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›Do not burden one's own army and its hinterland
with unneeded mouths!‹

The Fate of the Soviet Civilian Population Behind the ›Panther Line‹
in Eastern Belorussia, October 1943-June 1944

The battles of Army Group Centre in eastern Belorussia during the winter of 1943/44 have been rightly called »an unknown war«.¹ From October 1943 to June 1944, while the forces of Army Groups South and A were forced to retreat from Ukraine and the Crimea to the borders of Hungary and Romania, the 1,2 million German troops and auxiliaries belonging to Army Group Centre² held off a series of offensives aimed at Vitebsk, Mogilev, Orsha and Bobruisk, inflicting significant casualties on Soviet forces.³ Only on the southern flank of the army group did the Soviets make greater progress over the winter of 1943/44, taking in succession the towns of Gomel, Rechit-sa, Mozyr and Rogachev between November 1943 and February 1944.⁴

The fighting along the so-called ›Panther Line‹, to which Army Group Centre had retreated at the end of September 1943, not only cost the Red Army close to one million casualties, but also caused immense suffering to the approximately 2.4 million Soviet civilians inhabiting the army group's remaining zone of operations. Research on Wehrmacht occupation policy has often portrayed events during this final phase of the war in the east as falling under the heading of »crimes of the retreat« (*Rückzugsverbrechen*).⁵ In particular, much attention has been paid in recent years to

- 1 Karl-Heinz Frieser, *Der Rückzug der Heeresgruppe Mitte nach Weissrussland*, in: *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, Bd 8: *Der Krieg im Osten und an den Nebenfronten*. München, 2011, pp. 297-338.
- 2 From October 1943 to the end of June 1944, troop strengths, including Luftwaffe, SS, Osttruppen, Hungarian forces and auxiliaries, fluctuated between 1.170.000 and 1.284.333. OKH/Chef.H.Rüst.u.BdE /VA/Ag V III/Pl 1, *Zusammenstellung der Verpflegungsstärken des Feldheeres im Osten*, Stand 1.10.43, 1.12.43, 1.1-1.7.44, US National Archives and Records Administration Record Group 242, T77/1199/927-50. Hereafter, all T-documents cited are from NARA.
- 3 Between October 1943 and 1 April 1944, for example, the Soviet Western Front lost 330.537 casualties, while two offensives aimed at Vitebsk cost the 1st Baltic Front 303.214 casualties. Cf. V.V.Gurkin, ›Liudskie poteri Sovetskikh vooruzhenn'ikh sil v 1941-1945 gg: nov'ie aspekty‹ *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* 2, 1999, p. 8.
- 4 At a cost of at least 175.640 casualties. Cf. G. F. Krivosheev, *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses in the Twentieth Century*, London 1997, pp. 109 f.; Konstantin Rokossovsky, *A Soldier's Duty*, Moscow 1985, pp. 216-230.
- 5 Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde. Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weissrussland 1941 bis 1944*, Hamburg 1999, pp. 1097-1102; Dieter Pohl, *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht. Deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941-1944*, München 2008, pp. 321-331.

the perhaps most spectacular example of a *Rückzugsverbrechen* on the Eastern Front, the abandonment of 45.000 women, children, elderly and sick in three camps near the small town of Ozarichi in mid-March 1944.⁶ While the course of this atrocity has been reconstructed by a number of German scholars, notably by Christoph Rass⁷, insufficient attention has hitherto been paid to the context of this crime, and the fact that a similar action, Operation ›Himmelfahrt‹, was repeated at Vitebsk in June 1944, abandoning over 5.000 sick and unfit civilians, has remained almost entirely unknown. While both actions took place during minor tactical retreats, to perceive them as crimes produced solely by the retreat of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front would be to misunderstand their true causes. Rather, both occurred during a prolonged phase of relatively successful defensive combat lasting nine months.

Contextualising Ozarichi and its sister atrocity at Vitebsk therefore offers the opportunity to reexamine the conduct of the Wehrmacht in the final phase of the occupation of the Soviet Union. What impact did the course of military operations have on policies towards the civilian population? How did factors such as food and labour resources as well as epidemics interact to generate such dramatic actions? And how did the staffs of Army Group Centre and its subordinate armies talk themselves into such drastic decisions? Evidence for the decision-making leading up to Ozarichi and ›Himmelfahrt‹ exists in abundance, above all in the records of the quartermaster and economics staffs at corps, army and army group level. While these sources can be read for their recounting of events, the reports and orders can also be seen as a remarkably consistent discourse regarding the importance of living off the land for not only food but also civilian labour, as well as the »necessary« measures to be taken towards civilians unfit for work. As »objects of military necessity«, to use Isabel Hull's felicitous phrase⁸, civilians disappeared *as civilians* in the eyes of German military staffs, and were reclassified as enemy, helper or hindrance. Reasoning from pragmatic premises, Wehrmacht commanders, staff officers and their civil servant advisors in the economics staffs produced strikingly similar analyses of the situation of Soviet civilians inhabiting the combat zone. The effects of war left the region under German occupation with a much-reduced labour force on the one hand, and a much-reduced ag-

6 For Soviet sources, largely reproducing reports and eyewitness testimonies gathered by the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission, see S. I. Beluga (ed), *Prestupleniia nemetsko-fashistskikh okkupantov v Belorussii*. Minsk 1965, pp. 118-137 and the comprehensive documentary collection by G. D. Knatko et al (eds), *Zalozhniki vermakhta (Ozarichi – lager smerti)*. Dokumenty i materialy, Minsk 1999.

7 Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde* (wie Anm. 5), pp. 1097-99; Hans Heinrich Nolte, *Osarichi 1944*, in: Gerd R. Ueberschär (Hg.), *Orte des Grauens. Verbrechen im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Darmstadt 2003, pp. 186-194; Christoph Rass, »Menschenmaterial«: deutsche Soldaten an der Ostfront. Innenansichten einer Infanteriedivision, 1939-1945, Paderborn 2003, pp. 386-402 and Christoph Rass, *Ozarichi 1944. Entscheidungs- und Handlungsebenen eines Kriegsverbrechen*, in: Timm C. Richter (Hg.), *Krieg und Verbrechen. Situation und Intention: Fallbeispiele*, München 2006, pp. 185-195.

8 Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction; Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, Ithaca 2005, pp. 226-262.

ricultural base on the other. Much of the remaining population consisted of the elderly and the immobile, above all mothers with young children. The feeding and accommodation of these ›dregs‹ (*Bodensatz*), as an order signed by leader of the German military opposition Henning von Tresckow characterised them, represented nothing but a drain on dwindling resources.⁹ The division of the population into those fit for work (*Arbeitsfähige*) and those unfit for work (*Arbeitsunfähige*) was the logical solution. Implementing that division at Ozarichi and Vitebsk, as this article shows, involved measures that echo much that is familiar from the Nazi ›Final Solution of the Jewish Question‹: selections; train transports; death marches; the involvement of the SS; and barbed wire camps.

Labour Mobilisation and Civilian Evacuation as Wehrmacht Doctrine. The dynamic that led to Ozarichi and Vitebsk was in several respects nothing new for Army Group Centre and its four constituent armies (from north to south, 3rd Panzer, 4th, 9th and 2nd Armies), or indeed elsewhere on the Eastern Front. It was the direct consequence of the German military practices of the labour mobilisation and agricultural exploitation of the frontline divisional, corps and army zones on the one hand, and the desire of commanders of frontline divisions to remove unwanted civilians immediately behind the frontline to a depth of up to 20 km on the other. In trench warfare conditions, these practices almost invariably generated substantial numbers of refugees, and could easily deplete the agricultural labour force by proletarianising the peasantry as trench-diggers, setting into motion a vicious circle of agricultural decline that only exacerbated the consequences of ›living off the land‹ and requisitioning food for Wehrmacht purposes. Following the summer battles at Rzhev in 1942, for example, 9th Army reported that »the further reductions in agricultural acreage are the consequences of these great defensive battles.«¹⁰ This was not the result of the loss of ground, as hardly any penetration into German defences had been made, but because of increased conscription of peasants during the defensive battle. In this fashion, even unsuccessful Soviet offensives left bruises behind the German frontline.

While commanders had already gone over to the conscription of peasant labour for military purposes by spring 1942, this practice became enshrined as operational doctrine by a series of Hitler orders from September 1942 onwards.¹¹ After the defeat at Stalingrad, and in conjunction with the decision to withdraw from the Demyansk and Rzhev salient, labour mobilisation and the evacuation of military-age males was decreed in ›Führer Order No. 4‹, while the impressment and evacuation of women was demanded in ›Führer Order No. 8‹ along with the evacuation of a 20 km deep zone of all superfluous civilians.¹² Already in December 1942, 4th Army had com-

9 AOK 2 OQu/AWiFü/VII/Qu.2, Erfassung von 10 bis 13jährigen Jungen und Mädchen bei Bandenunternehmen, 26. 6. 44, gez v. Tresckow, T312/1300/299.

10 AWiFü AOK 9, Erläuterung über die taktische Lage, 7. 10. 42, Imperial War Museum (IWM), MI 14/312.

11 Der Führer/OKH/GenStdH/Op. Abt., Grundsätzliche Aufgaben der Verteidigung, 8. 9. 1942, issued as OKH/GenStdH/Op. Abt. (I) Nr. 11153/42 g.Kdos, 11. 9. 42, Führerbefehl, T78/345/6303232-45.

12 PzAOK 3 Ia, Führer Order No.4, 28. 2. 43, NOKW-1965, Case 12, Prosecution Document

plained that »the peasant population is being continually decimated. The removal of one-third of the necessary agricultural workforce was rendered all the more dangerous, as many younger men who might normally be expected to lead by example were now absent.«¹³ A solution to the contradiction was found only by compelling the peasantry to do double duty as farmers and forced labourers. »To ensure a rational employment of labourers,» the army reported in April 1943, »the assembly of labourers in ›labour villages‹ (*Arbeitsdörfer*) is foreseen in connection with the evacuation of the 20 km zone.« In IX Corps, these were labelled »collection villages« (*Sammeldörfer*).¹⁴

The regimentation of the peasantry went hand in hand with the deportation of the so-called excess civilian population to the rear. In 1942 and early 1943, *before* any systematic withdrawals had taken place, the frontline armies of Army Group Centre displaced around 300.000 civilians to the rear, in particular from the Rzhev salient, both to the westernmost regions of the army group rear area, as well as to the civilian-administered Generalkommissariat (GK) Weissruthenien, which had received around 30.000 evacuees by February 1943, again dispersing the refugees into the countryside.¹⁵ This did not prevent the deaths from starvation of between 15 and 20.000 Russian civilians in Rzhev and the surrounding area before its liberation in March 1943.¹⁶

From March 1943, in the course of systematic withdrawals, ever larger numbers of civilians, reaching the number of over 880.000, were displaced westwards in order to deny their labour power to the advancing Soviets. 130.000 (41,3 % of the population) were evacuated from the Rzhev salient in March, 220.500 (22,2 %) from the Orel bend in August, and 535.000 (22,5 %) from Smolensk and the easternmost regions of Belorussia given up during the retreat to the ›Panther Line‹ in September 1943.¹⁷ More than 110.000 evacuees from the Rzhev and Orel areas were deported to the Reichskommissariat Ostland, while around 75.000 from the Panther Line withdrawal were also transferred there by November 1943.¹⁸ While the earlier evacuations proceeded without significant interference and could be carried out using rail transports, lack of trains meant that the evacuation to the Panther Line was carried out by foot marches.

