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War Reaches Crucial Phase: Russia Must Outlast August

By DUNCAN AIKMAN

WASHINGTON, Aug. 7.—Sub-surface evidence that the war on the Russian front is going into a more crucial phase is mounting. Yesterday's German claims of staggering Russian losses can be discounted largely, but must be studied further.

This is not a warning of military tragedy ahead or even of heavy reverses for the Soviet armies. It is simply a realistic way of putting the current factual situation.

Since the war started on June 22, the Russians for the most part have been holding the Nazis outside their main fortifications by a series of magnificent delaying actions. Now the German drive eastward, after one of its periodic slowings up, appears to be moving forward again. This time, around Kiev and Smolensk and on the Estonian front approaching Leningrad, it is moving into the area of the main fortifications.

The fortifications might be pierced, "broken through" or even taken and the Soviet armies emerge still intact. But if Smolensk, Kiev and the Leningrad approaches went, it would put the Germans in control of the western rim of the Soviet railway systems and of important, if not altogether essential, manufacturing centers.

Some Handicaps

Russian armies, in other words, if the present German drive achieves the bulk of its objectives, will have had some of their resistance power taken away from them. They will not have quite the same communications, the same supply facilities or the same freedom of movement they have had to work with so far. No one is going to win the war, of course, by taking a few western Russian cities. But by taking point after point and fortification after fortification, the Nazis could eventually whittle down the Russians' ability to defend the rest of their country. It will be a crucial matter for the Soviets if the Kiev-Smolensk-Leningrad line undergoes anything like complete collapse during August.

With these factors in mind, let's consider the symptoms. Nazi claims that their pincer movements are reaching around Kiev in the Ukraine have not been convincingly challenged in Moscow yet, nor were their announcements of the occupation of the Estonian railway junction town of Tapa in the outer approaches to Leningrad.

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Crucial Phase

Striking Power

Whatever checks the Nazis have suffered during the last two or three weeks in their campaign, and however much their celebrated "time table" may have been disarranged, their striking power has not been destroyed. The Soviet armies held them up in the approaches to their main fortifications through a series of magnificent delaying actions during July. But in spite of the delays and the losses they have suffered, the Nazis are still able to attack those main fortifications with a full complement of men and mechanized material.

This is what gives the next four or five weeks that extra crucial quality. There is still time for the Germans to take the gateways of the Russian defensive system around Kiev, Smolensk and Leningrad before the autumn rains come in September. There can be little question that the Germans will throw everything they have into their efforts to take them. In result, Russian retreats and Russian losses, either of armies or of positions, will be much more serious counters in the game than Russian reverses have been to date. From now on it is not a question of anybody's "magnificent resistance" but of who wins the war.

If there is truth in the claims that Finnish and German troops have also cut the Leningrad-Murmansk railway to the north and are advancing on the rear of the old Czarist capital around Lake Ladoga, it is not impossible that the whole Leningrad area will be in a state of siege within the next few days or hours.

Fall of Tapa

This does not mean that Leningrad could be "taken" by Finnish-Nazi troops immediately, or necessarily that it would be beyond rescue. But the situation growing out of the fall of Tapa is a pertinent example of how operations on the whole Russian front are growing in seriousness.

The pincer operations around Kiev and the drive southeast of Smolensk are less significant for the present because they are still capable of being checked by counterattacks. There are still healthy possibilities, in fact, that the renewed Nazi offensive can be slowed, and slowed again by the tactics the Russians have used before, and that eventually it will bog down in the snow and ice of the early Russian winter. But meanwhile there is no occasion for overconfidence. From now until the snow flies, genuine bad news from the Russian front should be accepted as bad news, indeed.

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