THE GERMAN RETREAT

FROM THE BALTIC AND THE BALKANS

The last four months of 1944 in Eastern Europe were increasingly disastrous for the Third Reich and its armies, as Russian fire and air power became progressively more dominant over a diminished, tired and ill-equipped German Wehrmacht, and as Hitler's orders, directives and responses to events became ever more irrational, dangerous and bizarre. In telling the story of such a confused period affecting the futures of several countries and millions of people, one must inevitably generalise, but to retain some measure of clarity the text of this chapter is divided into sections, with one section per country.

Finland

The passionately fought Winter War of 1940, in which Finland had faced the Russian aggressor with such determination and had then been obliged to accept armistice terms requiring the loss of a significant part of her country to Russia, had left the Finns with little option but to accept German overtures to ally themselves with Germany for the assault on Russia. The alliance was, as we have seen, shaky and incomplete, and the Finns flatly refused to take part in the siege of Leningrad and other punitive operations. As the Soviet forces gained the upper hand over the Wehrmacht and drove it back Westwards, Finland looked likely once more to be the subject of the unwelcome attentions of the Soviet Union.

During the summer of 1944, war came once more to the Isthmus of Karelia, and once again the Finns put up fierce resistance to Russian incursion. In an effort to acquire the arms to sustain the fight against the Soviet Union, President Ryti allowed himself to be blackmailed by Ribbentrop into signing a document confirming Finland's unconditional alliance with Germany. By the end of July it was clear that Finland's best hope lay in the betrayal of this document, which had in any case been signed under duress, and President Ryti was replaced by the 77 year old Marshal Mannerheim, who negotiated an armistice with the Soviet Union. The ceasefire came on September 5th.

One of the conditions of the armistice was the removal of all Wehrmacht troops from Finland by September 14th, or their internment by Finland thereafter. Because General Vogel's XXXVI Mountain Corps, part of Colonel-General Rendulic's 20th Army, was over 600 miles from the nearest Finnish border, it was clearly not possible to get them out of Finland by the deadline. As Mannerheim sought means of interning them, Hitler, true to form, ordered the Kriegsmarine to attack the Finnish island of Sur Sari in the Gulf of Finland in an attempt to provide a temporary haven for German troops. The assault took place on September 14th and 15th, and was a
disaster for the Germans. Over 300 men were killed or wounded, and 1,000 were forced to surrender.

Over the next month, there was fierce fighting in several parts of Finland. Mannerheim's troops attempted to prevent the Germans escaping from the area around the Gulf of Bothnia into occupied Norway, but eventually had to allow them to retreat into safety in mid-October, leaving a trail of devastated villages and destroyed bridges behind them. In Finnish Lapland, Colonel-General Rendulic attempted to retain the base at Petsamo and the nickel mines at Kolosjoki for Germany, but was attacked on October 7th by the Russian Karelian Front under General Meretskov. By October 15th, the Russians had captured Petsamo, and had also carried on into Norway and captured Lyngenfjord. By the armistice between Finland and Russia, signed on 19th September, and by the force of subsequent events, Finland had now lost her access to the Atlantic, via Petsamo, and the valuable nickel mines of the region.

Lithuania and Estonia

The advance of the Soviet armies towards East Prussia during the summer of 1944 had cut off from Germany and her other armies the unfortunate Colonel-General Schorner and his Army Group North, now retreated to the Baltic States that had been occupied by Germany immediately before the war. In mid-August, Colonel-General Raus and the 3rd Panzerarmee managed to counterattack from the South of General Bagrmyan's 1st Baltic Front, and re-established contact with Army Group North near Tukums. Desperately, Colonel-General Guderian, in his recently acquired role of Chief of Staff at OKH, tried to persuade Hitler to permit a withdrawal by Schorner's army while there was a gap through which they could retreat. Hitler refused, his grounds being that a retreat might cause Finland to withdraw from alliance with Germany! Since this had virtually happened anyway, the Fuehrer's reason made little sense.

