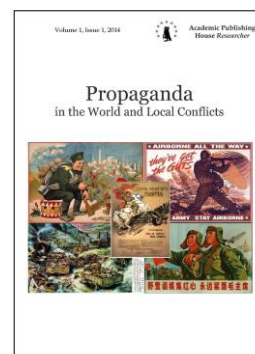


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Influence of German Propaganda on the Combat Effectiveness of Soviet Units in 1942 (as illustrated by the 408th Rifle Division)

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Abstract

The paper explores the effects German propaganda produced on the units of the 408th rifle division of the Red Army during World War II. The focus is made on the peculiar aspects characterizing the way the division was activated, as well as the methods of influence on the unit, used by the adversary.

The materials analyzed include archival documents from the Central Archives of the Ministry of Defense, Podolsk, Russian Federation, as well as reminiscences of World War II, narrated by Soviet and German military leaders.

Summing up his findings, the author concludes that the 408th rifle division, which was formed in the Armenian SSR and had predominantly Armenian personnel, was deployed on the front line in September 1942, where it was engaged in combat operations against German troops. Germans capitalized on a comprehensive arsenal of psychological levers against the 408th Division, which were put in action by the Armenian Legions who fought on the side of the German army. Psychological influence was generated through the use of sound broadcasting, individual night conversations with Soviet patrols, as well as the use of printed propaganda – leaflets. With the retreat of Soviet troops and the quick abbreviated training of personnel before combat operations, all these factors resulted in mass defection of Red Army soldiers to the enemy, desertion and self-mutilation. In the end, the 408th Division was discontinued.

Keywords: 408th rifle division, Armenia, Georgia, anti-Soviet propaganda, methods of psychological influence, combat effectiveness.

1. Introduction

1941 marked the invasion of the Soviet Union by the German army. In the course of almost two consecutive years, Germany advanced with assault operations, first by Army Group Center, and then by Army Group South. Along with combat activities, psychological tactics of warfare were also leveraged on a wide scale to demoralize Soviet units and compel personnel either to desert or defect to the side of Germany.

The paper looks at anti-Soviet propaganda as it was employed by the German army, and illustrates this by the combat effectiveness of the 408th rifle division (hereinafter – rd). The 408th rd was activated in 1941 in the Armenian SSR with conscripted members of Caucasian ethnic groups.

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2. Materials and methods

The body of materials is comprised of an entire range of sources: 1) archival sources – the Central Archives of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation (Podolsk, Russian Federation); 2) personal accounts – reminiscences of people involved in the events (for example: Degrell', 2012; Tike, 2015; Ernstkhauzen, 2012); 3) collections of published documents (for example: Diversanty..., 2008; Yampol'skii, 2008; Kollaboratsionizm..., 2014); 4) information and reference material (Osnovnye administrativno-territorial'nye..., 1986).

To address the research objectives, we used the principle of historicism, which enabled a comprehensive analysis of archival documents and personal accounts, which highlighted the influence of German propaganda on the combat effectiveness of the 408th rd units. Achieving the goal also entails utilizing a variety of other interconnected methods, i.e. problem-oriented chronological method, structured system method and comparative historical method.

3. Discussion

Analyzing historiography, it is necessary to take into account that Soviet ideology declared the existence of friendship amongst fraternal peoples in the USSR. For this reason, Soviet historiography paid almost no attention to collaborationist practices and voluntary defection of Red Army soldiers to Germany. As a result, works of Soviet researchers A.A. Grechko and E.I. Pyatigorskii (Grechko, 1969; Pyatigorskii, 1992) described combat activities of the 408th rd in the context of heroification. A similar perspective was given to the combat activity of the Georgian units in the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army by the study of I.L. Babalashvili (Babalashvili, 1977).

