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Commission on the History of the Great Patriotic War

Transcript of interview with Com. Nikifor Semyonovich Pankratov (chief of staff of a BSSR¹ partisan brigade)²

December 29, 1942

Interview was conducted by researcher Comrade Shkadarevich

Transcribed by the stenographer Comrade Laputina.

I was born in 1902 to the family of a poor peasant in Stalingrad Region³, Komsomol'sk District, the hamlet of Sennoi⁴. [...]

In 1941, I was appointed commander of the motorized rifle regiment of the 26th Tank Division, also in Minsk. The war found me, while I was quartered with the regiment in Stan'kovo,⁵ Dzerzhinskii District, where I was garrison commandant. [...]

From the start of the war until July 26, the regiment engaged in non-stop fighting. It was not so much mauled in the fighting as exhausted by the campaigns and forced marches. The division's objective was not to leave the encirclement, but to fight it out at Mogilev, where we had taken up defensive positions. [...] Ultimately, when we ran out of cartridges and shells, the regiments were mauled, and I myself was wounded in the leg and in the back, we started leaving the encirclement for the forest in groups. I found myself in the woods behind enemy lines with my commanders and rank-and-file soldiers until the end of October.

Since I was wounded, my commanders at the end of October set me up as a guard at a salting station in the town of Samokhvalovo⁶, where I was located until I had completely recovered. In April 1942, I went to a peat processing plant, where soldiers of the Red Army, those who had been surrounded by the Germans, were working, about five kilometers from Samokhvalovo. I went there with the aim of organizing a group and leaving for the forest. There, I met Com. Sokolov, who is now here in Moscow. We worked some time with him at the peat processing plant and then agreed to leave for the forest. He said that there were a lot of soldiers from the Red Army there, and that it was possible to organize a group of partisans. And I had latched on to this proposition. At the state farm⁷, we sought out a shoemaker from

¹ Abbreviation for „Belorussian Socialist Soviet Republic.”

² Nikifor S. Pankratov (1902-1943), commander of 26th Motorized Infantry Regiment (26th Tank Division). Later, deputy commander for line training, 9th Mechanized Guards Brigade, died in field hospital.

³ Today: Volgograd Region.

⁴ Now a part of Mikhailovka.

⁵ Belarusian Stan'kava – located 37 km southwest of the Minsk's city center.

⁶ While this village could not be located, what is clear is that the group makes a long and arduous journey from Mogilev to Negoreloe, some 235 km to the west.

⁷ “Sovkhoz” – Soviet industrial scale farm.

Gorkii,⁸ Ivan Fedorovich Bakin, and the three of us held a meeting in the forest on how to distribute the work of recruiting people and procuring cartridges and weapons. We distributed the work as follows: I had to get ammunition, and Sokolov had to recruit people. I got weapons in the following manner: about seven kilometers away, there was the Zhdany forest, where depots for air force units were located. They had been blown to pieces. People knew that cartridges were lying around. I went there and stocked up on cartridges. [...]

Since nobody contacted us, we decided to leave for the forest alone. At first, we had a group of 11 people, which then split into two groups [that] acted independently. [...] On June 22, we met up with a partisan detachment whose commander was Captain Nikolai Mikhailovich Nikitin and joined his detachment. I was appointed the detachment's chief of staff. This was on June 28. The detachment numbered 5 companies, which was approximately 300 or more people. [...]

On the morning of June 25, our camp was surrounded by the Germans, and a firefight ensued. We broke through the encirclement via the swamp [and went to] an island called Pokrovskii Island [...]. We walked about five kilometers through the swamp, in the water. From there, we went to the Negoreloe⁹ Station, where two of our companies, which had received the assignment to blow up the bridge at the Negoreloe Station, were located. The detachment's commander reported to us that they had not blown up the bridge, but had blown up the bed of the railroad tracks in several places. [...] From there, we set out for the Kopyl'¹⁰ District in the forest, where we took a 30-minute break on July 4. Reconnaissance reported that the Germans had been spotted, and that their wagons were moving toward the village. I sent out an additional reconnaissance team to clarify the situation. They reported back that a hundred peasant wagons, which had been mobilized by the Germans, were on the move and about 50 Germans via timber rafting. There, for three days in a row, partisans from the Kopyl' District had been coming to the river and dumping timber into the water. Therefore, the Germans decided to send a punitive detachment to post guards there and finally raft the timber. We decided to set up an ambush. [...] At 5 o'clock, 40 Germans, one officer, and one Russian interpreter were returning back. We let them get within about 10 meters of us, and then the entire detachment fired a volley. All of the Germans were killed. The interpreter, two soldiers, and the officer were wounded. Partisans killed the interpreter, when he shouted, "Save me, I'm one of you!" We took the officer and two soldiers prisoner. We took everything in the way of trophies, stripped the Germans of their uniforms and shoes, and moved on. [...]

