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SOVIET POWs IN WEHRMACHT CAMPS: BETWEEN EXTERMINATION, FORCED LABOUR AND COLLABORATION

Abstract

This article reviews the current findings regarding the issue of Soviet prisoners of war held by the Wehrmacht. The author focuses on three main aspects of the Red Army soldiers' captivity: extermination, mass labour and collaboration. The first phenomenon, which has often been associated with a deliberate extermination of prisoners as part of the so-called commissars' order, resulted from the ideological premises of the war of annihilation which had been waged against the USSR. However, the author demonstrates that the Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht was in fact pursuing the same goal, as it neglected the preparation of the camps, the so-called *Russenlager*, to house prisoners, and showed indifference to the high mortality rate of the Red Army soldiers. This happened despite the fact that a significant part of German administration was convinced of the need to send Soviet prisoners of war to work in the Third Reich. The use of the Red Army soldiers in labour, which rose steadily after 1942, was accompanied by attempts to improve their situation, but these activities were carried out only inconsistently.

As a result, the Third Reich's authorities did not fully exploit the potential of this workforce, nor did they make political use of the anti-Sovietism of those Soviet prisoners of war who joined the collaborative formations.

Keywords: Soviet POWs, German POW camps, *Russenlager*, 'the commissars' order', extermination, collaboration

Introduction

Group of the Soviet soldiers surrendering to the Germans, July 1941. German propaganda photo, National Digital Archives, Warsaw, Poland, collection Wydawnictwo Prasowe Kraków–Warszawa, ref. no. 3/2/0/-/1583

Red Army soldiers were the largest army group held in Wehrmacht POW camps during World War II. The most frequently accepted number of prisoners is 5.7 million, of whom as many as 3.3 million died; 2 million of these had died by the end of March 1942, as a terrible result of the devastating war waged against the USSR by the Third Reich (Keller 2011a, p. 91; Otto, Keller and Nagel 2014, pp. 71–72; Otto, Keller and Nagel 2008, p. 558) – a war that was intended to eliminate Bolshevism by eliminating all of its adherents, true or supposed. This group also included the soldiers of the Red Army. Their erstwhile allies were deprived of all rights, including being treated as comrades in arms. From the moment they were taken prisoner,



through the road to the permanent camps and their stay in them, which in many cases ended in death, Soviet prisoners of war could not count on any compliance with the principles of international humanitarian law (Vourkoutiotis 2005, 65–81). Unlike other POWs, they were not guaranteed the rights adopted in the Hague and Geneva Conventions to even a minimal extent. The Soviet authorities only ratified the 27 July 1929 convention on the treatment of the wounded and sick in active armies. However, they refused to ratify the convention on the treatment of POWs, adopted the same day in Geneva, which *inter alia* enabled humanitarian organisations to monitor conditions in POW camps. After the aggression against the USSR, the authorities of the Third Reich treated this fact as an excuse to disregard the applicable standards. This action was inconsistent with the spirit of common law – which required each of the belligerent parties to treat prisoners of war humanely, irrespective of the treaties signed – as well as with the Geneva Convention itself (Flemming 2000, 82; *The Convention* 1929, Art. 82).

The German supreme authorities also rejected diplomatic initiatives to improve the situation of the Red Army prisoners (Flemming 2000, 31). Nor did the initiatives by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), such as attempts to visit the camps for Soviet prisoners of war or include them in food aid operations (Bojar-Fijałkowski and Zientarski 1975, 85; Fleming 2000, 32), bring any results; this was often given as a reason for criticising this organisation, although its role in the confrontation with an aggressive totalitarian regime was very difficult (Wylie 2005, 266).

In addition to the German policy, dictated by Nazi ideology, the position of the Soviet authorities was also influenced by the situation of Soviet soldiers in captivity. In the first two months of the war two million Soviet soldiers were captured; by the end of 1941, the number of Soviet prisoners of war had reached 2,561,000 (Gdański 2005, 46). The Soviet commanders, who were taken aback by the rapid march of the Germans, surrendered entire armies. This led Stalin to designate the Soviet soldiers who had been captured as traitors to the motherland. Order No. 270 from the Headquarters of the Supreme Command of 16 August 1941 stated that all commanders, officers, NCOs, privates and political commissars submitting to the Germans were to be treated as deserters. In accordance with this, the arrests and repressions also affected the family members of the prisoners, who were referred to as ‘former soldiers’, denying them the right to be called the Red Army soldiers in official speech, and depriving them of help in captivity (Kuhlmann-Smirnov 2005, 12).

