

THE SOVIET INFANTRY MAN ON THE PRUT RIVER: 22 JUNE 1941 – HISTORIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON COMBAT TRAINING –

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In the wider field of universal historiography, the predominant depictions of the Soviet infantryman tend to oscillate between two opposing archetypes. On the one hand, the Soviet soldier is depicted as a physically imposing figure – an almost mythical giant – portrayed as superior to his opponents in terms of strength, combat effectiveness, and morale, often characterized by exemplary levels of equipment and rigorous training. On the other hand, alternate narratives cast the Soviet infantryman as a primitive or savage individual originating from the Asian steppes, described as a combatant sent into battle with minimal armament and under threat of encirclement or annihilation by superior enemy forces.

Technically, the equipment, training protocols and organizational structures of the Red Army rifle units had significant similarities to those of their Romanian counterparts. Despite differing ideological and operational doctrines, basic weaponry shared comparable characteristics in terms of design, manufacturing quality, and tactical utility. These common points suggest a level of standardization and inter-army influence that has crossed ideological boundaries in the period studied.

This paper aims to explore these issues in depth by analyzing a range of primary sources, including official archive documents, military manuals, along with secondary academic papers that examine the socio-historical processes involved in transforming the average Soviet citizen into a fully equipped and trained Red Army rifleman. Through this multi-source approach, the study seeks to elucidate the socio-military mechanisms that supported the mobilization, indoctrination and professionalization of Soviet infantry during the relevant historical period.

Keywords: training; equipment; rifleman; demographic recruitment pool; Red Army;

INTRODUCTION

On March 29, 1940, Vyacheslav Molotov, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), made a public statement at the Supreme Soviet session, characterized by aggressive rhetoric directed against Romania. In his speech, the central point of the Soviet argument was the assertion that peaceful relations between the USSR and Romania could not be achieved until the Bessarabian issue was resolved. This position was accompanied by diplomatic and media pressure, exerted both through official channels and through interventions in the framework of diplomatic relations between the Romanian and Soviet authorities. All these attempts ended once France was defeated by Germany, in June 1940. On June 21, 1940, the Kiev and Odessa military regions received an official order, which stated that *"Bessarabia must be wrested from the robber hands of boyar Romania."* (Constantiniu, 2017, p. 361). This was achieved by July 4, 1940, when the Romanian troops and administration withdrew to the right bank of the Prut, on the new border imposed by the USSR. These territorial gains and temporary successes were short-lived, as, in June 1941, the Romanian armed forces crossed the Prut again, to liberate the territory occupied by an enemy they *"did not value too much."* (A.M.R.P., 1940, f. 25), thus reflecting an attitude of rejection and antagonism towards the Soviet aggression on the national territory. The image of the Soviet adversary within Romanian military historiography is characterized by a certain ambiguity and lack of clarity, as a result of the fact that, for almost four decades, this field was subject to significant influence from the communist regime, which oriented and controlled the interpretation of historical events. Consequently, the issues related to the detailed knowledge of the enemy located west of the Prut River were often omitted or treated superficially, being passed over in silence in the official discourse. Only with the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, and, implicitly, with the liberalization of access to archival sources and documents, historians had the opportunity to study Operation Barbarossa in depth and critically, and, at the same time, the characteristics and human component of the Soviet army of that period. In what follows, I intend to offer my own perspective on the Soviet soldier facing the Romanian army in June 1941, attempting to present relevant

aspects of the equipment, organization, and structure of the Soviet infantry troops, as well as their recruitment and training methods. I believe that this approach, based on the analysis of historical archival documents and secondary sources that address the way in which a simple Soviet citizen became a Red Army infantryman, can contribute to a deeper understanding of the enemy's military profile and human resources, in the complex context of the summer 1941 campaign.

RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING BASE

The Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, as the Soviet Red Army was called (1918-1946), was, in June 1941, the largest army in the world. A large part of the Red Army's divisions were located on the borders with Germany and Romania. Although numerically it had the largest mechanized force in the world, the Red Army was still a force composed predominantly of infantrymen (Zologa, 1984, p. 14)¹.

