

# "A Tragedy Understated: The Soviet Army's Death Toll Revisited"

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## I. Introduction

The mass death of Soviet prisoners of war in German captivity represents one of the most catastrophic aspects of Nazi genocide, yet it remains significantly underexplored in historical scholarship. Despite the scale of this tragedy—over 60 percent of Soviet prisoners captured in 1941 died by early 1942—scholarly work on this topic is sparse, with no dedicated monographs published in English. This absence of literature not only undermines the memorialization of the victims but also obscures critical insights into the broader mechanisms of Nazi mass killing and the role of the Wehrmacht in these atrocities.

### The Scope of the Tragedy

The mass death of Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) during World War II represents one of the most tragic episodes of Nazi genocide, yet it remains significantly underexplored in historical scholarship. From the beginning of the invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, through the end of the war in Europe on May 8, 1945, German troops captured approximately 5.7 million Soviet military personnel. Among these, a staggering 3.3 million, or 58 percent, perished in captivity, marking them as the second-largest group of victims of Nazi mass murder, following the roughly six million Jews killed during the Holocaust.

The death toll among Soviet POWs was particularly acute in the war's early months. By February 1942, over two million of the 3.35 million prisoners captured in 1941 had died, primarily from starvation. Between October 1941 and January 1942, estimates suggest that between 300,000 and 500,000 prisoners died each month, with daily fatalities reaching around 8,000—an alarming figure that rivaled the total deaths of American and British POWs throughout the entire conflict. Even after German policy shifted toward exploiting Soviet prisoners as forced labor, another 1.3 million, or 27 percent, died in captivity. In stark contrast, only two to three percent of Western Allied prisoners died under similar conditions, illustrating the deliberate brutality embedded in German policies toward Soviet captives.

From the beginning of the invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 through the end of the Second World War in Europe on 8 May 1945, German troops fighting on the Eastern Front took

5.7 million Soviet military personnel as prisoners of war. Of these 5.7 million prisoners, 3.3 million (58 percent) died in German captivity, making Soviet prisoners of war the second-largest group of victims of Nazi mass murder, second only to the approximately six million Jews killed during the Holocaust. The death rate in the first year of the war was particularly high; of the 3.35 million Soviet prisoners captured in 1941, more than two million (60 percent) had died by February 1942, mainly due to starvation. Between October 1941 and January 1942, between 300,000 and 500,000 Soviet prisoners died each month, rivaling the pace of killing at the peak of the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question” in late 1942. During this period, as many as 8,000 prisoners were dying per day, roughly equal to the number of American and British prisoners who died during the entire war. Even after German policy shifted toward heavier exploitation of Soviet prisoners as a source of forced labor, another 1.3 million (27 percent) of Soviet prisoners in German captivity died. By comparison, only two to three percent of Western Allied prisoners of war.

### Historiographical Neglect

Despite the sheer scale of this tragedy, the fate of Soviet POWs occupies a marginal space in the historical memory of Nazi mass murder. To date, no dedicated monographs have been published in English on this subject, nor have significant works in other languages been translated. This absence in historiography not only fails to memorialize the victims adequately but also obscures critical insights into the broader mechanisms of Nazi mass killing, particularly the role of the German armed forces in these atrocities.

Postwar studies of the German military often perpetuated the “myth of the clean Wehrmacht,” which suggested that the army fought an honorable, apolitical war, absolving it of responsibility for war crimes.

However, recent research has revealed the extensive involvement of the Wehrmacht in war crimes, including the mass death of Soviet POWs. This catastrophic outcome stemmed from both deliberate policy choices and negligence in planning military operations.

German food policies prioritized the sustenance of German troops and civilians over that of Soviet prisoners, leading to widespread starvation. Moreover, German security policies permitted grave violations of international law, including the summary execution of political commissars and Jewish-Soviet prisoners.

