for the *Nordland* Regiment. On the radio, Quisling made an appeal for 17 and 25 year olds to come forward “to help our Germanic brethren fight English despotism”. It was hoped for three thousand volunteers, but the response was

not encouraging, being numbered only in hundreds. Jonas Lie the Chief of the Norwegian police who, although strongly pro-German, was not a member of NS was among those who did volunteer as was Axel Strang, minister of sport and Chief of Staff of the Rikshird. The age limit for volunteers was then raised to 40 years, a minimum engagement of two years was called for, at the end of which they would receive joint German citizenship. Nebenstelle Nordsee in Copenhagen acted as the recruiting agency for the Danes.

The *Nordland* moved to Heuberg in Northern Germany from Vienna and Klagenfurt in Austria in February 1941. Here the *Germania* Regiment of the *"Das Reich"* Division was to be the base on which a new division of the *Waffen-SS* was formed. The Danish - Norwegian *Nordland* and the Dutch - Flemish *Westland* Regiments were to be incorporated with it. This fresh division was now given the name *Wiking* and numbered the 5th Division of the *Waffen-SS*

A number of "green" personnel were seconded to *"Das Reich"* Division, to provide them with combat experience and took an active part in the invasion of Yugoslavia in April 1941. Among those were Jonas Lie and Axel Stang, after his return as a war-decorated hero having won the Iron Cross 2nd class, Lie immediately engaged in intriguing with Reichskommissar Terboven against their mutual enemy Quisling. Within the *Rikshird,* Lie founded the equivalent of the Norwegian *Allgemeine-SS* with the complicity of the German Authorities. On 16th May 1941, the immediate establishment of a *Norgess - SS* or Norwegian - SS was proposed by him at a secret meeting of the *7th Hird* Regiment in Oslo, with some 130 of its members enrolling at once. This was announced in the press on 21st May. Not forewarned or consulted Quisling was furious but impotent. The Norwegian SS had already been given Himmlers blessing and he arrived in Oslo to preside over the oath taking by the new recruits the very same day. Elverum was the destination for

the new Norwegian SS men, where they began their six week basic training after Himmlers departure. A dramatic event occurred before its completion which changed the whole perspective of the war as well as their part in it. Hitler invaded Russia on 22nd June 1941.

Not much success had been gained by Quislings' call to his fellow country men to join in the fight against "English despotism". However, a much more effective propaganda weapon lay in Hitlers self styled "crusade against bolshevism". Stalin's unprovoked attack on Finland had already angered the Norwegians, with her call for assistance in the struggle being answered by the formation of a Legion of Scandinavians volunteers. No significant contribution to the war was made as it arrived to late.



Latvian SS soldiers in action in Russia in 1943. The Waffen-SS raised two Latvian divisions, whose soldiers proved to be the toughest fighters of all the volunteers recruited by the Germans in Russia.

An announcement was made on the formation of a Norwegian Legion on 29th June 1941. It was under the control of the SS from the very beginning, with precautions being taken to conceal this fact from the Norwegian public. The Legion was portrayed as a Norwegian expeditionary force fighting against bolshevism rather than an SS body in Hitlers pay. The *NS* para military formations such as the *Rikshird* and the *Norges SS* predictably provided the majority of the volunteers, but generally a gratifying number of volunteers offered themselves. About 85% of the recently formed *Norges SS* volunteered. Promises were made to the Volunteers, that existing rank would be retain by serving soldiers, they would be subject to Norwegian, not German military law and the raised right armed "Nazi" salute employed by the SS would not be required to be use, were not eventually be honoured. The Legion was officially christened *Freiwillige Legion Norwegen* or "Volunteer Legion Norway" on 1 August, with its strength being given as 1218 men by the end of 1941. In Norway recruiting continued unabated with two new companies being raised, one drawn from Cadre personnel of the Labour service the other mainly from the police and predictably referred to as the police company. The Germanic SS devised by Himmler which encompassed all non-German *Allgemeine SS* formations in occupied western Europe saw the incorporation of the *Norges SS* into it when it was transformed into the Germanic SS Norway on 21st July 1942. All connections with its *Rikshird* parent were severed by the Germanic SS Norway and membership was no longer possible to both organisations. Its prime allegiance was now to Germany and not to its local collaborationist Leader, with a new oath of allegiance being taken this time to Hitler not Quisling.

The Danish government announced its intention of raising a corps of volunteers to fight against the Soviets on the Germans side within a week of the invasion. The *Freikorps Danmark* as it was to be known was proclaimed

on 28th June 1941. Volunteers between the ages of 17 and 35 who had either completed their period of conscript service within the previous ten years were currently in currently in the Danish armed forces were called on to enlist. An equivalent rank was promised to those who were career soldiers. It was very definitely an official body sponsored by the Danish government, not the protégé of any political party, but from the start was a part of the *Waffen-SS.* In its homeland, like the Norwegian Legion, this fact was concealed from the public. The *Freikorps Danmark* had a the strength of 1164 men by the end of 1941, it was attached to the *SS Totenkopf* Division and went into action in May 1942 and took part in the celebrated action at Demjansk. Having suffered 121 killed, it was brought back to Denmark for four weeks leave in September. In October 1942 it returned to the Easter front but in April 1943 was finally withdrawn being disbanded the following month.

Dutch and Flemish men between the ages of 18 and 25 were encouraged to volunteer in the *Standarte "Westland*" which had been established by the German SS in May 1940. Recruiting did not get underway until that autumn, they were told they could train "for police duties" in their respective homelands. The regiment was up to full strength in a matter of weeks due to the number of volunteers that presented themselves for service. The *"Westland"* was incorporated into the *Waffen-SS* during the winter of 1940 / 41. Himmler was encouraged by his success in finding Dutch and Flemish volunteers to raise a second volunteer regiment on 3rd April 1941, that was to be known as the *Freiwilligen Standarte Nordwest.* It was for young men from Flanders, Holland and now Denmark. The *Nordwest* shrank to such an extent that it was no longer able to carry on as a regiment, due to the fact the Flemings, Dutch, and Danes were being drawn off into ethnic Legions of their own, it was disbanded on 21st September 1941

A Flemish Legion, open to men between the ages of 17 and 40, was

announced. In September 1941 it was officially christened the *Freiwilligen Legion Flandern*, having previously been known variously as the *Verbond Flandern, Landesverband Flandern, Bataillon Flandern*. Ex-regular soldiers especially officers and NCO's were being shown preference. Those below the age of 23 could sign on for a specified period, the minimum being 12 months, while for other candidates enlistment had to be "for the duration". The unit was sent to the front at Leningrad in November 1941, having been deemed ready for active service, as part of the 2nd SS Motorised Infantry Brigade. It was pulled out of the line after six months active service at the front in June 1942, returning in August 1942, but latter was transformed into the SS Volunteer Assault Brigade *"Langemarck*" in May 1943. The honorary title *"Langemarck"* had been conferred upon the 4th SS *Totenkopf* infantry Regiment on 20 April 1942. It became the basic formation upon which a Flemish Brigade was to be constructed. Throughout Belgium, the SS had by now no fewer than 23 recruiting offices, but there were still insufficient numbers coming forward and it was only by adding a Finnish SS Battalion that the brigade could be brought up to the required strength.

Walloon Volunteers who came from Léon Degrelle's Rexist movement were concentrated by the German military administration in the *Legion Wallonie* and assigned to the army. It participated as an Army unit in the Eastern campaign, then in 1943 an agreement was reached between the Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht, the Commander of the General Staff of the Army and the *Reichsführer-SS* that the Walloons should be assigned to the *Waffen-SS* on 1st June 1943. The *Legion Wallonie* was then converted into the SS Assault Brigade *"Wallonien"* , and in July 1944 it was reorganised and enlarged becoming the 28th SS Volunteer Panzer Grenadier Division *"Wallonien"*

The contingent of French volunteer had a similar development. The French

Legion, *"Volontaire Française"* under the German military commander in France, was formed in 1941 and was employed on the Eastern Front as an Army volunteer unit. The Vichy French government in midsummer of 1943 gave special authorisation for the organisation of a French SS Volunteer Regiment which was reorganised into the French SS Volunteer Assault Brigade in 1944. It was to have assigned to it the German army's French Volunteer Legion, 6400 volunteers from the French militia, the navy, the NSKK and the *"Organisation Todt"* it became the *33rd Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS "Charlemagne"*.

From 1941 the *"Nordland" Regiment* had incorporated into it a battalion of Finnish volunteers which was assigned to the *"Wiking" Division*, were it participated in the Eastern Campaign. In midsummer 1943 it was ordered back to Finland, where it was incorporated into the Finnish Army.

When Latvia and Estonia had been invaded by the German forces, volunteer units were formed immediately for the support of the Army as *"Schutzmannschafts" batallions* in both countries. These were later subordinated to the commander of the police. All Latvian volunteers in the Waffen - SS were concentrated, at the beginning of 1943, into the newly formed *"Latvian SS Volunteer Legion"* together with the existing *"Schutzmannschafts" batallions*. This development was opposed strenuously by the "Ministry of the East". In February 1943, as a result of this concentration of volunteers, the *15th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS Latvian No1* was raised. Followed by, in early 1944, the raising of the *19th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS Latvian No2.* Estonia saw in the autumn of 1942, the establishment of an *"Esthonian SS"* which was first known as the *3rd Estonian SS Volunteer Brigade*. Further volunteers were called up from Estonian and in 1944 the *20th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS Esthonian No1* was formed. In the Western Ukraine, the local German

authorities were deeply suspicious and only after considerable differences between themselves had been overcome, were volunteer units raised in 1943. This led to the formation of a new division *14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS Galician No1*.

It should be added that the *"Cossack Corps"* was assigned to the *Waffen-SS*. It had been organised in 1943 under General von Pannwitz and during the summer of 1944 the two brigades were upgraded to become the 1st and 2nd Cossack Cavalry Division. In November 1944 the SS announced its intention of taking over both and creating a larger formation to be known as the *XVth Cossack Cavalry Corps*. The German officers belonging to the Corps, however, were not assigned to the SS, they were only attached.

An enormous amount of goodwill and enthusiasm was wasted, particularly in these regions, due to the lack of planning and hesitation on the part of the German authorities. A considerably greater number of volunteers could have been attracted in the Baltic States and the Ukraine than came forward in 1942 and 1943, if the German authorities had shown a positive and straight forward stance in 1941.

Strangely for the SS, with its racial policy, Muslim volunteers were recruited from the local population in Croatia and Albania. In early 1943, the first the Croatian SS Volunteer Division was formed, which was reorganised into the *13th Waffen Mountain Division of the SS "Handschar" Croatian No1*. A second Croatian Division was formed, being designated *23rd Waffen Mountain Division of the SS "Kama" Croatian No2*, in the summer of 1944. The Albanian National Committee recruited for the Albanian forces which were made up primarily from conscripts and less from volunteers. In the spring of 1944, in conjunction with other units, they raised a division which was later designated the *21st Waffen Mountain Division of the SS*

“Skanderbeg” Albanian No1.

Other national units were formed, some of strategic merit while others were of propaganda value only. These comprised, two Russian divisions, the *29th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS Russian No.1* and the *30th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS Russian No.2*, an Italian Waffen Grenadier Division and a Hungarian the *25th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS “Hunyadi” Hungarian No.1.*

Finally, of the more dubious value were, the Tartar Waffen Mountain Brigade of the SS, an East Turkish Waffen unit of the SS, the Serbian Volunteer Corps, two Rumanian Waffen grenadier regiments, a Bulgarian Waffen grenadier regiment of the SS, the Indian Legion, and the *Britische Freikorps* which was the smallest unit of foreign volunteers coming from Britain.

The idea that prisoners-of-war could be persuaded to fight in an anti-Bolshevik Legion was formulated in the mind of a scion of a distinguished British political family, John Amery, who was the eldest son of Leo Amery, Churchill’s Minister for India. The German army was not receptive to the notion at first, as it was opposed to the recruitment of prisoners. A change of heart occurred and Amery undertook a recruiting tour that yielded only one volunteer, the Germans decided to drop Amery but not the idea of a British volunteer corp. The propaganda campaign was heightened yielding about 58 volunteers who were assembled at Hildesheim. The name *Britische Freikorps* was adopted, it would appear in October or November 1943. It was sent to Dresden with the intention that it be trained as an Assault Engineer Unit. In the course of the infamous “fire storm” raid on the city it ironically suffered its first casualties when two of its members were killed. The *Britische Freikorps* was sent to Berlin in February 1945 and then assigned to the *“Nordland” Division* in March. On 13th April Cooper, the senior NCO in

charge, went to the HQ of the *"Nordland" Division* to discuss the *Britische Freikorps* with the commander *SS-Brigadeführer* Ziegler. Cooper briefed Ziegler on the background to the *Britische Freikorps*, emphasising that most of its members had been press-ganged into joining and that they could only be very uncertain factor in combat. Ziegler agreed and Steiner's formal consent was sort to withdraw the *Britische Freikorps* from the front line. Although withdrawn from a combat role the *Britische Freikorps* still had a job to do, and surprisingly enough they soldiered on. The *Britische Freikorps* continued with their work, driving trucks, directing traffic and helping with the evacuation of civilian refugees. On 29th April Steiner told his staff of his decision to break contact with the Russians and ordered his forces to head west into Anglo-American captivity. The *Britische Freikorps* were dully captured and returned to Britain.



British Freikorps members, including a youthful Kenneth Berry (left) and Alfred Minchin (centre), complete with Union Jack arm shields and cuff bands. The unit was militarily insignificant.

The foreign volunteer program remained central to the development of the

Waffen-SS but raised an obvious question, “what was their contribution to the war in Russia and was it worth it?” Questions as simplistic, are generally hard to quantify with any degree of precision. But some fairly direct answers emerge in this instance and can be broken down into two component parts, the Western volunteers on one hand and the Eastern volunteers on the other. The SS was able to tap a useful source of high-grade manpower, in the case of the Western volunteers, which the German armed forces would otherwise have found unavailable. The Western volunteers fought well on the battlefield, the ultimate criterion for any military organisation. The SS had one major criticism levelled against it, as far as the Western volunteers were concerned, which was the inability of its training grounds, Officer and, NCO schools to readily accommodate no-German recruits, a system weakness that was corrected far too slowly.

SS policy can only be seen as an almost unmitigated disaster in regard to the Eastern volunteers. On the credit side, the German invasion of the Soviet Union, considering the wide range of nationalities involved had some propaganda value in suggesting that it was a “European” undertaking intent on riding the world of communism. The military evaluation is more critical. The small Finnish SS detachments were obviously good soldiers but would have fought just as well in their own national institutions. The modest expectations held for the Baltic divisions were achieved, as for the others, the results were poor at best and at worst a complete disgrace, in fact, quite literally worse than useless.

The whole program could have been excused in 1941 or perhaps even as late as 1942 for its propaganda potential, but it siphoned off trained officers and NCOs desperately needed elsewhere at the time manpower and material shortages began to bite in 1943, and in the same way absorbed essential stocks of war munitions.

However the individual bravery of these volunteers can beast be illustrated by examining the table of awards of the Knights Cross of the Iron Cross and the units in which the recipients served.

CHAPTER 7

NEW TACTICS FOR A NEW WAR.



Waffen-SS armour in central Russia, August 1943. A StuG III Model B assault gun with its short, 28-calibre 75mm gun. Though originally intended to provide infantry fire support, the StuG III actually proved an excellent tank hunter when up-gunned to carry the same L/48 gun as the late model Panzer IV battle tank.

The *Wehrmacht* with the failure of the Kursk Offensive had been forced onto the defensive in the East. The seeds of the "winds of war" having been sown, it was now time to reap "White Hell's whirlwind and inferno. With the Red Army successfully halting what was to be the last great German offensive on the Eastern Front, was now poised to begin a massive attack all along the front. The objective, to rip apart the "Eastern Rampart", the deep defence

lines that was hoped would hold the Russians indefinitely. It was upon this the German High Command relied, a somewhat forlorn hope. The Russians, though, were confident and brimming with other ideas.

The southern sector was were the Red Army's main effort was directed. Their were five fronts that were known as, Central, Voronezh, Steppe, Southwest and South, the eastern Ukraine had to be pushed through to reach and then cross the river Dnieper. The Kalinin and West Fronts, situated father north, were tasked with pushing forward around Smolensk to hold down large German forces which would be urgently needed elsewhere. The art of balancing the actions of several fronts had been learnt by the STAVKA, or Soviet High Command, thereby enabling great local superiority to be established in designated sectors. The tactical problems of breaking through deep and strongly fortified defensive lines had also been mastered the by Russians. A logistical system capable of re-supplying their armies during the advance to keep up the momentum had also been devised. This was particularly important as the Germans had undertaken a scorched earth policy which laid waste towns and villages as they retreated.

After the battle of Kursk, Red Army tactics focused on strategic and organisational flexibility, with heavy concentrations of artillery and a broad frontage of attack. When the German line had been breached in one or two places, the main element of the attacking force was transferred into them for maximum exploitation. The response shown by the *Wehrmacht* and *Waffen-SS*, was to try to and insure that the initial Soviet assault struck empty space. This was achieved by withdrawing units immediately prior to the Red Army attack. To deal with Russian breakthroughs, the tanks were held back, with anti-tank weapons covering the main German killing zones. One such incident illustrates such an action and occurred during the fierce fighting on the north eastern front in February 1943. *SS-Untersturmführer* Gerardus

Mooyman who had joining the *SS-Volunteer legion "Nederland"* as a gunner in the 14th anti-tank company destroyed more than 15 Russian tanks south of Lake Lodoga with his anti-tank gun. To recognise this gallantry he became the first *"Germanic"* volunteers in the *Waffen-SS*, to be honoured with the award of the Knights Cross of the Iron Cross, on 20th February 1943. General Major Fritz von Scholz decorated him personally on 17th March 1943. Subsequently he was paraded for the press for propaganda purposes, first in Berlin, where he met Dutch journalists on 23rd March. He made a number of other photo calls, notably by being welcomed in April in Holland by *SS-Gruppenführer* Reuter and Seyss-Inquart. Others were made in Belgium. This was stage managed to help with the recruiting program in the Low Countries as well as to bolster flagging moral at home. Strongpoints were constructed by the German approximately 16 Km apart, which would hold for 24 hours against Russian attacks. The German troops would then fall back to the next defence line. Flank attacks could be launched against those Red Army units deployed to tackle each strongpoint. These tactics were a sound measure, but the Russian advance could never be delayed more than temporarily with this strategy, albeit at heavy cost to Red Army units. The hope that the Red Army would, in Hitler's words, "some day be exhausted" was totally unrealistic. The Red Army mustered 1400 tanks and over 20,000 artillery pieces during the battles to recapture Smolensk in August and September 1943, compared to the 500 tanks and 8800 artillery pieces the Germans could field.

The question now arises, what then of the *Waffen-SS*? The elite divisions of the organisation, the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler', Das Reich* and *SS-Totenkopfdivision* throughout the period 1941-1943, had displayed qualities which the Führer regarded as being essential to victory. A ruthless aggression in the attack, in the face of even the most determined opposition, conjoined

with a stolid refusal ever to yield ground. It was perhaps inevitable, therefore, that he should look to these units to save the situation in the East. The events in the Mediterranean at this time, however, gave Hitler cause for alarm. The Führer's worst fears concerning Italy were confirmed in the last week of July 1943, when the King dismissed Mussolini. Mussolini's regime falling, and his old ally being placed under arrest as he left the palace, made Hitler immediately start plans for rescuing the Duce and for strengthening the German hold on Italy. Marshal Badoglio's new government stated its intention of continuing the war, but no one at the Führer's headquarters, least of all Hitler, believed that.



Untersturmführer Geradus Mooyman (right) of the Dutch unit Legion Nederland with SS-Standartenführer Hank Feldmeyer. Mooyman won the Knight's Cross for knocking out 15 Russian tanks.

Hitler's initial plan was to transfer the *II. SS-Panzer-Korps* from Army Group South to Italy. He thought that the politically trained SS Divisions could form

a nucleus around which the Fascist elements in the Italian Army could rally. After consultation with the commander of Army Group Centre, Hitler decided to send only the *II. SS-Panzer-Korps* headquarters and the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'*. The *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* left all of its equipment, including its Mark IV and VI tanks at the front to be divided amongst depleted divisions. Though the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* was sent to Italy, *Das Reich* would remain in the Army Group South zone. Subsequently *Das Reich* and *SS-Totenkopfdivision* and *III Panzer Korps*, were sent to Stalino to try to stem the Russian offensive in that sector. But their respite was brief, having achieved their objective in August 1943, the Red Army attacked on 3rd August between Orel and Belgorod ripping a huge hole in the German line. To halt the collapse of Manstein's left flank *Das Reich* and *SS-Totenkopfdivision* were rushed to the Kharkov area. An attack at Belgorod fell upon the forces of Hoth's 4th Panzer Army and Army Detachment Kempf, commanded by General Werner Kempf like a thunder clap. It was launched by the Soviet Voronezh and Steppe Fronts, five armies with a superiority in tanks and guns of five to one over the hapless Germans. The Germans reeled backwards in total disarray, yielding Belgorod on 5th August. A 48 km wide gap soon appeared in the German line between Hoth's and Kempf's forces, into which the Red Army commander General Vatutin, poured troops. Kharkov was bypassed by the Soviets who then swung south-west towards Poltava. Their objective was to cut off Army Group South by taking the crossings over the river Dnieper between Kiev and Zaporozhye.

Field Marshal von Manstein ordered the two *Waffen-SS* divisions to repulse the Russian attack towards the river Dnieper and stop enemy armour from wheeling south and surrounding Army Detachment *Kempf* which was holding Kharkov. West of the city, just south of Akhtyrka, *Das Reich* and *SS-Totenkopfdivision,* dug in and awaited the Red Army tanks. The *Waffen-SS*

troops prevented the Russians reaching the river Dnieper, but endured ferocious assaults for seven days. Kempf's position became untenable in the city and to escape encirclement he was forced to abandon Kharkov on 22nd August. On Hitler's orders, for this unthinkable move, Manstein dismissed him of his command. Kempf's army was now placed under the command of General Otto Wöhler and redesignated the 8th Army. The rebuilding of the German front west of Kharkov became Wöhler's task, and who was greatly helped in this by the efforts of *Das Reich* and *SS-Totenkopfdivision.*



Waffen-SS troops on the retreat as Army Group Centre reels under relentless Russian pressure, autumn 1943. During this period the Das Reich and Totenkopf Divisions fought superbly to prevent a German collapse.

An action was undertaken between 15th and 20th August, which entailed the encirclement and destruction of Vatutin's spearheads trying to encircle Kharkov from the west, this was led by the *SS-Totenkopfdivision.* The *SS-Totenkopfdivision* then linked up with the still intact *7th Panzer Division* and

thus re-established contact with the 4th Panzer Army. The two SS divisions then covered the retreat of the 8th Army, helping to avert a major German disaster.

The fact that Germans would have to retreat to the natural defence line of the river Dnieper, was correctly assessed by Field Marshal Manstein and grudgingly accepted by Hitler in mid-September. The *SS-Totenkopfdivision* and *Das Reich* covered the retreat as the 4th Panzer and 8th Armies fell back to the river. However, the Russians had recommenced their attacks and both *Waffen-SS* divisions were sorely pressed in preventing the Russians reaching the river as the German troops and vehicles poured over the crossing points. There still was to be no respite for the SS troops who were now very tired. To the south, a crisis had developed where Russian forces had punched a hole in the German line between the right flank of Wöhler's 8th Army and the left wing of General Hube's 1st Panzer Army. Krivoi Rog was the rail, supply and communications centre for Army Group South, and now Russian tanks raced south towards it. Krivoi Rog's loss would have dealt a mortal blow to Army Group South as vast quantities of ammunition and supplies were held their.

They had smashed the 57th Army Corps and cut the rail link between Dnepropetrovsk and Krivoi Rog and by mid-October the Russians appeared to be within reach of the prize. A reserve force, was desperately thrown together by Field Marshal von Manstein, Schörner's 40th Panzer Corps, which included the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* and the remnants of the 9th and 11th Panzer Divisions and the 16th Panzergrenadier Division. From north of Krivoi Rog, the 40th Panzer Corps, counterattacked on 27th October spearheaded by the *SS-Totenkopfdivision*. After a week of bitter fighting, the Russians were stooped dead in their tracks losing 500 tanks and 5000 prisoners. They then pulled back, allowing the evacuation of Krivoi Rog four

months later, together with all the valuable supplies.

The superior fighting qualities of the *Waffen-SS* divisions were proved time after time, but there was a heavy price to pay. Hausser's *II SS-Panzer-Korps* lost over 400 tanks at Kursk. Such losses in equipment as well as that it suffered in personnel, would have quickly exhausted the *Waffen-SS* had it not have been for a decision taken by Hitler to substantially expand the organisation.



A brief period of rest before the next frenzied efforts to stem the Red Army. This photograph provides a good example of the seemingly endless Russian terrain encountered on the Eastern Front.

The elite *Waffen-SS* units, the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler', Das Reich* and *SS-Totenkopfdivision* together with the *SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Wiking"* were the beneficiaries of the initial decision to upgrade them in appreciation of their worth to panzer division status. The fact that the war would not be brought to a speedy end in the East, induced the decision to increase the number of SS divisions of all types in recognition of this situation. Finally Hitler decided that such was the worth of the best SS divisions that they should be formed into a central reserve, which would intervene in critical situations such as at Kharkov in early 1943.

The decision was not taken lightly, to increase the number of SS divisions for Hitler up till the disaster at Stalingrad, still wanted to preserve the exclusivity of the SS. However, Stalingrad forced him to authorise the creation of new divisions. On New Year's Eve 1942, Hitler agreed to the creation of two new divisions for the *Waffen-SS*. These were in fact to be sister divisions, and both were to be formed as armoured divisions. But originally they were designated as mechanised infantry divisions, numbered the 9th and 10th and named after two heroes of German military history. The division which was later to be named *9. SS-Panzer-Division "Hohenstaufen"* was formed without name in January 1943. The second likewise had no name and was identified by the number 10, simply as it was the tenth division of the *Waffen-SS*. In spite of the fact that Hitler did not like the name, the Division was called *"Karl der Grosse"* in April 1943. It had been dropped by 3rd October 1943, when from his Field HQ Hitler named the division after a historical figure more to his liking *"Frundsberg"* and the division was now titled *10. SS-Panzer-Division "Frundsberg"*. Himmler was forced to recruit native Germans for the first

time. The third, the famed *12. SS-Panzer-Division "Hitlerjugend"*, was created from the 1926 class of the Hitler Youth. But there was a recruiting drive in parallel to the additions to the *Reichsdeutsch* formations, which was the creation of the Eastern SS. Though undoubtedly necessary, it effectively destroyed Himmler's guidelines of racial selection. The *SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Wiking"* had remained on the defensive in the Caucasus during the winter of 1942-1943 and into the following spring. On 22nd March the *SS-Infanterie-Regiment "Nordland"* was withdrawn from the division and used as a cadre for a new SS division. The Scandinavian regiment was merged with two existing SS Germanic legions and a large number of west and south-eastern European volunteers to form the *SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Freiwilligen-Division "Nordland"*. During the summer the Estonian *SS-Bataillon "Narwa"* was attached to the *SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Wiking"* where it remained until July 1944 when it was transferred to the Estonian *20. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS*.



