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## **System of providing labor for defense construction in western Belarus (1939–1941)**

## **System zapewnienia siły roboczej dla budownictwa obronnego na Białorusi Zachodniej (1939–1941)**

### **Introduction**

The military and political events of 1939–40 led to the fact that the state border of the USSR was moved to the west. In strategic terms, this circumstance had a positive significance for the Soviet Union, as it allowed to reduce the threat to a number of the most important industrial and administrative centers of the country, to gain space and time to repel aggression and retaliate. But at the same time, the transfer of the border caused a lot of complications associated with the need to restructure the entire group of troops of the first strategic echelon, firmly strengthen the new borders, operational equipment of the acquired territories, and rework all operational plans.

On the territory of the BSSR, the Western Special Military District was located under the command of Army General D. G. Pavlov, which included the 3rd, 4th, 10th, and 13th armies and district formations—a total of 44 divisions, including 12 tank, 6 mechanized, and 2 cavalries. It is no exaggeration to say that both the Bialostock and Brest regions were practically "stuffed" with Soviet troops. Of course, to accommodate such a huge military infrastructure and prepare the theater of operations, it was necessary to carry out significant work: to build new fortifications, airfields, shelters, warehouses, barracks, bridges, roads, and "alter" the old railway track. In official Soviet documents of that time, all these activities were called "work on special construction sites", "work on defense construction", "closed construction".<sup>1</sup> These works were given great importance by the party, Soviet and military authorities, and a large number of labor and material resources were involved in their implementation.

The most significant "objects of special construction" on the territory of Western Belarus were the construction of fortified areas along the new state border, the construction of airfields and shelters in large cities. In addition, work was carried out on the construction of roads, canals, and the re-laying of the railway track.

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<sup>1</sup> *Накануне: Западный особый военный округ (конец 1939 г. – 1941 г.): док. и материалы*, сост.: В.И. Адамушко [и др.], Минск: НАРБ 2007.

The problem of providing special construction on the western border of the USSR with labor was one of the main problems for the republican and local authorities. Special construction was carried out by two departments – the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) and the People's Commissariat of Defense (NKO). The NKVD was engaged in the construction of airfields, built along the line of NGOs. Analysis of archival materials and eyewitness memories shows that the provision of mass labor for defense construction facilities was carried out at the expense of: 1) Komsomol battalions, specially formed from young people mainly in the eastern regions of the BSSR; 2) construction battalions – paramilitary units formed from conscripted from the reserve of military service; 3) local population serving labor and horse-drawn duties; 4) prisoners of prisons and correctional labor camps; 5) regular military units. To carry out the gigantic plans of special construction on the western border of the USSR, the party, Soviet and military bodies widely used command and administrative measures for the formation, management and use of large human resources.

### **The Komsomol battalions on the objects of military construction**

The Komsomol battalions were among the first to begin military construction. Already in the late spring of 1940, the first Komsomol battalions arrived to work on the construction of new fortified areas in the "Bialostock salient". The formation of the battalions took place with great difficulties. In the note of the junior technician of v/h 9384 Furman, who arrived in the Baranovichi region to organize the recruitment of labor, it was noted that with the plan of forming a battalion of 1000 people, it was possible to recruit 272. The reasons for non-fulfillment of the task were the following: *"1) the presence in the region of a large number of immigrants from the fascist parties, to whom the NKVD does not issue passes. For Klezkamp area of 60 people passed through Committee, pass only got 6 people; 2) a large number of objects directly in the field (construction of airfields, roads); 3) previously conducted large recruiting operation in the Eastern regions of the USSR and carry out these works at present; 4) the coincidence of recruitment work to agricultural"*<sup>2</sup>.

