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The battles of the French NSKK unit in Hungary¹

Introduction

Despite the fact that France is among the winners at the end of World War II, there are a number of chapters for its participation in the combats which are not studied in detail by historians. Among others, we find there the history of the French volunteers who served in the German armed forces. There are some French units relatively well known as the division Charlemagne of the Waffen-SS or the Legion of French Volunteers Against Bolshevism (*Légion des volontaires français contre le bolchevisme*) who participate in struggles against Allied regular troops on the Eastern Front. Nonetheless some other formations are virtually unknown due to lack of a remarkable military performance in the same combat zones.

This study is about to fill, at least partially, the gap by tracing the story of one of these units whose activity is also related to Hungary, because during its existence it has conducted its largest military action against Soviet troops in the territory of this country. We can only hope that the presentation of this particular episode enriches the military history of both concerned countries.

The creation and activity of the NSKK

The NSKK² is an organization established within the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP)³ before the war (in April 1931) having as objective the consolidation of Nazi party members with motorized vehicles which allows more effective participation of the people in parades organized by the party⁴.

Its mission changes after the seizure of power by the Nazi Party, it must provide mechanical training for German youth before their involvement in the army. The motorized organization set initially under the authority of the SA (with cars and motorcycles)⁵ and responsible for the transport integrates all members of clubs of cars and civilian motorcyclists as well as the members of the Hitlerjugend⁶ sent for

¹ This study was founded by the JánosBolyai Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

² *Nationalsozialistisches Kraftfahrkorps*: National Socialist Motor Corps.

³ *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*: National Socialist German Workers' Party.

⁴ Mounine1995 : 5.

⁵ *Sturmabteilung*: literally Storm Department, a paramilitary organization of the Nazi Party.

⁶ *Hitlerjugend*: Hitler Youth, other paramilitary organization of the Nazi Party.

technical training. After the fall of the SA in 1934, it is under the right direction of the Nazi Party and becomes responsible for all activities related to motor vehicles in Germany. As part of this new mission, a wide variety of activities are concentrated in the hands of the NSKK, including the tourist bus travels within and outside the country, the auto and motorcycle racing and the contribution to the traffic direction⁷.

In 1934, the size of the organization is 350 000 people, deployed between four divisions, nineteen brigades and about ninety regiments. A division (Motogruppe) includes five brigades (Motorbrigade), while three regiments belong to them (Motorstandarte). These regiments consist of three to six battalions (Motorstaffel) that count three to ten companies (Motorsturm) formed by three to four sections (Trupp) consisted by three to four groups (Schar) of eight to sixteen men. In 1939, the NSKK has already twenty-eight divisions and one brigade (in total hundred regiments) with over 500 000 people who form eight Territorial Army Corps on German and recently occupied Czech and Austrian territories⁸.

This relatively large and well educated force is automatically transferred to other units of the German armed forces at the beginning of World War II in order to contribute to the Third Reich war effort. This transfer is an important support to the Wehrmacht being in need of technically trained men; nevertheless it causes considerable problems for the NSKK who must participate in transportation missions of growing with the change of the international situation. First, he has to hold courses for motorized and armored units of the German army; secondly, it must establish armed guard battalions (NSKK-Wehrstaffel). From 1940, the organization receives a new mission: it must provide a part of the transport capacity of the Luftwaffe⁹ and over time of the other major units of the German armed forces. The transport units serving within the organization have several names over the years of war (NSKK Transportregiment Luftwaffe, NSKK Motorgruppe Luftwaffe and NSKK Transportgruppe Luftwaffe) while the number of tasks and thus the number attached to these units increase continuously¹⁰.

The NSKK recruitment campaigns in occupied Europe

At the same time most members of the NSKK are directed to other branches of the armed forces in order to fulfill their compulsory military service, so the organization is forced to look outward from 1941 to recruit

⁷ Thomas–Jurado1992 : 4.

⁸ Delatour1975 : 153.

⁹ In accordance with this change, the French NSKK volunteers wear the uniform of the Luftwaffe completed on his left sleeve by a tricolor badge decorated with a black axe (which was the personal symbol of Marshal Pétain during that time). Littlejohn 1972 : 265.

¹⁰ Thomas–Jurado1992 : 4.

volunteers in the occupied countries of Europe to be able to perform its tasks. These engaged foreigners, after driver and repair internships in line with the objectives of the NSKK, participate in the transportation of supplies, in the direction of traffic and in the maintenance of the transport vehicles¹¹. The first round of the German recruitment campaign held in the Netherlands and Belgium in May 1941¹² to be followed by several others on the entire European continent¹³.

