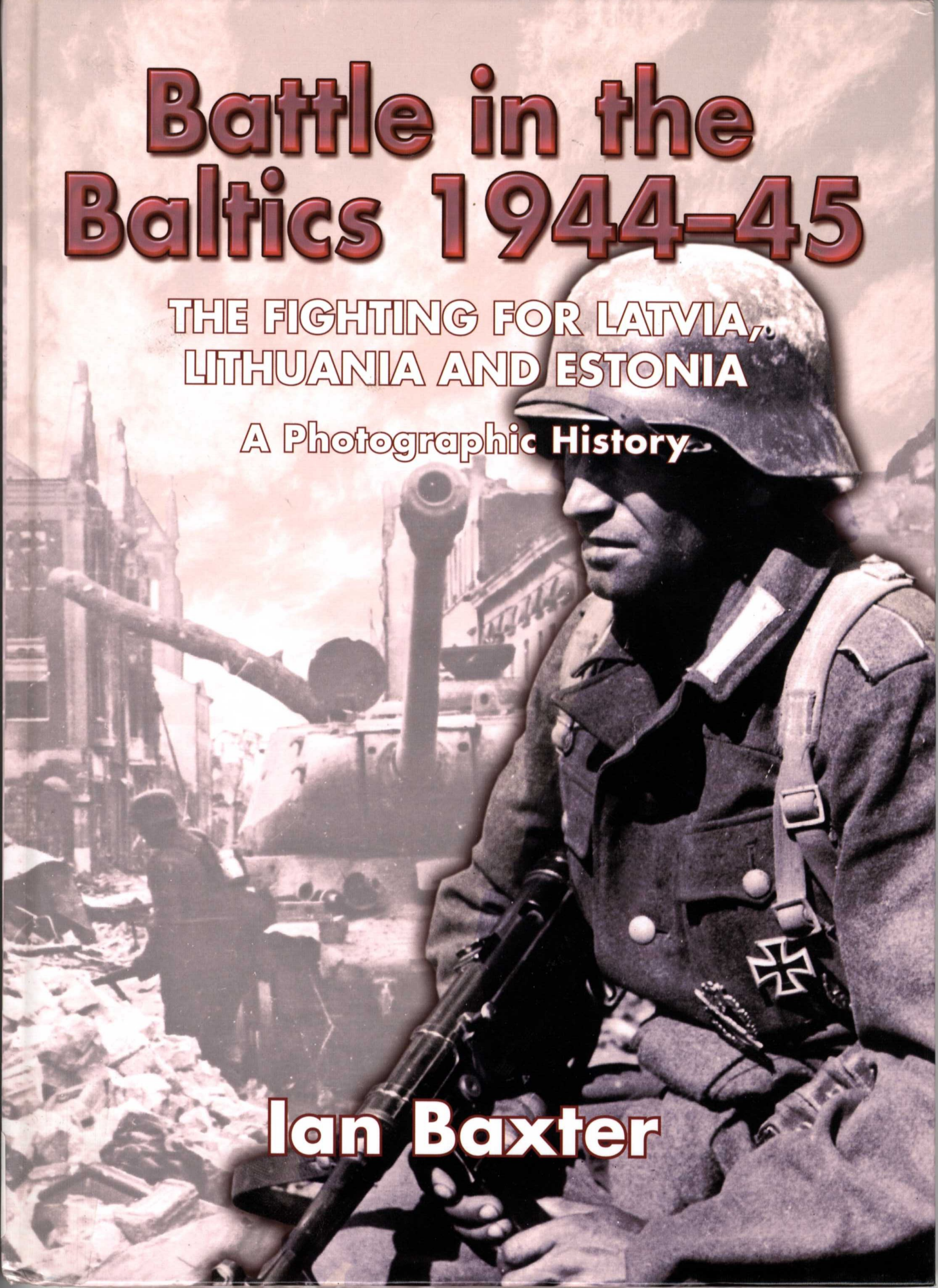


Battle in the Baltics 1944-45

THE FIGHTING FOR LATVIA,
LITHUANIA AND ESTONIA

A Photographic History

Ian Baxter



Battle in the Baltics is an exclusive insight into the last frantic months of the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS on the Eastern Front 1944–1945. By early 1944 there was nothing but a drum-roll of defeats for the German Army as it fought to the grim death to try and hold back the overwhelming might of the Russians from reaching the borders of the Reich. It was in the Baltics where Army Group North played a decisive role in trying to stem the rout and preventing the fragile lines from finally being smashed to pieces.

Drawing on a host of rare and unpublished photographs accompanied by in-depth captions, the book provides a revealing insight into the last desperate months of the war. It reveals in detail how the remnants of Army Group North were driven back across a scarred and devastated wasteland to the borders of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. What followed was the Battle of the Baltics, where exhausted and undermanned German forces fought to near-extinction against the constant hammer blows of Soviet ground and aerial bombardments. Everywhere disintegrating German forces tried to cling onto vital ground. Eventually, after many precious German Panzer and infantry divisions were encircled and annihilated, the remnants of Hitler's once-vaunted force was pushed back through the Baltic states into East Prussia, and then fought to the death in the last few small pockets of land surrounding three ports: Libau in Kurland, Pillau in East Prussia and Danzig at the mouth of the River Vistula. It was here that the final battle of the Baltics would take place where German troops were ordered to 'stand and fight' and wage an unprecedented battle of attrition.

We will be publishing a second volume in this series in 2010, covering the battles in East Prussia, Pomerania etc.

About the author

Ian Baxter is a military historian who specialises in German twentieth century military history. He has written more than thirty books including *Into the Abyss: The Last Years of the Waffen-SS*, *From Retreat to Defeat: The Last Years of the German Army on the Eastern Front*, *Road to Destruction: Operation Blue and the Battle of Stalingrad 1942-43*, *Operation Bagration: the Destruction of Army Group Centre June-July 1944* (these last four all also published by Helion), *Poland – The Eighteen Day Victory March*, *Panzers In North Africa*, *The Red Army At Stalingrad*, and *German Guns of the Third Reich*, as well as contributing over 100 articles to a range of well-known military periodicals. He currently lives in Essex with Michelle and son Felix.

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Introduction

Battle in the Baltics is an exclusive insight into the last frantic months of the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS on the Eastern Front 1944–1945. By early 1944 there was nothing but a drum-roll of defeats for the German Army as it fought to the grim death to try and hold back the overwhelming might of the Russians from reaching the borders of the *Reich*. It was in the Baltics where Army Group North played a decisive role in trying to stem the rout and preventing the fragile lines from finally being smashed to pieces.

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PART I

Army Group North 1941–1944

Prelude to destruction

At dawn on 22 June 1941, along an 1800 mile-long invasion front, three million German soldiers on the frontier of the Soviet Union unleashed one of the most brutal conflicts of the 20th Century – Operation Barbarossa. Directing this invasion of Russia was Field-Marshal Ritter von Leeb, commander of Army Group North, Field-Marshal Fedor von Bock in the centre and Field-Marshal von Rundstedt in the south. Von Leeb's Army Group North was given the task of destroying the Red Army fighting in the Baltic region. Hitler stipulated on the eve of the invasion that the German objective was to thrust across East Prussia, smashing Soviet positions along the Baltic, liquidating the bases of the Baltic Fleet, destroying what was left of the Russian naval power and capturing Kronstadt and Leningrad. Once the city had been razed to the ground, the German armies could sweep down from the north while the main force closed in from the west. With half a million men at Leeb's disposal, comprising almost 30 divisions, six of them armoured and motorized with 1,500 Panzers and 12,000 heavy weapons, plus an air fleet of nearly 1,000 planes, he was determined to strike along the Baltic coast and dispose of the Russian force once and for all.

Leeb's rapid two-pronged offensive along the Baltic opened up at first light on the morning of 22 June 1941. His force, consisting of 16th and 18th armies, smashed through the Soviet defences. Russian soldiers stood helpless in its path, too shocked to take action. Over the next weeks, German troops of Army Group North continued to chew through enemy positions heading through Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, straight towards their objective – Leningrad. Fortunately, the earth was baked under the blistering summer heat and Leeb's army was able to advance rapidly through the Baltic states.

By 10 July, Leeb's units broke south of Pskov and rolled toward Luga. At the rate they were advancing, they would need no more than nine or ten days to reach the outskirts of Leningrad. But following their surge of success, the Wehrmacht were losing momentum. Not only were their supply lines being overstretched, but enemy resistance began to stiffen on the road to Leningrad. In a desperate attempt to blunt the German advance and prevent them from reaching the imperial city, brigades of Russian marines, naval units, and more than 80,000 men from the Baltic Fleet were hastily sent into action against Leeb's forces. These Russian soldiers were now the sole barrier between Leningrad and the Germans. Although the advance was hampered by these Russian forces, by the end of August 1941, Leeb's Panzers were finally within sight of Leningrad. The terrified civilians left inside the city walls were now going to endure one of the most brutal sieges in 20th Century history.

As the summer of 1941 passed and the Germans drew closer to the city gates, Leningraders were given the grim orders to defend their city to the death. Although Leeb's forces had arrived within shelling distance of Leningrad, the advance had not gone as planned. Already units had been badly disrupted and were mired on the Leningrad Front by stiffening resistance. Even Leeb himself was now under considerable pressure from Hitler to complete his assignment of encircling Leningrad, to join forces with the Finns, and to wipe out the Baltic Fleet. His forces were desperately needed for the Moscow Front, where the Wehrmacht were preparing to go in for the kill and capture the capital. But despite assurances from Leeb that his forces were making good progress, German troops were still entangled in hundreds of miles of earth walls, anti-tank ditches and wire barricades, thousands of defensive pill-boxes, and the harrying activities of Russian tanks outside Leningrad.

By 17 September, the Moscow Front could wait no longer for victory in the north. The shift of the main weight, the powerful 41st Panzer Corps which Leeb required to sledge-hammer his way to the outskirts of Leningrad, was taken out of line and ordered to the Moscow Front. Without the 41st Panzer Corps the whole dynamics of Army Group North had altered. There would now be no attack on Leningrad. Instead, Hitler ordered that the city would be encircled and the inhabitants defending inside would be starved to death. During October and November 1941, some 10 German divisions were tied down around the city. For the next year German troops of Army Group North fought a series of bloody battles to hold their positions around Leningrad. Although they had managed to blunt Russian penetrations through their lines with the sacrifice of thousands of men killed and wounded, the battle had

in fact absorbed all the available resources of the 18th Army and elements of the 11th, which had resulted in the planned assault on Leningrad being abandoned.

Defensive positions

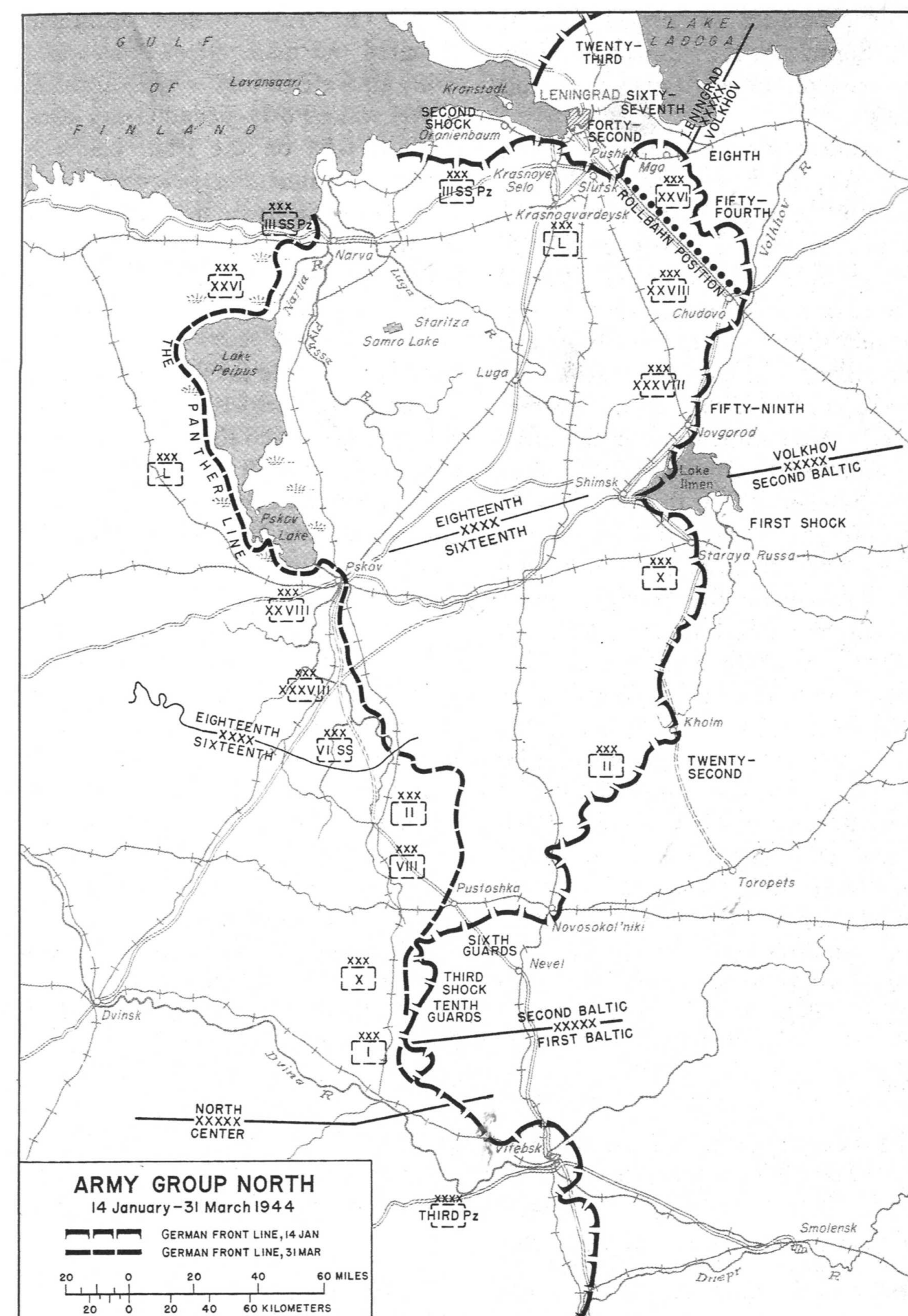
A sense of futility and gloom now gripped the German soldier in the north. Thousands of soldiers had been killed and by mid-October 1942, they found themselves substantially in the same position they had been in spring. From the Volkhov River to the Gulf of Finland the front was reminiscent of the First World War – with a string of trenches and shell holes in which gains and losses could be measured only in yards. Because of defeats in southern Russia, German forces were now compelled to go on the defensive against growing resistance. Despite the prevailing conditions and the daily shelling, Leningrad gradually regained strength and became a strong fortress, capable of withstanding a further year and a half of siege and every enemy attempt to destroy it. Costly as this defence was, it managed to pin down huge parts of Army Group North that were desperately needed elsewhere to plug the crumbling fronts. When news of the Red Army's breakthrough came on 18 January 1943, it was greeted by soldiers of Army Group North with trepidation. From their relatively inactive front they watched anxiously as the Russians began increasing their attacks. Commanders in the field were well aware if the hold on Leningrad were broken, Army Group North would eventually lose control of the Baltic Sea. Finland would be isolated; supplies of iron ore from Sweden would be in danger, and the U-boat training programme would be seriously curtailed. It was now imperative that the troops held the front and wage a static battle of attrition until other parts of the Russian front could be stabilized.

By the summer of 1943, the front continued to hold. The front-line German strength in July was 710,000 men. Army Group North was also building up a huge amount of reserves echeloned in depth behind the northern fronts in Estonia and Latvia. Both the Germans and Soviets in northern Russia were almost equal in strength, but the Red Army was known to have substantial reserves. They were also building up significant forces to weaken Army Group North's defensive battles around Leningrad and Nevel. The Germans tried their best to hold the lines by shifting Luftwaffe field divisions and SS units newly recruited in the Baltic States. By the end of 1943 the armies' tactical position had become very fragile. This was made worse on 14 January 1944 when the Red Army launched its winter offensive against the Leningrad and Volkhov Fronts.

The German 18th Army were outnumbered by at least 3:1 in divisions, 3:1 in artillery, and 6:1 in tanks, self-propelled artillery, and aircraft. By the morning of 18th January the fronts east of Oranienbaum and west of Leningrad were collapsing. The same was happening at Novgorod where a number of German units were being encircled. The Russian Second Shock and Forty-Second Armies then joined the attack against Army Group North. Along the Baltic coast some German elements escaped, but many were trapped and destroyed as the Russians swept in from the east and west. At Novgorod eight Soviet divisions encircled five German battalions. Their one hope was to escape annihilation by hiding in the swamps west of the city. As Novgorod was pulverized into oblivion by heavy Russian artillery, the Forty-Second Army attacked toward Krasnogvardeysk and started battering German units defending the town. The 18th Army was beginning to disintegrate. Fighting in mud and swampland, the troops were exhausted. On 23 January Pushkin and Slutsk were evacuated. General Kuechler, the new commander of Army Group North, appealed to Hitler for a complete withdrawal. Hitler responded angrily and prohibited all voluntary withdrawals and reserving all decisions to withdraw to himself. However, one week later, after the 18th Army had incurred more than 50,000 casualties, Hitler approved a retreat to the Luga River but directed that the front be held; contact with 16th Army regained, and all gaps in the front closed.

The following day on 31 January at the noon conference at Hitler's Rastenburg headquarters, Wolf's Lair, Hitler informed Kuechler that he was relieved of his command. Model, who had been waiting to replace Manstein, was given temporary command of the army group. Many of the commanders in the field including the soldiers looked upon Model as the Führer's troubleshooter. It was Model that ordered his 'Shield and Sword' policy, which stated that retreats were tolerable, but only if they paved the way for a counterstroke later. Out on the battlefield Model was not only energetic, courageous and innovative, but was friendly and popular with his enlisted men. Now commander of Army Group North, he was given the awesome task of trying to minimize the extent of the disaster that was about to loom along the Baltic. It was here in the north that Model had the greatest opportunity to display his talents as an improviser. He immediately sent out an order to all commanders in the field that they were not to step backward. They were also to uphold the Führer's demands that troops were to build defence lines where they stood, and fight to the bitter end.

Model was quite aware of the grave situation, and was even more conscious that the battle would soon spill over across into the Baltic State of Estonia. He envisaged that it would be along the borders and inside the heartlands of this country that would see some of the bitterest battles on the Eastern Front.