Book 7A, pp.82f.; Der Führer/OKH/GenStdH/Op.Abt., Führerbefehl Nr. 8, 5. 3. 43, IWM, MI 14/674; c. f. AOK 9 Ia/A.Pi.Fü./Ic/OQu/Qu.2, Führerbefehl Nr. 8, 20. 3. 43, T312/309/7876118-20.

13 Tätigkeits- und Lagebericht AWiFü AOK 4, 16. 12. 42-15. 1. 43, T77/1112/725.

14 Lagebericht IX AK Qu, 23. 4. 43, T314/425/436; AOK 4 OQu/Qu.1, Beurteilung der Versorgungslage, 7. 4. 43, T312/197/7745748 (citation).

15 Nicholas Terry, *The German Army Group Centre and the Soviet Civilian Population 1942-1944*, PhD, King's College London 2005, pp. 192-202.

16 See the figures in Komitet Rzhevskogo gorodskogo soveta, Akt No 59, 16. 8. 43; Akt o zlodeianiakh nemetsko-fashistskikh zakhvatchikov Rzhevskom raione, 25. 2. 44, Gosudarstvennye Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii 7021-26-510, pp. 2, 13R; further evidence cited in Terry, *German Army Group Centre* (wie Anm. 15), pp. 198-201.

17 WiIn Mitte, Lagebericht Nr. 34, 1. 10. 43, T77/1101/521.

18 AOK 2 OQu/Qu.2 an Hgr Mitte OQu.Qu.2, 22. 10. 43, T312/1269/909-911; Terry, *German Army Group Centre* (wie Anm. 15), pp. 202-214.

The speed of the Soviet advance led 2nd Army to drive a column of around 45.000 evacuees into forests away from the Gomel bridgehead by 2nd Army, while 9th Army abandoned close to 100.000 evacuees around Pochep, Klinty and Unecha.¹⁹

Each stage of the German retreat was planned as a progressive fallback to a new defensive line, which was to be built using the forced labour of the civilian population. Whether given a codename borrowed from Wagner's operas (›Hagen‹) or the zoo (›Schildkröte‹, ›Maulwurf‹, ›Panther‹, ›Bärenstellung‹), these stoplines became the loci for a thorough sieving and massive displacement of the population caught in the path of the German retreat.²⁰ Preparations for the ›Panther Line‹, the army group's name for the grandiosely entitled Ostwall, began especially early. Already in March 1943, the codeword ›Panther‹ was in use to describe the construction of a rear defense line east of Mogilev.²¹ In August 1943, Hitler issued ›Führer Order No. 10‹, ordering the rapid construction of the Ostwall using civilian labourers.²² Army Group Centre estimated that 400,000 civilians would be needed for this task, but could at first only mobilise a fraction of this number from evacuees and the local population.²³

After settling into position behind the ›Panther Line‹, at the end of November 1943, Army Group Centre was ordered by its new commander, Field Marshal Ernst Busch, to establish permanent civilian labour battalions, the so-called *Zivilarbeitsdienstabteilungen* or ZADAs, conscripted from men and women above the age of 16 and divided by sex into companies.²⁴ The four frontline armies progressively extended their dragnets 5, 10, 20 and finally 100 km behind the frontline. The rear areas were now scourged by ›registration actions‹ (*Erfassungsaktionen*) to bring in trench-diggers. 4th Army sought to harvest 6.900 labourers from Borisov and Krupka rayons, located in the far west of its army area, for a construction brigade assigned to build the ›Biber‹ position.²⁵ 9th Army similarly designated the region east of the Berezina as the target of its own *Erfassungsaktion*, arresting 4.950 men and 1.000 women, interning them in Dulag 131 in Bobruisk in the days before New Year's Eve, 1943.²⁶

ZADAs conscripted in the rear areas were then shipped forward to the frontline, and the routing and unloading of civilian labourers became a prominent part of the

19 Tätigkeitsbericht Räumungsstab Noack VII, 15-28. 9. 43, T312/1256/706-7; AOK 9 OQu/VIII/Qu.2, Evakuierung, 1. 10. 43, T312/325/7895183; WiIn Mitte Chefgr. Arbeit, Aktennotiz für eine Besprechung des Inspektors mit der Heeresgruppe, 27. 9. 43, T77/1100/1104; Heeresgruppe Mitte OQu/Qu.2, Flüchtlingsbewegung, 27. 9. 43, T77/1100/1089-91.

20 The codenames translate as ›Tortoise‹, ›Mole‹, ›Panther‹ and ›Bear Position‹.

21 WiIn Mitte, Protokoll über die Besprechung mit Chef WiStab Ost am 26. 3. 43, T77/1099/1038; WiKdo Mogilev, Lage- und Tätigkeitsbericht Nr 16, 17. 4. 43, T77/1147/342.

22 OKH/GenStdH/Op.Abt. (I), Führerbefehl Nr. 10 (Ostwall), 12. 8. 43, IWM AL 1591.

23 WiIn Mitte I/Ia, Pantherstellung, 12. 9. 43, T77/1101/275.

24 Hgr Mitte OQu/Qu.2, Aufstellung von Zivilarbeitsdienstabteilungen (ZADA), 27. 11. 43, gez. Busch, T313/305/8582497; c. f. HeWiFü Mitte, Aktenvermerk über die Besprechung beim RK Ostland am 16. 12. 43, T77/1101/620.

25 KTB Korück 559 Qu, Dezember 1943, T501/90/742.

26 Tätigkeitsbericht AOK 9 OQu/Qu.2, 31. 12. 43; AWiFü AOK 9, Tätigkeitsbericht Nr 51/43 (30. 12. 43), T312/325/7895313, 7895123.

staffwork of pioneer and logistics officers.²⁷ LVI Panzer Corps, operating in the swampy Polesie region, received 3.254 labourers at its railhead at Zales'e in early February 1944.²⁸ Labourers were circulated between army sectors and maneuvered as if they were tactical reserves. On New Year's Day, 1944, 3rd Panzer Army, fighting to defend Vitebsk on the northern flank of the army group, was informed that it would receive 700-1.000 labourers from 4th Army's sector in the centre. The reinforcement was immediately committed to a threatened sector held by IX Corps.²⁹ This followed a previous transport from Mogilev of 898 workers sent before Christmas. An additional 3.000 labourers were combed out from a refugee camp at Lesna in the GK Weissruthenien for the SS/Police battlegroups fighting on the panzer army's left flank.³⁰ In May 1944, 4th Army once again gave up 2.600 workers, this time to 2nd Army on the southern flank, which additionally received 2.000 labourers from Ukraine at the same time.³¹ By May 1944, 86.687 ZADAs had been mobilised.³² 400.000 of a rump population of 1,9 million in the zone of operations were engaged in nonagricultural work, of whom 300.000 performed directly military tasks in the ZADAs or supply services.³³ On the eve of the Soviet summer offensive, the army group chief of staff Hans Krebs described the ZADAs as »organic components of the troops.« Their importance, he declared, was because »the struggle in the east is no longer to be fought without the use of civilian labourers.«³⁴

The Refugee Crisis of 1943/1944 and the Fate of ›Unwanted‹ Civilians

The arrival of German frontline divisions in the formerly westernmost region of the zone of operations in the autumn of 1943 thus initiated the same dynamic of agricultural decline and proletarianisation of the rural population as had occurred in the Rzhev salient and east of Roslavl in the winter of 1942/3. Forced labour at the front entailed the removal of the greater part of the able-bodied workforce from agriculture. Intensifying the labour shortage was an increased quota of 75.000 workers for the Sauckel Action. Through targeting partisan-controlled territory and ›recruiting

27 AOK 9 APiFü, Tätigkeitsbericht 8. 3. 44, T312/340/7912714.

28 Korpsversorgungsstützpunkt Salesje, Wochenmeldung, 19. 2. 44, T314/1442/248; KTB LVI. PzK Qu, 2-14. 2. 44, T314/1438/880-92; LVI PzK, Wochenmeldung Korpsversorgungsstützpunkt, 12. 2. 44, T314/1441/222.

29 Tätigkeitsbericht PzAOK 3 OQu/Qu/2, 1. I. 44, T313/312/8589577; Lagebericht AWiFü AOK 4, 16. 12. 43-15. 1. 44, T77/1112/977.

30 SSPF Weissruthenien, Beitreibung von Stellungsba Kräften, 5. I. 44, NARB 370-1-2180, pp.14-15 (USHMM RG53.002M/16); Korück 559 Qu, 10-Tagesmeldung der Kommandanturen, 20. 12. 43, T501/90/1037; Tätigkeitsbericht PzAOK 3 OQu/Qu.2, 19. 12. 43, T313/288/8562481-2.

31 Monatsbericht Hgr Mitte OQu/Qu.2/VII (Mil.Verw) Mai, 12. 6. 44, T454/104/935; Lagebericht HeWiFü Mitte April, 5. 5. 44, T77/1102/451; AOK 2 OQu/Qu.2 (Kgf), Beitrag zum Tätigkeitsbericht Monat Mai 1944, 10. 6. 44, T312/1256/170-1.

