

Marianne N. Soleim

Soviet Prisoners of War in Norway 1941–45 — Destiny, Treatment and Forgotten Memories

During 1941-1945 nearly 100,000 Soviet prisoners were transported to Norway. About 90,000 of these prisoners were soldiers of the Red Army and nearly 9,000 were so-called "Ostarbeiter". The people in these two categories were Soviet citizens who were driven into forced labour for the Germans in Norway. Among the Soviet civilians there were about 1400 women and 400 children. There were several families among the Soviet civilians and 150 Soviet children were born in captivity in Norway. There were also about 4200 prisoners of war from Yugoslavia and 1600 prisoners from Poland who were sent to Norway, but my main focus will be on Soviet prisoners. Most of the Soviet soldiers were first sent to Stettin in Germany after they were taken prisoner and then packed together on cargo boats and sent to Norway. The German mistreatment of Soviet prisoners in Norway had basis in Nazi racial theory.

The Campaigns on Balkan and Soviet Union from 1941 gave the Germans a lot of new workers to Wehrmacht's extensive building plans in Norway. Soviet prisoners of war were mainly used in building of railroads, the main road 50, runways and fortresses along the coastline. The majority of the prisoners were stationed in the northern part of the country, many within the Arctic Circle. The projects on which they were employed meant that great numbers of them had to work in the most exposed places both on the coast and in the mountains. Commander-in-chief in Norway, Falkenhorst, demanded 145 000 Prisoners to carry through Hitler's plan of a railroad all the way to Kirkenes in Finnmark (Northern Norway). The building of the railroad was not finished before the war ended. Wehrmacht and Organisation Todt, a half military organization that

Марианне Н. Солейм,
*Ph.D., директор
Баренц института
Университета Тромсё
(Норвегия)*

carried out different building projects for warfare in Wehrmacht's duty, both cooperated and partly struggled about the allocation of the Soviet prisoners of war in Norway.

Most of the captured Soviet soldiers were first sent to Stettin in Germany after they had been taken prisoner and then packed together on cargo boats and sent to Norway. Several of Soviet civilian prisoners (forced labourers) were taken as prisoners from villages and cities in Soviet Union and sent to Germany and then to Norway. The German mistreatment of Soviet prisoners of war in Norway had basis in Nazi racial theory.

Prison camps

The Germans established nearly 500 prison camps with Soviet prisoners of war in Norway during 1941-1945. Most of the camps were established in Northern Norway. Size of the camps varied from a few prisoners to several thousand in the same camp. Condition and treatment of prisoners varied in the different prison camps. Personal qualities with the commander of the camp became an important factor for the prisoner's destiny. The POW administration was first 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 POW administration got little influence on the camp commander's decisions regarding Soviet prisoners.

After Soviet Prisoners had arrived to Norway they were sent to one of four main camps — Stalag — or a sub-camp to one of the Stalags. Each Stalag had a number that corresponded to their location. The four Stalags in Norway were: Stalag 303 at Lillehammer (South Norway), Stalag 380 at Oppdal/Drevja (in the middle of Norway), Stalag 322 at Kirkenes (Northern Norway) and Stalag 330 situated in Alta (Northern Norway) at first and moved in 1944 to Narvik. Befehlstelle Finland was responsible for the Stalag in Kirkenes. At the time of liberation of Norway the number of sub-camps attached to the different Stalags was as follows: Stalag 303 with 87 sub-camps in the south of Norway, Stalag 380 with 76 sub-camps in the middle of Norway and Stalag 330 with 121 sub-camps in the north of Norway. Prisoners in Stalag 322 at Kirkenes were probably sent to Stalag 330 in Narvik after the withdrawal of the German Army from Northern Norway in autumn 1944.

