CLASSIC EUROPA Briefing

German and Soviet Punishment and Probation Units

Of World War II

Alleged to be members of the Soviet 8th Shtraf Battalion, "Rokossovskiy's Gang"
(see Appendix: Photos for details)

Table of Contents

German soldiers deployed in Warsaw, September 1944, against the Polish Warsaw Uprising[1]

Many European countries fighting in World War II often needed more soldiers than they could recruit through conventional means, such as conscription or calls for volunteers. Some of these countries tapped alternative sources of personnel that normally were not allowed to serve as combat soldiers: civilians who had been convicted of crimes, and soldiers who had been court-martialled for military offenses or were being punished for various infractions. The two major totalitarian powers in the war, Nazi Germany and the USSR, used these sources of soldiers to a great extent. They also had a third source to tap: German citizens in German concentration camps or inmates in the Soviet GULag.

The Germans and Soviets differed on how to handle these peoples. The Nazis eventually raised special "rehabilitation" or probationary units for thousands of prisoners they decided to use as soldiers. The Soviets would mostly allow GULag inmates to become ordinary soldiers. They would recruit volunteers from the GULag, offering to reduce their sentences if they served as soldiers in regular units. Hundreds of thousands of GULag inmates went into the Red Army in this way. Mostly likely, the Soviets were willing to trust them in regular units as most inmates in the GULag were not actually political prisoners opposed to the regime. Instead, they were ordinary people swept into the GULag by Stalin's paranoid purges. Many were loyal to the state and had at best only committed what should have been

1 Source: Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-2005-0034, Fotograf(in) Seidel; https://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/dba/de/search/?query=Bild+146-2005-0034.

regarded as minor offenses. Many were completely innocent, having been arrested and sentenced on false charges, sometimes solely to fulfill the secret police's arrest quotas.

Real political prisoners might attempt to surrender to enemy, desert, or shirk their duties, as might true hardened criminals from the prison system or soldiers who had committed serious military offenses. Also, having such people in regular units was bad for the morale of the other soldiers, so they typically were sent to special punishment or prisoner units. The punishment units were subjected to harsh discipline and heavy, sometimes dangerous labor; some were poorly fed and cared for. All this was not just punishment for the units' soldiers but also to motivate soldiers in regular units to follow orders and forgo committing crimes, left they be sent to a punishment unit. Germany and the USSR also came to see value in forming special punishment units for serious offenders, where the troops were assigned very dangerous military missions. The Soviet "shtraf" battalions became infamous for their severe treatment and the extremely high losses they suffered. What is less well known, however, is that the Soviets got the idea (and the name) for these punishment units from the Germans!

A lot of misinformation surrounds these punishment units in popular culture sources. On one extreme, people claim they undertook suicide missions under the threat of instant death if they refused. At the other extreme, people cast doubt that the units could have been used as combat troops, claiming they'd instantly desert. In actuality, most punishment units were assigned to hard labor, not combat. The ones that were combat punishment units were not given actual suicide missions, although they were routinely assigned highly-hazardous mission with little regard to casualties. Desertion and surrender could occur but were not major problems, since the units typically were well guarded, and the penalties for attempting either act could be met with summary execution.

What's in a Name: Penal, Punitive, Punishment, Prisoner

In many books and websites, these special military punishment units are called penal units or penal battalions. That term is technically correct, as one important meaning of "penal" is "of, pertaining to, or involving punishment, as for crimes or offenses". However, most people assume penal units consisted of prisoners from the civilian prison system. The military punishment units were different: they did not contain civilian convicts but were filled with soldiers accused of various offenses or crimes.

Europa games designate these units "punitive" units. That term is slightly ambiguous, as "punitive" is more associated with inflicting punishment, so a

punitive unit can be misunderstood to be a unit inflicting punishment (on the enemy) rather than as a unit of soldiers being punished. This article accordingly uses "punishment" as a better term.

In addition to punishment units for military offenders, Germany also fielded Germany Army units containing civilian criminals and prisoners from concentration camps. These more fit the popular understanding of "penal units". Some gave good military service while others were less trustworthy. The SS also had a penal unit: the notorious Dirlewanger Brigade, which got its start as a security unit of convicted poachers. In practice, the SS itself was a criminal organization and soon used this unit to commit war crimes in occupied territories, partly as a means to terrorize the population into not resisting the Germans.

This article is mainly about military punishment and rehabilitation (probation) units. However, both Germany and the USSR had non-military organizations that in part or in total used forced labor, and both organizations worked on construction projects for their armed forces. The Soviet organization was the GULag: The Soviets had a huge population of prisoners in its GULag forced labor camps. GULag contingents were sent from the camps to work on construction projects in the field, guarded by special NKVD "convoy" troops. These contingents were not part of the Red Army and not armed, so they were not military penal units but rather were civilian prisoner units.

The Germans had Organization Todt (OT). This was a Nazi Party, later a government, labor service. At the start of the war, it used German labor, mainly of conscripted young German men before they went into the German armed forces. During the war, OT increasingly used forced labor of civilians in the lands Germany occupied. These civilians had not been convicted of or even arrested for crimes but were simply rounded up and forced to work for OT. Like with the GULag contingents, OT forced laborers were not military penal units but rather were civilian prisoners.

Obey or Pay

Punishment units, of course, were not a World War II invention. Many armies throughout history have used many kinds of punishment or penal units. In modern times, the advent of *levée en masse* in Revolutionary France led to the adoption of mass conscription in many countries, where males of a certain age range were subject to compulsory military service. This led to the problem of some unwilling soldiers refusing to carry out orders they considered too onerous or dangerous, which was corrosive to military morale. Most armies came to use various types of disciplinary or penal units to punish offenders and motivate other soldiers to obey orders or pay for their disobedience.

Another issue was that military-age men who were imprisoned for crimes could escape military service. This was sometimes seen as an unfair advantage by law-abiding men subject to conscription, and authorities sometimes feared that some men would deliberately commit crimes to avoid military service. In some places, some convicts were sent to penal units or were sent to special military units to serve their military service upon completion of their civilian sentences.

A detachment of the 1st Light Infantry Battalion of Africa in the successful defense of Mazagran, Algeria, 1835[2]

While this article concentrates on the punishment units of the German and Soviet dictatorships, any type of society could use punishment units. France, both as a and a republic, for example, used several types of punishment units. The French Army had

2 Jean-Adolphe Beaucé, artist; *Défense héroïque du capitaine Lelièvre à Mazagran* (*Heroic Defense of Captain Lelièvre at Mazagran*), oil painting; 1842.

disciplinary companies where soldiers who committed crimes or military infractions were sent. The French Army, however, had a problem with this system: when soldiers were released from disciplinary companies, they still had to serve the rest of their military terms, but the Army did not want them back in the regular units. In 1832, the French monarchy established the Light Infantry Battalions of Africa (*Bataillons d'infanterie légère d'Afrique* or BILA but better known as the Bat' d'Af). These were stationed in French North Africa and contained soldiers released from the disciplinary companies and civilian convicts who needed to fulfill their military conscription terms upon being released from prison.

The Bat' d'Af contained no prisoners, as all soldiers in them had already served their sentences in disciplinary companies or in civilian prisons. They were nonetheless a kind of punishment or rehabilitation unit, as they were deliberately treated harshly, subjected to strict discipline, often stationed in arid desert regions, and used as construction troops to build roads, bridges, railroads, and forts in addition to their military duties. Bat' d'Af soldiers knew their status and ironically sometimes called themselves the Joyful (*les Joyeux*) and their unit Hell (*l'Enfer*). Nevertheless, they often served well as soldiers in French wars and colonial actions. Some Bat' d'Af troops fought in France during World War I (most stayed in North Africa as construction troops and as security troops guarding against Muslim revolt).

Le Bataillon de la Douleur, the Battalion of Pain;
A 1934 French magazine article sensationalizing life in the Bat d'Af

After WW1, the Bat' d'Af went into decline. The French Army saw less value in them, perhaps not coincidentally as French media publicized lurid tales of their harsh treatment to the public. The BILA dwindled to just a single battalion, but several more were raised in 1939–1940 during mobilization for war with Germany.

The Bat d'Af was not the only kind of French punishment unit. There were also companies of the excluded (*compagnies d'exclus*), comprised of criminal soldiers serving sentences of five years or more. They were not allowed to carry weapons and were used as penal construction laborers in the Sahara Desert.

All armies, of course, have discipline problems, including criminal behavior, cowardice, refusal to obey orders, mutiny, desertion, and disloyalty. Totalitarian states like Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union knew that segments of their population had little love for the regime or willingness to serve it, but they also had the means and will to enforce obedience by harsh punishment.

Germany: Punishment through 1940

German military regulations

Part I is the Military Penal Code (*Militärstrafgesetzbuch*), October 1940 edition, which regular offenses like neglect of duty, disobedience, and desertion. Part II is the Wartime Special Penal Ordinance (*Kriegssonderstrafrechtsverordnung*), August 1938 edition, which applied during wartime and specified offenses on the "subversion of the war effort". This included actions or speech that undermined military service, such as inciting desertion, theft of mail, and attempted suicide.

German punishment units were collectively called *Strafvollzugseinheiten* (**punishment units**; literally, "infliction of punishment" units), and they came in several types. They were informally just called *Strafeinheiten*, such as a *Strafbataillon* (a punishment battalion) or a *Strafkompanie* (a punishment company). During the war, these terms would become most associated with the harshest punishment units, those given extremely hazardous combat missions.

During the 1930s once the Nazis came to power, Germany became expanding the small, highly-professional volunteer Army of the Reichswehr into a huge Army of the Wehrmacht, staffed via mass conscription. Initially, neither the Nazis nor the Wehrmacht wanted political dissidents or troublemakers to serve in the Army's regular units. Among various reasons, they were well aware that in World War I Russian left-wing activists had rotted the Imperial Russian Army from within, rendering it quite ineffective by 1917. They feared the same

could happen to the German Army. However, it was also not acceptable that able-bodied men could escape military service simply because they were a threat to discipline and morale. The solution to this issue was the creation of **special battalions** (*Sonderabteilungen*), in 1936. As conscripts went through basic training, troublemakers, undesirables, and those having a "lack of character" were sent to the special battalions.

The German Army was authorized seven battalions, and the Luftwaffe one[3]. (The Kriegsmarine formed its own battalion after the war began. The SS handled its own punishment for offenders in its various armed forces.) The special battalions concentrated on both punishing and training their soldiers, using very harsh discipline with the goal of instilling absolute obedience. Although details changed over time, soldiers were Army special battalions for a minimum of four months. At that time, if they were judged worthy of service, they were sent to serve in regular units. If they were not, they remained in the special battalions for up to two more months, with the ability to go to regular units if they reformed. After six months, failures could be sent to a military prison or to a punishment camp (*Straflager*, punishment camp; *Feldstraflager*, field punishment camp; *Wehrstraflager*, military punishment camp). If they were judged unworthy of serving in the military at all, they were discharged and sent to concentration camps or turned over to the Gestapo. Life in some punishment camps was especially grim, as the soldiers were considered cowards and subject to beatings and exhausting work. Many died within months of entering a camp. During the war with the USSR, the Germans established a number of "Polar Coast" camps in the Arctic, which became infamous for hard labor during the long, severe Arctic winters.

Army special battalions were part of the Replacement Army (*Ersatzheer*), the rear-area organization in charge of training recruits and providing replacements for the Field Army (*Feldheer*)[4]. Since the special battalions were in the rear areas, they did not undertake combat missions.

The system would change after Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, starting World War II. Several sources claim the seven special battalions were disbanded at the start of the war and their soldiers sent to regular units. Others imply the battalions remained active in some way until January 1940, when a more flexible system was instituted. Special battalions

3 Geoffrey P. Megargee, Rüdiger Overmans, and Wolfgang Vogt (editors); Volume IV: *Camps and Other Detention Facilities Under the German Armed Forces*; 2022; https://muse.jhu.edu/book/111925. This is part of: Geoffrey P. Megargee (general editor); *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945*.

4 The Army special battalions were at the training grounds in Altengrabow, Grafenwöhr, Königsbrück, Münsingen, Ohrdruf, Stablack (now, Bagrationovsk, Russia), and Wahn. The Luftwaffe's was at Dedelstorf, later at Leipzig. The Kriegsmarine's was at Hela (the German name of Hel, Poland, which was annexed into Germany during the 1939–1945 German occupation of Poland).

would be formed and disbanded as needed. There were six special battalions from this date, but the numbers changed over time. For example, there were just four special battalions in existence in 1942[5]. Their basic function remained the same: they remained at training grounds in the rear areas to try to install obedience on problematic conscripts. This new system has caused misunderstandings in the historical record, with some works claiming the special battalions were disbanded in 1940 (or at the outbreak of the war in 1939) and others implying the seven battalions continued to exist throughout the war.

Also in January 1940, three **field special battalions** (*Feld-Sonder-Abteilungen*, also rendered as *Feld-Sonderabteilungen*) were formed[6]. They were authorized for service in war zones. After spending six months in a special battalion, soldiers who failed to be released to regular units could be to field special battalions (rather than being sent to the camps or prisons). Soldiers in regular units who committed offenses could also be sent to these battalions[7]. In the latter case, regimental commanders (or the equivalent) could transfer soldiers to a field special battalion only after all other disciplinary measures in the field had failed to reform them. Transfer required the soldiers to be automatically demoted to the lowest enlisted rank (*Soldat*, equivalent to a private in the US or British Armies).

The field special battalions were not combat troops but were punishment units that subjected the soldiers to harsh discipline and heavy labor. They were often used in dangerous conditions near the front lines such as to clear minefields or build fortifications while under fire from the enemy. For example, in May 1940 German combat forces captured Ouvrage La Ferté, one of the lesser ouvrages of the French Maginot Line. Once the ouvrage was secured, Field Special battalion "C" of Army Group "C" was sent into the ouvrage to clear debris and remove the decomposing bodies of the defenders. This work was hazardous: The soldiers at times had to crawl through dark, debris-filled tunnels while wearing gas masks, as the ouvrage had filled with a lethal concentration of carbon monoxide gas once its French

5 In this system, a special battalion was numbered with the number of the Wehrmacht. (military district) it was in. For example, in 1942 Special Battalion IX was in Wehrkries IX. Wehrkriese that did not have their own special battalions would send their problem conscripts to a battalion in another Wehrmacht. For example, Special Battalion IX in 1942 handled troublemakers from Wehrkriese V, VI, IX, X and XII.

6 Some sources claim the special battalions were disbanded when the field special battalions were formed, while others claim otherwise. Most sources claim only three field special battalions were formed in 1940, one each for Army Groups A, B, C. A few sources claims a fourth battalion was formed, for *Oberbefehlshaber Ost* ("Oberost"), the German Army headquarters in change of Army forces in eastern Germany and German-occupied Poland. While an Oberost battalion seems logical, I don't have any further information about it, including what happened to it.

7 Some sources do not mention that soldiers from the rear-area special battalions could be sent to the field special battalions, implying that they were only for soldiers from field units. Other sources state things the other way around!

garrison had been trapped inside. Further, French artillery continued to shell even as the position as the battalion worked on the site[8].

The field special battalions were an early form of rehabilitation or re-education punishment units, so soldiers in them could redeem themselves and be sent to regular units. One perhaps less-reliable source states soldiers sent to these battalions had to serve a minimum of three months in them. After three months, the battalion commander could decide whether a soldier had reformed, in which case he was sent back to a regular unit. Soldiers deemed unreformable would be sent to a camp. The battalion commander could also decide a unreformed soldier was still potentially reformable and keep him in the battalion for a longer period.

Besides the Army's field special battalions, the Kriegsmarine during the war organized its own field special battalion (in addition to its special battalion). The Army's three field special battalions were consolidated into a single battalion later in 1940 and used for hard labor in occupied France. In 1941, the battalion was sent to labor on the Eastern Front once Germany invaded the USSR[9].

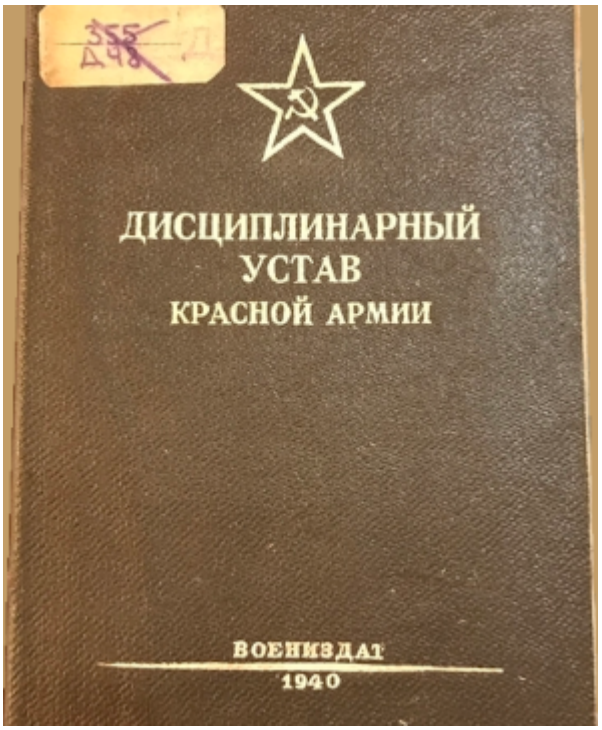
Although the Luftwaffe had its special battalion, it does not seem to have organized its own field special battalion. Instead, during the war it organized three **special companies for special purposes** (*Sonderkompanien z.b.V.*) that functioned like Army field special battalions. The Luftwaffe not only controlled the German air force and most of Germany's antiaircraft defenses, but it also had its own force of ground combat troops. By late 1942, this force had grown into a panzer division, several elite parachute divisions, and a set of weak "field" (infantry) divisions. The Luftwaffe special companies for special purposes were thus used to punish their errant soldiers, who when reformed would be sent to the field divisions.

None of these units were the infamous German *straf* combat units. These would be formed on the Eastern Front, a story to be told later...

8

9 Each of the three battalions was transformed into a company (A, B, C) in the new battalion. If the Oberost battalion did exist, it apparently was not merged with the others in 1940. After the battalion was sent from France to the East, in July it gained a "D" Company. This suggests that the Oberost battalion did exist and was the source of the "D" Company.

USSR: Punishment through 1940



Disciplinary Charter of the Red Army (*Distsiplinarnyy Ustav Krasnoy Armii*), 1940 edition[10]

The USSR's Red Army also had punishment units before the start of the war, a tradition going back to the Imperial Russian Army. The Russian Empire had a long history of using brutal penal settlements and penal units (for a World War I account, see *Life in a Penal Battalion of the Imperial Russian Army: The Tolstoyan N. T. Iziumchenko's Story*[11]). When the Communists took over Russia in 1917–1920, they at first described penal colonies, penal units, forced labor camps, secret police forces, and extra-judicial execution as instruments of repression by the Tsarist oppressors of the people, which they abolished. As opposition to their rule mounted, however, the Communists quickly took up the same tools of repression, using their far more than the Tsars ever did.

Before the German invasion in 1941, the Red Army had numerous disciplinary battalions, where soldiers guilty of various offenses were sent, such as (per a July 1940 order) for multiple absences without leave. These battalions were not combat units but kept in the rear areas and punished their soldiers with harsh discipline and hard labor.

10 I do not have the text of the 1940 edition, but the text of the 1941 edition is available at http://rkka.ru/docs/disc/disc.htm. (The http://rkka.ru/idocs.htm page has a link to what it claims is the 1940 edition, but the link goes to the 1941 edition.)