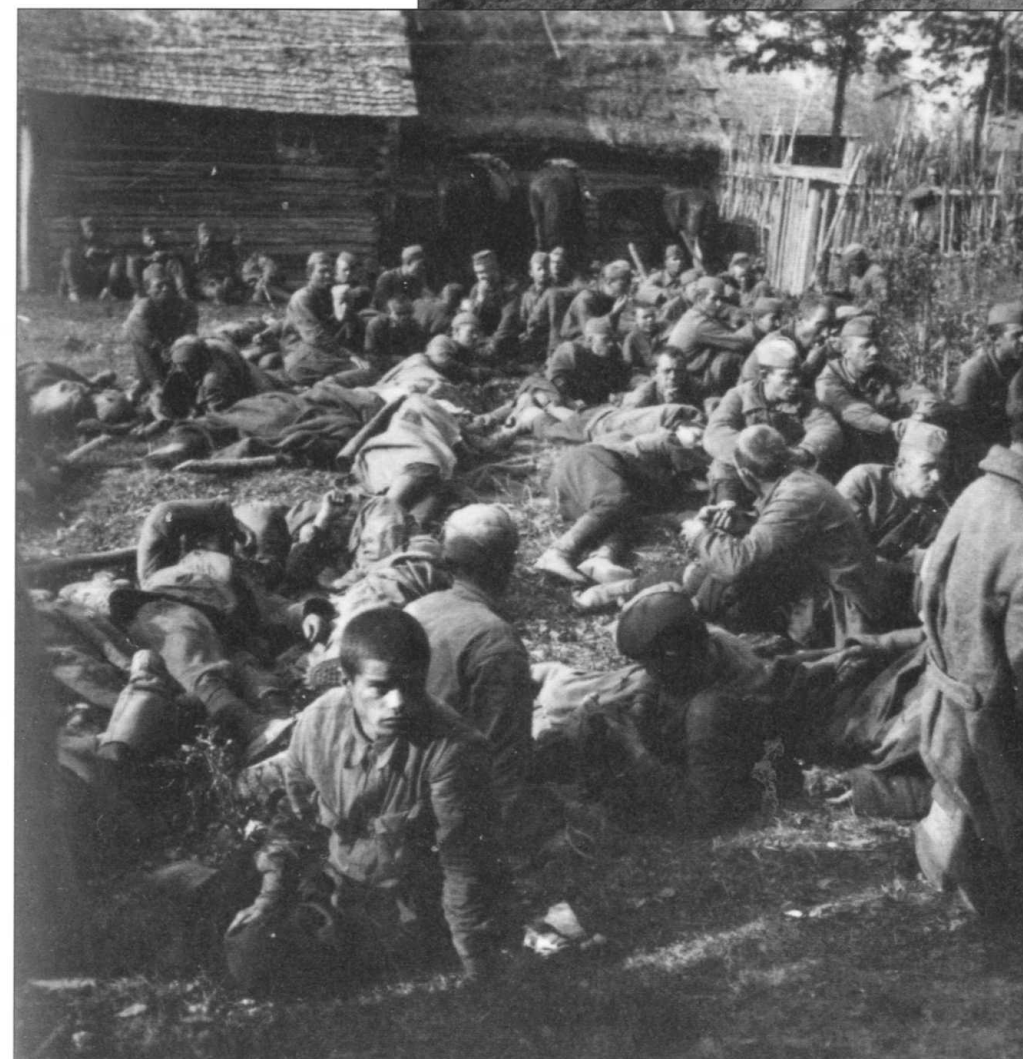
Army Group North unleashes its mighty force in Russia during the early morning of 22 June 1941. Here a column of Pz.Kpfw.38 (t) tanks move along a dusty road. With half a million men at General von Leeb's disposal, comprising almost 30 divisions, six of them armoured and motorized with 1,500 Panzers and 12,000 heavy weapons, plus an air fleet of nearly 1,000 planes, he was determined to strike along the Baltic coast and dispose of the Russian force once and for all.



A column of armoured vehicles have halted on a road in the Baltic state of Lithuania in early July 1941. In the distance plumes of smoke indicate that fighting is raging in the area. In front of the great German drive east through the Baltics the Russians were desperately redeploying their forces, taking men, tanks and aircraft from the Finnish front to bolster the disintegrating lines. It would now only be a matter of time before the armoured spearheads arrived at the gates of Leningrad.

An artillery regiment during Army Group North's advance to Leningrad in the summer of 1941.

Even by the time the German Army invaded Russia the majority of motive power within the regiments of the infantry divisions was mainly animal draught. The long distances in which the horses had to travel can well be imagined, but generally, in spite being under battle conditions, the horses were relatively well cared for.



As German troops of Army Group North continued to carve their way through enemy positions heading through Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, straight towards their objective – Leningrad – more and more Russian soldiers were surrounded and captured. Here in this photograph Soviet troops have been rounded-up and are waiting to be shifted westwards to specially constructed POW camps, and then to a fate that can only be imagined.



Infantry have halted on a road during Army Group North's rapid advance to Leningrad in the summer of 1941. Even as early as mid-July the Wehrmacht was beginning to lose momentum. Not only were their supply lines being overstretched, but enemy resistance began to stiffen on the road to Leningrad. Attached to their backs they display the infantryman's combat equipment, which generally consisted of the shelter quarter, canteen, bread bag, gas mask canister and entrenching tool. They are also armed with the standard issue German infantryman's Kar98 bolt-action rifle.

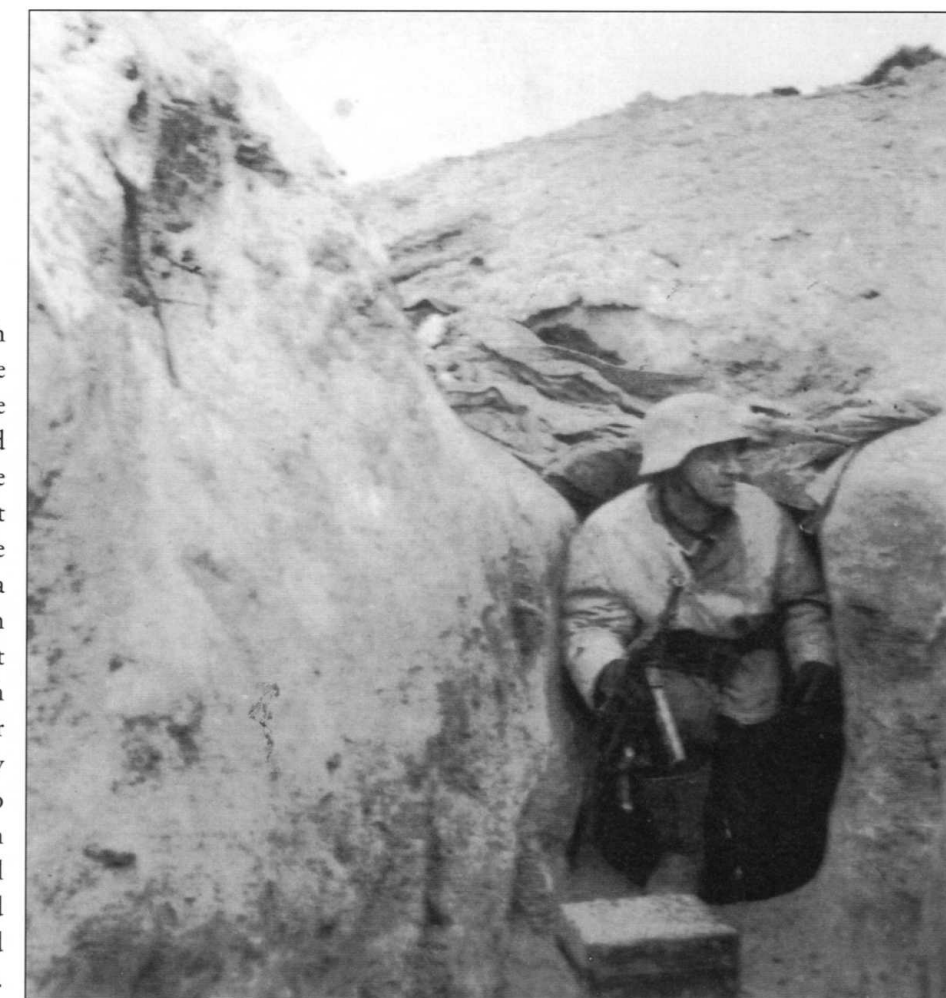


In the early winter of 1942 troops wearing the newly supplied winter snow overalls can be seen hitching a lift onboard a whitewashed Pz.Kpfw.III. The snow overalls, which were another form of white snow camouflage clothing worn by the infantryman, were worn by the troops especially during the first half of the war in Russia. Large and shapeless it was normally worn without a belt over any uniform or equipment.



Gebirgsjäger troops are standing on top of a Pz.Kpfw.III in late 1941 or early 1942. The soldiers are clearly not well dressed for arctic conditions. When the first snow showers fell in early October 1941 soldiers were not dressed in warm, protective clothing, and instead were compelled to improvise. To help keep warm soldiers found it necessary to wear every piece of clothing, and to supplement the layers of uniform the dead of both sides were stripped of overcoats, fur hats and boots, particularly Russian felt boots, which afforded the best protection in arctic conditions. Although the German leather boot helped combat short-term adverse weather conditions, over a long period of time soldiers found that their boots retained the damp, and constant exposure to the snow and wet often caused them to fall apart. As a result, this allowed the socks to become exposed or wet and caused unprecedented cases of frostbite. To help fight against frozen feet soldiers began lining their boots with straw or paper, but there were little of those two materials available across the vast icy wastelands of the Soviet Union.

A soldier in a defensive position armed with an MP38/40 machine pistol during the second winter in Army Group North. He is wearing a white-washed steel helmet and a two-piece winter reversible camouflage smock and black leather boots. The jacket is white-side out whilst his trousers are grey-side. For the second winter of 1942 a German Army reversible winter uniform was manufactured and supplied to the front lines. When the troops were issued with these garments in October and November 1942, they found the clothing extremely warm and comfortable. The uniform also provided the wearer with greater freedom of movement, especially with personal equipment. This uniform not only helped combat the severity of the cold, but helped prevent overheating during physical exertion.

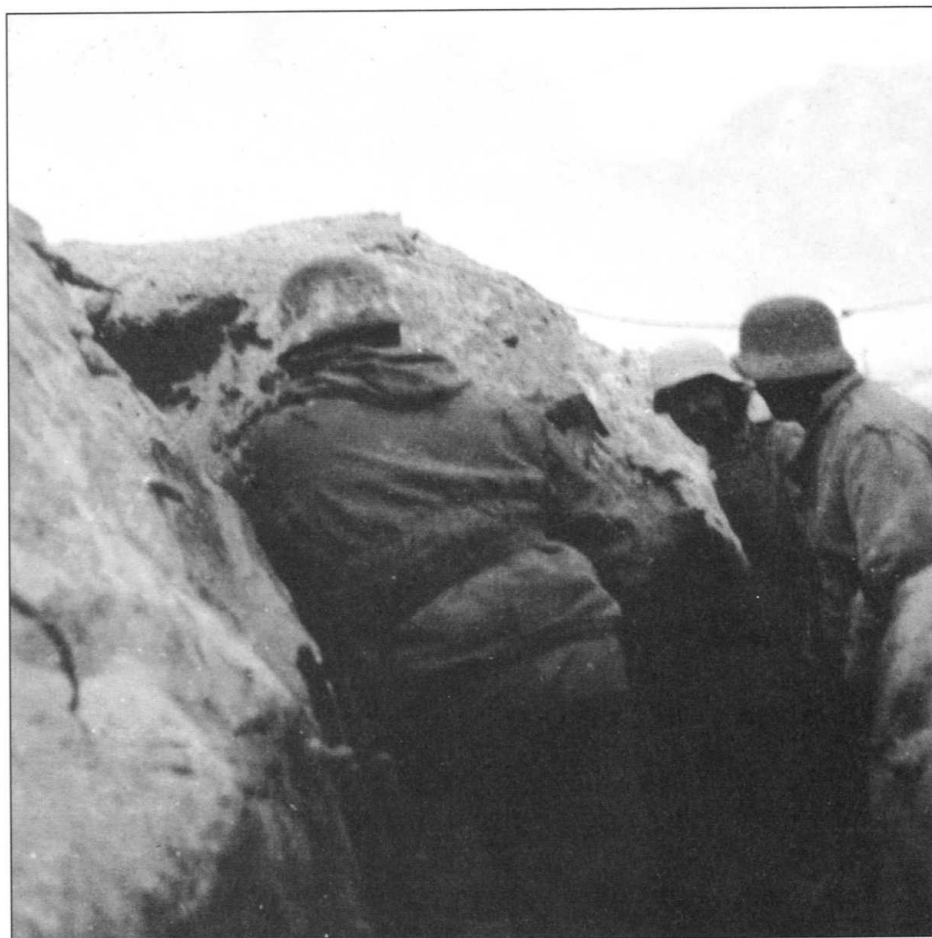


A typical trench system on the front-lines in Army Group North during the second winter of 1942/1943. All three soldiers are wearing winter reversibles white-side out.

The reversible clothing itself consisted of a heavy reversible double-breasted over-jacket that was designed for extra frontal warmth. The winter reversible was normally mouse-grey on one side and winter white on the other. The soldiers wore the reversible garment depending on the terrain. If the area was snow covered the wearer wore the uniform on the winter white side out, and during operations where there was no snow, it was worn mouse-grey side out.

However, there were other variations of the reversible, which included the green splinter pattern and the tan water pattern.

The reversible uniform was designed large enough to be worn over the service uniform, including personal equipment. However, troops did favour wearing most of their equipment over the winter jacket.



A mortar crew with 8cm GW 34 mortar being used against a Soviet target. This weapon remained the standard German infantry mortar throughout the war. During the war the mortar had become the standard infantry support weapon giving the soldier valuable high explosive capability beyond the range of rifles or grenades. Yet one of the major drawbacks was its accuracy, as it was an area weapon. Even with an experienced mortar crew, it generally required 10 bombs to achieve a direct hit on one single target.



Assault pioneers keep cover inside a trench during heavy fighting. The pioneer troops were mainly employed as assault troops. They were given the task of clearing minefields and booby traps, breached obstacles, and attacked fortifications with explosives and flamethrowers. Note the pioneer leading the men forward. He is armed with a Flammenwerfer 35. This flamethrower weighed some 35 kgs and had a range of 25 – 30 metres and flame duration of about 10 seconds with its 11.8 litres (3.11 gallons) of fuel oil.

Riflemen pause alongside a typical Russian road and take cover from aerial detection. The photograph gives an excellent display of a typical infantryman's combat equipment. The men are equipped with the gas mask canister, gas mask cape, and rifle ammunition pouches for their Karabiner 98K rifle. They are all wearing the M35 steel helmet painted in a rough texture matt slate-grey finish with pieces of rubber inner tube rings strapped around their helmets for foliage to be attached.



A photograph taken the moment a 21cm Mrs 18 fires its massive projectile miles into the enemy lines. This powerful long range, counter-battery gun was mounted in a 'mortar style' carriage that allowed very high elevation. The weapon was particularly effective during the siege of Leningrad and was used extensively against well-defended Russian positions.



A typical scene in 1943 showing a T-34 Russian tank knocked out of action in a forested area devastated by constant battles. Fighting on the front lines for the Germans in Army Group North was reminiscent to the savage battles that were fought during World War One. Here miles of trenches and shelters were dug and soldiers relentlessly attacked across areas that were very similar to 'no-man's land'.



Two soldiers, probably from the Gebirgsjäger, walk along a wooden road. Pine trees have been cut down to construct an improvised road in order to make the area accessible for infantry and light traffic to pass through. The area has been clearly devastated by continuous ground and aerial bombardments.



In a forward observation post a soldier can be seen peering through a 6x30 Sf.14Z scissor periscope to search for, detect, plot, and determine the direction to targets. It was quite common for the battery chief to operate the observation post. Note the small amount of foliage around the periscope, providing just enough concealment to break up its shape.

Soldiers belonging to a rifle company tuck into their rations in a defensive position along the front line. The troops have provided temporary shelter by digging out holes in the walls of the trench, which gave added protection against shelling and aerial attack.



A photograph showing a Wehrmacht mortar crew firing an 8cm Granatwerfer 34 or Gr.W.34 mortar. Note how all the crew duck for cover to avoid the back blast as the projectile leaves the gun tube. Two of the ammunition handlers or loaders can be seen holding the tripod in order to keep it steady and accurate when firing. This mortar earned a deadly reputation in line on the Eastern Front and captured '34s were eagerly employed against the Germans.



Two photographs showing a mortar crew resting inside one of the many dugout positions that were hastily constructed on the Eastern Front in Army Group North. A mortar crew usually consisted of at least three members. The gunner controlled the deflection and elevation of the weapon. The assistant gunner loaded the round at the command of the gunner. The ammunition man prepared and handed over ammunition to the assistant gunner.



Waffen-SS troops pose for the camera inside a trench during operations in Army Group North. By late 1943 the Russians were putting increasing strain on the German front lines and when the Soviets finally went over onto the offensive in January 1944 it drove the German armies westwards towards Estonia and Latvia. The main Waffen-SS force in the area was the 11th SS Freiwilligen Division *Nordland* and the SS Freiwilligen Division *Nederland*.



A Pak crew during a lull in the fighting. The lack of clothing is quite evident as all the soldiers are huddled behind the gun, which is affording some protection against the cold wind. Much of the terrain along the frontier of Estonia is flat, exposing troops not only to hostile fire, but the elements as well.



In a forward observation post a soldier can be seen peering through a 6x30 Sf.14Z scissor periscope to search for, detect, plot, and determine the direction to targets. Along huge parts of the front in Army Group North the lines were relatively stagnated sometimes for many weeks. Troops were constantly surveying the front in order to keep a daily check on the location and movement of their enemy.

A mortar crew in a dug-out position in the snow are in the process of loading their mortar for action against an enemy target. In Army Group North, General George Kuechler's force had for some weeks been trying in vain to hold its positions along its northern defences against strong Russian forces. From the Volkhov River to the Gulf of Finland the front was covered with a string of trenches and shell holes, reminiscent of trench warfare during World War One. On 15 January 1944, the defences were finally attacked by three powerful Soviet fronts, the Leningrad, Volkhov and Second Baltic. The 18th Army, which bore the brunt of the main attacks, was outnumbered by at least 3:1 in divisions. As usual German troops were expected to hold the front, but overwhelming enemy fire power proved too much for Kuechler's Army Group and it was compelled to fall back under a hurricane of enemy fire. Within four days of the attack the Russians had successfully breached Army Group North's defences in three places. This effectively wrenched open a huge corridor allowing the Red Army to pour through towards the besieged city of Leningrad.





A photograph taken the moment a 10.5cm I.FH18M gun's projectile leaves the barrel during defensive action in early 1944. These light field howitzers were constantly modified during the war in order to increase their ranges. Even as the Germans steadily withdrew combat experience soon showed that artillery support was of decisive importance in both defensive and offensive roles.



Wehrmacht troops cooking some food during a respite on the front line during early February 1944. By this period of the war operations in Army Group North had gone badly for the Germans. The Red Army, having lifted the siege of Leningrad, had now gone onto the offensive and were gradually driving the German armies westwards towards the frontier of Estonia and Latvia. It was in this sector of the front that the Germans of Army Group North saw some of the bitterest fighting of the war. The Wehrmacht, together with the European SS volunteers dug-in along the front and began to wage an unprecedented battle of attrition against the Russians.



Wehrmacht troops being supported by a StuG.III in the snow. The StuG.III had been a very popular assault gun on the battlefield. The vehicles had initially provided crucial mobile fire support to the infantry, and also proved their worth as invaluable anti-tank weapon. However, by the early winter of 1944 the StuG was primarily used as an anti-tank weapon, thus depriving the infantry of vital fire support.



