

Researching Soviet Military Awards

Soviet Military Research: What is it, and what can it do for you?

Throughout the period of the Second World War and the Cold War, the Soviet military kept excellent records on each of their personnel. Since there is no longer a Soviet military the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation has opened its archives allowing researchers to request records of individual personnel. This was actually possible prior to the fall of the Soviet Union, however, it was normally only made available to the veterans or their immediate next of kin.

Today, a researcher can go to the Central Archives in Padolsk, about a forty minute train ride from Moscow, and for a fee request certain records about an individual who served in the Soviet military (within privacy constraints.)

The Award Card

What normally is found first is the *Uchetnaya Kartochka*, often referred to in English as the Award Card. This simple, half page document will list several things. At the top of the page, after the words *Uchetnaya Kartochka* is a line that reads *Ordenskaya Knijka*, and directly below that is the word *Udostoverenia*. Translated, the top word means "Order Book," the bottom literally means "Identification Document." Order Books were issued with the awarding of orders, the Identification Document was issued with medals.

Usually, one of the two words will either be crossed out, circled, blacked out, etc, and there will be a number next to one of them. This number can simply be a number, normally six digits, or it can be a number (also six digits) following a letter. This is the document number of the Order Book or Identification Document issued with the award or awards.

If you then take the Order Book with the group and open it to the first or second page (normally the second page, the one listing all the award numbers, except in later documents) you will see that this number on the award card matches the number in the document. If it doesn't, you should be glad that you got the research and send the group back to the person you bought it from!

There are always exceptions to the rules, of course. Award cards filled out up to 1943 only had slots for the name of the award and the date, and none for the award number, though I have seen numbers written randomly on the cards. If a group does have this sort of card, and there are post-1943 awards in the group, normally there will be a second award card of the later type, with all the award numbers.

The other information that can be found on this card is the persons first, last and patronymic (middle) names, their rank, gender, date of birth, place of birth, party affiliation, education, nationality, date of joining the Red Army, place of service when the awards were presented, current place of service, and home address. The place of service when the awards were earned is often the last unit they served in during a war, or it could be their previous unit to the unit issuing the award card, or even the very same unit.

On the reverse of the card, you will find the listing of all awards, including orders and medals with their numbers, the document number issued with the award (including document numbers for campaign and early anniversary medals) and the unit issuing the award with the date issued. The quality of entries here depended greatly on the individual unit or regional commissariat that issued the document with the awards. I have seen some with as little as the basic information listed above, for only the persons orders, and I have seen award cards with every order, every medal, and even foreign awards listed! At a minimum though the person's numbered awards and medals are included though be careful. Sometimes later awards (issued after the award card was written) didn't make it onto the award card for some reason and will occasionally have a completely separate award card.

After the listing of awards, there is a place for the person's signature. This is quite handy to verify against the signature in the order book. Below that is the name and title of the person issuing the card, the date the card was issued, and the stamp of the unit. This unit stamp has saved the research on a group on numerous occasions, especially when only the award card was available and the handwriting on the front was too messy to decipher.

As I mentioned briefly above, sometimes the only document available on a person is their award card. For whatever reason, the citations and the service record are unavailable. Sometimes these groups may have been previously maintained in regional military centers, and with the fall of the USSR, the regional centers were turned over to the new republic, with the disposition of the documents falling to uncertainty. Sadly, some personnel files and citations "leaked" out of the Archives (both central and regional) in the early 1990s and those documents have made their way into collections around the world.

Award card styles do vary throughout the years, but have contained essentially (with few exceptions) the

same information with each style.

The Citations

After the award card is found, it is then time for the archive technician to dig through the massive volumes containing the citations for each award. When the award document for that particular individual is found, the page (or pages) is then photocopied and unless any further research is warranted, the page is mailed to you (or to a middleman, who then mails it to you.)

What can be found on the citation? These can either be a great wealth of information, or simply create an even greater mystery. Even though most collectors typically dread receiving citations for long service, I find them actually some of the most valuable citations that you can get back. Let me first cover what can be found on your average citation.

Much like the award card, we have the persons full name, rank, their position and unit, what award they are nominated for, their date of birth, nationality, party affiliation, their participation in the Civil War (and following conflicts), and participation in the Great Patriotic War, wounds received in either war, date of joining the Red Army, region drafted from, previous awards, and permanent address (normally also listing the next of kin, i.e. wife, father, mother, etc.)

Following this, the citation will then have the “short, concrete” description of the action for which the person is being nominated for an award. Remember, just the fact that the citation was written for a certain award didn’t mean that the person was necessarily going to receive that award. Much depended on politics, the person’s relationship with their superior, the number of other awards given to the unit for the same engagement, and so on.

The actual writing of the citation can vary from an excellent literary work to an example of a bad grasp of the Russian language! Some are short, some are long, some are flowery and some are direct and to the point.