11 Peter Brock and John L. Keep, eds.; *Life in a Penal Battalion of the Imperial Russian Army: The Tolstoyan N. T. Iziumchenko's Story*; York, England: William Sessions Limited, 2001.

Unit Command, Control, Sizes

Armed forces needed to maintain reliable control over their punishment units. This meant that officers from regular units, particularly experienced and competent ones, were used. In some cases, these officers were only temporarily assigned to the punishment units and would later return to regular units. In some cases, these officers were permanently assigned to the punishment units, and sometimes a mix of temporary and permanent officers were used.

Many types of punishment units also had guards, either regular soldiers or from security services. They ensured the officers commands were followed, enforced unit discipline (sometimes brutally and arbitrarily), and guarded the convicts to prevent mutinies and desertion.

Punishment units varied depending upon their type and nationality. In general, with exceptions, convicted ordinary soldiers sent to punishment units typically had been reduced to the lowest private rank and stripped of any rewards or decorations. Depending upon type of unit, they were prisoners without even the right to wear the regular service uniform. It is unclear from my reading whether officers who had committed crimes were sent to non-combat punishment units along with ordinary criminal soldiers.

Punishment units intended for heavy front-line combat were a bit different. The soldiers could win their release through exemplary service, and some were used as non-commissioned officers over the rest of the soldiers, under the orders of the officers. Officers who had committed crimes could be sent to combat punishment units. While in the units, they had their officer ranks suspended and served as privates and NCOs. From about 1942, as the German Army was continuously in action on multiple fronts, there were at time many convicted officers. Many were often highly motivated to redeem themselves in a combat punishment unit. At some times, up to 80% of the convicts in a German combat punishment unit were officers serving as privates and NCOs. Since officers tended to be more skilled and dedicated than privates, units with many officer-privates were likely quite effective in combat.

Punishment units used the standard military organization of battalions (and companies). Since non-combat punishment battalions were mainly used for hard labor, it seems many tended to be smaller in manpower than regular infantry

battalions, sometimes only about half the size. Again, there was a lot of variation (and much of it seemingly not well documented).

Combat punishment battalions were about the size of regular infantry battalions, at least when they first took the field or received a new intake of convict soldiers. However, their high-risk missions meant they were constantly losing strength (much more so that regular German and Soviet units, which also at times took heavy casualties).

Some of the many exceptions and variations to these general comments are covered for specific punishment units in the main text.

War Crimes Go Unpunished

Bronislav Kaminski (right foreground) and personnel of the Kaminski Brigade[12]

Both German and Soviet soldiers were sent to punishment units (and to military prisons and camps) for committing crimes, offenses against military regulations, and for chronic indiscipline. Typically, the worse criminals and the incorrigible went into the prisons and camps, while lesser offenders went to the punishment units. The very worst criminals could also be executed.

A soldier who committed war crimes, however, was often not imprisoned or sent to a punishment unit. Both Germany and the USSR were totalitarian states and were quite willing to commit war crimes in hopes of winning the war. Both sides' regular and punishment units often committed war crimes as well as crimes against humanity in pursuit of their dictators' goals. Soldiers typically only got in trouble if they committed war crimes for personal gain or for cruel enjoyment. Even here, wide latitude was sometimes given as long as the crimes did not interfere with the military mission. When they did interfere, however, then the offenders or their unit leaders could be punished.

12 Bundesarchiv Bild 101I-280-1075-10A, Russland, Borislaw Kaminski.jpg, via https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bundesarchiv_Bild_101I-280-1075-10A,_Russland,_Borislaw_Kaminski.jpg. Kaminski's name should transliterate at "Kaminskiy". "Kaminski Brigade" is from the German, since it was a unit raised and controlled by Nazi Germany, so for clarity "Kaminski" is used for the commander's name as well.

Perhaps the most notorious example was the Germans' Kaminski Brigade (aka *Waffen-Sturm-Brigade RONA*), formed from Russians collaborating with Germany and from June 1944 part of the SS. The brigade was notorious for "loose discipline, drunkenness and extreme brutality, which shocked even hardened SS veterans"[13]. After multiple instances of military incompetence while the brigade's drunken soldiers engaged in looting, rape, and torture, the Germans had enough. They had the brigade's leaders secretly assassinated, disguising the killings as the work of Polish guerrillas. Even then, the brigades' soldiers were not punished. Instead, the brigade was broken up and its men were sent to another collaborationist organization of Russians.

In contrast to the Kaminski Brigade, the Dirlewanger Brigade (*SS-Sturmbrigade Dirlewanger*) was not punished, despite it being regarded as "the most brutal and notorious Waffen-SS unit"[14]. The difference was that the Dirlewanger Brigade, which also had drunken soldiers looting and killing with abandon, was more useful, especially as an anti-guerrilla unit whose crimes terrorized the population of occupied areas. While some German authorities did want to dismiss Dirlewanger and dissolve his unit, the SS always prevented this.

The Dirlewanger unit was a unit of criminals from its start. Polish resistance to German occupation began in September 1939 and continued to grow. By March 1940, Polish guerrillas were ambushing German units, and the Germans decided to form a special anti-guerrilla hunter unit. This unit recruited convicted poachers from German prisons, hoping that their hunting and woodsmanship skills would make them expert guerrilla hunters. Poachers convicted of illegal trapping were excluded from recruitment, to ensure that only men with hunting skills were chosen. Convicts joining the unit would have their sentences suspended and could win pardons through good service. The unit was thus a sort of probationary or rehabilitation unit at first.

Oskar Dirlewanger, an SS officer already with multiple criminal convictions, was chosen to lead the unit. It became part of the Waffen-SS as the Oranienburg Poacher Command, (*Wilddiebkommando Oranienburg*) and was the size of a small company. The Germans wanted a larger unit, but there were not enough convicted poachers. To grow the unit to battalion size, it still recruited convicted civilian criminals but the restriction on just having poachers was abandoned. The unit would come to recruit men convicted of theft, arson, rape, and murder; some of its soldiers were criminally insane.

13 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaminski_Brigade.

14 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dirlewanger_Brigade.

The unit was redesignated Special Command Dirlewanger (*Sonderkommando Dirlewanger*). A unit of convicted criminals in the supposedly elite Waffen-SS caused some embarrassment in 1940. The unit was officially removed from the Waffen-SS and was just "placed" under the control of the SS. The unit later became SS Special Battalion Dirlewanger (*SS-Sonderbataillon Dirlewanger*)[15], under the SS Totenkopf branch. The SS was a large organization with many branches and departments. The Waffen-SS was the armed combat forces. The SS Totenkopf Units (*SS-Totenkopfverbände*) consisted of concentration camp guards and some second-line troops[16]. The General SS (*Allgemeine SS*) comprised the rest of the SS.

The Dirlewanger battalion operated in German-occupied territory in the east: Poland and, once German invaded the USSR in 1941, the Belorussian region (modern Belarus) of the Soviet Union. It suffered significant losses fighting Soviet partisans in Belorussia. To gain replacements, it was allowed to recruit Belarusian, Russian, and Ukrainian collaborationists. It also began receiving SS soldiers who had been convicted of various crimes. The unit effectively ceased being a rehabilitation unit where paroled criminals could win pardons for good service. Instead, it was a unit of criminals committing crimes both for personal gain and for Nazi Germany. Men sent to Dirlewanger had to serve for the duration of the war with no chance of parole.

From its first operations in Poland in 1940, the unit became notorious for war crimes and crimes against humanity. The highest levels of the SS leadership, including SS commander Heinrich Himmler, were aware of Dirlewanger's activities and permitted them, since the unit was effective at maintain control over conquered people. Once the USSR was invaded, the SS leadership would outright order Dirlewanger to commit mass atrocities, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of Soviet and Polish civilians.

The battalion was authorized to a regiment in 1942, as SS Special Regiment Dirlewanger (*SS-Sonderregiment Dirlewanger*). Once the war turned against the Germans, Dirlewanger was at times caught up in front line combat trying to halt Soviet breakthroughs. Its ill-disciplined, often drunken soldiers proved to be poor real soldiers and suffered heavy casualties whenever it fought Red Army units.

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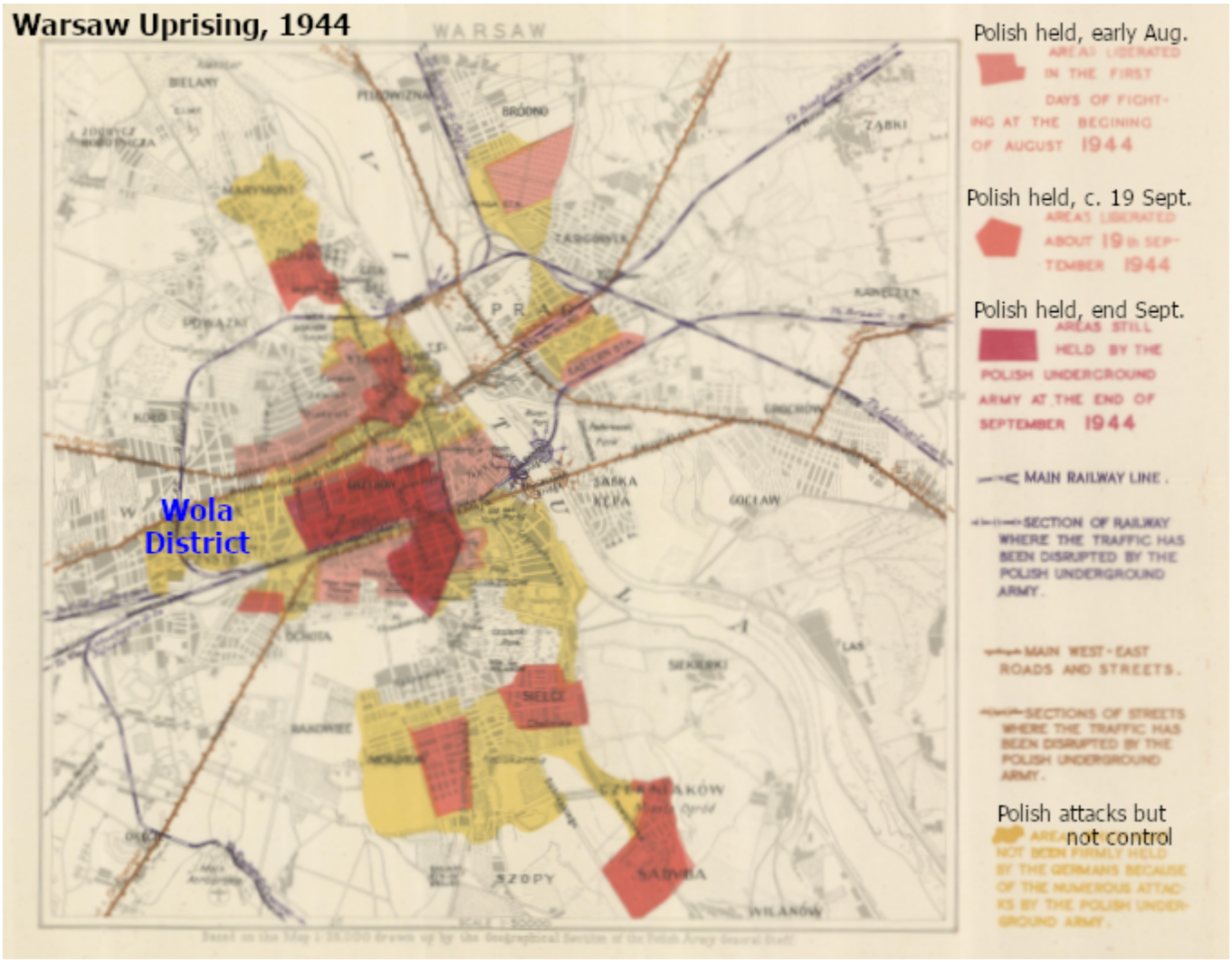
15 The "*Sonder*" in the *SS-Sonderbataillon Dirlewanger* designation might make the unit sound the same as a German Army special battalion (*Sonderabteilung*), but it was not a punishment unit for ill-disciplined soldiers like the Army battalions.

16 Confusingly, the SS Totenkopf Division ***was*** part of the Waffen SS! This division was initially raised mostly from *SS-Totenkopfverbände* regiments, hence its Totenkopf name.



The regiment was preferentially used in the rear areas against guerrillas and civilians. During the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, Polish guerrillas attempted to seize control of Warsaw from the Germans, and Dirlewanger was one of several German units thrown in to retake the city. The regiment became notorious for its actions in Warsaw, which involved mass slaughter of civilians, rape, and looting. Himmler himself ordered the forces fighting in Warsaw to kill "anything that moves", with no distinction granted between guerrilla fighters and unarmed civilians. The Dirlewanger Regiment, the Kaminski Brigade, and other units slaughtered at least 40,000 inhabitants of the Wola sector of Warsaw, in vain hope that this mass terror cause the guerrillas to cease resistance. As Dirlewanger was mostly killing unarmed civilians, the unit suffered quite light casualties, most of which are suspected to be the result of drunken soldiers accidentally firing on one another. During the massacre, Dirlewanger spun out of control so much that a battalion of SS military police was assigned to watch them, in case the soldiers tried to mutiny or attack nearby German units.

The rest of the fight in Warsaw saw Dirlewanger take heavy casualties, and the SS poured almost 2,000 convicted SS soldiers from the SS Danzig-Matzkau camp through the unit to keep its strength up. Once the uprising had been crushed, the Germans secretly assassinated the leadership of the ineffective, brutal Kaminski Brigade. The equally brutal but more effective Dirlewanger Regiment was rewarded. It was returned to being part of the Waffen SS and raised to brigade status, the SS Assault Brigade Dirlewanger (*SS-Sturmbrigade Dirlewanger*). The brigade was committed to front line combat but proved to be no more effective facing real soldiers than it had been as a regiment. In February 1945, the brigade was selected to become a division and was renamed the 36th Armed Grenadier Division of the SS (36. *Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS*), but it never exceeded brigade strength even with some German Army units attached to it. It was destroyed in fighting the Red Army by early May 1945, with an tiny remnant escaping west, trying to surrender to the US Army.

Germany: Rise of the Straf Units, 1941

This is a memorial marker (a "*Stolperstein*", stumbling stone, since these markers are emplaced in streets and walkways) for Karl-Heinz Meyer. Meyer deserted from the Germany Army in 1942, was arrested and later sent to the 500th Straf Battalion. He was executing in 1944. See the Appendix for Meyer's story[17].

In 1941, the German Army raised a special type of punishment unit, the *Bewährungs Bataillon* (**rehabilitation battalion** or probationary battalion). Regardless of the official name, this type of battalion would become widely known as the *Strafbataillon* (**punishment battalion** or straf battalion), even though these units technically were probationary units and not part of the punishment unit establishment (*Strafvollzugseinheiten*). Since rehabilitation battalions were filled with soldiers who had committed crimes and were accordingly given extremely dangerous missions, the distinction between probationary and punishment was moot.

The initial idea for these units was that certain one-time offenders in punishment units, punishment camps, or military prisons could serve a probationary period in a rehabilitation battalion. If the soldier performed exemplary service without any discipline issues or other infractions, he was released to serve in a regular unit. At first, there were strict selection criterion for which offenders were allowed into a rehabilitation battalion, including:

- The person's sentence had to be for at least 6 months.

17 Photograph from https://www.wikidata.org/wiki/Q76138048.

- Other than for the crime for which the soldier was convicted, the person could only have a minor criminal record and must have behaved impeccably while in confinement.
- The person could not have "character defects".
- The person to submit a written application for probation, declaring himself honestly willing to serve in the rehabilitation battalion.
- The person had to be a member of the Wehrmacht, a conscript, or someone able to be deployed as a soldier.
- The person had to be physically capable of serving as an infantry soldier.

The soldiers in rehabilitation battalions had their sentences suspended. Technically, they were probationers, not prisoners, and the rehabilitation battalions were not officially punishment units. The first battalion, the 500th Rehabilitation Battalion, was raised on 1 April 1941 and was trained and ready for action on 1 June. A probationary soldier could "prove oneself by service at the front" and be sent to a regular unit. The battalion was under special restrictions. Its role was "under dangerous circumstances to perform hard service as a combat unit with heavy weapons in difficult conditions". Its soldiers were not allowed leave, and very few promotions were allowed, since just being in the unit (rather than a punishment unit or camp) was considered a kind of promotion. At least at first, probationary soldiers were not awarded most types of medals, including the Iron Cross[18]. A few very basic medals were allowed, especially the Wound Badge (*Verwundetenabzeichen*), which would be frequently handed out (see picture at right). While the 500th was certainly given dangerous combat duties, it is unclear from my sources whether this unit at first was routinely assigned to the extremely dangerous missions that later made the straf battalions infamous. Almost all information I've seen on rehabilitation battalions covers their actions in 1942–1945.

The 500th Rehabilitation Battalion (also known as the 500th Special-Purposes Infantry Battalion, *Infanterie-Bataillon z.b.V. 500*, and commonly called the 500th Straf Battalion) was sent to the Eastern Front after Germany invaded the USSR in June 1941. It was organized with three rifle companies, one machinegun company, and various smaller units including combat engineers. Its equipment included rifles, machineguns, submachineguns, infantry guns, antitank weapons, and medium mortars (later, heavy mortars).

18 By 1943, the German Cross and the Iron Cross were certainly be awarded at least to the officers in rehabilitation battalions, although these were officers were not probationaries but regular officers assigned to command the probationers.

The German Army sustained constant casualties in the heavy combat of the Eastern Front, more than it could replace. This would lead to significant changes in the rehabilitation battalion system. The criteria for admittance to a rehab battalion was frequently relaxed, until eventually almost any soldier convicted of most types of serious crimes could be sent to a rehabilitation battalion, as long as he was physically and mental fit to serve as an infantryman.

It seems likely that some, if not many, of the requirements to serve in a rehabilitation battalion were relaxed in the autumn of 1941. In June 1941, the German high command had expected the Red Army to collapse and be pushed out of the western USSR after about eight or nine weeks of fighting if everything went well[19]. It did not. By Week 22, despite the Germans inflicting dramatic defeats on the Soviets and advancing to about 30 km (~20 miles) from the center of Moscow, the Red Army was still fighting ferociously. Parts of the German high command had now realized that the German offensive was on the verge of exhaustion and that the war would likely not end soon. After fighting for months in harsh conditions, the morale of some German soldiers was flagging, and incidents of indiscipline were increasing. It was in this context that the Germans expanded their rehabilitation system. Two new rehabilitation battalions were raised late November and early December, the 540th and 550th (although they may not have gone into action until 1942). Likely the requirements to serve in these units were relaxed at this time.

I also think it is possible that that the combat use of rehabilitation battalions changed in emphasis somewhat in the autumn of 1941. The 500th from its start had certainly been assigned hard combat in dangerous conditions, but now it and the other battalions as they took the field were deliberately used for the most dangerous combat assignments, what German soldiers called "going-to-heaven" missions.

> *Going to Heaven Missions*
>
> German soldiers had a black humor term for a high risk assignment: *Himmelfahrts-Kommando*, a "going-to-heaven mission". While these were not actual suicide missions, they were assignments in which chances for becoming a casualty were high, such as assaults on prepared defenses, no-retreat defense of

19 Eight or nine weeks (sources disagree on the exact number) was the best-case contingency. The Army high command actually had various different appreciations of how long it would take to defeat the Red Army, with some contingencies indicating victory in 17 weeks (US Department of the Army Pamphlet, *The German Campaign in Russia: Planning and Operations (1940–1941)*; 1955; https://history.army.mil/html/books/104/104-21/cmhPub_104-21.pdf) and a few pessimistic contingencies pointing to a prolonged war. However, German political and military high commands expected a very rapid victory, like the Germans had achieved in France in 1940.

positions, rearguard detachments to slow the enemy as other units retreated, and certain anti-guerrilla operations that involved intense fighting. While any German unit could be unlucky enough to be assigned one of these missions, the rehabilitation battalions were routinely assigned going-to-heaven tasks. These missions weren't always combat related: mine clearing was regarded as particularly dangerous task, one that many types of punishment units received.

