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Article Title: Men of Odessa Rose Against Enemy

Full Citation: W H Lawrence, "Men of Odessa Rose Against Enemy," *Nebraska History* 25 (1944): 142-145.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1944OdessaMen.pdf>

Date: 9/3/2013

Article Summary: The author presents a moving story of the Partisan movement in Odessa, U.S.S.R.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Anatoly Loschenko

Men of Odessa Rose Against Enemy

W. H. LAWRENCE *

The struggle for survival and freedom has spread all across the European continent. The desperation and determination with which a struggle is waged is usually comparable to the strategic importance of the position that is at stake. Odessa, commanding the south flank of Europe and the vital water communications of the Danube and the Black Sea, was a key anchor. There Billy Lawrence found the imprint of the stress and strain stamped on the faces of the Partisans even in the shadows of their underground caverns.

In the Odessa Catacombs, April 17 (Delayed) — Here in the deep limestone caverns that sheltered the real underground movement, foreign correspondents learned today from Partisan chiefs the amazing story of how ten thousand Odessans, half of them equipped with rifles and tommy-guns and other equipment stolen or purchased from money-loving invaders, emerged at night to create a reign of terror during the final two weeks' occupation by the hard-pressed German and Rumanian troops, who used this Black Sea port for a hasty sea and rail evacuation a few jumps ahead of the swiftly advancing Red Army. . . .

Our guide and lecturer on this unprecedented tour was Anatoly Loschenko, thirty-five years old, a tall, thin-faced, sandy-haired chemical engineer turned guerrilla leader, who offered the unabashed opinion that with twice as many arms the Partisans themselves could have taken the town before the Soviet troops arrived to liberate it on April 10 — just five days less than thirty months after it had been occupied by Rumanian forces, who dreamed of a Rumanian empire stretching to the southern Bug River.

Whatever the merits of Mr. Loschenko's proud boast, it is certain . . . that the Partisans prevented the retreating forces from carrying out greater plans for the deportation or execution of a large number of the city's male inhabitants, and they also played an important role in preventing wider destruction of the city's buildings. How great this destruction of Odessa might have been will never be known, but Mayor Davidinko estimated that . . . approximately 25 per cent of the city's living space has been rendered untenable.

To the testimony of Odessa residents as to the efficacy of the Partisan resistance must be added the observation of foreign correspondents who entered the city within the first five days after arrival of the Red Army.

* Special Correspondent, *New York Times*. Digest of dispatch published April 20, 1944.

Never in any Russian city so recently liberated have they seen on the streets so many men of military age and physically fit either for service or for forced labor in Germany.

The story of the Partisan movement, as related by Mr. Loschenko, tells why this is true:

"About January 1943, when the front began to approach Odessa, information reached us how the Germans ruthlessly destroyed in the wake of their retreat the population, especially males, and the industrial quarters of the Russian cities they had occupied. It was then that the idea of forming an organization took root. We began first by getting into contact with those with whom we had family ties, then those with whom we had worked, and so on, with the idea that when the time came we would hide, resist, and help the Red Army save us and our city."

It was only natural, therefore, that the extensive limestone caverns beneath the city, with their many entrances and stretching a total of 100 to 125 miles, should be the home of the underground movement . . .

Mr. Loschenko proceeded to relate how the work of organization had gone forward. Men, women and children cooperated in acquiring and hiding large stocks of food, finding and assembling a grain mill, installing a sausage-making factory, and clearing artesian wells inside the caverns. He said the Partisans had their own printing plant, where they printed principally warnings to Rumanians and Germans of the retribution that would be exacted if they carried out ruthless murder of the inhabitants or destruction of the buildings of Odessa.

In the beginning some citizens refused to cooperate because they did not believe the stories of ruthlessness practiced elsewhere. But then they saw with their own eyes trainloads of deportees arriving, including many children who had died because the blood had been drained from their bodies to provide transfusions for the German Army.

With this evidence the enrollment grew rapidly. For more than a year then the organization went on. Most of it under cover but above ground, with only a few isolated raids against the Rumanians, who had the principal responsibility of policing this town and the surrounding area.

"Where did you get the arms for your movement?" the reporters asked.

The guerrilla chieftain smiled, and said:

"Some we stole. Others were brought to us by several hundred Slovaks who deserted. Others we bought."

"Bought?" The question was almost a chorus.

