

07.00.00 Historical sciences and archaeology

07.00.00 Исторические науки и археология

UDC 93/94

«Dead Men Attack» (Osovets, 1915): Archive Sources Approach

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Abstract. The article, basing on archive materials, attempts to examine one of the chapters of World War I history, namely, so-called “dead men attack” during Osovets Tower (westward of Bialystok, within the territory of modern Poland) defense by Russian troops in 1915, reconstructs the battle, specifies attack, rather counterattack conditions, introduces new archive sources for scientific use.

Keywords: «Dead men attack»; chemical weapons; gases; World War I; 24 July/6 August; 1915; the 226th Infantry Regiment Zemlyansky; Russian Imperial Army.

Introduction. History of World War I contains many blank pages. «Dead men attack» is the unprecedented attack of military men from the 13th company of the 226th Infantry Regiment Zemlyansky during Osovets Tower defense. This theme is poorly developed in domestic and post-Soviet historiography, there are just some eyewitnesses' recollections and publications in newspapers. Symbiosis of these sources formed the face of the battlefield and penetrated into many history scientific web-sites, Wikipedia and journals.

Materials and Methods. The major source for this article is the 226th Infantry Regiment Zemlyansky unit diary, which is kept in Russian State Military Archive (Moscow, Russia). Source information, concerning these events, was collected on open source resources, namely on science websites, Wikipedia and journal publications. Methods. The article uses historical-situational method, which supposes historic facts study in the context of examined epoch in the aggregate with adjacent events and facts.

Discussion. It has already been mentioned that the theme of «dead men attack» is widely represented in Internet, including Wikipedia and in periodicals [1]. Osovets Tower received unofficial name of “Brest” Tower of the World War I. Despite the fact, that researchers in the preceding period managed to reconstruct many characteristics of the attack, the overall picture demands adjustment.

General Position on the Eve of the «Attack». It is well-known that Osovets used to be Russian defense fortress by Bobra River near Osovitsye (contemporary Poland) westward of Bialystok. The fortress was built within 23 km from the border with East Prussia for the defense of strategic route between Niemen and Vistula-Bug Rivers. The first attack of the fortress by the Germans was made in September, 1914, the second – in February – March, 1915. In early July, 1915 (in the new style) German troops under command of Field Marshall von Hindenburg started all-out offensive, which included new attack of Osovets Tower.

For the third attack German Army command decided to use chemical warfare – gases (chlorine and bromine). As a result, at the end of July (in the new style) Germans moved up gas artillery batteries to forward positions (German Army command knew that tower defenders didn't have gas masks). Thirty gas batteries, consisting of several thousand cylinders were installed. Germans had been waiting for favorable wind for more than 10 days and on 6 August (24 July in the old style) conducted gas attack. In accordance with attack plan, after the use of chemical warfare army troops had to join the battle in order to occupy desert Russian positions. Thus, the 76th Landwehr Regiment had to attack Sosnia Central redoubt and advance to the rear of Sosnia position; the 18th Landwehr Regiment and the 147th Reserve Battalion had to strike at both sides of railroad and together with the 76th Regiment attack Zarechnaya position; the 5th Landwehr Regiment and the 41st Reserve Battalion had to storm Byalogrodny and having broken through the position, attack Zarechny Fort. Both the 75th Landwehr Regiment and two Reserve Battalions, which had to advance along the railroad and strengthen the 18th Landwehr Regiment during Zarechnaya position attack, were kept in reserve.

For Sosnia and Zarechnaya positions attack Germans in total gathered the following forces: 13–14 infantry battalions, 1 engineer combat battalion, 24-30 siege guns, 30 gas batteries.

The following Russian units held the front against Germans at the forward positions of Byalogrodny – Sosnia Tower:

