

PARTISAN WARFARE ON THE RUSSIAN FRONT IN WWII

The Partisan Movement

On July 3, 1941, Stalin addressed the Soviet people by radio. "In the occupied regions, the enemy and all his accomplices... must be hounded and annihilated at every step and all their measures frustrated." By the end of the year, 30,000 partisans were operating behind German lines. By the following summer, this number had grown to 150,000. Although some Russians joined partisan units in order to escape the German slave-labor camps, most did so either out of patriotism or sheer hatred for the invaders. In the words of one such partisan, "There was not one person in whose family blood had not been shed. These people were fired with one desire - to kill Germans."

Partisan operations were generally concentrated in the forests of Byelorussia, bordering on Poland and the Ukraine. From hidden bases deep within these forests, they were able to do considerable damage to German lines of supply and communication. They gathered information on German troop movements, blew up bridges, pounced on small or isolated detachments, set fire to supply depots, and did considerable damage to forward Luftwaffe airfields. At first their activities were limited both by a lack of arms and by the absence of coordinated plans. They were even in constant danger of betrayal by hostile local villagers. Operations quickly expanded, however, as the Soviet High Command started airlifting supplies to them and peasants, once they had been exposed to the full effects Nazi occupation, began giving them food and concealing them from the invaders.

Lacking the strength to engage regular German units in conventional battle, the partisans nevertheless proved to be an ever-present threat to the Wehrmacht. A warning had to be issued to the occupation forces: "We Germans make the mistake of thinking that if neither offensive nor defensive operations are in progress then there is no war at all. But the war is going on... when we are cooking potatoes, when we lie down to sleep. A soldier must carry his weapons always and everywhere."

Partisan units were initially composed of cut-off Russian soldiers conducting independent operations. They were generally ignored by the German Army in its headlong advance and were able to conduct many small operations against supply and transportation targets of small tactical value. But, by 1943, the tide of war had turned. The Germans were suffering significant shortages in manpower. Active front-line units had a priority on precious replacements. Rear area security units eventually were only able to guard and secure critical supply, railroad, and communications centers. Eventually, as the war dragged on, only combat units periodically rotated out of the front lines could effectively conduct anti-partisan operations. The anti-partisan operation conducted by a German infantry battalion in the Lepel-Borisov sector, in June 1943, illustrates the principles and difficulties of conducting successful anti-partisan operations.

Attack on Daliki

(A German Success Story)

In the Lepel-Borisov area, a well-organized partisan headquarters was directing attacks against German supply facilities. German intelligence was able to ascertain that their headquarters was located to the south of Lepel, at Daliki. The German District Commander was also aware that any move by German forces against the partisan headquarters would be quickly relayed to the partisans by the local citizenry. He, therefore, assigned the task of destroying the partisan force to a bicycle-mounted infantry battalion temporarily withdrawn from the front and reassigned to his sector specifically for anti-partisan work.

Major Beer, the Battalion Commander, made it clear to his men that their area of operations was to be the Berezina Valley. He directed the battalion, minus #3 Company, to proceed toward Berezino via Lepel, taking care that billeting parties should depart in advance of the main body to prepare quarters at each company objective. He directed that each company should billet at a different village in the line of march and proceed the next morning to Lepel where the battalion would reunite and push on into Berezino. The battalion executed this march successfully and halted at Lepel, on schedule.

At this point, Major Beer implemented an elaborate deception designed to catch the enemy unaware. He ordered a normal troop movement with Berezino as the destination, sending billeting parties out in

advance of the main body as per standard operating procedure. He then ordered his troops to "double back" to Lepel and proceed as quickly as possible to Daliki using three converging roads.

A likely avenue of escape from Daliki was a swamp to the South and East. To prevent this escape route being used, Major Beer held #3 Company behind at Borisov. Later in the afternoon, this company moved by truck to Gorodok where they were billeted for the night. Next morning, they departed for Berezino. On the way, however, they dismounted in a wooded area East of Daliki. The trucks were allowed to stop for no more than a few seconds, then continued on to Berezino, as if they were joining up with the rest of the battalion. Once disembarked, the company then moved through the woods and occupied blocking positions in the swamp.

