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How Were Soviet Blocking Detachments Employed?

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(Editor's introduction: One of the more infamous institutions which the Red Army developed and employed during the Great Patriotic War was "blocking detachments." These forces were formed to prevent soldiers from leaving the battlefield, individually or *en masse*. Although little has been written about them in Soviet military-historical literature, German archival records mention their use extensively as one of the more draconian measures used by Soviet commands to prevent unauthorized withdrawals, desertion, or panic among military formations. This article, which describes one incident related to the overall concept of the blocking detachment, is one of the first to describe the origins and nature of the institution using Red Army archival sources.)

Unfortunately, today it is rather difficult to provide a sufficiently full answer to the substance of this question. The fact is that not only is there a shortage of publications on this subject, but there is also a rather meager source base upon which to address it. Up until now the questions of what sort of procedures the blocking detachments employed, the results of their employment, and other associated issues remain unclear. It is paradoxical that no more or less meaningful or productive instance of the use of blocking military formations has been written about on the basis of deservedly trustworthy documents. This is the case even when the Red Army employed such formations extensively during the course of two large-scale military conflicts -- the Civil War and the Great Patriotic War. It is apparent to all that such a situation is associated with the moral-legal side of the problem, a side which is sometimes obvious and sometimes invisible, but which is, without any doubt, always noticeable when examining the question.

Was the employment of blocking detachments and, consequently, the orders of the higher military-political leadership of the Soviet government about the use of such detachments fully justified from the moral-legal point of view both in the present day and in the period of the two former wars? During complex military situations, did only traitors to the Homeland, cowards, panic-mongers, deserters and so forth, alone, always fall under the influence of these formations? Were the forces which operated in the rear area as blocking detachments supported adequately enough in a material-technical sense so that they could successfully fulfill their combat missions? Finally, to what degree did the institution of the blocking detachment promote the resolution of political-educational missions in the army and increase the level of awareness and discipline among soldiers and officers?

There are no simple answers to these and many other similar questions in contemporary public consciousness, since the varied nuances of the questions themselves encompass a rather broad and contradictory spectrum. Moreover, usually one of these numerous nuances stands out to the detriment of one sort of public group, and, in this case, that group displays surprising military-political and moral-legal color-blindness regarding its opponent's arguments. This was manifested, in particular, in polemics on the pages of the military-historical press after the publication of the full text of Peoples' Commissar of Defense I. Stalin's Order No. 227 of 28 July

1942, after whose publication blocking detachments were employed in field army forces with new force and, often, also with unjustified special brutality.

Originally, Stalin and his associates embraced the idea of forming blocking detachments soon after the beginning of the war. *Stavka* of the Supreme High Command Order No. 270, dated 16 August 1941, demanded that force leaders and Red Army men "struggle to their final capabilities," and if "such a leader or Red Army unit preferred to surrender rather than organize a rebuff to the enemy, --to destroy them by all of their means [weapons], both ground and air..."¹

Already then, in the initial months of the war, there were commanders, who, seeing such stern measures, found themselves with hardly any means for fulfilling their combat missions, and, while trying to hold on to their occupied defensive positions at any cost, the commanders often gave their subordinates really unfulfillable types of orders, like "Stand to the death!" and "Not a step back!" Indeed, such commands and orders, which were poorly supported and reinforced in a material-technical sense, led to excessive and unjustified losses among the forces and to both notoriously unrealizable combat operations, which were doomed to failure, and, in the final analysis, urged similar officers and generals to undertake desperate steps, such as deciding to employ blocking forces to stop withdrawing soldiers.

As will become clear from the following materials, among the military leaders in this category we should now mention is the rather well-known Soviet general, A. Z. Akimenko. During the Great Patriotic War, he was the first commander of the celebrated "In-Honor of the Anniversary of the October Revolution" 2d Guards Taman' "Red Banner," "Order of Suvorov," "*imenno* [named after] M. I. Kalinin" Rifle Division, which was the pride of the Red Army and a participant in the military parades on Moscow's Red Square, including the most recent.²

In 1941, while a colonel in command of the 127th Rifle Division, Akimenko distinguished himself during the Battle of Smolensk and in combat to capture the city of El'nia. For the massive heroism of its soldiers, in September of that year, the division, which was among the first in the Soviet Armed Forces, was transformed into the 2d Guards Rifle Division, and, as a result, the army and the country learned the name of the command. It is true that the "flight to fame" of A. Z. Akimenko was short lived, and soon misfortunes on other fronts and in other ranks and duty positions followed.