As the Soviet Union collapsed, there is no need any longer to adhere to the Soviet doctrine "On the unity of the Soviet people during the war". With military archives now opened, researchers received an opportunity to bring to light little-known events that took place during World War II. For example, S.I. Drobyazko and A.V. Karashchuk (Drobyazko, Karashchuk, 2000) offer a view of the activities carried on by Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Belarusian and Ukrainian volunteer units that were involved in World War II as part of the German armed forces. The subject of collaboration was also covered by researchers such as A.A. Cherkasov (Cherkasov, 2003) and B.N. Kovalev (Kovalev, 2004; Kovalev, 2009). In addition, the work by V. Chernyavskii (Chernyavskii, 2004) presents a description of the system of Wehrmacht and SS commando units during World War II. Along with this, monographs by Russian authors A.V. Isaev and A.A. Cherkasov (Isaev, 2016; Cherkasov, 2008) delivered an analysis of military operations in the Crimea and the North Caucasus.

Foreign researchers from the post-Soviet countries also addressed the events of World War II. For example, E.A. Abramyan in his research works provided insight not only into the motives that contributed to the defection of Armenians in the Red Army to the German side, but also into the activities of the Armenian volunteer units formed by the Abwehr (Abramyan, 2002; Abramyan, 2005; Abramyan, 2006). A Georgian researcher, G.G. Mamulia focuses on the Georgian units in the German armed forces (Mamulia, 2007; Mamulia, 2011), while O.V. Romanko examined the service of Arabs, Hindus and USSR citizens of the Muslim faith in the German troops (Roman'ko, 2004).

4. Results

On July 25, 1942, the Wehrmacht launched a full-scale offensive in a southerly direction towards the Caucasus, and by middle of August, retreating Soviet forces took up the defensive of the mountain passes in the Main Caucasian Range. A series of organizational measures ensued as German troops threatened to reach the Black Sea coast of the North-Western Caucasus. A directive of the Headquarters of the Supreme High Command renamed the NCF¹ into the BSGF² of the TCF³ in early September. The period from the 1st to the 10th of September marked continued fighting of the Red Army units in the Novorossiysk direction against the Wehrmacht forces that occupied Anapa on August 31 and continued to advance with superior strength on Novorossiysk. Following fierce

¹ NCF – North Caucasian Front.

² BSGF – Black Sea Group of Forces.

³ TCF – Transcaucasian Front.

battles on the night of September 10, units of the 47th A¹, together with the ships of the Novorossiysk naval base, started evacuation from Novorossiysk (TsAMO. F. 47. Op. 1063. D. 179. L. 1).

On August 11, 1941, the 408th rd was formed in Yerevan, the capital of the Armenian SSR, with its personnel predominantly consisting of members of Caucasian ethnic groups, such as Armenians – 21 %, Azerbaijanis – 23 %, Georgians – 25 %, Slavs and other nationalities – 31 %. During the year, the 408th rd from time to time sent its best trained Red Army soldiers, who were replaced with locally-recruited conscripts – Armenians, to the front, and as a result, the number of Armenian soldiers increased by September 1942. As of the time the division was included into the BSGF, it had 11.6 thousand people (Pyatigorskii, 1992: 196).

In the middle of September 1942, units of the 408th division concentrated in the Gelendzhik area (TsAMO. F. 47. Op. 1063. D. 194. L. 272).

On September 28, the commander of the 408th rd received an order to redeploy by sea two regiments (663rd and 670th ones) from Gelendzhik to Tuapse, without the 672nd rifle regiment (hereinafter – rr), one division of the 963rd ar² and a training battalion (TsAMO. F. 1732. Op. 1. D. 3. L. 40b.).

The 672nd rr of the 408th rd with one division of the 963rd ar remained at that time at the disposal of the army commander. The regiment stood on defensive positions in the area of Hill 170.7, Krasnaya Pobeda (west), Lindarov. On the night of September 28-29, 89 Red Army soldiers from the 2nd company of the regiment (Krasnaya Pobeda area, east) went over to the enemy. On October 1, Wehrmacht forces pushed forward to the attack, delivering a strike with 10 tanks in the course of Krasnaya Pobeda. Units of the 672nd rr, having failed to withstand the assault and swept by the artillery and mortar fire, relinquished their positions and fled. By the evening of October 5, 170 people were rallied. According to preliminary information, the casualties amounted to: the killed – 38 people, the wounded – 279 people, the missing, i.e. those who actually sided with the Wehrmacht, 1,051 (TsAMO. F. 371. Op. 6367. D. 76. L. 38).

