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History of the Jewish National Military Unit Project as part of the Red Army in 1942–1943

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Abstract: During the Great Patriotic War, over fifty national military units were formed as part of the Red Army. In addition, military units were composed of foreign citizens. Based on documentary sources, the article examines the history of the unrealized project of forming a Jewish Army in early 1943. The analysis is based on the set of documents revealed by the author in the fund of the Chief Directorate for the Formation and Staffing of Troops (Glavupraform) of the Red Army in the Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation. The article examines the peculiarities of Soviet Jews' position in the Red Army, associated with their high representation among the commanding staff. From the beginning of the war, the Jewish public debated the formation of a Jewish military unit as part of the Red Army. This issue was close to realization only once. The appeal of a serviceman, G.L. Zilberman, was received by E.A. Shchadenko, the Deputy People's Commissar of Defense, who on January 15, 1943, prepared a draft resolution of the State Defense Committee for the formation of a force. The article examines the circumstances of the preparation of this document and analyzes the reasons why it was not implemented.

Keywords: World War II, anti-Semitism, I.V. Stalin, Jews of the USSR in the war against Nazism, Jewish servicemen, national military formations

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История проекта еврейского национального воинского формирования в составе Красной армии в 1942–1943 гг.

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Аннотация: Участие советских евреев в вооруженной борьбе против нацистской Германии в качестве военнослужащих Красной армии до сих пор изучено недостаточно. Одной из любопытных тем является попытка создания еврейских национальных частей для борьбы на

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советско-германском фронте. В центре анализа в данной статье находится комплекс документов, обнаруженный автором в фонде Главного управления формирования и укомплектования войск (Главупраформа) Красной армии в Центральном архиве Минобороны РФ. На основе этого и других документальных источников рассматривается история нереализованного проекта формирования Отдельной еврейской армии в начале 1943 г.: причины и обстоятельства возникновения общественного запроса на создание еврейской воинской части в начале войны; трансляция этого запроса через обращения инициативных лиц в адрес органов государственной власти и общественных организаций; переадресация обращений воентехника 1-го ранга Г.Л. Зильбермана заместителю наркома обороны Е.А. Щаденко; разработка под руководством Щаденко проекта еврейской армии; анализ реализуемости проекта и обстоятельств его отклонения высшей властью страны. В статье также рассмотрены особенности представленности евреев в Красной армии, их служебного положения и продвижения по службе, а также отражение их усилий на фронте в советском общественном сознании. Сделан вывод о том, что замысел формирования еврейской армии был вполне реализуем с организационной точки зрения, однако в глазах руководства страны не имел той политической актуальности, которой обладали иные, осуществляемые в тот же период проекты национальных воинских формирований.

Ключевые слова: ключевые слова, ключевые слова, ключевые слова, ключевые слова, ключевые слова, ключевые слова, ключевые слова, ключевые слова, ключевые слова

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Introduction

Relevance. During the first period of the Great Patriotic War (1941–1942), there were wide number of nationalities represented through military units as part of the Red Army. They were created for representatives of those Soviet ethnic groups which, for the most part, had poor knowledge of the Russian language. For the peoples well integrated into Russian-speaking society, national units were not created. By the beginning of the war, citizens of Jewish nationality had been generally integrated into the Soviet Russian-speaking socio-cultural environment. Nevertheless, the possibility of the formation of special Jewish national units was still discussed throughout the war. The documents of the People's Commissariat of Defense of the USSR recently found in the Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation indicates that at the turn of 1943 the possibility of creating a Jewish army as part of the Red Army was being worked out at the highest level, and it came to the preparation of a specific formation plan for approval by J.V. Stalin, the Chairman of the State Defense Committee. Despite their obvious scientific value, these documents are to this day completely unknown to the scientific community, which shows relevance of this article.

Elaboration of the problem. The issues of the participation of Soviet Jews as the Red Army soldiers in an armed struggle against Nazism have been previous raised in scientific literature, but mainly this subject of interest has been only weakly substantiated by sources of journalism¹. It is the political, propaganda and socio-political context of Soviet Jews'

¹ A.L. Abramovich, *V reshaiushchei voine. Uchastie i rol evreev SSSR v voine protiv natsizma* [In a decisive war. The participation and role of the Jews of the USSR in the war against Nazism] (Tel Aviv: [N.s.], 1981); *Yevrei v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny: vklad v pobedu* [Jews during the Great Patriotic War Jews

participation in the Great Patriotic War which should be thoroughly considered². In particular, O.V. Budnitsky analyzed the personal aspect of the Jews' military service, presented in numerous diaries of the war period³. The discourse on the possible formation of Jewish military units is not novel in historiography, but so far there has been insignificant public request on the initiatives of Jewish military personnel and cultural figures⁴. Reflecting on the reasons for which J.V. Stalin did not create a Jewish military unit, many authors emphasize the anti-Semitic features of his politics which resulted in indirect decisions and various kinds of hidden barriers. A.G. Kostyrchenko described this course as "state anti-Semitism in veiled terms"⁵.

The purpose of the study is to examine archival materials of the Soviet military department on the issue of the formation of a Jewish military unit. It utilizes material introduced into scientific use for the first time of previously unknown aspects of Soviet Jews' participation in the armed struggle against Nazi Germany and is related to the project of the formation of a separate Jewish army.

