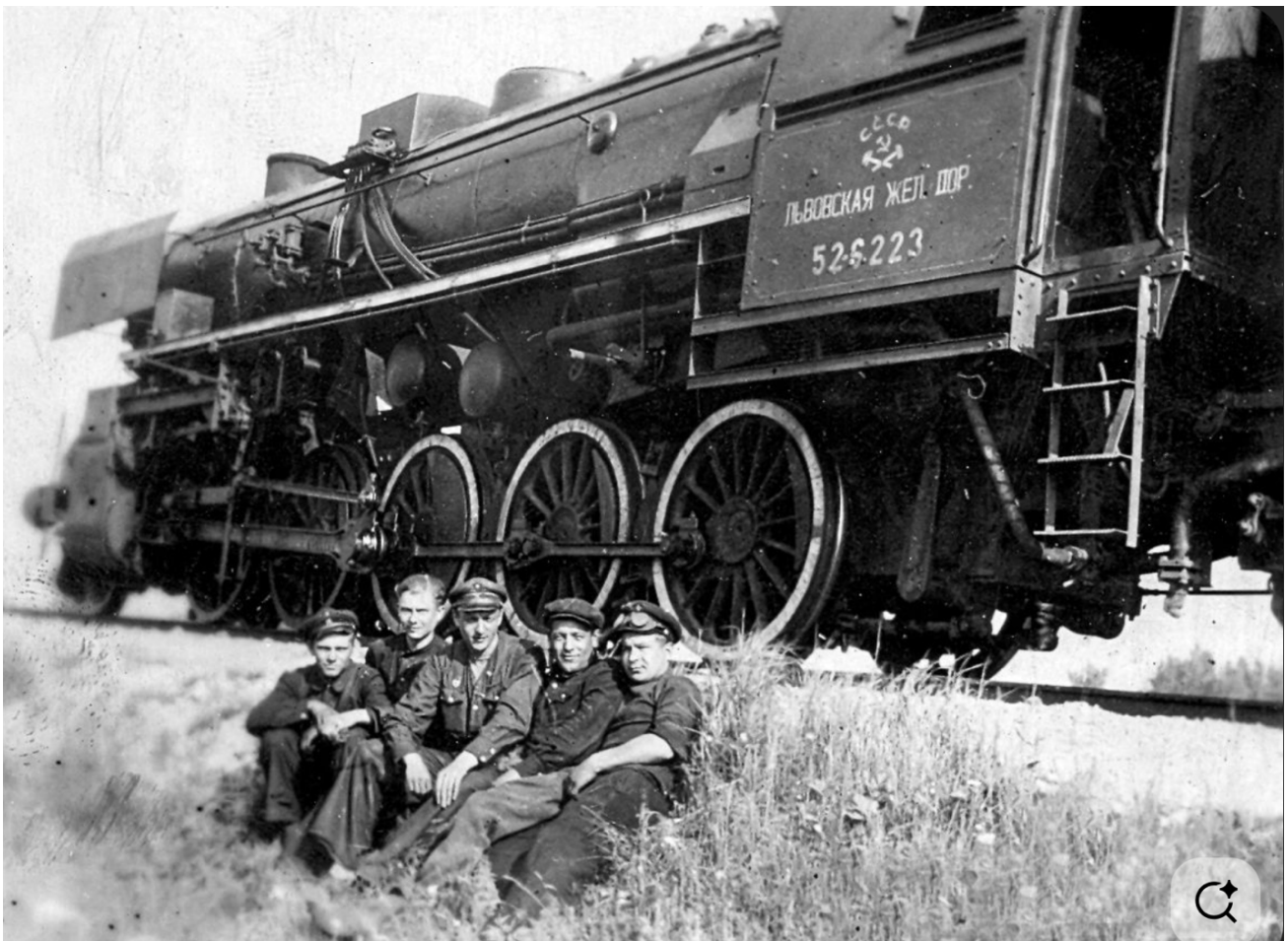




*An occasional
column by
**Andrew
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All Quiet at Bagrationovsk



Five Russian railwaymen display their captured German locomotive on a single-track railway line that crosses a Napoleonic battlefield in East Prussia. Their

Second World War *kriegslokomotive* simmers two kilometres from the frontier between Soviet Russia and Communist Poland. The line leads 37 kilometres north to the former East Prussian city of Königsberg, captured by the Red Army in April 1945 and re-named Kaliningrad by Joseph Stalin in 1946.

