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WAR EXPERIENCES IN RUSSIA

CHAPTER IV

KIROV and the 40 km. Gap

Experiences as Commandant of ROSLAVL

1. Withdrawal of Fourth Army

The positions could no longer be held. KALUGA, MALOYAROSLAVETS, MIDYN, YUKHNOV, BOROVSSE, and MOZHAYSK were lost to the enemy and much immovable war material had to be abandoned. Anxious to set a good example, Fourth Army Headquarters remained as far forward as possible. Field Marshal von Kluge had replaced Field Marshal von Beck as commander in chief of the army group and moved into a bivouac west of SMOLYNSK. Lieutenant General [General der Gebirgstruppen] Kuebler became Von Kluge's successor as commander of Fourth Army. He was flown to the Fuehrer, when he confronted with the untenable situation. Thereupon, General Kuebler was summarily relieved of his command and did not return. General Belarief, up to this time in command of II LITH Corps, which formed the right wing of Fourth Army, now became its commander in chief. His headquarters, located in a village just north of the express motor highway and just about west of the UGRA River, became hard pressed. On Army's right wing, KOZELSK had been lost, SUEHINICHI was encircled, and in the area between KALUGA and SUEHINICHI weak Soviet forces were advancing toward the express motor highway and were approaching Fourth Army Headquarters.

~~All available forces were rounded up in order to clear the approach.~~

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~~motor highway and were approaching Fourth Army Headquarters.~~

All available forces were rounded up in order to clear the express motor highway. I, too, had to contribute to this operation by furnishing a police company. Yet, in spite of some successful actions, the permanent threat to the express motor highway and to supply operations remained. Army Headquarters withdrew to SPAS-DEMENSK. There, in constant peril of partisan attacks and without access -- except for bad roads -- to either the express motor highway or YELNYA, the headquarters was trapped for all practical purposes.

The Army Chief of Supply and Administration withdrew his base to SHUMIACHI, southwest of ROSLAVL. My staff and I remained at SPAS-DEMENSK for the time being, because I wanted to clear the road to Fourth Army's right wing at KIROV. The course of the road, however, could no longer be made out. I was marooned amidst the vast whiteness of the Russian plains, and lost a good deal of time before I could summon help. The only possible route to KIROV was by way of the ZANOZNAIA - KIROV railway. I had my truck put on the railroad tracks and proceeded to KIROV, because I believed the town to be imperiled.

Approximately 20 km. north of KIROV, I stopped and went to see the commandant of the airfield located about 1 km. east of the railroad. Just then Junkers planes carrying Luftwaffe construction personnel came in for a landing. The men were properly clothed but loaded down by bulky equipment. They had come directly from BERLIN, were newcomers to the Russian scene, and looked in amazement at the wintry landscape. Charged with defending the airfield, these men were now faced with the enemy

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advanced and were thus immediately engulfed by war. Colonel Stahel, commandant of the airfield, was particularly concerned with the threat from the direction of KIROV in the south. Since the airfield was not immediately endangered, he turned over the command and the responsibility for defensive preparations to his executive officer, while he himself and a construction company accompanied me to KIROV. The company occupied empty freight cars, Stahel and I took our places next to the engineer in the locomotive, and off we went. About 10 km. south of the airfield, I called Colonel Stahel's attention to a column of Russian peasant sleighs, which was approaching the railroad on one of these wretched roads which we ordinarily found impassable. With their load of Russian soldiers, the sleighs might reach the railroad in approximately 15 minutes.

Our soldiers were nowhere to be seen. I ordered the train to stop at an unguarded station before KIROV and, for the protection of that town against enemy attacks from the north, I detrained one platoon of the construction company, having issued specific instructions to the platoon leader. KIROV still bustled with activity. It was the residence of the deputy commander of the Landesschutz [local defense] battalion which was committed in and around KIROV. The commander, an old gentleman, was a nervous wreck. His deputy was in the same condition. I made them show me the sketches of their defensive plan and noticed that the outposts were occupying positions in a semicircle 10 km. east of KIROV. An attack had not been reported from any point, and no immediate danger existed.

The town of KIROV had the appearance of a small fortress afforded

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natural protection by bodies of water. I ascribed particular importance to this town and felt that it had to be held. This objective could only be attained with a competent commander and artillery reinforcements, yet contact by telephone could not be established. I left the rest of the construction company in reserve at the KIROV station and ordered Colonel Stahel to assume command in KIROV at 0800 the next morning. I wanted to leave him there right on the spot, but he insisted on personally breaking in his deputy at the airfield.

