

How to Trace Red Army Soldiers Killed during World War II * **A Step by Step Guide to Use Multiple Military Resources**

Aharon Shneyer

Translated from the Hebrew

If you would like to find out information on a family member who was killed or declared missing during World War II, be prepared for long and difficult work. Do not expect that when you ask a question someone will answer it promptly and send details. It may very well be that after years of work you will find no new information or it can happen that after a few months you will discover some piece of information that will help you advance in your research.

The records you want are scattered among many archives and a portion of the documentation did not survive. Archives burned to the ground and information about those who fell or are missing was lost. Not only individual soldiers lost their lives during World War II but entire units and even companies were wiped out with all of its soldiers killed or declared missing in action. It is especially difficult to find any information on soldiers from the early part of the war, 1941-1942 who were declared missing in action. In spite of all of this there are various ways to search for information in the event that it may have survived.

First Steps

1. Gathering Information at home

First one must clarify that they have accurate personal details: the first name, family name, year of birth and place of birth. The place of birth must correspond to the administrative divisions of the Soviet Union before the war. It is generally not difficult to find the place of residence and the draft date of the person being researched. According to where one lived one can find out the draft office where the person was inducted into the army.

It is best to work with the information you have at home, especially old photographs and letters since through them you can find out the number of the unit or the military mail number, rank, names of villages of the area and dates. The rank can be determined by the level of education and the occupation of the missing person before the war. It is also important to know in which branch of the military he served – infantry, navy or air-force and if possible, which unit he served and the regiment number. Likewise, one should know the date of death or the date he was declared missing in action.

It is generally possible to determine the number of the larger unit (usually division) according to the military postal number. Next to the number of the unit on the envelope, in the center, there is a stamp with the date that the letter was sent. This can help determine a time framework and from the letter itself one can sometimes determine the soldier's rank, the decorations he received and information that could establish if he was an officer.

2. Checking the Internet

There are a number of websites you can check using the family name; however, there is not a central database containing all the information. It is advisable to search similar sounding and variant family names. This is especially appropriate if the name is long, if it is difficult to comprehend or if there is some doubt as to whether or not it has been distorted. In the search windows all the known details such as family name, birth date, date of enlistment into the army, etc. should be filled in. It is important to check military and genealogical Internet sites as well as their forums in order to find as many ways as possible to gather information. The collections and catalogues on military literature in libraries should not be overlooked.

One must remember not to be over-reliant on information received via the Internet and it is advisable to corroborate these sources with something more authoritative. One should always indicate that these facts were received from unauthenticated sources. When confronted with information that is clearly incorrect, inaccurate or not likely, it should not be discarded. It may

happen that after some time with the discovery of additional data, that which was considered untrustworthy may be part of a larger component that will bring us closer to our goal.

3. Memorial Books

There are Memorial Books for eighty-six districts in Russia and they contain the names of the majority of those who were killed or are listed as missing during the time of the War. These thick volumes are crammed with information but they are hard to obtain outside the borders of these districts. Some of these books are in my possession and an incomplete version is available on the Internet. It is always advisable to corroborate the information found in the various books such as those dealing with localities where people lived and the centers for military enlistment. In those areas where difficult battles raged there is generally information on those who fell in that particular place. If you know in which battle the soldier was killed the details should be checked against the existing information.

A very large database is available at the Poklonnaya Gora Museum in Moscow, which also provides telephone service. However, the recorded details list only a few personal items about the dead and missing: first name, name of family, father's name and year of birth. It must also be taken into account that some factual errors exist in the Memorial Books.

4. Questions to the Archives

Most of the documentation connected with World War II is found in the Central Archive of the Russian defense ministry in the city of Podolsk. Similar collections are located in the following places:

Navy – The Central Archives of the Navy in Gatchina includes material on sailors, coast guard and the naval air force.

Army – The Army Archive in Moscow also has information about the security forces, the NKVD.

Border Police – The Central Archive of the Border Police in the city of Pushkino.

