

Red army in Iran: Unknown «occupation»

Ejército rojo en Irán: desconocida «ocupación»

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Fecha de recibido: 2020-02-08

Fecha de aceptado para publicación: 2020-03-08

Fecha de publicación: 2020-04-03



Abstract

The article is devoted to an actual topic, practically not covered in the historical literature and devoted to the stay of the Red Army in Iran during the Second World War. A legal assessment was given of the events of August 1941 - the entry of Soviet troops into Iran. The author proves that the actions of the government of the USSR from the point of view of international law cannot be characterized as «occupation». The article gives a detailed analysis of the Iranian claims regarding the stay of the Red Army units in Iran. Claims of both a material nature and with respect to the behavior of the Red Army are covered. It was proved that the overwhelming majority of claims were unfounded, and in those rare cases when the complaints of the Iranian side were based, the Soviet military authorities conducted thorough investigations, punishing the perpetrators. The article highlights the activities of the Red Army to ensure security of supplies under lend-lease, to combat banditry and terrorism on the Trans-Iranian railway, which transported military cargo to the USSR. The question of the relationship of soldiers and

officers of the Red Army with the allies on the Anti-Hitler Coalition is being raised. The conclusion is drawn that the relations of the Red Army men with the Americans were more or less friendly. Soviet-British relations were tense. Also, the article raises issues related to the daily life of the Red Army in Iran - the problems they encountered in everyday life. The main scientific result obtained by the author is that the article substantiates the need for the Red Army to stay in Iran, stresses the importance of their contribution to the victory over Nazi Germany.

Keywords: Iran, the USSR, England, USA, the Red Army, Lend-Lease, the occupation, the Trans-Iranian Railway, terrorism, banditry.

Resumen

El artículo está dedicado a un tema real, prácticamente no cubierto en la literatura histórica y dedicado a la estancia del Ejército Rojo en Irán durante la Segunda Guerra Mundial. Se realizó una evaluación legal de los acontecimientos de agosto de 1941: la entrada de las tropas soviéticas en Irán. El autor demuestra que las acciones del gobierno de la URSS desde el punto de vista del derecho internacional no pueden caracterizarse como «ocupación». El artículo ofrece un análisis detallado de las afirmaciones iraníes sobre la permanencia de las unidades del Ejército Rojo en Irán. Las reclamaciones de naturaleza material y con respecto al comportamiento del Ejército Rojo están cubiertas. Se demostró que la abrumadora mayoría de las reclamaciones carecían de fundamento, y en los raros casos en que se basaban las denuncias del lado iraní, las autoridades militares soviéticas realizaron investigaciones exhaustivas y castigaron a los autores. El artículo destaca las actividades del Ejército Rojo para garantizar la seguridad de los suministros en préstamo, para combatir el bandolerismo y el terrorismo en el ferrocarril transiranio, que transportaba carga militar a la URSS. Se plantea la cuestión de la relación de los soldados y oficiales del Ejército Rojo con los aliados de la Coalición Anti-Hitler. Se llega a la conclusión de que las relaciones de los hombres del Ejército Rojo con los estadounidenses fueron más o menos amistosas. Las relaciones soviético-británicas eran tensas. Además, el artículo plantea problemas relacionados con la vida cotidiana del Ejército Rojo en Irán, los problemas que encontraron en la vida cotidiana. El principal resultado científico obtenido por el autor es que el artículo confirma la necesidad de que el Ejército Rojo permanezca en Irán, subraya la importancia de su contribución a la victoria sobre la Alemania nazi.

Palabras clave: Irán, la URSS, Inglaterra, Estados Unidos, el Ejército Rojo, Préstamo y Arriendo, la ocupación, el Ferrocarril Trans-iraní, terrorismo, bandidaje.



Introduction

In the last days of summer, in 1941, an event took place, which for long years stayed on the periphery of interest for both Russian and foreign historians. On August 25th 1941 the Red Army units entered Iran territory using clauses five and six of Soviet-Iranian 1921 treaty as the legal basis, having accomplished something like blitzkrieg. Within days soviet troops occupied all northern Iran, and on September 17th they had already been in Tehran. Stalin military doctrine to beat the enemy on its territory was brought to life for the first time. England and the USSR – former antagonists, came together and held the first combined military action under the codename "Consent".

