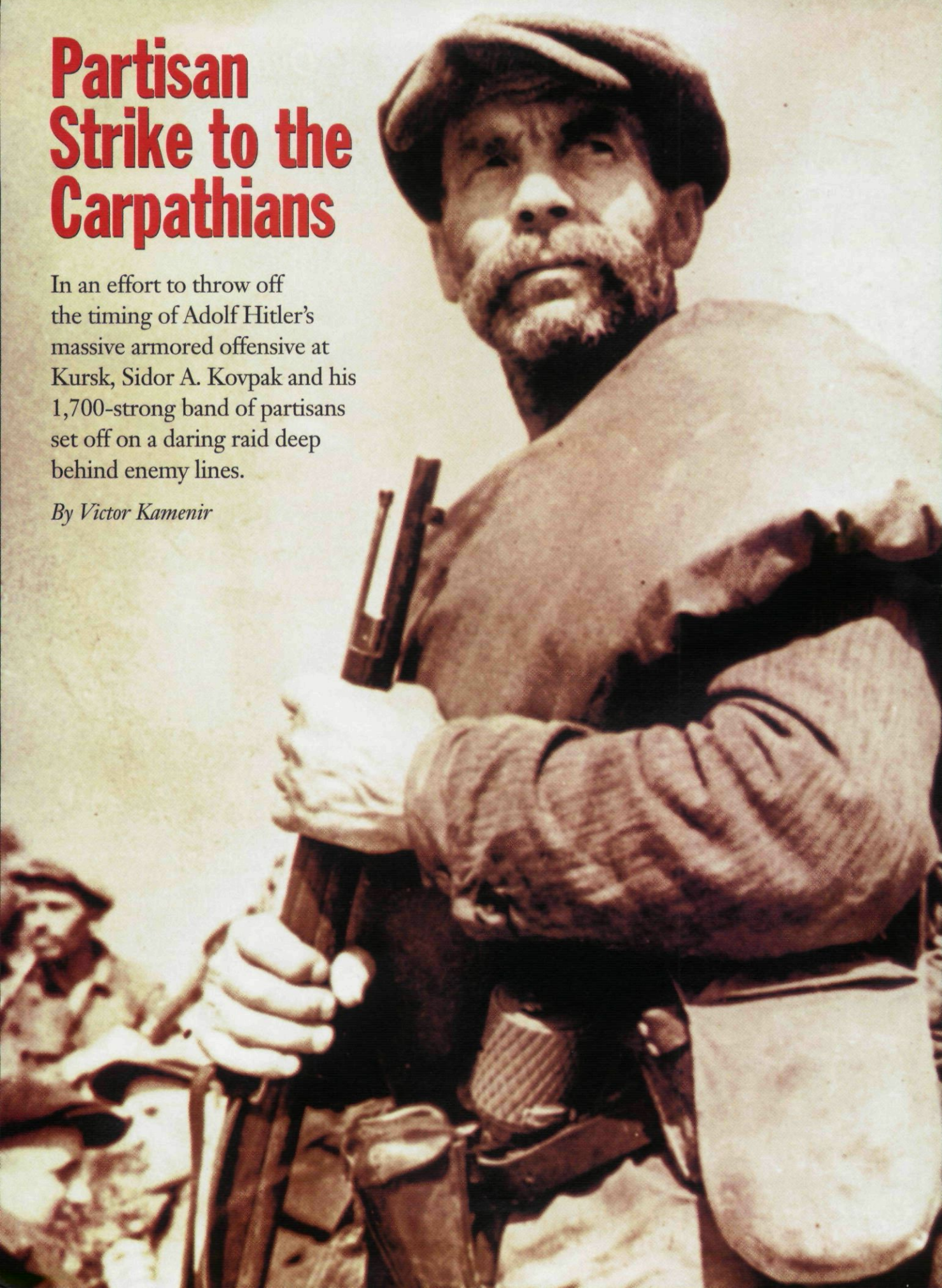


Partisan Strike to the Carpathians

In an effort to throw off the timing of Adolf Hitler's massive armored offensive at Kursk, Sidor A. Kovpak and his 1,700-strong band of partisans set off on a daring raid deep behind enemy lines.

