

“Dimensions of a Crime”: How the Wehrmacht murdered millions of Soviet prisoners of war

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On the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the German-Russian Museum in Berlin-Karlshorst is showing a small but significant open-air exhibition, “Dimensions of a Crime.” As the title suggests, the exhibition deals with the fate of Soviet prisoners of war during the Second World War. Due to the great interest, it is now being extended beyond the original date of October 3 to January 16, 2022.

At least 27 million Soviet citizens lost their lives in WWII. According to recent research in Russia the figure may be as high as 37 million. This includes 2.6 million of the 6 million Jews murdered in the Holocaust and over 3 million of the total of 5.7 million Soviet prisoners of war. To this day, these victims are hardly remembered.

For a long time after WWII, the crimes of the SS and Gestapo were contrasted with the allegedly “clean Wehrmacht.” It was not until the Wehrmacht exhibitions of 1995 and 2001 that this myth was refuted and it was revealed how the German military leadership, many commanders and troop units participated in mass executions and other crimes. These revelations caused an outcry in right-wing and military circles at the time.

The current small travelling exhibition at the site of Nazi Germany’s surrender now sheds light on a particularly dark chapter of the Wehrmacht. It shows how the army high command, in collusion with the Nazi leadership, planned and implemented an unprecedentedly barbaric policy for the treatment of Soviet prisoners of war. Unlike prisoners of war from Western countries, Red Army prisoners were summarily shot en masse, starved to death and allowed to die miserably of epidemics.

International law according to the Geneva Convention of 1929, which had laid down humanitarian rules for prisoners of war with regard to accommodation, food and medical care and had been signed by the German Reich in 1934, was suspended for Soviet soldiers by the OKW (High Command of the Wehrmacht).

The exhibition comes at a time when all of the established parties are calling for rearmament and for Germany to take up an aggressive independent military policy. Its political explosiveness in this situation was underlined by the presence of German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier at the opening event. He gave a long, pathos-laden speech in which he described the war against the Soviet Union as a “monstrous, criminal war of aggression and extermination” and called for reconciliation between the former war opponents in the “spirit of Helsinki.”

What he did not say was that he himself, as former foreign minister of the Grand Coalition of parties in 2013, initiated the about-turn in foreign policy and the revival of German militarism and great power politics. This has conjured up all the ghosts of the past, as evidenced by the radical right-wing machinations in the Bundeswehr.

The small garden in front of the “Kapitulationsmuseum” (Surrender

Museum), as the German-Russian Museum is still commonly called, only has room for a few panels. They provide shocking insights into the collection camps of the Wehrmacht, where the prisoners often had to live in the open, without hygienic facilities and without a roof over their heads. Everyday life was characterised by abuse, humiliation, torture and repeated executions.

“The sick and the healthy lay mixed up. Lice and rats crawled over our bodies. There was no medical help at all,” writes survivor Nikolaj Nikolajewitsch Danilow about one such camp, where a typhus epidemic had broken out in the autumn of 1941. His letter is in a special contact point of the museum, the KONTAKTE-KOHTAKTb1 e.V. association. “And we were beaten, beaten, beaten,” says another, Andrei Ivanovich Kiriyenko, in May 1942.

From the autumn of 1941 onwards, as the blitzkrieg faltered, the Wehrmacht leadership lowered food rations even further, and set in motion a wave of death through starvation. In some camps, hundreds of prisoners died every day. Survivor Boris Semyonovich Sheremet wrote of the hunger in the camp: “... we scraped off bark with a nail and fed ourselves that way.”

The large-format portraits, mostly taken by members of the Wehrmacht, and showing the faces of mostly young prisoners—factory and farmworkers, students, teachers, young women from the most diverse regions of the Soviet Union—are striking. A large map of Europe with countless large and small circles, the camp locations, conveys the sheer scale of the numbers of victims. In between, there is a clear view of Soviet tanks from the battle for Berlin in 1945.

On the occasion of the 80th anniversary of WWII, there was a whole series of commemorative events, films and publications dealing with the horrors of war. However, the exhibition in Berlin-Karlshorst stands out on two counts.

Firstly, it leaves no doubt that the war against the Soviet Union was not just a war for territory, raw materials and German supremacy in Europe and the world, but a war of extermination with an ideological orientation. Its aim was the destruction of the first workers’ state, which had been established in the October Revolution of 1917 and was based on the elimination of capitalist property relations.

Secondly, it shows, especially in the accompanying catalogue, how the Wehrmacht leadership treated the prisoners of the Red Army not as soldiers but as part of this hated state. The racist agitation against Slavic and Asian “subhumans” and vehement anti-Semitism went hand in hand with hysterical aggression against Communism, Bolshevism and Socialism. Soviet Jews were particularly hated because many were active in the revolutionary movement. As prisoners of war, they were marked with a Jewish star and usually murdered immediately.