### **Ideological Foundations and Military Planning**

Ideologically, the groundwork for this brutal campaign was laid by Hitler well before the invasion. In a meeting with his top generals in February 1939, he articulated his vision for a "racial war," emphasizing that the conflict with the Soviet Union would be a "war of annihilation" against perceived existential threats. Hitler's belief in the need for "living space" (*Lebensraum*) in the East was rooted in a Social Darwinist worldview, positing that the strongest nations would naturally conquer weaker ones. His strategy, predicated on a quick and decisive victory over the Soviet state, led to flawed operational planning characterized by overconfidence and inadequate logistics. This resulted in massive challenges for the Wehrmacht, as the vast territories of the Soviet Union and poor infrastructure severely hampered supply lines.

The implications of these failures were profound. While the German High Command anticipated rapid advances, the harsh realities of the Eastern Front, including the harsh climate and logistical constraints, resulted in disastrous conditions for both German soldiers and Soviet POWs. The exploitation of Soviet prisoners as forced labor came too late to save millions who had already succumbed to starvation and disease.

Although historical studies of the German military written in the decades immediately following the Second World War tended to emphasize the so-called "myth of the clean Wehrmacht," which claimed that the German armed forces had fought an honorable, apolitical war and that blame for the crimes against humanity perpetrated by Nazi Germany fell solely on the SS, more recent historical research has uncovered the massive breadth and depth of the Wehrmacht's own war crimes. It is now clear that the mass death of Soviet prisoners of war was the result of both deliberate policy choices and negligence during the planning of German military operations on the Eastern Front. German food policy, which prioritized feeding German troops and civilians at the expense of Soviet civilians and prisoners of war, resulted in the starvation of millions of Soviet prisoners in German captivity. German security policy in the Wehrmacht's rear areas, conducted in collaboration with the Nazi police and security apparatus, explicitly instructed German troops to commit violations of international law, including the summary execution of tens of thousands of political commissars and Jewish-Soviet prisoners of war. After the failure of Operation Barbarossa in late 1941, German policy toward Soviet prisoners of war shifted to exploiting them as a source of forced labor for a German war economy that was facing the prospect of a long, total war; however, this shift in policy came too late for millions of prisoners who had already died or were on the verge of death due to starvation and disease. The Wehrmacht's genocidal policy of Soviet prisoners of war was not an isolated phenomenon, and in fact, the fate of Soviet prisoners of war was often intertwined with that of the Jews of Eastern Europe who were killed during the Holocaust. However, despite its significant role in the history of Nazi mass killing, the mass murder of Soviet prisoners of war is far less widely known than that of the Jews due to both official repression and historiographic trends which prevented the study of the fate of Soviet prisoners for decades after Holocaust studies had become a well-established field of historiography.

On 10 February 1939, Hitler told an assembled group of his top generals that the coming war would be "purely a war of worldviews \[\*Weltanschauungskrieg\*\]...a racial war." More than six months before the invasion of Poland that began the war in Europe, and nearly two-and-a-half years before the German attack on the Soviet Union, Hitler had established the ideological parameters of the coming war. During the planning phase for the attack on the Soviet Union in late 1940 and early 1941, Hitler repeatedly emphasized the ideological nature of the conflict. On 30 March 1941, Hitler held a meeting with the staff officers of the German High Command. The Chief of the German General Staff, Generaloberst Franz Halder, recorded in his diary that Hitler had called for a "war of annihilation" (*\*Vernichtungskrieg\**) against the Soviet Union, claiming that "Judeo-Bolshevism" was an existential threat to National Socialism and that the Slavic and Jewish "subhumans" (*\*Untermenschen\**) living in the Soviet Union had to be destroyed to secure the future of the German people (*\*Völk\**).

Even as early as the writing of *Mein Kampf* in 1925, Hitler had spoken of the need for Germany to obtain "living space" (*\*Lebensraum\**) in the East, which would allow colonization by German settlers and thus the continued growth of the German people. This idea was the product of a fundamentally Social Darwinist worldview, in which the strongest nations would inevitably dominate and conquer the weakest. Obtaining this living space in the east would necessitate wars of conquest against Poland and the Soviet Union, which would be followed by the depopulation of the conquered territories and their repopulation with Germans, creating a so-called "Greater Germanic Reich" that stretched from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural Mountains. Contrary to

their postwar claims, according to Halder's diary entry from 30 March 1941, none of the assembled officers expressed any reservations about either the plan to invade the Soviet Union or Hitler's statements about the ideological, genocidal nature of the impending war.