By Victor Kamenir



On July 5, 1943, the German high command launched Operation Citadel, the massive armored offensive against the Kursk salient meant to eliminate a major Soviet bulge in German lines and, perhaps more important, restore the strategic initiative to Adolf Hitler's legions in Russia. If all went according to plan, the panzers would again ram-

page across vast swaths of Russian territory, and the German army's days on the defensive would be at an end. As so often happens, however, nothing went according to plan. Rather than dramatically altering the course of the war on the Eastern Front, Hitler's gamble cost him thousands of men and hundreds of tanks that he could ill-afford to do without.

One of the primary reasons for the defeat was that by the time the attack began, the Soviets were well aware of their opponent's intentions. So thoroughly had Russian intelligence penetrated the German military establishment that plans for the operation reached *Stavka* (Soviet supreme headquarters) even before German field commanders received their own copies of the orders. Armed with this intelligence, Red Army commanders on the ground were able to construct a defensive belt that was all but impenetrable. In addition, *Stavka* orchestrated multiple partisan raids behind enemy lines that disrupted Hitler's preparations for the upcoming campaign.

One raid was carried out by a 1,700-strong partisan detachment under the command of Maj. Gen. Sidor Artemevich Kovpak. Starting in the Pripjat Marshes in the northern Ukraine, this unit marched across almost 1,000 kilometers of territory to the Carpathian Mountains, blowing up railroad tracks, destroying small German garrisons and burning oil rigs along the Hungarian border as it went.

By the spring of 1943, large tracts of the Russian territory occupied by Germans were effectively under Soviet partisan control. The bulk of these partisan areas were centered in the thickly forested Pripjat Marshes, which stretched from eastern Poland through the northern Ukraine, southern Belorussia and into western Russia itself. With a somewhat secure base from which to operate, the scale of resistance organizations in this area could be quite large and well organized. Some units operated rough airfields, where at night hardy Polikarpov Po-2 biplanes kept up shuttle runs, bringing in supplies and evacuating wounded. More important, Moscow could fly key personnel in and out of these areas in order to better coordinate partisan activities. Because of this, partisan units became a strategic asset to Soviet officials rather than just a localized nuisance to the Germans.

While some partisan detachments were strictly for local de-

fense, operating in the vicinity where they were created, other units, termed "raider detachments," carried out operational and strategic missions under direct control of the Soviet Central Headquarters for Partisan Movement. These raider units received priority in weapons, ammunition, supplies and specialists, such as demolitions experts, radio operators and intelligence personnel.

General Kovpak's unit in particular had already carried out two large-scale operations in the northern and northeastern Ukraine. Besides engaging in active combat against the German occupiers, they left behind small resistance cells for intelligence gathering, sabotage and other subversive tasks. These resistance cells, in turn, acted as a basis upon which to create further partisan detachments.

Kovpak was a distinguished member in the Communist Party hierarchy. Son of a peasant, he fought in the Russian Civil War under the famed partisan leader Vasily Chapayev. Between the two wars, Kovpak served in a variety of political and administrative assignments. The start of World War II found him as mayor of Putivl, a town in northeastern Ukraine. From the very beginning of the war he organized and led a large partisan detachment in many successful operations against the Germans. For his achievements, Kovpak was promoted to major general and awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union, the highest Soviet military decoration.

As befitted so highly regarded a unit, his partisan band was structured along military lines. It had a headquarters detachment, four infantry battalions, a mounted reconnaissance squadron, an artillery battery of two 76mm guns and 10 smaller 37mm cannons, a mortar company, mobile hospital, communications platoon and a supply train. It was very unusual for a partisan unit to have cannons. The unit even had a reporter who had been specially flown in from Moscow to film its exploits.