Despite the name, the composition of the Komsomol battalions was diverse. The battalion, which arrived for the construction of the 62 Brest fortified district from the Gomel region, numbered 805 people, of which 344 were Komsomol members, the rest were non-party members. Among the workers, 150 people were minors (16–17 years old) and several old men 60–63 years old. In addition, there

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<sup>2</sup> Национальный архив Республики Беларусь (hereafter НАРБ), sygn. Ф.4п, оп. 37, д. 28, л. 96–97. Докладная записка мл. воентехника в/ч 9384 Фурмана А.В. «О результатах вербовки рабочих в Барановичской области на оборонные работы» от 5 августа 1940 г.

were a number of people "completely unreliable, convicted and having repressed parents, relatives", as well as two mute and one deaf<sup>3</sup>.

Upon arrival at the places of work, the battalions were faced with poor organization of work, life, payment, lack of attention from the leadership. In order to fulfill the plan for the supply of labor, the Soviet authorities went to various tricks. The most common was the promise of excellent working and living conditions. A group of Komsomol members from Snidovo noted in their complaint to the Central Committee of the Leninist Communist Youth Union of Belarus: "Before sending the Komsomol district committees talked about the conditions, where it was said:

1) Komsomol members who came to work will be presented with living quarters; 2) issue of special clothing; 3) provision of full grub; 4) cult service and bath»<sup>4</sup>.

A similar phenomenon was observed in the Gomel battalion. In the Gomel Regional Committee of the LKSMB, when recruiting labor, they promised that all workers would be enrolled in the Red Army and uniforms. As a result, a large number of workers arrived half-naked and barefoot with the mood that they would be provided with everything they needed for free<sup>5</sup>. In reality, they faced different conditions.

At the end of June 1940, head of the military department of the Sopotsk district Committee of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Belarus Zusmanovich checked the state of living conditions and cultural and mass work of the komsomol battalion v / h 9604, located in d. Tartak Sopotskinsky district. in his memo to the military department of the Bialostock regional committee, he reported (the style of the document is preserved): "during the inspection, it was found that the commander does not deal with the issue of improving the living conditions of the komsomol battalion sufficiently. so the bed linen was not changed or washed for a month, explaining that there was no change of bed linen. disinfection and complete sanitation werenot carried out during the month. as a result, there is lice.

*It is characteristic that the battalion commander said "we will not deal with the issue of washing clothes, everyone received a sheet and a pillowcase, let him wash it himself." During June 29, 1940, disinfection and complete sanitation of the entire battalion is carried out, after which all bed linen is issued, trophy linen is received and, at the request of the battalion commander, all bed linen will be replaced.*

<sup>3</sup> НАРБ, sygn. Ф. 4п, оп. 21, д. 1965, л. 25. Докладная записка секретаря Брестского обкома КП(б)Б Дружинина «О состоянии политмассовой работы среди комсомольцев батальона на военно-строительном участке вч 9344 (21 стройучасток) и создание условия к работе». 1940 г.

<sup>4</sup> НАРБ, sygn. Ф. 4п, оп. 37, д. 24, л. 102–103. Заявление в ЦК ЛКСМБ группы комсомольцев, поехавших на работу на укрепление западной границы БССР. 1940 г.

<sup>5</sup> НАРБ, sygn. Ф. 4п, оп. 21, д. 1965, л. 26. Докладная записка секретаря Брестского обкома КП(б)Б Дружинина «О состоянии политмассовой работы среди комсомольцев батальона на военно-строительном участке вч 9344 (21 стройучасток) и создание условия к работе». 1940 г.

*The situation is bad with taking into account work and paying wages. Komsomol members have been working since May 25, and the payment was received only on June 1, 1940, and for the first half of June until today, the payment has not yet been received, and no one knows how much he earned, and only on June 29 they were given an advance payment at the expense of wages. When asked why they do not give a calculation for the first half of the month, the battalion commander replied "the accounting department has not calculated yet." Poor accounting of work and delay in payment of wages causes dissatisfaction on the part of Komsomol members.*

*Special clothing in the battalion was issued only to individual Komsomol members, and the rest did not receive it. There are frequent cases of theft and hooliganism in the battalion. Food is poorly organized, the quality of meals is not good, the dining room is dirty, everyone carries a spoon in his pocket, during lunch there is a queue, jostling and noise. The stall at the battalion is organized, but today it does not provide enough Komsomol members with underwear, underpants, T-shirts, knitwear, shoes and other goods.*

