

80 years since the mass murder in Ozarichi, Belarus carried out by the German military

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One of the worst war crimes committed by Hitler's armed forces (the *Wehrmacht*) during World War II occurred 80 years ago, in March 1944: the deliberate mass murder of thousands of women, old people and children at the Ozarichi death camp in Belarus.

During its retreat following the major defeat at Stalingrad in February 1943, the German army left behind a trail of death and destruction in the USSR. It devastated the local economy, hospitals, railway lines and transport routes, burnt down villages, recruited able-bodied inhabitants for forced labour and carried out massacres against the civilian population.

The events at Ozarichi in March 1944 are collectively considered "one of the most serious crimes ever committed by the *Wehrmacht* against civilians," writes Dieter Pohl, historian at the Munich Institute of Contemporary History. [1] Pohl emphasises that the "security police were only peripherally involved" in this crime. [2] He thereby counters all the lies of a "clean *Wehrmacht*," which was common propaganda until the Hamburg *Wehrmacht* exhibitions of 1995 and 2001, and is still maintained by right-wing circles today.

From March 12, 1944, *Wehrmacht* units of the 9th Army rounded up as many as 50,000 people into a swampy area, fenced in with barbed wire, outside the Belarusian village of Ozarichi, where they had set up three camps without accommodation or sanitary facilities. The victims were mainly women with small children, the elderly and the sick who were crammed together in the open air without food or water—exposed to the cold, hunger, epidemics and the terror of their guards.

They were forbidden to light fires to keep warm, and attempts to escape were met with grenade launcher fire, explains Christoph Rass, Professor of Modern History and Historical Migration Research at the University of Osnabrück. [3]

Rass has been researching the events of March 1944 for many years, together with Aliaksandr Dalhouski from the Belarusian History Workshop in Minsk, and produced the film *Ozarichi 1944* together with students in 2006.

By March 19, in just seven days, at least 9,000 civilians had already died—"useless mouths," as the 9th Army high command declared. During the deportation, which took place in overcrowded cattle wagons and often on foot, at least 500 people, including children, were murdered because they could no longer walk. Even after the internment, the guards of the 35th Infantry Division "often shot for the slightest reason or for no reason at all, even at children ..., even at attempts by internees to drink the swamp water."

Thousands more died after their liberation by the Red Army, including death from typhus and fever, which also infected Soviet soldiers. According to a Soviet commission of inquiry, 1,526 cases of typhus were reported among the survivors by March 31. Many had to have their hands and legs amputated. Belarusian sources estimate that up to 20,000 people died in total.

"There was only the ground and barbed wire around us," Larisa Stashkevich, then six years old, recalled to the *Esslinger*

Zeitung newspaper years later. The prisoners were given neither food nor water, nor were there blankets, even though temperatures dropped to minus 15 degrees at night. "To protect ourselves against the heavy storms, we lay down behind the corpses," explained Larisa, whose account was published on the academic blog of the University of Osnabrück in 2014, on the massacre's 70th anniversary.

In a detailed research report entitled "The Concentration Camps near Ozarichi," Rass and René Rohrkamp quote a diary entry by a German military chaplain who was taken to one of the three camps, where more than 20,000 civilians were already interned:

I noticed that something had changed first of all because of a strange sound which I could not identify until I saw the camp in the distance. A continuous, low wail of many voices rose out of it up to the sky. And then I saw right in front of me how they were dragging the dead body of an old man as though he were a piece of cattle. They had tied a rope around his leg. An old woman lay dead by the wayside, a recent gunshot wound in her forehead. A member of the military police instructed me further by pointing to a bundle that lay in the dirt: dead children whom he had covered up with a pillow. Women who could no longer carry their children left them at the roadside, where they were also shot—"eliminated" like anybody else who cannot carry on due to illness, age, or infirmness. [4]

The aim of the *Wehrmacht* operation was to get rid of "diseased persons, crippled persons, old persons, women with more than two children under 10 years of age, and other persons incapable of labor."

