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VASSILI GROSSMAN

# THE YEARS OF WAR

(1941-1945)



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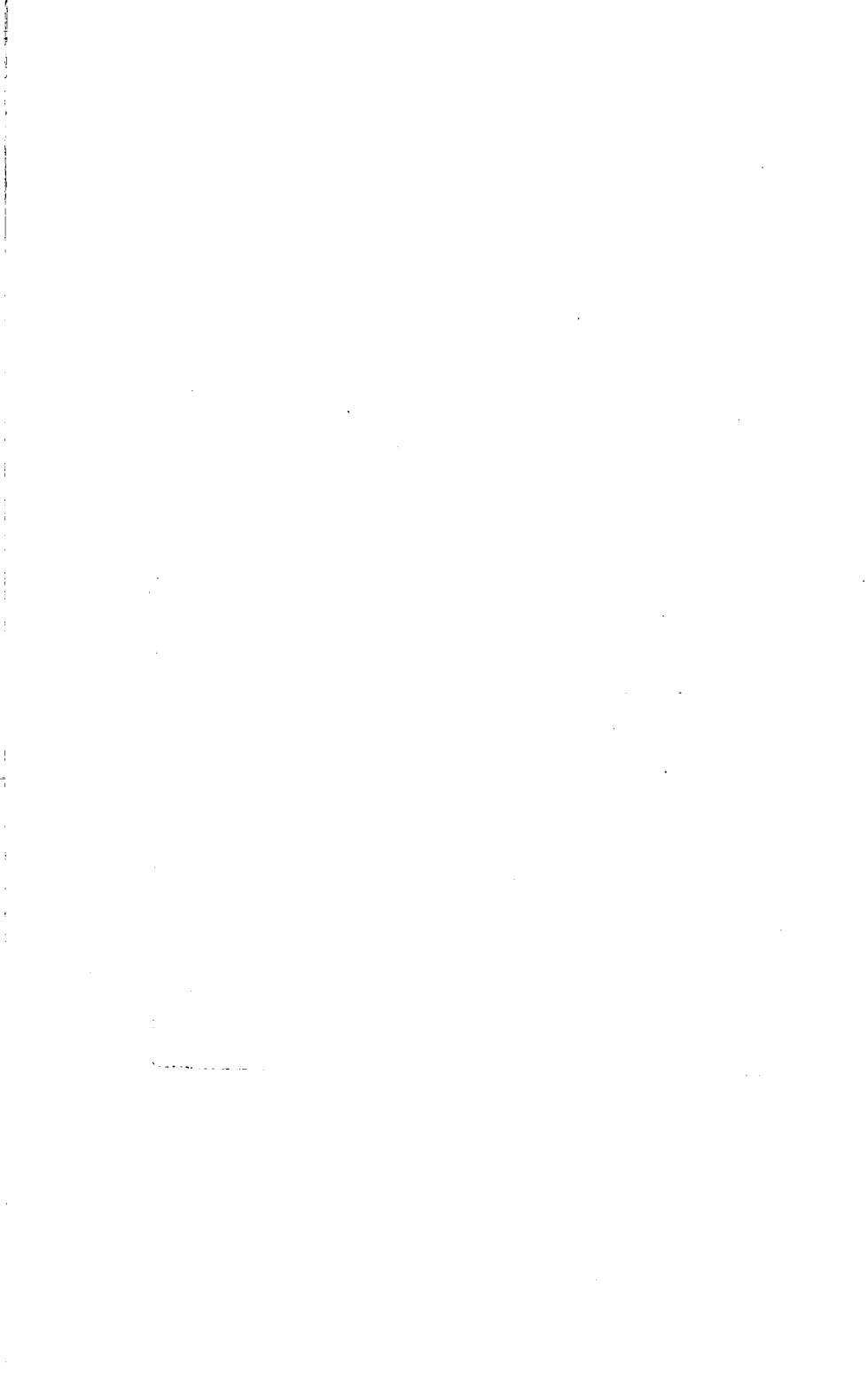
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VASSILI GROSSMAN



