

Soviet POWs

Between 1941 and 1945, approximately 5.7 million Soviet soldiers were taken prisoner by the Germans, of whom around 3.4 million perished. Their fate represents one of the most tragic aspects of World War II history. For racial and ideological reasons, the Third Reich abandoned any pretence of respect for international law, so Red Army soldiers were the worst treated prisoner-of-war group. Nor they were covered by the humanitarian aid of the International Committee of the Red Cross, for that matter. They were a large and very cheap reservoir of labour.

Soviet prisoners-of-war constituted the most numerous group by army of origin in the Lamsdorf camps. It is estimated that around 180,000-200,000 Red Army soldiers passed through them. In addition to Russians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, representatives of the Ural and Caucasian peoples, there were also Poles.

They were held in Stalag 318/VIII F Lamsdorf, the so-called *Russenlager*, located about 2-3 km from the camp for soldiers from Western European countries (the so-called *Britenlager*). This camp was not prepared for the arrival of Soviet POWs – men from the first transports were kept outdoors. To protect themselves from the cold, the prisoners were digging holes and burrows in the ground. In the following years, primitive huts were constructed, wherein as many as several prisoners were accommodated on a triple-decker bunk.

The camp authorities committed bestiality towards them. They mainly were exterminated by means of hunger, cold, appalling sanitary conditions, physical and psychological violence and mass shootings. The prisoners were subjected to selections and also sent to concentration camps. Tragic living conditions and insufficient medical care caused outbreaks of epidemics, resulting in the high mortality rate. The prisoners-of-war who died en masse were buried in nameless mass graves, usually without clothing - from 1942 onwards - in a separate Soviet POW cemetery, where around 40,000 of them are interred.

The evacuation of the camp, ordered at the end of January 1945, included most of the Red Army servicemen and claimed about 8,000 of them. Those unable to march were left in the camp, where around 4,000 of them lived to see liberation on 17 March 1945. On their return to their homeland, they were often subjected to harassment and sentenced to many years in the Gulag's camps.