32 Lagebericht HeWiFü Mitte Mai, 5. 6. 44, T77/1102/568.

33 HeWiFü Mitte, Niederschrift über die Besprechungen mit Chef WiStab Ost am 19-20. Mai 1944, T77/1102/494.

34 Hgr Mitte OQu/Qu.2, Zivilarbeitsdienstabteilungen, 20. 5. 44, gez. Krebs, T312/338/7910839.

children under the age of 14, Army Group Centre actually exceeded this quota, sending 77.281 civilians to Germany in the first six months of 1944.³⁵

Already in October 1943, a »severe shortage« of agricultural labourers was reported from the areas behind the frontline of 9th Army. The implementation of the ZADA action exacerbated this.³⁶ 4th Army's Economics Leader reported a similar development in its sector. »Through concentration in barracks, ration recipients are created from self-suppliers [...] the rural population will however be slowly but surely decimated and reduced in productivity.«³⁷ In the rear, the depopulation of the ›twilight zones‹ and the emergence of a no man's land between German and Soviet partisan-controlled areas compounded this loss of agricultural land. »The bandit border areas are denuded of people and livestock,» noted the Army Group Economics Leader in January 1944.³⁸ In the spring of 1944, a quarter of the total acreage in the zone of operations lay fallow. This was a result of the evacuation of the 5 km zone behind the front and the mobilisation of the 20 km zone for the ZADA action, as well as from losses to the partisans.³⁹ Precise calculations by 4th Army indicated that 28,9% of the acreage in its rear area lay under the control of the partisans or abandoned.⁴⁰ Fulfilment of agricultural quotas for the 1943/44 harvest year was accordingly dramatically under target, yet the quantities that were successfully requisitioned for the Wehrmacht deprived the civilian population of potential food reserves. That winter, more potatoes, grain and meat was requisitioned from the 47 rayons of Army Group Centre's zone of operations than from the 68 rayons of the GK Weissruthenien.⁴¹

The combined effects of the mobilisation of forced labour for the front, the mass round-ups of labour in the rear for the Sauckel Action, the intensification of antipartisan warfare and the continued deprivations of German requisitioning commandos sufficed to strip the entire zone of operations bare of the food and labour to sustain the existence of any civilian deemed unfit for work.⁴² Yet the number of *Arbeitsunfähige* had dramatically increased as a result of the repeated evacuations and population displacements. »The severe regrouping of the population through the migration that has emerged because of the retreat and the *Erfassungen*,» 4th Army observed in December 1943, »has led to a deterioration of social relations. Stores could not be taken in most cases. The expected inadequate utilisation of large agricultural acreages as a consequence of the establishment of the ZADAs, as well as the limited possibility

35 Lagebericht HeWiFü Mitte Juni 1944, 24. 8. 44, T77/626/1816164; further details in Terry, German Army Group Centre (wie Anm. 15), pp. 229-236.

36 WiIn Mitte, Lagebericht Nr. 34, 31. 10. 43, T77/1101/506; AWiFü AOK 9/WiKdo 208 (Bobruisk), Lagebericht Nr 1/44 Januar 1944, 23. 1. 44, T77/1083/1164; Lagebericht HeWiFü Mitte Januar, 31. 1. 44, T77/1101/984.

37 Lagebericht AWiFü AOK 4, 16. 12. 43-15. 1. 44, 16.2-15. 3. 44, T77/1112/971, 1012.

38 Lagebericht HeWiFü Mitte Januar, 31. 1. 44, T77/1101/983.

39 Lagebericht HeWiFü Mitte Mai, 5. 6. 44, T77/1102/558.

40 Lagebericht AWiFü AOK 4, 16.5-15. 6. 44, T77/1112/1087.

41 HeWiFü Mitte Ia, BriefReichsminister Rosenberg an Reichsmarschall, 29. 4. 44, NAT77/1102/434.

42 HeWiFü Mitte, Aktenvermerk über Besprechung am 25. 12. 1943, T77/1101/631.

of utilising the soil inside the *Sperrzonen*, will lead to a further worsening of living conditions.«⁴³

Already in September 1943, the Chief of Economics Staff East, General Otto Stapf, had warned that »it must be clear to all that the return of the unfit costs us food.«⁴⁴ This description characterised the majority of the 182.000 evacuees from east of the Panther Line resettled in eastern Belorussia during the autumn of 1943. With the start of the winter battles along the Panther Line, these were now joined by tens of thousands of fresh evacuees removed from the combat zone. As a result, the rear areas now filled up with an unbelievable concentration of refugees. The lucky ones were evacuated to the rearward rayons of the *Armeegebieten*, where they might be able to find housing, food and work on the land, and so avoid either deportation to Germany or the front. In December 1943, 3.000 civilians were so resettled in Osipovichi, Kirov and Bobruisk rayons from the forward areas of LV Corps in 9th Army's sector.⁴⁵ Yet these designated reception areas soon filled up.

Compounding the overcrowding was the problem of what to do with civilians evacuated during major antipartisan operations from the partisan zones but later deemed unfit for work. In December 1943, 9th Army ordered the evacuation of its remaining foothold in Klichev rayon, expecting to harvest 1.100 labourers from this withdrawal. Examination of the 700 evacuees who had not run away found that only 130 were fit for work; the rest were either children, their mothers or the elderly.⁴⁶ Orders issued by *Kampfgruppe* von Gottberg before Operation ›Kormoran‹ laid down that suspects found to be unfit for work were to be led back into ›closed zones‹ (*Sperrgebiete*) to avoid burdening the food supply.⁴⁷ In the event, much of the sieving out had to be undertaken in reception camps. On June 21, the day before the start of the Soviet summer offensive, several thousand captives from ›Kormoran‹ were examined in Dulag 240 by a labour commission, of which 500 were ›combed out as fit for work. ›Child-rich mothers«, numbering 1.500 with their offspring, were transported to Baranovichi, while ›invalids and the sick« were to be returned to their villages.⁴⁸ Particularly affected by this problem was the partisan-dominated rear area of 3rd Panzer Army. In January 1944, a transport of 900 ›captured partisan helpers‹ rounded up during Operation ›Otto‹ by SS and Police forces arrived at Lepel; only 50 women were deemed able-bodied, the remainder were sent back.⁴⁹ To cope with unwanted

43 Lagebericht AOK 4 OQu/Qu.2/VII Dezember 1943, 3. I. 44, T312/241/7795976.

44 Wiln Mitte, Aktenvermerk über Dienstbesprechung aus Anlaß Besuch General der Infanterie Stapf am 16. 9. 43, T77/1100/1033.

45 Tätigkeitsbericht AOK 9 OQu/Qu.2, 13. 12. 43; Monatlicher Lagebericht AOK 9 OQu/Qu.2/VII, Monatlicher Lagebericht, 4. I. 44, NA 312/325/7895286, 7895418.

46 AOK 9 OQu/AWiFü/VII/Qu.2, Räumung des Rayons Klitschew, 24. 12. 43; AWiFü AOK 9, Tätigkeitsbericht, 26. 12. 43; Tätigkeitsbericht AOK 9 OQu/Qu.2, 26. 12. 43, T312/325/7895317, 7895122, 7895316.

47 Kampfgruppe von Gottberg, Erfassungsaktion, 24. 5. 44, T77/1102/966-7; FS VI AK Ia an Gruppe Kiesling, 25. 5. 44, T314/335/116.

48 WiKdo 213 (Borissow) Gruppe Arbeit, Wochenbericht 19-25. 6. 44, T77/1146/648.

49 Tätigkeitsbericht PzAOK 3 OQu/VII (Mil.Verw.), 5. I. 44, 7. I. 44, T313/312/8589580-1, 8594109-10.

evacuees, the army ordered the creation of ›closed communities‹ (*Sperrgemeinden*) for Operation ›Frühlingsfest‹ in April 1944. These »had the purpose of accommodating the civilian population selected as unfit for work in closed quarters and separately from other civil persons.« The *Sperrdörfer* were then used to house evacuees from other areas. After the conclusion of ›Frühlingsfest‹, the German commandant in Ushachi reported that 2.000 refugees from Vitebsk and 500 from Orel had been resettled into the newly pacified areas.⁵⁰ »Considerable parts of the rayons Beshenkovich, Chashniki and Shumilino are heavily occupied by evacuees,« warned 3rd Panzer Army. »As a result there are not only food difficulties, but also difficulties in the division of land. The houses are often over-occupied and typhus infections are thereby not rare. As in this region the entire able-bodied population, as well as livestock and horses, have been taken out, only a fraction of the agriculturally useable area will be farmed.«⁵¹

The rear areas now had to support a population beyond that which could be sustained from their declining agricultural resources. In early 1944, the civilian population of 4th Army's sector was estimated as 535.000, of whom 105.000 labourers and their dependants were entitled to civilian rations, while 30.000 ZADAs were fed from Wehrmacht stocks. 100.000 evacuees »without any economic basis« were registered in transit camps and reception areas.⁵² An average of 3-6.000 refugees burdened each rayon in the *Armeegebiet*. Some districts were even more overcrowded: in the five rayons of Tolochin, Krugloye, Cholopenichi, Krupka and Borisov, there were 50.000 refugees.⁵³ The majority were hemmed into a narrow strip of territory in between the so-called ›Bärenstellung‹ and ›Biberstellung‹ east of Mogilev and Orsha. Even the 28.000-strong civilian labour force engaged in constructing the two fallback positions could no longer be fed from local resources.⁵⁴ By May, the 100.000 refugees were simply no longer being fed at all. The medium term prospects were even more bleak, as all agriculture had ceased in the area to the depth of 35 to 45 km behind the front.⁵⁵ In April, the army in desperation ordered an ›Aktion zur Heranführung versteckter Lebensmittel in Heimatgebieten evakuierter Flüchtlinge‹. This »self-help measure« entailed dispatching evacuees back to their home villages in the combat zone under guard, so that squirrelled food reserves could be dug up and distributed. Hopes that berry- and mushroom-picking could help bridge the burgeoning food deficit ran up against the total ban on all civilian movement ordered as a result of the partisan

50 PzAOK 3 OQu/Qu.2, Sperrgemeinden, 15. 5. 44, gez. Heidkämper, T313/312/8589921; Tätigkeitsbericht PzAOK 3 OQu/VII (Mil.Verw.), 17. 6. 44, T313/316/8594127.

51 Lagebericht AWiFü PzAOK 3, 16.5-15. 6. 44, T77/1129/47.

52 Lagebericht AWiFü AOK 4, 16.3-15. 4. 44, T77/1112/1041-2.

53 HeWiFü Mitte Abt BB, KTB-Rückblick 1.1-31. 3. 44, T77/1102/159; Lagebericht AOK 4 OQu/VII März, 8. 4. 44, T312/242/7796819-20.

54 Lagbericht AOK 4 OQu/VII Januar, 3. 2. 44; Februar, 3. 3. 44, T312/241/7796247-8, 7796537; Monatsbericht Hgr Mitte OQu/Qu.2/VII (Mil.Verw.) Dezember 1943, 11. 1. 44, p.4, T454/164 unpag.

