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AIR HISTORICAL BRANCH

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EXTRACTS FROM REPORTS
OF FUEHRER CONFERENCES
HELD ON 19.11.1943, 20.12.1943,
27.12.1943, 28.12.1943,
and 29.12.1943.

TRANSLATED BY:

AIR MINISTRY, A.H.B.6.

31.10.1947.

CONFERENCE HELD ON 19TH NOVEMBER 1943

Russian Front

Buechs reported that 24 German bombers had carried out nuisance raids on troop positions north of Saporoshje. The enemy had sent up single aircraft south of Gomel. Bad weather had severely hampered our formations.

Italy

Keitel reported that the movement of the British 50th Division on the Eastern flank of the front seemed to have been completed. Two enemy attacks had taken place in the afternoon of the previous day, against the villages of Arando and Archi. After inflicting severe casualties on the enemy, our garrisons had been withdrawn behind the Sangro.

The Fuehrer remarked that the enemy seemed to be making progress.

Keitel said it would be very dangerous if these small scale operations by the enemy developed into a real offensive, in view of the fact that the 16th German Division was in the process of being withdrawn. Elements of it had already gone..... The front here was very broad, and the 65th Division had only 6 battalions at its disposal. One would have to wait and see what happened.

The Fuehrer said that was no good. Kesselring must be informed at once of the departure of the 16th Division. It was absolutely necessary to have this Division for the Eastern front.

Balkans

Keitel said he had received a report that the Allies in Italy were forming an army of about 18,000 Yugoslav prisoners-of-war, which was to be landed on the Adriatic coast in collaboration with Tito in about two weeks' time.

The Fuehrer said it was possible; in his experience, however, men who had been prisoners-of-war had no great fighting value afterwards.

Peace negotiations

Keitel spoke of a report received from sources in Portugal that negotiations were in progress in Lisbon between the Allies and the Hungarian and Rumanian representatives. Both countries would shortly be asking for an armistice. He did not know what truth there was in these reports.

Naval situation

Assmann reported that the big convoy of 74 merchant ships had been located by aerial reconnaissance yesterday morning some 450 nautical miles West of Lisbon. Our submarines, on patrol in a reconnaissance strip too far West, had been directed in a North-Easterly direction. One submarine had approached the convoy, but had to submerge and was **strongly** attacked with depth charges. Intense air cover was reported. It was hoped soon to have further information about the progress of the operation.

Air situation

Buechs reported that in Norway, 100 enemy aircraft had yesterday attacked repair and maintenance workshops at Kella and also the Dainler-Benz works. 200 H.E. bombs had been dropped, causing considerable destruction. It was hoped to resume partial production in a weeks' time.

The Fuehrer said that that reminded him. He had received a report from who had been at Schweinfurt. Apparently some 60,000 finished ball-bearings were lying in the factory there. He did not know whether they

had been destroyed (in the Allied air raid) or not, but at any rate they had been there. It was not good enough; valuable equipment was lying in the factories absolutely ready, but was being delivered behind schedule. Finished articles must immediately be removed from the factories. One could not take the responsibility for their destruction if the factories were attacked. He had also heard that 200 heavy A.A. guns were lying ready in factories in Suhl and Zelle-Mehlis.

Buechs continued that regarding enemy air penetrations over Reich territory, he had to report that a total of between 400-450 aircraft had been engaged in two waves. The principal attack had been made by a force of some 200 aircraft in the general area of Berlin, although only about 70-80 of these had actually attacked the city; the majority flew on further North. Single attacks had been reported at Kremmen and Greifenberg, and about 30 aircraft were over Stettin. Bombs had been dropped at Poelitz, but no damage had been caused. The second wave had approached the Frankfurt-Mannheim area with some 200 aircraft. About 500-600 H.E. bombs had been dropped on the town of Mannheim, causing large fires in several factories and some damage to public buildings. Casualties had been insignificant; so far one person reported killed, and six wounded.

In Greece, the previous day had brought renewed Allied air attacks on our ground organisation, carried out by some 50 4-engined bombers escorted by 15 fighters at Eleusis, and by 40 T.E. bombers on Larissa. In contrast to previous attacks, these operations were very unsuccessful. At Larissa, two aircraft had been damaged and at Eleusis one aircraft damaged. Our fighters had apparently succeeded in preventing the raiders from carrying out aimed bombing, for the majority of the bombs had fallen outside the target area.

