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Echa Przeszłości 8, 165-170

2007

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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THE DESTINY OF THE 24TH TERRITORIAL RIFLEMEN CORPS IN JUNE-JULY 1941

After the annexation of the Baltic States to the USSR, in September- October 1940, on the basis of the former national armies were established territorial rifleman corps of the Red Army (in Latvia - the 24th Corps). Active work of political education began and repressions against the officers were launched in these corps, reaching their culmination on 14th June 1941. In total 550-555 Latvian officers in the active service of the Red Army were arrested in military camps and other places in the period between 14th and 21st June 1941.

After the operation that took place in the military camps of the 24th Territorial Corps on 14th June, war commissars held meetings and officers briefings in all units, to carry over the message that the arrests and deportation had been targeted against those officers whom the Soviet rule could not have trusted while those remaining in the Corps could rest assured about their security since the Soviet rule trusted them (that is, their trustworthiness had been tested).¹ It was not true though, as Latvian officers and soldiers continued to be intensively spied on, terrorised and distrusted, even to a considerably larger degree.

On 17th-19th June 1941, in compliance with a received order the 183rd division of the 24th Territorial Corps set off from the camp near Gulbene to march to Carnikava-Gauja training ground in the vicinity of Riga. The 181st division and the artillery units remained in the Ostrovieshi camp. Soon, on 22nd June Germany attacked the USSR; this initially provoked bravado among Russian commanders and commissars of the Corps that quickly turned into panic. Among other expressions, the panic revealed itself in the chaotic and contradictory orders that the Corps and its separate units received. After everything that had happened, the war was perceived rather unambiguously among Latvian officers of soldiers whom it gave hope of

¹ Puriņš J. Atmiņas par valsts un armijas pēdējā posma notikumiem un dienestu 24. str. korpusa 183. str. divīzijā// Lāčplēsis. - Nr. 20. - 1974. - 45. lp.; Latviešu karavīrs... - 217. lpp.

quickly approaching release from the hated service. At the moment when the war broke out, a part of the 183rd division was stationed in the proximity of Nitaure - Sigulda while some units of the division reached Carnikava-Lilaste camp only on 23rd-25th June. Here the units were expected to enlarge their ranks with fresh recruits and reserves from Moscow military district „in order to return to the staff numbers of wartime” (separate regiments had been thus enlarged already during their stationing in Litene camp, after the 14th June operation). This was partly achieved and on 27th June, in compliance with an order, separate units of the Division began the march back to North Vidzeme. The Corps Headquarters, Liaison and Mine engineers Battalion, the 613rd Artillery Regiment and units on the 181st Division departed by train from Litene and Gulbene stations towards Rezekne and Daugavpils and then towards Riga; however, obviously due to the rapid development of the German attack and the general chaos that was raging in the units of the Red Army, they returned to Litene a few days later.

Here the terror against Latvian soldiers continued, having become particularly ruthless all over Latvia as a result of the war. On 28th June political officers shot captain P. Ozols, lieutenant E. Luts and 12 other soldiers at Krievu hill in Ostrovieši camp and buried them on the site (after the arrival of the German troops the murdered were reburied in Pededze cemetery). Five Latvian soldiers from the Artillery Regiment were killed at Sita railway station; after the arrival of the German troops, their bodies were found and reburied in Balvi Lutheran cemetery together with the bodies of three other Latvian soldiers found murdered in Balvi parish. Judging from the verdicts of martial court placed under the coats of the soldiers found killed near Sita, two of them were executed for desertion, two for propaganda against the state and one for having said that under President K. Ulmanis life had been better than under the Soviet rule. In the night passing to 1st July, political officers shot lieutenant-colonel V. Pincers in the barracks of Litene camp. In 1988-1989 the mortal remains of 11 other killed unidentified soldiers from the Corps were found in the territory of Litene camp and reburied in Litene cemetery.² Thus altogether at least 31 Latvian soldiers (including Captain M. Linmeiers who was shot on 14th June) were murdered in the training ground in the proximity of Gulbene alone. However from the testimonies of witnesses and relatives of the missing soldiers, it follows that the actual figure could be considerably larger. To this figure we may add also Major J. Ozoliņš from the Liaison Battalion of the Corps, who shot himself in his tent in Litene camp at the moment of his arrest on 24th June.³

The atrocities committed by the political officers were closely related to the overall mood dominating in the Corps, which on its turn was closely related to the attitude of the Soviet rule against Latvian soldiers and Latvian people in the occupied country in general. Under the impact of what they had experienced under the

² Liepa L. Muguru liekt liktenis nav piespiedis// Padomju Jaunatne. - 1989. - 14. febr.; Siliņš A. Likteņlīnijas top skaidrākas// Lauku Avīze. - 1988. - 19. nov.; Svētdienas Rīts. - 1989. - 28. okt.; Literatūra un Māksla. - 1989. - 29. okt., 9. dec.; Dzimtenes Balss. - 1989. - Nr. 49; Tālavietis. - 1941. - 6. sept.; u.c.