55 HeWiFü Mitte, Niederschrift über die Besprechungen mit Chef WiStab Ost am 19-20. 5. 44, T77/1102/506; Ord.Offz Chef WiStab Ost, Reisebericht über die Dienstreise Chef WiStab Ost zur Heeresgruppe Mitte und AOK 2, 17-21. 5. 44, T77/1092/623.

situation. Only the decision in early June to permit food distributed to refugees to count against the quotas levied on the village collectives staved off complete starvation before the start of the Soviet summer offensive.⁵⁶

The refugee crisis was significantly exacerbated by the splitting-up of the nuclear family in the course of the conscription of able-bodied labourers. So far as was possible, it had been hitherto official policy to avoid the separation of families during evacuations. Exceptions to this rule had in fact occurred during the retreats of the autumn of 1943, but were seen as »contrary to plan.«⁵⁷ The introduction of the ZADA system changed all this. The regimentation of the able-bodied population into labour detachments meant that they became separated from their dependants, often being sent hundreds of miles away from their relatives and homes.⁵⁸ Though thousands of women were now drafted into the ZADAs or otherwise employed in the rear areas, little effort was made for the provision of childcare or even for the continuation of schooling. Indeed, the age of a family's children often determined the fate of the mother and father. If the children were aged between ten and 14, the family might well be deemed »capable of work in Germany« (*Reichseinsatzfähig*), and would be deported out of the zone of operations. If the children were aged between five and ten, the family would remain in the *Armeegebieten*; urban families might be lucky enough to find access to a kindergarten so the mother could return to work and thereby receive more food rations; rural families were in danger of resettlement into a »reception area«. Most at risk were mothers with very young children who could scarcely take up any kind of work at all. The proportion of such families was high. In March 1944, of 37,081 inhabitants of Osipovichi rayon, 3,416 were under three years of age, 9,2% of the population had thus been born under the occupation.⁵⁹

Hitherto, Army Group Centre had been able to rely on the Reichskommissariat Ostland as its dumping-ground for unwanted civilians. The evacuations of the autumn and winter of 1943, however, overwhelmed the capacity of the region under civilian administration to accommodate refugees, especially as the RK Ostland was also the reception area for all evacuees from Army Group North. In December, the Economics Staff East and the Quartermaster-General tried in vain to persuade the Government-General in Poland to take in 50-100,000 evacuees from the two army groups.⁶⁰ The traditional reception area for Army Group Centre, the GK Weissruthenien, was now »flooded« with refugees. »The available reception camps are massively overflowing with 36,000 people,« complained the *Generalkommissar*, Curt von Gottberg, in November 1943. »Around 300 to 400,000 refugees find themselves on the

56 Lageberichte AOK 4 OQu/VII März-April 1944, T312/242/7796820, 7797047; Lagebericht AWiFü AOK 4 16.5-15.6.44, T77/1112/1075-6.

57 Tätigkeitsbericht PzAOK 3 O.Qu./Qu. 2, 5.10.43, NOKW-2386.

58 See the regulations in Hgr Mitte OQu/Qu.2, Aufstellung von Zivilarbeitsdienstabteilungen (ZADA), 27.11.43, T313/305/8582497.

59 Otchet po Osipovichskomu raionu, 3.1944, NARB Mogilev 845-1-12, p.4R (USHMM RG53.002M/3).

60 WiStab Ost Chefgr Arbeit, KTB-Beitrag 11-17.12.43, T77/1091/160-1.

roads; there a nameless suffering holds sway.«⁶¹ The refugee camp at Alytus in Lithuania was similarly overflowing, and suffered from appalling hygienic conditions, food shortages, and eventually mass starvation.⁶² In the last two months of 1943, Soviet offensives forced a new round of evacuations from the city of Vitebsk, which soon lay under Russian bombardment. In November and December, some 29.000 inhabitants of Vitebsk and of the threatened frontline areas were evacuated, initially to the Lesna camp near Baranovichi, later to Alytus (Olita) in Lithuania.⁶³ At the same time, 4th Army sought to reduce the populations of the major towns in its rear area. 18.000 civilians from the cities of Mogilev, Orsha and Borisov were evacuated, the majority by train to Lesna, Alytus, Vilnius and Bialystok.⁶⁴ A total of 166.917 refugees and evacuees out of the Army Group Centre zone of operations were recorded in November and December, 89.196 to GK Weissruthenien, 30.000 to Lithuania, Latvia and Ukraine and 38.738 as Ostarbeiter to Germany.⁶⁵ With these resettlements, a limit had been reached. All evacuations were ordered halted at the end of December 1943. The transit camps in the GK Weissruthenien were to be dissolved and the region closed to further resettlement.⁶⁶

The New Doctrinal Response: Ozarichi and ›Himmelfahrt‹

Faced with a progressively worsening refugee crisis, at the turn of 1943/4, increasingly radical suggestions concerning the fate of the *Arbeitsunfähigen* were now proposed. At a conference between officials of the RK Ostland and Army Group Centre on December 16, the army group's Qu.2, Lieutenant-Colonel Schettler, announced that »the army group will take a fundamentally new path with evacuations. Only that part of the population that is valuable for the German economy will be brought back.«⁶⁷ Two days before the end of 1943, the army group's labour chief, Franz Gelberg, observed that »the suggestion to leave behind unfit people to the enemy was hitherto

61 RMO II 1c, Vermerk über die Besprechungen mit SS-Gruf. von Gottberg am 22-23. II. 43, T454/23/486-8.

62 PzAOK 3 Qu./Qu.2/VII, Abtransport von Zivilisten aus dem Armeebereich, 7.12.1943, T454/88/708-10. A comprehensive overview of Alytus can be found in Christoph Dieckmann, *Deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Litauen 1941-1944*, Göttingen 2011, pp. 1382-1391, who estimates that up to 35.000 evacuees died there.

63 WiKo 206 (Witebsk), KTB-Beitrag der Gruppe Arbeit, 15.II-5.12.43, 20-31.12.43, T77/1141/265-7, 270-1; Lagebericht PzAOK 3 OQu/VII (Mil.Verw.) Dezember 1943, 4. I. 44, T313/316/8594152-3; Lageberichte AWiFü PzAOK 3 16.10-15.12.43, T77/1128/765, 773-4.

64 KTB Korück 559 Qu, Dezember 1943; Korück 559 Qu, 10-Tagesmeldung der Kommandanturen, 20.12.43; 30.12.43, T501/90/742, 1037-41; Lagebericht AOK 4 OQu/Qu.2.VII Dezember 43, 3. I. 44, T312/241/7795977.

65 HeWiFü Mitte Abt. Arbeit, KTB-Rückblick November und Dezember, T77/1101/686-7.

66 Monatsbericht Hgr Mitte OQu/Qu.2/VII (Mil.Verw.) Dezember 1943, II. I. 44, p.4, T454/164 unpag.; Lagebericht AOK 4 OQu/Qu.2/VII Dezember 1943, 3. I. 44, T312/241/7795977; WiStab Ost Chefgr Arbeit, KTB-Beitrag 8-14. I. 44, T77/1091/996.

67 HeWiFü Mitte, Aktenvermerk über die Besprechung beim RK Ostland am 16.12.43, T77/1101/620.

rejected by the army group.«⁶⁸ Yet *all four armies* under the command of Army Group Centre now suggested precisely such a measure. »As far as the bringing back of the civilian population is concerned,« so the army group's quartermaster Colonel von Unold told a conference in Minsk two months later, »all armies have spoken out against the withdrawal of people unfit for labour. Reason: availability of food and shelter.«⁶⁹ As the labour department of WiKdo Borissov suggested, »If their accomodation in the previous settlement region is not possible, after examination of the military assumptions, reception areas must be established in isolated regions that in the case of a rearward movement can be left to the enemy.«⁷⁰ One solution contemplated by 4th Army was to create so-called ›women's villages‹ (*Frauentöfer*):

To make the harshness of evacuation and the tearing apart of families more bearable, it is suggested that in tactically irrelevant areas ›women's villages‹ are created. These villages are to be filled in the vicinity of the front with those parts of the population incapable of military service and uninteresting from a labour deployment perspective, that can then in the case of a backwards movement be left to the enemy. To relieve supplies, these women's villages must be bequeathed primitive economic possibilities.⁷¹

A similar arrangement was proposed by 3rd Panzer Army. Exasperated by the difficulties of resettling 1,500 evacuees from the sector of 14th Infantry Division in December 1943, the army's Qu.2 officer Lieutenant Dr. Westerkamp resolved that »in future to deport *arbeitsunfähige* civilians over the front, as an evacuation of all civilians out of the areas close to the front must lead to incalculable consequences in the long run.«⁷² In January 1944, in an order signed by Colonel-General Reinhardt, Westerkamp put the following words into the mouth of his commander-in-chief:⁷³

In situations as of late, it is intolerable that time and effort are squandered on the withdrawal of great masses of the population that represent only a burden as mouths to feed ... to be sure, it is forbidden to send the civilian population over to the enemy side, but it is perfectly conceivable to imagine situations in which the course of fighting demands particular decisions from the divisions on their own authority. Things could for example be such, that no other choice remains but to concentrate the civilian population in good time in particular localities, where they do not burden military operations or the lines of communications, and where

68 HeWiFü Mitte, Aktenvermerk über Besprechung am 29. 12. 1943, T77/1101/633.

69 HeWiFü Mitte Abt I/Rü, Aktennotiz über die Besprechung von General Nagel am 28. 2. 44 in Minsk, T77/1101/1046.

70 WiKdo 213 (Borissov) Gruppe Arbeit, Evakuierungsmassnahmen, 22. 12. 43, T77/1112/933.

71 Lagbericht AWiFü AOK 4 16. 11-15. 12. 43, T77/1112/944.

72 Tätigkeitsbericht PzAOK 3 OQu/Qu.2, 21. 12. 43, T313/288/8562484.

73 Der OB der 3. Panzerarmee OQu/Qu.2, Zivilbevölkerung bei Absetzbewegungen, 2. 1. 44; PzAOK 3 OQu/Qu.2, Zivilbevölkerung, 21. 2. 44, NOKW-2647 and -2424, also T313/312/8589722-3, 8589796-8.

finally they must perforce be left behind, but only after the *arbeitsfähige* male and female population have been carried off for German service.

2nd Army, too, saw things almost identically. The Economics Leader's Labour Department proposed the following:⁷⁴

Problem: where should the women with children and the elderly, left behind after the extraction of the *reichseinsatzfähig* families and the *Wehr-* and *Arbeitsfähigen*, remain? The troops want to keep the villages completely free of civilians. Yet difficulties with food, shelter and disease prevention arise from resettlement. Suggestion: settlement of the remnant families in localities that in the foreseeable future in all probability will be abandoned without fighting to the enemy.

In mid-February, 9th Army issued a summary order concerning the evacuation, registration and deployment of civilians, replacing no less than *twelve* orders on these themes issued in the previous three months. Signed by the army commander General Josef Harpe, the preamble to the directive offered the following slogans and precepts to the German commanders and troops:⁷⁵

»Deny all labourers and military age males to the Red Army!
Supply one's own army with a great many labourers!
Leave behind for the Red Army a great many mouths (women with many small children, children and elderly)!
Do not burden one's own army and its hinterland with unneeded mouths!

