

EXPLOITATION OF THE SOVIET PRISONERS OF WAR AT AUSCHWITZ

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OPERATION BARBAROSSA

- Germany and Soviet Union signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, or the non-aggression pact, in 1939. This divided Eastern Europe between the two states. “It ushered in a period of military co-operation which allowed Hitler to ignore western diplomatic moves and invade Poland.”¹
- However, this peace was short-lived, as Hitler “intended to destroy what he saw as Stalin's 'Jewish Bolshevik' regime and establish Nazi hegemony.”²
- On 18 December 1940, Hitler issued an order for the invasion of the Soviet Union. The invasion went by the code name of “Operation Barbarossa.”
- Germany had not accounted for the debilitating effects of the cold weather and terrain when planning the campaign. Despite the serious losses inflicted on the Red Army and extensive territorial gains, Operation Barbarossa was ultimately a failure.
- This invasion by the Germans constituted one of the largest operations in the history of modern warfare. The operation lasted 890 days. Out of 5.7 million captured throughout the Second World War, almost 3.3 million Soviet POWs died by the end of the Second World War in 1945.

¹ "Operation 'Barbarossa' and Germany's Failure In the Soviet Union." *Imperial War Museums*.

² "Operation 'Barbarossa' and Germany's Failure In the Soviet Union." *Imperial War Museums*.

SOVIET PRISONERS OF WAR IN AUSCHWITZ

- Soviet Prisoners of War (POW) were first captured after the German aggression on the Soviet Union in June 1941.
- Out of two million and a half captured Soviet POWs, 10,000 were deported to Auschwitz. The others were sent to camps in Buchenwald, Majdanek, Dachau, etc.
- At first, the Soviet POWs were held in a separate part of the camp (Auschwitz I). Later, the SS transferred the Soviet POWs to Auschwitz II Birkenau.
- They accounted for the fourth largest group of victims of the Nazi persecution — at about 15,000.
- Their death rate was particularly high. Apart from the few Soviet POWs who were transported from Auschwitz to other camps and the ones who escaped, the estimated number of deceased Soviet POWs exceeded 14,000 in Auschwitz.

TIMELINE

- **July/August 1941:** Germany attacked Soviet Union, breaking the non-aggression pact. Lead to capture of Soviet POWs who are sent to Auschwitz.
- **September 1941:** Auschwitz authorities allocated part of the main camp for Soviet POWs. Soviet POWs were employed on the construction of the proper POW camp on the territory of the former village of Brzezinka (approximately 3 km north-west of Auschwitz I), which would become Auschwitz II Birkenau. This month also marked the Soviet POWs as some of the first victims of gassing during testing trials of Zyklon B.
- **October 1941:** Six mass transports of Soviet POWs arrived in Auschwitz. During registration, they wore the Erkennungsmarke (identification tags) around the neck. This helped identify the prisoners killed by the Nazis.
- **March 1942:** Soviet POWs who survived were sent to Birkenau.

- **Autumn of 1942:** Soviet POWs became the first group in Auschwitz to have prisoner numbers tattooed.
- **End of October 1942:** Largest mass escape attempt by Soviet POWs in Birkenau. Few were successful. Many were caught and sent back to camp. Others were caught, brought back to camp, and shot.
- **March 1942 – March 1943:** Unternehmen Zeppelin (Operation Zeppelin), a secret operation that “involved recruiting POWs, designated in the records as “activists,” who were trained to carry out sabotage and spy operations in the rear of the Soviet forces.”³
- **End of 1942:** Soviet POWs who were “sick or unable to work” were brought to KL Auschwitz from the Unternehmen Zeppelin camp in Lower Silesia.⁴ They were sent to Block 11 for execution.
- **January 1945:** Only 96 POWs were reported at the final roll call at Auschwitz on January 17. The estimated tally of deceased Soviet POWs in Auschwitz exceeded 14,000.

³ Lachendro, “Soviet POWs in KL Auschwitz,” p. 21.

⁴ Lachendro, “Soviet POWs in KL Auschwitz,” p. 21.

IDEOLOGICAL AND RACIAL SUBJUGATION

- The German war against the Soviet Union clearly had an ideological basis with a racial impetus. The Germans viewed Soviet communism as a threat to their own National Socialist ideology.
- “In Hitler’s view, it was necessary to annihilate without any scruples the political commissars and the communist intelligentsia, and to make their rebirth impossible.”⁵
- The Germans viewed the Soviet POWs as subhuman — a racialized perception that deemed the Soviets as a lesser race, deserving of harsh treatment.
- The Directives for the Treatment of Political Commissars (the Kommissarbefehl), was issued by the OKW on June 6 to deny protection to commissars “guaranteed to them under international agreements as prisoners of war (POWs).”⁶

⁵ Lachendro, *Soviet Prisoners of War in Auschwitz*, p. 7.

