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<https://ipn.gov.pl/en/news/7400,People-war-and-mathematics-The-case-of-Bolshevik-prisoners-in-the-year-1920.html>

24.04.2024, 23:10

11.03.2021

People, war and mathematics. The case of Bolshevik prisoners in the year 1920

The Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, on the eve of the 77th anniversary of the Katyń Massacre and the 7th anniversary of the crash of the presidential plane of Lech Kaczyński at Smoleńsk, conducted a provocative action. At the Katyń memorial place an exhibition was opened commemorating the Soviet POWs in Poland between 1919-1921.



The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded to this provocation with a harsh diplomatic note. The Poles' indignation is very understandable. At the necropolis where Polish officers shot by the NKVD in 1940 are commemorated, an exhibition commemorating the victims of an entirely different war who died and were buried hundreds of kilometres away from Katyń was organised. What's even more important, is the fact that those Red Army soldiers, in contrast to the victims of Katyń, were not shot in Poland but died due to an epidemic or hunger. (There was a high probability of death due to starvation and diseases also in the case of soldiers who weren't captured by Poles but remained in the Red Army, due to a great economical chaos in the Soviet Russia at the time).

We are, therefore, dealing here with an attempt to bring back the theory from the late Soviet era, according to which Joseph Stalin wanted to avenge the death of the Soviet POWs in Polish captivity between 1920-1921 when he ordered the murder of Polish officers in Katyń. In reality, when Stalin ordered the killing in spring 1940 he didn't have the fate of the Red Army soldiers in mind at all. Soldiers taken into captivity – as the events of the Second World War showed – were nothing else but traitors of the nation to him. The reason for the Katyń Massacre was probably the fact that in the summer of 1940 Stalin intended to attack Germany. In this situation, the Polish government-in-exile would become his potential ally and he would have to free the arrested Polish officers and enable the creation of a new, Polish army. However, this army wouldn't be subordinate to the USSR and Stalin wanted to have the military completely under his

control. That is why he decided to immediately eliminate the Polish officers.

Inflated numbers

To this day, opinions are spread in Russia that 60, 80 or even 100 thousand people supposedly died in the Polish captivity between 1920-1921. This last number was given by the Russian Minister of Culture Vladimir Medinsky. His method of counting was rather simple. For the starting point he used the maximum estimated number of the Soviet prisoners: 157 000, 165 550, 206 877 or 216 000 and then subtracted the number of those who returned home from captivity – 67 000. That way, he came up with the result of 100 thousand victims or more. Historian Gennadiy Matveev in turn estimates the mortality among the prisoners in Polish captivity at 25-28 thousand people. Based on the documents of the Polish general command from the years 1919-1920 he came to the conclusion that during twenty months 206 877 Red Army soldiers were captured, out of which only 157 thousand were actually handed to the ministry of military affairs and classified as prisoners of war. However, both those numbers are highly inflated: 206 877 prisoners is one and a half more than the number of soldiers who fought in the ranks of the Soviet Western Front on the eve of the Battle of Warsaw (130-150 thousand people); at the same time it is worth stressing that these were the estimates of Józef Piłsudski who had no reason in the slightest to lower the numbers of the Soviet troops.⁵ The definite majority of prisoners was taken to captivity during the Battle of Warsaw and later, although they were mainly the front

line soldiers as the back of the army, stretching all the way to Minsk, already managed to disperse. Apart from that, more than 40 thousand soldiers of the Western Front were interned in Eastern Prussia. The number 206 877 was the result of adding all the reports of various units and subunits of the Polish forces and the number of prisoners was inflated by them regularly. The difference between the total number of prisoners and those who ended up in POW camps, at 50 thousand people, is also highly improbable. This many people couldn't have joined the ranks of the armies of Symon Petliura and Stanisław Bułak-Bałachowicz which, at the end of the war, counted much less than 50 thousand soldiers.

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