Soldiers of the 4th SS-Polizei Division digging trenches on the Eastern Front. In March 1943, the nucleus of the division was transferred to Bohemia and Moravia for refitting as a panzer-grenadier division. This was part of a general pattern of upgrading many Waffen-SS divisions in an effort to try to contain the Red Army on the Eastern Front, Hitler, though faced with grim strategic situation in Russia, was still convinced that the Waffen-SS could give him ultimate victory in Russia. This view was not shared by the troops at the front, and illustrates how detached Hitler had become from reality. The truth was that the Waffen-SS was stretched to the limit staving off defeat.

The summer and autumn found the division constantly on the defensive in the area from Kharkov to the river Dnieper.

The strict racial criteria set down by Himmler for admission to the *Waffen-SS* could no longer be afforded. Dedicated anti-Communist soldiers were needed to replace battle casualties, and units were needed to safeguard rear areas against partisans which had sprung everywhere in eastern Europe from 1942 onwards. Necessity resulted in a plethora of different national groups wearing *Waffen-SS* uniform.

The Latvians raised the *15th Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS*, which first fought on the Eastern front in November 1943. It put up spirited resistance against relentless Russian assaults, being driven west-wards in the face of the Red Army. The Estonians, too, provided a rich seam of recruits for the SS to tap.

As the situation on the Eastern Front worsened, Hitler came to depend even more on his SS divisions albeit at the time they were composed of German and Germanic personnel. By the end of 1943, for example, seven of his 30 panzer divisions were *Waffen-SS* and five of his *panzergrenadier divisions* wore SS uniforms. The *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* made the journey

between East and West no less than seven times, making a major assault on each arrival. In November 1943 for example newly returned from Italy, it led an assault which restored the Dnieper front.

By early February 1943, the retreating *"SS-Polizei-Division"* took over its newly assigned position west of Kopino where it had to repulse a number of fierce Russian onslaughts. March, brought a lull along the straight front. At this time, the nucleus of the Division was transferred to training areas in Silesia and in Bohemia and Moravia, for refitting as a *Panzer-Grenadier Division*. The remaining portions of the Division had been reduced to *"Kampfgruppe SS-Polizei-Division"* which played a defensive role in the northern portion of the Eastern Front from April 1943, till 21st May 1944.

The massive expansion of the *Waffen-SS* from 1943, in general did not lead to a commensurate rise in military prowess. Those units which had been established before then, were without doubt the best, with the eastern European formations and *Volksdeutsche* varying in performance from very poor to excellent. The *Waffen-SS*'s backbone was its panzer divisions; their leadership, training, equipment and morale was such that they postponed the ultimate defeat of the Third Reich. If such a phrase is not contradictory, the non-elite divisions of the *Waffen-SS*, saw many contrasts being high lighted. Only the west Europeans, Danes, Dutch, Belgians, French and Norwegians fought well, and they formed the numerically smallest group among Himmler's legions. Though theoretically a massive pool of recruits which Himmler could tap, the *Volksdeutsche* proved disappointing. *Volksdeutsche* personnel it was said, used their alleged inability to understand the German language as an excuse to avoid unpleasant or dangerous assignments. *SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Waffen-SS* Theodor Eicke was particularly scathing about them, commenting in like manner, even going as far as accusing them of cowardice. The barometer that could be used to gauge

a *Waffen-SS* unit's military efficiency was usually the amount of *Volksdeutsche* personnel it contained, the greater the ratio the less its combat efficiency. Despite all the efforts the floodgates in the East burst open in 1944, and the Waffen-SS was caught in the deluge. Despite its almost superhuman efforts, it could not prevent the Russians reaching the very borders of the Third Reich itself.



The strain begins to show. Fatigue was rife in the élite Waffen-SS divisions on the

Eastern Front in the second half of 1943, as they were rushed from one trouble spot to another to deal with Red Army attacks.

CHAPTER 8

THE DIRTY WAR



Suspected partisans and collaborators hanged by the Germans in Volokolamsk, near Moscow, in the winter of 1941. Bodies were left hanging as a warning to others.

The extermination of the Jews in the East was assigned to the SS, for which purpose *Einsatzgruppen* were set up prior to the invasion of Poland. The Führer's social plan for Poland was simple, radical and was to be extremely effective. This was the liquidation of the country's cultural and political elite; it was also to be the testing ground for the larger game plan, the destruction

of the Jews and other unmentionables that inhabited the Soviet Union. With the conquest of the "Evil Empire", Hitler's dream of racial purity for the world and the eradication of Bolshevism, which was in his eyes "a social criminality", could in the greater part be achieved. The SS was also charged with the responsibility for the conduct of the Anti-Partisan war in the East and the Balkans. Initially mission responsibility for combating the partisan menace had rested with the Army. However, control was handed over to the Waffen-SS in October 1942 and *SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Waffen-SS und Polizei* Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski was designated as Chief of the Anti-partisan warfare and was given the title of *Bevollmächtiger für die Bandenbekämpfung im Osten* or Plenipotentiary for the Combating of Partisans in the East. In 1943 this was changed to *Chef der Bandenkampfverbände* or Chief of Anti-Partisan Formations. He was born in Lauenburg Pomerania into a Junker family and became a professional soldier serving at the front in the First World War. After the war, he joined the police service, also joining the NSDAP in 1930 and the SS in 1931. When Hitler came to power, he was promoted quickly and for a time commanded the SS-District South East in Breslau Silesia. From 1932-1934 he was a *Reichstag* deputy. He became senior SS and police leader in the Central Army Group area in Russia during the period 1941-1942 and it was during this time he was involved in the liquidation of the Jews and Bolsheviks. On becoming head of all anti-partisan units, he was directly responsible to Himmler. Throughout the period of their spectacular triumphs in the Soviet Union the German forces were fighting a second campaign, a savage phantom war against the partisans. It was not a conflict which began spontaneously, for as the Germans drove deep into the Soviet Union in 1941 they were greeted by large sections of the population as Liberators who would free them from the Stalinist yoke.

Before the war, while still in the process of communising the country, the Soviet government had been totally opposed to the concept of “a nation in arms”. The resistance movements that were in place, at first did not take up arms against the invaders, but acted as couriers and agents. Their numbers were small, they possessed sophisticated techniques which required less brawn and more brain on the part of the security police.to track them down.

The perception held by the Russian people of their government, which was not universally popular, led many to a wait and see attitude as to whether it would survive or not. In fact, in the beginning, there were two collaborators for every partisan. But the growth of the partisan movement was sped by the ruthlessness of the Russian Guerrilla organisation with collaborators and the savagery meted out by the Germans in the occupied areas which was to bleed off more and more German forces and sap their morale.

There was no special equipment available or stocks of weapons, clothing, food and medical supplies. The many experienced partisans who had participated in the Russian Civil War of 1918 to 1921 were not being made use of nor those who had fought in the Spanish Civil War. Indeed many had been discredited as “enemies of the people” and shot in the purges. The absence of training for partisan warfare, both theoretical and practical conjoined with the lack of any clear thought as to how the leadership of it should be organised, led early in the war to disagreement between the Soviet leaders. The creation of large formations, which should operate in accordance with the plans of the Central Military leadership was insisted upon by some. Others held the view that numerous small detachments receiving only general co-ordination and support from the Military Command would prove more effective.

A belated call to arms was issued on 29th June 1941 by the Central

Committee of the Communist Party and the Soviet Government in a directive that first gave reference to the need to organise partisan and sabotage activity in German occupied territory. It was addressed to all party and government bodies in the western districts of the country and in a radio speech delivered by Stalin on 3rd July the entire population was made aware of its substance and they were called on, “to set up partisan cavalry and infantry detachments and sabotage groups in enemy occupied areas for the struggle against units of the enemy army, to inflame partisan warfare everywhere and at all times, to blow up bridges and roads, to spoil telephone communications, to set fire to forests, warehouses, and wagons, to create unbearable conditions in the occupied areas for the enemy and all who helped him, to pursue and destroy them at every step, to disrupt everything they do.”



Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, senior SS and Police Leader in Army Group Centre's area in Russia. Head of all anti-partisan units, he had a nervous breakdown in 1942 due to the atrocities committed in Russia.

At the same time, the directive demanded the establishment of "destroyer" battalions, formed from the most loyal members of the civilian population

and charged with preventing panic and disorganisation in areas near the front. “We must organise a merciless struggle against all disorganisers of our rear, deserters, alarmists, rumour-mongers, and destroy spies, saboteurs, and enemy paratroops, co-operating speedily with our destroyer battalions in all this. The war with Nazi Germany must not be looked on as an ordinary war. It is not merely a war between two armies, it is also a great war of the whole Soviet people against the German forces.”

This was not only a call to the people to develop partisan warfare in the rear of the German forces, but also a threat that those who did not participate in the “war of the whole Soviet people” would be regarded as traitors.

However, Stalin’s speech did not arouse or inspire the Soviet people. No spontaneous anti-German movement arose in the occupied areas so organisation of a partisan movement only continued along two lines, through the party organisation and that of the secret police. While on the other hand, the Germans made somewhat better use of local groups opposed either to Stalin’s government or to the racially dominated “Muscovite” Russians and these provided the troops for anti-partisan operations. The terrain in the Soviet Union was rarely as favourable for partisan operations as found in the former Yugoslavia but the sheer cruelty of the German occupation fanned a vigourous resistance movement into life and alienated many who were potential allies.

Yet despite the killings, the deportations and imposition of a brutal military occupation the Germans had little difficulty in finding volunteers to act as auxiliaries and behind-the-line security troops. The most enthusiastic of these were the non-Slavic people on the periphery of the Soviet Union, the Balts, Caucasians, Georgians, Turkomens and Cossacks. As the war progressed they were joined by Ukrainians and Russians and in many Ukrainian and

Russian towns the action groups found willing helpers among the racial Germans, indigenous self defence forces and militia. After the first wave of action, the Special Action Groups settled down to maintain security in the newly occupied and pacified territories, where they set up a static territorial organisation, which was in fact a miniature *RSHA* in the field, with SD, Gestapo and Kripo representatives under a Commander of Security Police and SD. Under each Commander were a number of local commanders of Security Police and SD. Towards the end of the war it was estimated that as many as a million citizens from the Soviet Union had taken up arms against their communist government.



Immediately following the Wehrmacht into Russia in June 1941 came the Einsatzgruppen, the SS Special Action Groups, intent on liquidating Communists,

Jews, UNDESIRABLES and anyone else who fell foul of SS racial guidelines. Each Einsatzgruppe numbered less than 3000 men and a few women, and one wonders how they managed to murder nealy 500,000 Jews and Gypsies aloneduring the first six months of the Russia Campaign, in addition to numerous Russian commissars who were captured. However, they were enthusiastically helped in their grisly task by locally raised volunteer units, especially in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia.

On 18th July 1941, the Party Central Committee issued a directive on organising the struggle in the rear of the German forces. It ordered that underground party committees be set up on occupied territory, with the job of ensuring that partisan and subversive activity developed in their areas. Responsibility for this was laid on local party and government leaders, especially on First Secretaries of party organisations. The directive ordered the immediate preparation of underground party bodies and partisan detachments in areas close to the front, the choice of the most loyal persons in the area for them.

Partisan detachments of 75 to 100 men each and sabotage groups of 30 to 50 men were be primarily organised in areas where main enemy forces were concentrated, but it was intended to have at least one of each in every administrative division. The main targets for partisan detachments were columns and garrisons of enemy motorised infantry, transport, airfields, and communications. For the sabotage groups, the main targets were telephone lines, stores of war materials, small groups of soldiers, single lorries and tanks, the killing of officers, seizure of documents, and the spreading of rumours aimed at causing uncertainty and alarm among enemy troops. The killing of officers was held as a very high priority, for it was a prime objective of Stalinist ideals. The Soviet forces during the Polish campaign also interacted with the German forces adding to the final destruction of Poland. The Soviets had a plan for the destruction of the Polish Officer Corp

and other Intellectuals that led to vast numbers of deportations and executions, as illustrated by the announcement by Radio Berlin on the 13 April 1943 of the discovery of a mass grave of 10,000 Polish officers in Katyn Forest near Smolensk. They had been methodically and expertly shot by pistol in the back of the head by the NKVD in the spring of 1940. The German report was somewhat inaccurate. In fact only 4,500 officers whom the Russians had failed to indoctrinate were murdered.

The urban counterparts to the partisan detachments and sabotage groups were the networks of conspiratorial groups and agents set up by the party, and independent networks set up by the Internal Affairs and State Security service. Their tasks were sabotage, terrorism, and intelligence. To carry these out they often posed as collaborators in order to penetrate German military and administrative installations, preserving strict secrecy and avoiding contact with the partisans. One example is recorded in the book the Moscow tram stop and gives an account of a prominent young girl partisan who was active in late 1941. She was interrogated by the German army and subsequently given duties in the Headquarters. An attractive girl, she soon won the favours of her new found friends. “Tanya” was exposed and taken out by the Germans with a plaque round her neck proclaiming her crimes, hanged publicly in front of an audience of soldiers and left as a stark reminder to others. Group hangings were a not uncommon grisly sight, the intense cold acted as a deep freeze and allowed it to be viewed without deterioration. A small boy was shot through the head for possessing a pigeon. Both were put on display. In the early months of the war about 70% of Partisans were Party or Youth League members; because of their inexperience many of them, especially the active Communists, were captured and killed.

About 350 detachments with a strength of 30 to 50 and small groups were

formed in the Leningrad Province. Their commanders and commissars were ordered to the provinces' western districts to establish bases before the Germans arrived. To control the partisan effort, 36 underground party district committees were created. But the results were insignificant. The war losses were over 50% in the first months with 7724 being killed in action or shot by the Gestapo. Several dozen of the small groups and 45 of the detachments were wiped out. Many commanders and party secretaries absented themselves with the retreating Soviet forces.

The German push in Belorussia was so rapid it proved impossible in many areas to make advanced preparation for partisan activity. In July the Belorussian Communist Party Central Committee and the Youth League sent 3964 men in 125 Partisan and sabotage groups behind the German lines, followed in the summer and autumn by 160 underground organisers. During the first few months the Partisans were relatively inactive, but where they fought, they fought bravely incurring heavy casualties.

33000 party members were dispatched by the Ukraine Communist Party to set up the underground party and partisan detachments in the occupied territory. Only a few survived, based in the wooded regions of northern Ukraine Bryansk Forests, which stretched north to south 125 miles and 40 miles west to east, and Polesye.



Suspected partisans being led away following a German anti-guerrilla sweep in the Bryansk area in 1943. Guilty or not, all of them would be shot by firing squad after a series of brutal interrogations.

In the Crimea special difficulties were encountered where most of the indigenous population were Tartars. A total of 3734 men were formed into 28 partisan groups but few Tartars if any were among them. The *Sicherheitsdienst* or SD toured prisoner-of-war camps behind the front in the beginning of 1942 and recruited approximately 3,000 “reliable” Tartars, who were formed into *Tartaren-Selbstschutz-Kompanien* or Tartar Self-Defence Companies. These volunteers were armed with German or captured weapons and received the same pay as German soldiers. In the following towns, Karassubar, Bachtschissaraj, Simferopol, Jalta, Aluschta, Sudak, St. Krim and Jewapatorija, one Tartar company was formed. The Tartars eagerly assisted the Germans, with the Self-Defence Companies taking part in punitive expeditions against the partisans, blocking their communications and

searching out and destroying their bases and stores.

Desertion was a serious problem everywhere. In Smolensk Province over 6000 party members and Youth League remained to operate in the German's rear. But only 2000 in 40 partisan detachments were operational in the area. by the autumn of 1941.

75 destroyer battalions were raised with a strength of 10000 in Orel province before the arrival of the Germans which were deployed as partisan detachments after the Soviet forces withdrew. Only 2300 remained when the Germans arrived and during the ensuing three weeks some detachments disintegrated altogether while others moved into Soviet controlled territory.

Soldiers were hiding in towns, villages and forests in large numbers, having been separated from their units. Party officials attempted to recruit them posing the question, "are you with us or against us?" A partisan commander later wrote, "our communists lost heart and some took conspiratorial activity to mean how best to hide themselves." Anti-German activity was limited in these circumstances. The mighty Bryansk Forest only housed some 2500 partisans in the first months

The Partisans of Moscow region provided something of an exception. A staff of the Partisan movement, 12 underground district Committees and 40 partisan detachments with their bases were set up before the German forces reached the area. They had a hard core of 1500 members of the party and 300 members of the Youth League. They operated actively attacking even German garrisons and suffered heavy casualties.



SS-Obersturmbannführer Friedrich Suhr, who is wearing the Anti-Partisan War Badge below and to the left of the Iron Cross on his left-breast pocket. Few pictures of individuals wearing this award are extant.

The Germans had occupied Soviet territory subjugating about 70,000,000 people by December 1941. At this time there were only about 30,000 Partisans in this region, but this rapidly rose to an approximated 80,133 men organised in 661 detachments by 1 July 1942. The level of activity was thought to be unsatisfactory by the Central Staff and on 1 August 1942 an immediate increase was demanded to aid the troops at the front. An amnesty was proclaimed on 12 August for all collaborators who ended their activities and charged partisan commanders with executing all those who continued.

The Belorussian and Bryansk Forest Partisans responded by blowing up

strongly guarded railway bridges over the rivers Desna, Ptich and Drissa, together with other railway installations. The German General Directorate of Railway “East” reported that due to partisan action, accidents increased from 90 in March to 180 in June, 315 in August, 342 in September and from August 1942 approximately 200 locomotives were neutralised every month. The increased activity reduced train speeds, movements by night, and led to an increase in patrols and the building of fortifications on important bridges and main lines.

The scale of increases in movements were the focus of high level discussion in Moscow at the end of August 1942, when about 20 commanders of the largest partisan brigades were summoned to a conference on subversive activity by the Central Staff. Stalin received the group on 31st August, which also conferred in the Kremlin with the Soviet leaders who concluded, “the partisan movement despite its obvious successes, has not yet become as massive as it could be.” They were ordered to create new partisan reserves in every village and to primarily direct efforts against the German lines of communication.

From the Bryansk Forests, commanded by S. Kovpak and A. Saburov, the two largest brigades with compliments of over 1000 raided from thence to the west bank of the Dniepr and on to the thinly wooded south western Ukraine. Through these regions lay the main German communication lines as they had destroyed the underground organisation. The raids had three distinct objectives, creating a diversion, symbolising Soviet power, and inflaming the population against the Germans. At the end of October Kovpak and Saburov brigades moved out, after being supplied by air with food, clothing, weapons, explosives, radios, and portable printing presses. The important Ukrainian railway junction of Sarny was attacked and five bridges leading to it blown up by Kovpak’s brigade in December. Kovpak’s brigade was encircled by the

Germans during a raid into the western Ukraine in summer 1943. Vershigora, head of intelligence, suggested that it should break out in small groups, taking different directions and assemble in an appointed place later. Many partisan leaders did not trust their men enough to permit them to disperse. The brigade commissar rejected the plan as they might go home instead and a team which had been created and held together by strict discipline through two years would fall apart. A number of small, passive detachments existed, which contributed little to the struggle. These were compelled to integrate or subordinate to active units for the sake of discipline and energetic action. In some cases their commanders refused, preferring an easy existence in the village or forest hide outs. These commanders were shot and their units forcibly integrated. Penetration by German agents and collaborators was minimised by the institution of rigorous checks on New Recruits. They carried out only auxiliary duties performed under constant surveillance. If it transpired they had an “unclean” past or had behaved disloyally, they and their families were shot, their property confiscated or destroyed and their houses burned.



The Anti-Partisan War Badge was introduced on 30 January 1944. It came in Bronze, Silver and Gold for 30, 75 or 100 combat days respectively. Himmler awarded the first four Gold badges in February 1945.

German Army Group Centre's communications were the priority of the Bryansk Forest partisans who even undertook a joint operation in February 1943 with the Bryansk front air forces. This attacked the stations while the

partisans blew up a number of railway tracks especially on the Bryansk to Karachev line. The Gomel to Bryansk lines, a 330 yard long bridge over the Desna was blown up in March, frustrating Army Group Centre's preparations for the offensive, Operation "Zitadelle", against the Soviet salient around Kursk in July 1943.

Several operations were mounted against the partisans of Belorussia and the Bryansk Forest during the summer of 1942 but they were only partially successful. Partisan detachments increased from 661 to 1061 between the summers of 1942 and 1943. The Germans renewed attempts to eradicate the partisans due to increased activity against their communications. The Bryansk Forests saw, in spring and summer 1943, large operations involving up to 60000 German troops, but with little effect. The German General Directorate of Railway "East" reports show that partisan attacks increased from about 500 in February 1943, to 1045 in May, 1060 in June and 1460 in July. Behind Army Group Centre alone, partisans blew up 44 bridges and damaged 298 locomotives and 1223 wagons during June 1943.

Hitler realised the extermination of the Jews in the East was no undertaking for regular soldiers so Himmler was ordered to form units to follow the German troops to undertake these liquidations. These were innocuously name *Einsatzgruppen* or Task Forces. Himmler entrusted this mission of mass killing to mobile *Sicherheitsdienst* SD and *Sipo* Security Police detachments. In preparation for the planned expansion eastwards, *SS-Obergruppenführer* Heydrich commissioned Walter Schellenberg, one of his most brilliant protégés, to work out a plan for fusing the State organisation the *Sicherheitspolizei* or *Sipo*, the Security police on which the *Gestapo* depended, with the Party organisation the *Sicherheitsdienst* or *SD*, an organisation which would oversee the *Einsatzgruppen* in Poland and eventually the Soviet Union. A project of this nature did not appeal to

everybody, it particularly failed to do so in the case of the head of the *Gestapo,* Werner Best, who was very keen on preserving the distinction between State and the Party. But with such strong patronage, the organisation to be known as *Reichssicherheitshauptamt,* the *RSHA* or Reich Main Security Office, came into being in September 1939. Its formation was based on a compromise according to which certain of its sections were placed under State authority and others under that of the Party. For the Polish campaign six *Einsatzgruppen* of 400 to 600 men were formed. One was assigned to each of the five invading armies whilst a sixth unit was deployed in the border province of Poznan, a former Prussian territory that Hitler intended to reclaim for the Reich. As the German army raced across Poland the SS followed, performing with vigour its next part in the destruction of that nation. Behind the advancing *Wehrmacht* and SS, hastily improvised reception camps were constructed. The *Einsatzgruppen* worked methodically from previously prepared lists of names. Government Officials, local political leaders, aristocrats, priests, business people, teachers and physicians were prime targets for murder, as were the Jews. All that could be found were rounded up and herded into these camps, where execution by shooting usually took place soon afterwards. A German diplomat described it in his diary, “the SS reign of terror in Poland progressed efficiently”. Seven days after the invasion a death toll of 200 Poles a day was claimed by SS commanders and twenty days later *SS-Obergruppenführer* Heydrich was able to announce ‘Of the Polish upper classes in the occupied territories only a maximum of 3% is still present’.



Members of an auxillary unit raised to assist the Einsatzgruppen with uniformed German police officers in the Ukrain. Note the skull in front of the blackboard, no doubt provided by one of the unit's victims.

Another variety of death squads, the so called Home Defence units, soon began operating alongside the *Einsatzgruppen.* They consisted of ethnic Germans who had been objects of inter German-Polish rivalry since the inception of the Polish State.. In the days immediately after the invasion a brief Polish hate campaign was waged where Poles sacked German farms and houses. 5,000 Germans were perhaps murdered and possibly as many as 50,000 were forced from their homes in Western Poland. These units were driven by a lust for revenge, as soon as the *Wehrmacht* had rolled past, men from the German minority banded together in Volunteer Militias bent upon killing Poles. In Western Prussia anti-Polish feeling was rife and here Albert Forster, the *Gauleiter* of Danzig, did everything he could to fan the flames of hatred.

Himmler, who always protected what he regarded as his domain, dispatched Gottlob Berger, the Chief of Recruiting office, to take charge and bring the Home Defence units under SS control. This was an important factor in the control of the auxiliary units that were to be taken over or formed in the occupied areas of the Soviet Union. These units were divided into four groups and each assigned a German SS commander by Berger. Although they were to serve as auxiliary police forces some units continued on their murderous endeavours, causing even *SS-Obergruppenführer* Heydrich to show concern. Evidently the lack of discipline worried him more than the lack of humanity shown by these newly recruited SS men.

The *SS-Totenkopfverbände* made no tactical contribution to the German victory in Poland. As the *SS-Verfügungstruppe* received its baptism of fire the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* received its initiation in blood, being employed in terrorising the civilian population through acts that included hunting down straggling Polish soldiers and torturing and murdering large numbers of Poland's population. Eicke had bestowed upon him the title of *Höhere SS und Polizei Führer HSSPF* or Higher SS and Police Leader, for the regions of Poland, making him accountable to Himmler alone for the measures he took in "pacifying" the conquered areas.

A trusted Eicke subordinate, *SS-Standartenführer* Paul Nostitz, commanded the *SS-Totenkopf Standarte "Brandenburg"*, who carried out his orders thoroughly and fanatically. On the 13 September *SS-Brandenburg* moved into Poland to begin *"Säuberungs- und Sicherheits Maßnahmen."* or "cleansing and security measures". A fitting introduction to the character of German rule was bestowed upon the towns and villages through which it passed during the three weeks it was on active duty in Poland and were a foretaste of things to come in the Baltic States and Soviet Union. They secured villages from "insurgents", conducted house searches and arrested

large numbers of “suspicious elements”. *SS-Standartenführer* Nostitz described in his report how insurgents, plunderers, Poles, and Jews were liquidated in large numbers, many of whom were shot “while trying to escape”.



“Here he stops at nothing, and in his vileness he becomes so gigantic that no one need be surprised if among our people the personification of the devil as the symbol of all evil assumes the living shape of the Jew.” (Hitler: Mein Kampf) in Nazi eyes the Slavs and Jews battled for top spot in the list of Sub-humanity”. The result was murder on a mass scale once the war in the East began. Himmler was informed on 23 March 1943 that 633,000 Jews, such as the one shown here, in Russia had been “resettled”, the euphemism for extermination. With regard to the Slav, the SS issued a brochure entitled The Sub-Human which stated: (the sub-human) is a frightful creature, a caricature of a man with features similar to those of a human being but intellectually and morally lower than any animal.” This Jewish man has been dressed in religious robes prior to being shot.

The “cleansing and security measures” that occured during and after the Polish Campaign engendered an attitude of uneasiness tempered with shock and disgust among responsible senior officers of the German Army. Their sentiment and suspicion was put on record by General Boehm-Tettelbach with his report to the VIII Army, in which he was of the clear impression that *SS Brandenburg* had the prime objective of taking violent action against the Jews. Nostitz repeated refusal to perform normal security duties was cited to support his claims. The general also highlighted how *SS-Gruppenführer* Pancke had said openly that the SS had special tasks to perform that were outside the competence of the army and therefore the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* would not obey army orders. The reports undoubtedly reached Colonel General Blaskowitz who found the Death Head units loathsome. The atrocities committed helped transform him into the army’s most bitter critic of SS behaviour in Poland. As a protest to *Generaloberst* von Brauchitsch, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, he composed a long memorandum cataloguing the crimes committed by the *SS-Totenkopfverbände* in Poland and sent it to him.