Military planning for the invasion of the Soviet Union had begun shortly after the conclusion of the campaign in Western Europe in late June 1940. The basic operational plan established by the OKW called for a three-pronged attack into the Soviet Union, with three Army

Groups—North, Center, and South—targeting Leningrad, Moscow, and Ukraine, respectively. In accordance with Hitler's wishes, this plan emphasized the rapid encirclement of the Red Army units in the western Soviet Union, trapping them as close to the German-Soviet border as possible and destroying them. Hitler believed that the Soviet state, weakened by the Purges of the 1930s, would be incapable of withstanding such a shock and would quickly collapse. The staff officers of the OKW did not necessarily share his confidence, but they nonetheless agreed that it would be possible to dispatch the Soviets in the space of less than three months.

The OKW's planning was deeply flawed due to both poor intelligence regarding the strength of the Soviet armed forces and the resilience of the Soviet state, as well as hubris stemming from the rapid victories the Wehrmacht had achieved in Poland and Western Europe. Because of their overconfidence in inducing a quick collapse of Soviet resistance, their logistical planning for the coming campaign was wholly inadequate. The vast expanses of the Soviet Union presented significant challenges to the Wehrmacht's logistical capabilities; the operational area on the Eastern Front was more than three thousand kilometers long and more than a thousand kilometers deep. The road network in the western Soviet Union was sparse, and many of these roads were not paved and would turn to mud in the event of heavy rains (which were common in the fall in western Russia). Furthermore, the Germans would be unable to use the Soviet rail networks for some time because the Soviet tracks ran on the broader Russian gauge, and would have to be converted to the narrower gauge used in the rest of continental Europe.

Nonetheless, the OKW forged ahead with an operational plan calling for armored advances of hundreds of kilometers within the space of days, which would rapidly outpace their supply lines, anticipating that the collapse of Soviet resistance would render such problems moot. This lack of attention to logistical details would have massive ramifications for both German military personnel and Soviet prisoners of war in the latter months of 1941.

Despite their negligence in logistical planning, the Nazi leadership was greatly concerned with food policy during the upcoming campaign. They remembered the food shortages that Germany had experienced during the First World War, which they believed had contributed to the domestic political unrest that had ultimately led to the German Army's defeat. Eager to avoid a repeat of this catastrophe, German planners emphasized that the Wehrmacht would have to live off the land in the Soviet Union, requisitioning food from the local population rather than relying on food transported from Germany. The German secretary responsible for food policy, Herbert Backe, openly acknowledged that this policy would result in the deaths of tens of thousands of Soviet civilians and prisoners of war, who were considered expendable "useless eaters." This policy, known as the Hunger Plan, tied into the larger German plan for the colonization of Eastern Europe, known as \*Generalplan Ost\*, which called for the depopulation of the occupied Soviet Union via starvation, forced labor, deportation, and mass killing to enable the resettlement of this territory by German colonists. The failure of Operation Barbarossa ultimately prevented the full implementation of these plans, but Soviet prisoners of war would bear the brunt of their partially-limited effects.

The syndrome of the First World War also pervaded the German High Command's planning for security policy on the Eastern Front. Under their operational plan, the area in the immediate vicinity of the front would be the responsibility of the OKH, while the OKW would be responsible for the vast rear areas. Both the Nazi Party leadership and the German military leadership firmly believed in the so-called "stab-in-the-back" myth, which claimed that the German Army had not been defeated in the field in the First World War, but had instead been stabbed in the back by its domestic enemies (i.e., Jews and leftists). To prevent a similar outcome in this campaign, the High Command believed it was necessary to implement a harsh security policy in the operational and rear areas which would protect German troops from the supposed dangers of "Judeo-Bolshevism." These security measures were conveyed to the lower echelons of the German armed forces in a series of instructions issued during the weeks leading up to the invasion, which have collectively come to be known as the "Criminal Orders."