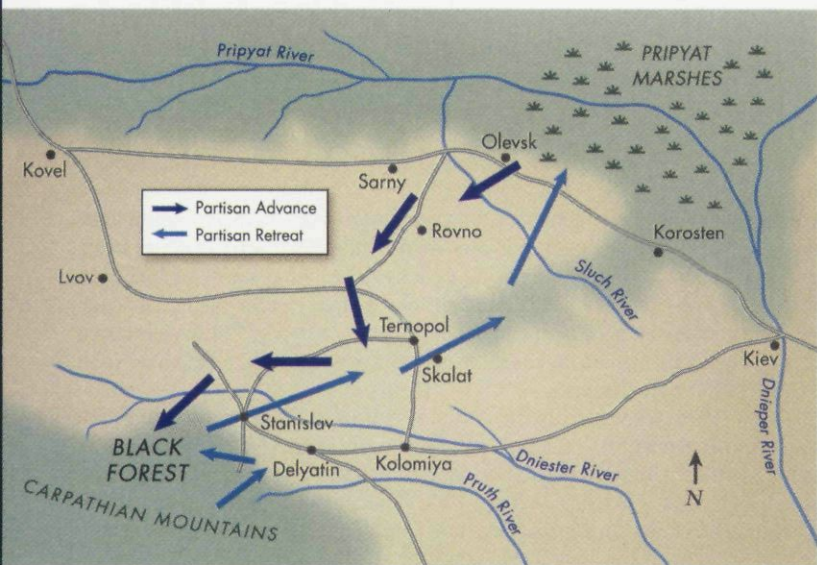
The raid on the Carpathian Mountains was launched on June 12 in an atmosphere of utmost secrecy. Only four people knew the group's objective: Kovpak and his commissar, Semyon V. Rudnev, chief of staff Colonel Grigory Yakovlevich Bazyma and chief of intelligence Lt. Col. Piotr Petrovich Vershigora. Even the battalion commanders did not know their destination.

To reach their goal, it was imperative for Kovpak's partisans to break through the heavily guarded Sarny-Korosten railroad line and into open country. Armed with the latest intelligence and with local superiority in numbers, the unit was able to successfully break the German cordon around the area. After a minor skirmish with the Germans and their Ukrainian police collaborators near the town of Olevsk, the partisans plunged into the forests south of the railroad line.

The group then headed southwest, crossing the Sluch and Goryn rivers. In this area Kovpak's unit came across the smoldering remains of several villages. The Ukrainian nationalist partisans had massacred their Polish inhabitants. While engaged in a bitter struggle against the Germans and the Soviet partisans



Left: A well-equipped partisan. The Soviet resistance movement was sufficiently strong that partisan bands such as Sidor Kovpak's could launch raids of strategic importance against the Germans. Above: A German poster urges Russians to fight back against the partisans. To a populace that had endured terrible cruelties under German occupation, such appeals usually fell on deaf ears (Left: Sovfoto/Eastfoto; Above: www.CollectRussia.com).



LEFT: BLUE MARBLE MAPS, LLC; RIGHT: NATIONAL ARCHIVES; BELOW: AKO IMAGES

Left: Kovpak's raid went deep into enemy territory and struck at German oil production facilities that were of tremendous importance to the Reich. Right: General Kovpak (left) with partisan leaders from other countries, at a postwar gathering in Prague. The Nazis were never able to completely suppress partisan activities in the territories they occupied. Below: A Russian propaganda postcard wished the partisans "Happy New Year."

alike, the UPA (*Ukrainska Povstanska Armiya*, or Ukrainian insurgent army) carried out its own program of genocide against local Poles and Jews. Even though the UPA did not engage the main body of Kovpak's unit, they did have several brushes with his forward recon elements.

After crossing the Goryn River, Kovpak's soldiers headed west, skirting the town of Rovno and keeping to the edge of the forest. Rovno was an administrative and supply center of the local German occupation authorities. Even though there were not many German troops there, the partisans did not tangle with them.

