

Forced to Fight: Coercion, Blocking Detachments, and Tradeoffs in Military Effectiveness*

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December 15, 2015

Our theories of soldier motivation have largely overlooked the role that coercion plays in manufacturing and maintaining unit cohesion. Yet nearly 20% of all belligerents in wars since 1800 have deployed specialized units designed to monitor and sanction their own soldiers violently. Despite the widespread nature of these “blocking detachments,” however, we have neither a systematic treatment of their tactical and operational effects nor of the tradeoffs associated with their battlefield use. This paper draws on new crossnational data and a case study of Soviet practices at Stalingrad and Kursk to explore four tradeoffs stemming from the use of blocking detachments. In brief, these detachments can bolster a military’s staying power, but at the cost of sharply increasing casualties and worsening loss-exchange ratios. In keeping with the volume’s intent, the paper concludes with a broader discussion of these tradeoffs at the war-fighting and political levels before proposing additional avenues of research on coercion and soldier motivation.

*Contribution to *The Sword’s Other Edge: Tradeoffs in the Pursuit of Military Effectiveness*, edited by Dan Reiter. I thank Rosella Cappella Zielinski, Filippo Andreatta, J. Tyson Chatagnier, Dan Reiter, Pascal Vennesson, and other chapter authors for helpful comments and feedback. I gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Air Force Office of Scientific Research (Grant #FA9550-14-1-0072) and the MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies Director’s Award (2014-16). An earlier version was presented at the Workshop on Force Protection and Military Effectiveness at the Fondazione Bruno Kessler, Trento, Italy, 25-26 June 2015.

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*It takes a very brave man to be a
coward in the Red Army.*

Marshall Georgi Zhukov

The Islamic State’s (ISIS) rapid march through northern Iraq during summer 2014 caught most observers by surprise. Its ability to recruit locally and internationally, along with its substantial combat power, prompted an American return to Iraq in the form of a sustained air campaign. Much less attention, however, has been cast on ISIS’s mechanisms for maintaining discipline within its own ranks, especially after its momentum was halted around Kobane during winter 2014. ISIS, like many combatants before it, created special units dedicated to enforcing unit cohesion—in particular, by using the threat of violent sanction—to reduce the odds of desertion and defection and to tamp down factionalism arising from the ethnically mixed nature of its forces. These ISIS units have executed hundreds of soldiers caught deserting or defecting; have arrested hundreds more, often along with their families; and have positioned themselves on the battlefield specifically to catch foreign fighters seeking to escape via Turkey or to defect to rival militant organizations. As one soldier noted, “ISIS wants to kill everyone who says, ‘no’ [to it]. Everyone must be with them. If you turn against ISIS, they will kill you.”¹

Our existing theories of soldier motivation, as well as leading historical accounts of key wars, typically dismiss the use of coercion as ineffective, amoral, and confined to a handful of “deviant” combatants. Yet so-called “blocking detachments” like those used by ISIS have a long history in warfare; indeed, as detailed below, nearly 20% of all belligerents in post-1800 wars have deployed “blocking,” “barrier,” or “anti-retreat” formations. These units participated in some of the most important wars of the past two hundred years, including the Napoleonic War, the Taiping and Nien rebellions in China, World War One, the Russian Civil War, and the Warlord Era in China (1916-28). Perhaps most well-known

¹“ISIS Executes 100 Foreign Fighters for Trying to Flee Syria,” *International Business Times*, 20 December 2014; “ISIS morale falls as momentum slows and casualties mount,” *The Financial Times*, December 19, 2014; “Battered but Unbowed, ISIS is Still on Offensive,” *New York Times*, 13 March 2015; “Islamic State has killed over 2,000 off battlefield since June: monitor,” *Reuters*, 28 April 2015; “Suicide bombers ‘defecting from Isis’ and fleeing to Turkey or rival militant groups,” *The Independent*, 15 May 2015.

is the use of blocking detachments (*zagraditel'nye otriady*) by the Red Army during the Second World War. Over 158,000 Soviet soldiers would die at the hands of their own comrades in 1941-44 (???).

Blocking detachments also offer a window into the notion that tradeoffs exist across different facets of military effectiveness at the war-fighting level. While earlier conceptual frameworks do acknowledge the possibility of tradeoffs across and within levels of analysis (?), most current theorizing instead tends to focus on discrete “building blocks” of military effectiveness. As Dan Reiter acknowledges in this volume’s introduction, this emphasis on narrow aspects of military effectiveness, however important these elements individually, tends to obscure tough decisions by combatants about which aspects of military effectiveness to privilege and which to sacrifice in pursuit of broader political aims. Put differently, military effectiveness is a spectrum of tasks, and proficiency in one area may come at the expense of another. At least for some belligerents, not all good things go together (Lyall 2015).

These units impose a central tradeoff: coercion can artificially bolster a military’s staying power — that is, its cohesion and resolve once battlefield fortunes turn against it — but at the cost of increased casualties and new vulnerabilities that can worsen its loss-exchange ratio in combat. This tradeoff manifests itself across several dimensions of military effectiveness. Blocking detachments can forestall (further) desertion and defection, for example, but using violence against one’s own soldiers obviously contributes to the butcher’s bill of casualties. Their presence can strengthen command and control (C2) over wayward soldiers and their officers. In doing so, however, they also generate incentives to rely on rigid tactics and operations that increase vulnerability to enemy fire, again increasing losses. These detachments can bolster soldier resolve through the threat of punishment, but soldier grievances will also mount, worsening morale and possibly spilling over into greater insubordination, including officer executions (“fragging”).

In keeping with this volume’s themes, I explore the tradeoffs inherent in blocking detachments at the war-fighting level. I first provide descriptive statistics and context on the historical use of blocking detachments using a new dataset of 250 conventional wars (1800-2011). I then outline four possible tradeoffs in their battlefield deployment before drawing on Soviet experiences at Stalingrad (1942-43) and Kursk (1943) to provide an initial plausibility probe using process tracing (?). Next, I consider several additional tradeoffs that emerge from this process tracing before concluding with suggestions for future research on

coercion, blocking detachments, and military effectiveness.

1 Blocking Detachments in History

I define *blocking detachments* as specialized units designed to monitor and sanction soldiers and their officers within a belligerent's own military during wartime. Monitoring includes surveillance of soldier attitudes using spies or other collection methods (i.e. reviewing and censoring soldier letters) to assess morale. These units often oversee possible retreat avenues to foreclose opportunities for military personnel to desert or defect. As part of this monitoring mission, blocking detachments can act as a barrier between soldiers and rear areas, preventing information exchange while limiting chances for soldiers to escape. These units also possess the capacity to sanction using the threat or imposition of violence against soldiers and, in some cases, their families. Possible sanction mechanisms include coerced return to units after successful desertion, forced enrollment in penal battalions, and even execution, oftentimes in front of a soldier's own unit.

Blocking detachments are typically stationed in the immediate rear of deployed forces to guard against unauthorized withdrawal and to prod soldiers into action when attacking. These units do not typically engage enemy forces, instead saving their fire for their own forces. In this definition, blocking units are officially authorized rather than ad hoc arrangements, though they may owe their origins to informal practices adopted haphazardly by frontline units. While exceptions do exist,² these units are usually staffed by personnel chosen for their presumed regime loyalty. Their diversion from frontline roles thus represents a costly investment since these hardline supporters are often the most effective units available to political leaders.

Though defined by their monitoring and sanctioning functions, these units' institutional design has varied across combatants. For example, their coverage net can vary substantially: in some armies, only a handful of blocking detachments are deployed, often positioned behind the most unreliable units, while in other cases, they are stationed behind all frontline units. The size of blocking detachments can also vary considerably, with some units as small as 50 soldiers and others as large as 200 or more men. Staffing, too, differs: in some cases, these units are drawn from regular military formations; in others,

²The Zhili Clique used a special unit of child soldiers (the *Du Jun Dui*) to shoot deserters with cannon fire in its 1925 war against the Fengtian Clique in China, for example.

specialized agencies (such as military intelligence organs); and in some cases, both types of units are present, often cross-guarding each other. Finally, blocking detachments vary in the amount and frequency of violence directed against fellow soldiers. Why we observe this heterogeneity across belligerents is an important question in its own right.

