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Red Army's Penal Battalions in the memoirs of a witness of history

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Red Army's penal battalions

The first information of penal battalions appeared already in 1919. Then were created disciplinary units which initially were called penal units. They were used as a correctional and nurture facility for private soldiers and members of younger leadership division who were sentenced to more than one-year detention. Battalions itself existed, under many different names (e.g. battalion, company), till 1934¹. However, by virtue of the decree of July 6 1940 signed by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, once again battalions were formed, but this time they were called disciplinary battalions. Changes and modifications had been declared by decrees every few months. According to the decree of August 12 1941, battalions took a completely different turn². Soldiers from a company were drafted into active service. In virtue of the decree of July 28 penal battalions must have been created mandatorily on the front and in the armies. The reason why soldiers landed in those battalions were breach of discipline, cowardice and many other military and civil violations. Penal units were not only involved into war activities but served also as a workforce.

The first document where we find the idea of punishing deserters is the Order No 264 of August 5 1918, given by the Commissioner of Military Affairs Leon Trocki. According to this order, each document which might have been used for identification should bear a special stamp or signing saying that "this so-and-so for his shameful behavior has been expelled from the Worker-Peasant Red Army."³

The document that informs about the creation of penal units is the Leon Trocki's Order No 262 of January 13 1919⁴. In this document Trocki proposes to create a penal battalion of deserters. He cites the example of the unit of this kind from

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¹ DAJNES 2015: 153.

² DAYNES 2008: 10.

³ DAJNES 2015: 155.

⁴ DAYNES 2008: 5.

Kamyszyn where soldiers showed distinctive bravery and even later became an exemplary company. By the Order No 997, signed by J.M. Sklianski, separate penal companies were created: 1) to confirm and bring into force the decree on creation of penal units and their function as a separate penal unit; 2) Penal units can be created where appropriate; 3) In the front units' dislocation area the creation of penal units rests upon front headquarters by virtue of War-Revolutionary Front Boards; in the inner military circles the creation rests upon military county stations; 4) Soldiers who committed a military crime or deserted are to be sent to the penal company; 5) A special sign is to be created to indicate deserters in the penal company – a black armband on left arm, 2 cm wide and 3 verses high⁵.

Soldiers sentenced for criminal offenses of a military nature, mainly desertion, were sent to penal units. Its causes were the winter weather, shortages in supplies, not only food, but also clothing, and the proximity of the town of origin of soldiers was often an escape. During the seven months of 1919, 95,000 deserters were condemned, most of whom were sent to prison units, and 600 were shot. In 1920, 10,666 cases of defection were registered, of which 17,500 were acquitted, 24,334 were convicted, 31,315 were sent to prison, 15,380 were sent to penal companies and concentration camps, 368 were removed from law and 5757 were sentenced to death by shooting. In other cases 12 352, a different type of penalty was applied⁶.

Experience in the creation and use of criminal units had a significant impact on the formation of the army during World War II. Stalin, the People's Commissar of Defense of the USSR, issued the order No. 227 on July 28, 1942, in which he began the creation of battalions and penal units: "War councils of the fronts, and above all the front commander: [...] c) they are to create from one to three (depending on the situation) criminal battalions (800 people), to which commanders of medium and high levels and appropriate officers are directed politics of all kinds of troops, guilty of violating discipline through cowardice or shakiness, and deploying them on more difficult sections of the front to give them the opportunity to repent of their crimes against the Homeland. Military councils of the army, and above all, army commanders: [...] c) they are to create within the army from five to ten (depending on the situation) penal companies (from 150 people in each), to whom rank soldiers and junior commanders, guilty of violating discipline through cowardice or shakiness and deploying them on more difficult sections of the army to give them the opportunity to redeem their crimes against the Homeland with blood"⁷.

The penal companies were formed from July 28, 1942, by virtue of order No. 227. Their activities were completed on the basis of the staff directive of the 5th Army No. 0238 from October 28, 1945. Soldiers earlier, on July 18, 1945, embraced the amnesty introduced under the decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, "About amnesty in connection with the victory over Nazi Germany"⁸.

