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## ORDER 227 OF THE PEOPLE'S COMMISSARIAT OF DEFENSE "NOT ONE STEP BACK!". PENAL COMPANIES AND PENAL BATTALIONS IN THE LARGE BEND OF THE DON RIVER IN THE SUMMER AND AUTUMN OF 1942<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** This year marks the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Order 227 of July 28, 1942, known as the Order "No one step back!". This Order reflected the crisis situation on the southern flank of the Soviet-German front and the disastrous results of the Red Army defeats. The Order outlined severe measures for establishing discipline in the troops and for preventing unauthorized retreat. Distributed to the Combat Army, the Order provoked contradictory, in most cases positive assessments by soldiers and commanders who fought in the large bend of the Don at that time. 6 penal battalions and more than 30 penal companies, several dozens of barrier troops were formed and took part in battles in the large bend of the Don in the August-September of 1942.

G.G. Matishov characterizes the circumstances of issue of Order 227 and draws the conclusion. V.I. Afanassenko reveals the data about penal units in the large bend of the Don in the summer and autumn of 1942.

**Key words:** the Great Patriotic War, large bend of the Don, Order 227, penal companies and penal battalions, barrier troops.

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## ПРИКАЗ НАРКОМА ОБОРОНЫ № 227 «НИ ШАГУ НАЗАД!». ШТРАФНЫЕ РОТЫ И БАТАЛЬОНЫ В БОЛЬШОЙ ИЗЛУЧИНЕ ДОНА ЛЕТОМ И ОСЕНЬЮ 1942 ГОДА<sup>1</sup>

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**Аннотация.** В этом году исполняется 75 лет приказу № 227 от 28 июля 1942 г., известному как «Приказ "Ни шагу назад!"». Этот приказ отразил кризисную обстановку, сложившуюся на южном крыле советско-германского фронта, катастрофические результаты поражений Красной Армии и предписал суровые меры по наведению порядка в войсках и прекращению самовольного оставления позиций. Зачитанный перед строем всему личному составу действующей армии, приказ вызвал разноречивые, в большинстве – положительные, оценки бойцов и командиров, воевавших в большой излучине Дона в это время. Шесть штрафных батальонов и более 30 штрафных рот, несколько десятков заградительных отрядов были сформированы и приняли участие в боях в большой излучине Дона в августе – сентябре 1942 года.

Г.Г. Матишов является автором вводного раздела, в котором характеризуются обстоятельства принятия приказа № 227, и заключения, содержащего выводы по статье. В.И. Афанасенко является автором основной части статьи, в которой раскрывается материал о штрафных частях в большой излучине Дона летом и осенью 1942 года.

**Ключевые слова:** Великая Отечественная война, большая излучина Дона, приказ № 227, штрафные роты и батальоны, заградительные отряды.

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The spring of 1942 was the time of hope and great expectations for the USSR population and for the Red Army. In the course of winter offensive Russian troops inflicted a number of defeats to the group of armies 'North' (Heeresgruppe Nord), 'Centre' (Heeresgruppe Mitte) and 'South' (Heeresgruppe Süd), and forced them to retreat 150-400 km to the west. Military authorities of nazi Germany were forced to make decision on strategic defense and to direct 39 divisions, 6 brigades and hundreds of infantrymen to the Eastern front [9, p. 159]. Order 130 of the People's Commissar of the USSR defense of May 1, 1942 outlined strategic offensive tasks: "The Red Army must mark the year of 1942 with the decisive overthrow of nazi troops and the emancipation of Soviet lands from Hitler's villains!" [7, pp. 106-109]. Active offensives were continued in May and were miscarried for the Soviet army. Attacks near the city of Kharkov and in the region of Lyuban, defense operations in Crimea, in the regions of Rzhev and Vyazma resulted in major defeats of armies of South-Western, Southern, Volkhov, Crimean, Kalinin and Western fronts. The enemy regained the strategic initiative and on June 28 pulled off the key operation of 1942 summer campaign. The Red Army troops experienced again a comedown as in the summer of 1941, and they had to retire from

important territories in the large bend of the Don river. Springtime hope in oncoming victory over nazi invaders changed into confusion and doubt. Grave danger seized the country.

The present paper investigates the disciplinary measures carried out by the USSR military and political authorities in order to get the army under control, the reaction of service personnel who fought in the large bend of Don in summer and autumn of 1942. The research is based on documents of the Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation, as well as recently declassified materials of two operational counter-intelligence subdivisions of People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) of the USSR: Administration of Special Departments and Third Department of the Second Special Department – military counter-intelligence and censorship [8]. The authors have already noted the importance of Order 227 and its practical application in fights at the Mius-Front in 1943 and in other battles in the South of the USSR in 1942-1943 [1, p. 86,87; 2, pp. 158-169; 3, p. 93, 211-212]. The present research is underpinned with the comparative-historical and narrative methods, which imply the study of facts in the context of certain historical conditions of the studied epoch taking into account the details of the whole range of events and the principles of historicism.

