

COLONEL NIKOLA BOTEV – COMMANDER OF THE 31ST INFANTRY VARNA (SILISTRA) REGIMENT IN WORLD WAR II

Natalia Mincheva, PhD

Regional museum of history – Silistra

Phone: 086/820 388

E-mail: natali@gbg.bg

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Abstract: *The research is dedicated to colonel Nikola **Botev** – commander of the 31st Infantry Regiment in the final stage of Bulgaria's participation in The Second World War (1944-1945). The goal is to present his military merits as commander of the regiment, as well as little-known facts from his biography that shed light on his personal qualities.*

Keywords: World War II, 31 infantry Silistra regiment, Colonel Nikola **Botev**

INTRODUCTION

Colonel Nikola **Botev** was the commander of the 31st Infantry Regiment in the second period of the final stage of Bulgaria's participation in the Second World War against Germany (December 1944 – May 1945)²⁶. Under his command, the regiment fought in Drava defensive operation from 6 to 21 March 1945 and in the Mur offensive operation from 29 March-April 15, 1945. During this period, Colonel Botev introduced the use of the name "Silistra" of the 31st Infantry Varna Regiment.

PRESENTATION

Nikola Stoyanov **Botev** was born on February 14, 1899 in Samokov. He is a native from Sofia. He was born prematurely in the pretty town at the foot of the Rila Mountain, while his mother he is visiting relatives to visit his father, whose regiment is on training there. The only son in the family. His grandfather Nikola **Botev** Nikolov and his great-grandfather Botyo Nikolov Vuchkov owned extensive land on the territory of today's capital. His mother is Elena Isaeva only daughter of Maritsa and Isai Isaevi.

His father, lieutenant Stoyan Nikolov **Botev**, graduated from the Military School, an artilleryman from the 6th Thracian Regiment, a hero and holder of orders for bravery from the Balkan and Inter-Allied Wars. His uncle, second lieutenant Toncho Isaev Isaev, died during the First WWI as a platoon commander of the 1st Howitzer Regiment in the Battle of Cherna Voda in northern Dobrudja (1917), posthumously awarded two orders "For

Bravery" - IV degree, 2nd class and IV degree, 1 class. His paternal grandfather's brother is a participant in Shipchenska epic - militiaman Alexander **Botev** Nikolov.

In 1920, Nikola **Botev** graduated from the 40th graduating class of the Military Academy (VNVU) and was promoted to second lieutenant of infantry. He excelled during his rider studies and repeatedly champion in dressage competitions. After graduation, he enters the service in the 1st Sofia Infantry Regiment, and in 1925 he transferred to the 25th Infantry Dragomansky regiment. From 1935 he served in the 1st border section, from 1938 in the 6th infantry Turnovo regiment and from 1940 - in the 1st Sofia infantry regiment. From 1942 he was a teacher at the Military School. In 1944 he served in the 22nd Thracian Infantry Regiment, in the Main quartermastership and in the First Army. Fluent in French and Russian.

He successively acquired the ranks: second lieutenant from October 4, 1920; lieutenant of the 27th November 1923; Captain from 31 October 1930; Major from 3 October 1938; lieutenant colonel from October 3, 1942; colonel from January 1, 1945 (Tashev, T., 2008)

With the inclusion of Bulgaria in the war against Germany, he was appointed deputy commander of the **31st infantry regiment** with commander Dimitar Vekilarchev. In the period October-November 1944, the regiment fought on the territory of southern Serbia, Vardar Macedonia and Kosovo. After Colonel Vekilarchev was wounded at the front, on December 4 of this year in Leskovac, the command was handed over to Colonel **Botev**.

In the second period of the final stage of the war against Germany, the 31st Infantry regiment under the command of Colonel **Botev**, is one of the 6 Bulgarian regiments, which is determined to continued participation in hostilities in Hungary. After a short rest and replenishment from Bulgaria On December 13, the regiment was loaded onto a train from Leskovac to Belgrade. On December 20 reached Sremska Mitrovica, where he received an order from the Bulgarian command until the 31st December to move to the town of Petrovaradin, where the Danube River will cross (Botev, N., 1957).

In extremely harsh winter conditions, fighting the cold and the river element, the regiment carries out a 250 km march with a double crossing of the Danube river: at Petrovaradin it is transferred to Novi Sad (January 1-5, 1945), after which at the Yugoslav border town of Bezdán it passed to Hungarian territory in Mohács (January 5-8, 1945) (Orloeva, K., 1988).

A task was set before the **1st Bulgarian Army** by the command of the 3rd Ukrainian Army front to take up a defensive position on the northern bank of the Drava River, including in the so-called Drava defensive operation, better known as Drava epic, conducted in the period of 6 until March 21, 1945. 34 The regiment was included in the composition of the 12th Infantry Division (31st, 32nd and 46th infantry regiments) of the Third Corps (8th, 10th and 12th Infantry Divisions) of the First Bulgarian army.