⁵ DAJNES 2015: 155.

⁶ DAJNES 2015: 157.

⁷ https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Приказ_НКО_СССР_от_28.07.1942_№_227 (Acces: 30.11.2017).

⁸ DAJNES 2015: 159.

Law basics

The legality of referral to a branch and a criminal unit has not always been respected. Military prosecutors revealed many accidents when a soldier or sergeant was sent to the unit for minor offenses. The main reason was not the severity of the law, but the rampant informers and excessive suspicion.

In the regulations regarding battalions and penal companies, it was pointed out that the so-called permanent staff (commanders, military commissioners, etc.) were appointed to command positions of the front or army commander, chosen from strong wills and the most distinguished officers and party functionaries in the fighting. As for ordinary soldiers: many of them volunteered for themselves, because “formally” in a penal company, when assigning to tasks, the consent of a soldier was needed for positions⁹. Commanders, on the other hand, were also sent there from ordinary units, without committing any crimes, as evidence of a kind of reward for good service to their homeland. Some of the young soldiers often did not have accurate information on what type of unit they rely on. Counting on a fast military career and the possibility of fighting at the front, without unnecessary objections, they often volunteered to command. However, most of the soldiers who went there have committed military crimes – desertification from the battlefield or cowardice at the critical moment of the skirmish. Some, especially those who once had friends in high positions, were convicted on the basis of invented accusations. Service in this type of battalion was also a punishment for crimes, and mainly for thefts¹⁰.

The regulations regarding battalions and penal companies determined for the permanent staff a half service shorter than in the commander and political cadre of active army units, and each month of service in penal formations was counted for six months when determining retirement. Often, for such commanders, advance promotions, numerous rewards, special assignments were foretold, which, as the former soldiers recalled, often remained on paper¹¹. In the memoirs of one of them, Belayev, we read: “To describe everything I had to survive, it is not possible. You would have to be there. It's enough to say that by the age of 23, I have grown gray. It is true that in a year and seven months I was given a captain and a major. An incentive for us, officers of the permanent penalty unit, who went into battle together with those who had to redeem the blame for the homeland with the blood, was a double pay, which we traditionally passed on to the Defense Fund”¹².

In the regulations concerning penal companies, it was stressed that after the soldier had given the appointed time in the unit, the headquarters submitted to the war council an application for his release. Moreover, by showing courage and bravery during the fights on the front, the convict has the opportunity to apply for release before the time and can also be presented by the commander for decorations. There was also a record saying that when a soldier was wounded in a battle, his punishment was automatically canceled. The question is: were these assumptions observed? Everything depended on the commanders. After successful action of the so-called

⁹ DAINES 2015: 205.

¹⁰ GOL'BRAYKH 2008: 194.

¹¹ GAVRILENKO 2008: 257.

¹² PYLCYN 2008: 52.

“jaunt” to the rear of the opponent, one of the commanders released all shtrafniks, regardless of whether they were seriously wounded or not. He justified his decision with the extraordinary courage and honesty of the soldiers. There were also cases when the entire battalion was granted a pardon, but before the verdict was strengthened, the entire valiant squad was killed in the next skirmish. On the other hand, despite the enormous involvement of the fighting, he pardoned only those who fell on the battlefield and the wounded who were unable to take further military action. The second part were applications for the restoration of military grades and decorations¹³. However, the most-used reward was the possibility of a few days' rest. Sometimes, when there were no troops in some units, several groups of army and front tribunals appeared in the place of stationing, who immediately dismissed the battalion and transferred to units where the fighting was missing at the time. Interestingly, the soldiers were not happy about these events. They explained their attitude that they got used to this mode of military life and found themselves in the unit of colleagues and friends, and transfer to another squadron is unnecessary.