To obtain information one has to send a request to the appropriate archive with all the known details. It is recommended to include a stamped, self-addressed envelope. If the rank of the soldier is not known or if there is some basis to believe that he was an officer, a request can be sent to the Central Archive of the Defense Ministry requesting that a search be made of the databases of the 6th, 9th and 10th Departments, where information on the rank of soldiers is catalogued. One should indicate the personal and family name, name of father, year and place of birth of the soldier. It is also suggested to request information on any decorations the soldier may have been awarded, since the Archives has records on all the soldiers who received citations of honor. The answer may take six months or a year to arrive, so if at all possible, it is best to visit the Archive and not contact them by mail.

Given the condition of war and being under fire, the recording of the dead and missing was carried out as much as possible in an orderly fashion. Every unit supplied the command with the names of the killed and missing: personal and family name, year of birth, rank, job in the army, date and place where he was killed or went missing, place of burial, office where he enlisted into the army and the address of parents or wife. After the war, all these details were transferred to the Archive of the Ministry of Defense; the databases mentioned above were developed on the basis of this information. These data in addition to the number of the division, brigade, company and platoon were entered into the soldier's personal file and transmitted to their family in the letter informing them of the soldier's death or of his being officially declared missing in action. Prisoners of war were recorded among the missing in action. Among the five million Red Army soldiers taken as prisoners of war were some 80,000 Jews of whom only about 4,700 survived.

Answers from the Archives can include the text of the letter informing the family of the death of the soldier with the number of the unit to which he was attached; place and date when it took place; rank and place of burial; announcement that the soldier was missing in action with the number of his unit and where he went missing; determination that the soldier was missing based on bits of information supplied by family and an announcement that the name of the soldier was not found in

the database of the Archive. The more detailed the received information the more likely is the possibility to reconstruct further facts about the life of the soldier.

5. Searches at the Enlistment Office

A written request or a visit to the office where the soldier enlisted in the army may bring results. If the exact address of the enlistment office is not known one can address a letter to the city or town to "The Regional Enlistment Office." In the request one must include all the details known about the soldier in order to improve the chances of receiving additional information. In the process of induction, the soldier was issued an enlistment card, which is preserved in the office. On the second side of the card on the second line from the bottom the number of the unit and the date that he joined the unit are indicated. One must remember that the induction cards in the enlistment offices in the Western Soviet Union, areas that were under German occupation, for the most part were destroyed and the information has not survived.

If it is known that the soldier's family received a government benefit, in those cases where the family breadwinner was killed or missing, it is possible to check in the Welfare Department. The original document or a copy approving the payment such as a death certificate or an army document reporting on the soldier and the number of his unit will likely be found. It is also probable that there is other documentation in the personal file in the Welfare Department such as a birth certificate, a marriage license or another record connected to the soldier or his family. The pension file is kept for twenty years after the death of the eligible individual and sometimes even longer.

On Site Research at the Archives

The next step is on site research at the Central Archives of the Ministry of Defense. Very careful planning must precede this visit. Not knowing the operational pattern of the Archives will only lead to frustration and a waste of time.

If one knows the number of the unit, it is possible to go to the hardest part of the research – reconstructing the soldier's military service record. Helpful details are: the number of the battalion or company and its assigned military task and actions carried out on which front. It must be remembered that units underwent innumerable changes such as absorbing other groups or being absorbed into another unit. Attention should be paid to the mobilization number, for example the 96th Division, third mobilization.

Some of the information can be obtained during the course of the day, especially personal details about the individual soldier. Following are some of the other data: the fate of the soldier according to lists of those who fell in action; if the soldier received military decorations, which ones he was awarded and a short explanation of the nature of his act of bravery; the officer's card and his personal file; reports on missing soldiers and methods of research such as the coordination of data between the various archives.

Answers to all of the above can be obtained in two to five hours. It is possible to examine these documents in the reading room – this can take days and even weeks of intensive study. It takes one day to get the ordered files.

If this is the first visit to the Archive and no further information other than the number of the division is available it is advisable to study the Archive bulletin that lists the numbers of the units and this will reduce the range of the search. Afterwards, one can order the details of the actions of the unit. An official authorization of the actions of the battalion or company can be obtained from the enlistment office of the soldier. From this point it is possible to trace the soldier's movements during the war.