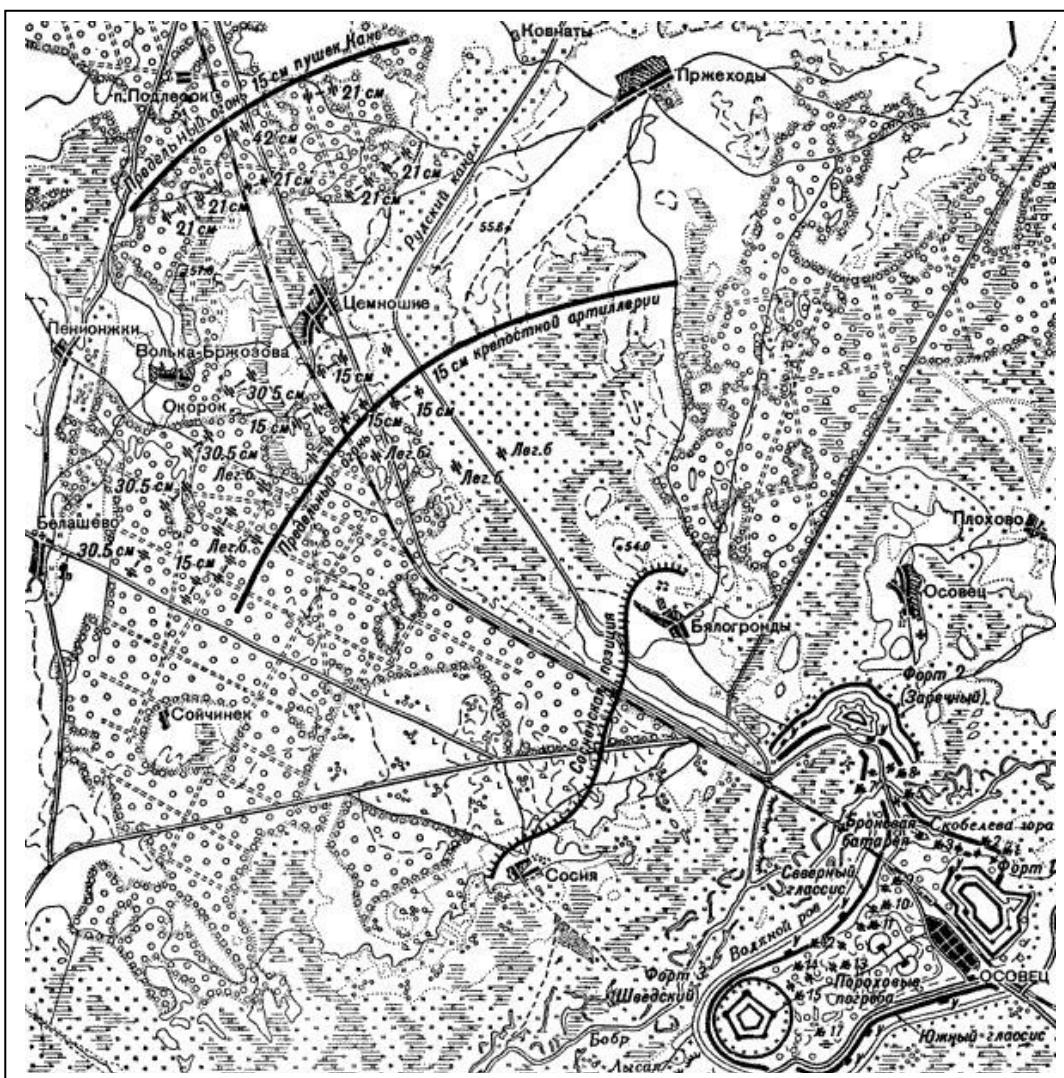
- right flank (Byalogrodny positions): the 1st company of Regiment Zemlyansky and two militiamen companies;
- centre (Rudskoy Channel to Central Redoubt positions): the 9th, the 10th and the 12th companies of Infantry Regiment Zemlyansky and militiamen company;
- left flank (Sosnia position): – the 11th company of Regiment Zemlyansky;
- principal reserve: one militiamen company [2].

Thus, only five companies (1st, 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th) of the 226th Infantry Regiment Zemlyansky and four militiamen companies came under direct attack by Germans at Sosnia position.

«Dead Men Attack» in Domestic Historiography. Let's pass on to direct treatment of “Dead men attack” in domestic historiography. A. Denisov in his article «Osovets. Dead men attack» gave the following description of the attack: «At 4 o'clock Germans brought down artillery fire on all the targets and at the same time fired the gases. Dark green smog of chlorine and bromine mixture moved towards Russian positions and in 5-10 minutes veiled them. The emitted gas wave of 3 km wide reached 8 km width and 20 km depth. All alive died in this «Death zone». The leaves on the trees turned yellow, curled up and fell off, the grass turned black and fell to the ground. Deep green layer of chlorine oxide settled on all copper items (guns and shells parts, wash stands, tanks, etc.). Russian units suffered significant losses: 9, 10 and 11th companies were killed, 40 people from the 12th company stayed alive and they had just one machinegun; 60 people from three companies, defending Byalogrodny survived and they had two machineguns. Gas accumulated in the woods, lowlands and by the open ditches. Repeated intoxication caused death. Garrison artillery suffered heavy losses...