To date, most discussions of these units consist of scattered references tucked within broader accounts of military effectiveness, if they are mentioned at all. To study blocking detachments systematically, I gathered data on the use of these units in 250 conventional wars from 1800 to 2011. Briefly, these data encompass 825 observations from 240 unique belligerents in conventional wars involving two or more states that resulted in ≥ 500 battle deaths. Belligerents are included if they possess a political capital, the ability to control their population, can muster a conventional army, and had $\geq 5\%$ of the total fielded forces or casualties in a war. Civil wars that were fought conventionally — that is, with firearm-equipped uniformed soldiers engaging in direct combat using combined arms — are also included. These civil wars include the American Civil War, the Taiping and Nien Rebellions in China, the Russian Civil War, and the Spanish Civil War, among others.³

What do these data reveal? Belligerents deployed blocking detachments at least 158 times, representing nearly 20% of all combatant observations (158/825). There were 87 recorded instances of blocking unit deployment in 483 pre-World War I observations (18% of all observations); an additional 71 instances were recorded in the post-World War I era (71/342, or 21%).⁴ These data indicate that leaders were equally likely to resort to blocking detachments across the “pre-modern” (1800-1917) and post-World War I “modern” (1918-) eras of warfare (??), suggesting that these units are not simply a response to the increased lethality of modern warfare. Nor are these units confined to the same set of combatants. While some countries have relied heavily on such practices (notably, Russia and China), a full 22% of all combatants in the dataset recorded at least one deployment of blocking detachments in the pre-World War I era (28/125). A similar 18% of combatants in the post-World War I era (19/103) did so as well.

Several trends emerge from these data. Above all, the deployment of blocking detachments is strongly associated with a regime’s prewar repression of ethnic groups within its national borders. As Lyall (2015) argues, regimes ruling divided societies are likely to adopt

³For a detailed overview of the new dataset and its many differences from the Correlates of War, see ?.

⁴These are conservative estimates and likely undercount the actual number of combatants deploying blocking units given gaps in the historical record and the tendency of some belligerents to suppress or purge these accounts from official histories.

coercive approaches to generating combat power because their use of violence in the prewar era creates grievances among targeted populations that translates into suspected political disloyalty by soldiers drawn from these populations. A legacy of prewar marginalization or regime-imposed violence is also unlikely to create units with high levels of motivation. Instead, prior violence hardens ethnic group identification, fueling collective action such as desertion and defection designed to escape the state's military machine. Coercion thus becomes an attractive — and perhaps only — option for generating and sustaining combat power since patriotic appeals and selective incentives are unlikely to trump soldiers' affiliation with their (repressed) ethnic group. The Ottoman Empire and Russia/Soviet Union, along with lesser-known combatants such as the Central Asian khanate of Kokand and the Mahdist State, all resorted to blocking detachments to monitor and sanction marginalized groups with prior exposure to regime-directed repression.

While we might imagine that blocking detachments are adopted only as last-ditch defensive measures by desperate belligerents, these data reveal that initiators (18%), joiners (17%), and targets (20%) have nearly identical rates of deployment. Drawing on the familiar 21-point Polity2 index of regime type (where +10 is a full democracy and -10 is a full authoritarian regime),⁵ we find that belligerents using blocking units are slightly less democratic than their non-using counterparts (-4.12 versus -2.62 for the 1800-2011 period), though the difference is only statistically significant in the modern era. When we substitute a democracy dummy variable (where Pol2 values ≥ 7), however, we observe a marked difference: democracies represent only about 7% of states that used blocking detachments, compared with 18% of those that did not, for the 1800-2011 era. While democracies, including the Confederate States of America during the American Civil War and the short-lived First Republic of Venezuela during its War of Independence (1810-12), have embraced such tactics, they are far more reluctant to do so than autocracies.⁶

More surprisingly, combatants with varying degrees of material power have adopted blocking units; they are not the sole preserve of the weak and desperate. Less powerful states certainly number among those adopting blocking detachments: Entre Ríos Province, during the Platine War (1851-52) with the Argentine Confederation, and Siam, during its

⁵?

⁶This reluctance may have less to do with innate democratic values, however. Democracies typically fight much farther from their borders than autocracies — often far overseas — reducing the threat of desertion and defection and thus attenuating the need for blocking detachments. Note, too, that ?, 73 find little statistical support for the proposition that democratic armies possess higher levels of morale.

1827 war with Vientiane, used battlefield executions and barrier troops to hold their forces together against superior foes. Yet we also find vast empires using blocking detachments, including the Ottoman Empire, Rabah Empire, the Kingdom of Dahomey, and Kokand. And, as noted above, even Great Powers, including China during the Korean War and Tsarist Russia on the Eastern Front of World War I, have relied on such units to round up deserters and to drive home frontal assaults. In fact, these data indicate that *stronger* powers or coalitions, as measured by relative share of total soldiers deployed during a war, utilized blocking detachments at a higher clip than their numerically inferior opponents.⁷

2 Soldier Motivation and the Tradeoffs of Blocking Detachments

Blocking detachments are one possible solution to a more general problem, that of motivating soldiers to fight and die. At present, the existing literature has offered three families of explanations for soldier motivation.

Some contend, for example, that soldiers are driven by ideology, especially nationalism, and thus fight to defend or advance a particular cause (?????). Others suggest that soldier motivation is tied to material benefits and selective incentives, including salaries and opportunities for battlefield spoils (???). Perhaps the most widely cited argument centers around the role of primary group bonds: soldiers fight not for sweeping ideological visions or crass material gains but instead for each other. Strong emotional ties and shared sacrifices bind soldiers into bands of brothers that fight doggedly for fellow soldiers until extreme losses shatter the primary group(??????).

By comparison, scholars have been largely silent on how coercion might motivate soldiers. Our theories tacitly assume, for example, that negative inducements are weaker than positive incentives for motivating soldiers. To cite one well-known study, Margaret Levi’s consent-based approach to the study of military service largely excludes the possibility that states coerce their citizens into fighting (?). While acknowledging that coercion may play a role in motivating soldiers, Jasen Castillo notes that “fear alone cannot keep soldiers fighting.” Eventually, “soldiers will begin to fear the enemy more than the blocking formations pushing them forward” (?, 24). In a sweeping study of American soldiers since 1776,

⁷This may indicate that larger armies suffer a greater probability of principal-agent problems that are “solved” using blocking units.

Christopher Hamner suggests that the practical realities of the battlefield render punishment an ineffective and unreliable instrument for motivation, leading states to embrace other means of bolstering unit morale (3).

This omission leaves us without a proper accounting of coercion's relative effectiveness and associated tradeoffs. It is time, as Hew Strachan has argued, "to take cognizance of the possibly positive consequences of punitive procedures for combat motivation" (?). Indeed, the possibility that states not only resort to these measures frequently but are rational to do so, and that both democracies and autocracies have drawn on such practices historically, needs to be entertained. Ideological appeals may find little purchase among certain soldiers, for example, while primary group bonds can actually facilitate desertion and defection, eroding rather than enhancing military effectiveness (?).

Blocking detachments may therefore be a viable, perhaps dominant, strategy for generating combat power for many combatants. There are, however, multiple tradeoffs inherent in their use, forcing states to privilege some elements of military effectiveness while accepting diminished performance in other areas. I follow the volume's shared definition of military effectiveness: "Militaries are effective to the degree that they can accomplish at acceptable costs the goals assigned to them by political leaders" (Reiter, this volume). I examine the presence of tradeoffs at the war-fighting level, which I define as the tactical and operational levels of analysis, where tactics are associated with small unit maneuvers while operations encompass army-size maneuvers across at least one front (?).

Blocking detachments are associated with at least one central tradeoff. Their presence can bolster a military's "staying power" — namely, its ability to absorb heavy losses while maintaining cohesion — but at extremely high cost, typically measured in terms of relative casualties suffered but also in lost materiel and battlefield opportunities. Concerns about staying power are often associated with combatants that are losing wars (?), but this not always the case; states can initiate wars and still rely on blocking detachments to secure their ambitions if unexpected casualties are incurred or attack momentum has been blunted. These detachments can buy time for regrouping by holding savaged units together and preventing further desertion or defection. Doing so, however, will worsen loss-exchange ratios, as soldier executions or imprisonment, along with tactical and operational vulnerabilities, conspire to increase losses and decrease capabilities for inflicting them. While these losses may appear favorable compared to complete military collapse, they are nonetheless worse compared to the counterfactual case of a similar combatant

that did not need to deploy blocking detachments.

