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The Scorched Red Earth

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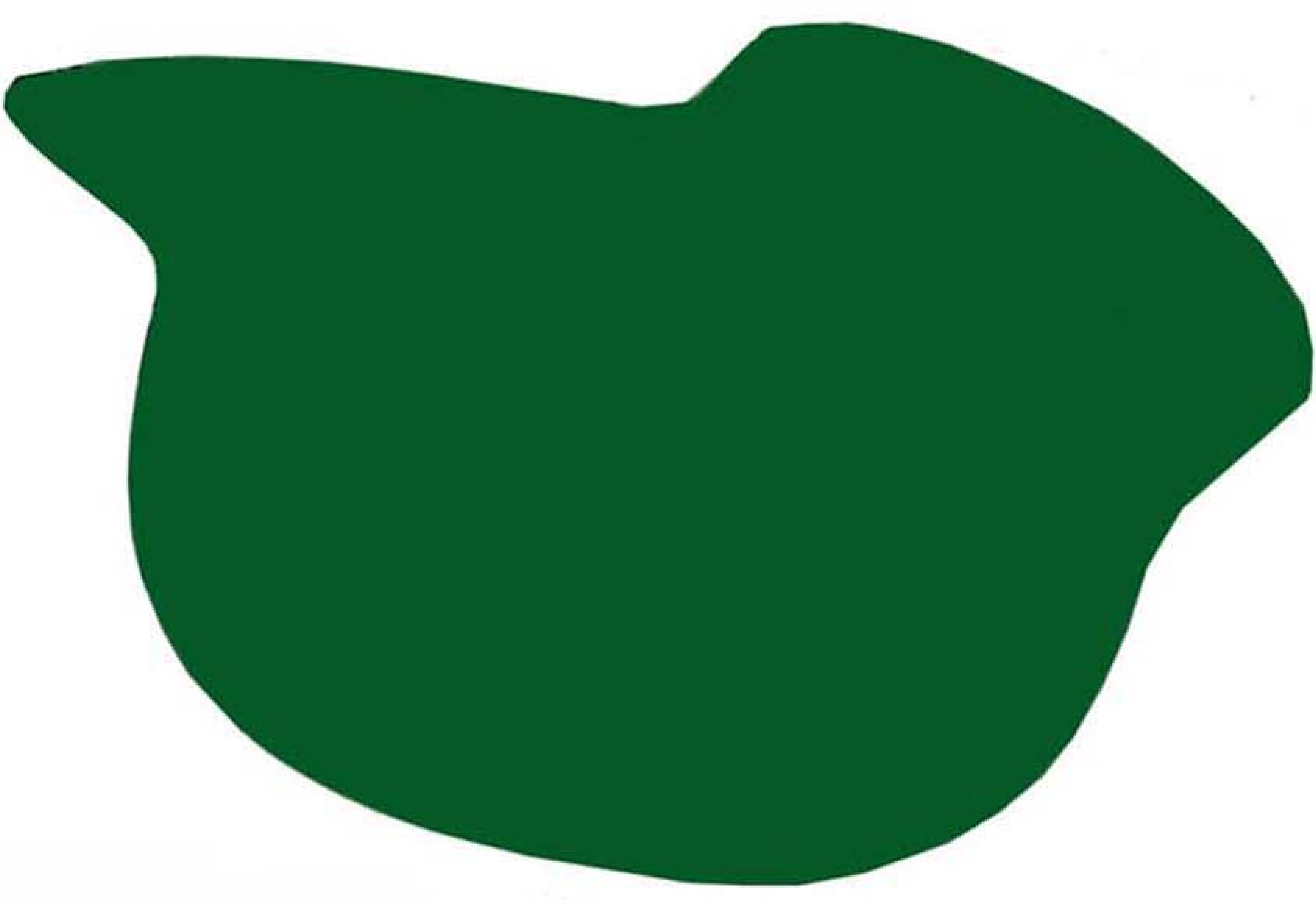

MOST of German-occupied Russia is in rags and ruins; huge sweeps of European Soviet territory have been systematically destroyed, partly by the Russians themselves and partly by the devastation of Stukas, panzers, guns and fire. I have trailed the smoking whirlwind of war several thousand miles by car and bus.

