

German map of situation on the Eastern Front from the half of July to the end of September 1941. Crossed out are the Soviet armies shattered or surrounded. National Library, Warsaw, Poland, polona.pl

Tamara Vrons'ka PhD, Dr. habil.

Institute of History of Ukraine, Department of Military Historical Research,
National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine
ORCID 0009-0009-3898-5662



Tetiana Pastushenko, Research Candidate

Institute of History of Ukraine, Department of Military Historical Research,
National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine
ORCID 0000-0003-0775-3788

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THE UNNOTICED VICTIMS OF WORLD WAR II. 'ENCIRCLED PEOPLE' OF THE RED ARMY: PUNITIVE PRACTICES AND REHABILITATION

Abstract

This article raises the problems the so-called 'encircled people' (in Ukrainian *оточенці – otochentsi*, in Russian *окруженцы – okruzhentsy*), i.e. soldiers and officers of the Red Army who, due to the fortunes of war, were surrounded by the enemy, yet managed to rejoin the Soviet military units. Deadly danger of the march out of the enemy rear, fear of captivity or death were just a part of these people's stories. Distrust, unfounded charges of treason, often cruel penalties followed upon their return to their units. Soviet authorities suspected that they had been recruited by the enemy and sent to the Soviet rear for intelligence or sabotage purposes. It has been rarely acknowledged that the 'encircled people' and prisoners of war were mentioned after the comma in repressive directives. This punctuation mark became a fatal conjunction during the war, as it was meant to *de facto* identify

servicemen in their social and legal status, and stigmatize them as traitors/deserters along with war prisoners. This article focuses on the evolution of the Stalinist regime and the attitude of the punitive-repressive bodies towards this group of war veterans. Conceptual approaches and security check procedures, punitive practices, social and legal effects of the 'encircled people' discrimination are at the core of this paper. Based on the analysis of legislative acts, reports, archival investigations, and a wide range of other sources, the article analyses the evolution of the attitude of the Stalinist regime and its punitive and repressive bodies to this category of war veterans. The focus of the study is on the principles and features of the vetting procedure, punitive practices and the social and legal consequences of discrimination against the "encircled people" extending over several post-war decades.

Keywords: World War II, *otochentsi*, 'encircled people', Red Army, NKVD, check, filtration, special camp, penal battalions, special detachment

Problem Statement

The issue of Stalinist repressions during World War II remains relevant for scientific research. Among different categories of persecuted people, there are understated war participants, such as the so-called 'encircled people' (in Ukrainian *оточенці* – *otochentsi*, in Russian *окруженцы* – *okruzhentsy*). Those were the Red Army soldiers and officers who, due to the fortunes of war, were surrounded by the enemy, lost connection with their unit, yet managed to rejoin the Soviet military units. These could also be the Red Army soldiers, who were not so fortunate and remained in the Nazi-occupied territory until the return of the Soviet forces. These people are most often mentioned in the context of route of the Red Army in 1941–1942.

Researchers usually focus on the Soviet war prisoners, the tragic outcome of the cauldron battles. But what was the fate of the Red Army servicemen, who were not imprisoned and managed to break out of the encirclement? Deadly danger of the march through the enemy rear, fear of captivity or death - those were merely some aspects of their stories. Distrust, ungrounded charges of treason, and often cruel penalties followed upon their return to their units. Soviet authorities suspected that they had been recruited by the enemy and sent to the Soviet rear for intelligence or sabotage.

Not every researcher understood the Soviet euphemism. Martin Blackwell in his book "Kyiv as regime city: the return of Soviet

power after Nazi occupation” (Blackwell 2016, XIII) explains that the *okruzhentsy* were the “Communist Party members who lived on Soviet territory occupied by Germany”. However, the *okruzhentsy* consisted not only of the Communist Party members, but included any combatants who had been surrounded, evaded capture and remained in the enemy-controlled territory, or came back to their troops.