A white-washed Flak gun and crew wearing full winter camouflage smocks in a defensive position against ground targets. By early 1944 the German Army were bitterly contesting the Red Army trying desperately to gain the initiative and throw back the enemy from its remorseless drive on the German frontier. By the end of January, the Soviets had reached the German defence lines at Narva. This 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, northwest of Vitebsk. The city of Narva itself had been a strategically important city for hundreds of years, and was the gateway to Estonia. Defensive positions consisting of a formidable mix of Wehrmacht, Luftwaffe and Waffen-SS had built a strong line along the west bank of the River Narva. For the next few months these forces were to stand firm against constant enemy attacks. In fact, the area of operations had become so important to the Germans that all the prominent foreign volunteer units of the Waffen-SS were sent to this sector, which was to become known as the 'Battle of the European SS'.



A German s.IG33 15cm artillery gun being used in action. A typical infantry regiment controlled three infantry battalions, an infantry gun company with six 7.5cm l.IG18 and two 15cm s.IG33 guns, and an anti-tank company with twelve 3.7cm Pak35/36 guns. The 15cm s.IG33 infantry gun was regarded as the workhorse, with pieces operated by specially trained infantrymen. During the Russian offensive troops of Army Group North found it very difficult to contain the Soviet onslaught. Troops of the German 18th Army were beginning to disintegrate. Already it had incurred 40,000 casualties trying to contain the Soviets. Fighting in the mud and freezing water, the men were totally exhausted and unable to hold back the enemy for any appreciable length of time. Hitler on the other hand still prohibited all voluntary withdrawals and reserved all decisions to withdraw himself. In a leadership conference held by the Führer the commanders were told to infuse determination in their men and to strengthen faith in ultimate victory. But in spite of Hitler's radical measures in trying to generate the will to fight until success was secured, the German Army were unable to stem the advance of the Russian forces.



In the snow a soldier can be seen with a tripod-mounted range finder. This device was able to calculate the approximate height and distance of an object either on the ground or air by a series of grid references imposed on the field of view. Once determined, the information could then be quickly given to the flak crew who would aim accordingly. Behind the soldier is an 8.8cm Flak gun being used against a ground target.



A heavy MG34 machine gun position on a sustained fire mount. By the early winter of 1944 Army Group North was dangerously understrength and faced an overwhelming enemy army. The Red Army had a numerical superiority of 11 to 1 in infantry, 7 to 1 in armour and a massive 20 to 1 in artillery. During early February, the Soviets began their attempts to soften up the German defences with heavy shelling, and some Russian units managed to break through a line of defence and cross the river between Hungerburg and Narva where they established a bridgehead. Here German and Russian forces fought a series of heavy battles where the Red Army was eventually thrown back. On 3 February, a further attempt was made by the Soviets to establish a bridgehead, but this was defeated by the SS *Nordland's* 11th Panzer Battalion *Hermann von Salza*. However, a few days later the Russians did succeed in establishing a small bridgehead at Ssivertski, to the northwest of the city.



Cold and dispirited troops in a typical defensive position during a lull in the fighting in late January or early February 1944. By 26 January the city of Leningrad was liberated after nine hundred days of siege. The 18th Army was now split into three parts and struggled to hold any type of front forward of the Luga River. The entire German Northern Front was now beginning to crumble and Hitler openly blamed Kuechler for its failure.



Out in the snow and the crew of a 2cm Flak gun are in action. The gun was a very effective weapon and had a fire rate of 120-280 rounds per minute. The weapon's rate of fire was more than capable of dealing with attacking enemy troop concentrations. Note the amount of expended ammunition cases that are lying around the position.



Two photographs taken in sequence showing soldiers in a trench armed with Mauser rifles and wearing white camouflage smocks. Although the white camouflage smock was a popular and practical item of winter clothing it tended to be worn night and day for weeks. Soon they became filthy, thus defeating the objective of the white camouflage.





StuG.III's advance along a snow-covered road with grenadiers standing watching the spectacle. Despite the longer 7.5cm barrel this assault gun was continually hard-pressed on the battlefield and constantly called upon for offensive and defensive fire support, where it was gradually compelled to operate increasingly in an anti-tank role. As a consequence more StuG's were lost on the battlefield, compelling the infantry, on many occasions, to fight unsupported.



A MG42 light machine gun position in the snow. Although a machine gun troop was normally a three-man squad, due to the high casualty rates suffered on the Eastern Front they were commonly reduced to just two, although still highly effective. It was here during the Battle of Narva that the MG42 machine gun proved its worth time and time again. Constantly the machine gun crews fought close-quarter combat with the enemy, but managed to drive them out of their positions. This photograph amply conveys the conditions faced by many of the soldiers during the battle, where temperatures often dropped to twenty below zero at night.



Soldiers pose for the camera next to the deadly 12cm Granatwerfer 378(r) mortar. This was one of the most impressive mortars used by the Germans on the Eastern Front. The weapon consisted of a circular base plate, the tube and the supporting bipod, weighing 285kg. Because of its excessive weight, a two-wheeled axle was utilised, enabling the mortar to be towed into action. The axle could then be quickly removed before firing. The weapon fired the Wurfgrate 42 round, which carried 3.1kg of explosives.



A column of vehicles have halted on an icy road on the Narva Front in February 1944. A whitewashed 7.5cm Pak 97/38 and a captured Russian 7.62cm Pak anti-tank gun can be seen on tow. Note the Kettenkrad passing the stationary vehicles. This tough little tracked vehicle was powered by an Opel Olympia gasoline engine, which developed 37 hp at 3400 rpm.



The crew of an 8cm sGrW 34 mortar in a dug out. Each battalion fielded some six of these excellent 8cm sGrW 34 mortars, which could fire 15 bombs per minute to a range of 2,625 yards. Aside from high-explosive and smoke bombs, this weapon also fired a 'bounding' bomb. It was very common for infantry, especially during intensive long periods of action, to fire their mortar from either trenches or dug-in positions where the mortar crew could also be protected from enemy fire.



Two photographs taken in sequence showing a Wehrmacht mortar crew during defensive operations in mid-1944. By this period of the war the German soldier had expended considerable combat efforts and lacked sufficient reconnaissance and the necessary support of tanks and heavy weapons to compensate for the large losses sustained.





The crew of a 2cm Flak gun company inside the city of Narva in an aerial defence role. The gunner has elevated the gun and is looking through the gun sight whilst another crew member scours the sky trying to sight enemy aircraft. Although these light anti-aircraft guns were used extensively to deal with the threat of the Soviet Air Force, the recurring appearance of heavier enemy armour compelled many flak crews to divert their attention from the air and support their own infantry and armour on the ground in an anti-tank role.



The gun crew of a modified 10.5cm le FH 18/42 pose for the camera during a lull in the fighting during the defensive battles on the Narva Front. Note two of the soldiers wearing the familiar winter reversible. By the early winter of 1944, the winter reversible had become the most popular item of winter clothing worn by the troops on the Eastern Front. Soldier survivability had actually increased, in spite of the major military setbacks. In the winter of 1941 more than half the cases of casualties were caused by the extreme sub-zero temperatures like frostbite. By the end of 1942, this figure had reduced considerably. Two year later in the early winter of 1944, it was less than a quarter of the casualties.



Cold and weary Waffen-SS troops near the city of Narva in February 1944. While the battle of Narva raged, the Soviets tried to outflank the city by making a landing on the coast west of the Narva. The landing force was engaged and destroyed by the Latvian SS-Freiwilliges brigade which later became the 19th Waffen Grenadier Division des SS (*lettische Nr.2*)

PART II

Defending the frontiers of Estonia and Lithuania

2 February–13 July 1944

The Narva Front

On 2 February 1944, as the Red Army was bearing down along the frontier of Estonia, Model inspected the front and watched as his divisions were pulled back to the west bank of the Narva River in order to strengthen the city of Narva. The river stretched from Lake Peipus northward to the Gulf of Finland. The area of land from Lake Peipus to the coast is about 30 miles wide and the terrain was low-lying making it ideal tank country. Much of the land is forested with swamps, cut by various waterways and vast sprawling fields. Model was totally aware of the geographical significance of Narva and its river line, which acted as a natural obstacle. The Germans had established quite a large and strongly defended bridgehead covering a large area of territory on the eastern approaches to Narva. The Russians were determined to secure a bridgehead, and Model knew that his force would have to defend the river and the city to the bitter end to prevent the Soviets breaking into the heartlands of Estonia. For this reason the Narva Front would have to be strengthened with the greatest possible speed if it was going to avert a complete catastrophe in the area. Here, soldiers from the SS Division *Nordland* and Brigade *Nederland* dug in and waited for the enemy assault. All available reserves were to be rushed to the front line and this included the release of an Estonian brigade. The brigade had been drafted by the *Waffen-SS*, which, since January 1944, had been conducting an extensive recruitment programme in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Many of the draftees were dispirited, and their only motivation for fighting alongside the Germans was through fear of reprisals against their own people.

When the Estonian troops arrived at the front on the night of 13 February many of them were reported to be totally unsuited for combat. A number of the soldiers were also dreading fighting the Russians, and as a result there was panic and disorder in the ranks. Some had even tried to desert on the way to the front. Model was compelled to shift some of his troops from the 18th Army to help support the Estonians. The battered 58th Infantry Division too was transferred north of Narva following three days recuperation.

The following morning on 14 February, Model received news that Russian Naval troops had landed several gunboats on the coast northwest of Narva. Almost immediately Stuka dive bombers were sent into wipe out the landing parties, but not until they had accidentally bombed a German command post and knocked out several Tiger tanks in the area.

To make matters worse, late that afternoon Soviet ski troops were identified on the west shore of Lake Peipus, north of the narrows. The security division responsible for holding the area was immediately put under heavy pressure as it was reported that Estonian troops had begun deserting. Model had no choice than to begin the withdrawal of forces to what was known as the Panther position. This was completed early on 1 March.

Elsewhere along the front the Germans held firm. On the Narva it was held by a mixture of well-armed and determined soldiers eager not to give one inch to their hated foe. For a number of days a stalemate of sorts reigned along the river with both sides shelling each other's positions.

At the end of February the 214th Infantry Division began arriving in order to relieve well-seasoned troops from some of the quieter parts of the front. Here men of the 214th were ordered to hold the line and began to construct lines of trenches reinforced with machine-gun and mortar pits. Mines were laid in a number of areas with extensive barbed wire barriers and some anti-tank guns. The defences were totally inadequate, but dogged German resilience and courage temporarily held the Soviets back in a number of places.

However, on 6 March the Russians began directing their might against Narva along the main road to Tallinn. A Soviet air assault began, and the main bridge over the river was blown. The baroque-style old town was subsequently levelled, with only the town hall and the Hermann Castle left standing. The following night, another air raid followed

at Ivangorod bridgehead on the opposite bank of the river. In the rubble-strewn streets groups of fanatical German troops continued to stand firm until they were either driven out of the town, or killed whilst fighting.

In the smoldering city of Narva the Germans continued resisting. Soviet air attacks mercilessly pounded Narva whilst artillery from the 2nd Shock Army launched a fierce unrelenting attack firing some 100,000 shells at three weakened German regiments defending the city. The *'Nederland'* Brigade took the brunt of the main attack, but the troops were able to temporarily blunt advance along the river. Two days later a heavy assault was launched northwest from Narva, bitterly defended by the 4th SS Brigade's 49th Regiment of the SS-Freiwilligen Panzergrenadier-Regiment *de Ruyter*. For hours both sides dueled. The fighting was so fierce that the attack disintegrated into violent hand-to-hand fighting between advancing Soviet infantry and vastly outnumbered Dutch troops of the 49th SS Regiment. After several hours of fierce combat the Soviets withdrew with high losses, and decided to shift their attack elsewhere.

A few miles north of Narva, three divisions of the Soviet 14th Rifle Corps attacked the front lines of the Estonian Division in Siivertsi. Although the Estonians tried to hold the lines with the support of German armour, artillery and machine guns, the Russians were far too powerful and smashed into the division and established a bridgehead on the west bank of the river 5 miles north of Narva. Supported by the artillery of the III Germanic Armoured Corps, Estonian machine-gunners were placed along the riverbank where they successfully held back three Soviet rifle divisions.

Over the next two weeks the 4th SS Brigade tried desperately not to fall back, in spite being subjected to constant artillery and air attacks. In other parts of the front the 24th SS Regiment *'Danmark'* of the 11th SS Division also received a heavy mauling along with the 4th SS Brigade's 48th Regiment positioned to the south of the 24th SS Regiment. Fighting was very intense and losses were massive resulting in the virtual annihilation of the 49th Regiment's 5th Company.

As parts of the German front began to crumble the Russian Second Baltic Front stepped up its pressure against the divisions of the 16th Army, trying to punch a hole through its lines. Luckily for the Germans the weather had turned for the worst. After a warm winter the spring thaw had set in early. A foot of water covered the ice on the surrounding lakes and Soviet tanks were sometimes sinking up to their turrets. In a number of places the roads were turned into a quagmire making the advance painfully slow.

The terrible situation enabled Model to quickly improvise, but as he set about increasing the defences on the Narva Front, Hitler replaced his 'trouble shooter' for the new posting as commander of Army Group South. General Georg Lindemann was appointed as acting commanding General of Army Group North. Lindemann was no defence expert, but he soon rallied his commanders in the field to ensure that the front held at all costs.

In the last week of March Lindemann's dogged determination and fearless attitude saw the Wehrmacht gain the initiative. After seven long weeks of fighting, the Soviet 2nd Shock Army were exhausted, low on supplies, and had suffered huge amounts of casualties, far too many to mount any large scale operations.

Exploiting the situation the Germans decided to go over to the offensive and destroy the Kriivasoo bridgehead. Early on 26 March, the 11th, 170th and the 227th Infantry Divisions attacked the Soviet 109th Rifle Corps. Grenadiers supported by Tiger and Panther tanks moved forward through the swamps and soon penetrated the fortified positions of the Soviet 109th Rifle Corps. By the end of the month most of the bridgehead was destroyed with huge Russian casualties. For another two weeks the Germans fought hard and pushed back the Russians into the swamps bringing hope of completely destroying the Kriivasoo bridgehead. However, the spring thaw meant that the Tigers and Panther tanks were unable to be used in the swamps, making it increasingly difficult for the grenadiers to secure the area. Consequently the German offensive halted and the front line stagnated until May.

The Crushing of Vilnius

Throughout May and June 1944, the Narva Front continued to hold as the Russians built up their reserves for a new offensive. The Germans too were also trying their best to bring additional reinforcements to the area in order to try and contain themselves cohesively on the battlefield. Although the temporary lull had given the Germans time to build a number of new defensive positions, Army Group North was no exposed by an even greater menace that would threaten Lithuania. On 22 June 1944, the Russians unleashed their long-awaited offensive in Army Group Centre, code named 'Operation Bagration'. Within a matter of weeks 17 German divisions had been destroyed. The Soviet attack was so swift that the by early July the 1st Baltic Front was now driving towards Baranovichi and then Molodechno and onto Vilnius, the capital of the Baltic State of Lithuania. On 7 July Baranovichi was finally captured and the focus of effort immediately shifted to the north for Vilnius. The Russian advances attacked towards Slonim and Vilnius and widened the deployment of their forces, especially against German blocking units. However,

German forces in the area were not going to give up ground that easily. On the Baranovichi – Berezovka road heavy fighting broke out as parts of the 4th Panzer Division halted, and tried to contain Red Army units moving west along the road. The 507th Heavy Tank Battalion counterattacked at Leipciani and what followed was a brutal tank battle between the battalion's Tigers and the enemy. After the successful engagement the battalion withdrew east of the Berezovka forest which enabled the Soviets to advance at breakneck speed towards Vilnius.

Already the Soviet 5th Guards Tank Army had bypassed the 5th Panzer Division, which was attempting to reach the city. Vilnius was under Hitler's 'Fortified Area' order, and the *Führer* had already made it perfectly clear to his commanders that it must be held at all costs. Hitler was hoping to defend the city with four Panzer divisions, but was told these could not be assembled before 23 July. It was imperative to hold Vilnius, he said, because without the city it would become a springboard for the Russians to carve its way through Lithuania onto the Baltic Sea shores and then into East Prussia. Without the city he was concerned that it would become almost impossible to re-establish a sustainable connection between the two German army groups.

German Order of Battle – Defence of Vilnius

Southern flank of 3rd Panzer Army (General Georg-Hans Reinhardt):

XXVI Corps (General Gerhard Matzky)

Garrison of Vilnius (General Rainer Stahel)

4th Army (General Kurt von Tippelskirch):

XXXIX Panzer Corps (General Dietrich von Saucken)

Sperrgruppe Weidling

The fortress of Vilnius was under the command of Luftwaffe General Rainer Stahel, and elements of the 3rd Panzer Army under the command of General Reinhardt. The garrison comprised a battalion from the 16th Parachute (*Fallschirmjäger*) Regiment, Grenadier Regiment 399, Grenadier Regiment 1067, Artillery Regiment 240 of the 170th Infantry Division, an anti-tank battalion of the 256th Infantry Division and various other units.

Over the next few days the German garrison at Vilnius tried to hold out against heavy attacks from the 5th Guards Tank Army. During the night of 10 to 11 July Luftwaffe combat formations with 8.8cm flak guns were committed in the fortress of Vilnius and reported that they had successfully destroyed 30 enemy tanks. However, in spite of a number of successful engagements against the enemy the situation was drastically changing for the worse and it soon became clear that the fortress could no longer hold. Model's drastic attempts to close the gap north and south of the city to help relieve the fortress made no difference whatsoever. Despite the appalling conditions and the chaotic nature of the situation the defenders continued to mercilessly resist enemy attacks for as long as possible. With the position deteriorating by the hour General Stahel, commander of the fortress, proposed to breakout west during the night of 12/13 July.

On 11 July General Stahel received reports that Army Group North was in the process of closing the gap between Army Group Centre with their own forces. Stahel was aware that this army movement would allow the relative safe evacuation of the garrison from the city. During the night of 12/13 July, after destroying all their heavy weapons the fortress broke out of the city in a westerly direction. Almost 3,000 soldiers in total left Vilnius, with many frantically swimming the river to reach lead elements of the 6th Panzer Division.

Over the next fort-eight hours Russian infantry began driving back the German defenders into the city and pulverising it street by street. Heavily-armed grenadiers resisted well but by 13 July strong Red Army units had managed to split the German garrison defending the city into two pockets. Many isolated units spent hours fighting a bloody defence in the ruins. Russian soldiers frequently requested them to surrender, but the Germans preferred to die fighting than capitulating to their Red foe. However, as the Russians intensified the bombing of the city it soon became apparent that the fortress could no longer withstand the enemy fire and as a consequence this finally sealed the fate of the defenders trapped inside. Altogether some 13,000 German troops had been killed or wounded in the defence of Vilnius, and by the evening of 13 July what remained of the garrison capitulated after more than five days of continuous combat.