Extermination

The basis for waging the devastating war in the East was laid out in the guidelines issued by the Wehrmacht command in May and June 1941 to front-line units; among other aspects, these concerned wartime jurisdiction, and included the so-called 'commissars' order' (*Komissarbefehl*). The latter, issued by the Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht on 6 June 1941, ordered the immediate execution, whether on the battlefield or after captivity, of Soviet military commissars and, mostly, civilians as well (Streit 1978, 44–49; Jacobsen 1967, 449–546; Otto 1998, 48).

Column of the Soviet POWs passing by advancing German troops, June 1941. German propaganda photo, National Digital Archives, Warsaw, Poland, collection Wydawnictwo Prasowe Kraków–Warszawa, ref. no. 3/2/0/-/1604

The above document was expanded to include the instructions contained in operational order No.8 from the head of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt*, Reinhard Heydrich, on 17 July 1941 regarding purges in POW camps intended for Soviet soldiers. This action was initially limited to the POW camps in the 1st Military District of the Wehrmacht (East Prussia) and the General Government, but was quickly extended to the entire Reich. The undesirable elements were understood as: significant state and party officials, especially professional revolutionaries, party officials of the CPSU and party members in the Central Committee and local committees, people's commissars and



their deputies, former political commissioners in the Red Army, important figures at the central and middle level in offices of state, for the economy, Soviet intelligentsia, all Jews, and person defined as warmongers (*Aufwiegler*) and Communist fanatics (Otto 1998, 52–53). The result of this definition of the enemy was the extension of the scope of persons subject to the ‘commissars’ order’ not only to representatives of the authorities and elites, but also to ordinary citizens. The active involvement of the High Command of the Wehrmacht (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, hereinafter OKW) in the physical elimination of prisoners of war from the Soviet army took place in several stages. It was the OKW which was responsible for all the events that took place during captivity and during transports to assembly points or camps away from the front line.



In all these places, the prisoners of war were selected according to their nationality, education and degree of loyalty. German officers saw to this process during the first months of the war, and the executions were carried out by Wehrmacht soldiers. From the autumn of 1941, *SD-Einsatzgruppen* and Gestapo units started taking part in the executions. The exact number of victims of the ‘commissars’ order’ has not been determined to date, but estimates range between 40,000 and 120,000 victims (*Verbrechen der Wehrmacht* 2002,234).

The selection of undesirable persons from among the Soviet POWs also took place in POW camps on Reich territory, but the prisoners selected were taken from there to concentration camps. The first groups of prisoners of war – probably political commissars – were sent to KL Auschwitz as early as July or August 1941, and were put to death shortly after their arrival (Lachendro 2016, 10–12). The second group of prisoners of war in the concentration camps were Soviet soldiers sent there in October 1941 for construction work. Around 25,000

Soviet POWs in makeshift camp, 1941. Institute of National Remembrance Archives, ref. no. AIPN, 2196/555, copy obtained from National Archives and Records Administration at College Park MD, USA, ref. no. 242-GAP-207-D-17



Yakov Dzhughashvili (Joseph Stalin's son) taken prisoner by German forces, July 1941. German propaganda photo, National Digital Archives, Warsaw, Poland, collection Wydawnictwo Prasowe Kraków-Warszawa, ref. no. 3/2/0/-/1601

of them survived (Lachendro 2016, pp. 15, 28–29); and at Majdanek in November 1941, out of 1500–2000 prisoners, only 500 remained alive (Siwek-Ciupak 2010, pp. 39–41). By the summer of 1942, 42,000 Soviet prisoners of war had been executed in the concentration camps (Otto 1998, pp. 9–12).

Although the scale of the shootings and other forms of killing of Soviet soldiers was significant, most of them died as a result of their terrible living conditions. Although the military's strategic plans had allowed for millions of prisoners of war from the Eastern Front to be taken, the OKW did not make the appropriate preparations to detain and secure them, also in terms of means of transport (Jacobsen 1967, p. 476). Moreover the construction of the special POW camps, the so-called *Russenlager*, was not completed on time, in particular as regards the accommodation of prisoners (Keller 2011b, pp. 88, 426).