On July 28, 1942 the People's Commissar of the USSR defense Joseph Stalin signed Order 227, which left its mark in the history of the Great Patriotic War and in the consciousness of Soviet citizens under the title "Not one step back!". Despite being addressed to millions of Red Army soldiers in summer of 1942, in the postwar period this Order had been placed on secret list. The Order's last clause pointed out: "The Order is to be read out in every company, squadron, battery, wing, crew, headquarter" [4, l. 128].

According to numerous memories of front-line soldiers, the effect of the Order on the Red Army was comparable to that of "ice-cold shower in August heat". Just three months ago, the order of the People's Commissar of the USSR Defense, comrade Stalin, no. 130 of May 1, 1942 proclaimed strategic offensive tasks for Soviet soldiers [7, pp. 106-109]. And all of sudden, Supreme Commander-in-Chief Joseph Stalin informs the whole multi-million Combat army that its troops are not ready even to defend against the enemy, who brought discipline to its army, regrouped troops, engaged newly trained reserve force and modernized machinery. The soldiers of the Red Army were informed for the first time, that their setback caused country's loss of half of its human and economic potential. The Order's preamble, unlike Soviet Information Bureau's reports, which often provided false data for the purpose of keeping a military secret, provided factual assessment of catastrophic state of affairs on the front line and indicated the major cities, seized by the enemy. Unlike most of the documents of the war's first year, this Order was signed only by Joseph Stalin and included "I-phrases" ("I think..."), which pointed to the unity with people addressed ("our Motherland", "our troops"). Such a confidential tone of the official document contributed to its emotional power. Military and political leadership of the USSR faced the need of taking strong measures, aimed at radical change of situation at the front and at preventing military catastrophe. The military were told: "... part of Southern front troops, following the alarmists, left Rostov and Novocherkassk without the order from Moscow and in the absence of serious opposition, thus disgracing their colours. The people of our country, for all the love and respect that they have for the Red Army, are beginning to feel disappointment in it; they are losing faith in it,

and many curse the Red Army for giving our people over to the yoke of the German oppressors while the Army runs away to the east... Every commander, every Red Army soldier and every political worker must realize that our resources are limited. After the loss of Ukraine, Belarus, the Baltic lands, the Donbass and other regions, we have much less territory, far fewer people, much less grain and metal, fewer factories and industrial plants. To retreat any further would be to ruin ourselves and our Motherland. Every little scrap of land that we give up strengthens our enemy and weakens our defense, our Motherland... And so the time for retreating is over. Not one step back! That must now be our watchword [4].

In the very content of the Order Joseph Stalin rejected decidedly the ideology of "Scythian war", which penetrated the consciousness of commanders and soldiers and brought them the ideas of territory and resources unlimitedness, drawing the enemy deep into the vast country. The Order contains no undeserved reproaches of soldiers. They are particularly addressed to confused or voluntary commanders – from company commanders to front and army commanders. It is them, who were threatened with severe repressions. The logo "Not one step back!" addressed to commanders of the Red Army, appeals not "to consider themselves strategians" making independent decisions on forwarding or retreating, maneuvering or not. The development of such overall "strategic thinking" in soldiers and military officers, who tried to correlate their battle tasks with "the general condition at all front lines" and to decide whether it had been necessary or not to defend one or another border-line, represented great danger for the whole army in the light of the general strategic situation. Commanders and soldiers must not only possess initiative, but also "think in the frames of Combat manual", which dictates to solve the stated military tasks against all the odds. Meanwhile, in July 1942, unorganized setback of Soviet troops resulted in the destruction of fixed structure of armies and fronts and in their transformation into uncontrolled armed crowd. The complex of severe measures was applied to all the soldiers, who retreated without order. Military councils and commanders of fronts and armies, commanders and commissars of corps and divisions were

ordered: "to eliminate the retreat moods in troops on the spot and to suppress with iron hands the propaganda of possible retreat to the East without associated danger. Commanders of companies, battalions, regiments and divisions, along with their commissars and political workers, will be considered traitors to the Motherland if they retreat without orders from above". Besides, army commanders were to be sent to the General Headquarters, commanders and commissars of corps and divisions – to the Military Councils of the front, commanders and commissars of regiments and squadrons – to the Military Councils of the front with the following commitment for trial and deprivation of military medals.