The investigation into the reasons behind the massive defection of Red Army soldiers to the enemy uncovered that while the 672nd rr was in close contact with Wehrmacht units on the front line, dialogues took place between Soviet and German soldiers in the Armenian language (TsAMO. F. 276. Op. 811. D. 27. L. 85).

To drive impactful anti-Soviet propaganda designed to damage combat effectiveness of Soviet units in the defensive sector of the 672nd rr, the German command could make use of volunteers from the Armenian national regiment, stationed in Simferopol and formed from prisoners of war (POW) (Yampol'skii, 2008: 253, 262).

The defeat of the Soviet forces by the Wehrmacht on the Crimean Peninsula in May and in the summer of 1942 resulted in more than 100,000 Red Army soldiers taken prisoner by Germans. Importantly, even before the Crimean offensive, the German command kept an eye open for numerous prisoners and defectors of Caucasian nationalities from Soviet divisions in areas near Sevastopol and Kerch. As an explanation, the share of Caucasus natives reached 80% in Red Army divisions in the sector of the front line (Yampol'skii, 2008: 250).

For example, the 386th and 388th rifle divisions were created in Georgia and almost totally consisted of personnel of Caucasian decent, mainly Georgians (Babalashvili, 1977: 157-158; Isaev, 2016: 60).

Combat activities between December 17 and 27, 1941 killed, wounded and made missing 6,452 people from the 388th rd – the unit retained only 4,370 people as its personnel (TsAMO. F. 1711. Op. 1. D. 1. L. 6). It meant that the division's actual losses amounted to 2/3 in 10 days of combat operations. Without providing precise figures of the losses in his report, Divisional Commander Monakhov disguised the number of Red Army soldiers who voluntarily switched to the enemy.

The Wehrmacht command took advantage of the favorable preconditions for carrying out anti-Soviet propaganda campaigns among Caucasus natives in the Red Army, which was expected to transform into an active struggle against communism in the future. It considered the military potential of using prisoners of war of Caucasian decent, who had to be subjected to propaganda indoctrination. Propaganda activities were to be implemented by anti-Soviet Caucasians in various

¹ A – army.

² ar – artillery regiment.

training camps arranged for the purpose. The German command began to man Armenian national units in early 1942, assisted by Dashnak émigrés led by Dro Kanayan, the head of the notorious reconnaissance group “Dromedar”. Armenian national units were aimed to be used against regular Soviet forces, for anti-partisan operations, as well as reconnaissance and subversion missions. (Yampol'skii, 2008: 250-251, 262).

On the front line of the TCF NGF (Northern Group of Forces), the German command also leveraged Caucasian volunteers of the special group “Bergmann” to carry out anti-Soviet propaganda activities. The sector of the 89th (Armenian) rd was the target of distribution of leaflets in Armenian, which urged Red Army soldiers with weapons to go over to the Wehrmacht and together with units of the German army, proposed to liberate Armenia from Soviet invaders. They informed that an Armenian unit of the “Bergmann” battalion was deployed opposite the 89th rd. In the evenings, music and songs in Armenian were audible from the direction of German units. As a result, from September 26 to September 30, 1942, more than 300 people switched over to the German forces, and this forced the Soviet command to redeploy the 89th rd from the front line to the rear (Abramyan, 2006: 109-110).

It is known from the war diary of the 370th rr of the 89th rd that the regiment suffered losses within 3 days at the end of September 1942: 69 people were killed, 412 wounded, 673 people reported missing (TsAMO. F. 7023. Op. 210173. D. 1. L. 13). Once again, the number of missing persons stand for soldiers who defected to the enemy.

Around the same time (September 1942), at the front, in the defensive sector of the 414th rd, which was formed from Georgians, the German command engaged Georgian volunteers to carry out anti-Soviet propaganda argumentation and agitation in Georgian using loudspeakers. As a consequence, almost the entire 3rd battalion of the 375th rr of the 414th rd and the personnel of an artillery battery defected to Germans, and in this context the 414th rd was removed from the front and dispatched to the rear (Abramyan, 2006: 110).