The first of these orders, issued on 13 May 1941, was known as the Barbarossa Decree. This order informed the German forces fighting on the Eastern Front that this war was a war of annihilation requiring extraordinary security measures. It authorized the summary execution of suspected saboteurs and partisans, while also exempting Wehrmacht personnel from punishment under the military legal code for crimes against Soviet civilians. Furthermore, the Barbarossa Decree empowered German officers to order collective reprisals against Soviet civilians for acts of sabotage or resistance.

Six days later, the OKW issued the so-called Guidelines for the Conduct of the Troops in Russia. This order told German troops that "Bolshevism is the mortal enemy of the National Socialist German people" and thus the most radical measures were required to suppress all forms of resistance. It instructed them to "ruthlessly" crack down on any perceived resistance by "Bolshevik agitators, partisans saboteurs, and Jews," effectively authorizing the mass killing of Jews and suspected partisans and paving the way for the Wehrmacht's involvement in the Nazi program of racial persecution in the occupied Soviet Union. Negotiations between the OKW and the head of the RSHA, Reinhard Heydrich, secured the cooperation of the Wehrmacht with the actions of the SS Einsatzgruppen, which carried out massacres of more than a million Jews, Roma, and other Soviet civilians, as well as prisoners of war.

The last of the Criminal Orders issued prior to the invasion was the so-called Commissar Order, which was published on 6 June, which informed German troops that Soviet political commissars were "the originators of barbaric, Asiatic methods of warfare" and that "therefore, when captured either in battle or offering resistance, they are to be shot on principle." This order amounted to an explicit instruction to summarily execute enemy combatants. After the beginning of Operation Barbarossa, the RSHA issued further orders to its personnel to inspect captured Soviet prisoners of war and execute Jews, political commissars, and communists, with the OKW's consent. Such orders blatantly violated international law, which the German High Command was no doubt aware of, as evidenced by the small number of printed copies of the order that were issued. Germany was a signatory to the 1929 Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, but the Soviet Union was not. Nonetheless, Article 82 of the Convention required all signatories to treat *\*all\** prisoners of war, not just those of signatory nations, according to the terms of the Convention. Although Germany generally observed the Convention in its treatment of Western Allied prisoners of war, it flagrantly flouted its requirements in its handling of Soviet prisoners of war.

On 22 June 1941, German troops crossed the Soviet border and commenced Operation Barbarossa. Despite repeated warnings over the previous months regarding the impending invasion, Stalin remained in denial about the German threat, and, as a result, Soviet forces were caught completely flat-footed. Within days, German armored units had pierced dozens of kilometers into the Soviet rear areas, encircling entire armies, while the Luftwaffe destroyed thousands of Soviet aircraft before they could even get off the ground, ensuring German air supremacy across virtually the entire front. German forces advanced rapidly over the following weeks, trapping millions of Soviet troops in several large pockets and taking massive numbers of prisoners of war: more than 320,000 at Minsk in late June and early July; more than 500,000 at Smolensk in mid-July; 665,000 at Kyiv in September; and 600,000 at Bryansk and Vyazma in October. Despite internal tensions between Hitler and the OKW over whether the Wehrmacht should prioritize capturing the economically-critical regions in eastern Ukraine and near Leningrad or a direct drive on Moscow, by the end of September, the German forces were prepared for a final push to capture the Soviet capital.

The responsibility for the huge numbers of prisoners of war taken during the early months of Operation Barbarossa fell to the Prisoner of War Administration (*\*Chef des Kriegsgefangenenwesens\**) within the General Office of the Armed Forces (*\*Allgemeines Wehrmachtsamt\**) of the OKW, which was led by Hermann Reinecke. Upon their capture, Soviet prisoners of war were taken to divisional collection points (*\*Sammelpunkte\**), then to Army Prisoner Collection Points (*\*Armee-Gefangenen-Sammelstelle\**, or AGSSts) near the front.

