

The background features abstract geometric shapes in shades of blue and white. A large, dark blue triangle points downwards from the top left corner. A lighter blue triangle points upwards from the bottom left corner. The remaining space is white.

**Forum:
The German
Treatment
of Soviet
Prisoners
of War
During the
Second
World War**



The Prisoner of War Camps of the Wehrmacht: Key Findings of the *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, Volume IV

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Volume IV of the *USHMM Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, titled *Camps and Other Detention Facilities under the German Armed Forces*, published in 2022, documents camps and other types of detention sites operated by the Wehrmacht during the Second World War. The volume documents many of these sites for the first time, while providing new details about others. Among the most significant subjects explored in this volume are the structure and organization of the German prisoner of war camp system, the experiences of prisoners of war in German captivity, and the role of the Wehrmacht in the persecution of civilian populations. Of particular interest are our findings regarding Soviet prisoners of war in German captivity, a subject that has largely been neglected in the English-language historiography.

Volume IV demonstrates the massive extent and breadth of the Wehrmacht's camp system, which extended well beyond

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¹ See Gerhard Schreiber, *Die italienischen Militärinternierten im deutschen Machtbereich, 1943 bis 1945: Verraten, verachtet, vergessen* (Munich, 1990).

the prisoner of war camps. The volume includes individual entries for more than 600 sites, which include some well-known types of camps, such as *Kriegsgefangenen-Mannschaftsstammlager*, or Stalags (enlisted men's camps); *Offizierslager*, or Oflags (officers' camps); and *Durchgangslager*, or Dulags (transit camps); as well as lesser-known facilities such as improvised camps for interned Italian military personnel and military prisons for Wehrmacht personnel convicted of violations of the military legal code. The volume also includes entries for a wide variety of sites for civilians, including internment camps for Allied civilians in the Reich, the system of Wehrmacht-run labor camps for Tunisian Jews, and ad hoc detention camps for civilians. Volume IV is the first publication to document some of these sites, and the first to document many of them in English. Volume IV is also the first English publication to provide a comprehensive overview of the organizational structure of the Wehrmacht prisoner of war camp system, as well as the first systematic attempt to document each of the main camps.

In addition to simply illustrating the breadth of the Wehrmacht's system of camps and detention sites, Volume IV has unearthed significant new findings about many of these sites. In documenting these camps, we have come across several noteworthy trends. The first is the stark difference in the treatment of various groups of prisoners of war within the military camp system. There was a clear hierarchy in the camps, in which prisoners were stratified along national lines: Western Allied prisoners were treated well, in accordance with the Geneva Convention of 1929, which dictated the treatment of prisoners of war. Polish prisoners were treated more harshly, especially early in the war, when they were forced to live in primitive camp conditions. Italian soldiers who were interned after the armistice in 1943 were viewed as traitors by the Germans and treated poorly; of the approximately 600,000 Italian military prisoners, around 45,000 died.¹ The worst treatment, however, was reserved for the Soviet prisoners of war, who

were not provided with adequate housing, food, or medical care; of the roughly 5.7 million Soviet prisoners captured by the Germans, approximately 3.3 million died.² The volume also reveals more specific phenomena within these general trends, such as the dichotomy between the treatment of metropolitan French prisoners and French colonial troops from West Africa; the treatment of Jewish prisoners of war compared with the treatment of non-Jewish prisoners of the same nationality; and the general decline in conditions for prisoners of all nationalities in the camps during the final months of the war.

Our findings regarding the Soviet prisoners of war are particularly noteworthy because this subject is poorly documented in the existing English-language historiography. While German historians have created a substantial body of historiography regarding Soviet prisoners of war, historians writing in English have not given significant attention to the experiences of Soviet prisoners, and none of the major German works on the subject has been translated into English. Using a variety of sources, including official German military documentation, postwar investigative reports, and eyewitness accounts from survivors, Volume IV illustrates the mistreatment of Soviet prisoners of war in German captivity in graphic detail. The volume includes descriptions of the insufficient housing provided to the Soviet prisoners; the meager food rations they received; the lack of proper medical care for sick and injured prisoners, and the resulting epidemics of typhus and other diseases; forced labor; and the outright killing of Soviet prisoners, both as part of the 1941 “Commissar Order” issued by the German High Command (which instructed German troops to immediately execute captured political commissars) and as part of the so-called “weeding out” actions (or *Aussonderungen*), in which Gestapo personnel identified Jews, Communist Party members, and any surviving political commissars, who were then sent to concentration camps and killed.³

² Christian Streit, *Keine Kameraden: Die Wehrmacht und die sowjetische Kriegsgefangene, 1941–1945*, 3rd ed. (Bonn, 1997), 10.