With anti-Soviet propaganda campaigns and large-scale defection of Red Army soldiers of the Caucasian decent to Germans, the German command managed to activate the second point of the “Dromedar” Abwehr commando group in the Krasnodar area, and its backbone was build on nearly 70 Armenians from Sochi and Armavir. The leader of the group was Arutyun Arutyunyan. Armenian volunteers were trained to be infiltrated to the areas outside Tuapse, Sochi and other settlements on the Black Sea coast. In addition, a special-purpose camp was set up near Krasnodar, in which around 1,000 defected Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis and North Caucasians were kept. On September 29, 1942, the German command made a decision to form four army companies from the volunteers. The newly formed North Caucasus units were assigned to mount anti-partisan operations (Abramyan, 2006: 69-71, 144).

The voluntary units had failures in their activities as well. In May 1942, Armenian POWs were used to create the 808th Armenian infantry battalion that arrived in Neftegor'sk in September (80 km southeast of Maikop), where it was disarmed by Germans for its sympathy with the Soviet regime as the legionnaires were inclined to return to the Red Army. The command staff were executed by shooting, the battalion renamed into the 808th road construction battalion, in which 180 people were allowed to remain, and the rest of the personnel (up to 800 people) were sent to France as insecure elements (TsAMO. F. 47. Op. 1063. D. 199. L. 134-135).

At any rate, anti-Soviet propaganda dealt serious blows to the combat effectiveness of Red Army units. The successful agitation among Red Army soldiers of Armenian nationality was driven by the position of the German government. For example, even before the start of the war against the USSR, Adolf Hitler considered the possibility of establishing a Caucasian federal state and supporting the culture and ethnic identity of Caucasian peoples (Yampol'skii, 2008: 92, 97).

Meeting objectives in the new circumstances of the war with the Soviet Union required a different approach to the members of Caucasian nationalities. At the end of November 1941, A. Hitler signed an order to form four Caucasian legions. The plan was to install separate states in the occupied Caucasus territory – Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, whose representatives formed national liberation committees that were granted the status of equal allies with Germany on April 15, 1942. The consolidated struggle was targeted against the Soviet Union, which Armenians associated with the Ottoman Empire. In the summer of 1942, as soon as they celebrated victory over the Bolsheviks, Georgia and Armenia were planned to take part in the war against Turkey that would later be divided. Armenia was promised a resolution for the so-called “Armenian issue” –

a return of Karabakh, Kars and Nakhichevan territories, and Georgia was promised to be given the Zagatala and Sochi districts. Note should be made that until the end of 1944, J. Goebbels' Ministry of Propaganda published the "Hajastan ("Armenien") weekly for Armenian legionnaires, which came out in Armenian and German (Abramyan, 2006: 27, 33, 41, 45-50, 74).

The TCF BSGF command was unable to take immediate measures to investigate the causes of Armenian Red Army soldiers' defection to the enemy. The reason was the German offensive on Tuapse, which was launched on September 23, 1942 (Tike, 2005: 164).

The virtually capable 672nd rr was brought back by the TCF BSGF Command to the 408th rd, i.e. the regiment was redeployed from Novorossiysk to the Tuapse area (TsAMO. F. 371. Op. 6367. D. 76. L. 38).

At this time, in the Tuapse direction, the 408 rd with two regiments (663 and 670 rr) was concentrated in the Goitkh, Perevalnii, Altubinal area by 10 a.m. on October 5, 1942 and commenced installing a defense line (TsAMO. F. 371. Op. 6367. D. 102. L. 143, 144).

Importantly, as soon as the regiments of the 408th rd faced off with Wehrmacht units, Armenian Red Army soldiers were subjected to anti-Soviet agitation by the enemy. The anti-Soviet propaganda primarily focused on the call to switch over to Germans and together fight against the "Red Plague" for the liberation of Armenia (Abramyan, 2002: 8).

