

Russian Cossacks In the Service of the German Reich – 1941 to 1945

During the summer of 1941, numerous Red Army soldiers, prisoners and deserters, joined the ranks of the German Army to fight in the war against the Soviet Union and Stalin. With various motives, often ideological, these men were formed into a multiplicity of smaller units spread all over the eastern front. Their numbers continued to grow from 1941 through 1944. Among these volunteers were the Russian Cossacks led by their *Atamans*, (chiefs). They enjoyed a certain historical independence which originated from within the confines of the Russian Imperial Armies of the Czars whose task it was to guard the vast frontiers of the Russian empire. During the Russian Civil War, (The Bolshevik Revolution - 1917 to 1923) a majority of the Cossacks fought on the side of the White Russians, (those allied with the Czar and opposed to the communists). During the 1920's and 30's, they were defeated by the Bolsheviks, persecuted by Stalin and deprived of their land and liberties.

In the summer of 1942, the arrival of German military forces in the Cossack regions of Russia, (southern Russia and the Caucasus) were regarded by the Cossacks as an unexpected chance to topple the communist regime and regain their ancient rights. The great wave of Cossack recruitment took place that summer when General von Kleist's First Panzer Army penetrated into the Cossack lands. As soon as the Germans arrived in the Southern Russian regions of the Don, Kuban and Terek, numerous Cossacks presented themselves spontaneously to German units with great enthusiasm. Taking advantage of the down fall of the local Soviet Authorities, the Cossacks revived their ancient traditions and elected an Ataman by the name of Serguei Pavlov. In September 1944, those Cossack tribes who allied with the Germans were forced to leave their lands with the advance of the Red Army and retreat with the German forces from the Soviet Union. They emigrated near the operational and training areas of the German Cossack Cavalry Corps in northern Italy.

On May 8, 1945 when the surrender of Germany was signed, there were two groups of Cossacks located in Austria. During the first weeks of May 1945, the two main Cossack military groups still armed, believed they would be trapped by Soviet Army units or fall into the hands of Italian or Yugoslavian communist partisans. They decided to surrender to British forces, hoping to escape the vengeance of the Soviets. The handing over to the Soviets by the British of over 50,000 Cossacks stationed in southern Austria during May and June 1945 marked the end of the war for the Cossack nation. However, the history of those who fought with the Germans did not end there. Their story continued after May 1945 in the form of a long odyssey imposed on them by the Soviet Authorities, partly out of a desire for vengeance and the need to eradicate all trace of those Cossacks who rebelled against Stalin. The majority of the Cossack military men were shipped off to Russian Gulags where most were put into slave labor and eventually died. Their wives and children were sent to reeducation camps where they were indoctrinated into the Soviet system.