

Marianne Neerland Soleim, dr.art, UIT The Arctic University of Norway, Norway, [marianne.n.soleim@uit.no](mailto:marianne.n.soleim@uit.no)

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Summary: The article describes German and Finnish treatment of Soviet prisoners of war in Norway and Finland, the death rates among Soviet prisoners of war in the two countries and why these prisoners can be described as a forgotten part of the national collective memory in Norway and Finland.

### **Soviet prisoners of war in Norway and Finland – treatment, deaths and forgotten memories**

This article gives a description on German and Finnish treatment of Soviet prisoners of war in Norway and Finland. Focus is on the Northern parts of these countries. The treatment of the prisoners of war was not according to the rules of the Geneva Convention of 1929, and the article gives an impression of which factors were decisive for the prisoners' fate. One of the main camps, Stalag 322 Elvenes/Kirkenes, nearby Kirkenes in Finnmark is described in detail to show the treatment of the prisoners and transfers of prisoners from the Murmansk front to Eastern Finnmark in Norway and Northern Finland. The article briefly discusses food rations, death rates and causes of death among Soviet prisoners of war in the two countries and why these prisoners for many years were not part of the national collective memory in Norway and Finland. Initially, the distinction between the civilian and military prisoners will be described.

During 1941-1945, nearly 100,000 Soviet prisoners of war and Soviet civilian forced workers were transported to Norway. About 90,000 were soldiers of the Red Army and nearly 9,000 were so-called 'Ostarbeiter'.<sup>1</sup> Among the Soviet civilian forced workers, there were about 1,400 women and 400 children. There were several families among the Soviet civilians, and 150 Soviet children were born in captivity in Norway. Fifty of these children were born at the forced labour camp 'Frostfilet' in Bodø during the years 1944 and 1945.<sup>2</sup> The Wehrmacht and Organisation Todt (OT) established nearly 500 prison camps with Soviet prisoners of war and Soviet civilian forced workers in Norway during 1941-1945.<sup>3</sup> Most of the camps were established in Northern Norway. The size of the camps varied from a few prisoners to several thousand.

The German Commander-in-Chief in Norway, Generaloberst Nikolaus von Falkenhorst, demanded in 1943 145,000 prisoners to implement Hitler's plan of building a railroad to Kirkenes in Finnmark in Northern Norway.<sup>4</sup> The project was far from

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<sup>1</sup> Norwegian National Archives, Sosialdepartementet, Kontoret for flyktninge- og fangespørsmål, eske 0417. Flyktninge- og fangedirektoratet: Final Report, Prisoners of War executive, Headquarters Allied Land Forces Norway. H.Q. B.L.F.N. Oslo 14 Dec 1945.

<sup>2</sup> Private archive, Knut Støre: Navnelister, Russelager Fabrik Frostfilet, barn. 1945.

<sup>3</sup> Soleim, M.N. Sovjetiske krigsfanger i Norge – Antall, organisering og repatriering. Oslo 2018: 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Ziemke, E.F. The German Northern Theatre of Operations 1940-1945. Washington 1959: 264 f.

finished before the war ended. The Wehrmacht and OT both cooperated and partly competed regarding the allocation of Soviet prisoners in Norway.

Different Stalags functioned as a main camp for a determined district. The administration of each sub-camp was the Stalags responsibility. In the Stalags the prisoners of war were first divided into companies or working-battalions and then sent out to the sub-camps that required workers. According to German sources the fourth main camp for Soviet prisoners of war, Stalag 322 Elvenes/Kirkenes, was established in June 1941.<sup>5</sup> In November the same year Wehrmacht reported that the Soviet prisoners had all the necessities regarding accommodation, food and clothes.<sup>6</sup> However, later it was clear that the living conditions were disastrous for the Soviet prisoners. Enormous overcrowding in a small area, lack of food, lack of proper medical care, and harsh treatment by the German guards led to mass famine and disease, which in turn produced a high death rate.<sup>7</sup> As in other camps in German occupied countries, prisoners were screened to remove “undesirables” as Jews and Communists, who were executed.<sup>8</sup>