By now serious articles dedicated to this theme had already been written, even one dissertation had been defended besides. However, not all white spots of Soviet-Iranian relationships history have been erased so far, events related to further stay of the Red Army units in Iran remained unexplored virtually, up to the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Iranian territory in 1946. Only one theme has proved more or less developed – organization assassination of the big three in Tehran in November – December 1943. However, there are still issues remaining unanswered. What were the relationships between the Red Army and local population? What were the Red Army and its western "partners", the United States and Great Britain Armies, contacts like?

What difficulties did both Red Army fighters and commanders of the Red Army have to face? Even for a not well-informed person, ignorant of eastern policies issues, it becomes clear that these issues are not only of academic interest but also of political one.

Research methods

In the course of work at this article the authors used methods developed by modern science. The first group of theoretical methods includes: system method, comparative method, social-psychological, structural-functional methods. The second group of empirical methods includes: archival documents contents analysis, statistical processing of information received.

Research results and their discussion

First of all, let's pay attention to legal assessment of the Red Army stay in Iran. The fact is that in modern Iran the fact of foreign troops presence is treated as occupation, and they can count on appropriate compensation. However, if we consider the entry of troops in terms of

international law, let's get back to 1921 treaty, clauses 5 and 6, that allowed the URSS to hold force actions against Iran. As to the British, they had no such an agreement with Iranian government. Hence only British actions can be described as occupation. And then the period of the occupation was completed on January 29th in 1942 when the USSR, Great Britain and Iran signed a triple Union Treaty. Another thing is that both in the press and in some documents of that period, the fact of the Red Army stay was really called occupation.

Military disposition. On completion the Iranian military operation and the fall of the Shah's Reza Pehlevi in September 1941, all Red Army troops unification under single command took place in the territory of Iran.

Command and control over troops remaining in Iran were exercised from Ashgabat, conducted by colonel N.A.Chernyshevich, chief of staff in central Asian military district. By 1946 troop numbers had decreased significantly. [9, p.79].

As can be seen from archive documents, soviet troops were stationed (city data) in: Ardebil – 15th cavalry corps (9th cavalry regiment) and 75th rifle division, Dilman – 15th cavalry corps and 75th rifle division, Zenjan – 15 cavalry corps (6th cavalry regiment) and 75th rifle division, Kazvin – 15th cavalry corps (12th cavalry regiment) and 75th rifle division, Maku – 28th rifle division, Rezaie – 14th, 21st, 118th cavalry regiments and armor squadron, Hoi – 34th rifle regiment, 14th cavalry regiment, 18th rifle division, Tebriz – 15th cavalry corps and 75th rifle division, 20th tank brigade, Urmia – 15th cavalry corps and 75th rifle division. Communications units were stationed in Tebriz, road troops – in Zenjan, Kazvin, Pehlevi, Tebriz, repair units – in Tebriz, medical troops – in Resht and Tebriz, supply units – in Tebriz [3, 1.304]. Thus, we can see that primarily the Red Army units were stationed in northern parts of Iran – Russian Empire's former zone of influence along the border with Turkey.

The first problem soldiers had to face was getting across to local population. Soviet historians preferred to shut out this topic or used to write about Iranians' friendly relations with the Red Army units. Though archive documents provide the opposite picture, not so idyllic.

Throughout the Red Army stay in Iran, Iranians made claims against the Soviet side. First of all, those were material claims. In Iranian government memo to the USSR embassy, dated 11 April 1942, it was stated that Soviet military authorities prevented delivering provisions from northern regions to Tehran. In the note №153/1122 of Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the USSR embassy, dated 17 April 1942, it was stated that Soviet soldiers bought draft cattle from peasants, ate them and took them out of the country. On the

8th of February in 1942 19 head of cattle and 172 head of goats and rams were put aboard a steamboat “Sentsroyuz” in Pehlevi and brought to the USSR. In the note of Iranian government №1056 to the USSR embassy, dated 22 June 1942, it was said that recently from Iranian Astara to Soviet Astara 53 head of cows, 105 eggs boxes and 80 oil cans were exported. In the note №14038/454 Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the USSR embassy, dated 26 July 1942, it was stated that the Soviet authorities in Gorgan bought and sent to the USSR a large number of cows and horses carrying out earth work.