(END OF CONFERENCE)

CONFERENCE HELD ON 20TH DECEMBER, 1943.

Western Front

The Fuehrer said that he had been studying the files placed before him; there could be no doubt whatever that the attack in the West would be launched in the next Spring. He thought that the attack would be launched on a wide front. There was however one interesting point: he did not believe that the enemy at present had sufficient forces at his disposal They would have to withdraw forces from the Middle East. Unfortunately we could not even put five divisions into the field in the Mediterranean. Our forces were stretched to the utmost.

The proposed enemy alliance with Turkey seemed to indicate the formation of another front as well. Diversionary attacks could be expected in the Balkans, in the Bay of Biscay and in Norway. We would have to collect the submarine formations in the North early in February. There was a definite possibility of a landing up there and we had to be prepared to carry out mass submarine operations. One could not afford to wait until the attack actually came, because ice conditions in the Baltic could not be forecast in advance.

The Fuehrer continued that such an operation would only be a "decoy", but it would nevertheless be very unpleasant for us if the enemy gained a foothold up there, and enticed out the Luftwaffe. He did not think that the enemy would send naval forces to lure out our ships but they might attempt to discover our strength in the air.

Jodl said that the enemy might also make a mistake; the weather in the North was usually bad.

The Fuehrer answered that in any case we must expect the enemy to do something in Norway, either at the middle of February, the beginning of March or in April. The enemy must not be allowed to gain a footing; it would affect our entire Northern Army since transports would no longer be able to pass. We knew from the Mediterranean what this could eventually mean.

The second thing was the Bay of Biscay. We must also have strong submarine forces there in readiness. He, (Hitler), was constantly studying new plans to strengthen our defences in the West; for example, the provision of flame-throwers, and of barrels of oil which would burn in the sea.

Zeitzler mentioned the new type of mine which would be detonated by enemy mine-sweeping apparatus. The first of these would probably be ready in January.

The Fuehrer said this would be certain to destroy the enemy's confidence. There could be no doubt that the enemy had made up his mind on invasion, but he, (Hitler) did not feel that the British would enter on the operation with any great enthusiasm. There were too many people there only too anxious to apply the brake! There were also those who wanted to be sure of maintaining intact until the end of the war the small number of British divisions, just as we had once tried to conserve our Fleet. Furthermore, England's war potential was getting very low. The authorities were trying to place the blame for this on the public, who no longer believed in the existence of danger. In actual fact it was due to a fall in coal and steel output. The Fuehrer then discussed the volume of American aid to Britain, which he compared to our own deliveries of supplies to In fact we had reduced those deliveries to the lowest level from the very beginning.

In any case, the Fuehrer continued, the attack would be launched, and would decide the outcome of the war. If it were beaten off, we could quickly withdraw forces from the West.

Discussing the recent attack on V-weapon sites, Jodl said it was the most powerful to date, but had apparently done little damage to the sites.

The Fuehrer said that small targets were not so easy to hit.

Jodl said that it was believed that the sites were only secondary targets.

Buechs said that the 4-engined formations had approached over Northern Holland as if heading for the Reich. They had then turned off westwards and attacked the sites.

The Fuehrer said it was clear that the sites were getting on the enemy's nerves. We would feel the same if we knew that the enemy was preparing to destroy Berlin. The important thing was to keep the sites as small as possible and to instal heavy Flak defences. To hit such a small objective from a height of 6-7,000 metres would be a pure fluke.

Jodl pointed out that the attacks sometimes took place from 2,000 metres.

The Fuehrer said that it would be different once our flak defences were stronger. We would have to concentrate our A.A. defences in the West and in Italy. He thought that perhaps one month's entire output of (the 3.7 cm.) gun should be sent to the West. Elsewhere we could manage with the 2 cm. gun. Deliveries to the East would have to be blocked at once; the Divisions in the West had not been getting their fair share. One month's output would amount to some 700-800 guns.

The Fuehrer said that in the event of an invasion of Norway, we must be able to concentrate between 60-80 submarines there.

Jodl said that the German forces in Norway totalled 430,000 men.