It appears that prisoners captured at the Murmansk front were transferred to Stalag Titowka and Stalag Parkkina (close to Petsamo) at first. Then they were sent to Stalag 322, camp 8 in Kolosjoki (near Nikel) or to other camps. The number of prisoners varied constantly in Stalag 322. In January 1944 Wehrmacht reported that prisoners who had tuberculosis would be sent to the prisoner’s hospital in Salla in Finland. Invalids, epileptic and other incapacitated among the prisoners were also supposed to be transported to the hospital. According to the high command of Wehrmacht they were planning to transfer a group of 1,000 new prisoners under the command of AOK 20 (20<sup>th</sup> Mountain Army) in February 1944. It is not reported how many of these prisoners who should be sent to Stalag 322.<sup>9</sup>

The prisoners under the command of Stalag 322 were working with road construction, runway construction at airfields, building of fortresses along the coast and forestry. The Soviet prisoners were also working with the expansion of the road from Elvenes to Jakobsnes in the area outside Kirkenes.<sup>10</sup> A rough estimate gives a number on about 4-5,000 Soviet prisoners administrated by Stalag 322, but the number was probably higher, since the German lists on food rations from April 1942 stated that 35,000 prisoners were in the range of the 20<sup>th</sup> Mountain Army.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv (BA/MA), RH/20/20/192, AOK Befehlsstelle Finnland, O.Qu./Qu.2/Iva, Nr. 42/41 g.Kdos, Besondere Anordnungen für die Versorgung Nr.7, 19.6.41.

<sup>6</sup> BA/MA, RH/20/20/205, Generalkommando Gebirgskorps Norwegen, Qu.Nr 536/41 geheim, 15.11.1941.

<sup>7</sup> *Soleim*, Op. Cit. P. 168.

<sup>8</sup> Bundesarchiv-Aussenstelle Ludwigsburg, files 8588-8590, 'Aussonderung' von Kriegsgefangenen im Stalag 322 in Elvenes bei Kirkenes (Norwegen).

<sup>9</sup> BA/MA, RH/20/20/254, Oberkommando der 20. Gebirgs – Armee. Qu 2. Tätigkeitsbericht für die Zeit vom 1.1-31.1.1944. 26. Februar 1944.

<sup>10</sup> BA/MA, RH/20/20/216, Oberkommando der 20. Gebirgs-Armee O.Qu./Qu.1 Nr.500/42g.Kdos, Überblick über die Versorgungslage der 20. (Geb.) Armee vom 1.9.42. O.U., den 10.9.1942.

<sup>11</sup> *Sør-Varanger historielag*, Sør-Varanger under 2. verdenskrig. Arena i stormaktskonflikt. Kirkenes 1997: 179.

## **The treatment of Soviet prisoners of war**

The treatment of Soviet prisoners varied in the different prison camps. The personal qualities of the commander of the camp became an important factor for the prisoner's destiny. The prisoner of war administration was established one year after the arrival of Soviet prisoners to Norway. Because of long distance between the administration and the camps, the head of the prisoner of war administration got little influence on the camp commander's decisions regarding the Soviet prisoners.

The brutality had no limits during the War and the Wehrmacht and OT usually paid no attention to the Geneva Convention of 1929 regarding the question of treatment of Soviet prisoners of war. Factors as prisoner's ethnicity, nationality of the guards at the prison camps and the guard's attitude towards prisoners, and whether the guards belonged to the Vlasov's liberation Army or not, were important for Soviet prisoners' living conditions and the treatment they got in Norway. Especially in Northern Norway, a high number of Soviet prisoners were suffering from different diseases and malnutrition. In this area, many prisoners died because of bad treatment and a minimum of food supply. The Wehrmacht decided that the food-supplies to Soviet prisoners in Norway should be kept at a minimum of cost. The food-rations should be below what was normal for non-Soviet prisoners in Germany, but much higher than for Soviet prisoners elsewhere. But, the rations should be sufficient for maintenance of their ability to work. One day ration consisted of 750 gram of bread, 750 gram of potatoes, and in addition 100 gram of fish three or four times a week. And they should receive 20 gram fat three to four times a week.<sup>12</sup> But in reality the rations was very much lower. In Kvesmenes in Nord-Troms the one day ration was 1100 calories and only those who were able to work, got some more food. The prisoners who was registered as dead of exhaustion died in reality of hunger according to the report from allied war crimes commission.<sup>13</sup>