A number of notes of protest were sent by Iranian government in autumn 1942. “Soviet authorities in Iranian railway department prevent sending bread and other foodstuffs to Tehran insisting in each particular case on a permission from Soviet military authorities” (from Iranian government memo to the USSR embassy in Iran dated 28 September), “Soviet officials in northern regions of Iran did not fulfill the agreement on food and livestock export, concluded by relevant authorities” (the note №2104 of Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the USSR embassy dated 9 November 1942), the USSR mission bought 500 tones of grains in Kuchan and the entire crop of the current year from the building of agricultural joint stock company “Horosan”: wheat, barley, grains and fodder grass. All this is being gradually exported to the USSR. In addition to the set amount 200 horses, 1200 cows, 45000 sheep were transported across the border from Bajigiran. (note № 25148/3152 of Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the USSR embassy, dated 17 November 1942) [4, 1.64-77]. Note that the peak of Iranian claim came at a time when German troops implementing their plan to capture the Caucasus were successfully moving to the southern borders of the USSR.

In 1943 Iranian authorities raised the issue of illegal logging by Soviet soldiers. Supposedly Soviet military units during their stay in Mehabad cut down and took out by car 340 trees from the territory of local military barracks. However, the documents say the opposite – soldiers never did unauthorized logging. Military units located in Iran used exclusively both deadwood and dry wood for making bonfires, and only in areas designated for this purpose by Iranian authorities [5, 1.95]

According to People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs (NKID) for a short period (November-December 1943) to Maku’s vice consulate received many complaints from both Iranian authorities and local population about illegal actions of the Soviet military towards Iranian population. According to these complaints on November 8th and 9th they were taking tombstones from a Muslim cemetery by cart, on the outskirts of

Hoi town. One more complaint was received soon. The point was that the Red Army fighters, grazing horses, robbed peasants near the village of Hantahta. From a certain Hasem, who lived in the village of Hamar, they took 270 tumans (the tuman – Iranian currency) and injured his finger. On the same day in the village of Tamar the soldiers took 97 tumans from Samed and cut his coat. They took 14 tumans from Zulfagar in the same village. Three razors and 9 pairs of scissors were taken from Gulam. On November 18th one more signal was received: two days ago two soldiers took out on a cart 50 poods of wheat from the mill in the village of Munganjin, having beaten the miller besides. On December 1st two soldiers took from a certain Abdul Azi 100 tumans, on December 4th the governor Ehti Shami reported that the Soviet military personnel were taking out rails prepared for building bridges. On December 8th the governor of Hoi town reported that on 29th November the Red Army fighters removed bricks from the ice cellar, thus, having destroyed it [12, 1.203]. One more incident occurred on November 30th 1943. On that day one of the Soviet officers broke into a tax official’s office, where he fired a shot and took the money.

Archival documents say that according to all those strong complaints a competent investigation was held. On the occasion of the theft from the mill in the village of Munganjin 50 poods of wheat and beating the miller, it was revealed that the miller made a fictitious complaint in order to take possession of the wheat given for him to grind it by other Iranians. He hid the wheat beforehand at his place. On the issue of withdrawal of money from the Iranians Hasam, Samed, Zulfagar, the investigation established that on that day, at that place no soldiers were found there, i.e. that the complaint was a fake. Narrow gauge road Shahtahty - Maku had been dismantled by Iranian authorities in 1921 already. A large number of rails were taken by local people for their own purposes. Carting away the rails, planned for bridge building, by soldiers has not been confirmed by anyone, not even by vice consul Barulin in the city of Maku. The complaint about taking away rails intended for the construction of bridges could be explained quite simple – unwillingness of Iranian authorities to make repairs of both railroad and the bridges Maku – Shahtahty. According to the claim of the governor in the town of Hoi at the end of November 1943 about pulling down the ice cellar, a thorough investigation found that dozens of bricks were taken in one corner of the ice cellar by unknown person. Soviet soldiers were not involved in this. Vice consul Barulin personally and representatives of local authorities in the town of Hoi checked the statement of taking out tombstones from the Muslim cemetery. In the



same period the police detained local residents who lived near the cemetery and took away the tombstones. Regarding the episode of taking 100 tumans from a certain Abdul Azi, no military personnel from Hoi garrison were at the place of the robbery. Of all numerous incidents only one was confirmed in the case of a brawl of a Soviet officer on November 30th 1943. Lieutenant Savchenko while intoxicated entered tax inspector's office in Hoi, where he fired a shot and took 20 tumans. Being intoxicated on the same day he shot the lieutenant Yakovenko. The verdict of the military tribunal read – 10 years in prison [12, l.304]