After the gas attack 14 German battalions moved on-call to occupy burned positions. But when German troops approached Russian trenches, the survived defenders from the 8th and the 13th companies, little more than 100 people launched bayonet attack against them, shouting or rather wheezing out "Hooray". Barely able to walk, they joined the battle, which seemed to have been lost. They looked horribly. Bearing traces of chemical burns on their faces, wrapped up in rags, they coughed up blood, spitting out pieces of lungs on bloodied blouses.

The unexpectedness of the attack and enemies appearance shocked Germans so much that they panicked. Three regiments (7000 bayonets!) flocked back, trampling the others. Got caught in the wire entanglement of the second trench line, many of them died from Russian batteries' shrapnel. Fire, concentrated on first trench line, occupied by Germans, was so dense, that they left the trenches, dropping captured guns and machineguns. By 11 o'clock everything was over. Sosnia position was cleared of the enemy, garrison artillery shifted the fire to German trenches, bringing undertaking to a conclusion» [3].



Battle Zone Map [5]

This episode was also reflected in Professor A.S. Khmelkov's work, who witnessed gas attack, being the artilleryman. A.S. Khmelkov wrote that: «Garrison artillery batteries, despite significant losses due to intoxication, started shooting and soon the fire of nine

heavy and two light batteries slowed down the 18th Landwehr Regiment advance and cut off principal reserve (the 75th Landwehr Regiment). Director of the 2nd Department for Defense sent the 8th, the 13th and the 14th companies of the 226th Infantry Regiment Zemlyansky from Zarechnaya position for a counterattack. The 13th and the 8th companies, having lost up to 50 % due to intoxication, deployed by both sides of the railroad and launched an attack; the 13th company, having met parts of the 18th Landwehr Regiment, charged with the bayonet, shouting "Hooray". This "dead men" attack struck Germans so much, that they didn't accept the battle, but rushed back and many Germans died of garrison artillery gunfire in the wire entanglement of the second trench line. Garrison artillery gunfire, concentrated on first trench line (Leonov's courtyard) was so dense, that Germans didn't accept the battle and hastily retired» [4].

All the rest open access sources repeat the same information, without adding anything new.

«Dead Men Attack» in Archive Sources. What was going on in the battle zone? Let's turn from historiography and personal sources to archive sources. Thus, the 226th Infantry Regiment Zemlyansky unit diary contains the following information, concerning these events: «Approximately at 4 a.m. Germans emitted asphyxiating gas cloud and under its cover launched a fierce attack, mainly against the 1, 2 and 4 sectors of Sosnia position. At the same time the enemy opened drenching fire on Zarechny Fort, Zarechnaya position and the road, leading from the latter to Sosnia position. Due to mass intoxication of almost all defenders of the 1, 2 and 4 sectors, these sectors, despite all the measures taken were occupied by the enemy» [6].

It is necessary to understand that the highest concentration of asphyxiating gas was in immediate proximity to hotspot of gas emission. As a result, defenders of the 1st Russian defense line could offer no real resistance. Most probably that by so-called "measures taken" was meant counter (artillery batteries) and barrage (between first line of attackers and reserve) fire, delivered by the Russian artillery.

Extract from the unit diary: «Having received a report about it (taking-over of the 1st defense line is meant) from the Chief of the 3rd Battalion, Captain Potapov, saying that the Germans, having occupied the trenches, continue to approach the tower and are close to the reserve. Regiment Commander immediately ordered the 8th, the 13th and the 14th companies to march out from the fort to Sosnia position and launching the counterattack, dislodge Germans from our trenches, besides the 13th company was sent along the railroad to the 1st sector, the 8th company to the 2nd sector, the 14th company to the 3rd and the 4th sectors of Sosnia position. After the 13th company, headed by Sub-lieutenant Kotlinsky left the tower, it was scattered by dense gunfire and advanced along the railroad towards approaching German troops. When within about 400 steps of the enemy, the company, headed by Sub-lieutenant Kotlinsky rushed forward and dislodged the enemies from their position by bayonet attack, making them run away... Without a pause the 13th company continued to chase the enemies and using bayonets dislodged them from trenches of the 1st and the 2nd sectors of Sosnia positions. We reoccupied the latter and returned our anti-assault weapon and machineguns. At the end of this bold attack Sub-lieutenant Kotlinsky was fatally wounded and passed command of the 13th company to Sub-lieutenant of the 2nd Osovets engineer combat company Strezheminsky, who brought Sub-lieutenant Kotlinsky's undertaking to a triumphant conclusion» [7].

