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Life and Death of Soviet POWs in Occupied Ukraine 1941-1944

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The Ukraine is a European region covered with mass graves of totalitarian dictatorships, victims of the Russian Civil War, of the Great Famine of 1932/33, of the Stalinist so-called Great Terror, and of course victims of the Holocaust, among which about 1.3 mio. were shot inside Ukraine and buried there. But there are also other mass graves which have received less attention. Only some years ago a mass grave has been discovered where the victims could not be identified, but after some investigations it came out that these were corpses of Soviet POWs. Who had died between 1941 and 1944.

In comparison to the Holocaust there is almost no research on the mass dying of Soviet POWs on Ukrainian soil. One of the few exceptions is the 1985 book by Tamara Pershina on Genocide in the Ukraine. Though written rather Soviet-style, it contains a chapter on the fate of the Soviet POWs.¹ Only during the last years the interest in the fate of Soviet POWs in the occupied territories rose. Most important in western historiography are comparable studies by Christian Gerlach on Belarus and Christoph Dieckmann on Lithuania, which include big chapters on the POWs, but also other western historians have addresses the fate within Ukraine, like Karel Berkhoff, Wendy Lower or Tanja Penter, who reconstructed the recruitment and deployment of POWs for the Donbas mines.² Russian and exile historians started investigating the subject during the 1990s.³ Within Ukrainian historiography, several

¹ T.S. Pershina, *Fashistskii genotsid na Ukraine, 1941-1944*. Kiev: Naukova dumka, 1985.

² Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde. Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland*, Hamburg: Hamburger Edition 1999; Karel C. Berkhoff, *The „Russian“ Prisoners of War in Nazi-Ruled Ukraine as Victims of Genocidal Massacre*, in: *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 15 (2001), S. 1-32; Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005, esp. pp. 59-66 (on Zhytomyr region); Simone Attilio Bellezza, *Il tridente e la svastica. L'occupazione nazista in Ucraina orientale*, Milano: Franco Angeli Editore, 2010.

³ A. Shneer, A.: *Plen*. Ierusalim 2003 (abridged version Moskva 2005); Oleg Smyslov, *Plen: zhizn' i smert' v nemetskikh lageriakh*. Moskva: Veche, 2009. Cf. also *Lageria sovetskikh voennoplennykh v Belarusi 1941-*

historians have done important research, especially V. Korol in his brochure,⁴ but also others.

The German invasion in June 1941 focussed on the northern direction leading to the Baltics and only after some weeks made the progress expected for conquering the Ukraine. By October 1941, almost all of the territory of the Ukrainian Soviet Republic came under German rule. Hitler and the Wehrmacht leadership had envisaged a real Blitzkrieg of 8 – 12 weeks, in which tank forces would thrust into Soviet territory, and together with the slower Infantry units would encircle the majority of Red Army forces in large pockets. Thus it was clear that millions of Red Army soldiers would fall in German hands. While the Wehrmacht prepared its POW system in spring 1941, German industry expected to have a larger workforce of Soviet prisoners in summer 1941/42.

But things went differently than expected. The German campaign slowed down already in July 1941 and Hitler forbade the transport of Soviet POWs into the Reich, fearing that German society might be inflicted with Bolshevism. Nevertheless, tens of thousands of POWs were sent to the camps in the Reich, some of them working already in July/August 1941 on German construction sites and elsewhere. But the majority of POWs remained inside camps within Soviet and Polish territory. The German Army Group South, Heeresgruppe Süd, which was responsible for conquering the Ukraine, until April 1942 – according to its own statistics - captured 1.4 mio Soviet POWs, until 1944 between 2.5 and 3 mio. of them.⁵ Especially during the battles of Uman and Kiev the Wehrmacht claimed to have captured 100.000 and 660.000 POWs, in 1942 after the battles of Kerch (100,000) and Kharkiv (240,000).