A month later, on September 24th, Marshal Govarov had captured almost the whole of Estonia, and launched six divisions in an amphibious invasion of the islands of the Gulf of Riga, held by two German divisions. After a spirited and hopelessly outnumbered defence lasting almost two months, the German divisions were successfully evacuated by the Kriegsmarine under cover of fire from the Lutzow, Scheer and several cruisers. Six weeks earlier, soldiers of General Eremenko's 3rd Baltic Front had taken Riga, the capital of Latvia, on October 13th. As long before as August 21st, Guderian had instructed Schorner to reinforce the port of Memel because he was certain that the Russians would attempt to take it and isolate Army Group North again. Schorner did not accept Guderian's reasoning, and disobeyed the order. On October 5th, he had cause to regret it.
General Bagramyan attacked the weak defences along the road to Memel with 500 tanks and, meeting inadequate resistance, averaged 15 miles per day to reach the Baltic at Palanga in just six days. The 26 Divisions of Army Group North were largely cut off from German supplies and were isolated. Defeat was inevitable.

Hungary, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia

Throughout the second half of 1944, Soviet troops of the 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts fought their way through the Balkan states. From August 20th, when the 2nd Ukrainian Front attacked Iasi, capital of Moldavia, through to the siege of Budapest at Christmas, the German Army was gradually pushed back. As the Russian conquests moved Westwards, the Bulgarian government announced on August 26th that it was withdrawing from the war, and set about disarming German garrisons. On August 29th, a German move to take over the puppet state of Slovakia to prevent similar action sparked off a Slovak national uprising that kept significant numbers of crack German troops busy for almost two months until the insurgents were driven into the Low Tatra mountains in October.

On September 8th, following a declaration of war against Bulgaria on September 5th, the Russians entered Bulgaria and took the port of Varna. On the same day, the 8th, the Bulgarian government declared war on Germany in an effort to counter the Russian attack, and launched its 5th Army, commanded by General Stanchev, against Germany. This army was well equipped with German weapons, including the 88mm anti-aircraft and anti-tank gun, and had 88 German Pzkpfw 4 tanks. It became the left wing of Marshal Tolbukhin's army, and was given the task of cutting the retreat of the German army as it made its way from the Balkans.

Rumania

But the major interest in this area of the Balkans centred on Rumania. After Russia's defeat of German troops at Stalingrad, the Rumanian opposition forces had secretly contacted Great Britain and the United States, and a revolutionary plan had been formulated against the day when it could be put into effect. Now, as Marshal Antonescu, who had taken Rumania into active participation in the Axis war, organised with Hitler's staff the defence of Rumania against the Russian advance, King Michael I of Rumania and the leader of the National Peasants' Party, Julius Maniu, planned to unseat Antonescu and turn the tide of Rumanian action against Germany.

This was potentially much more significant for Germany's ability to resist the Soviet advance than similar events in other Balkan countries simply because of the level of commitment and integration of Rumanian troops into
the German armies. Of the four Armies making up the two sections of the
German Army Group South Ukraine and defending Rumania, two were Rumanian,
and had sworn an oath to their king. Although it might be argued that for
some considerable time they had not been discharging that oath effectively,
King Michael was confident that the loyalty of the Rumanian rank and file
to Germany was less than their loyalty to him.

So, on August 23rd, Michael called Antonescu and his Minister for Foreign
Affairs to his palace and ordered them to conclude an immediate armistice
with the Allies. They did not agree, and were immediately arrested. That
evening, Radio Bucharest broadcast an order to all Rumanian troops to cease
fire, which caused Colonel-General Friessner, in command of Army Group
South Ukraine, to telephone Generals Dumitrescu and Steflea, who commanded
the two Rumanian Armies in the German line. Both refused to disobey their
king's orders.

Because of this turn of events, Hitler took characteristically rash and
ill-considered action, and ordered the bombing of Bucharest. This gave the
new Prime Minister of Rumania, General Sanatescu, good reason to declare
war on Germany, which he did on August 25th. Rumanian troops occupied the
bridges over the Danube, the Prut and the Siretul and opened them to the
advancing Russians, who speedily cut off the German 6th Army in a gigantic
pincer movement. Fourteen German divisions were annihilated, and only two
of the divisional commanders escaped without being killed or captured. The
German 8th Army fared little better, for its IV Corps was forced to
surrender. Colonel-General Friessner had lost 16 of his 24 divisions in
just two weeks.

