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The Military Reality of the Early Days of the Great Patriotic War against the Background of the Fate of an Encircled Officer: The Case of Colonel M.G. Kirillov (1942)

Abstract

In the midst of severe defeats of the initial period of the war, many units and formations of the Red Army were surrounded. Both private and command corps who broke out of the

encirclement, as well as those who were captured and escaped, were thoroughly checked. This measure seems reasonable and legitimate. The absolute majority, after passing this “filter,” were sent to the front, against others charges were brought under the laws of wartime. Among the latter was the commander of the 38th Rifle Division, Colonel Maxim Gavrilovich Kirillov, who was shot by court verdict in 1942. Commanding his division, M. G. Kirillov was surrounded in the Vyazma defensive operation (October 2-13, 1941) to the west of Vyazma. Several times, the colonel placed disparate groups under his under command, making unsuccessful attempts to break out. Later, he was captured by the enemy, escaped, commanded a partisan detachment. In March 1942 Kirillov was summoned to the “mainland,” accused of treason and shot; only in 1991, he was rehabilitated. The personality of Colonel Kirillov is much discussed in press and in the Internet. His personal tragedy is considered an example of illegal repressions against the servicemen who were surrounded and held captive. The facts provided in the article detail and clarify Kirillov's actions in the occupied territory. It is shown that charges against him were mostly proven and fell under current statutory provisions. Information on Kirillov is given against the background of mass repressions against senior Red Army officers at the beginning of the war. Investigative documents record some changes in the work of the punitive apparatus in contrast with the period of 1937–38. However, physical coercion and attempts to bring his action under the article 58 of the criminal code remained. The conclusions on Colonel Kirillov's sentence are another evidence of tragical and inconsistent fate of the Soviet encircled servicemen and prisoners of war. The facts indicate a need for a thorough study of the fate of each serviceman who was surrounded or captured from the standpoint of military realities of the initial period of the Great Patriotic War.

Keywords

Great Patriotic War of 1941–45, Vyazma defensive operation, Colonel M. G. Kirillov, 38th Rifle Division, captivity, repression.

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