1944. Spravochnik. Red. V. I. Adamuško u.a. Minsk 2003; Lager sowjetischer Kriegsgefangener in Belarus. Ein Nachschlagewerk, Minsk 2004.

⁴ V. Korol', Trahediia viis'kovopolonenykh na okupovaniy teritorii Ukraïny v 1941-1944 r., Kyïv 2002.

⁵ Oberkommando des Heeres, Fremde Heere Ost, Angaben sowjetischer Kriegsgefangener nach Meldungen der Heeresgruppen, Bundesarchiv, Militärarchiv Freiburg i.Br. (BA-MA), RH 2/2773. There is a hiatus in the statistics between April and June 1942, when few POWs were captured, but the number of 800,000 new POWs was notified. This is probably 500,000 persons too high. The figures include POWs captured in Southern Russia. Heeresgruppe Süd was several times reorganized into Heeresgruppe A and B, and Südukraine and Nordukraine.

Who were those prisoners? Until the 1980s it seemed clear that these figures were quite exact, but then Russian military historians published detailed official figures on the losses of the Red Army. Thus the problem arose that, according to Red Army statistics, in 1941 one million Soviet soldiers less were missing than officially arrived according to Wehrmacht figures.⁶ This enormous difference, which is only visible for 1941, has not been fully clarified yet. Of course, the Red Army during its retreat in 1941 suffered from a breakdown of organisation and one can assume that efforts were made to reduce the official numbers of losses. But there are also other explanations: As some Wehrmacht reports admit, the POWs figures also included other uniformed personell than Red Army soldiers, like NKVD soldiers, sometimes even railway officials or others, and they included units consisting of civilians like People's Regiments or construction units set up to build anti tank fortification. Thus one can assume that a certain percentage of those called POWs by the Wehrmacht actually were not Red Army soldiers.⁷

The German divisions transferred the POWs immediately to the so-called Army POW collection points, the Armee-Gefangenensammelstellen, which sent them to the Transition camps, the Durchgangslager or Dulag under military occupation. The latter were already established larger camps, though often without the necessary facilities, even without enough shelter for the POWs. The term Transition camp already states their purpose: a transitional imprisonment before final transfer to the west. Nevertheless, due to the German military failure and to the debate on the transport to the Reich, many POWs had to stay for a long time within the *transition* camps.

As final destination of the POWs the Stationary camps, Stammlager or Stalag were installed, within the Reich, but also within occupied Poland and under civil occupation in the Ukraine, in the Reichskommissariat Ukraine, or in the district of

6

⁷ Dieter Pohl, Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht. Deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941-1944, München: Oldenbourg 2008, pp. 201-242

Galicia, which had been attached to the so-called General Government in Poland. Only very few Stalags existed within the military occupation zone. As camps, these facilities were installed within or at the outskirts of Ukrainian cities. As German military units, they remained mobile. Thus the units moved from one camp to the other and assigned its number (Dulags for 100/200 on, Stalags from 300 on) to the camp it used.

We have to date no exhaustive overview on all the POWs on Ukrainian soil. There were approximately 20-25 Dulags and 25 Stalags within the Ukraine, not counting the Crimea.⁸ This is the number of POW camps according to military units. Some of them with the advance of the Wehrmacht moved further to Crimea or Southern Russia. On the other hand, there were lots of branch camps, which have not yet identified. The Handbook of Nazi camps in the Ukraine lists 223 POW camps or sub-camps, the smaller branch camps situated in or nearby villages.⁹ Not all the camps were actually newly erected, in most cases older installations like economic facilities were taken over and transformed into a camp.

The responsibility for the camps bore the occupation authorities. Under military administration, that means in most parts east of the Dnipro, the Commander of the Rear Army Area South supervised nearly all camps by his Commander of the POWs, Kommandeur der Kriegsgefangenen beim Berück Süd (later: im Operationsgebiet I and II).¹⁰ In the Reichskommissariat the POWs were not directly subordinate to the civil occupation, but remained under army supervision under the Wehrmachtbefehlshaber Ukraine.¹¹

The tragedy of Soviet POWs started already on or nearby the battlefields. An unknown number of POWs were shot directly after being captured. This fate

⁸ Gianfranco Matiello, Wolfgang Vogt, *Deutsche Kriegsgefangenen- und Internierteneinrichtungen 1939-1945*, Koblenz 1986.