Albania and Greece

The change of loyalties of the Rumanian Army brought a speedy order to Army
Group E in Greece at the end of August to begin an evacuation of the Aegean
and Ionian islands and of the mainland, but Bulgaria's declaration of war
on Germany early in September caused a further change of plan. Now Hitler's
instruction to Colonel-General Lohr was to retreat to what had in 1939 been
the frontier between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. There he was to join up with
General de Angelis' 2nd Panzerarmee and the tail of Army Group F to
protect a corridor through which German troops could retreat, and by which
the Danube plain could be defended against the Bulgarian 5th Army, now on
the attack.

Some 40,000 of the 60,000 German soldiers on the Greek islands were
evacuated, the remainder staying in considerable comfort until the war was
over. The unlucky ones were pulled back first to Athens, which was handed
over to its Mayor on October 4th, and then to Yugoslavia. The smooth and
relatively untroubled nature of the withdrawal was helped by an undercover
agreement between the Germans and the ELAS Communist partisans, by which ELAS undertook not to obstruct the retreat if the Germans left them large quantities of weapons and ammunition.

Back in Greece itself, a British Airborne force had, on October 4th, helped Greek patriots to liberate Patras, and on October 14th a naval squadron made up of both Greek and British ships and commanded by Rear-Admiral Troubridge arrived in Piraeus. There it disembarked Lieutenant-General Scobie and III Corps of the British Army, with specific instructions from the British Government to prevent the overthrow of the Greek regime by communist insurrection. In fact, Scobie was unable to prevent a revolution that was, after an initial success that brought near-peace in February 1945, to drag on for almost four years. Even as he arrived in Greece, the Communist ELAS was straggling across country into Athens bearing the arms that they had so recently acquired by their deal with the Germans. The best that Scobie's British troops could do was to overcome the initial surge to arms, then provide a policing presence - a procedure to which the British Army was to become accustomed during the coming decades.

Yugoslavia

In Yugoslavia, unlike the other Balkan countries, war against the occupying Axis army had been conducted with considerable success for more than three years by Tito and his Partisan Army, despite the British government's politically expedient but misguided belief in, and support of, Mihailovic's much smaller and virtually inactive non-communist Cetnik army until early in 1944. Tito's Partisan Army had withstood seven major offensives by vastly better equipped and numerically superior German forces, and had aroused the admiration of the world. Nonetheless, Britain, committed to support of the Royal Yugoslav government in exile under King Peter, could not support fully Tito's fight against the Axis until there was some form of agreement between Tito and the government in exile on the form of government in postwar Yugoslavia.

In June 1944, Tito somewhat unwillingly met the leader of the government in exile at the Partisan Army's new headquarters on the island of Vis, off the Dalmation coast. The government in exile agreed to full support of the Partisan Army, and both agreed to allow the Yugoslav people to determine the question of whether there should continue to be a monarchy after the war. Mihailovic was dismissed from his nominal post as Minister for War in the Royalist government, and the way was open for Churchill to meet Tito and provide full support for the closing stages of the Partisan campaign. The meeting took place on 12th August in Naples, to which Tito was flown by the RAF. Two weeks later, as the Red Army entered Rumania, Tito suggested that he should visit Stalin, and on 21st September he was flown in a Soviet aircraft to Moscow, where he startled the Soviet leader, not for the last
time, by making it quite clear that Yugoslavia was not to become simply a Soviet satellite state, as Stalin expected, and that the Red Army had only the right to fight through Yugoslavia, if need be, not the right of occupation.

As we have seen, General von Luohr's Army Group E, retreating from Greece, sought to establish a defensive line north of Yugoslavia to prevent encirclement by the advancing Red Army. Von Luohr's withdrawal started at the beginning of September 1944, and the Partisan Army, supported by the RAF and the United States Air Force, launched attacks against Axis communications. The Bulgarian army, now fighting against the Axis, had taken Nis, and had thereby barred the German columns' most practical route to the Danube, so the Germans had little choice but to retreat through the length of Yugoslavia. By the end of September, Partisan armies were converging on Belgrade under two of Tito's most successful commanders, Popovic and Dapcevic, and two strong Red Army forces advanced from other directions, joining with the Partisans as they approached the city. Desperate to retain their communications southwards until the German retreat was complete, the Germans reinforced the Belgrade garrison with every soldier available, and the battle that followed was as savage as any in Eastern Europe. Not until 20th October did Tito's First Proletarian Division, the elite formation of the Partisan Army, finally drive the Germans from their capital city so that Tito could enter in triumph as his country's liberator.