It has hardly been acknowledged hitherto that encircled people and prisoners of war were mentioned after the comma in repressive directives. This punctuation mark became a fatal conjunction during the war, as it was meant to *de facto* identify servicemen in their social and legal status, and stigmatize them as traitors/deserters along with war prisoners.

This article explores the evolution of the Stalinist regime and the attitude of its punitive-repressive bodies towards this group of militants. Conceptual approaches and security-checking procedures, punitive practices, the social and legal effects of the discrimination of the encircled people are the core of this paper.

These issues are presented in the context of research based on the archival materials of the Communist Party, People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), archival-investigative files of the former encircled people and prisoners of war (for example: Stenogramy zasidannya uchasnykiv oborony Kieva 1941 r. [Transcripts of the meeting of participants of the defence of Kyiv in 1941], kept in the Tsentral'nyi derzhavnyi arkhiv gromads'kikh o'dednan' Ukrainy, Central State Archives of Public Organizations of Ukraine, hereinafter: CDAGOU, ref. no. ф. 166, оп. 3, сип. 37; Stenogramy besydy vidpovidal'nykh spivrobotnykiv TsK KP(b)U ta Kyivskogo obkomu KP(b)U z uchastnikamy komunisticheskogo pidpillya ta svidakmy natsists'koyi okupatsiyi v Kyevi [Transcripts of conversations with the representative of the Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine and the Kyiv Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine with members of the Communist underground and witnesses of the Nazi occupation in Kyiv], CDAGOU, ref. no.: ф. 1, оп. 22, сип. 290–375), disclosure of the previously classified documents – reports on breaking out from encirclement of the units and formations of the Red Army (for example: Organy 1995–2007; 1941 god 2011; Kyiv 2014), and published memoirs of war veterans.

The issue of the ‘encircled people’ was first raised in memoirs and fictionalized documentary literature (see Popel' 1959; Bagramyan 1971; Solzhenitsyn 1973; Tolstoy 1996; Bethell 1992; Kazantsev 1972; Kuznetsov 1968; Dolmatovskiy 1985; Cheron, Lugin 1987). This