At the railway station and in its immediate vicinity were several railway administration offices with personnel, aside from engineer railway troops and section hands. They all were to participate in the defense of the station.

The return trip was difficult. Burning bad coal and spewing steam and spray from every possible opening, our old Russian locomotive stood on the tracks, ready to depart with several open freight cars full of mines, which were to be transported to the express motor highway. Little did the engineer and his fireman suspect that the enemy had by this time undoubtedly seized the right-of-way. With machine pistols in our hands, Colonel Stahel and I took our places next to the locomotive crew and kept on the lookout. Shortly before reaching the point of the enemy penetration, our train had to climb a grade. Clinkers had choked the fire box, and the locomotive had to halt in order to get up steam. We went through twenty maddening minutes. But when I told the locomotive crew that now we had to make our way through a Russian-held stretch, the locomotive picked up terrific speed, climbed the grade, pushed through the

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Russians, and reached the airfield. From then on everything happened contrary to expectations. The airfield was attacked that very night. The station before KIROV was lost. Measures were taken at ROSLAVL to evacuate the railroad personnel. Before leaving the station, they burned whatever equipment could not be moved. Frightened by the blaze, all outposts east of KIROV withdrew, because they thought that the Russians had already taken the town. The hapless deputy commander of the Landeschuetzen lost his head completely, and his men were left without a leader. A state of panic prevailed. Colonel Stahel was surrounded and could no longer furnish any assistance.

I gave the army commander a situation report, which he supplemented with information about ROSLAVL. He ordered me to proceed immediately to ROSLAVL, then, with a police company, to continue by rail to KIROV, and to stop the withdrawal. He attributed particular importance to keeping the bridges across the SNOPT and DESNA Rivers intact. The trip by rail took six hours. Engineer railway troops were preparing the demolition of the SNOPT bridge, but I could still prevent them from carrying it out. Fortunately, the men of the Landeschuetzen battalion and of the construction company could not march very fast, so that I managed to stop them 20 km. west of KIROV. I moved the troops into a defensive position and procured a new battalion commander.

To the south, contact was to be established with the 4th Panzer Division, which was located at LYUDINOVO. However, the distance was too great and the terrain was impassable without skis. This gap was infested with partisans.

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To the north, there also was a big gap of approximately 20 km. It was an almost impossible situation. Our fighting strength amounted to 200 Landesschuetzen and 100 engineer construction troops. The weak police battalion was needed elsewhere. Had the Russians continued their advance, they would have thrust into the chaos that was ROSLAVL, and would thus have closed the express motor highway. But the Russians did not stir and remained in KIROV. I was assigned a secondary mission, which charged me with assuming command over the big 40-to-50-km.-wide gap. The only troops at my disposal were the 300 men mentioned above.

## 2. Experiences as Commandant of ROSLAVL

We recaptured the airfield north of KIROV, where Colonel Stahel had been surrounded. Fourth Army Headquarters remained at SPAS-DEMENSK. The Army's right wing, curving back from the airfield in the direction of DUBROVA and the BOLA River, formed a front toward the southeast. Since the partisans were too strong in either gap, contact through patrols could neither be established with the right wing of Fourth Army, a panzer corps under General Kume, nor with the left wing of Second Panzer Army, represented by the left wing of the 4th Panzer Division under General von Langermann-Erlenkamp. However, telephone communications existed. Telephone wires to the left wing of Second Panzer Army led via BRYANSK-ORDZHONIKIDZEGRAD to ZHIZDRA and, in my opinion as well as by all accounts, were tapped by the partisans. Telephone communications with the right wing of Fourth Army led via ROSLAVL and SPAS-DEMENSK. Telecommunications between ROSLAVL and the CP of the Landesschuetzen

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battalions were frequently interrupted, because the lines were cut time and again.

Every night Soviet troops poured through the gap south of KIROV, some using motor sleighs, and others hand sleds or skis. They moved either in the direction of BYTOSH, where the partisans operating in civilian clothes had their headquarters, or, filtering through gaps between the outposts, they moved north behind our weak front, crossed the express motor highway, and joined General Belov, the local Soviet partisan commander, in the area north of SPAS-DEMENSK. The partisans and their commissars put pressure on the male inhabitants of the many out-of-the-way localities to join their ranks. The heads of these communities were on the spot. If they did not yield, they were shot. If the population did not agree to make common cause with the partisans, it was threatened with heavy punishment at the hands of the Soviets, who were seen expected to arrive. Thus, the situation behind the front grew more and more precarious. Despite all representations, the Fuehrer did not make any troops available for anti-partisan warfare, and the units at the front, their ranks thinned by the enemy and the winter, were in no position to extend help.