There are at least four specific tradeoffs underpinning this “macro” tradeoff between staying power and loss-exchange ratios. First, blocking detachments pit cohesion against casualties: they can mitigate the risk of desertion, defection, and more diffuse foot-dragging by the threat or application of violence, but at the cost of self-inflicted casualties. Second, blocking detachments help militaries maintain tighter battlefield control over their officers and soldiers. At the same time, however, they reduce tactical and operational flexibility, again driving up casualties as militaries come to rely on rigid, costly, and less innovative practices such as frontal assaults. Third, blocking detachments reduce training demands, lowering the investment in human capital necessary to generate combat power quickly. Such gains come at the cost of lowering the skill level of soldiers, in turn reducing their ability to master their weapons and to execute complicated tactics and operations, including combined arms integration and movement under fire. Fourth, blocking detachments may stiffen the resolve of units, leading them to fight harder and longer than they otherwise would, but at the cost of creating new grievances, including the opening of a second front between officers and soldiers and soldiers and their blocking detachments. These tradeoffs are summarized in Table 1.

Before exploring these tradeoffs in greater detail below, it is worth noting that assessments of tradeoffs hinge on identifying the appropriate comparison group. We can identify tradeoffs in two ways: (1) the belligerent’s own battlefield performance during a given war, where we can identify the positive and negative effects of blocking detachment within the same military across different facets that comprise military effectiveness (a “within-case” comparison); and (2) the comparison to a similar belligerent that did not deploy blocking detachments (a “paired-case” comparison). This second comparison is helpful in establishing the counterfactual (??): that is, how much worse (or better) would the state’s battlefield performance have been had it not used blocking detachments? I use both types of comparison below.

Table 1: Coercion and the war-fighting tradeoffs of blocking detachments

<u>Tradeoff</u>	<u>Benefit</u>	<u>Drawback</u>
Cohesion vs. Casualties	Decreased desertion, defection, shirking	Increased (self-inflicted) casualties
Tighter battlefield control vs. Reduced flexibility	Enforce control (incl. over officers)	Rigid tactics and operational art
Reduced training demand vs. Lowered skill	Substitute for training	Reduced weapons and tactical proficiency
Stiffened soldier resolve vs. New grievances	Reduced panics, increased fire volume	Worsened morale, open “second front”
<i>Sum</i>	Improved battlefield staying power	Worsened loss-exchange ratios

2.1 Cohesion versus Casualties

Blocking units represent an institutional response to the twin threats of desertion and defection that have plagued armies for centuries, particularly those armies that find themselves suffering high casualty rates at the war's outset. *Desertion* is defined as the unauthorized wartime withdrawal of a unit (or group of soldiers) from the battlefield or its rear areas with the intention of permanently abandoning the fight. Withdrawing from the war effort can take two forms: hiding from state authorities among the civilian population in an attempt to return to a prewar life; or resorting to brigandage in rear areas without coordinating with enemy forces (?). *Defection*, by contrast, is defined as the transfer of allegiance to the opposing side with the intention of taking up arms against one's former government.

If successful, blocking units may significantly reduce manpower drain—perhaps eliminating desertion and defection entirely—while also preventing the transfer of weapons and intelligence to one's opponent. Stemming this loss of manpower also has downstream benefits: preventing desertion undercuts the formation of brigandage units by deserters that prey upon logistical lines or local populations for food, weapons, and money. During the First World War, the Ottoman Army, for example, experienced massive desertion from its Greek, Armenian, and Arab soldiers who, in turn, formed groups that attacked railway lines to pilfer supplies, hobbling Ottoman logistics (?, 270-72).

Similarly, blocking detachments not only restore a military's manpower but also prevent large groups of disgruntled, armed, soldiers from heading home with the intent of toppling the regime itself. Shaky regimes may turn to blocking detachments as a battlefield form of "coup-proofing" that minimizes the chances that military indiscipline and desertion could become existential challenges to regime survival. There is a now-extensive literature on coup-proofing, particularly in Arab authoritarian states, where leaders take deliberate action — including circumscribed training, prohibitions on live-fire exercises, recruitment and promotion that favors certain (loyal) groups over merit — to reduce coup threat. These actions invariably trade regime security for military effectiveness, however (????), And while the impetus behind the deployment of blocking detachments is to improve staying power, and the odds of eventual victory, by sealing soldiers in place, it is undeniable that these measures can have spillover effects that contribute to regime security.

This externally-imposed discipline comes with a marked downside, of course. In many cases, these units can inflict tremendous casualties on their own forces. Santiago Marino,

a key leader of the (Second) Republic of Venezuela during its war of independence (1812-14), resorted to executing every fifth deserter caught by his special disciplinary formations. Given the small size of his army (less than 5,000 soldiers at some points), the effect was enormous (?, 105). Desertion was also a widespread, chronic, issue facing Iraqi forces throughout 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war; according to one estimate, some 25,000 soldiers deserted in a four month period between December 1986 and March 1987 alone. Saddam Hussein would order his disciplinary units to execute thousands, and perhaps tens of thousands, of Iraqi soldiers for desertion over the course of the war; as early as May 1982, orders were sent to execute hundreds of soldiers to forestall rising panic within the ranks (?, 176,297).

There is also a hidden side to these casualties. Anecdotally, we often observe the rise of self-inflicted mutilation and maiming by soldiers desperate to escape both the battlefield and the wrath of blocking units. These behaviors reduce the available pool of recruits and, equally as important, contribute to the erosion of morale among remaining soldiers. Given these attempts at evasion, it is unsurprising that some blocking detachments, including those employed by the Soviet Union, had specific orders to comb field hospitals for soldiers suspected of deliberately harming themselves (?, 330fn59).

The creation and staffing of these units can also represent a sizable diversion of resources away from the battlefield. Imperial China and the Soviet Union each supported their blocking detachments with substantial bureaucracies, rear prison camps, and extensive surveillance efforts that demanded tens of thousands of soldiers. Moreover, these units are typically drawn from the most competent (and loyal) personnel: pulling them from the front-lines to rear overwatch positions is a gamble that may not pay dividends. Nor is maintaining the loyalty of these units automatic; in many cases, militaries have devised special incentives to motivate these soldiers that undercut overall military effectiveness. Loyalty-inducing policies can range from higher pay and preferential access to food and weapons to sanctioned battlefield looting, as is the case with President Bashar al-Assad's quasi-blocking force, the National Defense Forces.

Militaries adopting blocking detachments are essentially gambling that they can generate a credible deterrent to desertion and defection without inflicting sufficient casualties to sabotage the entire war effort. The exact location of this tradeoff is an empirical question, one that depends on the detachment's size, its lethality, the extent of its bureaucratic apparatus, and the salience of the underlying grievances leading soldiers to challenge authority. That said, the tradeoff between cohesion and casualties is a basic feature of

blocking detachments, one that all militaries employing such units will inevitably face on the battlefield.

2.2 Control versus Flexibility

Blocking detachments can improve command and control (C2) in two ways. Tighter control can be exercised over officers if these units have the authority to punish them for failure. In turn, officers can use the presence of these units to threaten their soldiers with punishment, reinforcing their own control over the rank-and-file. Together, these pressures on soldiers and their commanders can improve battlefield C2, particularly when battlefield losses are piling up and when senior military commanders suspect disloyalty among their officers or soldiers. The result is a more unified effort within and across units while also increasing the odds that orders will be carried out, improving battlefield performance somewhat when compared to a baseline of total C2 breakdown. Improved C2 also reduces the likelihood of a successful officer-led challenge, adding another layer of battlefield coup-proofing.