USSR: Death to Traitors, 1941

Germany invaded the USSR on 22 June 1941, so plunging the country into existential crisis as the Wehrmacht repeatedly smashed the Red Army and advanced deep into the western USSR. While many Red Army soldiers fought loyally for the USSR, some willing surrendered to the enemy or deserted. Even loyal troops sometimes became demoralized from the heavy combat and near-constant defeats; they at time would simply retreat without being ordered to do so when the Germans broke through.

The situation was exacerbated by the Soviet high command's unrealistic defense strategy, which repeatedly called for the Red Army to stand fast, halt the enemy, counterattack, and defeat the invaders. The 1941 Red Army had insufficient forces and ability to achieve this plan and kept seeing its forces surrounded and annihilated.

Stalin expected his orders, however unrealistic, to be carried out without hesitation. In 1941–1942, with the existence of the USSR (and Stalin's reputation) at stake, he turned to heavy repression and widespread use of the death penalty.

On 16 August 1941, Stalin issued Order № 270. Somewhat innocuously titled "On the responsibility of military personnel concerning surrender and abandonment of weapons to the enemy", it is best characterized as the "Fight to the Last" order or even the "Death to Traitors" order. Soldiers who were encircled were ordered to "to selflessly fight to the last", protect their weapons from capture, and break out of encirclement rather than surrender. Those who surrendered "should be destroyed by all means possible" and their families punished. Officers who tried to surrender or "desert to the rear" were to be shot "on the spot", and their families would be punished. Officers who try to hide in safe places during battles were to be demoted to private or summarily executed[20]. The Soviets frequently resorted to execution, especially during the crises of 1941–1942, with at least 135,000–160,000 soldiers and officers being killed by summary execution or the sentences of court-martials.

Order № 270 was part of a series of reforms that month that changed the Red Army punishment system. The order resulted in increasing numbers of soldiers and officers that were to be punished, and **field punishment units** were created for them. These mostly supplanted the disciplinary battalions that the Red Army had been using. The disciplinary battalions were in the rear areas, being used for heavy labor, but this was now seen as too lenient. All but the most unreliable soldiers were released from these battalions. Those judged to be reliable went simply sent to regular formations, where they served the same as other soldiers. Soldiers believed to be less trustworthy but usable were sent to the newly-formed field punishment units.

The field punishment units were raised on an as-needed basis at the front and did not have formal organizations. They were used in combat and were subject to harsh discipline and hard labor. In combat situations, they were used as regular troops. Soldiers that survived their term of punishment in them and were in good standing could be released to regular units. The field punishment units weren't the infamous Soviet *shtraf* units that would used for the most dangerous combat missions. Those would come in 1942...

Soviet military aviation had problems with timid pilots and aircrews, who would abandon their missions if enemy fighters showed up and sometimes sabotaged their planes to avoid dangerous missions. One form of punishment for these personnel was to be made aerial machinegunners in low-speed bombers and shturmoviks (ground attack aircraft), as being a

20 See the Appendix for the text of Order № 270.

machinegunner could be quite dangerous. The Soviet fighter force was decimated at the start of the war, so bombers and shturmoviks often flew their missions without any escort. Enemy fighters could attack the slow aircraft at will and quickly learned their weak points, such as attacking from the rear to shoot up the tail or fuselage. The DB-3F medium bomber, for example, was only protected by three machineguns, one facing forward, one ventral, and one in a rear-facing position. This latter position was often exposed to fire during rear attacks, resulting in casualties. The position needed to be filled, as the absence of a rear gunner allowed the enemy to close in to make devastating attacks. DB-3F aircraft losses were high. Since there were almost no Axis night fighters on the Eastern Front, the Soviets in 1941 were eventually forced to switch the DB-3F (and other medium and heavy bombers) to night missions to lessen the loss rate.

The Il-2 shturmovik had to be flown during the day. This was the Soviets' primary ground attack aircraft, with a well-armored design that protected the engine, cockpit, and fuel tanks. It had forward firing guns for strafing and defensive purposes, and it carried bombs and forward-firing rockets for ground attacks. However, the aircraft was heavy and rather slow. Once the war, it had an obvious flaw: there was no rear gun position to defend the aircraft from rear attacks. This might not have mattered too much had Soviet fighters been available for escort duties, but the shortage of escort fighters in 1941–1942 meant the Il-2 was quite vulnerable. Shturmovik units began modifying their planes in the field to cram in a rear machinegunner behind the pilot. The rear of the canopy was cut open, a rear-firing machinegun on a pivot was added, and, sometimes, a sling seat was installed for the gunner. About 1,200 Il-2s were modified this way. Fire from the rear MGs kept the enemy from approaching too closely but usually did not deter rear attacks[21]. The gunners were badly exposed and often became casualties. Most Il-2 rear gunners were ordinary air personnel, but on occasion problem air personnel were forced to serve as rear gunners as punishment[22].

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21 The ventral (under) side of the Il-2 did not have any defensive armament. Once rear machinegunners began appearing, enemy fighters more frequently tried to attack from below, trying to hit the radiator.

22 Some people deny that military personnel were force to became Il-2 rear gunners as punishment. However, there are numerous instances of this punishment in: Artem Drabkin; *Ya dralsya na Il-2* (*I fought on the Il-2*); 2005.

The Soviets eventually designed a "two-seat" Il-2 model that had a rear machinegunner. The position was protected by armor and was enclosed by the cockpit canopy (which had armored glass). This went into production by the end of 1942. Rear machinegunner losses were much lower in these models.

Germany: Punishment, 1941–1945

In October 1941, the field special battalion was downgraded in status from a punishment unit, from which well-behaved soldiers might be sent to regular units, to an outright penal unit. The reason for this is not given. Perhaps offenders were being preferentially sent to the camps instead of the field special battalion, as this was certainly the case by 1943. The men in the field special battalion were stripped of military insignia and as far as I can tell could no longer be released back to regular units. They continued to be used for heavy labor, such as clearing minefields, building fortifications, felling trees to construct corduroy roads, and manually clear snow from roads during the winter. In 1943, as the strength of the battalion decreased, it was reduced from four companies to three, and by 1944 it had just 300 inmates guarded by 40 soldiers. The battalion disappears in the German records by the end of 1944.

The Army rear-area special battalions continued to function for almost the entire war. In March 1945, with the Army needing as many soldiers as it could scrounge up, these battalions were disbanded and their soldier sent as replacements to regular units. However, this was not really a reprieve. Life in a regular unit by this time was quite dangerous, as the German Army was badly outnumbered on all fronts and fighting for survival. Also, Nazi security forces were now combing the rear areas for deserters, stragglers, and any soldiers away from the front without proper authorization. These men would be rounded up, with some executed for cowardice by flying tribunals and the rest sent back to the front.

The invasion of the USSR, although apparently highly successful at first, did not go as well as the German high command expected. By early December 1941, the German drive on Moscow faltered and stalled in the face of snow, deep cold, and the desperate resistance of the Red Army—whereupon the Soviet high committed their reserve armies in a winter counteroffensive against the exhausted German forces. With morale wavering and troops giving ground, the rehabilitation battalion was one method the German Army used to enforce discipline. Two new battalions were raised in the east in December, and all three were given plenty of opportunities to go to heaven throughout the long and cold winter of 1941/42. (More were formed later.) However, by this time, these were not the only punishment battalions in combat. Soldiers had to be sentenced by court-martial to the rehabilitation battalions, so typically the more offending or egregious cases ended up these. Approximately 80,000 men served in these rehabilitation battalions during the war, which suffered heavy casualties.

Oberleutnant (equivalent to First Lieutenant) Hans Wolff,
Commander 3rd Company/540th Special-Purposes Infantry Battalion

Wolff won the German Cross in Gold (*Deutsches Kreuz in Gold*) on 23 January 1943, followed by the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross (*Ritterkreuz des Eisernen Kreuzes*) on 8 February 1943. A German newspaper report of March 1943 makes clear why he won these medals: "Oberleutnant Wolff and his company were deployed in the thick of the battle south of Lake Ladoga. Over the course of 6 days he and his men repulsed 13 major enemy attacks."[23]

The *Bewährungs Bataillon* was for more serious offenders. In the spring of 1942, the Army created another kind of punishment unit, for soldiers sentenced to somewhat lesser offenses: the **field punishment prisoner battalions** (*Feldstrafgefangenen-Abteilungen*). Soldiers who had sentences of 3 months or more were sent their sentences to these field units, where they were subjected to strict discipline and were used for "the hardest work under dangerous conditions" such as clearing minefields and building fortifications near the front lines. They were required to work seven days per week with no formal rest days. However, the prisoners were supposed to be adequately fed (which did not always happen) and not worked to death, as when their sentences were up they returned to regular units.

The more-reliable soldiers in these battalions could be armed and used for security purposes and to fight partisans. The battalions were not intended for front-line combat but sometimes got caught up in it, such as during emergencies when the Soviets broke through the front

23 https://www.tracesofwar.com/persons/21090/Wolff-Hans-Infanterie-Bataillon-zbV-540.htm

lines[24]. According to war anecdotes, sometimes regular field commanders would take control of these units (and also the Luftwaffe special companies), throwing them into action with no regard to casualties, in order to spare their own units[25].

Use of these field punishment prisoner battalions expanded throughout the war, and some works suggest field commanders sometimes could send disobedient soldiers to these units without a formal court-martial. A total of 22 were formed during the war.

The field punishment camps (*Feldstraflager*) were set up during the war in combat zones. Inmates were subjected to very heavy labor of 12–14 hours per day, seven days per week. The inmates performed similar labor as soldiers in the field punishment prisoner battalions, but under worse conditions. Death rates were high due to overwork, mistreatment, and poor rations. After 3–6 months in one of these camps, a well-behaved inmate could be sent to a field punishment prisoner battalion or, only under the most exceptional circumstances, to a regular unit.

Until late summer 1942, the Luftwaffe had a small contingent of combat troops. Elite force consisted of the parachute units and the various incarnations of the Hermann Göring unit[26]. Ordinary infantry regiments were first formed in the Luftwaffe in the winter of 1941/42 to fight on the Eastern Front. In September 1942, the Luftwaffe, which was overstaffed, was ordered to transfer 200,000 men from its surplus to the Germany Army, which badly needed replacement soldiers. Hermann Göring objected, on the grounds that the Luftwaffe was the most Nazified service of the Wehrmacht[27], and its men should not be sent to the less-ideological Army[28]. Instead, the Luftwaffe was authorized to form these men into 20 Luftwaffe Field Divisions (*Luftwaffen-Feld-Divisionen*).

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24 Presumably in these conditions, all the soldiers in the battalion would have been armed. Some works indicate that in the final years of the war, these battalions were increasing used as a combat troops because of the heavy losses the Army's regular units had suffered.

25 See, for example, https://www.spiegel.de/politik/sie-haben-etwas-gutzumachen-a-eb7530d6-0002-0001-0000-000029193825?context=issue (in German).

26 This started the war as Regiment General Göring with AA and guard troops and progressively grew into Parachute Panzer Division Hermann Göring (the "parachute" signified elite status; the division was not jump capable). It finally became Parachute Panzer Corps Hermann Göring with the 1st Parachute Panzer Division Hermann Göring and the 2nd Parachute Panzergrenadier Division Hermann Göring.

27 Despite "Wehrmacht" now sometimes being used for all of Germany's armed forces, the Waffen-SS was not part of the Wehrmacht (the Army, the Luftwaffe, and the Kriegsmarine). It was part of the Nazi Party. When deployed in the field, SS units came under Germany Army operational control, but in all other respects (recruitment, training, administration, etc.) the SS was separate from the Wehrmacht.

28 Göring was a master empire builder in the German government and military, and he of course did not want to lose any of "his" personnel.

This major expansion of the Luftwaffe combat troops also meant the Luftwaffe would now have many more soldiers committing offenses or having discipline problems. In the autumn of 1942, the first two of several Luftwaffe rehabilitation units were created: the "Luftwaffe Field Battalions for special purposes" (*Luftwaffen-Feld-Battailone z.b.V.*; later renamed "Luftwaffe Fighter Battalions for special purposes", *Luftwaffen-Jäger-Battailone z.b.V.*). These units were used for both heavy labor and combat service. They were often used as emergency troops to trim to stem Soviet breakthroughs, fighting attached to the Luftwaffe field divisions. Allegedly, they were often flown to hot spots by air transports, since the Luftwaffe of course controlled the transports. These units are said to have taken very high losses in combat, as training in these units (like in the field divisions themselves) had been deficient at all levels. Unlike in the Army rehabilitation units, officers and NCOs in the these Luftwaffe were hastily trained and inexperienced.

In 1944, after the Allies landed in France, some Luftwaffe punishment units were transferred from the Eastern Front to the Western Front. These units typically were used for tasks like bridge repair. Allegedly, they were sent west because bridge repair was a more dangerous task on the Western Front. At least one of these units in the west ended up in front line combat units, as *Kampfgruppe Walther*, a scratch battle group formed to halt the Allied advance in Operation Market-Garden, contained a Luftwaffe punishment battalion (allegedly wearing tropical uniforms!), which gave good service.

The Luftwaffe field division were also poorly trained and led by inexperienced officers and NCOs. They performed so badly that in late 1943 the surviving division were turned over to the Army for retraining and reorganization. During 1944, the Luftwaffe rehabilitation battalions were all disbanded or incorporated into the parachute troops, like because without the field divisions the Luftwaffe now had far fewer soldiers committing offenses.

The SS ran its own punishment regime for Waffen-SS and SS-Police[29] soldiers who committed military offenses. SS soldiers found guilty of crimes were sent to punishment camps (*Strafvollzugslager der Waffen-SS und Polizei*, "Punishment Camps of the Waffen-SS and Police"), where like in the Army camps they were subject to harsh discipline and heavy

29 In the 1930s after the Nazis came to power in Germany, the SS security services and the Germany police became intertwined, as Heinrich Himmler was head of both the SS and the police. Once the war began, German militarized police units served in the field as occupation and anti-guerrilla forces, with occasional front-line combat. At first these police units were technically not part of the SS but were effectively under SS control (SS officers staff all the higher levels of the police, as "SS-and-Police Leaders"). Later in the war, these police units were officially made part of the SS, although not part of the Waffen-SS. (Confusingly, however, the Police Division did officially become part of the Waffen-SS.)

labor. The Dirlewanger unit, originally founded as a unit for civilian convicts, later had SS convicts sent to it, as described elsewhere.

The SS also had punishment companies (*strafkompanien*), but it is somewhat difficult to untangle their histories since the SS used "punishment company" (and "punishment command" [*strafkommando*] for different purposes. The Totenkopf branch of the SS ran the German concentration camps, which were for people the Nazis persecuted rather than for SS military offenders. Some camps were outright death camps, but many were brutal forced labor camps (and some were a combination of both). At various camps, the SS formed punishment companies from selected inmates. Prisoners in these companies were subjected to even heavier labor and more brutal treatment than the other prisoners. For example, the Klinkerwerk complex (originally a sub-camp of the Sachsenhausen concentration camp) had a punishment company that constantly incurred a high rate of fatalities. However, the SS may also have had some military punishment companies of SS soldiers guilty of offenses, which I have not been able to research fully. It is known, for example, that in 1944 that an SS "Punishment Company 103" was in the field in Estonia and was incorporated as replacements in the 11th SS "Nordland" Division. This must have been composed of SS soldiers, as it seems inconceivable that a concentration camp punishment company would have become part of an SS division.

Military ID Papers of Otto Ostermann, SS 500th Parachute Battalion[30]

A few sources mention that the SS had a rehabilitation battalion (sometimes called the *Bewährungs-Bataillon der Waffen-SS*). This was actually the 500th SS Parachute Battalion. It was raised in 1943. Half of the unit' soldiers were supposed to come from regular Waffen-SS units and the other half were to be recruited from the SS punishment camps. Some German sources state most of the men initially came from the SS camps (particularly

30 Source: https://www.ww2collectorsworld.com/documents/germany-ss-paratrooper-id.

Strafvollzugslager Danzig-Matzkau). The battalion was at first employed in operations against the Yugoslav Partisans, including the failed airborne raid against Tito's Partisan headquarters.

The 500th SS Parachute Battalion was not just an airborne unit but was also a special operation unit intended to operate behind enemy lines. It often suffered heavy casualties in its missions. It was disbanded in late 1944 and its few survivors became the core of a new 600th SS Parachute Battalion, which was not a rehabilitation battalion. The 600th was a special operation unit, and two of its companies formed part of Otto Skorzeny's 150th Panzer Brigade during the Battle of the Bulge. (The 150th was tasked with disrupting American forces and seizing bridges needed for the German offensive. Part of its soldiers spoke English and wore US Army uniforms to confuse the Americans. To further the deception, some of the brigade's equipment was captured Allied gear, and some of its vehicles were German vehicles disguised as Allied vehicles.

The 600th became part of the SS's Hunting Units (*SS-Jagdverbände*), special operations units formed from 1943. At least one of these, the SS 502nd Hunter Battalion (*SS-Jäger-Bataillon* 502), had initially tried to train prisoners from an SS prison as special forces but failed.

USSR: Redemption in Blood, 1942–1945

One aspect of the German-Soviet war is that each side tended to copy and improve things of the enemy that impressed them. The Germans, for example, were impressed by the Soviet 120-mm Mortar M1938 and went on to produce their own, somewhat improved version, the German 12 cm Granatwerfer 42. Similarly, the Germans by late 1941 were quite impressed by the Soviet T-34 tank, and its sloped armor partly inspired the design of the later German tank, the Panther. In turn, the Soviet high command was impressed by the German straf units and soon created their own "improved" versions.

The Soviet winter offensives of 1941–1942 had driven the Germans back in many places but failed inflict a major defeat on the enemy. By May 1942, the Germans were able to score important victories over Soviet forces in the Crimea and near Kharkov (now, Kharkiv, Ukraine). By early summer 1942, the Germans launched their major offensive for the year, attempting to surround and destroy Red Army forces while advancing to Stalingrad and the Soviet southern oilfields. Unlike in 1941, Red Army soldiers were more experienced and knew what happened when the Germans broke through: Holding the front meant they would be encircled and killed or captured. In the summer of 1942, great numbers of Soviet soldiers spontaneously retreated when faced with the threat of encirclement, despite the Soviet high command typically ordering the troops to hold the front lines[31]. Even though the unauthorized retreats saved many soldiers who then continued the fight further east, it was unacceptable to the Soviet high command and especially Stalin that soldiers would not obey orders to hold the line.

Further, a number of Red Army units had decreasing morale, as it seemed that the Germans were once again winning all the battles and that the Soviet high command was out of its depth. These factors resulted in the infamous Soviet "Not a Single Step Back"[32] Order Number 227 issued in Stalin's name on 28 July 1942.

> *Order № 227, Excerpts*[33]
>
> Some units of the South front, following the panic-mongers, have abandoned Rostov and Novocherkassk without serious resistance and without order from Moscow, thus covering their banners with shame...

31 Some Soviet-era histories claim that Stavka actually ordered these retreats, but this was face-saving propaganda. It is clear in many cases the Soviet soldiers began retreating first, and Stavka only ordered the retreat after the fact.