From a legislative point of view, the Soviet Constitution of 1936, in Article 133, stipulated that *"the defense of the country is a sacred duty of every Soviet citizen"* (Soviet Constitution, 1936). To implement this provision, the law on universal military service was adopted, which imposed on all men, regardless of race, nationality, religion, level of education, social status or ethnic origin, the obligation to participate in the defense of the country². The only citizens who could avoid compulsory military service were those with physical deformities or mental problems. Consequently, in the event of war, all physically and mentally fit Soviet citizens were to participate in the war effort in one way or another. According to the 1939 census, the Soviet Union had a population of 170,000,000, mostly rural. This population was not uniform, being composed of 60% Russians, 16.5% Ukrainians and 3% Belarusians, the rest of the population being composed of Uzbeks, Tatars, Georgians, Azerbaijanis and Armenians. Of these, 37,000,000 were citizens aged between 20 and 39 (Schechter, 2015, p. 7). These 37,000,000 Soviets could be called up at any time for military service.

In the heavily regimented Soviet society, military training began in primary school and continued until the end of schooling. This general military training consisted of physical exercises, political indoctrination, and pre-military summer

¹ According to some sources, the Red Army had 28,000 armored vehicles, many of which were tanks that were no longer adapted to the new conditions on the battlefield. For more details, see Steven J. Zologa, *The Red Army of the Great Patriotic War 1941-45*. Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1984, p. 14

² For more details, see <https://www.prlib.ru/en/history/619624>, retrieved on 30 August 2025.

camps. At the end of the 10th grade, for example, students received a “*certificate of maturity*”, which designated them as fit for military service. It is worth noting that in rural areas, training was more theoretical, due to the lack of materials for practical training exercises with weapons and other defensive means, but also due to the lack of adequate spaces for these training sessions.

The quality of theoretical education was also questionable, as it was provided either by a reserve officer or by a non-commissioned officer without specialized training. The situation was different, however, in cities that had a garrison from which the authorities could borrow both materials and experienced personnel to conduct training activities (Rottman, 2007, p. 10).

The district military commissariat was directly responsible for sending out the enlistment orders. These orders specified a date and a place where prospective soldiers were to report for registration. Most often, the assembly place was the local school. Upon reporting, recruits underwent a rudimentary medical examination to determine whether they were fit for military service. From there, accepted recruits were transported by train to district mobilization centers. At these centers, recruits were registered, underwent another medical examination, were dewormed, and received standard military equipment. This equipment consisted of a set of uniform, two sets of underwear, a cap, boots, a belt, and puttees (Ib., p. 8). Once examined and equipped, recruits were subjected to a harsh disciplinary regime.

The young recruit was also taught how to march in cadence, which he had to perform during field exercises and maneuvers. The training program began daily at 05:00 and lasted between 10 and 12 hours, depending on the training theme of the day. During this interval, there were short breaks and a one-hour lunch break. During tactical exercises, which involved the deployment of troops in the field, live ammunition was used to familiarize with the danger. As for patriotic education, there were political indoctrination classes, during which recruits were familiarized with Soviet history and Marxist-Leninist ideology. Training and indoctrination activities were carried out for 6 days a week. On Sundays, the recruits were responsible for maintaining the equipment and weapons, as well as the barracks where the training took place, being directly responsible for how the sleeping and dining areas were maintained (Ib., p. 10).

RATIONS

Unlike the diet of infantrymen in other European armies, the diet of the Soviet infantryman was as frugal as possible. While the recruit was in training, he was provided with three meals a day. For breakfast, a type of wheat porridge called *cașa* was served, lunch consisted of a plate of borscht, and for dinner, the soldiers received bread and pickles (Lucas, 2014, p. 83). This diet provided the minimum calories necessary for soldiers in peace time. The situation changed, however, when the troops were on long marches and on the offensive, as was the case during the invasion of Bessarabia, when *“the food was reduced and very little, consisting of (sic!) most days of boiled and slightly sugared tapioca, which (sic!) made everyone very weak and pale in appearance.”* (A.M.R.P., 1940, p. 15).

EQUIPMENT WITH WEAPONS AND AMMUNITION

In the context where the recruits came mainly from rural areas and did not have higher education, which would familiarize them with advanced principles of mechanics, the armament provided was simple, robust and easy to use by any soldier with minimal theoretical training. The basic weapon of the Soviet rifleman was the Mosin Nagant M1981 rifle. In service since Tsarist times, this 7.62 mm caliber weapon was very widespread in the Red Army, mainly due to the huge stocks left over from World War I. With a length of 123.2 cm and a 5-round magazine, the efficiency of this weapon was comparable to the Z.B. M1930 in service with the Romanian infantry. To support the infantry actions, the Degtyarev Pakhotnyi light machine gun of 7.62 mm caliber was used. With a 47-round drum magazine, used efficiently, it could have a rate of fire of 500-600 rounds per minute. But since conditions in combat are rarely favorable, in practice the rate of fire was only 80 rounds per minute.