From the AGSSts, they were then transported to transit camps (*\*Durchgangslager\**, or Dulags) in the army rear areas administered by the OKW. They were then transported to permanent prisoner of war camps for enlisted men (*\*Stammlager\**, or Stalags) or officers (*\*Offizierslager\**, or Oflags). Some of the Stalags and Oflags exclusively held Soviet prisoners (denoted by Arabic numerals), while others held both Soviet prisoners and prisoners of other nationalities (denoted by Roman numerals). In addition to confining the prisoners, the Stalags served as hubs for forced labor units (*\*Arbeitskommandos\**); unlike enlisted men, officers could not be compelled to work under the Geneva Convention.

At every stage of this process, Soviet prisoners were subjected to atrocious conditions, and each stage led to compounding attrition. The prisoners were generally transported to the collection points, and subsequently to the Dulags, on foot or in open railcars, even in winter. Men who fell out while marching to the camps were shot or left to die, while many men froze to death during long trips by train. The death rates varied between transports, with rates of 20 percent frequently reported; in some transports, as many as 75 percent of the prisoners died. Those who survived the journey to the Dulags arrived at sites that, in many cases, could barely be called camps. The Dulags in the occupied Soviet Union were often little more than open fields fenced in with barbed wire, with no barracks or other camp facilities. Prisoners were forced to sleep under the open sky or dig holes for shelter. They were provided with little or no food and water, and almost no medical care was available. These conditions rapidly led to starvation and disease in the severely overcrowded camps. Conditions were little better in the Stalags and Oflags, where starvation, disease, and deliberate mistreatment by the guards were the rule. On paper, prisoners who were working as forced laborers were supposed to receive 2,035 calories

per day, while prisoners who were not working were allotted 1,400 calories per day. Even these calorie totals would have been inadequate to sustain the prisoners, but in practice, most prisoners received no more than 700 calories per day, often in the form of so-called "Russian bread" (\*Russenbrot\*), made of barely-edible grains and filled with leaves or sawdust to make up the requisite weight, and a thin soup called \*balanda\*, which was often little more than hot water with a few grains or bits of potato or rutabaga thrown in. Within weeks, prisoners began to starve to death on a massive scale.

During this time, German troops rigorously applied the Commissar Order. Although many German officers would later claim to have ignored the order, research in the German Military Archives indicates that up to 90 percent of German units carried out the order, resulting in the deaths of between 4,000 and 10,000 commissars before the order was rescinded in May 1942. In addition, the Gestapo and SD conducted so-called "weeding out" operations (\*Aussonderungen\*) in the camps, identifying commissars, Jews, and other "undesirables," who were taken out of the camps and shot or sent to concentration camps to be killed. A special animosity was reserved for women in Soviet combat units—derisively referred to as "rifle broads" (\*Flintenweiber\*) by the Germans—who were often summarily executed. Their fate in the German concentration camps remains poorly documented and further research is needed to fill this critical gap in the historiography of Soviet prisoners of war.

In October 1941, the Germans initiated what was expected to be the final assault on Moscow. However, within weeks, the autumn rains set in, turning the roads to muck and halting the German advance. Supply problems also began to set in, with German armored units suffering heavy attrition due to lack of parts and maintenance equipment, while the effectiveness of the remaining units was hindered by shortages of ammunition and the inability to quickly reinforce depleted units with fresh troops from the rear, as Germany had already nearly exhausted its reserves of manpower. The German offensive ground to a halt by early December; shortly thereafter, the Soviets launched a massive counterattack, using their own reserves as well as experienced units recalled from Siberia. The German forces were repulsed from Moscow by January 1942 and narrowly avoided a full-on collapse. The Red Army, and the Soviet Union as a whole, had proven more resilient than Hitler and the OKW had expected, and Germany now faced the prospect of a long war against an enemy with vastly superior numbers and industrial capacity.