These were "calculated murders," as the historian Christian Gerlach, who teaches at the University of Bern, wrote in his dissertation at the Technical University of Berlin (TU Berlin) in 1998. [5]

The high command of the 9th Army ("Army Group Centre") had planned and carried out the massacres deliberately. The "unemployable" population was to act as a "human shield" to slow down the advance of the Red Army. It intended to repeat similar operations all along the front, but was no longer able to do so.

The 9th Army's war diary of March 8, 1944 states:

It is planned to move all locals not fit for work from the army's front-line zone to the area to be abandoned and leave them there when withdrawal from the front takes place, this applies especially to the numerous typhus sufferers who have hitherto been accommodated in special villages, in order to eliminate as far as possible any health hazard to the troops. The decision to free themselves from this burden, which was also considerable in terms

of nutrition, was taken by the AOK (Ameieberkommando) after careful consideration and examination of the resulting consequences. [6]

After deportation to the camps was completed, the entrances were blocked with mines. The Wehrmacht units withdrew, leaving only a few small guard detachments behind. On March 17, 1944, these last remaining guards also retreated to the new main front line of the 35th Infantry Division, firing on the camps to prevent internees from escaping. When the Red Army found the camps on 19 March and cleared the mines, they were unable to save many of those liberated.

The command of the 9th Army judged the operation to be a success:

The round-up operation brought considerable relief to the entire combat area. Residential areas were considerably loosened up and freed up for troop accommodation. No more rations are being consumed by useless mouths. Outbreaks of infection were significantly reduced by deporting those affected by the epidemic.[7]

The perpetrators were never prosecuted

After the end of the war, the Wehrmacht commanders who were primarily responsible and the head of the SS special command involved were never prosecuted in Germany. Only those who had been taken prisoner by the Soviets were punished, including the commander of the 35th Division, Lieutenant General Johann-Georg Richert, who was sentenced to death and executed in Minsk in 1946.

Rass and Rohrkamp's "The Concentration Camps near Ozarichi" reports:

However, most of the men directly responsible for the planning and execution of the Ozarichi deportations, first of all Helmuth Looss, commanding officer of Sonderkommando 7a, Josef Harpe, commander in chief of the 9th Army, and Friedrich Hoßbach, commander of the LVI Corps, and Werner Bodenstein, chief quartermaster of the 9th Army, were never held accountable for their crimes.

After the crimes in Ozarichi, the commander-in-chief of the 9th Army, Harpe, took over the supreme command of the notorious 4th Panzer Army in northern Ukraine, which had already carried out calls for the murder of Jews during the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. [8] He was taken prisoner of war by the US in mid-April 1945, was released after three years in 1948 and lived unmolested in West Germany, where he died at the age of 80 in Nuremberg in 1968.

Friedrich Hoßbach, commanding general of the LVI Infantry Corps, died in Göttingen in 1980. He was revered for a long time in the postwar German army (*Bundeswehr*) and displaced persons' associations for his "merits" in the defence against the Red Army. He was a "strategically outstandingly gifted general" who, as temporary commander of the 4th Army, "took the yoke of the Red soldiery off a few thousand East and West Prussians ... for a while" and remained "unforgotten" by many, according to a 1992 text by the right-wing Cultural Foundation for

Displaced Persons.

Helmuth Looß went into hiding in Bremen in 1945 under his mother's name, Gessert, became a primary school teacher and stood as a candidate for the Free Democratic Party in the 1961 Bundestag elections. It was not until the end of the 1960s that he was interrogated about the events on the Eastern Front and given leave of absence as a teacher. The Bremen district court then suspended his prosecution due to the statute of limitations. He died in 1988 without charges ever being brought against him.

Werner Bodenstein, a colonel in the general staff, was even appointed to a leading position in the reorganisation of the *Bundeswehr* after 1945. From 1958, as "1st German Plenipotentiary NORD" (*Deutscher Bevollmächtigter NORD*), he was commander of one of the six military divisions (*Wehrbereiche*) set up in 1956. In 1960 he was promoted to brigadier general and in 1964 he received the Federal Cross of Merit. He died in 1983 in Hirschberg, Rhineland-Palatinate, highly decorated and never brought to justice for his involvement in the mass murder of thousands of civilians in Ozarichi.