⁶ Lachendro, *Soviet Prisoners of War in Auschwitz*, p. 8.

LEBENSRAUM

- The ideology that drove Operation Barbarossa was the geopolitical concept of Lebensraum.
- “The Nazi policy of expansion and extermination was rooted not only in the desire to achieve political domination of Europe and the world, but in plans for effecting wide-ranging demographic changes in areas that, according to Nazi racial doctrine, were German *Lebensraum* or ‘living space’.”⁷
- Lebensraum explained the German expansion towards Eastern Europe; it underlined the Nazi doctrine of biological inequality, where “superior” nationalities had the right to exercise dominance over the “inferior” ones.
- German political and military leaders regarded Soviet POWs not only as racially less valuable, but as potential enemies and obstacles in the German conquest of Lebensraum, who then needed to be removed.

⁷ Piper, “The Political and Racist Principles of the Nazi Policy of Extermination and Their Realization at KL Auschwitz,”

LABOUR RESOURCE

- The German expansion to the east was more than just ideological; from mid-1942 on, the Germans viewed the Soviet POWs as an important labour resource who would provide them with incessant manpower.
- After the arrival of Soviet POWs at Auschwitz, they were forced to fell trees, work at levelling land, build roads and barracks.
- Soviet POWs destructed buildings that remained after the displacement of local villagers in the spring of 1941. They mined gravel, unloaded trains, transported construction materials, and helped in the camp kitchen.
- In 1944 they were clamping potatoes, clearing drainage ditches, composting, unloading various materials. They also worked in the food storehouses, the kitchen and the hospital sector.
- 19 Soviet POWs who arrived from the Lublin camp in April 1944 were sent to join the Sonderkommando.
- Such work was often conducted in harsh weather conditions and without appropriate clothing, alongside continued harassment and brutal beating by the kapos and the SS, which ultimately sped up the death of many.

TREATMENT OF SOVIET POWS

- The living conditions of the Soviet POWs were often the worst at Auschwitz. The following are some ways in which Soviet POWs were treated:
 - Soviet POWs were farmed out for slave labor. Many died due to exhaustion.
 - They faced set starvation rations; they received lesser food than other prisoners.
 - Most were deprived of essential medical assistance; paramedics only admitted dying Soviet POWs in the camp hospital.
 - The Soviet POWs that failed to perform their duties adequately were killed by SS staff and *kapos* at work.

TESTIMONIES FROM AUSCHWITZ

Stanisław Aleksandrowicz was a Pole from Soviet-controlled territory and Red Army soldier. Aleksandrowicz was a prisoner at Auschwitz. His testimony underlines how the Nazis kept the Soviet POWs undernourished with limited rations, especially after days of strenuous manual labour:

“The food was inappropriate in all aspects. We received about a litre of soup: less than a full can. At the time, the soup was cooked as a rule from frozen potatoes. You couldn’t find any fat in it. Bread for dinner was served in different amounts: sometimes a loaf was cut into six, sometimes seven, and often into eight pieces. We got herbal infusion to drink for breakfast and dinner.”⁸

⁸ Lachendro, *Soviet Prisoners of War in Auschwitz*.

Pery Broad was a non-commissioned SS officer, translator and stenographer at Auschwitz. Broad was one of the many perpetrators who testified about the harsh treatment of Soviet POWs. He provided his testimony voluntarily to a British officer in which he discusses how Soviet POWs were brutally beaten for interrogation purposes:

“The Russians, brought to Auschwitz in 1941-1942, came to the sub-camp Birkenau, which was then in process of construction. Their misery here was incredible. People lost their reason owing to starvation. They would greedily hurl themselves on any kind of food. Whole wagon-loads of corpses drove to the Auschwitz crematorium every evening. Half-dead men, unable to bear their torments any longer crept of their own free will into the wagons and were bestially murdered there.”⁹

⁹ Höss, Broad and Kremer, *KL Auschwitz seen by the SS*, p. 125.

EXPLOITATION OF SOVIET POWS

- The Nazi policy toward Soviet POWs ranged from outright extermination to callous exploitation and complete disregard for their lives, as can be gathered through Aleksandrowicz's and Broad's testimony.
- Germans were apathetic towards the deaths of Soviet POWs and only wanted to keep the ones alive available for their labor needs.
- The Germans claimed that they were under no obligation for the humane care of prisoners of war from the Red Army since the Soviet Union had not ratified the 1929 Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War.
- The Soviet Union had also not specifically declared its commitment to the 1907 Hague Convention on the Rules of War. But the Germans had. These conventions obliged signatories to treat all prisoners according to the dictates of humanity.

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