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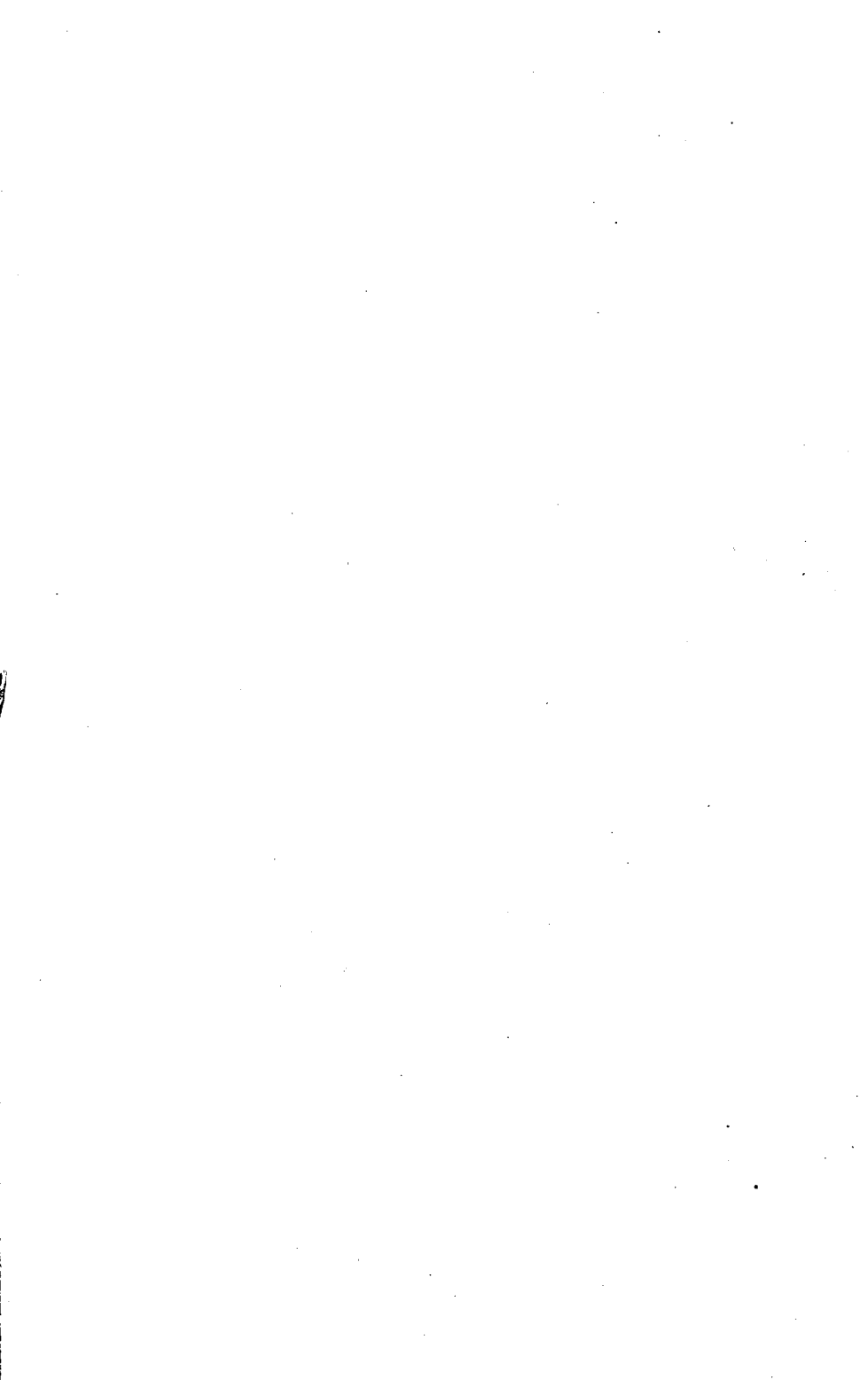
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1941





# THE PEOPLE IMMORTAL

AUGUST

**E**ARLY one summer evening in 1941 heavy guns could be seen moving along the road to Gomel. The guns were so enormous that even the blasé baggage train crews, who had seen everything there was to see, kept glancing at the huge steel barrels with interest. Dust hung thickly in the evening air, faces and uniforms were grey, eyes inflamed. Only a few of the artillerymen were marching, most of them were riding on the guns. One man was drinking water from his steel helmet, the drops trickling down his chin, his moist teeth glistening. Glancing at him casually you might have thought that he was clowning, but he was not—his face was thoughtful and drawn with fatigue.

