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_Reckoning the Cost of People's War: The German Experience in the Central USSR_

Before nightfall on 22 June 1941, the first day of Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union, the Seventh Panzer Division of the attacking Army Group Center encountered armed Soviet civilians who ambushed German vehicles and soldiers. During the first forty-eight hours of the invasion, at least two members of the division had been killed and several wounded, while fifteen guerrillas were shot in battle or summarily executed.¹ The partisan war in the central USSR had claimed its first victims.

An unresolved question of that conflict, however, remains: how many victims were there? How many casualties did the Soviet partisans inflict on German and satellite forces, and how many partisans, "suspects," and hostages died at the hands of the Germans? Estimates of Marxist and Western historians vary wildly on these matters. The Soviet official history claims a total of 1.5 million enemy soldiers, civil officials, and "traitors" put out of action by partisans, one-third of whom fell in Belorussia.² The standard Western study of the Soviet partisans, however, estimates the partisans inflicted only 35,000 total casualties, only half of whom were Germans,³ while a recent account places German and satellite losses at 45,000 "killed."⁴ The number of Russians killed in the course of German anti-partisan operations likewise varies considerably according to the source: Soviet histories acknowledge a loss of 25,000 partisans killed in action in Belorussia, and offer the amazingly precise figure of 1,409,225 civilian victims of the German occupation of the

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same area; Western estimates range from Gerald Reitlinger’s 250,000 to Alexander Werth’s one million.

Disparate as all of these estimates and calculations are, they share a common problem: none review the data bases which produced them. The Soviet estimates presumably derive from records in Soviet archives, but these—save for some documentary publications—are unavailable to Western scholars. The latter have utilized the voluminous German operational records seized by the Allies and largely microfilmed by the National Archives prior to restitution to the German Federal Republic, yet no systematic examination of that data has appeared. What might such an examination, supplemented by published documentation from Soviet archives, reveal? Whose estimates would be strengthened, weakened, or possibly reconciled? The purpose of this article is to answer these questions.

As the volume of material precludes a detailed treatment of all German-occupied Soviet territory, our study will focus upon the central sector, comprising Belorussia and the western Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic (RSFSR). This concentration on the stronghold of the partisans also permits comparisons with the data presented in recent Soviet documentary publications concerning occupation policy and guerrilla warfare in this area.


8. Two excellent accounts based on these records are Edgar M. Howell, The Soviet Partisan Movement 1941-1944 (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1956), and Erich Nesse, Der sowjetrussische Partisanenkrieg 1941 bis 1944 im Spiegel deutscher Kampfverweisungen und Befehle (Göttingen: Musterschmidt Verlag, 1963); neither work, however, attempts a statistical summary.

9. E.g., Prestupleniia nemetskogo-fashistskikh okkupantov v Belorussii 1941-1944, comp. Institut Istorii Akademii nauk BSSR (Minsk: Belarus, 1965), and the multi-volume publication prepared by the same staff, Vsenarodnoe partizanskoe dvizhenie v belorussii v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny 1941-iyul 1944: Dokumenty i materialy v trekh tomakh, of which the following volumes are available: Vol. I: Zarozhdienie i razvitie partizanskogo dvizheniia v pervy i voiny, 1941-1943 (Minsk: Belarus, 1967), and Vol. II: Razvitie vsenarodnogo-partizanskogo dvizheniia v voyne 1943 (two parts) (Minsk: Belarus, 1973 and 1978). Subsequent citations to this work will use the abbreviation VPDB, followed by volume, part, and page number.