³ See Reinhard Otto, *Wehrmacht, Gestapo und sowjetische Kriegsgefangene im deutschen Reichsgebiet 1941/42* (Munich, 1998); Felix Römer, “The Wehrmacht in the War of Ideologies: The Army and Hitler’s Criminal Orders on the Eastern Front,” in *Nazi Policy on the Eastern Front, 1941: Total War, Genocide, and Radicalization*, ed. Alex J. Kay, Jeff Rutherford, and David Stahel (Rochester, N.Y., 2012).



Figure 1. Stalag 349 at Uman. A German guard sitting on the end of a 20mm gun platform watches over 50,000 Soviet POWs, August 1941. USHMM, courtesy of NARA, WS #91098.

⁴ See Streit, *Keine Kameraden*.

The volume demonstrates that the deaths of Soviet prisoners were the result of conscious and deliberate actions by the Wehrmacht, illustrating its role as an active participant in the propagation of Nazi racial-ideological policy. Wehrmacht personnel actively participated in the killing of Soviet prisoners of war and maintained the conditions that caused them to die en masse in the camps, particularly during the fall of 1941 and the winter of 1941–1942, when typhus epidemics ravaged the overcrowded camps and killed thousands of prisoners already weakened by weeks or months of starvation rations and forced labor.⁴

Surviving prisoners of war recounted both the horrific living conditions and the cruelty of the German camp personnel. A. E. Sukhinin, a Soviet soldier who was a prisoner at Stalag 345 in Smila, Ukraine, from October 1942 to May 1943, recalled:

To this camp they brought the wounded, to deliberately let them die. In winter, the buildings were not heated in any way, and we were warmed only by the heat of our bodies. We slept on bare boards, covered with nothing: they took away all our clothing and footwear and left us only our underwear. We slept in a ball, thrusting our arms into the neckband of our shirt with our palms



under our arms, and pressing our knees up toward our chins – that was the best way to conserve heat. The food they gave us was not enough to sustain life. I tried not even to move unless necessary, and not to speak.⁵

In addition to the criminal actions of Wehrmacht personnel, our research has documented the involvement of virtually all parts of the Nazi security and police apparatus in the killing of Soviet prisoners of war, including the Gestapo, the Security Police (Sicherheitspolizei, or Sipo), and the Security Service (Sicherheitsdienst, or SD, the intelligence agency of the SS), as well as the military police forces and gendarmerie. Gestapo personnel were responsible for the identification of Jewish prisoners and political commissars, while the Sipo and SD were often called upon to execute these prisoners.⁶

Soviet prisoners of war were also transferred to concentration camps, where they were either killed immediately or held under brutal conditions and subjected to exceptional acts of cruelty, including human experimentation. One noteworthy example is the use of Soviet prisoners of war in the first Zyklon B gassing experiments at Auschwitz in September 1941. Significant numbers of Soviet prisoners were sent to other German concentration camps, including Buchenwald,

Figure 2. Stalag 308 (VIII E) at Neuhammer-West (Świętoszów). Soviet POWs begging for food behind a barbed wire fence, date unknown. Courtesy USHMM; public domain.

⁵ Alexander Kruglov, “Mannschaftsstaumlager (Stalag) 345,” in *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, Volume IV: Camps and Other Detention Facilities under the German Armed Forces*, ed. Geoffrey P. Megargee, Rüdiger Overmans, and Wolfgang Vogt (Bloomington, Ind., 2022), 345.

⁶ See Otto, *Wehrmacht, Gestapo und sowjetische Kriegsgefangene*.



Figure 3. Dulag 126. Heinrich Himmler confronts a Soviet POW. Probably Minsk. Courtesy USHMM; public domain.

⁷ Franciszek Piper, "Gas Chambers and Crematoria," in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, ed. Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Bloomington, Ind., 1998), 157–159.

Mauthausen, and Sachsenhausen. The proliferation of Soviet prisoners of war throughout the German camp system and the involvement of so many different institutions in the killings further emphasizes the deliberate and premeditated nature of the mass murder of Soviet prisoners in German captivity.⁷

The volume also details the Wehrmacht's crimes against civilian populations, particularly within the occupied Soviet Union. In addition to the formal system of internment camps (*Internierungslager*) for Allied civilians within the Reich, the Wehrmacht operated a variety of ad hoc detention sites for civilians. Most of these sites were improvised camps in the occupied Soviet Union, although there were a few in German-occupied Serbia as well. Like the camps for Soviet military personnel, the conditions in these camps were terrible, with severe overcrowding and little food or medical care, and death rates were high.