*Social work is carried out insufficiently, organized circles for the delivery of rules on the icon TRP stage 1, the icon of PVHO and sun, organized, choir, drama and other clubs. Political information and conversations on international and domestic issues are regularly held"<sup>6</sup>.*

On the document there is a postscript that by agreement with the secretary of the district committee, a report on the state of the Komsomol battalions will be heard at the bureau and measures will be taken. However, apparently, the measures taken remained on paper, since in October 1940, a similar situation developed on site 31 in the Svyatsk-Gursky estate, where the Komsomol battalion numbered 230 people. Here the workers lived in a dirty barrack, *"in the evenings there is no light, cultural work is poorly organized, Komsomol members are rarely taken to the bathhouse, as a result of which there is a lot of lice, theft, playing cards. At the site of special construction there was one case when the worker Lychigin Ivan Ekimovich got into a car stone crusher and died to death, this is the mood of the Komsomol members was not healthy, they say that we are dying here"<sup>7</sup>. The commission, which checked the work of Komsomol detachments on special construction in Sopotskinsky and Snidovsky districts, came to the conclusion that the material and living conditions in the Komsomol battalions are not normal. To restore elementary order in the area, according to the inspectors it was necessary to bring to the atten-*

<sup>6</sup> Государственный архив общественных объединений Гродненской области (hereafter ГАООГО), sygn. Ф. 6195, оп. 1, д. 435, л. 4–4об. Докладная записка зав. Военным отделом Сопоткинского РК КП(б)Б Зусмановича о состоянии комсомольского батальона в\ч 9604. 29 июня 1940 г.

<sup>7</sup> ГАООГО, sygn. Ф. 6195, оп. 1, д. 431, л. 147–148. Докладная записка Военного отдела Белостокского обкома КП(б)Б о проверке состояния комсомольских батальонов на спец. строительстве воинских частей 9384, 9868, 9604. 21 октября 1940 г.

tion of the Regional Party Committee and the Regional Committee of LKSMB (Leninsky Kommunistichesky Sojuz Molodezy Belarusi), site administration and command of battalions of shortcomings, in particular to establish the issue conditions and to pay special attention to the improvement of setting political-cultural and mass work among the workers and members of the Komsomol.

It cannot be said that the republican and regional authorities did not make decisions aimed at improving the work and life of people working in military construction. However, many decisions remained on paper. Soviet industry could not cope with the production of necessary goods in sufficient volume. For example, the secretary of the Brest Regional Committee of the CP(b)B Druzhinin noted that The Regional health department is not able to provide the sites with the necessary medicines due to the lack of such<sup>8</sup>.

### **The local population serving labor and horse-drawn duties**

In the spring of 1941, work on the construction and airfields intensified, which led to the strengthening of command forms of attracting labor to defensive work. February 22, 1941 The Council of People's Commissars of the BSSR and the Central Committee of the CP(b)B adopted a joint resolution "On ensuring the defensive construction of the Western Special Military District". It obliged the executive committees and regional committees of the Brest, Bialystok, Baranovichi, Pinsk and Viley regions to ensure an organized recruitment of labor and horse-drawn transport and to place at the disposal of the construction chiefs No. 71, 72, 73, 74. in the Brest region, the number of workers was to be 9,000, in the Bialystok and Baranovichi regions – 4,000, in the Pinsk and Vileisk regions – 2,000. at the same time, the Bialystok region was to send 900 submarines daily for 71, 72, 73 for the period from May 1 to December 1, 1941. Leaders of the Union and the people's Commissariat of Belarus was instructed to organize a network of retail and health care workers in the places specified by engineering management, and for the organization politically-mass and cultural services responsibility was vested in the regional Executive committees and regional committees<sup>9</sup>.