Beer detached the antitank guns from #4 Company (the "heavy" company) and divided them between #1 and #2 Companies to assist in knocking out any dug-in machinegun positions. Once these were destroyed, the partisans tried to fall back but were killed crossing open ground. #1 Company then resumed its advance. However, before they were able to enter Daliki, they were ordered to turn west and assault the village of Ivan Bor where a large force of partisans had regrouped. They soon found themselves in a furious firefight that required every bit of available firepower, including machine-guns, mortars, and anti-tank guns to win. As the machinegunners of #4 Company cleared Daliki, elements of #3 Company became heavily engaged with the partisan headquarters staff as they tried to escape through the swamp. All were killed.

The attack on the partisan headquarters at Daliki has to be considered an overall success. Essential to this success was Major Beer's ability to deceive the partisans as to where he was going to attack. Partisan intelligence was always good and a headquarters unit would have an even better intelligence network than most other partisan units. If the partisans had been able to learn of the impending German attack, they would have most likely withdrawn before the Germans arrived. An additional reason for German success in the attack was the critical emplacement of #3 Company as a blocking force. Previous anti-partisan operations had shown that large frontal assaults against partisan units usually resulted in the partisans breaking down into groups that were small enough to escape through the lines of the attackers.

To destroy the headquarters "facility" without killing or capturing the staff would serve little purpose. This operation should also be considered a success because the entire partisan leadership was killed in the attack. If they had been able to escape, then the German attack would have been a failure no matter how many other partisans were killed. If the partisan leadership survived the attack, they would simply move to new locations.

An Otherwise Dismal Pattern

The Daliki action, though typical of successful operations, was not typical of anti-partisan operations in general. German security forces were often inadequate to move against and destroy partisan forces. Manpower shortages often forced the reassignment of designated security units from rear area protection to front-line service. In addition, rear area security forces often lacked motor transport. Shortages of

gasoline and spare parts for existing vehicles often aggravated the problem. First priority in the German supply chain was for "SS" units and, after that, the rest of the army's combat formations. Soldiers assigned to rear area security units were often older than normal and suffered from various chronic medical problems rendering them unsuitable for front line duty. Nobody seemed to consider that anti-partisan operations might require "fit" individuals as well!

Those rear area security forces not pulled for duty at the front were used to provide security for railroad bridges and critical railroad lines used to transport troops and supplies. The shortages in available rear area security personnel, adequate heavy weapons, a general lack of mobility, and experience in combat assault operations required German District Commanders to assign important missions to whatever combat experienced infantry might be "passing through" their territory.

Keeping anti-partisan operations secret was one of the greatest challenges to conducting them successfully. Due to manpower shortages, the German occupation army was forced to hire many local civilians to work in German troop areas and on military installations. With very little effort, these civilian workers could observe German troop movements, locate critical supplies, and sketch defensive layouts. German exploitation of the Russian economy resulted in large numbers of Russian civilians being reduced to starvation rations. Add to this the death of thousands of Russian prisoners of war due to illness, starvation, and general mistreatment and the abject subjugation of millions of Soviet citizens by German occupation forces and you have a formula for disaster.

TYPICAL GERMAN REAR-AREA FORCES

In 1944, a typical German "Army" would include the following anti-aircraft units, deployed for rear-area security:

14xFlak platoons, each with 4x10.5cm FlaK39s, towed by Sdkfz 8 tractors

14xFlak platoons, each with 4x3.7cm FlaK36s or 2cm Flak38s, towed by trucks or horses

A typical German "Corps" in the same period would include:

9xFlaK batteries, each with 4x8.8cm FlaK36s, towed by Sdkfz 7 tractors.