Bialystok, perhaps, stands out as the epitome of it all; you may add the name of this city in what was Poland to those of Waterloo and Gettysburg. It was there the first great death struggle between the world's two strongest military powers took place. The town, with its 95,000 people, lies on the edge of the fine forests to the south and east. To the west, from which I came, were open fields and parklike groves.

Long lines of concrete bunkers, some still unfinished, were backed by shattered artillery emplacements. Already, cattle were grazing peacefully around the bomb craters. Women and children were peering, still frightened, through the doorways of their little straw-covered houses. Everything had been shelled and blasted. Smoke smudges around the loopholes of concrete ramparts told how their defenders had been burned out by flame throwers. On a near-by meadow lay the remains of thirty Soviet fighter planes. Near by, a bearded peasant was cutting grass for a scraggly horse.

At a crossroads on the outskirts of the town two machine gunners sat behind their weapons, muzzles pointing into near-by woods. Wandering Russian bands still were in those woods, coming out at night to raid traffic on the dusty highway.

The battlefield of Bialystok was a huge circle a hundred miles in diameter. The German pincers came around the edges and closed in to trap thousands of Red army fighters. As we drove down the long road across the battlefield, we first saw burned-out trucks and cars here and there. People from the shattered town already were salvaging what they could for their own use. Farther along came straggling refugees—dirty, unshaven, barefooted men, little children limping along, tired women with frightened eyes carrying babies with dusty, tear-smeared faces. All their belongings were in sacks over their shoulders.

Some of the refugees got back to find their homes, or the remains of their homes—or the bomb crater where the

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Disheartened and forlorn, the prisoners of war are marched to the rear. In this column there were 10,000 Russians, most of them captured in the Kiev fight

home used to be. Deep craters lined the road along which the peasants walked. Every type of war material, twisted, shattered and burned almost beyond recognition, was scattered in the fields and through the woods. Long-barreled guns still pointed skyward. Scores of munitions trucks stood abandoned. There were bales of printed propaganda, field radio sets, rolling kitchens, range finders—everything used in the grim business of killing—some unharmed, some burned to a crisp. Heavy and light tanks crouched in broken and crushed heaps. One fifty-two-tonner had been split wide open by a direct hit and its halves lay on opposite sides of the road. The bodies of artillery horses, still in harness, lay where they had fallen.

The Price of Defeat

In the forest—into which we were told not to step too far for fear of unexploded mines and uncaptured Soviet soldiers—were smashed barriers of felled trees, blasted tanks, crushed artillery to show where the panzers had passed.

Farther on, the wreckage of defeat stood silent in the wheat fields. White flags still waved from farmhouse windows. A steel bridge hung, a twisted lacework of metal, from its riverbank supports; beside it was the hastily built pontoon bridge the German engineers

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Sad Ukrainians and grave German soldiers make an eloquent picture as, according to Berlin, the old peasant woman explains that they are glad to be "free" again

had thrown across the stream. We rolled through villages—or what had been villages and were now heaps of rubble. In one hamlet I counted nineteen Soviet tanks, some wrecked, others untouched.

In Bialystok itself every building bore a mark of war. Every open space was an army camp, with the soldiers' wash hanging out on lines. Down narrow, roughly cobbled streets, cars, motorcycles, trucks and little Russian wagons pulled by small, struggling horses fought for passage. The German commander's headquarters were in a gutted bank building. Outside was a truckload of Soviet soldiers just captured in the near-by forest. I talked to some of them.

Surprisingly, only one of them could speak Russian. They came from different parts of the country and only three could understand one another. The only Russian most of them understood was the commands of their officers. They were very downcast and said they never expected to see their homes again.

"If I got home and the Soviets were still there," said one, "I'd be shot for surrendering."

Down the street a junior college had been gutted by a fire set by the retreating Russians. Hundreds of half-burned books, bales of leaflets littered the courtyard. In the center of the yard stood a headless statue of Stalin—a plaster shell, painted over.

In the Ukraine, Kiev, with its peacetime population of about a million, was an example of the thoroughness with which the Soviets destroyed what they could not defend. Outside the city entire sections of woods had been cut to make tank barriers; rails had been encased in cement to block roads. Wires were strung waist-high through the trees—with a mine attached every few feet.