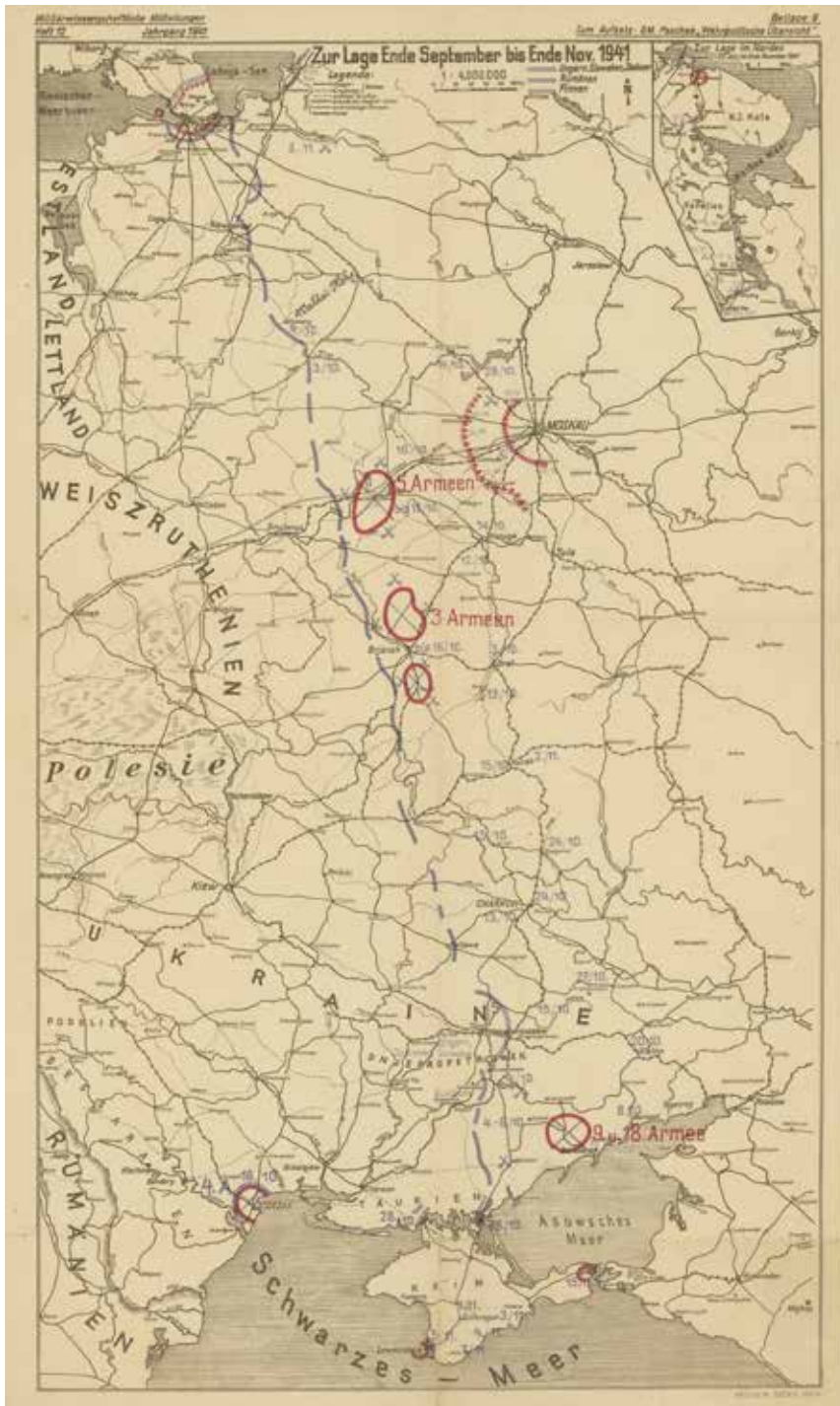
theme has also been mentioned in some academic papers dealing with repressions during the war, prisoners of war, or the functioning of Gulag (see Savina 1996, 197–199; Zvyagintsev 2006; Ivanova 2006; Perezhogin 2000; Petrushin 2006; Shevchenko 2010). The activities of military units in encirclement during World War II are covered most profoundly in contemporary historiography (see *1941 god* 1992; *Skrytaya* 1992; Bashmakov 2003; Isaev 2005; Bykov 2008; Hrytsyuk 2010; Hrytsyuk 2011; Marinchenko 2011; Larionov 2014). The ‘encircled people’ have been studied in the context of insurgency development in Ukraine as one of its active proponents (Perezhogin 2000; Kapas’ 2016).

The issue of their post-war legitimization and security checks (NKVD ‘filtration’) has also been raised in some studies. The substance and details of such punitive practices regarding the prisoners of war and ‘encircled people’ are studied in detail in a recent dissertation *The Vetting System of Red Army Military Personnel Returning from Captivity and Encirclement: 1941–1945* (see Latyshev 2016). The Red Army servicemen are the main focus of the above-mentioned study by Artem Latyshev. ‘Encircled people’ are dealt with using an “after the comma” approach treating them as traitors or deserters. Accordingly, the social and legal status of the ‘encircled people’, as well as their fate in the military and civil life have not been the subject of academic research so far.

The ‘Encircled People’. The Ways of Escaping the “Cauldron”

It became obvious from the very first months after Germany attacked the USSR that the strategy of the Red Army focused on the attack was inefficient in the war with the Wehrmacht. The Red Army proved incapable of preventing the rapid advance of the German staggered tank formations. Although the Soviet troops counterattacked and did their best to hold their ground, the enemy flanked them nonetheless. Consequently, they often missed the opportunities to retreat, became encircled and captured.