The railwaymen recorded their obvious affection for 52 6223 on the run-round loop at a station they knew as Багра́тио́новск [Bagrationovsk]. The old German station house is still standing. It was grandly built in the imperial 'Wilhelmine' style by the K.P.u.G.H.St.E, the *Königlich Preußische und Großherzoglich Hessische Staatseisenbahn*, a company known to Cook's Continental Timetables as the Royal Prussian and Grand-Ducal Hessian State Railways.

The frontier beyond the railhead at Bagrationovsk ceased to be a Warsaw Pact boundary between Soviet Russia and Communist Poland in 1989 and in 2003 became the frontier between Vladimir Putin's Russia and the European Union.

The town founded by Prussian knights of the Teutonic Order around 1348, was until 1945 known as Preussische-Eylau. *Ylow* was the Old Prussian word for mud and swamp.

The 6,400 largely Russian residents of Bagrationovsk are now living 150 kilometres west of the Suwalki Gap, a lonely area of primeval forest and impenetrable marshes described by the German-owned *Politico* news service in 2022 as 'the most dangerous place on earth' outside a war zone. 'In a showdown between Russia and NATO, the "Suwałki Gap" would likely be the first point of contact.'¹ *Politico* has suggested that the fourth president of Estonia, Toomas Hendrik Ilves, claimed to have invented the concept of the *Suwalki Gap*² before his crucial 2015 meeting with Ursula von der Leyen, then German defence minister, now president of the European Commission.³

A railway historian, Dale W. Fickés,⁴ has traced the history of 52 6223 at Bagrationovsk⁵ from around 1942 until around 1992, when it was still listed as

¹ <<https://www.politico.eu/article/suwalki-gap-russia-war-nato-lithuania-poland-border/>>

² The Fulda Gap [*Fulda-Lücke*] had been the obvious lowland attack corridor for a Soviet tank invasion of West Germany during the Cold War, 1947-1991.

³ Matthew Karnitschnig, 'The Most Dangerous Place on Earth' (2022), pp. 18-19.
<<https://www.politico.eu/article/suwalki-gap-russia-war-nato-lithuania-poland-border/>>

⁴ <<https://steamlocomotive.info/nloconoteshow.cfm?which=26086>>

⁵ Photo courtesy Soviet Railway Collection [Sovetskaya zheleznodorozhnaya kollektsiya].

1042 4570 in the Kaliningrad strategic reserve of the Soviet Union, at least six months after the upper house of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union had voted the union out of existence.⁶

More than 6,300 *kriegsloks*, many built with forced labour in 13 nationalised workshops controlled by Albert Speer,⁷ were delivered between 1942 and 1945 to a radical 2-10-0 design by Dr Richard Wagner.⁸ Dr Wagner was awarded the gold medal of the Society of British Locomotive Engineers in 1936 and retired as *Reichsbahnoberrat* in June 1942, by which time some of his *kriegsloks* were 220 miles from Moscow, running on tracks converted to German gauge and stabled at a depot known to German railwaymen as *Bw Smolensk Ost*.



52 6223 survived the *Götterdämmerung* of 1945, turning up in post-war Czechoslovakia and working for the CSD until SZD, Soviet Railways, seized her as war reparations to work on un-converted standard gauge railway lines in former East Prussia.

A month after the death of the old Bolshevik Mikhail Kalinin on 3 June

⁶ December 26, 1991.

⁷ Minister of Armaments and War Production in Nazi Germany.

⁸ 1882-1957, unrelated to Hitler's favourite composer.

1946, Joseph Stalin signed an edict re-naming the captured city of Königsberg as Kaliningrad. Clement Attlee and Harry Truman had already agreed at the Potsdam Conference that Königsberg should become a Soviet 'exclave' surrounded by Poland and Lithuania.

Not all the captured Kaliningrad railways were converted to Russian gauge and an old East Prussian line from Königsberg ran through Preussische-Eylau to Bartenstein, now Polish Bartoszyce, and Rastenburg, now Polish Kętrzyn, only 7 kilometres from Adolf Hitler's secret wartime headquarters – the *Wolfschanze*.⁹

In February 1807, the Russians, Cossacks and Prussians had fought the inconclusive Battle of Eylau in temperatures of minus 25 degrees Celsius, against Napoleon's *Grande Armée*. In 1945, therefore, the Soviets renamed the township after Pyotr Bagration a steadfast general during the horrific encounter with Napoleon at Eylau.¹⁰

Stalin had already invoked Bagration's name for the devastating 1944 summer offensive in Byelorussia that left 450,000 German soldiers killed, wounded or captured, and is sometimes termed the Destruction of Army Group Centre.