⁹ *Handbuch der Lager, Gefängnisse und Ghettos auf dem besetzten Territorium der Ukraine (1941-1944)*. Red. M. G. Dubyk. Kyiv 2000, pp. 205-258, including Ismail Oblast, but excluding the Crimea.

¹⁰ Until Nov. 1942: Generalleutnant Curt von Oesterreich (1880-1949); Generalmajor d.R. August Schmidt Edler von Luisingen (1884-1963); Nov. 1942 – Oct. 1943: Generalmajor Arnold von Bessel (+1945); from Oct. 1943: Generalleutnant Moritz Andreas (*1884), who themselves supervised the Kriegsgefangenen-Bezirkskommandanten.

¹¹ Kommandeur der Kriegsgefangenen beim WBU until Nov. 1942: Generalleutnant Josef Feichtmeier (1885-1945); from Nov. 1942: Generalleutnant Kurt Wolff (*1886).

occurred not only to alleged political functionaries, who were killed according to the so-called Commissar Order. Several thousand of alleged or real Red Army Commissars were murdered within Ukraine.¹² But in most cases the killings were motivated either by feelings of revenge or by military deliberations, in order to avoid the transfer of personell to the rear areas.

The actual transfer also turned out to be murderous. Since transport by train was often denied, the exhausted and sometimes wounded soldiers had to walk west, over hundreds of kilometres. Out of the 665.000 captured persons during the battle of Kiev, 320,000 were transferred to the RKU, half of them by foot.¹³ Thousands of POWs who collapsed were shot. Especially after the gigantic pocket battles of 1941 ukrainian roads were full of corpses, POWs shot by their guards. Most murders occurred after the Briansk-Vyazma-Battle of Army Group Center, but similar cases are known in the Ukraine, for example on the way from Stalino to Zaporyzhzhja or near Khorol.¹⁴

Between 1.5 – 2.5 mio. Soviet POWs came through the camps within Ukraine, around 1.5 mio were registered in the Stalags;¹⁵ but we do not know how many there were at specific dates. There are only statistics of the Wehrmachtbefehlshaber Ukraine, who claimed that his camps had a capacity for 445,000 POWs, and was propably responsible only for approximately half of the POWs in Ukraine:

POWs under WBU in 1942¹⁶

1.11.1941	320.000
1.12.1941	243.000
1.2.1942	139.000
1.4.1942	135.600
1.5.1942	162.000
1.6.1942	211.000
1.8.1942	216.000

¹² Felix Römer, Der Kommissarbefehl. Wehrmacht und NS-Verbrechen an der Ostfront 1941/42, Paderborn: Schoeningh 2008.

¹³ WBU, report no. 2, 14.11.1941, BA-MA RW 41/1.

¹⁴ Verbrechen der Wehrmacht, S. 224; Report of the 8th Department of the Political Administration of the South Front, 26.10.1941, TsDAHO 62-9-4, Bl. 15-21.

¹⁵ Cf. the registration statistics in the annex.

¹⁶ WBU, report no. 2, 14.11.1941, BA-MA RW 41/1. Table compiled from: WBU, report no. 3, 13.12.1941, BA-MA RW 41/1; OKW, Belegung Stalag im Reich, 1.4.1942, BA-MA RW 6/v. 450

1.9.1942	301.000
1.10.1942	332.000
1.11.1942	256.000
1.12.1942	216.000

The biggest camps were situated rather in the West under the WBU, in places like Shepetovka/Slavuta, Kirovohrad, Bila Tserkva, Kryvyi Rih, Dnipropetrovsk, Proskurov and Mykolaiv, each with an average of 20,000-30,000 inmates, at times much more.¹⁷