We arrived in the Kopyl' District, the small town of Timkovichi,¹¹ where there was a dairy farm. There, we smashed all the milk machines and moved towards the village of Ugly¹². [...] In the village of Ugly, we met a partisan brigade whose

⁸ Today: Nizhnii Novgorod.

⁹ Belarusian Neharélae, town located 45 km southwest of the city center of Minsk.

¹⁰ Belarusian Kopyl', town located 88 km south-southwest of the city center of Minsk.

¹¹ Belarusian Tsimkavichy, about 11 km southwest of Kopyl'.

¹² Belarusian Vuhly, 10 km southeast of Kopyl'.

commander was Com. Kapusta.¹³ We established contact with him. We agreed to go together to Nalibotskaia Pushcha,¹⁴ to the railroad, where a guard of unarmed peasants was posted [in intervals] about a hundred meters from one another. This guard would come out only at night, during the day, no one stood guard. If a peasant spotted partisans, he had to shout to another, “Partisans are coming,” and that one passed it on. At night, we drew close to the peasants guarding the railroad, seized them, lumped them together, set up a post near them and said that if they shouted, we’d shoot them. Then, they started to beseech us not to blow up the railroad at this spot, as all of their families would be shot otherwise. We promised to pass up this spot and went on to Nalibotskaia Pushcha. [...]

On July 24, in the small town of Ushachi,¹⁵ the peasants complained that the Germans had been taking their salt, livestock, etc. We decided to take revenge on the German garrison in Ushachi. [...] We acted together with Dubrovskii’s brigade of 50 people. We immediately opened fire, and a battle began, which lasted two and a half hours. Even before the shooting, the chief of staff of the 3rd Detachment had burst into the village, seized the police barracks, and set them on fire. 80 policemen were burned there. I must say that, by doing so, he somewhat undermined our cause, since he created a source of light and illuminated the place where the partisans were supposed to pass. We were forced to make a detour. Thus, we carried out the operation with a loss of 4 people killed and three wounded. A total of 152 policemen and Germans were killed. The mayor, his wife, and daughter were taken prisoner. The commander of the 6th Detachment, Kamnev, shot them himself.

After this operation, there were some minor skirmishes, which are difficult to remember, but which I have written down. [...]

On October 21, our group, 406 people in number, crossed the front near the village of Churilovo,¹⁶ to the right of Nevel’,¹⁷ and arrived at the headquarters of the Belarusian Partisan Movement in the town of Toropets,¹⁸ where the brigade stopped for rest. [...]

*Atrocities of the German occupiers*¹⁹

¹³ Filipp Filippovich Kapusta, commander of the Voroshilov partisan brigade, see: <https://partizany.by/partisans/30662/>

¹⁴ Forest expanse, 60 km west of Minsk. The name given here is the Belarusian. In Russian, it is Nalibokskaia Pushcha.

¹⁵ Belarusian Ushachy, 155 km north-northwest of the city center of Minsk.

¹⁶ Village more than 280 km northeast of the city center in Minsk.

¹⁷ Town roughly 40 km from the point of crossing.

¹⁸ Small town just over 100 km from the point of crossing.

¹⁹ It is important to keep in mind the date of the interview with Pankratov: December 29, 1942.

On November 4, 5, 6 and 7, the Germans killed 56 thousand Jews in Minsk.²⁰ The Germans killed infants, grabbing them by the legs [and smashing them] against the wall, or forced their mothers to kill them. Jews were buried alive in a pit, and submachine guns were fired at them. Of course, many were buried alive. This happened on Yubileinaia Square in Minsk and at the former Jewish cemetery. They sprayed gasoline from a hose and set the Jews on fire. Several Jewish quarters in Minsk were fenced off, and it was forbidden for Jews leave the area and go to the market and sell food. It was forbidden to heat lodgings in winter.

The Germans also do not like Russians [...], they consider them most backward and uncivilized. It was very difficult for a Russian to get a job.

The Germans have built gallows in squares, parks, and near theaters. Recently, they've been putting up gallows in every district (*volost'*),²¹ and are hanging people by the jaw with an iron hook, like fish. [...]

The Germans are treating the prisoners of war very cruelly. In three months, 35 thousand prisoners of war died in the camps alone, not counting Jews and party workers. In Minsk, typhus patients were locked up in stables and burned alive. In February, 3 thousand people were shot in the streets in Minsk. Families, whose fathers or sons went to partisan detachments, are being shot or hanged.

²⁰ The large-scale operation meant here took place November 7-11. The number 56,000 is considerably exaggerated. For this period, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum gives estimates ranging from 6,500 (German documents) to 12,000 (Soviet accounts). It is also possible that Pankratov speaks of "5, 6 thousand" victims, and the number was erroneously transcribed as "56 thousand."

²¹ Volost: the smallest territorial-administrative unit in Tsarist Russia, abolished in 1918. The Nazi occupiers restored the volost system. Every volost had its own commandant, land office, head of supplies, and police force.