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The Second Hungarian Army Is Decimated at the River Don

Following the failure of Germany's Operation Barbarossa launched against Moscow in the summer of 1941, Hitler demanded increased support from his allies for the initiation of his next campaign against Stalingrad. In January 1942, László Bárdossy made a pledge to Germany's foreign minister, Joachim von Ribbentrop, and General Wilhelm Keitel that a second Hungarian force would be sent to the Eastern Front. Consisting of nine infantry and one armored division, the Second Hungarian Army was to be placed under direct German command.

Arrangements for the deployment of a Second Hungarian Army had already begun by January 1942. While this mobilisation extended throughout the entire territory of Hungary, the draft was done so as to include the smallest possible proportion of younger (and therefore far more valuable for the purpose of national defence) conscripts. Older troops were instead promised that they were to be relieved by fresh reserves once they had reached the front. A force comprised of roughly two hundred-thousand soldiers, the Second Army contained an additional fifty thousand (mostly Jewish) forced labourers who were ordered to serve while unarmed. In a move meant to spare Hungarians, numerous soldiers of ethnic Romanian or Ruthenian origins were also conscripted. It was also stipulated that no more than twenty percent of the Hungarian Army's total effective force could be deployed to the Second Hungarian Army. While some historians are of the opinion that Hungary's military leadership intended to preserve the army's more combat-ready troops for the end of the war, these claims are contradicted by the fact that the Second Hungarian Army not only received half of the weaponry at Hungary's disposal, but was also given three-fourths of its total transportation resources. The fact that the Second Army's military technology—including rifles, horse-drawn artillery and light armored vehicles—was obsolete compared to the far better equipped Red Army is yet another question. The Hungarian government was assured that the German military would provide these Hungarian soldiers with modern equipment once they had reached the front.



Meanwhile, the minister who had urged joining the war on Germany's side, László Bárdossy, was replaced by Miklós Kállay, a choice made by Regent Miklós Horthy in an attempt to loosen ties with Germany. Not a supporter of extremist, pro-German politics, Kállay's goal was to lead Hungary out of the war while sustaining as few losses as possible. Kállay recognized the fact that an Allied victory would represent a way out for Hungary. In the beginning of 1943, Kállay

..... tried to contact British diplomats in an attempt to negotiate the conditions for a
..... truce. In 1942, however, Germany's position was still far too strong to allow for any
..... changes in political leanings. Forced by circumstances to keep his so-called
..... 'shuttlecock politics' a secret from the Germans, Kállay had no choice but to agree
..... to the deployment of the Second Hungarian Army to the Eastern Front.

As preparations were made for its mobilisation to the Eastern Front, Colonel General Gusztáv Jány was chosen to head the Second Hungarian Army. Formerly a member of Hungary's general staff during World War One, Jány had also directed the occupation of Eastern Transylvania in 1940. Sending the divisions to the front was meant to be done in utter secrecy, a move made so as to avoid awakening public outcry; it could not be avoided, however, that family members usually bid farewell to their loved ones at railway stations. One of the slogans created by official propaganda to send the troops off contained the following exhortation: 'This land must be protected there, where the enemy can be best defeated. The farther you go in pursuing the enemy, the safer your parents' home, your children and the future of your Hungarian countrymen will be'.

The Second Hungarian Army was shipped to the front in three groups on a route through Poland. The task for the first unit, the Third Corps, was to push forward from Kursk to Voronezh. The other two units faced a five hundred-kilometre march to the River Don, where they arrived weary and exhausted. Forced labourers had to assist the fighting Hungarian forces by digging trenches, constructing defence systems and doing other forms of physical labour while enduring brutal, humiliating treatment and inhuman living conditions. Once the Germans did not supply the Hungarian army with the promised modern military equipment and gear, troops were not outfitted satisfactorily. Furthermore, in spite of being a light armored military division, the Second Hungarian Army was given the task of defending a front line stretching more than two hundred kilometres, a mission even a heavy armored division would have found difficult to execute. In other words: the army was absolutely inadequate for eliminating the Soviet Army's bridgeheads located at the bend of the River Don. By September 1942, this stand-off ended in the deaths of thirty thousand soldiers serving in the Second Hungarian Army.