After being fairly tattered in the El'nia operation, up to the beginning of fall, the division was located in the Kursk region to reform and refit, and, in September 1941, it occupied positions along the right bank of the Kleven' River in the Rylsk combat sector on the southern flank of the Briansk Front near regional urban centers in Sumy *oblast'*, including the city of Glukhov and the village of Shalygino. The division's missions were to participate in the Briansk Front's counterstrokes against General Guderian's enemy tank group [Second Panzer Group], which was then encircling Southwestern Front armies, to sever the important German Glukhov-Putivl' lateral road, and to capture Glukhov.³ This was supposed to assist the breakout of encircled Soviet forces from the Kiev region.

In spite of its desperate attempts, the division was unable to capture Glukhov in mid-September. Meanwhile, having liquidated the encircled Southwestern Front, Guderian's forces prepared to strike a strong blow from jumping-off positions near Glukhov and Shostka against Briansk Front forces and, subsequently, to strike toward Moscow along the old Kiev-Orel-Moscow High Road. At the end of September 1941, employing sizable tank and infantry forces from 17th Panzer Division and other units of General Guderian's Second Panzer Army, supported by powerful aviation forces, to protect the right flank of the strategic grouping which was preparing to attack from possible counterstrokes by Soviet forces, the enemy crushed the defenses of 2d Guards Rifle Division and drove its units into the swamps in the Kleven' Valley in the region of the villages of Chernovo, Kholopkovo (renamed Peremoga in 1945), and Shalygino (today Glukhov *raion* [district]). The apotheosis of these events occurred on 24 September.

Chief Marshal of Tank Forces A. Kh. Babadzhanian (1906-1977), a direct participant in the combat, described in his memoirs what occurred. At the time he was a major in command of the 2d Guard's Rifle Division's 395th Guards Rifle Regiment. The marshal recalled the following about these critical events:

Tens of enemy dive-bombers appeared in the sky with the first rays of the sun. After less than an hour nothing was left of Chernevo. Smoke and dust dispersed as the artillery preparation followed. And then the enemy tanks and infantry advanced. It seemed as if it would be impossible to endure such a blow. Communications with the division were lost, and we could expect help from nowhere. Could the soldiers maintain their nerves? They are enduring.⁴

Babadzhanian went on to describe the heroism of the regiment's soldiers, writing such impressive passages as the following: "...Only 100-120 active combat soldiers remained in the battalions, and all soldiers fought, including soldiers in the support subunits."⁵ The contents of a telephone conversation between A. Z. Akimenko and A. Kh. Babadzhanian during the beginning of the battle are particularly interesting. The dialogue went as follows:

-- They informed me that you intend to withdraw to the east bank [of the river] at nightfall.

-- Yes, actually, I asked the division command group to report my request about that to you: there are many wounded, and little ammunition and antitank means. We must save the remaining personnel.

-- Not a step back. Stand to the death.

-- That is clear, comrade general.⁶ I have no other requests.⁷

What rather essential and important information did the Marshal "neglect" while writing about the battle of Chernevo? The recently discovered manuscript recollections of A. Z. Akimenko, which he wrote in 1953, help to restore these "omissions." He wrote in his recollections:

The 395th Rifle Regiment stubbornly held on to its position and assisted the 875th Rifle Regiment with its fire. But a large group of enemy tanks (70-80) struck a blow from the direction of the railroad station, that is, north of the village of Kholopkovo, at the junction of the 535th and 395th Rifle Regiments. They wedged into and burst through the combat formations of both regiments, but the units defended stubbornly. But unexpected confusion and an extraordinary incident occurred in our combat formations. When the tanks attacked our positions and burst into the combat formation of our 2 regiments, a large number of replacement troops from Kursk, numbering about 900 men, committed treachery to the interests of our homeland. As if by command, this group rose up, threw away their rifles, and, with raised hands, they proceeded to the side of the enemy tanks. The enemy tanks quickly edged up the the traitors and, under the cover of other tanks, began to take the traitors away. This circumstance created an exceptionally difficult and morally serious condition among our personnel. I saw this situation occur while I was at the observation post, but I lacked the forces and means required to remedy the situation and to take control of the traitors for future punishment before our Soviet organs.⁸ But a traitor is a traitor, and he deserved immediate punishment on the spot. I gave an order for two artillery battalions to open fire on the traitors and the enemy tanks.⁹ As a result, a considerable number of the traitors were killed and wounded, and the enemy tanks were scattered. I reported this extraordinary incident to the *Stavka* of the Supreme High Command by ciphered message.¹⁰

The group of traitors were received by the division from a reserve brigade in the city of Kursk. At that time, the 2d Guards Rifle Division received 5,000 men, who were poorly trained and even more badly prepared in an ideological sense. The Kursk *oblast'* party committee was informed about the treachery. The party *obkom* [*oblast'* committee] bore the responsibility for political training and ideological preparation of the population.¹¹

