

THE BELARUSIAN NATIONAL DEFENCE: THE HISTORY OF ITS ESTABLISHMENT AND ACTIVITY (1944–1945)

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After a number of events, during World War II in Belarus collaboration of the local people with the German occupation authorities took place. One of the most obvious episodes of collaboration was the establishment and the activity of the Belarusian National Defence. The armed unit was formed at the end of spring and in the beginning of summer 1944 through mobilization and was intended for armed combat with Soviet partisans and the Red Army. The article analyzes the process of establishing the unit, its numbers, the degree of combat readiness and participation in warfare. In summer 1944, after withdrawal of German forces from Belarus some of the soldiers of the Belarusian National Defence turned up at the Western front.

Key words: Belarus, World War II, Third Reich, collaboration, Belarusian National Defence.

The aim of this publication is the analysis of processes connected with the establishment and the activity of the Belarusian National Defence. The article deals with the process of formation of the unit, its numbers, the degree of combat readiness and participation in warfare. It includes also an analysis of political and military issues that contributed to the formation of the Belarusian National Defence and had an influence on the activity of the unit.

During the interwar years a number of Belarusians lived in the Republic of Latvia. According to census data, in 1920, there were

75 000 Latvian residents who considered themselves to be of Belarusian nationality, while in 1935 only 27 000. As opposed to other national minorities (Germans, Poles, Lithuanians) the Belarusians belonged to those non-Latvians who were deprived of the so-called diplomatic support (there were no Belarusian diplomatic missions because Belarus was incorporated into the USSR). Nevertheless, the Belarusians constituted one of the most numerous national groups in Latvia. The Belarusian minority had its own schools and the Latvian Ministry of Education had an active Belarusian department. Besides different social societies and the structure of main schools worked actively, there were published about 10 periodicals. For some reasons, relations between the Latvian Belarusians and the Polish and Russian minorities were very complex. During the years 1924 and 1925, relations with the Latvian government came to a crisis. In the above mentioned period we can talk about some repressions towards Belarusians: in the district court of Latgale a so-called Belarusian lawsuit took place. A lot of Belarusian activists with Kastus Jezavitau at the head were accused of making appeals for separatism. Among outstanding activists of the Belarusian movement of Latvia Kastus Jezavitau, Uladzimer Pihulieuski, Siarhieĵ Sacharau, Mikalaj Džiamidau should be mentioned.¹ In August 1940, the Republic of Latvia was incorporated into the Soviet Union. The Belarusian diaspora occurred in a dead-end situation. Condemnation of the Soviet occupation caused a wave of repressions. After 17 June 1940, the Society of Belarusians in Latvia extended official congratulations to the government of 'the democratic Republic of Latvia', the Red Army and Stalin. At the same time staunch Belarusian activists tried to draw their attention to the reconstruction of Belarusian education system, that had experienced serious losses during the period of the authoritarian government of Ulmanis. Ēriks Jēkabsons is right saying that the Soviet repressions in 1940 and 1941 affected the Belarusian minority to a smaller extent in comparison to the representatives of other nations.²

As a result of the rapid German offensive in summer 1941 Latvia was occupied by the Wehrmacht. Occupation policy towards

Belarusians did not differ from the policy carried out in Lithuania. The Nazis assumed that Belarusians cannot be assimilated. The underlying cause of this policy were the Nazi plans to prepare the Baltic countries for their incorporation into the Third Reich. In accordance with this conception Latvians and Lithuanians were condemned to assimilation while the Slavic minorities were denied the right to be the Aryan nation. Therefore, the Slavs were to be deported to the East in the future. In the Decree of the Commissioner of the Reichskommissariat Ostland on national policy in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania of 27 July 1942 we read among other things: "Russians and Belarusians cannot be assimilated because: 1) the blood of the nations that will be incorporated into the Reich will deteriorate [that of the Reich Germans]; 2) you have to take into account that Belarusians from the Baltic states will be resettled into Belarus proper [...] There is danger that through assimilation of the Russians and Belarusians the racial elements of little value will then penetrate to the German people [...] Therefore, national policy should not be handed over to the national boards of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, but kept firmly in German hands."³

The second factor determining the policy towards national minorities in Latvia (except for Jews) was a desire to neutralize the activity of the Latvians. The census taking place on 24 February 1943 in the General District showed that 48 601 Belarusians (2.7%) lived there. In connection with the above mentioned it is no wonder that in August 1941 in Riga the Belarusian Committee led by K. Jezavitau came into existence (from March 1942 – the Belarusian Association). Its branches were established in Daugavpils, Zilupe, Indra, Pasiene and Krāslava. The organization was open mainly for the representatives of the intelligence (generally for teachers).⁴ Some Orthodox and Catholic clerics also belonged to the Committee.⁵

During the years 1942 to 1944 the Belarusian Committee in Latvia tried to persuade the German authorities to form the Belarusian army units.⁶ Jezavitau issued an appeal to the directors of Committee branches and proposed to consider the opportunity of forming the Belarusian companies or battalions of Schutzmannendienst (Schuma) in Latvia. However, it did not evoke any response

from the German authorities and the Belarusian young people were conscripted into the Latvian Legion SS.⁷ It was a common occurrence. Thus, for instance, in the school year 1943 and 1944 some of the Belarusian schools in Latvia had difficulties with creating classes, because many students were mobilized into the Schuma army and police. The number of conscripts and volunteers of Belarusian nationality in the Latvian armed formations on the side of the Third Reich was difficult to estimate.⁸ The situation of the Belarusians outside Latvia was different. In contrast to Latvia, the Germans had big problems with the organization of auxiliary police in Belarus. This was mainly due to the intensification of the communist resistance movement. Accordingly, numerous battalions Schuma were redeployed to the General District Belarus, also from the General District Latvia [Ostland]. In the years 1941–1944 in Belarus there were 56 Schuma battalions, of which 26 were accounted to Latvian ones.⁹ These formations took part in battles with partisans and pacification campaigns in Belarus. The German authorities tried to involve the local Belarusian people in the anti-partisan battle. For this purpose, armed formations consisting of Belarusians were formed. During the German occupation 12 Belarusian battalions Schuma, the Belarusian Voluntary Self-Defence Corps and battalions Schuma SD No. 13 were formed inter alia. Without a doubt, the largest Belarusian armed unit established by the support of the Germans was the Belarusian National Defence. The article is devoted just to this issue.

On the eve of World War II a part of Belarusian society cherished the hope of regaining the independence of Belarus and the establishment of a sovereign state based on the Third Reich. At least for this part of society, especially at the beginning of the war, the Third Reich was an obvious ally. Some important reasons had contributed to that. After the Belarusian territory had been taken by German troops in the summer of 1941, there began collaboration with the enemy, which arose from the anti-Soviet sentiment of the local population. Such an activity was carried out in order to become emancipated politically. Historians estimate that during 1941–1945 in Belarus more than 130 thousand people

cooperated with the occupants for various reasons. In the USSR they were treated as traitors (*izmenniki rodiny*). Is it really possible to talk about treason? It seems that we are dealing rather with an insinuation that cannot be justified. Many Polish and Belarusian historians believe that the concept of 'collaboration' should be re-evaluated in connection with the Belarusians. From a moral point of view, the Soviet government, against which the Belarusians fought, was not their government, on the contrary, it was imposed on them by violence. Most of the so-called Belarusian collaborators did not support the Third Reich for ideological reasons. After World War I on the political map of Europe there was no space for an independent Belarusian state, therefore before the outbreak of World War II some Belarusian activists were willing to follow even the devil to eliminate the current unfavourable line-up of powers in Europe.¹⁰

Among the leaders of the Third Reich two attitudes existed towards the issue of policy with regard to Eastern nations. The first of them, associated with Alfred Rosenberg, assumed that ethnic issues were the weakest point of the USSR, therefore Germany should use the existing decentralist tendencies for her purposes. Rosenberg postulated the division of the USSR into several nation states and the creation of an anti-Soviet cordon subordinated to the Third Reich. This position met with support mainly in the circles of diplomacy and military intelligence whereas Hitler rejected the possibility of any concessions to the conquered peoples of the USSR. He justified his attitude by both economic and racial considerations (he considered the Slavs as 'subhuman' who, under the 'German order', may be slave labour at best). The actions of the occupying authorities generally oscillated between these two attitudes, and daily politics was influenced not only by 'ideological', but also by purely practical considerations.