After the fall of Vilnius fighting in the area continued with unabated ferocity. The 6th Panzer Division fought to open a route through to Zsmory, whilst remnants of the IX Army Corps were embroiled in thick fighting near Anyksčiai. Losses in the area were terrible. The destruction of so many troops prompted Model to form 'corps detachments' from battered battalions and organize them into divisions and re-arm them. The Third Panzer Army was given remnants of the 95th Infantry Division, 197th Infantry Division, and the 246th Infantry Division. The Fourth Army was supposed to receive what was left of the 110th Infantry Division, 299th Infantry Division and 267th Infantry Division, whilst the Ninth Army was to receive remnants of the 296th Infantry Division, 134th

Infantry Division, and 383rd Infantry Division. The Second Army was to receive the 35th Infantry Division, 129th Infantry Division and the 232nd Infantry Division. As for the other smashed and badly depleted divisions, these were moved to defend other parts of the Reich and to relieve the pressure on the Western Front, which was by this stage of the war also causing OKH considerable problems.

With Lithuania now under serious threat Model appealed to Army Group North to come to his assistance and help stabilize the deteriorating situation. However, Army Group North could not release any divisions for they were already fighting for survival against massive attacks from the 2nd Baltic and 3rd Baltic Front.

In spite of the dire military situation defending Lithuania the 3rd Panzer and 4th Armies managed to halt on a line from Ukmerge, south of Kaunas, and along the Neman to south of Grodno. The Second Army had contested bitterly and was brought back toward Bialystok. The 9th Army, almost decimated, was licking its wounds along the borders of East Prussia. As for the Red Army, they had covered more than 200 miles without pause, but for the time being had outrun their supplies. This allowed what was left of Army Group Centre to regain some of its strength and reinforce its position in Lithuania and in the provinces just east of Poland. But the Russians were now deep in territory ravaged by the recent battles against Army Group Centre. With Russia almost liberated, the Baltic States were now under serious threat of being overrun.



Four photographs showing Field Marshal Walter Model inspecting a unit in Army Group North in March 1944. On 1 March 1944 Model was promoted to Field Marshal, the youngest in the Wehrmacht. Many commanders in the field including the soldiers looked upon Model as the Führer's troubleshooter. It was Model that instigated the 'Shield and Sword' policy in Army Group North, which stated that retreats were tolerable, but only if they paved the way for a counterstroke later. Out on the battlefield Model was not only energetic, courageous and innovative, but was friendly and popular with his enlisted men. Now commander of Army Group

Continued opposite



North he was given the awesome task of trying to minimize the extent of the disaster that was about to loom along the Baltic. It was here in the north that Model had the greatest opportunity to display his talents as an improviser. Model was determined to gather reserves for an immediate counterattack that would drive the Soviets back and relieve pressure on other areas of the front. However, in spite of this doctrine the Red Army was too powerful and Model ordered a fighting withdrawal to what was known as the Panther Line. By March 1944, the fighting withdrawal was complete and the majority of Model's force was intact. The Shield and Sword counterattacks had cost him some 12,000 men, but they had kept the Soviets off-balance and won Model time to pull his units back.





Troops defending Narva wearing a variety of clothing in the snow. Three of the soldiers are wearing the army green splinter pattern and the tan water pattern reversible uniforms. These reversible uniforms were designed large enough to be worn over the service uniform, including personal equipment. However, troops did favour wearing most of their equipment over the winter jacket. Note the unusual camouflage pattern on the soldier's M35 steel helmet.



A rare photograph of Estonian conscripts in the German Army in early 1944 trudging through the snow bound for the Narva Front. To prevent the Soviets breaking into the heartlands of Estonia the Narva Front would have to be strengthened with the greatest possible speed if it was going to avert a complete catastrophe in the area. Here, soldiers from the SS Division 'Nordland' and Brigade 'Nederland' dug in and waited for the enemy assault. All available reserves were to be rushed to the front line and this included the release of an Estonian brigade. The brigade had been drafted by the Waffen-SS, which had been conducting an extensive recruitment programme in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania since January 1944.



During a defensive action a 7.5cm Geb36 gun crew can be seen with their weapon. Firing an artillery piece in the snow could be frequently problematic for the gun crew. The recoil would regularly drive the weapon deep into the snow and would often cause inaccurate firing. For this reason this 7.5cm Geb36 gun has been modified – its wheels have been removed and replaced with sturdy gun trails



A white-washed 15cm field howitzer in its elevated position in action against an enemy target in the snow during bitter fighting on the Narva Front in March 1944. Special metal-lined wicker cases protecting the projectiles have been carefully stacked together next to a tree as a ready ammunition station.



Troops during a lull in the fighting. They are all wearing the snow suit and whitewashed M35 steel helmets, and are seen in one of a number of defensive positions that were hastily constructed along the front in a drastic attempt to hold ground against overwhelming enemy opposition.



Inside a typical dug-out on the Eastern Front. A mortar crew prepares their weapon for action. They are all wearing the reversible gray/white two-piece winter suits white-side out. They blend particularly well into their surroundings.



Two photographs of Wehrmacht troops wearing white camouflage winter smocks preparing to use their Pak35/36 anti-tank gun in the Narva area. This weapon was the first anti-tank gun mass produced and saw service in both the Wehrmacht and *Waffen-SS* until the end of the war. In front of the city of Narva the Germans established a fairly large and strongly defended bridgehead covering a vast area of area on the eastern approaches to Narva.





A column of winter white-washed Panthers with additional track links attached to their turrets have halted on a road. During 1944, Panthers appeared in increasing numbers on the front lines. By June 1944, Panthers were about one-half of the German tank strength both in the east and the west. As German troops found themselves constantly becoming either encircled or cut-off the Panthers were organized into special rescue units to relieve the trapped pockets of Germans. During the course of these daring rescue missions Panther crews fought with tenacity and courage, but time and time again the sheer weight of the Soviet army overwhelmed them.



From a slit trench soldiers can be seen poised for action. The soldier nearest to the camera is armed with the Kar98 carbine bolt-action rifle which was the standard issue piece of weaponry supplied to the German Army throughout the war. Attached to his black leather belt is a P38 holster and bayonet for his rifle. Much of the Narva front consisted of many miles of trenches and various other forms of defensive positions. For days Russian ground and artillery pounded the front. Even inside the city itself much of Narva was reduced to rubble, but both the Wehrmacht and their *Waffen-SS* counterparts had dug deep and were determined to defend their positions to the bitter end.

Three members of a 7.92mm MG34 machine gun crew prepare to open fire on suspected enemy targets. This light MG is being used from its bipod mount. With the bipod extended and the belt loaded, the machine gunner could effectively move the weapon quickly from one position to another and throw it to the ground and put it into operation, with deadly effect.



A 10.5cm artillery crew are in action against a Soviet position. The 10.5cm light field howitzer was used extensively on the Eastern Front and provided the divisions with a versatile, comparatively mobile base of fire.



The crew of a 7.5cm Pak 40 rest in a field along a defensive position in Estonia in March 1944. Although thinly scattered during the battles of Estonia and Latvia this anti-tank gun proved its worth on the Eastern Front and was more than capable of disabling heavy Soviet tanks. *Waffen-SS* gunners in particular were able to demonstrate the efficacy of the weapon in action in a number of armoured assaults in the Baltics.



Well concealed inside a wooded area the crew of white-washed 7.5cm Pak40 can be seen with their deadly anti-tank weapon. The Pak40 had spaced-armour shield which was held together by large bolts. These bolts also had drilled holes that allowed the crews to thread foliage through them.



A light MG42 machine gun crew out in a field. The field of view for the gunner must have been immense and would have certainly offered a very good opportunity for detecting enemy movement from some distance away. In the Narva region along the frozen plains both the German defenders and Soviet attackers fought a series of heavy battles that quickly degenerated into ferocious hand-to-hand combat. Only the arrival of armoured support enabled the infantry to withdraw safely to another fixed position. Fierce fighting in the region continued through March and April, with the Russians making little headway against the tenacious German defenders.



Three soldiers converse amongst themselves during a brief respite in the fighting. Two of the soldiers have been issued with the usual rifleman's equipment and weapons; the army enlisted man's leather belt, rifle ammunition pouches for his Karbine 98K rifle. The soldier on the right is armed with the 9mm MP38 or MP40 machine pistol. The MP38/40 machine pistol was commonly called the 'Schmeisser'. He also wears a pair of 6 x 30 field binoculars.



Two photographs showing Wehrmacht and *Waffen-SS* troops posing for the camera in front just one of many of the shelters erected along the Estonian frontier in early 1944. Such shelters offered no real protection from enemy fire, but did protect weapons, ammunition, and crew from the rain and snow. It also provided a degree of concealment as well.



Two photographs taken of Tiger tanks belonging to the Heavy Tank Battalion (*Schwere Panzer-Abteilung*) 502 in Narva. In January 1944 the tank battalion received 32 replacements, and a further 20 in February 1944, bringing the total strength of the sPz.Abt 502 up to 71 Tigers on 29 February 1944, although only 24 were operational. But despite this the commander Major Jähde led the battalion in a number of successful engagements. The unit fought well around Leningrad and at Narva.





Waffen-SS infantrymen sit beside a shelter during operations in early 1944. The shelters which the Germans built were called *Halbgruppenunterstände* (group and half-group living bunkers). These were to become essential for both the *Waffen-SS* and Wehrmacht if they were to survive the ceaseless artillery and terrible freezing weather conditions.



On the front line and *Waffen-SS* troops tuck into their rations. Rations among these soldiers seem plentiful with loaves of bread and various tins of rations spread along the trench. Within months food supplies to the front lines had severely diminished making life for the soldier very difficult. In the Narva Bridgehead were soldiers from Division *Nordland* and Brigade *Nederland*. The German forces bitterly defending the area were a mix of Wehrmacht, *Waffen-SS*, Luftwaffe, Navy and police troops. Opposing them were the Soviet 8th and 47th Armies and the 2nd Shock Army.



SS Panzergrenadiers have earned themselves a bottle of beer each following heavy fighting. During the last two years of the war the number of Panzergrenadier divisions grew and they soon earned the respect of being called the Panzer élite. With the mounting losses of men and armour, the Panzergrenadiers displayed outstanding ability and endurance in the face of overwhelming odds. Although losses in terms of manpower and equipment had been too high in the face of increasing Russian strength, the Germans could still mount a number of small-scale counterattacks.



Three grenadiers, one armed with an MG42 machine gun and one armed with a Karbine 98K bolt action rifle round-up Soviet soldiers that have capitulated during fierce fighting along the Narva River in early 1944. All three soldiers are wearing the *SS* fur lined anorak, which was first issued in the winter of 1943.



A Nebelwerfer crew is loading the rocket shells into the Nebelwerfer 41. The Nebelwerfer 41 was equipped with six barrels, each firing a 34 kg (75 lb.) 150 mm (5.9 in.) Wurfgrate 41 (rocket shell 41) rocket out to a range of approximately 6800 meters (7437 yards). Along the Narva front the Nebelwerfer was used extensively and caused high losses in the Russian lines.

Wehrmacht troops pose in front of a captured T-34 tank that has been pressed into service by the Germans. A number of captured Soviet armoured vehicles were used in the German Army during the war. Whilst it helped bolster the diminishing number of German vehicles being knocked out of action, the Germans did find it difficult replacing damaged or worn parts. Ammunition too could sometimes be difficult to obtain.



A well-camouflaged Luftwaffe 2cm Flak gun mounted on the back of a four wheeled vehicle during operations in Estonia. The number of guns assigned to light flak batteries varied through the war, but was typically twelve 2cm and/or 3.7cm guns in four platoons.



A MG42 machine gun team taking cover in an open field during operations in the Baltics. This heavy machine gun appears to be covering an advancing rifle company. The infantry battalion's machine gun company had two heavy machine gun platoons, each with four guns. In open terrain they would protect the flanks of advancing rifle companies, as in this photograph.



A mortar crewman surveys the local terrain with a pair of binoculars inside a well dug-in 8cm sGrW 34 mortar position. Life in the line for these soldiers was a continuous grind, but any let-up in defence would ensure that the Red Army would push deeper into the German defences. German commanders in the field were well aware of the disasters befalling their comrades in the central and southern sectors of the front in Russia, and knew that their position in Estonia was becoming more precarious with each passing day.



A soldier stands next to a 2cm quadruple self-propelled flak gun during operations in the summer of 1944. This weapon could engage not only air targets but ground ones as well. The gun is in a defensive position and great lengths by the flak crew have gone into camouflaging the position. Note the camouflaging netting with foliage draped over the crew's shelter.



Two photographs showing gun crews preparing to fire modified 10.5cm le FH 18/42 guns in anger. The 10.5cm was the standard light artillery piece deployed in the artillery divisions on the Eastern Front. However, in order to give the gun better punch on the battlefield the weapon was modified in 1942. The barrel was lengthened, a cage muzzle-brake was fitted, and the carriage was a lightened version of the le FH 18 design.





A 2cm Flak gun mounted on the back of a half-track in a field with one of the crew members scouring the terrain for enemy activity. The sides of the vehicle are folded down. The sides allowed extra space on board the halftrack for the flak crew to easily manoeuvre.



A MG42 machine gun crew in a dug-in position in a field in Latvia during operations in the summer of 1944. The MG42 had a proven record of reliability, durability, and ease of operation, but was most notable for being able to produce a stunning volume of suppressive fire. The MG42 has one of the highest average rates of fire of any single-barreled light machine gun, between 1,200 and 1,500 rpm. The MG42 weighed 11.6 kg in the light role with the bipod, lighter than the MG34 and easily portable. The bipod, the same one used on the MG34, could be mounted to the front or the centre of the gun depending on where it was positioned.



A Wehrmacht gun crew with their 7.5cm le IG18 light infantry artillery piece. This particular weapon was used in direct infantry support. The gun was very versatile in combat and the crew often aggressively positioned it, which usually meant the piece was regularly exposed on the battlefield. A typical infantry regiment controlled three infantry battalions, an infantry gun company with six 7.5cm le IG18. Remarkably this weapon was one of the first post-World War One guns to be issued to the Wehrmacht and later the *Waffen-SS*. The gun was light and robust and employed a shotgun breech action. Even by 1944, during the battle in the Baltics this weapon was widely used, especially in foreign units.



Waffen-SS troops rest in a forest. Few other units could produce such confidence from their Führer as did those of the *Waffen-SS*. Even in the Baltics where the bulk of the SS were foreign conscripts Hitler felt he could still rely on these elite units to stave off the inevitable defeat, or at least hold back the Russian onslaught for some appreciable length of time. However, Hitler's confidence in them was a double-edged sword. Like so many other areas of the Eastern Front the *Waffen-SS* were constantly rushed from one threatened sector to another and expected to save the front from disaster.



Two photographs showing both *Waffen-SS* and Wehrmacht mortar crews with the 8cm Gr.W.34 mortar. During the war the mortar had become the standard infantry support weapon giving the soldier valuable high explosive capability beyond the range of rifles or grenades.



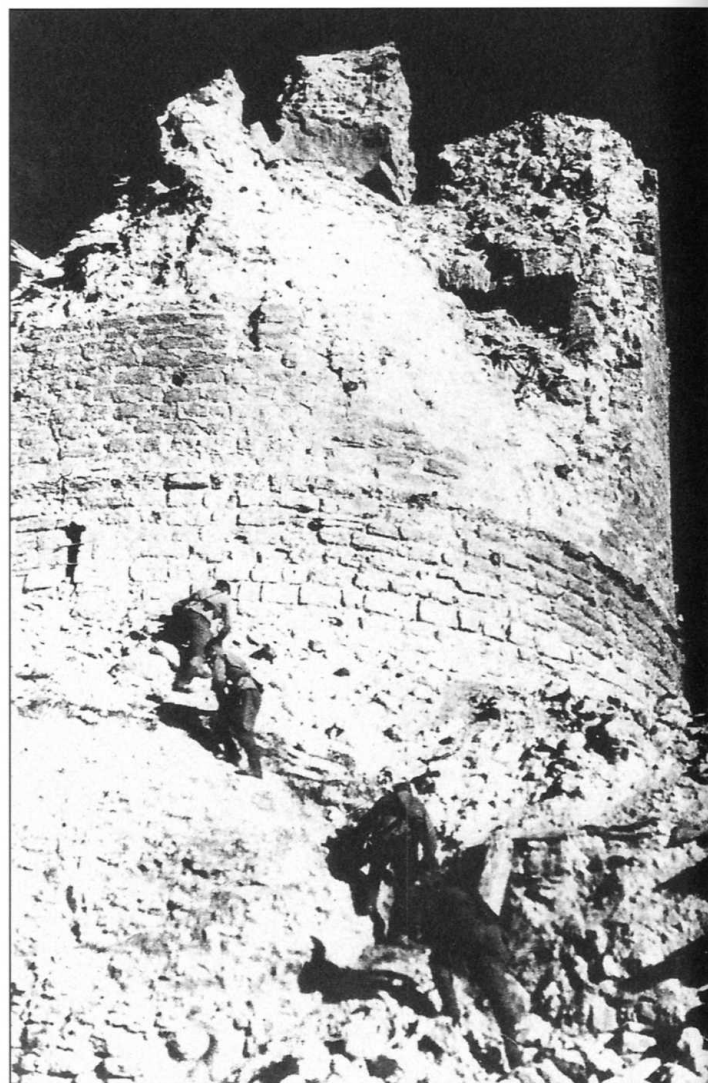
'Jan Rose', a scout of a Lithuanian partisan detachment and a holder of five Soviet military awards, Summer 1944. (Photo archive of the Bulgarian Ministry of Defence)



A *Waffen-SS* 5cm Pak 38 crew rest during defensive operations in the Baltics. The Pak 38 was well liked among the crews that had the opportunity to use it in battle. Not only was the weapon effective in combat, but also easy to conceal, as in this photograph.



A mortar crew during a pause in the fighting on the outskirts in the western suburbs of Narva in July 1944. On 25 July the city was evacuated and the troops ordered to withdraw to the so-called Tannenberg Line. By the next day the Russian assault on the Tannenberg positions had begun. The fighting in the region between Narva and the Tannenberg Line was ferocious and battles see-sawed back and forth, first one side having the advantage and then the other. Despite many of its successes both the Wehrmacht and *Waffen-SS* suffered massive losses in men and material, while the enemy poured an ever-increasing number of fresh troops over the River Narva and into the battle.



Soviet troops attack the citadel in Narva, July 1944.
(Photo archive of the Bulgarian Ministry of Defence)



A Soviet column of lend-lease Ford GPA amphibian trucks, Narva, Summer 1944. (Photo archive of the Bulgarian Ministry of Defence)



A 15cm Nebelwerfer 41 fires one of its deadly six-barrels into action. This weapon fired 2.5kg shells that could be projected over a range of 7,000 metres. When fired the projectiles screamed through the air, causing the enemy to become unnerved by the noise. These fearsome weapons that caused extensive carnage during the battle in the Baltics served in independent army rocket launcher battalions, regiments and brigades.