The withdrawal of 20th Gebirgsarmee from Finland through northern Norway and on to southern Norway in October 1944 resulted in changes of the food rations to Soviet prisoners of war. Around 8-9000 prisoners under General Jodl's responsibility were forced to march about 30 km a day. In Skibotndalen in Lyngenfjorden the prisoners were set to build fortifications, but because of inadequate food rations and consequently weakened health condition, they became increasingly less able to work. Their health got particularly bad from December 1944, reported divisional doctor (Brunner) by 6th Gebirgs Division. The reports also showed that in February 1945 was 20% of the prisoners of war too sick to work, in March it increased to 30% and by April was half of the prisoners unable to work. The reason for the prisoners' poor health status was the reduction of the food rations.<sup>14</sup>

At Engeløya in Steigen there was an especially high death rate among the Soviet prisoners of war. Many died due to poor health because of hard labour and the guards often beat those prisoners who were too weak to work or who were disabled. "Death

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<sup>12</sup> BA/MA, RH 26-214/33, AOK Norwegen, Anordnung über den Einsatz russischer Kriegsgefangener in Norwegen und Behandlung sowjetischer kriegsgefangener. 1941.

<sup>13</sup> National Archives (UK), WO 331/24, Investigation of War Crimes in area of Skibotn and Kvesmenes, Troms Fylke, juni 1945.

<sup>14</sup> National Arcives (UK), WO 331, War Crimes in Norway, War Crimes Investigation Branch, Norway 32 Eaton Square, London, S.W.1. 21<sup>st</sup> March 1946: 52.

ruled everywhere" says Viktor Petrasjevskyj. Hard labour, inadequate food rations and inhumane conditions ruined the prisoners' health. Camp discipline was very strict and the smallest misconduct would be punished with ten to twenty-five or even 50 lashes. Theft or an attempt to escape resulted in 50 lashes.<sup>15</sup>

Approximately 13,700 Soviet prisoners of war died in Norway during the War. This number includes victims after the sinking of the two ships "Palatia" and "Rigel" were 885 and 1800 Soviet prisoners of war died. The number does not include the civilian forced workers who died in Norway.<sup>16</sup> The Soviet authorities claimed that the number of missing soldiers in Norway was 16,000. According to the Norwegian German source material gives a number on about 7,000 perished Soviet prisoners in Norway.<sup>17</sup>

Both the Wehrmacht and OT considered escaped Soviet prisoners to be a threat to their prison camp system from the start of the war. According to documents from AOK 20<sup>th</sup> Gebirgs Armee in Finland Wehrmacht feared espionage, sabotage and the organisation of partisan groups. The German guards would often order Soviet prisoners to walk ahead of them, and then shoot them in the back, and later report that the prisoners had been shot while escaping. Soviet prisoners trying to escape to Sweden had little chance of success. They were usually unable to speak Norwegian and had poor clothing and shoes. They were also undernourished and had no food. Many prisoners were captured during the escape and many died from hunger and cold in the mountains nearby the border to Sweden. Some of the people who were neighbours of prison camps or construction sites would often report escaping prisoners to the police. Norwegian newspapers contained warnings of the strictest punishments for helping the Soviet prisoners to escape. The Wehrmacht paid well for information about escaped prisoners.