The last sentence of the write up will have what award the person is recommended for. Following that, there will be the name, title and signature of the person nominating the individual, normally a regimental commander or above. Most of the time, the signature of the unit commissar, the date and the unit stamp will also be present on the citation, but it’s not uncommon to find them without one or all of these.

On the reverse of the citation, there will be several lines for the approval or disapproval of the award from the next authority in the chain of command. For lesser awards that could be awarded by the unit (the medals For Valor, For Military Merit, and the Order of Glory 3rd Class) this line would be for (normally) the divisional commander. Just as with the initial signature line, this area can also be found with the signatures of the commander’s chief of staff, the unit commissar, date, and unit stamp, or none of these at all.

The next and subsequent lines are for the next authorities in the person’s chain of command, all the way up to (depending on the award) the Front Commander. For the highest awards, such as the Hero of the Soviet Union, the Order of Lenin, etc, the citation would then be sent to the General Staff in Moscow for final approval and processing.

During each of these approvals, disapprovals and further nominations, there was always a chance of the award being upgraded, downgraded, or in some cases, both. Here too, politics and the greater external environment played a role in the upgrading and downgrading, but the actual intention was to have these reviews be a sanity check, to ensure that no one was simply giving away awards, and that their true value was being upheld.

Since there are exceptions to every rule, especially when you calculate how many millions of awards the Soviet Union handed out over 73 years, there are of course variations in the citation format.

There were several common formats that differed from the normal citation (which often was generated at the unit level and contained multiple variations.) One was the format used for the awarding of the medals For Valor and For Military Merit during the war, which was essentially a condensed version of the long form citation, listing the persons name, rank, and so on, with a short citation. These would be fit several to a page, often covering several pages. These are commonly found when the Regiment or Division would award a number of soldiers the same award at the same time (though often with different citations.) The nominating authority would then sign the bottom of this citation, and it would then go up the chain as a normal citation would.

A last variation of the common citation is the format used for awarding of a long service award. These citations were either for the medal For Military Merit, and the Orders of the Red Star, Red Banner and Lenin.

Although the citation will sometimes contain interesting information (and many references to the person's dedication to "party of Lenin-Stalin"!)) the greatest thing about these citations is the reverse. Instead of the normal areas for authority approval, there is a large area to list the units and billets the person had served in through their career and what dates they had served there.

This has been a literal gold-mine for several groups that I have had, with otherwise ordinary citations. A rather plain group can quickly turn into an impressive group when one discovers that the units the soldier had served in had been wiped out, or had been at Stalingrad, or at Kursk, or Berlin to name a few places.

Sometimes, the citations are unavailable for an award. This could mean that the citations were lost (as often happened, especially with the combat loss of a major unit headquarters) or were misfiled or are still classified. A special note should be made here about naval citations. The naval citations which I have received have all (except for one) been re-typed onto new paper. I don't know why this is, as I am just grateful for what I have received!

The Awarding Declaration

Once an award citation was approved, the award could not be presented until it was listed in the official declaration of the awarding unit. For high awards, long service, or post war awards, they were awarded by the declaration of the Supreme Soviet. The official declaration of the Supreme Soviet was called an *Ukaz*. The same declaration, but coming from any other issuing authority below that of the Supreme Soviet was called a *Prikaz*. From my experience, if the award was issued by *Prikaz*, citations are normally available for that award. However, awards issued by *Ukaz* are often without citation. Exceptions exist, of course. For example, all long-service awards awarded during the war had written citations, which are normally available to the researcher. However, awards such as the first class "commander" awards such as Suvorov and Kutuzov often are without citation. A citation was certainly written for the award at some point; however, the location of the citation for research purposes is unfortunately an unknown in many cases.

In much the same way, citations for post-war long-service awards seem to be nonexistent, as when researched the only information that the requestor receives is a copy of the *Ukaz* awarding the decoration. However, the research confirming that the particular award was given to that person serves as a valuable tool in the confirmation of the legitimacy of a group.

Special documents for Heroes and Cavaliers of all classes of the Order of Glory

In the 1960s, the Soviet archivists began a process of organizing the service records of those who by that time had been awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union or Cavalier of the Order of Glory. A new form was created, which provided a single-source document for the award card and personnel data.

The Cavalier and the Hero documents were the same. In fact, the Cavalier document was simply the Hero document with *Hero of the Soviet Union* crossed out and *Cavalier of the Order of Glory* stamped above it! These documents listed all the information found on the award card, to include their name, date and place of birth, and so on, as well as some minor service history, a listing of all awards and documents with their respective numbers, and a photo of the award recipient. In addition, these documents were normally updated to contain their current occupation and residence, along with (if applicable) their date and place of death.

What is a Personnel File?