In the forest north of Rovno, Kovpak's unit stumbled onto another Soviet partisan unit whose presence they were unaware of. After a brief exchange of fire, Kovpak was able to get a cease-fire. Fortunately, only one man in the general's group was slightly wounded in the action.

Now they were heading south, for the first time moving outside the shelter of the forests, through the open steppe and low hills. Even though they were moving mainly during the day, Kovpak's band was able to escape detection by the Germans. Sometimes, the local Ukrainian police engaged them in firefights, but these poorly trained units rarely ventured outside the protection of the villages in which they were stationed.

Each day as the sun began to set, Kovpak and his commanders had to consider where they would halt for the night. It was an important decision. Not only did the defensive features of any camp site have to be taken into consideration, but also how close the local villages were and whether they would be considered friendly; the location of dry, not swampy, land to allow for the movement of wagons and heavy equipment; and an adequate supply of drinking water for the people in the unit as well as the hundreds of horses needed to be able to continue the fight.

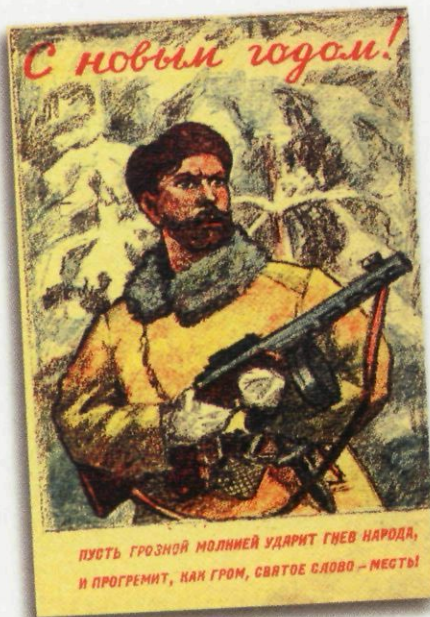
Kovpak's force had its first serious encounter with German troops at Skalat, southeast of Ternopol. After a firefight with the garrison, they pushed the Germans out of the town and captured large amounts of supplies. What they could not take with them, they let the local residents loot. They also liberated nearly 100 survivors of a small Jewish ghetto. Those Jews capable of fighting joined their liberators to conduct their own war against their oppressors.

The day following the group's victory at Skalat, however, German aircraft finally spotted them. After making a brief strafing run and dropping several small bombs on the Russians, the planes left. From that point on, enemy aircraft became a constant threat.

The word was now out that there was a large Soviet force operating behind the Germans' front lines, and despite the demands of the offensive around Kursk, local German commanders began moving what infantry they had available to stop Kovpak. Encounters between German infantry and Soviet partisans now became much more common. In all these engagements, the Russians gave a good account of themselves. On one occasion German soldiers defending a road crossing were probably surprised to find that the "irregular" troops they were opposing were armed with 76mm cannons.

At a bridge across the Dniester River, the partisans found Germans from the 4th and 6th SS Security regiments and a detachment from the SS Division "Galicia," which was made up of Ukrainian collaborators. Unshaken by their opposition, Kovpak and his commanders decided to rush

the bridge guards using their mounted detachment and two companies from the 3rd Battalion. In a scene reminiscent of another era, the Soviet horsemen charged headlong onto the bridge. Unfortunately for them, any romantic notions of cavalry



charges they may have had did not last for long. Overturned wagons wrapped in barbed wire halted the charge. German machine-gunners then opened up on the milling, frightened horses and mowed down the front rank of horsemen.

Kovpak would not be stopped. He brought up his mortar company and soon silenced the German machine guns. Partisan infantrymen then crawled onto the bridge and pulled apart the barricade, allowing their cavalymen to charge again. After a brief fight on the other side of the river, the German survivors withdrew, allowing Kovpak's detachment to cross the Dniester.

The partisan commander wanted to get into the Black Forest, a large wooded area southwest of the city of Stanislav. In a surprise attack on the crossing of a small river called Lomnitsa, just north of the city, the partisans once again used their artillery to suppress a German four-gun battery stationed there. After crossing the river, the film operator Boris Vakar actually filmed the partisans' blowing up the bridge behind them.