32 The Russian phrase can also be translated as "Not a Step Back" and "Not One Step Back".

33 From https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1943-2/the-nazi-tide-stops/no-one-steps-back/. See the Appendix for the full text.

Every new piece of territory that we leave to the enemy will strengthen our enemy and weaken us, our defences, our Motherland...

The conclusion is that it is time to stop retreating. Not a single step back! Such should now be our main slogan.

We have to introduce the strictest order and strong discipline in our army, if we want to save the situation and defend our Motherland...

From now on the iron law of discipline for every officer, soldier, political officer should be — not a single step back without order from higher command...

After their winter retreat under pressure of the Red Army, when morale and discipline fell in the German troops, **the Germans** took some strict measures that led to pretty good results. They **have formed 100 shtraf companies that were comprised of soldiers who broke discipline due to cowardice or instability; they have deployed them at the most dangerous sections of the front and have ordered them to redeem their sins by blood**. Further on, they have formed around ten shtraf battalions comprised of officers who had broken discipline due to cowardice and instability, deprived them of their decorations and put them at even more dangerous sections of the front and ordered them to redeem their sins by blood. At last, the Germans have formed special blocking units and deployed them behind unstable divisions and ordered them to execute panic-mongers at the site if they tried to leave their defensive positions without order or if they tried to surrender. As we know, these measures were effective, and now the German troops fight better than they fought in winter. What we have here is that the German troops have good discipline, although they do not have an uplifted mission of protection of the Motherland, and only have one goal – to conquer a strange land. Our troops, having defense of defiled Motherland as their mission, do not have this discipline and thus suffer defeat.[34]

Shouldn't we learn this lesson from our enemy, as our ancestors learned from their enemies in the past and overcame their enemies? I think that we should.

...

34 The number of punishment units and scale of the German punishment measures are exaggerated, but this passage is best read as propaganda justifying the harsh measures being ordered on the Red Army.

Order 227 required Red Army forces to form shtraf battalions (*shtrafnye batalony*, the shtraf battalions) and shtraf companies. The "shtraf battalions" name was even a Russian translation of the informal German name for its rehabilitation battalions, *straf bataillone*[35].

Red Army forces were also ordered to form "blocking detachments" (*zagraditelnye otryady*) and "deploy them in the rear of unstable divisions and oblige them to execute panic-mongers and cowards at site in case of panic and chaotic retreat, thus giving faithful soldiers a chance to do their duty before the Motherland". Retreat blocking units were also used with the shtraf units.

Red Army Retreat Blocking Units

Order № 227's blocking units were not a new Soviet innovation but the continuation of a tradition that started soon after the formation of the Red Army in 1918, while it fought the Russian Civil War. The Red Army was first intended to be a volunteer, ideologically-motivated force fighting for Communism. It quickly became clear in 1918 that the Red Army was not receiving enough volunteers, and the Soviets soon resorted to mass conscription to find enough soldiers. The bulk of the population at that time consisted of "peasants" (poor farmers). Most had no interest in fighting for Communism and some regarded the Communists, who opposed allowing the peasants to own their farmland, as the actual enemy. Peasant-soldiers frequently deserted from the Red Army, often tried to surrender to the enemy or mutiny, and sometimes simply changed sides *en masse*. The Red Army responded by creating retreat blocking units like those created by Order № 227.

The Red Army disbanded its retreat blocking units after the civil war. When Germany invaded the USSR in 1941, some Red Army units provided unreliable, and soldiers in many units were prone to panic and giving ground. The Red Army accordingly began forming and using ad-hoc blocking units in 1941. Order № 227 thus really just formalized and extended an existing practice.

There is considerable debate as to how effective the Red Army retreat blockers were. Some people assert the blockers willingly fired on their own comrades, while others suggest many of these units did little except being repurposed for rear-area tasks and guard duties.

35 The Soviets transliterated the German "st" letters into Cyrillic as "шт" (sht) instead of "ст" (st) to preserve the way the Germans pronounced "st".

The formal blocking units established by Order № 227 were officially disbanded in October 1944. In actuality, all this meant is that the Red Army returned to its 1941 practice of forming ad-hoc blocking detachments as needed.

There was, however, another type of Soviet retreat-blocking unit. The NKVD had temporarily used blocking units during the Winter War with Finland in 1939-40. In 1941, the NKVD would create highly-effective blocking units. These will be covered later...

Order № 227 was the origin of the Red Army shtraf units. Subsequent instructions in 1942 further defined and refined these units, covering the composition, organization, and employment of the shtraf units. 227 had only concerned front line formations and combat troops, but there were plenty of soldiers the rear areas who were guilty of disorderly behavior or running black-market operations. Subsequent regulations thus cast the shtraf net over these troops.

Shtraf battalions were organized somewhat similar to regular rifle battalions, having rifle companies and smaller specialist subunits. Most of the men were armed with either rifles or submachineguns, with other weapons and equipment including antitank rifles, light machineguns, heavy machineguns, antitank guns, mortars, and engineering gear.

The men sent to the shtraf units were commonly called shtrafniki (the "punished ones"). German rehabilitation battalions initially had strict requirements on the kinds of criminal soldiers could serve in them, to exclude soldiers who only wanted to avoid the heavy labor units and camps and were not genuinely motivated to reform themselves. (The Germans later greatly relaxed these requirements.) This was never a factor for the Red Army shtraf units. They were outright punishment units to which any combat-able soldier who shirked duty could be sent. Accordingly, shtraf units all had their own internal guard subunits charged with making sure the soldiers followed orders and did not try to desert or surrender. The guards were well-armed soldiers from regular units and were empowered to fire on shtrafniki who tried to retreat without orders or, when ordered to attack, held back due to heavy enemy fire. Shtraf units were also backstopped by the Soviet retreat blocking units.

The military officers and political officers (or commissars[36]) of the shtraf units were not offenders sentenced to serve in a shtraf unit but came from regular units. Only officers who

36 Commissars and political officers were in change of Communist Party political indoctrination and watched the soldiers for signs of disloyalty. Commissars also held dual command with the Red Army commanders and could override the commanders' orders. The USSR abolished dual command later in 1942, which made the commissars just political officers.

had distinguished themselves in battle were selected, and they were authorized with powers of summary execution: They could shoot fishtail who did not obey, with no court-martial required. Sometimes these officers were simply transferred from their regular units to command shtraf units. As the war progressed, many officers volunteered for this duty, they received a number of benefits, both immediate and for their pensions. A commander of a shtraf company, for example, had the same privileges as that of a regular regimental commander.

Dreaded Symbol of Enforcement

NKVD Border Troops during the war

Besides the Red Army's retreating blocking units, the NKVD also had its own blocking detachments and was the true enforcer of the "Not a Single Step Back" order. The NKVD was a huge government organization with many civilian functions (like police and firefighters), oversight of the GULag, and many state security duties. For its security functions, the NKVD had several armed forces, such as the internal troops (which were use for security as well as combat operations against the enemy), the border guards, and other protective forces.

In peacetime, the border guards controlled the frontiers of the Soviet state. The USSR exercised quite repressive and brutal control over its population, especially towards those it called "class enemies" or "enemies of the people". Accordingly,

besides keeping foreigners out of the Soviet Union, one major mission of the border troops was to prevent Soviet citizens from fleeing the country.

The border troops were organized and equipped as a fully militarized force, so that they could guard the border against foreign military forces. When Germany invaded on 22 June 1941, the border troops were the first to go into action. As the Germans advanced into the USSR, the surviving troops fell back and fought alongside the Red Army. They were soon given new duties: On 2 July, the border troops were assigned to guard the internal border between the war zone, where the Red Army was fighting the enemy, and the rest of the Soviet Union. Their duties included rounding up Red Army stragglers, capturing deserters, and preventing troops from leaving the war zone without authorization. They also guarded against Soviet citizens from entering the war zone from the interior without authorization, to stop people trying to flee to the country and to prevent anti-Soviet spies and saboteurs from trying to join up with the enemy.

These duties made the border guards like blocking units. On 12 September 1941, a special order authorized the NKVD to form actual blocking detachments (*zagraditelnye otryady*). These were formed mostly from border guards as well as other NKVD troops. They had orders to shoot anyone attempting to surrender to to enemy or to retreat without orders — and they were quite willing to do so. NKVD blocking units watched over the entire Red Army, especially units considered unreliable. This duty extended to helping guard the shtraf units. The shtrafniki often thus had a triple layer of guards: the Red Army guard soldiers assigned to the shtraf units themselves, backstopped by the NKVD blocking units, with the NKVD border troops further in the rear guarding the war zone bone.

This photo is often used on web pages covering Red Army or NKVD blocking units, as it seems to show soldiers ready to fire on their own troops should they try to give up the assault. Instead, it is almost certainly Red Army soldiers providing covering fire for the attacking troops and some source claim it is a photo of the 5th Guards Rifle Brigade in action in the Kuban region.

The Red Army also formed punishment tank companies. Soviet tank units suffered heavy losses in 1941–1942, and light tanks were especially deadly assignments for tankers. Until the later in 1942, the Soviets simply could not make enough medium tanks for their needs, so they often misused the thin-armored light tanks as main battle tanks. Soviet tankers sometimes called their most produced light tank, the 2-crew T-60, a grave for two brothers. The result was that some fearful tank crews looked for excuses to avoid going into action, such as finding a minor mechanical fault or even creating one themselves. On 10 August 1942, Directive № 156595 required each tank army to form a punishment tank company from their shirkers and given them the most dangerous missions, so that they could "atone for their guilt"[37]. Tank punishment companies were not permanent units but were formed as needed by the tank armies. The 6th Tank Army (later the 6th Guards Tank Army), which

37 "Shtrafnye podrazdeleniya bronetankovykh i mekhanizirovannykh voysk, kavalerii, VVS, VMF v gody Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyny" ("Punishment units of the armored and mechanized troops, cavalry, Air Force, and Navy during the Great Patriotic War"); http://stat.mil.ru/winner_may/history/more.htm?id=11697680@cmsArticle (in Russian). The tank punishment companies were for tank crews. Other problem soldiers in armored and mechanized units were sent to the infantry shtraf units.

There were d

was formed in 1944, never formed a punishment company. The other five tanks armies did at times.

The Red Army had a large military aviation force, and especially in the early war years had many pilots guilty of cowardice and indiscipline. In 1941–1942, Soviet pilots were very poorly trained, Soviet aircraft were inferior to German aircraft, and the Luftwaffe had many expert fighter pilots. This meant Soviet air units suffered heavy losses against the Luftwaffe. Like with the Soviet tank crews, this made some pilots and aircrew reluctant to engage the enemy, including abandoning their missions if German fighters appeared. There were also discipline problems with the ground crews that serviced Soviet aircraft, including helping pilot sabotage their planes so that they could avoid flying missions. Problem air personnel were mostly sent to Red Army infantry shtraf units.

Soviet air armies, which controlled Soviet air units, were also allowed to form shtraf air squadrons, for problem pilots and aircrew[38]. For example, in September during the Battle of Stalingrad, the 8th Air Army (the aviation arm of the Stalingrad Front) established three 10-aircraft shtraf squadrons: a fighter squadron with LaGG-3 and Yak-1 fighters, an attack bomber squadron with Il-2 shturmoviks, and a night light bomber squadron with U-2 biplanes[39]. The shtraf squadrons commander was not a prisoner but directed the operations of the squadron and flew with it, watching for how the aircraft performed in their missions. If a shtraf aircraft performed a number of missions with dedication and skill, the aircraft's pilot (and other crew if any) were returned to a regular air unit.

Some Russian sources state that all air armies in Soviet fronts had shtraf squadrons until the end of 1942. Some shtraf squadrons existed into 1943 at least, as documents exist showing the 8th Air Army had some assigned two errant pilots to a shtraf squadron in June 1943.

The Soviet Navy was separate from the Red Army. Some works claim it was outside the shtraf system but it did have its own punishment punishment ships and boats for sailors.

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38 The shtraf squadrons likely were for problem pilots and aircrew that the army commanders thought reformable and did not want to lose to the infantry shtraf battalions. The high casualties suffered by the infantry shtraf likely meant few air personnel survived to return to their air units.

39 The U-2 was a slow (but quite maneuverable) biplane with a tiny bomb load and was quite unsuited for daytime operations if enemy fighters or air defenses were active. As a light bomber, it was excellent for night harassment missions. The could fly quite low over their targets at night and drop their bombs, often without being detected in advance. Although the aircraft did little actual damage, they were effective at waking up the enemy at night, causing fatigue and demoralization. "Shtrafnye podrazdeleniya bronetankovykh i mekhanizirovannykh voysk, kavalerii, VVS, VMF v gody Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyny" ("Punishment units of the armored and mechanized troops, cavalry, Air Force, and Navy during the Great Patriotic War"); http://stat.mil.ru/winner_may/history/more.htm?id=11697680@cmsArticle (in Russian).

In the 8th Air Army, to keep it up to strength, the U-2 shtraf squadron was allowed to include non-prisoners as well as prisoners. The implication is that service in this unit was not as hazardous as in the others.

Other works claim that once the shtraf system was enacted, problem sailors and officers could and were sent from the Navy to Red Army infantry shtraf battalions[40]. They also state the Navy itself started forming naval punishment platoons and companies from September 1942. It is unclear from my sources whether these platoons and companies were used in ground combat like Red Army shtraf units or were used for hazardous naval duties[41].

Order № 227 was issued in late July 1942, and the first shtraf units began forming in August, with thousands of soldiers in them. Many soldiers were sent to the units and many more to the field punishment units. Some works estimate a total of 400,000-600,000 served in the shtraf and field punishment units, of which about 430,000 are known to have served in the Order № 227 shtraf units.

> "It takes a brave man to be a coward in the Red Army."
>
> "We do not have prisoners of war, we only have traitors."
>
> Quotes attributed to Joseph Stalin during World War II.

Soldiers were given 1-3 month terms of punishment in the shraft units. The length of the term depended upon the seriousness of the soldiers' offenses. For example, soldiers who had been court-martialled and given death sentences could instead be sent to shtraf units on 3-month terms. If they survived the term, they were eligible to return to their regular units. Soldiers who died in shtraf units had their offenses posthumously forgiven — which was more important that it might sound, as this meant the soldiers' families would no longer be harassed and punished. This supposedly motivated the shtrafniki to fight well and be less afraid of death, for sake of their families.

Shtrafniki could be released from their terms early if they displayed courage in battle or if they were wounded in combat, as a soldier who "split his blood" fighting for the Motherland

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40 "Shtrafnye podrazdeleniya bronetankovykh i mekhanizirovannykh voysk, kavalerii, VVS, VMF v gody Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyny" ("Punishment units of the armored and mechanized troops, cavalry, Air Force, and Navy during the Great Patriotic War"); http://stat.mil.ru/winner_may/history/more.htm?id=11697680@cmsArticle (in Russian).
The Soviet Navy sent many thousands of sailors into the field to serve as soldiers. Some were sent to form Red Army units, the "naval rifle" brigades. These were part of the Red Army and problem naval riflemen would have been sent to the Red Army shtraf units. Others sailors were formed into Soviet Navy "naval infantry" brigades. (Note that the Army used "rifle" while the Navy used "infantry".) While naval infantry units could come under Red Army control for ground operations, it is unclear from my sources whether problem naval infantrymen would be sent to Red Army shtraf units or to Navy punishment units.

41 The platoons and companies were not permanent units but were formed as needed by the various Soviet fleets and flotillas. The following fleets and flotillas are known to have formed punishment units: Red Banner Baltic Fleet, Black Sea Fleet, Danube Flotilla, Dnepr Flotilla, Northern Fleet, and Volga Flotilla.

was judged redeemed. The Soviets were very good at judging whether a shtrafniki had truly been wounded in combat or had wounded himself in hopes of being released — before the shtraf units were formed, many soldiers in regular units in 1941–1942 had inflicted wounds on themselves in attempts to avoid combat.

Once the shtraf units were formed, Order № 270 of August 1941 (which ordered soldiers to escape from encirclement and not to surrender) caused some soldiers to be sent to shtraf units. Soldiers who had surrendered but later managed to escape and make they way back to Soviet lines became shtrafniki. You might think that escaping and returning proved loyalty, but this did not atone for the crime of surrendering[42].

Soldiers who managed to elude being encircled by the enemy sometimes were sent to shtraf units. This may seem surprising, but when the Germans broke through Soviet lines, things often became quite chaotic. With soldiers from smashed units streaming back from the front, the NKVD blocking units had difficulty in determining who had genuinely escaped from being pocketed and who were just retreating without orders. Anecdotes suggest the NKVD was not inclined to give many the benefit of the doubt.

Casualties in punishment units were often extremely high, as they were indeed used "on the more difficult sections" of the front. One tragic illustration of this occurred during the Battle of Stalingrad in 1942: 58 soldiers arrived at the front as replacements. They were sent to a shtraf unit by mistake. Two months later, when the authorities caught the error and tried to correct it, they found all 58 were "already wounded or killed".

This apparently was not exceptional. Another indication of the casualty rate comes from 1944, during a time when shtraf units supposedly were being treated better than in 1942–1943. By 1944, a full strength punishment battalion could have about 1,000 men (up from about 800 in 1942), but the average strength of a punishment battalion in 1944 was about 225–250 men. That year, the average monthly loss rate at shtraf units was about 50% of their strength, 3–6 times the rate of regular Soviet units when participating in offensives.

Popular culture accounts claim Soviet punishment units were forced to march through mine fields as means of clearing them when engineers were not available. This did actually happen, and apparently the Soviets also did this with GULag prisoner gangs and groups of

42 Accounts show that Soviet soldiers who escaped from German captivity to Soviet lines were detained and interrogated by the NKVD, which often had access to their records, their unit history, and other intelligence. Ex-POWs were subjected to service in a shtraf unit, imprisonment in the GULag, or execution. Only in November 1944 did the Soviets relax the provisions of Order № 270 and did not presume all ex-POWs were traitors. Even then, they continued to filter all ex-POWs for cases of cowardice, treason, or collaboration with the enemy.

Axis soldiers who had been taken prisoner. However, overall, it appears this was an occasional cruel expedient and not a matter of policy. When time was available, the Soviets cleared minefields the proper way.

> *"The casualties were very high"*
>
> From *Night Combat*; U.S. Army Center of Military History Publication 104-3[43]:
>
> Russian commanders had no scruples about casualties when a minefield had to be cleared in a hurry. On 28 December 1942 on the Kerch Peninsula, for instance, a Russian penal battalion was driven across a particularly dense German minefield during the hours of darkness which preceded the attack. The casualties were very high, but several lanes were cleared for the follow-up units.

According to some works, shtraf units sometimes were sent to sent assault the enemy even when some of their soldiers lacked weapons. In these cases, the weaponless soldiers supposedly were ordered to arm themselves during the assault by taking arms from fallen soldiers. If this happened this way, it was likely in exceptional circumstances. During emergencies in 1941–1942, Soviet regular units were rushed to the front without being fully equipped. Supposedly at time some of these units were committed to action with some unarmed soldiers, who supposedly armed themselves during actions with weapons from fallen comrades. At least as late as September 1942 during the Battle of Stalingrad, regular units were being rushed from the rear to Soviet 62nd Army at the city, to prevent the Germans from capturing the city. Some soldiers in some units did arrive without weapons. However, it is certain that at least some (and perhaps all) of these soldiers received small arms on hand at 62nd Army before going into action[44]. Since shtraf units were treated harsher than regular units, it seems possible that some at time went into action with some unarmed soldiers.