These activities began to be questioned by numerous German soldiers. Their heinous enterprises were to be camouflaged by such euphemisms as “counterespionage work” in the attempt of keeping them secret from the regular forces.

The XIV Army’s operational section reported on the 20 September that the “troops are especially incensed that instead of fighting at the front young men should be demonstrating their courage against defenceless civilians.” In the Operational Zone the *Einsatzgruppen* were technically under army command, and more than one senior *Wehrmacht* officer was becoming worried at the consequences. Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, the Chief of the *Abwehr* or military intelligence, told the High Command that, “the world will one day hold the *Wehrmacht* responsible for these methods since these things are taking place under its nose.” But most generals were content to leave the dirty work to the SS, and prepared to ‘turn the Nelsonic eye’.

At the end of March German military mechanics were swept into a new and terrible “planning phase” when Hitler revealed what his “crusade against Bolshevism” involved. On 30th March, in a two and a half hour speech, Hitler addressed the commanders of the three services, top commanders and some 250 senior officers selected for “Barbarossa” where he made plain that he was not committed merely to conquest but was to embark on a war of extermination. In this gigantic clash of ideology knightly virtues would have no place, for Bolshevism was “a social criminality”. Bolshevik commissars and Communist intelligentsia must all be put to death, and no personal scruple could hold sway

Himmler had been granted substantial and independent powers over occupied territory in the East and on 3rd March took responsibility for “certain tasks which stem from the necessity finally to settle the conflict between the two

opposing political systems". The "Instructions on Special Matters' (Annex to Directive 21) the OKW directive of 13th March 1941, laid down Himmler's special freedom of action and decreed the division of occupied Russia into "ethnographic areas" following the army group divisions Baltic, Belorussia, Ukraine. Each was to be ruled by *"Reichskommissars"* which were to take over as rapidly as possible. Their responsibility lay directly to the Führer and assigned to Göring the co-ordination of "the economic administration" of military operational and rear administrative zone alike. Military rule, exercised by the army was therefore cut to the minimum and severely limited in both time and scope

The "special tasks" would be carried out in the military rear as such, General Wagner, Quartermaster General, discussed with Heydrich the terms of the relationship between the military and SD. On 26th March, a draft order covering this arrangement and the eventual operations of the *Einsatzgruppen* in the army's rear areas was published. Hitler's speech put Communist commissars and officials, military and civilians, beyond any law save one which automatically sentenced them to summary execution. Commissars when captured would be shot out of hand, if not by German combat troops then by the *Einsatzgruppen* to whom they would be handed over, or, as the draft of the infamous Commissar Order put it, "Political leaders and commissars who are captured will not be sent to the rear."

Another directive on the "co-ordinated execution" of "special tasks" in the East was published at the end of March. The army's first Special Directives dated 3rd April was issued by General Wagner on this basis, limiting the army's responsibility to its already limited zone. The boundaries of the military conscience had also to be fixed or forgotten. Further wrangling between the SS and OKW took place, then an agreement which stated in part that 'the *Einsatzgruppen* are authorised, within the framework of their task

and on their own responsibility, to take executive measures affecting the civilian population.' The zones and conditions in which the *Einsatzgruppen* or Special Action Groups could operate were laid down by *Generaloberst* von Brauchitsch, the Commander in Chief of the Army on 28th April 1941. The operational zones were divided into four with an *Einsatzgruppenin* each, which were: A, assigned to operations in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia and commanded by *SS-Gruppenführer* Stahlecker; B, assigned to the Baltic states and the Ukraine, commanded by *SS-Gruppenführer* Nebe; C, assigned to the Ukraine south of B, commanded by *SS-Oberführer* Rasch; D, taking the remainder of the Ukraine, commanded by *SS-Gruppenführer* Ohlendorf. The order also empowered them to take executive measures against the civilian population as long as they did not interfere with military operations.

A number of different departments, offices and units of the *Sicherheitsdienst* SD, Waffen-SS and Order Police provided personnel for the *Einsatzgruppen* which were armed with light automatic weapons. Vast distances were covered by the fully motorised *Einsatzgruppen* which followed so closely in the wake of the advancing German troops, that often *Sicherheitsdienst* SD and Gestapo personnel became involved in action with the retreating enemy. In the days following the invasion one of the first atrocities occurred on the Soviet frontier at the village of Virbalis. Along a five kilometre length of anti-tank trench Jews were forced to lie down then exterminated by machine-gun fire. This was repeated seven times. The children were spared only to be held by the legs, their heads smashed against stones, and then buried alive. The *Einsatzgruppen* fanned out behind the front line which had by now penetrated deep into the Soviet Union. Here they killed with a ferocity and intensity all who came into their clutches, Political functionaries or commissars, active communists, looters, saboteurs, Jews with false papers, agents of the NKVD, traitorous Ethnic Germans, reconciliatory and sadistic

Jews, unwanted elements, carriers of epidemics, members of Russian partisan bands, armed insurgents, partisan helpers, rebels, agitators, young vagabonds, and Jews in general. The licence given to the *Einsatzgruppen* for their programme of slaughter appeared to know no bounds.



The executioners toy with one of their victims during the SS's war against "sub-humanity" in Russia. This Jew will make his way to a large pit to be shot; he will be but one of hundreds, maybe thousands.

A look at the *Einsatzgruppen* commanders gives a depth to the enormity of the horrors wreaked upon the occupied territories. *SS-Gruppenführer* Franz-Walter Stahlecker was an 'information officer' in the SD in 1938 and went on to become Head of section VIa of the Reich main security office. At the beginning of 1942 Heydrich got rid of Stahlecker by dubiously promoting him to the command of *Einsatzgruppe A.* Heydrich's reports claimed that Stahlecker's group had liquidated 221 000 victims. It is possible however that such figures were reached carelessly with the same totals being added several times over. Heydrich nevertheless would have benefited from this misrepresentation, firstly by demonstrating his success in the 'final solution' and secondly to neutralise Nebe, who is said to have fought against Heydrich's orders. These calculations allowed Himmler to contrast Nebe's quite modest score of 46 000 executions against Stahlecker's 221 000. On the other hand *SS-Gruppenführer* Artur Nebe, was principally an old styled police officer who, since 1934, had seen his criminal police department infiltrated by amateur Gestapo officers and finally absorbed by Heydrich in 1939. Nebe's retention of office was due to his 5 months spent in Russia heading *Einsatzgruppe B.* Nebe's headquarters were at Minsk and later Smolensk. *SS-Oberführer* Dr Otto Rasch commanded *Einsatzgruppe C*, which had its headquarters at Kiev. It claimed more than 51,000 executions. *SS-Gruppenführer* Otto Ohlendorf was both a lawyer and an economist. A graduate of Leipzig and Göttingen universities, he was also a well-known lecturer, which led him to the tile of the intellectual executioner. Ohlendorf was chief of the inland (internal) SD. He spent much of his time lecturing to German businessmen, especially the Heinrich Himmler friendship circle. His

reputation as an administrator who was logical, intelligent and humane was established in all quarters. The other commanders were reticent, while on the other hand, Ohlendorf immediately became an expert on extermination. Ohlendorf kept exact scores of his achievements: by the winter of 1941-2 his command had liquidated 92 000 Jews and was still going strong. The other groups were feeling the psychological strain and replacements were made. Ohlendorf however became more fanatical

Transcripts of German police radio messages, the so-called “Incident Reports” detailing the massacre of thousands of Soviet Jews show that the German *Ordnungspolizei*, or Orpo, were massacring Jews as early as June 1941, several months before it was believed that the so-called Final Solution began. Thus the Holocaust actually began with Operation Barbarosa and could raise the number of Jews believed to have been exterminated by a further million.



Eager civilians in Latvia or Estonia receive orders from an auxiliary about the

digging of graves to hold the corpses of Jews. It is a sad fact that Nazism tapped a rich anti – Semitic vein in the Soviet Union.

On 18th July 1941 *SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Waffen-SS und Polizei* Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, *Ordnungspolizei* commander in the Soviet republic of Belorussia, sent the following message to his superiors in Berlin summarising the activities of his men. “In yesterday’s cleansing action in Slonim, carried out by Police Regiment Centre, 1153 Jewish plunderers were shot.” By 7th August he was reporting to *SS-Oberstgruppenführer und Generaloberst der Polizei* Kurt Daluege *Chef der Ordnungspolizei* and Himmler, “The total number of executions in territory under my jurisdiction has now exceeded 30,000.” On the same day the SS Cavalry Brigade based in the Minsk area of Belorussia reported having carried out 7819 executions to date.

SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Polizei Friedrich Jeckeln, *Ordnungspolizei- commander* in the Ukraine, told Daluege and Himmler that on 27th August, “the Special Action Staff with Order Police Battalion 320 shot 4,200 Jews near the town of Kamenets-Podolsk”. Four days later he reported that the same battalion had executed a further 2,200 Jews. A month later Jeckeln said his men had “disposed of 1,255 Jews according to the usage of war” near the town of Ovruch. It was the last week of August that held the most horrifying figures, for during that time 12,361 Ukrainian Jews were executed. Another report, from Lithuania, stated that “about 500 Jews, among other saboteurs, are currently being liquidated every day.” Most were killed by police rather than the SS. The *Ordnungspolizei* messages dried up in September after Daluege warned his commanders that the enemy might be listening and told them to send details of all future “executions” to Berlin by courier. On 19th December 1941 from *Einsatzgruppe B,* a report stated “In checks on the exit roads from Ogilev carried out with the assistance of the

Ordnungspolizei a total of 135 people, most of them Jews, were seized. 127 people were shot."

The winter of 1941-2 had taken a toll on the *Einsatzgruppen* leaders, who were feeling the effects of the murders. Nebe was a mere shadow of himself and on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Himmler travelled to Minsk to encourage his executioners. He told Nebe that he wished to witness a liquidation, who obligingly supplying 100 alleged partisans from the city jail, all but two being men. It is suggested, Himmler ordered Nebe to seduce the two women before shooting them, thinking it a useful way of obtaining information of partisan activities.



The work of the Einsatzgruppen went on regardless of the weather. However, by the end of 1942 shooting as a method of mass extermination in the East was giving way to the gassing of victims.

But when he attended the shootings he nearly collapsed, *SS*-

Obergruppenführer und General der Waffen-SS und Polizei Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, pressed Himmler to reserve any momentary sympathy, not for the victims, but for the executioners who had to carry out such work. Shortly after this visit Himmler instructed Nebe that another method of killing had to be developed. Nebe agreed, for the psychological effect on those who had to carry out the executions was very great. He began experimenting with killing people, in one case 80 inhabitants of a lunatic asylum, using exhaust gas from his car, an 8 cylinder Horch. He went about the task with an enthusiasm that he was incapable of keeping to himself. He was a keen amateur film maker and after the war footage showing a gas chamber, worked by the exhaust of a lorry, were found in his Berlin flat.

In May 1942 the Commander of Security Police and SD Lublin formed a *Sondereinsatzgruppe* or special Action Group which was to disguise itself as a partisan band and assist the security forces in the maintenance of order. This unit was intended to carry out large scale looting and reprisals in the name of the partisans, and thus discredit the partisan movement in the eyes of the local inhabitants. Even so a few details surfaced in some messages. On 23rd July 1942, the police chief in Kamenetz reported that in “the Jewish action, 700 incapable of working have been shot”.

Not only was the destruction of life the primary objective of the SS but the confiscation of property and valuables belonging to their victims as well as the conquered States was of paramount importance. Details of a special SS battalion which under the guidance of *SS-Obergruppenführer* Joachim von Ribbentrop, the German Foreign Minister, was plundering works of art and sending them back to Berlin. The messages also give a clue to the disappearance of the legendary Amber Room, looted from one of the Tsar’s palaces near Leningrad by the Germans. They refer to a “Special SS Battalion”, set up to loot treasures from occupied countries, being responsible

for dismantling the gold and amber-clad room and taking it to Germany, where it later disappeared before the Allies invaded.

The auxiliary police units were first established by the German army. The *Einsatzgruppen* following closely behind immediately took over the existing auxiliary units or formed their own with recruits sort from the ethnic Germans, pro-Germans in general, and reliable members of the defunct Soviet militia. They had numerous nolacture such as Ortsmiliz, Miliz, Ordnungsdienst, Bürgerwehr and Selbstschutz. Once the *Einsatzgruppen* became static, auxiliaries were deployed primarily as interpreters and guards, whilst the Order police took some of the rank and file. The indigenous population continued to be the subject of recruitment by both police and army who employed them in similar rolls and later as anti-partisan fighters. These units were often unreliable, being haphazardly formed, ill-disciplined, badly equipped and trained.

The situation behind the front deteriorated to such an extent, particularly in Belorussia‘s heavily wooded regions, that guidelines for combating the partisans menace in the Eastern territories were forced to be issued by the OKW. It was the first official recognition that Soviet citizens had been trained and armed to fight in the rear of the German forces. A fact, contrary to Hitler’s wishes.

All auxiliaries, on Himmler’s orders given on 6th November 1941, were to be mustered into auxiliary police units. These were known as *Schutzmannschaften,* officially abbreviated to *Schutz.-Btl.*, or more commonly *Schuma. Btl*. These battalions were placed at the disposal of the order police commander and the HSSPF. A six months engagement was stipulated for recruits from Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians and Ukrainians

The Ministry for Occupied Eastern Territories, receiving from the military

the administration of the areas behind the front, began to inorgorate four massive *Reichskommissariat.* The situation at the front dictated that only two were created, *Reichskommissariat Ostland,* consisted of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Belorussia, which comprised much of the Ukraine. The other being the *Reichskommissariat Ukraine* itself.

Hinrich Lohse was appointed *Reichskommissar* of *Reichskommissariat Ostland* and *HSSPF Ostland* was *SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Polizei* Friedrich Jeckeln. With the occupation of Estonia, Army Group North, established a *Selbstschutz.* With normalisation of conditions the *Selbstschutz* was re-organised on territorial lines. Reval, Harrien, Jerwen, Wierland, Narwa, Dorpat, Werro, Walk, Petschur, Pernau Fellin, Ösel and Wiek were established as self-defence regions in July 1942 *Selbstschutzgebietsführer* or Regional Self-Defence Leader was appointed to command each region and was subordinate to the Police Prefect. All Estonia's railway territory was formed into a railway region in July 1944 and was subordinate to the Railway Prefect. With the exception of those employed in the war economy, Estonians who were physically fit and between the ages of 17 and 45 were eligible for compulsory service. A Estonian Security Police supposedly comprising five departments also existed in Reval. *Estnische Sicherungsabteilungen* or Estonian Security Battalions were formed at the end of 1941 being re-titled *Schuma battalions* in 1942

A former police captain Petersens commanded the Latvians auxiliary police force which had been raised on the 3rd July 1941 and numbered 240 men in six police districts by 16th July 1941. These had been either former police constables, soldiers and members of the *"Aizsargi"* a Self-Defence organisation founded during the Ulmanis dictatorship in 1934. The German army discovered looting in Karsava, and found the culprits to be a Latvian

self-defence detachment which was promptly disbanded. After consultation with District Self-Defence Commander and Rositten's mayor the army regional commander formed a new *Selbstschutz* in the town. Various auxiliary units were amalgamated to form the *Lettische Sicherungs-Abteilungen* or Latvian Security Battalions in November 1941, being renamed *Schuma. Battalions* in 1942

The German Field Commandant's office, ordered that all anti-Soviet partisans in and around Kovno in Lithuania be disbanded on 28th June 1941. 5 auxiliary companies were then formed from the reliable elements. The Jewish concentration camp at Kovno was guarded by one company while another undertook police duties. In Wilna the Lithuanian political police was disbanded in July 1941 with the *Ordnungsdienst* or Order Service consisting of about 150 men being affiliated to the *Einsatzgruppen.* Probably from Order Service personnel and auxiliary police the Lithuania Security Battalion was formed at the end of 1941.

In 1939 a new Belorussian police force was in place replacing the former organisation after it had been thoroughly purged. However as the Germans approached it fled destroying its records. From Polish and Belorussian criminal police officials a *Hilfspolizei* or auxiliary police was formed. The German Security Police in Bialystok were tasked with utilising this unit. It is also thought Belorussian auxiliary security police units existed. In Belorussia the first *Ukrainian Schuma. Battalion* was formed on 24th August 1941.

The second region was *Reichskommissariat Ukraine*, with Erich Koch appointed as *Reichskommissar* and *HSSPF Russland-Süd* being *SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Waffen-SS und Polizei* Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski. A Ukrainian Security Service was found to exist in Cherson, unreliable elements were "weeded out" and subsequently 157 men were

ceremoniously sworn in. Guarding factories and stores against looters and saboteurs, was what was euphemistically called “the maintenance of peace” was its task, as well as rounding up of Jews. Ethnic-Germans were obliged to report to the commando and about 180 had complied by 10th September 1942. Identity papers were issued and they were then employed as specialists and interpreters. To maintain order a Ukrainian Self-Defence force or Militia was also established, with the first *Schuma. Battalions* being raised in August 1941 which reached a strength of 14,452 men by February 1942. The Ukrainian police unit *“Murrawa”*, as the 23rd Security Service Battalion was attached in July 1944 to the *30th Waffen-Grenadier-Division (Russ. Nr.2.)* for a short time.



The Russian, Waffen-Brigadeführer der SS Bronislav Vladislavovich Kaminiski, who raised a private army to fight on behalf of the Germans. This force fought a number of successful actions against partisans in the Bryansk Forest.

Rumania received the province of Transnistria from the Ukraine in August 1941. Approximately 8 to 9,000 men from the ethnic-German population which numbered some 140,000 people served in the *Selbstschutz*.

Waffen-Brigadeführer Bronislav Vladislavovich Kaminiski was born in St. Petersburg, the son of a Polish father and German mother. A chemical engineer by profession, Kaminiski had no reason to love the Soviets. Under suspicion as a 'foreigner', bourgeois intellectual and potential dissident, he had spent 5 years in one of Stalin's labour camps, having been released only a few months prior to the German invasion. He was a brilliant, if autocratic, organiser, spoke German fluently and threw himself wholeheartedly behind the German cause. He tried, unsuccessfully, to form a Russian Nazi Party but apart from this one failure, his record was one of unqualified success.

In January 1942 the town of Lokot fell under the jurisdiction of the 2nd Panzer Army. It stood on the edge of the Bryanask Forest, about halfway between Orec and Kursk in central Russia. It became a model of self sufficiency under his guidance, having its own newspapers, hospitals, banks and even its own Kaminiski devised tax system. The stipulated food supplies never failed to be delivered to the *Wehrmacht* on time and the Germans found it necessary to maintain only a minimum liaison staff. The original self defence force of 500 men was expanded into a small private army, which by September 1943 had grown into a brigade of some 10,000 men organised in 5 infantry regiments, supported by its own artillery comprising 36 field guns, and armour comprising of 24 captured Soviet T-34 tanks, as well as engineer, signals and medical units. This force went under the grandiose title of, 'The

Russian Liberation Peoples Army' or *RONA.*

The *RONA* fought several successful actions against the partisans of Bryanask and even induced some of them to change sides. Kaminiski was dubbed, 'the War Lord of the Bryanask Forest'. By the autumn of 1943, the Germans were in continuous retreat in Russia, and it was not long before Lokot had to be evacuated in the face of the Red Army's relentless advance. Kaminiski and his *RONA*, which now comprised some 15,000 men, were removed to Ratibor on the Polish Czech border, prompting an exodus accompanied by 10,500 civilians and 1,500 cows.

In March 1944 the *RONA* was renamed a *'Volksheer Brigade',* - Peoples Brigade. In July it was accepted into the *Waffen-SS* as SS Assault Brigade RONA. Kaminiski was granted a commission as a *Waffen-Brigadeführer*. His men were not, as yet, deemed fit for front line service and were sent for further training to Hungary.

Operation *"Zeppelin",* with the objective of raising large units for special operations behind the Soviet lines was conceived. RSHA Amt VI C, had attached to it under the command of *SS-Obersturmbanführer* Dr. Gräfe selected SS leaders from March until June 1942, who in occupied Russian territory, toured prisoner-of-war camps to encourage Red Army soldiers to work against the Soviets with promises of a modicum of freedom and better conditions. A unit of former inmates was established in April 1942 with the initial purpose of broadcasting subversive propaganda to their erstwhile comrades. By the end of the year, this project had been re-evaluated to encompass the concept of parachuting into Russia suitably trained Russian agents to act as saboteurs in the enemy rear. This lead to the establishment of three units, North, Central and South, who were tasked with information gathering and the organisation of subversion and sabotage. Sizeable numbers

of recruits came forward, but due to lack of sufficient aircraft with which to transport them, no really large-scale operations were ever undertaken. Thus the original purpose of *"Zeppelin"*, the deployment of large units in the Soviet rear had been thwarted, which brought about the decision to employ the majority of the personnel in anti-partisan operations. A combat unit was formed and given the title *"Drushina"* or Bodyguard. The leading light was an ex-Soviet Lieutenant-Colonel V.V. Gil, a Kuban Cossack the 35 year old former Chief of Staff of the Red Army's 229th Infantry Division. The *"Drushina"* , with only eight German officers and around 1000 Russians volunteers, proved exemplary in combat against the Belorussian Partisans. A second group was subsequently formed giving two units *"Drushina I"*, and *"Drushina II"*. Those considered unsuitable for subversive activities were mustered in the former, while for special operations the most intelligent and reliable elements comprised the latter. In March they were merged under the designation *"SS-Verband Druzhina"* or 1st Russian National Brigade with a motto of "Fight for a New Russia.". The nom-de-guerre Rodionov was now adopted by Gil who, was appointed its commanding officer. It stood at about battalion strength comprising some 3000 men and was subsequently moved to Nevel, Northeast of Polotsk in Belorussia. Here, to help contain a Soviet breakthrough, it was thrown into the front line almost immediately. HSSPF Belorussia's anti-partisan force was augmented in May 1942 by the inclusion on its strength of *"SS-Verband Druzhina"*. *"Drushina"* was engaged against partisans and is thought its size to have been increased greatly by late 1942, consisting possibly of four battalions and an H.Q. On 18th November 1942, forming part of the anti-partisan strength of HSSPF Central Russia was Gil's battalion and the "Signalling Battalion" which comprised *"Group Naumann"*. The first defection from a unit which had apparently enjoyed the Germans confidence occurred during the night of the 24th/25th November.

After wounding two German workers and killing four others and one SD NCO, 63 men of the 1st company of Gil's battalion went over to the partisans at Kolitschenko. They were wearing SS uniform and carrying all its light and heavy weapons. In the Glubokoe area a defined territory were assigned to Gil's men to administer as an autonomous region in the spring of 1943.

SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Waffen-SS und Polizei Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski launched during the summer of 1943 the largest anti-partisan operation code-named "Cottbus" to be held in Belorussia and under Action Group West *"Drushina"* units took part. During this period there was talk of incorporating *"Drushina"* into General Vlassov's "Russian Army of Liberation" and one of Vlassov's senior staff officers Lieutenant-General Zhilenkov was moved to Pskov where he was assigned responsibility for forming a "1st Guards Brigade" from among the Russian volunteers. His arrival, with its implied challenge to his authority seems to have finally clinched matters for "Gil-Rodionov". His presence there probably suggested to Gil that he might be replaced at any moment and his unit absorbed into a much larger formation. For sometime past he had begun to question the wisdom of his conversion to the German side so contact was made with the partisans. By August Gil had determined not only to defect back to the Soviets, but if possible take the brigade with him. On 13 August in what would appear to have been a prearranged encounter, the "Zhelezniak Brigade" a strong partisan force ambushed the brigade and demanded its surrender. Gil then threatened to shoot anyone unwilling to change sides. All the German liaison staff were killed. Despite this some 30 officers and 500 other ranks refused to go over to the Partisans and fought their way out of the encirclement to return to the German lines. Gil's battalion was renamed the 1st Anti-Fascist Brigade and Stalin rewarded him with the Order of the Red Star. During the German anti-partisan operation "Spring Feast" in April

1944, Gil together with the majority of his fellow deserters were killed.



Following partisan attacks, the Germans would invariably instigate retaliatory action. This included the killing of civilians from villages suspected of giving aid to partisans.

The small number who had shown their trustworthiness by fighting their way out of the ambush became, under Lieutenant-General Zhilenkov's leadership, the First Guards Brigade of the R.O.A. Those other members of *"Drushina"* who remained loyal to the Germans eventually ended up in the *"Kaukasischer Waffenverband der SS"*. The *Reichsführer-SS* was of course careful to keep the *"Drushina"* fiasco concealed from Hitler who was merely informed the brigade had been disbanded "because of indiscipline."

In the East the situation was deteriorating rapidly, as 1943 drew to a close, and some of the units recruited from the indigenous population in Russia and the Ukraine were beginning to prove unreliable and it was decided to exchange them for German units in the west. Large numbers of auxiliaries

were transported to France, Italy and Yugoslavia where they fought partisans under SS, Police and army command. No precise estimates of the results of sabotage by partisans or by the groups and agents in the towns are available. Figures given by partisan commanders were often exaggerated or repeated in reports of several commanders. It was on the basis of such data that Ponomarenko, Chief of the Partisan Movement Central Staff claimed that during the first two years of the Soviet - German war the partisans of Belorussia alone had killed over 300000 Germans caused over 3000 railway accidents and destroyed 3263 bridges, 1191 tanks, 4097 lorries and 895 stores of various kinds. Though these figures are exaggerated the fact remains that the partisans did have an effect on German prosecution of the war.

The killings in the East by the SS were so monumental that to look a global figures tends to dehumanise the indescribable horrors perpetrated. By looking at one individuals record it is hoped that the extermination of 6 million soles is brought into focus. *SS-Oberführer* Christian Wirth a former Stuttgart police officer, he had been loaned to operation euthanasia by Himmler through *SS-Gruppenführer* Nebe. He was an expert in all three phases of the program: incurables, direct extermination by special treatment, and experiments in mass sterilisation. Grawitz, hearing Himmler's complaints that a better method had to be found than gas vans and shootings to liquidate Polish Jews, suggested Wirth for the task. Wirth was immediately assigned to Poland, under Odilo Globocnik, with the brief to find an efficient method of dispatching one million Polish Jews. He selected an area along the Lublin-Lwow railway for his first experimental camp; he went on to head an organisation of a group of four extermination camps.

Wirth decided he wanted nothing to do with gas vans or mobile death units but instead, a stationary unit, having three "shower rooms", was constructed at the centre of the camp. To further camouflage them, he planted geraniums

and kept the surrounding grass cut. The victims were pacified by the thought of a shower but inside they received the exhaust gas from diesel engines. He had wide doors on both front and back walls to make the removal of gassed victims easier. He was so pleased with the killing centre that he added three more to allow the camp to deal with 1500 Jews daily a sign was hung over the gate that read, ‘Entrance to the Jewish State’. Above the large doors through which the Jews entered the gas chamber was a banner made from a synagogue curtain which stated in Hebrew, ‘This is the gate of the Lord into which the righteous shall enter’. Wirth was an egotist without conscience, exemplified by an eyewitness’ account of when he struck a woman across the face with five lashes of a whip to encourage her into the chamber. The engines failed to work and the victims were crammed in for two hours and forty nine minutes before they started. A further thirty five minutes passed before all were dead. Then, the workers prised open the victims mouths with iron bars for gold teeth, and searched private parts for hidden valuables. Wirth was dubbed, ‘the death camp king’ but this elevation aroused the jealousy of others determined to topple him, in particular Höß who eventually succeeded.