Memoranda and orders such as these provided the backdrop and justification for the evacuation in mid-March 1944 near the town of Ozarichi in the Polesie oblast of Belorussia. Ozarichi lay inside the so-called ›wet triangle‹ of swampland in the Polesie, a sector which had been defended since the autumn of 1943 by LVI Panzer Corps, initially under the command of 2nd Army, later under that of 9th Army.⁷⁶ The fighting generated thousands of refugees, all of whom remained inside the corps rear area.⁷⁷ During December 1943, a breach was created on the seam between 2nd and 9th Armies which was only closed at the very end of the year by a counterattack mounted by 16th Panzer Division.⁷⁸ 10,000 civilians fled eastwards through the so-called ›Rudobelka Gate‹ to join the Soviet 65th Army under General Batov.⁷⁹ In early 1944, forces of the

74 AWiFü AOK 2 Sachgebiet Arbeit, Notiz für Vortrag beim Chef, 24. 2. 44; see also the similar analysis in AWiFü AOK 2 Ref. La an OQu/Qu.2, 25. 2. 44, T77/1111/752-3.

75 AOK 9 OQu/Qu.2, Zusammenfassung der grundlegenden Bestimmungen über Evakuierung/Erfassung von Arbeitskräften/Einsatz der Arbeitskräfte, 18. 2. 44, gez. Harpe, T314/1441/144-151, as in original.

76 Fighting around Parichi at the turn of the year, one formation nicknamed itself the ›forest and swamp division‹: Werner Haupt, Geschichte der 134. Infanterie-Division, Bad Kreuznach 1971, p. 206.

77 KTB LVI. Pz.K Qu., 25. 12. 43, 14. 1. 44, 20. 1. 44, T314/1438/838, 860, 866.

78 Hgr Mitte Ia, Aufzeichnung über die Besprechung der Chefs der Generalstäbe der Armeen am 12. 12. 43, T312/329/7900530 ff.; AWiFü AOK 2, Lagebericht Nr. 122, 23. 1. 44, T77/1111/644.

79 V. I. Kozlov, Kommunisty – organisatory partizanskoi borby v minskoi oblasti, in: Nepoko-

Soviet Belorussian Front under Marshal Rokossovsky launched several major offensives against the south flank of Army Group Centre, notably the Kalinkovichi-Mosyr offensive (January 8-30) and the Rogachev-Shlobin offensive (February 21-26), both of which forced withdrawals from German bridgeheads in Mozyr and Rogachev.⁸⁰

To this military pressure was added the effects of the largest typhus epidemic to affect Belorussia during the Second World War. During the winter, infection rates from typhus increased as an inevitable result of the cold weather; civilians and soldiers simply spent more time indoors, in close physical proximity, providing a lethal breeding-ground for the lice which spread the disease. The churning of the civilian population, and the near-famine among refugees, further created almost ideal conditions for a major outbreak. In the autumn of 1943, isolated incidents took place where typhus sufferers were simply shot by German troops or police, as occurred in a village near Lida, when ten evacuees from Kalinin oblast in Russia were executed for displaying signs of infection.⁸¹ More common were sharp orders to implement a sanitary apartheid between the troops and the population.⁸²

Despite such precautions, the epidemic began around the turn of the year. In the Polesie region held by 2nd Army, by December 1943, there were soon pockets of cases in villages northeast of Kalinkovichi housing evacuees from the combat zone. Worst affected was Lunin, where evacuees from Smolensk had been transported to work as forced labourers for the Organisation Todt. The source of infection was identified as three transports of 2,267 evacuees from the refugee camps in Lesna and Mogilev. Thirty died in transit, while almost 40% of the deportees were adjudged incapable of work after their arrival. Before the arrival of the transports, there were already 69 cases; a month later, 180 cases; by the end of February 1944, 333 cases.⁸³ A further 166 cases were recorded in Lakhva at the same time. The disease then spread to German troops, infecting 1,306 soldiers of 2nd Army during February and a further 843 in March.⁸⁴ The parlous state of civil medical services prevented the army from gauging the extent of the epidemic among the population until May, by which time the worst was largely over. Even in this month, over a thousand new cases were reported. Lunin

rennaia Belarussia: Vospomaniia i statii o vsenarodnom partizanskom dvizhenii v Belorusii v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny (1941-1945 gg). Moscow 1963, p. 50; XLI PzK, Bewirtschaftung des Korpsgebietes, 14. 2. 44, T314/980/218.

80 These offensives cost Rokossovsky's forces 87,434 casualties. Gurkin, *Liudskie poteri* (wie Anm. 3), p. 8.

81 Akt, 17. 8. 44, Lida, NARB 845-1-8, p. 9 (USHMM RG53.002M/5).

82 Der Oberbefehlshaber der 9. Armee/IVb, 15. 12. 43, T314/980/70.

83 HeWiFü Mitte Abt. Arbeit, Abschriftlicher Auszug aus der Niederschrift über die Dienstreise des MVR Kunert nach Pinsk und Bobruisk am 13.-16. 1. 44, T77/1102/82. Further details can be found in AOK 2 IVb, Lage- und Tätigkeitsbericht Februar 1944, T312/1288/457 ff.; Lagebericht AOK 2 OQu/VII (Mil.Verw.) Dezember 1943, 2. 1. 44, Januar, 30. 1. 44, T312/1286/531-3, 959-60; Tätigkeitsbericht AOK 2 OQu/Qu.2, Woche 24-31. 12. 43, T312/1271/711; AWiFü AOK 2, Lagebericht Nr. 122, 23. 2. 44, EC-486, also T77/1111/650-1; Lagebericht HeWiFü Mitte Februar 1944, T77/1101/992.

84 Lage- und Tätigkeitsberichte Armeearzt AOK 2 Februar, März 1944, T312/1288/457-8, 448-9.

remained under quarantine from German troops well into April.⁸⁵ By early March, the epidemic had jumped across the frontline: two corps of the Soviet 65th Army were infected with typhus. Across the whole of liberated Belorussia, 47.000 cases of typhus were registered during the first half of 1944.⁸⁶

Behind the German lines, the disease similarly spread northwards, into the sectors of 4th and 9th Armies, and westwards, into the GK Weissruthenien.⁸⁷ From February, 4th Army reported that typhus was »widespread«; the following month, it noted a »growth in typhus cases, above all in those parts of Belynychy rayon overcrowded with refugees.« By April, the army was reporting around 1.300 new cases, »primarily caused by refugees.«⁸⁸ From January to May, the German troops of XXXIX Panzer Corps incurred 148 cases of typhus; a further 204 civilians in the sector of the 337th Infantry Division fell sick with the disease in February and March. The neighbouring 342nd Division established a »sickness village« (*Krankendorf*) in its rear to accommodate typhus sufferers.⁸⁹ 9th Army suffered heavily from the outbreak; from an unseasonal low of only 26 cases among the civilian population in December 1943, the epidemic grew to infect 239 soldiers in just one fortnight as late as May 1944.⁹⁰ Precisely how many civilians succumbed to the disease between these two dates is unclear. In Rogachev, abandoned by the Germans at the end of February, over 1,200 patients sick with typhus were left behind by the retreat of 9th Army's forces.⁹¹ At the same time, the army imposed a total ban on all civilian movement in the combat zone to prevent the spread of the epidemic. Anyone caught outside their home villages was to be sent to the nearest POW camp.⁹²

Compounding the problem were growing food shortages and a general overcrowding of the forward areas. At the start of 1944, the four infantry divisions of XX Corps, then fighting around Kalinkovichi in the sector of 2nd Army, had to feed well

85 Lagebericht AOK 2 OQu/VII (Mil.Verw.) Mai, 31. 5. 44, T312/1305/15; Tätigkeitsbericht AOK 2 OQu/Qu.2, 24. 4. 44, T312/1307/151.

86 P.I. Batov, V pokhodakh i boyakh, Moscow 1962, p.258; Zalozhniki vermakhta (wie Anm. 6), p. 12.

87 Gebietskommissar Glebokie, Lagebericht für die Monate Dezember 1943, Januar, Februar u. März 1944, 22. 3. 44; Gebietskommissar Hansewitsche, Lagebericht für das erste Vierteljahr 1944, 4. 4. 44, T454/27/1459, 1444.

88 AOK 4 OQu/VII, Lageberichte Februar-April 1944, T312/241/7796533, T312/242/7796820-1, 7797047.

89 Korpsarzt XXXIX PzK, Tätigkeitsbericht 1.1-30. 6. 44; Zustandsbericht auf dem San-Gebiet der 337. Inf.Div. März 1944; über die 342. Inf.Div. vom 1-26. 1. 44, 1-26. 2. 44, T314/953/389, 686, 501, 592.

90 Monatlicher Lagebericht AOK 9 OQu/VII, 4.1.44, T312/325/7895418; AOK 9 Ia, Besprechung des Kommandierenden Generals am 26. 5. 44, T312/338/791146.

91 AWiFü AOK 2, Notiz über Besprechungen beim HeWiFü Mitte in Borissow am 7-8. März anlässlich der Anwesenheit des Generals d. Inf. Stapf, 15.3.44, T77/1111/777; AOK 9 OQu/Qu.2, Erfahrungsbericht über den Abschub nichtarbeitsfähiger Zivilisten zum Feind, 28. 3. 44, T312/338/7910313.

92 AOK 9 Ia/OQu/Qu.2, Verbot des Verkehrs der Zivilbevölkerung im Gefechtsgebiet, 15. 2. 44, gez. Harpe, T312/338/7910331.

over 12.000 civilians in their combat zones, of whom 4.650 were evacuees and only 1.323 were fit for work. Food could be supplied to the trench-diggers, but not to the remaining population. In the corps rear area, the commandant of Mozyr had virtually no food stocks to feed the 2.300 inhabitants of the town, who included 1.100 children, 1.000 women and just 200 men.⁹³ Most of the population had been resettled into the combat zone from evacuated areas further east, and the able-bodied combed out for the *Reichseinsatz*. The standing directives laid down by ›Führer Order No. 8‹ to evacuate a 20 km zone now threatened to tip the forward areas over into crisis. »A sudden increase in population density in this part of the army zone, as is conditional on the immediate evacuation of the 20 km zone, brings with it the danger of a famine among the civilian population,» warned 2nd Army.⁹⁴

At the very end of December 1943, LVI Panzer Corps was refused permission to evacuate over 6.000 civilians to Luniniec in the rear area of 2nd Army, as a preventative measure against the spread of typhus and because of the food shortage.⁹⁵ The corps was forced to shuffle contingents of 1.000 civilians between its divisional sectors in order to accommodate the growing number of displaced persons. To the north, the neighbouring XLI Panzer Corps complained of the »unbearable accumulation of the civilian population« and of the »extraordinary burdening of accomodation possibilities for the troops« because of the evacuees.⁹⁶ In January 1944, 9th Army predicted that food stocks for the 37.000 evacuees in its rear area would not last through to the spring. An audit conducted in February revealed that available stocks of grain would run out in Zhlobin and Parichi by the end of March, while the supply of potatoes for the civilian population would be exhausted by the end of May, long before the new harvest. The rear areas of XLI and LVI Panzer Corps were regarded as »crisis areas ... where great masses of people have gathered.« Conditions were so poor in the region of Zhlobin, that Soviet partisan units had supposedly forced over 5.000 elderly people and children to leave the partisan zones, burdening the German-controlled villages and towns with further »unpopular natives« (*missliebigen Einheimischen*)⁹⁷ An estimated 90.000 refugees crowded out the forward *corps* areas of 4th and 9th Armies.⁹⁸ Permission was forthcoming only in exceptional circumstances to evacuate refugees to the *Armeegebieten*, already overburdened by several hundred thousand displaced

93 AWiFü AOK 2 Sachgeb. BB, Aktennotiz über die Verpflegung und Versorgung der Zivilbevölkerung, insbesondere der Evakuierten im Gebiet des XX. A.K. und der Korps-Abt. E , 4.-9.1.44, T77/1111/613-5.