However, soldiers sent into battle without weapons are quite ineffective. Shtraf units were not just sent into combat to punish the soldiers, the Soviets wanted them to help defeat the enemy. Shtraf units were often committed as the spearheads of assaults (and at times were committed to attack after attack with no chance to rest) and as rearguards to hold back the enemy while regular units retreated. It stands to reason that outside of exceptional

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43 *Night Combat*; Historical Study; US Army Center of Military History Publication 104-3; 1953; https://history.army.mil/html/books/104/104-3/CMH_Pub_104-3.pdf

44 This is covered in several places in: David M. Glantz and Jonathan House; *Armageddon in Stalingrad: September-November 1942*; Volume 2 of the Stalingrad trilogy; 2009. The authors do not stay how 62nd Army happened to have spare weapons available, but, given the heavy casualties occurring in the battle, it seems likely they were those scavenged from casualties.

circumstances, shtraf units were fully armed whenever practical. When resources were available, it is known that the Soviets sometimes augmented the strength of shtraf units with extra submachineguns and antitank weapons.

On at least one occasion, an entire Red Army regiment was made into a shtraf unit. The Soviets placed very high value on the battle flags of divisions and regiments. It was the "holy duty" of a unit to ensure its flag was properly guarded, and it was a great dishonor to lose it. In November 1944, the 214th Cavalry Regiment of the 63rd Cavalry Division was counterattacked and fought its way out of encirclement, losing its battle flag in the action. The regimental commander was demoted in rank from lieutenant colonel to major, and the entire regiment was made a shtraf unit. The Soviets considered this a lesser punishment, since the unit otherwise had a distinguished combat record and had not lost its battle flag through cowardice. The 214th fought as a shtraf unit through February 1945, when it was made a regular unit again (but the commander remained a major).

The threat of being sent to a punishment unit was a powerful motivational tool in the Red Army. Many accounts note this. In one, a Soviet tank caught fire after being hit by two antitank rounds, which also killed the radio operator. The surviving crew bailed out of the burning tanks and hid in a farm field. They then watched with disbelief when the fire went out without causing the fuel tank to explode. Soviet tankers were allowed to abandon their tanks under two circumstances: if the tank was on fire or if the armament was knocked out. With the fire out and armament intact, it looked like they had bailed out for no good reason. They now faced being condemned to a shtraf unit. Fearing that the Germans would open fire again, the driver crawled through the field, entered the tank through the bottom hatch, and drove it back to Soviet lines.

> "Penal sub-units be employed only in situations that permit blocking detachments to be deployed immediately after them."
>
> Alleged to be in an 18 March 1943 directive from General Konstatin Rokossovskiy, commander of Central Front[45]

Punishment units did not always perform satisfactorily. If not properly watched, some men in these units were willing to surrender or desert to the enemy. This was not a major problem as long as the units were guarded correctly, but it did occur. For example, in early 1943, front commander Kostantin Rokossovskiy allegedly complained of "weak discipline and unsatisfactory organizational work in the training and education of the personnel in

45 However, I have been unable to document if this directive actually existed.

penal companies and battalions". One example was the desertion of 19 men from a punishment unit, which had conducted a reconnaissance mission without the supervision of a blocking detachment.

Various accounts suggest that treatment of punishment units became less harsh in the later war years, once it was clear the Germans would be defeated. Alexander Cherepkov, a chess player who became an international master (one rank below grandmaster) after the war, was a lieutenant who volunteered to lead a punishment company while recovering from wounds in 1943-44. At age 83, he offered his recollections, such as claiming that the NKVD blocking detachments never fired on his unit, although he implied the reason for this is that NKVD itself was cowardly and avoided getting near the front). His unit was assigned missions including capturing prisoners, reconnaissance in force, pursuit of the enemy, and participating in offensives. As is evident from Cherepkov, punishment units in this phase of the war still received extremely hazardous assignments. For another example, Alexander V. Pylcyn was commander of a punishment company in 1944-45 and recounts how his unit took 80% casualties in breaking through the enemy lines.

After the war, mention of punishment units disappeared in Soviet media. Soviet censors prevented publication of anything that did not fit the propaganda line of the people rising *en-masse* in patriotism and heroism to defend the USSR. This included any mention of Order № 227 (banned until 1988), the existence of punishment units and blocking detachments, soldiers voluntarily surrendering to the Germans, anti-Communist Soviet citizens assisting the Germans as auxiliaries and combatants, the treatment of Soviet POWs as traitors, and war crimes the Soviet high command encouraged the Red Army to commit in East Prussia. Due to their own wartime experiences, millions of Soviet citizens new about many of these topics, but almost everyone knew they would get in trouble if they tried to publicize them.

As Soviet censorship weakened in the late 1940s, stories about Red Army punishment units began to mentioned in public. After the USSR itself collapsed, articles, books, movies, and even a hit TV mini-series, *Shtrafbat*, appeared in Russian media. However, as Vladimir Putin has become increasingly dictatorial in the Russian Federation, some Russians claim the government had been discouraging Russian media from covering certain negative topics about the Soviet past. Disinformation attempts to play down or cause confusion about these topics have increased (such as promoting stories that the NKVD blocking detachments never fired on Red Army soldiers); at least some of these are likely by Russian government agents or their lackeys. Some Russians also claim the government is trying to prevent the *Shtrafbat* series from being run again on Russian television.

Germany: The "Unworthy" Bear Arms

The Germans had more than one series of combat rehabilitation units. The "500-series" rehabilitation battalions covered earlier consisted of first-class soldiers who had committed offenses against the German military regulations[46]. By 1942, the Army's growing need for manpower forced the German government to tap a pool of men who had previously been not allowed to become combat soldiers. The German Army established the 999 series of rehabilitation units for them. These men comprised:

- Second-class soldiers in military prisons for more serious offenses such as directly refusing to obey orders, assaulting officers, theft, etc. These soldiers had been considered hard cases and ineligible for service in the 500-series of rehabilitation battalions. Until now, their crimes had made the soldiers "unworthy of bearing arms" for Germany.
- Various able-bodied German citizens who were prisoners in concentration camps (*Konzentrationslager*, abbreviated KZ, and inmates of the camps were thus call *KZ* ["KZs" in English]) or who were judged likely to be sent to the camps in the future. All sorts of criminals, "undesirables", "anti-social" elements, and resisters to Nazi rule were in the camps, including conscientious objectors, dissenters, socialists, and communists. For example, Alex Funke had been arrested by the Gestapo for involvement in the "Confessing Church" (*Bekennende Kirche*, a Protestant political/resistance movement opposed to the Nazis gaining control of the German Protestant churches) and chose service in the 999 units instead of imprisonment. The presence of socialists and communists has given the 999 units another layer of misinformation and stories, as we shall see.

Hardened criminals (multiple convictions or arrests) were excluded for service, as were Jews, Roma, or other types of people.

The 999 units were lead by "reliable" officers and NCOs without criminal records from regular German Army units. The first 999-series unit to be raised was the 999th Africa Brigade in 1942, later expanded to divisional status in 1943. A portion of the division was sent to fight in Tunisia, including two infantry regiments, while the rest of the division continued forming in Europe. The units sent to Africa mostly fought well in battles like Foundouk Gap and Longstop Hill, where assaulting British units took heavy casualties.

46 "500-series" is a label of convenience, as while most of the battalions were numbered in the 500s, a few were later raised with lower numbers.

However, there were also instances of 999 soldiers deserting to the enemy. The African 999-units fought to the end of the Tunisian campaign and surrendered with the rest of the Axis forces in May 1943.

999th Africa Brigade and Division

999th Africa Brigade [*Afrika Brigade* 999]

Formed on 6 October 1942 at the Heuberg Troop Training Grounds in Germany. Moved in early January 1943 to the region near Antwerpen, Netherlands, and then from 12 January 1943 to the Nîmes-Avignon region of southern France, where it continued training.

Organization (combat units only):

Africa-Rifle Regiment (mot) 961
Africa-Rifle Regiment (mot) 962

Recreation of the 999th Light Africa Division's symbol

999th Light Africa Division [*leichte Afrika-Division* 999]

Formed around 1–2 February 1943 or in early March 1943 (sources disagree) by redesigning the 999th Africa Brigade as the 999th Light Africa Division. The existing units remained training in the Nîmes-Avignon region of southern France, while new units were raised and entered initial training at the Heuberg Troop Training Grounds in Germany. Combat-ready units were sent to Africa and fought there as non-divisional units.

Organization (combat units only):

Africa-Rifle Regiment (mot) 961
Africa-Rifle Regiment (mot) 962
Africa-Rifle Regiment (mot) 963
Artillerie-Regiment (mot) 999
Engineer Battalion (mot) 999
Reconnaissance Battalion (mot) 999
Antitank Company (mot) 999

The entire division was supposed to be ready for field service in early May 1943. On 6 March 1943, the deteriorating situation in Tunisia caused the Germans to start sending combat-ready parts of the division to Italy for transfer to Tunisia (mainly the 961st and 962nd regiments plus various bits and pieces). By this time, Allied air and naval superiority around North Africa made the transit from Europe to Tunisia quite dangerous. Some ships carrying the 999th's equipment were sunk, and some air transports flying in the 999th's personnel were shot down. On 5 May, with the city of Tunis about to fall, the Germans ceased sending the division to Tunisia, so its parts were scattered across Tunisia, Italy, France, and Germany. Axis forces in Tunisia including those of 999th soon began surrendering, ending with the final Axis surrender there on 13 May 1943.

About 30% of 999er men who surrendered in Africa were ex-political prisoners, including anti-Nazi socialists and communists. It appears that many of them subsequently preferred to claim that they had deserted from the 999th rather than having surrendered while in the 999th, but this seems to be an exaggeration in most cases. Once in POW camps in the USA, the small group of socialists continually clashed with the small group of pro-Nazi prisoners until the Americans labeled them as troublemakers and moved them to special camps away from the other POWs. Once separated, these prisoners became "model POWs" in American eyes. While in the POW camps, they published pamphlets and newsletters calling for a free and democratic Germany. While many of them did believe in these ideals, it must be noted that after the war a number of them went to East Germany and helped in the creation of the repressive Communist state there, which was neither free nor democratic.

After Tunisia, the Germans mostly gave up trying to form a division with the 999-men. Instead, they now formed smaller, non-divisional units and sent them to garrison Greece and the Italian-owned Aegean Islands[47]. This established the pattern that the Germans would mostly follow with the 999 units. New 999 units were formed as fortress battalions. Their ID numbers followed the format: I/999, II/999, III/999, IV/999, etc.; eventually thirty battalions were formed). They were deployed as separate battalions, in fortress regiments, or in fortress brigades. The socialists and communists in these units certainly did not like serving for the hated Nazi regime. Germany sent many of these units to garrison Aegean islands where the

47 These were the "Dodecanese Islands" (literally "Twelve Islands" but there were actually 15 large islands and well over a hundred islets) in the southeastern Aegean. Italy had taken them from the Ottoman Empire in 1912, and they remained Italian possessions until after WW2, when in 1947 they became part of Greece. Rhodes was by far the largest Dodecanese island, and 999-units sent there became part of the German Rhodes [*Sturm-Division Rhodos*] Assault Division. This division was more like a reinforced brigade and contained both 999 and regular units.

populace hated the Axis, possibly in the hopes that isolation and local hostility would deter desertions. A number of these 999 men did desert, and some joined the local guerrilla movements. One post-war Communist myth about these units is that most of the men deserted to the guerrillas, but the extent of the desertion is exaggerated. The units remained in existence until the end of the war and served on the mainland in the Balkans after Germany retreated from Greece in late 1944 — the 41st Fortress Division, for example, was formed late in the war from a number of these units.

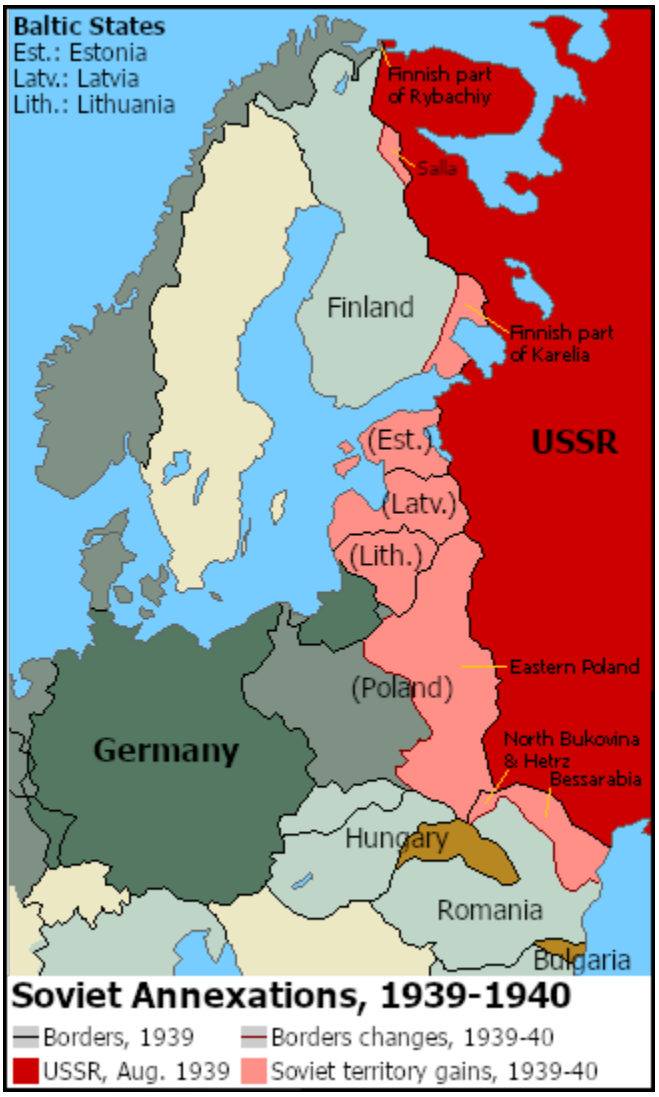
Not all the 999-units went to Greece or the Balkans. Some battalions served as occupation and anti-guerrilla troops on the eastern front. While not intended as front-line troops, some 999 battalions in the east did occasionally ended up in the front lines, such as in emergencies trying to halt Soviet breakthroughs. At least one battalion was sent to the western front — the US Official History for the Battle of the Bulge notes a "999th Penal Battalion" in line defending the Echternach bridgehead along with the German 320th Infantry Division[48].

The German Army also had yet another kind of rehabilitation unit, for German nationals who had served in France's Foreign Legion (*Légion étrangère*). At the start of World War II, the Legion contained numerous German nationals, who enlisted for a variety of reasons include adventurism, hiding from a criminal past, opposition to the Nazis, etc. After the defeat of France in 1940, the Franco-German armistice required German citizens of the Legion to be repatriated to Germany. The Nazi government was wary of the ex-legionaries and at first deemed them "unworthy to bear arms" for the country. In 1941, a special rehabilitation unit, the 361st Africa Regiment (*Afrika Regiment* 361[49]) was formed from these men and sent to Africa. Although the unit had a reputation for acquiring equipment by unorthodox means, it gave good, reliable service in combat. In 1943, the Germans removed the "rehabilitation" status from the unit and no longer regard with suspicion German nationals who had served in the French Foreign Legion or who had fought in the Spanish Civil War for the Republicans against Franco.

48 Hugh M. Cole; *The Ardennes: Battle of the Bulge*; part of the series, United States Army in World War II, The European Theater of Operations; 1965.

49 Its unit type was later redesignated a few times until it ended as the 361st Panzergrenadier Regiment.

USSR: The GULag at War



In addition to punishment units, the Soviets had many forced labor contingents of GULag prisoners in the field. These were part of the GULag system and not in the Red Army, but a number of them were working on military projects or on transportation projects of benefit to the military. The USSR had expanded west in 1939–1940 as a result of the 1939 secret deal with Nazi Germany that split eastern Europe between them. The Soviets embarked on massive construction projects in its new territories, building border fortifications, constructing airbases, and regauging rail lines. Throughout the USSR, GULag forced labor contingents were building new roads and railroads, some of which had strategic value for the Red Army. These units or "special contingents" were not housed in the GULag camps but were in the field, guarded by NKVD "Convoy Troops" rather than the GULag camp guards.

When the Germans invaded in June 1941, their rapid advance meant GULag forced labor units were often caught up in the fighting and sometimes overrun. You might expect that GULag prisoners would try to desert to the Germans (and likely some did), but there were several instances of GULag prisoners taking up whatever weapons they could grab or improvise and fighting alongside the convoy troop guards. Nevertheless, the Soviet government did not trust having GULag units or GULag camps close to the enemy, and they were all relocated out of the war zone over the course of 1941.

Gulag special contingents continued to work on important transportation and infrastructure projects throughout the war. For example, as the Germans advanced towards the Rostov-na-Donu area in 1941, the Soviets realized their railroad net in the North Caucasus had a strategic weakness: If the Germans advanced much past Rostov, they would cut all major rail lines from the North Caucasus and the Transcaucasus to the rest of the USSR. Since the Red Army was highly reliant on railroads to move troops and carry supplies, this weakness threatened the Soviets' ability to hold the great Caucasus region, source of over half of the USSR's oil. A crash project built a new rail line on the western shores of the Caspian Sea,

ensuring rail communications to the Caucasus. GULag continents helped to build the railroad (along with Red Army engineers and local civilians impressed as temporary workers). The rail line managed to go into operation just about the time that the German 1942 summer offensive cut the rail lines further west.

The new rail line was built in a hurry, so expedients were taken that lowered its capacity. Nevertheless, once the main rail lines were cut, the new line helped the Soviets, who shipped supplies and equipment south to the Red Army defenders and oil north to Soviet industries.

Right before the war, the Soviets had begun developing natural gas resources in the central Volga region, east of Saratov. The Germans overran the Donbass in 1941, depriving much of the western USSR of its best coal supply. It was clear that natural gas could help reduce Soviet dependency on coal. In 1942, the Soviet began considering building a pipeline to bring natural gas to Moscow. This city, with its large population and numerous factories, was a voracious coal consumer for heating and industrial needs. The project had to wait until the Germans had mostly been pushed out of the USSR but finally began in September 1944.

80% of the pipeline's labor came from GULag prisoners. Civilians along the path of the pipeline were also conscripted to work on the project, and some source simply state they were held to the "same standards" as the prisoners, which must have meant long hours and demanding work quotas. Motorized construction equipment was mostly lacking, requiring most of the work to be done by hand. The Soviets were unable to complete the pipeline during the war, and it began providing Moscow with gas in 1946.

The GULag provided much more than field labor to the war effort. One myth in popular culture (and even in some academic sources) is that a million GULag prisoners were sent to Red Army punishment units during the war. The GULag certainly did became a source of manpower for the Red Army following its disastrous losses in 1941. Mostly starting in late 1941, about a million (975,000 by some estimates) GULag inmates were released into the Red Army, most arriving in 1942. GULag prisoners who agreed to serve in the Red Army could have their sentences greatly reduced or eliminated, provided they served honorably. This in itself was appealing to many inmates, since most were ordinary Soviet citizens willing to fight for their country rather than anti-regime political prisoners. An added motivation was that the Red Army soldiers were fed much better than GULag inmates. Even in pre-war times, the GULag used food to motivate prisoners to work hard. Only those who exceeded their work quotas received adequate rations, and those who fell short of their quotas were place on inadequate rations. The worse workers, even when due to age or infirmity, received starvation rations. During the war, things were even worse. The German invasion had badly

disrupted Ukrainian agriculture, leading to food shortages across the USSR. Soldiers, workers in defense industries, and Communist officials received food priority. The GULag was at the bottom of the list and experienced a devastating famine in the winter of 1941/42, with about a 25% death rate from starvation and diseases of malnutrition.