### **Soviet prisoners of war in Finland**

During the common war with Germany against the Soviet Union, in 1941-1944, the Finnish authorities handed over roughly 2,500 Soviet prisoners of war and 12 Jews into the hands of the German authorities.<sup>18</sup> Among them were other people, such as known Communists, whose lives were in direct danger in German hands. Elina Sana's book in 2012 made it known that Finland had handed over Soviet prisoners of war and Jews to German authorities.<sup>19</sup>

64,000 Soviet prisoners of war were registered in Finnish custody between 1941 and 1944. About 19,000 these died. Of those who perished, approximately a fifth died of malnutrition, and over two-thirds died of various diseases. The rest died of wounds after combat or they were shot by the Camp guards. 1942 was disastrous for the prisoners as during that year, 15,000 Soviet prisoners of war perished. According to a study based on card records of prisoners of war and civilian internees, most of these deaths were due to diseases. About a quarter of the total of deaths from diseases, were caused by

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<sup>15</sup> Letter from Viktor Oleksandrovytsj Petrasjevskyj to the author, 6.6.2001, translated by Viktor Igorovitsj.

<sup>16</sup> *Soleim, M.S.* Sovjetiske krigsfanger i Norge – Antall, organisering og repatriering. Oslo 2018: 34.

<sup>17</sup> Norwegian National Archives, oversikt over de russiske gravers antall og fordeling ved Eugen Syvertsen, udatert, Krigsgravtjenesten, sovjetiske krigsgraver 1946-1952, boks 26.

<sup>18</sup> *Westerlund, L.* 'The Mortality Rate of Prisoners of War in Finnish Custody between 1939 and 1944', in *Pow deaths and people handed over to Germany and The Soviet Union in 1939–55. A research report by the Finnish National Archives* Lars Westerlund (ed.). Helsinki, 2008: 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Sana, E.* Luovutetut: Suomen ihmislouvutukset Gestapolle. Helsinki 2012.

intestinal infections, about a tenth by respiratory infection, and about a fifth due to other infections and diseases. The guards and the command personnel in the camps shot dead 1,019 Soviet prisoners of war, i.e. 5.3 per cent of all the prisoners of war who perished during 1941-1944.<sup>20</sup> About 29 500 Soviet prisoners of war were in German custody in Finland during 1941-1944. Data on the death rates among the prisoners in German custody in the Province of Lapland, Salla, Suomussalmi-Kuusamo-Kiestinki, Petsamo, and Pori indicate that there were at least 4,700 deaths and probably more. The information in this region is scattered both by area and time. Available data indicate that the mortality rate varied between 11% and 45% depending on the area.<sup>21</sup>

A very negative attitude towards the Soviet prisoners of war prevailed among the leading officers in the Finnish General Headquarters for all of 1941 and still in the beginning of 1942.<sup>22</sup> This attitude caused a harsh treatment of the prisoners of war. In the early years of the Continuation War, and particularly in the winter of 1941/1942, Finland did not fulfill the requirements of the Geneva Convention of 1929. The consequence was the mass mortality among the Soviet prisoners of war in Finnish custody 1941-1944. The prisoner of war policy pursued by the Finnish General Headquarters did not intend to starve the prisoners of war to death. However, the Finnish General Headquarters reviewed its prisoner of war policy by the spring of 1942. This partially happened because of the reports and suggestions from the commanders of the prisoner of war camps, the inspectors of the prisoners of war, and the staff of the Finnish home army.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the high number of deaths among the Soviet prisoners of war in Finnish custody there are not many memorials or monuments regarding these victims in the country. One of the few examples is the memorial in Nastola. A total of 1,055 prisoners were buried in Nastola in Finland between 1941 and 1944. A memorial statue was unveiled in 1987. The statue representing Mother Earth by the Russian sculptor Vladimir Feodorov is on Kausantie road near the centre of Nastola.<sup>24</sup> There were also cemeteries for Soviet victims established during the war. One example is the cemetery for Soviet prisoners of war in Naarajärvi. The wooden crosses at the cemetery in Naarajärvi were removed shortly after the war. A total of 2,813 prisoners were buried here during the war. A memorial statue was unveiled after the war.<sup>25</sup> War heritage is not protected by law in Finland, and remains related to the Second World War in particular have been considered as war junk in Finnish Lapland. They have been regarded as obstacles that destroy the natural beauty of Lapland's wilderness.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Westerlund, L. 'German POW Policy in Finland and Norway in WWII'. Paper, Narvik, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Westerlund, L. 'The Mortality Rate of Prisoners of War in Finnish Custody between 1939 and 1944', in *Pow deaths and people handed over to Germany and The Soviet Union in 1939-55. A research report by the Finnish National Archives* Lars Westerlund (ed.). Helsinki, 2008: 122.