94 Der Oberbefehlshaber der 2. Armee, Evakuierung, 1.1.44, gez. Weiss, T312/1286/542-3.

95 KTB LVI. Pz. Korps Qu., 25.12.42, 27.12.43, 20.1.44, T314/1438/838, 840, 866.

96 XLI. Pz.K. Qu, Bewirtschaftung des Korpsgebietes, 14.2.44, T314/980/218.

97 Monatlicher Lagebericht AOK 9 OQu/Qu.2/VII, 4.12.43, T312/325/7895413; AWiFü AOK 9, Lagebericht Nr 2/44, 23.2.44, Nr 3/44, 22.3.44, T77/1083/1240, 1153; HeWiFü Mitte Abt BB, KTB-Rückblick 1.1-31.3.44, T77/1102/159-60.

98 Ord.Offz Chef WiStab Ost, Reisebericht über die Dienstreise Chef WiStab Ost zum HeWiFü Mitte, WwiKdo Reval, WiIn Nord und WwiIn Ostland vom 8-11.3.44, T77/1091/1198; HeWiFü Mitte, Aktenvermerk über Besprechungen anlässlich des Besuches Chef WiStab Ost am 8.3.44, T77/1101/1078.

civilians. In early March, XLI Panzer Corps secured authorisation from 9th Army to evacuate 1.500 civilians by rail out of its corps area, yet within five days, this concession was cancelled.⁹⁹

The reasons for this cancellation can be deduced from the following analysis by 9th Army of the situation in March 1944 resulting from the cumulative effects of overcrowding, food shortages and epidemics:

Through the withdrawal of natives in the course of the defensive battles west of the Panther Line and the evacuation of the 5 km zone, an ever greater compression of the population emerged in the rear of the combat zone. The emergence of typhus epidemic centres and the necessity of bringing food to already overpopulated settlements in order to secure the feeding of their inhabitants, urgently demanded the deportation of a part of this population, in particular because of the forthcoming evacuation of the 20 km zone. As the army group declared itself unable to make available reception areas for the 27.000 civilians due to be evacuated, and furthermore forbade any evacuation movement, the army command decided to deport civilians unfit for work (sick, cripples, elderly, mothers with more than two children under ten and other *Arbeitsunfähige*) to the enemy.¹⁰⁰

On March 9, a conference of all corps and division quartermasters was convened by the Chief of Staff of 9th Army, to which the Army Economics Leader, Transport Officer and the commander of Sonderkommando 7a were also invited. The subject under discussion was the deportation of »around 20.000 civilians unfit for work« to the enemy, which was to take place in the sector of LVI Panzer Corps.¹⁰¹ In the preceding two days, both the commander in chief of 9th Army, General Josef Harpe, and the chief of staff of Army Group Centre, Lieutenant-General Hans Krebs, had visited the headquarters of LVI Panzer Corps to discuss the operation with the corps commander, General Friedrich Hossbach.¹⁰² The order for the expulsion was issued immediately after the conference; it was to be destroyed after the completion of the action. No copy of it survives in the files of either LVI Panzer Corps or 9th Army.¹⁰³

The evacuation affected the frontline areas along the entire length of 9th Army's sector. Evacuees from XXXV and LV Corps on the left flank of the army were to be transported by train southwards to LVI Panzer Corps' railheads at Rudobelka, Porosslishche und Mikul Gorodok. By contrast, those evacuated from XLI and LVI Panzer Corps were to be moved by truck and footmarch.¹⁰⁴ The army rear area, however,

99 KTB XLI. Pz.K. Qu., 3. 3. 44, T314/981/1112.

100 AOK 9 OQu/Qu.2, Erfahrungsbericht über den Abschub nichtarbeitsfähiger Zivilisten zum Feind, 28. 3. 44, T312/338/7910313.

101 Op.cit.; KTB LVI. Pz.K. Qu., 9. 3. 44, T314/1438/914-6; KTB XLI. Pz.K. Qu., 9. 3. 44, T314/981/1114.

102 Ferngespräche LVI PzK Ia, 7-8. 3. 44, T314/1436/1049-50; KTB AOK 9 Ia, 8. 3. 44, T312/333/7904778.

103 According to KTB LVI Pz K Qu, 9. 3. 44, T314/1438/914, the order – AOK 9 Ia/OQu/Qu.2 Nr 223/44 g.Kdos, 9. 3. 44 – was destroyed on March 18, 1944.

104 Sonderkommando 7a, Auflockerung der Gefechtsgebiete, 28. 3. 44, T314/1440/980-1.

remained outside the scope of the operation: the rayon of Osipovichy was completely unaffected by the comb-out of *Arbeitsunfähigen*.¹⁰⁵ The action began on March 12: in Zhlobin, German soldiers went from house to house shouting »evacuation, evacuation« and gave the entire population of the town three hours to gather their belongings. A *sortirovka* – selection – was conducted outside the town commandants' office.¹⁰⁶ The first transports arrived on March 13. By then, the three camps had already received 8,100 civilians from LVI Corps' rear and 2,200 from XLI Corps.¹⁰⁷

Preparations for the reception of the deportees had begun immediately after the order for the evacuation had been issued on March 9.¹⁰⁸ On March 11, thirteen officers and officials of LVI Panzer Corps and its subordinate divisions, as well as *SS-Sturmabführer* Loos, commander of Sonderkommando 7a, met at the headquarters of the 35th Infantry Division to discuss the deportation. Hossbach ordered that the »final camps« into which the evacuees would be driven were to be located inside forests and camouflaged so as to hide the operation from Soviet aerial reconnaissance. Three such camps were to be set up behind the frontlines of (from north to south) the 129th, 35th and 110th Infantry Divisions. The camp set up by the 35th Division measured no more than 500 by 600 metres. The surrounding woods were to be heavily mined, and the deportees warned that »every step to the west or the south means mines or fire.« Casualties among the evacuees were fully expected:

- Spades are where possible to be given to the civilians
- a) to be able to dig in somewhat in the event of enemy fire
- b) on hygienic grounds because of the accruing corpses¹⁰⁹

Shortly after the arrival of the first transports from the north on March 13, the chief of staff of LVI Panzer Corps was informed by 9th Army's operations officer to expect »significantly more civilians« to arrive. In fact, the number was to double. A total of eight transports arrived on March 13, 14 and 15. From the reception camps at the corps railheads, the deportees were marched by foot over 35 km in the snow. By March 16, the evacuation was complete. The SD reported that 46.003 civilians, including an estimated 6.500 small children, had been placed in the three »final camps«. 537 evacuees died on the train transports, footmarches and inside the camps up to this time. A further 921 civilians were selected as labourers or men of military age

105 Nachal'nik Ospivichskogo Raiona, Otchet po Osipovichskomu raionu za mart mesiat 1944 g, pp. 2-3, NARB Mogilev 845-1-12 (USHMM RG 53.006M/5).

106 Protokol sudevnogo zasedaniia 18.12.47 goda, Gomel, NARB Gomel 1345-2-7, pp. 28-33 (USHMM RG 53.006M/1); Akt 23.11.44, Zhlobin, NARB 861-1-6, p.176 (USHMM RG 53.002M/7).

107 Ferngespräche LVI PzK Ia, 12-13. 3. 44, T314/1436/1055-6.

108 Just after midnight on 9/10. 3. 44, the quartermaster and pioneer leader of 9th Army spoke by telephone: »barbed wire for divs. LVI PzK sufficient«. AOK 9 APiFü, Tätigkeitsbericht 9. 3. 44, T312/340/7912720.

109 KTB LVI PzK Ia, 11. 3. 44, T314/1435/372; Besprechung auf dem Gefechtsstand der 35. ID in Grabje am 11. 3. 44, T314/1436/508-512 (citations); SK 7a, Auflockerung der Gefechtsgebiete, 28. 3. 44, T314/1440/983.

prior to their arrival in the end-camps in a final sieving by commissions of German military doctors. Officially, the deportees were furnished with food for three days.¹¹⁰ In practice, many received nothing at all to eat. In the night of March 16/17, the three infantry divisions of LVI Panzer Corps withdrew behind the three camps, leaving light rearguards behind in the corps' old positions. 39.597 civilians, »plus an estimated many thousand small children« were officially reported as »dropped off towards the enemy.« Amazingly, Soviet forces barely even probed the LVI Panzer Corps sector the next day. It was not until the night of March 18/19 that troops of General Batov's 65th Army entered the camp and discovered the refugees.¹¹¹

Officially, Soviet forces liberated 33.480 civilians including 15.960 children under the age of 13. At least 900 bodies were found on the sites of the three camps.¹¹² According to one survivor, Lidia Bykova, the dead were »stacked like firewood«. Soviet prosecutors at both the main Nuremberg trial and in war crimes trials in Belorussia subsequently gave conflicting figures of the total death toll at Ozarichi.¹¹³ All indicators are, however, that a simple subtraction of the Soviet figures from the German claims to produce a possible death toll of 12.000 is inaccurate. German aerial reconnaissance determined that by March 18, columns of civilians had fled the camps to the northeast and east; presumably, it was these fleeing civilians who alerted Soviet troops to the presence of an even greater number of sick, elderly and immobile in the camps.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, a cautious estimate of the number of Belorussians who died on the way or in the Ozarichi camps during the seven days of their existence would amount to at least 2.000 people.