CHAPTER 9

RED STORM IN THE SOUTH.



A Waffen-SS machine-gun team awaits the next Russian attack during the fighting around Kharkov in August 1943. The SS was instrumental in saving Army Group South.

The latter half of 1943 was a time of crises for German forces in the East, which were often only saved from turning into catastrophes by the intervention of *Waffen-SS* units. By mid-August, for example, a 55 km wide gap had opened up in the German lines west of Kursk, and Red Army units began to pour through it, threatening Kharkov once again. *Das Reich* and *SS-Totenkopfdivision* together with the *SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Wiking"* were all thrown into battle to prevent the loss of the city, though weakened by

the Kurk disaster, *Das Reich* had received all of the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler''s* armour before the latter had been transferred to Italy, making it a formidable fighting force. In a reversal of the German capture of Kharkov in March, it was now the Red Army's turn to launch a massive pincer attack, with the 53rd Army driving in from the north and the 57th Army from the south. The 5th Guards Tank Army was to apply the hammer blow. The Russian attack was not quite as effective as the German one, though. The Soviets ran into strong defences, and on just one day of fighting *Waffen-SS* anti-tank gunners knocked out over 180 Russian tanks. It must be stated that Russian tactics still tended to be somewhat unsophisticated. However, such was the strength of the Red Army that it could only be delayed. Manstein fearing encirclement, Kempf's position became untenable in the city and to escape the feared encirclement he was forced to abandon Kharkov on 22nd August.

Over the next few weeks *Das Reich*, *SS-Totenkopfdivision* and the *SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Wiking"* achieved some outstanding successes in small-scale combats with armoured units of the Red Army. On 12th September, for example, *Das Reich* destroyed 78 enemy tanks in one engagement. However, the Russians seemed to have little problem in replacing such losses, whereas the hard-pressed *Waffen-SS* units found it increasingly difficult to maintain their own strength.

Hitler agreed to Field Marshal von Manstein's Army Group South withdrawing to the line of Melitopol and the river Dnieper, thus retaining the strategically important western Ukraine in German hands. The withdrawal, undertaken in the face of Soviet pressure, was completed by 30th September. By that time a total of 68 German divisions, 1,250,000 men and over 2000 tanks of Army Group South was tasked with holding the river line at all costs. Opposing them, however, the Red Army fielded a force almost twice as

strong and better equipped.

In late August, Soviet forces began to advance and the *Waffen-SS* took part in a spirited withdrawal towards the river Dnieper. Yelnya fell to the Red Army after two days of bitter fighting, but the Russians were made to fight for every metre of ground and had to pause within a week to regroup. Then the offensive continued, the Russians capturing Bryansk, Smolensk and Roslavl in quick succession. By 2nd October the Germans had been driven 240 km westwards.

One personal account of the conditions was given by a Dutch volunteer *SS-Standartenoberjunker* Jan Munk, of the *SS-Panzergrenadier Regiment Westland, 5th SS-Panzer-Division Wiking.* Our positions were still in the Dnieper area, but were rather exposed. There were lots of bushes and undergrowth with a sprinkling of tree. The Russians tried several attacks in what was, for them, very favourable terrain, but we managed to stop them every time. During their night attacks, for example, it was almost impossible for them to move without making a noise, so we had no problems in that respect.

On 2nd November 1943, we knew something was up because we heard the enemy singing and making a lot of noise. In other words, they had had their ration of vodka to boost their courage prior to an attack. Sure enough, at about 1800 hours we received information that an attack was imminent. At that time I commanded a squad, and I sent them all out of the bunker we were in to take their places in the trenches. They all went except for one, a Romanian, who told me that someone had taken his steel helmet, and the one left behind was too small for him. He wanted to stay behind and guard the bunker. I told him what I thought of that, and gave him my own helmet. It fitted. I went out wearing my camouflaged field cap. Then I joined my

number two on the machine gun.

The attack came, a bit fiercer than usual, but we managed to beat it off again. As always, that was the time when our own artillery started shelling, in front of the retreating enemy, catching them in between our shells and machine-gun fire.



In the Soviet Union, especially near marshland, mosquitoes were a perennial problem for the armies of both sides. These Waffen-SS motorcyclists have found a pratical answer to the airborne threat.

This time the barrage was very close by. I heard one gun in particular whose rounds landed short and to our left, then the next one was to our left but nearer still.



A German soldier dashes for cover during the retreat to the Dnieper in the autumn of 1943. Despite the efforts of the Das Reich and Wiking Divisions, Army Group South was in trouble as the year closed.

The following one was a bull's-eye. It landed right in front of us and destroyed the machine gun. We had been a split second too late in taking cover. It felt as if an enormous weight had pushed me violently down. My number two started to splutter that the bastards had blown his nose off. It wasn't quite that bad, though. A tiny splinter had pierced his nose from one side right through to the other, and he was bleeding like a stuck pig. We decided to go back to the bunker so that I could bandage him properly.

To my surprise I found that I couldn't move. I thought I had merely cut off the blood supply to my legs by squatting on my haunches. When the next shell came I was pushed, or so I thought, through the trench so fast that I couldn't keep upright, and I scraped my face on the ground. I shouted to my comrade not to be so bloody stupid and to calm down. He helped me to the bunker. Once inside, however, he told me that he hadn't touched me, let alone pushed me. It dawned on me then that something wasn't quite right. My legs were still useless, so I undid my belt and the lower buttons of my tunic and tried to feel along my back. finding nothing, I loosened my trousers and inspected that area. Still nothing. I dressed again and went back to bandaging my friend. We both had a smoke and then I began to feel hot and sweaty. I took my cap off and blood poured down over my face. With my fingers I could feel where the blood was coming from, a small cut right on the top of my head. Now I knew why my legs wouldn't work.

After a while I was carried through the trenches to an area where it was wide enough to use a stretcher. I was then brought to a collection point to wait for proper transport. Quite a few men were there, some on stretchers, some badly

injured and others not quite so bad.

Then the Russians attacked again and all the wounded who could walk were told to man their positions again. Those of us remaining were left behind to fend for ourselves as best we could. We were given some grenades and machine pistols and wished “good luck”. We fully understood. More than a dozen men would have been needed to carry us away, and they couldn’t be sparred.

The Russians appeared and shot at us, we shot back. They threw hand grenades and we replied. Fortunately, the *Wermacht* counterattacked with support of some light tanks.



SS-Standartenoberjunker Jan Munk of the Panzergrenadier Regiment Westland,

Wiking Division (left), whose account of the fighting around the River Dniep is recounted in this chapter.

We did not lose a single wounded man, although some of us, including me, collected a few more wounds, though nothing serious. I was then taken by stretcher again to a Wehrmacht bunker. It was deep, with well protected entrance and a very thick roof. Inside were tables and easy chairs. A radio was playing, and it looked almost like something from a propaganda picture. A Doctor examined me and said: “When did you last have a piss?”. as far as I could remember that was noon the previous day, a good seventeen hours before. Before I knew what was happening, I had a catheter inserted. I didn’t feel a thing, though the Doctor was pleased that he had done it in time.

During and after the German counterattack, several Russian prisoners were taken. These were used, as usual, for carrying ammunition and on this occasion, to carry the stretchers. To go back to the dressing station we had to cross rather bare, flat field. The Russians were directing some artillery fire on this area and every time a shell landed the Russian carrying the foot of the stretcher I was on would just drop it and take cover. The one at the head end was more careful and lowered me gently. By this time I had a splitting headache and all the dropping wasn’t helping. I told the one at the feet that if he dropped me again I would shoot him. I had to warn him twice more. After each warning he would initially lower his end, but soon went back to just dropping me. Eventually I got my pistol out and fired a shot over his head. Everything went fine after that!

In November 1943 the *Leibstandarte SS ‘Adolf Hitler’* was released from duty in Italy and was sent back to the Eastern Front. It was allocated to *XLVIII Panzer Korps* of the Fourth Panzer Army, deployed to the south of Kiev in the Ukraine. Despite the sterling efforts of the *Das Reich Division,*

which was operating near Kiev, the city fell to the Russians on 7th November. The *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* did have some localised successes against Red Army units in the Kiev sector, but again these represented only delaying actions.

Between mid-November and the end of the year, both the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* and *Das Reich Division*, attempted to encircle a number of Red Army units. This was achieved, but the German units were spread so thinly that they could not maintain their positions, and soon the Germans were themselves fighting desperately to avoid encirclement. At Brusilov, XXIV Panzer Korps, to which the *Das Reich Division* had been allocated, was simply overwhelmed in bitter hand-to-hand fighting by massive Russian forces. The remnants of the division, together with the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'*, retreated towards Zhitomir. The *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* was then deployed to Berdichev, where it linked up with the 1st Panzer Division and succeeded in halting the Red Army advance in that sector, but only for a short time.



A Panzer IV of the Leibstandarte Division in the Kamenets-Podolsk Pocket in March 1944. By April 1944 the Red Army offensive in southern Russia had destroyed the entire southern wing of the German armies on the Eastern Front. The only good news as far as the Waffen-SS was concerned was the appearance of two new panzer divisions in Russia: the 9th SS Panzer Division Hohenstaufen and the 10th Panzer Division Frundsberg. Both of them would become élite fighting formations, though it would take a lot more than two divisions to reverse German misfortunes in southern Russia and prevent defeat.

The remaining division of *II. SS-Panzer-Korps* the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* had assumed the role of a fire brigade, continuously rushing from one threatened sector to another. In November and early December 1943, for example, it served with Hube's First Panzer Army, which was attempting to hold Krivoi Rog and the defensive positions on the river Dnieper. On 12th December,

together with the 11th and 13th Panzer Division, it halted the Soviet advance in that sector.

On 24th December 1943, the Russian forces in the southern sector of the front continued their push westwards from their positions around Kiev. Zhitomir was quickly recaptured, and only a determined effort by Manstein's forces slowed the enemy advance, though not before some German units had already been pushed back by as much as 160 km, being badly mauled in the process.

At this juncture the Soviets attempted to smash German forces around Kirovgrad. They captured the town on 8th January 1944, but found German resistance stronger than expected. Some 11 German divisions were involved, including the *SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Wiking"* and *the SS-Sturmbrigade "Wallonie"*, the Belgian Wallon volunteer unit recently transferred to *Waffen-SS* control for Himmler decided that they had proved themselves worthy of admission into the *Waffen-SS*. This did not imply any question of merging them with the existing Flemish *Waffen-SS*. On 1 June 1943 the Walloon legion became the *'SS- Sturmbrigade Wallonie'* and joined the *SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Wiking"* in the southern Ukraine in November.

These strong German units posed a serious threat to Koniev's northern flank and Vatutin's southern flank. This German-held salient would have to be eradicated to ensure the success of the Soviet attack. Koniev renewed his attack on 25th January, and by 29th 60,000 German troops had been encircled near Cherkassy. A sudden thaw turned the terrain into a boggy morass, making movement all but impossible. The airfield within the pocket, which the Luftwaffe was using to resupply the isolated divisions suddenly became unusable. Constant pressure from the Russians saw the salient shrink

rapidly, until it measured only 65 square Kilometres by 9th February.



Wiking Division soldiers engage Russian forces at night in the southern sector of the Eastern Front in early 1944. The division was badly mauled at Cherkassy and had to be withdrawn for refitting.

Like on earlier occasions, Hitler refused to entertain any talk of a breakout by the encircled units, insisting that only an offensive by Manstein's forces to relieve them was a viable option. The Red Army, however, had thrown a ring of 35 divisions around the salient and any escape attempt by the trapped forces looked unlikely to succeed. Fortunately, Hitler was persuaded to allow the encircled units to attempt a breakout. The only armoured unit in the pocket, the *SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Wiking"*, commanded by SS-Obergruppenführer Herbert Otto Gille, would cover the flanks, while *SS-Sturmbrigade "Wallonie"* formed the rearguard.

On the night of 16th February, the breakout began. Movement over the waterlogged terrain was difficult, and once the Russians became aware of what was happening a heavy barrage of artillery and rocket fire was laid down on the fleeing Germans. The wounded had to be left behind, as did

most of the artillery and other heavy equipment. *SS-Sturmbrigade "Wallonie"* suffered dreadful losses covering the rearguard, with a staggering 70% of its strength left dead on the battlefield. Their effort to fight their way out lasted for several weeks and was enormously costly. On 14th February, over 200 members of the Walloon assault brigade were killed, including its commander Lucien Lipert and Degrelle, who had spent most of the war on the Russian front, with a legion of Walloon Volunteers was promoted to replace him. When the Germans finally broke out, and as the remnants of the brigade drew near to the German lines, they were in danger of being overtaken by pursuing Red Army units. The *Wiking Division* was down to 4000 men and of the original 2000 Walloons, only 632 came through unscathed. The survivors were sent to Wildflecken in Franconia to regroup but, in fact, received little respite. A desperate situation had developed in Estonia and the Walloon assault brigade had to be rushed there to take part alongside its Flemish compatriots in the Battle of the European SS at Narwa in July 1944.

SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Wiking"'s few remaining panzers therefore turned back and held off the enemy for just long enough to allow the last of the brigade to reach the German lines, before being overrun. Some 32,000 Germans escaped with their lives from the Cherkassy Pocket. Despite the fact that a great deal of equipment had been left behind, a major disaster had been averted. If the pocket had been totally destroyed, Manstein's Army Group South would have been dealt a fatal blow.

For the superb performance of their troops, both Gille and *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Léon Degrelle commander of *SS-Sturmbrigade "Wallonie",* were taken to Hitler's headquarters in Prussia and decorated. Gille received the Oakleaves and Swords, and Degrelle the Knights cross. He subsequently was to have the Oak Leaves conferred upon him by Hitler

personally becoming the 355 recipient. Hitler held Degrelle in such high esteem that he said to him, "If I had a son, I would wish him to be like you".

The *Das Reich Division* now totally exhausted was withdrawn from Russia and sent to France for rest and refitting in February 1944. A battlegroup from the division, under the command of *SS-Oberführer* Heinz Lammerding, remained on the Eastern Front.

During March 1944 Army Group South was forced to make a slow withdrawal to the river Dniester, on the boarder with Romania. On 11th March 1944, elements of the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* were airlifted to Balta to form the core of a new defence line. Events were moving too fast, however and both the Sixth and Eighth Armies were too weak to prevent the Red Army from crossing the Dniester on a wide front before the new defences were ready, the Russians pushing deep into Rumanian territory. The *SS-Totenkopfdivision* attached to XLVIII Panzer Korps battled its way west to avoid encirclement. The exhausted Waffen-SS men fought off the Soviet spearheads for three weeks as the withdrawal continued through Balta and Rumania across the river Sireth and into the Carpathians.

The Russian offensive eventually ran out of steam and the month of May was relatively peaceful. On 9th June the division was pulled out of the line for rest and refitting receiving badly needed tanks and other armoured vehicles as well as around 6000 replacement troops. Some of these men were the *SS-Totenkopfdivision's* veterans returning to duty after recovering from wounds, but 75% were raw recruits hastily transferred from the newly formed *16. SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Reichsführer-SS"*.

In March 144 as Army Group South struggled to reorganise its left flank, it was hit by a new Russian offensive which shattered it completely, tearing a massive gap between the 1st and 4th Panzer Armies at Proskurov. Before the

breach could be sealed the entire 1st Panzer Army was surrounded in the Kamenets-Podolsk Pocket. Among the units trapped were the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* and *SS-Oberführer* Heinz Lammerding's battlegroup.

At this point Hitler agreed to allow the reconstituted *II SS-Panzer-Korps* containing *9. SS-Panzer-Division "Hohenstaufen"* and *10. SS-Panzer-Division "Frundsberg"* to be rushed to the Eastern Front. These two divisions though untried in battle were of the highest standard. Manned primarily by ethnic Germans they were equipped and trained to a high level. Also of significance was the fact that the units were built around cadre personnel from tried and tested units such as *Das Reich* and the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* and had been fortunate enough to be allowed 12 months of training. Both units were to display combat performances equal to that of the best Waffen-SS divisions. The *9. SS-Panzer-Division "Hohenstaufen"* was led by *SS-Brigadeführer* Willi Bittrich and the *10. SS-Panzer-Division "Frundsberg"* by *SS-Brigadeführer* Karl von Treuenfeld.

As much fuel and ammunition as possible was being airlifted by the Luftwaffe into the Kamenets-Podolsk Pocket in order to avoid Manstein's forces having to abandon much of their heavy equipment and armour when the time came to break out. On 27th March undercover of blizzard conditions the withdrawal began. *9. SS-Panzer-Division "Hohenstaufen"* and *10. SS-Panzer-Division "Frundsberg"* as part of the 4th Panzer Army took part in the counterattack launched to take the pressure off the retreating 1st Panzer Army as it fought its way west. Contact was made on 7th April and over the next nine days the bulk of Manstein's forces made it back safely into German-held territory. Unlike the breakout from Cherkassy this escape was achieved without serious losses. The Soviets however lost several hundred armoured vehicles as the Germans headed west.

In April the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* was withdrawn from Russia and moved to France for refitting and SS-Oberführer Heinz Lammerding's battlegroup rejoined the *Das Reich Division* in France. *9. SS-Panzer-Division "Hohenstaufen"* and *10. SS-Panzer-Division "Frundsberg"* were withdrawn to Poland but when the D-Day landings took place in June they were both rushed to France. The *SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Wiking"* badly mauled in the escape from the Cherkassy Pocket was withdrawn from the front for rest and refitting.

CHAPTER 10

FIELDS OF GLORY.



The strain of battle clearly shows on the faces of these members of III SS Panzer Corps attempting to hold the line at Narva against the Red Army in March 1944.

In northern Russia, 1944 had begun badly for the *Wehrmacht*. The Red Army, having lifted the siege of Leningrad had bone on to the offensive and gradually drove the Germans westwards towards Estonia and Latvia. It was in this sector of the front that most of the west and east European SS volunteer units were concentrated. The main *Waffen-SS* force in this area was *III (germanisches) SS-Panzer-Korps* commanded by *SS-Gruppenführer* Felix Steiner and containing the *11. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Nordland"* and *SS-Freiwilligen-Brigade "Nederland"* . within these two units alone were volunteers from Norway, Denmark, Holland, France,

Finland, Sweden and Switzerland. In addition, allocated to the same sector of the front were the *15th Waffen- GrenadierDivision der SS (lettische Nr1)* and *19th Waffen- Grenadier Division der SS (lettisches Nr2)* from Latvia 20th *Waffen- Grenadier Division der SS (estnische Nr1)* from Estonia the Flemish *Langemarck Brigade* and *SS-Sturmbrigade "Wallonie"*.

SS-Unterscharführer der Reserve (Flemish Volunteer) Remy Schrynen, volunteered for the *Waffen-SS* and joined the *SS assault brigade "Langemarck*". He demonstrated his fortitude in many taxing situations: on 2nd January 1944 he destroyed three Russian T.34 tanks; on the 3 March he was wounded for the seventh time. On the fourth day of the Russian offensive his gun crew was neutralised, either killed or wounded, and the support grenadiers retreated. Schrynen, now alone, received orders to withdraw. He decided to stay at his post, loaded, aimed and fired at the advancing tanks. The Russian infantry attacked, as a dying naval radio operator directed artillery fire onto his own position. Behind the infantry came thirty tanks, five being Joseph Stalin type. In a dramatic fire-fight he destroyed three Stalin and four T.34s, putting others out of action, until a Stalin, at thirty metre range, blew up his gun, severely wounding him and catapulting him away. During a counter-attack he was discovered surrounded by the shot up and glowing parts of a dozen Soviet tanks. For his bravery he was awarded the Knight's Cross 21 September 1944

By the end of January 1944 the Red Army had reached the strong German defence lines at Narva. These ran from the city of Narva itself, south along the banks of the River Narva, to the shores of Lake Peipus and down to Polotsk, north-west of Vitebsk. A concentrated effort by the Russians along the entire line was expected. It came on 2nd February but any hopes that the German defences would easily crumble were soon dashed. Narva, the gateway to Estonia was too important to yield without a mighty struggle.

Defensive positions had therefore been established along the west bank of the River Narva, and for the next few months Teiner's men and other SS units stood firm against overwhelming odds. So prominent were the foreign volunteer units of the *Waffen-SS* in this sector that the defence of Narva was to become known as the "Battle of the European SS".

The Germans had established a large and strongly defended bridgehead covering a substantial area of territory on the eastern approaches to Narva, directly opposite the city itself. At this location soldiers from the *11. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Nordland"* and Brigade *Nederland* dug in and awaited the Russian assault. For the attack on Narva the Red Army had assembled a formidable force, the 8th and 47th Armies and the 2nd Shock Army.

At the beginning of February the Red Army began its attempts to soften up the German defences with heavy shelling and some Russian units forced a crossing of the river between Hungerburg and Narva and established a small bridgehead. The *Waffen-SS* soldiers, however, were able to throw the enemy back with some ease and on 3rd February another attempt by the Russians to establish a bridgehead was defeated by the *11. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Nordland"'s SS - Panzer Abteilung 11 Herman von Salza*. Eventually the enemy did succeed in establishing a small bridgehead at Ssivertski, to the north-west of the city. A subsequent attempt to break out of the bridgehead into the German rear areas was quickly halted by an SS battlegroup. This Russian pocket among the defenders was finally destroyed in a concerted assault by elements from *Nordland* and *Nederland*.

The Soviets forced yet another bridgehead on the west bank at Vopsküla which was supported by heavy artillery. However it too was destroyed by the *19th Waffen- Grenadier Division der SS (lettisches Nr2)* after savage hand-

to-hand fighting. It was in this action that Estonian volunteer *Waffen-Unterscharführer* Haralt Nugiseks was decorated for extreme gallantry. His heroism was typical of many SS soldiers who fought at Narva. He had exposed himself to enemy fire on three occasions to urge on his assault troop on each occasion being hit by enemy fire, yet he continued to lead his men in close-quarter fighting with the enemy driving them out of their positions.



Remy Schrynen, a Flemish volunteer in the Waffen-SS who won the Knight's Cross for outstanding bravery in Russia in January 1944. An anti-tank gunner in the Lanemarck Brigade, he single-handedly knocked out seven Russian tanks in one action before being wounded. Schrynen was an exceptional example of the calibre of the western European recruits fighting in the Waffen-SS in the northern sector of the Eastern Front in early 1944. The defence of Narva was called the "Battle of European SS", and the fact that the Red Army was stalled at Narva for six months is teastimony to the fighting qualities of the Dutch, Norwegian, Danish, French, Finnish, Swedish and Swiss SS recruits.

For his actions he was awarded the Knights Cross on 2nd May 1945. Five days later he was captured and served a long sentence of captivity in a Siberian prison camp.

Frustrated by their lack of success the Soviets decided to attempt an amphibious assault on the coast to the west of Narva, bypassing the defenders and striking deep into the German rear. This, it was hoped, would lure German units away from the front, thereby weakening the line and creating a chance for a Russian breakthrough.

The seaborne assault force was ferried in a motley collection of fishing boats and steamers, but did manage to land undetected and overrun the defenders in the immediate area of the beach near Merekula. The defenders were soon alerted though and although the Russian force managed to push forwards into the town, that was as far as it got. German reinforcements were called up in the shape of *Waffen-SS* grenadiers and Stuka ground-attack aircraft and the invasion force was swiftly crushed, the Russians suffered heavy losses.

To the south near Krivasso, the Red Army established a strong bridgehead from which to launch its attack into German-held territory. By 24th February the Soviets looked as though they would break out and sweep up the rear of

III (germanisches) SS-Panzer-Korps. Troops from the *11. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Nordland"* were quickly moved to the scene and initially made good progress in their counterattack, before becoming bogged down. The Soviets counterattacked, and the fighting quickly degenerated into ferocious hand-to-hand combat with knives, bayonets and entrenching tools. Only the arrival of some army Tiger tanks enabled the *Waffen-SS* troops to withdraw safely. Fierce fighting continued throughout March and April with the Soviets making little headway against the tenacious German defenders.

When the *Waffen-SS* troops recaptured Sirgula in March, they discovered the corpses of Estonian civilians who had been used as forced labour to carry ammunition for the Red Army. The Russians had killed the civilians before fleeing. Several Danish SS volunteers had also been captured and shot by the Russians at Hrastovica.

In early March, Soviet artillery and aerial bombardment of the Narva area increased dramatically. On 7th Marchfor example massed Russian air attacks went on for 12 hours to be followed by massive artillery barrage.



Waffen-SS troops prior to moving up to the front at Narva. The Russian offensive at the start of 1944 had threatened Army Group North with a total rout. Fortunately, Steiner's III Panzer Corps helped prevent this.

However the civilian population of Narva had been evacuated and the *Waffen-SS* defenders simply dug deeper into the rubble of the city. The main Russian attack following the softening up was against the area held by the Dutch volunteer *General Seyffardt Regiment*. The Dutch soldiers repulsed every Soviet attack and even launched their own counterattack. Their commander *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Wolfgang Joerchel was decorated with the Knight's Cross on 21st April 1944 in recognition of the achievements of his command.

The main axle of the Russian attack then moved against the positions at Lilienbach, held by another Dutch volunteer regiment *SS-Panzergrenadier Regiment "De Ruyter"*. *SS-Hauptsturmführer* Carl-Heinz Fruhauf from January throughout March 1944 served as battalion commander of the *23rd*

pioneer battalion SS-Panzergrenadier Reiment "Nederland". On 13th March he was reassigned as battalion commander of *SS-Panzergrenadier Regiment "De Ruyter"*. During March Fruhauf's battalion was engaged in heavy fighting at Narwa. It was during this battle that he received the Knights Cross. While fighting in the Narva bridgehead, the 5th companies position was overrun by assault after a heavy artillery preparation. Because the battalion reserve had been committed the situation was desperate. Fruhauf immediately assessed the situation and gathered every non essential soldier. He then led a counterattack and successfully threw back the enemies local gain after intense hand to hand fighting. The success of the counterattack retained key terrain and restored the former forward line of troops. The award of the Knights Cross was announced on 4th June 1944. After this bitter fighting, where the enemy had broken through the *Waffen-SS* positions, they were driven back by reinforcements from the *11. SS-Freiwilligen-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Nordland"* 's *Danmark* and *Norge* Regiments. On 27th July 1944 Fruhauf was severely wounded by a tank hi-explosive shell. He received shrapnel wounds to the right hand and knee, upperthigh, lower left leg, left side of the temple and to the chest as well as a damaged lung. He spent four months recovering in the field hospital in Zappot East-Prussia.