On the ROGLAVL - BRYANSK highway, partisan activities made the stretch from a point south of the SESNCHINSKAYA airfield to BRYANSK impassable to all single vehicles. The woods on either side of the highway were also infested by large numbers of partisans and Soviet soldiers. This was a most unpleasant state of affairs.

I urged the closing of the gap. My request was rejected on the

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grounds that we lacked the requisite forces. In an estimate of the situation, which I submitted to Army Headquarters, I vividly described the dangers which would result from an advance of the Soviets upon ROSLAVL. On the express motor highway to SMOLENSK there were no obstacles whatsoever to stop the Russians, and no German troops except for the drivers of the motor convoys. The way west to ERICHEV was also open. Aside from the forces at ROSLAVL, the only troops along this route guarded a PW camp holding 10,000 Soviets. The result of my report was that the Fourth Army Chief of Staff told me he had transmitted my estimate of the situation to the Armed Forces Operations Staff.

The first days of February saw the arrival of an inspection team from the [Army High Command] Office of Supply and Administration. The team consisted of a general staff officer and members of the top echelon of the Medical Service and of the Fiscal and Administrative Office. I was directed to attend a conference at ROSLAVL. At this conference, I described the situation at the front as well as the conditions in ROSLAVL, of which the team had gained a personal impression. Conditions in ROSLAVL were approximately as follows:

The town held 20,000 civilians, 20,000 rear-echelon troops, and 10,000 Soviet PW's. Among the latter a typhus epidemic had broken out. Owing to the lack of other billeting facilities and to the impassability of roads other than the express motor highway, the installations of all corps, divisions, and special-purpose units of Fourth Army and adjacent armies, such as army post offices, field bakeries, butcheries, legal

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sections, fiscal and administrative offices, medical and veterinary units, signal units, convoy formations, field hospitals, and canteens -- in other words, every type of installation that had no business at the front -- were located in ROSLAVL. Large motor-vehicle and other kinds of repair shops were operating in this town.

ROSLAVL was a transit station for all traffic moving to and from the front. The town commandant was an old colonel, who was directly responsible to Fourth Army. The PW camp was under the control of higher headquarters at SMOLENSK. The town commandant was assisted by a billeting office, which was so overworked that its administrative machinery was thrown completely out of gear. All main thoroughfares and side roads in town were covered with deep snow and were constantly blocked. Day and night, the convoy formations left their vehicles parked in the streets, a practice which resulted in delays of several hours. All billets were overcrowded, including the unheated church. Field hospitals were crowded to capacity and could not receive additional patients. Evacuation of the wounded had come to an almost complete standstill. The hospital basements were full of corpses which could not be buried, because the ground was solidly frozen. Almost all the town people lived off our soldiers, who were billeted in their homes. In the beginning of February, Christmas packages for the soldiers at the front lay solidly frozen in front of the post offices, because there was no room inside. In brief, it was a sad and disagreeable situation. I added to the worries of the inspecting officers by telling them that a ground and air attack on ROSLAVL could not be ruled out.

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By order of the Fuehrer, the general staff officer assigned me the secondary duty of town commandant of ROSLAVL, where I was to take up quarters immediately. The town was to be evacuated, since large-scale troop movements were to be routed through ROSLAVL in the spring. Provision was to be made for the evacuation of the population. Responsibility for the future defense of ROSLAVL was to rest with me, and I was to take all requisite measures.

At this time, ROSLAVL also became the seat of a high-level railroad and transport authority. The SMOLENSK - ROSLAVL railroad was to be put into full operation. The first hospital trains were to depart in a few days. Provision had been made for evacuating the wounded first to KRICHEV, and then south to UNECHA on the main railroad line [from BRYANSK to GOMEL].

Although a typhus epidemic plagued the PW camp, I requested its evacuation and offered STODOLYSHCHE and VASKOVO, two towns north of ROSLAVL, as temporary camp sites. I also asked for the early transfer of the PW's to the ZI. For the PW's who were to be employed as labor in ROSLAVL, I requested additional rations and supplies. All these requests were approved.

Thus, I assumed immediate command over ROSLAVL. I assigned two police detachments to traffic control duties. Parking lots were set up and vehicles were no longer allowed to park in the streets. Snow was removed from the streets until they looked like city streets. Traffic flowed freely. I requested engineers and had them blast graves in the ground; then the dead were removed from the hospital and buried.