The consequences of Ozarichi were many and far-reaching. 3rd Panzer Army was informed of the deportation by the army group the day after the completion of the operation, on March 18.¹¹⁵ The after-action reports written by Sonderkommando 7a and 9th Army's quartermaster were subsequently circulated around the army group and later submitted to OKH in April. The practical consequences began to be felt within a week of the Ozarichi deportation, as German commanders lost their few remaining inhibitions concerning the mass concentration and deportation of civilians.¹¹⁶ In the course of the construction of Bobruisk as a so-called ›fortified place‹

110 Ferngespräche LVI PzK Ia, 13. 3. 44, T314/1436/1056; SK 7a, Auflockerung der Gefechtsgebiete, 28. 3. 44, T314/1440/980-1.

111 LVI Pz K Ia, Tagesmeldung an AOK 9, 17. 3. 44, T314/1435/802; AOK 9 Ia, Tagesmeldungen der Korps, 17. 3. 44, T312/334/7905818; Batov, V pokhodakh i boyakh (wie Anm. 86), pp. 258-60.

112 op.cit, pp. 261-5; Zalozhniki vermakhta (wie Anm. 6), pp. 10-12.

113 Protokol sudevnogo zasedaniia 18. 12. 47, Gomel, NARB Gomel 1345-2-7, pp.28-33 (USHMM RG 53.006M/1). See also Nuremberg document USSR-7, available in a word for word English translation in the May edition of Soviet War News.

114 KTB AOK 9 Ia, 18. 3. 44, T312/333/7904747.

115 Tätigkeitsbericht PzAOK 3 OQu/Qu.2, 18. 3. 44, T313/312/8589654.

116 The report, Hgr Mitte OQu/Qu.2 Nr 4286/44 geh, 3. 4. 44, is seemingly lost. See Monatsbericht Hgr Mitte OQu/Qu.2.VII (Mil.-Verw.) März, 12. 4. 44, p. 6, T454/156, File EAP 99/498 unpag. The report was registered as received in HeWiFü Mitte Abt Arbeit, KTB-

(*Fester Platz*), 9th Army ordered »the reconnaissance of a piece of land camouflaged from aerial observation and suitable for a civilian camp with a capacity of 20-30.000 people« to the west of the city.¹¹⁷ A holding camp similar to this concept was later constructed to the west of Mogilev by 4th Army. In late April, 4th Army's quartermaster asked XXXIX Panzer Corps whether it could accommodate 14.000 *Arbeitsunfähige* in its rear area; the corps flatly refused.¹¹⁸ Despite this refusal, new standing orders issued by the same corps in May required that all *Arbeitsunfähige* be left behind during retreats: »Principle: no total evacuation! Deny the enemy all military-age and able-bodied people and engage them to strengthen our own combat power. On the other hand leave useless mouths to the enemy.« Word for word, this was identical to a general standing order issued by the army group in April.¹¹⁹ Eventually, XXXIX Corps was forced to accept 6.000 evacuees from Mogilev and Gorki in early June. The *Arbeitsunfähige* were concentrated east of the Dnieper but outside the Shklov bridgehead in the corps rear area.¹²⁰ Major-General von Tresckow, one of the driving forces behind the German military opposition to Hitler, authorised and signed a similarly identical order to 2nd Army prohibiting the evacuation of *Arbeitsunfähige* in late May. Those unfit for work (and now, those deemed unfit for evacuation) were to be confined to the 20 km zone, where they could most easily be dispensed with in the event of a retreat.¹²¹

In 3rd Panzer Army's sector, the Ozarichi deportation coincided with the evacuation of the remaining able-bodied population of Vitebsk. Though the city had already undergone one mass evacuation in November 1943, at the turn of the year, there were still 19.000 civilians in the city, including 6.500 children under 15, a number which continually threatened to rise because of the re-emergence of further refugees from hiding or the arrival of new evacuees from outside the town.¹²² Already on January 7, 1944, officers and officials of the army's economics and quartermaster staffs had discussed whether the relatives of those fit for work who could be deported as *Ostarbeiter* from the city should either be »brought back (which would mean that the homeland would be burdened only with mouths unfit for work) or be left to their fate in

Beitrag 17-23. 4. 44; KTB-Rückblick 1.4-30. 6. 44, T77/1102/716, 730. Based on the misdating of the evacuation in these sources, Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, p.1099, has claimed that a second deportation of 40.000 civilians took place. This is, however, incorrect.

117 AOK 9 Ia/OQu/Qu.2, Evakuierung Bobruisk, 23. 3. 44, T312/338/7910330.

118 KTB XXXIX PzK Qu, 21. 4. 44, T314/953/330-I; c. f. Zalzozhniki *vermakhta* (wie Anm. 6), p. 12.

119 Hgr Mitte HeWiFü/OQu/VII/Qu.2, Personelle Räumung, Erfassung und Einsatz von Arbeitskräften, 29. 3. 44, gez. Krebs; similar in HeWiFü Mitte, ARLZ-Massnahmen in Weissruhenien und Südlitauen, 30. 4. 44, T77/1102/658-663, 904-5; identical wording in XXXIX PzK Qu, Erfassung und Einsatz von Arbeitskräften, personelle Räumung, 7. 5. 44, T314/953/794.

120 KTB XXXIX PzK Qu, 7. 6. 44; XXXIX Pz K Qu Nr 5115/43 geh, 27. 5. 44, T314/953/353, 847.

121 AOK 2 OQu/AWiFü/Qu.2, Erfassung der Zivilbevölkerung, 27. 5. 44; AOK 2 OQu/lc/IVa/IVb/AWiFü/VII/Qu.2, Durchführungsbestimmungen zum Befehl AOK 2 OQu/AWiFü/Qu.2 Nr 3260/44 geh vom 27. 5. 44, 27. 5. 44, T312/1300/76-78; 51-2.

122 Lagebericht AWiFü PzAOK 3 16. 12. 43-15. 1. 44, T77/1128/782.

Vitebsk.«¹²³ At the start of March, the city was evacuated »according to the following standpoints: a) labour action Reich with families, rough sorting in Vitebsk, b) separation of the families into *Arbeitsfähige*, ZADA-members and labourers for trench digging, c) the leftovers will be sheltered en bloc in villages in the army rear area and remain there.«¹²⁴ The evacuation was conducted in conjunction with a 17-man labour selection *Sonderkommando*, who succeeded in ›recruiting‹ nearly 14.000 *Ostarbeiter* from Vitebsk in the first two weeks of March. A further 3.844 were transported to Chashniki rayon for local forced labour and 4.081 were evacuated to Alytus. At least 6-7.000 sick, elderly and unfit, however, remained in the city, which was already under Soviet artillery fire and aerial bombardment by the end of 1943.¹²⁵

In late May, 3rd Panzer Army decided upon the removal of the residual civilian population of Vitebsk. Colonel-General Reinhardt signed the formal order for what was cynically codenamed Operation ›Himmelfahrt‹ (›Ascension Day‹) on May 26.¹²⁶ The planning for the deportation had begun much earlier. On May 22, the panzer army's Qu.2, Lieutenant Dr. Westerkamp, conferred with the quartermasters of LIII Corps and VI Corps, in whose sectors respectively lay Vitebsk and the proposed site of a holding camp on the model of Ozarichi. Because of the high percentage of sick and crippled among the civilians to be evacuated, ›Himmelfahrt‹ was carefully planned. Transports were divided between two groups of the »march-capable« and two »march groups sick.«¹²⁷ As at Ozarichi, the evacuees would pass through an initial three reception camps, but only a single *Endlager* was to be set up in the rear of 14th Infantry Division in whose sector a planned retreat was scheduled to take place. Again as at Ozarichi, the Army sought the involvement of the SD: Einsatzkommando 9 was to oversee the evacuation. The final stretch of the footmarch from the rail stations would have to take place during darkness to avoid observation by Soviet forces. The planning also incorporated an elaborate cover story with which to deceive the evacuees as to their intended fate.

The German plan relied on more than deception and false promises to keep the deportees under control. On May 31, just prior to the actual execution of the operation, the troops of the 14th Infantry Division received the following order: »Fire is to be opened on civilians that flood back out of the ›Himmelfahrt‹ camp after the with-

123 Tätigkeitsbericht PzAOK 3 OQu/Qu.2, 7. I. 44, NOKW-2384; Lagebericht PzAOK 3 OQu/VII (Mil.Verw) Januar, 10. 2. 44; Februar, 1. 3. 44, T313/316/8594232, 8594250.

124 Ord.Offz. Chef WiStab Ost, Reisebericht über die Dienststreife Chef WiStab Ost zum HeWiFü Mitte, WwiKdo Reval, WiIn Nord und WwiIn Ostland vom 8-II. 3. 44, T77/1091/1199.

125 Pz. AOK 3, O.Qu./Qu.2, Evacuation of Vitebsk, 23. 3. 44, NOKW-2648, Case 12, PDB 7B, p. 95, also T313/312/8589830-1; Lagebericht AWiFü PzAOK 3 16.3-15. 4. 44, T77/1129/28; HeWiFü Mitte, Abt Arbeit, KTB-Beitrag, 6. 3. 44, T77/1102/70; WiKdo 213 (Borissow) Gruppe Arbeit, Wochenberichte 28.2-19. 3. 44, T77/1146/382-5.

126 Pz. AOK 3 Ia, Panzerarmeebefehl für Herauslösen der 14. Inf.Div unter Frontverkürzung im Raum Wyssotschany, 26. 5. 44, gez. Reinhardt, T314/335/175-6.

127 PzAOK 3 OQu/Qu.2, Evakuierung Witebsk. Besprechungsergebnis Qu.2 mit Quartiermeister LIII AK und anschliessend Quartiermeister VI AK am 22. 5. 44, T313/312/8589926-8; VI. AK Qu, Aktion ›Himmelfahrt‹, 24. 5. 44, T314/335/103-6.

drawal of the rearguards to the new frontline.«¹²⁸ In the event, the deportees received the news »apathetically.«¹²⁹ The abandonment of the camp passed without incident on the night of June 2/3; by 6pm on June 3, German spotters observed civilians leaving the camp to the northwest, suggesting that complete surprise had once again been achieved over the Soviet forces.¹³⁰ The after-action report for »Himmelfahrt« written by VI Corps presented the »result« almost in the form of a balance-sheet:

In total were brought from Vitebsk by rail transport:

| | | |
|---------------------------------------------|-------|----------------------|
| March-capable | 5.239 | |
| Sick | 1.450 | <u>6.689</u> |
| of whom were selected in the reception camp | 1.218 | |
| <i>Arbeits- and Wehrfähige</i> | 282 | |
| Relatives of <i>Hiwis</i> , OD etc | 906 | |
| Died during the march movement | 30 | 5.471 |
| Births | 3 | 5.474 ¹³¹ |

As with Ozarichi, »Himmelfahrt« was rapidly held up as a model for future practice. On June 10, Lieutenant Westerkamp observed that »even the chief of staff of IX Corps has declined the proposed evacuation of 3.000 *arbeitsunfähige* people to the region of Ushachi. The people shall remain in the corps region and perhaps at some time or other be treated as in »Himmelfahrt.«¹³² It seems likely that only the advent of »Bagration«, the Soviet summer offensive which began on June 22, 1944, prevented further expulsions from taking place.