The described incident is very impressive. To discover mention of it in the numerous books and different publications about the war, which would, at the least, be an appropriate pursuit, would have been futile.¹² Moreover, different sources confirm the high loss levels of the division during the period described. For example, a report by the headquarters of a higher command (No. 108/109 - 1941) emphasized, in particular, that, "the replacements of the 44th Brigade turned out to be unstably treacherous."¹³ It pointed out that on 24 September, during the day-long battle for Chernevo, more than 100 men in the 535th Rifle Regiment went over to the enemy, and, according to the 395th Guards Rifle Regiment commander, on the night of 24 September, half of a company deserted to the German side and, on the day of battle, more than 600 men more.¹⁴ Here is the scale of total personnel losses in the regiments of Akimenko's division for the period from 20 through 24 September, inclusive, according to a document prepared by the division headquarters: the 395th Guards Rifle Regiment -- 150 men killed or drowned in the river and swamps, 50 missing in action, 405 wounded, and around 850 surrendered as prisoners of war; and the 535th Guards Rifle Regiment -- 250 men killed, drowned, or missing in action, 78 wounded, and 100 captured with their weapons as prisoners of war.¹⁵

Thus, it is apparent that, in the days when the army and country were celebrating the birth of the Soviet guards, at the obscure Ukrainian village of Chernevo, the enemy organized the virtual destruction of one of the first four guards divisions, whose full liquidation was saved only by the tardiness of German armored forces, who, at noon on 24 September, concluded that it did not make sense to finish off the division, which was then scattered throughout the swamps.¹⁶

In connection with the newly revealed circumstances of the battle of Chernevo, I consider it appropriate to turn also to the tale of V. S. Grossman, entitled "*Narod bessmerten*" [Immortal people]. In that regard, the memoirs of General D. Ortenberg, who served as the chief editor of the Red Army newspaper *Krasnaia zvezda* [Red star] during the war, are interesting. "In fall of 1941," he wrote:

Grossman visited the region of heated battle in the Ukraine, near Glukhov. There, the 395th Rifle Regiment operated heroically, repelling savage German attacks on the right bank of the Kleven' River -- it covered the withdrawal of our forces. The forces were unequal; however, the enemy did not succeed in overrunning or even forcing our regiment beyond the river. The author decided to write about this and wanted to steal across the river to Babadzhanian, the regimental commander, but the political department would not permit this.¹⁷

Further, Ortenberg wrote:

The impressions of the soldiers at Glukhov were later reflected in Grossman's story, *Narod bessmerten*, which was published in eighteen issues of *Krasnaia zvezda*. In the process of working on it, the author inquired, "In the end, what ever happened to the 395th Regiment?" He was informed that the regiment had fulfilled its duty fittingly but had suffered great losses. They also declared that the regimental commander, Babadzhanian, had also been killed in action.¹⁸

Ortenberg then described the ensuing argument:

By the way, I will mention that I had an argument with the writer. I advised him to let Babadzhanian survive, for it seemed to me that such a turn of the subject would strengthen the spirit of the story. Grossman did not agree. Without this,' he said, there is no truth about the war.'¹⁹

The truth of the war....How far from it both the well-known memoirs and the no less well-known story prove to be. And indeed, are they alone?...We cannot unconditionally accuse the authors of this, either the distinguished military leader or, no less, the distinguished writer. We must be careful to remember that, in such a time of bad memories, they wrote their works just like the totalitarian regime, itself, evaluated its present and its past.

While ending the "Glukhov" passages in his memoirs, A. Z. Akimenko writes, "Having occupied and fortified the city of Glukhov, operational groups Akimenko and Ermakov, which were brought together into a single

army operational group, had the capability of strongly fortifying the Kholopkovo region and closing that path (high road) to the Germans. Let historians study and clarify who was guilty for that not occurring."²⁰ Here, he points out that one of the principal reasons for this failure was the poor combined-arms training of the replacements who had been called up from the reserves. Certainly, it is impossible not to agree with the division commander, for the ancient axiom says, "The best persons, and the most devoted to the people and the state will perish in an armed struggle with the enemy if they are not trained and equipped to a sufficient degree with weapons, ammunition, and so forth." At this point, the most important questions in this article arise, namely, "Were all Soviet military service men who raised their hands in the battle at Chernevo really traitors to the interests of the Homeland," and, "Did the command do everything possible to provide the division with effective antitank means?" Unfortunately, for the time being, it does not seem possible to answer these questions with 100 percent accuracy. Meanwhile, to a great degree, the millions of Soviet prisoners of war in the past war resulted from the criminal policies of Stalin and his marshals and generals, who often threw nearly unarmed forces against German armored spearheads. It is completely clear that the real political-legal cause for this was the celebrated pronouncement which is usually ascribed to Stalin, "We do not have prisoners of war, we only have traitors."