The Fuehrer remarked that this approximately equalled the peacetime strength of the French army. It was colossal. He repeated that the enemy must not be permitted to seize and occupy an island; this could endanger our entire supply system. We would have one advantage, - that the enemy would have to transport everything over great distances. On the other hand, we had next to no Air Force units in Norway. One could only hope that by the time they attacked our new aircraft would be ready for them; with every month that passed, the possibility that we would have at least one Gruppe of jet-propelled fighters was greater. He, (Hitler), was afraid of one thing, that the enemy Air Force would drop 4,000 kg. block-buster bombs on the locks at our submarine bases.

Von Puttkamer pointed out that there were no locks at Brest and Lorient; these existed only at St. Nazaire, La Pallice, and Bordeaux.

The Fuehrer said that the enemy would be employing many formations without war experience; that should be an advantage to us.

Buhle said that providing the units detailed for the Western Front really arrived in January, there would be no need to worry. But if we robbed the West of everything.....! No sooner had an organization been built up than it was broken up again by troop withdrawals.

The Fuehrer retorted that he would not accept the blame for these withdrawals. Buhle would have to speak to Zeitzler about it. But he, (Hitler), was also in a difficult position. Every day he studied the situation in the East, and it was terrible. Five or six divisions could make all the difference there. He had however always been worried about the Western Front, and had never adopted the attitude that nothing could happen there. He believed that the time would come when the British would be compelled to invade, whether they wanted to or not, in order to finish off the

war. An additional factor was the American Presidential election. If Roosevelt was to succeed, he would have to show some sort of military success, and would for this reason launch the offensive.

The Fuehrer continued that the British were being extremely cunning in leaving the appointment of Commander-in-Chief to the Americans. Then if things went wrong they would not be responsible. One could not expect the British to be as optimistic as Eisenhower, who had carried out only successful landings, and that with the help of traitors. There was a difference between being greeted by General Giraud or by Italians sitting in their trenches and not firing a shot, and setting foot in the West, where our batteries would fire until the last round.

Buhle added that there were also batteries in the rear, which the enemy would have to destroy one by one.

The Fuehrer said that it would be a relief when the attack actually came. They had seen it the year before at Dieppe. He had seen how it was fortified then and how it was fortified now. When the landing began, the decisive factor would be whether the enemy had all his equipment where it was most needed. If something went wrong during the landing operation, and certain items of equipment were missing, there was bound to be a fatal delay.

The Fuehrer continued by asking whether a special allocation of flame-throwers could not be made for the Western Front. These were terrible weapons of defence.

Buhle replied that we had 1,200 flame-throwers. There were also in the West thousands of electrically operated Russian flame-throwers.

The Fuehrer then spoke at length on the possibilities of the flame-thrower as a weapon of defence. Among other things, he said that he had been considering the use of these weapons against low-flying aircraft, but apparently this was not feasible.

The Fuehrer then spoke by telephone to Saur, and asked what was the present monthly production of flame-throwers.

Saur replied that the figure was 1,200.

The Fuehrer told him this output must be trebled, and that labour would have to be redirected accordingly.

Saur said that he believed this could be done. The closing down of factories due to enemy bombing had made available a large number of workers, and these could be employed on the production of flame-throwers.

The Fuehrer said that if we had 20-30,000 Flame-throwers in the West we could never be caught unawares...

(END OF CONFERENCE)

Russian Front

Zeitzler opened the conference, saying there was nothing special to report from Herresgruppe "A". After reporting at length about operations on all sectors of the Russian front, he expressed the opinion that the Crimea would be lost within a few days. The reasons were that it was being cut off from the rest of the front by the Russians, that the weather had been so bad that the Luftwaffe could not go into action at all, and that the enemy seemed to have more and more fresh troops at his disposal. He begged for permission to withdraw one division from the northern section of the front.

The Fuehrer gave permission for this. He said that through this withdrawal there would be an extra Division available, but he could not agree with Zeitzler about giving up the Crimea. He knew that they could talk like that now and say that the sector had been as good as lost already. But when the actual hour really came, Von Manstein would not take any responsibility whatever; they would have to do that.