As the partisans began filing into the Black Forest, the locals watched with reserved interest. In this area, up to now almost completely bypassed by war, the Soviet partisans were unheard of. The partisan commissars used the opportunity to approach some of the residents and engage them in political and patriotic conversations.

Temporarily safe within the woods, Kovpak gathered his staff and informed them of the detachment's first objective, the Solotvyn oil works southwest of Stanislav. One and a half battalions were selected to make a night attack on the small town and destroy the oil rigs there.

As the column approached the town, however, Germans ambushed the lead elements. Rather than disappear into the night, Kovpak ordered the main body of the battalion forward to sweep aside the defenders. The German troops put up a spirited fight, especially around the stone post office building in the center of the town. It took until daybreak for the partisans to finally overcome the last resistance. Kovpak's men had achieved their objective, and as they marched away from the town the vital oil rigs were burning.

The column then continued west to the foothills of the Carpathians. As they began to pull deeper into the mountains, a German spotter plane found them again, but it left without attacking. Anticipating a German return in force, Kovpak drove his people to get them into the refuge of the mountains quickly. The narrow dirt road that led to safety was so steep that the partisans had to dismount and lead their horses. It was extremely difficult for the wagons of the supply train and the horses pulling the cannons to go up. Infantrymen had to be detailed to push and pull the weapons. The column began to slow down and telescope onto itself.

Just as the congestion and confusion reached its most intense, German combat aircraft arrived. The bogged-down partisan column, strung out between a mountain pass and the central square of the small village of Manyava, became an easy target for

Luftwaffe pilots. A flight of three Messerschmitt Me-109s dropped their bombloads and then followed with a strafing run. Horses killed during the attack blocked the movement of the rest of the column. A second flight of three Me-109s followed 10 minutes after the first one left. It was met by ineffective partisan anti-air defense from machine guns and rifles. Two more flights of German aircraft followed in rapid succession. When the aircraft finally left, the column was in tatters. Pulling aside the dead horses, the partisans continued limping upward. On reaching the first mountaintop, Kovpak ordered a halt. During this encounter, the partisans had lost 10 men killed and 29 wounded, their most serious casualties so far. Also, 148 horses were killed—more than a quarter of the total number—and 18 wagons were destroyed.

Finally reaching safety in the mountains, Kovpak's unit was able to camouflage itself so well that German aircraft were not able to find it for three days. During this respite, the partisans sent out scouting parties to the other side of the first mountain range toward the Bitkuv oil rigs and set them on fire. The three days of rest gave Kovpak's troops an opportunity to reorganize themselves. Wagons that were pulled by a pair of horses were cut in half, with each half to be pulled by one horse as a single-axle cart. A battalion that became separated during the fight at



A partisan patrol moves through a marsh on its way to attack the enemy. Without aircraft of their own, Kovpak and his men had to use the terrain to maximum advantage to conceal their movements and husband resources during the raid.

Solotvyn rejoined the main body. While making his way to find Kovpak, the battalion commander, Fedota Matyushenko, on his own initiative attacked and destroyed many oil rigs in the vicinity of the village of Yablonov.

So far the partisans had not used much of their supply of rifle and artillery ammunition and explosives, but their food supplies were beginning to run low. On their way through the open steppes and forests they had lived off the land, with only minor supplies distributed from central stores. In the mountains, with villages far between, nourishment became harder to find.

On the night of June 22, the partisans set off deeper into the mountains. They traveled along a dirt road that had not been used by large numbers of men and wagons since World War I. Wagons often broke down. Some pack horses tumbled down the



Left: Lieutenant Colonel Piotr Petrovich Vershigora was one of Kovpak's lieutenants during the raid. After the war he wrote a number of books praising the partisans' efforts. Right: Members of a partisan unit in the Kursk region prepare an ambush. Their heavy machine gun indicates that they have a secure supply route. Below: A partisan husband and wife prepare to fire on an enemy soldier. Men and women of all ages served together in partisan units.

steep ravines, taking precious supplies with them. The speed of the column was less than one kilometer per hour.