Millions of the Red Army soldiers were trapped and captured by the Wehrmacht during these first months of the war: some 300 thousand in the Białystok–Minsk region, 103 thousand near Uman’ [Human], 348 thousand in the Smolensk–Roslav’ region, 50 thousand near Gomel’ [Homel], 30 thousand – near Bolshiye Luki [Velikiye Luki], 662 thousand in the Vyaz’ma–Bryansk region (October,



German map of the situation on the Eastern Front from the end of September to the end of November 1941. Crossed out are the Soviet armies that were shattered or surrounded. National Library, Warsaw, Poland, polona.pl

1941). According to German sources, about 3,350,000 of the Red Army soldiers and officers had been captured by December 20, 1941 (Overmans 2005, 805). From 450 thousand (*Velikaya* 2010, 85) up to 665,000 (Overmans 2005, 805) Red Army servicemen were captured near Kyiv in September, 1941. The latter is considered to be one of the major encirclements in military history. Only 21,000 soldiers and officers managed to break out and avoid captivity, which accounts for merely 4% of the military personnel on this front (Hrytsyuk 2010, 40).

Millions of Soviet servicemen experienced the horrors of the cauldron. They suffered greatly. Very few managed to get out in military uniforms, with headquarters documentation and standards. That was the case of Hovhannes Bagramyan, Deputy Chief of the South-Western Front's Staff. Ivan Khristoforovich (Hovhannes Khachaturovi) Bagramyan (1897–1982) was a Soviet military Commander and Marshal of the Soviet Union of Armenian origin. Owing to his experience in military planning as Chief of Staff Bagramyan distinguished himself as a capable commander in the early stages of the Soviet counter-offensive against Nazi Germany. He was given his first command of a unit in 1942, and in November 1943, he received his most prestigious command as Commander of the 1st Baltic Front. In this capacity, he participated in the offensive which pushed German forces out of the Baltic republics. Back in 1941, he and a group of 50 soldiers rejoined the Red Army after a week-long march, when the command group of the South-Western Front led by Colonel-General Mikhail Kirponos, Chief of Staff Vasily Tupikov died on September 19-20, 1941 nearby Lokhvytsa (Poltava Region) (for more details, see Pastushenko 2015).

Most of the servicemen had to get rid of personal papers and munitions, and walk to the front line at night. The story of the escape of General Andrey Vlasov, Commanding Officer of the 37th Army, is rather typical. His troops were the last to leave Kyiv. For more than a month he was making his way through the Wehrmacht rear in civilian clothes to join the Soviet units near Kursk (see Hoffman 2003).

Some encircled people, who were unable to reach the Soviet troops, joined the insurgency movement on the occupied territories. However, the majority of the servicemen quietly lived in cities and villages, concealing their status and waiting for the return of the Red Army. Those who managed to get through the front line had to break through numerous clearances before they rejoined the Red Army. They were treated with the same severity as prisoners of war.



The Ideological Grounds for Filtration

The Soviet military doctrine did not provide any detailed plans for the defensive action. The Red Army Field Manual draft of 1939 dealt exclusively with the action in the attack (*Polevoy* 1939). Its versions of 1940 and 1941 contained no recommendations regarding the action in strategic encirclement, and not a single word about the order of actions for the fighters and their commanders. Only after large-scale encirclements in 1941, did the new Infantry Field Manual of 1942 featured a separate chapter (i.e. chapter 17), entitled “Fighting in encirclement. Exit from an encirclement” (see *Boevoy* 1942).

The order of the Supreme Command of the Red Army of August 16, 1941, No. 270 “On the Responsibility of the Military for Surrender and Abandoning Weapons to the Enemy”, was the first document in which a desirable line of conduct for servicemen in encirclement was stated explicitly. This document allowed for only one scenario: “fighting to the end” (*Organy* 2000a, 485). In essence, Soviet authorities transferred the responsibility for strategic defeat onto the rank and file soldiers and ordered them to die heroically. There was no other way out left *per se*.