Source base. The article is based on the documents of the central governing bodies of the People's Commissariat of Defense of the USSR stored in the Russian State Military Archive – (F. 39415 – the Chief Directorate of the Formation and Staffing of the Red Army forces) and in the Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation – (F. 7 – The Main Organizational and Mobilization Department of the General Staff of the Red Army; F. 56 – Chief Directorate for the Formation and Staffing of the Red Army forces), as well as published materials on the activities of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC)⁶. The biographical and official data of the characters mentioned in the article were checked against the materials of the documentary database "Memory of the people".

The analysis is centered on the set of documents with the draft resolution of the State Defense Committee on the formation of a separate Jewish army. The documents were found in the materials of the management of reserve units and draft of reinforcements of the front of the Chief Directorate of the Formations and Staffing of the Red Army of the Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation. The name of the project of the Jewish army was not included in the inventory; the inventory of the management of

in the Great Patriotic War: Contribution to Victory] (Moscow: Vorobyev A.V. Publ., 2016); A.V. Zotova, "Soviet Jews in the fight against Nazism during the Great Patriotic War (historiography of the topic)," *Klio*, no. 12 (2017): 27–37.

² G.V. Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Stalina. Vlast i antisemitizm* [Stalin's secret policy. Power and anti-Semitism], 222–271 (Moscow: International Relations Publ., 2001); G.V. Kostyrchenko, "Yevreiskii antifashistskii komitet v gody voyny: mezhdru ofitsialnoi propagandistskoi missiiei i borboi za natsionalnoie vyzhivaniie i dostoinstvo [Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee During the War: Between the Official Propaganda Mission and the Struggle for National Survival and Dignity]," in *Puti k Pobede. Chelovek, obshchestvo i gosudarstvo v gody Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyny: materialy XIII Mezhdunarodnoy nauchnoy konferentsii, Yekaterinburg, 21–24 iyunya 2021 g.*, (Moscow: EGU Publ., 2021); K. Feferman, " 'The Jews' War': Attitudes of Soviet Jewish Soldiers and Officers Toward the USSR in 1940–41," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 27 (2014): 574–590, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2014.963407>; S. Rudnitsky, "Prisoners Nos. 41 and 42. The Fates of Victor Alter and Henrik Erlich in Soviet Prison," *Judaic-Slavic Journal* 2, no. 1 (2019): 215–233.

³ O.V. Budnitsky, "Jews at War. Soldiers' Diaries," *Lechaim*, no. 5 (2010): 28–34; O.V. Budnitsky, "Jews at War: From Soviet to Jewish?," *Lechaim*, no. 9 (2010): 36–41.

⁴ A. Shneer, *Plen. Sovetskie voennoplennyye v Germanii* [Captive. Soviet prisoners of war in Germany], 339–350 (Moscow: Mosty kul'tury Publ., 2005); I. Arad, *Oni srazhalis za Rodinu: evrei Sovetskogo Soiuza v Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine* [They fought for their homeland: the Jews of the Soviet Union in the Great Patriotic War], 57–65 (Moscow: Mosty kul'tury Publ.; Jerusalem: Gesheirim Publ., 2011).

⁵ G.V. Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Stalina*, 244–245.

⁶ *Yevreiskii antifashistskii komitet v SSSR, 1941–1948: Dokumentirovannaiia istoriia* [The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee in the USSR, 1941–1948: Documented History] (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyie otnosheniia Publ., 1996).

reserve units and draft of reinforcements was in low demand among researchers, therefore the materials had not been used for a significant period of time.

The set of documents in question was printed in triplicate. One of them was handed over to the head of the Organizational and Mobilization Department of the General Staff of the Red Army and obviously remained in this body. Another (third) copy was destroyed under the act of May 6, 1943; there is a corresponding mark on the preserved copy. The set of the documents that we found is the first copy (in the margins it is called the “original”). It consists of two appeals from the Red Army soldiers (G.L. Zilberman and A.N. Taits), a cover letter from the apparatus of the Secretary of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks and the first secretary of the Leningrad city committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks A.A. Zhdanov. Additional reference material for the project includes an order of the Deputy People's Commissar of Defense, Colonel General E.A. Shchadenko by Major General S.N. Krasilnikov, the head of the department of reserve units and draft of reinforcements of the Chief Directorate of the Formations and Staffing of the Red Army, as well as a the draft resolution of the State Defense Committee and the accompanying report of E.A. Shchadenko addressed to J.V. Stalin.

Jews in the Red Army on the eve of the Great Patriotic War

Soviet Jews were both active participants in the construction of Stalinist socialism and its beneficiaries, delegating their representatives to the core of party-state, production, cultural, educational, scientific elites of Soviet society⁷. In the field of the Armed Forces creation on the eve of the war, the Jews took one of the leading places in the Red Army, often making brilliant careers in all kinds of commands. The “entrance fee” (high-quality general education and a good command of the Russian language) which was impractical for many *nationals* of those years was not a barrier for most Soviet Jews, due to a high degree of assimilation in the Russian-speaking cultural environment. Speaking of the Soviet Jews of the 1930s, Yu. Slezkine rightly notes that:

no other people [in the USSR] were so Soviet, and no other people showed such readiness to abandon their language, rites and traditional places of residence...⁸

The career focus of the Jewish military personnel is also evidenced by the fact that, according to the census of the Red Army personnel, which was carried out simultaneously with the All-Union census of the population in January 1939, only 21 % of them named the Jewish language as their native one⁹. This is half as much as among the entire civilian Jewish population of the USSR (41.5 %¹⁰). The Red Army census showed that among Jewish military personnel there was the highest percentage of persons with higher and secondary education 11 % and 63 %, respectively (among the civilian population, this percentage was 7 % and 25.6 % respectively¹¹). In general, the indicators of the basic education among

⁷ The exception is the Jewish population of the western territories annexed to the Soviet Union before the war, which did not have time to integrate into Soviet society. At the beginning of the war, almost all of it was under occupation. The article examines the “native” Soviet Jewish population and its participation in the armed forces of the USSR.