By extension, blocking units can also be deployed to enforce control over unreliable proxy forces. During the ongoing war in Ukraine, Russian forces have been accompanied by the Ministry of Interior's Dzerzhinskiy Division to serve as barrier troops behind Russian and rebel (proxy) lines. Reports place the Dzerzhinskiy Division near Debaltseve (in northern rebel controlled territory) and Mariupol, for example. Eyewitnesses have recorded at least five instances of punitive action taken against Russian soldiers by this Division; rebels, too, have been sanctioned.⁸

Tighter control in turn restores some options at the operational level, at least compared to militaries facing disintegration. Blocking detachments may reopen avenues of action previously ruled out by the threat of (further) desertion. These stop-gap measures, however inefficient, permit a combatant to launch operations that states in similar situations but without blocking detachments could not undertake. In fact, the threat of sanction exhorts units to prosecute riskier and costlier operations than otherwise possible, perhaps gaining a significant edge over adversaries that cannot muster similar efforts. Blocking units can, for example, drive near-suicidal frontal attacks that can swamp an enemy's defenses. Pushed past their natural breaking points, these units become key assets in an attritional struggle to grind a superior opponent down.

⁸Igor Sutyagin, "Russian Forces in Ukraine," *RUSI Briefing Paper*, March 2015, 9.

Reliance on these blocking detachments does reduce battlefield flexibility, however. In particular, these units can impose sometimes severe restrictions on the tactics and operational practices of fielded armies. Since blocking detachments substitute coercion for soldier initiative, militaries will often simplify their tactics and operations to limit their complexity for soldiers who are poorly motivated and trained (see below). Frontal assaults are a hallmark of forces with blocking detachments since they concentrate manpower at a fixed point, reducing the need for complicated coordination while allowing advancing units to remain tethered to their minders.

The need to maintain close physical proximity to blocking detachments also undercuts the ability of attacking armies to seize opportunities, especially during exploitation operations after breaking through enemy positions. Tactics and operational art will also innovate at a slower pace since many battlefield problems can be “solved” simply by throwing more soldiers into the fray, a luxury that armies not backstopped by these detachments might not be able to consider. These conservative tactics and operations are rational from the commander’s point of view: they offer less risk of failure than bold but unproven operations. Better to muddle through and “only” lose men than risk personal sanction for abandoning orthodox battlefield practices.

Rigid command and control, along with simplified tactics and an unwillingness to rely upon individual soldier initiative, is a recipe for increased casualties, however. Conservative tactics and the need to advance at the pace of blocking detachments create new vulnerabilities that enemies can exploit to inflict greater casualties than otherwise possible. These same vulnerabilities also limit the amount of damage done to an enemy; blocking detachments may slow rates of advancement, for example, providing scattered enemy forces time to regroup and escape encirclement. By slowing rates of innovation, blocking detachments impose constraints on killing proficiency, forcing belligerents to miss out on the early adoption of alternative tactics or operations that might improve loss-exchange ratios.

The presence of blocking detachments also introduces a specific form of C2 vulnerability. If these units are required to maintain military cohesion, then they become high priority targets. Given their distinctive profile on the battlefield, these units are perhaps uniquely vulnerable to counter-C2 efforts. This is especially true in the modern era of warfare; these units can be found, fixed, and targeted by aircraft, drones, and electronic warfare to degrade their capabilities. Cracking these disciplinary units could in turn create new opportunities for desertion and defection from previously bottled up soldiers, leading to

the unraveling of whole formations if not the entire fielded force.

2.3 Reduced Training versus Lower Skill

Another key aspect of creating power, if an unglamorous one, is training. Realistic training exercises are thought essential to fostering cohesion within units and imparting the skills necessary to wage combat, particularly in the modern era of sophisticated weaponry and complex combined arms operations. Training provides the opportunity to engrain tactical thinking and master new technologies (??, 13). It acts as a key mechanism of socialization in which civilians are transformed into professional soldiers, imbibing the military ethos while forming primary group bonds through shared hardships that create strong unit cohesion. Realistic training also increases military effectiveness by creating a familiarity with the noise and confusion of the modern battlefield, reducing the destructive nature of surprises that can shatter cohesion while also socializing soldiers into the habit of firing their weapons, something they typically are reluctant to do in the absence of prewar training (?, 49).

States may lack the resources to devote to realistic training. They may also fear the consequences of diffusing prewar weapons training throughout their population given suspected disloyalties. Once war begins, states may lack the time to provide realistic training, especially if battlefield casualties are heavy. In these situations, states need to mobilize large numbers of soldiers quickly and have them make an immediate impact, even if they are unskilled. Blocking detachments provide one solution: coercion allows states to short-change training, sacrificing quality for quantity and using threatened violence rather than socialization as the glue holding units together. This solution provides a framework for action that does not hinge on a high level of skill or training but that generates combat power quickly, if crudely, a kind of exoskeleton for low-skill soldiers.

In fact, by halting widespread desertion or panic, blocking detachments can actually buy time for more sustained training over the medium-to-long term. The presence of these units will also improve killing proficiency by forcing soldiers to overcome their reluctance to fire their weapons. This is especially true in the pre-World War One era, where the absence of rigorous (prewar) training meant that soldiers still had a strong aversion to killing (?). Units with blocking detachments will be more proficient—as measured by volume of fire—than comparable units without blocking units, though perhaps not as effective as units

that never needed these detachments in the first place.

Of course, the substitution of coercion for sustained training imposes costs. Armies with blocking detachments will muster and deploy soldiers with lower-than-average skills relative to their non-blocked opponents. Tactical skills are an important, if often overlooked, aspect of military effectiveness: they help soldiers maximize their use of terrain, reducing their exposure to enemy fire while maximizing their ability to inflict casualties (?). Weak skills translate into reduced tactical proficiency, imposing constraints not only on basic tactics but also the ability to carry out complicated operations that require a high degree of coordination. Unskilled soldiers will also have reduced means to seize sudden battlefield opportunities or to improvise within their commanders' guidelines in order to stay alive and inflict casualties.

The result is again a ballooning of the costs incurred by combatants utilizing blocking detachments: casualties will be higher than non-blocked armies and loss-exchange ratios far worse as less skilled soldiers fare worse on the battlefield, reducing their ability to inflict casualties even as their own losses mount. Reduced firearm proficiency will also result in a decreased ability to kill enemy soldiers, resulting in worsened loss-exchange ratios. Reduced opportunities to acquire skills also extends to more prosaic issues such as maintenance: without these skills, armies risk the interruption of their operations due to logistical delays in repairing and resupplying materiel.

2.4 Resolve Versus Grievance

Perhaps the most intuitive reason for using blocking detachments is that coercion can increase soldier resolve, especially among units with poor morale and indiscipline but that have not (yet) committed mass desertion or defection. By foreclosing the ability to retreat, blocking units may force soldiers to fight harder and to absorb higher casualties than they otherwise might have if left to their own devices. These units can be especially valuable when enforcing discipline and order among soldiers who view the state as illegitimate or are in danger of breaking from heavy battlefield casualties. In these instances, blocking units represent a last-ditch effort to force soldiers to fight, avoid costly retreats, and to buy time for reinforcements to arrive.

The effects of these blocking units can also extend beyond their immediate surroundings to influence other (non-blocked) units. The deployment of blocking units in select

circumstances may create a demonstration effect via indirect deterrence that persuades other units to shape up to avoid similar sanction. By shoring up resolve in wavering units, blocking detachments can stop the spread of panic to other units. ?, for example, argues that informational cascades in which steadfast soldiers (or units) nonetheless desert because they witness others doing so, leading them to reassess their own positions as the preferences of others are revealed. Units may wish to stand fast but will nonetheless collapse into disarray as their soldiers update their expectations about the likelihood of others' desertion and the probability of winning the war (Rosen 2005, 125).

Yet while coercion can induce resolve mechanically, its use only creates further grievances among soldiers and officers. If soldiers were reluctant to fight on behalf of the regime before, threatened violence is unlikely to generate genuine pro-regime sentiment. Instead, the use of blocking detachments will be treated as an credible signal that the regime believes its soldiers are unreliable, and that they will exercise less initiative (unless organizing desertion) and less resolve if left ungarded. These grievances may lead to catastrophic spirals of desertion and defection if a unit is separated from its blocking detachment during battle, especially if soldiers were from targeted groups that had experienced violence or discrimination at the hands of the regime in the prewar era. Blocking detachments can reinforce rather than suppress existing ethnic and other fault-lines within these units if their punishment is applied unevenly. In turn, these grievances may be exploited by opponents' propaganda that calls attention to the graphic nature of the regime's own devaluation of their lives.