Despite the spirited and often successful defensive actions by the Dutch SS troops at Lilienbach it became clear that this part of the bridgehead on the east bank of the Narva could not be held much longer. *Waffen-SS* losses in manpower and equipment had been too high and the Soviet strength was increasing, the *Waffen-SS* units were being bled white. Nevertheless by June 1944 the Red Army had still not taken Narva though the German bridgehead on the east bank opposite the city had been drastically reduced. The Germans aware of the battering on the central and southern sectors of the front in Russia realised that their position at Narva was becoming more precarious as

each day passed so it was decided to withdraw to a new defensive position farther west to the so-called Tannenberg Line.



One of thousands of Russian soldiers who gave their lives during the fighting in and around Narva. The intensity of the battles at Narva frequently resulted in units on both sides being annihilated.

On 24th July 1944 the northern end of a massive pincer attack forced the 20th *Waffen- Grenadier Division der SS (estnische Nr1)* back over the river Narva. The Estonian volunteers were forced to retreat fighting every meter of the way in defence of their homeland. Having experienced Soviet occupation once before they had no wish to repeat it, and they fought tenaciously. On 24th July the *Waffen-SS* units still on the east bank of the Narva slipped quickly over the river and into the city, destroying the bridges as they did so. By the close of the next day, the city itself had been evacuated. However, during the retreat to the Tannenberg positions the Dutch unit *General Seyffardt* was cut off and annihilated by the Soviets.

On 26th July the Russian attack against Tannenberg began. The Russians mounted a series of sledgehammer blows against the greatly outnumbered Germans and their European allies. The fighting seesawed back and forth, neither side able to establish a lasting superiority. Despite its many successes the *Waffen-SS* suffered great losses, while the enemy poured ever increasing numbers of fresh troops over the Narva and into the battle. The *Waffen-SS* formations had lost virtually all their armour, and their artillery was the only remaining heavy weaponry. The Russian attacks slackened somewhat in August as the Red Army gathered its strength for one final all-out assault on the beleaguered *Waffen-SS*. The punch-drunk European volunteers could only await the impending hammer blow.

By this time the European volunteers knew that the Soviet offensive was tearing holes in the front. On 22nd June, for example, the Red Army had launched its summer offensive across the entire Eastern Front. Codenamed

“Bagration” it was deliberately timed to start on the third anniversary of the German invasion of Russia. The Red Army had built up a massive force of some six million men, compared to the *Wehrmacht’s* two million. Army Group Centre, which was destined to take the main brunt of the offensive could field only 750,000 men under 1000 tanks and 10,000 artillery pieces. Opposing it, however were over two million Red Army soldiers, 4000 tanks and nearly 29,000 field guns.

Both qualitatively and quantitatively the Red Army was better. Its conscripts were no longer half-trained, poorly equipped peasants, the types the Germans had faced during the Blitzkrieg in the summer of 1941. By 1944 the Red Army’s front-line combat units were composed in the main of experienced veterans who had good hardware. The latest T-34 tank with its uprated 85mm main gun and the new Josef Stalin heavy tank armed with a 122mm gun, were a match for most German tanks. In air power too the Soviet Air Force was technically equal to the Luftwaffe having excellent fighters and ground-attack aircraft plus overall superiority in numbers in all theatres.



SS-Brigadeführer Jürgen Wagner of the SS-Freiwilligen Brigade Nederland chats to men of his command who have just been decorated for gallantry after intensive action

against the Red Army at Narva.

Although 1943 and the first half of 1944 had been a period of disasters for the armies of the Third Reich on the Eastern Front, Hitler had reason to be greatly pleased with the performance of his elite *Waffen-SS* divisions. Over and over again SS units had stood firm against almost impossible odds while Wehrmacht troops retreated. Even the most die-hard Waffen-SS troops must have realised that military success on the Eastern Front was now impossible but they continued to make sacrifice after sacrifice often holding the line to allow other units to escape.

Few other units in the *Wehrmacht* could engender such confidence from the Führer as did those of the *Waffen-SS*. However though proud of their achievements and their deserved elite status Hitler's confidence in them was a mixed blessing. With alarming regularity *Waffen-SS* divisions were rushed to threatened areas of the front and expected to save the day. That they did so is testament to the fact that they were elite troops. However they were not invincible and there would come a time when not even the *Waffen-SS* could stave off defeat.

Although the *Waffen-SS* at this point in the war represented only around five per cent of the fighting strength of the *Wehrmacht* it is significant that some 20 per cent of the *Waffen-SS* units were panzer divisions of the highest standard. In fact just over 25 per cent of all panzer divisions were *Waffen-SS* and around 30 per cent of all panzer-grenadier divisions. Yet despite this fact apart from the 12 *Waffen-SS* divisions that could truly be called elite the remainder were indifferent often as in the case of those formed late in the war of divisional strength in name only and sometimes poorly equipped. In view of these figures the military significance of the *Waffen-SS's* achievements on the Eastern Front is indisputable.



Awaiting the next Russian bombardment or aerial attacks. Air and artillery attacks were a favoured Russian tactic at Narva. On 7th March 1944, for example, the city endured 12 hours of aerial bombing, followed by a savage artillery barrage. Though the Waffen-SS defenders inhabited bunkers, a great deal of damage was done to the defenders' vehicles, guns and equipment. Worse than the heavy bombardment were the weeks of continuous Russian shelling, which took a steady toll of lives. The Russian attacks grew in intensity, and in July 1944 the Red Army hurld some 20 divisions against Narva. III SS Panzer Corps was forced to retreat west to save itself.

Despite the *Waffen-SS's* efforts the Red Army in the summer of 1944 had only been delayed not halted. The amount of men and equipment the Russians could put into the field by the middle of 1944 was truly staggering. For the liberation of Byelorussa alone for example the Red Army deployed 21 armies representing a total of 1.4 million men, 31,000 guns and mortars 5200 tanks and assault guns, plus 5000 aircraft. Russian strength was only one part of the equation, though, for Hitler's insistence on no withdrawal

aided the Red Army. The Russians simply encircled vast numbers of German units. When Army Group Centre was destroyed some 17 divisions were totally annihilated. The *Waffen-SS* could only achieve localised successes and by 1944 even the supermen were faltering. Defeat for the Third Reich was now inevitable on the Eastern Front, the only uncertain factor was when this would occur.

CHAPTER 11

NO RESPITE.



The face of the German Army on the Eastern Front in 1944: heavy fatigue due to constant fighting and apprehension about the Red Army's seemingly unstoppable advance.

In the north, by the spring of 1944, STAVKA the Soviet High Command had decided that Byeloruss was to be the next priority for the Red Army. Stalin intended that the Red Army would drive from its starting point, east of Lake Peipusalong a line running through Gorki in the centre, skirting the Pripet Marshes, and on to Odessa on the shores of the Black Sea and push the Germans back some 650 km to the very gates of Warsaw. For this it mustered 19 armies and two tank armies, with some 1300 or so aircraft in support.

On the night of 22nd June 1944 the main assault began the Russians ripping through Army Group Centre. Within just seven days the entire length of a 320 km front stretching from Ostrov on the Lithuanian boarder and Kovel on the edge of the Pripet Marshes had been completely overrun. In the weeks that followed, some 350,000 German troops were eliminated.

On 25th June 1944 the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* was immediately ordered north from Rumania to help fend off the Soviet attack west of Minsk. The roads however were chaotic and the division did not reach its assigned designation until 7th July. By then the Red Army was advancing rapidly towards Grodno, endangering the southern flank of the 4th Army and the northern flank of the battered remnants of the 2nd Army. The *SS-Totenkopfdivision* held the line at Grodno for 11 days against massive odds, before being ordered to withdraw towards the south-east to join the mass of German troops retreating slowly towards Warsaw.

In the centre, the westward drive continued. Since 16th July German counterattacks had tried in vain to crush 3rd Belorussian Front's bridgehead over the Niemen and on 28 July the front advanced from its bridgeheads. By 31st August when it took Kovno it had covered 48 km. On 20th , the left wing of 1st Belorussian Front had broken through the German defences near Kovel crossing the western Bug into Poland.

Zakharov's 2nd Belorussian Front had a more difficult passage, for by mid-July over 10 German divisions had been concentrated on the Grodno-Svisloch line, a defence had been organised and the Germans had begun a number of large and small scale counter attacks. But when Zakharov brought up his reserve army, the German force was broken and its reserves swept aside. The armies of 2nd Belorussian Front surged through Bialystok and by the end of July stood on the East Prussian boarder.



The Germans abandon another Russian town in the face of the Red Arm's mid-1944 offensive, which saw the Russians reach the East Prussian boarder by August 1944. The Easter Rampart was falling.

These latest defeats convinced the German High Command that the only chance of halting the Russian offensive was to fall right back to the line of the Vistula where it might be easier to build a stable defence and an immediate withdrawal began with the Soviet spearheads hard on the heels of the German rearguards. Lublin fell to 1st Belorussian Front on 23rd July and Brest Litovsk was captured on 28th.

A sombre occasion was the Soviet liberation of the Nazi death camp at Maidanek 2 km west of Lublin where some 1,500,00 prisoners had been liquidated and the foulest atrocities perpetrated.

While the battle for Brest Litovsk was still in progress, the left wing of 1st Belorussian Front was racing towards the Vistula and Warsaw. Between 28th

July and 2nd August two bridgeheads were forced across the Vistula south of Warsaw and throughout August these bridgeheads were the scene of furious battles as the Germans desperately tried to destroy the Soviet footholds on the west bank. The Luftwaffe increased its attacks and the German ground forces were greatly strengthened, two Panzer and five infantry divisions arrived at the front during August, as well as four infantry and motorised brigades. Against their attacks the Soviet forces with great difficulty succeeded in holding on to their bridgeheads but were not strong enough to extend them and continue the offensive.

North-east of Warsaw armoured units of 1st Belorussian Front had reached the Radzymin-Wolomin area, only to run into stiff German resistance. Here too the offensive was halted. A successful defence was followed by a spirited German counterattack by four Panzer divisions and one infantry division, which recovered Radzymin and Wolomin, dealt out heavy losses to the Soviet armoured formations, and forced them back 24 km to 32 km to the south. At last it seemed that the Eastern Front was steady again.

As soon as the first Polish territory was liberated, the Committee of National Liberation, led by the Polish Communist Partybecame active. Functioning as a provisional government, the Committee had already issued a manifesto, “To the Polish People”. This manifesto called on all Poles to fight together with the Red Army for the freedom and independence of Poland. It also drew up the main features of a programme of radical social change, the building of a new, democratic Poland. Troops of the Polish 1st Army were serving in the ranks of 1st Belorussian Front in the liberation of eastern Poland.



A brief respite for these two Wiking Division grenadiers allows them to get their bearings, but there is only one way to go – west. The division was pushed back all the way to the River Vistula by August 1944.

As large German reinforcements concentrated on the Vistula Line, resistance stiffened and Soviet problems were increased by serious supply difficulties, particularly in fuel and ammunition, to the Red Army formations which had advanced over 480 km since 23rd June. But the offensive was maintained, all military vehicles were mobilised to get the supplies up to the front and the civilian population in the liberated areas proffered every possible assistance to the Soviet command. The Belorussian Partisans, struck boldly at the German forces, cut their communications, wiped out individual German units and gave them no chance to blow up bridges or remove valuable materials.

When the Red Army reached the approaches to East Prussia and the bank of the Vistula it had outrun its strength after its sweep through Belorussia. The

Soviet troops already fatigued and considerably weakened in the preceding battles, now had to beat off strong German counterattacks in the Shyaulyay area, east of Warsaw, and in the Magnuszew and Pulawy bridgeheads. By the end of July, it was already clear that the Germans would be able to hold a solid defensive front along the East Prussian approaches and the Narew and Vistula rivers. And now, with the Red Army rapidly approaching the Polish capital, but with the Soviet offensive petering out the Polish Home Army resistance movement launched the Warsaw Rising. With the Polish Home Army up in open revolt against the Germans on 1st August, the Germans were stunned at the initial strength of the uprising and initially lost almost two-thirds of the city to the valiant Polish fighters. With the Red Army so near, the Poles believed the city would be taken from the Germans.

What the Poles did not realise was that the Red Army's advance was rapidly running out of steam. The Germans were aware of the tired state of the Soviet troops and could concentrate on putting down the uprising. Stalin allowed the Germans to deal with the Poles as he wanted Poland to be under Soviet occupation after the war. Just to make sure he refused the Western Allies the use of Soviet air bases from which to launch supply missions.

The aim of the rising, as the Polish reactionaries who organised it openly stated at the time, was not to help the Red Army to liberate Poland, but to obstruct it. They considered that by seizing the capital they could establish themselves in power and prevent the people's democratic order from coming into being in Poland.

The Soviet government was not informed of the rising until it had begun, and made no secret of its attitude. Its note to the British government dated 16th August pointed out.

The Warsaw action is a reckless, appalling adventure, which is costing the

population heavy casualties. This would not have been the case if the Soviet command had been informed before the Warsaw action began, and if the Poles had maintained contact with it. In the situation which has arisen, the Soviet command has come to the conclusion that it must dissociate itself from the Warsaw venture.

The Polish Home Army had made preparations for a general uprising against the Germans during the final stages of the war. It was timed to coincide with a German collapse brought about by the blows of the Allies, and was to consist of attacks by the entire strength of the Polish Home Army on German garrisons throughout the country.

In case there were no prospects of an imminent German collapse, the Home Army had made plans, in consultation with the Polish government in London, for another operation given the codename Burza or Tempest. As the Soviet German front moved west the Home Army was to engage the German units from the rear in successive zones as they retreated across Poland.

The general uprising was never launched, however, as the conditions required for it had not come about. Instead, the Home Army put into operation plan Tempest. In 1944 units of the Home Army fought for Vilnyus, Lublin and went into action in many other locations, thereby rendering valuable assistance to the Red Army.

On 21st July Hitler ordered General Guderian to take over command of the Eastern Front. His task was to reorganise it and to halt the Red Army offensive. The Vistula, with a bridgehead on the east bank at Praga, was adopted as the new line of defence; while Guderian appointed General Vordman to command the sector of the middle Vistula between Jablonna and Deblin. This General had commanded IX Army which in June had been almost obliterated in Belorussia and latter been reinforced by part of the II

Army and by new units. The II Army was to concentrate along the lower reaches of the Bug, north of the IX Army.



A brief rest for these Germans on the Eastern Front in mid-1944 as they pell back in the face of Russian pressure. For Hitler and his Third Reich it was a moment of crisis, but the Waffen-SS would come to the rescue.

As this regrouping was taking place, but before the new defensive measures could become effective, the front line was nearing the Vistula, and all the while the German retreat and evacuation were being accelerated. Between 21st July and 25th German stores, workshops, civilian institutions and military command alike left Warsaw. Police and army units were also pulling out.

Then on 26th July the directives of the new commander of the German front began to take effect. German administrative authorities and the police returned to Warsaw. On 27th July the Luftwaffe General Stahel took over military command of Warsaw. German civilian authorities announced that the

city would be defended and called upon the Polish population of the capital to co-operate, and through the street public address system and through wall posters they commanded that 100,00 men come forward to put up fortifications round the city. Guards at German institutions were strengthened, assault guns were placed at main street intersections, police and tank patrols in the city were increased. Units of the German 73rd Infantry Division began arriving on the outskirts of Warsaw.

During the night of 28th July and on the days that followed, Warsaw could hear the sound of battle fought for the town of Wolomin between German XXXIX Panzer corps and the Soviet 2nd Tank Army. On 21st July 1944, the Communist National Council set up a Committee of National Liberation, which it intended to foist upon the country as a political authority. When on 23rd July Moscow radio published a manifesto to the Polish nation issued by this committee, it described the Polish government in London and its organs in Poland as usurpers.

These moves seemed to indicate that, without regard to the Polish government in London, the Soviet Union was going to try to impose its will upon Poland through this Committee of National Liberation. On 29th July the Soviet station Kosciuszko broadcast the following programme in Polish. For Warsaw, which never capitulated and never gave up the struggle, the hour of action has struck. By fighting in the streets of Warsaw, in houses, factories and stores, we shall bring nearer the moment of ultimate liberation and we shall preserve the country’s wealth and the lives of our brothers.

On 30th July the Polish Prime Minister Stanislaw Mikolajczyk arrived in Moscow from London. On 31st he had his first conversation with Soviet Foreign Secretary, Molotov, on how to co-ordinate the campaign against the Germans in Poland.

According to the appraisals of the situation arrived at by the Home Army HQ, the defeat suffered by the German armies in Belorussia in June and July.

The commander-in-chief of the Home Army, General Tadeusz Komorowski who was codenamed Bor had reached the decision that in either case the Home Army would, at an opportune moment, attack the German troops in Warsaw, as in one case this would shorten the fight for control of the city and minimise losses, and in any case would enable the Home Army to meet the entering Red Army as hosts and masters in their own house.

General Bor estimated that a rapid capture of Warsaw lay in Soviet interests: politically, since it was the capital, and militarily, since it was the largest and most convenient communications centre on the Vistula from which to launch a further advance west. On 25th July General Bor obtained the agreement of the London appointed Polish Deputy Priminister and Government Delegate for Poland Mr J Second Class without Swords, Jankowski. To the decision in principle to engage in a battle for Warsaw and together they presented this decision to the presidium of the Polish underground parliament and obtained its agreement. The C-in-C informed the Commander of the Warsaw District, Colonel Antoni Chrusciel codenamed Monter of this decision and gave the order to get the district ready for action. The action itself was to follow the plan of the general uprising for which the units of the district had been preparing for three years.

The Polish side faced an opponent about equal numerically, but overwhelmingly superior in armament and technical facilities, who could also call upon air and armoured support, neither of which the Home Army possessed.

The numerical strength of Home Army units in Warsaw was approximately 38,000 soldiers of which about 4,000 were women. Units of the Home Army

belonging to the Warsaw District and based in the vicinity of the capital numbered approximately 11,000.



German troops in a Polish town in July 1944. The Russian 1944 summer offensive saw the Red Army advance 730 km (459 miles) in five weeks, though it then began to out run its supply lines.

These forces and their chain of command were organised in seven urban and one suburban precincts, which in their turn were sub-devided into sectors. The armament consisted of heavy and light infantry weapons and was sufficient for 25% of the effectives, and there was sufficient ammunition for seven days fighting. Deficiencies were to be supplemented by capture from Germans, and supplies of arms were also expected from the west, through the usual aerial drops which had been going on for the last three years.

Besides the units mentioned there were two organisations in Warsaw not subordinated to the Home Army. They were *Narodowe Sily Zbrojne (NSZ)* or the National Armed Forces, an organisation of a very right-wing and

nationalistic complexion; and *Armia Ludowa (AL)* , the People's Army, a Communist organisation wholly subordinate to Moscow. Each organisation had a few hundred men in the city and their units later joined the fight at the side of the Home Army.

The numerical strength of the German garrison was estimated by the Home Army HQ at about 40,000. Some units had been pulled out between 21st and 25th July, but every day other units were being quartered in or near the capital, and there were reasons to believe that numerically the Polish and German sides were evenly matched. On 31st July at the afternoon briefing of the inner HQ of the Home Army, Colonel Monter, as Commander of the Warsaw District, reported that the German bridgehead on the east bank of the Vistula had been breached by Soviet armour and that its defence had been disorganised. According to the report, Soviet detachments had taken the suburban localities of Radosc, Milosna, Okuniew, and Radzymin.

On the basis of this report, in the presence of Deputy Prime Minister Jankowski, General Bor ordered Colonel Monter to attack the Germans on the following day, 1st August at 5 pm. On the very same day, at 6.30 pm, Colonel Monter issued his operational orders to the units under his command, though some of them did not receive these orders until the following morning, as the police curfew delayed their transmission.

However, the military situation round the German bridgehead that day was in fact as follows: Soviet armoured detachments did make a breach in the southern perimeter of the bridgehead, even capturing the General commanding the German 73rd Infantry Division, but German defence had not been disorganised and they were not forced to retreat from the east bank of the Vistula. At the same time a battle between German and Soviet armour was being fought round Siedlce, further east, and its outcome was not yet

clear.

The concentration of Home Army units at their assembly points was carried out in the afternoon of 1st August without German counter action, although owing to the difficulties inherent in the secrecy with which the concentration had to be carried out, only 85% of troops managed to reach the appointed places.

At 5 pm, Home Army units launched their attacks at prearranged objectives. Within minutes the entire city was engulfed in fighting, German patrols and troops in the streets were attacked and disarmed, and many objectives, those which were not powerfully reinforced or strongly manned, were captured. Those which were properly manned, however, managed to repulse the initial Home Army assault. Where the initial attacks were not successful, they were renewed during the night, many of them several times, and those parts of the city cleared of the Germans were occupied by the Home Army.

Throughout the next two days 2nd and 3rd August, the Home Army renewed its assault on German strongpoints not taken on the first day, but it was not particularly successful for it lacked the heavy assault weapons nessary to breach pillboxes and other reinforced concrete defences.

Both sides suffered heavy casualties in killed and wounded. The Polish side captured a considerable quantity of arms and ammunition, but German resistance, though uncoordinated at the outset, proved strong almost everywhere.

The intensity of the fighting exacted its toll, and on the Polish side ammunition ran low despite the quantities captured; and this, combined with the mounting casualties and disappointing outcome of the attacks of 2nd and 3rd dampened the momentum of Home Army offensive operations.

Then, to the disappointment of all, the sounds of the battle waged on the east bank of the Vistula between German and Soviet forces, which up till then had been steadily gaining in intensity grew fainter on 3rd August, to be followed on the 4th by a complete lull in the fighting. The Red Air Force disappeared from the sky above Warsaw on 2nd August.



A Tiger tank of the Wiking Division outside Warsaw in August 1944. The division was part of IV SS Panzer Corps, which threw the Red Army back just before the city

in August, stabilising the front temporarily.

Having considered all these factors and after consulting his C-in-C, Colonel Monter ordered his troops to abandon their offensive tasks and to switch to defence as from 5th August. At the conclusion of this initial stage of the fighting the Home Army controlled three-fifths of the City.

Documents captured by the Germans over the previous years had already given them a fragmentary idea of the plan for general uprising planned by the Home Army. Judging by the behaviour and attitude of the Polish population, they counted on the possibility of a Polish attack in the last days of July, but they believed that such an attack would take place at night.

On 1st August the increased traffic in the streets and the reports from their agents alerted the German security organs, which used various means at their disposal to increase the general watchfulness of the garrison. But it was not until 4 pm that General Stahel ordered a state of general alert. This order failed to reach many German positions and smaller units before 5 pm, and failed completely to notify the various units in transit. Thus, although the German command was not taken by surprise, the lateness of the alert meant that the garrison was not all ready. The Polish attack did catch many units unaware.

But when reports of the outbreak of fighting reached Hitler and Himmler, their reaction was instantaneous. On 2nd August Hitler appointed a new commander foe units engaged against the rising , *SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Waffen-SS und Polizei* Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski a specialist in fighting Partisan movements behind the front and possessing a special staff experienced in this kind of warfare. In Warsaw, Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski was determined to crush the Polish revolt with every means at his disposal. Himmler’s reaction was to rush reinforcements by both road and

rail to Warsaw, and these consisted of infantry and police. A brigade recruited from criminals serving prison sentences commanded by *SS-Oberführer der Reserve* Dr. Oskar Dirlewanger. The *SS-Sturmbrigade "Dirlewanger"* was most notorious for its actions in Warsaw during the Polish uprising. One of the stories was that Dirlewanger had entertained the officers of his mess with the death struggles of Jewish girls to whom he had given strychnine injections. Also two brigades composed of men of various Soviet nationalities who had defected to the Germans earlier in the war. One regiment of around 1700 men under Lt. Col. Vrolov was detached from the *SS Assault Brigade RONA* commanded by *Waffen-Brigadeführer* Bronislav Vladislavovich Kaminiski and sent to the Polish capital to assist in the suppression of the revolt. It arrived on 5th August but was withdrawn 3 weeks later on the orders of *SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Waffen-SS und Polizei* Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski, because of its atrocious conduct and general lack of discipline. Kaminiski himself was in Warsaw for only about 10 days. Later he was arrested by the SS in Lodz and charged with looting, an offence punishable by death. He was shot by an SS firing squad on being found guilty. His death, however, was officially attributed to a Polish partisan ambush on the road to Lodz.



SS-Oberführer Oskar Dirlewanger, whose brigade fought in the Warsaw Uprising. Composed of murderers, rapists and other criminals, it committed many atrocities in the city during the fighting.

During the succeeding stages of the fighting, *SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Waffen-SS und Polizei* Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski received considerable reinforcements in heavy artillery, including 610 mm siege guns, rocket launchers, and flame throwers.

The Polish attack had split up the German forces inside the city into a few isolated pockets cut off from one another. One of the largest of these was in the Bruhl Palace in Plac Teatralny, where General Stahel had his HQ and which was manned by a considerable number of SS and Police. The Germans retained control of the suburb of Praga, where Home Army units were

crushed after two days of fighting. They also held the Warsaw Citadel, the air-field at Okecie and at Bielany, and the wireless transmitters at Boernerowo.

After the first four days of the fighting, the areas controlled by the two sides became stabilised. Both the Home Army and the Germans built barricades round their perimeters.

Besides a number of fortified strongpoints within the Polish lines the Germans also controlled wedges of territory which probed deep into the city, and divided the quarters in Polish hands so that they became three separate centres of fighting. In the south of the city were Mokotow and Czerniakow, then, centrally placed was the city centre proper with Powisle, on the low-lying river bank, and in the north was the Old town, with Zoliborz separate from it but maintaining contact with Home Army units in the Forest of Kampinos, not far away.

Colonel Monter found that exercising direct command over these separate perimeters from his own HQ in the city centre was difficult and so, on 6th August, he reorganised the structure of command to reflect the realities of the situation. He nominated Colonel S. Kaminsky codenamed Daniel to command Mokotow and Czerniakow; Colonel E Pfeiffer codenamed Radwan to command City Centre and Powisle; and Colonel K, Ziemski codenamed Wachnowski to command the Old Town, with Zoliborz and the Forest of Kampinos also subordinated to him, the whole being designated Group North. The tasks set for these three commanders were to maintain their perimeters and overcome nests of German resistance still surviving within the Polish lines.

The first operational task the German side set itself was to pierce routes from the west to the bridgehead at Praga. This task was given to two groups, one

attacking from the south-west along the axis Aleje Jerozolimskie/Poniatowski Bridge, and the other from the west, along the axis Wola/Kierbedzia Bridge. The attacking forces had the support of an artillery barrage and support from the air was provided by the German Luftflotte V, which bombed the Polish positions and the city at large using fragmentation and incendiary bombs, thus causing waves of fires.

The original aim, to overcome the Polish army by setting the whole town alight and smoking it out, was abandoned, as it was feared that the centres of German resistance within the Polish lines would be wiped out in the conflagration.

The German attempt to establish a permanent rout to the Poniatowski Bridge failed. A part of the XIX Panzer Division did fight its way across it from Praga to the west on 4th August, but later the Home Army effectively blocked the rout between the Central Railway Station and Ulica Bracka. By 8th August the Germans managed to establish the other route Wola/Kierbedzia Bridge, after bitter fighting and tank attacks, but even then a few sectors of this route remained permanently exposed to Polish fire.

During this stage of the fighting the Germans carried out mass executions of prisoners of war, of civilians and of the wounded in hospitals, including the entire staff of doctors and nurses. In some cases Polish civilians were driven in front of attacking German tanks to give protection against fire from Polish barricades.