At the end of 1943, when Berlin finally realized that it will not be possible without allies in the East to win this war, a large number of concessions to conquered nations was made. These events did not omit also occupied Belarus. At the end of 1943 and the beginning of 1944 the German authorities decided to create a symbolic Belarusian political representation in the form of the Belarusian Central Council (*Bielaruskaja Centralnaja Rada*, BCR) led by President Radaslau Astrouski. The above men-

tioned representation was entrusted with propaganda functions. Apart from that in the winter of 1944 the largest Belarusian National Defence was established. It had been so far the largest armed formation of the Third Reich composed of Belarusians.

POLITICAL CONDITIONS AND MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT OF BELARUSIAN NATIONAL DEFENCE

On 23 February 1944, Kurt von Gottberg, the acting Commissioner General of Belarus, ordered to form the Belarusian National Defence (*Bielaruskaja Krajowaja Abarona, BKA*) or *Weissruthenische Heimwehr* and on 6 March 1944 the BCR President R. Astrouski signed the order to launch mobilization that would last until 15 April 1944. Major Franz Kushal was appointed commander of the BKA, while Captain Vital Mikula became his deputy. The staffing of the BKA was as follows: Captain Aliaksej Vasilenia was appointed the chief of the General Office, Symon Romanchuk became the Human Resources officer, Doctor Hleb Bahdanovitch was appointed the head of the department of sanitation, Captain Usevalad Rodzka (later Uladzimer Hucko) – the head of propaganda department, Second Lieutenant Anatol Pleskacheuski – the head of marketing department.¹¹ District BKA managers were responsible for the mobilization: Captain Mikhail Pugachou – in the district of Minsk, Captain Stsiapan Shnek – in the district of Sluck, Second Lieutenant Uladzimer Rusak – in the district of Baranowicze, Captain Jazep Dakinievich – in the district of Słonim, Captain Barys Rahula – in the district of Nowogrodek, a certain Babicz – in the district of Wilejka and Second Lieutenant Rygor Zybajla – in the district of Glebokie.¹² The captain of Kummer's Security Police was appointed German liaison officer at the BCR, and Captain Schneider became an educational officer on behalf of the SS Chief and the police Weissruthenien.¹³ Hancewicze and Lida districts and the following areas in other districts: Braslau, Iwieniec, Kozłowszczyzna, Miadziol, Wolozyn, Uzda were excluded from mobilization. On 7 March, mobilization of officers (up to the age of 57) and non-commissioned officers (up to 55 years), and on 10 March

mobilization of soldiers (born 1908–1917 and 1921–1924) was announced. People who avoided conscription were punishable by the death penalty.¹⁴

On 31 March 1944, the numbers of battalions were determined. Belarusian activists initially planned to form as many as 48 battalions, each 450–500 strong. Although in the areas subject to mobilization there lived 91 758 people who were due for military service in the BKA (1632 officers, 7397 non-commissioned officers and 82 729 private soldiers), only about 40 thousand conscript soldiers turned up at the mobilization offices. Due to lack of barracks and weapons a large number of the conscripts were sent back home. In the district of Baranowicze, for example, 154 officers, 923 non-commissioned officers and 19 252 private soldiers fell under conscription into the BKA, of whom 90 officers, 541 non-commissioned officers and 13 203 riflemen were discharged. All of 1400 mobilized people in Slonim were sent home.¹⁵ Discharging a part of volunteers was associated with Gottberg's reluctance to create a major Belarusian military organization. Towards the end of March 34 battalions 21 629 strong¹⁶ were formed. By June 1944, 39 battalions of riflemen and six battalions of sappers were formed.¹⁷ The statement of some researchers that the BKA was ready to develop plans for the creation of armour, marine, cavalry, artillery and special units etc. should be considered extravagant.¹⁸ The manpower of the BKA at its peak was over 25 thousand people.¹⁹

The following tables give information about the individuals battalions of the BKA:²⁰

Table 1

INFANTRY BATTALIONS

Battalion number	Station	District	Commander
1	Baranowicze	Baranowicze	2nd Lt Ivan Barbarych
2	Glebokie	Glebokie	Lt Mikalaj Danenkovich
3	Nowogrodek	Nowogrodek	Lt Stahanovich
4	Minsk	Minsk	Lt Kaborda
5	Sluck	Słuck	Lt Ambrozhevich

Battalion number	Station	District	Commander
6	Wilejka	Wilejka	Lt Leon Shmatin
7	Słonim	Słonim	2nd Lt Hrakau
8	Nowa Mysz	Baranowicze	2nd Lt Anton Paulovich
9	Plisa-Luzki	Głębokie	2nd Lt Auhén Trusau
10	Zaslaw	Minsk	2nd Lt Mickevich
11	Gresk	Sluck	2nd Lt Miron Kurjanovich
12	Molodeczno	Wilejka	Lt Ramuald Vilchynski
13	Iwacewicze	Slonim	Capt Kraucevich
14	Lubcza	Nowogrodek	Capt Cyprian Kacevich
15	Horodziszcze	Baranowicze	Lt Anton Mancijeu; Usevalad Rodzko
16	Szarkowszczyzna	Głębokie	Lt Branislau Katovich
17	Kojdanow	Minsk	2nd Lt Zuj / Baranouski
18	Kopyl	Słuck	Lt Janka Novik
19	Ilia	Wilejka	Lt Mikhail Rybavik
20	Byten	Slonim	Lt Col Ivanou
21	Korelicze	Nowogrodek	Lt Kulesh
22	Nieswicz	Baranowicze	2nd Lt Uladzimer Rusak
23	Doksyce	Głębokie	Capt Mikhail Sirafimovich
24	Rudensk	Minsk	2nd Lt Mikhail Chorytoniuk
25	Siemiezewo	Sluck	2nd Lt Vincenty Zukau
26	Radaszkowicze	Wilejka	2nd Lt Wasil Nybin
27	Kleck	Baranowicze	2nd Lt Ihar Shchors
28	Miory	Glebokie	?
29	Smolewicze	Minsk	Lt Auhén Tchura
30	Dereczyn	Slonim	Lt Wasil Bialous
31	Lachowicze	Baranowicze	Lt Ivan Charnecki

Battalion number	Station	District	Commander
32	Woropajewo	Glebokie	2nd Lt Iosif Krykun
33	Lohojsk	Minsk	Lt Uladzimer Lazarevich
34	Stolpce	Baranowicze	2nd Lt Izotau
35	Postawy	Glebokie	2nd Lt Leanid Hlinski
36	Mir	Baranowicze	2nd Lt Leanid Stochka
37	Dziszna	Glebokie	Lt Parfion Hanecki
38	Starobin	Sluck	Lt Mikalaj Chorytonovich
39	Krywicze	Wilejka	Lt Ivan Chrushchou

Table 2

SAPPERS BATTALIONS*

Battalion number	Station	District	Commander
1	Borysow**	Borysow	Lt Auhen Dekovich
2	Baranowicze	Baranowicze	Capt Vincenty Paplauski
6	Sluck	Sluck	?
7	Sluck	Sluck	Capt Mantvila
9	Minsk	Minsk	Ihnat Chudavec
11	Minsk	Minsk	2nd Lt Wasil Mikhael

* According to other data, 13 battalions of frontier were formed. The first battalion was formed in May 1944, the second – in September 1944, whereas the others (3rd–13th) were formed in July 1944. See: J. Gdański (2005). *Zapomniani żołnierze Hitlera*. Warsaw, pp. 247, 248.