PART III

Battle of Attrition: 21 July 1944–January 1945

Withdrawal

Along the Baltic front the Germans were experiencing defensive problems in many areas and in spite of strong fortified positions, which were manned with Pak guns and lines of machine gun pits, the Red Army moved forward in their thousands regardless of the cost in life to their own ranks. Already reserves or reinforcements were dwindling to help bolster the struggling Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS forces. All along the battered and blasted front German troops tried in vain to hold their positions against overwhelming odds. Whilst a number of areas simply cracked under the sheer weight of the Russian onslaught, there were many places where German units continued to demonstrate their ability to defend the most hazardous positions against well-prepared and highly superior enemy forces. Along the Narva Front German infantry divisions bitterly contested large areas of countryside. Fighting was often savage, resulting in terrible casualties on both sides.

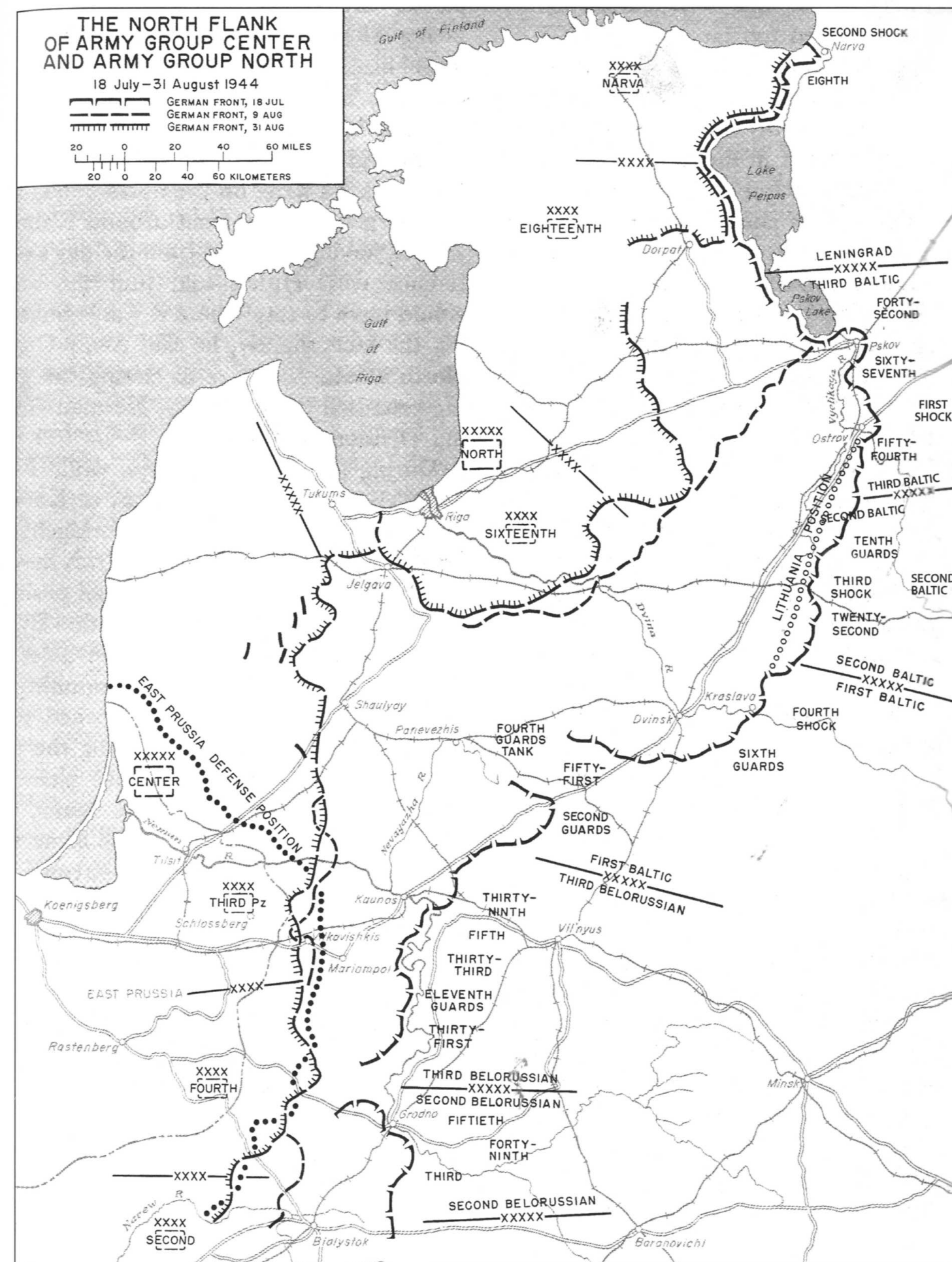
However, despite Germany's dogged determination to hold its lines to the grim death, the decimation of Army Group Centre meant that much of the pressure now fell on Army Group North. By mid-July the Red Army had already taken full advantage of the situation and was slowly grinding down German forces in both Estonia and Lithuania. In order to avert a catastrophe a new defensive line was built called the Tannenberg Line (*Tannenbergstellung*) with the main defences erected to the west of Narva. On 21 July Hitler grudgingly ordered his forces to withdraw to the Tannenberg Line, and fight to the death. Units ordered to the Tannenberg Line consisted of strong formations made-up from Lieutenant General Felix Steiner's III SS Panzer Corps. The 4th SS Armoured Grenadier Brigade *Nederland* dug in on the left north flank of the Tannenberg Line, whilst the 11th SS Volunteer Armoured Grenadier Division *Nordland* was on the right south flank.

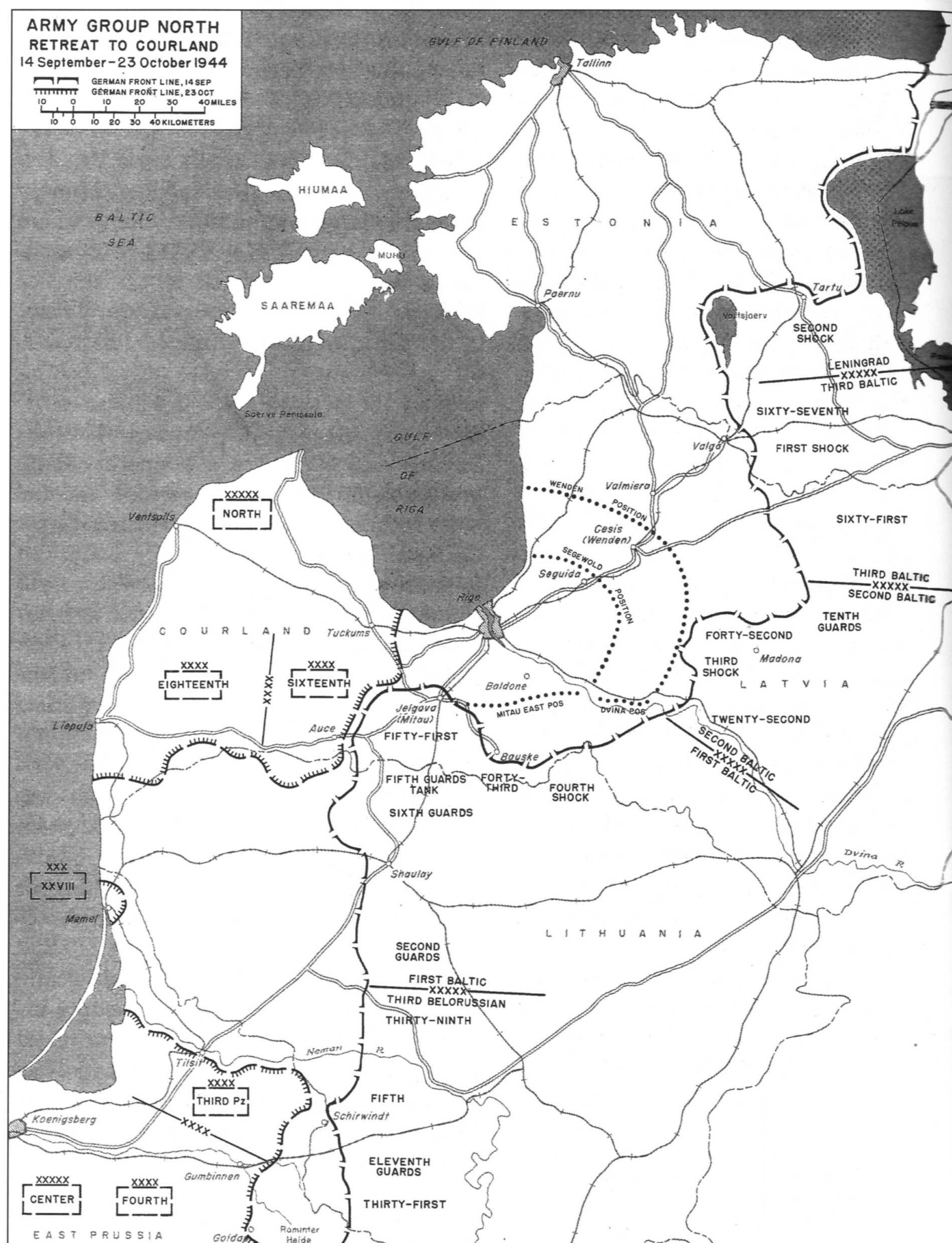
Three days later on 24 July strong Russian forces attacked the Tannenberg Line. What followed was a series of bloodthirsty infantry and armoured battles that saw the Germans dwarfed by enemy superiority. Both German and Estonian forces tried to hold their defensive positions, but in many places were pulverized by 2,000 tons of shells. The Red Army attack engulfed much of the front, but this did not deter German and Estonian front line troops accompanied by Panther tanks and rocket artillery from launching a series of savage counterattacks of their own. Some of the counterattacks were so fierce that the Germans managed to recapture the towns of Tornimägi and Grenaderimägi.

During the morning of 25 July, as troops on the Tannenberg Line fought for survival, 1360 Soviet guns fired nearly 300,000 shells as the Second Shock Army began attacking across the Narva River. The remaining Estonian defensive positions that had not been blasted by the shelling were attacked, and in many areas these last strongpoints ran out of ammunition. As the Estonian troops fled in panic they were cut down by Russian fire. Along the banks of the Narva both German and Estonian Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS forces were driven from their trenches and foxholes. As confusion swept across the entire front commanders in the field hastily gathered the remaining units together to try and defend the main highway to Tallinn. The situation for the defenders was calamitous. The Germans were well aware how important it was to prevent the Russians advancing on Tallinn, but there seemed no stopping the Red Army drive.

During late July the Germans fought a number of defensive actions trying in vain to hold the Soviets from pushing along the Tallinn highway. Although the German withdrawal to the Tannenberg Line was reached successfully by many retreating units, the city of Narva could no longer be held and as a consequence the Russians finally captured it after six long months of bloody battle with the cost of nearly 500,000 men.

In the first week of August the German position in Estonia and Latvia looked increasingly grim. Army Group North was exhausted and the Russians were relentlessly driving them back by pouring troops, often young boy soldiers and old men, at every weak point along the receding front.





On 10 August the Third Baltic and Second Baltic Fronts launched massive air and artillery attacks against the 18th Army south of Pskov Lake and north of the Dvina. The attacks were so fierce that within only a few days massive holes were punched through the German lines raising the fear that Estonia would soon be lost. In a drastic measure to support the disintegrating 18th Army the Luftwaffe hastily sent a Stuka squadron to the area commanded by Major Hans Rudel, known by his comrades as the *Panzerknacker* (tank destroyer). The 12th Army too, from the remnants of Army Group Centre, was ordered personally by Hitler to support the 18th Army along with a grenadier division airlifted from Königsberg.

By incredible efforts and courageous fighting the German Army managed to temporarily slow down the Russian advance. But in spite of frantic measures holding back the Soviet Army, the bulk of the German divisions left to defend Estonia were exhausted and undermanned. In a radical effort to prevent the front from caving in, General Heinz Guderian, Chief of the General staff, proposed that thirty divisions of Army Group North, which were redundant in Kurland, be shipped back to the Reich so they could be re-supplied and re-strengthened to reinforce Army Group Centre in Poland. Hitler, however, emphatically refused Guderian's proposal. Kurland and the Estonian islands of Hiiumaa and Saaremaa were to hold out, he said. This, he believed, was necessary to protect German U-boat bases along the Baltic coast.

Whilst preparations were made for the defence of Kurland and the Estonian islands, on 17 September, General Ferdinand Schörner, commander of Army Group North, decided to evacuate his forces from Estonia before they were driven along the Baltic coast and cut-off. The withdrawal was codenamed 'Operation Aster'. It began with evacuating elements of the German formations and Estonian civilians. In less than a week some 50,000 troops and 1,000 POWs had been removed. The remaining parts of Army Group North in Estonia were ordered to withdraw into Latvia through the town of Pärnu. The German III Armoured Corps reached the town on 20 September, exhausted and low on ammunition. The II Armoured Corps, however, withdrew south to form 18th Army's rearguard. As German forces retreated the infantry were ground down in a battle of attrition and could no longer sustain itself cohesively on the battlefield. The Russians in overwhelming superiority advanced across the flat plains of Estonia using both fields and the long straight highway, bound for Tallinn. Panzergrenadiers, Luftwaffe field units, Waffen-SS and Estonian conscripts tried in vain to hold back the enemy onslaught. By 22 September Tallinn was captured and two days later the Red Army heavily bombed the harbour at Haapsalu and Vormsi Island, preventing desperate German units from escaping by sea. The Russian 8th Army of the Leningrad Front then went on to capture the remaining islands off the Estonian coast in a large amphibious attack.

Retreat to Kurland

By the end of September 1944, Army Group North was tactically in a more dangerous position than it had ever been before. The front was badly scarred and depleted and the bulk of its forces had withdrawn from Estonia, and was already being threatened in Latvia and Lithuania by deep overwhelming attacks. German troops battered and bruised by months of ceaseless combat desperately tried to hold their positions, but the situation in the Baltic States had deteriorated far quicker than the German High Command had anticipated. From Königsberg in the north the front had been reduced to a coastal strip of some 80 miles in width and over 400 miles in length. In the Tukum-Riga area the 5th Guards Tank Army had broken through to the coast at the end of July and was now threatening the whole area. Infantry units of Army Group North and the 3rd Panzer Army were fighting for survival and were vulnerable everywhere. Hitler was totally aware how precarious the situation had become, but was determined not to withdraw his forces out of what had become known as the Tukum-Riga corridor. He told Schörner that Army Group North would have to hold onto northern Latvia against determined Soviet attacks. The Red Army was reported to be only 35 miles from Riga on the south and 50 miles from the coast below the Vortsjaerv. South of Riga the SS Panzergrenadier Division *Nordland* dug-in along what was known as the Segewold position.

The Red Army's objective was to spearhead the 2nd and 3rd Baltic Fronts on a broad front towards Riga, and as the operation progressed they were to pursue Army Group North into Kurland. Although German commanders in the field were well aware of their enemies' intentions the Germans knew that they were hindered by weak infantry, lack of armour and artillery. In order to help defend the front lines a number of Panzer divisions were moved into the Shaulay-Raseynyay area in early October, but the 3rd Panzer Army was very weak in infantry. The 55th Grenadier Division west of Shaulay, for instance, was trying to hold a 24-mile line, but because it had insufficient artillery and anti-tank guns, it could only man certain sectors of the front.

On 5 October the 1st Baltic Front finally attacked west of Shaulay toward Memel. German units tried frantically to hold their meagre positions together, but over a couple of days determined Soviet forces smashed through their lines and attacked toward the Soerve Peninsula. The 3rd Panzer Army was almost overrun by the 5th Tank Army

and 43rd Army. The 3rd Panzer Army command post was overrun and the staff had to fight its way through heavy clashes with enemy infantry toward Memel, where further fighting had erupted around the port. In a drastic measure to stabilize the deteriorating situation Schörner began moving divisions through to begin defending the northern tip of Kurland, where the Leningrad Front had less than 20 miles of water to cross after it had captured the Soerve Peninsula. The city of Riga was now under heavy air and ground bombardment, but still Hitler protested and delayed giving up the Latvian capital.

To the southwest of Riga in Kurland, Schörner reported he had enough strength to hold the area for some appreciable length of time, but on 10 October Army High Command suddenly announced that the 3rd Panzer Army was being returned to Army Group Centre. The following day as the Russians intensified their attacks, Schörner ordered the withdrawal of his troops from Riga, and two days later the city fell to the 3rd Baltic Front. With the fall of the Latvian capital came the evacuation of thousands of troops and 100,000 of tons of materials to the Kurland bridgehead. In total some thirty divisions would be moved to the Kurland area where they were ordered to dig-in and fight to the death in order to defend what remained of Latvian territory that was still in German hands.

Fortress Kurland

In spite of General Guderian's frequent appeals to Hitler to ship back over 500,000 soldiers including 20,000 men of the Latvian 19th SS-Division that were in Kurland, the *Führer* continued rejecting the proposals of his Chief of Staff in a drastic effort to halt the series of major military reverses in the Baltic. During October, as predicted, Army Group North was cut off and disjointed, leaving only the battered 4th Army to defend East Prussia against four well-armed and well-equipped Russian armies. The Soviet objective was to crush the German forces in Kurland, where the main body of Army Group North was now positioned. The bulk of the forces in Kurland consisted of the once-vaunted German 16th Army and 18th Army. Both armies were given the task of protecting the remaining U-boat forces along the shores of the Baltic by repelling any Soviet attacks however fierce they were.

Schörner was determined to stamp out the least sign of defeatism in Kurland. He told his commanders in the field that every soldier was to comply with the *Führer's* unyielding resolve to defend Fortress Kurland to the bitter end. Schörner showed little concern what his subordinates thought of him and his methods, and thought even less of the Latvians that were staking their lives for him and his German army. Whilst he saw the Latvians as an under-trained, badly-equipped force that was constantly deserting, he did consider the Latvian 19th Waffen-SS Grenadier Division as the best division in Kurland.

The German and Latvian force that was given the task of defending Fortress Kurland were relatively intact and very strong, in spite the lack of tanks, artillery and anti-tank guns. The Germans and their Latvian allies had barely dug into their lines in mid-October when the Soviets attacked. The main Red Army drive, which massed two Soviet Army corps with thirteen divisions, targeted the weak part of the fortress against the Latvians that were positioned between the Gulf of Riga and Ventspils. Over the next few days ferocious fighting erupted along the front. For days shells and gun fire rained down on the Latvians, but they stood firm. Tank after tank was brought to a flaming halt along with the infantry. Surviving soldiers kept running forward, shouting wildly to keep the momentum going. By 22 October the Russians, savagely mauled by the determined defence, fell back. It seemed that the Soviets had underestimated the strength and determination of their enemy. Further attacks on Kurland were unleashed on 27 October, but still the Russians could not breach the outer defences of the Fortress. Soviet commanders were optimistic that it would only be a matter of time before Kurland would be crushed, but they had no idea that this engagement would continue until the end of the war. Both German and Latvian soldiers were dug-in deeply. Dozens of MG42 machine gun nests were buried along newly constructed fortified defences in order to halt advancing infantry. The MG42 was regarded by the German soldier as a formidable weapon of war and was probably the greatest machine-gun of the Second World War. As long as machine gunners could keep their machine guns intact and operational, they were quite capable of holding up attacking infantry many times their number. Furthermore, it only took a few well-sighted, well-hidden and well-supplied MG42 machine guns to delay an entire attacking regiment for hours on a frontage of some five or six miles.

