Institute of National Remembrance
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Soviet prisoners of war 1919-1921

In connection with the centenary of the Battle of Warsaw, we encourage you to read two texts by renowned Polish scholars Prof. Waldemar Rezmer and Prof. Zbigniew Karpus on the subject of Soviet prisoners of war. Both texts are also available in Russian (see the attached pdf file).

Soviet prisoners of war interned in Poland in the years 1919 - 1921

As a result of the defeat of the central countries, prisoners of war, interned persons and those forcibly taken to labour camps - citizens of the former Russian empire - began returning to their homelands (Russia, Ukraine, Poland, the Baltic nations). The first groups on the lands of the Polish Kingdom, freed from German occupation, already appeared in mid-November of 1918, i.e. the period of the formation of the centre of power of the reviving independent Polish state. Russians hurried home mainly using communication routes through Poland, from west to east.

The first stage for them, before their further journey to the east, was Warsaw, the main railway hub, where they were gathered in post-German barracks at Powązki. Inter alia the first transport of Russian POWs set off from Kalisz to Warsaw immediately following the evacuation of the Germans on 14 November. These transports were used by Russians to travel home after being held at the POW camp in Szczypiorno. In general, on the days of 14-16 November 1918 alone, 14 thousand POWs were sent from Kalisz.
The process of evacuating POWs and Russian labourers from Germany to the east took place spontaneously and without any impediments from the German authorities. Thus they attempted to rid themselves of those they no longer wanted to hold, especially given the difficulties with provisions and, as the Poles suspected, they were also motivated by a wish to destabilise the situation in reviving Poland. From 15 November 1918 to 20 January 1919 a total of 281 thousand Russians reached Poland. On the clear demand of the Polish authorities, the countries of the Triple Entente prohibited, from 22 January 1919, the directing of transports with Russian POWs and labourers to the east through Polish territory.

At this time the Polish-Soviet war began, which wasn’t very intense initially, which is also why the number of prisoners of war on both sides wasn’t overly large. In November 1919 (i.e. during the time when battles were suspended and prognoses were ongoing in Mikashevichy) there were 7,096 Bolshevik POWs in Poland (this is the number given in Polish military documents from the time). This issue wasn’t touched upon during talks in Mikashevichy.

The Polish side attempted to ensure proper living conditions for the Bolshevik POWs at the camps. This was not always possible. It should be noted that, during the period of autumn and winter at the turn of 1919 and 1920, some of the camps experienced difficulties in food supply and sanitary conditions for their prisoners. This was noticed, *inter alia*, by the Polish press and the Sejm, whose delegation visited individual POW camps and presented its report at an open air conference. As a result of the intervention of the MPs, in spring of 1920, the POWs’ situation clearly improved in the camps, and the Bolshevik POWs were directed to work in agriculture and state institutions. In this manner their living conditions (both alimentary and sanitary) improved significantly.

Extensive problems with Bolshevik POWs began for the Polish authorities only after the victorious Battle of Warsaw. As a result over 40 thousand Red Army soldiers ended up interned in Poland, and continuing military actions added significantly to this number. After the Polish-Bolshevik battles were completed (i.e. after 18 October 1920), Poland ended up with ca. 80 thousand Soviet POWs. A further 25 or so thousand Soviet POWs had volunteered for anti-Bolshevik military detachments forming in Poland.

The Polish side experienced extensive difficulties in duly dealing with their fate, especially as regards the autumn and winter cold. The Polish authorities were thus also faced with other important issues requiring urgent attention. This included the issue of 50 thousand interned soldiers and their families from former military detachments allied with Russia and Ukraine which, toward the end of November 1920, again found themselves in Poland. The problem arose of ensuring such a large number of POWs and prisoners the appropriate lodgings and sanitary, medical and alimentary care.
The first official document concluded between Poland and Soviet Russia, which mentions care for the POWs, was an agreement signed on 6 September 1920 in Berlin by representatives of the Polish and Russian Red Cross. It was intended to be carried out through the intermediary of delegates appointed by the Polish and Russian Red Cross. In Poland Stefania Sempołowska was in charge of Bolshevik POWs and civil prisoners, however, in Soviet Russia care for the Polish prisoners was to be the domain of Katarzyna Pieszkowa. By virtue of the armistice agreement dated 12 October 1920, Joint Commissions were to be appointed immediately (they finally came into existence in May of 1921).