It should be noted that other border republics also faced difficulties in mobilizing labor for defensive construction. The problems were solved by the allied bodies using typical command and administrative methods. On March 24, 1941, the resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU (b) and the SNK of the USSR "On the introduction of paid labor and horse-drawn duty in closed construction" was adopted. This document gave the Soviet and party bodies of the Union republics

<sup>8</sup> НАРБ, sygn.Ф. 4п, оп. 21, д. 1965, л. 30. Докладная записка секретаря Брестского обкома КП(б)Б Дружинина «О состоянии политмассовой работы среди комсомольцев батальона на военно-строительном участке вч 9344 (21 стройучасток) и создание условия к работе». 1940 г.

<sup>9</sup> НАРБ, sygn. Ф. 4п, оп. 21, д. 2321, л. 30–31. Постановление СНК и ЦК КП(б)Б от 22 февраля 1941 г. «Об обеспечении оборонительного строительства ЗапОВО».

and regions the right to determine the amount of paid labor and horse-drawn service of the population and actually formalized and consolidated what had already been done on the ground. The resolution of March 24, 1941 became the basis for the work of the republican and regional authorities to provide military facilities with labor before the war<sup>10</sup>. Reports on the number of people and carts sent were regularly sent to the command of the UNS, as well as to Regional and Regional Executive Committees.

This information indicates that almost every day on special construction came out of the labor force less than required. As further events showed, due to the huge amount of work, the industry did not have time to provide everything necessary for the construction in the planned time frame. The creation of new fortified areas in some districts was a complete failure due to the lack of materials, transport and machinery.

### **The using of prisoners of prisons and correctional labor camps**

In early 1941, the Soviet government decided to build airfields in Western Belarus with concrete strips of 1200 m x 80 m. In the Brest region, it was planned to build 15 airfields, in the Bialostock region – 11: object No. 101 – Gonendz, No. 117 – Zabłudov, No. 169 – Belsk, No. 202 – Lapi, No. 227 – Grodno, No. 253 – Bialystok, No. 270 – Svisloch, No. 294 – Kvatery, No. 337 – Skidel, No. 360 – Ros, No. 400 – Sokolka (Krasniy). It was planned to spend 16 million rubles on the construction of each of the airfields and finish it by September 1, 1941. The staffing of these facilities was carried out by soldiers of construction battalions called up from the reserve, convicts serving sentences in corrective labor colonies and prison inmates are specifically aimed at spectrotest. Objects in Gonendze, Belsk, Lapa, Kwater and Skidel were built by Red Army construction workers, while the rest were built by prisoners of colonies and prisons. A camp of 513 prisoners from the prisons of Polotsk, Grodno, Baranovichi, and Bronnaya Gora was organized in Russia. parties of prisoners from the Russian regions – Voronezh, Tambov, Molotov – were expected to arrive. Archival materials indicate that the conditions of detention and work at these facilities were difficult. People with various diseases and even women who were pregnant for more than 5 months were sent to work. Basic conditions of detention were not observed, a shower unit was not installed, people were not cut, not shaved, dirty, food and drinking water supply were not organized. Construction was poorly provided with mechanisms and workers of the necessary specialties. The prisoners were mainly used as unskilled labor and diggers. As a result, labor productivity was low, production plans were not fulfilled. In total, according to the lists for May 20, 1941, there were 9560 Red Army construction workers, 5020 prisoners, 491 freelancers and 3010 people in the

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<sup>10</sup> ГАООГО, sygn. Ф. 6195, оп. 1, д. 191, л. 139. Постановление ЦК ВКП(б) и СНК СССР «О введении платной трудовой и гужевой повинности на закрытом строительстве». 24 марта 1941 г.

order of labor service on the construction of airfields in the Bialostock region. However, this was less than the required number of workers to complete the work in a certain time frame. According to the calculations of experts, up to 42 thousand people were supposed to go to the airfield construction every day<sup>11</sup>.