⁸ Yu. Slezkine, *Era Merkurii: Evrei v sovremennom mire* [The Era of Mercury: Jews in the Modern World], 319 (Moscow: Novoye literaturnoye obozreniye Publ., 2005).

⁹ *Tsentralnyi arkhiv ministerstva oborony Rossiiskoi Federatsii* [Central Archives of the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation] (hereafter – TSAMO RF), f. 7, op. 24, d. 135, l. 2–3.

¹⁰ *Vsesoiuznaia perepis naseleniia 1939 goda: Osnovnyie itogi: Rossiia* [All-Union Population Census of 1939: Main Results: Russia] (St. Petersburg: BLITS Publ., 1999).

¹¹ For comparison, among the Russian population there were about 0.9% of people with higher education and 9% with secondary education.

the Jews were the highest among all Soviet ethnic groups, which provided them with wide access to military schools and a further successful career in the Red Army in command positions and in positions of supply officers, engineers, doctors, lawyers, etc.)¹². Among the command staff of all nationalities, the Jews accounted for 3.7 %, whereas among all military personnel – 1.8 %, and among the population of the USSR (excluding the Jewish population of the western regions annexed in 1939–1940) there are even less – 1,64 %¹³. Among the military personnel of Jewish nationality, the share of command staff reached 26.9 % – this is also a record among all Soviet national groups.

In the prewar years, the number of Jews among the Red Army low-ranking soldiers was also growing, but more slowly than among the command staff. By the beginning of 1941, the number of low-ranking soldiers and junior commanders reached 48 thousand people¹⁴ (2 % of the total Red Army). The total number of Jews in the ranks of the Red Army for three years more than tripled: from 22.5 thousand people in 1938 to 75.4 thousand people – in 1941¹⁵. However, in those years, the number of the entire Red Army grew in proportion as well.

The representation of Jews among various categories of military personnel of the Red Army according to the archival documents of the Soviet military department should be studied, but even the data given is enough to understand that at that time Jews made a no less brilliant career in the Red Army than in science, art, and in the system of party and state management. Therefore, the opinion in modern literature that Jews faced some “career restrictions”¹⁶ in the military sphere is groundless.

Soviet Jewish community and Jews' efforts on the fronts of the Great Patriotic War

The military personnel of Jewish nationality took an active part in the Great Patriotic War from its first days. Their number in terms of active enlistment had increased many times compared to the pre-war period. The first statistically accurate information concerning the number of Jewish military personnel in the ranks of the Red Army during the war period dates to July 1, 1942, when their number reached 178,152 people¹⁷. According to these data, they ranked sixth in the Red Army after: Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars, Belarusians, and Kazakhs.

In the second half of 1941 and early 1942, more than fifty national military units were formed as part of the Red Army, the task of which was to conciliate cultural and linguistic differences for military personnel called up for military service from various republics of the USSR, including the RSFSR. The units were often initiated by local party and state elites demonstrating in this way to the country's leadership the active participation of their people in the common struggle against the invaders. In the case of Jews, these conditions were not relevant: Jews did not need any special socialization in the armed forces, nor did they have their own authorities who were ready to advocate for their needs and interests with the country's leadership (we do not take into account the politically powerless Jewish Autonomous Region of the RSFSR). The discourse on the potential Jewish

¹² Accordingly, for Russians these figures were 1.5 and 32%.

¹³ TSAMO RF, f. 7, op. 26, d. 123, l. 2.

¹⁴ Ibid., 21.

¹⁵ Ibid., f. 7, op. 24, d. 114, l. 2; TSAMO RF, f. 7, op. 26, d. 123, l. 2, 21.

¹⁶ V. Konstantinov, *Evreiskoe naselenie byvshego SSSR v XX veke: (sotsialno-demograficheskii analiz)* [The Jewish population of the former USSR in the twentieth century: (socio-demographic analysis)], 74, 297 (Jerusalem: Lira Publ., 2007).

¹⁷ TSAMO RF, f. 7, op. 26, d. 181, l. 2 ob.

military unit had a completely different nature, chronology, and developmental trajectory. Perhaps, there can only be seen clearly in two forms regarding this discourse, which often intersect – the international and internal political realms respectively.

The idea of creating a Jewish national unit was discussed almost from the very beginning of the war, long before it arose regarding other Soviet national groups. This idea emerged on the international agenda simultaneously with the Polish and Czechoslovak units covered in the Soviet and foreign press; their creation began in the summer of 1941 through an agreement between the Soviet government with their Polish and Czech officials in exile, and through the mediation of Western allies, above all the UK¹⁸. The military-diplomatic combination of the Soviet government with bourgeois states that was unthinkable several months before gave a reason to hope that such an agreement in one form or another was also feasible with international Jewish organizations. In the first months of the war, there was discussion of the involvement of representatives and foreign diasporas in the struggle on the Soviet-German front. On August 24, 1941, in Moscow, local Soviet Jews held the first All-Jewish rally which was broadcast on the radio to many countries and had a wide resonance among other Soviet Jews, for whom “the word ‘Jewish’ resonated for the first time after the war began.”¹⁹

