

## PART III

# *Leningrad in Blockade*

*With each step the feet grow heavier  
But better not to pause for rest.  
Perhaps, Death sits beside the road,  
Just resting, too. . . .*

## 27 . *The Circle Closed*

NO ONE HAD PLANNED TO FIGHT A BATTLE AT MGA. THE little railroad station figured on no strategic charts, either German or Russian. In fact, the engagement at Mga was accidental, small-scale, haphazard. It was the consequences of Mga that were so far-reaching.

What gave Mga importance was that once the Nazis firmly grasped the town they severed all of the rail connections between Leningrad and the remainder of Russia—the “mainland” as it came to be called—and they cut all the highways.

The first sign of danger in this direction came when the battered Soviet Forty-eighth Army, which was defending the main Moscow-Leningrad railroad line in the vicinity of Ushaki and Tosno, about thirty-five miles southeast of Leningrad, began to crumble under the Nazi Panzer attacks. Instead of falling back northward toward Leningrad, the broken regiments of the Forty-eighth Army drifted *eastward*, opening up a gap which the Nazis quickly managed to exploit.

The Leningrad Command, back to the wall, striving to stem the Nazi tide at a dozen critical points, did not immediately realize what had happened.

Colonel Bychevsky, chief of Leningrad's sappers, for example, occupied around the clock placing mines, blowing up bridges, ceaselessly seeking to build barriers against the Germans, had no inkling of the new danger. For him August 28 began very much as did each of the days of late August which later came to form in his mind a blurred calendar of disaster.

Bychevsky was disturbed that morning for a different reason. In the midst of battle the Chief of Staff, the sardonic General D. N. Nikishev, whose skepticism of Moscow's desire or ability to provide sufficient resources for Leningrad's defenses had never been concealed, had vanished.<sup>1</sup> Along with Nikishev went his deputy, N. G. Tikhomirov. Why? Bychevsky had

<sup>1</sup> More fortunate than most, General Nikishev was not shot. He survived to participate in the Stalingrad battle. (*N.Z.*, p. 444.)

no better idea than he had of the other strange, never-explained command changes which so often caused his colleagues to disappear. He guessed that possibly Nikishev had offended Voroshilov. But this was only a guess. In Nikishev's place appeared Colonel N. V. Gorodetsky from the Twenty-third Army, a good, vigorous officer. But it was not easy to pick up the threads of the complex battles then raging. Gorodetsky made mistakes, some of which cost Leningrad dearly.

On this bright August morning with the scent of buckwheat and golden-rod heavy in the hedgerows outside Leningrad, the new Chief of Staff advised Bychevsky that the Forty-eighth Army was heavily engaged in defending the Moscow-Leningrad railroad and that it needed help. He told Bychevsky to send a detachment of sappers to Tosno to lay down a series of mine fields and to destroy any bridges which might be seized by the Germans. Tosno was located about fifteen miles south and west of Mga.

Bychevsky sent off a small unit from his 2nd Reserve Pontoon Battalion and decided to go to Tosno with Commissar Nikolai Mukha and look at the situation himself.

They drove out the Moscow highway, which runs almost arrow-straight, paralleling the railroad. When they got as far as Krasny Bor, a large village fifteen miles outside the city, they heard firing in the forest. Leaving the car, they started on foot in the direction of the sound, moving very carefully. At this point they were less than five miles south of the Kolpino fortified region, established along a little stream, the Izhora River. The fortifications had just been occupied by the Izhorsk workers artillery and machine-gun battalion, a volunteer unit, which had had no training in firing from stationary batteries. Behind this small unit there was nothing—just the broad, empty Moscow highway leading straight to the southeast gates of Leningrad.

What, thought Bychevsky, is going to happen if the Germans break through here? The two officers came up to a wooden barricade thrown across the highway. Beside it was an armored car where they found two generals, A. I. Cherepanov and P. A. Zaitsev. The generals were directing a field regiment and the small engineering detachment which Bychevsky had ordered to Tosno in a fire fight against German units. The field regiment had only about fifteen cartridges per rifle and three submachine guns.

The Germans, it seemed, had broken through the remnants of the Forty-eighth Army and swept beyond Tosno. It was their armored reconnaissance that was being held up in the fire fight.

General Zaitsev went back to the Izhora River line to try to organize a defense there. The other officers stayed on the highway to hold up the German advance as long as they could.

The German fire grew hot. The Russians fell back a couple of hundred yards as the sappers hastily put up heavy wooden barriers along the highway and dug in some antitank mines. But the field regiment was running out of

ammunition. The Russians would certainly have been overwhelmed had not five heavy Soviet tanks come up and laid down covering fire. Two German light tanks appeared on the highway, but one hit a mine and caught fire and the other was hit by its own artillery. The Germans began to lay in heavy mortar fire and two Messerschmitts roared down the highway, machine guns blazing.

The Russians had no alternative. They fell back into the fortified positions at Yam-Izhorsk and Bychevsky's men mined the bridge across the little Izhora River. As the Germans approached the bridge, the mines were touched off, halting them temporarily. The Germans were advance reconnaissance units of the 39th Army Corps of the Sixteenth Army, comprising the 12th Panzer Division and the 121st and 96th Infantry divisions (with the 122nd Infantry in the second echelon).

Dusk was beginning to fall. Bychevsky and Mukha had to report to Smolny. Artillery exchanges already had begun between the Izhorsk battalion and the Germans. The officers stopped a moment to wish good luck to one of the workers units, headed by I. F. Chernenko, an engineer in the great Izhorsk works.