<sup>22</sup> Westerlund, Op. Cit. P. 63.

<sup>23</sup> Westerlund, Op. Cit. P. 77.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.nastola.fi/matkailu/nahtavyidet.htm>.

<sup>25</sup> Westerlund, L. (ed.) *Prisoners of war and internees: a book of articles by the National Archives*, Helsinki : Kansallisarkisto, 2008: 568.

<sup>26</sup> Seitsonen, Oula and Herva, Vesa-Pekka. 'Forgotten in the Wilderness: WWII German PoW Camps in Finnish Lapland', in *Archaeology of Internment*, ed. A. Myers and G. Moshenska. 171-190. New York, 2011: 178.

There was little punishment for war criminals in Finland. After the war the Finns were forced to put eight senior politicians on trial, but this was a random exercise. For instance, the Russians insisted on the Social Democrat, former foreign minister Väino Tanner being brought to trial and he was given a prison sentence. Many others, including the pro-Nazi Toivo Horelli, who was minister of the Interior during the beginning of the war, were not accused. This was despite the fact that he was the person who decided to hand over the Jewish refugees to German authorities.<sup>27</sup> The project 'Finland, prisoners of war and extraditions 1939-1955' by the National Archives of Finland has made a valuable contribution to the research on the destiny of Soviet prisoners of war on Finnish soil. However, the Soviet prisoners of war do not seem to be a part of the national remembrance of the Second World War in Finland.

### **Forgotten memories**

The history of Soviet prisoners of war serves as a good example on how dramatic war experiences from the Eastern front were transferred to Norway, and both the individual and collective memory connected to these prisoners shows the will to remember other nationalities in a national context.

In the collective memory of the war other nationalities and their suffering on Norwegian soil are mainly a part of a local narrative. On the one hand, the subject Soviet prisoners of war is something strange and forgotten in the Norwegian history of occupation, but on the other hand this is something familiar through all the local historical knowledge both oral and written. However, this knowledge is not used in a broader perspective and the result is a limited memory. There has not been space for a living memory about the Soviet prisoners of war on a national level in the Norwegian community.<sup>28</sup> One reason for this absence is the prisoners' destiny after their repatriation to their homeland in 1945. About 84,000 Soviet citizens were repatriated from Norway<sup>29</sup>, and until the beginning of the 1990s, there was almost no contact between Norwegians and former Soviet prisoners.<sup>30</sup> After the repatriation a lot of western researchers asked questions about Stalin and his treatment of the returned former prisoners. Eyewitnesses could tell about shooting and the ill treatment of the repatriated. Because of this, a myth was established about their destiny and many researchers claimed that all prisoners were forced into work camps in northern Russia or killed.<sup>31</sup> Russian researchers have presented a more nuanced picture. They claim that 58 % of the former prisoners of war were sent home, 19 % sent to military duty, 14 % to working battalions, 6,5 % to the NKVD system and 2 % were still in transfer camps abroad.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Holmila, Antero and Tilli, Jouni Aleks.* 'From Silence to Historical Consciousness: The Holocaust and WWII in Finnish History Politics', in *Scandinavian - Canadian Studies*, 2016: 127.

<sup>28</sup> *Soleim, MS.* (ed.). Introduction, in *Prisoners of war and forced labour – histories of war and occupation*, Cambridge, 2010: 11.