Thus, except for one fact, that really took place, all other facts concerning alleged misconduct have not been confirmed. Fictitiousness of unconfirmed claims resulted from hostile attitude towards the Soviet troops and perversion of individual cases of relationships between Soviet military and the locals from the governors of the cities Hoi and Rezaie.

It should be said that the complaints about soldiers' misconduct were received in subsequent years of their stay in Iran. And in each case, when claims were confirmed, military tribunals of the Army, corps, division held show trials of emergency offenders, verdicts in those cases being widely explained to the personnel of the units [12, l.309].

The most important task that was solved by units of the Red Army in Iran was to ensure security of military supplies of allies on land lease. The main goal of terrorists related to special services of Nazi Germany was Trans-Iranian railway. In 1943 with the help of local agents Germans engineered some acts of sabotage on the railroad. This railroad had a difficult profile, teeming with numerous tunnels and steep climbs, passed through narrow gorges of mountain ranges. In other words it was a good target for terrorists. “All protected sites are easily vulnerable in terms of sabotage due to the presence of good hidden approaches”,- was ascertained in the legend to protected by the Red Army soldiers area deployment scheme of Trans-Iranian railroad [15, l.29]. Total length of tunnels on the railroad was 84 kilometers. 95 tunnels 20.55 km. long ran in the northern section of Bender-Shah-Tehran and 125 tunnels 63.45 kilometers long ran in the southern section Tehran-Bender-Shahpur. In the northern section the longest tunnel was Geduk, while in the southern section – Abdiz [11, l.35-36].

Daily in protection of Trans-Iranian railroad 709 people were involved, not including railroad staff. Of 118 railroad bridges only 62 were guarded by the Red Army soldiers, and of 93 tunnels – 68 [15, l.2]. The group of bridges in the sections 157-160 km. and 195-199 km. was guarded by the night

watch rather than a round-the-clock patrol. Important station objects were not guarded at all (depot, oil depots etc.) at the stations of Pole-Sefid, Firuzkuh and Bonekuh [16, l.6].

No wonder that during wartime on Trans-Iranian railroad several hundred accidents occurred, including those due to sabotage, mostly on difficult railroad sections as on a segment Ahvaz – Horremabad, where of 260 km. of railroad downhill ascents, steep climbs and turns were 162 kilometers. Saboteurs prepared a tunnel explosion near the station of Firuzkuh, then, on August 3rd 1943 organized a train wreck with military cargo for the USSR. The locomotive and wagons were broken, Soviet citizens died – train driver and his assistant as well as four Iranians. According to a message from Ahvaz on 15 March 1943, south of Karun station, collision of two trains occurred, as a result of which severe material damage was inflicted on the railroad [6, l.156].

In 1943 only in protected areas small bandit groups were seen near the stations of Geduk, Surhabad, Zirab, and there was a group of 20 people, headed by a certain Togu near the station of Duab. In October 1943 his men tried to dismantle railway cloth at the junction of the tracks near the station of Mehabad [15, l.29]. Other actions hostile to the allies were also prepared.

Let's pay attention to the fact that local population was involved in the sabotage. On 6th April 1944 200 people of the village of Zaga started to dismantle railway on a stage Tehran – Kazvin, at the same time an attack was made on the lineman [12, l.318]. The Soviet station information statement said that during 1943 there were a number of major accidents: train wreck in Bender-Shah, Julfa, Tebriz areas, fires on ships transporting weapons and ammunition, loss of ship at the Caspian sea with military cargo from the USA and other accidents. At once in several places a car assembly plant in Horremshahr was set on fire. In two days the fire destroyed 354 automobiles in addition to buildings [8, p.81].