** The 1st sapper battalion was formed in Baranowicze and then moved to Borysow.

The mobilization plan stipulated that each BKA battalion will be 600 strong. However, the real state looked differently. Only a few battalions reached the desired quantity of soldiers. The average battalion was between 400 and 500 strong. 17th battalion in Kojdanow, for example, was 451 strong, including 23 officers and 41 non-commissioned

officers.²¹ However, 32nd battalion (Woropajewo) was 500 strong.²² In some cases, the battalions were only 200–250 strong.²³ The battalion of the BKA riflemen consisted of three or four rifle companies. A company was formed by three platoons, each of them fifty strong, including one officer and three non-commissioned officers. A platoon consisted of four teams, each of them 10 strong (one non-commissioned officer and nine private soldiers).²⁴

On 19 March 1944, the BCR President issued order No. 13 about the BKA troops swearing-in. According to this order, the procedure had to take place on 26 March 1944. In fact, only battalions stationed in Minsk were sworn on this day. The 1st sapper battalion (Baranowicze, 10 May) and the 15th rifle battalion (Minsk, 22 May) were the last ones that took the oath.²⁵ In the text of the BKA oath we can read among other things that ‘I, the soldier of the BKA, swear to Almighty God and to the soldier’s honour that I will faithfully serve my people, conscientiously and perfectly perform all the orders of my commanders and managers. I swear that I will fight shoulder to shoulder with German soldiers. I will not surrender until peace and security set in, and the last enemy of Belarusian people on our land is destroyed. I swear that I will sooner die heroically than allow my wife and children, brothers and sisters and the entire Belarusian nation once again endure abuse and Bolshevik slavery. If I break this oath due to weakness or evil intentions, then let God punish me by ignominious death of a traitor to his people and homeland.’²⁶ It is worth noting that a mention of the swearing-in of the BKA soldiers appeared in the West-European press. The German newspaper *Fölkischer Beobachter*²⁷ and the Swiss *Suisse*²⁸ wrote about it.

Mobilization took place in difficult conditions. The population was in a very embarrassing situation. On the one hand, evading the conscription was punishable by death penalty, while on the other hand, if the man due for military service appeared at the mobilization office, his family was subject to repression by the Soviet partisans. In Soviet historiography, it was commonly believed that all Belarusians had boycotted mobilization. This information is based on the statements of Soviet partisans. In turn, some emigrants from Belarus indicate that mobilization proceeded perfectly and nearly 100% of the men turned up²⁹, although that departs from the truth. In order to guarantee the propaganda effect, the BCR

activists took care of organizing in cities and towns demonstrations and rallies that accompanied mobilization.³⁰ According to the reports of the high command of the BKA and reports of commanders of the individual battalions, the Belarusians took an exemplary attitude towards mobilization. However, the intelligence reports of the Polish underground resistance movement are characterized by contradictions. For example, on 6 May 1944, the Government Delegate for Poland emphasized the mass nature of the course of mobilization,³¹ in April 1944, the high command of the Home Army (Armia Krajowa, AK) reported that 'the Belarusians are completely propitiated for the Germans because of the past concessions, and the majority of them willingly joins the army',³² and the situational report of the Polish underground for June 1944 stressed that 'people had a hostile attitude [toward mobilization. – J. G.] and ran away and went to the Soviet and Polish partisans'.³³ As usual in such cases, the truth probably lies somewhere in between. It is worth to take a closer look at both the Soviet and Belarusian data.

The order of the Soviet partisans was to stop mobilization. The guidelines for conducting subversive actions among the soldiers of the East formations in the German service were previously issued in a special directive by Panteleimon Panomarienko, the head of the Central Headquarter of the Partisan Movement, dated 9 July 1943. In addition, in March 1944, the Council of People's Commissars of the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (*Sovet Narodnykh Komissarov Beloruskoy Sovetskoy Socialisticheskoy Respubliki, SNK BSSR*), the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the BSSR and the Central Committee of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party of Belarus (*Centralnyj Komitet Kommunisticheskoy Partii (bolshevikov) Bielarusi, CK KP(b)B*) issued an appeal to the Belarusian people, urging them to evade conscription.³⁴ Mass distribution of leaflets was intended to call off mobilization. For this purpose, in the district of Minsk 62 thousand leaflets and 54 thousand copies of the newspaper were distributed containing an appeal of the BSSR government to Belarusian people. In order to disrupt mobilization, among the civilian population rumors were spread that under the guise of mobilization into the BKA the Germans were preparing another massive export of forced labour to the Third Reich. Soviet sources mention

the number of cases in which Belarusians dodged mobilization and escaped to the partisans. According to the leadership of the Belarusian Staff of the Partisan Movement (*Belorusskij Shtab Partizanskogo Dvizhenija, BShPD*), during mobilization into the BKA in March and April 1944 15 thousand people escaped and ran into the forest.³⁵ It must be admitted that in comparison with more than 91 thousand people subject to mobilization the above number does not look too impressive. Furthermore, the data offered by partisans are hardly reliable because for understandable reasons the BShPD cared about raising the number of people who had dodged mobilization. These facts, however, took place. Soviet partisans made every effort to disrupt mobilization, but they were unable to seriously threaten the formation of Belarusian units. By way of illustration we can cite an example of how mobilization proceeded in the Smolewicze county. The partisan documents mention about 460 people who were mobilized to the BKA, because the rest had escaped and gone to partisans. According to the data of the battalion commander, out of 1726 people who were subject to mobilization 514 did not turn up, of which only four escaped and went to partisans. In addition, there was one case of desertion. In contrast, a much more serious problem for mobilization were partisan actions aimed at preventing the people from getting to mobilization offices. Therefore it was no coincidence that in the above mentioned county 502 out of 514 men did not managed to break through the partisan blockade.³⁶ Soviet partisans were ordered to burn bridges to hinder the conscripts from getting to the mobilization committee.³⁷ Situation was similar in the Zaslav region, where due to life being paralyzed by communist partisans as many as 402 out of 611 conscripts did not appear (conscripts of two districts out of 11 did not turn up for mobilization).³⁸

These facts took place also in the following districts: Slonim, Sluck and Minsk. In the absence of ready barracks in the districts of Slonim and Wilejka most mobilized soldiers were quartered in peasant cottages. The situation is illustrated by the mobilization process in the Kleck region: about 3 thousand people turned up before the commission, about 1,5 thousand of them were qualified for the mobilization and about

500 people took refuge in forests.³⁹ In the Dunilowicze region (the county of Postawy) instead of the expected 600 conscripts more than one thousand signed up. The K. Rokosowski and K. Woroshilow Soviet partisan brigades took the trouble to prevent the peasants from access to mobilization offices.⁴⁰ According to the data of the Polish underground, mobilization had the best results in the following areas: Minsk, Sluck, Nieswicz, Nowogrodek and Slonim. At the same time there were reported escapes and desertions in the vicinity of Wolozyn (sic!), Stolpce, Baranowicze. Impressive were statistical data concerning mobilization in the Sluck district, where more than 7 thousand men turned up. About 4 thousand of them were enlisted into the army. The number of men who dodged military service was only 1.4 percent. It should be noted that in some places, especially where the Soviet partisans were active, the German authorities and Belarusian organizations deliberately refrained from mobilization. For example, in the aforesaid district of Sluck 16 counties were excluded from mobilization, i. e. 17.4% of the district area (6.5% of the total population)⁴¹ The mobilization results reflect indirectly the data included in the table below.

Table 3

THE MANPOWER OF THE BKA ON 30 MARCH 1944

District	Turned up at the mobilization offices ⁴²	Conscripted privates	Officers	Non-commissioned officers
Sluck	approx. 7000	3714	80	188
Nowogrodek	?	2047	18	69
Baranowicze	26 050	6049	64	382
Glebokie	?	2800	13	97
Wilejka	?	2330	24	60
Slonim	?			
Minsk	?	2139	65	154

Source: The author's own estimation based on: *Za dziazauunuju nezaleznaśc Belarusi*. London, 1960, pp. 97, 98.