Soviet rule, Latvians took the first opportunity to desert after the beginning of military activities against Germany (and the opportunities were not lacking in the conditions of the raging chaos); thus 124 officers, 463 soldiers and sergeants from the 181st rifle Division alone had deserted by 29th June. As a result of this and also due to deportations and desertion, the Division had a short-fall of 5887 persons, disregarding the influx of fresh recruits and the reserves from Moscow Military District that had joined the Division between 20th and 25th June. The corresponding figures for the 183rd Division stationed in Vidzeme and the 111th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battery stationed in Riga, are missing; yet there is no doubt that in these units the situation was similar. For example, in the night to the 25th June captain V. Krūmiņš from the 639th Artillery Regiment arbitrarily left Carnikava-Lilaste camp; he, however, ran into the guard on duty and was shot not far from the camp. Other officers and soldiers followed suit.⁴ Several other Latvian soldiers were executed after desertion or retiring, for example senior lieutenant J. Kalniņš from the 624th Artillery Regiment was killed near Straupe on 28th June, lieutenant A. Vītols from the 295th Riflemen Regiment - near Dzērbene on 3rd July, etc.⁵

In late June units of the Corps received the order on 30th June to start withdrawing to Opočka-Ostrova district in Russia and to retire from the army the majority of officers and soldiers who were „citizens of Latvian SSR” (motivating this with the mass-scale desertion that attested to „the political instability” of the citizens of „the new Republics”). As a result between 29th June and 1st July approximately 600 officers and 1400 soldiers, that is, the absolute majority of the Latvians still on service, were demobilised from the Corps.⁶

In late June desertion was indeed mass-scale, facilitated by the rampant chaos in the Soviet troops and in spite of the increased mistrust towards Latvian soldiers from the part of political officers and Russian officers. Desertion was both individual and collective. For example, a whole group of 70 soldiers, led by captain A. Tomass from the Aviation Squadron secretly left Gulbene and having marched through Lubāna swamp, came in the rear of the German troops. As another example, on 30th June Commander of the Liaison Battalion of the Corps lieutenant-colonel K. Aperāts led three armed companies of the Battalion out of Litene camp to join partisans in actively fighting against the Red Army. Partisan groups, that for the most part had deserters among their members, in many places were commanded by former officers of the Corps.⁷ The manner of the retirement from the Corps was rather strange. In some units it was a whole-sale retirement of all Latvians, some units retired only those Latvians who in an interview expressed the wish to retire, other units (for,

³ Tālavietis. - 1941. - 1941. - 6. sept.

⁴ Latviešu karavīrs otrajā pasaules karā. - 8. grām. - Lincoln, 1982. - 166. lpp.; Tēvija. - 1941. - 23. jūl.

⁵ Tēvija. - 1941. - 26. jūl.

⁶ Savčenko V. 24. strēlnieku korpusa liktenis. - 69. lpp.

⁷ Daugavas Vanagu Mēnešraksts. - 1969. - Nr. 2. - 17. lpp.; 1980. - Nr. 1. - 26. lpp.; Latviešu karavīrs... - 254., 260. - 261. lpp.; E. V. Mūsu pulka beigu posms. - 27. lpp.; Dzintars J. Vai hitlerisko diversantu kaps ir tautas svētvieta?// Daugavas Vanagu Mēnešraksts. - 1980. - Nr. 1. - 31. lpp.; u.c.