The most achievable goal was to create a military unit from Polish Jews. It could have been created within the Polish Army of General W. Anders which was being formed in the USSR. This issue was discussed with Anders in the fall of 1941 by G. Erlich and V. Alter, the Bund figures in Poland that were authoritative in international circles²⁰. Being consistent critics of the Soviet regime, in the fall of 1939, they had resisted Soviet authorities in territory occupied by Soviet troops. Both were arrested by the NKVD bodies and at the beginning of the Great Patriotic War they were sentenced to death on charges of association with Polish intelligence. However, in September 1941, against the backdrop of a successfully developing Soviet-Polish military-political dialogue, the situation changed dramatically. On the initiative of People's Commissar for Internal Affairs L.P. Beria²¹, Erlich and Alter were released, presumably in order to create the International Anti-Fascist Jewish Organization (Committee), the project of which they proposed to the Soviet government while they were still in prison²². The committee could have engaged in the organization of international assistance to the Soviet Union. While being evacuated to Kuybyshev along with the Polish embassy, they came into contact with Western diplomatic representatives who had moved there, proposing, among other things, to form the “Jewish Legion” in the United States and to transfer it to the Soviet-German front. In the end, the overconfident activity of Erlich and Alter who believed in their indispensability ended with new arrest and long detention in the Kuybyshev prison of the NKVD. On May 14, 1942, G. Erlich committed suicide, and V. Alter was secretly executed on February 17, 1943²³. The issue of the “Jewish legion” created by foreign Jews was raised from time to time, however, each time these were only individual initiatives.

The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC) created under the Soviet Information Bureau at the beginning of 1942 was initially focused on information and propaganda activities, as well as on the collection of material and financial assistance to the Soviet Union

¹⁸ A. Bezugolny, “The Manning of Polish Troops in the USSR and the First Polish Army: Problems of Ethnicity and Nationality, 1943–1945,” *Modern and Contemporary History*, no. 4 (2022): 98–119, <https://doi.org/10.31857/S013038640021034-5>

¹⁹ *Yevreiskii antifashistskii komitet*, 32.

²⁰ V. Anders, “Without the last chapter. The Polish Army in the USSR,” *Zvezda*, no. 1 (2013): 183.

²¹ G.V. Kostyrchenko, *Yevreyskiy antifashistskiy komitet*, 213.

²² *Yevreiskii antifashistskii komitet*, 24–25.

²³ S. Rudnicky, “Prisoners Nos. 41 and 42”, 227–231.

from international Jewish organizations. Its individual members' attempts to discuss empowering the JAC to represent the interests of all Soviet Jews were not encouraged. Occasionally, the idea of the "Jewish military unit" was voiced at the 1st and 2nd plenums of the JAC (May 28, 1942 and February 18–20, 1943), but it was not developed further²⁴. The JAC which almost entirely consisted of the figures of science, art and culture who were far from the military sphere and were hardly able to correctly reflect on this idea and to propose a specific plan of the Jewish military unit to the authorities. Such a unit was never mentioned later, and only came up later in 1949–1952, in the protocols of interrogations and in the indictment of the JAC members, who were accused of incredible "nationalist" plans. It seems that the idea of creating Jewish military units, if it had really been discussed in the JAC, were only used in the revelatory schemes of later investigators.

The JAC never became a "body for Jewish affairs", therefore, various organizations and figures received a proposal to create Jewish military units: the JAC and its individual members (S.M. Mikhoels, P.D. Markish), journalists (I.G. Ehrenburg), party leaders (A.A. Zhdanov, A.S. Shcherbakov) and certainly J.V. Stalin. It is necessary to mention another motive, which was pointed out in almost all such initiatives. It was based on the desire to disprove the thesis "Jews do not fight", which was widespread in the Soviet rear and at the front, as there was an opinion that Jews were trying to avoid military service or at least the front line itself. In a letter to S.M. Mikhoels, I. Kalmanovich from the city of Frunze of the Kyrgyz SSR described the problem in historical terms:

Many people in all countries, including the Jews, have a thousand-year prejudice about the alleged intrinsic inability of our people for military matters²⁵.

Whereas in the troops anti-Semitic attacks were, as a rule, strictly suppressed, then in the rear, in places of evacuation of the Jewish population, they were in comparison, widespread. Objectively, the growth of anti-Semitic sentiments was associated with the forced mass displacements of the Jewish population deep into the rear and social distortions caused by these: a shortage of living space, high cost of products, and competition for jobs²⁶. According to W. Anders, during the negotiations with Polish Prime Minister W. Sikorski in December 1941, even Stalin said that "Jews are bad soldiers" and "worthless warriors". However, judging by the context of the conversation, in this case he was probably playing along with the anti-Semitic statements of the Poles, with whom at that time he did not want to spoil the relations of which had become increasingly tense²⁷.

The incitement to hatred for the Jews was one of the main points of Nazi propaganda towards Soviet citizens. As K. Feferman notes, the enemy tried:

to put into the heads of Soviet people the idea of Jews' cowardice and their strategy of sending non-Jews to fight for Jews... Fearing to play into Germany's hands, the wartime Soviet counter-propaganda never openly challenged this assertion, stating only that the war was being waged against the entire Soviet people. Soviet media avoided publishing any mention of Jews' association with the Bolshevik regime or of Jews' possible special motives in fighting for the USSR²⁸.

The Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda and manifestations of anti-Semitism in the Soviet rear and at the front forced the leadership of the Jewish Anti-Semitic Committee to take an

²⁴ *Yevreiskii antifashistskii komitet*, 70, 72.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁶ T. Kende, "Anti-Semitism and inner fronts in the USSR during World War II," *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 26, no. 6 (2019): 963–976, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2019.1625308>

²⁷ V. Anders, "Without the last chapter," 195.

²⁸ K. Feferman, " 'The Jews' War' ," 574–575.

active position in presenting the efforts of Jews at the front, seeing collecting and popularizing in the USSR and abroad “accurate information about the role and participation of Jews in the Patriotic War” was one of the main tasks of the committee²⁹. Apart from mobilizing international Jewry to fight Nazism and organizing a movement of anti-fascist solidarity with the USSR among Jews around the world, the coverage of Jews’ heroism at the front, radio rallies, and oral propaganda was aimed at combating the anti-Semitic thesis “Jews do not fight.” However, the best argument in this counter-propaganda could have been a real Jewish military unit, capable of “highlighting” the participation of Soviet Jews in battles by showing this participation in a more concentrated and clear manner.

It was a number of appeals by technician-lieutenant G.L. Zilberman who served in the sorting and evacuation hospital No. 1170 in Leningrad which became a direct impetus for the appearance of this issue on the agenda of the Soviet military department. After the war, Zilberman explained his motives by the fight against anti-Semitic sentiments of a part of Soviet society:

I pursued the following goal – to put an end to the constant talk that everyone was fighting while Jews were in Tashkent. The existence of a Jewish, I emphasize, Jewish army would deprive the anti-Semites of their last trump cards!³⁰

“A Jewish national unit in the form of a small army...”³¹

The first letter on the issue of “organizing a Jewish volunteer army” was sent by G. L. Zilberman in December 1941 to the Council of Nationalities of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, with a copy was sent to the Military Council of the Leningrad Front. Then he wrote two letters personally to A. A. Zhdanov, the Secretary of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks and the First Secretary of the Leningrad City Committee. The motives voiced in the letters did not include the issue of anti-Semitism, but he mentioned the possibility of mobilizing international Jewry, which was popular at the beginning of the war and was being publicly discussed; he expressed confidence that “the possibilities of attracting human and material reserves, both in our country and, most importantly, outside our Union, have not been exhausted.”³²

G. L. Zilberman’s first letter was lost in Zhdanov’s secretariat; the second one was forwarded from the secretariat to the Chief Political Directorate of the Red Army in the spring of 1942. From there, in May 1942, it was forwarded to the Chief Directorate for the Formation and Staffing of the Red Army forces; Zilberman received a written notification about it. However, there was no news from the Chief Directorate for the Formation and Staffing of the Red Army forces, and Zilberman wrote to A. A. Zhdanov again³³. He was persistent and politely asked again and again:

If for some reason the question I have asked cannot be resolved in this form, I would like to know the reasons...³⁴

After November 1942, G.L. Zilberman no longer bothered anyone with his idea. He remembered the story of the fruitless correspondence in detail, and in his declining years

²⁹ *Yevreiskii antifashistskii komitet*, 57.

³⁰ Ya. Lipkovich, “One destiny,” *AMI-Narod moi*, no. 15 (2013): 126–137, <https://ami.spb.ru/A236/A236-41.htm>.

³¹ TSAMO RF, f. 56, op. 12236, d. 382, l. 67.

³² *Ibid.*, l. 53.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

he told it to journalist Ya. Lipkovich³⁵. Unfortunately, Zilberman never learnt that his last letter had unexpectedly been given a go-ahead and that he had found a powerful ally in the person of E.A. Shchadenko, the Deputy People's Commissar of Defense, Army Commissar 1st rank (from December 6, 1942 – Colonel General).



Fig. 1. G.L. Zilberman

Source: https://pamyat-naroda.ru/heroes/booklet/?index=podvig&type=chelovek_nagrazhdenie&id=1560287744 (accessed: 27.09.2024).



Fig. 2. E.A. Shchadenko (1943)

Source: <https://pamyat-naroda.ru/heroes/pamyat-commander1421/?ysclid=mb146lmk5o485365412>

On November 15, 1942, A.A. Kuznetsov, the second secretary of the Leningrad City Committee sent on Zhdanov's instructions another (the last) letter from Zilberman to the Chief Directorate for the Formation and Staffing of the Red Army forces, and it was reported personally to E.A. Shchadenko. This time, the seed fell on fertile soil: the deputy people's commissar got interested in the idea, although he could have sent Zilberman's letter straight to the archive: the neutral formula of the cover letter from Zhdanov's secretariat “for consideration” did not oblige him to do anything. It should be noted that Shchadenko had adventurous spirit, which may have played a positive role in the development of the project. Occupying the position of head of the Chief Directorate for the Formation and Staffing of the Red Army forces from August 1941 to May 1943, Shchadenko repeatedly proposed to Stalin unhackneyed projects related to the creation of the Armed forces³⁶.

In addition to G.L. Zilberman's letter, which came to Shchadenko, there was a letter written during those same days, very similar in content addressed to J.V. Stalin from A.N. Taits, a student of the V.I. Lenin Military-Political Academy³⁷, who also advocated for a “separate national Jewish unit”³⁸. Taits' letter was forwarded to the office of the Deputy People's Commissar of Defense from the Special Department of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks. After reading both letters, Shchadenko

³⁵ Ya. Lipkovich, “One destiny,” *AMI-Narod moi*, no. 15 (2013): 126–137, <https://ami.spb.ru/A236/A236-41.htm>.