The partisans finally passed the first low mountain range along the shallow course of a small river, the Bystritsa, near a village of the same name. The horses were completely exhausted and people, mindful of the German aerial assault several days earlier, kept nervously looking up at the sky.

At the wide mouth of the valley of the Bystritsa River, they chased away a small German border guard detachment—their way into Hungary was open. A small, but well-armed group was sent in the direction of the Drogobych oil works.

The next morning, three German infantry battalions supported by artillery attacked the partisan rear guard at the head of the valley. After two days of defensive fighting, the whole partisan unit disengaged and retreated along the Zelenichka valley into Hungarian territory. When the unit began its descent from the mountain pass, it ran into a Hungarian border guard detachment. As soon as the forward partisan companies filed through a tiny mountain village and emerged into a small plateau, several machine guns opened up, followed by a six-barreled mortar.

Kovpak's column was cut in two, with Colonel Vershigora's forward detachment caught in the open. Rapidly moving off the road, the partisans approached a small, nameless mountain river where another enemy machine gun opened fire on them. Without pause Vershigora's detachment brushed the gun aside, plunged into rapidly moving water and made it to the other side and scampered into the mountains.

During the night, a company sent by commissar Rudnev found them. Its commander, Sergey Gorlanov, also captured several German prisoners. After examining enemy documents and interrogating prisoners, the partisans found out that they now faced a fresh SS security regiment. Also deployed along the border facing north was a Hungarian mountain infantry division.

It took Vershigora's two and a half companies two days of extremely arduous marching over steep terrain to rejoin the main unit. They arrived at a difficult time—the main body was fight-

ing against a Hungarian division and the German 32nd Infantry Regiment. The Soviets had to abandon all the wagons and carry the wounded on makeshift stretchers. The number of partisan wounded—about 60 before reaching the mountains—was now more than 100. The wounded presented a particular problem because they could not be cared for in established hospitals, but had to be brought along. The artillery, a particular source of pride for Kovpak, now had to be abandoned. They used up all the ammunition, then blew up the cannons to prevent their falling into the enemy's hands.



The going was extremely difficult; some mountain slopes were so steep that it was hard even to lie down to rest. The rainwater ran in countless little streams, swamping them. Partisans had to dig little trenches with their bayonets to divert the rivulets away.

Four to six men carried each stretcher. Immediately behind the stretcher, a second team was waiting to relieve the first one. The unit finally found a mountain goat trail and was able to slip through the encirclement. By now they were suffering from hunger, even resorting to eating mountain flowers, but many who ate them began to vomit. Fortunately, no one died, but

FAR LEFT: WWW.COLLECTRUSSIA.COM; LEFT: TASS; SOVIET; BELOW: AKG IMAGES

people became so weak that a halt for the night had to be called.

Veterans of fighting in forests, the partisans had to learn on the job about moving in the mountainous terrain. At first they went up and down the mountain slopes. Then they learned to walk along the crests of the mountains, which at first looked as if it would add to the travel distance and take up valuable time. However, the crest of the mountain range was not split by a ravine, and the partisans could move from mountaintop to mountaintop without going down into a valley first.

All of July was spent in a deadly game of cat-and-mouse. Slowly, but inevitably, the Germans continued to pull the noose tighter and tighter around the partisans. Firefights with German mountain infantry were almost constant. The German recon planes, dubbed "dragonflies" by the partisans, would drop small bombs, scoring direct hits on the column. Sometimes, the Germans and the partisans would be on the opposite slopes of the same mountain.

Even though it was extremely dangerous to do so, General Kovpak was forced to call a halt for several days on the Sinichka Mountain, close to the headwaters of the Pruth River, in order to give his exhausted men and women some rest. The situation was desperate, ammunition was almost completely expended and food long gone. During their stay on Sinichka, six of the wounded men committed suicide.