<sup>29</sup> Norwegian National Archives, Kontoret for flyktninge- og fangespørsmål, eske 0417. Flyktninge- og fangedirektoratet: Final Report of Prisoner of war Executive, Headquarters allied land forces Norway, Oslo 14. Dec 1945.

<sup>30</sup> *Soleim*, Op. cit. P. 11.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, *Bethell, Nicholas.* *The Last Secret*, xiii; *Tolstoy, Nikolai* *Victims of Yalta*, 409.

<sup>32</sup> *Zemskov, V.N.* 'K voprosu o repatriacii sovetskich graždan 1941-1955', in *Istoriya SSSR*, no.4 (1990): 26-41.

The same numbers are also used by Pavel Polian on the repatriation of Soviet prisoners of war published in 2001.<sup>33</sup>

The Second World War has left its mark on the Finnish landscape. Remains of the battlefields and war monuments and cemeteries are an integral part of local and national memory and heritage. The memory and commemoration of the Second World War is a vital part of Finnish national identity. The national will and need to commemorate these difficult times has not come to an end but rather developed and taken new forms. The new heritage museums and copies of battlefield landscapes of the Second World War history have become visible tourist attractions during the last decade. However, this national memory and war commemoration has not included those groups who were defined outside the national identity. Such groups are the Jews and the Soviet prisoners of war.

In Finland and Norway the memory of Soviet prisoners of war have been more included in the nations collective memory and memory culture in the last decade. In Finland has the questions of the country's behaviour regarding the atrocities committed both by the Nazis and the Finnish military authorities attracted a lot of interest. Investigations on the atrocities towards Soviet prisoners of war in Finland and deportation of Jews from Finland to Germany represents a change in how Finns have coped with wartime experiences. In the last decades, the personal dimension has slowly overtaken the issues of wartime political and military topics. Soviet cemeteries in Norway have received more focus from both Norwegian and Russian authorities and the public is taking part in the ritual commemorations that very often contains stories of personal suffering and contact between local people and prisoners of war.

In both Norway and Finland, a lot of research has been done on the history of Soviet prisoners of war in the last years and the identification of the Soviet victims during the war. The National Archives of Finland published in 2008 a database containing information on deaths for both Finnish prisoners of war camps and camps for civilian internees in Eastern Karelia. Also included in the database is a list of deaths among prisoners of war in Finland during the Winter War. The database has been compiled in a research project by the National Archives of Finland "Finland, prisoners of war and extraditions 1939-1955".<sup>34</sup>

A lot of source material regarding the killing of Soviet prisoners of war in Norway was destroyed when the German occupation regime capitulated in Norway. Our research project "War graves seek names" has identified nearly 4000 new names on perished Soviet prisoners in Norway. In this work we use the Russian database OBD Memorial<sup>35</sup> with digitalized prison cards to identify more Soviet victims on Norwegian soil. A searchable database was established in 2011 with all the identified victims among Soviet prisoners of war in Norway ([www.krigsgraver.no](http://www.krigsgraver.no)).<sup>36</sup>

With the use of databases, searching for information has been made easier for the relatives of the victims. With both research and the databases, there is a possibility to change the huge memorial sites and graveyards in these countries from places with

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<sup>33</sup> Polian, P. *Deportiert nach Hause. Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene im "Dritten Reich" und ihre Repatriierung.* München/Wien 2001.

<sup>34</sup> <http://kronos.narc.fi/>

<sup>35</sup> <https://obd-memorial.ru/html/>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.krigsgraver.no/nb>

victims in unknown mass graves to include the new identifications. In this way, it will be possible to include a personal memory to the memory of the prisoners. The Soviet memorials connected to the military losses of the Red Army are often memorial sites, which do not include personal memories, and most of the victims are unnamed. By research, maintenance of war graves, memorial sites and museums it is possible to broaden the perspective of the collective war memory in the different countries mentioned here. It is also a good opportunity to pay more attention to the fallen of foreign nationalities in Norway and Finland.