POW camp inmates under WBU on 1 April 1942¹⁸
(camp names in German)

Oflag	Wlodzimierz (Volodymyr V.)	6,342
Stalag 301	Kowel (Kovel)	4,112
Stalag 360	Rowno (Rivne)	3,864
Stalag 355	Proskurow (Khmelnyskyi)	8,980
Stalag 357	Schepetowka (Shepetivka)	7,403
Stalag 329	Winniza (Vynnytsia)	12,525
Stalag 358	Shitomir (Zhytomyr)	7,982
Stalag 349	Uman	8,857
Stalag 334	Bjelaja Zerkow (Bila Tserkva)	19,116
Stalag 339	Kiew (Kyiv)	8,164
Stalag 305	Kirowograd (Kirovohrad)	17,402
Stalag 345	Bobrinskaja (Smila, Stantsiya im. Tarasa Shevchenko)	6,881
Stalag 338	Kriwoj Rog (Kryvyi Rih)	6,557
Stalag 348	Dnjepropetrowsk (Dnipropetrovsk)	14,356
	Lazarett Shitomir (Zhytomyr)	3,087
		135,628

But most Red Army soldiers came to the camps under military administration, where almost no documentation has been found yet.¹⁹ In the Dulag, the POWs were

¹⁷ Another 21,000 in Stalag 363 in Kharkiv under military administration in Oct. 1942.

¹⁸ OKW, Belegung Stalag im Reich, 1.4.1942, BA-MA RW 6/v. 450, p. 48.

¹⁹ Charkow, Cherson, Chorol, Konotop, Krasnograd, Mariupol, Pawlograd, Poltawa, Konstantinowka, Kremenschug, Mirgorod, Stalino, Sumy.

generally registered, in the Stalag individually; most of the registration cards have been found some years ago in the archives of the Russian Defense Ministry.²⁰

The camps themselves were rather improvised. Especially the transit camps often could not house all arriving POWs, since much too few barracks had been built. In several camps like Kherson the POWs had to dig caves in the soil, or were put in tents.²¹ It has been estimated that appr. half of the POWs had to live under open skies in autumn 1941. This also worsened the disorganisation within the camps. The delivery of meals often proceeded in a chaotic fashion, so that the weaker POWs were not able to eat anything.

Lack of housing was one basic problem, nutrition was the other. Propably only until September 1941 there was a sufficient amount of food delivered, though of bad quality. But already during that month, with the arrival of POWs from the battle of Kiev, with total overcrowding of the camps the first signs of starvation surfaced. In Shepetovka camp even cases of cannibalism were reported that early.²² Not only had the camps been unsufficiently prepared for the arrival of more than 600,000 persons. Nazi and military leadership in September-October 1941 discussed altering the ration system. In October 1941, when the death rate was already at 6 %, it was decided to lower the rations for those POWs who were considered unable to work, "arbeitsunfähig".²³ This accelerated the already ongoing mass dying, which arrived at its highest point at the end of the year, esp. around Christmas 1941. The WBU reported for November "that in the camps in his realm out of exhaustion 2,500 prisoners are dying each day." By December, this figure rose to more than 4,000 POWs a day.²⁴

²⁰ Reinhard Otto, Rolf Keller, Jens Nagel, Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene in deutschem Gewahrsam 1941-1945. Zahlen und Dimensionen, in: Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte 56 (2008), S. 557-602.

²¹ Hygienic travel report of Prof. Konrich to South Eastern Ukraine, 22.6.-15.7.1942, BA-MA RW 19/2144, pp. 129-145.

²² Report Rüstungskommando Schepetowka, 1.10.1941, IfZ T-77, reel 1136, fr. 590.

²³ WBU, report no. 2, 14.11.1941, BA-MA RW 41/1. Especially Gerlach, Kalkulierte Morde, pp. XXX.