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Town people, PW's, and all our troops participated in this task, which netted them extra rations. I did not evacuate the population, because it was not the sort of thing one would do during the cold season. I preferred to see the people take charge of their homes and keep them in order.

Administrative offices that were not needed in ROSLAVL were moved to the rear and into the nearest villages. Adjacent armies either had to come and get whatever canteen merchandise -- mainly liquor and frozen wine -- they had at an earlier time stored in large barracks, or else see those items sold at auction. All divisions had to call for their Christmas packages, even if it meant the expenditure of gasoline. Since there were no animals to be slaughtered, the butchers -- and also part of the bakers -- were put to work on fortifications outside the city. Woodcutting details with sleds were sent into the forests, and returned with wood for the heating of the billets. The evacuation of the wounded progressed satisfactorily. The billeting office was staffed with new personnel. Town maps and road signs helped the troops to orient themselves.

Soon order was established and sufficient space was available. In the barracks alone, I was able to accommodate 2,000 men in heated quarters. The roads were repaired and improved. I had the church vacated and made it available to the community for religious services. ROSLAVL once more presented a pleasant appearance.

At first I lived at the city's outer edge, in modest quarters, where I became well acquainted with bedbugs and rats. After order had been

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established, I moved with my staff into the police station which was the traffic control center for the main thoroughfares.

There were no more traffic jams. All requests for billets could be taken care of. The quarters were heated and provided adequate shelter during the winter. It was only later that bombs were dropped on the town. Only 3,000 to 4,000 men, most of them sick, were left in the PW camp, and they had now ample space. ROSLAVL was ready for the troop movements which were to be routed through the town during the spring offensive. When the time came, the troop movements did not create much of a stir and did not affect Fourth Army.

Trips by rail to the front in the direction of KIROV were very trying. I mostly rode on the snowplow with the Russian laborers. En route, the locomotives almost invariably developed mechanical troubles. A travel time of six hours for the 70-km. distance to the front could be considered a good performance. The sporadic news from this gap always gave me cause for concern. Indeed, there was no lack of alarming news. Since the few guards and sentries were always posted in the same place, the partisans who passed at night called them by name. This was proof of how well informed the partisans were, and I had the feeling that they were playing cat-and-mouse with us. Traffic on the SMOLENSK - ROSLAVL railroad now functioned smoothly. Even a railway repair outfit arrived. Since it had to cover shorter distances, convoy traffic did no longer raise any difficulties. Only the 40-km. gap at KIROV continued to be our problem child.

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3. The Attempted Attack on KIROV

Finally, Army Group took an interest in the closing of the gap and assigned this operation to Second Panzer Army and Fourth Army. I was asked how much manpower I could muster. This manpower consisted of my 300 men in the line. I could also make two police companies temporarily available, as well as some butchers, bakers, and mail clerks. The latter personnel, however, were rather old men; the young men were at the front. This was not an attack force. Out in the open I picked up an abandoned German howitzer minus sights. Just the same, I had it moved up on line.

Skis had finally arrived, yet my men were not Bavarians, Austrians, or mountaineers. They knew nothing about skiing, and old men do not learn easily. There was, moreover, reason to worry that such beginners would be sent out on patrols only to fall easy prey to the partisans, who knew how to ski from their early youth.

In the personnel of the 4th Panzer Division train, which was in its winter quarters, I procured an additional force. From its quarters along the ROSLAVL - BRYANSK highway, this personnel moved by motor vehicle via ROSLAVL to KUZHNICHKI. From there it proceeded on foot in the direction of KIROV, so as to push forward into the gap while maintaining contact with Panzer Corps Stumme. Already the approach march was doomed to failure. During the day, the small force ran into a partisan ambush, and its leader was wounded. The train personnel gradually fought their way forward, but the gap remained open. Panzer Corps Stumme was similarly unable to make any headway in the deep snow. The

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attempt thus came to naught, and I returned the train personnel to the 4th Panzer Division with due thanks.

Things did not look any better on the right wing. The 4th Panzer Division was to take KIROV. I discussed the attack with General von Langermann over the telephone. I suggested that he keep close to the villages in view of the cold and the snow. I attributed particular importance to a village along the road to KIROV. This village, approximately 10 km. from the town, was to afford his troops shelter during the night. With LYUDINOVO as the point of departure, the main pressure would have to be exerted by his left wing, which operated in an area abounding with villages and farm houses, and affording cover. As soon as I ascertained its advance, I was to establish contact with his left wing and join our forces.