From Belgrade, the Germans continued their withdrawal as best they could, and within only a few weeks most of the country was free of the Axis presence. Tito's National Committee ruled in Belgrade as the effective government, soon to be ratified as the official government by the Allies and, in March 1945, by King Peter. What remained of the German army of occupation was trapped in Croatia and Slovenia until the German capitulation, and lost almost 100,000 killed and 200,000 wounded during the last two months of the war under furious attacks from the Partisans. On 7th May 1945, General von Luohr was forced to surrender to the Partisans. He expected death at their hands, and was duly executed.

Hungary

The battle to push the German Army Group South out of Hungary rolled on throughout the autumn and winter of 1944 and into the New Year. Once again the unique brand of bizarre incompetence that Hitler had espoused as his own was to play a major part in events, and from the actions he took to defend Budapest were to spring the successes of the Soviet Army in East Prussia and Eastern Germany. When, on October 6th, Marshal Malinovsky's 2nd Ukrainian Front launched its offensive westwards into Hungary, it was opposing nine corps and 26 divisions of Army Group South. But 14 of those
divisions were Hungarian, and Colonel-General Friessner, commanding Army Group South, had grave reservations about their battle-worthiness, doubts that were fully to be realised when they went into action.

Manoeuvring on the vast Hungarian plain, the Panzer corps of Friessner's Group were able to use their North African desert experience to the full, and did in fact frequently outmanoeuvre the Russian armour. But so outnumbered were the German troops that no amount of skill could produce a victory. By October 20th, Malinovsky had taken Debrecen. Ten days later, the German High Command announced, with some exaggeration, that Malinovsky had lost over 18,500 men killed or captured, 1,000 tanks and over 900 guns, as a result of an excursion by General Pliev into the Tokay vineyards along the River Tisza and a successful pincer trap pulled on his force. Victory for the German 6th Army though this was, it had been won at an enormous price, for the 6th Army now had only 67 tanks. Nonetheless, it had saved the German 8th Army from being trapped by the Russians.

Now the weight of the offensive shifted away from the German 6th and 8th Armies to the Hungarian 3rd Army, which stood in the way of Malinovsky's 6th Guards Tank Army's approach to Budapest. The offensive began on October 29th, and rapidly overcame the Hungarian Axis defenders. Within days, they were within 40 miles of Budapest itself. The German defence rapidly regrouped, but were desperately short of men and equipment. Hitler decided to reinforce Army Group South for the defence of Budapest, and sent three new Panzer divisions and three additional battalions of tanks. But the Soviet Army was also able to call up major reinforcements in the shape of the 3rd Ukrainian Front following the fall of Belgrade. On November 27th, the Russians went on the offensive again.

From both sides of Budapest, the two Russian Armies, the 2nd and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts, converged on the capital. Throughout the first three weeks of December, the German armies were pushed remorselessly back on two fronts. Just before Christmas, the Germans lost 12,000 dead, over 5,000 prisoners, over 300 tanks and almost 250 guns in a last ditch defence of the small town of Szekesfehervar. Three days later, on December 27th, the two Russian armies met and joined for the final assault that would finally clear the Germans from Hungary. Four days earlier, Colonel-General Friessner and his colleague General Fretter-Pico had been dismissed and disgraced for allowing the Russian armies to triumph, and Friessner was replaced by General Woehler. On Christmas Day, Hitler issued a fateful order that was to have grave consequences for his defence of East Prussia. Because he had designated Budapest a "fortress", and it could not therefore be allowed to be lost, he transferred two Panzer Divisions and a Panzer Corps from Army Group Centre's defence of East Prussia, and brought them South to Hungary. In vain did his Generals protest at the danger this presented to Germany. To delay the inevitable in Budapest for just a few
weeks, Hitler opened the way for the Russians into the Fatherland.