example, the 639th Artillery regiment) did not offer their soldiers the opportunity to retire or offered only partial retirement and soldiers were taken to Russia against their will. The retirees had to submit all weapons and received a certificate of retirement that as a reason of retirement quoted Article 43 of the Law On Service in the Red Army, in compliance with which they qualified as retired because of incompetence or political disloyalty. In several places troops of the People's Commissariat of Interior opened fire at the retirees after the act of their retirement, killing several soldiers and officers.⁸ Many retirees and deserters were detained by the attacking German units and as prisoners of war sent to POW camps in East Prussia, where, for the sake of justice, one should mention, they were separated from the mass of the Russian prisoners and together with Lithuanian and Estonian soldiers enjoyed relatively better conditions. Officers, who were rather numerous, such as captains E. Alazi, K. Šēnfelds, K. Pētersons, J. Zvirbulis, K. Šmits, K. Kaliņš (and many officers from the former Geodesy-Topography Department of the Latvian Army Headquarters who had later been assigned to the Headquarters of the Special Baltic Military District) were also placed in a separate section of the POW camps. After a relatively short period of imprisonment (i.e. in late 1941) Latvians, together with Estonians and Lithuanians were released from the POW camps and allowed to go home. As an interesting fact I should mention that one of the inmates of such camp was the former political officer of the Coastal Artillery Regiment V. Beikerts, who, as he was moved to the section of imprisoned Latvian officers, refused to mingle with Latvian officers and to part from the Red Army soldiers; a similar story features Commissar of the Corps Bisenieks, who attempted to play the role of an ordinary officer, but was found out.⁹

In some places the sub-units of the Corps had to engage in local skirmishes with units of Latvian partisans or even deserters from the Corps. For example, on 28th June the former II rank military doctor of the Artillery Regiment J. Tukums (formerly Colonel-lieutenant Tukums, doctor of the Latvian Army) was seriously wounded in such tragic incident and died from the wounds soon after his return to Litene camp (16 soldiers of the Corps whose nationality has not been established were also killed in the same skirmish).¹⁰ In a similar clash in Kurzeme near Skrunda where students and officers from the Red Army Riga Military School were dislocated after the beginning of military operations, on 25th June Latvian partisans killed captain A. Zelmenis. Units of the 183rd Division several times found themselves under air-raids of German aviation near Cēsis and suffered heavy losses (the issued order commanded them to hide on the right side of the road on such occasions, otherwise units of the People's Commissariat of Interior that accompanied units of the Corps during marches, opened fire at the violators of this order). Thus, for instance, the 227th Riflemen Company alone lost 28 soldiers who were killed in such a raid at Ranka

⁸ Puriņš J. Atmiņas par valsts un armijas pēdējā posma notikumiem... - 47. lpp.; u.c.

⁹ Sķāk sk.: Latviešu karavīrs otrajā pasaules karā. - 8. grām. - 167. - 169. lpp.

¹⁰ Sirmāis O. Pretrunu – daudz, patiesība – viena// Cīņa. - 1988. - 26. aug.

while many others were severely wounded.¹¹ Units of Latvian National Partisans that engaged in fights against the withdrawing units of the Red Army in the summer of 1941, had 103 of their men killed, including 12 officers (for example senior lieutenant M. Brunovskis from the 24th Corps was killed in Limbazhi and junior lieutenant P. Ligers fell in Alūksne).¹²

However, many Latvian soldiers and officers remained in the ranks of the Corps even after 1st July and were thus transferred to Russia. For example, the 111th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battery was withdrawn from Latvia as early as 26th June. The captain of this battery K. Liepiņš was not repressed and came out of the war as lieutenant-colonel of the Red Army and member of the Communist Party (artillery captains J. Lepinis and E. Katlaps, II rank military doctor D. Glinternieks, several aviation officers and some other former Latvian army officers also served in the Red Army during the war).¹³ In the battle at Vyazma in October 1941 a large group of soldiers led by lieutenant K. Dakteris from the 11th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battery deserted to the German side and testified that right after the crossing of the Latvian border several officers had „disappeared” (meaning they were arrested).¹⁴ Tragic events took place in the Aviation Squadron of the 24th Territorial Corps, stationed in Gulbene. Pilots received an order to evacuate the airfield and depart for Russia. Some aircrafts complied (to be more precise - five aircrafts with eight Latvians and two Russians on board). One of them crashed and two aircrafts changed their course and landed in a clearing in Palsmane forest. The pilot of one of the aircrafts, a Latvian junior lieutenant, shot lieutenant R. Irbe, who had been one of the few Latvian officers who actively supported the policies of the Soviet rule, and flew back to Latvia. The remaining rank-and-file personnel of the airfield were evacuated to Russia by trucks.¹⁵ It is interesting to note that the brother of the killed lieutenant R. Irbe, senior lieutenant of the 195th Riflemen Regiment V. Irbe whom the literature, published in exile, describes as a supporter of the Soviet rule, in fact was arrested on 30th June for attempted desertion and during his term in Saranska prison carried out „anti-Soviet” propaganda among the inmates.¹⁶