Russia's Desperate Defense

South of Kiev in the open fields the Soviets had constructed an intricate system of trenches, barbed-wire entanglements, tank traps and artillery emplacements camouflaged in shacks. These had all been bombed and blasted into ruins. In the city itself were formidable street barricades made of logs, sand-

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bags, cobblestones and dirt. The outskirts showed the desperate measures to which the defenders had resorted. All railway and road bridges had been blown up, factories dynamited or burned. Streetcars stood abandoned where they were left when the power plant was destroyed along with other public facilities. Except where the Germans had managed to make repairs, Kiev was without lights, gas, water or heat. Blocks of the business section still smoked as the result of fires started by hidden mines which exploded four days after the city was surrendered.

When they left, the Soviets took all the city's fire-fighting apparatus as well as the firemen and all expert workmen who might be able to repair the power plant and waterworks. The Germans say it will take four years to rebuild Kiev after the necessary workmen and materials can be assembled.

In the hotel where I stayed, the Russians had even taken the bedclothes. Formerly called The Red Kiev Hotel, the Germans had ironically renamed it "Hotel Liberty"—but that couldn't make the elevator run or put blankets on the hard mattresses.

The citizens who remained in the town seemed friendly enough, going about their own business if they had any or to work if they could find it. Food conditions were bad, the Russians having systematically destroyed all food stores before leaving. Potatoes were generally procurable but such things as meat, coffee, tea, butter and sugar were unheard of. The Germans were issuing rations to people in long bread lines. People waited in other lines to buy newspapers. When the first paper in the Ukrainian language appeared, crowds stood on street corners around one purchaser while he read it aloud. Before this paper appeared, the only reading matter consisted of notices posted in German, Russian and Ukrainian, warning of death penalties for plundering, sabotage and acts against German soldiers.

In Kiev hearses were being used for carrying everything except corpses. They were full of booted, beshawled women with legs hanging over the sides, bumping down cobbled streets. The price of a ride was about one cent but it represented about one dollar to the Ukrainians. There were two typically American things: shoeshine boys and scooters. In the country was another familiar sight: all along the roads women were attempting to thumb rides in our car.

In Kiev and throughout the southern Ukraine the Jews wore no distinctive arm bands or markings as elsewhere. No notices had been posted concerning Jewish labor corps or registrations.

What happened in captured Russian cities long after the Red army left proved the Russians to be the world's best saboteurs. So cleverly were time and incendiary bombs and mines hidden that expert German mine removers couldn't find all of them. In Kiev alone more than 10,000 mines were discovered and removed, but this still did not prevent a large section of the city from being blasted to bits by hidden infernal machines. The commonest type had plungers like hand grenades. They were hidden in stoves, clothes closets, under chair cushions, in beds—any place where a string or wire could be attached to the plunger. When the stove or closet

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door was opened, the mine exploded. It was the same if you sat on a chair, attempted to sleep in a bed or even raise a window. Other bombs were hooked up with telephones, electric light lines or water pipes. In the first two types the bombs were set off simply by taking the phone off the hook or turning on the light. Sometimes turning on a light on the fourth floor would set off a mine under the basement floor. Those mines hooked up with water pipes were set off by some pressure principle when the tap was opened.

In Odessa, the entire building occupied by the Rumanian General Staff was blown sky-high as a result of someone turning on a water tap. Both in Kiev and Odessa hundreds of bombs went off automatically four days after the Soviets evacuated the town. Most of them were "two-timers," meaning they first blew out the walls and then set fire to the wreckage.

There were even teleignition bombs. The fuses of these were attached to radio-receiving sets set to a certain wave length. These bombs were exploded by the Russians miles away and days later by broadcasting a certain signal to which the set was tuned. A mine of this type with three and a half tons of dynamite inside was found and removed from the big new Lenin Museum in Kiev, but another one, undiscovered, blew the place to ruins. The greatest and most complete sabotage job I saw was in the huge Nikolaev shipyards, where 25,000 men used to be employed. Only the two-thirds-finished hull of a 35,000-ton battleship, a steel-plate-cutting plant and two small power plants remain. And in that great hulk of steel there might still be a joker. Everything else—machinery, railway yards, work and tool shops, locomotives, the hulls of an 8,000-ton cruiser and two submarines were ruined beyond repair.