³⁶ For example, in the fall of 1941, he proposed forming two partisan armies – in the south of Russia and near Moscow, and in the fall of 1942 – five shock armies of a “new type” at once, which, according to his plan, in the spring of 1943 were to go on the strategic offensive and decide the outcome of the war.

³⁷ Battalion Commissar Abram Nikolaevich Taits was appointed to the Political Directorate of the Southern Front on December 30, 1942, fought as deputy chief of the political department of the 16th Guards Bashkir Cavalry Division and went missing on February 23, 1943, during a division raid behind enemy lines. He was declared dead in 1945 (Memory of the People website).

³⁸ TSAMO RF, f. 56, op. 12236, d. 382, l. 63–63 ob.

asked the opinion of his deputy for reserve units and draft of reinforcements, Major General S.N. Krasilnikov, by also instructing him to find out how many Jews were listed in the active army and “in the reserve units,” how many of them would join the troops with the conscription of citizens born in 1925³⁹ and how many of them would remain “in reserve and in other categories.”⁴⁰

On January 2, 1943, a document on the number of Jews in the Red Army as of October 1, 1942, was provided by Colonel S. M. Podolsky, the head of the 8th department (accounting for the number of Red Army personnel) of the Organizational and Accounting Directorate of the General Staff of the Red Army. As it turned out, there were 106.1 thousand Jews on the active fronts, 9.6 thousand on the non-active ones; 54.3 thousand in the military districts; 839 people in the chief directorates of the People's Commissariat of Defense. The total number of military personnel was 170.8 thousand people. There was also expected the conscription of 9.6 thousand people born in 1925⁴¹.

Obviously Major General S. N. Krasilnikov immediately disliked the idea of a Jewish army so much that, when he delegated the task of collecting information on the current number of Jews in the Red Army to his subordinate Colonel S. G. Latyshev, he gave him the following instructions: “Prepare for the Deputy Commissar of Defence⁴² a report on the *inexpediency* (italicized by the author) of creating a special Jewish army.”⁴³ When, a few days later, he presented a report to E. A. Shchadenko “On the Formation of a Jewish Army,” Krasilnikov expressed doubt that the number of the available resources of Jewish military personnel would make it easy to form a Jewish army and maintain its staff during battles:

Given that a significant portion of Jewish military personnel are out of action (workmen of all specialties, musicians, commissariat workers, staff commanders, political workers of all branches of the armed forces, procurement officers, doctors, etc.), taking them from the active army will be difficult and impractical – at best, 50-60 thousand [people] can be assigned for the formation of a Jewish army... I consider the formation of an army based on 50-60 thousand people of all specialties to be impossible, especially since there will be no human resources to replenish this army [in the future]⁴⁴.

When giving the order to S.G. Latyshev, Krasilnikov suggested, not without mockery, that “for the sake of experience, it would be better to form one Jewish division and send it to the front, where successful battles are taking place, so that [it] would take fascists prisoner for their greater shame.”⁴⁵ When formulating the same idea to his superior E.A. Shchadenko, he was serious: in his opinion, the first Jewish division formed should be sent “to the active front, where serious success has already been achieved,” and:

in order to immediately harden it in successful battles, to inspire confidence in its own strength to the personnel of this division and create a good reputation for it in the [Red] Army⁴⁶.

Nevertheless, S.N. Krasilnikov's objections did not seem convincing to E.A. Shchadenko, and on January 15, 1943, there was made a draft resolution of the State Defense Committee on the formation of a Jewish army. Attached to the draft was a report addressed to J.V. Stalin, prepared for E.A. Shchadenko by Colonel S.G. Latyshev. The

³⁹ *Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsialno-politicheskoi istorii* [Russian State Archive of Social and Political History] (hereafter – RGASPI), f. 644, op. 2, d. 117, l. 62–70.

⁴⁰ TSAMO RF, f. 56, op. 12236, d. 382, l. 53.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, l. 55–57.

⁴² That is, to the Deputy People's Commissar of Defense E.A. Shchadenko.

⁴³ TSAMO RF, f. 56, op. 12236, d. 382, l. 54.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

latter, without further ado, used many provisions (sometimes verbatim) from a letter addressed to Stalin by battalion commissar A.N. Taits.



Fig. 3. S.N. Krasil'nikov

Sours: https://pamyat-naroda.ru/heroes/booklet/?index=podvig&type=nagrada_kartoteka&id=1370936797 (accessed: 27.09.2024).



Fig. 4. S.G. Latyshev

Sours: <https://pamyat-naroda.ru/heroes/booklet/?index=person&type=hero&id=123882750> (accessed: 27.09.2024).

Shchadenko did not consider it necessary or did not have time to correct the report (in the evening of that day he was summoned to Stalin⁴⁷), so he voluntarily or involuntarily conveyed the rhetoric of the Jewish community in the person of A.N. Taits. The report noted that the Red Army already had national units that “proved themselves quite well in battle,” but “there is no Jewish national unit.” “Jewish workers,” according to E.A. Shchadenko, serve in the international units of the Red Army along with the rest of the workers of the Soviet Union. Later in the report, he got to the core of the matter:

Their (i.e. Jews’ – author’s note) participation in the battles for the Soviet Motherland is inconspicuous, and partly for this reason some backward groups of the population still have ... negative attitudes, which are specifically expressed through statements that most Jews avoid the front⁴⁸.