More generally, grievance formation can spark an intra-military "second front" pitting soldiers against their officers and units against their blocking detachments. The creation and deployment of blocking units can drive a wedge between officers and soldiers by setting up dueling incentive structures. Officers will be punished by blocking detachments for not pushing their soldiers forward, creating incentives to use them callously to avoid their own execution or cashiering for poor performance. Soldiers will naturally resent these operations and are liable to strike back by "fragging" officers. Bonds of trust between officers and their soldiers will also crumble, hobbling coordination and strategy. At its extreme, this resentment may push soldiers to organize collective action against the blocking detachments themselves, either by purposely attempting to separate during battle or even by turning their weapons against them.

3 Tradeoffs in Action: The Soviet Experience at Stalingrad and Kursk

Operation Barbarossa, Hitler's plan for invading the Soviet Union, was launched on 22 June 1941 and quickly inflicted staggering losses on Soviet forces. Enormous battlefield losses — some three million Soviet soldiers were captured as Prisoners of War in the first six months alone (?, 175) — and widespread desertion and defection pushed the Red Army to its breaking point. Despite local successes in blunting German momentum, as at Moscow, an increasingly desperate Red Army instituted blocking detachments as official policy in 1942.⁹

I use process-tracing to explore the tradeoffs associated with Soviet blocking detachments during key battles at Stalingrad (23 August 1942 to 2 February 1943) and Kursk (5 July-23 August 1943). Soviet commanders had already implemented coercive measures in an ad hoc fashion as early as June 1941 to hold units together against the German onslaught. Deserters and defectors were often shot on the spot during summer 1941 to stiffen resolve; in some cases, whole units turned against their political officers (*politruki*) in a bid to escape punishment or the war itself (?, 168). In at least one notable instance, Soviet artillery fire was called down on a unit that was defecting to the Germans at the Battle of Chernevo in 1941 (?, 428-29). On 16 August 1941, Order No.270 was issued by Stalin, which extended authority to commanders to shoot deserters and arrest their family members; it also prohibited encircled soldiers from surrendering and authorized the battlefield cashiering of hesitant, incompetent, or just plain unlucky, officers.

These measures failed to stem the tide of desertion and battlefield setbacks, however. Stalin then resorted to more drastic measures, personally writing Order No.227 on 28 July 1942 (?, 223). The order called for the immediate creation of 200-man blocking detachments to be staffed by Red Army soldiers and positioned in the rear of all units. They were part of a broader interlocking monitoring and sanctioning system of secret police (NKVD), surveillance and censorship, and penal battalions for officers (*shtrafbaty*) and companies for soldiers (*shtrafrotty*).¹⁰ Blocking detachments were to establish positions two-three kilometers behind the front lines to fulfill three tasks: return straggling or lost soldiers to their units; prevent desertion and defection through fear of sanction; and to

⁹The literature on the Eastern Front is vast. Key works include: ??????????.

¹⁰Ideological changes, including patriotic and nationalist appeals, were also adopted. See Lyall 2015.

imprison or kill commanders or soldiers that deserted, defected, exercised poor judgment, or otherwise represented a threat to cohesion.¹¹

This harsh measure was justified, Stalin believed, by continued indiscipline:

What do we lack? There is no order and discipline in companies, battalions, regiments, in tank units and air squadrons. This is our main deficiency. We should establish in our army the most stringent order and solid discipline, if we want to salvage the situation, and to keep our Motherland. . . Panic-mongers and cowards should be wiped out on the spot.¹²

The adoption of these blocking detachments was not due solely to battlefield losses, however. Stalin and his Soviet High Command (*Stavka*) faced a deeper structural problem: allegiance to the regime was highly variable among soldiers, particularly those drawn from ethnic groups that had suffered from repressive prewar Soviet nation-building and collectivization drives. These soldiers had little desire to fight for a regime that had victimized their families, helping to explain why desertion and defection was so high among Soviet forces during 1941-42. In addition, many of these soldiers, especially Ukrainians and Belorussians, had homes in now-German occupied territories, creating both motive and opportunity for soldiers to slip away from the ranks. Many Soviet commanders viewed their own soldiers with suspicion, accusing them of divided loyalties and an unwillingness to bear the necessary costs to protect the Soviet regime. Nor could commanders rely on primary group bonds to instill discipline and maintain cohesion: by one estimate, loss rates were so high during these initial years that the average front-line tour for an infantryman before death or serious wounding was only three weeks (?, 16).

Yet reliable information about these detachments, despite their well-known role, remains difficult to obtain, in part because of prior censorship and current sensitivities; Order No.227 itself was not publicly released until 1988. Most scholarly treatments of the Eastern Front typically marginalize the effects of these units, pausing only to highlight their shocking nature before returning to blow-by-blow accounts of various battles. In fact, the best accounts of these units are actually found in Soviet- and post-Soviet literature.¹³

¹¹The best Russian-language discussions of blocking detachments are: ????.

¹²Order No.227, People's Commissar of Defense of the USSR, 28 July 1942, Moscow.

¹³See, for example, Emmanuil Kazakevich's *Star* [1946] and *Two Men on the Steppe* [1948], Grigori Baklanov's *South of the Main Blow* [1958] and *The Dead Feel No Pain* [1966], and Yuri Bondarev's *The Battalions Request Fire Support* [1957]). For the post-Soviet era, see ?, 38-39.

That said, Soviet-era archives have gradually revealed their secrets about blocking detachments, and even more material is slated to be declassified beginning in 2017 (? , 722fn1). These archival records, if still incomplete, have sparked a vigorous debate how, and if, blocking detachments affected Soviet military effectiveness. At one extreme, nationalist Russian historians have questioned the very existence of most of these units, suggesting that their role has been exaggerated by Western historians seeking to denigrate Soviet contributions in Nazi Germany’s defeat (*degeroisatziya*).¹⁴ Other historians have argued that executions were so infrequently and haphazardly carried out that they did not serve as a credible deterrent. “Soldiers may have been afraid,” Roger Reese has argued, but “that does not explain the compliance of the majority of the army (? , 173).

Others assign a much more prominent role to these units, however. “All soldiers shared some measure of fear,” Catherine Merridale has written, and “the NKVD soldier with his pistol, shooting stragglers in the back, is an abiding image of this war” (? , 317). Alexander Statiev has reached a similar finding, noting the “nearly unanimous opinion of Soviet veterans [that] the threat to be sent to a penal unit strengthen[ed] discipline” (? , 745). Perhaps the strongest claims are made by David Glantz in his monumental study of Soviet military performance: “The iron discipline and administered by Stalin... served as the essential “glue” that bound the Red Army together as a coherent fighting force and permitted it to survive and, ultimately, prevail despite the appalling combat conditions its soldiers had to endure” (? , 582). This view of blocking detachments as indispensable has been echoed by a consortium of Russian military historians. Order No.227, they concluded, played “a major role in increasing the resilience and military activity of Soviet forces [and] in creating a turning point in the course of military operations” (? , 330).

3.1 The Cases: Stalingrad and Kursk

The Battle of Stalingrad is often considered a turning point in Nazi and Soviet fortunes on the Eastern Front. The battle began with Germany’s Army Group South launching its massive Operation Blau to shatter Soviet forces at Stalingrad, which occupied a key defensive salient barring further Nazi advances. Soviet forces bent but did not break, blunting German momentum before launching their own Operation Uranus (19 November 1942), a two-pronged attack aimed first at weaker Romanian and Hungarian units protecting the

¹⁴For one such account, see ? , 120-24.