To maintain anti-Soviet propaganda, Wehrmacht forces in the Tuapse area had volunteers from the 813th battalion of the Armenian Legion, which was transported to the Apsheron sky workers' settlement together with a battalion of the Georgian Legion (Abramyan, 2006: 253).

The German command had not only Armenian volunteers at its disposal. Léon Degrelle, a Belgian, who fought for Germans in the "Walloon" battalion in the Tuapse axis in August 1942, noted: *"... People who lived the villages located in the fields vehemently opposed Bolsheviks. Some of our Armenian peasants went 15-30 kilometers from Kubano-Armenyanskii. A couple of days later, they reappeared with detailed intelligence on the Reds. The hatred of these peasants against the Soviet regime was astonishing to us. Poor, even destitute people, they were to yield to the temptation of Bolshevism. Instead, they felt so much terror of the Bolsheviks that they risked their lives every day to help us. The old gray-haired peasants, whom the Reds had forced to work for many years, were filled with particularly intense hatred for them. Wearing light leather sandals, they could sneak anywhere and led our patrols. Some of our Armenian guides fell into the hands of the Bolsheviks and were killed. But this did not shake the commitment of the village"* (Degrell', 2012: 87-88).

Along with Wehrmacht forces, which claimed allegiance of Armenian volunteers, the 408th rd was also in contact with the local Armenian population that was deeply discontented with the Soviet regime and voluntarily collaborated with Germans. The combat zone of the 408th rd was located in the Armenian district, Krasnodar Krai, with the district center in the village of Shaumyan. The Armenian district incorporated the following rural councils (soviets): Goitkhskii, Gunayskii, Kubano-Armyanskii, Rezhetskii, Sadovskii, Tubinskii, Chernigovskii and Shaumyanovskii (Osnovnye administrativno-territorial'nye..., 1986: 118).

The Kubano-Armyanskii khutor (small rural settlement) was located 50 km from the front, where Red Army soldiers of the 408th rd stood on the defensive, and Germans appointed an Armenian Odisyian as the head of the locality. Not only Armenians, but members of other ethnic groups collaborated with Germans in the occupied territory of the Krasnodar Krai.

Gradually, anti-Soviet propaganda in the 408th rd units started paying off. On October 8, at 04-00 p.m., the division headquarters received a report from Senior Lieutenant Kovalev, the 670th rr Chief of Staff, that a Red Army soldier of the 7th rifle company, Minas O. Khloyan, shot his left arm (TsAMO. F. 1732. Op. 1. D. 4. L. 245). Self-wounding was not only practiced by ordinary Red Army soldiers. In the period between October 1 and 19, the division's special department recorded 14 cases of self-wounding, which included incidents with the Second-in-Command of the 1st battalion of the 663rd rr, Lieutenant Davtyan, and commander of the 3rd rifle company of the same regiment, Lieutenant Manukyan, who were handed over to the military tribunal (TsAMO. F. 276. Op. 811. D. 27. L. 84).

There were other noteworthy cases as well. For example, Babken Mkrtchyan, the political officer of the 4th rifle company of the 670th rr, after having killed the company commander, abandoned his unit on the battlefield and fled. The result was almost complete destruction of the 4th company by the enemy. Subsequently, Mkrtchyan was handed over to the military tribunal.

In addition, from October 9 to 11, 20 people deserted from the 76-mm battery of the 663rd rr, led by communist Lieutenant Khachatryan (TsAMO. F. 276. Op. 811. D. 27. L. 84).

On the night of October 13, Senior Lieutenant Pindyurin (candidate member of the VKPb¹), Chief of Staff, with his two assistants for accounts and communications disappeared from the rear of the 663rd rr, taking with them secret documents and a situation map (TsAMO. F. 276. Op. 811. D. 27. L. 84). On the third day after Pindyurin and his assistant officers' desertion, the enemy threw fire on the division command post (TsAMO. F. 276. Op. 811. D. 27. L. 85ob.).