The first places where the Soviet POWs were sent were located in the USSR and Poland. The living conditions were terrible in almost

Red Army soldiers were detained in the so-called prisoner-of-war labour camps (*Kriegsgefangenen-Arbeitslager*) in the concentration camps at Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau, Flossenbürg, Gross-Rosen, Mauthausen, Neuengamme, Majdanek and Sachsenhausen (Otto and Keller 2019, p. 208 *et seq.*). They were noted in the records of the Wehrmacht and formally had the status of POWs, although in practice this did not change much, as there is no known case of a prisoner returning from a concentration camp. Even if they were not killed right away, the hard work at a fast pace led to their complete exhaustion (Sula 2010, pp. 108–9). In *KL Auschwitz* in March 1942, out of around 10,000 registered Red Army soldiers – who had arrived from the *Stalags* 318/VIII F Lamsdorf and 308/VIII E Neuhammer – only just over 660



all of them, both the *Dulags* and the *Stalags*. The prisoners died of malnutrition, weakness, frostbite, gastrointestinal diseases, typhus and other infectious diseases. A total of 10,000 people died in *Stalag 352* Minsk in the winter of 1941/1942 (*Verbrechen der Wehrmacht* 2002, 227). In *Stalag 305* Kirovograd the daily death rate was 50-80 people, and on some days even more (*Verbrechen der Wehrmacht* 2002, 239). Famine was severe in all camps, including those located in the General Government. Estimates of Soviet prisoners of war who died in the General Government range widely, at between 500,000 and 800,000 people (Motyka 2015, 23).

The camps established on German soil did not comply with either the standards of international humanitarian law, or with German regulations on the organisation of camps from 1939, including the 'Official instructions for commanders of POW camps for privates and NCOs' (Keller 2011b, 92-3). In the summer of 1941, only 12 of the 20 planned *Russenlager*s were in operation in Germany. As in other places, the POWs were detained there under the open sky, in pits, or dugouts they had dug themselves. The most brutal camps were the *Stalags* in Lamsdorf, Neuhammer Zeithain, Bergen-Belsen, Wietzendorf and Fallingbostal-Oerbke. At the turn of 1942, the death rate in these places ran at over 10,000 people (Keller 2011b, 435).

Soviet POWs
in *Stalag 327/Z*
in Pelkinie
(Jarostaw),
1941. Institute
of National
Remembrance
Archives, ref. no.
AIPN Rz, 19/131

Leaving aside the fate of the Soviet prisoners of war who had been sent to concentration camps, the fact that most of the Red Army soldiers ended up in what were seemingly 'better' POW camps did not result in their being taken under the protection of international humanitarian law, and did not mean that they were saved from extermination (Streit 1978, 299).

Labour

During the Second World War, the German economy employed about 4.6 million POWs, and in August 1944 alone, over 1.9 million prisoners were involved in work, accounting for 6.5% of all the labour force in Germany (Spoerer 2001). The economic needs of the Third Reich were expressed primarily by German industrial circles, which strove for the widest possible use of the Red Army prisoners' labour. They were responsible to a large extent for the ruthless exploitation of the POWs, their work in often dangerous conditions, including – contrary to humanitarian law – in the arms industry, and finally for the use of Soviet officers, most of whom ended up in the *Stalags*. On the other hand the pragmatism they represented stood, from the very beginning, in contradiction with the ideology of total war and the racist worldview.

They fairly quickly realised that the growing labour deficit could not be contained without the mass employment of Soviet prisoners of war. As early as July 1941, transports of these POWs deep into the Reich began, although they were suspended thanks to a decision by Hitler, who in August 1941 limited the size of the Soviet contingent to 120,000 people, to be employed exclusively by the Wehrmacht in large groups for land reclamation or construction work. The policy was changed at the end of October the same year. In 1941, a total of about 500,000 Soviet prisoners of war were brought to Germany, although only about 225,000 of them were put to work (Keller 2011b, 427). The appalling living conditions for this group of prisoners of war, together with the cold winter of 1941/2, further limited the opportunities to use them for labour, for example, in construction investments (Gruźlewska 2017, 53–68). By March 1942, the total number of employed Soviet POWs had fallen to 187,000 (*Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene im Arbeitseinsatz* 2013, 28).