Sixth Army's flanks before encircling the entire Sixth Army. Its surrender in February 1943 represented the first time that Soviet forces had encircled and destroyed a German Army. The cost was high for both sides, as the battle degenerated into brutal house-to-house fighting within Stalingrad's shattered environs. Soviet forces lost an estimated 1,129,619 casualties; Nazi forces, about 850,000 soldiers killed, wounded, or captured. Soviet materiel losses were also enormous: some 4,341 tanks, 15,728 artillery pieces, and 2,769 aircraft were destroyed; the Nazis lost 500 tanks, 6,000 artillery pieces, and 900 aircraft.¹⁵

If Stalingrad blunted German momentum, then Kursk represents the watershed mark when strategic initiative passed into Soviet hands for good. Desperate to restart its stalled campaign, Germany launched Operation Citadel, a massive effort designed to punch through a large concentration of Soviet forces in the Kursk salient. The German offensive envisaged a complicated double pincer maneuver that would encircle and then destroy trapped several Soviet armies on the Voronezh and Central Fronts. Yet Soviet commanders, armed with intelligence intercepts, had constructed a massive defense-in-depth that, for the first time, blunted a blitzkrieg-style offensive before it reached Soviet strategic depths. The Nazi thrust only penetrated about 8-12 kilometers in the north and up to 35 kilometers in the south, before bogging down amid the eight defensive belts that extended up to 170 kilometers behind Soviet front lines. Soviets forces shifted to the offensive on 12 July, launching two operations (Kutuzov and Polkovodets Rumyantsev). The fighting, which witnessed some of the largest tank battles in history (as at Prokhorovka, 12 July 1943), was extremely bloody. Some Soviet units essentially disintegrated in place, sustaining up to 70% losses in a desperate bid to prevent Nazi incursions (? , 275). Overall, 1,041,150 Soviet soldiers were killed, wounded, captured, or missing, while over 6,000 tanks and assault guns were destroyed or rendered non-operational; Axis forces lost 252,182 soldiers, along with 760 tanks and assault guns.¹⁶

Space constraints do not permit a full examination of these battles, each of which has its own (vast) dedicated literature. Taken together, however, these battles offer a plausibility probe of the tradeoffs associated with blocking detachments in various phases of modern, high-intensity, warfare. Blocking detachments were partially deployed at Stalingrad, for example, but had proliferated to nearly every unit at Kursk. Soviet forces were both on the defensive and offensive in these battles, and in each case transitioned from defensive

¹⁵Estimates are from ?, 107-09,221-22.

¹⁶Estimates are from ?, 123-24,228.

positions to counteroffensives, permitting investigation of blocking detachments during various campaign phases. And we also observe the use of these units during different types of combat, ranging from the close quarters, block-to-block fighting of Stalingrad to mobile operations, including some of the largest combined arms operations ever undertaken.

3.2 Cohesion versus casualties

The battles at Stalingrad and Kursk illustrate perhaps the greatest asset of blocking detachments: their ability to increase unit cohesion mechanically by foreclosing opportunities for desertion and defection. A staggering number of soldiers were detained and arrested by the 41 detachments (about 8,200 men) operating on the Stalingrad and Don Fronts. Some 51,728 soldiers, or 37% of total Red Army soldiers deployed on these fronts, were detained for suspected desertion or unauthorized leave from their units.¹⁷ Between 1 August and 15 October 1942, an estimated 140,755 soldiers were detained by 193 blocking detachments (38,600 soldiers) across all fronts. While only partial records are available, a similar story emerges at Kursk: blocking detachments stationed behind three of the armies caught almost 7,000 soldiers from 8-14 July alone, more than half stemming from eight different supposedly-elite Guards divisions. The 93rd Guards Rifle lost 10% of its strength (n=969), for example, while a further 734 soldiers were detained on 8 July alone from a single unit after its panicked flight from Nazi forces (?, 174).

These blocking detachments functioned as a catch-and-release program that steered the majority of wayward soldiers — stragglers, those absent without authorization, malingerers — back to their units. While filtration points acted to channel those suspected of desertion or defection into prison camps or public executions, the majority of soldiers went right back to their units, boosting Soviet manpower enormously. During 1942-43, 1.25 million soldiers were caught away from units without proper documentation and another 200,000 were identified as stragglers. In 1943, the immediate rear area (extending 25 kilometers behind the front line), the NKVD detained 158,585 soldiers for “straggling behind,” another 42,807 men for unauthorized departure, and 23,418 for suspected desertion. Another 18,000 soldiers were sent to penal units or the Gulag (?, 174-75). If nothing else, these detachments prevented a massive loss of Soviet personnel that could have turned into an exodus like

¹⁷“Spravka OO NKVD STF v UOO NKVD SSSR o deyatel’nosti zagraditel’nykh otryadov Stalingradskogo i Donskogo frontov [Ne ranee 15 oktyabrya] 1942 g.,” ?, 230-31. 36,109 soldiers were detained on the Don Front, and another 15,649 were detained at Stalingrad.

that seen during the last days of Tsarist Russia's Army in 1917.

Given the scale and enduring nature of the problem, it is clear that blocking detachments did not completely solve the Red Army's cohesion problems. An estimated 4.4 million incidents of desertion (2.846 million alone), defection, and unauthorized leaves were recorded over the course of the war (?, 41). For comparison, the Red Army had about 6.7 million soldiers in the battlefield at the time of the Battle of Kursk. Large units, including whole companies and battalions, deserted at Stalingrad, and soldiers continued to try to reach German lines even after Operation Uranus was launched, including the entire 42nd Rifle Division (24 September 1942).

Desertion would only ebb in late-1944, and we cannot say with confidence how much more (or less) desertion would have occurred had blocking detachments been absent. That said, we get intriguing glimpses: at Kursk, 19 men of the 179th Penal Company of the 13th Army's 148th Rifle Division defected to the Germans while others fled to the rear because a blocking detachment was not present (March 1943). This incident, and others like it, forced Soviet commanders to reissue orders explicitly stating that penal units could only be used in situations where blocking detachments were present to monitor them.¹⁸

The blocking detachments exacted a heavy price, though, in terms of increasing Soviet casualties. Red Army detachments and their NKVD counterparts executed an estimated 158,000 of their own soldiers (?, 157). While these executions represented "only" 3% of the total number of soldiers detained, these losses in an absolute sense were enormous, representing at least eleven full-strength Soviet divisions. Some 13,500 soldiers alone were shot at Stalingrad within the space of two weeks (?, 157). Put differently, these casualties rivaled total US Army losses in the European and Atlantic theaters (185,924) and dwarfed those suffered in the Pacific campaign (106,207) (?). An additional 450,000 soldiers were captured by blocking detachments and reassigned to penal battalions. These units conducted high-risk missions such as route clearance for Soviet offensives in exchange for reduced criminal sentences; casualties were staggering, often reaching 50% or greater of unit strength in just one operation (?, 577). In short, blocking detachments reduced cohesion problems but did so at the direct cost of massive casualties.

¹⁸"Direktiva voennogo soveta Tsentral'nogo fronta no.027 ot 18.4.43 g," quoted in ?, 578.

3.3 Control versus Flexibility

Blocking detachments also enabled Soviet commanders to maintain a degree of control over their soldiers likely not possible in their absence. We can observe their effects in two ways. First, *Stavka*, fearful that its commanders had grown overly cautious after the defeats of 1941, viewed these units as mechanisms that prevented premature withdrawal by commanders paralyzed by the threat of encirclement. As such, blocking detachments removed an element of discretion from the commander's purview by foreclosing any unauthorized retreats and by emphasizing offensive action (?, 97).

Second, these units could enforce control over regular units that were suffering catastrophic losses, whether as part of an attritional defense-in-depth strategy or offensive operations. At Kursk, losses among frontline Soviet divisions ranged from a low of 20% to as high as 70%, casualty rates likely unsustainable in most, if not all, armies (?, 275). The 52nd Guards Division, for example, was virtually annihilated in the first few days of the German offensive at Kursk, its soldiers sacrificed in an attritional effort to limit the depth of German penetration. Similarly, the threat of coercion pushed soldiers forward to seize the momentum from stalled German attacks even when units were seriously depleted. Soviet casualties spiked three-fold, from 7,000 on 11 July to 20,000 soldiers on 12 July 1943, when the Soviet pivoted from the defensive to offensive at Kursk, yet continued to push forward.