The military servants who broke discipline due to cowardice or uncertainty were sent to penal units. From 1 to 3 penal battalions (each of them included 800 soldiers) were formed within every front, where the delinquent common and senior commanders and the corresponding political workers were sent. From 5 to 10 penal companies (each of them included 150-200 soldiers) were formed within every combined-arms army, where convicted combat performers and junior commanders were sent. According to Order 227, the penal units must be directed to "the hardest parts of the front so as to atone for their crimes against the Motherland with their blood".

Along with the penal battalions and penal companies, 3-5 barrier troops (each of them included 800 soldiers) were formed at defense lines of every combined-arms army. Men in these units would be "at the rear of an attack and would shoot anyone not advancing quickly enough or were seen retreating". Commanders and commissars of corps and divisions had to "provide any assistance and support for blocking detachments for establishing the strictest order and iron discipline in our army" [4].

Joseph Stalin was familiar with the ancient and contemporary history. He was aware of decimation – the execution of every tenth warrior in the legions of Roman army as a punishment for post abandonment or cowardice in fight. Stalin also remembered the autumn of 1918, when in the conditions of grave danger for the young Soviet state, flying squads and barrier troops were formed to carry out repression measures against retreating units of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army up to shooting every tenth soldier. The

Supreme Commander-in-Chief was well informed about the penal units of Wehrmacht and made direct reference in Order 227 to the enemy's "fresh" experience: "After the winter setback under the Red Army's pressure, when the discipline in German troops got shattered, the German High Command took severe measures to regain it and got positive results... As we know, those measures made German troops fight better than they did in winter". The armies of Germany's allies had formed penal units as well. For example, Romanian Command sent to Stalingrad penal battalions formed of criminals serving sentences for robbery, murder, theft [6, pp. 118-119].

Blocking detachments had also been used in various armies and wars. Since June 1941, barrier troops had been formed within the Red Army, at special departments of People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, and aimed at ruthless struggle against spies, traitors, raiders, deserters, alarmist and cowards. On September 12, 1941, General Headquarters of Soviet High Command sent out special directive no. 001 919 to military councils of the fronts [8, pp. 255-256]. The directive ordered to form in every division barrier troops not exceeding a battalion in number of soldiers, at the rate of one company at a rifle regiment, in order to prevent the unauthorized withdrawal of units. The detachments were subordinate to the division commander and were not made up of NKVD servicemen, but of ordinary Red Army men, sometimes armed with tanks or armored vehicles. In contrast, the NKVD's barrier troops fought primarily against German raiders and spies, deserters and other "criminal elements" in the army and front rears.

The first penal unit in the USSR – penal company of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Army of Leningrad Front – was formed on July 25, 1942, three days before the issue of Order 227. Two months later, on September 28, 1942, People's Commissariat for Defense issued Order 298, which approved the provisions and manning chart of penal battalions, companies and barrier troops of the Combat army. According to the provision, penal units were under the military councils' control. Their personnel was divided into two categories – permanent and non-permanent. The permanent personnel consisted of commanders and commissars "from among the most determined and distinguished in battles commanders and political workers", who were

given high authority. The commander of penal battalion had the rights of division commander, and the commander of penal company – the rights of regiment commander. One month of their military service counted for six months of front-line soldiers' service, or twice as much as for others. Accordingly, the term of service in officer ranks was halved. Non-permanent staff (penalized soldiers) fell into penal units by higher command for violating military discipline or by the court verdict for the commission of military or general criminal offense (except for crimes, which invoke the punishment in the form of death sentence). The grounds for the release of penalized soldiers included the serving of penal term (up to 3 months); moderate or severe injury requiring hospitalization; early decision of the army's military council at the request of the commander of a penal battalion or a penal company as an encouragement for showing exceptional gallantry and courage. At the release, the penalized soldiers regained their ranks, posts and awards. Occasionally, convicts from the places of liberty deprivation were sent to penal companies. However, the prisoners who committed grave offences, including political crimes, were not allowed to the army, since they could not be subjected to delay in sentence execution until the end of hostilities as provided by the Criminal Code of the RSFSR of 1926. However, in some cases, persons convicted of banditry, robbery and theft, still fell into the penal companies. Penal battalions and companies had existed until the very end of the Great Patriotic War.

Six penal battalions were formed within the front-line units operating in the large bend of Don in August-September 1942 – the 1<sup>st</sup> separate penal battalion of the South-Eastern front, afterwards the Stalingrad front (1942), a separate penal battalion of the South-Western front (1942–1943), the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 76<sup>th</sup> separate penal battalions of the Stalingrad front (1942), and the 8<sup>th</sup> separate penal battalion of the Don front (1942).