The Fuehrer continued, that hard times would follow, during which there would be a great crisis in that region, with the immediate result that Turkey would be involved. On the 15th February the enemy wished to force Turkey to enter the war. Should there be a crisis in the Crimea, their propaganda would do the rest. Von Manstein would take no responsibility, he would blame it on politics instead. (N.B. Field Marshal Von Manstein was Commander-in-Chief in the Crimea.)

Zeitzler agreed, and thought things would be difficult, as it would be hard to save anything.

The Fuehrer was of the same opinion. The results would be catastrophic. They were catastrophic also in Rumania. He thought that one could not say that the Russian Winter offensive had started, it was simply a continuation of the earlier offensive. They did not want the Germans to have a respite, so they were just fighting on. But one could see that they were getting exhausted as well. Sooner or later there would come a lull. He had read a report, he said, of conditions at the front, and in his view the question of morale was a deciding one. It seemed to him that the morale of the troops was low.

Zeitzler retorted that that was the reason he submitted these reports periodically. He had to reckon with such things.

The Fuehrer replied that it was really he who had drawn attention to this question. He had spoken with representatives from the Armoured units; they had told him that the infantry was not fighting at all. People were trying to tell him that the question of morale did not come into it, as far as the infantry was concerned. As one who had personally built up and led perhaps the greatest organization the world had ever known, an organization which he was still leading to-day, he had always discovered that the fault in these cases lay with the leaders. If an officer said to him that propaganda speeches to the troops had no effect, he would answer that this was because the officer personally had no influence on his men, and that the officer would have to go.

The Fuehrer was sure that Manstein knew exactly where the enemy would attack, he was ready to give up some of the units as lost already. He was doing this to clear his conscience. The hour of crisis was approaching. There was always a lot of talk about "bringing the matter to a victorious end"; - he was of the opinion that victory could only be achieved by putting a halt to the Russian drive in one way or another.

/Zeitzler

Zeitzler agreed and added that we could never defeat the Russians. To the Fuehrer's optimistic remark, that last Winter we had also been in a tragic situation and had overcome it by May and counter-attacked in July, he replied that the great trouble now was the enormous tension of the situation, which could be overcome only if matters took a different turn.

The Fuehrer thought that once the troops had dug themselves in properly, their spirit would return. But the useless divisions must be removed at once. He had studied the report carefully, and could only say that some of the divisions were utterly useless. He repeated that when a Commanding Officer told him he could get nothing out of his men, his reply would be: Your influence is useless, you have not the power to influence them. No doubt the officer would be speaking the truth, but only from his viewpoint. In 4 years of war he had got to know Regimental Commanders whose influence was simply laughable, because no one took them seriously. There had been other Commanders who had rectified the worst situations in the minimum of time.

The Fuehrer continued that Zeitzler and he had already survived such times once before. They had withdrawn to a "shorter front", which they had been unable to hold, either. But they would certainly have been able to hold it, if their forces had been more mobile and less selfish. They would have been able to save a great deal. Here they had a classic example. The whole catastrophe, from Newel downwards, could be traced back to the petty egotism of the two "Heeresgruppenfuhrers". (C.-in-C.'s), who had simply not wanted to join in, out of sheer egotism. Now we were forced to hold the longer front line, but even that had to be achieved. He could foresee all-important results.

The Fuehrer was of the opinion that the loss of the Crimea would be far worse than anything else could be on the Russian front, at that time. It would have the worst effect on Turkey. The Finns were far less dangerous. (The Fuehrer and Zeitzler then discussed minor troop movements along the front line, from which could be seen that the latter greatly feared what the future would bring, whereas the former could not quite share his pessimism.)

The Fuehrer thought that the enemy would first try to seize Vitebsk, in order to capture the great number of roads and the railway junction. (Consulting a map, the Fuehrer and Zeitzler discussed detailed troop movements at great length. Zeitzler mentioned that most of the formations being transferred from North to South on the Russian front went via Koenigsberg, to make use of the good railway line. Another good line was that running between Bobruisk and Minsk).

(END OF CONFERENCE).

CONFERENCE HELD ON 28TH DECEMBER, 1943

Russian Front

The conference consisted mainly of long and detailed references to maps of the Russian front. The Fuehrer was very angry with Field-Marshal von Manstein, for the latter's handling of the most unfavourable situation in the southern sector of the Russian front, around the Crimea.