It seems that almost all recruits from the GULag first went to Red Army regular units, not punishment units. However, this is a persistent belief that they went to punishment or shtraf units. If this were the case, there would have been far more of these units than records indicate that existed. The belief is likely due to another factor: Some, perhaps many, GULag prisoners indirectly ended up in shtraf units. Conditions in the GULag had brutalized most inmates. Many GULag inmates had to resort to theft or deceit to try to secure enough food to stay alive. This meant many were prone to discipline problems when they reached the Red Army, and an unknown number of ex-Gulag soldiers thus ended up in shtraf units.

Besides the field contingents and the recruits, during the war the GULag camps, like the overall Soviet economy, were required to support the war effort as much as possible. Camps with light manufacturing facilities made all sort of equipment, uniforms, and supplies for the military. Since so many engineers and technical experts had been sent to the GULag, they were gathered in special labor colonies and assisted defense factories to make ammunition, weapons, tanks, and aircraft. (Many GULag camps were already involved in resource extraction, and these continued to supply timber, coal, and ores to the Soviet economy.)

The wartime Soviets also had another pool of forced labor outside the GULag system, which was unofficially called the Labor Army (*Trudovaya Armiya*). Soon after the war began, the Soviets internally deported groups of people they considered untrustworthy or potentially disloyal to the USSR. The "Volga Germans" were the biggest group[50]. They were Soviet citizens who ancestors had emigrated to Russia from Germany in the 18th and 19th Centuries and who had retained their German ethnic identity[51]. Those living in the western USSR, where the Axis might reach their territory, were arrested and sent to the east, such as to Kazakhstan or Siberia. There, almost all men of "military age" were forced to work in the Labor Army, with almost all women of "military age" forced into the Labor Army later. The Labor Army worked on projects under similar conditions in the GULag special contingents or labor colonies. Some Labor Army workers were used at actual GULag camp and colonies.

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50 Although best known as the "Volga Germans" due to their large present along a region of the Volga River, they were actually located in many other places: Ukraine, southern Russia, and the Transcaucasus. All were affected by the internal deportations.

51 Many spoke German as their home or even only language. This was not unusual in the early decades of the USSR, as it had many dozens of ethnic groups. See http://classiceuropa.org/articles/sovethgroups/SovietEthnicGroups1941.html for more details.

Since there were technically labor conscripts rather than people sentenced for crimes as in the GULag, at these places the Labor Army was supposed to be treated better than the GULag population. In practice in most places, they were not.

Besides the Germans, other minorities belonging to Axis ethnic groups, like Soviet citizens of Romanian, Hungarians, Finnish, or Italian ethnicity were deported. Even Soviet minorities belonging to ethnic groups fighting the Axis, like the Greeks, were deported. Some of them were also used in the Labor Army.

As the war proceeded, many Soviets citizens in Axis occupied lands cooperated with or even fought for the Axis. Despite these people including many Russians and Ukrainians, the Soviets used this to persecute certain ethnic minority groups when they regained control of the occupied territory. For examples, the Muslim Chechens and Crimean Tatars and the Buddhist Kalmyks were deported en masse from the homelands to the east once the Soviets recaptured them. Some of these deportees were used in the Labor Army. Overall, the largest group in the Labor Army consisted of Soviet citizens of German ethnicity.

Alleged to be Labor Army workers clearing snow at a work site at Bakalstroy in the Urals[52]

52 Picture per https://geschichte.rusdeutsch.ru/21/63. While the men ins picture are often claimed to be Labor Army Germans, it is possible they instead are GULag inmates, since both were at the site.

Balakstroy (a contraction of the Russian for Bakal and Construction) was the construction site for the planned Bakal Metallurgical Combine (*Bakalskogo Metallurgicheskogo Kombinata*), and iron-and-steel works near the Bakal iron ore mines in the Chelyabinsk region of the Urals. Equipment for the combine came Krivoy Rog in the Ukraine, which was evacuated in 1941 to prevent the Germans from capturing it. The GULag was in change of construction, with the Bakal "corrective" labor camp set up at the site for the GULag forced laborers. In late 1941 Red Army engineers were sent to the site to assist in the

Germany: Organization Todt

Polish civilians being rounded up in Warsaw for German forced labor, perhaps 1941[53]

Organization Todt (OT; *Organisation Todt*) was formed in 1938 as a construction organization under the Nazi Party and was responsible for many civil and military work projects, including building the Westwall. OT was named after Fritz Todt, a construction engineer and senior Nazi official. Although a Party organization, OT had deep connections with the German government since the Nazis controlled Germany. Once Todt became head of the government's Reich Minister for Armaments and Munitions in 1940, OT greatly reconcentrated its efforts on military projects, including some on or near the front lines. (Some OT construction units, for example, were working in the Stalingrad area in 1942 and were trapped there when the Soviets surrounded the city[54].) Todt died in 1942, and a reorganization transferred OT from the Nazi Party to the armaments ministry[55].

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construction. However, around this time many Volga Germans were also deported to the area, and these Labor Army Germans became the largest work contingent on the site from 1942. That year, Balakstroy was renamed *Chelyabmetallurgstroy* (for Chelyabinsk Metallurgical Construction), with the plant becoming the Chelyabinsk Metallurgical Combine (ChMK, *Chelyabinskiy Metallurgicheskiy Kombinat*). The plant produced its first products in May 1943.

53 *Source:* https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lapanka_zoliborz_warszawa_Polska_1941.jpg. While it is unknown if any of these men were sent to OT, it is a possibility.

54 OT Detachments (*OT-Abteilungen*) 45, 47, III/1, and III/2 were operating with the German 6th Army at Stalingrad in October 1943 (https://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Gliederungen/Armeen/6Armee.htm), and (per other sources) parts or all of these units were caught in the pocket.

55 The ministry was renamed the Reich Ministry of Armaments and War Production in 1943.

OT initially obtained much of its labor from the Reich Labor Service (RAD, *Reichsarbeitsdienst*), a compulsory labor organization where young German men were conscripted and served for six months before being sent to serve in the German armed forces. In addition to labor, RAD conscripts underwent paramilitary training to prepare them for the military[56]. Although labor in the RAD was compulsory for young adults, its units were neither punishment nor penal units.

The OT also came use many sources of foreign labor once the war began: foreigners interned by Germany, guest workers recruited from countries like Italy, and laborers from occupied lands like Poland and the USSR. Some of this was voluntary labor, such as guest workers from countries allied to Germany, while workers from occupied lands where increasingly forced laborers and, eventually, the equivalent of slave labor[57].

56 The RAD also had a separate wing for young German women. Female service in the RAD was initially voluntary but became compulsory in 1939 soon after the outbreak of the war. The RAD women's wing was not deployed into the field for manual construction projects. Instead, RAD women were used in agriculture, industry, offices, transport, and civil defense (including, eventually, working searchlights at night to spot enemy bombers for the AA guns and night fighter aircraft).

57 Beside OT, many German industrial and agricultural organizations used the force labor of foreigners. Since these were working in the German economy rather than in the field, this work does not cover them.

Germany's treatment of forced laborers from occupied territories changed over the course of the war. Before the war started, some Poles from Poland worked as voluntary seasonal agricultural workers in Germany, returning to Poland when the harvest was over. When Germany invaded Poland in September 1939, these workers became trapped in Germany and thus became the nucleus of a foreign forced labor force. They continued to be paid (albeit poorly). Later, many Poles in occupied Poland were forced to labor in Germany but in 1939–1940 were also paid (albeit poorly) for their efforts. In 1941 after the invasion of the USSR, Germany recruited thousands of Ukrainian volunteers as guest workers. However, German employers treated them quite badly. When news of this reached Ukraine, the pool of volunteers dried up. By 1942, the Germans resorted to compelling Ukrainians and other Soviet civilians to work in Germany, so now they were outright forced laborers. As the war turned against Germany, the conditions of these "eastern workers" (*Ostarbeiter*) deteriorated into slavery at heavy, often-dangerous work.

USSR: Assault Rifle Battalions

In the late war years, the Red Army began raising special assault rifle battalions. These were created to solve a problem the Soviets were encountering, and they fall into a special category between the shtraf units and the regular units. Like the shtraf units, the assault battalions were given extremely hazardous missions, such as spearheading the opening assaults of offensives. The problem involved the status of the Red Army officers who had been living in German occupied territories but had not joined the partisans to fight the enemy.

Most Soviet citizens in the Axis occupied Soviet territories were loyal to the Soviet regime (or at least did not cooperate with the Nazi occupiers, seeing them as no better than the Communists). However, a fair number of Soviet citizens had actively helped the German occupation authorities as administrators, workers, security personnel, or even soldiers. Some did this because they were disloyal to the USSR (often because they or their families had suffered at the hands of the Soviets, such as from famine caused by collectivization of agriculture or through Stalin's massive purges of the 1930s). Others worked for the Germans in order to earn money, which they needed for food and shelter. Stalin was determined to exact revenge on everyone who had collaborated with the enemy, even for something as simple as selling firewood to the Germans. As the Red Army liberated occupied territory, the NKVD set up filtration camps to screen Soviet citizens there. People who had collaborated with the enemy were punished harshly, including by execution, internal exile to Siberia or Kazakhstan, or being set to the GULag with two consecutive 10-year sentences.

If the NKVD could not find any indication that a person had collaborated, most were released, although military-age men were drafted directly into the Red Army. There was one group, however, that was rather suspect: Red Army officers living in the occupied regions who had not joined the partisans. These officers typically had been in units that the Germans had smashed and were then trapped in the occupied regions, where they blended into the civilian population. In the Soviets' view, there was no good reason why loyal military officers in these circumstances did not join the partisans. The suspicion was that they either were cowards or were disloyal, even though the NKVD had found no evidence that they had collaborated. The Soviets did not trust them enough simply to send them to Red Army regular units, but they certainly weren't going to let them go free. At first, they were sent to NKVD "special camps" where presumably they were used for forced labor.

After the Soviets won the Battle of Kursk in 1943, the Red Army went over to the offensive and soon began considerable liberating territory that the Germans had occupied for some time. The Soviets at some point must have realized that they would soon have more of these suspect officers on their hands. On 1 August 1943, Stalin issued a decree ordering the Red Army to form separate assault rifle battalions composed of these officers. The battalions were intended "for use on the most active sectors of the front" and would give the officers the opportunity to "prove their loyalty to the Motherland with weapons in their hands". An officer could be rehabilitated to a regular unit by serving two months "of participation in battles" (which possibly meant only time on actual combat operations counted towards the term). Officers who failed to fight acceptably would incur draconian punishments, up to and including summary execution. These officers also remained under official suspicion. If the NKVD later found that the officer had collaborated, he would be removed from the battalion and subjected to punishment for treason[58].

Significantly, officers sent to the battalions were not convicts and were deprived of their officer ranks, even though they served like privates and NCOs. At the end of a term in a battalion, survivors had to pass an exam proving they knew Red Army combat regulations. If they passed, they resumed their full officer ranks and were sent to serve in regular Red Army units. My sources do not say what happened to someone who did not pass the exam. Perhaps they received another stint in an assault battalion.

Not being deprived of rank conferred an additional benefit: The officers' families received the privileges granted to families of officers. This in itself was likely an important motivational factor for many officers, as it gave their families access to adequate shelter and food.

There were two other ways an officer could win early release from an assault battalion and return to a regular unit: Wining a medal for valor in combat or being wounded in combat. Officers sent to the battalions were not told how long they have to serve in these units. In one battalion at least it was widely believed that the term was six months, creating the impression that the only realistic way to survive was to win a medal or get wounded. In case you are wondering, by 1943 the Soviets were quite good at detecting self-inflicted wounds, having had considerable experience dealing with such in regular Red Army units. Officers who wounded themselves would have been severely punished.

58 It seems likely that evidence of collaboration would cause an officer to be arrested even after he had served in an assault battalion and then was sent to a regular unit. My sources do no go into this.

Stalin's order also pertained to NKVD officers in the occupied territories who did not join the partisans. These officers served in the assault battalions exactly like the Red Army officers. Presumably they returned to the NKVD after being released from the battalions, but my sources do not cover this. Since the Red Army was much larger than the NKVD, the bulk of the personnel in the battalions must have been Red Army officers.

The decree specified that four battalions be formed (the 1st through 4th), but in practice the number of battalions and their unit identifications varied over time. The decree also ordered the NKVD special camps be combed for suspect officers already under detention, who formed the first contingent to fill the assault rifle battalions.

The units were officially called separate assault rifle battalions ("separate" being the Soviet term for a unit that was not an integral part of a larger field unit like a regiment, brigade, or division). The units were informally known as "officer assault rifle battalions" and the like, given their personnel composition. The leadership of an assault rifle battalion came from the regular Red Army: battalion and deputy battalion commanders, company commanders, and senior staff officers. They were carefully chosen and were supposed to have been well trained with actual combat experience. Similar, the political officers (in charge of political indoctrination and watching for signs of disloyalty) were carefully chosen from the Political Administration of the Red Army.

All other officers, NCOs, and specialists (like blacksmiths, cooks, and drivers) were selected from the officers sent to serve in the battalion. Only officers judged to be loyal and competent were allow in these roles. The rest of the officers sent to a battalion were treated and uniformed like privates ("redarmyisits" in Soviet military terminology). In contrast, officers sent to shtraf units were officially demoted to private, because they were guilty of offenses.

Although officers sent to the assault battalions were not quite free, they had not been court-martialled and technically were not prisoners. My sources do not say if these battalions had special guard units watching them, like the shtraf units did. My sense is they did not, but the units' senior commanders and political officers could punish those who tried to shirk combat, who needlessly got wounded (to be released from the unit), who displayed cowardice, or who tried to surrender or desert. Punish could include summary execution (a common punishment for soldiers who displayed cowardice in front of enemy).

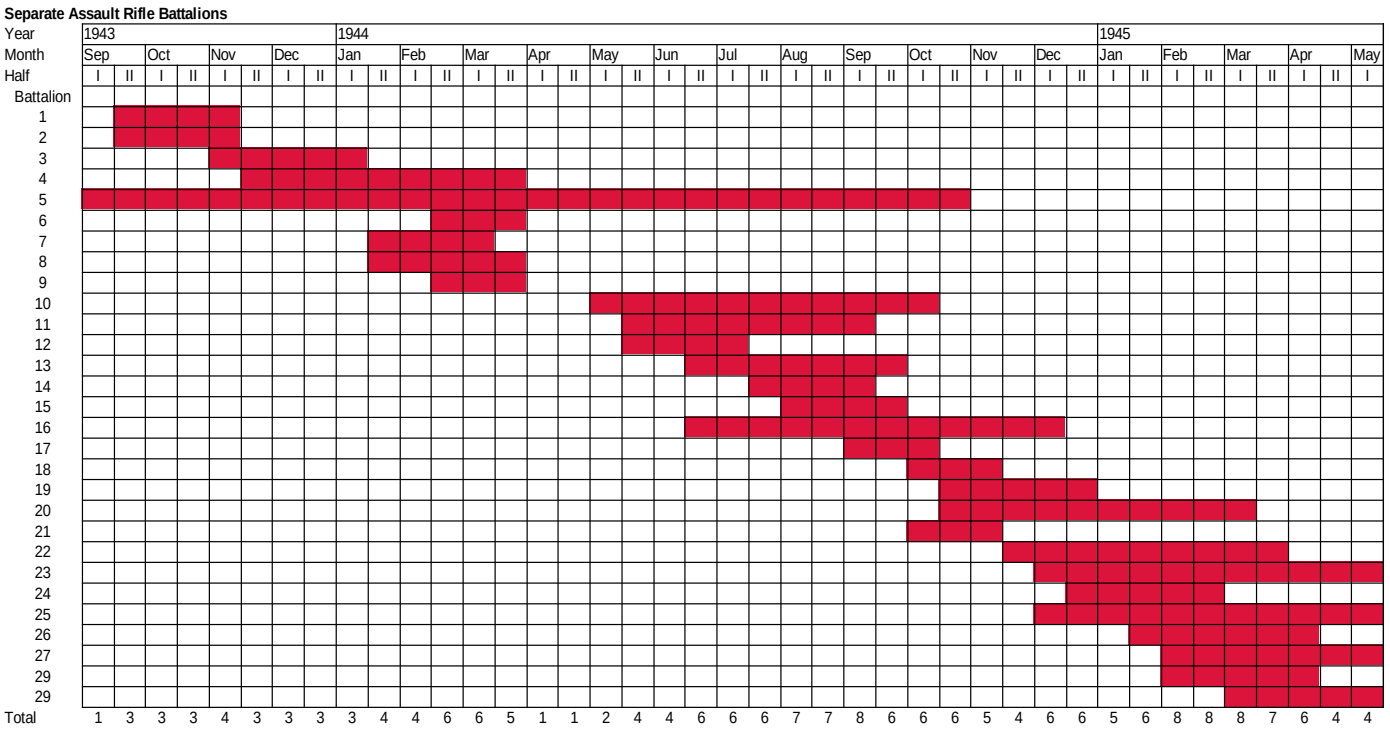
I have found no sources covering (one way or another) whether the assault rifle battalions were required to perform heavy labor (like shtraf units) when not fighting. I suspect they

were subjected to heavy labor, as this would be a way for the officers to demonstrate their loyalty during quite periods on the Eastern Front.

Only a few battalions were formed at first. A battalion was to use Shtat 04/331 for unit organization, which at full strength would have meant it had 927 personnel. I suspect the Soviets were not picky about the actual starting strength of the battalions. If they didn't received enough officers for a battalion from the NKVD, rather than waiting around they likely would it to the front once it was equipped and trained. If they received more officer than what the shtat called for, they almost certainly did form over-strength battalions. One memoir of a survivor of an assault rifle battalion mentions that 130 personnel remained after a combat action, "slightly more than ten percent" of its starting strength. This implies the battalion initially had on the order of 1,300 personnel.

Armament of a separate assault rifle battalion:

556 rifles and carbines
195 submachineguns (PPSh or PPD)
18 antitank rifles
36 light machineguns
12 heavy machineguns
21 mortars (50-mm and 82-mm)
2 antitank guns (45-mm)



The first assault rifle battalions began arriving at the front in September 1943. The battalions were not permanent units and were periodically disbanded, likely once they were too weak for further effective use. It is unclear exactly how this worked, as it seems some battalions likely received replacements over time. (A few managed to stay in existence for five months or longer.) New battalions were formed as the Soviets liberated more territory, and a total of 29 were formed throughout the war.

When a battalion was disbanded, its unit number was not re-issued. Instead, new unit numbers were issued as new battalions were formed. In the summer of 1943 and winter of 1943/44, there were typically about 3–6 battalions in existence at any one time. From the summer of 1944 almost to the very end of the war, there were typically about 4–8 battalions in existence at any one time.

People serving in these battalions were informally known as *sturmbatovtsy*, meaning "assault-battalionists". Since even the privates were trained officers, the assault battalions had very good combat abilities. Like the shtraf battalions, the assault battalions were given the most hazardous combat missions and suffered high losses. One battalion supposedly lost 75% of its personnel after just a few days of combat. Another battalion took 90% casualties (killed or wounded) in one battle. The remaining 10% were then all processed for release back to regular Red Army units.

Left: A Soviet unit (possibly scouts) equipped with Trud Vacha knives
Right: A modern picture of an old Trud Vacha knife, showing the Cyrillic stamp on the blade, з-д. ТРУД ВАЧА (*z-d. TRUD VACHA*).