“Ai-ir-craft!” came the long-drawn-out shout of the Lieutenant marching at the head of the column.

Two planes were darting over the oak grove in the direction of the road. The men followed their flight apprehensively, exchanging comments:

“They’re ours!”

“No, they’re German.”

And the usual frontline joke was cracked:

“They’re ours all right—where’s my helmet!”

The planes were heading at right angles to the road, which meant that they were ours. German aircraft usually turned on spotting a column and flew parallel to the road.

Powerful tractors hauled the guns through the village street. The great guns barging through the peaceful twilight of the countryside looked weird and out of place among the whitewashed cottages with their miniature front gardens full of crinkly golden balls and red peonies flaming in the rays of the setting sun, among the women and greybeards sitting in front of their houses, amidst the lowing of cows and the barking of dogs.

Near a small bridge that groaned painfully under the fearful, unaccustomed burden passing over it, stood a car, waiting for the artillery column to pass. The driver, who was obviously used to such halts, grinned as he watched the soldier drinking from his helmet. The Battalion Commissar sitting beside him kept craning his neck to see whether the end of the column was yet in sight.

"Comrade Bogarev," said the driver with a strong Ukrainian accent, "perhaps we'd better stop the night here, it'll be dark soon."

The Battalion Commissar shook his head.

"We've got to hurry," he said. "I must get to Headquarters."

"We'll never be able to make these roads in the dark, and we'll have to spend the night in the woods in any case," said the driver.

The Battalion Commissar burst out laughing:

"What's the trouble? Did you get a sudden hankering for a drink of milk?"

"A drop of milk and some nice fried potatoes wouldn't be half bad."

"Not to mention goose," said the Battalion Commissar.

"Why not?" retorted the undaunted driver enthusiastically.

Soon the car was passing over the bridge. Flaxen-haired urchins ran after it.

"Hey! Take these cucumbers, take these tomatoes, take these pears!" they shouted, tossing handfuls of cucumbers and green pears through the half-lowered windows of the car.

Bogarev waved to the youngsters and felt a cold wave of emotion flood his heart. The sight of the village children seeing off the Red Army as it withdrew was sweet, but it was bitter at the same time.

Before the war, Sergei Alexandrovich Bogarev had been a professor, holding the chair of Marxism-Leninism at one of the Moscow institutes. Research work fascinated him, and he tried to devote as few hours as possible to lecturing. His main interest was the scientific research work that he had begun about two years previously. He used to come home for supper from the institute and pull out a manuscript from his brief case to read while he was at the table. When his wife would ask him whether he liked what he was eating, whether the omelette was salted enough, he would answer something quite beside the point. She would fume and laugh at the same time, while he would say to her: "You know, Lisa, I had a wonderful day of it today—I read a letter of Marx's which was only recently discovered in an old collection."

And now Sergei Alexandrovich Bogarev was Assistant Chief of the Political Department of one of the fronts. Occasionally he would recall the cool vaults in which the institute's manuscripts were kept, the table littered with all sorts of papers, the shaded lamps, the squeaking

of the wheels on the ladder that the librarian moved about from shelf to shelf. Sometimes fragmentary phrases from his unfinished book would float into his mind and he would muse on the questions that interested him so deeply and so vitally.

The car sped along the road. Sooty dust, brick dust, yellowish dust, fine grey dust—making one's face like that of a corpse—clouds of dust hang over these roads at the front. This dust is raised by hundreds of thousands of Red Army boots, truck wheels, tank tracks, tractors, guns, flocks of sheep and droves of pigs, the hoofs of collective-farm horses and great herds of cows, collective-farm tractors and the creaking carts of refugees, the bast sandals of collective-farm foremen and the dainty shoes of girls leaving Bobruisk, Mozyr, Zhlobin, Shepetovka, Berdichev. Dust hovers over the Ukraine and Byelorussia, dust curls over Soviet soil. At night the sombre August sky flushes with the sinister glow of village fires. The thunderous roar of exploding bombs rumbles through dark oak and pine forests, through quivering aspen groves; red and green tracer bullets stitch the heavy velvet of the sky; anti-aircraft shells burst aloft like white stars; Heinkels loaded with high explosives drone monotonously in the towering gloom. And the old men and women in the villages and hamlets who see the soldiers off say to them: "Drink some milk, ducky . . . eat this cheese . . . take these pies, sonny . . . a few cucumbers for the road." Old eyes weep and weep, searching for the face of a son amidst the thousands of dusty, grim, weary faces. And the old ladies who hold out little bundles of goodies tied in white napkins beg the men: "Take it, take it, honey; you are all as dear to our hearts as our own children."