The next objective of the Germans after blasting their way through to Kierbedzia Bridge was to capture the Old Town. On 12th August they launched their assault against it using three groups, attacking from the south, the west and the north supported by an artillery barrage, flame-throwers, Goliath’s, exploding miniature tanks steered by cable from the German lines,

also aerial bombardment.



Shown here in the uniform of the POA after their transfer from the Russische Befreiungsarmee, these Russians took part in suppressing the Warsaw Uprising. Their conduct in the city was atrocious.

The Soviet offensive had been renewed on 14 August with an attempt to surround the Polish capital with attacks over the Vistula to the north and west of the city. However *IV SS-Panzer Korps* with a powerful force comprising the *SS-Totenkopfdivision* and the *SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Wiking"* was ready and waiting. For a full week the Russians battered against the German positions without success and were eventually forced to withdraw to regroup. On 25th August a massive new offensive was launched principally against the *SS-Totenkopfdivision*'s positions and gradually the Germans were forced to fall back towards Warsaw.

The Polish forces, by then completely surrounded and deprived of regular supplies from outside were losing ground every day. By night attacks some of

the ground lost during the day was regained, but the ceaseless artillery and aerial bombardment inflicted a mounting toll of casualties on the civilians, many of whom were buried under collapsed buildings. Nevertheless the attitude of the population was as unflinching as that of the Home Army garrison.

To maintain communications, to evacuate light casualties and to bring in supplies of ammunition, routes were established about mid August with the City Centre and Zoliborz via the sewers. They were difficult to negotiate, but skilled guides, many of them women kept them serviceable throughout.

After reinforcing the garrison of Zoliborz with a battalion brought from the Forest of Kampinos, the commander of Group North made two attempts to break the German ring surrounding the Old Town. An attack launched from Zoliborz on Dworzec Gdanski, a railway station during the night of 19th August was unsuccessful and during the following night the same station was attacked from two sides, from Zoliborz and the Old Town. Again the attack failed to break the German ring.

To relive the garrison of the Old Town and to open a way out for them to the south a public park separated the Old Town from the City Centre. During the night of 30th August all the forces in the Old Town and detachments equivalent to about three battalions from City Centre launched their attack on Ogrod Saski, and kept up the assault until dawn, but it failed in its main objective. Only a group of 59 men managed to fight their way through to the City Centre.

During the following night the garrison of the Old Town carried Colonel Monter’s new order to evacuate to the City Centre. About 1500 men and 300 light casualties made their way out through the sewers without alerting the Germans, while 800 more withdrew to Zoliborz in the same way; and so the

German attack launched the next morning found nothing. However, those wounded whom it had been impossible to evacuate through the sewers were killed off by the Germans; most of them were soaked in petrol and burned alive.

While the fight for the Old Town was going on, other sectors remained relatively quiet. In the City Centre the Home Army took a few isolated buildings which had been in German hands, and which were stubbornly defended floor by floor.

Having taken the Old Town, the Germans commanded a wide stretch of Warsaw separating the City Centre from Zoliborz. The latter now became a separate centre of fighting, Group North as such having ceased to exist and its commander, Colonel Wachnowski, having become Colonel Monter's deputy upon reaching City Centre.

The Warsaw Rising entered its third stage, resistance to the utmost. The defenders were kept going by the hope that they would last out until the time came when the Germans, unable to resist Red Army pressure, would be forced to retreat from the City. The Home Army now finally gave up all offensive operations in favour of intensified defence of the positions held.

Counting on the possibility that the Red Army would eliminate their bridgehead at Praga, and that the Polish Home Army would then have direct contact across the river with it, the Germans set out to throw back the Home Army units occupying the river bank between the Poniatowski and Kierbedzia Bridges. After three days of fighting, beginning on 4th September the Germans were masters of the river front, and had pushed back the Poles into the City Centre.

Beginning with 8th September they then concentrated their attacks on the City Centre, trying at several points to drive wedges into the Polish

perimeter, but repeated attacks along Aleje Jerozolimskie one of the original east west axes, achieved only minor breaches in the Polish positions.

The fighting was now entering its sixth week and as hopes of Soviet assistance for the Rising waned and as the suffering of the civilian population increased, the political quarters of the Resistance asked Home Army HQ to explore with the German command whether there existed a possibility of a negotiated surrender.



Warsaw burns as the Germans eradicate the last remnants of Polish resistance. It had

cost Bach-Zelewski 26,000 men to put down the revolt – it cost the Poles a lot more in terms of blood.

On 7th September an opportunity of direct talks with the Germans arose through the intermediary of the Polish Red Cross. Representatives of the latter obtained a cease fire of a few hour's duration along some sectors of the perimeter, and on 8th and 9th several thousand women, children, old people and lightly wounded left Warsaw.

Only a small proportion of the civilian population chose to be evacuated in this way, about a quarter of a million opting to remain in the City Centre rather than give themselves up voluntarily into the hands of the Germans. The inhabitants of he capital felt that they would stay as long as the fight continued and they could render help to the Home Army, especially as they felt the Rising was a fight involving the whole city not just the troops.

The envisaged attempt at exploratory talks with the Germans was not pursued, as on 10th September Red Army units, including one Polish division, launched an assault on the German bridgehead in Praga. After five days the German troops had been driven out and the east bank of the Vistula opposite the Polish positions in Zoliborz, Solec, and Czerniakow was in the hands of the Red Army, so that contact with it across the river was now possible.

However, without letting up their pressure against the City Centre, and while maintaining a harassing artillery fire and aerial bombardment of Zoliborz and Mokotow, even launching diversionary attacks against them, the Germans now set about pushing the Home Army back altogether from the bank of the Vistula. They carried this out in three phases.

On 14th, 15th and 16th September, the freshly arrived XXV Panzer Division, supported by air attacks, pushed Home Army units in Zoliborz about 1 km

back from the river where they managed to hold out in new defensive positions. At the same time in the south of the city, in Czerniakow, a German attack carried out along the river also captured the river bank, pushing back the Polish defenders.

The Polish side now held only a narrow strip of the river bank south of the Poniatowski Bridge and north of Czerniakow. It was defended by units of the local precinct, reinforced by elite troops withdrawn there from the Old Town and commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Jan Mazurkiewicz codenamed Radoslaw. On 11th September overwhelming German forces launched an attack on this area. An extremely stubborn battle fought day and night in a very restricted space, followed; individual buildings changed hand several times in repeated attacks and counterattacks, and there was almost continuous hand-to-hand fighting. Here, too the Germans spared no one, carrying out mass executions of captured prisoners, of the wounded in hospitals and civilians.

The garrison of the City Centre carried out several attacks in the direction of the escarpment dominating the low-lying battle field on the river bank in an attempt to link up with the units there, and it scored some initial successes, but could not maintain them in the face of powerful German counterattacks. The link-up attempted was unsuccessful.

On 19th September after eight days and nights of continuous fighting, the battle reached a point of crisis. The Polish defenders, surrounded in an area 500 meters long by 500 metres across, were down to their last rounds of ammunition and had exhausted their food and medical dressings. They had no water supplies other than the river and had reached the limits of physical endurance. Lieutenant-Colonel Radoslaw therefore decided to withdraw part of his forces through the sewers to Mokotow, while another part was to cover

the withdrawal of the seriously wounded across the Vistula to the Soviet side. Facing terrific German fire the latter units held out for two more days, covering the evacuation carried out by boat at night. It was possible to evacuate only a small proportion of the wounded in this way, and on 23rd September the Germans overran the Polish positions. The entire length of the river bank was now in German hands.

While the Home Army was fighting to maintain its hold on the west bank, the Soviet former Polish 1st Army found itself on the opposite bank as part of Marshal Rokossovsky's forces. Units of this army made a number of attempts to cross to the west bank, and on the nights of 16th and 17th September some detachments of the 6th infantry Regiment crossed over to Zoliborz, by that time the Home Army garrison had been driven off the riverbank, to be decimated there by the Germans.

On the nights of 15th and 16th September two battalions and the regimental HQ of the 9th Infantry Regiment crossed over to Czerniakow, where they joined the forces under Lieutenant-Colonel Radoslaw. At the same time the 8th Infantry Regiment made an unsuccessful attempt to get a foothold on the west bank near Ponitatowski Bridge, and the 1st Cavalry Brigade made just as unsuccessful an attempt near Kierbedzia Bridge. Next came the turn of Mokotow. After an artillery barrage and bombing lasting some days, and after reinforcing their troops there with the XIX Panzer Division, on 24th September the Germans launched attacks on it simultaneously from the south and the west. After a three day battle the Polish forces were compressed into a small area affording no chance of defence.

During the night of 26th September a part of the garrison of Mokotow entered the sewers to withdraw to the City Centre. The Germans, however, expecting this, had obstructed the sewers and kept tossing gas grenades into

them, creating panic and causing heavy losses. Many men and women perished in the sewers and only about 600 managed to reach City Centre. The remainder of the garrison of Mokotow, about 2000 men laid down their arms at noon of 27th September.

Immediately after this surrender the Germans moved the XIX Panzer Division north of the city and on the following day their forces facing the garrison of Zoliborz began their assault on the Polish lines. After two days of stubborn fighting, during which the defenders had to yield ground, their position worsened but their commander Lieutenant-Colonel M Niedzielski codenamed Zywiciel, rejected a German proposal to capitulate. But by this time the Home Army HQ itself was considering surrendering; provided the German conditions were acceptable. Further resistance in Zoliborz was deemed pointless, and on 30th September following an order from the Home Army C-in-C, its garrison numbering about 1500 men laid down their weapons.

At the same time as the operations against Mokotow and Zoliborz, the Germans set out to dislodge the Home Army from the Forest of Kampinos. These troops, two infantry regiments and two cavalry squadrons, about 2500 men in all, were commanded by Major A Kotowski codename Okon. They acted in an auxiliary capacity to the Rising, receiving aerial drops from the West and transporting them to Zoliborz, and harassing German communications from the rear.

A special group, detached from the German IX Army, designated *Sterschuppe*, began operations against the Forest on 27th September. Major Okon had recognised the German build up and moved his troops to the southern edge of the forest, intending to break his way out to the south. The German attack thus missed its target and meet only rearguards. Major Okon’s

column moved south from the forest until it came upon the Skierniewice-Zyrandow railway line, where at noon on 29th September an armoured train barred its way. Detachments of German tanks then caught up with it and dispersed it, but only one cavalry squadron, about 100 troopers strong managed to fight its way through to the Kielce province.

Towards the end of September the situation of the insurgents was becoming more critical with every day that passed. They had lost control of the river bank, the outlying bastions of Mokotow and Zoliborz had fallen, and the Forest of Kampinos was in German hands. Ammunition was running out, water, in quantities which were insufficient, was being drawn from improvised wells, and they were short of medical supplies. From 20th September onwards barley and sugar were their only sustenance. The troops had no warm clothing and instances of soldiers fainting on the barricades from exhaustion were becoming more frequent.

After consultations with the civilian Resistance leaders, the Home Army HQ, accepted that to continue fighting would not bring the aims of the Rising any nearer, though it would prolong the suffering and losses of the population. *SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Waffen-SS und Polizei* Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski invitation to enter into negotiations made through the Polish Red Cross was therefor accepted. A cease fire was agreed upon as from 2nd October and on that same day a Polish delegation signed an act of surrender at the German HQ at Ozarow.

After more than two months of fighting the Polish troops laid down their arms. The Germans evacuated the entire remaining population of the city and proceeded to a systematic destruction of whatever was still left standing. Any moveables worth taking were shipped to the Reich. It is impossible to arrive at an estimate of civilian losses with any accuracy but the figure of 150,00

may be close to reality. German losses according to *SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Waffen-SS und Polizei* Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski amounted to 26,000. As with the earlier revolts Himmler wished to see this as a battle honour for the SS, so the Warsaw Shield was instituted on 10th December 1944 and was intended to be awarded "as a battle badge to members of the Armed Forces and non-military personnel who between 1st August and 2nd October 1944 were honourably engaged in the fighting in Warsaw." The award was to have been made by the commander Bach-Zelewski but circumstances prevented him from making a single award as it is believed that the factory producing them was bombed out.



The Warsaw Shield commemorating those who "Were honourably engaged in the fighting in Warsaw". Ironically, it was never issued as the factory producing the awards was destroyed in an Allied bombing raid, but some received the citation.

The *SS-Totenkopfdivision* faced the same problem with regard to being unable to rapidly make good its losses, whereas the Soviets were back up to strength and ready to launch yet another attack against the city by 10th October. This time the weakened Germans were forced back to the north-

west of the city but managed to stabilise their positions quickly and halt the Soviets once again.

By the end of October 1944 Rumania and Bulgaria had capitulated and defected to the Soviets while in the north Finland had sued for peace terms. The Red Army's 1st Baltic Front had retaken Memel in Lithuania on 10th October while Yeremenko's 2nd Baltic Front had captured Riga, the Latvian capital. The Russian offensive had cut off two entire German armies in Courland comprising some 33 divisions. Rather than tie up a considerable number of troops in trying to eliminate them, STAVKA chose an air and sea blockade of the pocket.

Among the units able to escape by sea were the remaining Dutch SS volunteers from the *Nederland Brigade*. The ship evacuating them was attacked and sunk but some of the Dutch SS men did survive and formed the nucleus of the *23rd Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier Division Nederland.* The unit went back into action at Stargard in Pommerania and also saw action at Stettin, before being forced back towards Berlin.

In January 1945 the Red Army was ordered to drive the Germans out of Poland. Marshal Zhukov and his 1st Byelorussian Front was to drive to Poznan while Marshal Koniev would direct his assault towards Breslau to the south. Each massive force comprised over one million men, with over 30,000 guns and 7000 tanks between them. Opposing them was a weakened Army Group Centre with 400,000 men and just over 1000 tanks. That said the Germans still had some 580,000 troops in East Prussia.

On 12th January Koniev's attack began after a massive artillery barrage lasting 105 minutes. Two days later Zhukov's forces joined in the assault his forces aiding the Soviet formed 1st Polish Army in taking Warsaw. During the second half of January the Red Army seized Silesia, one of Germany's

most important industrial regions, rich in coal deposits and by early February had reached the river Oder. Those German strongpoints which had withstood the Soviet onslaught such as Breslau were merely bypassed to be dealt with later.

All along the front the *Waffen-SS* divisions were being destroyed by the Russian onslaught. By the spring of 1945 most of the elite *Waffen-SS* divisions were carrying out a fighting withdrawal through Hungary and into Austria The *SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Wiking"* was to be all but decimated in the fighting for the approaches to Vienna. While in the central and northern sectors of the Eastern Front those *Waffen-SS* units still in action were principally east and west European volunteer formations. The level of determination shown by these volunteers in their attempts to hold the Soviet advance was quite exceptional, if not entirely surprising. These units raised from eastern European states no longer had any homelands to return to as their nations had been conquered by the Russians and were now in Stalin's iron grip. The only option was to try and reach the western Allies to surrender. Those who surrendered to the Soviets or were handed over to them after giving themselves up to the Western Allies were usually shot out of hand.

CHAPTER 12

THE BLACK GUARD DIES.



A study of a Panther and Grenadiers of IV SS Panzer Corps in January 1945. The corps attempted to relieve Budapest, but the city fell to the Russians in February 1945.

From August 1944 as the Red Army drove through Rumania and Bulgaria Hitler's east European allies deserted him. As Army Groups E and F, under Field Marshal von Weichs were forced back through Yugoslavia the ethnic volunteer *7th SS Freiwilligen-Gebirgs Division "Prinz Eugen"* was decimated south of Vukovar in January 1945 what was left of it withdrawing into Austria.

In Hungary the capital Budapest came under the protection of General Otto

Wöhler's Army Group South. Units committed to the defence of the city included the *8th SS Kavallerie Division "Florian Geyer", 22nd Freiwilligen-Kavallreie Division der SS "Maria Theresia"* and *18th SS Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier Division "Horst Wessel"*, although some of the latter's units were sent to Galicia, and others helped suppress the Slovak uprising that occurred during August to October 1944.

In October 1944 the Red Army crossed the Hungarian border and raced for the Danube, reaching the river to the south of Budapest and establishing a bridgehead on the west bank from where it could launch future operations.

To the south-west of the city lay Lake Balaton, between which and the area around Budapest the Germans had established strong defensive positions. By 20th December 1944 the Soviets had advanced across the Danube and reached the southern shore of Lake Balaton. The main German defences however proved a difficult nut for the Red Army to crack, as by this stage of the war the Germans were making use of natural defence lines, such as rivers, and "fortress cities". The Soviets had also overran their supply lines. The breathing space for the Germans was short, though. Marshal Tolbukhin diverted his attack past the eastern of Budapest, and with the 6th Guards Tank Army attacking from the north-east and the 46th Army from the south the city was eventually surrounded in a massive pincer action. Fighting raged for sometime, the Soviets unable to rout the Germans and the latter unable to throw back the attackers.

On 26th December, *IV SS-Panzer-Korps*, comprising the *3rd SS-Panzer-Division "Totenkopf"* and the *5th SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Wiking"* were transferred from the Warsaw area in an attempt to relieve Budapest.



Mud massively affected the war on the Eastern Front. It totally destroyed mobility, as the 6th SS Panzer Army found to its cost at the beginning of Operation "Spring

Awakening “ in March 1945.

Two attempts to raise the siege of the city were beaten back by the Soviets, before they in turn launched a counterattack which forced *IV SS-Panzer-Korps* on to the defensive. The beleaguered garrison struggled on, but the odds had been impossible. After two weeks of fighting the attempt had to be called off. The garrison weakened, shrunk in area by mid January, until 11th February 1945, when some 30,000 of the troops inside the city attempted a breakout to the west. But the retreating Germans were cut to pieces: the *8th SS Kavallerie Division “Florian Geyer”* and *22nd Freiwilligen-Kavallreie Division der SS “Maria Theresia”* were annihilated, and approximately eight hundred of the survivors broke the encirclement and reached the safety of the German lines. Amongst them were 170 troops of the *Waffen-SS,* all that remained of the 8th and 22nd *Kavallerie Division’s*. The Division’s youthful commander *SS-Brigadeführer und Generalmajor der Waffen-SS* Joachim Rumohr, committed suicide after being wounded while attempting to escape from the Hungarian capital. Budapest surrendered on 12th February.

The survivors of the two SS cavalry divisions formed the nucleus of a new unit, *37th SS Freiwilligen-Kavallreie Division “Lützow”* but it never reached the strength of a single regiment, and existed for only three months before being swallowed up in the Russian advance.

The fall of Budapest released a large number of Russian troops for a fresh offensive against the Germans. This threatened the German held oilfields at Nagykanizsa, Hungary. Hitler was horrified at the thought of loosing this precious source of oil, and decided that only a new offensive could throw the Red Army back over the Danube and save the overall situation in Hungary.

Army Group South under General Wöhler comprising the 6th SS Panzer Army, 8th Army, 6th Army and the Hungarian 3rd Army would strike south

from the Margarethe defence lines, while Army Group Southeast's 2nd Army would attack from the west of the Soviet lines. This pincer movement, it was hoped, would crush Tolbukhin's 3rd Ukrainian Front, made up of the 4th Guards Army, 26th Army, 57th Army and 1st Bulgarian Army. *IV SS-Panzer-Korps* would remain around Lake Balaton.

Led by *SS-Oberstgruppenführer* Sepp Dietrich, the 6th SS Panzer Army consisted of the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'*, *Das Reich*, *9. SS-Panzer-Division "Hohenstaufen"* and *12. SS-Panzer-Division "Hitlerjugend"*. The *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'* commanded by *SS-Brigadeführer* Otto Kumm, and the *12. SS-Panzer-Division "Hitlerjugend"* commanded by *SS-Oberführer* Hugo Kraas, were grouped together as *I SS-Panzer-Korps*, while *Das Reich*, temporarily commanded by *SS-Standartenführer* Rudolf Lehmann and the *9. SS-Panzer-Division "Hohenstaufen"* led by *SS-Oberführer* Sylvester Stadler, formed *II SS-Panzer-Korps*.

The operation was codenamed "Spring Awakening", but the omens for success were not good. The area around Lake Balaton is predominantly marshy, although under normal circumstances the severe frosts during the early part of the year render the ground hard enough to bear the weight of heavy vehicles. However, in the spring of 1945, the thaw came much earlier than expected and the terrain was turned into a sea of mud, into which Sepp Dietrich's panzers sank, up to their turrets in some extreme instances.

As a preliminary to the main attack, *I SS-Panzer-Korps* had smashed the Soviet bridgehead around Estergom with little difficulty. Once the Soviets became aware of a large body of elite Waffen-SS troops in the region, however, they quickly realised that a major offensive was imminent and began to strengthen their defences, increasing the depth of their minefields and preparing anti-tank defences. This prelude to the main attack, though

successful in its own right, had merely forewarned the Red Army of what was to come.

The day the operation commenced 6th March heavy snow had made conditions even worse. *I SS-Panzer-Korps* was best placed for the attack, the men having reached their positions in time, but *II SS-Panzer-Korps* was still floundering in the mud, its heavy vehicles finding the going almost impossible. Not supprisingly, the German attack began to suffer heavy losses almost from the start. However, the *Waffen-SS* soldiers threw themselves into the attack with fanatical bravery, driving the enemy back, in the case of *I SS-Panzer-Korps* for distances of up to 40 km. *II SS-Panzer-Korps* however could only manage penetration of around 8 km at best.

The Soviets could make good their losses relatively quickly, while the Germans could only call upon men who were often poorly trained and equipped, and had no motivation to sacrifice their lives at this late stage in the war. The offensive slowed up, and German aircraft began to spot evidence of a massive Soviet build-up, obviously intended for a counterattack.



Waffen-SS soldiers in Poland at the beginning of 1945. By this time the Russians had a superiority of 15 to one on the Eastern Front. It was only the Red Army's over-streetched supply lines which constrained it.

The Soviet offensive began on 16th March along the entire sector west of Budapest. The Russian sledgehammer blow stopped the German offensive in its tracks. Dietrich desperately reshuffled his forces to reinforce the areas under threat, but when he did so the Soviets soon swamped the areas from which the reinforcements had been taken. The 6th SS Panzer Army was in danger of being cut off, as *IV SS-Panzer-Korps* struggled to maintain the German base line. *Das Reich* desperately battled to hold open a corridor of escape for its comrades, but the defection of the Hungarian Army left the flank of *II SS-Panzer-Korps* wide open to the enemy. The Germans had no option but to retreat or lose the best remaining divisions they still possessed on the Eastern Front. By 25th March, the Russians had torn 100 km gap in the German defences.

As well as the four elite panzer divisions of the 6th Panzer Army and the two panzer divisions of *IV SS-Panzer-Korps*, the *16th SS Panzergrenadier Division "Reichsführer-SS"* was also committed to battle around Lake Balaton. The *18th SS Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier Division "Horst Wessel"* had been fortunate enough to escape the encirclement of Budapest and retreat into Slovakia. Within ten days of the offensive being launched, however, it had been totally wiped out.

Hitler was infuriated at the failure of his *Waffen-SS* divisions. When the news of the near annihilation of Sepp Deitriech's units *"Adolf Hitler", "Das Reich", "Totenkopf"* and *"Hohenstaufen"* reached his ears, realising that his order not to lose Vienna to the Russians had not been obeyed and, added to his horror his crack SS units, although completely exhausted and their will to fight nearly totally diminished, had taken refuge in the city, he erupted in wild fury. Hitler cancelled all promotions that he had given on 20th April 1945, which was his birthday, and ordered that all the surviving members of those units must remove their prized cuff titles. Himmler, not having the courage to face his commanders with such an order in person, transmitted it to them in writing instead. Deitriech on hearing the order, summoned the four commanders of those units, *SS-Brigadefuhrer and Generalmajor der Waffen-SS* Otto Kumm, *SS-Standartenfuhrer* Karl Kreutz, *SS-Brigadefuhrer and Generalmajor der Waffen-SS* Hellmuth Becker and *SS-Brigadefuhrer and Generalmajor der Waffen-SS* Sylvester Stadler to a conference at his headquarters in Vienna, where he stated categorically that not a cuff title was to be removed and retorted to his commanders, "There's your reward for all that you have done these past five years". He sent a stiff reply to Hitler's headquarters to Hitler's order, with his refusal to implement that order.



Inspector of the Wehretüghtigungslarger (Special Military Preparatory Schools) Gerhard Hein, holder of the Knight's Cross with Oakleaves, instructs Hitlerjugend recruits in the dying months of the war.

A very interesting story abounds that at the same time he packed up his own decorations in a chamber pot and sent them off to Hitler with his reply. Whether this story is true is unknown, but illustrates Deitriech's feelings at the time and those in conjunction with those prized honorariums. Despite the wrath of Hitler, the professionalism of the *Waffen-SS* was such that its units would continue to fight for him and Germany until the end.

After smashing the German offensive around Lake Balaton, the Soviet advance continued to the west of Budapest in a two pronged movement towards Pápa and Győr. By 2nd April, the Red Army had reached the Neusiedler Lake, on the boarder between Hungary and Austria, and two days later the last German soldiers had been thrown out of Hungary. The Soviet 46th Army was then transported by boat along the Danube to attack Vienna

from the north, while the 4th Guards Army drove towards the city from the south-east. Of the *Waffen-SS* divisions which had fought in Hungary, most had withdrawn into Austria to defend Vienna.

The *9th SS Panzer Division "Hohenstaufen"* had been badly mauled in Hungary, so its remnants were formed into small battlegroups, which fought a rearguard action during the withdrawal towards Vienna. The *3rd SS Panzer Division "Totenkopf"* also fought in defence of the Austrian capital, while the *12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend"* withdrew into strong defensive positions in the mountainous area around Wienerwald, to the south-west of the city, but was forced out of its positions by the unrelenting Soviet pressure after only a few days

Das Reich put up a stubborn defence to the south of Vienna, before withdrawing into the city itself and becoming involved in bitter fighting around the Florisdorf bridge on 13th and 14th April. Despite its efforts, it was gradually driven out of the city by intense Russian pressure. Elements continued to fight in the area to the west of Vienna, but the bulk of the division's remnants were sent to the region east of Dresden to help in the futile attempt to hold back Soviet units swarming into Germany itself. The fall of Vienna on 13th April 1945 had netted the Soviets over 125,00 prisoners. To the north, Regiment *"Der Führer"* was fighting an insurgency in Prague from 6th to 8th May. In their westward retreat from that city, they transported as many of the German population as possible out of Russian hands. However, rather than pursue the retreating Germans, Stalin halted major operations in Austria and concentrated on the final push on Berlin.



Waffen-SS soldiers fighting in Austria in March 1945. Both the Hohenstaufen and Totenkopf Divisions fought in the defence of Vienna in April, but were unable to prevent the city falling to the Russians on the 13th.

As the battered German armies on the Eastern Front retreated deep into the Reich, the *Waffen-SS* divisions were once again to play a major role as rearguard units. The *10th SS Panzer Division "Frundsberg"* serving in Pomerania as part of *SS-Obergruppenführer* Felix Steiner's 11th Panzer Army in early 1945, took part in an attack on Zhukov's 1st Byelorussian Front as it advanced on Berlin. On 16th February *Frundsberg*, *Nordland*, *Nederland* and *Wallonien* attacked in a south-westerly direction, smashing into Zhukov's northern flank. The weakened German divisions, however, did not have the strength to seriously deflect the massive Soviet assault and were driven back within a couple of days.