In this regard, E.A. Shchadenko considered it “timely and useful to form a Jewish national unit in the form of a small army within the Red Army units...”⁴⁹ He also expressed the opinion (also quoting Taits’ letter) that “the creation of such an army will undoubtedly have a favorable response and approval from the world community.”⁵⁰

According to the project, a separate Jewish Army was to have: a command and political department, four rifle divisions, one tank brigade, one cannon regiment, one howitzer regiment, one anti-aircraft artillery regiment, a fighter-anti-tank regiment, rear units and institutions, one reserve brigade, and a reserve rifle regiment. As can be seen, the organization of a separate Jewish Army was planned by E.A. Shchadenko according to the

⁴⁷ *Na prieme u Stalina. Tetradi (zhurnaly) zapisei lits, prinyatykh I.V. Staliny (1924–1953 gg.): Spravochnik* [At a Reception with Stalin. Notebooks (journals) of records of persons received by I.V. Stalin (1924–1953): Handbook], 395 (Moscow: Novyi khronograf Publ., 2008).

⁴⁸ TSAMO RF, f. 56, op. 12236, d. 382, l. 64.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

“economical” model of a regular combined arms army from the initial period of the war, without taking into account the corps organization which was being restored just during that period of the war and without significant means of reinforcement at the disposal of the army commander.

The report provided a detailed calculation of the numbers, weapons, equipment and transport necessary to staff the Jewish army: 59,421 people, 8,321 horses, 2,468 cars and 358 tractors, 124 T-34 and T-60 tanks, 37,420 rifles and carbines, 2,823 light and heavy machine guns, 3,641 submachine guns, 692 mortars of various calibers, and 558 cannons and howitzers of various calibers⁵¹.

E.A. Shchadenko proposed appointing Major General Ya.G. Kreizer as the commander of the future army; he was a Jew by nationality, one of the first to be awarded the title of a Hero of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the war.

To what extent was this plan feasible? By the beginning of 1943, the Red Army staffing bodies had already accumulated considerable experience in creating national units which required special efforts to find human resources of the necessary nationality in the troops and in places of compact residence, to concentrate them in places of formation and to organize combat training in accordance with their national characteristics. However, there was no precedent for the formation of an entire national army.

Objecting to the formation of a Jewish army, General Krasilnikov especially emphasized the lack of available resources of servicemen of Jewish nationality. At the same time, the report received from the Organizational and Mobilization Department of the General Staff did not contain information on the available composition of Jewish servicemen by branch of the armed forces and official position (command staff, junior commanders and Red Army soldiers), except for their distribution among the fronts and military districts. Krasilnikov replaced the missing information in the report addressed to Shchadenko with the above-mentioned “improper information” (“workmen, musicians, political workers...”), and also complaining that “unfortunately, we do not keep detailed records of the categories of Jewish military personnel.”⁵²

In fact, a detailed report with socio-demographic and nationality data on the Red Army servicemen was being prepared at that time by the Organizational and Staff Directorate of the General Staff, but by the time the request was received it was in progress. It was not possible to find out whether these data were requested by Krasilnikov's assistant, Colonel S.G. Latyshev. However, today this gap can be closed by supplementing S.N. Krasilnikov's report made eighty years ago with archival data from the Organizational and Staff Directorate of the General Staff.

We have information on the accountable strength of the Red Army as of January 1, 1943 (data from the troops were submitted in advance and correspond to the beginning of December 1942). The number of Jewish servicemen almost coincides with the number that was provided by the General Staff to General Krasilnikov, namely 172 thousand people. This included 81.1 thousand privates, 24.2 thousand junior commanders and 66.7 thousand command personnel⁵³. As can be seen, the above-mentioned pre-war trend of a large number of Jews in the command personnel only increased; it now approached 40%. For comparison: among Russians, whose indicators can be considered the norm, the proportion of command personnel on the same date was 9.1%, and among ethnic groups for which national units were specially created, it was significantly lower: Armenians – 8.1%,

⁵¹ TSAMO RF, f. 56, op. 12236, d. 382, l. 64.

⁵² Ibid., l. 55.

⁵³ Ibid., f. 7, op. 26, d. 220, l. 29–48.

Kazakhs – 2.4%, Uzbeks – 1.5%, etc.⁵⁴ The acute shortage of national command personnel was a problem due to which, in particular, due to the fact it was necessary to cease the formation of most Central Asian national units. In this respect, the Jewish unit was in a much more favorable position compared to other national units, since it had a large surplus of command personnel. The total need for officer personnel for the Jewish army was only 6,740 individuals.

However, the Jewish unit could have faced an opposite difficulty – a shortage of privates and junior commanders. Of the specified 81.1 thousand privates and 24.2 thousand junior commanders, only 24.1 thousand and 8.3 thousand people, respectively, were serving in infantry. The rest served in other branches of the armed forces, were in reserve units, or belonged to the variable composition of military educational institutions, i.e. they were training to become officers⁵⁵. This meant that with the staff strength of a separate Jewish Army of 38.6 thousand privates and 14.1 thousand junior commanders⁵⁶ mentioned in the project, it would be necessary to find additional sources of recruitment. Obviously, this problem would be solved by conscripting young people born in 1925, transferring servicemen of Jewish nationality from other branches of the armed forces, as well as replenishing Jewish units with representatives of other nationalities, as was widely practiced in all other national units.