As rain turned into snow and temperatures dropped from minus fifteen degrees Celsius to minus forty degrees Celsius by January 1943, unending fog added to the already impossible weather conditions the Hungarian army faced while inadequately supplied with uniforms intended for summer. Reserves were late in arriving and soldiers remained hungry, a situation that could only be remedied by stealing food from the civilian population. The lock mechanism on the five-shot rifle used by the Hungarian troops frequently froze in the cold, while Soviet machine guns remained operable. According to the recollection of Lieutenant Olivér Sigmond, '[o]ur ammunition reserves were getting lower and lower, to the point that by the end I received a division command—in other words, a direct order—literally containing the following words: "I order commanders of defence areas to give fire with heavy weaponry once a week and once per barrel".' As promised reserves continued to show no sign of arriving, morale plummeted and despair took over, leaving troops without any fighting spirit. Most soldiers could not comprehend what the Hungarian army was doing two thousand kilometres from its own territory. With Soviet forces in front of them, beyond the River Don, and endless stretches of Russian snow fields behind them, those fighting on the front felt their own military leadership had sentenced them to death. 'We knew that if we were ever attacked, that would be the end of us', Lieutenant Sigmond recalled. 'Why would that have been the end? Because there wasn't anywhere to go. Where could we have gone? There was a trench about 150 to 200 metres behind us, and after that the snow fields and nothing else. Nothing. End of story'.

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In January 1943, the Second Hungarian Army's situation turned critical. As Captain Árpád Lajos looks back on this period: 'On January 11th the sun was shining brightly and it was -25°C...we ascended to reconnaissance altitude and flew toward the Don. We'd just about reached the Ostrogosk line when the German pilot directed me to observe the left incline. I determined that a column of artificial fog and smoke blanketed the entire width and length of the Uriv bridgehead, to a height of about 1,500-2,000 meters. It remained unmoving due to the lack of wind. We could immediately tell that things were imminent there at the Uriv bridgehead'. On 12 January, Soviet forces at the Uriv and Storozhevoye bridgehead broke forth with the aid of strong tank support. Within a few days they broke through multiple places in the Hungarian defence lines. To make matters worse, in the south Italian forces fighting Soviets attacking from the Shchuchye bridgehead took flight, thereby leaving the Hungarian troops in even worse circumstances. In spite of the increasingly desperate situation, Hungary's political and military leadership persisted in—at Hitler's orders—maintaining the demoralising command to 'defend our own positions at all costs' because 'there is no road back, just ahead'. For days at a time and while even launching a counter-attack in some places, the Hungarian units covered the withdrawal of the German motorized units, a situation of which the Germans sometimes took brutal advantage. This is how Captain Tibor Zetelaky remembered the retreat: 'We were able to make our way on sleds to the next position, where the Germans didn't even treat us like a fighting force...it was almost as if we had three enemies there—the cold, the Russians and then the Germans'.

It was not until 16 January that Colonel General Jány was willing to resist orders from the German military leaders. By then whatever remained of his army had already given up the fight. Lacking any reorganisation of its command structure, the Second Army's troops had no chance at reforming their combat line. Meanwhile, the advancing Soviet forces had already flanked those Hungarian units still fighting. Complete chaos broke out, rendering any kind of orderly retreat impossible. For those left alive under the barrage of Soviet bullets, the only remaining choice was to drag themselves west across the endless snow fields where they froze to death. In the words of Sergeant Major Imre Fenyvesi: 'A skinned horse was there. The haunches and bigger chunks of meat had already been stripped away. A Hungarian soldier wrapped in a piece of tent was sitting on it. The wind had blown snow all over him...I tried to move him, but he was frozen to the horse'. As far as the forced labourers were concerned, most of the survivors either ended up in Soviet Prisoner of War (POW) camps or fled to the enemy side.

Hungary's military leadership was incapable of handling this crisis situation appropriately. On 24 January, Gusztáv Jány issued a new military command in which it was stated that the Hungarian Army had broken its vows and lost its honor. Jány decreed order and total discipline while threatening execution for anyone to abandon his unit. This military command elicited such a strong outcry in military circles that Jány later withdrew it.

The greatest defeat in the history of Hungary's military occurred in the area surrounding Voronezh. 42,000 soldiers and 25,000 forced labourers fell there, while 28,000 were taken captive. Altogether, the Second Hungarian Army lost between 100,000 and 120,000 men. Any survivors were shipped back to Hungary beginning in April 1943. A taboo topic under socialism, Sándor Sára's twenty-five episode, black-and-white documentary film series entitled 'Chronicle: the Second Hungarian Army at the River Don' was aired on Hungarian television in 1982.

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