The German hordes were moving from the west. On the German tanks are daubed the skull and crossbones, red and green dragons, wolf maws and fox tails, antlered reindeer heads. Every German soldier carries in his pocket photographs of conquered Paris, devastated Warsaw, shamed Verdun, burned Belgrade, captured Brussels and Amsterdam, Oslo and Narvik, Athens and Gdynia. In every German pocket are photographs of German women and maidens in bangs and curls, wearing striped pyjama trousers. On every German officer are gold amulets, strings of coral by way of charms, stuffed mascots with yellow bead eyes. In every German officer's pocket is a Russian-German military conversation manual with the brief phrases: "Hands up," "Halt, don't move," "Where are the guns?" "Surrender." Every German soldier has learned the words: "Milk," "bread," "eggs,"

and the curt phrase: "Hand over, hand over." They marched from the west.

And millions of people rose to encounter them—from the bright Oka and the broad Volga, from the muddy waters of the Kama and the foaming Irtysh, from the steppes of Kazakhstan, from the Donbas and Kerch, from Astrakhan and Voronezh. Millions of loyal workers' hands dug anti-tank ditches, trenches, bunkers, pits; the rustling groves and forests silently laid thousands of their trunks across highways and quiet country lanes; barbed wire tangled around factory yards; iron bristled into anti-tank barriers on the squares and streets of our lovely green towns.

Sometimes Bogarev was surprised at the ease with which he had been able to cut short his former mode of life, suddenly, in the course of a few hours; it pleased him to know that he had retained his power of judgment in difficult situations, that he could act resolutely and swiftly. And most important of all he saw that there, too, in the midst of a war, he had preserved his integrity and his ideals, that people trusted him, respected him and sensed his inherent power. But in spite of this he was not satisfied with what he was doing. It seemed to him that he was not close enough to the Red Army men, to the hub of the war, and he wanted to leave the Political Department for the actual firing line.

He frequently had occasion to interrogate German war prisoners, N.C.O's for the most part. He noticed that the burning hatred for fascism which tortured him day and night changed during the questionings into contempt and disgust. In the majority of cases the prisoners proved a cowardly lot, promptly and eagerly told him the number of their units and gave information about their armaments, roundly asserted that they were workers, that they sympathized with Communism and had served prison terms for their revolutionary ideas, and in one voice would say: "Hitler is *kaput, kaput,*" although it was quite clear that they actually did not believe their own words.

Only rarely did he come across a fascist war prisoner who flatly maintained his loyalty to Hitler and his belief in the superiority of the German race, whose mission it was to enslave the other peoples of the world. Bogarev would question such prisoners in detail: they had read nothing and were not only ignorant of such names as Goethe and Beethoven, but had never heard of even such pillars of German statesmanship as Bismarck or such famous military men as Moltke and

Schlieffen. All they knew was the name of the secretary of their district branch of the National-Socialist Party.

Bogarev made a close study of the orders of the German Command and noted in them an extraordinary propensity for organization—the Germans looted, burned and bombed methodically and in organized fashion; they could organize the collection of empty tin cans in bivouacs and could elaborate a plan for the most intricate movement of a huge column, providing for all the innumerable details and carrying them out punctually and with mathematical precision. In their capacity for mechanical obedience, for blind goose-stepping, in the complex and tremendous movement of millions of soldiers fettered by unthinking discipline, there was something degrading, something foreign to the free spirit of man. This was no culture of reason, but a civilization of instincts, something in the nature of the organization of ants and herds of cattle.