These actions can be considered successful because the numbers of Flemish, Walloon and French volunteers who have pledged to the unit exceed ten thousand until July 1943. These men form a division consisting of two brigades under the command of General Graf von Bayer-Ehrenberg. Each brigade consists of three regiments which are formed by two battalions. About 1 000 soldiers are in a regiment. The first brigade (with the 1st, 2nd and 3rd regiments) is established in France in summer 1941 and its service is performed exclusively in this country until 1944 when the progress of Allied troops causes its decline to Germany, where its members will be deployed as regular infantry against the Allied armies during the last months of the conflict. The second brigade (with the 4th, 5th and 6th regiments) is created in the eastern part of Belgium in May 1941. At first, it has only two regiments to be supplemented by a third one in spring 1943, which has mainly French volunteers in its ranks. This unit, unlike its homologue, is deployed in the Soviet Union, in northern Italy, in Yugoslavia and, as we shall see, also in Hungary¹⁴. At the same time, it should be mentioned that along with the organization presented in this study other units with similar missions are established using the human potential of the occupied countries. It is such transport formations that NSKK Transportgruppe Todt or NSKK Transportbrigade Speer Legion whose workforce is partially composed of French citizens (several thousand people), but they are less interesting for us because of the lack of their presence on the scene of eastern operations during the war¹⁵.

In France, the NSKK recruitment begins July 21, 1942 and encourages French youth to join the German transport unit¹⁶. These calls had some success, because, according to conservative estimates, about

¹¹ Littlejohn 1972 : 265.

¹² That also explains the high number of Flemings serving in the ranks of the organization (3 000 people).

¹³ Costabrava 2007 : 41.

¹⁴ Thomas-Jurado 1992 : 4-5.

¹⁵ Littlejohn 1987a : 163-164.

¹⁶ The volunteers are invited to 2, Godot de Mauroy Street, Paris where the recruiting office of the NSKK operates under the direction of Captain Troupeau, the son-in-law of the Secretary of State for War, Eugène Bridoux. Littlejohn 1987a : 161.

2000-2500 French¹⁷ engage to the organization between 1942 and 1944¹⁸. This performance is explained by the fact that the German authorities have already created in 1941, following the advice of Peter Costantini, one of the founders of the LVF¹⁹, the Automobile Corps of Anti-bolshevik Volunteers (Corps Automobile des Volontaires Antibolcheviques) which includes the French volunteers intending to serve in the German transport units. Therefore, after the launch of the recruitment in 1942, with only the change of the name of the organization, it could immediately mobilize the entire previously engaged workforce that consists of men being between 18 and 50 and also being in a good physical condition. After a compulsory medical examination, the men skilled committed fit for military service are gathered in Paris to be directed at Vilvoorde (a suburb of Brussels). They are forced to spend a further medical examination, sign their final employment contract and can begin their instruction. The training lasts for five months and consists of driving, repair courses and basic military training²⁰.

According to the memoirs of the participants, the first phase of the military training is realized by captured French weapons which is followed by teaching the use of German weapons. These are only light infantry weapons (Mauser 98K, MP0, MG34, grenades, etc.), the heavy weapons are represented only by a few small anti-tank grenade launchers (Panzerfaust, Panzerschreck), as troops NSKK are not intended for regular infantry missions. After this traditional training in the modern armies conducted in Belgium (early in Schaefen/Diest, then in Grammont/Gerardsbergen)²¹, the French volunteers are transferred to Tübingen to attend driving classes organized at the special school of the NSKK (NSKK Motor Schule–Lehrgang)²².

We must refute a widespread assumption that the NSKK was a kind of antechamber of the Waffen-SS and the members of the first are

¹⁷ At the same time, according to some German sources, this figure is around five thousand people. BBAMA N 756/201. Die Kameradschaft: Die EuropäischenFreiwilligen:3. concerning this question, it has to be noted that the Francophone volunteers are often considered French by German authorities. However, a number of Wallons (at least 2 000 people) also engage in the organization, so they can appear in certain statistics as French. Littlejohn 1987b : 111. In general, the number of three thousand is accepted as a reliable information. See Hochstetter 2005.

¹⁸ AN 72 AJ 258, 232 14. Soldats français sous uniformes allemands, 1941-1945 : 8.

¹⁹ Nevertheless the proposal of Costantini concerning the possible involvement of French pilots in the Luftwaffe on board French or German planes is strongly denied.

²⁰ BAMA RS 3-33/3. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS "Charlemagne" (französische Nr. 1.) : 57. ; Costabrava 2007 : 47-48.