Fortunately, for the first time since they entered the mountains, they were able to reestablish radio contact with Moscow. During a three-hour conversation, however, they could only gather a partial message. In it, help was promised in about a month, when nights would be longer.

With time for his band running out, on August 2 Kovpak decided to break out of the mountains through the small town of Delyatin, at an intersection of several roads. An assault group of two battalions of the healthiest men would lead the breakout. After midnight they moved down into a valley along a barely perceptible mountain goat trail. Two men lost their footing and fell to their deaths in a ravine. It was so dark that partisans sometimes had to crawl down the steep slope. Where they could walk, they walked holding on to the person in front of them. Often the members of the group would lose contact and then spend valuable time finding each other in the darkness. They eventually found a small mountain stream and followed it to a road that led to Delyatin.

Approaching Delyatin, the strike force divided into three parts. One battalion was sent to capture the railroad station. The second battalion split: One group went for the German headquarters in the town itself, while the second group under Colonel Vershigora went after the bridge over the Pruth River.

Vershigora's detachment took the bridge after overcoming a German machine gun crew. The railroad station was also captured, almost without resistance. In the town, a small detachment of Germans guarding the headquarters was scattered without difficulty.

Despite their success, the partisans became disordered in the town. Many found food stores left behind by the retreating Germans and swarmed over them, often abandoning the fight. Commanders lost control of their men in the darkness. Instead of an organized retreat, the partisans were now streaming through Delyatin in small groups.

For his part, Colonel Vershigora was extremely uneasy about the unexpectedly light resistance in town. His worst fears came true almost immediately. As the disorganized partisans were heading down the road toward Kolomiya, the Germans sprang their ambush. The 273rd Mountain Infantry Regiment was waiting for Kovpak in blocking positions across the road three kilometers outside Delyatin. The leading group of 50-70 partisans under commissar Rudnev immediately lost eight men and was pinned down against a low hillside.

While the Germans were overpowering the advance elements of Kovpak's unit, the main partisan body was still passing the bridge to Delyatin. Every time Vershigora, now in charge of the rear guard, was ready to blow it up, another group of partisans would stumble up, some carrying wounded. He could not blow the bridge until around 10 a.m. and then follow the main body.

The night was spent in the nearby woods gathering partisans who had become separated during the fight. Just six brief weeks before, Kovpak's unit numbered 1,700 men and women. Now it was down to approximately 1,000, including about 100 wounded. All their wagons and artillery were gone. Neither commissar Rudnev nor any of the men who were caught in the ambush with him were accounted for. Kovpak and his senior staff feared that Rudnev was killed, or even worse, captured.

The next day the unit was divided into six groups, with



German soldiers on an anti-partisan sweep search a farmhouse. As they tried to close the ring on Kovpak's men, the SS police, Ukrainian security and Wehrmacht formations came into contact with the partisans. In almost every instance they found the Russian irregulars to be just as formidable as regular Red Army troops.

Kovpak, Bazyma, Vershigora and three other battalion commanders each leading a group. They split up the remaining ammunition and established rallying points along their route north, back to the safety of the Pripjat Marshes. All wounded who could not walk remained behind under care of the unit's medical personnel. A company of partisans was detailed to provide protection. When the majority of the wounded had healed, they were to attempt to make their way out as well.

Only the commanders of each detachment knew the rallying points. The senior commanders assumed that at least one group would be destroyed, and the Germans might think that it was the main body and go after it, allowing the other groups to slip through. The group leaders pulled lots to see who was going to take which route. Vershigora pulled the only course that passed through the open steppe; the other five routes went through the mountains.