By the end of 1942, there were 24,993 shtrafniks in the Red Army. In 1943, their number increased to 177 694, in 1944 it decreased to 143 457, and in 1945 was 81 766. To sum up, during the World War II, 427,910 soldiers fought in the penal companies. In these years 65 independent criminal battalions and 1028 penal companies were established¹⁴.

Battalions and penal companies were used on the most difficult sections of the fronts and the toughest combat tasks. However, their orders and regulations did not indicate which missions they should be directed to. Everything depended on the situation and the place in which the given branch was found.

Penal companies performed suicide tasks, such as mine clearance, for example. It was even claimed that these soldiers were thrown into hell, usually where the infantry could not cope. They went to attack without preparation, fire support and appropriate weapons. The fighters were basically destined to perform one-off tasks. These battalions were used only a few times a month, but despite the fact that they spent their remaining time in close backs in a state of readiness, they had to reckon with the fact that they would be in the middle of the worst fight in a moment. Quite often, these units were treated as complementary and designed to correct the errors of the command¹⁵. In the soldiers' memories, the issue of emotions that the enemy unit has raised is often discussed. Some people thought that the Germans looked in horror at the criminal unit. In fact, it was an attack of people who were condemned to death in advance, so they have nothing to lose¹⁶. They were also aware that most of them want to buy their faults at all costs and pour blood for their homeland.

Although at some point in the penal battalions fought about 400 thousand soldiers, the authorities decided that civil prisoners from the Gulag will be directed to these companies. Some researchers say that overflowing blood was more than one million at one time, but it can be considered an exaggeration. The promises of rehabilitation themselves in these cases proved to be false due to the bureaucracy and

¹³ PYL'TSYN 2007: 248.

¹⁴ DAYNES 2008: 79-82; MOROZ 2008: 148-164.

¹⁵ RISKIN 2008: 281-283.

¹⁶ DAJNES 2015: 238.

indifference of officials to human fate. Often soldiers who committed heroic deeds were left in their units, which can be easily compared with leaving them to certain death¹⁷.

The culminating moment in the history of penal companies was the beginning of 1945. Just before the start of the offensive on Berlin, anyone who could fight was directed to the military unit. Prisoners were the most widely accepted group. As many times have been mentioned – they could only pay a tribute to their homeland for their offenses with their own blood¹⁸. The need for new soldiers was so strong that the State Defense Committee issued a special directive on sending prisoners to the front. A specific number of convicts should be provided by the NKVD's regional and military prosecution authorities¹⁹. All this, not hiding, to some extent was a great opportunity for prisoners. The opportunity to “break out” from everyday life and wait for a slow death seemed like a life chance. Everything depended on the branch to which they were going.

In connection with the tasks performed by soldiers in the penal unit, the losses in the population were enormous. In the year 1944, total personal losses, i.e. killed and wounded, from all criminal units amounted to 170 298 people. When calculating the average, 14.191 persons per month were from the unit. It was from 3 to even 6 times more casualties than on average in ordinary armies in the same operations in 1944²⁰.

Memoirs of a soldier

Serving in a penal battalion means not only fighting the enemy and trying to redeem your wines. It consisted of many different factors. Some of them are obvious – battle on the front, command, and others help to survive and not break down. Reconciling with fate was one of the toughest tasks that soldiers faced from the unit²¹. Being aware of the risks they face, they had to look for ways to escape reality. Some had military education, others were so-called “simple” people who never had a chance to see a weapon before.

Vladimir Wiktorowicz Wojciechowicz was born on May 10, 1924 in the town of Skobrowka in the Minsk region. He completed 10 classes at the school in Marijna Gorka²² which was widely known and graduates of mathematical profile classes, only on the basis of an interview, without preliminary examinations were accepted to the Bauman Institute²³ in Moscow. At school, the ideals of justice, equality and brotherhood were instilled in students. 45mm guns or construction of rifles and guns were no secrets for them. Wladimir Wojciechowicz found the war preparations he obtained at school appropriate. The lecturers were officers with combat experience and they always explained something to the listeners calling an example taken from life. Interestingly, to make them real officers they were also taught dancing. Although everyone was trained for a different weapon, the other weapons were also to be known

¹⁷ PYL'TSYN 2007: 180.