In conclusion, in my view we must ask ourselves one more highly important question, "Why, over his long life, did A. Z. Akimenko not consider it necessary to publish reliable recollections about the war; could he, who stood as the sources of the Soviet guards, not have said something of considerable interest to the reader, even in the situation of severe censorship limits? We cannot rule out the fact that such a decision by this military leader was not the latter, and it is possible that the battle at Chernevo played an important part. It is possible that a sense of personal guilt because of his dead Soviet soldiers weighed heavily upon him to the end of his days, while overshadowing his own pattern of selflessness and self-sacrifice in the name of the Homeland, which, during the combat career of the general, was undoubtedly considerable.

Endnotes

- ¹ The order's full text was prepared for publication and first published by Academician A. M. Samsonov. See 7 February 1988 issue of the newspaper *Moskovskie novosti* [Moscow news]. See also *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal* [Military-historical journal], No. 1 (January 1992), 46. Hereafter cited as *VIZh*. [BACK](#)
- ² Akimenko, Adrian Zakharovich (1898-1989) was a Ukrainian who joined the Communist Party in 1940. After entering the Red Army in 1918, he participated in the Russian Civil War. A 1933 graduate of the Frunze Academy, during the Great Patriotic War he commanded the 127th Rifle Division (from 18 September 1941 the 2d Guards Rifle Division) and, then, the 3d Guards Rifle Corps. After teaching for a time at the Frunze Academy, from January 1944 until war's end, he commanded the 75th Rifle Corps. He was awarded with the Order of Lenin, four Orders of the Red Banner, the Order of Kutuzov, 1st Degree, the Order of Bogdan Khmel'nitsky, and several medals. [BACK](#)
- ³ *Tsentral'nyi Arkhiv Ministerstva Oborony*, F. 1047, Op.1, D. 12, L. 18. Hereafter referred to as *TsAMO*. [BACK](#)
- ⁴ A. Babadzhanian, *Dorogi pobeda* [Roads to victory], (Moscow: "Molodaia gvardiia," 1975), 54. [BACK](#)
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 51. [BACK](#)
- ⁶ Here, there is a mistake. A. Z. Akimenko was awarded with the rank of major general in 1942. Moreover, in materials in the book about the battle of Chernev, the phrase, "A. Z. Akimenko was already a general at that time" [page 51], was emphasized on purpose. It is rather complicated to verify whether A. Kh. Babadzhanian forgot the military rank that his immediate superior had during the period of battle around Glukhov and Chernevo, which, as it has now become obvious, was, without understatement, a turning point in the history of the combat journey of the formation. [BACK](#)

7. Babadzhanian, 51. [BACK](#)

8. The observation post of the division commander was situated on the left bank of the Kleven' River on the western outskirts of Shalygino. [BACK](#)

9. The artillery battalions were located in a birch grove not far from A. Z. Akimenko's observation post [BACK](#)

10. I have not succeeded in finding the text of the enciphered report. [BACK](#)

11. *TsAMO*, F. 1047, Op. 1, D. 12, LL. 11-12. [BACK](#)

12. Among such publications is the book about the combat path of the 2d Guards Rifle Division. See, A. F. Terekhov, M. P. Skirido, and A. K. Mironov, *Gvareiskaia Tamanskaia* [Guards Taman'], (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1981). [BACK](#)

13. *TsAMO*, F. 1047, Op. 1, D. 6, L. 22. [BACK](#)

14. *Ibid.* [BACK](#)

15. *Ibid.* [BACK](#)

16. Here is how A. Kh. Babadzhanian completed his story about the battle:

All the same, in the evening we received the command to withdraw to the eastern bank of the Kleven' River. Under the cover of smoke and darkness, we moved the remnants of the regiments across the wide swampy floodlands to the other bank. There General Akimenko was waiting for us. He approached me, embraced me, and kissed me.

-- Thank you.'

-- Here is all that remains of the guards regiment, comrade general,' as I gestured with my hand at the sparse rank of soldiers.

-- The regiment fought heroically, and with honor.'

-- But Pivovarov, he is no longer [with us]...' Akimenko grasped my hand with his two hands''

Note: N. I. Pivovarov, the commander of the 395th Guards Rifle Regiment, perished during the battle for Chernevo. One cannot fully dismiss the possibility that he died from the fire of weapons which opened fire on the division in accordance with A. Z. Akimenko's orders. [BACK](#)

17. D. Ortenberg, *Sorok tretii* [Forty-three], (Moscow: Politizdat, 1991), 406. [BACK](#)

18. *Ibid.* [BACK](#)

19. *Ibid.*, 407. [BACK](#)

20. *TsAMO*, F. 1047, Op. 1, D. 12, LL. 17-18. During the period of combat for the city of Glukhov, A. Z. Akimenko was operationally subordinate to the 160th Rifle Division, which was operating in the Banichi and Pogarichi region, that is, south of the city. The main forces of Major General A. N. Ermakov's Operational Group were attacking Glukhov from the northeast. [BACK](#)