Conclusion

For all their novelty on the Eastern Front of the Second World War, Ozarichi and »Himmelfahrt« were not the first occasions when the German Army deliberately left behind for the enemy a civilian population deemed unfit for work. Almost exactly twenty-seven years before Ozarichi, during Operation »Alberich«, the withdrawal to the »Hindenburg Line« in March 1917, the Kaiserheer abandoned 40.000 unfit French civilians in St. Quentin while removing more than twice that number of able-bodied

128 FS VI AK Ia an 14. ID, 299. ID, nachr. 256 ID, 31. 5. 44, T314/335/270.

129 VI. AK Qu, Erfahrungsbericht über die Aktion »Himmelfahrt«, 5. 6. 44, T314/335/426. See also the eyewitness account of a 40-year old woman caught up in the evacuation, who had evaded deportation from Vitebsk in March but had been caught during a razzia in the spring of 1944. Protokol doprosa Nadezhda Dukashenko, 21. 2. 49, NARB 861-1-5, pp.63-4 (USH-MM RG 53.002M/7).

130 KTB VI AK Ia, 1. 6. 44, 3. 6. 44, T314/335/15, 17.

131 VI AK Qu, Erfahrungsbericht über die Aktion »Himmelfahrt«, 5. 6. 44; Ia-Tagesmeldung vom 31. 5. 44 an PzAOK 3, T314/335/426, 271 (reporting 32 instead of 30 deaths).

132 Tätigkeitsbericht PzAOK 3 OQu/Qu.2, 10. 6. 44, NOKW-2384. A further 1.800 civilians were resettled from Vitebsk into villages in Ushachi rayon left empty by »Frühlingsfest« earlier in the spring. Lagebericht PzAOK 3 OQu/VII (Mil.Verw.) Mai, 1. 6. 44, T313/316/8594377.

civilians.¹³³ Nor was the stigmatisation and control of *Arbeitsunfähige* unique to the Nazi era. After the completion of ›Alberich‹, the German 1st Army ordered that civilians registered as unfit for work in its rear area had to wear an armband marked by the letters ›A. U.‹ and their registration number.¹³⁴

That the volume of the official history of the First World War covering ›Alberich‹ appeared in 1939, refreshing the memories of veteran officers¹³⁵ and educating a younger generation, is one possible explanation for the frequency with which Wehrmacht officers suggested or contemplated expelling unfit civilians over the frontline in the winter of 1941/2.¹³⁶ Yet other than limited expulsions carried out at divisional level during the retreat from Moscow¹³⁷, Wehrmacht occupation policy in 1941 and 1942 generally evacuated ›useless mouths‹ to the countryside in military-occupied rear areas¹³⁸, and sometimes refrained from evacuating civilians at all, in spite of serious food shortages.¹³⁹

Rather than contemplate expulsions over the frontline, during the course of 1942 and 1943, Army Group Centre instead evolved a strategy of dumping sizeable contingents of unwanted civilians onto the Reichskommissariat Ostland. Up to mid-1943, approximately 100.000 civilians were so transferred, while between July 1943 and March 1944, no fewer than 373.381 were evacuated to the four districts of the Ost-

133 OKH (hrsg.), *Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918*, Bd. 12, Berlin, 1939, pp.124-5.

134 Etappen-Inspektion 1 Ib, *Organisation der Arbeitskräfte der Zivilenwohner*, 5. 4. 17, IWM File 34900, Box 7.

135 See on this Johannes Hürter, *Kriegserfahrung als Schlüsselerlebnis? Der Erste Weltkrieg in der Biographie von Wehrmachtgeneralen*, in: Bruno Thoss / Hans-Erich Volkmann (Hg.), *Erster Weltkrieg/Zweiter Weltkrieg. Ein Vergleich. Krieg, Kriegserlebnis, Kriegserfahrung in Deutschland*, Paderborn 2002, pp. 759-772.

136 At least four examples can be named: KTB XXVII AK Ia, 27. 11. 41, T314/772/1169 (population of Kalinin); Kdeur Inf.Regt 192, *Befriedung*, 4. 11. 41, T315/967/840 (Bryansk region); VO OKW/WiRüAmt AOK 17, *Gedanken über die Evakuierung der Bevölkerung aus den Industriestädten im Donez-Gebiet im Interesse der Sicherheit und Ernährung der deutschen Wehrmacht*, 2. 11. 41 (Abschrift), T77/1179/970-1, also EC-339 (Donets region); VP 22084/41/6 g, *Niederschrift über die Sitzung des Wirtschaftsführungsstabes Ost vom Donnerstag, den 18. Dezember 1941, unter Vorsitz von Herrn Staatssekretär Körner*, T77/1166/619 (Kharkov).

137 Two examples are known from the sector of 2nd Panzer Army: 25. Inf.Div. (mot) Ic, *Tätigkeitsbericht* 23. 12. 41-31. 3. 42, T315/813/129; 18. Pz.Div. Ic, *Tätigkeitsbericht*, 4. 12. 41, T315/714/395.

138 Examples from other army groups can be found in Johannes Hürter, *Die Wehrmacht vor Leningrad. Krieg und Besatzungspolitik der 18. Armee im Herbst und Winter 1941/42*, in: VfZg 49 (2001), pp. 401-449, here: pp. 442 f.; Norbert Kunz, *Das Beispiel Charkow: Eine Stadtbevölkerung als Opfer der deutschen Hungerstrategie 1941/1942*, in: Christian Hartmann / Johannes Hürter / Ulrike Jureit (Hg.), *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Bilanz einer Debatte*, München 2005, pp. 136-144; Gert C. Lübbbers, *Die 6. Armee und die Zivilbevölkerung von Stalingrad*, in: VfZg 1 (2006), pp. 87-123.

139 Manfred Oldenburg, *Ideologie und militärisches Kalkül. Die Besatzungspolitik der Wehrmacht in der Sowjetunion 1942*, Köln 2004, pp. 232-4 (Donets region under 17th Army).

land.¹⁴⁰ Even subtracting evacuees subsequently impressed as Ostarbeiter after reaching the Ostland, this population displacement significantly exceeded the 307.927 Ostarbeiter recruited or deported from Army Group Centre between 1942 and 1944.¹⁴¹ Mortality among the evacuees to the Ostland was undoubtedly high, both while in resettlement camps such as Lesna and Alytus as well as after dispersal in the countryside. Several hundred thousand more Russian civilians were evacuated over the course of 1942 and 1943 to the exact same regions of eastern Belorussia that would make up the reduced army group zone of operations in 1943/44; there, too, many evacuees died of hunger.¹⁴²

By March 1944, however, evacuation out of the army and corps rear areas had largely ceased to be a possibility, while the mobilisation of the ZADAs had separated the fit from the unfit in a more systematic manner than hitherto. It was at this time that the four frontline armies devised ever more ingenious methods of corralling both the able-bodied and unfit population. The volte-face represented by Ozarichi and ›Himmelfahrt‹ must be seen in this context, as one of several strategies that could be used to move civilians into the ›right‹ place in the Belorussian countryside. The dividing line between village and camp became practically erased. ZADA camps account for a significant proportion of the known forced labour camps on Belorussian soil, yet were rarely more elaborate than a converted peasant village.¹⁴³ An astonishing variety of names were given to the quarters assigned to each group, reflecting the ever more careful categorisation and filtration of the population. Civilians were to be held in ›Krankendörfer‹, ›Frauendörfer‹, ›Arbeitsdörfer‹, ›Sammeldörfer‹ or ›Sperrdörfer‹. In April 1944, the classification of the population became complete with the establishment of the first ›Jugenddörfer‹ or ›Kinderdörfer‹ to accommodate children between the ages of eight and 14 evacuated from the forward areas.¹⁴⁴ Not only were both the fit and the unfit confined to villages or camps, but in the winter of 1943/44, they were increasingly transported to these holding pens by rail, in sharp contrast to the foot marches of the late summer and early autumn of 1943. The railway network not only enabled the deployment of civilian labourers as virtual tactical reserves, but also made possible the mass deportation to the Ozarichi camps.

140 WiStab Ost Chefgr Arbeit, KTB-Beitrag 22-28. 4. 44, T77/1092/358-9. 193.232 were resettled in the GK Weissruthenien, 69.734 in the region of Vilnius; 43.000 in Latvia and Estonia; 67.885 were deported from the Ostland as Ostarbeiter to Germany.

141 Wi In Mitte/HeWi Fü Mitte, Lageberichte und Tätigkeitsberichte, T77/1098, 1099, 1100, 1101, 1102 passim; HeWiFü Mitte, Monatlicher Lagebericht, 6. 9. 44, T77/626/1816227.

142 Meldungen aus den besetzten Ostgebieten Nr. 49, 9. 4. 43, T175/236/2725798-9 (deaths among 50.000 evacuees in the Bobruisk region).

143 See V.I. Adamushko (ed.), Spravochnik o nemetsko-fashistskikh lageriakh, getto, drugikh mestakh prinuditel'nogo soderzhaniia grazhdanskogo naseleniya na vremennno okkupirovannoi territorii Belarusi v period Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny 1941-1945 gg., Minsk 1998.

144 AOK 9 Ic/IcAO/OQu/Qu.2/VII, Errichtung von Jugenddörfern, 14. 5. 44, NAT312/338/7910914; HeWiFü Mitte, Aktennotiz über die Besprechung am 12. 5. 44 unter Vorsitz von Generalleutnant Niefenführ, 14. 5. 44, NA T77/1102/466.

What emerges above all else from the records of the last nine months of Army Group Centre's policies towards the Soviet civilian population is the warped clarity of the Wehrmacht's *perception* of contingent circumstances such as Soviet military advances, shortages of food and housing, or typhus epidemics, and the consequences that would ›necessarilly‹ follow. As the examples quoted above demonstrate, there is a remarkable lack of overtly »Nazi« rhetoric to be found in the reports and orders relating to the civilian population from this phase, yet the discourse that evolved in the final phase of the occupation regarding fit and unfit civilians was nonetheless grounded in a thoroughly ideological, utilitarian doctrine of military necessity. The acceptance of the basic premises of living off the land for food and labour was near-universal among the officer corps and officialdom of the army group, army and economics staffs. Small wonder, then, that different staffs arrived at such very similar ›solutions‹ to the man-made humanitarian disaster that unfolded in eastern Belorussia during the winter of 1943 and 1944.

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