Reliance on blocking detachments to maintain control translated into reduced battlefield flexibility and thus indirectly contributed to higher casualties, however. Despite improvements over time, Soviet tactics and operational art remained fairly simple, if not crude, for much of the war. This is true of both Stalingrad and Kursk, where even the most innovative commanders — often in armor units — continued to rely on frontal assaults and basic maneuvers rather than more complicated operational art such as mobile defense or double envelopment. As Glantz acknowledged, the stereotype of the Red Army as a “monolithic and rigid force that employed artless steamroller tactics to achieve victory regardless of cost” was largely correct. The Red Army sought to absorb German offensives and then shift to the attack once their momentum had been halted, moving “in painstakingly rigid fashion while on the offense, often artlessly and regardless of cost” (?, 618).

Blocking detachments conspired to narrow battlefield flexibility by design: to remain a credible deterrent, these units needed to be tethered to regular line units. As a result, Soviet

commanders embraced simplified, rigid, tactics that assumed military cohesion would suffer if a gap emerged from regular units and their minders. The need to preserve this linkage created incentives to rely on costly frontal assaults where blocking detachments could maintain near constant surveillance. Similarly, exploitation efforts were curbed for fear that attacking units might become separated from their blocking detachments.

Moreover, the fact that blocking detachments could punish officers created reinforcing incentives to rely on tried-and-true, if costly, tactics and operations and to eschew more innovative but riskier approaches that might save lives. Fearing cashiering if seen as insufficiently aggressive, commanders launched many mistimed offensives that stalled out in part because they felt pressured to take action even if their men and materiel were depleted.

In short, blocking detachments restored some measure of control over units and their commanders, no minor feat given the Red Army's state of disarray in 1941-42. Yet these blocking detachments also undercut battlefield flexibility, increasing the predictability and vulnerability of Soviet forces and indirectly contributing to greater casualties and worsened loss-exchange ratios. Yes, in one sense the blocking detachments *recovered* some measure of flexibility; some units, if not the entire Red Army itself, may have completely disintegrated without their presence, restoring the ability of commanders to wield combat power on the battlefield. But the rigid tactics and operational art dictated by the same presence of these units represented a loss of battlefield freedom relative to the options available to commanders who did not have to rely on coercion to maintain control. In this case, Soviet coercion allowed German forces to punish the Red Army heavily for its inflexibility, inflicting casualties at a rate above the baseline expectation of losses had these units not been necessary.

3.4 Training versus skill

Order No.227 and the threat of sanction from blocking detachments also permitted Soviet commanders to create new units at a breakneck pace. Coercion became a substitute for realistic training; raw recruits often received as little as two weeks training before their assignment to the front (?, 138). In some cases, civilians were actually shanghaied into service, while whole units were thrown together from remnants of shattered units. Under such conditions, lasting primary group bonds were unlikely to form, creating units with potential discipline problems, low initiative, and unskilled soldiers. Blocking detachments thus

acted as cement to keep these units together while also allowing commanders to shorten training cycles. Faced with short time horizons and severe casualties, Soviet commanders could not afford peacetime training regimens designed to create cohesion through socialization. Coercion offered the quickest pathway to generating the most combat power with the least amount of time and resources.

Predictably, shortening the training cycle meant that Soviet conscripts lacked the time to acquire necessary weapons proficiency and tactical skills before being thrust into battle. Soviet Generals at Stalingrad immediately recognized the tradeoff and lamented the fact that poor training of Soviet infantry. General Malinin, Army Chief of Staff and present at Stalingrad, complained that “our infantry are useless... The artillery is doing its job, keeping the enemy’s heads down, but the infantry won’t stand up and push forward.”¹⁹ General Zhadov, commander of the 66th Army of the Don Front, also emphasized how unskilled infantry were a liability in battle: “infantry, particularly the new divisions, are not trained, don’t know how to fight, and aren’t capable of carrying out their assigned tasks”²⁰

Using blocking detachments also had a detrimental effect on the Red Army’s overall skill level. Blocking detachments were authorized to capture suspected deserters among armor and aviation units and reassign them to penal battalions as infantry. Having pilots, tank drivers and, crucially, maintenance crews serve instead as infantry led to a de-skilling of the Red Army at precisely the moment when these specialities were most needed (? , 729). For example, Soviet armored formations sustained high attrition rates at Stalingrad — some units lost 80-90% of their tanks — due mostly to mechanical breakdowns rather than enemy fire. These mechanical deficiencies foiled Soviet efforts at exploiting German collapses during Operation Uranus, letting a key opportunity for deep penetration slip by (? , 605).

3.5 Resolve versus grievance

By foreclosing most opportunities for soldiers to abandon their units, blocking detachments improved overall resolve, if only in a negative sense. Widespread panics were reduced once

¹⁹“Dokladnaya zapiska OO NKVD DF v UOO NKVD SSSR o nastupatel’nykh operatsiakh 66-i armii, 30 oktyabrya 1942 g.,” in ? , 253.

²⁰“Dokladnaya zapiska OO NKVD DF v UOO NKVD SSSR o nastupatel’nykh operatsiakh 66-i armii, 30 oktyabrya 1942 g.,” in ? , 252.

blocking detachments were implemented, especially when compared to the dark days of summer 1941, when desertion and defection occurred even among units not yet engaged in combat. Coercion thus offered a partial substitute for patriotism and Russian nationalism, especially among populations that had experienced prewar repression and for whom calls to support the regime rang hollow. Accurately gauging the volume of weapons fire, often a measure of unit resolve, is a difficult proposition, though it is clear that Soviet forces began inflicting a greater number of casualties on German forces once blocking detachments were deployed.

Perhaps more telling, however, is the tinge of desperation and gallows humor that accompanied front line soldiers accounts of their own resolve. As one popular song recounted:

The first shell punctured my gas tank.
I jumped out of the tank — how I do not know.
So they called me over to the special section [the blocking detachment]:
“Why didn’t you burn up with your tank, you son of a bitch?!”
So I answered, and this is what I said:
“I’ll be sure to do that the next time we attack.”²¹

Still, inducing resolve via coercion created its own problems. Even as late as Kursk, soldiers attempted evasion if blocking units failed to seal possible escape routes. Soldiers quickly came to resent their presence, speaking openly of a “Second Front” being organized against them.²² The NKVD, which monitored soldier attitudes closely using a vast network of informers, was alarmed by the possibility that “hostile elements” might exploit the creation of blocking units to induce Soviet soldiers to desert or defect.²³ The specter of armed mutiny also worried the NKVD.²⁴ Officers often became focal points for these grievances since soldiers could not determine whether executions and reassignment to penal battalions were genuinely for restoring order or merely an insurance policy for the commander to highlight his “resolve.” Soldiers took particular exception to the arbitrariness

²¹?, 175.

²²See, for example, “Dokladnaya zapiska OO NKVD STF v UOO NKVD SSSR ‘O reagirovaniyakh lichnogo sostava chastei i soedinenii na prikaz Stavki No.227, 14/15 avgusta 1942 g.,’” in ?, 191.

²³Ibid., p.187.

²⁴See, for example, “Spetssoobshchenie OO NVKD STF v UOO NKVD SSSR ‘Ob otritsatel’nykh vyskazyvaniyakh ot del’nykh voennosluzhashchikh Stalingradskogo fronta v svyazi s izdaniem prikaza Stavki No.227, 19 avgusta 1942 g.,’” in ?, 190-92.

of these punishments; in many cases, innocent soldiers were prosecuted or killed. Soldiers sometimes resorted to killing (“fragging”) their own officers, creating a potential crisis for command-and-control (?, 192).

4 Discussion

As the Soviet experience demonstrates, blocking detachments can play a critical role in maintaining unit cohesion under punishing conditions. This battlefield staying power came at tremendous cost, however. Indeed, the combination of executions, officer fragging, soldier mutilation, and reduced tactical and operational flexibility induced by these units produced far more Soviet casualties and a poorer loss-exchange ratio than otherwise expected by strict calculations of efficiency (?).