The **31st Infantry Regiment** under the command of Colonel **Botev** occupies positions on the western sector from the line of the First Bulgarian Army. The headquarters and two infantry companies of regiment settled in

Kadarkut, and a third infantry company in the village of Mike eight kilometres from the front line and in close proximity to the 299th Rifle Division of the 57th Soviet army. The aim is to prevent the German command from moving its defence to the Danube river by strengthening the approaches to Austria and part of Germany. In this way, it seeks to bring turning point in the course of hostilities.

The enemy strike began on March 5-6, 1945. The German High Command focused on the Western sector of the 2nd Panzer Army. In an attempt to stop the rush offensive, the commander of the First Bulgarian Army ordered the commander of the **31st Infantry regiment**, reinforced with an artillery division, to move quickly to the area of the village of **Csököly**. The counterattack of the 31st infantry regiment with commander Nikola **Botev** begins at 3:30 p.m. after 15 minute artillery strike on the enemy. In the first echelon, the 1st and 2nd battalions advance, and in the second – 3rd battalion. After a short reconnaissance, the regiment advanced rapidly. The opponent does not last and retreats, but in depth holds the stubborn village of Ragyogi, which is why the pace of the counterattack on the right flank gradually decreased. The regimental commander brings into battle the second echelon. By 7:30 p.m., the regiment fulfilled its assigned task by taking control of the line: Jako village - the railway line Kaposvar - Churgo village, where it stops and fortified. With the flanker in its attack on the advancing enemy, the 31st Infantry Regiment provided considerable assistance to the **299th Soviet rifle division** to stop and repel the enemy. In particularly fierce battles, the regiment entered the villages of Jako, Csököly and Sabash. The joint actions of the 10th and 12th infantry divisions together with the 299th Soviet Division stall the attempts of the 2nd German Panzer army to break through the defences.

On March 10, near the village of Kis-Bajom, the 31st Infantry Regiment fought its heaviest battle, fending off the attack of 71 SS Division with 22 tanks. On a narrow stretch of battlefield, with stubborn resistance, the regiment managed to repulse the advance of the enemy, which was many times superior to it (manpower and combat equipment). In the bloody battle of that day, the regiment sustained the most casualties. Killed: 6 officers, 13 non-commissioned officers, 56 soldiers. Wounded: 10 officers, 23 non-commissioned officers and 163 soldiers (**Botev, N., 1957**).

The actions of the regiment under the command of Colonel Nikola **Botev** are highly appreciated from the Bulgarian General Command in notice No. 99 of March 11, 1945: "[...] the Army of Gen.Stoychev [First Bulgarian Army] from 6 t.m. [March 1945] fought heavy defensive battles. The enemy penetrated in places in our disposition with powerful counter-attacks everywhere was rejected or destroyed. [...] During these battles the Silistrens, led by their commander Colonel Nikola **Botev**, showed great resilience and exemplary actions." (**Botev, N., 1957**).

From March 29 to April 14, 1945, the 31st Infantry Regiment took part in the Mursko Offensive operation: breaching the fortified Margit Line, forcing the Principalis Canal and the Mur river, the battles at the village of Podturen and the mastering of the fortified position "Yastrebtshi".

Botev displayed personal bravery during the fighting. After crossing a river Mursko to help the first company surrounded by the Germans near the village of Podturen, he managed to pass under the heavy fire of the enemy and reach the reserve company of the regiment. This makes it possible to organize a counterattack, as a result of which the Hitlerites troops are forced to retreat to their starting positions.

From the front line, Colonel **Botev** led the battles against the 13th SS Mountain Division "Dagger". Under his command, the heavily fortified Yastrebtzi position was breached most forward from the 31st Infantry Regiment on 14 April 1945.

Moving on top of the pursuit wedge, the 31st Infantry Regiment pursued the German troops to Volkemark (May 1945), where he ended his combat career. High score for the qualities of commander Col. Nikola Botev gives Major General Stefan Taralezhkov – commander of the 12th infantry division: "[...] In general, the brilliant and successful actions of the 31st infantry regiment were largely due to its brave commander, Colonel Botev, who showed himself to be an excellently prepared and brave combat commander and an inspired leader of his regiment'.

For his valiant participation in the war, Colonel Nikola **Botev** was awarded two orders "For bravery": IV degree, 1st class and III degree, 2nd class. He is the recipient of three Soviet orders, including **order "Alexander Nevsky"**, as well as the Hungarian Order "For Hungarian Freedom" - silver. For services to the Bulgarian Red Cross in April 1946 he was awarded the most his highest distinction – a gold medal.

His only son Stoyan Nikolov **Botev** (1925 – 2006), only 19 years old, also fighting at the front. He served as the commander of a mounted reconnaissance platoon in the 10th Rodopsky regiment with the rank of lieutenant. He was seriously wounded on May 6, 1945, and was awarded the Order of Gallantry.

At the front, in the early spring of 1945, was also Colonel Botev's wife, Ekaterina Grigorova **Boteva**. With a Red Cross delegation, she visited all the positions of the regiments of the First Bulgarian Army, supporting them.