Prior to the signing in Riga of the repatriation treaty on 24 February 1921, an attempt was made at managing the exchange of POWs on the basis of names lists. It soon proved that neither of the two parties was prepared for a quick exchange of POWs.

Ensuring the appropriate living and alimentary conditions, as well as medical and sanitary care for ca. 150 thousand prisoners and POWs (not just Soviet ones) in the years of 1919 – 1921 was a difficult task for the emerging Polish state. An important factor needing to be faced were epidemics of infectious diseases rampant not only among the military, but also experienced by the civil populations.

After getting captured, the POWs were subjected to obligatory sanitary procedures (bath, change of undergarments, disinfection of clothing) as well as medical examinations. Ill POWs were not to be sent to camps in the country’s interior but placed in special wards of hospitals on the fronts, and later in special hospitals for POWs. Medical care was also available at every POW camp. Medical personnel ran an infirmary, pharmacy and hospital, usually with an isolation ward.

In 1919, when ca. 29 thousand prisoners and POWs were held in camps around Poland (including 7 – 8,000 Soviet prisoners), this system operated rather effectively although, even then, it was not fully possible to control the spread of infectious diseases. Following the situation at the camp in Brest when, as the result of an epidemic, ca. 15 thousand POWs died (including approx. 500 Bolshevik POWs), this camp was closed. Its victims also included Polish medical personnel, e.g. the head doctor of the Brest camp died from spotted typhus.

Subsequently a difficult sanitary and alimentary situation, as well as the return of an infectious diseases epidemic in POW camps in Poland occurred in late autumn of 1920. At that time there was a sharp rise in the number of POWs and prisoners, and their situation was greatly influenced, inter alia, by the loss of a large amount of specialist sanitary and medical equipment during the Polish withdrawal of summer 1920, as well as the destruction of large parts of the country through which detachments of the Red Army passed. The capture of former allies in battle
with the Bolsheviks gave rise to the need for transferring Soviet POWs to other camps. They were transported in inadequate conditions during a severe winter, which caused a subsequent outbreak of epidemics of cholera, typhus, influenza and dysentery. During the worst months of the epidemic, at the turn of 1920 and 1921, at the main POW camps, 1,682 people died in Strzałkowo in November and 1,558 in December, while 561 died in Tuchola in January. Afterwards the situation at the camps was brought under control.

During the entire duration of the stay of Soviet POWs at the camp in Strzałkowo (June 1919 – October 1921) 7,000 – 8,000 of them perished there and, in Tuchola (late August 1920 – mid-October 1921) – ca. 2,000. On the basis of many preserved sources it is possible to determine that, during their entire stay in Poland, ca. 14 – 16 thousand Soviet POWs lost their lives in Polish captivity. They were buried in mass graves at camp-side cemeteries. During the entire inter-war period they were under the care of the Polish authorities.

Pursuant to the repatriation arrangement from mid-March to mid-October of 1921, 65,797 Soviet POWs were sent from Poland and, by the beginning of 1922 – a further 965. Also 2,001 civilians returned to Soviet Russia. Approximately 1,000 people declared the will to remain in Poland. Aside from this number, approx. 1,000 former Red Army soldiers returned from Polish captivity to other countries.

Zbigniew Karpus

Polish prisoners of war in Soviet captivity

The Republic of Poland, reviving in the wake of the wars of 1918 – 1921 was not a party to the Hague Convention of 1907 regulating the issues of POWs, however it respected its provisions. This also referred to the Polish-Bolshevik war, which de facto began on 4 January of 1919 near Vilnius, and ended de iure by a peace treaty entered into in Riga on 18 March 1921. Ending the war, both parties to the repatriation arrangement dated 24 February 1921 acknowledged that the POW status also applies to all those who served in Polish armed formations battling against the Bolsheviks on Russian territory in the years 1917 – 1920.