In all the German correspondence that Bogarev had examined he had found only two letters—one from a young woman to a private, the other a letter which a private had been about to send home—wherein he found a glimmer of thought devoid of automatism, and feeling devoid of the usual middle-class vulgarity, letters filled with shame and sorrow for the crimes that were being committed by the German people. Once he had questioned an elderly officer who had formerly been a teacher of literature, and this man, too, had proved to be a person who thought, and who cherished a sincere hatred for Hitlerism.

“Hitler,” he told Bogarev, “is no minister to the common weal; he is a plunderer. He has plundered the industrial culture of the diligent and zealous German people like any common gangster.”

“Never,” thought Bogarev, “never will they conquer our country. The more accurate their calculations in trifles and details, the more mathematical their movements, the greater their helplessness in understanding what is most important, the more overwhelming will be the catastrophe which awaits them. They plan trifles and details, but they think in two dimensions. They are unaware of the laws of historical movement in this war they have started, nor is it possible for these people of instinct and vulgar utilitarianism to grasp them.”

His car sped through chill dark woods, over little bridges spanning winding streams, through hazy valleys, past quiet ponds reflecting the starry flame of the vast August sky. The driver said quietly:

"Comrade Battalion Commissar, remember that soldier who was drinking from his helmet, sitting on the gun back there? You know, it just occurred to me that it was my brother, no other; now I know why I was so interested in him!"

## MILITARY COUNCIL

BEFORE THE MEETING of the Military Council of the Front, Divisional Commissar Cherednichenko went for a walk in the park. He strolled slowly along, stopping now and again to fill his short-stemmed pipe. Passing by the old palace with the gloomy tower and the clock that did not go, he went as far as the pond. A thick green mane of branches hung down over the water. The swans on the pond gleamed dazzlingly in the morning sunlight. It seemed as though they were moving so slowly and holding their necks so rigidly because the dark green waters were too thick and turgid for them to cleave. Cherednichenko stood still, looking thoughtfully at the white birds. The wet gravel crunched under his jackboots. A rather elderly Major with a dark beard was coming down the avenue from the direction of the signals office.

Cherednichenko knew him—he was from the Operations Branch and had reported to him on the situation once or twice.

"Might I have a word with you on an official matter, Comrade Cherednichenko?" said the Major in a loud voice.

"Certainly, what is it?" answered Cherednichenko, his eyes following the swans, who were making for the opposite bank, frightened by the Major's loud voice.

"Information has just been received from the Commander of the 72nd Rifle Division."

"From Makarov, that is?"

"That's right, from Makarov. It's very important information. He reports that yesterday at twenty-three hours the enemy began moving large formations of tanks and mobile infantry. Prisoners stated that they belonged to three different divisions of Guderian's Tank Army and that they were given the direction of the movement as Unecha-Novgorod-Seversk."

"Well," said Cherednichenko, "I knew that last night."

The Major looked curiously at his lined face with the large yet narrow eyes. The Divisional Commissar's eyes were much lighter than the weather-beaten skin of his face, which had known the winds and the

frosts of the Russo-German war in 1914 and the campaigns in the steppes during the Civil War. He looked calm and thoughtful.

"May I go, Comrade Cherednichenko?" asked the Major.

"Give me the latest operations report from the central sector."

"The operations report with information to four nought nought hours. . . ."

"Hm," said Cherednichenko, "four nought, nought. . . . Couldn't possibly have been three fifty-seven hours, could it?"

"Possibly, Comrade Cherednichenko," smiled the Major. "There's nothing much in the report. On the other sectors of the front the enemy were not particularly active. Only that they had occupied the village of Marchikhina Buda to the west of the river crossing, losing about a battalion and a half in the action."

"What village?" asked Cherednichenko turning to the Major.

"Marchikhina Buda."

"You're certain?"

"Absolutely certain."

The Major was silent for a moment and then said in a guilty voice:

"Beautiful swans, Comrade Divisional Commissar. Two of them were killed in an air raid yesterday. Their young were left."

Cherednichenko lit his pipe again, blowing out a cloud of smoke.

"May I go?"

Cherednichenko nodded.

The Major turned on his heel and went off in the direction of H.Q., passing the old maple under which Cherednichenko's orderly was standing. The Divisional Commissar looked long at the swans, vivid patches of light on the green surface of the pond. Then he said softly:

"Oh, mama, Lenya, shall I ever see you again?" and he coughed with the hard, dry cough of a soldier.