The next morning before daylight, when Vershigora's group of 170 set off, the other five detachments thought it was marked for death. Moving carefully, only covering 50 kilometers in three days, Vershigora's group made it to the relative safety of the Black Forest near the city of Stanislav. There they came across a handful of survivors from the nearly exterminated Jewish community in the city. They had supplies of food and medicine, which they shared with the partisans. For Vershigora's starving men, the meager food was a godsend. What was more impor-

In order to take some pressure off Kovpak, Vershigora conducted several small-scale attacks around Stanislav to draw German attention. On August 23, the Germans surrounded the forest. Part of Vershigora's group, under Matyushenko, broke away from the Germans and retreated north after a short firefight. Vershigora, instead of retreating deeper into the forest where Germans were looking for him, moved closer to the town of Stanislav, where the Germans least expected him. During the night, Matyushenko's group was surrounded and largely destroyed. A few survivors found their way back and rejoined Vershigora. Matyushenko himself and few others slipped through again and made it to the Pripyat Marshes sometime later.

Vershigora's group spent three days hiding in the brush near Stanislav. In a bold move, they finally broke out of the encirclement by going through the outskirts of the town itself, not the forest where the Germans were expecting them.

On September 2, Vershigora was able to reestablish a radio link with Moscow. He was informed that a plane had been sent for him a week earlier, but when it had not seen any marking fires, it had turned back without dropping supplies. He also received orders to act on his own discretion. *Stavka* considered the missions in the Carpathians to be accomplished, and it now wanted all the groups to make their way back to the Pripyat Marshes.

Kovpak's decision to break up what remained of his party had been the right one. Even though some smaller elements had been destroyed, the Germans were unable to bring so many separate groups to heel. As the partisans retreated to safety they ran into German detachments. After each skirmish, the partisan groups would keep fragmenting into smaller and smaller elements, sometimes escaping and evading in ones and twos. This made it more difficult for German intelligence specialists to pinpoint the partisan main body.

On September 27, Vershigora's group finally reached the edge of the Pripyat Marshes. They were now safe. Several days later Kovpak came in with what remained of his group as well.

Eventually the survivors of all six groups joined together. Throughout October 1943, the smaller elements that had become separated dribbled in. Even the remainder of the company that stayed behind to guard the medics and the wounded made it back. Out of 1,700 men and women that started out with Kovpak in June, plus several dozen Jewish survivors who joined them during the raid, fewer than 800 made it back to safety. They had lost all their equipment, cannons, mortars and the wagon train. Overall, however, the raid was a great success. Kovpak's unit, along with other raider units, drew away a large number of German troops that were needed during the Kursk battle. The partisans blew up thousands of miles of railways, destroyed supplies and production centers. Behind them, Kovpak's detachments left active cells to further spread the resistance to the German occupiers. They also won a great moral victory. By showing their presence in the area previously dominated by the Germans and Ukrainian nationalists, Kovpak and his partisan band brought hope to thousands living under occupation. □

Victor Kamenir writes frequently about the war on the Eastern Front. For further reading, see German Anti-Partisan Warfare in Europe, 1939-1945, by Colin D. Heaton.



A partisan stops at his farm to greet his mother during the raid. Popular images like this flooded Russian papers during the war. To ensure that the story of the resistance got out, partisan bands such as Kovpak's had their own photographers whose film was sent to Moscow along with other important documents whenever possible.

tant, the Jewish group's leader had local contacts who began to gather information for the partisans.

While the partisans had to dispose of all their heavy equipment, each detachment had German deutsche marks and Polish zlotys that they had captured during their raid. They gave this money to the locals to buy food and drink in Stanislav. They were also able to buy batteries for flashlights, which they adapted for their radio, and were able to get in touch with Moscow. Vershigora was worried that Germans might become aware that large quantities of flashlight batteries were being bought up around the town but they did not seem to notice. On several occasions Vershigora was even able to slip a few of his own men into Stanislav to snoop around.

The partisans spent 10 days in the forest, resting and recovering their strength. On the 11th day another group of partisans came in and several days later a third. Vershigora's group used up all its food supplies feeding the new arrivals. Four partisans from Kovpak's unit also stumbled in. The Germans had found it on the very first night of the breakout attempt, and in constant skirmishes they kept fragmenting it, mainly by cutting off the advance guard elements. Commissar Rudnev's 16-year-old son Radik was killed in one of those firefights.