Knowing that their ability to continue fighting the Soviets would require a total mobilization of the German war economy, the German military leadership turned to both Soviet prisoners of war and Soviet civilians as a source of labor. Initially, Hitler had resisted the idea of bringing large numbers of Soviet prisoners to the Reich for forced labor, viewing any potential contact between Soviet troops and German civilians as an unacceptable security risk. However, faced with the prospect of a long, attritional war, Hitler was forced to relent, and on 31 October 1941, he ordered the mobilization of Soviet prisoners of war for labor. This policy shift included an increase in rations for prisoners who were working; however, it also sealed the fate of those who could not work. In a meeting of high-ranking Army officers at Orsha in occupied Belarus on 13 November 1941, the Quartermaster General of the Army, Eduard Wagner, stated bluntly that non-working Soviet prisoners would have to starve so that the working prisoners could be fed more.

In reality, this change in policy was already too late to alter the fate of most of the Soviet prisoners in German captivity at that time. During the fall of 1941 and the winter of 1941-1942, conditions in the camps reached catastrophic levels due to a lack of food (partially due to the inability of the German transport network to get food to the camps, or even to their own troops, due to poor logistical planning in the leadup to Barbarossa) as well as rapidly worsening epidemics of typhus and dysentery. The vast majority of Soviet prisoners were incapable of working by the time that Hitler issued his order to mobilize them for labor on 31 October.

Employers who received Soviet prisoners frequently complained that more than half of the men (sometimes more than three quarters) were incapable of working because of malnutrition.

During this time, mass death in the camps reached its peak, with thousands of prisoners starving to death every day. From October 1941 to January 1942, between 300,000 and 500,000 prisoners died each month, with as many as one percent of all Soviet prisoners in the entire camp system dying each day. By February 1942, more than two million Soviet prisoners had died, mainly due to starvation.

Even the shift to forced labor over mass starvation as the order of the day did not dramatically alter the fate of Soviet prisoners. During the final three years of the war, Soviet prisoners continued to die at a much higher rate than any other group of prisoners of war, as well as civilian laborers from Eastern Europe (\*Ostarbeiter\*), who were also subjected to terrible treatment. Between February 1942 and May 1945, another 1.3 million Soviet prisoners (27 percent of those who remained alive) died, compared with "only" ten percent of Soviet civilian forced laborers, bringing the death toll for Soviet prisoners in German captivity to 3.3 million out of 5.7 million, or just under 58 percent.

A comparison with the experiences of Western Allied prisoners of war illustrates the stark differences between the fates of the two groups and further underlines the deliberate and targeted nature of German policy toward Soviet prisoners of war. Unlike Soviet prisoners, Western Allied prisoners of war were generally treated

according to the requirements of the Geneva Convention of 1929. They were given adequate housing, food, and medical care, and were permitted to receive Red Cross food parcels, as well as other supplies from charitable organizations. In addition, observers from neutral nations were allowed to inspect the camps and talk to prisoners about their treatment, which was not allowed in the camps for Soviet prisoners. Western Allied prisoners who were held in camps that also held Soviet prisoners were well aware of their suffering and in some cases attempted to help them by sharing food and clothing, often at risk of punishment from the German guards. The death rates for Western Allied prisoners in German captivity were roughly between two and three percent—a jarring discrepancy between their fate and that of Soviet prisoners.

The mass killing of Soviet prisoners of war was not an isolated phenomenon, but should instead be viewed within the larger context of Nazi mass murder more generally. Like other groups persecuted by the Nazis, Soviet prisoners of war were frequently sent to concentration camps; estimates of the number of Soviet prisoners sent to the concentration camps vary, but some studies have yielded totals as high as half a million. Soviet prisoners were treated just as poorly in the concentration camps as they were in the prisoner of war camps. Many of the Soviet prisoners sent to concentration camps in the late summer and early fall of 1941 were commissars and Jews who were earmarked for summary execution; in many cases, these prisoners were not even registered in the camp, and were immediately taken to be killed. Later in the fall of 1941, Himmler developed plans to use Soviet prisoners as a source of labor for the SS, including an ambitious plan for a camp for 100,000 prisoners within the existing Auschwitz concentration camp complex; this plan was never realized, and instead this camp would become the Birkenau extermination camp, where more than one million Jews were murdered.