Along with the various MG42 machine gun positions were an assortment of the 5cm Pak 38, 7.5cm Pak 40, the 8.8cm Pak 43 and the deadly 8.8cm Flak guns that were being used against both ground and aerial targets. These guns were the backbone of the defence against the overwhelming Soviet armour and would prove decisive in the months that followed, despite a gradual depletion in ammunition. By late 1944, the Germans had become masters of defence and were expertly dug-in. Russian attacks continued with unabated ferocity, but both the Germans and Latvians fought bitterly to hold ground. The Red Army tried their best to exploit the situation by using air superiority to heavily damage the two main ports and their facilities.

The second battle of the Kurland pocket lasted until 25 November, and although the Germans incurred high casualties it was the Russians that had suffered the most. During late November and the first half of December the fighting eased and this allowed the Germans to be resupplied, and to also evacuate the large numbers of wounded soldiers and civilians back to the *Reich*. Surprisingly Schörner ordered that many able-bodied soldiers and large amounts of anti-tank and heavy artillery guns were to be moved back to the homeland as well, which significantly reduced their strength inside the Fortress.

Whilst the Germans tried their best to re-strengthen their defensive positions the Soviet Army prepared for the third offensive. The third battle began on 21 December and lasted until New Year's Eve. The Latvians referred to the fighting during this period as the Christmas battles. With at least six-to-one numerical superiority the Soviets attacked along the front looking for any weak spots for a breakthrough. For hours Russian aircraft bombed the German and Latvian lines and almost succeeded cutting through the front near Ventspils. However, German grenadiers launched a series of attacks aimed at blunting the Russian drive. Although the Germans suffered high casualties, Red Army losses were much worse.

Over the next few weeks fighting in Kurland continued with unabated ferocity. By early January the strength of the German and Latvian force amounted to some 400,000 men. The Red Army was determined as ever to smash Kurland and had collected some sixty divisions in order to prepare its forces for yet another assault. The attack was to coincide with the massive offensive being prepared in the central sector of the Eastern Front against German troops holding the banks of the Vistula in Poland.

On 12/13 January 1945, the German High Command received reports that the Vistula Front that ran for some 350 miles, was under attack. Almost immediately the German Army was engulfed in a storm of fire. Across the snow-covered terrain Soviet troops and massive amounts of armoured vehicles flooded the battlefield. By the end of the first day the battle had ripped open a breach more than 20 miles wide in the Vistula Front. The 4th Panzer Army was virtually annihilated.

Simultaneously in Kurland, Army Group North was once again attacked. The Soviet assault was massive, but both the Germans and their Latvian allies fought back with everything they could muster. Just prior to the Red Army assault, Hitler had removed several divisions back to Germany including Schörner, who had been summoned home to help in the defence of the *Reich*. He was replaced by General Lothar Rendulic.

Rendulic's force of some twenty-one undermanned divisions had stretched itself even thinner across the front to cover the lines against massive Russian attacks. The Germans were suffering from an unmistakable lack of provisions. Many units were simply being thrown into battle piecemeal, their commanders hoping that they would stem the Soviet drive through Kurland. To Hitler Kurland was the last bastion of defence in the East and every soldier, he said, was to continue to 'stand and fight' and wage an unprecedented battle of attrition. As the battles in Kurland continued to intensify and the death toll rose to unprecedented proportions, on 25 January Hitler officially renamed Army Group North as Army Group Kurland, and formally designated the Kurland region as a Fortress. Hitler made it quite clear that Army Group Kurland would not be evacuated. He was quite aware that there was now no possibility of restoring a new land corridor between Kurland and East Prussia. Instead, the force would have to fight to the bitter end as the Red Army commenced the encirclement and the slow reduction of the Kurland pocket.



A Wehrmacht MG42 machine gun crew defending the coastline near the Estonian capital, Tallin. By 22 September Tallin was captured and two days later the Red Army heavily bombed the harbour at Haapsalu and Vormsi Island, preventing desperate German units from escaping by sea.



A 15cm sIG 33 howitzer is positioned in a log-frame shelter and is about to be fired. Such shelters offered no real protection from enemy fire, but did protect the gun, ammunition, and crew from the rain. It also provided a degree of concealment as well. This photograph was taken along the so-called Tannenberg Line, where German forces had begun pulling back from Narva during the summer of 1944.



Waffen-SS troops marching towards the front through a destroyed town in the Baltics. The troops are all armed with the Karabiner 98K bolt action rifle. Whilst many of the Waffen-SS troops fought courageously in the Baltics only 12 Waffen-SS divisions on the Eastern Front could truly be called élite. The remainder were mainly divisional strength in name only and sometimes poorly equipped in the face of an overwhelming enemy.



A well dug-in and concealed 5cm Pak 38 during defensive operations along the border of Latvia and Estonia. Although this weapon proved deadly against lighter armour, in the Baltics the Germans lacked sufficient quantities of more potent anti-tank guns like the 7.5cm Pak40 and the deadly 8.8cm Pak43.



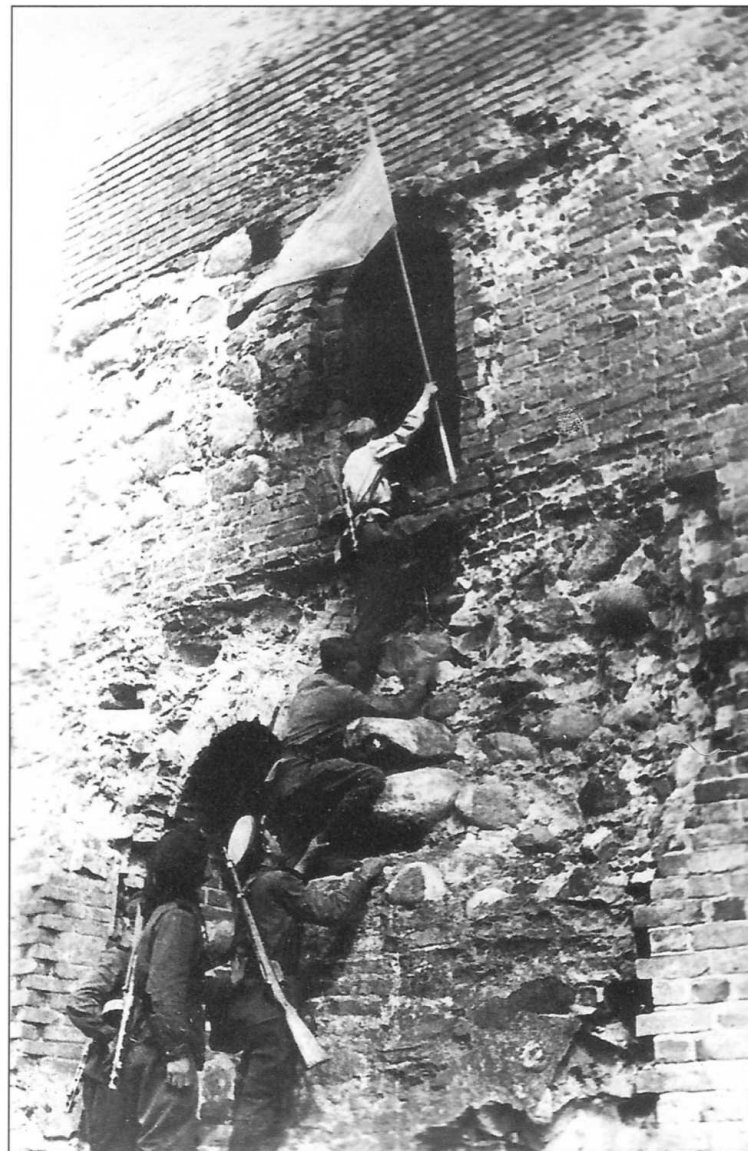
The crew of a 10.5cm heavy field howitzer are in a field during a lull in the fighting and waiting for the order to resume firing again. Ammunition lies stacked in special crates. Note the gun's aiming stake is being temporarily used as tent pole.



It was very common for infantry, especially during intensive long periods of action, to fire their mortar from either trenches or dug-in positions where the mortar crew could also be protected from enemy fire. Along the Tannenberg Line many mortar crews had dug-in to prepare for a bitter defence. During late July and through August heavy fighting saw the Germans, in spite all their tenacity, being bled white: much of their armour had been smashed to pieces, and their artillery and anti-tank guns were fast diminishing in the face of overwhelming enemy superiority.



Soviet troops enter Kaunas during the first days of August 1944. The first two vehicles are probably Dodge 4 x 4 WC lend-lease Weapons Carriers. (Photo archive of the Bulgarian Ministry Of Defence)



Soviet troops rise the Red flag in Vilnius, July 1944.
(Photo archive of the Bulgarian Ministry Of Defence)

A photograph taken the moment the projectile is about to leave the barrel of a 15cm field howitzer. Note how many of the crew are plugging their ears. In Army Group North the 15cm howitzer provided reliable support, especially in a defensive role.



A MG42 machine gun crew during a defensive action. The machine gun is mounted on the newly-developed *Lafette 42* tripod, which weighed 20.5 kg. The optimum operating crew of an MG42 for sustained fire operation was six men. The gunner was known as the No.1, the No.2 carried the tripod, and Nos.3, 4, and 5 carried ammunition, spare barrels, entrenching tools, and other items. For additional protection the No.1 and No.2 were armed with pistols, while the remaining three carried rifles. This large team was often reduced to just three (as in this photograph), the gunner, the loader (also barrel carrier), and the spotter. The gunner of the weapon was normally a junior non-commissioned officer (or Unteroffizier).



A MG42 machine gunner in a defensive position during the summer of 1944. Although the MG42 was an impressive weapon, often holding back entire attacking enemy infantry regiment, the gun had a number of drawbacks which included a lot of attention in terms of maintenance. Dirt and battlefield debris would regularly cause jamming if left unchecked.



Two photographs taken in sequence showing an 8-cm sGrW 34 (heavy grenade-launcher model 1934) in action in a village. During the last year of the war the mortar was used more aggressively, and soon earned a reputation in line with the fearsome 8.8 Flak gun and the Tiger Tank. Even among Soviet troops, that were now dominating the battlefield, this mortar was dreaded for its accuracy and rate of fire. The effectiveness of the German mortar was primarily the result of very good training of German mortar crews. They were experts at their craft. German mortar crews always seemed to possess the ability to engage in and out of action rapidly, and were able to constantly hold the enemy back, and bring fire down rapidly on their adversary.



A group of SS troops rest. By this stage of the war the SS and their Wehrmacht counterparts were not only fighting against numerically superior enemy forces but increased partisan activity as well to the rear of the main lines. The German soldier was now fully aware that the average Russian conscript was no longer the half-trained poorly trained and badly equipped conscript that had faced the mighty Wehrmacht in 1941. During the battle in the Baltics the Soviet troops now composed of experienced veterans who had excellent equipment and the latest armoured vehicles



Two StuG.III Ausf.Gs along a muddy road in Latvia after a heavy downpour of rain. The leading StuG appears to be getting some assistance as it's stuck in the mud. Note the track links attached to both vehicles for additional armoured protection. Both the StuGs are armed with an MG34 machine gun with a folding cast armoured shield, which was used to protect the gunner against aerial attack.



A Waffen-SS MG42 machine gunner and his team advance along a typical muddy road. When times and conditions allowed, machine gun crews invariably prepared a number of fall-back positions. They appreciated the full value of the MG42, and along these fall-back positions the machine gunners were able to set-up advantageous defensive positions. In the face of the mighty Soviet Army time and time again SS units stood firm against almost impossible odds. Even some of the most fanatical SS troops fighting in the Baltics must have realised that military success was now impossible, yet they continued to make sacrifice after sacrifice, often holding the lines with a few MG42 machine gun positions in order to allow other units to withdraw.



A photograph showing a Waffen-SS mortar crew with the standard German mortar, the 8cm Granatwerfer 34 or Gr.W.34 mortar. The mortar's maximum range was 2.4km when it fired the standard Wurfgranate 34 round which carried 550g of explosives. The round could be set to detonate on impact or in an airburst. It could also fire the Wurfgranate 40, a larger round with an increased explosive charge of almost 5kg. However this decreased the maximum range to 950m.

A well-concealed Waffen-SS Pak 35/36. The Pak 35/36 was the first anti-tank weapon to serve both the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS. However, by the time it saw its debut on the Eastern Front the German gunners soon realized how limited the weapon was in an anti-tank capability. In spite of its inadequate fire capability the weapon still saw extensive action during the last years of the war including many defensive actions in the Baltics.





A photograph taken the moment a 10.5cm artillery crew fire at an enemy position. Various pieces of foliage have been covered over the trail spades and part of the splinter shield and wheels in order try and conceal the weapon from aerial observation. In total, the 10.5cm howitzer had a nine-man crew. Usually fewer are seen serving this piece because often some of the crew were to the rear with the horses, limber and caisson. The 10.5cm light field howitzer was used extensively in the East and provided the division with a versatile, comparatively mobile base of fire. Although these howitzers provided armour piecing and shaped-charged anti-tank rounds, these guns were far from being effective anti-tank weapons. It was primarily the artillery regiments that were given the task of destroying enemy positions and fortified defences and conducting counter-battery fire prior to an armoured or infantry assault.



Soviet troops in Tallinn, September 1944. A SU-76 self-propelled gun is in the forefront, two T-34 tanks in the background. (Photo archive of the Bulgarian Ministry of Defence)



A captured train with equipment that the Germans failed to evacuate, Tallinn, September 1944. (Photo archive of the Bulgarian Ministry Of Defence)



Waffen-SS troops somewhere in the Baltics. A comrade has been injured and is being carried on a stretcher to a field hospital hastily erected to the rear of the front. Though many SS units performed superbly in 1944, there was nothing but a catalogue of defeats and withdrawals with huge amounts of casualties.



Troops queue for their meagre rations near to the front line in Latvia in September 1944. By this time troops were becoming increasingly undernourished due to severe lack of rations. The basic ration for the men was an army loaf and some stew or soup.



A mortar crew rest on the front during a quite spell. Fighting in the Baltics varied considerably from constant heavy fighting, unending aerial and ground bombardments, to hours or even days of total inactivity.



Soviet torpedo cutters in Tallinn, Autumn 1944. (Photo archive of the Bulgarian Ministry Of Defence)



Out in the snow and the crew of a 7.5cm l.IG18 are preparing to go into action. Each infantry regiment possessed its own artillery in the form of 7.5cm l.IG18 and 15cm s.IG33 infantry guns, which were regarded the workhorse pieces operated by specially trained infantrymen. Each infantry gun company had six 7.5cm l.IG18s



A light MG34 machine gun crew wearing winter reversibles white-side out stand beside a road. The machine gun has the MG34 50-round basket drum magazine fitted. The term light and heavy machine guns defined the role and not the weight of the gun. Rifle groups generally had a light machine-gun with a bipod, along with one or two spare barrels. A heavy machine-gun group, however, had the bipod fitted machine gun, but additionally carried a tripod with optical sight.



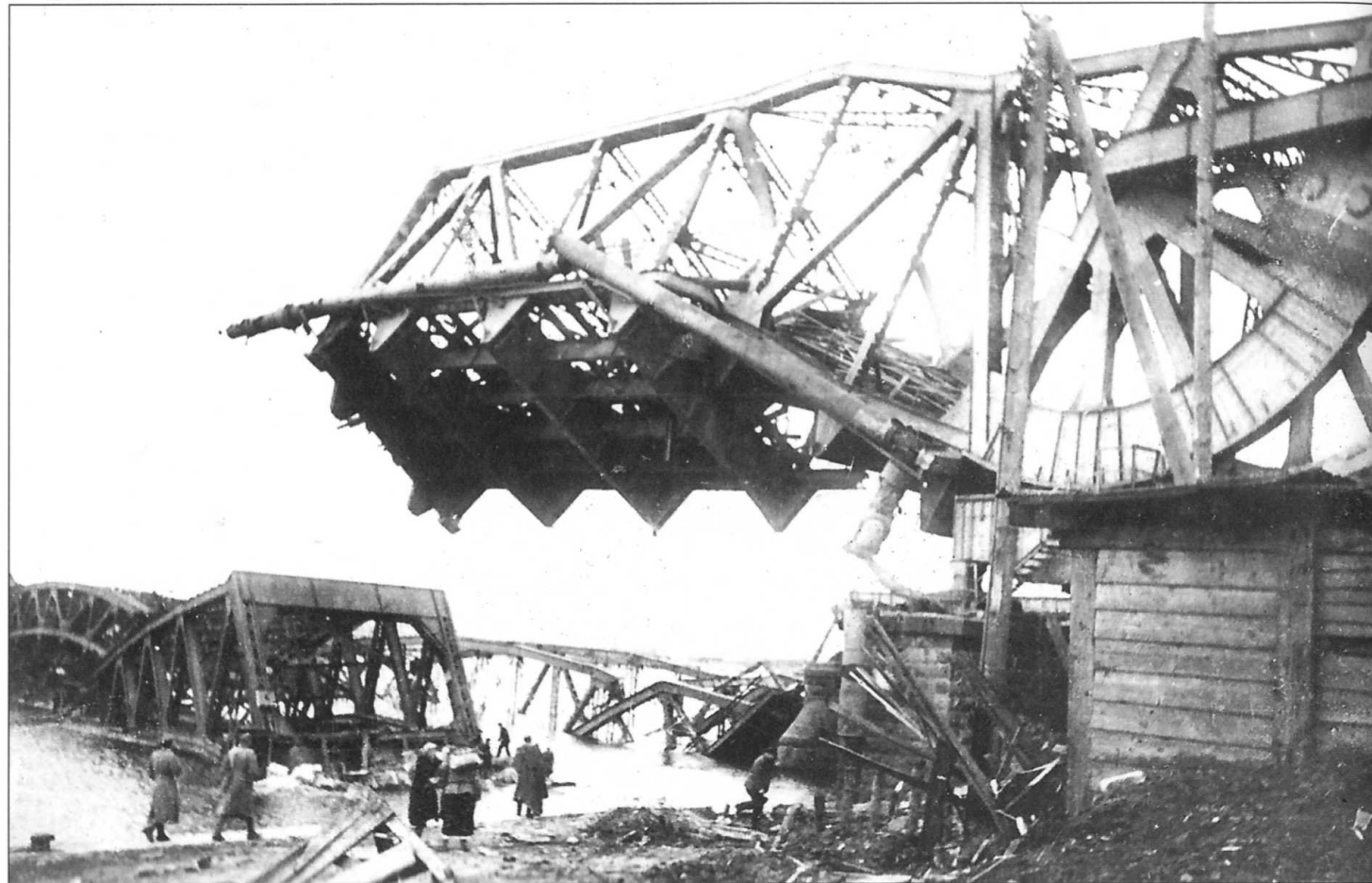
Out in the snow in Kurland and troops prepare to move forward into action. A stationary whitewashed halftrack can also be seen. To Hitler Kurland was the last bastion of defence in the East and every soldier, he said, was to continue to 'stand and fight' and wage an unprecedented battle of attrition.