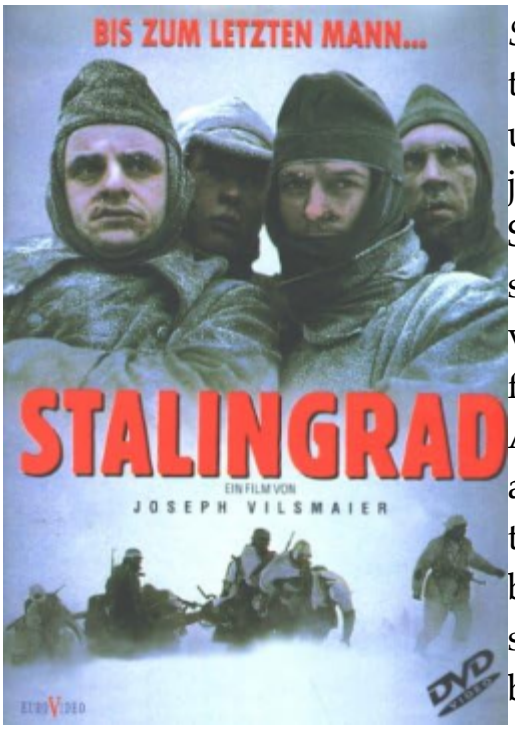
The memoirs of a soldier in a regular Red Army unit contain an account of the soldier encountering an assault battalion in February 1945. The Red Army was in Budapest fighting to take control of the city. The soldier saw a group of soldiers all armed with Trud Vacha combat knives, a prized knife not typically issued to ordinary soldiers. These knives were

made at the NKVD "Trud" factory in the village of Vacha and were stamped "z-d. Trud Vacha" at the base of the blades (z-d. the abbreviation of *zavod*, factory). They were typically reserved for paratroopers, scouts, combat engineers, SMERSH agents, and special forces units. The *sturmbatovtsy* had been assigned to take a position on Gellert Hill in Budapest. They were issued the knives because they were ordered to take the position in a single assault, by hand-to-hand combat if necessary. The soldier was told that anyone holding back was to be shot for cowardice. According to the memoir, the *sturmbatovtsy* rushed the position through heavy fire, tossed grenades to suppress the defenders, and used their knives to subdue further resistance.

Assault battalions materially helped in Soviet operations. The 23rd Separate Assault Rifle Battalion, for example, had been sent to Poland to join the 1st Belorussian Front in December 1944. In early January 1945, it was attached to the 274th Rifle Division for an assault on German field fortifications in the upcoming Vistula-Oder Offensive Operation. The division and the battalion attacked on 14 January, quickly broke through the German lines, and advanced west, crossing the 1939 German-Polish border in late January. The battalion was withdrawn into reserve on 28 January and was credited with the destruction of 2,500 enemy combatants, four Tiger tanks, 12 self-propelled guns, and 40 other vehicles. It also captured 600 enemy combatants, 23 artillery pieces, 24 mortars, and 16 machineguns.

Punishment Units… At the Movies and on TV

Stalingrad (1993 movie)



Stalingrad is a close up of the battle of Stalingrad, seen through the eyes of soldiers of a fictionalized German assault engineer unit. The movie starts with the unit on R&R in southern Italy, just back from North Africa, and then being ordered to Stalingrad. (This is dramatic license. Historically, in the summer of 1942, the Germans did send assault units from various places in Europe to participate in the Stalingrad fighting, but to my knowledge no units were ever sent from Africa to the eastern front.) The soldiers' train ride east serves as metaphor as a descent into hell, as the further east they travel, the grimmer and more foreboding the landscape becomes. When they reach Stalingrad, they are thrown into the street fighting that was taking most of the city building by building from the determined Soviet defenders. In an assault on a factory, most soldiers in the unit quickly become casualties. (The factory symbolizes the intense fighting that historically occurred at places like the Barricades Factory.) As the fighting grinds on inside Stalingrad, the summer passes into late autumn, and the Red Army surrounds the city in a surprise offensive.

Several of the unit's men end up in a scuffle while trying to save the life of a comrade in a first aid station. To set an example that discipline must be maintained, all the survivors of the unit are now placed in a punishment unit. The movie graphically shows the disdain the Germans displayed for these units and the dangerous tasks they were assigned. It is now winter, and the men are sent on a hazardous mission to clear mines in the portion of the steppes the German 6th Army was holding outside the city. While there, a Soviet tank assault is breaking through the defenses, and the men are thrown into to hold the gap. They use antitank guns to fight T-34 tanks at close range in the bitter cold and snow. They turn back the assault at heavy cost and are reposted back to their regular unit as a reward for courageous service.

Stalingrad is still surrounded, and all hopes of rescue disappear. The unit withers away from starvation and frostbite, until the last two survivors attempt to escape the city on foot and perish in a blizzard on the Russian steppes.

Shtrafbat (2004 TV series)

"Shtrafbat" is Russian slang for "*shtraf batalon*", punishment battalion. Part of the unit is composed of condemned Red Army soldiers, including men who had escaped German encirclements only to be branded deserters and being given a chance to be "rehabilitated" for their "crimes". The rest of the shtrafniki are Gulag prisoners promised released from their sentences if they would "wash away their past sins with their own blood". There's even a Russian Orthodox priest in the unit! (This is dramatic license, as the screenwriter, Eduard Volodarsky, admits, although he claims all the other characters are historically justified.)

The series covers the unit during the mid-war period. They receive a series of extremely hazardous tasks, including mounting forlorn diversionary attacks, marching over mine fields to clear them, and clearing towns of German snipers and booby traps.

Why do they do this? In large part, what unites them as a unit is their hatred for the Nazi invaders and their love of the Motherland. In no small part, almost their every move is shadowed by their NKVD guards, who are more than willing to machinegun down anyone disobeying orders, including the wounded retreating from battle. Self sacrifice in the name of Communism, almost needless to say, motivates none of them, and Soviet-style communism is mocked when the unit captures an officer from the German-sponsored Vlasov Army (Soviets citizens fighting for Germany against the USSR, in Vlasov's Russian Liberation Army). The Vlasov connection seems to be symbolic, standing in for the various German-controlled "Eastern Troops" of Soviets citizens fighting against the USSR. (The Vlasov Army only formed in late 1944 and its first unit only went into action in early 1945, just three months before the end of the war. However, A.A. Vlasov is well known in Russia as a Soviet army commander who surrendered to the Germans in 1942 when his army was surrounded and then joined the Germans in hopes of overthrowing Stalin.) The Vlasov Army captive insists that he is not a Nazi and is fighting for a Russia without Communism. The

commander of the shtrafbat allows the captive to commit suicide with his pistol, rather than handing him over to the NKVD guards for torture and execution.

The unit takes horrific casualties and at the end of a climactic battle has only two survivors (the commander and the priest). Unlike the two final German soldiers in the movie "Stalingrad", these two survive the war. Supposedly, in the work the "Shtrafbat" series was based on, everyone perishes in the final battle.

The series was very popular on Russian TV, with accolades like being "by far the best and most honest Russian treatment to date of the Great Patriotic War either on screen or TV". Of course, by addressing some of the unpleasant realities of Stalin's Soviet Union, it has incurred considerable displeasure, too: "[M]any films like *Shtrafbat* (*Penal Battalion*) or *Posledniy Mif* (*The Last Myth*) spread lies about the war, our generals and frontline soldiers. No effort is spared to allege that we were fighting incompetently." (M.A. Gareev; "Lessons of the Great Patriotic War", Military Thought; April-June, 2005.) In more recent times, some Russians claim the Russian government is trying to prevent the *Shtrafbat* series from being run again on Russian television.

Appendix: Punishment Unit Photographs

German soldiers deployed in Warsaw, September 1944, against the Polish Warsaw Uprising[59]

Some works on punishment units, especially online sites, contain photos supposedly of punishment units. The above photograph, for example, can be found on many sites with captions indicating that the troops are from a German straf (punishment) unit or the SS Dirlewanger unit (mainly composed of criminals released to the unit) fighting in Warsaw in 1944. There is no firm evidence, however, that they were straf. The Bundesarchiv simply identities them as "German troops". It also states that the original caption for the photo stated they were police troops (the Germans fielded a number of militarized police during the war) but then notes that the original captions could be incorrect, due to mistakes or due to deliberate mislabeling for propaganda purposes.

Why, then, is this picture used for straf units? Neither the wartime Germans nor the Soviet celebrated the actions of their punishment units. While the existence of punishment units was not a secret, soldiers sent to them were in disgrace. This is not something propaganda photographers would be allowed to document. As for private phots, the soldiers in punishments units were under heavy discipline and would not be allowed to own or have

59 Source: Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-2005-0034, Fotograf(in) Seidel; https://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/dba/de/search/?query=Bild+146-2005-0034.

access to cameras (like some German soldiers in regular units had). Thus, there are few genuine photographs of punishment units.

After the war, these units attracted attention for a variety of reasons, so works on them seeking to illustrate their text would use photos of regular units, sometimes mislabeling them as a punishment units but often just displaying them without any attribution. Once such a photo appeared on a web site, other sites would simply copy it. Thus, the above photo has become associated with German punishment units/Dirlewanger, but there is no reason to believe this is correct.

The photograph on the cover page of this briefing (reproduced above) is possibly another example. It frequently appears on Russian websites about Soviet shtraf battalions and is sometimes captioned «Банда Рокоссовского» – это 8-й штрафной батальон ("Rokossovskiy's Gang" – This is the 8th Shtraf Battalion). The 8th was indeed Rokossovskiy's Gang, as it had been part of Rokossovskiy's commands (Don Front, Center Front, 2nd Belorussian Front) from 1942 through 1945. However, I have been unable to authenticate the photo as the 8th or even any shtraf battalion at all.

It is the work of Soviet war photographer Mark Stepanovich Redkin. On some sites that do not cover shtraf units, it is sometimes labeled as "Gathering ahead of a military mission. In the vicinity of Berlin, 1945.". This caption neither confirms nor negates whether the soldiers in the photo were part of a sthraf battalion. (The soldier with a star belt buckle would almost certainly be an officer.) It is clearly posed and, for wartime Soviet photography, is quite high quality; signs of Soviet wartime propaganda photos. Is it really a shtraf unit?

Appendix: Karl-Heinz Meyer

Karl-Heinz Meyer was drafted into the German Army in 1940 and in 1941 participated in the invasion of the USSR as part of the 408th Infantry Regiment. He was wounded in Latvia and on recovery returned to his regiment, promoted to corporal. He deserted in 1942, was apprehended in Germany, and was sentenced to serve five years in prison once the war was over. In the meantime, he was sent to an Army punishment camp in the Emsland peat bogs, likely as a peat digger.

The Emsland "Peat Bog Soldiers" were subjected to heavy forced labor, brutal punishments, and inadequate rations. By 1943, Meyer was too ill to work and sent away to recuperate. After he regained his health, the Army sent him to serve in the 500th Straf Battalion (aka 500th Rehabilitation Battalion, 500th Special-Purposes Infantry Battalion) on the Eastern Front. He was wounded in late 1943, returned to the battalion upon recovery in 1944, and deserted again in May 1944.

Meyer once again made his way back to Germany, where he was captured apparently in August 1944. He was tried and sentenced to be executed. While death by firing squad was a typical punishment for deserters at this time, Meyer was condemned to be beheaded. He was held in a prison or pre-trial detention center in Stuttgart while preparations were made and was guillotined on 24 August 1944.

Source: https://www.stolpersteine-hamburg.de/en.php?&LANGUAGE=EN&MAIN_ID=7&p=3&r_name=Meyer&rBIO_ID=5227&BIO_ID=5831

Appendix: Order № 270

Adapted from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Order_No._270/. For a version of the document in Russian, see https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/%D0%9F%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B0%D0%B7_%D0%A1%D0%92%D0%93%D0%9A_%D0%A1%D0%A1%D0%A1%D0%A0_%D0%BE%D1%82_16.08.1941_%E2%84%96_270.

Order of the Supreme Command of the Red Army on August 16, 1941, No. 270; "On the responsibility of military personnel concerning surrender and abandonment of weapons to the enemy"

Not only our friends, but also our enemies are forced to acknowledge that, in our war of liberation from German-Fascist invaders, that elements of the Red Army, the vast majority of them, their commanders and commissars conduct themselves with good behavior, courageously, and sometimes – outright heroically. Even those parts of our army who, by circumstances are detached from the army and encircled, preserve the spirit of resistance and courage, not surrendering, trying to cause more damage to the enemy and to leave the encirclement. It is known that such parts of our army continue to attack the enemy, and take every opportunity to defeat the enemy and break out of their encirclement.

Deputy Commander of the Western Front, Lieutenant-General Boldin, while in the 10th Army near Bialystok and surrounded by German-Fascist troops, organized from deep in the enemy's rear Red Army troops, who fought for 45 days behind enemy lines and made their way to the main forces of the Western Front. They destroyed the headquarters of two German regiments, 26 tanks, 1,049 passenger vehicles, transport vehicles and staff cars, 147 motorcycles, five batteries of artillery, four mortars, 15 machine guns, eight machine guns, one airplane at the airport and a bomb arsenal.

More than a thousand German soldiers and officers were killed. On 11 August Lieutenant-General Boldin struck the Germans from behind, broke through the German front, united with our troops, and led out of the encirclement 1,654 personnel and officers of the Red Army, including 103 wounded.

The commissar of the 8th Mechanized Corps, Brigade Commissar Popiel and the commander of the 406th Rifle Regiment, Colonel Novikov, have fought out of encirclement with 1,778 soldiers. During a bitter battle with the Germans, the Novikov-Popel group travelled 650 kilometres, causing huge losses to the enemy's rear.

The commander of the 3rd Army, Lieutenant-General Kuznetsov and Member of the Military Council, Army Commissar 2nd Rank Biryukov fought out of encirclement with 498 soldiers and officers of the 3rd Army, and led out of encirclement the 108th and 64th Infantry Divisions.

All these and many other similar facts show the resilience of our troops; the high morale of our soldiers, commanders and commissars.

But we can not hide that recently there have been some shameful acts of surrender. Certain generals have been bad examples to our troops.

The commander of the 28th Army, Lieutenant General Kachalov who – together with his headquarters troops – was surrounded, showed cowardice and surrendered to the German fascists. However, the headquarters of Kachalov came out of encirclement, a small group from the encirclement of Kachalov's group, and Lt.-Gen. Kachalov[60] chose to surrender – chose to defect to the enemy.

Lieutenant-General Ponedelin, commander of the 12th Army was encircled by the enemy, but had ample opportunity to get through them, as did the vast majority of his army. But Ponedelin has not shown due persistence and will to win, was panicked, frightened – and surrendered to the enemy, deserted to the enemy, thus committing the crime against the country of breaking a military oath.

The commander of the 13th Rifle Corps, Major General Kirillov, was surrounded by German-Fascist forces and, rather than to fulfill his duty to the country, entrusted to him to organize stubborn resistance of the enemy and to move out of encirclement, deserted the field of battle and surrendered to the enemy. As a result the 13th Rifle Corps was broken, and some of them without serious resistance surrendered.

In all the above situations some military council members, commanders, political workers, special section members, that were present in the encirclement, showed an unacceptable distraction, shameful cowardice and did not even try to become motivated to prevent Kachalov, Ponedelin, Kirillov and others to surrender to the enemy.

These shameful facts of surrender to our sworn enemy testify that there are unstable, cowardly, cowardly elements in the ranks of the Red Army, which is staunchly and selflessly defending its Soviet Motherland from the vile invaders. And these cowardly elements are not only among the Red Army, but also among the commanding staff. As you know, some

60 Unknown to the Soviets at the time, Kavachov had actually been killed while attempting to break out from encirclement.

commanders and political workers by their behavior, not only at the front of the Red Army did not show a sample of courage, strength and love of country, and vice versa hide in crevices in the offices are busy, do not see and do not observe the field of battle, and when the first serious challenges to combat shrink from the enemy, tear off his insignia, a deserter from the battlefield.

Can we put up with in the Red Army cowards, deserters who surrender themselves to the enemy as prisoners or their craven superiors, who at the first hitch on the front tear off their insignia and desert to the rear? No we can not! If we unleash these cowards and deserters they, in a very short time, will destroy our country. Cowards and deserters must be destroyed.

Can we assume battalion commanders and commanders of regiments, who hide in crevices during combat, do not see the battlefield, and make no progress on the field of battle are regimental commanders and battalions? No we can not! These are not commanders of regiments and battalions, they are impostors.

If such impostors are unleashed, they soon turn our army into a massive bureaucracy. These impostors should be immediately dismissed from office, reduced in post to the rank and file, transferred, and if necessary shot on the spot, before appointing in their place bold and courageous people from the ranks of junior command personnel or soldiers.

I ORDER:

That commanders and political officers who, during combat tear off their insignia and desert to the rear or surrender to the enemy, be considered malicious deserters whose families are subject to arrest as a family, for violation of an oath and betrayal of their homeland.

All higher commanders and commissars are required to shoot on the spot any such deserters from among command personnel.

Encircled units and formations to selflessly fight to the last, to protect materiel like the apple of their eye, to break through from the rear of enemy troops, defeating the fascist dogs.

That every soldier is obliged, regardless of his position, to demand that their superiors, if part of their unit is surrounded, to fight to the end, to break through, and if a superior or a unit of the Red Army – instead of organizing resistance to the enemy – prefers to become a prisoner they should be destroyed by all means possible on land and air, and their families deprived of public benefits and assistance.

Division commanders and commissars are obliged to immediately shift from their posts commanders of battalions and regiments, who hide in crevices during battle and those who fear directing a fight on the battlefield; to reduce their positions, as impostors, to be demoted to the ranks, and when necessary to shoot them on the spot, bringing to their place bold and courageous people, from among junior command personnel or those among the ranks of the Red Army who have excelled. This order is to be read in all companies, squadrons, batteries, squadrons, teams and staffs.

Headquarters of the Supreme Command of the Red Army
Chairman of the State Defence Committee
I. STALIN

Deputy Chairman of the State Defence Committee V. MOLOTOV
Marshal S. BUDYONNY
Marshal S. TIMOSHENKO
Marshal B. SHAPOSHNIKOV
General of the Army G. ZHUKOV

Appendix: Order № 227, "Not One Step Back"

Order № 227, 28 July 1942

Adapted from https://soviethistory.msu.edu/1943-2/the-nazi-tide-stops/no-one-steps-back/. For a version of the document in Russian, see https://www.marxists.org/russkij/stalin/t15/t15_23.htm.

The enemy feeds more and more resources to the front, and, paying no attention to losses, moves on, penetrates deeper into the Soviet Union, captures new areas, devastates and plunders our cities and villages, rapes, kills and robs the Soviet people. The fighting goes on in Voronezh area, at Don, in the Southern Russia, at the gates of the North Caucasus. The German invaders are driving towards Stalingrad, towards Volga, and want to capture Kuban and the North Caucasus with their oil and bread riches at any price. The enemy has already captured Voroshilovgrad, Starobelsk, Rossosh, Kupiansk, Valuiki, Novocherkassk, Rostov on Don, half of Voronezh. Some units of the South front, following the panic-mongers, have abandoned Rostov and Novocherkassk without serious resistance and without order from Moscow, thus covering their banners with shame.

The people of our country, who treat the Red Army with love and respect, are now starting to be disappointed with it, lose faith in the Red Army, and many of them curse the Army for its fleeing to the east and leaving the population under German yoke.

Some unwise people at the front comfort themselves with arguments that we can continue the retreat to the east, as we have vast territories, a lot of soil, many people, and that we will always have abundance of bread. By these arguments they try to justify their shameful behavior at the front. But all these arguments are fully false, faked and working for our enemies.