Mr. Loschenko smiled again and continued:

"Yes, bought. The Rumanians and Germans were terrible speculators. We could buy arms in the open market or in houses near by, . . . and you could exchange bread for hand grenades."

The Partisans went into their catacombs about two weeks before Odessa was captured—a period when, according to our guide, any able-

bodied man appearing on the streets faced certain deportation or execution.

It was during that period that the German-Rumanian forces had been fleeing as rapidly as possible through deep mud since they left the Bug River line and began to evacuate the city and prepare the destruction of vital industrial services and buildings. It was then that the Partisans lived underground by day, giving the occupationists a free hand by daylight but emerging at night to become virtual governors of the town in the darkness.

Many were the daring raids that the Partisans carried out, their leaders told us. Germans mined the port district in entirety once, but by darkness the Partisans had de-mined it. The Germans re-mined, but the Partisans de-mined and finally succeeded in saving the first thirty piers. The Germans mined the State Opera Building, an important and beautiful historical landmark, as well as the Central Telephone Exchange and much of the water system; these two were saved.

In one of the Partisan raids they entered a German barracks and took into custody sixty-seven German policemen who had been responsible for much terror, and the Partisans were determined to bring them to justice. During the raid one policeman shot himself. That shot brought two German patrols running. But before they arrived—one from each side—the Partisans slipped away with the prisoners. In the darkness more patrols arrived, each thinking the other a Partisan group. They fought a pitched battle until dawn and a number were killed and wounded. The guerrillas meanwhile arrived safely in the catacombs with their prisoners, who were turned over to the Red Army after its arrival.

The Partisans finally were brought into open battles through two developments. One was the posting of a notice that after 3 p. m. April 8 no Odessan could appear on the streets, and that inhabitants must keep their windows closed and their doors open under penalty of being shot. The other was the sound of guns of the approaching Red Army. Then the Partisans knew the time had come to strike the final blow at the retreating enemy.

When the Partisans reached the streets on April 9, they found few soldiers willing to oppose them in the districts where the guerrillas were in control. There were a few pitched battles, however. Mr. Loschenko estimated the total number of German casualties at five hundred, while the Partisans lost fewer than thirty.

Not so lucky were some of the people in near-by entrances to the catacombs. One of these the enemy had learned by trailing Slovak deserters, and to this area their troops had come on April 8, entering a house where they bayoneted to death a six-months-old child and sought to intimidate residents into revealing the entrance by throwing hand grenades into the house, which was set afire. A barefooted woman cried as she told how an old woman had been burned to death and she had lost her home and all her belongings, but had kept from the enemy the

secret of the catacomb entrance—a locked shed in the rear of the destroyed house. . . .

Then Mr. Loschenko led us to the main entrance of the catacombs, which the Germans had tried unsuccessfully to blow up with hand grenades. There we stooped low for the descent into the dark passages. Small boys with vodka bottles containing oil which fed their flaming wicks led the way as we crawled down the steep boulder-strewn caverns deeper and deeper into the earth. About 100 to 125 feet down we were in the chambers, where we could stand erect. Facing the entrance from the passage were barricades, behind which Partisan tommy-gunners would have been able to mow down the invaders if any had tried to come, but none did.

Some of the Partisans had beds, but most slept on the ground, which was not too cold despite the depth under the surface. We noticed a very large number of bottles and somebody asked why. Mr. Loschenko, a chemical engineer, told us how the Partisans, in preparation for a protracted struggle, had developed their own laboratory where they made simple but powerful grenades consisting of high-test gasoline—which, in the parlance of modern warfare, are known as "Molotoff cocktails."

We asked how the guerrillas had managed to care for their own wounded, and were told they had prepared a good-sized hospital with sterile surgical bandages and beds with clean sheets. Among the Partisans were sufficient doctors.

Mr. Loschenko told us of various enemy ruses that the Partisans had foiled, and of a girl spy for the Gestapo who was finally taken prisoner and turned over to the Red Army when it arrived. . . .

Before we left the catacombs one of Mr. Loschenko's deputies, Dmitri Gauslin, gave a message to us as correspondents and for the Allied peoples fighting Hitler.

"I want you men to know that what moved us was love for our country," he said. "This is not Communist propaganda. I am still a non-party man, but I commanded a Partisan detachment. We were moved by hatred of the enemy—beginning with small children and growing bigger and bigger. If you in America and England had the same feeling you would have conquered long ago."