The conditions in which the Polish Army formed and battled hinder the precise
determination of the number of losses. It is accepted that, from 1 November 1918 to 31 December 1920, 19,841 soldiers fell and 27,214 died of injuries or illness (a total of 47,055). However 54,281 of them actually died. The decisive majority were captured, a small amount actually disappeared without a trace, and there were deserters, who changed sides.

Ca. 44,000 Polish Army soldiers listed as missing ended up in permanent Soviet captivity. Many more were actually held in captivity but of these many fled or were returned after changes on the front, and they were not counted in this category.

The most populated group of Polish Army soldiers which simultaneously – on 11 January 1920 – entered into Soviet captivity, belonged to the 5th Rifle Division. It was formed in 1919 in Siberia of the Poles residing there and Russian soldiers of Polish nationality freed from captivity and mobilised to German and Austro-Hungarian armed forces during World War I. Many Poles included into the Russian Army also belonged to this division and demobilised after the revolution of 1917. From autumn 1919 the division fulfilled the role of a backup guard during ongoing battles of the armies of Admiral Kolchak and the Czechoslovak Legion/Corpus withdrawing to the east along the trans-Siberian railway. In a hopeless situation on 10 January 1920, at the station of Ujar (formerly Klukwiennaja) the division capitulated against the Bolsheviks on honorary terms. Approximately 8,000 soldiers together with Colonel Walerian Czuma, the Commander-in-Chief of the Polish Army in Eastern Russia and Siberia, laid down their arms. The rest tore through to the east with their arms in their hands, to Harbin, from where they returned to the country by sea. They formed the core of the Siberian Brigade that – assigned to the 5th Army of General Władysław Sikorski battling by the Vistula and the Wkra – took part in the Battle of Warsaw.

Soviet command respected the provisions of the capitulation agreement concluded on 10 January 1920. Only the families of soldiers remained free, and without any food supplies. Younger officers were locked in a prisoner of war camp while the older ones, from the rank of captain and up, were jailed. This included Colonel Czuma. The position of civilians and prisoners of war was tragic as – contrary to the capitulation agreement – they were plundered even of their personal belongings and documents. From the common soldiers who did not agree to being incorporated into the Red Army, working detachments were formed, which were sent to work in coalmines or to fix railway infrastructure.

Pursuant to the provisions of the repatriation agreement, the exchange of prisoners of war began in mid-March of 1921. It took place at two border points: at the railway stations of Negoreloe near Koydanov (on the Soviet side) – Stołpce (on the Polish side), as well as at the station of Zdolbunów (for both parties, it was located in Poland).

The longest repatriation procedure was for the POWs of the 5th Rifle Division and their families from Siberia. Firstly, most often under the bare sky, they awaited transport for
weeks on end, and subsequently they travelled by train in very primitive conditions sometimes even for several months, receiving poor food rations (generally a quarter pound of bread a day). This resulted in mass infections (e.g. in January 1922, 60% of the POWs were ill), and deaths on the return route to the country. The Soviet authorities attempted to detain qualified tradesmen, which is why they hindered their repatriation. Diplomacy needed to intervene in the case of many people, e.g. Colonel Czuma only returned to Poland on 22 January 1922.

From March to July 1921, 10,694 POWs arrived in Poland via Negoreloe, and via Zdolbuniv – 5,762. From July to December that same year 12,119 and 3,791 POWs returned to the country respectively. Later the numbers clearly decreased. From January to July 1922 2,473 soldiers returned from Soviet captivity. In total, from March 1921, when the campaign began, until mid-1922, 34,839 prisoners of war returned to Poland. After adding those who had simultaneously returned from Soviet camps, prisons, labour divisions, hospitals and during transport (there may have been several hundred of them), we have approximately 35,500 prisoners of war that have returned to the country. By November of 1922, when the return campaign was practically concluded, several hundred more POWs may have arrived.

The repatriation was voluntary hence a small number of prisoners (approx. 2,000 – 3,000) decided to remain in Russia for different reasons. According to the data of the Office of the Polish Central Committee of the Communist Party of Russia from 1 March 1922, approx. 8% of prisoners of war did not wish to return, which was the equivalent of approx. 3,000 people. This results in a total of approx. 38,500 – 39,000 prisoners subject to repatriation.