²⁴ Streit, Keine Kameraden, p. 133.

Death resulted not only from a lack of food, but from a variety of reasons. To a large part, the POWs had come weakened or even wounded to the camps and were not taken care of properly. The actual delivery of food varied from place to place and according to time. The situation was worse in camps in Northern Ukraine in comparison to the Southern areas. An important factor constituted the lack of housing. Especially during rain a large part of the POWs could not cover under a roof. Thus epidemics like typhus began to spread from the weakest prisoners and could not be isolated. Rather some camp commanders concentrated all weak POWs in specific barracks designed as death zones. In the Stalino camp all POWs considered as unfit for work were pressed into big barracks, so crowded that the inmates were unable to sit or lay before they died.²⁵

The military hierarchy reacted with an intense debate how to save the able-bodied POWs in order to keep them as workforce. Especially the Rüstungsinspektion Ukraine intervened and sent plenipotaries to the regions in order to look for workplaces and to approve the supply of nutrition.²⁶ By December 1941, only around 50,000 POWs under Army Group South and around 100,000 under WBU actually had a workplace.²⁷

In early 1942 the death rate began to diminish, but remained high until June 1942. Several factors were influential for this development: Some camps were almost dying out in early 1942, transportation to the Reich started on a bigger scale, and the deployment as workforce within the occupied area was enlarged. But this not always heightened the chance to survive. In August 1942 20,000 POWs were sent to the Donbas coalmines. They were in bad shape, still without proper housing, and had to do the extreme hard work within the mines. Thus they died in masses. Out of the 40,000 POWs who worked in the Donbas mines in October 1942, 17,000 died within six weeks.²⁸ The mass dying of the 1941/42 winter did not repeat itself a year later,

²⁵ Jürgen Thorwald, *Wen sie verderben wollen*, S. 49

²⁶ Rüstungsinspektion Ukraine, War Diary Nr. 2, 30.11.1941, IfZ T-77, reel 1093, p. 858.

²⁷ Berück Süd, War Diary, 20.11.1941, IfZ MA 858, fr. 1252; Hgr. Süd, Ib, order, 21.12.1941, BA-MA RH 22/189, Bl. 22.

²⁸ WiIn Don-Donetz, monthly report, 1.12.1941, IfZ MA 1722, fr. 764.

nevertheless mortality was high again in some camps like Stalino, Sumy or Yasinovata.²⁹

But most important for survival was the decision to release certain groups of POWs. This was part of the racial policy of Nazi and Wehrmacht leadership. Certain nationalities were considered not only as racially superior among the POWs, but as politically more sympathetic to Germany. This applied in first place to the ethnic Germans, then to the Balts, and in a quantitative sense most important – to the Ukrainians. The Quartermaster General already in July issued an order which allowed the release of these groups.³⁰

According to their ethnic identity, Jewish and sometimes even muslim or asian POWs were killed, while the other groups had a much higher chance to survive. No ethnic statistics on the POWs have been found yet, so the information relies on estimates. The majority of all POWs were Russians, but propably one million of them, maybe even 1.3 mio. had Ukrainian nationality.³¹ The number of captured Jewish Red Army soldiers is estimated at 60.000 to 80.000.³² It is even less unclear what the ethnic composition was like in the POW camps on Ukrainian soil. According to the statistics of releases, most Ukrainian POWs were held within the Ukraine.

The release of Baltic and Ukrainian POWs has been ordered at the end of July 1941, but actually started only in late August. Military commanders restricted the releases to the rear army group area South, sometimes even to those POWs whose hometown was not too far away. We do not have precise information on the course of the releases, but already in November Hitler stopped them. The administration feared that released POWs might join the partisans, or from October on, spread the

²⁹ Korück 593, Lt.San.offz., 15.6.1943, BA-MA RH 23/353, pp. 12-14.

³⁰ OKH, GenQu, 25.7.1941, BA-MA RH 23/219.