¹⁸ KULESHOV 2008: 278.

¹⁹ BEEVOR 2015a: 200.

²⁰ DAJNES 2015: 212.

²¹ BABCHENKO 2008: 165.

²² DRABKIN 2015: 209.

²³ Technical university which specializes in education of specialists in the field of military industry.

in detail. He praised the discipline and punishment for the insubordination. In addition, he mentions simple things, such as the ban on bathing in the Ural River, because it was so dirty²⁴. After graduating from school, he was immediately directed to the front and received the rank of lieutenant.

Commanders

The author remembered and recalled his commanders with sympathy. He claimed that he always got on with educated, cultural and ambitious officers. Describing the figure of Colonel Lubienchenko, he spared no praise and compliments. In Wojciechowicz's opinion Lubienchenko was an honest and noble man but marked by a heavy fate. About his past he knew only that around 1938, when a wave of repression swept through the army, the officer stood up for the commander of the regiment and was sentenced to a labor camp for 10 years²⁵. Although he returned to service after a short time, the events he witnessed in that place left a huge mark on him. The soldier mentioned that even in the worst situations, the commander did not raise his voice or abuse alcohol, what could seem unreal, considering the conditions under which soldiers lived and where they were. The second commander, whom he well remembered was Vasily Filipovitch Margelov. Wojciechowicz considered him a competent man in the right position. In spite of impetuosity and energy, and at some moments of exaggerated courage (the author himself claimed that some actions should have been more cautious), he aroused respect and admiration among his subordinates²⁶.

The beginning in the penal company

One of the most often memories is how they got to the penal company. Wojciechowicz was sent there immediately after returning from the hospital. He was appointed commander of the mortar regiment. At first he was terrified that he was directed to a penal company. He kept asking himself: what for? It turned out, however, that officers get there, for whom it is not only a chance for development, but also other benefits, such as greater pay and double counting of years of service. He also described his first subordinates. They came from around Azov. Already during the incorporation of them into the unit a problem arose. There were more than 250 soldiers, however, due to the riots taking place at night, 25 remained detained to explain the incident. This was the group from Rostov, famous for robberies, which Wojciechowicz commanded²⁷. From the very beginning, they started to give him an ultimatum, and he, basically without too much choice, gave in and agreed on the crazy ideas of his subordinates. One of the methods to get into the unit was the use of a water tram. Despite the lack of funds (the soldiers got them quickly and in a not too legal way), and a forced stop lasting up to three days in the family home of one of the men, they arrived unscathed and without major problems on the agreed place. Their commander only mentioned that he could not do anything, because they outnumbered him and they

²⁴ DRABKIN 2015: 218.

²⁵ DRABKIN 2015: 219.

²⁶ DRABKIN 2015: 203.

²⁷ DRABKIN 2015: 221.

had known each other for years and because of the fact that he had their sentences in the bag, which if they took them, they would have disappeared without a trace. He had no choice but to agree to their solutions. The story is not too happy, because these soldiers came under the command of lieutenant Fadiejew, with whom the commander-in-chief had conflicts. Lieutenant knew German well and once he moved to German positions to overhear Germans' conversations. Then he was hit in the back. The whole situation set the group in front of the field court, and the guilty party was shot.

Another story worth to mention was the preparation of soldiers to go outside their homeland. Wojciechowicz mentioned the collection that took place before leaving for Romania, when the commanding officer ordered them to behave duly abroad, and that the spread of vengeance, theft and general unnecessary violence would be punished in a strict and even final manner which was the shooting. He also remarked that soldiers were welcomed like the lierators in every country they reached²⁸. The local population did not spare sympathy and “available amount” of alcohol.