The fate of Soviet prisoners was intimately intertwined with that of the Jews under the Nazis. Many of the methods that were later used during the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question,” the industrialized mass murder of Jews by gassing in the extermination camps, were tested on Soviet prisoners of war. For example, the first gassing experiment at Auschwitz using Zyklon B was carried out on a group of 900 Soviet prisoners of war in the basement of a camp building in early September 1941. The use of purported medical procedures to deceive victims about their fate was also practiced on Soviet prisoners in concentration camps including Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald, where prisoners were taken to a sham medical center in the camp and executed using a specially-built apparatus disguised as a measuring stick (the so-called “neck shot apparatus,” or \*Genickschußanlage\*). Historians have estimated that more than 100,000 Soviet prisoners of war died in Nazi concentration camps.

Soviet prisoners of war were also directly involved in the extermination of the Jews, both as victims and as perpetrators. Among the most notable Jewish-Soviet prisoners of war was Lieutenant Alexander Pechersky, who was sent to the Sobibór extermination camp in 1943 as part of a transport of approximately 2,000 Jews (both prisoners of war and civilians) from Minsk. The majority of the people on this transport were gassed immediately upon arrival, but Pechersky was selected for forced labor in the camp, where he soon came into contact with the camp resistance movement. Pechersky and some of his fellow prisoners of war took a leading role in the planning for the revolt that ultimately took place on 14 October 1943. The prisoners killed several of the SS staff in the camp and some 300 of them managed to escape; Pechersky was among the 58 escaped prisoners who are known to have survived until the end of the war.

Soviet prisoners were also present on the other side of the mass murder of the Jews. The Germans selected thousands of prisoners of war as collaborators in various roles, including auxiliary police, combatants in collaborationist military formations, counterintelligence agents and propagandists, and guards in concentration and extermination camps. Some 5,000 prisoners of war, primarily ethnic Ukrainians, were trained at the Trawniki camp in Poland and served as so-called “volunteers” (\*Hilfswillige\*, or Hiwis) in the SS camp system. The Ukrainian guards were often noted for their particular cruelty, as in the case of the infamous Treblinka guard known as “Ivan the Terrible.” After the war, hundreds of these men were prosecuted in the Soviet Union, and to a lesser extent in the west, and many of them were executed.

Although the number of collaborators was relatively small compared to the overall number of Soviet prisoners of war, they were accorded an outsized importance in the Stalinist regime’s rhetoric regarding returning prisoners of war. Even for those prisoners who had not collaborated with the Germans and had been fortunate to survive the brutal conditions in the camps, there was an intense social stigma due to Stalin’s Order No. 270, issued on 16 August 1941, which forbade Soviet troops to surrender and branded those who did as traitors. Returning Soviet prisoners were sent to so-called “filtration camps” operated by the NKVD, where they were interrogated about their time in captivity. Approximately 1.5 million prisoners passed through the filtration camps, of whom 43 percent were re-conscripted, 22 percent were sent to labor battalions, 20 percent were freed, and 15 percent were sent to the Gulag. Most of the prisoners in the latter group were released as part of a general amnesty in 1956, but even the de-Stalinization process did not fully remove the stigma attached to their time in German captivity. Despite the efforts of Soviet military leaders, including Marshal Georgy Zhukov himself, former prisoners of war were not accorded official recognition as veterans and provided with pensions

until 1994, after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The postwar repression of prisoners of war in the Soviet Union contributed to the lack of historical research and memorialization of those who had died in Nazi captivity until the end of Communist rule in Eastern Europe. Although the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission investigated and documented the mass murder of Soviet prisoners of war, and German military personnel were frequently prosecuted for mistreating Soviet prisoners in the years following the war, the official *\*damnatio memoriae\** of Soviet prisoners prevented historical research into their fate until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Research was similarly stymied in East Germany, where the public was more interested in uncovering and memorializing their own losses than those of their Soviet occupiers.