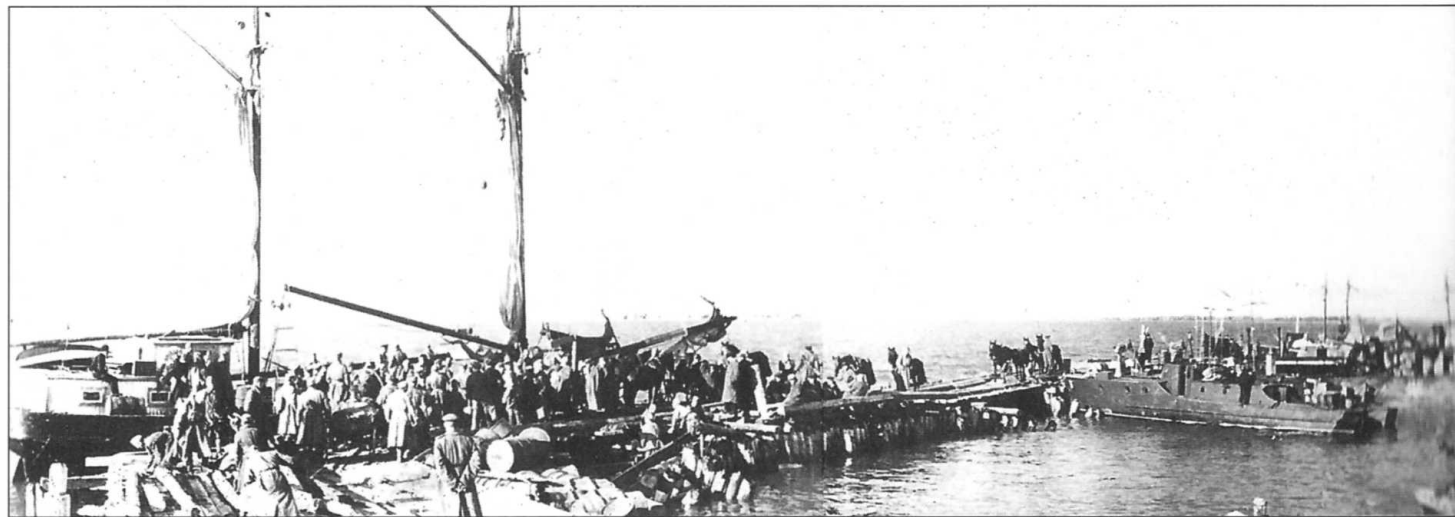
A white-washed StuG.III with intact side-skirts moving across a frozen field. By 1944 the StuG.III had become an extremely common assault gun, especially on the Eastern Front. By this period of the war the StuG had been slowly absorbed into Panzer units, Panzer and Panzergrenadier divisions of the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS.



A photograph showing a mortar crew in a dug-out with the 8cm mortar Gr.W.34. The design of the weapon was conventional and it broke down for transportation into three loads (barrel, bipod, baseplate). It gained a reputation for extreme accuracy and rapid rate of fire, although much of the credit was due to skill and determination of the crews.



A railway bridge destroyed by retreating German troops, Riga, October 1944. (Photo archive of the Bulgarian Ministry Of Defence)



A Soviet landing party on its way to Saaremaa island, Autumn 1944. (Photo archive of the Bulgarian Ministry Of Defence)



Soviet troops land on Saaremaa island, Autumn 1944. (Photo archive of the Bulgarian Ministry Of Defence)



A mortar crew prepare their weapon for action in the snow. The Germans enjoyed considerable standardisation in mortar types with three basic weapons, though production shortfalls ensured that a range of foreign mortars served in both the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS.



Fighting in the extreme arctic conditions and a mortar crew inside a dug-out prepare to fire one of the projectiles against an enemy target. In spite of the terrible conditions that prevailed in what became known as the Kurland Pocket the Germans' staunch defence and the Red Army's need to regroup had stabilized the front.

A nice view of an MG42 machine gun and gunner in a defensive position in the Kurland pocket in early 1945. For the Germans fighting in Kurland they were dangerously understrength and faced an overwhelming army. But in spite being exhausted and demoralized they continued waging a battle of attrition until the end of the war.



Emerging from his shelter in the Kurland is a soldier armed with the Kar98k bolt-action rifle, and is holding what appears to be a chain of bullets for an MG34 machine gun.

PART IV

*Defeat: 25 January–9 May 1945***Baltic Exodus**

The principal objective of the Red Army during January 1945 was for an all-out assault along the Baltic to crush the remaining under-strength German units that had once formed the vaunted Army Group North. It would be these heavy, sustained attacks that eventually restricted the German-held territory in the north-east to a few small pockets of land surrounding three ports: Libau in Kurland, Pillau in East Prussia and Danzig at the mouth of the River Vistula.

It was here along the Baltic that the German defenders continued to try and stall the massive Russian onslaught with the few weapons and men they had at their disposal. Every German soldier in Army Group Kurland was aware of the significance if these ports were captured. Not only would the coastal garrisons be cut off and eventually destroyed, but masses of civilian refugees would be prevented from escaping from those ports by sea. Terrified civilians eager to board the next ships to the Homeland queued night and day until the next vessel came in. They were so desperate to leave that they often stood out in the open, enduring constant bombing and strafing by low-level Russian aircraft, which were now unchallenged in the sky. Tens of thousands more civilians walked for days to reach the congested ports along the Baltic, frantically wanting to escape Latvia and Lithuania before the Russians finally reached the coast. In the sea port of Memel in Lithuania Soviet aircraft constantly swept over columns of fleeing civilians, the pilots dropping their bombs on cowering women and children.

Defending the port of Memel was the German XXVIII Corps under the command of General Hans Gollnick. The corps was part of the northern wing of the 3rd Panzer Army and since early October 1944, it had been defending the port from units of the 1st Baltic Front. For three long months the German force was largely made up of elements from the Großdeutschland and 58th Infantry Divisions and the 7th Panzer Division, which were heavily reinforced from artillery fire from ships including the *Prinz Eugen* in the Baltic, and a tenuous connection with the remainder of East Prussia over the Curonian Spit.

During this period the XXVIII Corps held Memel doggedly only allowing civilians and wounded soldiers through to be evacuated by sea. In a number of areas fighting was so fierce that the Großdeutschland and 7th Panzer Divisions were withdrawn, having suffered heavy losses, and replaced by the 95th Infantry Division which arrived by sea. Almost immediately the 95th Infantry Division was embroiled in intense and unrelenting fighting. Although mercilessly bombed and shelled, men of both the 95th and 58th Infantry Divisions courageously and persistently pinned the Soviets down. But their ardent defensive tactics had cost them dearly. In some areas where the fighting had been at its fiercest, officers reported that they were outnumbered at least 10 to one. By mid-January German troops were almost encircled inside Memel and close to annihilation. In spite orders from the German High Command that the line of defence surrounding the port must never be abandoned, what remained of the infantry divisions began evacuating its force to the Curonian Spit, where the 58th Infantry Division acted as a rearguard for the withdrawal. The last Germans left the battered port of Memel during the afternoon of 28 January 1945. The Red Army occupied the port later that evening.

With Memel now captured by the Soviets German forces were slowly becoming compressed along the last remaining strips of land along Baltic shore of Latvia and Lithuania. With every defeat and withdrawal came an ever-increasing pressure on the commanders to exert harsher discipline on their weary men. The thought of fighting on German soil for the first time resulted in mixed feelings among the men. Although the defence of the *Reich* automatically stirred emotional feelings to fight for their land, not all soldiers felt the same way. In some sectors of the front in Lithuania, commanders in the field found that many new conscripts began showing signs that they did not want to die for a lost cause. Conditions in the Baltic were miserable not only for the newest recruits, but also for battle-hardened soldiers who had survived many months of bitter conflict against the Red Army. For the majority of these troops they had been forced to withdraw along the shores of the Baltic Sea in a vain effort to defend it to the last man. The withdrawal had been one of unimagined dimensions. Exhausted and unshaven, Wehrmacht officers and privates trudged from one fixed position to another. The journey was sometimes one of disorder and terror. The

roads to the coast had become jammed by thousands of refugees mingling with soldiers. Red Army pilots had easy pickings and regularly bombed and strafed the long columns. Carnage and death filled every foot of ground. Suicidal opposition from Wehrmacht, SS and Luftwaffe strongpoints bypassed in earlier attacked reduced buildings to blasted rubble. In many places now the Germans were being forced to withdraw either westwards for the defence of East Prussia or to fight it out along the Baltic. For many hours or even days the German soldier fought a bloody defence. Russian soldiers frequently requested them to surrender and assured them that no harm would come to them if they did so. But despite the reassuring tone, most German troops continued to fight to the end.

By early February the supply situation for the German Army was dire. The bulk of the infantry divisions left to fight in the Baltics were either protecting the last remaining ports or were defending to the grim death the last remaining towns and villages. It seemed that it would only be a matter of time before the Red Army consumed all that was left of Latvia and Lithuania.

The End

For Germany stemming the Soviet winter offensive was no more than a short reprieve. By February 1945, it no longer had enough small arms to equip newly-conscripted soldiers in the Baltics. German troops were now barely holding their wavering lines with what ammunition and supplies they had left at their disposal. But despite the dire military situation in the Baltic the men of Fortress Kurland were still defending tenaciously the bombed and devastated area along the Baltic Sea in Latvia. In spite the constant arguments among Hitler and his commanders, the *Führer* reiterated the importance of holding the port of Libau in Kurland, which was vital, he said, for the supply of the German forces still fighting in the Baltic. Various attempts were made to change Hitler's mind by pointing out the immense logistical problems placed upon the navy to supply the divisions and corps. It was announced that only twenty-eight ships were available to carry the vital supplies to the Kurland Army, but Hitler simply brushed the figures aside. Consequently, with one sentence he had inadvertently condemned the remaining forces to annihilation.

On 12 February the Red Army once again attacked the Kurland Army, targeting once more the strategically important port of Libau. For a full month the fifth battle of Kurland raged as the Soviets poured infantry and armoured units into the pocket. The conditions in which the Germans had to fight over the next four weeks were horrific. Some of the more seasoned soldiers had fought at close quarters among the ruins and rubble-strewn streets, but never endured a battle of attrition like this. A total of some fifty Russian divisions with nearly 2,400 tanks pulverized the front line around the Kurland pocket. Dozens of Katyushka rockets fired their fearsome projectiles from 16-rail rocket launchers miles into the enemy lines. Aircraft mercilessly bombed the pocket and artillery regiments endlessly poured a hurricane of fire onto the German positions. The unrelenting attacks wore down the defenders, but once again the Red Army only succeeded in pushing the front back a couple of miles. It was only in the sea where the Soviets caused serious disruption and prevented the bulk of German shipping from entering the port of Libau. The last of the U-boats too had also been chased out of the Baltic. The Germans now had only one operable submarine in the area.

A strength return after the fifth Kurland battle assessed the Kurland Army Group's fighting capacity. It showed that the men were bleeding to death on the battlefield and that to produce soldiers of sufficient fighting quality Luftwaffe and Navy units had to be converted into infantry battalions. In anticipation for another Russian offensive a considerable effort was made to bolster the fighting line in Kurland at significant cost elsewhere on the front. But no Russian offensive came. The Red Army was now busily throwing much of its strength in the assault on Berlin and other areas of the Eastern Front. The Soviets, it seemed, were content to surround the Kurland Army Group, slowly reducing the pocket by aerial and ground bombardments and launching limited attacks into the area.

In spite of the seriousness of the German situation the cost of the attacks against the Kurland Army had been horrendous. It was estimated that some 320,000 Russian troops had been killed, wounded, or captured, with little gain to show for their effort. Still the Soviets continued ruthlessly trying to destroy the men fighting in Kurland. On 17 March they launched another attack against the fortifications, hurling thousands of infantry and armour. Many of the defenders, including thousands of Latvian conscripts, believed they were unable to endure another attack, as they were fast running out of basic supplies to keep them alive. The bulk of the force was short on food and ammunition, and relied mainly on animal draught to haul their guns from one battle front to another. All seemed lost, but amazingly, the weary and exhausted troops held out for another few weeks. The Red Army lost another 70,000 troops and hundreds of tanks trying to break through the pocket.

In early April as the situation became even more desperate for the Germans and their allies, Admiral Karl Dönitz suggested a plan to Hitler to evacuate more than 23,000 men and 4,500 horses from the cauldron. The *Führer* flatly rejected the idea including General Guderian's continual insistence that the Kurland Army Group should be

evacuated. On 28 March, the Chief of the General Staff was finally relieved of his command following a heated debate about Kurland. Hitler was determined, he said, to have commanders that followed his orders to the letter and did not show any signs of defeatism on the battlefield. For this reason he decided to also relieve the commander of Fortress Kurland, General Lothar Rendulic, and replace him with a tougher commander, General Karl Hilpert.

On 18 April the new commander of Fortress Kurland journeyed to Berlin to discuss with the *Führer* the defence of the pocket. By now the Russians were conducting successful operations in Pomerania, West Prussia, and Silesia. East Prussia had already fallen into Russian hands and the ancient Teutonic cities of Danzig and Königsberg had also been captured. In front of Hilpert Hitler was still unyielding on evacuating the fortress and promised the commander additional reinforcements by sea. Hilpert returned to the pocket and tried his best to infuse his field commanders with dogged determination to resist at all costs.

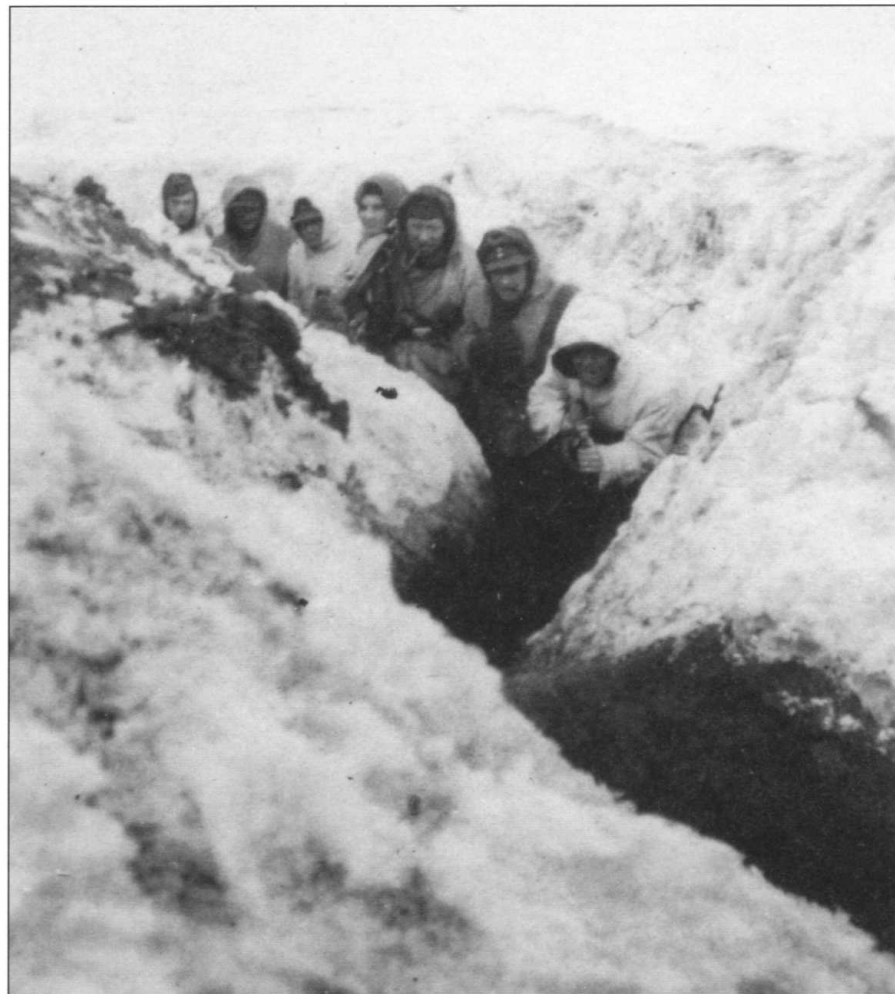
When news reached the pocket in early May that Berlin had fallen and Hitler was dead, Hilpert received word that Dönitz, who had assumed control of the Reich government, had already begun planning the evacuation of Kurland. The fortress was one of the last German military positions still holding out. Although hundreds of ships had already supplied and evacuated the wounded and civilians, there were few ships that were able to rescue the remaining 200,000 men from Soviet capture. Nevertheless, during early May minesweepers, minelayers, torpedo boats and trawlers ran a shuttle service to carry the evacuees from the Kurland harbours and other ports where they could be transferred to much larger vessels. All of the ships would risk being sunk from Soviet submarines and aircraft. Every available ship in the eastern Baltic was pressed into service and the vessels were ordered to be loaded to capacity where they would sail for Kiel, Eckenforde and Neustadt. Even when the war was declared officially over on 8 May, the Russians continued attacking the ships, sinking a number of them in the process. 8 May was also agreed upon the day that the remaining German forces in Kurland would officially capitulate to the Soviets. Karl Dönitz ordered General Hilpert, to surrender Army Group Kurland. During the early afternoon of 8 May Hilpert surrendered himself, his personal staff, and three divisions of the XXXVIII Corps to Marshal of the Soviet Union Leonid Govorov. Hilpert sent the following message to his troops: "To all ranks! Marshall Govorod has agreed to a cease-fire beginning at 14:00 hours on 8 May. Troops to be informed immediately. White flags to be displayed. Commander expects loyal implementation of order, on which the fate of all Kurland troops depends."

Following the capitulation of the fortress a few days later Russian troops began rounding-up the last remaining pockets of resistance that were still determined to fight on to the death. By the end of 11 May the troops of the Leningrad Front had finally secured the Kurland peninsula, reaching the coast of the Riga Bay and the Baltic Sea. In total some 140,500 men and non-commissioned officers, 5,083 officers and 28 Generals in the Kurland pocket had surrendered. The Russians had also captured 307 tanks and self-propelled guns, 75 aircraft, 1,427 guns, 3,879 machine guns, 52,887 rifles and submachine-guns, 557 mortars, 219 armoured personnel carriers, 4,281 motor vehicles, 3,442 carts loaded with equipment, and 14,046 horses.

By 23 May the Soviets had finally completed their round-up of the last remnants of the Kurland Army. A total of some 180,000 German troops had been taken into captivity.



Two German soldiers in a foxhole, Kurland 1945. It was from such foxholes that thousands of soldiers fought isolated and desperate battles for survival.



Troops negotiate one of the many trenches in the Kurland pocket. The German soldier did their duty to the last, many units in the Baltics sacrificed themselves trying fiercely to hold ground and stem the Russian drive from reaching the Baltic Sea. Even when the Germans knew they were powerless to halt the enemy's advance they still put up fanatical resistance to the last.