A rather lengthy record was kept on all Soviet officers. These can be anywhere from 10-80 pages in length, depending on who the person was, how well their file was maintained, and how long they served in the military.

In a "complete" personnel file, you will find the person's complete service history, normally in a neatly typed format, often at least one copy of an autobiography, if not several from different years, all of their officer performance reports and promotion documents, Party paperwork, official letters and correspondence and retirement papers.

What does this give you? By having all of these papers, you have a wide view of the person's career and their background history. You know who their family was, the personal triumphs or tragedies, the quality of officer they were and so on. Sometimes, this is the only way you can know about their participation in the Civil War, as well as promotions past the time that their award card was issued (especially for general officers.) Additionally, on several occasions, I have found citations for awards that had been misfiled into

their service record, rather than in the proper books.

Does everyone have a service record? No. These are typically only available on senior officers as well as officers whose service continued through the War into the post-war years. Until the person's retirement from the military, their service record was kept at their local unit. The units were supposed to send the records to the Central Archives upon the person's detachment from the military. However, they were sometimes lost, misplaced, or sometimes given to and kept by the service member! Additionally, records on officers who served prior to 1941 vary widely in quality and quantity. Of all the aspects of Soviet award and personnel research, this is the portion that can vary to the greatest extent.

What is a Service History?

In addition to the personnel file on an officer, a separate record was kept called the service history. This document (or in many cases, documents) listed the basic biographical information about an officer, such as their date and place of birth, the names of their wife and children, awards, Party membership and penalties and the like. The reverse of the front page that listed the biographical details would contain a chronological record of all units that the officer had served in. For long serving officers, this record might run more than a single page. This record is often available even when the personnel file is not, and is a reasonable addition to most requests for research as it can provide significant details about the life and career of the officer.

How do I start?

I am asked on a regular basis which awards I think are the "best" to research. Honestly, the awards that are best to research are those that hold the most interest for you. Will that beat-up For Valor medal have a better citation than that nice, expensive Suvorov? Maybe, or maybe not, but 1) you never know and 2) the whole point of research is not to get the coolest citation, but to learn more about the person that wore that award. If that award or that group of awards means something to you, that's the group to research.

However that being said, if one wanted to hedge their bets, the awards that usually (note: usually!) have the best citations are the Orders of Glory and the Orders of Aleksandr Nevsky. Does that mean that a Lenin or Red Banner will have an average citation? By no means! I have had outstanding citations for both of those awards, and have had some really ho-hum citations for awards that I just knew were going to be good!

One will find though that quite a few awards of the Orders of Lenin, Red Banner, Red Star and the medal For Military Merit were given for long service. Up through 30 December 1956, and prior to the implementation of the Irreproachable Service medals, these were the only awards that they had to award personnel for their long service to the Soviet state.

Research isn't inexpensive. On average, it will cost you \$60-\$70 for a single award, and upwards of \$120-\$130 for a large group. A large, complete service record will sometimes run as high as \$150.

Is it worth it? Undoubtedly, yes! Despite the few times that the research comes back on a group and its not quite as "exciting" as you thought it was going to be, most of the time it really shines a whole new light on the group, and really gives you a great respect for who the person was who wore those medals.

Additionally, research is invaluable particularly with groups in verifying the authenticity of the set, ensuring that each of those awards was actually given to that person. And, on a purely surface level, an ordinary group with great citations can up to double in value!

Reference Books

Reading through the biographies at the beginning of this book may have caused some readers to wonder how I found out the information that I wrote. How could I transform the stiff retelling of a couple of citations into the story of an amazing career? My psychic abilities? Not hardly. This was the result of investing wisely in quality reference books about the battles on the Eastern Front. Having a robust historical library is something that no true researcher can be without, as it is through these books that the historical context of a soldier's or officer's actions take on a new light.

Before you depart to your local bookseller to invest your life savings in books about war, let me say that the investment of even a few hundred dollars can provide the foundation for a strong research library.

If you are at all interested in researching your medal groups, especially ones from the Patriotic War, there is one book, and one set of books that you need for your collection.

First of all, the set of books is *The Soviet Order of Battle, World War II*, by Charles Sharp, and published by George Nafziger. There are eleven volumes in this set, each averaging about 120 pages. These cover every major combat unit and their respective sub-units in the Soviet Army in WW2, from Tank and Infantry Regiments to Militia and Penal Battalions.

The single book is *The Red Army Order of Battle in the Great Patriotic War*, by Robert Poirier and Albert Conner. This 408 page book lists every major Soviet unit in WW2, with histories starting from 1918 through the immediate postwar years. Even though the book doesn't have the full in-depth unit histories like the other Order of Battle, it does have an advantage where it lists each of the Armies, something that the Sharp series doesn't list.

Following this chapter is a list of references which I have found of value in my collecting and research. Please avail yourself of every opportunity to learn more about this violent, yet most heroic, time in the history of our world.

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