

CONFESSIONS OF A NAZI OFFICER

BY

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LIEUTENANT K. F. BRANDES of the German army was killed on October 24 on the right bank of the Dnieper. A diary was found on him. I have seen many diaries of German officers and soldiers. They were all identical records of looting, drunken sprees, and executions. Lieutenant Brandes' diary differs in this respect. It is written by a clever and educated man. Brandes was a doctor of historical sciences and a man of letters. Different from his colleagues in service he did much reading and thinking.

Brandes was a fascist. He calls the conquest of Europe the "German Spring." Like his colleagues he came to Russia for *lebensraum*. But as distinct from other Hitlerites Brandes saw the limit of his dreams. He faithfully described the disintegration of the German army, showed the meanness of the men who are still ruling Germany. I will cite the most interesting excerpts from his diary:

July 1. It will take us a long time to recover from the winter losses. The situation in Germany proper is difficult. I choke with rage when I recall all the stupid assertions made during the last years. We fell for our own propaganda. Now we are staggering just as in the first world war. The beginning was a wonderful German spring rising over Europe. This is all behind now.

July 6. Yesterday I saw the beginning of our offensive north of Kharkov. Officers from an SS Division were astonished at the pessimism prevailing in our division. These officers drink, organize sprees, while our men frequently do not get enough to eat. SS looting is seizing everything from local inhabitants.

July 12. Americans are landing in Sicily. This is quite uncheerful news. A battle now rages in the Belgorod and Orel areas. There are heavy air raids on the Rhineland. Our country is being devastated. I cannot sleep thinking of this. Is this the beginning of the end? Fortunate indeed are the idiots and the deceived. But understanding is growing. The mind constantly notes symptoms of doom.

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July 17. Yesterday saw the beginning of a great Russian offensive on a sector our division is holding. Everywhere the Russians succeeded in wedging into our positions. My 466th Regiment was originally in the rear as a reserve. By midday the situation became grave and we were pressed into action. Awful confusion prevailed all day long. There are orders and counter-orders. Even a company of recuperating soldiers has been thrown into battle.

July 21. Early this morning the Russians launched strong attacks with tanks. I succeeded in calming a handful of our infantrymen and forced several artillerymen to return to their guns.

July 23. Losses are very heavy. I have never seen such devastating fire. Oh, if only we had our army of 1941! In seven days we lost 119 of 246 men. In addition thirty-six were lightly wounded.

August 1. I cannot help thinking of our tremendous losses. In most cases we could not even bury our dead. The Italian tragedy is developing with unparalleled speed. Mussolini's fall is a heavy blow to us.

August 7. In the morning the Russians bombed our positions and passing SS units. It is a ghastly picture: the dead, cries in the ruins. These bombings recurred every two to three hours on all roads.

August 8. Bad news. We surrendered Orel.

August 15. It is nonsense that the war may last four more years. I am gripped by a mad fury passing into hatred for our rulers. We have all forgotten how to laugh.

August 23. This morning the Russians were jubilant in their trenches. It turns out that we have surrendered Kharkov. One more heavy blow. And the bombing of Germany continues.

August 24. Everybody is depressed at the new bombings of Berlin.

September 1. This drama which began four years ago is now becoming a tragedy. The British have landed in Italy. Orel and Kharkov have been followed by Taganrog. Again Berlin has been bombed. Our retreat continues.

September 5. The population is being evacuated from here. What a pity that the grain in the fields remains unharvested! Potatoes, corn, sunflowers, pumpkins. Millions of homeless are now roaming the roads in Germany.

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September 7. We surrendered Alavyansk. It looks as though we will lose all the eastern Ukraine along with the Donbas. Neither will we succeed in retaining the Kuban bridgehead. What we now are losing we will never regain.

September 8. Civilians have been evacuated from the village. Barley, oats, rye, and wheat have been threshed but can't be shipped out. It would last Berlin for a whole year.

September 9. We will have to lose the Donets. Who could think that the Russian offensive would prove so successful! Just received news about the unconditional surrender of Italy. The last act of the tragedy has begun. What an end after such triumph! We should have long ago ousted our incompetent politicians. We are paying for their stupidity and haughtiness. Hitler is an amateur in almost every field. Apparently he has poor knowledge of people. Goering is perhaps the most popular. He is not a dogmatist but a man with common sense. But he is walking over corpses. An idea of Himmler's beliefs and aims may be gained from his appearance. Goebbels is sly but he is a nonentity—a backdoor politician. Funk is not entirely Aryan in appearance. He is clumsy and ugly. His light-mindedness and affected optimism are one of the reasons for our trouble. Ley resembles Funk in appearance. He suffers from vaingloriousness and self-adoration. He is apparently a chip off the same block. Ribbentrop is a true gentleman of the Third Reich but unquestionably poorly educated and bred. Parvenu.

September 10. Villages are ablaze everywhere. What a misfortune that we could not hold this fertile region. At Lozovaya we saw the chief—von Mackensen. He too was not particularly calm. When Russians tried to break through he lost command of himself. I rarely saw such confusion.

September 12. The 62nd Division has been completely routed.

September 23. There is a disastrous retreat here and not a glimmer of hope in Italy. I feel like knocking my head against a wall and want to scream from rage. The light-mindedness and the mediocrity of our rulers who are suffering from megalomania are to blame.

September 27. Got to Dniepropetrovsk just as it was being evacuated. Much trouble. There has been large-scale blasting

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work. Yesterday the Russians seized a bridgehead on our bank of the Dnieper and for two days have been repulsing our strongest counterattacks and inflicting heavy losses.

September 28. Russian artillery very strong and smashes everything. There are only a handful left of the First Battalion. (There are almost more staff officers in the ranks than privates.) There are twenty-nine soldiers left in the battalion.

September 29. Received the first company. In the afternoon there were terrible cries, the front was breached, all units rolled back, and finally panicky flight. Stationed in a small village I have tried without success to stop the fleeing men.

October 3. I am now in command of the first, second, and third companies. In reality they total no more than thirty men. I have never before heard our wounded swear like this.

October 6. Yesterday reinforcements arrived at last and I formed a new company.

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We have thirty-five men including ten officers and one commanding officer. Almost all are middle-aged.

October 15. Soldiers of the fifth year of war are almost impossible to force into attack. Zaporzhe surrendered.

October 22. The Russians are shelling us. We can't lift our heads from our holes. By the end of the day the Russians breached our right flank on a wide front. About a hundred Russians are entrenched in our rear. The Dnieper is in the east and south and retreat to the west is out. Just received orders to abandon everything that cannot thing. Oh, these idiotic politicians who in the fifth year of war make such suffering for our people! Unfortunate Germany!

BRANDES realized that the fascists' dream had scattered. He called the seizure of Poland, France, the drama of Germany's doom—a tragedy. To us the doom of Hitlerite Germany is the triumph of conscience, reason, and light and therefore we read the confession of the enemy with profound satisfaction. **ILYA EHRENBURG.**

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