Except the fight against saboteurs there was another serious problem – theft on the roads. As the column of cars slowed down, usually on the mountain climbs, robbers jumped from the rocks into the back, cut the tarps with knives and picked up everything that came to hand. Whole cars sometimes disappeared. On 25th February 1942 theft problem became a topic of conversation between A.Smirnov and R.Bullard, in which the Soviet ambassador stated that “cargo is not only stolen but also damaged, as it was with sugar” [1, l.59].

In fact, banditry became a serious problem faced by the Red Army. To fight the criminal element was one of the goals for the Red Army in Iran. Just a few examples: on 9 November 1943 in

Maku, in one of the souk lanes three unarmed Red Army soldiers were beaten. Some merchants and even gendarmes took part in the beating. In June 1944 on the highway Shahi – Sari one Red Army soldier, who guarded provisions, was killed. In Firuskuh area the bandits dealt with the whole group of topographers, having taken their documents and property [12, p.342]. Only in Zenjan within the period from 12th June to 4th July four armed assaults on military personnel of the Red Army occurred. On 14th August 1944 in the area of Kurd-Male the Red Army soldiers, who were picking nuts in the woods, were attacked. On 31 August 1944 in the forest, in Kurd-Male area the Red Army fighter, who was guarding harvested firewood, was stabbed with a dagger [14, p.307]. On the same day, on the road 8 kilometers southwest of Kurd-Male, one more soldier cutting timber was killed by unknown persons, two rifles were stolen as well. On 5 September 1944 a Soviet officer was killed at night by unknown person in Meshhed. On February 27th 1945 24 kilometers from Gorgan on the road to Bander-Shah some bandits fired at the Red Army soldier. He was badly injured and died a few days later. It should be pointed out that the number of victims was not limited to the mentioned above cases. The Red Army suffered non-combat losses in Iran monthly.

Groups of bandits consisted mainly of local peasants. Gangsters were Turkmen – defectors from the USSR and deserters from the Red Army. Despite the appearance of numerous gangs in Horosan and northwest of Mazenderan, Iranian authorities did not fight enough on their own with bandits, motivating their inactivity due to lack of troops for that goal. Thereby they contributed to the spread of banditry. Governor General of Mazenderan Mohsen Naser, according to some reports a convinced anglophile, despite regular reports by the Soviet consul, did not take significant measures to eliminate the gangs.

Of particular interest is the question of interaction of the Red Army with allies – military personnel from England and the USA. Contrary to popular belief, relationship between Soviet soldiers and officers and Americans was friendly. Keynote of their communication was as follows: the war will be over soon and the future must belong to people of both the USSR and the USA, who jointly should decide the fate of the post-war world. There are no such contradictions between Russians and Americans as between Russians and the British. “We have nothing to share”, - military personnel on both sides were convinced of this. As for specific surnames, General Officer Donald Connole sincerely advocated for cooperation with the Russians – US commander in the Persian Gulf. “Russians...felt at home in the Persian Gulf command headquarters”, - writes, for example, a

French publicist Laslo Havas [10, p.189]. Of course, mentality differences affected the relationship. Soviet soldiers were astounded by Americans’ looseness in communication, demanding conditions, what was not peculiar to Russian soldiers brought up in harsh, Suvorov traditions.

However, the above does not mean that the Americans shared their military secrets with representatives of Soviet military command. On the contrary, they carefully guarded them. Particularly with respect to the strategic bomber B-29, it was not supplied under Lend-Lease, but that plane was in Iran, and American pilots had a strict order not to fly up to the Red Army zone or to land on the airfields, where were the units of the Red Army.

Relations with the British remained tense. During the entire war they were collecting intelligence on parts of the Red Army, stationed in Iran. “...in Meshed English intelligence intensified. Intelligence work is carried out by Indians led by English officers”, - was noted in the intelligence summary №0046 of separate headquarters of the Central Asian Army [17, l.1]. The British officers without approval of the Soviet military authorities conducted a topographic survey of the area entering zone of the location of the Red Army sometimes [2, l.32]. Moreover in the very center of Tehran the British secretly organized a special school in which Iranians were taught espionage, aiming to further inserting them in the republics of Soviet Transcaucasia [7, p.26].