On the basis of the above mentioned facts one can conclude that in most cases the Soviet partisans' knowledge of the region, to a smaller extent the Polish one, was a decisive factor in case of mobilization results. In districts where the partisans were most active mobilization had little effect. The situation was different in areas where the German authorities felt more confident. The BCR sources show that in some regions 85% of men due for military service arrived at the mobilization offices.⁴³ It is noteworthy that the history reports numerous cases of joining the BKA battalions by a number of volunteers born in 1925–1926.⁴⁴

The BKA high command reports show that an additional factor that hindered the success of mobilization in the districts of Baranowicze, Slonim and Glebokie was the unfavourable attitude of the German civil administration, in contrast with the attitude of the police. Another factor that complicated mobilization was careless work of local authorities and German economic organizations (e.g. TODT), which did not have accurate data on the number of people being subject to mobilization.⁴⁵ Not only because of Territorial Commissioners (*Gebietskommissare*) at the time of mobilization the barracks were not prepared, the conscripts working in civil offices and peasants carrying out various works for civil administration were banned from conscription into units of the BKA. This situation irritated the BCR activists. In the Wilejka district only an intervention of the SD prevented further exemptions from military service. In this respect the worst situation was in the Slonim district. According to the report of the BCR representative in the district, a territorial commissioner disorganized mobilization, and due to lack of barracks mobilized men were divided into groups of 80–100 people and quartered in peasant cottages. In the 17th battalion (Kojdanow) only 50% of the soldiers lived in barracks, while the rest were quartered in the houses of local inhabitants.⁴⁶

Because of the higher than anticipated number of men eligible for recruitment and in case of the impossibility to fix the recruits up with lodgings it was decided to give them indeterminate leave on the condition that they can be recruited to the unit at any time. It should be noted

that the BKA soldiers had an opportunity to apply to their commanders for leave or to turn directly to the president of the BCR for partial or total exemption from military service. Peasants conscripted into the army used this possibility. Sowing time was often given as one of the reasons for such absence. The commander at the district level had the right to give leave. With this active status soldiers often fell victim to the Soviet partisans.⁴⁷

During mobilization the ethnic factor was taken into account. According to the order given by headquarters, no other nationalities had to be conscripted into the army except Belarusians. The attention was paid especially to the Poles who were treated as suspicious and disloyal. According to the order of the BKA commander No. 15 of 15 March 1944, all Polish officers and non-commissioned officers were subject to immediate dismissing from the BKA and handing over to an employment agency. In a similar way it was ordered to deal with privates of the Polish nationality. Also Belarusian riflemen who morally and politically seemed to be suspect were liable to be dismissed from the BKA and handed over to an employment agency.⁴⁸ In fact, the order was carried out differently. It is known that the ethnic factor was not taken into account in the district of Wilejka. Because of the BCR plenipotentiary, Jazep Malecki, in this district the order was attributed both to Poles and representatives of other nationalities, including Russians, former officers of the Red Army, who were highly qualified professionals.⁴⁹ In several cases, the mentioned order was disregarded. An evidence of this is a list of the officers and private soldiers of the 7th battalion, bearing Polish names.⁵⁰ The conscription of Polish soldiers into the BKA is confirmed also by Polish underground sources.⁵¹

OFFICERS AND NON-COMMISSIONED OFFICERS

In all the BKA battalions there was lack of specialists: signalers, doctors, sappers, quartermasters etc. However, most acute was lack of the operation and intelligence services, so that members of the Soviet and Polish underground could infiltrate into the BKA rather easily. In some battalions vacancies for officers came to 45% and those

for non-commissioned officers came to 35 percent.⁵² Most reports of the BKA district clerks indicated that the mobilized officers presented insignificant battle value because of their age. In respect of the former place of service mobilized officers were divided into officers of the Polish Military (40%), the Red Army (40%) and the Russian Army (20%). It was decided to eliminate lack of qualified staff by organizing courses in mid-March 1944 in Minsk: for officers (attended by 50 people) and non-commissioned officers (attended by 250 people).⁵³ In the absence of officers, the president of the BCR on 5 April 1944 issued an order on the strength of which all cadets of the Polish Military School were promoted to the rank of second lieutenant of the BKA. At the same time, as regards the staffing of commanding and propaganda positions in the battalions, it was decided to be guided, first of all, by the loyalty of candidates and their extent of involvement in Belarussian issues. Political loyalty was preferred to professional qualifications.⁵⁴ Gottberg himself undertook the search for the BKA commanders, in March 1944 issuing an appeal with a request to register the Belarussian officers and non-commissioned officers outside the district. Among others he made an appeal to the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories (*Ostministerium*), the Territorial Commissioner (*Gebietskommissar*) of Wilno and the district of Wilno and the authority of the General Government. For example, in the Wilno region (Oszmiana and Swir districts) 20 to 30 suitable people 'were found' who agreed to serve in the BKA.⁵⁵ Due to lack of Belarussian officers several cases of conscription into the BKA officers and non-commissioned officers of Polish nationality were registered. These facts took place among others in the Braslaw district.⁵⁶

On the strength of the directive No. 21 issued on 5 April 1944 by the president of the BCR, establishing of military (officer and non-commissioned officer) schools began. At the meeting with the BKA president on 12 and 13 May 1944 it was decided to establish a four-week officer school in Minsk.⁵⁷ The school was to train an officer corps for needs of the BKA. On 21 May 1944, the second year took an oath. Although only people with secondary education were admitted, an exception was made for soldiers who had

distinguished themselves in the battlefield. After 6 months of studies the students were promoted to the rank of second lieutenant of the BKA. Nearly 280 students were enrolled. Most of them were members of the Association of Belarusian Youth. The school was managed by Captain Viktor Tchebatarevich.⁵⁸ It consisted of the first (commander second lieutenant Karaneuski) and second companies. By the BKA commander's order No. 15 from 15 March 1944 in Minsk, on 6 June 1944 the school battalion was to be established in order to train the corps of non-commissioned officers. The district officers were ordered to select the candidates: 100 people from the Baranowicze district, 100 people from the Glebokie district, 50 people from the Nowogrodek district, 100 people from the Wilejka district, 50 people from the Slonim district.⁵⁹ From 18 to 20 April about 300 officers and non-commissioned officers were gathered in Minsk.⁶⁰

EDUCATIONAL AND POLITICAL WORK

The BKA high command tried to take care about the Belarusian soldiers' morale. In greeting the BKA soldiers said 'Long live Belarus!', the answer was: 'It lives!' or 'For Country!'.⁶¹ On 15 April 1944, the BKA high command gave the order No. 8 concerning military discipline which was to serve like a penal code.⁶² At the battalion's commander level there was created the post of an education officer whose duty was to teach soldiers, among other things to discuss patriotic issues and to give lectures on history and culture of Belarus. At the same time the officers were ordered to use the Belarusian language only. According to the BKA high command's order No. 22 from 30 May 1944, it was forbidden to sing Polish and Russian songs in barracks. It was also required to spread folk traditions among the Belarusian soldiers through singing songs and staging plays.⁶³ According to the decision of the BCR Presidium on 22 April 1944, the duty of education officers was to conduct an appropriate work in battalions and companies. Educational work consisted firstly of talking with soldiers about different issues (among others about national holidays, international

situation), watching propaganda films, reading newspapers. Education officers had to spread among the Belarusian soldiers not only anti-Soviet and anti-communist, but also anti-Polish propaganda. Among the subjects of discussions between the officers and soldiers were *The life of the Belarusians under the Polish authority*, *The partition of Belarus by Poland and Bolsheviks*, *The Polish politics of Polonization*.⁶⁴ The commanders did their best to make the soldiers believe they were flesh and blood Belarusian soldiers. The realization of the above mentioned order went differently in practice. In April 1944, during the inspection of the 4th, 10th and 17th battalions it was found, for example, that the officers in the course of their talks gave commands in Russian, ignoring the Belarusian ones, and refused to sing the national anthem and Belarusian marching songs. However, in the opinion of the commanders the 'Belarusization' in the 29th battalion went well. During mid-April to early May 1944, four discussions were held about the international situation, seven readings of newspapers, one discussion on 1 May, a visit to a concert and a cinema.⁶⁵ In the 18th battalion in Kopyl on the initiative of the soldiers a battalion orchestra and an amateur band was organized in order to raise the spirits of soldiers. Impeccable posture was presented by well armed and equipped officers and soldiers of the 15th battalion.⁶⁶