Therefore, defections to the German forces were practiced not only by Armenians, but Russian commanders as well. In its anti-Soviet agitation efforts, the German command, among other things, distributed leaflets in Russian among Red Army soldiers. Planes dropped leaflets at the positions of Soviet units, which read as follows: "Come over to our side! No passes required! Everyone will receive good treatment!" (Cherkasov, 2008: 168).

Despite Red Army soldiers' systematic defections to the enemy, aggravated by combat losses, the units of the 408th rd continued to hold the defensive in their sectors. On October 12, a group of Red Army soldiers from a battalion of the 670th rr switched over to the enemy (TsAMO. F. 1732. Op. 1. D. 4. L. 283-283ob., 342).

Meanwhile, Red Army soldiers continued to communicate with the enemy and received responses in Armenian (TsAMO. F. 276. Op. 811. D. 27. L. 85). In parallel with this, the combat effectiveness of the 408th rd, bulwarked by the 963d ar (artillery regiment), continued to go down because of systematic defections of Red Army soldiers to Germans. On October 14, the 963d ar command reported that the morale of the personnel was high, and instantly pointed out an emergency: "The commander of the 6th battery, Lieutenant E.M. Mirakyan and 5 Red Army soldiers abandoned the observation point on October 13 and nothing has been known of them to this day. The search is being conducted" (TsAMO. F. 1732. Op. 1. D. 4. L. 293).

Combat reports by the 963d ar command consistently informed that the morale of the personnel was high, and in the meantime, Red Army soldiers, commanders and political officers left the artillery regiment and went over to the enemy on a regular basis. On October 16, 10 people deserted from a separate mortar battalion, led by the deputy political officer, Shakhramanov, who was also a Communist Party organizer (TsAMO. F. 276. Op. 811. D. 27. L. 84).

Influenced by German propaganda, another case of desertion took place on the night of October 18: led by Junior Lieutenant Ambartsumyan (a VKPb member), the commander of fire platoon, 2nd battery, 1st battalion of the 963d ar, 16 Red Army soldiers and junior commanders of the same battery left with weapons in an unknown direction (TsAMO. F. 1732. Op. 1. D. 4. L. 331; TsAMO. F. 276. Op. 811. D. 27. L. 84).

The head of the political department in the 408th rr, Senior Battalion Commissar Sarkisyan, reported on November 15 in his final report on the morale in the division's units:

"Party member Aram Khachaturovich Airapetyan – a Red Army soldier of 670th rr – left his party card and service record book of the Red Army soldier in the trench on the fighting ground and went over to the enemy.

In addition, there are numerous facts when groups of soldiers and commanders disappear during combat missions. For example, in the 663rd rr, during a combat mission, the deputy commander for political affairs of the 3rd company – political officer Simonyan together with 15 soldiers went missing, an assumption is that the whole group betrayed their motherland.

On October 18, the commander of the 2nd battalion, 663rd rr, Senior Lieutenant Manukyan, reported that one 6-strong squad from the antitank rifle company, assigned to the regiment, killed their sergeant at night and went over to the enemy, leaving weapons behind them.

There are numerous cases when Red Army soldiers, led by their commanders, have hidden in gorges in the rear of their regiment's battle dispositions, absolutely deliberately avoiding combat.

It is not untypical for division and army anti-retreat units to detain groups of idlers, cowards and scaremongers in the rear and send them to the front.

Along with this, there are such types of treason, practiced in the division units, as self-wounding, abandoning the fighting ground, cowardice and scaremongering...

¹ VKP(b) – All-Union Communist Party (bolsheviks) (author's note).

27 people have been arrested by the division's Special NKVD Department, who abandoned the fighting ground and shamefully fled, of which 5 people have been shot...

...The number of facts of accidents, cowardice, scaremongering, self-wounding in the division units is much greater, and they have created an alarming situation" (TsAMO. F. 276. Op. 811. D. 27. L. 84).

On October 17, 1942, the 408th rd continued to defend the same line with what remained of its units. It is known from the report of the 408th rd's commander that in the period of action, from September 25 to October 16, the division lost: 447 people killed, 1,404 wounded, 2,162 missing, 495 put out due to illness. As of October 16, the personnel of the division numbered 5,638 people (TsAMO. F. 371. Op. 6367. D. 102. L. 149).