Misunderstanding relating to issues concerning Trans-Iranian railway management arose. According to the agreement, supplies in the northern section of the road had to be controlled by the Soviet transport commission, whereas in the southern section of the railroad the British were supposed to do that. The British General Officer Roads did everything he could to remove the Soviet transport commission from work. He refused to discuss the transportation plan for January 1942 with its representatives and he even threatened to resign. There were cases when Roads forbade Iranians to give the Soviet specialists the necessary materials [1, l.11].

Other conflicts arose. The British bought foodstuffs in large quantities in the northern regions of Iran for transporting it to the south and even outside the country. The export was carried out by military vehicles, and therefore was not under Iranian customs control. “The British military authorities everywhere in the south of the country (Kermanshah, Isfahan, Fars, Ahvaz) actively intervened in food affairs, often replacing Iranian authorities. Such a policy of the British pursues very definite goals – using local food as much as possible for the needs of the English army...The ambition to settle the foodstuffs issue



in the south is of high policy interest for the British, since the south is very different from the north. General economic and political situation in the north in reported months was more favourable than that in the south, as noted by Iranian public and the press of the country, and sometimes drives the English out of usual balance. English representatives in Iran, primarily through their consular representatives, exceptionally nervously reacted to our aspirations to establish control over food export from the north to southern regions and capital city”, - was published in the report of the Soviet embassy on food situation in Iran [4, l.53]. “The British are making large purchases of food in Tehran area, without regard to prices. Indeed, according to the authorized representative of Skotimport only in the space of two months – from December last year to January of the current year – the British exported about 700 tons of meat from Tehran by rail to the south of the country”, - was reported on 24 March 1943 in one of the telegrams of the Soviet military command in Iran [1, l.11].

The Red Army soldiers and officers encountered considerable difficulties in everyday life. Hard acclimatization was not very easy for them, to say the least of it. Living in Iranian climate was a real test for the Red Army soldiers, not to mention their service, although military units stationed in Iran were brought up to strength from the inhabitants of the south. Not every one could stay out of doors all day long where the temperature was 50 degrees centigrade. Earth cracked from the heat and drought, cracks formed, depth being up to three meters, in which poisonous snakes hid. Many Red Army fighters had an unbearable headache resulting in vomiting.

Iranian cities were real foci of malaria. In Maku in 1942 up to 80% of personnel in the garrison got malaria, 14 cases of malaria coma were observed besides. In 1943 malaria rate in garrisons in both Maku and Maraga was not less [14, l.64]. In February 1944 there was a sharp increase in the number of malaria cases. Some individual commanders had an opinion that a special type of this disease was rampant in Iran, against which known methods of prevention supposedly did not work [12, l.101]. Except malaria, among the fighters of the Red Army an epidemic of mosquito

fever pappatachi broke out. Almost the entire military personnel were ill with this disease.

The Red Army was not spared by force of nature. In Gorgan the Red Army fighters had to survive a strong earthquake, as a result of which the town was practically razed to the ground. Soldiers jumped out of the windows, a gap formed on the ground, up to ten meters deep, hell seemed to have come in which there was no room left for anybody alive.

Rare passes brightened up the life of soldiers. A special place was given to trips to the local bazaar. A lot was new to soldiers. The Red Army fighters were struck by lack of queues, abundance of food, vegetables, fruit and oriental sweets. Famous Persian carpets were sold here also. To be able to bargain, cutting prices in half or reducing the price three times, became a skill, acquired by the Red Army soldiers, having caught all the oriental bazaar subtleties.

Conclusions

Summing it all up, let's say that the military service in Iran, undoubtedly, differed from the front line service. The distance from the main front put a damper on both soldiers and officers sometimes. The mode was not kept enough in everyday life, there were many plump and heavy fighters among private soldiers and sergeants. The appearance of the soldiers was disturbed by variety of clothes, military bearing and smartness were clearly inadequate [13, l.45]. However, this does not mean that the Red Army fighters stay in Iran was pointless. But just the opposite, Red Army units, stationed in Iran, honorably fulfilled their duty to the Fatherland, having ensured important supplies under Lend-Lease, which accelerated the Victory over the main enemy – Nazi Germany. And the feat of the Red army fighters who gave their life in Iran will certainly remain in the memory of peoples.

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