Every commander, every soldier and political officer have to realize that our resources are not infinite. The territory of the Soviet Union is not a wilderness, but people – workers, peasants, intelligentsia, our fathers and mothers, wives, brothers, children. Territory of USSR that has been captured by the enemy and which enemy is longing to capture is bread and other resources for the army and the civilians, iron and fuel for the industries, factories and plants that supply the military with hardware and ammo; this is also railroads. With loss of Ukraine, Belorussia, the Baltics, Donetsk basin and other areas we have lost vast territories, that means that we have lost many people, bread, metals, factories, and plants. We no longer have superiority over enemy in human resources and in bread supply. Continuation of

retreat means to destroy us and also our Motherland. Every new piece of territory that we leave to the enemy will strengthen our enemy and weaken us, our defenses, our Motherland.

This is why we have to eradicate the conversations that we can retreat without ending, that we have a lot of territory, that our country is great and rich, that we have a lot of population and we will always have enough bread. These conversations are false and harmful, as they weaken us and strengthen the enemy, for if we do not stop retreating, we will be left without bread, without fuel, without metals, without raw materials, without factories and plants, without railroads.

The conclusion is that it is time to stop the retreat. Not a single step back! This should be our slogan from now.

We need to protect every strongpoint, every meter of Soviet soil stubbornly, till the last droplet of blood, grab every piece of our soil and defend it as long as it is possible. Our Motherland is going through hard times. We have to stop, and then throw back and destroy the enemy, whatever it might cost us. The Germans are not as strong as the panic-mongers say. They are stretching their strength to the limit. To withstand their blow now means to ensure victory in the future.

Can we stand and throw the enemy back toward west? Yes, we can, as our plants and factories in the rear areas are working perfectly and are supplying our army with more and more tanks, planes, artillery and mortars.

So what do we lack? We lack order and discipline in companies, regiments and divisions, in tank units, in the Air Force squadrons. This is our major drawback. We have to introduce the strictest order and strong discipline in our army, if we want to save the situation and defend our Motherland.

We can no longer tolerate commanders, commissars, and political officers, whose units leave their defenses at will. We can no longer tolerate the fact that the commanders, commissars and political officers allow several cowards to run the show at the battlefield, that the panic-mongers carry away other soldiers in their retreat and open the way to the enemy. Panic-mongers and cowards are to be exterminated at the site.

From now on the iron law of discipline for every officer, soldier, political officer should be – not a single step back without order from higher command. Company, battalion, regiment and division commanders, as well as the commissars and political officers of corresponding

ranks who retreat without order from above, are traitors of the Motherland. They should be treated as traitors of the Motherland. This is the call of our Motherland.

To fulfill this order means to defend our country, to save our Motherland, to destroy and overcome the hated enemy.

After their winter retreat under pressure of the Red Army, when morale and discipline fell in the German troops, the Germans took some strict measures that led to pretty good results. They have formed 100 shtraf companies that were comprised of soldiers who broke discipline due to cowardice or instability; they have deployed them at the most dangerous sections of the front and have ordered them to redeem their sins by blood. Further on, they have formed around ten shtraf battalions comprised of officers who had broken discipline due to cowardice and instability, deprived them of their decorations and put them at even more dangerous sections of the front and ordered them to redeem their sins by blood. At last, the Germans have formed special guards units and deployed them behind unstable divisions and ordered them to execute panic-mongers at the site if they tried to leave their defensive positions without order or if they tried to surrender. As we know, these measures were effective, and now the German troops fight better than they fought in winter. What we have here is that the German troops have good discipline, although they do not have an uplifted mission of protection of the Motherland, and only have one goal – to conquer a strange land. Our troops, having defense of defiled Motherland as their mission, do not have this discipline and thus suffer defeat.

Shouldn't we learn this lesson from our enemy, as our ancestors learned from their enemies in the past and overcame their enemies? I think that we should.

The Supreme Command of the Red Army Orders:

1. The military Councils of the fronts and first of all front commanders should:

   a) In all circumstances decisively eradicate retreat attitude in the troops and with an iron hand prevent propaganda that we can and should continue the retreat to the east, and this retreat will not be harmful to us;

   b) In all circumstances remove from offices and send to Stavka for court-martial those army commanders who allowed their troops to retreat at will, without authorization by the Front command;

   c) Form within each Front 1 to 3 (depending on the situation) shtraf battalions (800 personnel), where commanding, senior commanders and political officers of

corresponding ranks from all services, who have broken discipline due to cowardice or instability, should be sent. These battalions should be put on the more difficult sections of a Front, thus giving them an opportunity to redeem their crimes against the Motherland by blood.

2. The Military Councils of armies and first of all army commanders should:

a) In all circumstances remove from offices corps and army commanders and commissars, who have allowed their troops to retreat at will without authorization by the army command, and send them to the Military Councils of the Fronts for court-martial;

b) Form 3 to 5 well-armed blocking units, deploy them in the rear of unstable divisions and oblige them to execute panic-mongers and cowards at site in case of panic and chaotic retreat, thus giving faithful soldiers a chance to do their duty before the Motherland;

c) Form 5 to 10 (depending on the situation) shtraf companies, where soldiers and NCOs, who have broken discipline due to cowardice or instability, should be sent. These units should be deployed at the most difficult sectors of the front, thus giving their soldiers an opportunity to redeem their crimes against the Motherland by blood.

3. Corps and division commanders and commissars should:

a) In all circumstances remove from offices regiment and battalion commanders and commissars who allowed their troops to retreat at will without authorization from divisional or corps command, deprive them of their military decorations and send them to the Military Councils of fronts for court-martial;

b) Provide all possible help and support to the blocking units of the army in their work of strengthening discipline and order in the units.

This order is to be read aloud in all companies, troops, batteries, squadrons, teams and staffs.

People's Commissar for Defense, I. Stalin

Appendix: Classic Europa OB for Punishment Units

Punitive units have appeared in several games, such as *Scorched Earth* and *Second Front*, each having special rules for these units. The draft optional Classic Europa rules for these units will be along these lines:

Punishment Unit Types

Germany and the USSR fielded various kinds of punishment and prisoner units (per the UIC, these are j punishment infantry/punishment rifle, ⅃ punishment fortress, and j̲ punishment construction). All of these units have construction construction unit abilities (per Rule 14A).
DISCUSSION: An earlier draft of the work had another unit type, "corrective rifle", for the Soviet assault rifle units, and this unit type did not have construction abilities.

Punishment infantry/rifle units, as indicated on the UIC, incur required losses (R-9J) when used in combat or overruns. (Soldiers in punitive and corrective assault units were required to perform very hazardous combat missions in order to rehabilitate themselves and be released from these units.)

Since there were always soldiers committing military offenses and being sent to punishment units, some punishment units may be replaced at no RP cost, as follows:

East Theater: During each Axis initial phase starting on Jul I 41, the Axis player may replace one eliminated German punishment infantry unit or one eliminated punishment construction unit for free (no RP cost). Units replaced via this rule appear the same as any other replaced German unit.

All Other German Theaters: During each Axis initial phase starting on Sep I 43, the Axis player may replace one eliminated German punishment infantry unit or one eliminated punishment construction unit for free (no RP cost). Note that this one unit for all non-East theaters, not one unit per non- East theater. Units replaced via this rule appear in the theater the same as any other replaced German unit.

During each Soviet initial phase starting on Sep I 41, the Soviet player may replace, for free, one eliminated Soviet punishment unit or one eliminated

punishment construction unit. Units replaced via this rule appear the same as any other replaced Soviet unit.

[[*Draft, further optional, consider dropping:*]] Punishment construction units were often required to work extremely long hours on exhaustive, sometimes dangerous construction tasks. Accordingly, during the phasing player's movement phase, the phasing player may declare that a punishment construction unit is making an extraordinary effort. The unit uses the quick construction rule (R-14A1b) without a second construction unit being present. However, at the end of the movement phase, the player consults the Success Table, and the punishment construction unit is eliminated on any Failure result. (This does not negate any construction activity the unit performed.)

Some punishment units are not show in the game. For example, many countries fielded non-combat punishment units where problem soldiers were subjected to heavy labor. In Classic Europa, most of these are assumed to be functioning in the background, just like military prisons and POW facilities, and there is no need to show them explicitly. The exception is that some Soviet non-combat punishment units are shown, as prisoner construction units.

Most combat punishment and rehabilitation units are shown explicitly. Historically, most of them were independent battalions (or smaller units). For the Soviets, many of these would rate as zero-strength units, but they did have a net effect. Accordingly, the shtraf units are placed in composite punishment brigades. Similarly, the assault rifle battalions are placed in composite assault rifle brigades. The Soviet punishment tank companies are not show as being too weak even if placed in a composite unit. The Soviet punishment air units are not shown, as any game system for them seems it would be complex and have little practical effect on play.

Germans punishment and rehabilitation units are shown in one of three ways:

- The Army 500-series rehabilitation battalions, some of the Army 999-series rehabilitation battalions, and various other rehabilitation battalions are shown as punitive battalions, representing those used for dangerous combat missions and hard labor.
- Many of the 999-series punishment units are shown as punitive fortress regiments and brigade, representing the less-reliable men used more for occupation and anti-guerrilla purposes than for front line combat.

- Some rehabilitation units are not shown as punitive units or punitive fortress units but just as regular units. Examples include the Army 361st Regiment (ex-French Foreign Legionnaires) that fought well in Africa, the Army 999-series units that gave good service in Tunisia, and the mixed rehabilitation/volunteer SS parachute battalion. (These units are not included in the following German order of battle.)

As for prisoner units, Soviet GULag special contingents and Labor Army contingents are not shown. They are assumed to be working in the background on various projects. The same is assumed for the forced laborers in Germany's Organization Todt.

Draft German Order of Battle

(This OB may be used in place of the German punitive units in the *Scorched Earth* German OB.)

Jun I 41

Greater Germany:
Any WK:
1x 1-6 Pnsh Inf ll 500

Transfer to East:
1x 1-6 Pnsh Inf ll 500

East:
Punishment Unit Replacement Rate: 1 punishment infantry or punishment construction unit for free each German initial phase in the East Theater.
Arrive:
1x 1-6 Pnsh Inf ll 500

Dec I 41

East:
2x 1-6 Pnsh Inf ll 540, 550

Sep I 42

East:
1x 1-6 Pnsh Inf ll 560

Nov II 42

East:
1x 1-6 Pnsh Inf ll 561
2x 0-1-6 Pnsh Cons ll 1, 2 (LW)

Dec I 42

East, Arctic:
1x 0-1-6 Pnsh Cons ll PK (KM)

DISCUSSION: PK: *Polarküste* [Polar Coast]. This is a composite unit representing sailors and soldiers sent to punishment units and camps in the Arctic.

Mar I 43

Greater Germany:
Any WK:
4x 1-6 Pnsh Inf ll 999 A, 999 B, 999 C, 999 D

Transfer to Southeast:
2x 1-6 Pnsh Inf ll 999 A, 999 B

Transfer to North:
2x 1-6 Pnsh Inf ll 999 C, 999 D

North:
Arrive:
2x 1-6 Pnsh Inf ll 999 C, 999 D

Southeast:
Arrive:
2x 1-6 Pnsh Inf ll 999 A, 999 B

DISCUSSION: All German units with IDs in format 999 [LETTER] represent game-adjusted punishment units rather than strictly historical units (which had IDs in the form I/999, II/999, XXI/999, etc.). They represent the more combat-reliable manpower in 999-series units, with the other manpower going to the punishment fortress units. Also, theater assignments are abstracted, so that each theater gets at least two punishment battalions. While inactive, fairly safe theaters like the North Theater historically did not have many punishment units, they almost certainly would have received some had they been active. Thus, the OB allocates such units to these theaters — if they become active, the units are there ready for use.

Jun I 43

Greater Germany:
Any WK:
3x 1-2-4* Pnsh Fort X 963, 965, 966

Transfer to Southeast:
3x 1-2-4* Pnsh Fort X 963, 965, 966

East:
1x 0-1-6 Pnsh Cons ll 3 (LW)

Southeast:
Arrive:
3x 1-2-4* Pnsh Fort X 963, 965, 966

DISCUSSION: Unlike the 999 [LETTER] punishment infantry battalions, the punishment fortress units use historical IDs.

Jul I 43

Greater Germany:
Any WK:
1x 1-2-4* Pnsh Fort X 967

Transfer to Southeast:
1x 1-2-4* Pnsh Fort X 967

Southeast:
Arrive:
1x 1-2-4* Pnsh Fort X 967

Aug I 43

Greater Germany:
Any WK:
1x 1-2-4* Pnsh Fort X 968

Transfer to Southeast:
1x 1-2-4* Pnsh Fort X 968

Southeast:
Arrive:
1x 1-2-4* Pnsh Fort X 968

Sep I 43

All German Theaters other than East:
Punishment Unit Replacement Rate: 1 punishment infantry or punishment construction unit for free each German initial phase. Note that this one unit for all non-East theaters, not one unit per non- East theater.

South:
1x 1-6 Pnsh Inf ll 490
DISCUSSION: Battalions 490 (and 491 of Jul I 44) may not have officially been intended as rehabilitation battalions, but research in captured German World War II records indicates that the German South Theater used these battalions as punishment units.

Oct I 43

South:
1x 0-1-6 Pnsh Cons ll 7 (LW)

Dec I 43

Greater Germany:
Any WK:
1x 1-2-4* Pnsh Fort X 964

Transfer to Southeast:
1x 1-2-4* Pnsh Fort X 964

Southeast:
Arrive:
1x 1-2-4* Pnsh Fort X 964

Jan I 44

Greater Germany:
Any WK:

1x 1-2-4* Pnsh Fort X 969

Transfer to Southeast:
1x 1-2-4* Pnsh Fort X 969

Southeast:
Arrive:
1x 1-2-4* Pnsh Fort X 969

Withdraw:
1x 1-2-4* Pnsh Fort X 965

DISCUSSION: the 965th was used to form the German Army 41st Fortress Division in the Southeastern Theater.

Mar I 44

East:
1x 0-1-6 Pnsh Cons ll 5 (LW)

South:
2x 0-1-6 Pnsh Cons ll 8, 9 (LW)

Apr I 44

East:
1x 0-1-6 Pnsh Cons ll 10 (LW)

South:
1x 0-1-6 Pnsh Cons ll 4 (LW)

May I 44

Greater Germany:
Any WK:
1x 0-1-6 Pnsh Cons ll 6 (LW)

Transfer to East:
1x 0-1-6 Pnsh Cons ll 6 (LW)

Jul I 44

West:
1x 1-6 Pnsh Inf ll 291

South:
1x 1-6 Pnsh Inf ll 491

Sep I 44

East:
Transfer to West:
1x 0-1-6 Pnsh Cons ll 6 (LW)

West:
1x 1-6 Pnsh Inf ll 292
2x 0-1-6 Pnsh Cons ll 41, 42 (LW)

Arrive:
1x 0-1-6 Pnsh Cons ll 6 (LW)

Dec I 44

East:
Arrive:
1x 1-6 Pnsh Inf ll 491

West:
1x 1-6 Pnsh Inf ll 999 G
2x 0-1-6 Pnsh Cons ll 51, 52 (LW)

South:
Transfer to East:
1x 1-6 Pnsh Inf ll 491

Draft Soviet Order of Battle

(This OB may be used in place of the Soviet punitive units in the *Scorched Earth* Soviet OB.)

Sep I 41

Punishment Unit Replacement Rate: 1 punishment rifle or punishment construction unit for free each Soviet initial phase.

Any MD:
6x 0-1-6 Pnsh Cons X 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

DISCUSSION: These are not the shtraf battalions but are heavy-labor punishment battalions amalgameted into composite brigades. The Red Army did had these battalions dating back to at lesat to the 1930s, but they are not shown until Sep I 41, following Soviet August 1941 decisions that increased the scope and severity of punishments for the Red Army, resulting in increased use of these units.

Sep I 42

Reorganize: 1x 0-1-6 Pnsh Cons X any to:
1x 1-6 Pnsh Rifle X [same ID]

Available:
6x 1-6 Pnsh Rifle X 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

DISCUSSION: These punishment rifle brigades represent the shtraf battalions (and smaller units) the Red Army formed following the Not One Step Back decree of 1942. Historically, the heavy-labor punishment battalions remained in existence, but their importance diminished once the shtraf battalions were formed. (For one example, many soldiers in heavy-labor punishment battalions were transferred to the more-dangerous shtraf units.) Having both types of units overrepresents things in game terms, so the game simply converts punishment construction brigades into punishment rifle units.

Each Soviet front HQ (and HQ equivalent of a front) fighting the Axis formed a shtraf battalion, and Soviet Army HQs also formed shtraf companies. The complete number of companies formed is unknown and must have fluctuated greatly over time. Overall, it seems to best to have 12 punishment rifle brigades, which is roughly the

number of fronts the Soviet had facing the Axis. (They exceeded this at times in 1942–1944 with as many as 15 fronts, but some were in quite sectors, which must have meant they had fewer soldiers being sent to shtraf-level discipline.)

Six brigades appear in this turn, and the other six trickle in during the rest of 1942. (While all fronts in the battle zone may have formed shtraf battalions by the end of September 1942, it seems likely that it would some time for the shtraf system to be fully manned and effective.)

Since there were no actual shtraf brigade headquarters, the unit IDs for them are given as consecutive numbers starting with 1. An alternative system, given them IDs the same as their fronts, would require about twice the counters, since almost every front in the battlezone was redesignated at least once during the war after the straf system was instituted.

Oct I 42

Any MD:
2x 1-6 Pnsh Rifle [X] 7, 8

Nov I 42

Any MD:
2x 1-6 Pnsh Rifle [X] 9, 10

Dec I 42

Any MD:
2x 1-6 Pnsh Rifle [X] 11, 12

Sep I 43

Special: Soviet 1-6 punishment rifle units may be upgraded to 2-1-6 strengths starting with this turn. However, when such a unit is eliminated for any reason, always place it in the replacement pool at its 1-6 strength.

Upgrade: 1x 1-6 Pnsh Rifle [X] any and 1 inf RP to:
1x 2-1-6 Pnsh Rifle [X] [same ID]

Available:
12x 2-1-6 Pnsh Rifle [X] 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12

DISCUSSION: Shtraf units were always used for hazardous combat, as punishment for the soldiers sent to them. Conditions in them changed a bit during 1943–1944, however, as the German defeats at Stalingrad and Kursk meant it was clear the Soviets were going to win the war. Anecdotes suggest soldiers were treated a bit better. The units seem to have been reinforced more and seeom to have become more integral to Soviet offensives instead of being more like “forlorn hopes” thrown in just in case they achieved anything useful. Accordingly, from this turn, the Soviets may spend inf RPs to upgrade the strengths of the punishment rifle brigades.

Any MD:
1x 3-1-6 Corrective Assault [X] 1 Sh

Conditional: From this turn, the first Soviet initial phase after the Soviet players liberates a Soviet primary city:
Any MD:
1x 3-1-6 Corrective Assault [X] 2 Sh

DISCUSSION: Sh: *Shturmovye* (Assault). Punishment infantry units with "Sh" IDs are the assault rifle units, formed from Soviet officers under suspicion of being disloyal or cowardice (see main body of article for details). The Soviets only decided to form these units once they were winning the war and pushing back the Axis, with little chance the Axis could turn the tables. This is beyond the scope of what a rule for a conditional reinforcement can handle. Instead, I simply allow for it after the first two years of the war. The Soviets formed battalions, which the game assembles into composite brigades. The first brigade arrives as a regular reinforcement, since the initial assault rifle battalions were formed from suspect officers already in Soviet hands when the decision to form these battalions was made. The second arrives as a conditional reinforcement predicated on liberating Soviet territory. The brigades have relatively high combat strengths since even the "privates" in them were fully-trained officers.