The BCR attempted to provide social services to families of the BKA soldiers. By order No. 30 of the BKA President issued on 28 April 1944, the Relief Fund for Families of the BKA Soldiers was created, to which the Belarusian Mutual Aid Society transferred 50 thousand of Reichsmarks. The fund was at the disposal of the BCR presidium and in districts the district representatives of the Council could use it. The latter was to have a sum of up to 5 thousand RM. The financial resources could be granted to the families of soldiers killed or wounded in the fighting. One-off grants amounted to 300 RM. The Council decided to initiate a propaganda campaign aimed to make the Belarusian people realize the need to come to the assistance of the Fund.⁶⁷ The sources reported some cases on which Belarusian organizations and individual citizens had donated money to develop the BKA, but the sum was rather paltry and

could not have had a significant impact on improving the financial condition of the Fund. By way of illustration it is worth mentioning the case, which took place in May 1944. The participants of the first and second officers' courses of the BKA handed over to the BKA high command 1999 RM.⁶⁸ Noteworthy is also the fact that in June 1944 the Belarusian Committee of Mutual Aid Society in Upper Silesia transferred to the Fund 47 RM.⁶⁹ Available sources allow to come to the conclusion that some Orthodox clergymen supported the BKA financially. In the spring of 1944, the parishes of Minsk sent the District Head of the BKA M. Puhachou 735 RM for the needs of the Belarusian National Defence.⁷⁰

UNIFORMS AND MILITARY DISTINCTIONS

The BKA high command was aware of the need to produce uniforms for the Belarusian soldiers. This was to have a positive impact on the moral state and mood of the soldiers. On 18 March 1944, the BKA staff gave an instruction to introduce uniforms for the BKA, which entered into force on 25 March 1944. The following uniform pattern for soldiers, non-commissioned officers and the BKA officers was approved: on the cap there was the emblem of Pahonia; on the collars stripes (4 × 6,5 cm) with a hexagonal cross of Jaryła placed in the middle, the so-called *Dwukrzyż* (2 × 4 cm) on a red background. The insertions on the officers stripes (0.3 cm) were golden. Golden *Dwukrzyż* were reserved for officers and silver for non-commissioned officers and privates. On the left sleeve there was a disc-shaped stripe in white-red-white with the emblem Pahonia in the middle. The BKA orchestra had to wear stripes on both sleeves. On shoulder straps badges of the BKA ranks were placed. The battalions of the BKA initially used military ranks according to the held position (e.g. the battalion commander, the company commander, etc.). According to the BKA Staff Instruction of 18 March 1944, the following system of military ranks was introduced.⁷¹

Table 4

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BKA

<i>BKA</i> ranks (in the Belarusian language)	Equivalents in the Polish Army
Stralec	Rifleman
Starejšy stralec	Senior rifleman
Družynovy	Corporal
Zviazovy	Master Corporal
Starshynia	Staff Sergeant
Lejtenant	Second Lieutenant
Starejšy lejtenant	First Lieutenant
Kapitan	Captain
Major	Major
Padpalkoŭnik	Lieutenant Colonel
Palkoŭnik	Colonel

On 5 April 1944, the BCR president issued an act 'About promoting to the officer ranks of the BKA'. In accordance with the act, the final word in this matter rested with the BKA president who made a decision on application of the BKA high command. Ranks received during service in foreign armies (Russian Army, Polish Army, Red Army) were accepted. At the request of the BKA commanders, for special services in the battle field, the president could promote non-commissioned officers to the ranks of officers.⁷² On 12 April 1944, Astrouski endorsed the rules of promotion to the ranks of non-commissioned officers. Graduation from the non-commissioned officer school was a sine qua non for receiving the first rank of non-commissioned officer (Corporal). A company commander could give promotion to Private First Class. The other promotions were dependent on the decisions of the district Chief of the BKA.⁷³

Separate rules applied to medical officers. According to the decision No. 41 of the BCR Presidium from 10 June 1944, doctors who were assigned to the BKA, were promoted to the officer ranks: the battalion doctor was made lieutenant, the district doctor became captain, the Chief Medical Officer of the BKA – major, the manager of the district hospital – captain, other doctors of the district hospital – lieutenants, the manager of the area hospital – lieutenant, other doctors of the area hospital – second lieutenants. Medical officers wore an emblem with an image of medical service (snake) on their shoulder straps.⁷⁴

Privates and non-commissioned officers wore red stripes on their shoulder straps, while officers had silver stripes and stars. In mid-April 1944, the appearance of shoulder straps was changed. The usual stripes and stars were replaced with yellow cornflowers (for soldiers) and stripes (for officers).

For privates black uniforms were planned from the Allgemeine SS reserve with grey insets, pockets, cuffs and shoulder straps. However, non-commissioned officers and officers wore grey-green (feldgrau) uniforms of Wehrmacht. Since 1943 non-commissioned officers wore German forage kepi.

Students of the military school in Minsk, like the BKA privates, were dressed in black uniforms of Allgemeine SS with gray insets, pockets, cuffs and shoulder straps.⁷⁵ However, a group of officers and non-commissioned officers, who were delegated to Minsk, had to remain for the duration of the training course in civilian clothes, supplemented with epaulets.⁷⁶

Directives on wearing uniforms were not always carried out. In fact, serious lack of uniforms and weaponry bothered almost all the BKA battalions. Only a few battalions of riflemen and all battalions of sappers were fully armed, equipped and uniformed according to the instructions of the headquarters. It is not surprising that in some battalions soldiers looked like partisans. The commanders often reported receiving complaints from Belarusian soldiers that the AK partisans living in the forest were dressed better than the BKA soldiers stationed in the city. According to the report of the 17th battalion headquarters (Kojdanow): 'only seven officers and

non-commissioned officers who arrived from Minsk are uniformed and equipped [...] 50% of riflemen go barefoot. There are also those who do not have warm clothes.⁷⁷ According to the commander of the above mentioned battalion, lack of uniforms made the BKA soldiers who looked like civilians the object of ridicule for the local population. In the 29th battalion, 35% of the soldiers went barefoot, so that they were not able to attend manoeuvres.⁷⁸ Due to lack of uniforms the soldiers of the 1st battalion in Baranowicze wore ordinary peasant shirts contrary to the provisions. In March 1944, a representative of the BCR in the district Baranowicze S. Stankevich reported that the Belarusian nation 'watches in disbelief that the Polish, Cossack and other military units have uniforms and weapons, while our units have nothing of that. This state of affairs affects the mood of mobilized soldiers.'⁷⁹ The stored documents permit to acknowledge that in some battalions there were cases of the use of the emblems of foreign military officers, which met with disapproval of the BCR high command and activists. An evidence of this is the decision of the BCR Presidium of 6 June 1944 which banned the use of the symbols of foreign forces and ordered the propaganda unit to carry out an action in order to turn commanders' attention to the fact that it is an honour to wear uniforms of Belarusian units.⁸⁰

Like other Belarusian units in German service, the battalions of the BKA commonly used white-red-white flags. Contrary to the assertions of some authors, the BKA had neither their own orders nor decorations.

WEAPONS, EQUIPMENT, MORALE

In the BKA units there was lack of weapons and equipment. In some battalions 6–10 soldiers shared one gun. The BKA battalions were armed with Polish, Dutch, French, Soviet, German and Italian guns.⁸¹ 506 soldiers of the 17th battalion had only 100 Italian and 50 Russian guns.⁸² A rarity in the BKA battalions were heavy machine guns. In the best case, each company had one or two of them. In the Slonim district 300 guns had been distributed among a few battalions. Catering for the BKA units to a large extent rested

on the local organizations of the Belarusian Mutual Aid Society and the Belarusian Youth Union. In accordance with the order of the BCR the above mentioned organizations were to appeal to the self-governments and the Belarusian people for voluntary assistance to supply the BKA with necessary provisions. The Soviet sources reported that there were cases when food was confiscated by the BKA units.⁸³ Based on the analysis of the reports of the individual BKA battalions command (among others 4th, 10th, 17th, 29th), it can be deduced that sanitary conditions also left a lot to be desired. Especially a deficiency of medical remedies, hygiene measures, baths and beds made soldiers' life a misery.⁸⁴ In order to overcome these problems and to take care of hygiene it was attempted to build baths and to provide mattresses filled with straw to sleep on in places where battalions were stationed. In May 1944, an instruction was worked out on the compulsory training of all units of the BKA that provided 145-hour-long programme in assault and defence activities in a variety of field conditions.⁸⁵