Labour deployment in Germany

Despite the destruction of all workers' organisations from 1933 onwards, the Nazi regime saw its internal stability threatened by the continued existence of the Soviet Union. Hitler was even fearful of the emaciated, half-starved prisoners of war who were transported to Germany.

A revealing report in the catalogue by Rolf Keller of the Lower Saxony Memorials Foundation describes a discussion Hitler had with business leaders and the Reich Ministry of Labour about the use of Soviet prisoners as forced labourers in Germany.

At first, Hitler wanted to prevent this at all costs. He feared that contact between German workers and Soviet prisoners of war might revive the deep-rooted solidarity of the German and Soviet socialist labour movements.

Hitler at first forbade the transport of Soviet prisoners of war into Reich territory. He then allowed a limited number to be transported, but they were to be used in far-flung building sites and quarries. Finally, he gave in to German industry's insistence that they also be allowed to be worked in the armaments industry.

A total of about 500,000 forced labourers were used in Germany, half of whom had already died by spring 1942 due to the policy of starvation.

Hatred of "Jewish Bolshevism"

What Hitler had not reckoned with was the enormous determination and willingness to sacrifice on the part of the Soviet population to defend the achievements of the October Revolution, despite Stalin's terror.

As curator Babette Quinkert points out in her catalogue essay, the Wehrmacht leadership considered the "possibility of 'ideological' warfare to be particularly effective." In particular, the Nazis had hoped to use anti-Bolshevik demagoguery to stir up the population of non-Russian ethnic groups in the west of the Soviet Union—ethnic Germans, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Belarusians—against the Red Army and to split off sections of Russian troops.

Quinkert lists in detail the orders for the special treatment of Soviet prisoners of war issued long before the German offensive against Russia. A memo by the head of the Wehrwirtschafts und Rüstungsamt, Georg Thomas, about his report to Hermann Göring on February 26, 1941 is the earliest written reference to the Wehrmacht's murderous plan. Göring, it says, "like Hitler believed that when the German troops marched into Russia the whole Bolshevik state would collapse . . . It would be important to first quickly finish off the Bolshevik leaders."

A month later, on March 30, 1941, Adolf Hitler gave a speech to commanders of the future Eastern Army, which the chief of the Army General Staff, Franz Halder, noted in its key points: "Struggle of two world views against each other. Devastating condemnation of Bolshevism as asocial criminality. Communism a tremendous threat to our future. We need to move away from the standpoint of soldierly comradeship. The communist is no comrade, then or now. It's a war of annihilation."

The so-called military tribunals decree of May 13, 1941 suspended the international law of war and empowered any officer to execute civilians and also prisoners of war without formal trial. At the same time, all members of the Wehrmacht were guaranteed extensive impunity for crimes against the population.

On May 19, 1941, the Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht (OKW) issued guidelines for all units participating in the Eastern campaign, requiring them to swear to ruthless, murderous aggression. It states:

"Bolshevism is the mortal enemy of the National Socialist German people. It is against this corrosive world view and its proponents that Germany is fighting."

Finally, on June 6, 1941, the so-called Commissar Order was issued. It stipulated that German commanders should "single out" Red Army commissars when capturing enemy units and "immediately finish them off at gunpoint."

In the autumn of 1941, this was supplemented by a demand that other groups among the captured soldiers and civilians be segregated and murdered—"all important functionaries of the state and the party, particularly professional revolutionaries, Comintern functionaries, all leading party functionaries of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and its ancillary organizations in its central committees, district and regional committees, all people's commissars and their deputies, all former political commissars in the Red Army, leading members of central and mid-level government bodies, leading persons in economic life, members of the Soviet Russian intelligentsia, all Jews and all persons judged to be agitators or fanatical communists" (RSHA, Annex 2 to Deployment Order No. 8 of 17 July 1941).

Additional leaflets in the first weeks of the war warned of an "enemy trained not just in war but in politics as well" and demanded that the German soldiers on guard duty act ruthlessly and take up arms at the slightest sign of "insubordination and disobedience."

According to Quinkert, the Nazis' idea that the multi-ethnic Soviet Union was "held together only by the violence of the 'Jewish-Bolshevik' ruling class" was a misconception. Rather, there was an opposite reaction among the population in the west of the Soviet Union. The "segregation" and murder of active party members merely served to strengthen the determination to fight together against the fascist aggressors.

Some of the portraits on the exhibition panels convey an inkling of this fighting spirit. The prisoners look into the camera of the Wehrmacht photographer with pride, confidence and, as in the case of the farm labourer Ilya Ivanovich Novikov, even with a smile on their face.

The following are some of the biographies outlined in the exhibition: **Ilya Ivanovich Novikov** (1921–1941), from the Smolensk region, taken prisoner on July 7, 1941 as a soldier in a tank unit, segregated as an "intolerable" prisoner in Stalag (= Stammlager) 321 Oerbke in Lower Saxony, taken by the Gestapo to Sachsenhausen concentration camp and killed via a shot to the neck. He was 20 years old.

