Diary of a Soviet Officer on the Eastern Front

by patorikkudozzu

Summary

A darkly comedic accounting of a Soviet officer's personal experience leading men on the Eastern Front. Based on the diary of a Soviet Officer fighting in the Ukraine in WWII.

Notes

This work is based on the diary of a Soviet officer fighting on the Eastern Front against the Germans in World War II. This occurred in the latter part of the war, when the Germans were being pushed back after their failed invasions in the Soviet Union as part of the Barbarossa campaign. I heard this read by podcaster Dan Carlin in his excellent series on the Eastern Front called "Ghosts of the Ostfront." This excerpt from the diary came from episode 3. You can find the episode as well as other excellent topics from Dan Carlin's podcast "Hardcore History" on iTunes, as well as his personal website. I've added some little elements to flesh out the story, but for the most part it is the same as what that unnamed Soviet officer wrote. The term cucumber used here is in reference to the green uniforms worn by the soviet soldiers. Contains some racist terminology from the original source.

The regimental commander has maps and orders from above, while I have nothing but a rifle, a pistol, and an entrenching tool. As such, they have the burden of giving orders, while I must see those orders enforced. Somewhere up above a general looks at a map and it seems reasonable to him to change the front line. He sends down an order.

"At such and such a point, move 5 kilometers forward."

Well, as luck would have it there turns out to be a river just at that point, the White Sturgeon. It's deep and swift, in open terrain. It would be convenient and relatively safe to dig some trenches and sit behind this natural obstacle. But an order is an order, and I can't say that it's technically impossible to cross here, even though from a sane man's point of view it is indeed
impossible to cross; we have no boats, nor planks, nor are there nearby trees to cut into rafts. Another predicament lies in the fact that all the soldiers in my regiment come from the steppes. Not only can they not swim, but I'd wager that they've never even seen a river in their entire lives.

I let out a sigh and shake my head. I know what I must do. Orders are orders. We've all seen the price paid for the slightest insubordination. Those men who are executed on the battlefield are the lucky ones. Knowing my luck, if I disobeyed my orders it wouldn't be as simple as a pistol behind the ear. No, they might make an example of me and my relatives. I shudder as I recall the stories told in the officer's tent at mess time. Dark places with damp concrete floors. A room with a single metal chair soaked in old blood, and a pile of human tongues, noses, and ears, torn from the bodies of men unlucky enough to disobey orders or to be born to the wrong family.

Shaking my head to dispel that unpleasant imagery from my mind, I relay the orders to advance the front to the men under my command. Looking confusedly at the rushing river and each other, one of the slanteyes that speaks Russian hesitantly approaches me.

"Comrade Lt. Sir, I can't go in the water. I don't know how to swim." He looks back at the others, and they nod their agreement.

I can't allow myself to be moved to pity. I know that it's better to drown a soldier than to show irresoluteness or insubordination to orders given from a commanding officer. Even if they all have to drown, it's better than what could happen to us all if we disobey an order. Besides, I already reported to the Major upon receiving the order that there are no boats. He told me to do it anyway. Steeling myself for what I must do, I pull out my service revolver, cock it, and point it at the face of the cucumber in front of me.

"Get in the water you son of a bitch! I'll give you to the count of 3 to get in there, or you'll never go anywhere else."

The soldier starts sweating. With a worried look on his face he glances from me to the other men. I shove the gun into his face and yell for him to hurry up. He quickly turns and hustles to the river bank. Holding his pack up above his head in one hand and his rifle in the other, he steps into the water, evidently trying to wade across. Of course the strong current immediately seizes him and carries him down the river as he ineffectually thrashes about. He disappears under the water and is swept downstream, apparently drowning.

Some of the others don't speak Russian, but they understand when I point my pistol at them that they must also wade into the river.

All the rest of the cucumbers that I force into the river drown.

Having done my duty, I adjust my hat and dust my uniform off as best I can. Taking a deep breath, I walk into the Major's tent, where he sits examining lists of supplies, equipment, and other such logistical paperwork. He looks up at me as I enter. He has a resigned look to his eyes. It's a look that some men get when they get their first taste of combat and discover it's not as glorious as they believed. The stupid ones can fool themselves longer.

"What do you have to report Comrade?"

I straighten my back, raise my head and salute. Holding my salute, I keep my eyes locked on a point on the far canvas wall of the tent.

"Comrade Major, there are only 5 men left in my company." The Major, of course, is furious. His weariness seems to be wiped away as he comes roaring to his feet.
"WHAT!? What did you do to them!? I didn't hear a single shot!" Without lowering my salute, I force myself to respectfully lock eyes with him.

"They all drowned crossing the river, Comrade Major." He looks surprised and disgusted, as if I hadn't told him this would happen just a few hours ago.

"What do you mean 'drowned'!? I'll shoot you right here like a dog!" I keep my face impassive.

"As you will Comrade Major, but I did report to you that there were no planks or logs to be found in the area, that the river is deep and swift, that it can't be forded. You told me to stop arguing and to just obey orders."

"You blockhead! What a stupid way to destroy a whole company!" Having said this, his anger clearly deflates. I lower my arm to my side and relax a bit. I know that he and I both have done our duty and followed our orders. Now the Major must report this debacle to his superior officer. The Major clearly feels that he bears some fault for losing most of our men (imagine that) as he visibly steels himself for the call he has to make. Calling over a communications man, he places a call to the Colonel, his regimental commander.

The Colonel arrives shortly in a groundcar.

"I gave you five hours to cross the river!" he shouts as he enters. "Have you carried out the order!?!" Looking like a mirror image of myself not half an hour before, the Major stands, salutes, and straightens his back.

"No, Comrade Colonel, we've sustained heavy losses."

"Losses?" The Colonel immediately calms down. He puts a hand to the stubble on his chin, looking thoughtful. "Well. That's fine. If there weren't any losses our heads would roll. What happened? Everything's quiet, I didn't hear a single shot from over here. Did they all get knifed or what?"

"No. Drowned. The company that was to cross over were all slanteyes. Never saw a river before. Naturally they drowned, since there was nothing to float on." The Colonel is incensed at this.

"You son of a bitch! Why didn't you take some pontoons? We've been dragging a whole transport of pontoons around! I could give you as many as you want!"

"I no longer need them Comrade Colonel. There are five cucumbers left in the first company, ten in the second, maybe twenty in the third. There's no one left to cross." The Colonel ponders for a moment.

"Well, you'll just have to cross anyway. What counts is the fact that the order has been carried out, even if only one man makes it."

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