Two memorial events

On the 80th anniversary, two events commemorated the horrific massacres—on March 15 in the town hall of Osnabrück and on March 19 in the Berlin-Karlshorst Museum, known as the "Surrender Museum" because this is where the unconditional surrender of the *Wehrmacht* was signed on May 8–9, 1945. The University of Osnabrück's Rass and Aliaksandr Dalhouski from the Belarusian History Workshop Minsk, which works together with the IBB (International Education and Meeting Centre) Dortmund, spoke at both events.

However, although the two commemorative events were announced in many media and programme magazines, most recently on the day of the Berlin event, March 19, in a detailed calendar article by Deutschlandfunk, remarkably no press reports followed!

The fact that the memory of Ozarichi was ignored in the media is significant. Under conditions where the German ruling class is once again focussing on confrontation with Russia following the start of the Ukraine war in 2022, the crimes of the *Wehrmacht* are to be ignored.

Every day, the coalition government in Berlin beats the drum for a return of German militarism, for the *Bundeswehr*'s "war-readiness" and for fresh arms deliveries for Ukraine's war against Russia. It is obvious the German state is returning to the traditions of the *Wehrmacht*, as the Osnabrück decree by Defence Minister Boris Pistorius makes clear.

The Berlin-Karlshorst Museum, which gave up the name "German-Russian Museum" last year, is the only museum in Germany that commemorates the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union. The museum's sponsoring association was formed after German reunification in 1990 on the basis of an agreement between Russia and Germany that is binding under international law and also involves Belarus and Ukraine. The aim of the museum, formulated in the catalogue for its permanent exhibition, stresses it should be "a museum against war, a museum that promotes peace at the site of the surrender."

This, however, no longer suits the German elite today. Government representatives, in particular the German Culture Minister Claudia Roth (Greens) and the FDP's defence spokesperson Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann, are demanding ever more loudly an end to all cooperation with Russia and Belarus. If they get their way, it would mean the end of the museum.

Memories of the mass murder of Ozarichi no longer fit into the current concept of the war-mongering upper class and are to be hidden away. But facts are stubborn. The murderers of Ozarichi, who continued their careers

after 1945 as if nothing had happened, refute all the talk of a “zero hour” after World War II and an alleged new beginning for Germany. They make clear the terrible traditions bound up with the return to German militarism.

The images from Gaza of dying women, children and the elderly, which are frighteningly similar to the images from Ozarichi, also impel the political elite and the official media to refrain from publicising the war crimes of the German army. After all, the German coalition government is directly involved in today’s genocide, providing the far-right Israeli regime with finances, weapons and propaganda lies!

This makes it all the more important for workers and young people to study and reflect on what happened in Ozarichi 80 years ago.

[1] Dieter Pohl: Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht. Deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941–1944. Oldenbourg, München 2008, S. 328.

[2] Dieter Pohl: Die Kooperation zwischen Heer, SS und Polizei in den besetzten sowjetischen Gebieten. In: Christian Hartmann, Johannes Hürter, Ulrike Jureit: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Bilanz einer Debatte. München 2005

[3] Christoph Rass, “Menschenmaterial”: Deutsche Soldaten an der Ostfront. Innenansichten einer Infanteriedivision 1939–1945, Paderborn 2003, S. 386–402

[4] Christoph Rass und René Rohrkamp, “Die Konzentrationslager bei Ozarichi,” Universität Osnabrück, Interdisziplinäre Arbeitsgruppe Konfliktlandschaften

[5] Christian Gerlach: Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941 bis 1944, S. 1088 ff.

[6] Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv BA-MA Freiburg, zitiert nach Hans Heinrich Nolte: Osarici 1944. In: Gerd R. Ueberschär (Hrsg.): *Orte des Grauens. Verbrechen im Zweiten Weltkrieg*. Darmstadt 2003, S. 186-194.

[7] *ibid.*

[8] Christian Hartmann: *Wehrmacht im Ostkrieg. Front und militärisches Hinterland 1941/42*. München: Oldenbourg 2009, S. 666 f.



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