Diomid Tawadze (1921–1941) from Georgia, student serving in the artillery. Captured near Minsk on July 3, 1941, he was sent to Stalag 321 Oerbke in mid-October. The prisoners live there in earth caves and improvised shelters and are starving. Spotted fever spreads. Diomid Tawadze dies on December 25, 1941 of "general physical weakness," as the Wehrmacht report puts it, a few days before his 21st birthday.

Mikhail Alexeyevich Savarsin (1917-1941) from the Siberian region of Altai, trained as a locksmith. After his capture in Riga on July 5, 1941, he was sent to work near Hanover via Stalag 321 Oerbke. There the 24-year-old was shot during an escape attempt.

The high level of motivation on the part of Soviet troops facing the Wehrmacht and the indescribable conditions they experienced as prisoners of war is underlined by interviews with survivors, which can be accessed in a digital exhibition at the House of the Wannsee Conference. "Remembering injustice" is an educational presentation on the topic of Soviet forced labourers, aimed primarily at young people.

After the Commissar's Order had failed to have its intended effect, it was formally suspended in May 1942. Instead of targeted assassinations of individual party commissars, the Wehrmacht, SS and Gestapo now unleashed a murderous campaign against the entire Soviet population, burning villages and organising massacres of the elderly, women and children. In the concentration camps, the industrial extermination of Jews in gas chambers began, and prisoners of war were also driven to their

deaths en masse. On behalf of the Wehrmacht, the Gestapo combed the German prison camps for “unusable elements,” took them to concentration camps and had them shot immediately upon arrival. These actions alone claimed the lives of 33,000 prisoners, 12,000 of them in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp alone.

The Wehrmacht had already handed over around 25,000 Soviet prisoners of war to the SS for use in concentration camps from autumn 1941. They were to be used in the construction of the “Eastern Settlement” as part of the General Plan East and in the SS armaments industry. Most of them met their death.

One who survived was **Alexandr Aronowitsch Petscherski** (1909–1990). Raised in a Jewish family in Kremenchug, the music and theatre scholar was drafted on June 22, 1941 and taken prisoner in October. Via Borissov, he was sent to a camp in Minsk and later to an SS labour camp, which transferred him to the Sobibor extermination camp in September 1943. There, the 34-year-old lieutenant organised an armed uprising together with other prisoners. On October 14, 1943, eleven SS men were killed and over 300 prisoners managed to escape, only 60 escaped prisoners lived to see the end of the war, among them Petscherski.

These Stalinist crimes, which continued for five decades after the war, ultimately led to the political disarmament of the working class. When Stalin’s successors committed their final crime and dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991 to restore capitalism, there was no longer any significant resistance. This turn of events was a tragic setback, which has ushered in the rule of super-rich oligarchs and the impoverishment of the population, and today again leads to the danger of a new world war.

The travelling exhibition “Dimensions of a Crime” will be shown in Lower Saxony, at the Flossenbürg concentration camp memorial, and later in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus.



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Discrimination after 1945

For a long time after the war, the surviving prisoners of war received no recognition or compensation. It was only 70 years after the end of the war that the German Bundestag, after a series of controversial debates, decided in May 2015 to make a symbolic “recognition payment” to the remaining survivors.

In the Stalinist Soviet Union, prisoners of war were first classified as deserters, traitors and “cowardly elements.” At the end of the war, the survivors were screened and sweepingly suspected of collaborating with the Germans. The approximately 1.5 million returnees were treated with suspicion and socially disadvantaged for decades. Only after the dissolution of the Soviet Union did a presidential decree in 1995 put them on an equal footing with other war veterans.

In his catalogue contribution, Moscow scholar Artem Latyshev provides many interesting details about the treatment of prisoners of war under Stalin and his successors. Stalin had already initiated an order on August 16, 1941 that soldiers of the Red Army who surrendered to the enemy were to be treated as “malicious deserters” and their families as “families of deserters who broke the oath and betrayed their fatherland.”

However, Latyshev’s contribution, like other catalogue contributions, suffers from blaming Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership for Stalin’s crimes. For example, Latyshev writes that the distrust of those who had had contact with the enemy “obviously resulted from the character of the Bolshevik party and state, as well as the personal qualities of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Joseph Stalin.”

In fact, the material in the exhibition contradicts this standard anti-communist argument. It makes clear that the Red Army’s victory over the Nazis was possible primarily because Soviet workers defended the gains of the October Revolution despite Stalinist repression. The ideas of the Bolsheviks led by Lenin and Trotsky still had great appeal.

Conversely, the enormous number of victims was the responsibility of Stalin, who had murdered not only Trotsky’s followers and most of the old Bolsheviks in the Moscow trials, but also the most capable leaders of the Red Army. His pact with Hitler in 1939 left the Soviet population completely unprepared and unprotected for the Nazi blitzkrieg. As the figures in the exhibition show, most Red Army soldiers were taken prisoner in the first few months of the German invasion, and the majority had died by the spring of 1942.