In the absence of weapons and equipment, at a meeting of the presidium of the BCR on 12 and 13 May 1944, the BKA commander F. Kushal proposed to carry out the reduction of personnel, which in his opinion would allow the 'cleansing' the BKA ranks of disloyal members. However, it did not meet with approval of the majority. For example, the Chief of the BKA Staff Captain V. Mikula tried to convince that such a reduction would expose the weakness of the Belarusian formations and weaken the positions of the BCR in the eyes of the German principals. It should be emphasized that the Belarusian activists were not aware of the reasons why the Germans did not want to arm the BKA soldiers. In this regard, some even proposed to apply to the authorities in Berlin or the Wehrmacht. During the aforementioned briefing significant findings were made. It was decided, *inter alia*, to refrain from reduction, but to get rid of the soldiers considered politically and physically unfit for military service, to move the poorly armed battalions to safer places. Due to the fact that Germans excluded the battalions of sappers from the control of the BKA high command, it was decided to prohibit the transfer of the rifle battalions to the units of sappers.⁸⁶

Due to lack of weapons and equipment, newly mobilized Belarusian soldiers sometimes fell victims of assaults. On the night of 26 and 27 April 1944, partisans attacked the barracks of the 21st battalion (Korelicze). One non-commissioned officer, Auhien Kraskouski, was killed, but attackers were fought off. On the night of 19 March 1944, partisans of the Lenin brigade (the Baranowicze district) attacked the barracks of the BKA unit of unidentified numbering in the town Jaworska Ruda and as a result 66 Belarusian soldiers were captured. On 4 April 1944, the brigade *Pobeda* (Victory) attacked barracks in Ostrow (the Baranowicze district). Twenty BKA soldiers fell in action and 28 were taken prisoners of the Soviets.⁸⁷ Partisan actions, whose goal was to break down the BKA battalions, were successful in the district Glebokie. As a result of partisans assaults on the barracks of the 9th battalion (Łużki – Plisa) and the 32rd battalion (Woropajewo) in March 1944, the mobilized soldiers were dispersed. In that case they fled home and 82 soldiers (from the 9th battalion) went over to the side of partisans. After the partisan attack on the barracks of the 16th battalion (Szarkowszczyzna) two companies were completely beaten.⁸⁸

The BKA soldiers feared the Soviets' revenge on their families. Apart of this they lived in barracks in difficult conditions. There is no doubt that heavy field exercises and lack of uniforms and equipment contributed to their desertion and escape to partisans. It was an important factor affecting the morale and mood of Belarusian soldiers. For example, in the Wilejka district four battalions were formed, of which from March to May 1944 70 soldiers that were placed in barracks deserted under the influence of the communist propaganda. Similar incidents were recorded in the Baranowicze district. In April 1944, out of 1500 mobilized soldiers in the area of Kleck about 500 soldiers fled and went into the forest. Another example was the desertion of 90 soldiers and a failed attempt of desertion (130 soldiers) from the 17th battalion in Kojdanow.⁸⁹ In the 10th battalion that was stationed in Zaslaw 15 soldiers ran away to partisans. The individual cases of mass desertions took place in the Baranowicze, Wilejka and Minsk districts. Numerous desertions

occurred among the soldiers of the 34th battalion in Stolpce. According to the Polish underground sources, from the above mentioned battalion about 500 strong approximately 120 soldiers deserted. In contrast, the Soviet partisans intelligence service reported that out of 1600 mobilized soldiers as many as 1400 gave in to the communist propaganda and deserted their unit.⁹⁰ In the light of the known facts, the Soviet statement is not credible, as the 34th battalion formed in Stolpce was one of the most valuable BKA units. It is worth to remember that desertion as a phenomenon has always accompanied the army and has been fought by military authorities. The Belarusian units were not an exception. According to the order of the BKA high command of 25 May 1944, the captured deserters had to be sent to the penal companies, in which strict discipline and intense exercises were applied. Re-leaving the barracks could lead to the situation that offenders would be put on a supreme charge.⁹¹

The Soviet partisans tried to introduce their agents in the ranks of the BKA. In April 1944, the M. W. Frunze partisan brigade *Shturmovaja* (Assault) recruited three members of the BKA (two in the Zaslaw region and one in the Łohojsk area). In addition, one partisan agent held the position of platoon commander.⁹² The 2nd battalion (Glebokie) was quite invaded by the Soviet agents. The secret intelligence service of the Belarusian Staff of Partisan Movement reported that dozens of secret partisans were conscripted into the 1st battalion in Baranowicze.⁹³ Due to the subversion of members of a special group of the NKGB (*Narodnyj Kamissariat Gasudarstvennoj Biezapasnosti*, People's Commissariat for State Security) *Aktivnyje* (Active), 69 Belarusian soldiers of the 33rd battalion went over to the side of partisans, 50 of them were incorporated into partisan brigades *Bolshevik* and *Smiert fashizmu* (Death to Fascism). Due to the activities of the special group of the NKGB *Za Rodinu* (For Fatherland), the 21st Battalion deserted to partisans almost in a body (about 250 people).⁹⁴ In June 1944, the command of the 17th battalion reported that among Belarusian soldiers there had been noticed cases of spreading rumors that the Western Allies had occupied half of France.⁹⁵ The Baranowicze district was famous for the largest

number of the Soviet agents in the ranks of the BKA units. They were counted in dozens.⁹⁶

Another problem for the BKA troops was the activities of the Polish underground whose members tried to influence the moods of Belarusian soldiers. According to the reports of the commander of the 17th battalion, robberies occurred to the west of Kojdanow. They were committed by the 'Polish Legionnaires' on families of those people who were mobilized to the BKA.⁹⁷ Steps taken to eliminate the Polish element did not cause the 'cleansing' of the ranks of the formation, because into the BKA battalions a number of Belarusian Catholics who sympathized with the Polish underground had been mobilized. According to the BKA reports, the AK agencies strongly influenced the ranks of the 35th battalion that was stationed in Postawy. Under the influence of the AK propaganda two companies of this battalion deserted and then joined the Polish partisans. In the 1st battalion (Baranowicze) there was a group of Belarusians and Poles (about 40 people) who planned to go over to the side of the AK. An attempt to eliminate the Poles from soldiers of the 15th Battalion in Horodyszczce turned out to be a failure because there were close to 80 undercover members of the AK, including one who held the position of company commander. In April 1944, the secret AK men conducted an unsuccessful attempt to move part of the battalion to the Polish partisans.

Owing to the efforts of its agents, the AK intelligence service had quite detailed and accurate information about combat actions of the BKA units and behaviour of their commanders. The Poles knew, for example, that F. Kushal had decided not to use the Belarusian battalions in action to the east of Minsk during the retreat of the German army at the end of June 1944. It was also known that U. Rodzka had been decorated with the Iron Cross for his command of the 15th battalion at the time of anti-partisan actions. In contrast to the Soviet partisans, the Poles did not resort to attacks upon the militarized units, yet there were a few clashes.

The Soviet and Polish propaganda was a major challenge for political and educational officers. On a par with the enemy

propaganda, a very common type of an offence was absence without official leave from barracks and flights home. Thus, favourable conditions were created by the fact that the battalions were formed in support of the principle of territoriality. Soldiers homes in near proximity had a negative influence on their morale. For example, many soldiers willfully left barracks and went home to help their families with farming and sowing. After some time, soldiers returned to the units. In April 1944, approximately 5% of the personnel in the 10th battalion left the unit. In May 1944, 27 out of 506 people committed such a desertion in the 17th battalion.