³¹ Ukraïna u Druhii svitovii viini, S. 142; Rossiya i SSSR v voynakh, S. 238 f., 463. The estimate of 1.3 mio. Ukrainian POWs, of which 500,000 died: Bezsmertya. Knyha Pam'yati Ukraïny 1941-1945. Red. I. O. Herasymov u.a. Kyïv 2000, S. 559. On 1 April 1942, appr. 20 % of the POW in the OKW camps were of Ukrainian nationality: OKW, Belegung Stalag im Reich, 1.4.1942, BA-MA RW 6/v. 450, p. 54.

³² Yitzhak Arad, The Holocaust in the Soviet Union, Lincoln, Jerusalem: Univ. of Nebraska Press, Yad Vashem 2009, pp. 377-381.

epidemics from the camps.³³ All in all around 300,000 POWs were released in 1941, most of the Ukrainians, and most of them from camps within Ukraine.

Release from the camps did not mean actual full freedom. Most of the liberated POWs were obliged to join auxiliary services for the Germans, either as Hiwi within the Wehrmacht, as auxiliary policeman for German Police, or even as auxiliary for the SS in the Trawniki training camp in Poland. Release of POWs continued after November 1941, esp. for work in the farms, from summer 1942 again more for German military and police.³⁴ All in all until 1944 about 600,000 POWs could leave the camps, the majority of them Ukrainians.

It is here not necessary to repeat the history of general Nazi policy against Soviet POWs, the abrogation of international law, the guidelines for brutal treatment and the orders to kill specific groups among the POWs. This has been described and analyzed by dozens of authors.³⁵

Nazi and Wehrmacht leadership had planned right from the outset of their military campaign to kill specific groups of POWs, like the commissars, but probably also all Jewish POWs. During the first months of the campaign, even Asiatic POWs or Kalmyks and some Caucasian nationalities were considered racially inferior and shot. In some camps, Red Army officers were singled out for killing.³⁶

Except the murder of political functionaries of the Red Army, the crimes against specific ethnic groups were delegated to the Einsatzgruppen of the Security Police and the Security Service of the SS. Until October 1941 debate was going on whether the Einsatzgruppen units got access not only to the Stalag, but also to the Dulag near the front. This was officially granted only in October, but in practice lots of camp

³³ OKH, GenQu, 17.11.1941, BA-MA RH 20-18/1209.

³⁴ Bes. Ano. WiStOst Nr. 55, 5.1.1942, BA-MA RW 31/139; KTB Befh. rückw. HGeb. Süd bzw B/Ib, 21.2.42, BA-MA RH 22/175.

³⁵ Cf. Christian Streit, *Keine Kameraden. Die Wehrmacht und die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen 1941-1945*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt 1978; Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde; Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg. Band 4: Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion*. Von Horst Boog u.a. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt 1983; Andrej Angrick, *Besatzungspolitik und Massenmord. Die Einsatzgruppe D in der südlichen Sowjetunion 1941-1943*, Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2003; Christoph Dieckmann, *Deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Litauen 1941-1944*, Göttingen: Wallstein, 2011.

³⁶ Berkhoff

commanders allowed them to do so already in July/August. The Rear Army Group Area Commander in August gave access to the killer units.³⁷

The first known mass killings of POW camp inmates occurred in mid-July in Zhytomyr. Einsatzgruppe C started to search the camps for Jewish POWs. Those had been singled out by the camp functionaries and then were shot by the SS-Police units. In August at least hundreds of Jews from the POW camps in Berdychiv, Kirovohrad and Kherson were murdered. But the main wave of killings started in October, after the large groups of POWs from Kiev battle entered the camps. Now the Einsatzgruppe had full access to all camps in order to kill all POWs which were considered especially dangerous and not suitable for transport into the Reich. In some places like Uman the battalions of the Order Police took over this murderous task.