Soviet civilians watching advancing German troops, August 1941. German propaganda photo. National Digital Archives, Warsaw, Poland, collection Wydawnictwo Prasowe Kraków–Warszawa, ref. no. 3/2/0/-/1903

Order No. 227 of July 28, 1942, also known as the “no step backwards” order”, issued by People's Commissar for Defence Joseph Stalin's, proclaimed that any retreat by the servicemen without an order would be treated as a crime. To fight against the “panic-mongers and cowards”, and the “barrage detachments”, penal battalions were formed. The authorities reacted to military defeat in their usual way – by intensifying the repressions.

Interrogations and security checks of the formerly encircled people were conducted by the NKVD personnel. The NKVD classified instructions treated each serviceman who found him/herself in the enemy's rears as a potential traitor or agent recruited by the German intelligence. These documents instructed NKVD officers to be alert to and irreconcilable towards the encircled people (*Organy* 2000b, 87). NKVD Directive No. 292/k on fighting against German intelligence of November 19, 1941, instructed “... to conduct a thorough filtration of all persons who crossed the front line from the territory occupied by the enemy, and send them in the far (Soviet) rear, away from the front line...” (*Organy* 2000b, 321).

Encircled People Categories

The surrounded soldiers who managed to break out from encirclement under their command and with weapons, were drafted into the closest military unit or sent to the rear to form new units. Single servicemen were in a much harder situation, especially if they were unable to explain clearly whereabouts they “had strolled” for so long, and why they had abandoned their weapon, documents, and military uniforms. In case of any suspicion, such people were sent to division headquarters or to the rear for a detailed vetting.

There were different requirements depending on the status of the encircled people – soldiers, commanders, political officers, NKVD officers, Communist Party members. Some groups received special scrutiny. Commanders of units and sub-units, who were unable to explain their long stay on the occupied territories, loss of their personnel, weapons and documents, were charged under different sections of Article 193 *On Military Crimes* of the Criminal Code – failure to execute orders, desertion, criminal inaction, voluntary retreat.

NKVD personnel had to go through the most severe filtration. Two, sometimes three registry cards were filled for each NKVD serviceman in the enemy rear, or one for those who came back to

the Soviet side of the front. The first card was filled with personal data and witnesses' testimonies about his /her stay in encirclement (see Galuzevyi derzhavnyi arkhiv Sluzhby Bezpeky Ukrainy, hereinafter: HDA SBU, ref. no. 12/10874). The second registry card was called "Index Card of NKVD of the Ukrainian SSR regarding a person coming out from encirclement". It contained twelve columns. On the recto, there was the first name, second name, family name, year of birth, special rank, position, when and where surrounded, when and where came out from the encirclement. On the verso, there were boxes for stating the exact date of arrival to the special inspection of the personnel department of the NKVD, as well as for answers to the following questions: were you in captivity and for how long, did you stay on the territory occupied by the enemy, did you keep uniform, documents, and weapons, did you break out alone or in a group. The last column, i.e. "summary of investigation", was intended for the ultimate verdict: retained or discharged from the service in NKVD bodies. Sometimes this summary contained a caveat: "... eligible only for work in the rear."

This kind of statement was provided for those who were unable to convincingly prove that their behaviour in enemy rears was immaculate. Such persons were still allowed to work with state security bodies, but they did not enjoy the full trust anymore. They were granted only limited access to undercover work and intelligence.

Several thousand Ukrainian SSR NKVD personnel became encircled, including Vasyl Serhiyenko, People's Commissar (Republican Head of NKVD). His special security check materials have recently become available to the public in the Archive of State Security Service of Ukraine (HDA SBU, ref. no. 13/410). It is now possible to not only reconstruct the case of his coming out of the enemy encirclement, but some backstage details of the vetting.