The Russians now took breath for the final push, the capture of Berlin. In the north was Rokossovsky with the 2nd Byelorussian Front, in the centre

Zhukov with the 1st Byelorussian Front, and in the south Koniev with the 1st Ukrainian Front. For the Red Army commanders it was to be a race to see who could reach the Reich's capital first. This rivalry was encouraged by Stalin, who used it to get most out of his commanders. Zhukov had established a bridgehead over the Oder at Küstrin, which had been taken on 28th March, from where he would launch his attack. Wishing to achieve maximum impact, he decided to open his attack with an artillery barrage of unparalleled ferocity, employing over 8000 artillery pieces in a 30 minute barrage. This would be followed by an immediate and massive assault. Zhukov had nearly 150 searchlights brought up to the launch point, intending to bounce their powerful beams off the low cloud cover and blind the German defenders. Koniev, on the other hand, was taking no chances, and intended a prolonged barrage of some 145 minutes in length, followed by an attack under the cover of darkness.

The first probing attacks began on 14th April and two days latter the main assault began. But the German defenders were aware of Zhukov's plan and withdrew from their positions before the artillery barrage began. Once it had ended they quickly returned to their positions and were waiting for the Soviet assault troops. The searchlight tactic did not work, as they illuminated the attacking Soviets, making them ideal targets. Despite Zhukov's threats his troops could not throw the Germans out of their strongly defended positions on the Seelow Heights, opposite his bridgehead. Instead of the immediate victory he had expected, three full days of the most bitter fighting were required before the Germans could be slowly forced back. By 19th April though the German defences had been overrun and the Seelow Heights captured, and Rokossovsky's push from the north launched.



The remains of a German town near Berlin, April 1945. By this stage of the war the élite divisions of the Waffen-SS were shadows of their former selves, but they continued to put up a spirited fight.

Koniev ordered his 3rd and 4th Guards Tank Armies to break into the city on 20th April, but by the 23rd Stalin had declared that it was to be Zhukov's troops who would make the main assault. Zhukov's men would have the honour of capturing the Führer bunker and the Reichstag itself. Hitler is said to have inspected some survivors of the *10th SS Panzer Division "Frundsberg"*, at the bunker on his last birthday 20th April 1945, the conditions surrounding the Nazi innercircle had by now become farcical.

On 21st April Hitler had ordered an attack to relieve the city. General Theodor Busse, defending the Oder Line with his 9th Army to the south-east of Berlin was to march to the relief of the city. To the west General Walther Wenck, holding back the Americans, was to do the same, and Steiner's 11th Panzer Army was to launch an attack from the north to relieve Berlin. But it

was all fantasy. If Busse and Wenck had abandoned their positions to march to the relief of the city, their pitifully few troops would have been instantly overwhelmed. As for Steiner, his “panzer army” existed on paper only, as his best troops had already been sacrificed or sent into the city. *Nordland* had been sent into Berlin, *Nederland* was sent south to contain a Soviet attack, and the *Walloons* had been cut to pieces.

By 25th April Berlin was completely surrounded and the next day 500,00 Red Army troops swarmed into the city itself. The battle for the city was savage and the *Waffen-SS* took part in this last battle. On 28th April the Soviets broke through the inner city defences and stormed towards the Reichstag. As usual, the SS fought with great courage. The battered buildings had been turned into a fortress with heavy machine guns and artillery emplaced behind makeshift gun ports.

The *SS Begleit-Kommando* the unit that was charged with Hitler’s protection and it was in fact the SS who had the task of disposing of the last vestments of the Führer. Fore in the closing days of the war Hitler had informed *SS-Sturmbannführer* Otto Günscher that he and Eva Braun were going to commit suicide. Further more he was to be sure that he burned their bodies so that they did not fall into Russian hands, “I don’t want to be put on display in some Russian waxworks.’



Volkssturm (“Home Guard”) recruits receive instruction in the use of the MG 42

machine gun in Berlin, April 1945. Such measures were wholly inadequate to resist the might of the advancing Red Army.

30th April 1945 saw Hitler's suicide. Günsche was the first person to see his body, where upon he ordered *SS-Sturmbannführer* Erich Kempka to forage for fuel necessary to incinerate the corpses. Finding only 160 litres in the Reich chancellery garage Kempka "borrowed" another 20 litres from the chancellery's chief technician, Hentschel. *SS-Sturmbannführer* Heinz Linge help wrap the corpse in an army blanket and carry it into the chancellery garden where it and Eva Braun's were to be cremated. It fell to Kempka, after the suicide pact, to carry Eva's body; he carried her half way up the stairs leading from the bunker to the garden, only to be relieved by Günscher, who carried her the rest of the way, placing her body next to Hitler's. The corpses were doused with the fuel and ignited by Bormann in a Viking funeral pyre, in accordance with Hitler's last orders. Linge helped inter the charred remains in a shell hole. *SS-Oberführer* Wilhelm Mohnke had been transferred to Berlin as Commandant of the Reich Chancellery, was in the Führer bunker when Hitler committed suicide and an eye witness reported that he wept openly. It was Mohnke who set fire to the bunker on the following day, 1st May. He joined one of the escape groups on that night, only to be captured latter by the Russians while hiding in a cellar in the Schönhauser Allee.

The first Soviet assault went in on 30th April, supported by artillery and Katyusha rocket launchers. Three battalions of infantry charged forward in the face of heavy fire and managed to breach the defences. Inside the building the fighting degenerated into hand-to-hand combat. The SS had turned the cellar into a fortress and it took two days of heavy fighting before they were defeated. Some 2500 of the Reichstag's defenders were killed with another 2600 taken prisoner. By that time Hitler was dead and the battle for Berlin was over. At 1500 hours on 2nd May, Lieutenant- General Weidling

surrendered the city to the Russians. There were still groups of *Waffen-SS* troops fighting in various pockets of the shrinking Reich. They continued to fight until all the formal surrender negotiations had been completed. The *Waffen-SS* had like the *Wehrmacht* failed to bring the Führer victory but it had fought with courage and tenacity throughout. But there was another side to its action, the atrocities committed by Hitler's elite.

The *Waffen-SS* had been an organisation that had fought in a manner never encountered before. It was to lay the foundation for the truly integrated defences that were employed by NATO after the end of the war and the beginnings of the "Cold War". It without doubt lengthened the war in the East considerably, but by how much is very hard to quantify.



Volkssturm learn how to use the Panzerschreck anti-tank weapon in Berlin in the last days of the war. Up until the end Himmler's Escort Battalion scoured the city's streets, hanging deserters and "shirkers".

Possibly their tenacity gave a false sense of security to not only Hitler and Himmler, which made them continue the war and the atrocities, but to the German High Command. The attempts to sue for peace by the officer corps might have been prosecuted more diligently. The attempt on Hitler's life on 20th July 1944 might well have born greater fruits, and as it turned out gave greater control to the SS might have been averted. The terrible loss of life both on the battle field and in the extermination camps might well have been alleviated.

The price the *Waffen-SS* paid in the East can in some ways be illustrated by how they entered captivity. Their mode of surrender was not one of subjugation, it was of pride in their position as Hitler's elite. The *2nd SS-Panzer-Division "Das Reich"*, in the last days of the war, was able to retreat to the west and into American captivity. The *3rd SS Panzer Division "Totenkopf"* had withdrawn to the north-west of Vienna and surrendered to the Americans on 9th May. But its members were then handed over to the Russians were few of the Waffen-SS soldiers survived Russian captivity. The *4th SS-Polizei-Panzer-Grenadier-Division,* after a brief rest south-west of Stettin, fought its way form an area north of Berlin, across the Elbe to Wittenberge-Lenzen and into American captivity. The *5th SS-Panzer-Grenadier-Division "Wiking"*, in the final months of the war fought a stiff defensive action from Stuhlweissenburg, west of Budapest, back into Czechoslovakia, just south of Fürstenfeld. There were long march delays through the mountains on the day of surrender. Through the confusion, rumours abounded, requests buzzed, and orders were given. Many wanted to reach the mountains and were prepared for a long stay. The "Alpine fortress", had been supplied with stores, equipment and weapons. Although, left to their own discretion, the unequivocal orders and old discipline held the division together. At roughly 18.00 hours followed a further march to

Mauterndorf, where during the night of 8th May, the first American advance guards were encountered. However, they paid little notice to the German column. They were attempting to move east as quickly as possible to, as they said, to halt the Soviets as far to the East as possible. Near Wagrain, just before the demarcation line, the commander once again assembled his officers. *SS-Oberführer* Ullrich released the commanders and officers from their oath and left them free to go into an uncertain imprisonment with the troops or to strike out into the mountains and attempt to teach their homes. He explained he preferred to remain with his men. The assembled officers, all shared their commander's view and went as a complete unit into American captivity. On the eve of 13th May, the division's command section reached the American barricades. All weapons had to be surrendered, only the officers being permitted to retain their pistols. The *9th SS Panzer Division "Hohenstaufen"* pathetic remnants surrendered to the Americans at Seyr in Austria, as did the *Leibstandarte SS 'Adolf Hitler'*. The *10th SS Panzer Division "Frundsberg"* was under the 4th Armoured Army, Army Group Centre, in May, fighting near Cottbus and further south in Saxony. The Division moved to the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia under Army Group Centre and entered Russian captivity at Schönau. The *12th SS Panzer Division "Hitlerjugend"* managed to surrender to the Americans on 8th May, when they crossed the demarcation line near the town of Enns, south-east of Linz, and entered American captivity. Just before crossing the demarcation line, and at less than a mile from it, *SS-Brigadeführer und Generalmajor der Waffen-SS* Hugo Kraas inspected the remnants of his division in one last review. 455 men and one tank were all that remained of what had been one of German's foremost armoured divisions. Proud and stubborn even in defeat, they had refused to comply with the American order that their vehicles should be draped with white flags as token of surrender.

The *11th SS Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier Division "Nordland"* was smashed in the Battle of Berlin. The *14th Waffen- GrenadierDivision der SS (ukrainische Nr1)* from the Ukraine surrendered to the Soviets in Czechoslovakia and the bulk of its surviving personnel were promptly shot. Part of the *15th Waffen- GrenadierDivision der SS (lettische Nr1)* from Latvia participated in the defence of Berlin. The *16th SS Panzergrenadier Division "Reichsführer-SS"* withdrew into Untersteiermark in the south of Austria, but became fragmented. Some units of the *16th SS Panzergrenadier Division "Reichsführer-SS"* surrendered south of the River Drau, while others withdrew towards Klagenfurt and surrendered to the Americans and British. The *22nd Freiwilligen-Kavallreie Division der SS "Maria Theresia"* predominantly Hungarian, was destroyed in the fighting for Budapest. The Red Army also overran the predominantly Hungarian volunteer, *25th Waffen-GrenadierDivision der SS (ungarische Nr1) "Hunyadi"* and *26th Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS (ungarische Nr2) "Hungaria"*, while they were still forming. The *34th Waffen- Grenadier Division der SS "Landstorm Nederland"* little more than a regiment, was wiped out in the fall of Berlin, and the battered remnants of the *27th SS Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier Division (flämische Nr1) "Langemarck"* and *28th SS Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier Division "Wallonien"* were also wiped out during the fighting for the Reich's capital city as were the remaining volunteers of the French, *33rd Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS (französische Nr1) "Charlemagne"*. On the day after the capitulation, thirteen French volunteers were shot without the benefit of a Court marshal near Bad Reichenhall. The order for the execution was given by the French General Leclerc, Commander of the French 2nd Armoured Division. Why were these men put in front of a firing squad? These French volunteers were wearing German uniform, more precisely that of the *33rd Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS*

(französische Nr1) "Charlemagne".. They had only been deployed in their units in the East, and had surrendered to the Americans on the day of capitulation. These unfortunate volunteers were then handed over by the US Army to the support "Leclerc Division". The General took a personal interest in these French prisoners of war and asked them, "why are you wearing these German uniforms?" one prisoner replied, "General, why are you wearing an American uniform?" that was enough to sign the death warrant of the thirteen French volunteers. The dead remained unburied for three days, the French chaplain, who was present did not try to establish their identities or see to it that they had a Christian burial. The executed soldiers were buried under the supervision of the US Army. Only the names of five of the men could be established: Paul Briffot, Robert Doffat, Serge Krotoff, Jean Robert and Raymond Payras, the other eight victims were included on a memorial as "Unknown Soldiers". But many more lie were they fell, truly unknown. With the "Iron Curtain" swept away it is possible to see in the former East Germany graves beside the road. Tended now openly. One particular story unfolded were in the last day of the war a scratch company of mixed German troops held out at the Duke of Brunswick's hunting lodge at Altenbrack in the Hartz mountains. They were eliminated by the American forces. With the withdrawal, the village fell into Russian hands. Two graves in the woods were tended by a mother whose sons had died in the west. She had no chance to visit her sons graves, but substituted these "Unknown Soldiers", as her own.

ORDER OF BATTLE OF THE WAFFEN-SS

A. SS-Armeen: 6. SS-Panzer-Armee

B. SS-Armee-Korps

I. SS-Panzer-Korps “Leibstandarte”
II. SS-Panzer-Korps
III. (Germanisches) SS-Panzer-Korps
IV. SS-Panzer-Korps
V. SS-Freiwilligen-Gebirgs-Korps
VI. Waffen-Armee-Krops der SS (lettisches)
IX. Waffen-Gebirgs-Korps der SS
X. SS-Armee Korps
XI. SS-Armee Korps
XII. SS-Armee Korps
XIII. SS-Armee Korps
XIV. Kosaken-Kavallerie-Korps der SS
XVIII. SS-Armee-Korps

C. SS-Divisionen

1st SS Panzer Division *Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler*
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 1
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 2
SS - Panzer Regiment 1
SS - Panzer Artillerie Regiment

2nd SS Panzer Division *Das Reich*
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 3 *Deutschland*
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 4 Der Führer

SS - Panzer Regiment 2
SS - Panzer Artillerie Regiment 2

3rd SS Panzer Division *Totenkopf*
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 5 *Thule*
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 6 *Theodor Eicke*
SS - Panzer Regiment 3
SS - Panzer Artillerie Regiment 3

4th SS Panzergrenadier Division *SS-Polizei*
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 7
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 8
SS - Artillerie Regiment 4
SS - Sturmgeschutz Abteilung 4

5th SS Panzer Division *Wiking*
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 9 *Germania*
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 10 *Westland*
SS - Panzer Regiment 5
SS - Panzer Artillerie Regiment 5

6th SS Gebirgs Division *Nord*
SS - Gebirgsjäger Regiment 11 *Reinhard Heydrich*
SS - Gebirgsjäger Regiment 12 *Michael Gaissmair*
SS - Gebirgs Artillerie Regiment 6
SS - Sturmgeschutz Batterie 6

7th SS Freiwilligen-Gebirgs Division *Prinz Eugen*
SS - Freiwilligen Gebirgsjäger Regiment 13 *Artur Phleps*
SS - Freiwilligen Gebirgsjäger Regiment 14 *Skanderbeg*
SS - Freiwilligen Gebirgs Artillerie Regiment 7
SS - Sturmgeschutz Abteilung 7

8th SS Kavallerie Division *Florian Geyer*
SS - Kavallerie Regiment 15
SS - Kavallerie Regiment 16
SS - Kavallerie Regiment 18
SS - Artillerie Regiment (mot) 8
SS - Panzerjäger Abteilung 8

9th SS Panzer Division *Hohenstaufen*
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 19
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 20
SS - Panzer Regiment 9
SS - Panzer Artillerie Regiment 9

10th SS Panzer Division *Frundsberg*
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 21
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 22
SS - Panzer Regiment 10
SS - Panzer Artillerie Regiment 10

11th SS Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier Division *Nordland*
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 23 *Norge*
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 24 *Danmark*
SS - Panzer Abteilung 11 *Herman von Salza*
SS - Panzer Artillerie Regiment 11

12th SS Panzer Division *Hitlerjugend*
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 25
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 26
SS - Panzer Regiment 12
SS - Panzer Artillerie Regiment 12

13th Waffen-Gebirgs Division der SS (Kroatische Nr1) *Handschar*

SS - Waffen Gebirgsjäger Regiment 27
SS - Waffen Gebirgsjäger Regiment 28
SS - Waffen Artillerie Regiment 13
SS - Panzerjäger Abteilung 13

14th Waffen- GrenadierDivision der SS (ukrainische Nr1)
Waffen - Grenadier Regiment der SS 29
Waffen - Grenadier Regiment der SS 30
Waffen - Grenadier Regiment der SS 31
Waffen - Artillerie Regiment der SS 14

15th Waffen- GrenadierDivision der SS (lettische Nr1)
Waffen - Grenadier Regiment der SS 32
Waffen - Grenadier Regiment der SS 33
Waffen - Grenadier Regiment der SS 34
Waffen - Artillerie Regiment der SS 15

16th SS Panzergrenadier Division *Reichsführer-SS*
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 35
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 36
SS - Artillerie Regiment16
SS - Panzer Abteilung 16

17th SS Panzergrenadier Division *Götz von Berlichingen*
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 37
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 38
SS - Panzer Artillerie Regiment 17
SS - Panzerjäger Abteilung 17

18th SS Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier Division *Horst Wessel*
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 39
SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment 40

SS - Artillerie Regiment 18
SS - Panzerjäger Abteilung 18

19th Waffen- Grenadier Division der SS (lettisches Nr2)
Waffen - Grenadier Regiment der SS 42 *Voldemars Veiss*
Waffen - Grenadier Regiment der SS 43 *Heinrich Schuldt*
Waffen - Grenadier Regiment der SS 44
Waffen - Artillerie Regiment 19

20th Waffen- Grenadier Division der SS (estnische Nr1)
Waffen - Grenadier Division der SS 45
Waffen - Grenadier Division der SS 46
Waffen - Grenadier Division der SS 47
Waffen - Artillerie Regiment 20

21st Waffen- Gebirgs Division der SS (albanische Nr1) *Skanderbeg*
Waffen - Gebirgs Division der SS 50
Waffen - Gebirgs Division der SS 51
Waffen - Gebirgs Artillerie Regiment 21

22nd Freiwilligen-Kavallreie Division der SS *Maria Theresia*
Freiwilligen- Kavallerie Regiment der SS 52
Freiwilligen- Kavallerie Regiment der SS 53
Freiwilligen- Kavallerie Regiment der SS 54
Freiwilligen- Kavallerie Regiment der SS 55

23rd Waffen-Gebirgs Division der SS *Kama*
Waffen - Gebirgsjäger Regiment der SS 56
Waffen - Gebirgsjäger Regiment der SS 57
Waffen - Gebirgsjäger Regiment der SS 58
Waffen - Gebirgs Artillerie Regiment der SS 23

23rd Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier Division *Nederland*
SS Freiwilligen Panzergrenadier Regiment 48 *General Seyffardt*
SS Freiwilligen Panzergrenadier Regiment 49 *De Ruiter*

24th Waffen - Gebirgs Division der SS *Karstjäger*
Waffen - Gebirgsjäger Regiment der SS 59
Waffen - Gebirgsjäger Regiment der SS 60
Waffen - Gebirgs Artillerie Regiment 24

25th Waffen- GrenadierDivision der SS (ungarische Nr1) *Hunyadi*
Waffen - Grenadier Regiment der SS 61
Waffen - Grenadier Regiment der SS 62
Waffen - Grenadier Regiment der SS 63
Waffen - Artillerie Regiment der SS 25

26th Waffen- Grenadier Division der SS (ungarische Nr2) *Hungaria*
Waffen - Grenadier Regiment der SS 64
Waffen - Grenadier Regiment der SS 65
Waffen - Grenadier Regiment der SS 66
SS - Panzer Bataillon 26

27th SS Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier Division (flämische Nr1) *Langemarck*

28th SS Freiwilligen-Panzergrenadier Division *Wallonien*

29th Waffen- Grenadier Division der SS (russische Nr1)

29th Waffen- Grenadier Division der SS (italienische Nr1)
SS - Füsilier Bataillon *Debica*
SS - Füsilier Bataillon *Vendetta*

30th Waffen- Grenadier Division der SS (weissruthenische Nr1)
Waffen - Grenadier Regiment der SS 75

Waffen - Grenadier Regiment der SS 76
Waffen - Grenadier Regiment der SS 77
Waffen - Artillerie Regiment der SS 30

31st SS Freiwilligen Grenadier Division
SS - Freiwilligen Grenadier Regiment 78
SS - Freiwilligen Grenadier Regiment 79
SS - Freiwilligen Grenadier Regiment 80
SS - Artillerie Regiment 31

32nd SS Freiwilligen Grenadier Division *30 Januar*

33rd Waffen-Kavallreie Division der SS (ungarische Nr3)

33rd Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS (französische Nr1) *Charlemagn*e

34th Waffen- Grenadier Division der SS *Landstorm Nederland*
SS - Freiwilligen Grenadier Regiment 83
SS - Freiwilligen Grenadier Regiment 84

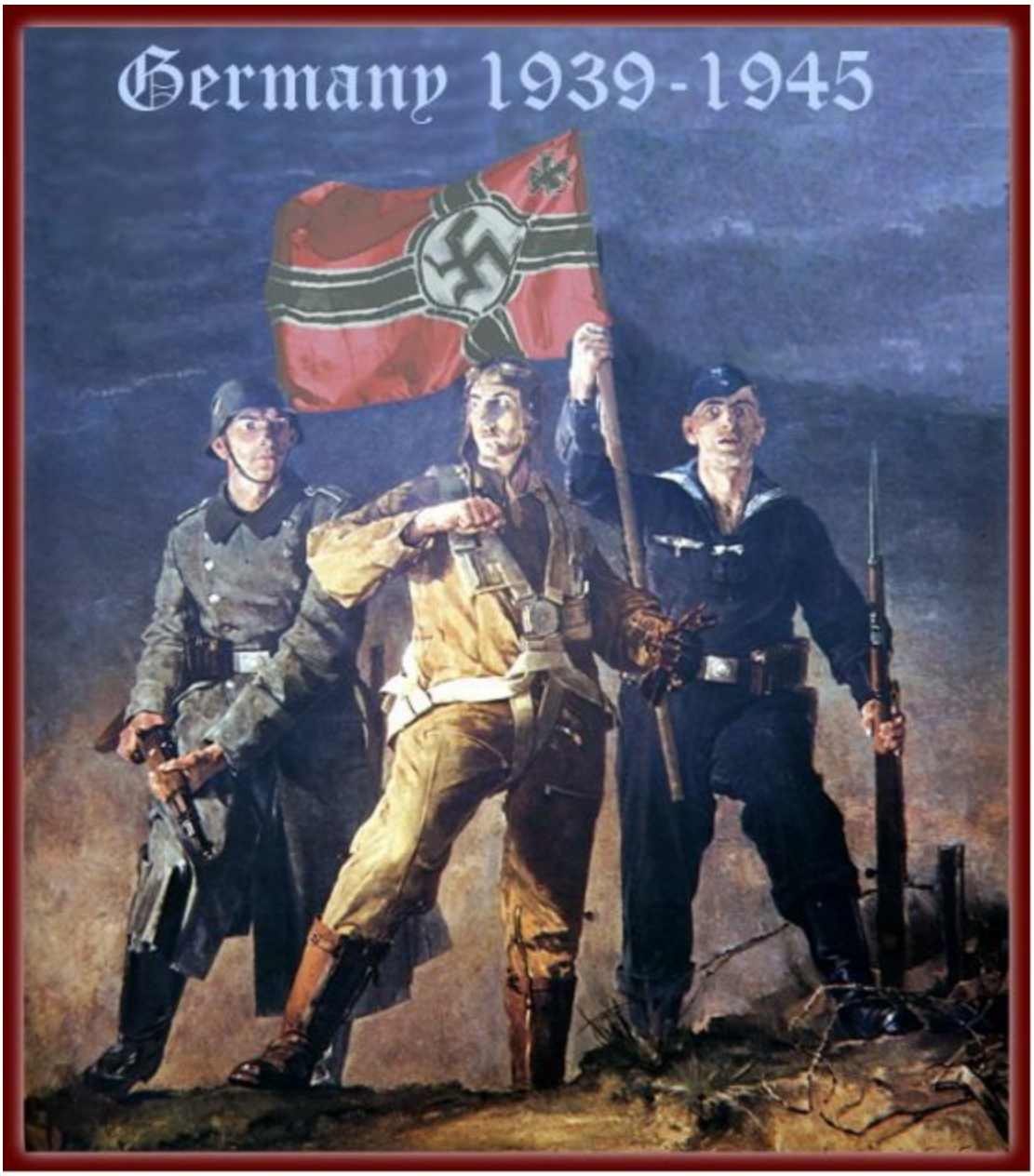
35th SS Polizei Grenadier Division

36th Waffen- Grenadier Division der SS

37th SS Freiwilligen-Kavallreie Division *Lützow*

38th SS Grenadier Division *Nibelungen*

TABLE OF WAFFEN-SS AWARDS FOR SERVICE ON THE EASTERN FRONT



Award Name — Date of Introduction

Wound Badge 1939 - Black Class — 1 September 1939

Wound Badge 1939 - Silver Class — 1 September 1939

Wound Badge 1939 - Gold Class — 1 September 1939
Iron Cross - Second Class — 1 September 1939
Iron Cross - Second Class 1939 Bar - First Type — 1 September 1939
Iron Cross - First Class — 1 September 1939
Iron Cross- First Class 1939 Bar — 1 September 1939
Knights Cross of the Iron Cross — 1 September 1939
Knights Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves — 3 June 1940
Knights Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves and Swords — 21 June 1941
Knights Cross of the Iron Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords and Diamonds — 15 July 1941
German Cross in Gold — 28 September 1941
German Cross in Silver — 28 September 1941
War Merit Medal — 19 August 1940
War Merit Cross Second Class Bronze without Swords — 18 October 1939
War Merit Cross First Class Silver without Swords — 18 October 1939
War Merit Cross, Knights Cross Silver without Swords — 19 August 1940
War Merit Cross, Second Class Bronze with Swords — 18 October 1939
War Merit Cross, First Class Silver with Swords — 18 October 1939
War Merit Cross, Knights Cross Silver with Swords — 19 August 1940
Roll of Honour Clasp - Army — 30 January 1944
Medal for the Winter Campaign in Russia 1941 - 1942 — 26 May 1942
Fuhrer Commendation Certificate – 1941
Courland Commemorative Cuff Title — 12 March 1945
Cholm Shield — 1 July 1942
Crimea Shield — 25 July 1942
Demjansk Shield — 25 April 1943
Kuban Shield — 21 September 1943

Warsaw Shield — 10 December 1944
Lapland Shield — February 1945
Balkan Shield
Army Parachutists Badge — 1 September 1937
Infantry Assault Badge - Silver Class — 20 December 1939
Infanty Assault Badge - Bronze Class — 1 June 1940
Silver Tank Battle Badge — 20 December 1939
Silver Tank Battle Badge - 25 Class — June 1943
Silver Tank Battle Badge - 50 Class — June 1943
Silver Tank Battle Badge - 75 Class — June 1943
Silver Tank Battle Badge - 100 Class — June 1943
Bronze Tank Battle Badge — 1 June 1940
Bronze Tank Battle Badge - 25 Class — June 1943
Bronze Tank Battle Badge - 50 Class — June 1943
Bronze Tank Battle Badge - 75 Class — June 1943
Bronze Tank Battle Badge - 100 Class — June 1943
General Assault Badge — 1 June 1940
Gereral Assault Badge - 25 Class — 22 June 1943
General Assault Badge - 50 Class — 22 June 1943
General Assault Badge - 75 Class — 22 June 1943
General Assault Badge - 100 Class — 22 June 1943
General Assault Badge - Bronze Class
Army Flack Badge — 18 July 1941
Close Combat Bar - Bronze Class — 25 November 1942
Close Combat Bar - Silver Class — 25 November 1942
Close Combat Bar - Gold Class — 25 November 1942
Army Balloon Observers Badge - Bronze Class — 8 July 1944
Army Balloon Observers Badge - Silver Class — 8 July 1944

Army Balloon Observers Badge - Gold Class — 8 July 1944
Anti-Partisan War Badge - Bronze Class — 30 January 1944
Anti-Partisan War Badge - Silver Class — 30 January 1944
Anti-Partisan War Badge - Gold Class — 30 January 1944
Special Badge for Singlehanded Destruction of a Tank - Silver Class — 9 March 1942
Special Badge for Singlehanded Destruction of a Tank - Gold Class — 18 December 1943
Badge for Shooting Down Low Flying Aircraft - Silver Class — 12 January 1945
Badge for Shooting Down Low Flying Aircraft - Gold Class — 12 January 1945
Snipers Badge - First Class — 20 August 1944
Snipers Badge - Second Class — 20 August 1944
Snipers Badge - Third Class — 20 August 1944

Commanders of European units and European volunteers decorated with the Knight’s Cross of the Iron Cross.