The Wehrmacht POW organisation almost fully supported these crimes. Especially the camp intelligence officers and the physicians sorted out Jews and alleged Commissars, lots of whom had been denounced by their comrades. Only in exceptional cases like Vynnytsia camp the commander denied access to the killer units.³⁸ On the other hand, in several camps the Wehrmacht did not wait for the Einsatzgruppe, but took over the mass murder themselves. This is especially well documented in the case of Adabash, a branch camp of Stalag 305 in Kirovohrad. There the guards, consisting of Landeschützenbataillon, shot the selected Jews.³⁹

At the end of 1942 these mass crimes started to decline. Almost no new POWs entered the camp system, the Commissar order had been lifted in June 1942, and the captured Jewish Red Army soldier had been almost completely exterminated. In most of the mass executions in 1941/42 dozens or hundreds of POWs had been shot; for example in Bila Tserkva between May 1942 and August 1943 at least 800 POWs were shot by their guards. We do not have overall statistics on the crimes within

³⁷ Pohl, *Herrschaft der Wehrmacht*, pp. 230 ff.

³⁸ Streit, *Keine Kameraden*, pp. 101-102.

³⁹ Streim, pp. 129-133; *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht*, pp. 239-246 (incl. photos); Christian Möller, *Massensterben und Massenvernichtung. Das Stalag 305 in der Ukraine 1941-1944*, MA-Thesis Univ. of Hannover 2000 (based on the criminal investigation Hannover court 2 Ks 1/68 re: Garbe et al., 14 vols.).

Ukraine, but it is reasonable to assume that they took place most of the Dulag and Stalag, thus costing the lives of 20,000 persons or much more.⁴⁰

One of the least researched fields remains the environment of the POW camps, their relation to the local population. The locals within the Ukraine new quite well about the fate of the POWs, lots of them saw the POWs on their march to the camps, the ill-treatment and sometimes the killings on the roads, and people knew about the camps themselves and their horrific interior. Women travelled over long distances in order to find their captured husbands, brothers or sons in the camps.

Especially in those towns and cities where the camps were located the population was quite aware of the mass dying of POWs. Lots of inhabitants provided individual help, in several places, esp. in Western Ukraine, local committees were set up in order to facilitate the ordeal of the POWs.⁴¹ It highly depended on the camp leadership whether it allowed assistance from outside or even cooperated with those committees. Apparently the camp commanders became more reluctant in late autumn, some of them even issued shoot on sight orders on civilians who approached the camps in order to throw nutrition over the barbed wire. German minister Alfred Rosenberg in February 1942 wrote: „The majority of camp commanders forbade that the civilian population supplied food to the POWs and thus rather condemned them to death by starvation.“⁴² Every assistance to POWs who escaped was punishable by death.⁴³ But there is only scattered information on executions of civilians in that context. Since little research has been done on the local society under German occupation, it is no wonder that we do not have an overall picture on their relationship towards the tragedy of Soviet POWs. When American scientists interviewed Soviet exile citizens who had left their homes in 1944 about

⁴⁰ Cf. Streim, *Behandlung*, pp. 235-236, 241-243, mentions 18 Stalags under WBU and at least 4 Dulags under Berück Süd, where evidence on mass executions has been found. Based on statistical estimates (between 1-2 % of the POWs were Jewish), it can be assumed that only the Jews among the victims account for 20,000 dead, thus the actual number of all victims might be much higher.

⁴¹ Cf. Kostyantyn Kurylyshyn, *Ukrainske zhyttia v umovakh nimetskoï okkupatsii (1939-1944 rr.)*, Lviv: NANU 2010, pp. 172 ff.

⁴² Letter Rosenberg to Keitel, 28.2.1942, in: *Unternehmen Barbarossa*, p. 399.