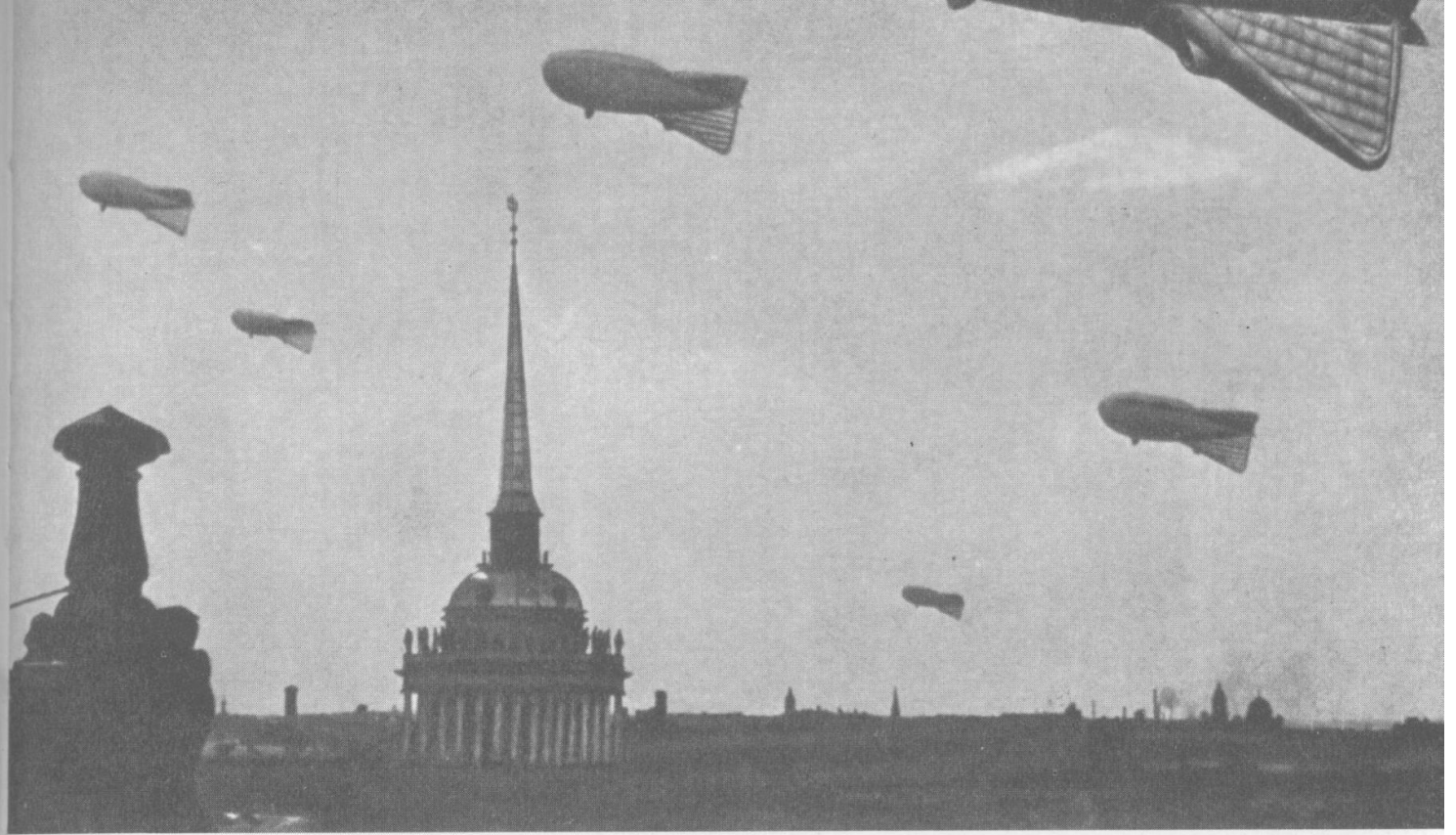
Chernenko had gotten back to Kolpino that afternoon from Leningrad. At the station he found he could only buy a ticket as far as Pontonny. The girl at the ticket window said the rail line was under fire and a train had been hit. He rode to Pontonny and walked into Kolpino. Within an hour or so he was sent up to the lines. He decided to wear his leather jacket even though the afternoon was hot. It probably would be cold that night in the trenches. He was right.

The Izhorsk factory where Chernenko worked was one of the greatest in Russian industry. Founded by order of Peter the Great in 1722 to produce timbers for ship construction, in the mid-eighteenth century it began to make anchors and copper sheeting and in the nineteenth century pioneered in machine building, boiler construction, engines, turbines, armor plate and heavy military equipment. It produced the armor for Russia's early dreadnaughts—the *Petropavlovsk*, the *Sevastopol*, the *Gangut* and the *Poltava*.

Under Soviet aegis it vastly expanded. Now it boasted blooming mills, steel rolling mills and a whole series of specialized plants, including artillery works, a shell factory and—extremely important at this moment—a heavy tank plant. It was turning out both the reliable Soviet T-34 and the massive KV 60-ton monster of whose existence the Germans were beginning to become aware.

Not only had the Germans driven to the entrance to Leningrad; they had gotten within close artillery range of a military factory whose production was vital to Leningrad's defenses and to the whole Soviet war effort.

At this moment there were about a thousand men, members of Izhorsk factory volunteer units, in the fortified lines along the little Izhora River. Most of them were armed with rifles from drill halls, carbines, hand grenades



Air-raid barrage balloons over the Admiralty spire.

Evacuees assembling at railroad station. (*Sovfoto*)