Only after the end of the typhus epidemic in most of the *Russenlager* were the German authorities able to begin a larger-scale recruitment of Soviet prisoners of war for work in agriculture, mining, and the

armaments industry. Although the German command had indicated the need to revise the 'commissars' order' in autumn 1941, it was only finally rescinded on 6 May 1942 (Wesołowski 2001, 206–207). Earlier, on 24 March 1942, the OKW issued new ordinances regarding the treatment of Soviet prisoners of war, which were intended to improve their living and food conditions (*Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene im Arbeitseinsatz* 2013, 34). In 1942, individual farmers were allowed to employ prisoners of war, which – as reports and memoirs indicate – generally also improved the the situation of the latter. (This is evidenced, for example, by the fate of Dmitry Chirov, a prisoner in *Stalags* 318/VIII F Lamsdorf and XVII A Krems-Gneixendorf, who as a prisoner of war was sent to work on Austrian farms and survived the war there. See Chirov 2010). The number of Soviet POWs employed in industry, especially in the mining and metal industries, also rose steadily; employment in mining from the end of June to the end of September 1942 rose by more than eightfold (Streit 1978, 273). In January 1942, the total number of Red Army soldiers employed reached 546,000 (*Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene im Arbeitseinsatz* 2013, 28). In August 1944, around 700,000 Soviet prisoners of war were involved in labour, most of them in the mining and armaments industries (*Verbrechen der Wehrmacht* 2002, 207).

Despite the recommendations to improve the prisoners' work efficiency, the conditions of their accommodation, nutrition and treatment did not change significantly. For example, inspections of the labour commandos in Military District VIII led to similar conclusions: the barracks were insufficiently equipped, the working day lasted over 12 hours, the food was of low quality, and it was issued depending on the efficiency of the prisoner. Exhausted and sick prisoners of war were sent to the main camp, from where, if they recovered, they were sent back to work. It is worth noting that the German authorities only decided to significantly increase the POWs' food rations in the spring of 1944, in the face of an acute labour shortage (Kobyłarz-Buła 2015, 97–98; Senft and Więcek 1972, 86–88, 92–93).

In the light of the latest research, it can be convincingly assumed that the political and military authorities, economic circles and security organs of the Third Reich had contradictory assumptions towards the Soviet prisoners of war. While some of these circles were primarily aimed at employing the largest possible group of Soviet prisoners of war, others at the same time supported their extermination. This conflict had negative consequences for both the detained Red Army soldiers and the German economy (Keller 2011b, 428–429).



Soviet POWs led by German soldiers, 1943. German propaganda photo. Institute of National Remembrance Archives, ref. no. AIPN, 3412/1

Collaboration

The collaboration of Soviet prisoners of war is a subject that has been explored to only a limited extent. This is due in part to the long taboo on examining the problem, especially in Soviet historiography. This stereotypical approach has resulted in the perception of the ‘Vlasovites’, or other formations serving alongside the Germans, as nothing more than criminals or co-organisers of mass executions. Formations such as the Russian People’s Liberation Army (RONA) under the command of Bronislav Kaminski, the 36th *Dirlwanger* SS Grenadier Division, or even the SS-*Wachmannschaften* units at the Trawniki camp, did indeed commit many crimes and atrocities (Kuwałek 2015, 201–231). The problem with describing the attitudes of Soviet POWs in captivity lies not only in the question of collaboration, but also – paradoxically – in the diametrically opposite phenomenon, i.e. the resistance in German POW camps. (These problems were discussed, among others, during an international conference entitled *Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene. Widerstand,*

Kollaboration, Erinnerung, co-organised by the German Historical Institute in Moscow in 2018. See *Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene. Widerstand, Kollaboration, Erinnerung* 2018). In official testimonies and prisoners' memoirs, it was often referred to as a phenomenon of 'rehabilitation', which protected them against accusations of treason (One example is the testimony of Miron Fiodorovich Kuznetsov, a prisoner of *Stalag* 318/VIII F Lamsdorf, contained in the personal file opened on him by the Ministry of State Security of the USSR of the Niemen region in 1950. It ended with the words: "I will add that at every step in captivity I was fully devoted to the Fatherland, I was agitating, organising sabotage groups and other such in the mines." From the private collection of Elena Krawczyk). Some Soviet POWs organised military resistance in certain Wehrmacht camps, e.g. in reserve hospitals (Nagel 2005, 64), leading to the participants being sent to concentration camps, but this was not a mass phenomenon. Escapes from POW camps, which became more frequent especially in the second stage of the war, were a much more common way of opposing the German authorities.