As Cherednichenko walked back to the palace with his usual un-hurried gait, the waiting orderly asked him:

"Shall I send the car for your mother and son, Comrade Divisional Commissar?"

"No," answered Cherednichenko shortly; then, seeing the look of astonishment on his orderly's face, he added: "Last night the Germans occupied Marchikhina Buda."

The Military Council met in a high domed hall, the long, narrow windows of which were draped with portières. In the half light the

tasselled red table-cloth looked black. About fifteen minutes before the conference was due to begin, the secretary on duty walked noiselessly across the carpet and whispered to the orderly:

"Murzikhin, have they brought the apples for the Commander?"

"I gave the usual instructions and ordered Narzan water and 'Severnaya Palmyra' cigarettes too. Here they come," answered the orderly in rapid tones.

An orderly came into the room with a bowl of green apples and a few bottles of Narzan water.

"Put it down over there, on the little table," said the secretary.

A few minutes later the Chief of Staff entered, a General with a tired and dissatisfied look on his face. Following him came a Colonel, Chief of the Operations Branch, carrying a roll of maps.

The Colonel was a tall, thin man with a ruddy complexion, the General stout and pale. But somehow they looked remarkably alike. Turning to the orderly, who was standing stiffly to attention, the General asked:

"Where is the Commander?"

"On the wire, Comrade Major-General."

"Is the connection through?"

"It was put through twenty minutes ago."

"There you are, Pyotr Yefimovich," said the Chief of Staff, "and your precious Stemekhel said he'd put us through only by noon."

"So much the better, Ilya Ivanovich," replied the Colonel, and with the severity expected of a subordinate under such circumstances, he added: "When are you going to get some sleep? This is already your third sleepless night."

"Well, you see, with the situation as it is one simply doesn't think about sleep," said the Chief of Staff, as he walked over to the little table and helped himself to an apple. The Colonel spread his maps out on the big table and also reached out for an apple. The orderly, standing to attention, smiled, and exchanged glances with the secretary.

"Here it is," said the Chief of Staff, bending over the map and staring at the thick blue arrow indicating the direction of the German tank column within the red semicircle of our defensive line. He frowned as he studied the map. Then he bit into the apple and grimacing wryly exclaimed:

"Sour as hell!"

The Colonel also took a bite of his apple and said hurriedly:



"I'll say they are! Pure vinegar!" Turning to the orderly he snapped: "Can't you get any better apples than those for the Military Council? Simply outrageous!"

The Chief of Staff laughed:

"Don't start arguing about tastes, Pyotr Yefimovich. That's the Commander's special order, he likes sour apples."

They bent over the table, conversing in low tones.

"Our main line of communication is threatened. The enemy's objective is quite clear. Just look here; they're outflanking us on the left," said the Colonel.

"Hm, outflanking," said the General. "Shall we say: a potential threat of an outflanking movement."

They put the bitten apples on the table and sprang smartly to attention as Yeremin, the Commander-in-Chief of the Front, entered the room. He was a tall, spare man with close-cropped greying hair. His boots clattered noisily as he came in, for he did not walk on the carpet like everybody else, but on the brilliantly polished parquet floor.

"Good morning, comrades, good morning," he said, and glancing at the Chief of Staff, asked: "Why are you looking so fagged out, Ilya Ivanovich?"

The Chief of Staff, who usually addressed the Commander by his first name and patronymic, Victor Andreyevich, at this time, just before the meeting of the Military Council, answered loudly:

"I feel fine, Comrade Lieutenant-General. May I report the situation?"

"Let's have it," said the Commander, and added: "Ah, here comes the Divisional Commissar."

Cherednichenko nodded as he came into the room and sat down in the chair at the farthest corner of the table.

"Just a minute," said Yeremin and opened a window. "I think I told you to open the windows," he said sternly to the secretary.

The situation, as reported by the Chief of Staff, was extremely serious. The spearheads of the German fascist army were driving into both flanks of our troops, threatening them with encirclement. Our units were withdrawing to new lines. At every river crossing, on every bit of hilly terrain there were fierce battles. But the enemy pressed on and we retreated. The enemy occupied towns and vast territories. Every day the fascist radio and press reported fresh victories. Fascist