After bayonet attack in open terrain, which made the enemies panic and run away, Germans couldn't hold the occupied trenches, as the panic seized the soldiers, retaining the line. At the same time few German soldiers, trying to withstand were killed during the bayonet attack. Thus, it was the counterattack of the 13th company, which decided the battle.

You may ask where the remained two companies of the 226th Infantry Regiment Zemlyansky were. They are not mentioned in archive sources, but, nevertheless, we suppose that it is necessary to consider German artillery barrage. Most likely two remained companies were delayed by it and failed to reach Sosnia positions.

As for the appearance of the 13th company soldiers, it was most likely similar to the one, described in the sources. The soldiers were really intoxicated and the expression, which became a catch phrase «bearing traces of chemical burns on their faces, wrapped up in rags, they coughed up blood, spitting out pieces of lungs on bloodied blouses» [8] is justified. But there is no confirmation that the soldiers launched the attack, shouting “Hooray” in the diary. Most likely that this sentence is fiction, as it is difficult to shout “Hooray” with injured respiratory tract. Although it is quite possible that some soldiers could attack, shouting battle cry, but it wasn’t massive.

Meanwhile, Russian troops had to exploit their success and regain their positions. From the unit diary: «After the trenches of the 1st and the 2nd positions were reoccupied by the 13th company, Leonov’s courtyard (forward defense post) remained in enemy hands and Warrant Officer Radke, having assumed command of the 13th company from Sub-lieutenant Strezheminsky, after the garrison batteries opened fire on Leonov’s courtyard, launched the counterattack and with bayonet attack dislodged the enemy first from communication trench and then from Leonov’s courtyard. In total the 13th company captured 25 soldiers, munitions, guns and equipment. The 13th company inflicted heavy losses in killed and wounded on the enemy. Meanwhile, the 14th company under Warrant Officer Tidebel command, sent to regain position on the left flank of Sosnia position, having arrived at the 3rd sector, which remained in our hands, divided into two parts. The first half together with the half of the 12th company under Sub-lieutenant Gaglokov general command went along communication trench towards the 4th section (Sosni Village) and after a stubborn battle the Germans were dislodged from this point of Sosnia position by bayonet attack. And we captured 15 soldiers, many munitions, guns and field telephone cable. Thus, by 8 o’clock we regained control over the tower forward positions» [9].

On 24 July the losses of Russian troops were the following: 1 officer (Sub-lieutenant Kotlinsky) killed, 7 officers died of gas intoxication, 20 officers and 2 doctors were gassed and evacuated [10]. The unit diary doesn’t contain any information, concerning losses of low-ranking officers. Nevertheless, we consider, the losses of low-ranking officers can be approximately 200 people and twice as much of sanitary losses.

Sub-lieutenant Kotlinsky was buried near the 3rd Osovets garrison hospital, but later his mother reinterred his body in Pskov. On 26 September, 1916 Sub-lieutenant Vladimir Kotlinsky was awarded post mortem with fourth-degree Order of St. George [11].

In conclusion it should be noted that today it’s quite difficult to reconstruct the battle without German archive documents – war diaries. These documents would allow to determine German troops losses and German view on the events. But we think that using the archive sources we have managed to retrieve the names of Russian Army commanders and with the help of their evidence present the battle details. Battle detailization allowed us to consider “dead man attack” to be a successful counterattack of the Russian troops.

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УДК 93/94

«Атака мертвецов» (Осовец, 1915 г.): взгляд через призму архивных источников

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Аннотация: В статье на основе архивного материала сделана попытка рассмотреть одну из страниц истории Первой мировой войны, а именно, так называемую «атаку мертвецов» в период обороны русскими войсками крепости Осовец (Западнее г. Белостока, на территории современной Польши) в 1915 г. Восстановлена картина боя, уточнены обстоятельства атаки, а точнее контратаки. Введены в научный оборот новые архивные источники.

Ключевые слова: «Атака мертвецов»; химическое оружие; газы; Первая мировая война; 24 июля/6 августа 1915 г.; 226-й Землянский пехотный полк; Русская императорская армия.