The data provided partly confirm that General S.N. Krasilnikov was right: recruitment of a Jewish army would indeed have been difficult, as if it had participated in military operations and suffered inevitable losses, the mono-ethnic Jewish composition would inevitably have been replenished by people of other nationalities. This happened to all national units of the Red Army. The authorities of the Union republics sometimes received permission to send reinforcements to "their" divisions, thereby maintaining their mono-ethnic composition. In the case of the Jewish unit, this would have been hardly possible, since there were neither places of compact residence of the Jewish population, nor representatives of the leadership who could take on the responsibility of replenishing Jewish units.

Nevertheless, in military-organizational terms, there were no such insurmountable difficulties in creating a Jewish army. While absent Jews could have been replaced by Slavs, which would not have prevented the army from being called Jewish, since there were many cases when the titular ethnic group in a national military unit was in the minority. Moreover, whereas in the Central Asian or Caucasian national divisions such forced replacements complicated language communication, then in the Jewish army there would have been no language barrier. Even more so, it would not have been difficult to form and staff at least one "model" Jewish division, as General Krasilnikov proposed.

Apparently, the denouement of this case came on January 15, 1943. On that day, there were printed E.A. Shchadenko's report to Stalin and the draft resolution of the State Defense Committee on the formation of a separate Jewish army. However, the document was not signed by him, and therefore it was not officially presented to the Supreme Commander-in-Chief. However, in the evening of that day, E.A. Shchadenko was summoned to the office of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief at the same time as Deputy Chief of the General Staff for organizational issues, Major General F.I. Bokov and Chief of the Chief Organizational Directorate of the General Staff, Major General A.G. Karponosov. Also present at the meeting were the Chief of the Red Army's Rear Services, Colonel General of the Quartermaster Service A.V. Khrulyov, and the country's political leadership –

⁵⁴ TSAMO RF, f. 7, op. 26, d. 220, l. 29–48.

⁵⁵ Ibid., l. 29, 33.

⁵⁶ Ibid., f. 56, op. 12236, d. 382, l. 65.

V.M. Molotov, G.M. Malenkov, L.P. Beria⁵⁷. E.A. Shchadenko spent 80 minutes in J.V. Stalin's office, and perhaps at some point an exchange of opinions took place on the Jewish army project, following which the Chief of the Chief Directorate for the Formation and Staffing of the Red Army received instructions from the leader to postpone or revise it. On the same day, January 15, the documents were handed over to Chief of the Organizational and Staff Directorate of the Chief Directorate for the Formation and Staffing of the Red Army, Major General N.I. Chetverikov. After that, there were no activities concerning the Jewish army project, and in early May 1943 it was finally closed. E.A. Shchadenko personally ordered “to file it and not to respond to anyone.”⁵⁸ Certainly, he meant Zilberman and Taits; the latter had already died at the front by that time. The interested Jewish community learned nothing about this either.

Conclusion

The zeal with which E.A. Shchadenko, who had personally known J.V. Stalin for many decades seized upon the idea of forming a Jewish army and prepared a draft resolution of the State Defense Committee, suggests that the very possibility of making such a decision by the leader was not impossible. Its organizational component, as shown above, did not pose insurmountable difficulties, but E.A. Shchadenko was wrong about the political expediency of its foundation.

Whatever J.V. Stalin's personal convictions (or prejudices) regarding the Jews, he acted prudently. The considerable number of Jews in the highest party, government and military positions, including in his immediate circle, is proof of this, confirmed by modern statistical studies of the representation of Jews in the Soviet state apparatus⁵⁹. Strained and even hostile relations with some people or state did not prevent the Soviet government from implementing major military-political projects, an example of which can be the cooperation with the Poles, as the government spent enormous organizational, personnel and material resources of the Soviet Union on their military units.

For over a quarter of a century of the Soviet regime, national military units became a tool of national policy, with the help of which the state concentrated and channeled in its interests the social energy and political potential of ethnic groups, which, as a rule, were far from the Russian cultural and linguistic environment. Obviously, Stalin did not see in a Jewish military unit the same political benefits that were brought by the combat use of other national or foreign units – Caucasian, Baltic, Polish, Czechoslovak, and Romanian. Through their creation, the state sought to cultivate a common participation in the common fight against Nazism ethnic groups that had problems with loyalty to Soviet power. The direct participation of such units in the battles for their small homeland, literally for their land, was their most important political mission legitimizing the joint campaign with the Red Army. The potential Jewish army did not have such an obvious goal, there was no “homeland” that would have to be liberated, nor was proving loyalty to the Soviet regime necessary, especially since Soviet Jews were often apart of this regime. As for the motive of fighting anti-Semitic manifestations at the front and in the rear, it should be noted that unlike the Jewish community, it was hardly important for the authorities, which did not recognize the very existence of this phenomenon in Soviet society. Moreover, as already

⁵⁷ *Na prieme u Stalina*, 395.

⁵⁸ TSAMO RF, f. 56, op. 12236, d. 382, l. 64.

⁵⁹ Мухомов Б.Н. “The Opportunistic Nature of Soviet Jewish Policy,” *RUDN Journal of Russian History* 23, no. 4 (2024): 501–518, <https://doi.org/10.22363/2312-8674-2024-23-4-501-518>; B.N. Mironov, “Participation of the Jewish Ethnos in the Governance of the USSR,” *Modern History of Russia* 14, no. 2 (2024): 346–376, <https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu24.2024.207>

noted, perhaps J.V. Stalin did not want to indulge Nazi propaganda, which presented the Soviet Union's resistance to the Wehrmacht as a “Jewish war” alien to the Slavs, and the creation of Jewish military units would have done a such service for the Nazis.

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