⁴³ Berück Süd/Qu, *Ergänzung zum Befehl vom 15.12.1941*, 8.1.1942, IfZ MA 866, fr. 318.

their experiences, the treatment of the POWs was considered the worst feature of German occupation.⁴⁴

Like the overall figure of POWs who were imprisoned in the Ukraine the number of those who died is unknown. The Extraordinary Commission on Hitlerite Crimes claimed that around two million POWs died in occupied Ukraine. Their findings were based in fragmentary knowledge and some exhumations of mass graves, which resulted in very high estimates. Their general findings on POW victims are probably an overestimate of 100%, thus one can assume that the real figure is rather around one million dead POWs. Other estimates based on a limited set of registration data assume that approximately 1.2 mio. POWs died in Ukraine.⁴⁵ I rather think that reasonable estimates should be placed between 700,000 and 1.2 mio. victims. That means, as in the Holocaust the Ukraine also was a central site of the mass death of Soviet POWs and others who had been interned in the POW camps. Approximately every third victim died in Ukraine.

At least a part of the victims can be identified by the new internet database of the Russian Defence Ministry.⁴⁶ In this basis, it might be possible to establish the names and fates of a majority of POWs, who suffered or died within the Ukraine, and who constitute an important group of victims. The POW camps were a central site of Nazi mass murder, more than almost any other places of detention under occupation. The German leadership had planned to treat Soviet POWs much worse than any other like French, Polish or Serbian. On the other hand, it was envisaged to feed the German campaign out of Ukraine's grain and other nutrition, and to leave millions of civilians, esp. in the cities of Russia and Eastern Ukraine, without proper food. But actually the POWs were hit the hardest way by these plans, because they were considered racially inferior, politically dangerous, because they were not sufficiently enough recruited for labor tasks, and because the German campaign did not work

⁴⁴ Alexander Dallin, German Rule in Russia, XXX. The HURIP interviews have only rarely been used, for example by Karel Berkhoff.

⁴⁵ Klaus-Dieter Müller, Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene in deutscher Hand: Stand der Forschung und Erfassung, [Dresden 2010], S. 12 <http://www.dokst.de/main/sites/default/files/dateien/texte/Müller.pdf> [31.8.2011].

⁴⁶ <http://obd-memorial.ru/>.

out as a Blitzkrieg, but turned out to be far more difficult, even endangering the provisions for the German army.

The specificity of the Ukraine came from the course of the campaign, with major pocket battles like in Belarus and Central Russia, which brought millions of persons into captivity. But more specific was the German policy of racial difference, which led to the release of hundreds of thousands Ukrainians from the camps in 1941/42, while the others were left to die. Only by mid-1942 this policy changed, but the treatment of the POWs remained inhumane.

Today, the POWs who suffered are almost forgotten. They did not receive compensation by the German state or Forced labor foundation, and there are only few places of commemoration for them. Now it is the task of historiography to reconstruct and analyse their fate, in the same manner as that of other victim groups.

Annex

Registration numbers for POWs in the RKU⁴⁷

Note: These are the results of two investigations within a set of 300,000 registration cards, published in 2008 and again compiled in 2009. Klaus-Dieter Müller estimates that there were around 25 % double registrations, thus it is not possible to simply add the highest numbers to a reliable sum (which would add up to 2 Mio.)

	Camp	Highest no. found 2008	Lowest no.	Highest no. found 2009
305	Kirowograd	25.211	2	39.376
329	Winniza	36.931	44	94.770
334	Belaja Zerkow	37.351	1.510	39.990
338	Kriwoj Rog	46.051	1	140.338
339	Kiew-Darnitza	37.560	58	50.652
345	Bobrinskaja	65.751	50	121.654
346	Krementschug	26.178	1	27896
348	Dnjepropetrowsk	39.098	28	43.240
349	Uman	35.538	92	124.242
357	Schepetowka	31.491	20	102.789
358	Shitomir	52.417	181	507.646
360	Rowno	56.151	2	127.177
365	Wladimir-Wolynsk	55.298	2	229.621
370	Simferopol	21.957	181	50.091
Oflag XI A	Wladimir-Wolynsk	36.980	3	264.664

⁴⁷ Müller, Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene in deutscher Hand, S. 22.