Whatever the Soviet regime was able to construct in twenty years its people destroyed in just so many hours.

New Masters for Old

Retreating before Hitler's steam roller, the Soviets left behind much of the peasant population, although thousands of men from farm regions had been hastily conscripted for military service. Often from one third to one fourth of civil populations fled before the Germans got there. Thus, occupied Russia is suffering from a labor shortage and there is confusion in everyday life. In the north, settlers who had been transferred from other parts of Russia to territories taken from Finland showed flashes of dull resentment at the new upheaval which again overwhelmed them. They accepted their new masters, the Finns, with a shrug. Most of the peasants have seen all kinds of suffering and accept without much complaint what Providence brings.

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In cities the people go about with an air of caution frosted over with reserved friendliness. Many Ukrainians are without jobs because the factories and stores in which they work were destroyed, but none seem to be worrying.

The Germans say their chief interest is in getting the country back to normal and that they are leaving the population alone as far as is possible provided they behave themselves.

As in the United States, where farmers in the great Middle West really represent American opinion, so I found it in the occupied territories. Many individuals in Soviet Russia still remember the time when the soil they tilled, however small their holding, however meager their existence, belonged to them. As the saying goes: "Take away a city fellow's job and he forms a union, but take away a farmer's land and you will have shotgun trouble." The Germans realized this to a great extent and published certain rules for the Ukraine, although the war still was in progress. Small plots of land which the Soviets had allotted to peasants to plant as they pleased now become their personal property, free from taxation. On the conditions of a good harvest and successful sowing, these individual grants can be doubled. At the same time the Germans told the peasants they will be given a chance to own livestock without the heavy taxes imposed by Russia.

Full freedom of religion also is being restored. I saw many churches being reopened, especially in Kiev. The historic old St. Andrew's Church overlooking the Dneiper River was overflowing with worshipers when it was reopened after twenty years. Other churches were being reopened as quickly as the interiors could be cleared of propaganda posters, cinema screens and even bales of hay.

The most disheartening thing in an occupied country is the prisoners. Whether you see them in prison camps, marching down roads or being trucked around, they tear at your emotions. They all look the same—dirty and unshaven, none with complete uniform, their clothing tattered and torn. I remember particularly one column of about 10,000 marching south from Kiev. Dejectedly, they shuffled down the road under the eyes of a few German guards. When they stopped to eat, they bargained and fought over such choice morsels as green cabbage leaves and slices of raw pumpkin and carrot they had snatched from roadside gardens. A crust of bread thrown among them started a fight; a cigarette caused a riot. I was told they were part of the most desperate Communist fighters that had been captured at Kiev. They looked it. Once assigned to organized camps, they were given sufficient food, chiefly potatoes and some bread, and usually put to work.

Prisoners everywhere are being used to clean up debris in destroyed cities and hundreds of such gangs are visible. When I walked through a devastated sector, they were lunching on boiled potatoes and bread and munching pieces of sugar. Everywhere they can be seen working on roads and in places like German army filling stations where they pump gas and apparently enjoy a certain amount of liberty.

Thousands of former Russian soldiers now are in the service of the German fighting forces. They have been formed into what is called Ukrainian Militia. Most, but not all, still wear Russian uniforms and carry Russian guns. They are used for policing certain sectors in cities, guarding buildings and moving supplies. Other militiamen are actually used in the German army itself. In one long column, I saw them in Russian uniforms driving many of the supply wagons. These men are considered both traitors and lucky by their comrades, but luckiest of all are thousands of other Ukrainian soldiers who have been released.

Everywhere along the roads they can be seen walking back home, a tedious and precarious journey. The Germans are releasing hundreds daily if proof of their identity can be found and authorities are convinced they will return to their homes and go to work. As time goes on, prisoners undoubtedly will be used in many ways, but nowhere did I see any working in the fields.

Russia, except for big new blocks of army barracks, party headquarters and administrative buildings, looks rundown. Undoubtedly, production of every kind was increased through better organization, regardless of the means used. But the fruits of all that went into the mammoth war machine of the Red army. Now that this machine has been almost destroyed, the country will have to start from far worse than scratch.