24xFlaK platoons, each with 3x2cm FlaK38s, towed by trucks or horses

12xFlaK platoons, each with 3x2cm Quad FlaK37s, towed by trucks or horses

An "SS" Corps in 1944 generally included a "Security" Battalion composed of the following:

1xBattalion HQ Platoon

3x"SS" Companies, each with 1xHQ Squad, 3xInfantry Platoons, 3xMMGs, and 2x8cm Mortars

1xSupport Company, with 1xHQ Squad, 4x8cm Mortars, and 6-8xMMGs in two MG Platoons

Luftwaffe Divisions in 1944 contained:

4xFlaK Batteries, each with 6x2cm FlaK38, towed by trucks

2xFlaK Companies, each with 1xHQ Squad and 3xPlatoons with 4x8.8cm FlaK36s towed by Sdkfz 7 tractors

1xFusilier Company, with 1xHQ Platoon, 3xInfantry Platoons mounted on bicycles, and 1xFlaK Platoon with

3xQuad 2cm Flak37s, towed by trucks

Offensive Partisan Activity

(The Other Side of the Coin)

The enormous German offensive aimed at pinching off the Soviet "bulge" around the vital railroad centers of Kursk and Orel, "Operation Zitadelle", was finally winding down in August of 1943. The Soviet High Command was wasting no time before exerting whatever efforts were necessary to convert their massive defensive victory at Kursk into an equally massive offensive one in the summer of 1944, "Bagratian". Doing this required transferring large numbers of armored and infantry units from defensive to offensive positions over hundreds of miles of front. Reconnaissance missions would have to be conducted to identify German weak points. German reserves would have to be pinpointed and, if possible, neutralized. German capabilities and intentions would have to be precisely ascertained.

To accomplish many of these and other missions, Soviet "Front" commanders could call on the assistance of hundreds of thousands of partisans, both active and passive, military and civilian. These forces commenced operations immediately upon receiving their orders. German radio and telephone transmissions were intercepted. German troop movements were monitored. German supply and maintenance depots were identified. German soldiers were captured and interrogated. Once the picture was clear, plans were laid to prepare the way for "Bagratian" with the maximum of efficiency.

First, German commanders would have to be kept in the dark concerning Soviet plans. This meant maintaining normal levels of partisan activity in the theater of operations; no more - no less. Next, crucial bridges, supply depots, rail yards, and staging areas were identified. Then, troops and weapons were secretly gathered within striking distance of these targets. Finally, when the signal was given, these forces attacked, simultaneously spreading panic and confusion in the German rear and misleading them as to the true objectives of the offensive.

A crucial aspect of the partisan effort was the destruction of German airfields and Luftwaffe aircraft on the ground.

The effect was twofold. First, by destroying aircraft, repair installations, and other equipment, the partisans would remove an important weapon from the German arsenal - tactical air-support. But, in addition, by knocking out forward airfields, they would effectively blind German aerial reconnaissance, further weakening their ability to react to Soviet moves.

The combined partisan/Red Army attack on the Luftwaffe base at Berezino, near Minsk is a classic example of the kind of "deep penetration" raids executed in the run-up to the Soviet 1944 Summer Offensive. In this raid Red Army tankers and cavalry joined forces with local partisans to wreck an important German installation.

"The Berezino Raid"

The German airbase at Berezino was an important target for two reasons. First, German ground attack aircraft located here could have a serious effect on the first stage of the planned offensive. Berezino was to be a major objective during its first phase, as the axis of advance of the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Byelorussian Fronts converged on Minsk to the West. 2nd Byelorussian Front in particular would have to take out the town since it needed to cross the Berezina River here.

Secondly, in the period before the offensive actually commenced, German reconnaissance flights would have to be curtailed in order to mask the enormous shifting of forces necessary for the offensive to succeed. Three infantry armies and a Guards Tank Army had to be moved from other parts of the front and German intelligence, particularly the long-range reconnaissance aircraft of Luftflotte 6, had to be neutralized. The Berezino airbase had to go!