### **The situation in the construction battalions**

No less difficult was the situation in the construction battalions, which were specially formed for work on defense construction on the western border of the USSR. These battalions were mainly used in airfield construction and military engineering training of the border strip. In fact, these were paramilitary units, which were completed by conscripted from the reserve conscripts of older ages who were not suitable for various reasons for combat service. The most typical situation is that of 446 construction workers who arrived to work at facility No. 337 (Skidel airfield). Enlisted personnel in the number of 940 people were called up from the military service of the Vileisk region, command and political mobilized from the reserve, which is registered in the Vitebsk region. By nationality, the rank and file of the battalion consisted of 630 Belarusians, 181 Poles, 81 Jews, 27 Russians, 29 Lithuanians. By profession, mainly peasants and sole proprietors prevailed – 580 people, carpenters were 60 people and the rest of different specialties, with the complete absence of those professions and specialties that were needed in airfield construction-masons, concrete workers, etc<sup>12</sup>.

The command of the 291 air base, whose task was to form and man the battalion, did not carry out any work for the reception, placement and supply of uniforms. The battalion, after being randomly divided into companies, was stationed in three villages in peasant households. The uniforms and food of the soldiers were organized only for the second month, and more than half of the received uniforms turned out to be unfit for wear. The battalion, called up to work on the special construction site, did nothing for a month and a half except for performing minor work on the air base and building small temporary structures on the construction site. The norms provided for works of various categories were not regularly fulfilled due to the lack of experience and skills of the construction soldiers. The construction management did not provide the battalion with work orders and often transferred people in the midst of work from one place to another. "Political mass work" was practically not carried out. All this caused discontent among the soldiers, and there were two cases of group desertions in the battalion. The authorities everywhere recorded negative statements in the stroybatov environment, which reflected the actual state of things: "they have no right to keep us here, we have won our

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<sup>11</sup> ГАООГО, sygn. Ф. 6195, оп. 1, д. 191, л. 17–21. Докладная записка о недочетах комплектования Лагпункта объекта № 360 по состоянию на 13-е мая 1941 г.; Ibidem, л. 68–70.

<sup>12</sup> ГАООГО, sygn. Ф. 6195, оп. 1, д. 457, л. 19–22. Рапорт «О состоянии и комплектовании 446-го стройбатальона». 1941 г.

own, let those who have not yet served fight now, or those who have never been taken – they are not called up, and we are called up every three months. in the disciplinary battalion, even better than here, at least you will work in your specialty, and here you are forced to dig only the ground»; "It's hard to serve in the army, many are forced to work, bad food, better to be in prison than to serve in the red Army"; "Now as for serfdom, which once was forced to work day and night, not just 8 hours, and 24. The army hired should not be, and again transferred to cost accounting, why do we need rifles and work day and night, we should not. If you are forced to work, then you must pay"<sup>13</sup>.

Due to the fact that the military enlistment offices promised two-month fees when conscripted, the servicemen did not work well and waited for the earliest possible dispatch home. At the same time, any rumors about a delay in the training camp caused a negative reaction, and the usual practice of authorities at any level to silence or openly deceive people contributed to an open manifestation of discontent. So, the servicemen of the 348 construction battalion in June 1941 left work at the facility and, calling the command, said : " Here you are starving and there at home, probably, they are also starving. Let us read the order that the People's Commissar detained us for 6 months in the army." The situation was aggravated by open talk about the imminent start of the war: "I was in Lipsk today, where I talked with the Poles, who say that at least in a month, and the war will be. After all, we see all this for ourselves, so we will soon have to fight, and we will not see our relatives again"<sup>14</sup>.

### **The regular military units as a labor**

Despite the measures taken, plans for military special construction on the western border were constantly disrupted. In order to speed up the work on preparing the border strip for combat operations, the command of the Western Special Military District in the spring of 1941 ordered regular military units to be sent to defense work – one battalion from the rifle regiment. They were mainly engaged in field reinforcement of the field—they dug anti-tank ditches, rifle trenches, and built field engineering fortifications. These units were moved to the border and placed in the field – in tents. As participants of those events recall, the ammunition was taken only for guard duty<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, it is not surprising that these units, with the beginning of the attack of German troops on June 22, 1941, could not organize a proper repulse to the enemy, suffered huge losses and were actually destroyed in

<sup>13</sup> Центральный архив Министерства обороны РФ (hereafter ЦАМО РФ), sygn. Ф. 2322, оп. 1, д. 23, л. 1–2. Спецсообщения об отрицательных настроениях и пьянках отдельных красноармейцев 142-го, 348-го стройбатов и 5-го саперного батальона 71-го УНС. 1941 г.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, л. 3–4.