On July 21, 1945, Silistrians welcomed their Iron 31st Infantry Regiment, led by its commander, Colonel **Botev**. In front of the multi-thousand gathered rally, he described the battle path of the First Bulgarian Army with 31 infantry Silistren Regiment, which he calls "the blade of the big wedge in the German defense'. On August 12 this year Col. Botev attended the big one military celebration in Silistra on the occasion of the distribution of 310 commemorative signs to the fighters of 31st Infantry Regiment.

After the war, Colonel **Botev** served as the head of the infantry department at the Army Headquarters (1946) and Head of Department at the Military Academy (1947). Since 1947, he has been the commander of the 5th infantry division. In 1950, he was appointed head of the "Command and Staff" faculty in G.S. Rakovski Military Academy and remained in this position until his retirement in 1956.

During the closing stages of the war, the 31st Infantry Regiment acquired the common knowledge today name "Silistrenski". This happens after the death of his commander, Colonel **Botev**, who in all the regiment began to mention its orders, reports and battle orders "Silistrenski", instead of using his official name "Varnenski". He argued his decision with the fact that a large part of the personnel and of those killed in the war were mostly from the Silistren region (this is also reflected on the monument near the village of Kisbayom in Hungary, in the inscription: "To the fallen Silistrenians of the 31st Varna regiment" - note.). Captain Evgeni Mitov, commander of the 2nd squad, points out that the naming of the regiment "Silistrinsky", personal by his commander, is perceived by the Bulgarian General Military Command, which also begins to use this name in his orders.

Botev confirms the name he gave "Silistrensky" to the 31st Infantry Regiment in **his memoir, published in 1957**, with the title: "Silistriani in the Homeland war 1944-1945". In the preface he writes that he dedicates his work to the Silistren fighters, for: "[...] By their glorious feat they immortalized their names and with their blood they drew the victorious path of the regiment from Bulgaria to the Alps". In a categorical way, he gives his assessment on the participation of the 31st Infantry Regiment in World War II: "[...] The Immortal Deed of heroes who showed rare self-denial and set an example of devotion to the people and the motherland will shine brightly in the pages of our latest military history" (**Botev, N., 1957**).

In the decades up to today, the name "Silistra" and the nickname "Iron" have been added the historical memory of the 31st Infantry Regiment and are present in numerous documentary and archival documents sources, encyclopedic editions, studies and materials reflecting his participation in WWII. To perpetuate the memory of the soldiers who died, it was erected **monument** in Silistra in 1985 with the inscription: "Glory to the heroes of the 31st Silistra Infantry Regiment /Iron/" .

After his retirement, Colonel **Botev** developed an active scientific and public activity. He is the author of numerous articles and scientific works in the field of military history, strategy and the tactics. He is a contributor to a number of military publications: "Military History Collection", "Izvestia of the Military Historical Scientific Society", "Bulgarian Warrior", "For the Motherland". Regular is a contributor to the "Silistre tribune" with materials about the war path and the heroism of 31 infantrymen Col. He is the founder of the Union of Scientific Workers in Bulgaria and recipient of its honorary degree badge. He is an honorary member of the Reserve Officers' Club. As such, he is a lecturer at the National military history museum and leads a children club. As recognition for his activity he receives the "For Merit to the BNA" medal, which he defines to his relatives as particularly dear.

Col. **Botev** invariably participates in the commemoration of the anniversaries of the Drava epic and since the end of World War II. At the end of March 1970, he participated in a representative delegation of o.z. generals and officers, which is visiting Hungary to mark the 25th anniversary of the end of World War II.

In November 1969, Colonel **Botev** visited Silistra to participate in the scientific session "The contribution of the 31st Silistren Infantry Regiment to the defeat of the Hitlerite hordes". Special guests at the conference are Gen. Vladimir Stoychev – commander of the First Bulgarian army and Col. Petar Hadjiivanov - Chief of Staff of the First Bulgarian Army in the final stage of the war. Commanders and fighters from the regiment take part. In his report, retired colonel Khadzhiivanov awarded the 31st Infantry Regiment "[...] first place in bravery and combat merits among The 19th [regiment] in the army".

Col. Nikola **Botev** ended his earthly journey on July 8, 1981. According to the memories of his granddaughter Prof. Ekaterina Boteva remained a disciplined officer, devoid of vanity, neat until the end and in excellent shape.

His funeral was solemn, with military honors given by a representative company. The head of the "Military History" section of the Union of Scientists delivers a eulogy workers Boris P. Kuyumdzhiev.

In 2019, the Sofia Municipal Council **named a street in Sofia** after Colonel Nikola **Botev**.

CONCLUSIONS

The heroism of the 31st Infantry Regiment in the battles at Drava, Mur and the village of Yastrebtzi, under under the command of Colonel Nikola Botev, mark one of the peaks of Bulgarian military glory in this war. The military qualities of the Bulgarian army impressed the allies. the hopes that this will lead to the recognition of Bulgaria as a co-belligerent country are not justified. Making its contribution to the war, it nevertheless emerges from it enlarged, preserving the South Dobruja.

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