The Red Army’s use of blocking detachments also highlights several additional tradeoffs. The presence of these units likely contributed to the barbarization of warfare on the Eastern Front, for example.²⁵ To be sure, both Hitler and Stalin refused to adhere to existing agreements governing the treatment of prisoners of war. As Timothy Snyder points out, the first concentration camps to appear on the Eastern Front were designed specifically to hold Soviet prisoners of war captured during the encirclement battles of 1941 (?, 175-79). Yet while Hitler worked feverishly to dismantle incentives for individual Soviet soldiers to consider surrender, Soviet blocking detachments did so from the rear, creating a kill-or-be-killed environment in which Soviet soldiers sought revenge upon captured Germans. The combination of Nazi and Soviet policies created a setting where neither surrender nor retreat were viable options for most Soviet soldiers, contributing to battles where quarter was neither given nor accepted. The result was a savage reciprocity where Soviet and Nazi POWs faced staggering mortality rates and where scores of soldiers (on both sides) were summarily executed while trying to surrender (?, 220-24).

In addition, the use of blocking detachments generated political tradeoffs. Red Army and NKVD blocking detachments had an extensive role in policing — or, more aptly, “re-occupying” — newly liberated areas in Ukraine, Belarus, the Northern Caucasus, and the Baltic states. Viewing these populations as disloyal and potentially restive, the Red Army

²⁵Intriguingly, the work most centrally associated with this barbarization thesis — Omar Bartov’s *The Eastern Front, 1941-45, German Troops and the Barbarization of Warfare* — omits any mention of Red Army or NKVD blocking detachments.

deployed blocking detachments to suppress local populations. These clampdowns included forced population resettlement (as in Chechnya), the rooting out of suspected traitors and their networks, and the (re)conscription of soldiers who had taken to hiding among locals when their units were overrun during German offensives in 1941-42. From the regime's point of view, blocking detachments had political benefits in the form of reconsolidating Soviet power; the tradeoff, measured in terms of additional civilian lives destroyed, was judged as necessary and unavoidable.

Some belligerents, however, have concluded that the political costs associated with blocking detachments are too high to countenance their battlefield deployment. Faced with widespread desertion from Union ranks, President Abraham Lincoln believed the political costs of creating these units far outweighed their supposed advantages:

If I should go to shooting men by scores for desertion, I should soon have such a hullabaloo about my ears as I haven't had yet, and I should deserve it. You can't order men shot by dozens or twenties. People won't stand it, and they ought not to stand it. No, we must change the condition of things in some other way.²⁶

Even desperate belligerents suffering from poor cohesion and high desertion rates have delayed adopting blocking detachments out of concern for their political consequences. The Confederate States of America, for example, was faced with endemic desertion and a corresponding crippling manpower shortage but only belatedly authorized the creation of dedicated forces to hunt down and return deserters in 1863-64 (? , 193-95). Desertion varied sharply across (and within) CSA states, forcing President Davis to temporize in his decision about introducing these units for fear of upsetting his political coalition. But as increasingly large bands of deserters began preying upon locals, he was forced to adopt drastic measures to curb the steady erosion of support for the war among victimized populations. Similarly, Syria's President Bashar al-Assad's appears to have resisted a full-fledged commitment to these forces until 2014, when a combination of battlefield setbacks, territorial losses, rampant desertion, and recruitment woes drove him to accept the political costs associated with relying on blocking units.²⁷

²⁶?, 557.

²⁷"Desperate for soldiers, Assad's government imposes harsh recruitment measure," *The Washington Post*, 28 December 2014.

Finally, Soviet practices also raise the key issue of whether these cross-cutting war-fighting effects scale up to affect war outcomes. Of course, many factors contribute to a state's victory (or defeat), and it can be difficult to isolate the specific effects of any one policy or practice. This is especially the case with blocking detachments, where selection effects concerning the adoption of these units and timing of their implementation are wrapped up in broader war dynamics and belligerent characteristics. Was the belligerent already on the glide path to defeat when these units were created, thereby spuriously associating blocking detachments with defeat? Did these units prolong the collapse of an army or actually hasten its demise? All of these scenarios are plausible, and so we must be cautious in assigning blame and credit to blocking detachments.

That said, there are a sufficient number of historical examples of belligerents deploying these units and winning major wars — the Bolsheviks during the Russian Civil War, the USSR during the Winter War (1939-40) and Eastern Front, the Chinese government during the Taiping and Nien Rebellions — that we cannot rule out the possibility that their war-fighting effects are on balance positive at least under certain circumstances. The question of how these war-fighting scale up to affect macrolevel war outcomes and postwar regime survival remains central to future research.

5 Conclusion

Blocking detachments highlight the often-neglected role that coercion can play in motivating soldiers to fight and maintain discipline even under brutal circumstances. The tradeoffs and costs associated with purchasing battlefield staying power are high, however. These costs range from sharply higher casualties to rigid tactics and constrained operations as well as the creation of grievances among soldiers and a second front between officers and soldiers. Though often relegated to the margins of our theoretical and historical accounts of warfare, the role of blocking detachments, as well as similar institutions such as disciplinary units and state-created paramilitaries, opens new avenues for inquiry into how coercion influences military effectiveness.

Understanding these tradeoffs will require substantial investment in the collection of microlevel data fine-grained enough to parse out wartime dynamics between blocking detachments, coerced soldiers, local populations, and enemy forces. Ideally, our research design would capture situations where only some units were assigned blocking detachments

while other similar ones were not, with selection criteria approaching “as-if” random requirements. Time-series data will also become crucial for identifying the effects of these coercive institutions before and after their implementation for a host of battlefield activities, including desertion, defection, and loss-exchange ratios. There is a key role for qualitative evidence and process tracing in these accounts, too, for many of the measures of battlefield performance, including missed opportunities, decreased flexibility, and poor training, are difficult to gauge quantitatively. Similarly, teasing out the relationship between coercion and desertion will require careful tracing of the sequence of events linking the incidence of desertion and the adoption of blocking detachments.

It also remains an open question whether states can “fine-tune” the severity of these tradeoffs. It may be possible, for example, to limit the number of executions, or to deploy blocking detachments to only the worst offenders, without undermining the deterrent value of these forces. States could reduce the combat skills necessary for combined arms by adopting less complicated, but more reliable, equipment, thus keeping the force generation properties of coercion while limiting its downside. Where the exact location of the tradeoff lies will vary across combatants; we should not assume that these tradeoffs are necessarily fixed or that states are helpless captives before them. There may be some room to adjust the severity of these tradeoffs, if only on the margins, for at least some portion of combatants wielding these forces in battle.

The role of coercion in motivating soldiers, and of blocking detachments more specifically, could also be extended to the study of insurgent organizations. Here, too, coercion has largely been neglected in favor of arguments about the relative importance of material incentives, emotional appeals to revenge, and ideological commitment for recruitment and socialization dynamics (????). Yet many insurgencies draw on coercive tactics to recruit, motivate, and foster greater discipline. And while insurgent organizations typically favor hit-and-run strikes rather than direct battle, as they edge closer to conventional warfare we are likely to observe the formation of disciplinary (sub)units.

These tradeoffs may also be altered in the future by the introduction of new technology. While innovations such as drones have clearly affected the lethality of modern warfare (Horowitz, this volume), these technologies may have an even greater effect on the ability of belligerents to monitor and sanction their own soldiers. Technologies such as aerostats, drones, and biometric identification could all be deployed to mitigate or even eliminate opportunities for desertion and defection. If blocking detachments were aided, or even

replaced, by these technologies, their deterrent effects would be bolstered by removing discretion from local commanders and by closing spaces for soldiers to escape detection. Of course, these C2 systems would also make lucrative targets for opposition forces, either via direct action or electronic means that degrade or destroy these battlefield capabilities.

Perhaps most importantly, blocking detachments and other coercive institutions illustrate the importance of casting military effectiveness as the culmination of multiple tradeoffs. Militaries are rarely proficient across all facets of effectiveness; choices are often necessary about when to maximize performance in some facets of battlefield performance while accepting greater risk and inefficiencies in others. Efforts to maximize performance in certain areas — say, the reduction of threats to cohesion — can have negative, sometimes unanticipated, consequences for other aspects of military performance such as loss-exchange ratios. Studying these tradeoffs, including why and when they occur, will push our theories away from simple building block approaches and towards richer, more nuanced, accounts of military effectiveness.

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