Local partisan units were notified of the mission and additional weapons and other vital supplies were airdropped to them. In addition two companies each of T-34 tanks and regular Soviet horse cavalry were infiltrated through the German lines to rendezvous with them a few days before the attack. Once a plan of action was decided upon, troops began closing in on the target. The biggest problem involved in this was the noise produced by the tanks. To over-

come the noise, the Russians moved them only while aircraft engines or other equipment was running at the base or when heavy freight trains were passing on nearby tracks. H-Hour was set for 21:30 on 19 June, one hour before dusk. The precise time selected is significant.

First, at the end of a long workday, German personnel would be tired and security would be slack. Second, many of the Germans would be washing up or sitting down to supper. Third, the guard would just be changing. The new shift would be too busy settling in to be fully alert. Finally, the attack was expected to take no more than thirty or so minutes, after which the Russians would retreat into the forest. By the time German reinforcements arrived to pursue them, it would be fully dark!

The Plan

The plan was simple. First, the infantry would attack out of the woods on the north side of the field, drawing attention to themselves. Next, the main attack by tanks and cavalry would strike the opposite side of the field aimed at taking out the installation's anti-aircraft weapons. Once these were neutralized, the infantry would close in and destroy the control tower and hangers by fire and demolition. Finally, any aircraft on the ground would be knocked out by demolition charges placed on them and the infantry would withdraw east and South, dispersing into small groups while the tanks and cavalry made their escape by pre-determined routes through the forest.

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The Russians Are Coming!

Ukraine - 19 June 1944

The Luftwaffe garrison of the forward air base near Berezino had finished a long day. They had serviced many sorties on this hot summer afternoon. Only two more days until the longest day of the year! Fatigued from their duties, the men were preparing for supper, cleaning up, or changing the guard for the evening. Everything in their area seemed normal and quiet.

The woods surrounding the airfield, however, had many strange visitors. Partisans, reinforced by cavalry and armour units, had crept up to the very treeline. Soon, their torrent would descend on the hated fascist invaders! The Red Army would be one step closer to liberating their homeland!



Germans

Garrison,
Berezino Airfield

Cohesion

12

Infantry

15

FlaK Units

1xFlaK Company(-)

2x8.8cm FlaK36

(in LIGHT improved positions)

3xFlaK Platoon

@ 1x2cm Quad FlaK37

(in LIGHT improved positions)

2xFlaK Platoon

@ 1x3.7cm FlaK36

(in LIGHT improved positions)

Luftwaffe Ground Staff:

14xInfantry '39,

2xInfantry Support

(support stands in LIGHT improved positions)

4xGerman Aircraft

placed on or adjacent to the "runway"



Russians

Cohesion

14

Partisan Battalion

9xInfantry '42,

1xInfantry Support,

1x82mm Mortar(3),

1xEngineer Infantry

Red Army Detachment

1xCavalry GHQ (+1),

9xCavalry,

2xCavalry Support,

6xT-34C

INITIAL DEPLOYMENT:

Germans - (set up first)

Deploy within five inches of the "runway" or buildings.

Russians Infantry deploy in woods north of the "runway."

Tanks/Cavalry deploy in woods south of the "runway."

SCENARIO LENGTH: 10 TURNS

VICTORY CONDITIONS:

Each "Barracks" is worth 15 points, the "Hangers" are worth 35 points, the "Tower" is worth 10 points, and each aircraft model (ten actual aircraft) is worth 20 points.

Russian Decisive - Destroy 150 points

Russian Tactical - Destroy 110

Russian Marginal - Destroy 70 or more points

German Decisive - Russians destroy less than 50 points.

German Tactical - Russians destroy less than 90 points.

German Marginal - Russians destroy less than 120 points.

TERRAIN SUGGESTIONS:

- The map should measure approximately 36" by 72".
- Non-specified terrain is Open: maximum sighting distance is 20".
- The east-west road, "hanger" road and the runway are "good" roads.
- The buildings are "Light."
- The woods are "Standard."