Serhiyenko abandoned his personnel, destroyed weapons and personal documents, changed into civilian clothes, and spent a month in Kharkiv undercover. He joined the Soviet troops only in December, 1941 (HDA SBU, ref. no. 13/410, pp. 1–15). Despite such circumstances and controversial accounts of his subordinates, he passed the check easily. The favour of NKVD head Lavrentiy Beria, and the support of his colleagues from counterintelligence, helped Serhiyenko to reclaim the post of People's Commissar of Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, while many of his personnel were punished.

The rank and file NKVD officials who retreated along with him were indignant at the indulgence shown to Serhiyenko.

“All are bastards in the People’s Commissariat. We got into encirclement because of Serhiyenko. But he is back to the People’s Commissar position now, while we are imprisoned. And it is his cowardice and failure to manage the group that caused all of this”

– bitterly stated Fesenko, one of the imprisoned officials.”

Stepanenko, another NKVD official, shared a similar view with his fellow inmates:

“It is us who appeared to be guilty of encirclement, and we are in prison now. Meanwhile, Serhiyenko abandoned weapons and us, and fled. And he is not under arrest, while I am, although I only abandoned weapons.” (HDA SBU, ref. no. 13/410, pp. 52–53).

According to the minutes of the investigation concerning Deputy Head of NKVD special detachment for work with undercover agents (military counterintelligence units, since April 1943 renamed SMERSH) who was overseeing the 37th Army, Captain of State Security, Isidor Bytnevsky (see Vrons’ka, Lyaskovs’ka 2011), went through the check rather smoothly, although he got rid of the Communist Party member ticket, personal weapons and, most importantly, left his fellow servicemen with no support. All of this would be sufficient for capital punishment for anyone at the time. Instead, the former Special Detachment (*osobyy otdel*) officer made a good career. He became a Chief of Prison Department of the Ukrainian NKVD in March, 1942. Since the spring of 1944, he was the Superior of the All-Ukrainian NKVD School.

Only selected people enjoyed such lenient treatment. Encircled people, soldiers and officers mobilized from countries and territories (1939/1940) annexed/occupied by the USSR not long before, were checked with prejudice. That was imposed not only by the NKVD instructions, but also by a directive signed by Chairman of State Defense Committee Joseph Stalin and Deputy of People’s Commissar for Defense Lev Mekhlis in July 20, 1941. The latter stated that “there is a number of traitors among those mobilized in the Western regions of Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Bukovina [Chernivtsi region of Ukraine], and the Baltic republics”. These people, including commanders and political officers, who were encircled and broke out of encirclement alone or in groups were instructed to be checked more thoroughly (*Russkiy Arkhiv* 1996, 48–51).

Communist Party members were double-checked. It was the political bodies of the Red Army that dealt with this. At the beginning of the standard procedure with special detachments, they had to go through interrogations at the Party commissions regarding how they lost their party ticket. Encircled communists were threatened with one more serious penalty – expulsion from the Party.

Women were yet another category under special scrutiny. They were the subject of Lavrentiy Beria letter to Stalin of November 24, 1941. Beria informed Stalin that NKVD sub-units were instructed to “detain and interrogate women who work or serve in the Red Army units after captivity” (Latyshev 2016, 36). He stressed that NKVD functionaries were instructed to thoroughly interrogate women with regard to their stay in captivity and the circumstances of escape from the occupied territory. The order was to arrest them on charges of espionage or provocations.

Security Checks. Special Camps

By the autumn of 1941, special checks of servicemen who managed to come back from enemy encirclements were conducted spontaneously. At first, simplified interrogation and other proceedings were conducted by counterintelligence units – special detachments (since April 1943 renamed as SMERSH – *Smert' shpionam*, i.e. *Death to Spies* – counter-espionage unit of People's Commissariat of Defence).