²¹ According to the memoirs of participants, the morale is weakened by the severe weather conditions and the insufficient food portions.

²² Mounine 1995 : 6-7.

regularly transferred en masse to the second. We can see that this is not the case, because the members of the transport body are appreciated by the German high command due to the importance of their activity in the proper functioning of the armed forces. At the same time, we know many examples when French volunteers headed to the instruction camp of Vilvoorde desert to join the Waffen-SS whose prestige is much higher, because it is a combat detachment and the service made in its ranks is more attractive than the transport missions carried out within the NSKK²³. Therefore, from time to time, a number of French who contracted a contract of employment with the transport unit, individually or in groups, are presented in the recruiting offices of the Waffen-SS in order to continue their service in the military organization. This choice is probably motivated by the fact that before the summer of 1943 the French citizens can not engage officially to this unit. The largest group of deserters opts for the Waffen-SS in June 1943 when thirty people join the military unit²⁴. This action is certainly encouraged by the creation of the French unit of the Waffen-SS in France (initially as a regiment and later as brigade and finally as a division from early 1945), because this change offers the opportunity to do military service in the ranks of a "national" troop within the German organization.

The NSKK French volunteers in the European theaters of operations

Because of their relatively large number, the French volunteers are attached to the 2nd NSKK Brigade, however, their commitment distributed in time does not allow the establishment of a fully French unit and the French are present in all three regiments of the Brigade²⁵. They are most numerous in the 4th Regiment (NSKK Regiment 4). This unit is divided into two battalions which are composed of two, three or four companies dependent on the number of volunteers and the warlike situation. In general, ten to twelve columns lie within a company and a column contains twelve vehicles. Beyond trucks, ambulances, motorcycles, also troubleshooting and workshop cars are in the motorized

²³ It has to be noticed that the desertion does not lead to sanctions according to the regulations of the German army, if the deserter presents for service with another unit of the German armed forces. Therefore the French NSKK volunteers opting for service in the Waffen-SS are warmly welcomed by the other German organization who also leads an intense recruitment policy.

²⁴ Forbes 2005 : 31.

²⁵ Thomas-Jurado1992 : 4.

fleet of the companies. The staff of a truck are a driver and a guard equipped with light weapons, especially guns²⁶ to defend the cargo²⁷.

The first French volunteers of the unit are deployed in the Soviet Union in the winter 1942-1943 to help supply the German army fighting in the Eastern Front. These people are in the Rostov region where the members of the French companies conduct conveys, transport of supplies and repair failed vehicles. Among the Germans, there is a generally favorable opinion on their activity because they mention that the French are good drivers, but they do not pay much attention to their vehicles. Although their mission is theoretically conducted among peaceful conditions far from the front, the partisans' forcefulness increasingly strong threats also the French who are obliged to participate in clashes to defend. Because of this situation, the transport unit begins to gradually transform to a combat troop. In total, three French companies of the VIth battalion of the NSKK perform a service on the Eastern Front during this period before being underwent a complete reorganization in spring 1943 when a part of the French volunteers are grouped in the IInd battalion²⁸. Therefore, this contingent retains its French character until the end of the war²⁹.

The IInd battalion established with the soldiers who have acquired war experiences at Eastern Front and the recruits who recently completed their instruction is declared fit for service in the fall of 1943. The unit with three companies (the 4th, 5th and 6th) is led in northern Italy in early December. During the months of December and January, the battalion is located in Brescia to begin its transportation service in which its companies are scattered throughout the region. The 4th company is sent to Verona, while the other two companies are directed to the south and some columns carried supplies even to the German defenders of Monte Cassino. The French equipped with German-, French- and Italian-made trucks fulfill transport missions for the Organization Todt, the Speer Legion, the Luftwaffe and the Wehrmacht in relation to the needs of those. Despite the intense activity of the French unit until autumn, it does not meet regular or irregular enemy troops and its minimal losses are exclusively due to attacks of the Allied fighter-bombers. Possibly, this more or less intact military potential also contributes to the fact that the

²⁶ In the beginning this is a captured armament manufactured in France which is later replaced by German weapons.

²⁷ BAMA RS 3-33/3. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS "Charlemagne" (französische Nr. 1.) : 58.

²⁸ An interesting fact: it was proposed to the volunteers being returned from East to work in German factories instead of military service. There is no official data on the number of French who have opted for this possibility. Forbes 2005 : 30.

²⁹ Mounine 1995 : 6.

French members of the NSKK are considered combatants and they receive a Soldbuch (German pay book)³⁰.