However, throughout this day I did not notice any advance. General von Langermann had been unable to capture the village halfway to KIROV. Since he could not let his troops spend the night in the open, he had returned to the point of departure. By order of Corps, he had put the main weight of the attack in his right wing. There, however, the Russians had thrust into his open flank, and, as a result, the advance was frustrated also in this area.

The attack lacked drive and a joint command. This was probably due to the fact that it was considered an operation of secondary importance. Thus it did not produce any results. There was no word of another attempt and the front remained as quiet as it had been before. The quiet of winter reigned supreme.

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In March I left on a two-week leave, for which I availed myself of an opportunity to fly both ways. I was granted this leave only on condition that I would promise to return to my post.

In April the snow began to thaw. The express motor highway became soggy and gave way in numerous places. Road conditions became worse from day to day, although there was a sufficient number of road construction gangs. Trucks were abandoned on the motor express highway, and the few available wreckers were on the road day and night. There was, incidentally, a critical shortage of wreckers.

The beautiful, clear, and cold winter of Central Russia was coming to an end. Since February it had by no means been unbearable with its severe cold, diminishing snowfalls, blue skies, and sunshine. Now everything sank into the mire and was literally plastered with mud. At the same time, we worried increasingly about Russian attacks. A line of antitank obstacles was to be constructed as early as April. For purposes of this project, I was assigned the southern part of the sector behind the BOLVA River (between SPAS-DEMENSK and KIROV). When I reached the BOLVA with my laborers, the river was at such a high stage that we could not even think of constructing any field fortifications. Dripping mud, we departed without having accomplished our objective.

During the last days of April, I received a telephone order to report on 30 April to Fuehrer Headquarters near RASTENBURG for the purpose of assuming a new administrative mission. A seat was to have been reserved for 30 April on the SMOLENSK - LOETZEN courier plane. Thus I took leave from ROGLAVL. In some places on the express motor highway, the passenger

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car which took me to SMOLENSK had to be pulled by prime movers, because there was no longer a possibility of getting through by other means. At the time of my departure, the mayor of ROSLAVL had presented me with a simple icon and conveyed to me the gratitude of the population. In SMOLENSK I took leave from Field Marshal von Kluge, whom I impressed with the necessity of doing something about the gap at KIROV.

During the flight to East Prussia, as well as during the flight which I had taken at the time of my leave, I noticed that up to MINSK a good many fields had not been cultivated. Only from MINSK on did the picture change. Our agricultural officers had done good work. Indeed, every plot of land had been utilized. Most of all, I watched for reserves on their way to the front, but I could not detect any movements on the highways. It was said that a large-scale summer offensive would be launched in the vicinity of ORYOL and south of it. We could therefore hardly expect to see any reserves in Central Russia. I was certain of only one fact: Fourth Army, which I had seen at SMOLENSK in the fall of 1941, was no longer the same in the spring of 1943. Then, having gone through heavy fighting and having marched for months on end, it had made a tremendous impression upon me as it faced intrepidly the events to come. Now many of its brave soldiers were dead, wounded, missing, or, for that matter, had suffered seriously from the effects of the winter. Many veteran and young officers were dead and gone. The equipment was battered and the motors were worn-out. Everything bore the marks of damage done by the winter. Normal wartime strength was a thing of the past. Battle strength at the front was alarmingly low. Fourth Army had fallen victim

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to the winter and was in its present condition no longer capable of participating in a summer offensive. Yet, for rehabilitating this army neither men nor materiel were available.

Carrying the offensive into the Russian winter had been a serious mistake on the part of the Fuehrer. Providence, to use his words, had failed him grievously. The head of a state must stand on the firm ground of reality and face the facts. That is Providence. One of the most serious shortcomings of any man in a position of leadership is to have a preconceived opinion and to persist in it. What Dr. Goebbels had so highly touted as the Fuehrer's boundless wisdom, had proved to be a complete flop and led to total bankruptcy. The Commander in Chief must be a professional soldier and must have confidence in his generals and his general staff. If a nonprofessional believes in his superior judgment, the result is dilettantism; if he imposes his decisions and actions with brute force, the result is despotism. Dilettantism coupled with despotism was our downfall.

All soldiers at the Eastern Front, who had stuck it out for any length of time, received a remedy that cured all woes -- a red ribbon with a white stripe, commonly known as the snowflake.

This snowflake enjoyed great popularity and was very much in evidence among the many soldiers who returned to Germany on furlough.

Signed: von Unruh  
Lieutenant General [General der Infantry]

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