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The Operation of the Supreme Commander East Against Wilna.

1. The Battles in Lithuania and Courland until the End of August¹.

a) The Battles of the Niemen Army.

(Maps 6 and 7, Tables 26).

The July Campaign Against Mitau and Schaulen.

From the month of July onwards, the battles of the Niemen Army are no longer to be regarded as independent actions, but as preparations for a future offensive against Wilna, which the Supreme Commander East proposed as an effective support for the offensive in South Poland on July 2 in Posen, and which also received the approval of General von Falkenhayn for a later date². The Supreme Commander East kept this constantly in view. Should this breakthrough operation penetrate so deeply into the enemy's deployment that it had full effect, then on the one hand, the large fortress of Kowno had to be taken, which secured the northern flank of the Russian Niemen front; on the other hand, securing against the railway lines leading from the interior of the empire to Dünaburg and Riga was necessary. The latter task had to be solved first, with the approach to the lower Düna and the blocking of this power line being the most effective means and requiring the least forces over time. However, from the beginning of July, as all the strength of the Supreme Commander East had to be directed towards the Narew operation, only very limited resources were available; intentions and objectives had to adapt to this and therefore change repeatedly in detail.

The 10th Army received orders on July 2 to suspend the preparations already begun for the attack on Kowno³, and based on that order, to cover the left flank of the Ditierees in the previously established position; the Niemen Army, with the 41st Infantry Division as a new force ready to intervene, was to attack the Russian 5th Army, thereby relieving the German 10th Army and distracting the enemy's attention from the Narew operation.

¹ Connection to G. 130 ff. - ² G. 271 ff. - ³ G. 277. - ⁴ G. 280.

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Task and Organization of the Njemen Army.

The Njemen Army under General of Infantry Otto von Below was at that time with around seven infantry divisions and five cavalry divisions in the area north of the Njemen from the lower Dubissa to the area east of Libau in a front width of about 250 kilometers. The opposing enemy seemed to be superior (somewhat). General von Below wanted to launch the attack, similar to how the Supreme Commander had often ordered at that time in the directive of June 14, to avoid the strong enemy positions at Schauern, which led the present Russian northern wing consisting of cavalry, in order to then swing against the flank and rear of the Schauern position. Accordingly, he organized his troops under the weakening of the right wing as follows: Southern group under Lieutenant General Freiherr von Richthofen (Higher Cavalry Commander 1 with Department Esbed, 36th Reserve Division, Division Beckmann, 3rd and Bavarian Cavalry Division) from the Njemen to the Rakiewo Lake south of Schaueln, Corps 3 Morning (General Command of the 1st Reserve Corps with Brigade Homeyer and 1st Reserve Division) in the positions before Schaueln, Northern Corps under General von Lauenstein (General Command of the XXXIX Reserve Corps with 6th and 78th Reserve and 41st Infantry Division) northward following behind the course of the Windau up to north of the railway line Libau–Murawjewo, Cavalry Corps of Lieutenant General Egon Graf von Schmetton (6th and 2nd Cavalry Division) northward following, Group of Lieutenant General von Pappritz (Governor of Libau with 8th Cavalry Division and troops of the fortress) at Hasenpot and east of it. The implementation of this organization required considerable marches; the attack could therefore only begin around July 15. In this context, the Northern Corps, accompanied by cavalry on the left flank, was to initially move in the general direction of Mitau, the left wing of the Pappritz group.

1) I. and ½ XXXIX. R.R. 41. I.D., 6. R.R.D., Div. Beckmann, Dept. Esbed and troops from Libau; 2), 3., 6. and Bavarian R.D. 2) In fact, about nine infantry and seven cavalry divisions, essentially the same forces as seen from p. 469. 3) p. 127. 4) Gren. Regt. 2 and Erl. Regt. Königsberg including artillery, etc. 5) Including 29. Abw. and two brigades of the 4th R.D.

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As the troops from Libau were involved here, the navy was provided for the protection of the place against the sea, but also for immediate support through naval forces in the advance against Wilna. Due to the expected supply difficulties at Borridien, the further construction of the Bolbahn Memel-Bajohren across the border to connect with the Libau-Schallen railway was requested from the chief of railway construction, who, however, estimated a construction time of six months; thus, little was offered for the upcoming operations. They also agreed on the Libau-Schallen railway. The enemy deems it necessary, it seems, that he is attacking his northern flank of the front in Poland. Northwest of Schallen, it was estimated that there were only about two Russian infantry divisions against the four Germans designated for the attack. There had also been signs for a long time that the Russians would clear the western Courland in the event of further German attacks. Since the attack of Army Group Gallwitz against the Narew was to begin on July 13, the advance in Courland was finally set for July 14 at the request of the Supreme Commander East, in order to achieve the desired distracting effect. On this day, the Northern Corps, with the left wing (41st Infantry Division) north of the town of Muranowo-Mitik, launched the attack, alongside the cavalry divisions. Over a front of about 30 kilometers, the crossing over Windau was forced, and the middle and left wings gained ground against Russian cavalry and landwehr up to 15 kilometers forward. Aircraft reported continued fires in the north as well as numerous refugee columns, thus creating the impression of significance that the enemy wanted to withdraw. On the other hand, on the right wing of the Northern Corps, the 6th Reserve Division made little progress against stronger enemy resistance. On July 15, the spatial successes across the entire attack front, especially on the northern wing, could be expanded. The attempt to cut off parts of the enemy succeeded, but just as little as days before. On July 16, the Russian resistance intensified. In the 78th Reserve Division, only the left wing advanced.