The attitude of the Soviet political and military powers toward the Polish prisoners of war changed dependent on the course of the war. However, the Bolsheviks generally considered the Polish society (and the Polish Army) as a community in which “the proletariat of the cities and villages battles against reactive elements”. That is also why the most diverse actions were undertaken with the aim of leading to the internal breakdown of the Polish armed forces, “pulling” the common soldiers onto one side (originating from the “peasant and labouring masses”) and, with their cooperation, leading to the outbreak of a revolution in Poland. The positions and activities of the POWs that qualified as anti-Soviet, were ruthlessly overpowered. Alongside the remarkably strong propaganda campaign, on the one hand, an entire range of repressive actions were applied and, on the other – incentive and promises of socio-living privileges.

The fate of the Polish prisoners was relatively bearable until spring of 1920 when there were few of them and they were predominantly exploited in agricultural works in the European part of Russia (the fate of the 5th Division has been described separately). At the height of the Polish-Bolshevik war, the situation of the POWs deteriorated significantly – there were many more of them, they were subjected to all types of harassment, plundered, starved, forced to work for a dozen or more hours a day (in coalmines, deforestation,
loading and unloading of train carriages and ships, railway construction). In autumn the camps experienced an outburst of epidemics of spotted typhus, dysentery and scurvy. The sanitary conditions were very poor, there was no running water, no sewage, prisoners were bathed at a bathhouse once a month, their undergarments were changed once every several months, insects were everywhere. Food was often down to a pound of bread a day and, due to the lack of wood or fuel, there was no soup nor were the rooms heated.

The Bolsheviks attempted to form the 1st Polish Red Army in 1920 using POW-deserters and forcibly mobilised prisoners of war, which, together with other incorporated categories reached approx. 1,000. After entering into a truce in October 1920 it was formally disbanded, and its soldiers subjected to intense ideological training so that, following their return to Poland, they would propagate communist ideals or run antinational activities.

Although official Soviet orders commanded the generous treatment of POWs, based on class assumptions and intelligence requirements, this wasn’t always the case in practise. A series of incidents of murdering POWs are known, in particular of those considered to be “class enemies”, soon after taking them captive, or mass crimes on surrendering defenceless soldiers. There were especially numerous incidents of killing POWs in the First Cavalry Army of Siemion Budiony. The dominant view among its soldiers was that the cavalry cannot be burdened with POWs as, owing to this, it would lose its greatest asset, which is the its fast pace of action. One of the cruellest crimes was committed by Budionny’s cavalrymen on 17 August 1920 by Zadwórze (east of L’viv) where over 300 defenders perished from sabres and bullets. This same doctrine and practise was in force in the 3rd Corps of the Cavalry, comprised mainly of Cossacks, headed by Comcor Gaya Gai Bzhishkyan. This formation, moving in summer of 1920 on the northern wing of the Bolshevik armies, advanced the furthers, attempting to cross the Vistula near Płock and circumvent Warsaw from the west. After launching the Polish counteroffensive, it desperately attempted to get through to the east. On 22 August near Mława Gaya’s soldiers murdered 150 POWs from Poland’s 49th Infantry Regiment in the cruellest way.

Within the scope of repression the head of the 5th Army, General Władysław Sikorski commanded not taking any POWs from this formation. On 24 August at the site where the Polish soldiers had perished, 200 Cossacks were executed.

Approx. 44,000 Polish soldiers remained in Soviet captivity. Taking into account that between 35,500 – 36,000 returned to the country, a maximum of 3,000 remained in Soviet Russia voluntarily, it can be assumed that we know of the fate of ca. 39,000 Polish soldiers – Soviet POWs. Ca. 5,000 POWs are missing from the balance. Thus we do not know: whether they were killed or died in transit between POW assembly points or during transport to camps, or whether they were murdered in camps or jails, died at camps or during repatriation transport, or whether they died in unknown circumstances. In order to at least partially clarify what happened to them, it is necessary to carry out archival research in Russia and the Ukraine.
DOWNLOADS

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