On October 21, German forces overran Perevalnii and Goitkh, and following this, individual units of the 408th rd defected to the enemy (TsAMO. F. 276. Op. 811. D. 28. L. 126).

While being deployed in the Tuapse area, the command of the 408th division investigated into the reasons for the low combat effectiveness of the personnel and revealed a number of deficiencies. The area, where the rifle division was formed, (Armenian SSR), was predominantly populated by Armenians, many of whom lived abroad. The personnel included Red Army soldiers who lived in France from 1917 to 1934. The 76-mm battery of the 663rd rr suffered the desertion of 20 people, among whom Dashitonyan had 2 brothers repressed by the NKVD. Conversations in Armenian between Red Army soldiers and the enemy systematically took place along the line of contact. Cases of self-wounding and desertion were not uncommon. While Red Army soldiers complained of poor meals, the detained 5 deserters were found to have 15-day supply of food; they threw their weapons into the river (TsAMO. F. 276. Op. 811. D. 27. L. 85-86).

Over the week, Colonel Shapovalov scrutinized internal conditions in the division and submitted a corresponding reported to the commander of the Tuapse defense area, Major General Petrakovskii on November 15:

"The 408th rifle division, activated in Yerevan in September 1941, started combat training only in March 1942, having the personnel with which the division was integrated into the army.

The division personnel were staffed from the Armenian SSR population, and its ethnic composition comprises Armenians.

The combat training of the division's personnel was conducted according to the intensified combat training program with one-month drilling exercises, beginning in June of this year it started a three-month program that was fully covered by the personnel due to the following reasons:

a/ sending up to 50 % of the personnel for defensive organization work;

b/ strengthening the protection of the border with the neighboring state – Turkey with up to 1/3 of the division's personnel, hence the complete combat training program was taken by no more than 30 % of the division's personnel;

The training of the division's units was provided not at a high level of quality, and the reasons were:

a/ personal inappropriate expertise of commanding officers, as well as poor qualification in specific areas;

b/ grossly inadequate provision of material needs for the training process, etc.;

In the course of the division' combat training, there were cases of immoral behaviors, such as:

a/ desertion (by groups and individuals);

b/ self-wounding;

During combat action, the number and range of immoral behaviors rose in the division which is attributable to:

a/ very low moral stamina of the personnel in combat;

b/ mass desertion from the fighting ground;

c/ group defections to the enemy and its agitation for defection;

d/ an instance that totally goes beyond the boundaries of all the listed immoral behaviors – is group desertion from the fighting ground, with most deserters being party members.

Cowardice and scaremongering are a widespread phenomenon, and it pervades the rank and file and junior commanding officers.

As of October 21, 1942, the division has no more than 600 or 800 combat-fit manpower, and this is bearing in mind that the division did not conduct tough combat action with the enemy.

My understanding is that the division, considering all of the above, is not combat-ready, is morally disturbed and wants changes in its composition, should be remanned and withdrawn to the rear” (TsAMO. F. 276. Op. 811. D. 27. L. 88).

Colonel Shapovalov’s findings about the division’s combat effectiveness were taken into account by the BSGF command. As a result, according to the order for the front troops, dated November 18, the 408th Infantry Division was inactivated on November 25, 1942 (TsAMO. F. 2354. Op. 1. D. 19. L. 32).

5. Conclusion

Summing up, the 408th rifle division, which was formed in the Armenian SSR and had predominantly Armenian personnel, was deployed on the front line in September 1942, where it was engaged in combat operations against German troops. Germans capitalized on a comprehensive arsenal of psychological levers against the 408th Division, which were put in action by the Armenian Legions who fought on the side of the German army. Psychological influence was generated through the use of sound broadcasting, individual night conversations with Soviet patrols, as well as the use of printed propaganda – leaflets. With the retreat of Soviet troops and the quick abbreviated training of personnel before combat operations, all these factors resulted in mass defection of Red Army soldiers to the enemy, desertion and self-mutilation. In the end, the 408th Division was discontinued.

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