Apparently von Manstein had lately made two requests; one of these had been for 8 divisions to enable him to turn the tables. He had received these 8 divisions, plus an extra one as well, viz: 5 of the best available armoured divisions, 3 infantry divisions and one extra paratroop division (airborne division). Yet he plainly could not alter the situation. He had his headquarters in Winniza, which was badly threatened; much fighting seemed to have been taking place in the region of Kamenka. The general opinion at this time was that it was quite out of the question that a victory could be achieved in that sector of the Russian front - the most that could be expected was a speedy end of the fighting. All efforts were being directed towards that end.

Von Manstein hoped that the enemy would try to break through between Tscherkassy and Kirowograd. Shmerinka was the chief railway junction used for German troop movements in that sector. Von Manstein was getting worried about the development of the situation, and was doing everything in his power to move more and more divisions into the sector which he thought was most threatened, even at the expense of possibly upsetting other parts of the line. He had demanded further divisions from the West, imagining that they could be spared.

The Fuehrer scorned Von Manstein's idea of renewing large-scale operations. Colossal quantities of weapons and gear of all kinds had been sent into von Manstein's sector, including some 1500 tanks, quite recently; yet it all seemed to have been of no avail. The Fuehrer wanted the headquarters moved from Winniza at all costs, as it was all too near the actual firing; he thought that even Cernowitz might be better, but in the end decided on Tarnopol. When Hoth had been in charge around Kiev, the morale of the troops had fallen considerably, and even now, after Hoth's removal, their spirits were still bad, which accounted, in part, for Manstein's shortcomings.

The Fuehrer continued that no reinforcements could be sent from the Western Front to Russia. There were no infantry divisions in the West which could be used in the East, but the 371st Division, which was about to be moved from harvesting duties in Yugoslavia to Italy, could perhaps be spared. After much discussion, this suggestion was also abandoned.

Jodl was of the opinion that a crisis in the southern sector of the Russian front must be avoided at all costs, because otherwise an Army would be cut off completely. Even the last movable division from the West must be rushed up to save this Army; otherwise the whole Eastern front would collapse. And then the War would be lost, as nothing was happening in the West. Such a crisis, which was developing "à la Stalingrad", must be avoided.

Zeitzler agreed, saying that he had come to the same conclusions as von Manstein, although for different reasons.

The Fuehrer said that what had demoralised the troops was that they had retreated voluntarily, when the necessity was far from being apparent. Germany had produced more than 200,000 rifles per month; the total had sunk from 6.1 millions to 5.1 millions. With 6 months' production to add, that meant that there had been a loss of 1.5 million rifles; that was the best proof that there was no question of a "successful retreat".

/The

The men had fought well, and dug themselves in. Just because there had been a break-through in the Northern Sector, they could not understand why they should retreat some 500 km. One could not explain it to them.

The conference closed with Zeitzler undertaking to work out the time it would take to send new reserves (the 101st Division etc.) to the front by railway.

(END OF CONFERENCE)

CONFERENCE HELD ON 29TH DECEMBER, 1943.

Zeitzler reported that nothing special had happened since yesterday's conference. He confined himself mainly to map reference, mentioning, however, that there was fighting going on in Kasatyn. At the time the railway station there was in German hands again. Last night Korosten had been re-captured, but this morning the enemy had entered it again.

After discussing extensive troop movements, the Fuehrer said that he was willing to withdraw troops from the Northern sector of the front and transfer them to the South, because he thought that the worst that could happen up North was that the Finns would give trouble, but that was inevitable, anyway, whereas in the South the Crimea, the mountainous region around Kirovoj Rog and Nikopol were at stake. If these were lost the economic and supply situation would suffer incomparably more than in the North. Therefore it was wise to risk everything to stop the fighting in the Southern sector. He was of the opinion, that, even to-day, Heeresgruppe "Nord" could spare some 12 divisions.

The Fuehrer concluded the debate by complaining bitterly of von Manstein's ungratefulness; he acted as if his requests for reinforcements had been entirely ignored, whereas in fact he was just about the only one who had got what he had asked for.

(END OF CONFERENCE)

A.H.B.6. Distribution.

Same as for Translation No.VII/49.