PARTICIPATION IN COMBAT MISSIONS

Probably the major impediment to the functioning of the BKA was caused by the German authorities themselves. It also happened when some German organizations and companies tried to select able-bodied people for work in their factories by mobilizing them to the BKA. On 12 April 1944, in order to prevent these ventures F. Kushal issued the relevant regulation treating such activities of German companies as lawlessness. On 6 May 1944, the BKA commander gave an order that forbade the conscription of the BKA soldiers to various German economic organizations.⁹⁸ In fact, the Belarusians did not have much say concerning the formation and use of the BKA. On 19 April 1944, the main headquarters issued a regulation recommending the BKA commanders of each battalion to avoid open clashes with partisans as far as possible in order to save strength for the moment when all the battalions would be duly armed, equipped and trained.⁹⁹ During mobilization each district was a separate unit, which allowed the Belarusian activists to make plans for forming the regiments of the BKA.¹⁰⁰ German views were not consistent with the Belarusian ones. Gottberg intended to use the BKA units for their own operational purposes under the guise of creating 'the Belarusian national army'. Ironically Gottberg implemented plans of his opponent Kube, who at all costs tried to create the Belarusian armed forces as the Belarussian Self-Defence (*Bialaruskaja Samaakhova*, BSA). The plan of the Commissioner General

of Belarus foresaw the formation of an anti-partisan grouping, the so-called *Kampfgruppe von Gottberg*, amounting to 20 thousand people. He intended to incorporate into it, in addition to the BKA battalions, the Cossack and Caucasian troops, the Brigade RONA and Belarusian Schuma battalions. On 1 March 1944, von Gottberg presented such a project at the meeting in the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories (*Ostministerium = Reichsministerium für die besetzten Ostgebiete, RMfdbO*). It can therefore be assumed that he treated the BKA only as an integral part of the anti-partisan forces designed for the needs of the Commissioner General and the formation was to include a maximum of 10 thousand people.¹⁰¹ Although in the course of time he had to abandon these plans, the BKA high command was totally dependent on the Germans and had no opportunity to make any operational decisions without their permission. This state of affairs was reflected in the order No. 21 issued by the BKA headquarters on 27 May 1944.¹⁰² According to the concept of the German authorities, the role of the Belarusian activities in the formation of the BKA had come down only to the propaganda efforts by using nationalist slogans in order to mobilize the Belarusian people for the armed struggle on the occupier's side. After the war, the commander of the BKA F. Kushal recalled: 'In some cases, my role of a propagandist [...] was too strongly stressed [by the Germans. – J. G.]. For example, in Sluck just after my speech [to the BKA soldiers. – J. G.] and after the oath the commander of the German regiment of sappers gave the operating order. Well, my role as a BKA commander was very unpleasant, the more so because neither the BKA soldiers or the Belarusian society understood my actual position.'¹⁰³

The success in the development of the BKA first of all should be considered as political success of the BCR and its president. The BKA was seen as an asset to authenticate the council activists in the eyes of the occupiers and to raise the prestige of the BCR among the Belarusian society and to create the image of the Belarusian nationalists as a real political force having its own armed forces. That is why during his public speeches Astrouski tried to convince those present that the BKA is a true 'national guard of

the Belarusian nation' and 'the armed forces of the free Belarus.' Of course, the reality was quite different. In March 1944, the president of the BCR said that the Belarusian National Defence would not be sent to the front, because it had to fight with the 'internal enemy of the Belarusian people', i. e. with communists.¹⁰⁴ Thus Astrouski intimated that the Belarusian soldiers would not be used outside their home country. However, the Germans believed that in the face of a potential Soviet offensive the BKA would also be used to fight with the Red Army. From May 1944, in each rifle battalion an assault company was formed.¹⁰⁵ In May 1944, to achieve better results in eliminating partisans the BKA headquarters issued an order that prohibited to use violence on prisoners, and even more to shoot the captured partisans. On the contrary, it was ordered to sent those partisans who had surrendered voluntarily directly to the dock.¹⁰⁶

Only some of the BKA units participated in combat operations. In May 1944, the battalion fought against partisans during the German anti-partisan campaign Spring festival (*Frühlingsfest*) in the vicinity of Lepel and Begomel in the Vitebsk region.¹⁰⁷ For participation in this action dozens of soldiers and officers of the battalion were decorated with the Medal of Merit for the eastern nations, and the BKA staff attorney V. Rodzka was decorated with the Second Class Iron Cross.¹⁰⁸ The 35th battalion fought against partisans in the area of Dzisna. As a result of this battle the battalion lost several men, some of whom were killed and others wounded. The sources also report that in mid-June 1944 the 34th battalion took part in anti-partisans actions.¹⁰⁹ On 28 April 1944, a patrol of the 33rd battalion, that was on guard in Lahojsk, was attacked by a group of the Soviet partisans. The BKA soldiers managed to successfully resist the attack. The bravest soldiers were awarded with 750 RM.¹¹⁰ In March the 11th battalion fought several skirmishes with the partisans in the vicinity of the town Grozowa.¹¹¹ The 3rd battalion (Nowogrodek) participated in military action in the north-east of Glebokie.¹¹² On 28 April 1944, the soldiers of the 33rd Battalion repulsed the attack of the Soviet partisans in the foreland Łohojsk. Courage was demonstrated also by soldiers

of the 29th battalion who on 9 June 1944 fought against the partisans in the vicinity of Smolewicz.¹¹³ The 37th battalion fought the battle with partisans near the village Buszewo and Gorka in Dzisna district.¹¹⁴ Information about the combat losses in the 17th battalion also indicate the involvement of this unit in clashes with partisans.¹¹⁵

Information about the participation of the BKA in combat missions was obtained by confronting the Belarusian and Soviet sources. In some cases there is doubt as to the events mentioned in various documents. Thus, for instance, partisans of the BKA unit were often confused with Schuma police battalions. In accordance with the partisan sources the partisans fought with and inflicted serious losses on the 1st, 2nd and 44th (sic!) battalions of the BKA. At the same time it is maintained that the 44th battalion lost about 100 soldiers in the struggle with the 'folk avengers'.¹¹⁶ The list of the BKA battalions, drawn on the basis of intelligence reports and reports of the intelligence of the Belarusian Staff of Partisan Movement, contains a lot of errors. Among the BKA units are named, for example, 'the 47th battalion of the BKA', 'the 48th battalion of the BKA', 'the 44th battalion of the BKA in Wilejka', 'the BKA battalion of Barys Rahula'.¹¹⁷ In the first two cases, 47th and 48th Schuma battalions were probably meant. The 44th battalion of the BKA has never existed, and Barys Rahula was the commander of the 68th Schuma battalion. Furthermore, such mistakes are natural during the war times, so the researcher must exercise utmost vigilance.

The participation of the BKA soldiers in the above mentioned actions is difficult to assess unambiguously. It was a real tragedy because for Belarusians this fight had, in fact, features of a civil war, as the enemy were their countrymen. Such statements are confirmed by the fact that the Soviet partisans were mainly recruited from the local Belarus population. However, after assessment of the role of the BKA a conclusion has to be drawn that it was one of the most sophisticated attempts to create regular armed units of the Belarusian national character in the military history of the twentieth century Belarus.

FURTHER FATE AFTER EVACUATION FROM BELARUS IN THE SUMMER OF 1944

According to German sources, after the occupation of the territory of Belarus by the Red Army in the summer of 1944 about 16 thousand soldiers of Belarusian military and police formations, including 6 thousand police officers of Schutzmannschaften, two thousand SD officers and eight thousand BKA troops withdrew with the German troops to the West. Other sources say that about 19 thousand Belarusian soldiers of armed units in German service got to the West. Knowing the realities of the evacuation of German troops from Belarus, it certainly does not sound credible at least in respect of the BKA units. The sudden offensive of the Red Army in the summer of 1944 became a complete surprise for both the Germans and the Belarusian activists. In the face of the Soviet attack many Schuma and BKA units became panic-stricken. Left without the high command the BKA battalions were dissolved by their commanders or ceased to exist because soldiers willfully left barracks. There have been numerous cases of abandonment of the battalions by their commanders. It is natural that in the face of upcoming Soviet threat these people tried by all means to save themselves and their families.¹¹⁸ In reports of the AK high command from July 1944, there is a mention, that in defense of Minsk against the Red Army the 5th battalion¹¹⁹ was used, but this is not confirmed either in Belarusian or German documents. Alternatively, the above mentioned report says that there was an attempt to use the Belarusian soldiers in order to organize a retreat of German units on the outskirts of the capital of Belarus. At the time of the retreat the BKA commander F. Kushal lost contact with the BKA troops. During the evacuation subversive propaganda was carried out among the Belarusian soldiers by members of the Polish and Soviet underground, who decided that it was the right time to leave the ranks of collaboration formations. The recent police officers joined the ranks of the AK partisan units straight away. Such cases occurred in the areas of Nowogrodek and Wilno. Desertion and going over to the side of Polish partisans also took place on Polish territory after the withdrawal from Belarus. The cadets of the BKA military school

from Minsk faced a tragic fate. In the face of the Soviet offensive the young Belarusians were left by their previous commander Captain W. Tchebatarevich, who went home to save his family. Then Captain V. Mikula took over the command of the 'orphan' cadets. By his attitude Mikula won favour with his students. On 29 June, the cadets set off for Minsk towards Wilno. During the march they were harassed by Soviet and Polish partisans. Secret agents were the first to leave the ranks. Having murdered several of their course-mates, they joined the partisans. Only about half of the cadets and just one fourth of the leadership reached Wilno.¹²⁰