Filtration was conducted both at the front line and in the rear – at transit points. The NKVD was convinced that special checks at the front line or close rear were inefficient. In December, 1941, the State Committee on Defence issued resolution that provided for special camps of the NKVD “for uncovering the traitors of the motherland, spies, and deserters among the former Red Army servicemen who were in captivity” (see Gosudarstvennyi Komitet Oborony, Popstanovlenie ot 27 dekabrya 1941 goda, no. GKO-1069ss [State Defence Committee, Resolution of December 27, 1941, no. GKO-1069ss], Document published; accessed on September 6, <https://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/fond/issues-doc/58845>). In February, 1945, they were renamed as “checking-filtration points” (*Проверочно-Фильтрационные Пункты*, *Proverochno-Fil'tratsionnye Punkty*).

The resolution was followed by the establishment of transit points for formerly encircled people called the “former Red Army servicemen”. These special camps hardly differed from the Gulag camps. The same severe guards, barbed wire, prohibition of correspondence, and other

Waffen-SS soldier talking to Soviet civilians, Belgorod, July 1943. German propaganda photo. National Digital Archives, Warsaw, Poland, collection Wydawnictwo Prasowe Kraków-Warszawa, ref. no. 3/2/0/-/1916



restrictions characterized the status of people detained there. Soviet authorities treated them as criminals by default and called the “special contingent” (see above).

Checks After Stalingrad Battle

Stalingrad became the turning point in the war. It brought some changes in the treatment of formerly encircled people. Early in 1943, the USSR leadership modified its repressive policies. Checking procedures for the Red Army servicemen, who evaded captivity or were liberated, changed. Instead of counterintelligence, army commissions were to deal with them at transit points rather than at special camps. Junior officers and soldiers with no incriminating data on them were sent away to reinforce military units. Commanders and political officers were to wait for new appointments from higher command. Those

considered “unreliable, hostile elements” were sent to the abovementioned NKVD special camps for a thorough check (Rybchenko 2010, 308).

According to the People’s Commissar of Defence order of August 1, 1943, separate infantry assault battalions were formed of the officers, who remained under suspicion even after profound filtration. These are not to be confused with penal battalions, created in July-September 1942. Servicemen were supposed to spend at least two months “in action” in assault battalions, while their family members remained eligible for cash benefits (see Prikaz narodnogo komissara obrony no. ORG/2/1348 komanduyushchim voyskami Moskovskogo, Privolzhskogo i Stalin--gradskogo voennykh okrugovo formovanii otdel’nykh

shturmovykh strelkovykh batal'onov ot 1 avgusta 1943 g. [Order of People's Commissar of Defence No. ORG/2/1348 to the commanders of Moscow, Volga and Stalingrad Military Districts on forming separate assault rifle battalions of August 1, 1943], in *Russkiy Arkhiv* 1997, 70-71).

Assault units made of formerly encircled officers were used in the “most active front areas”. Military people called them *smertnik* – prisoners sentenced to death. These units suffered the heaviest losses. About 25,000 Red Army servicemen were sent to assault battalions during the war (Dembitskyi 2004, 257).

Checking the Recaptured Areas

As the Soviet troops advanced, the NKVD territorial units got into dealing with the former ‘encircled people’ and other “suspicious elements” on the spot. One of the first instructions, issued for recaptured territories (February 18, 1942), points out that encircled people should be treated on a par with the potential “traitors” and “collaborators” (see HDA SBU, ref. no. 16/35/2, pp. 104–108). They were charged with the “stay on occupied territory”. After security checks, some of them were sent to the Red Army units, others – to special camps for additional clearance.

People who joined partisan units were treated with the same distrust. In 1944, in the NKVD special camp no. 240 in Stalino, the former Red Army encircled soldiers who joined a partisan division under command of S. Malikov were subject to a check (see CDAGOU, ref. no. 1/23/1364, pp. 4–6). The former partisans complained to their commander that they were forbidden to correspond with their relatives or wear military uniforms, that they were beaten and humiliated. One of the encircled soldiers who joined the partisans, first lieutenant Ivan Korzhyk, remembered bitterly after the war: “My one and only fault was that after the encirclement in 1941 near Kyiv, people like me should have shot themselves” (Rubtsov 2006).