In the months of October and November, the battalion with weapons but without vehicles is embarked to be directed to Denmark after a long train journey. After its arrival, it stays around Odense and custody of some local military depots. This quiet service does not last for long, because the battalion is sent to the Eastern Front in early 1945³¹.

The French volunteers in Hungary

The relatively small battalion is split into two groups and sent to Hungary to participate in the last great German counteroffensive. The first French contingent embarks in February, the second at the end of March to go to the new theater of operations by train. Considering the fact that the two units retain their weapons, but do not own vehicles, we can assume that the German High Command was planning to deploy them as improvised battle groups (*Kampfgruppe* according to the German terminology) in the Hungarian region of Transdanubia. According to the plans of the German general staff, a concentration of available forces may allow repelled the Red Army and also the defense of oil deposits in Western Hungary having a strategic importance³².

At the same time, the air attacks of the Allied air forces prevent the movement of the French troops, because their actions destroy a large part of the German railway infrastructure, cause turbulence in traffic and kill some members of the French battalion. Because of the effectiveness of these air operations, the first contingent can realize his trip to Hungary for a month and it only arrives in late March, until the second cannot do it at all, because it is in Austria when the war ends in May³³.

Some memoirs talk about a French officer (NSKK-Sturmführer which is equivalent to the rank of lieutenant) of Hungarian origin in the ranks of the battle group arrived in Hungary in March. This officer named Györ (possibly Győri according to Hungarian spelling) leaves his unit after crossing the Hungarian border and disappears forever. Presumably he opted for desertion with the help of his knowledge of language and terrain to avoid the participation in an unequal battle against the Soviet regular troops³⁴.

The group (which is probably made up of two companies³⁵) is equipped with trucks in Hungary and it is directed straight to the frontline

³⁰ Ibid., 7-8.

³¹ Thomas–Jurado 1992 : 9.

³² Keegan 2008 : 877-878.

³³ Mounine 1995 : 10.

³⁴ Forbes 2005 : 233-234.

³⁵ Ory 1976 : 265.

to fight against the Red Army. Lacking fuel, the unit is not able to achieve great trip and the members of the group receive jerry cans and rubber hoses to retrieve fuel from the abandoned vehicles. Initially, the group is deployed west of the city of Veszprém, north of Lake Balaton where a Soviet unit surprises the French soldiers and inflicts severe losses on a short and hard clash. After this action gone wrong, the French contingent is withdrawn behind the front to reorganization. The members of the detachment have to serve as tank destroyers equipped with grenade launchers. The new formation does not participate only once in operation when it is forced to fight against Soviet tanks in late April west of Balaton during the general decline to open a path toward Austria³⁶. During this action, the French destroy two tanks, the Soviets retreat and the survivors of this campaign can continue the retreat westward overnight. Those that remain of the battle group arrive in Austria to the south of the city of Sopron and they are informed about the end of war³⁷. Then members of the contingent try to get by individually: some go to the Western Allied troops, others wearing civilian clothes and try to return to France³⁸.

The other battle group, despite the orders of the German command, is in Austria at the end of the war without effective participation in any military operation. The commander of the unit, NSKK-Hauptsturmführer Hans Ströhle, demobilizes the detachment April 29 because of the hopeless military situation. The French soldiers form small groups and go toward west. Some go in Northern Italy because it was familiar ground for them after their service carried out in the region and the progress of Soviet troops in that direction seems unlikely. A curious fact which illustrates the differences between the various units of the German armed forces that even at the last moment of the conflict (we are 3 May 1945) they meet the French Waffen SS who intend to continue the fight and encouraged them to do the same. Nevertheless, members of the NSKK refuse this proposal and continue their journey to the west³⁹.

Conclusion

Although the NSKK is a little known military contingent in the German armed forces during the World War II, its members perform an important activity, especially in hinterland for the German war effort.

A feature of the unit is that foreign volunteers make up the majority of its workforce including, surprisingly, a number of French citizens.

³⁶ Forbes 2005 : 234.

³⁷ BAMA RS 3-33/3. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS "Charlemagne" (französische Nr. 1.) : 58.

³⁸ Forbes 2005 : 234-235.

³⁹ Mounine 1995 : 10-11.

Although these men did not commit to military service in the first line, they are forced to fight there because of the evolution of the war situation, they fight even in Hungary during the last months of the conflict. Of course, this episode does not influence the main events of the war, however, it is a very interesting element of the Franco-Hungarian military relations, especially as the two countries were neither allies nor enemies during the years of the conflict.

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