The Soviet infantryman was also equipped with a wide range of grenades. Among them were the F-1 fragmentation grenades, unconventionally called limonka-lemon, due to its shape, the RG-42 and the RGD 33. In addition to these, there were also bottles with a flammable mixture, similar to the famous Molotov cocktails of Finnish origin (Rottman, pp. 24-28).

The ammunition for the Mosin rifle was stored in cartridge cases located on the belt, they contained 40 cartridges, and in the shoulder strap there were another 14 sectors, each of 5 cartridges. Most often, a bayonet was also attached to the weapon. For protection against shrapnel, soldiers were equipped with various

types of Soviet-made helmets. The infantryman's equipment included M36, SSch-39 and SSch-40 helmets. Often, the helmet was attached to the backpack, the soldier preferring to wear Pilotka, a type of olive-green textile cap. Other personal effects were stored in the back pack or gas mask bag (Campbell, 2014, pp. 41-42).

ORGANIZATION OF RIFLE TROOPS

The Soviet infantryman was generically called a rifleman, which is why he was part of rifle units and subunits, not infantry men, as is the case in other armies. This semantic difference is related to the Russian tradition, according to which a rifleman (*strelitsi*) is more professional than a simple infantry man (*pyekhoty*) (Zaloga, p. 4). Following the difficulties encountered in the Winter War (Soviet-Finnish War), the rifle divisions were in the midst of reorganization in June 1941. Thus, a rifle group was to be formed by 11 soldiers. Four rifle groups formed a platoon, which was led by an officer and 2 non-commissioned officers. Three platoons formed a rifle company, to which was added a political commissar for a total of 5 officers and 171 soldiers. A rifle battalion was mainly composed of 3 rifle companies and had a total of 636 soldiers on paper. These three battalions formed, in turn, a rifle regiment, which could count 3,182 soldiers, of which: 131 were officers, 56 were political commissars, 435 were non-commissioned officers, and 2,560 were soldiers of various ranks (Campbell, 2014, pp. 124- 125). According to the new directives of April 1941, a rifle division counted on paper 14,483 soldiers (Askey, 2008). The divisions were, in turn, grouped into armies arranged in fronts, depending on the geographical area in which they carried out their activity.

CONCLUSIONS

The training and equipping of the Soviet infantryman continues to be a broad, complex subject of major importance for understanding the dynamics of military conflicts during World War II. This field requires and deserves to be approached with methodological rigor, scientific seriousness, and a detailed analysis of historical sources, in order to provide a faithful and comprehensive picture of the training process of Soviet soldiers, as well as of the military equipment and techniques used.

In military art, knowing your opponent is one of the fundamental pillars for achieving success and, implicitly, victory in armed confrontations. This idea emphasizes the importance of studying the enemy's strategy, tactics, resources, and mentality in order to effectively anticipate and counter his actions on the battlefield.

Currently, Romanian military historiography is making concentrated efforts to recover and adequately render the four decades in which Operation Barbarossa was a taboo subject, thus being eclipsed in the official and academic discourse. In this sense, numerous researches and publications try to fill the gaps in the collective memory, offering more balanced perspective on the events and the actors involved, as well as on their impact on the course of the Second World War.

For a comprehensive understanding of this event with a decisive impact on world history, it is necessary, however, to turn our gaze to the opposite side, which, from a historiographical point of view, continues to be shrouded in fog. Romanian scientific works, in general, frequently fail to provide an exhaustive perspective on the opponent on the left bank of the Prut, which limits in-depth knowledge of the structure, tactics and mentality of the Red Army. In this context, a notable contribution is Pavel Moraru's work – *“Stalin's Army as Seen by the Romanians”*. This book brings to the fore a reinterpretation of the image of the Soviet army in World War II, offering a different perspective from that conveyed by war propaganda and official Soviet historiography. Through a critical and documented analysis, the author reconstructs how the Soviet army was perceived by Romanians, thus contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the adversary and the mechanisms of propaganda and perception in the context of the conflict. In my opinion, this work represents an important step in diversifying and deepening knowledge about the Soviet forces and about how they were interpreted and understood from the Romanian perspective, being a valuable resource for a detailed study of the complexity of the Romanian-Soviet relationship during the war.

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