Information on Soldiers who were Patients in Military Hospitals

If it is known that the soldier was hospitalized the archive of medical records of the Army Medical Museum of the Russian Federation (see list of archives at end of paper) should be contacted. Even if no other information is found at any other place, it is worthwhile to be in touch with them. It is probable that the soldier was wounded and would thus appear on the Archive's list. If the place and

time of the injury is known it is advantageous to find the number of the hospital where he was treated by searching the units operating at that location at the time he was wounded. After checking the possibilities Unit 9 of the Central Archives of the Ministry of Defense should be approached. This database has information on those killed in action and the place of their burial.

Researching Soldiers who were taken Prisoners of War by the Germans

The Defense Ministry has nearly five hundred thousand German information cards recording soldiers who were killed while they were prisoners of war. This contains 321,000 soldiers who were not officers. Soldiers liberated by the Soviet army from German prisoner of war camps were debriefed by the NKVD, where the security personnel clarified details on their capture, a map of the German camp and conditions in the camp.

It is not true that all the liberated soldiers were sentenced to serve in Soviet camps. In those cases that did not require further clarification only an interview was held and the soldier was reassigned to rear infantry units. In other cases the soldiers were sent to punishment units. The period of time in the debriefing units ranged between one to two months. It is likely that in the archives of the region where the soldier lived or at his birthplace debriefing documentation can be found. One must make telephone contact to obtain any information. Family members can acquire photocopies of documents but to do so one must write to the actual archive or to the Defense service station in the area.

Many regions transferred the documentation from the debriefing locations to the archives of the FSB (Federal Security Services) or to the national archives of the region. It is probable that there is a German database with information on prisoners of war, but the Russian Department of Defense Central Archive has no record of it. There is also the possibility that data on those born before 1910 was destroyed because of obsolescence.

Researching Home Guard Soldiers (Volunteers)

In the first years of the war a number of volunteer infantry units were organized. If there is no information on these units in the Central Archive of the Defense Ministry it is recommended to check the archives in the area where the soldier joined the unit. The order to join must include the place where the unit was commissioned or the order of enlistment. From this information it is possible to determine the number or the name of the unit or the number of the enlistment office. Continued research depends on the data in the Archive of the Defense Ministry according to the number or name of the unit.

Researching Infantry Soldiers Killed on the Front

Sometimes research at the induction center only provides the date the soldier was sent from the center but does not indicate his destination. Generally, infantry soldiers were sent from the induction center to reserve infantry units, to points of assembly of units or directly to the front line.

Reserve units were made up of called-up reserve soldiers, soldiers released from hospitals after being wounded, soldiers who were separated (lost) from their divisions, released prisoners of war after being discharged from debriefing points, civilians who were re-inducted after their localities were liberated from the Germans, soldiers from disbanded units and citizens inducted for the first time. The reserve units underwent basic training and instruction to do various army jobs. This time of preparation lasted from a few days to half a year.

Researching Discharged Soldiers

When a soldier was discharged he turned in his army card and received documentation that permitted him free passage to the location where he was inducted. After turning these papers over to the induction center he received discharge papers and an identity card. To locate information concerning his discharge one must check the induction office. The Archive of the induction center possesses information on all the discharged soldiers who were still suitable to be called up for

reserve duty. This includes the place of residence and the profession of the soldier until he reached the age when he was exempt from reserve duty.

If the soldier received disability benefits from the army one has to search in the department of disability pension. The number of the hospital and the reason why he is eligible for such a benefit would be in his file. To continue to search one would contact the Army Medical Museum of the Russian Federation. Two requests must be submitted: (1) a search for the soldier's general file; (2) request to establish contact with the hospital where the soldier was a patient. Most likely, the second question's answer will be negative since most of the hospitals never transferred the information to the Archive.

Researching Partisans

Data on partisan units during World War II are maintained at the Russian General Headquarters under the entry Political History.

International Tracing Service of the International Red Cross at Arolsen

It is possible to find documentation on prisoners in concentration camps from 1935-1945, on foreign nationals who were swallowed up in the area of German, on those deported to Germany and on the children of all of these people. The address for international enquiries is:

Grosse Allee 5-9, 34444 AROlsen, Bundesrepublik Deutschland.

<http://deutsch.its-arolsen.org>

The Tracing Service was established during World War II with the goal of finding those missing and those deported and reuniting families separated as a result of the war. Today its primary goal is cataloging all the information on those who were in concentration camps and work camps in Germany during the war.