Fighting on the front

The memoirs obviously included also descriptions of fights on the front. Immediately after school, Wojciechowicz came to the northern outskirts of Stalingrad. He described heavy street fights and the snipers' faultlessness. He was seriously injured during those fights. The bullet hit the building in which his unit was stationing. He was completely covered up, only his officer boots were standing above the rubble, thanks to which colleagues knew where to dig. He spent several days in the hospital, unable to speak, and the explosion took his hearing for a while. After leaving this place, he immediately went to the front²⁹. The entire battalion was to be in front of the enemy and had to prepare for a meeting with him in a town more than 150 kilometers away. A grueling march followed by a fierce fight, and the names of the town – this undoubtedly stamped into the narrator's memory. This was one of the most important battles to which the criminal company was directed. The battles took place in small villages whose names, due to the area of the USSR, do not say anything. Soldiers, or rather commanders who committed the withdrawal of their units, were automatically degraded and sent to a penal company. The first battalion on the Stalingrad front appeared around August 22. All commanders who decided to withdraw from the battlefield were gathered in one branch.

Parts of the soldiers were told that soon they would be summoned to the commission and sentenced. However, everything took place immediately, because they went straight to the penal company. Unfortunately, after a few months, when some of them had already died in the fight, it turned out that the whole incident was someone's mistake³⁰.

Some of the memories related to the clash on the Dnieper. The soldiers defending the front line were so few that they were within 400 meters of each other. When the German reconnaissance team reached the shore occupied by the Russians, it went on patrol and killed six of its members, but despite the small success, the

²⁸ DRABKIN 2015: 222.

²⁹ DRABKIN 2015: 224.

³⁰ BEEVOR 2015b: 104.

Wehrmacht soldiers captured the battery commander who gave them the coordinates. Thanks to them, the artillery squadron was destroyed. After the war, all the guilty officer was caught and put in front of a field court, which in principle can even be considered a show trial. Guilty was sentenced to 10 years in a labor camp, moreover, veterans asked him why he gave such accurate coordinates. He replied that he had no idea that the Germans would fire. At this point, the author admitted that he participated in at least three show trials³¹. The convicts were soldiers who deserted or refused to fight on the front lines.

The second battle was fought in Moldova. There Wojciechowicz commanded the battalion. Due to unfavorable conditions in the field (the occurrence of the Dniester from the bed and flooding of nearby lands), in order to relieve its subordinates, the commanding officer ordered to conduct continuous open fire, which resulted in getting rid of unnecessary heavy grenades. Even for such bravery he was to be brought before a field court, but due to the course of events, this never happened³². The fights on the bank of the Mius River were very heavy and bloody. Many outstanding and talented commanders and an unlimited number of soldiers died there. This was caused by a well-developed defense line and the creation of solid trenches by the Germans. He recalled that the entire road to the Dnieper could be stained with the bodies of fallen comrades because so many lost their lives there. He considered the heaviest personally under the Moscow clashes that took place before he was sent to the penal company. He described them as difficult. The author did not mean only the strength of the opponent, but also the responsibility that rested on the shoulders of the fighters. It is also worth noting that the soldiers had excellent equipment in the form of uniforms. However, there were cases of freezing. It was really close that his fate would be similar. If it was not for the commander's vigilance and quick reaction of his battalion colleagues, he would die³³. What's more, these types of assault units went in complete silence, without any "Urra!" shouts that were typical of infantry. The attack also did not move the whole unit at once, where the soldiers walked side by side at a distance of three meters. Comrade could only be seen from the corner of his eye, and not actually touched, as it is usually shown³⁴.

Decoration

At the beginning of the war, no soldiers were honored at all, although it was at that time that the toughest fighting was going on. The first decorations, this time on a mass scale, took place after the Battle of Stalingrad³⁵. This was caused not only by the enormous sacrifice and decoration of the soldiers, but by the pressure from the then commander Staciura³⁶. After the fighting on the Dniepr line, many soldiers got their first decorations, while at the end of the war they were rewarded very generously, although the author of these memories immediately pointed out that he could not show

³¹ DRABKIN 2015: 230.