Some civilians in the occupied Soviet Union were confined in German prisoner-of-war camps. Elena Shakuro, a civilian living in the village of Khrapovichi, north of Vitebsk, in

present-day Belarus, was sent along with several thousand others from the surrounding area to Stalag 313 in Vitebsk, a prisoner of war camp that was also used as a transit camp for civilians – in this case people who were suspected of aiding partisans. Shakuro recalled:

In late March 1943, German soldiers herded our whole family and the inhabitants of the village of Khrapovichy into the Vitebsk POW camp. There were a great many civilians there, old men, women, and children. In the barracks where they put us, there was no floor, only three tiers of bare plank beds on wire frames, and the overcrowding and filth were terrible. Hunger was rampant, and there was a typhus epidemic. People were dying in huge numbers, 20 to 30 a day, from starvation, typhus, and slave labor. In April 1943, our family was taken from the Vitebsk camp, in a transport of more than 1,000 people, to the Majdanek death camp.⁸

A particularly shocking example of the Wehrmacht's punitive actions against civilian populations was Endlager Ozarichi, located near the town of Ozarichi in present-day Belarus. In March 1944, the Wehrmacht placed thousands of Soviet civilians in a camp near the town, which was located between the German and Soviet lines. Like the other improvised Wehrmacht camps for civilians, the conditions in the camp were primitive, with no housing, food, or medical care provided. The Germans surrounded the camp with barbed wire and land mines, designed to kill any prisoners who tried to escape as well as any Soviet military personnel who approached the camp to attempt to rescue its prisoners. Soviet troops were forced to clear the mines before they could evacuate the survivors, by which time thousands of prisoners had died or been killed while trying to flee.⁹

Volume IV also documents the cruelty of the Wehrmacht toward its own soldiers. Despite the publication of several studies in German, notably those of Peter Lutz Kalmbach and the late Hans-Peter Klaus, who both contributed to the volume, the Wehrmacht penal system is almost entirely absent

⁸ Alexander Kruglov, "Mannschaftsstaumlager (Stalag) 313," in *The USHMM Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, Volume IV: Camps and Other Detention Facilities under the German Armed Forces*, ed. Megargee, Overmans, and Vogt, 302.

⁹ Christoph A. Rass and René Rohrkamp, "Endlager Ozarichi," in *The USHMM Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, Volume IV: Camps and Other Detention Facilities under the German Armed Forces*, ed. Megargee, Overmans, and Vogt, 571–574.

10 See Peter Lutz Kalmbach, *Wehrmachtjustiz* (Berlin, 2012); and Hans-Peter Klausch, *Die Bewährungstruppe 500: Stellung und Funktion der Bewährungstruppe 500 im System von NS-Wehrrecht, NS-Militärjustiz und Wehrmachtstrafvollzug* (Bremen, 1995).

from the English-language historiography. Volume IV covers several different types of penal facilities, including the Wehrmacht prisons established before the war, the wartime Wehrmacht prisons, Wehrmacht penal camps, and field penal units. These facilities held prisoners accused of a variety of crimes, including homosexuality, desertion, and the broad range of offenses which fell under the umbrella of “subversion of fighting power” (*Wehrkraftzersetzung*). The prisoners experienced terrible conditions, from the dark, damp cells of the military prisons (which also served as execution sites) to highly dangerous military engineering and minesweeping work in the field penal units.¹⁰ Volume IV is the first publication to address these sites in English.

Finally, Volume IV details several other categories of sites operated by the Wehrmacht that have largely been neglected up to this point. Among them are brothels for Wehrmacht personnel in which thousands of women in occupied territories were victimized; civilian labor units conscripted by the Wehrmacht; and labor camps for Tunisian Jews. Describing these sites further expands our understanding of the Wehrmacht’s interactions with the civilian population in German-occupied areas. While our analysis is limited in some cases by a lack of documentation, we have nonetheless made significant progress in uncovering these sites and the policies which led to their creation.

We believe that Volume IV has made significant strides in the documentation and analysis of the camps and detention sites operated by the Wehrmacht. Its detailed descriptions of the Wehrmacht’s crimes against both prisoners of war and civilian populations provide yet another firm rebuke of the “myth of the clean Wehrmacht,” which had long claimed that – in contrast to the SS, which was responsible for the mass murder perpetrated by mobile killing squads and in concentration camps – the German military was “clean” in the sense of having had nothing to do with mass murder. While this myth has long been discredited among historians, it nonetheless

persists in popular discourse around the Second World War and in popular culture. Thus, it is important for historians to continue to provide well-documented evidence of the Wehrmacht's role in crimes against humanity. The volume's findings represent another step in the long process of breaking down this pernicious myth. We hope that the volume will serve as both an authoritative resource for the documentation of the Wehrmacht's war crimes and a stimulus for further research on this subject, particularly in the English language historiography, where significant lacunae remain.

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