In 1943 alone, the NKVD units in the recaptured territories detained and checked 931,549 men. Among them there were 582 515 military personnel – deserters, those who fell behind their units, servicemen with wrong documents. There were 18 086 ‘encircled people’ among them (Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiyskoy Federatsii, State Archive of Russian Federation, hereinafter: GARE, ref. no. Ф. 9401, Оп. 2, Д. 68, pp. 64, 9–13).

Soviet civilians controlled by German NCO, 1944. German propaganda photo. National Digital Archives, Warsaw, Poland, collection Wydawnictwo Prasowe Kraków-Warszawa, ref. no. 3/2/0/-/1847

Repatriation

In the early 1944, the military action moved into the territories of European countries. A special mechanism for the repatriation of the Soviet citizens was launched; the State Defence Committee issued a resolution providing for changes in the procedures concerning the encircled people. "Prisoners of war, encircled soldiers and non-commissioned officers" were forcibly sent to the mining industry and construction plots for an indefinite time (GARF, ref. no. Ф. 9401, Оп. 2, Д. 68, pp. 229–230). This kind of serfdom persisted till Stalin's death in 1953. Some people somehow managed to return home and settle, though they were constantly under watchful supervision from the authorities (for more details about repatriation, see: Pastushenko 2013).

As the war ended, Soviet authorities and state security bodies did not change their strict attitude towards the formerly encircled people.

Those who experienced special checks or stayed at the camps experienced further humiliation and ungrounded charges. They had to go through arrests and their investigations in their units' command. In daily routine, they faced common distrust, which was an obstacle for gaining education, obtaining profession, career advancement, change of the place of residence (on the life in Soviet society, discrimination and control by the the Soviet state over its people, see Vrons'ka, Stiazhkina 2020).



Rehabilitation

Distrust and persecution towards the encircled people were recognized as erroneous practices only in 1956. The joint resolution of the Central Committee of the

Communist Party of the USSR and Council of Ministers of USSR of June 29, 1956 *On Fixing Breaches of Law regarding Former Prisoners of War and their Family Members* mentions encircled people, again after the comma. According to this document, encircled people regained their citizen rights, military ranks, and decorations. The time encircled people spent under special investigations and in penal battalions was to be recognized as active service (*Reabilitatsiya* 1997, 92–96).

However, it was the amnesty rather than rehabilitation. Soviet authorities “pardoned the offenders” instead of asking for pardon for their own failures / abuses. However, even after these changes, the formerly encircled people and their relatives experienced distrust and discrimination. In the Soviet Union, every employee must have a full special record. Until the end of 1989, the standard form of personnel records contained a column with a question: “did you or your relatives stay on occupied territories, encirclement/in captivity?”.

All of these precautions were dismissed only after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Appropriate legislation was adopted in Ukraine (*Zakon Ukrayiny* 1995) and in Russia (*Ukaz* 1995), respectively. All war veterans were granted a widely recognized veteran status “in order to restore historical justice and lawful rights of the citizens who were captured or encircled while protecting Fatherland” (*Decree No. 63* 1995).

Conclusions

The issue of severe, unfair treatment of the ‘encircled people’ in the USSR ought to be viewed in the broad context of the functioning of the totalitarian state, in which each citizen had to live under permanent control from the state apparatus. Any stay of the Soviet citizen in the occupied territory, either as a prisoner of war or civilian, meant that the Soviet state lost control over the man. A necessary and justifiable procedure of debriefing, interrogation and vetting of servicemen who spent time in the enemy’s rear, was turned in the USSR into yet another kind of repression.

The analysis of the legislation and instructions based on the reconstruction of the checking procedures shed more light on the Soviet state during World War II. The knowledge of this murky side of the war, numerous human sacrifices hidden from the world outside of the Soviet Union, as well as operations of secret services contribute to the better understanding of the context of the Soviet society routine, add up to the picture of the war’s naked truth.

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