³² DRABKIN 2015: 235.

³³ DRABKIN 2015: 217-218.

³⁴ SABCHIN 2008: 264.

³⁵ GORBIYENKO 2008: 226-227.

³⁶ DRABKIN 2015: 240.

the value of the awards and how they were issued because he was always on the front line.

Army supplements

The general view was that all freed Soviet prisoners of war were sent immediately to the labor camp because, according to Stalin's orders, they were considered "enemies of the nation". However, officers who were former prisoners (those who did not prove voluntary cooperation with the enemy) were often sent as the supplement to the criminal battalions³⁷. The decision was made by the commission headed by the order of the Headquarters (*Stawka*) No. 270 of August 16, 1941. The order was: Whoever surrenders to the enemy will be treated as a traitor³⁸. Unfortunately, the commissions were not able to distinguish who had been taken prisoner voluntarily, and who was taken there because he was wounded or in a result of other dramatic events³⁹. While in the first case, punishment proved to be advisable, then in subsequent soldiers did not commit crimes. In principle punishment hit everyone equally, because the committees did not have enough time to look carefully at each case individually. Moreover, in the years 1942-1943, the time when criminal units were formed, the demand for officers-condemned increased, so other, special commissions were started, which accelerated the processes of determining guilt and punishment among soldiers⁴⁰. Their activity was a blessing for the army, but one should take into account the lack of justice towards the punished soldiers. In addition, many officers were sent to penal units without the verdict of the court and the commission, only on the orders of the commander or army. It was legally determined that such an order was justified. However, the soldiers thought that it was justified, but only and exclusively the need to quickly make additions to battalions fighting at the front.

Only many years after the war people began to be mention the actions of the criminal battalions. Photographers, filmmakers and journalists did not visit the units⁴¹. It was believed that this grouping and actions performed by them were secret.

The whole struggle in criminal companies was aimed at one thing: to redeem their own guilt with blood. However, most did not want to take part in the toughest fights. The exemption from the unit could be obtained in two cases: the first, when the designated period of service has already passed and the second – until the first wound. Immediately the question arises: did the fact that the soldier was in a penal unit reflect somehow on his career? Well, the officers were usually restored to a lowering degree, besides many were simply left behind and commanded battalions and regiments⁴².

The subject of the criminal battalions is still unknown to a wider audience. In the content, with the help of fiction literature, the soldiers' different approach was shown not only to the service, but also to the faith in the need for the activities performed. However, based on memories, one cannot create a perfect and true image,

³⁷ SHVEB 2008: 300-303.

³⁸ DAYNES 2008: 10.

³⁹ NEKRASOVA 2008: 232.

⁴⁰ PYL'TSYN 2007: 268.

⁴¹ LEBEDEV 2008: 306-308.

⁴² BARABOLYA 2008: 236.

because soldiers as eyewitnesses have their own version of this part of the story. Sometimes they even color the facts to emphasize or to arouse emotions of the readers.

Summing up, it is worth considering what conclusions can be drawn from the previously described events. Is it due to the fact that this document is a memoir, we treat the soldiers who served in penal battalions as persons and not just as digits in statistics and because of that we begin to understand their behavior and dilemmas? For sure it is a different look at something that should be fearful. Because it was always thought that the worst, ruthless criminals had been sent to these units, no attempt was made to delve into their biographies. However, thanks to some fragments, it can be understood that they were often condemned, but for preaching inappropriate views or minor offenses. Therefore, if you are interested in a part of the story, it is worth to get to know the two sides of the medal, because it may turn out that the latter is a more “human” face what will throw a completely new light on that matter.

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Summary

Red Army's Penal Battalions in the memoirs of a witness of history

Penal battalions functioned in every army. Building on Władimir W. Wiktorowicz memoirs we show how did the Red Army's penal battalions function. We analyzed the penal battalion soldiers' deal of their service and faith in their duty.

Keywords: Red Army, Penal Battalions, Wiktorowicz, memoirs