The 1807 Battle of Eylau was described by the British military historian Loraine Petre (1852-1925):

It requires a strong effort of the imagination to picture the horrors of that night. The valley and the heights on either side, deeply buried in snow, were lit by the bivouac fires of 120,000 men. The flames flickered in the icy north wind which swept along the positions, carrying with it the smoke from the damp wood, and the constantly falling snow. Not even the pale light of all these hundreds of fires could impart warmth to this arctic scene. The men crowded round the fires for warmth, hardly for rest; for what rest was possible in such circumstances? Between the opposing lines of fires stood the outposts of the armies, and the sentries, who, on their cheerless posts, must have thought with envy even of their

⁹ <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sconce_\(fortification\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sconce_(fortification))>

¹⁰ 'Bagration was by birth a Georgian, of short stature, with strong dark features and eyes flashing with Asiatic fire. Gentle, gracious, generous, chivalrously brave, he was beloved by everyone and admired by all who witnessed his exploits. No officer ever excelled him in direction of an advance or rear guard; nor had any officer's capacity in these commands ever been so severally tested; especially in the retreat from Pultusk to Eylau in the last war.' General Sir Robert Wilson, British liaison officer with Bagration in 1812.
<<https://archive.org/details/narrativeofevent00wils/page/n7/mode/2up>>

companions behind them . . .

Food was lacking to both sides. In the villages nothing was left but potatoes and water. Augereau and his staff with difficulty obtained a loaf or two of bread. The provision trains had not been able to follow closely the long French column, marching from Landsberg on a single road. The Russians suffered still more severely from hunger and cold. For days previously the soldiers had to prowl and dig for the buried food of the peasantry; so that, between search of provision and duty, they had scarce time to lie down, and when they did, they had no other bed than the snow, no shelter but the heavens, and no covering but their rags.¹¹

When the five Russian railwaymen asked their pal to take their picture with 52 6223 it was surely inconceivable that German soldiers on active service would ever return to the battlefield of Eylau. Yet German soldiers reappeared this summer at Budry, 80 kilometres along the Polish–Kaliningrad border from Bagrationovsk. Forty Bundeswehr sappers laid a triple row of concrete ‘Czech hedgehogs’ as part of the 800-kilometre planned East Shield¹² of tank traps. *Generalleutnant* Harald Gante, commander of the German Field Army, joined his NATO colleague, General Stanislaw Czosnek, on the border at Budry.

Lukasz Jasinski at the Polish Institute for International Affairs told *Deutsche Welle*:

the participation of German sappers has politically symbolic significance. Poland wants to convince Germany and other partners that Poland’s eastern border is also the external border of the EU and NATO. Our Western partners should treat this border a bit like their own.¹³

French, Romanian, Croatian and even British reconnaissance groups have been seen around Elk, a formerly Prussian town in the Masurian Lakes, ‘only 57 clicks from Suwalki’. The second battalion of the Royal Anglian Regiment, known as ‘The Poachers’, are described as spearhead battalion for NATO’s Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (Land).¹⁴

¹¹ Loraine Petre, *Napoleon’s Campaign in Poland, 1806–1807* (London: John Lane, 1907). OCLC: 504519385

¹² *Tarcza Wschód*

¹³ <<https://www.dw.com/en/german-army-helps-poland-protect-itself-against-russia/a-78464726>>

¹⁴ <<https://www.royalanglianregiment.com/news/2nd-battalion-poland/>>

Vladimir Putin told the Valdai political forum in Moscow on October 1:

If it comes to a direct attack on the Russian Federation – in this case, we are referring to Kaliningrad, and perhaps other territories as well – the question of the Russian Federation deploying all the weapons at our country's disposal will, of course, inevitably and immediately be on the agenda.¹⁵

Poland's *Tarcza Wschód* of Czech hedgehogs and planned minefields heads towards Bagrationovsk, in the face of constant clandestine provocation from the Kremlin and high treason at the White House. For how long, I wonder, will there be 'nichts Neues'¹⁶ at Preussische-Eylau?



Railways of the Kalinin Oblast, Wikimedia Commons.

¹⁵ <<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/putin-says-world-is-living-through-dangerous-moment-warns-west-not-escalate-2026-10-01/>>

¹⁶ *Im Westen nichts Neues*, [*All Quiet on the Western Front*] by Erich Maria Remarque, 1928.