General Officers Commanding

IIIrd (Germanic) SS Panzer Corps

Steiner Felix —

10.08.1944 (Swords 86th) Obergruppenführer und General der Waffen-SS

23.12.1942 (Oakleaves 159th)

15.08.1940 (Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross)

Vth SS Mountain Corps

Phleps Arthur —

24.11.1944 (Oakleaves 670th) Obergruppenführer und General der Waffen-

SS
04.07.1943 (Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross)

VIth Waffen Army Corps of the SS (Latvian)

Krueger Walter —
01.02.1945 (Swords 120th) Obergruppenführer and General of the Waffen-SS
31.08.1943 (Oakleaves 286th)
13.12.1941 (Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross)

IXth Waffen Mountain Corps of the SS (Croatian)

v. Pfeffer-Wildenbruch Karl —
04.02.1945 (Oakleaves 723rd) Obergruppenführer and General of the Waffen-SS
11.01.1945 (Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross)

Corps Pioneer Commander IIIrd (Germanic) SS Panzer Corps

Schaefer Max —
25.01.1945 (Oakleaves 714th) Standartenführer
22.02.1943 (Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross)

7th SS Volunteer Mountain Division “Prinz Eugen”

Dietsche Bernhard — 17.07.1943 – Sturmbannführer
Krombholz Franz — 28.03.1945 – Hauptsturmführer
Kumm Otto — Brigadeführer and Major General of the Waffen-SS —
04.04.1945 (Swords 138th)
06.04.1943 (Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross)
Neumann Eggert — 03.11.1944 – Sturmbannführer
Paletta Harry — 26.11.1944 — Obersturmbannführer
Petersen Heinrich — 13.11.1943 — Obersturmbannführer

11th SS Volunteer Panzer Grenadier Division “Nordland”

Bunse Fritz — 30.01.1944 — Sturmbannführer
Christophersen Egon — 11.07.1944 — Unterscharführer
Fischer Alred — 09.05.1945 — Sturmbannführer
Gieseler Karl-Heinz — 29.04.1945 — Obersturmbannführer
Guerz Martin — 23.10.1944 — Hauptsturmführer
Haemel Heinz — 16.06.1944 — Hauptsturmführer
Hektor Albert — 23.08.1944 — Oberscharführer
Hund Willi — 20.04.1945 — Obersturmführer
Kam Soeren — 07.02.1945 — Untersturmführer
Karl Friedrich-Wilhelm — 26.12.1944 — Obersturmbannführer
Kausch Paul-Albert — 23.08.1944 — Obersturmbannführer
Knöchlein Fritz — 16.11.1944 — Obersturmbannführer
Kruegel Albrecht — 12.03.1944 — Sturmbannführer
Langendorf Georg — 12.03.1944 — Untersturmführer
Luengen Siegfried — 16.11.1944 — Hauptscharführer
Potschka Herman — 26.12.1944 — Sturmbannführer
Rott Rudolf — 28.02.1945 — Obersturmführer
Saalbach Rudolf — 12.03.1944 — Hauptsturmführer
Seebach Walter — 12.03.1944 — Obersturmführer
Sporck Kaspar — 23.10.1944 — Unterschführer
Spoerle Richard — 16.11.1944 — Hauptsturmführer
v. Scholz Fritz — Gruppenführer and Lieutenant General of the Waffen-SS
—
08.08.1944 (Swords 85th)
12.03.1944 (Oakleaves 423rd)
18.01.1942 (Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross)
Schulz-Streeck Karl-Heinz — 02.05.1945 – Sturmbannführer

Stoffers Arnold — 12.03.1944 – Obersturmbannführer
Vogt Fritz —
16.03.1945 (Oakleaves 785th) Hauptsturmführer
04.09.1944 (Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross)
Wild Philipp — 21.03.1944 – Oberscharführer
Ziegler Joachim — Brigadeführer and Major General of the Waffen-SS — 28.04.1945 (Oakleaves 848th)

13th Waffen Mountain Division “Handschar” (Croatia No. 1)

Hampel Desiderius — 03.05.1945 – Standartenführer
Kinz Hemlut — 03.05.1945 — Hauptsturmführer
Liecke Karl — 03.05.1945 — Sturmbannführer and Major of the Police
Stenwedel Albert — 03.05.1945 — Sturmbannführer

14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS (Galician No. 1)

Freitag Fritz — 30.09.1944 — Brigadeführer and Major General of the Waffen-SS

15th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS (Latvia No. 1)

Aperats Karlis — 21.09.1944 – Obersturmbannführer
Ax Adolf — 09.05.1945 — Oberführer
Heilmann Nikolaus — 13.08.1944 Oberführer
Sensberg Karlis — 09.05.1944 — Unterscharführer

19th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS (Latvian No. 2)

Adamsons Mervaldis — 25.04.1934 – Untersturmführer
Ancans Robert — 25.01.1945 — Untersturmführer
Ansons Zanis — 25.01.1945 — Hauptscharführer
Butkus Zanis — 21.09.1944 — Hauptsturmführer
Gaigals Roberts — 05.05.1945 — Obersturmführer

Galdins Nikolajs — 25.01.1945 — Obersturmbannführer
Reinholds Voldemar — 09.05.1945 — Sturmbannführer
Riekstins Alfreds — 05.04.1945 — Unterscharführer
Schuldt Hinrich — Brigadeführer and Major General of the Waffen-SS — 25.03.1944 (Swords 56th)
02.04.1943 (Oakleaves 220th)
05.04.1942 (Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross)
Streckenbach Bruno — Gruppenführer and Lieutenant General of the Police —
21.01.1945 (Oakleaves 701st)
27.08.1944 (Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross)
Veiss Voldemars — 09.02.1944 — Standartenführer

20th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS (Estonian No. 1)

Augsberger Franz — 31.03.1945 — Brigadeführer and Major General of the Waffen-SS
Langhorst Bernhard — 05.04.1945 — Sturmbannführer
Maitla Paul — 23.08.1944 — Hauptsturmführer
Nugiseks Harald — 09.04.1944 — Unterscharführer
Rebane Alfons —
09.05.1945 (Oakleaves 875th) — Standartenführer
23.02.1944 (Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross)
Riipalu Harald — 23.08.1944 — Obersturmbannführer

SS Volunteer Panzer Grenadier Battalion “Narwa”, 5th SS Panzer Division “Wiking”

Eberhardt Georg — 04.08.1943 — Sturmbannführer

22nd SS Volunteer Cavalry Division “Maria Theresia”

Ameiser Anton — 01.11.1944 — Sturmbannführer

Vandieken Anton — 26.12.1944 — Hauptsturmführer
Zehender August — Brigadeführer and Major General of the Waffen-SS — 04.02.1945 (Oakleaves 722nd)

SS Volunteer Legion “Nederland”

Mooyman Gerardes — 20.02.1943 — Sturmmann

23rd SS Volunteer Panzer Grenadier Division “Nederland”

Behler Clemens — 17.03.1945 — Obersturmführer
Bruins Derk-Elsko — 23.08.1944 — Rottenführer
Collani Hans — 19.08.1944 — Obersturmbannführer
Ertel Karl-Heinz — 23.08.1944 — Heuptsturmführer
Frühauf Carl-Heinz — 04.06.1944 — Hauptsturmführer
Hellmers Johannes — 05.03.1945 — Obersturmführer
Hofer Lothar — 05.04.1945 — Sturmbannführer and Major of the Police
Jenschke Walter — 18.12.1944 — Gunner
Joerchel Wolfgang — 21.04.1944 — Obersturmbannführer
Lohmann Hanns-Heinrich – Obersturmbannführer — 09.05.1945 (Oakleaves 872nd)
12.03.1944 (Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross)
Meyer Hans — 02.09.1944 — Hauptsturmführer
Petersen Otto — 11.12.1944 — Hauptsturmführer
Ruehle von Lilienstern Hans-J. — 12.02.1944 Hauptsturmführer
Rieth Herbert-Albert — 11.12.1944 — Untersturmführer
Scheibe Siegfried — 09.05.1945 — Sturmbannführer
Schlueter Wilhelm — 23.08.1944 — Sturmbannführer and Major of the Police
Schluifelder Georg — 26.11.1944 — Standarten-Oberjunker

Scholz Helmut —
24.09.1944 (Oakleaves 591st) — Obersturmführer
04.06.1944 (Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross)
Strapatin Stefan — 16.11.1944 — Rottenführer
Wanhoefer Günter — 27.08.1944 — Hauptsturmführer
Wagner Jürgen — Brigadeführer and Major General of the Waffen-SS —
29.12.1944 (Oakleaves 680th)
24.07.1943 Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross)

27th SS Volunteer Grenadier Division “Langemarck”

Schellong Conrad — 28.02.1945 — Sturmbannführer
Schrijnen Remi — 21.09.1944 — Sturmmann

28th Volunteer Panzer Grenadier Division “Wallonien”

Degrelle Leon —
27.08.1944 (Oakleaves) — Sturmbannführer
20.02.1944 (Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross)
Gillis Leon — 30.09.1944 — Untersturmführer
Leroy Jaques — 20.04.1945 — Untersturmführer

33rd Waffen Grenadied Division of the SS “Charlemagne” (French No. 1)

Fenet Henri-Joseph — 29.04.1945 — Hauptsturmführer
Vaulot Eugène — 29.04.1945 — Unterscharführer

TABLE OF WAFFEN-SS RANKS

Revised late 1941

SS-Mann
SS-Sturmmann
SS-Rottenführer
SS-Unterscharführer
SS-Scharführer
SS-Oberscharführer
SS-Hauptscharführer
SS-Untersturmführer
SS-Obersturmführer
SS-Hauptsturmführer
SS-Sturmbannführer
SS-Oberbannsturmführer
SS-Standartenführer
SS-Oberführer
SS-Brigadeführer
SS-Gruppenführer
SS-Obergruppenführer
Reichsführer-SS

Revised 1942 - 1945

SS-Schüte — Private
SS-Oberschütze — Senior Private, attained after six month's service
SS-Sturmmann — Lance-Corporal
SS-Rottenführer — Corporal

SS-Unterscharführer — Senior Corporal / Lance Sergeant
SS-Scharführer — Sergeant
SS-Oberscharführer — Staff Sergeant
SS-Hauptscharführer — Warrant Officer
SS-Sturmscharführer — Senior Warrant Officer after 15 years' service
SS-Untersturmführer — Second Lieutenant
SS-Obersturmführer — First Lieutenant
SS-Hauptsturmführer — Captain
SS-Sturmbannführer — Major
SS-Oberbannsturmführer — Lieutenant-Colonel
SS-Standartenführer — Colonel
SS-Oberführer — Senior Colonel
SS-Brigadeführer und Generalmajor der Waffen-SS — Major – General
SS-Gruppenführer und Generalleutnant der Waffen-SS — Lieutenant-General
SS-Obergruppenführer und General der Waffen-SS — General
SS-Oberstgruppenführer und Generaloberst der Waffen-SS — Colonel-General
Reichsführer-SS

The type of unit that the *SS* - Man was assigned to effected the designation of the tile of the rank for the lower straters of the command structure. Also in two further special circumstances the prefix *SS* before the rank title was dropped and substituted by the word *"Legion"* the abbreviation *"Leg."* or *"Waffen"*. The first was in the case of Foreign Legions serving as part of the *Waffen-SS*. The rank title was amended to *Leg. - Schütze, Leg. - Sturmman* and so on. In the case of Divisions that were made up primarily of "Non Germanic" personnel volunteers or conscripts and bore the designation *"Waffen-SS ..... Division der SS"* the rank title changed to *Waffen* -

Oberbannsturmführer der SS, Waffen - Standartenführer der SS and so on

SS - Panzer – Regiment
SS – Panzerschütze
SS - Panzeroberschütze

SS - Panzergrenadier Regiment
SS – Panzergrenadier
SS - Panzerobergrenadier

SS - Grenadier Regiment
SS – Grenadier
SS - Obergrenadier

SS - Gebirgs - Jäger – Regiment
SS – Jäger
SS - Oberschütze

SS - Reiter – Regiment
SS – Reiter
SS - Oberreiter

SS - Artillery – Regiment
SS – Kanonier
SS - Oberkanonier

SS - Gebirgs - Artillery – Regiment
SS – Kanonier
SS - Oberkanonier

SS - Sturmgesch. – Einheit
SS – Kanonier
SS - Oberkanonier

SS - Panzer - Jäger – Einheit
SS – Schütze
SS - Oberschütze

SS - Kradschutzen. – Einheit
SS – Schütze
SS - Oberschütze

SS - Panzer - Späh. – Einheit
SS – Panzerschütze
SS - Panzeroberschütze

SS - Flak – Einheit
SS – Kanonier
SS - Oberkanonier

SS - Pionier – Einheit
SS – Pionier
SS - Oberpionier

SS - Nachrichten – Einheit
SS – Funker
SS - Oberunker

SS - Werfer – Einheit
SS – Kanonier
SS - Oberkanonier

SS - Radfahr – Einheit
SS – Schütze
SS - Oberschütze

SS - Nachschub - Einheit (Besp.)

SS – Fahrer
SS - Oberfahrer

SS - Nachschub - Einheit (Mot.)
SS – Kraftfahrer
SS - Oberkraftfahrer

SS - Sanitäts – Einheit
SS – Schütze
SS - Oberschütze

SS - Veterinär – Einheit
SS – Reiter
SS - Oberreiter

SS - Werkstatt – Einheit
SS – Schütze
SS - Oberschütze

SS - Feldgend. – Einheit
SS - Feldgendarm

SS - Karstwehr – Bataillon
SS – Jäger

SS - Oberschütze

SS - Wehrgeologen – Bataillon
SS – Schütze
SS - Oberschütze

SS - Kriegsberichter Abteilung.
SS – Schütze
SS - Oberschütze

SS - Jäger - Bataillon 502

SS - Bewährungsschütze

TABLE OF WAFFEN-SS RANKS OF OFFICER AND NCO CANDIDATES

Early 1940

SS – Junker

SS – Standartenjunker

SS - Standartenoberjunker

From July 1943

Führer – Bewerber

SS – Junker

SS – Standartenjunker

SS - Standartenoberjunker

NCO CANDIDATES

SS - Unterführer - Anwärter — Signed for 12 years service

SS - Unterführer - Bewerber — Signed for less than 12 years service

Einsatzgruppen in Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland

The Einsatzgruppen targeted four groups for *"Säuberungsaktionen"* : communist, functionaries, asiatics, jews, and gypsies. Other classifications (i.e., homosexuals, asocials, etc.) were also usually persecuted also. From the very beginning, the *Einsatzgruppen* were composed of a mixture of SD, Polizei, *SS-Verfügungstruppe*, and *SS-Totenkopfverbände* personnel.

AUSTRIA:

For the occupation of Austria: *Einsatzkommando "Osterreich"* under the command of *SS-Standartenführer* Dr. Franz Six.

CZECHOSLOVAKIA:

For the initial occupation of Czechoslovakia (under the Munich accords), the Germans deployed *Einsatzgruppe "Dresden"* (5 Einsatzkommandos; CO: *SS-Oberführer* Heinz Jost) and *Einsatzgruppe "Wien"* (2 Einsatzkommandos +11 smaller Kommandos; CO: *SS-Standartenführer* Dr. Walter Stahlecker). On 15th March 1939, when the Germans seized the remainder of the country, they deployed Einsatzgruppe I "Prag" (4 Einsatzkommandos: Budweis, Prag, Kolin, Pardubitz), *Einsatzgruppe* II "Brünn" (3 Einsatzkommandos: Olmütz, Brünn, Zlin), and Sonderkommando "Pilsen".

POLAND:

follow main armies and enter Poland on 4th September 1939. *Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des Sicherheitsdienst* were mobile detachments of the *Sipo* and SD. Their purpose was the rapid intervention in intelligence and security police matters. Their members wore the service uniforms of the *SSVT* with the SD diamond on the left sleeve. Each Einsatzgruppe was divided into a number of Einsatzkommandos of 100-150 men each. All of the senior posts were occupied by SD commanders. The units were engaged in the "suppression of all anti-Reich and anti-German elements in rear of the fighting troops" (i.e., murdering Polish aristocrats, priests, intellectuals, and Jews)... Armed with previously prepared lists...

Einsatzgruppe I (CO: *SS-Brigadeführer* Bruno Streckenbach, comprised of 4 Kommandos, attached to the 14th Army). Streckenbach later Director of Amt I in the RSHA. He was sentenced to 25 years imprisonment in the USSR, but released in 1955.

Einsatzgruppe II (CO: *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Dr. Emanuel Schäfer, comprised of 2 Kommandos, attached to the 10th Army). *SS-Totenkopfstandarte I "Oberbayern"* and *III "Thüringen"* were part of this

unit. Schäfer later served as BdS Serbien and Trieste. In hiding until 1951, then he was sentenced to 1 year, 9 months by a Denazification court. He was then sentenced to an additional 6 years, 6 months by a German criminal court for his role in the gassing of 6000 Jews from the Semlin camp.

Einsatzgruppe III (CO: *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Dr. Ludwig Fischer, comprised of 2 Kommandos, attached to the 8th Army). *SS-Totenkopfstandarte II "Brandenburg"* was part of this unit. Fischer was later Landkommisar (Governor) of Warsaw. Executed in Warsaw on 8 March 1947 for his part in the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto.

Einsatzgruppe IV (CO: *SS-Brigadeführer* Lothar Beutel, comprised of 2 Kommandos, attached to the 4th Army).

Einsatzgruppe V (CO: *SS-Brigadeführer* Ernst Damzog, comprised of 3 Kommandos, attached to the 3rd Army).

Einsatzgruppe VI (CO: *SS-Oberführer* Erich Naumann, comprised of 2 Kommandos, assigned to the city and province of Posen). Later CO of *Einsatzgruppe B* in USSR (1941-3) and CO *Sipo* Holland. Condemned to death by US Military Tribunal at Nuremberg on 8 April 1948; executed in Landsberg prison on 8 June 1951.

In mid-Sept 1939, Himmler dispatched a new unit, *Einsatzgruppe zur besondere Verwendung* (350 effectives; CO: *SS- Obergruppenführer* Udo von Woyrsch) to liquidate Poles and Jews in the Ostoberschlesien area. It was ordered to return to Germany on 22 September, 1939 because of Wehrmacht complaints about the unit's excesses.

Some irregular units were also involved (*Volksdeutsche Selbstschutz*), as well as *SS-Wachsturmbann "Eimann"*.

On 21st Sept, Heydrich instructed the *Einsatzgruppen* to start the deportation

of Jews into the heart of Poland. Once their immediate tasks were ended, the *Einsatzgruppen* turned themselves into static outposts (*Gestapo Leitstellen* and *SD Abschnitte*). They also provided the personnel for future *Einsatzgruppen*. Once static, each district was under the command of a KdS (*Kommandeur der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD*); groups of districts were subordinate to a BdS (*Befehlshaber der Sicherheitpolizei und des SD*) who in turn was directly subordinate to the *RSHA*. The *Ordnungspolizei* also had a chain of command in place. The real power, however, lay with the *Höhere SS und Polizeiführer (HSSPf)* who covered both chains of command.

Report of Col-Genl. Johannes Blaskowitz on *SS* atrocities: collected reports on *SS* crimes in Poland and collated them in a memorandum dispatched to the C-in-C of the Army in mid-Nov 1939. January 1940: Blaskowitz draws up a new list of 33 incidents proved in every detail. May 1940: Blaskowitz transferred to the Western Front.

On 1st September, Theodor Eicke informed the three *SS* Death's Head regiments assembled outside Berlin (at Oranienburg) that they would conduct police and security operations behind German lines in Poland. Eicke declared that they would have to carry out the harshest orders without hesitation. The bulk of the *Einsatzgruppen* commanders and officers came from the *SD*; the manpower was from the *Sipo*, *Orpo* and *SS*. The total strength of the *Einsatzgruppen* in Poland was about 2700 effectives. Their operations went by the codename of "Tannenberg". Woyrsch's *Einsatzgruppe* went about torching synagogues and beating and killing Jews so openly that Field Marshal August von Mackensen insisted that they be withdrawn.

Autum 1939 in the *Generalgouvernement* was marked by a widespread terror and murder campaign designated the *"Intelligenz-Aktion"*. The was followed by the "Allgemeine Befriedungs-Aktion" in May-July 1940. Both of these

campaigns focussed on eliminating the Polish cultural and intellectual elite class.

Organizational Structure as of 20th September 1939

AOK 14 :

Einsatzgruppe I — *SS-Brigadeführer* Bruno Streckenbach — Cieszyn
EK 1/I — *SS-Sturmbannführer* Ludwig Hahn — Katowice
EK 2/I — *SS-Sturmbannführer* Bruno Müller — Krakow
EK 3/I — *SS-Sturmbannführer* Alfred Hasselberg — Jaroslaw
EK 4/I — *SS-Sturmbannführer* Carl Friedrich Brunner — Cieszyn

Polizeigruppe 1 — *SS-Obergruppenführer* Udo von Woyrsch
Polizei Bataillonen 62, 63, 81, 92, and 171

Einsatzgruppe zbV — *SS-Obergruppenführer* Udo von Woyrsch — Tarnow
EK Sipo — *SS-Oberführer* Otto Emil Rasch
1. TK — *SS-Brigadeführer* Otto Helwig
2. TK — *SS-Oberführer* Hans Trummler
EK Orpo — *Oberst. d. Pol*. Friedrich Wolfstieg
also Polizei-Regiment 3 and Polizei-Bataillon 1

AOK 10 :

Einsatzgruppe II — *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Emanuel Schäfer — Czestochowa
EK 1/II — *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Otto Sens — Czestochowa
EK 2/II — *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Karl H. Rux — Kielce

Polizeigruppe 2 — *Generalmajor d. Pol*. Herbert Becker
Polizei Bataillonen 42, 71, 101. 102, and 103

AOK 8 :

Einsatzgruppe III — *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Hans Fischer — Lodz
EK 1/III — *SS-Sturmbannführer* Wilhelm Scharpwinkel — Lodz
EK 2/III — *SS-Sturmbannführer* Fritz Lipphardt — Lodz

Polizeigruppe 3 — *Oberstleutnant d. Pol.* — Hermann Franz
Polizei Bataillon 41, SS-TV Reiterabteilung, Polizei-Regiment 4 (bataillonen 2, 3, 4, and 91)

2. SS-Totenkopfstandarte — *SS-Gruppenführer* Günther Pancke
"Brandenburg" — *SS-Standartenführer* Paul Nostitz

AOK 4 :

Einsatzgruppe IV — *SS-Brigadeführer* Lothar Beutel — Bialystok
EK 1/IV — *SS-Sturmbannführer* Helmut Bischoff — Bialystok
EK 2/IV — *SS-Sturmbannführer* Walter Hammer

Polizeigruppe 5 — *Generalleutnant d. Pol.* Arthur von Mülverstedt
Polizei-Bataillon 1, Polizei-Reiterabteilung 5

AOK 3 :

Einsatzgruppe V — *SS-Standartenführer* Ernst Damzog — Soldau
EK 1/V — *SS-Sturmbannführer* Heinz Graefe — Drogusowo
EK 2/V — *SS-Sturmbannführer* Robert Schefe — Pultusk/Makow
EK 3/V — *SS-Sturmbannführer* Walter Albath — Soldau/Plonsk/Siedlce
Polizeigruppe Eberhardt — *Generalmajor d. Pol.* Friedrich Georg Eberhardt
Polizei-Regimenten 1 and 2

MBF Posen :

Einsatzgruppe VI — *SS-Oberführer* Erich Naumann — Poznan
EK 1/VI — *SS-Sturmbannführer* Franz Sommer — Poznan
EK 2/VI — *SS-Sturmbannführer* Gerhard Flesch — Poznan

Polizeigruppe 4 zbV — *Generalleutnant* Karl Pfeffer von Wildenbruch
Polizei-Bataillon 61

MBF Westpreussen :

Einsatzkommando 16 — *SS-Obersturmbannführer* Rudolf Tröger — Danzig
TK Gdingen — *Kriminaldirektor* Friedrich Class — Gdynia
TK Bromberg — *SS-Sturmbannführer* Jakob Lölgen — Bydgoszcz
TK Thorn — *Kriminalkommissar* Hans-Joachim Leyer — Torun

SD Einsatzkommando 16 — *SS-Sturmbannführer* Franz Röder — Bydgoszcz

Miscellaneous Crimes in Poland

DATE — LOCATION — DISTRICT — VICTIMS — PERPETRATOR

8-15/9/39 — Berkenek — Zbiczno — Pomorze — ~ 200 — Einsatzkommando

13/9/39 — Bydgoszcz — Bromberg — Pomorze — ~ 100 — Einsatzkommando

24/9/39 — Zalno — Pomorze — 60 — Einsatzkommando

28/9/39 — Chojnice — Pomorze — 40 — Einsatzkommando

28/9/39 — Blonie — Warszawa — ~ 800 — Einsatzkommando

8/10/39 — Swiecie (Schwetz) — ---------- (CO von Alvensleben)1 — 63 — Selbstschutz Westpreussen

14/4/40 — Jozefow — Lublin (CO von Alvensleben) — 191 — Selbstschutz Westpreussen

1939/40 — Dabrowka — Poznan — 2500 — Einsatzkommando2

1939/40 — Debienko — Poznan — 1700 — Einsatzkommando2