

## The 250<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (the Spanish Blue Division) in 1941/1942

Over the years, it has become common knowledge amongst most historians and WWII enthusiasts that the 250. Spanish Division in the German Army was an “elite” unit.<sup>1</sup> Many books have been written about the division, games have been made (i.e. ASL games, Tactical Combat Series game), many articles have been written about it, and they all have a common theme, and that is that the 250. Division was a hard fighting and tactically sound unit. That was, until the group that I put together started translating German WWII reports associated with the so-called Battle of the Wolchow Kessel.

The bulge in the German lines, in the Wolchow (Volkhov) area north of Leningrad, was created when the Soviets launched their winter offensive towards Leningrad. The Germans were able to bring the offensive to a halt, but the Soviets had punched a large bulge into the German lines. The Germans first brought the offensive to a halt during February-March of 1942, then by late May early June 1942, they slowly started to reduce the bulge in the German lines. They eventually erased the bulge by the first week of July 1942. The 250. Spanish Division was located to the south of the Bulge, and to the north of the city of Nowgorod (Novgorod). During the reduction of the bulge, several Spanish battalions took part in the fighting.

I had decided to translate all of the German type written reports dealing with the reduction of the bulge in the German lines at the Wolchow. I started the translations with the date of May 1<sup>st</sup>, and we worked our way through to the date of July 7<sup>th</sup>. In the process, my team uncovered some incredible new details about the 250. Spanish Division. Here is a report from June 22, 1942, prepared by the XXXVIII.A.K. (Keep in mind this is during the liquidation of the so-called Wolchow Kessel):

“At 10:00 hours, *A. A. 250* attacks from the area west of Bol. Samoschje towards the north and northwest respectively. By afternoon, they too reach the forest clearing 2km northwest of Bol. Samoschje. At that point, reinforced enemy resistance prevents any further advance. North thereof, *III./I.R. 262 (span.)*, advancing without any organized reconnaissance along the supply route toward the south, is ambushed by several enemy counter-attacks, and, partially in a panic, is pushed back and then retreats without orders to the Kerestj River. Heavy casualties are inflicted due to ineffective leadership. In part, the Spaniards have abandoned the ammunition because it became too uncomfortable for them to carry. The ammunition had to be brought forward by a German transport column. The Spaniards, however, are not up to this task, despite all reassurances. Furthermore, they are lacking proper and reliable leadership. Therefore, the attack along the line Bol. Samoschje-Bol.Samoschje road to the northwest-western edge of the forest clearing 2km northwest of Bol. Samoschje-*Spährtruppweg*-Kerestj River-eastern bank to the estuary of the Owsjanskij stream and, therefore, the attack on Mal. Samoschje as well, has to be called off. The *General Kommando* does not have any other troops at its disposal to replace the Spanish battalion. Reserves have not been available for quite some time now.” (**Battle of the Wolchow Kessel, Volume I, pages 254-255**).

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<sup>1</sup> The Blue Division (Spanish: *División Azul*, German: *Blaue Division*) was a unit of volunteers from Francoist Spain operating as part of the Wehrmacht from 1941 to 1943 on the Eastern Front. It was officially designated the Spanish Volunteer Division (*División Española de Voluntarios*) by the Spanish Army and 250th Infantry Division (250. *Infanterie-Division*) by the Germans.

It goes without saying, when we first had this passage translated, we were all a little shocked. Nearly all of us had always been of the opinion that the 250. Infantry Division (Spanish) was a first-rate unit from the very beginning, but according to we are finding, nothing could be further from the truth.

Continuing on with reports from the War Diary of the XXXVIII.Korps, from June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1942:

“A strong advance group, moving from the forest clearing at Point 38.3 to the southwest up to Point 38.0, encounters minor enemy resistance as well. Contact with the advance group deployed along the Owsjanskij-Kerestj River Estuary cannot be established. To deploy the Spaniards in this terrain, even in such a limited tactical scope, would present a risk. The attack on Mal. Samoschje revealed their poor military training and combat experience, their lack of interest, and their lack of responsibility, all to our dissatisfaction. No wonder that these limited and easy tasks will either not be executed at all or only insufficiently. The tactical verdict concerning the Spanish division: “suitable for defense purposes only” is fitting, despite the fact that sometimes this, too, has been shown not to be true.” (**Battle of the Wolchow Kessel, Volume I, Page 260**).

And again, when we all read this, we were dumbfounded, as this goes completely against what we had always been led to believe about the combat efficiency of the 250. Infantry Division (Spanish). The last sentence of that paragraph is truly troubling, as the German officers, at times, would not even rate the Spanish Division as capable of defense! Clearly the Spaniards had some growing pains going on, and I think it is more than obvious that later in the war the 250. would become a very good unit, but starting out its tour on the Eastern front was certainly difficult for the Spaniards.

I will also point out that Volume II of our work on the Wolchow Kessel includes many more full pages of reports by German officers on the tactical ineptitude of the Spanish Division. Information that until now, has not seen the light of day in the English-speaking world.

Rounding out this discussion on the 250. Spanish Division is a report that we just translated for Volume III of the series. The report discusses the conditions for horses in the divisions within the XXXVIII.A.K. over the winter of 1941-1942:

“Animal epidemics:

The mite mange was the only epidemic or epidemic-like disease that occurred during the winter. In the fall of 1941, contagious catarrhs were not observed with the troop’s horses, in the spring of 1942 only with the younger horses brought up from the *Ostland* with march battalions. The mange did not spread to a threatening extent among the equestrian stocks of the German troops. The strict implementation of the countermeasures as specified in Army Regulation 56 is the explanation for this. With the stocks of the *Spanischen Division*, on the other hand, all conditions for a spreading of the mange were present. Half of this division’s horse stock, approximately 1,000 horses, fell ill. Every inflicted horse fell gravely ill.

The allocation of one fumigation cell each for veterinary companies proved to be necessary. In the coming winter, it is to be maintained in the same manner. In order to successfully combat the mange in the *Spanish Division*, 3 fumigation cells were made available by the *Armee*. In the coming winter, as well, the appearance and the spreading of this war animal epidemic must be anticipated. Successful control depends in large part on the condition of the fumigation cells. Repair of the fumigation cells during the summer months is especially important. Among the stocks of the civilian population, the mange was widespread. A scheduled eradication of the mange for these horses is to be forcefully carried out by the local garrison command. The construction of Russian fumigation facilities in the rear area and general rehabilitation of the Russian horses is necessary.”

This particular report does not necessarily go into great detail on what caused all of the Spanish horses to get sick, but the implication seems to be that the Spanish didn't know how to care for their horses. Granted, this is a far cry from being told that the Division is not even capable of mounting an effective defense, but never the less, it does tie in with what the Germans seemed to have thought about this division in general. Is it possible that on some level there was racism involved in the German opinions? I would say yes, but probably to only a small degree. I think the Germans were fairly forthright in the information in which they reported to their superiors. Overall, I would say the Germans felt that the Spanish Division was very raw at this early stage of the war. Clearly the Blue Division would go on to become a tough veteran division, but clearly, they had a long way to go before they would become an elite unit. That being said, this should not take anything away from the Blue Division, as they would eventually go on to become a very capable and tough unit.

Brian Burmeister, April 2023.

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