The most extreme way to survive captivity was to join the German collaborationist units. Initially, the Third Reich's authorities rejected the possibility of creating such formations on a mass scale. The first changes were introduced as early as October-November 1941, although the basic regulations regarding the recruitment and creation of foreign troops fighting on the Eastern Front were implemented in mid-1942 (Gdański 2005, 48). This led to the release from captivity of mainly those prisoners who joined various formations such as the *Hilfsdienst* (Auxiliary Service, the so-called *Hiwis*), the *Ordnungsdienst* (auxiliary police), the *Osttruppen* (units securing the rear areas), the *Ostlegionen* (combat units), or other units personally subordinate to Heinrich Himmler. Prisoners were also released on the basis of their nationality: those nationalities which, due to their origin or aspirations to independence, were considered potential enemies of Bolshevism – first the Volga Germans, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Ukrainians, then Belarusians and Cossacks, and also Russians and Caucasians (However, many of them remained in captivity. In July 1944, among over 47,000 of Soviet prisoners of war of *Stalag* VIII B Teschen, created at the end of 1943 with a view to better management of the workforce directed to the Upper Silesian industry, as many as 30% were Ukrainians, Belarus and Caucasians. Vojenský historický archiv in Prague, ref. No. 121.1.34, n.p.). By 1 May 1944, over 800,000 had been released from the camps (Gdański

2005, 48). However, there is no precise data on how many of them ended up in the army or the police, and how many were employed in the economy of the Third Reich.

In total, according to estimates, over 1.2 million Soviet citizens passed through the German formations in the years 1941–45: most were Russians, Ukrainians or Turkmen (Gdański 2005, 9). Some of them were driven by the desire to fight the Stalinist dictatorship and restore independence to their homeland; others saw it mainly as an opportunity to save themselves from death in the camps, most often by starvation. However, here too one should be careful, because the motivation of the prisoners was complex (Machcewicz and Paczkowski 2021, 214). Some of the Red Army soldiers were guided, for example, by their fears about the future. Returning to the homeland could lead to unpleasant consequences, which the prisoners were generally aware of. In addition to the influence of German propaganda, Soviet soldiers in the camps were also – for the first time without fear of denunciation – able to exchange comments on how the war was being waged, how the state economy was operating, the Stalinist repressions, and finally the treatment of their own soldiers. The level of disappointment in the command's attitude to the problem of prisoners is best reflected by the bitter reflection of one of them, who stated: "They are needed as long as they stay at the front and defend the Soviet regime. If they are unlucky enough to be captured, the Soviet government does not need them. And that is why it refuses to care for its POWs." (Dawletschin 2005, 180).

At the same time, they were discouraged from cooperating with the Germans by the latter's instrumental policy towards the soldiers of the eastern formations and the disregard for their political demands, as shown by the example of General Andrei Vlasov, whose demands were ignored until the autumn of 1944. It was only then, when the scale of the German defeat on the eastern front was becoming increasingly apparent, that a decision was made to create the 'Committee for the Liberation of the Nations of Russia', and a unified military formation, the Russian Liberation Army (Machcewicz and Paczkowski 2021, 215). The reluctance or open contempt expressed by German officers, and above all the Soviets' previous tragic experiences under German captivity, did not favour the transition to the German side, especially of senior Soviet commanders who had unsuccessfully hoped for clear political guarantees from the Third Reich (Thorwald 1974).

Summary

Regardless of where the Soviet prisoners of war were held, whether on native German territory or those occupied by the Third Reich, they could have expected one of only three outcomes: death in captivity, backbreaking work ending with liberation, or violating their oath and cooperating with the enemy. The executions affected mainly people recognised as representatives of Bolshevism, as well as all identified Jews; these were subject to immediate and ruthless extermination. According to estimates, between 33,000 to 80,000 Red Army soldiers of Jewish nationality taken prisoner were murdered (Polian 2012,64). At the same time,

as of spring of 1942, the number of Soviet prisoners of war employed in various branches of the German economy grew. In August 1944, they constituted as much as 37% of all employed POWs contributing to the German war economy. Here, it is worth mentioning Alfred Rosenberg, the Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories, who in a letter of 28 February 1942 to the head of the OKW, General Wilhelm Keitel, stated the brutal truth about the treatment of the Red Army soldiers, and summed up the attitude of the German authorities: “The more of these prisoners who die, the better for us.” (Datner 1961, 304–305). The following years of the war clearly showed that this belief was subject to revision, but this came too slowly and inconsistently to save the lives of further thousands of Soviet POWs.



Soviet investigation commission inspects open mass grave with remains of Soviet POWs murdered in Stalag 333 in Ostrów Mazowiecka, Komorowo, 1947. Institute of National Remembrance Archives, ref. no. AIPN GK 4048/28379

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