Arolsen has information on the procedures in the camps, lists of prisoners, prisoners transferred from camp to camp, the ethnic makeup of the prisoners, documentation on attempts to escape, punishments meted out on those who violated the regulations, lists of work groups, citizens deported from their homelands, work-cards of forced laborers, medical files, insurance policies of the camps, documentation on medical experiments carried out in the camp, marriage licenses, lists of births and deaths, documentation and lists of prisoners who did not return to their native countries after liberation but emigrated to other countries. There is also data on foreign residents in Germany at the time of liberation including lists of more than forty-four million files of people sent to concentration or forced labor camps.

From the time it began operation 7.2 million requests have been answered. About one third received positive replies and additional information was requested from two million questioners. Every year about one hundred thousands requests are received from various countries including Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, countries of the former Soviet Union as well as the Baltic countries, Poland, Germany and others.

Documentation is provided for requests on the following topics:

- Prisoners in concentration and forced labor camps under the direction of the SS in Germany and other European countries between 1933-1945.
- Foreign residents in the Third Reich between 1933-1945.
- People sent for forced labor to Germany, Austria and Italy during World War II including those who at the end of the war were under the protection of international organizations such as the headquarters of the United Nations for post-war rehabilitation and international organizations to aid refugees.
- Children who were part of the above groups who at the end of the war were under eighteen years old.

The archive does not have any information on prisoners of war unless the prisoner was in a concentration camp or was engaged in agricultural or construction work in Germany. In most of the cases, even if there is not detailed information, a document with date of death and place of burial

will be provided. It is also possible to locate people who did not return to their birthplaces after the war but emigrated to the United States, Canada or other countries.

It is important to state that not all the documentation survived the war. A large portion was destroyed by SS soldiers before the camps were evacuated. In some of the countries the documentation was not kept in an orderly fashion while in others it disappeared or was destroyed during the course of the war. In the camps Treblinka, Kolmof, Sobibor, Belzec, Riga-Jungerhof none of the names of the prisoners were recorded. We also do not have information on the camps and Ghettos established in the former Soviet Union, with the exception of Riga, Kovno, Klooga and Vaivare.

In order to receive information, one must write indicating full details or complete a form in Russian or German. Basically you are asked to fill in details on the family, the name of the father, for a woman, her maiden name, exact date of birth and the name of the company for which the prisoner did forced labor or the name of the employer, if known. If the missing person was held in a German concentration camp the name of the camp, its location and prisoner number must be indicated. Unsigned requests with no return address will not be dealt with. If the request concerns a family member, the relationship should be indicated.

A special feature of their service is that even if a great deal of time has passed since the initial request, if new relevant information is discovered, it will be forwarded to the enquirer. Consequently, it has happened that even after a negative reply has been received, new data is sent after the lapse of a few years. It takes between one to three years to receive an answer. The waiting time is shortened if the person making the request is over eighty years old or if there is a cooperative agreement between the service and another humanitarian organization. Such an agreement exists with the *Fond Vzaimoponimaniya* [the Understanding Fund] of the Russian Federation reducing the waiting time to six months. There is no charge for searches.

I suggest using the Arolsen records if no information is forthcoming from the archives of the Russian Federation.

List of Archives in Russia:

The Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense

Tsentralny arkhiv Ministerstva Oborony Rossii
142100, Moskovskaya obl. G. Podolsk, ul. Kirova , 74

The Central Archive of the Navy in Gatchina which includes material on sailors, coast guard and the naval air force

Tsentralny voenno-morskoy arkhiv
188300, Leningradskaya obl.
Gatchina, Krasnoarmeyskiy per., 2

The Archive for medical documentation at the Army Medical Museum of the Russian Federation

Arkhiv voenno-meditsinskikh dokumentov Voenno-meditsinskogo muzeya
191180, Sankt-Peterburg, per. Lazaretnyi,2

The Military Archive of the Russian Federation

Rossiyskiy gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv
125212, Moskva, ul Admirala Makarova, 29
e-mail: rgvarchive@mtu-net.ru

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Dr. Aharon Shneyer was born in Latvia in 1951 and completed his studies in history at Riga University. He has been on the staff of Yad Vashem since 1993. Dr. Shneyer is the author of a number of books on the tragedy of the Jewish prisoners of war during World War II.