Two StuG.III Ausf.G's halted in the snow in early 1945. With its low silhouette for better survivability, the StuG III not only gave sterling service when on the defensive, but also fought brilliantly during defensive battles as well. In the Battle of the Baltics the StuG.III played a crucial role in protecting the front from disintegration.



Moving to the front grenadiers have hitched a lift on board a StuG.III Ausf.G. By January/February 1945 the Panzerwaffe was a shadow of its former self. What was left of its armour was now loosely organized in *ad-hoc* groups, often piecemeal. In a number sectors of the front the remaining tanks and assault guns run out of fuel and were abandoned by the crew.



An interesting photograph showing a Flak crew with a quadruple Flak gun during the early winter of 1945 in the Kurland pocket. The cruciform platform has been positioned in the snow and nearby is the weapon's transport limber. The limber was often placed very closely to the gun just in case the crew suddenly needed to move the weapon quickly.



A grenadier armed with a MP38/40 machine pistol and M1924 stick grenades shoved inside his infantryman's belt, advances through a bomb crater. A Soviet T34 can be seen knocked out of action. In spite the vast superiority of the Russians the German Army still possessed a fanatical determination to hold the line and cause as much disruption as possible to the Soviet onslaught.



A Grenadier armed with the deadly Panzerfaust stealthily makes his way through some undergrowth. During the last year of the war the Panzerfaust was used extensively to combat Russian armour. It was a handheld rocket-propelled grenade, which was effective at a range of about 90 feet.



Three newly decorated crewmembers stand beside a 2cm Flak gun. This weapon was usually served by eight men (four single 2cm Flak guns would need a total of 24 men), onto a single mount to give a combined cycle rate of fire of 1800 rounds per minute. These lighter calibre guns were much respected by Soviet aircrews and were also devastating against light vehicles, as well as soldiers caught out in the open. These guns also armed a variety of vehicles on self-propelled mounts.



Grenadiers are hitching a lift onboard a Sd.Kfz.10/4 halftrack. The vehicle mounts a 2cm Flak 30 gun. Note some of the troops on the Sd.Ah.51 trailer. The Flak30 was used extensively on the Eastern Front and had a maximum rate fire of 120 rounds per minute, with a horizontal range of 4800 metres.



A photograph showing a Pak35/36 crew with their well-camouflaged weapon defending one of the very few intact stretches of railway line that led through Lithuania into East Prussia. Even by 1945 the Pak35/36 was still used as an anti-tank weapon despite it not being very effective against heavier Russian tanks like the T-34.



A lull in the fighting during the early spring of 1945. An 8.8cm Luftwaffe flak crew have taken a much-needed respite. By the look of the guns elevation the '88' has been used against a ground target. Note the used ammunition shells and limber unit standing close by.



Kurland, a Soviet soldier carries a wounded comrade, early 1945. (Photo archive of the Bulgarian Ministry Of Defence)



An interesting photograph showing a well-concealed soldier armed with the lethal *Panzerschreck* or 'tank terror'. The popular name given by the troops for this weapon was the *Raketenpanzerbüchse* or rocket tank rifle, abbreviated to RPzB. It was an 8.8cm reusable anti-tank rocket launcher developed during the latter half of the war. Another popular nickname was *Ofenrohr* or stovepipe.



In a Lithuanian town not far from the East Prussian frontier German troops withdraw to begin a new defensive line. Although the Battle of the Baltic States of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania was almost over, what was left of Army Group North withdrew into East Prussia, Pomerania and Silesia to begin the last defensive actions within the *Reich*.

Epilogue

By May 1945, the German Army had been vanquished forever from the Baltic States. The once mighty Army Group North that had stampeded across Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia during the summer of 1941, were smashed to pieces four years later and its remnants withdrew back towards a devastated *Reich*, evacuated by sea or were captured and thrown into Soviet captivity. Yet, remarkably during the last 15 months of the war the German Army fought a dogged defence in all three of the Baltic States against overwhelming enemy strength. As a result the Soviets paid a heavy price in blood and material. The Battle of Narva and Kurland were two examples where the Germans fought a bitter defensive action. Hitler had been determined to hold the Kurland peninsula at all costs, and as a result of his resolve it became one of the longest defensive battles of World War Two, and was one of the last defensive positions still resisting at the end of the war. The German soldiers did their duty to the last, many units in the Baltics sacrificed themselves fiercely trying to hold ground and stem the Russian drive from reaching the Baltic Sea. Even when the Germans knew they were powerless to halt the enemy's advance, Hitler told his field commanders that the troops were to put up fanatical resistance to the last. Throughout the battle in the Baltics Hitler was obsessed with the belief that fanatical aggression could win victories. In a number of areas his hard line strategy actually worked, but at a huge cost in men and material. Nevertheless, the battle in the Baltics essentially slowed the Russian drive along the northern front and tied down an immeasurable amount of men and armour. It also prevented much of the Soviet Army from reaching the Baltic Sea, which the Germans believed would seriously curtail the U-boat training programme. The Baltic Sea had also been used throughout the war to ferry vital supplies to Army Group North, and without this important supply artery operations would have seriously been hampered. Hitler made it clear that it was imperative that the troops hold the front and wage a static battle of attrition until other parts of the Russian front could be stabilized.

Geographically the battle in the Baltics was an important defensive operation for the Germans. Every soldier was made aware of the significance of holding onto as much land as possible, and it was essential that they wage a static battle of attrition until other parts of the Eastern Front could be stabilized. However, when the Red Army unleashed their summer offensive in June 1944 code-named 'Operation Bagration', the attack caused massive reverberations on the Eastern Front. The offensive was so violent that it not only annihilated Army Group Centre, but brought the Russians sweeping round into Latvia and Lithuania, causing massive problems in the defensive strategy of Army Group North. Slowly and systemically the Soviet Army ground down the Germans, forcing their troops to withdraw from Estonia and fight a determined defence in Latvia and Lithuania. When the last German troops were finally expunged from Latvia in May 1945, the Russians were conquerors of the Baltic States.

The German defeat was an outstanding victory for Marxism. After the war all three Baltic States were confined to Communism as a system of government within the boundaries of the Soviet Union. The Russians felt that they had spilt enough blood to place these countries under Soviet rule. It would not be until nearly forty years later that these Baltic States would be restored to their sovereignty.

APPENDIX I

The German neu Art Infantry Division 1944

Divisional Troops

Divisional Headquarters
Mapping Section
Field Police Unit
Field Post Unit
Divisional Signals Unit
Fusilier Battalion

3 x Grenadier Regiments each comprised of:

Regimental Headquarters (including one mounted or bicycle Reconnaissance Platoon and one Pioneer Platoon)
Infantry Gun Company – containing six 7.5cm guns in three Sections of two each and a fourth Section with two 15cm guns.
Anti-tank Company – containing three towed 5cm or 7.5cm anti-tank guns, and two Platoons each with eighteen 8.8cm Panzerschreck launchers.
Two Infantry Grenadier Battalions – containing Battalion Headquarters, Communications Platoon, Battalion Train, Machine Gun Company, Company HQ, Company Train, Three Machine Gun Platoons with a 12cm Mortar Platoon, Three Rifle Companies each comprising of a Company HQ, Company Train, 8cm or and 12cm Mortar Section/Platoon.

Divisional Artillery Regiment

Regimental Headquarters
Three Light Battalions – each containing twelve towed 10.5cm howitzers, divided into three Batteries with four guns per Battery. One gun from one Battery could be removed to give eleven guns in total.
Medium Battalion – comprising of twelve towed 15cm howitzers, divided into three Batteries with four guns per Battery. One gun from each Battery could be removed to give nine guns in total.
Anti-tank Battalion – one Company with twelve towed 7.5cm guns in three Platoons of four guns each. One Assault Gun Company with ten assault guns, in three Platoons each of three guns and one for Company Headquarters.
One Flak Company with twelve 2cm weapons in three Platoons of four guns each.

Engineer Battalion

Battalion Headquarters
Three Pioneer Companies (one motorized)
Bridging Column

Supply

Supply Troops
Administrative Troops
Veterinary Company

Medical

Two Medical Companies
Ambulance Company

APPENDIX II

Support elements of a typical Panzer Division mid-1944

The division comprised two Panzergrenadier regiments, each formed from a Regimental HQ and two Panzergrenadier battalions. The support elements within the divisions comprised the following:

Communications Battalion

- 1 x Panzer Signals Company
- 1 x Panzer Radio Company (Both the Panzer signals and Panzer Radio companies were motorized)

Divisional Artillery

- 1 x Signals Platoon
- 3 x Light Battalions each comprising of 12 x 10.5cm guns in 3 Batteries
- 1 x Medium Battery of 12 x 15cm guns
- 1 x Self Propelled Regiment of 12 x 10.5cm Wespe and 6 x 15cm Hummel in 3 x Batteries

Combat support

- 1 x Pioneer Battalion
- 1 x Signals Platoon and 3 x Pioneer Companies (One equipped with halftracks and the other two were lorry-borne)

Divisional Reconnaissance Battalion (the battalion varied from unit to unit)

- 1 x Signals Platoon
- 1 x Halftrack Company
- 1 x Light Halftrack Company
- 1 x Halftrack Reconnaissance Company.
- 1 x Heavy Company of 6 x 80cm mortars and 6 x 7.5cm guns.

Divisional Anti-tank Battalion

- 3 x Companies of 12 x 7.5cm and 14 x Self-Propelled anti-tank guns in 2 Companies, each of 3 x Platoons

Anti-aircraft Battalion

- 1 x Anti-aircraft Company of 12 x 2cm Flak guns in 3 x Platoons and 8.8cm guns in 2 x Companies of four to six guns each.

APPENDIX III

Military formations subordinated to Army detachment 'Narva' 1 March 1944

XXVI Army Corps – General Anton Grasser

- 11th Infantry Division
- 58th Infantry Division
- 214th Infantry Division
- 225th Infantry Division

3rd Estonian Border Guard Regiment (15 April)

XXXXIII Army Corps – General Karl von Oven

- 61st Infantry Division
- 170th Infantry Division
- 227th Infantry Division
- 'Feldherrnhalle' Armoured Infantry Division
- 'Gnesen' Grenadier Regiment

III SS (Germanic) Armoured Corps – SS-Obergruppenführer Felix Steiner

- 11th SS Armoured Grenadier Division 'Nordland'
- 4th SS Armoured Grenadier Brigade 'Nederland'
- 20th SS Grenadier (Infantry) Division (1st Estonian)

Separate Corps:

Eastern Sector, Coastal Defence (Staff of 2nd Anti-Aircraft Division as HQ) Lieutenant General Alfons Luczny

Estonian Regiment 'Reval'

- 29th Estonian Police Battalion
- 31st Estonian Police Battalion
- 32nd Estonian Police Battalion
- 658th Eastern Battalion (Estonian)
- 659th Eastern Battalion (Estonian)

Other military units:

- Artillery Command No. 113
- Senior Pioneer Command No. 32
- 502nd Heavy Tank Battalion
- 752nd Anti-Tank Battalion
- 540th Special Infantry (Training) Battalion

APPENDIX IV

Army Group North Order of Battle June 1944

Reserves:

12th Panzer Division

Sixteenth Army

Reserves:

24th Infantry Division
69th Infantry Division
281st Security Division
285th Security Division

I Army Corps:

205th Infantry Division
87th Infantry Division

X Army Corps:

389th Infantry Division
290th Infantry Division
263rd Infantry Division

II Army Corps:

81st Infantry Division
329th Infantry Division
23rd Infantry Division

VI SS-Corps:

15th SS-Grenadier Division 'Latvian 1'
19th SS-Grenadier Division 'Latvian 2'
93rd Infantry Division

L Army Corps:

218th Infantry Division
132nd Infantry Division
83rd Infantry Division

Eighteenth Army

Reserves:

215th Infantry Division

XXXVIII Army Corps:

21st Luftwaffe Field Division
32nd Infantry Division
121st Infantry Division

XXVIII Army Corps:

30th Infantry Division
21st Infantry Division
212th Infantry Division
126th Infantry Division
12th Luftwaffe Field Division
1st (Estonian) Grenzschutz-Regiment
2nd & 3rd (Estonian) Grenzschutz-Regiments (attached to 227th Infantry Division)
4th (Estonian) Grenzschutz-Regiment
5th (Estonian) Grenzschutz-Regiment (attached to 207th Security Division)
207th Security Division & 5th (Estonian) Grenzschutz-Regiment

Army 'Narva'

Army Reserves:

61st Infantry Division

XXVI Army Corps:

227th Infantry Division & 2nd & 3rd (Estonian) Grenzschutz-Regiments
170th Infantry Division
225th Infantry Division

XXXXIII Army Corps:

58th Infantry Division
11th Infantry Division
122nd Infantry Division

III Panzer Corps-SS:

SS-Panzer Grenadier Division 'Nordland' & SS-Grenadier Brigade 'Nederland'
20th SS-Grenadier Division 'Estonian 1'

Kustenverteidigung 'East':

2nd Luftwaffe Flak Division & 5th (Estonian) Battalion

Kustenverteidigung 'West':

285th Security Division & 4th (Estonian) Battalion

APPENDIX V

German 18th Army Order of Battle 15 July 1944

XXVIII Army Corps

Kampfgruppe Hofer
12th Luftwaffe Division
21st Infantry Division
30th Infantry Division

XXXVIII Army Corps

21st Luftwaffe Division
32nd Infantry Division
83rd Infantry Division
121st Infantry Division

L Army Corps

15th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS (1st Latvian)
19th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS (2nd Latvian)
93rd Infantry Division
126th Infantry Division
218th Infantry Division
Kampfgruppe Streckenbach

Direct control of Army Headquarters

Headquarters VI SS Corps
207th Security Division
300th Division zbV (Estonian border guard units)

APPENDIX VI

Ranks of the German Army

Generalfeldmarschall
Generaloberst
General der ...
Generalleutnant
Generalmajor
Oberst
Oberstleutnant
Major
Hauptmann
Oberleutnant
Leutnant
Stabsfeldwebel
Oberfeldwebel
Feldwebel
Unterfeldwebel
Unteroffizier
Obergefreiter
Gefreiter
Oberschütze
Schütze

General der...

General der Artillerie
General der Gebirgstruppe
General der Infanterie
General der Kavallerie
General der Nachrichtentruppe
General der Panzertruppe
General der Pioniere

Officer candidates

Oberfähnrich
Fähnrich
Fehnenjunker-Unteroffizier
Fahnenjunker-Gefreiter

General of the Army
General
Lt General
Major General
Brigadier General
Colonel
Lt Colonel
Major
Captain
1st Lieutenant
2d Lieutenant
Sergeant Major
Master sergeant
Technical sergeant
Staff sergeant
Sergeant
Corporal
Acting corporal
Private 1st class
Private

Artillery
Mountain troops
Infantry
Cavalry
Signals
Armoured Troops
Pioneers

Oberfeldwebel
Unterfeldwebel
Unteroffizier
Gefreiter

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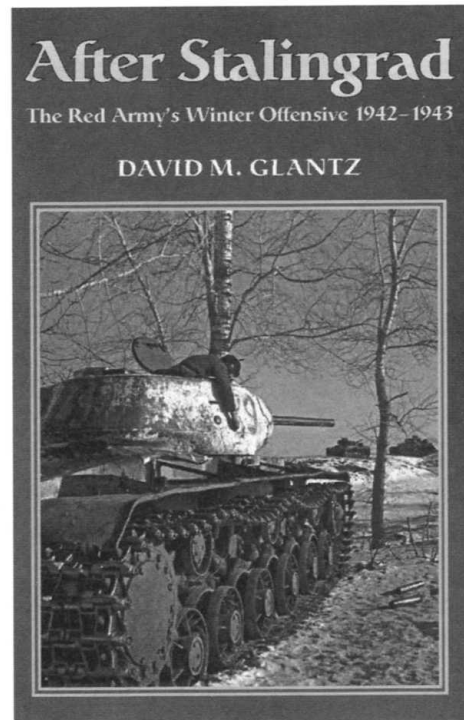
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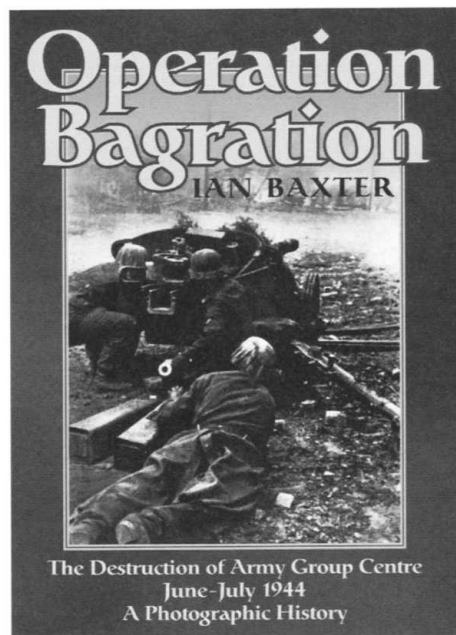
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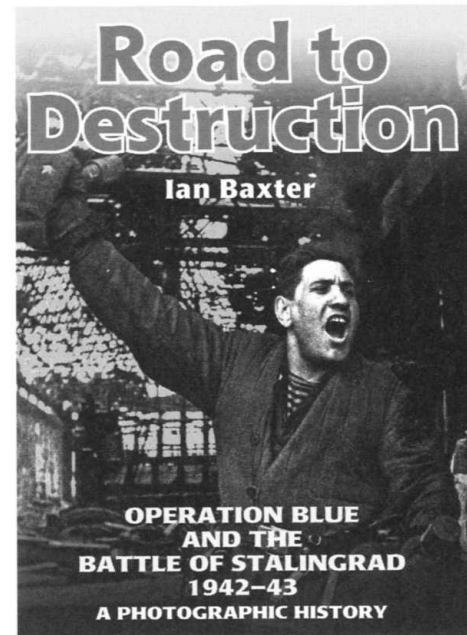
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Battle in the Baltics is an exclusive insight into the last frantic months of the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS on the Eastern Front 1944–1945. By early 1944 there was nothing but a drum-roll of defeats for the German Army as it fought to the grim death to try and hold back the overwhelming might of the Russians from reaching the borders of the Reich. It was in the Baltics where Army Group North played a decisive role in trying to stem the rout and preventing the fragile lines from finally being smashed to pieces.

Drawing on a host of rare and unpublished photographs accompanied by in-depth captions, the book provides a revealing insight into the last desperate months of the war. It reveals in detail how the remnants of Army Group North were driven back across a scarred and devastated wasteland to the borders of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. What followed was the Battle of the Baltics, where exhausted and undermanned German forces fought to near-extinction against the constant hammer blows of Soviet ground and aerial bombardments. Everywhere disintegrating German forces tried to cling onto vital ground. Eventually, after many precious German Panzer and infantry divisions were encircled and annihilated, the remnants of Hitler's once-vaunted force was pushed back through the Baltic states into East Prussia, and then fought to the death in the last few small pockets of land surrounding three ports: Libau in Kurland, Pillau in East Prussia and Danzig at the mouth of the River Vistula. It was here that the final battle of the Baltics would take place where German troops were ordered to 'stand and fight' and wage an unprecedented battle of attrition.



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