Meanwhile, in the West, the dictates of the Cold War led to the suppression of the memory of Soviet prisoners of war as victims of Nazism. Although Wehrmacht personnel were prosecuted for a variety of war crimes (including mistreating prisoners of war) in the immediate aftermath of the war, by the late 1940s, the attention of the former Allied Powers had shifted to the burgeoning threat of the Soviet Union, and interest in prosecuting German war criminals petered out. During this time, many German officers, including Erich von Manstein and Heinz Guderian, published exculpatory memoirs of the war, which began the creation of what would come to be known as the "myth of the clean Wehrmacht." Von Manstein and Guderian, among others, claimed that they had been opposed to Hitler and Nazism and blamed the war crimes on the Eastern Front exclusively on the SS, while claiming that the Wehrmacht had fought an honorable, apolitical war. Even though the United States and Britain had both prosecuted German officers for war crimes on the Eastern Front and knew these claims to be patently false, they allowed them to persist—and even furthered their spread through gestures such as appointing the former Wehrmacht Chief of Staff, Franz Halder, to head the office in the U.S. Army Historical Division responsible for producing official histories of the German side of the war. The Americans and British were content to tolerate this mythology as a way of manufacturing consent for the rearmament of West Germany, which would have been a tough sell to a public that had spent six years viewing Germany as the enemy.

### **The Myth of Wehrmacht**

The "myth of the clean Wehrmacht" dominated historiography in West Germany for several decades following the war, as the German public became largely disinterested in the crimes of Nazi Germany and came to see themselves as victims of Nazism as well, due to the hardships and losses they suffered during and after the war. The first challenge to the silence on the fate of Soviet prisoners of war came in the form of Christian Streit's seminal 1978 book, *\*Keine Kameraden\**, which detailed the role of the Wehrmacht in the mass death of 3.3 million Soviet prisoners. Streit's book was among the works of a new generation of German historians who challenged the dominant narrative of the war, a challenge which kicked off a debate between right- and left-wing German historians over the legacy of Nazi Germany, which came to be known as the "historians' conflict" or *\*Historikertreit\**. The key issues at stake during this debate, which raged throughout the latter half of the 1980s, were whether the Second World War and the Holocaust were unique events for which Germany bore a special guilt and whether Germany had taken a "special path" (*\*Sonderweg\**) to Nazism that could not have happened in another country. Historians like Streit who spoke openly of Nazi war crimes were decried by the right wing for "fouling their own nest" by exposing their country's complicity in committing crimes against humanity.

The key turning point in dismantling the "myth of the clean Wehrmacht" in Germany came in the form of the Wehrmacht Exhibition (*\*Wehrmachtausstellung\**) which was presented in 1995 by scholars from the Hamburg Institute for Social Research. This exhibition toured Germany, exposing the war crimes of the Wehrmacht, including the mass killing of Soviet prisoners of war. Although it was met with a hostile reaction from the German right, which still sought to defend the "honorable" reputation of the Wehrmacht, the exhibition was nonetheless successful in raising public awareness of the Wehrmacht's war crimes. Since that time, historians in Germany have conducted extensive research into the fate of Soviet prisoners of war and have developed a robust historiography on the subject that continues to grow in breadth and depth.

However, despite the shift in public consciousness of the Wehrmacht's atrocities against Soviet prisoners of war in Germany, such an awareness of this enormous crime has not developed in the English-speaking world, where the "myth of the clean Wehrmacht," while long discredited amongst professional historians, retains currency in both popular history and popular culture.

None of the major German studies of Soviet prisoners of war—not even the seminal *\*Keine Kameraden\**—has been translated into English, and no monographs have been published in English on the subject. Although Soviet prisoners of war have received more attention from scholars writing in English in the last decade, more work is still needed to fill this lacuna in the history of the Second World War and Nazi mass murder.

## II. Conclusion

In conclusion, the mass murder of Soviet prisoners of war in German captivity represents a critical yet underexamined aspect of Nazi genocide. Understanding this tragedy not only honors the memory of millions of victims but also illuminates the systemic brutality of the Nazi regime. The ideologically driven policies, military strategies, and logistical failures that contributed to the suffering of these prisoners must be confronted to ensure that their stories are not forgotten in the broader narrative of World War II and the Holocaust. Addressing this historiographical gap is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of the scale and nature of Nazi atrocities.

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