30 penal companies took part in the Battle of Stalingrad – 13 companies at the Stalingrad front and 17 companies in the Don front. The number of penal companies in the armies was uneven: no penal company in the 62<sup>nd</sup> army; 4 – in the 64<sup>th</sup> army; 2 – in the 21<sup>st</sup> army; 8 – in the 63<sup>rd</sup> army. Penal units suffered 6 times heavier

losses in the battles as compared to conventional infantry companies. 3 penal battalions and 22 penalty companies, who fought in the Battle of Stalingrad at the final stage, were disbanded in February 1943 [5].

The main task of barrier troops was to bring the discipline upon the servicemen, who had panicked and left their positions without command. In addition to detaining the units from retreating and returning them to the front line, the detachments were also engaged in guarding rear units. They had to fight against the advancing enemy as well. Thus, one of the barrier troops of the 62<sup>nd</sup> Army was almost completely killed in fierce battles for the Stalingrad-1 railway station. A report on the activities of barrier troops of the Don front from August 1 to October 1, 1942 indicated that during this period they detained 36,109 soldiers and commanders who had escaped from the front line. Most of them (32,993 servicemen) were returned to their units and to transit points. 1056 soldiers were sent to penal companies, 33 soldiers – to penal battalions, 736 soldiers were arrested and 433 soldiers – shot. 15,649 servicemen were detained at the Stalingrad front: 244 of them were arrested, 278 – shot, 218 – sent to penal companies, 42 – sent to penal battalions, 14,833 people – returned to their units and to transit points [6, p. 230]. The report specifically noted that the blocking detachments at the Stalingrad and Don fronts, subordinated to special departments of the NKVD of combined-arms army, played a positive role in the period of the most fierce defensive battles in part of bringing discipline and preventing unorganized departure of soldiers from their border-lines and returning a significant number of servicemen to the front line. At supreme moments, when extra support was necessary to defend the lines, the barrier troops fought against the enemy, successfully restrained his onslaught and inflicted losses on him.

Many front-line soldiers considered Order 227 “Not One Step Back” to be a harsh but timely and necessary decision. Thus, junior lieutenant of the 36<sup>th</sup> tank brigade, Romanov, in a conversation with other commanders, claimed: “Such an order should have been issued earlier, when we were in the Kupyansk area, then we had enough strength to carry out this order and not to allow retreat beyond the Don”. After reading Order 227, Junior lieutenant Khutoryansky from the 1051<sup>st</sup> rifle

regiment of the 300<sup>th</sup> Rifle Division of the 21<sup>st</sup> Army said: "Comrade Stalin's order puts an end to our shameful desertion. It will force many commanders to carefully prepare, conduct and direct combat operations, adhering to the instruction 'Not one step back'". In the words of Red Army soldier of the 293<sup>rd</sup> rifle division Nikitenko "The order of the People's Commissar is hard for the cowards and alarmists. Comrade Stalin directly indicates the measures to be taken to them, including rank and file, common and senior commanders" [6, pp. 184-185].

Some believed that the Order was late. Major Kraynov and Captain Vakulenko claimed: "The Order is good, but it's too late. It must have been issued in May, before our offensive". Senior battalion commissar S.V. Razumovsky also believed: "This Order had to be released two months ago" [6, p. 171]. Junior commander of the 26<sup>th</sup> artillery regiment, Slepchenko, also expressed his opinion: "If this Order was issued 20 days ago, there would not have been such a disorderly withdrawal. Our units would have completely detain the enemy at old border-lines" [6, pp. 172-173].

Besides, some servicemen spoke negatively about the disciplinary measures set forth by Order 227. For example, the Red Army soldier of the 203<sup>rd</sup> Rifle Division, Repin, after reading out the text of the Order to the personnel, stated: "The Germans took almost the whole of Russia, and our commanders just woke up. The government establishes some orders of Suvorov, Kutuzov, Nevsky, and does not lead the army. If they were less involved in the issue of medals and rewards, but focused on discipline, the situation would have been much better by now" [6, p. 188]. There were many such opinions, but they did not determine the moods of the overwhelming majority of the Red Army in the bitter August of 1942.

Order 227 "Not one step back!" reflected the catastrophic situation in which the military and political leadership of the USSR found themselves in summer of 1942, as well as their desire to use any possible means to achieve a turning point in the war. The harsh measures taken by the Soviet command played a certain positive role in strengthening military discipline, but could not radically change the course of military operations. Only at the cost of incredible efforts and sacrifices

the troops of the Red Army managed to stop the Wehrmacht troops in the foothills of the Caucasus and on the Volga river.

### NOTES

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