<sup>15</sup> *В июне 1941 г. Воспоминания участников первых боев на Гродненщине*, под редакцией Р.И. Карачун. Гродно 1997, с. 90, 100.



the first hours of the war. In our opinion, the responsibility for this lies with the Soviet party and military authorities, who exercised leadership under a totalitarian regime.

On June 17, 1941, the next day after the resolution of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and the USSR CPC "On acceleration of deployment of fortified areas", the plenum of the regional party committee and a closed meeting of secretaries of district party committees, chairmen of district executive committees, heads of military departments and heads of construction of NKVD and NKO facilities were held in Bialystok<sup>16</sup>. The meeting discussed the measures to force the construction of military facilities. But there was not enough time. A few days later war broke out.

## Conclusion

Today, there is no doubt that the Soviet leadership knew and prepared for war with Hitler's Germany. Preparation for war was a heavy material and moral burden on the shoulders of the peoples of the USSR. We can say that the command-administrative methods of organization of defense building in a totalitarian regime on the eve of the war contributed to the successful preparation of the theater of hostilities, and was one of the causes of the tragedy of the Soviet people in the early days of the Great Patriotic war. It is safe to say that special construction, together with deportation of the population, personnel policy, economic, educational and cultural measures, was an important element of the overall policy of "Sovietisation" pursued by the party authorities in the western regions of the USSR in the pre-war period.

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<sup>16</sup> ГАООГО, sygn. Ф. 6195, оп. 1, д. 451, л. 24–46. Стенограмма закрытого совещания секретарей РК КП(б)Б, председателей райисполкомов, зав. военными отделами и начальников строительства специальных объектов НКВД и НКО от 17 июня 1941 г.

### Summary

The problem of providing special construction on the western border of the USSR with labor are discussed in the article. On the basis of analysis of archival materials and eyewitness memories the author comes to the conclusion that the provision of mass labor for defense construction facilities was carried out at the expense of: 1) Komsomol battalions, specially formed from young people mainly in the eastern regions of the BSSR; 2) construction battalions – paramilitary units formed from conscripted from the reserve of military service; 3) local population serving labor and horse-drawn duties; 4) prisoners of prisons and correctional labor camps; 5) regular military units. To carry out the gigantic plans of special construction on the western border of the USSR, the party, Soviet and military bodies widely used command and administrative measures for the formation, management and use of large human resources.

### Streszczenie

W artykule omówiono problem zaopatrzenia w siłę roboczą budownictwa specjalnego na zachodniej granicy ZSRR. Na podstawie analizy materiałów archiwalnych i wspomnień naocznych świadków autor dochodzi do wniosku, że zapewnienie masowej siły roboczej dla obiektów budownictwa obronnego odbywało się kosztem: 1) batalionów komsomolskich, specjalnie formowanych z młodzieży głównie we wschodnich obwodach BSRR; 2) batalionów budowlanych – jednostek paramilitarnych formowanych z poborowych z rezerwy służby wojskowej; 3) miejscowej ludności pełniącej służbę roboczą i konną; 4) więźniów więzień i poprawczych obozów pracy; 5) regularnych jednostek wojskowych. W celu realizacji gigantycznych planów budownictwa specjalnego na zachodniej granicy ZSRR partia, organy radzieckie i wojskowe szeroko stosowały środki dowodzenia i środki administracyjne w zakresie formowania, zarządzania i wykorzystania dużych zasobów ludzkich.

**Key words:** border, aggression, the first strategic echelon, operational plans, fortifications, airfields, shelters, warehouses, barracks, work on defense construction

**Słowa kluczowe:** granica, agresja, pierwszy echelon strategiczny, plany operacyjne, fortyfikacje, lotniska, schrony, magazyny, koszary, praca nad budownictwem obronnym.