On the basis of expert analysis of German and Belarusian documents one can say that the following BKA units withdrew to the West: part of the military school (about 150 people) and the 23rd and 34th battalions of the BKA. Mass desertion was sometimes accompanied by murders of German and Belarusian officers. Such cases were reported, for example, in the 36th police shooting regiment. Noteworthy are also battalions of the BKA sappers, which from the very beginning were under the German command and were handed over at the Wehrmacht's disposal. The BKA high command had no influence on their fate. After the withdrawal to the west, when the battalions were near Poznan, reorganization was carried out. As a result there came into existence two building battalions (Bau-Battaillon), which were used at the fortification works on the Western front.¹²¹ Nevertheless, the BKA high command attempted to keep in touch with those battalions. This is proved by F. Kushal's visit to sappers in September or October 1944. The commander informed the soldiers about the BCR activities in Berlin.¹²²

According to the order by Reichsführer SS, on 1 August 1944 the brigade of auxiliary police (*Schutzmannschafts Brigade*) was formed consisting of four regiments and commanded by SS-Obersturmbannführer Hans Siegling. On 18 August 1944, the *Schutzmannschafts Brigade* was renamed 30. *Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (2. Russische)* (the 30th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS (2nd Russian)). The BKA military school (about 100 people) and the 23rd and 34th battalions of the BKA were conscripted into the 4th SS Grenadier Regiment of this unit.

Readiness for action in some Belarusian formations left much to be desired. As an example the 23rd battalion of the BKA (about 300 people) can be mentioned. Part of its soldiers had no boots, and the mood of hysteria prevailed in the unit.¹²³ The Belarusian officers in the 30th Division felt humiliated in front of Germans and Russians. This concerned especially those who previously belonged to the BKA and were fully politically and nationally aware. Commanding positions were mainly held by German officers who mostly were translators or interpreters. An exception to this rule was merely exercising the duties of platoon commanders. In the headquarters company of the 76th regiment there was only one officer, a Belarusian.¹²⁴ Former heads of police stations, accustomed to independent action and to a certain freedom, were admitted to the divisions as private soldiers. Besides some patriotic Belarusian officers were irritated by the name of the division, i. e. 2nd Russian. There were incidents of critical public statements on the subject by officers.¹²⁵ It must be admitted that Siegling proved himself to be a person hostile to Belarusians. He tried to condemn the efforts of a handful of Belarusian officers to 'Belarusization' of formation while favouring Russian officers.¹²⁶

Although the division had not yet reached readiness for action, it was sent to the front in France as early as August 1944. During the battles in France, part of the soldiers really avoided battle, but others took the fight with the Allies and the French partisans. After some time, after Germans' failures on the front, desertions intensified in the 30th division. The entire battalions came under it. On 27 August 1944, the soldiers of the 2nd battalion in the 1st regiment, and 2nd battalion in the 2nd regiment rebelled against the German officers and killed several of them. This provoked a bloody repression: those who did not manage to escape to the French partisans were executed. There were the former soldiers of the 62nd and 63rd Ukrainian battalions of Schuma.¹²⁷ In the sources of the Belarusian emigration information can be found that as a result of that rebellion 72 officers and German soldiers lost their lives.¹²⁸ The documents show that the most active in the rebellion were former soldiers of the 34th battalion of the BKA.¹²⁹ On 29 August 1944, in the 4th

regiment there was another mass desertion: a group of soldiers from the 1st and 2nd battalions fled to Switzerland. On the basis of German documents a conclusion can be made that the action was inspired by former soldiers of the 23rd and 34th battalions of the BKA.¹³⁰

Soon the desertions became so frequent that in December 1944 the high command was forced to withdraw the division to the rear. Some of the soldiers, including the officers, were taken to the military court. What became of these deserters after that? The author has information on about 100 soldiers of Belarusian nationality, who from September to November 1944 deserted or went over to the Allies, and then volunteered for the Polish Armed Forces in the West. Among them were also former cadets of the BKA military school. Going over to the side of the Allies has been vividly described in the memoirs by the cadets themselves residing after the war in the West.¹³¹ Initially, they were incarcerated in Allied camps in France, then declared their willingness to join the Polish Army. In January 1945, they were enrolled in the 2nd Polish Corps of General W. Anders in Italy. Many of them took part in the battles with the German 10th Army as Polish soldiers.

Despite numerous cases of group desertion, some reports of the high command of Army Group 'G' indicates that there were also acts of valour and courage of the former BKA soldiers on the battlefield. The attitude of Belarusian soldiers of the 30th SS division during combat operations was also described in his field diary on 6 September 1944 by the liaison officer Senior Lieutenant Hansen: 'In the 30th division there is a formation, composed of the officers of the Belarusian Youth Union. Despite the fact that the division soldiers have lost their morale, as well as shortage of arms and food, the Belarusian unit still retains a state of high combat readiness'.¹³² Any signs of a certain loyalty to the Germans should be treated as a unique and isolated phenomenon, because the general mood of the soldiers was reversed.

The last episode associated with the BKA evidently was the creation of the 1st school battalion of the BKA in October 1944 in Berlin (commander F. Kushal). In March 1945, the battalion numbered only 196 people¹³³ who were soon incorporated into the 30th

grenadier division of the SS (1st Belarusian), which was stationed in Bavaria and was in the stage of forming on the basis of the existing 30th grenadier division of the SS (2nd Russian). In April 1945, the Belarusian soldiers surrendered to the Americans.¹³⁴ This fact should be considered as the end to the war epic of the Belarusian National Defence soldiers.

In the conclusion, it should be admitted that hopes of the founders of the BKA concerning this unit did not come true. This was influenced by political issues. From the very beginning the German high command and the command of Belarusian activists cooperating with the Third Reich were characterized by diametrically different approach to the issue of functioning of the BKA. The Belarusians saw in this unit the germ of a national army while the Germans treated the soldiers of the BKA like common cannon fodder. However, in the evaluation of the role of the BKA it should be stressed that despite of everything it was one of the most advanced attempts at establishing of regular national and Belarusian armed units during World War II.

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BALTKRIEVIJAS NACIONĀLĀ AIZSARDZĪBA: DIBINĀŠANAS VĒSTURE UN DARBĪBA (1944-1945)

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Atslēgas vārdi: Baltkrievija, Otrais pasaules karš, Trešais reihs, kolaborācija, Baltkrievijas Nacionālā aizsardzība.

Kopsavilkums

Otrā pasaules kara laikā pēc vairākiem svarīgiem notikumiem Baltkrievijā sākās vietējo iedzīvotāju kolaborācija ar vācu okupācijas varas iestādēm. Viena no acīmredzamākajām kolaborācijas epizodēm bija Baltkrievijas Nacionālās aizsardzības dibināšana un darbība. Bruņotā vienība tika izveidota 1944. gada pavasarī un vasaras sākumā ar mobilizācijas palīdzību, un tās mērķis bija bruņota cīņa ar padomju partizāniem un Sarkano armiju. Rakstā analizēts vienības izveidošanas process, tās lielums, kaujas gatavības pakāpe un līdzdalība karadarbībā. 1944. gada vasarā pēc vācu armijas atkāpšanās no Baltkrievijas teritorijas zināms skaits Baltkrievijas Nacionālās aizsardzības karavīru ieradās Rietumu frontē.

Iesniegts 03.06.2014.