Among other casualties that should be mentioned, in the battle against Latvian partisans in Māilupes parish in Latvia fell the commander of the 183rd Division colonel Tupikov, Commissar of the division Ryabcev, Chief of the Headquarters Tkachov and Commissar of the 285th Riflemen Regiment Samoilov. On 4th July at the battle by Liepna took the life of the Commissar of the 227th Riflemen Regiment Nyegoduiko (according to other sources, he was shot by the local Latvian partisans

¹¹ Ivana L. Likteņgadi// Jelgavas Ziņotājs. - 1989.- 25. marts (bijušā 227. strēlnieku pulka kareivja V. Deneškāna liecība).

¹² Biezais H. Nacionālie partizāni// Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls. - 1992. - Nr. 4. - 139. - 140. lpp.; Lācis V. Un ar reizi nāks tas brīdis, kad viņš savu naid(ī)nietu vienu pašu lejā grūdis, noslīcinās atvarā...// Latvijas jaunatne. - 1990. - 10. nov.; Tēvija. -1942. - 25. jūl.

¹³ Sk.: Latvijas armijas augstākie virsnieki. - 45. lpp.

¹⁴ Tēvija. - 1941. - 29. okt.

¹⁵ Daugavas Vanagu Mēnešraksts. - 1970. - Nr. 3. - 19. lpp.; Latviešu karavīrs... - 26. - 261. lpp.

after the battle); assistant to the Commander of the 195th Riflemen Regiment captain Belisons, who had taken very active part in arresting Latvian officers, was killed in a night air-raid of the German aviation near the Latvian border and the Commander of the same Regiment Nyichipurenko was shot in the same place by Latvian soldiers. The 181st Division took part in defence battles by the river Velykaya in early July, but the 183rd Division fought its way to Pskov and later withdrew towards Novgorod. The Corps was formally disbanded in the vicinity of Novaya Rusa in August, but many of the Latvian soldiers who had still been with the Corps, were assigned to Latvian units of the Red Army.¹⁷

When the war broke out in the night of 24th-25th June, the two former submarines of the Latvian Navy, on the order of the chief of the basis of Liepaya Military Port, where they were stationed, were taken out of the port and blown up together with other submarines, while the former Latvian Navy ships "T-297" (formerly known as "Virsaitis"), T- 298 (former "Viesturs") and T- 299 (former "Imanta"), that still had several former Latvian Army officers and instructors among their crews, sailed into the open sea from Daugavgrīva with the mission to lay mines in the Irbes strait.¹⁸ At a later date the ship "Virsaitis" took part in the anti-aircraft defence of Leningrad and in December run into a mine and sunk (the crew, led by II rank captain A. Meņroze, was rescued). The ship „Imanta” with almost all of its crew (including III rank captain R. Lasis and two Latvian instructors) perished in the Irbes strait. The ship „Viesturs” (initially co-commanded by III rank captain K. Turovskis and lieutenant L. Stūris until the former's arrest on 7th July 1941) was part of the Soviet Navy until the end of the war. The former Latvian Army Coastal Artillery Regiment tugboat "Artilerists" at the beginning of the war also took part in the operations of the Soviet Navy, under the command of the former non-commissioned officer of the Latvian Navy captain E. Zālītis.¹⁹

This leads us to the conclusion that the destiny of the 24th Corps, with particular clarity, illustrates the historical tragedy that all the Baltic nations were pulled in against their will in 1939-1945 and that left permanent marks on these nations, namely, the first Soviet occupation with the subsequent Sovietisation measures and repressions, unsubstantiated hopes sparkled by the breaking out of German-Soviet war and the attitude of both occupation powers towards Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians that resulted in one of the heaviest losses of human resources in the history of the Baltic nations.

¹⁶ LVA, 1986. g., 2. apr., P-8178. l., 4. lp.

¹⁷ Savčenko V. 24. strēlnieku korpusa liktenis. - 69. - 70. lpp.; Puriņš J. Atmiņas par valsts un armijas pēdējā posma notikumiem... - 47. lpp.; Reimanis K. 24. korpusa augšamceļšanās// Zvaigzne. - 1989. - Nr. 17; Latviešu karavīrs.. - 254. - 255. lpp.

¹⁸ Bormanis V. Latvijas Kara flote... - 83. lpp.; Latviešu zemūdeņu nogremdētājs nošauts// Tēvija. - 1941. - 17. sept.

¹⁹ Latviešu karavīrs... - 266. lpp.