The different Stalags functioned therefore as a main camp for a determined district. The administration of each sub-camp was the Stalags responsibility. In the Stalags prisoners were first divided into companies or working battalions and then sent out to the sub-camps that required workers. The transport lists of the Wehrmachtbefehlshaber Norwegen shows that a large number of Soviet prisoners already were divided into work battalions before they arrived to Norway. These battalions were usually sent directly to the sub-camps. In the source material there is a distinction between a Stalag and a work battalion. Most likely were Soviet prisoners in the Stalag at Wehrmachts disposal and the prisoners in the work battalions at the Organisation Todts disposal. The Organisation Todt was a semi-military organization and became one

of Germany's most valuable instruments in the War¹. The Organisation Todt had the character of an enormous building firm that carried out Hitler's plans. They were responsible for projects as the building of railway and main road in Norway. In these projects a huge number of Soviet, Polish and Yugoslavian prisoners were at their disposal. Organisation Todt's work and administration in Norway was very complex and extensive.

Treatment of Soviet Prisoners

As Soviet prisoners fell into German hands in extraordinary numbers, they were treated quite differently to their counterparts the previous year. They were starved to death or marched into the ground till they looked "more like skeletons of animals than humans"². Within six months, over two million Soviet prisoners had starved to death in German captivity³. To understand why precisely Soviet prisoners of war and their destiny at the beginning of the war were more attached to the ideology of the Nazis is Hitler's *Weltanschauung* decisive. With the German invasion of Soviet Union the war changed; it became a *Vernichtungskrieg* — a war of annihilation⁴. The ideological war against the Soviet Union was connected to the political long-term aim of the Nazis and Wehrmacht became an active participant in fulfilling these. The German ideological representations of Soviet soldiers and prisoners were characterized by the racial term *Untermensch*⁵. Nazi racial theory, the ideological basis for the criminal mistreatment of the Eastern European peoples, was openly expressed in such publications as the SS pamphlet "Der Untermensch" (1942).

The surrender of huge numbers of Soviet troops — 3,350,000 prisoners were taken in six months of 1941⁶ — points to widespread defeatism and disaffection in Soviet forces, even if the Germans were impressed by the stubbornness with which other units resisted. The NKVD was instructed to imprison or even to shoot as deserters any Soviet soldiers who escaped and fell into their hands. But those who remained in German hands were no better treated. The German armed forces alone are said to have executed an estimated 600,000 Soviet prisoners during the war. Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, issued guidelines for the troops to be "ruthless and energetic" in their attacks on Bolsheviks and Jews⁷. The German army, expecting a short war, had made no proper preparations for such overwhelming numbers of prisoners. If the organization was inadequate, the German attitude was also shaped by the Nazis' *Untermensch* propaganda: they were dealing not with human beings like themselves but with a subhuman race. An OKW directive of 8 September 1941 on the treatment of prisoners of war declared that they had forfeited every claim to be treated as an honourable enemy, and that the most ruthless measures were justified in dealing with them⁸. Large numbers were shot out of hand, without any pretext, in order to relieve the army of the burden they represented. Hundreds of thousands were forced to march until they dropped and died from exhaustion or were herded into huge improvised camps and left without food, medical aid for the wounded, shelter or sanitation. According to a German

report of 19 February 1942, almost three million out of the four million prisoners taken by that date had perished⁹.

The Geneva Convention was no help to Soviet prisoners, since Soviet Union had never ratified it, and this left the Germans free to ignore its provisions¹⁰. Stalin was no help either, taking the view that any soldier, who fell into German hands, was ipso facto a traitor and not entitled to protection from his government. The brutality with which the Germans treated both prisoners and the civilian population in the east drove many to take to the forests and join the partisans. The living conditions of Soviet prisoners differed from camp to camp in Norway, but in general they had far too little to eat. There are a lot of stories about Soviet prisoners and their desperate attempts to get some food — either by mutual exchanges, utilizing everything that was eatable or engaging in illegal exchange with the local population. It was mainly in such situations that the Norwegians became acquainted with Soviet prisoners. The former Soviet prisoner in Norway Ivan Pashkurov wrote in his book “Lost years”¹¹, about the packets they found containing bread, potatoes and fish in the most peculiar places. He writes that these packets meant more than just food. They gave strength, courage, hope and inspiration.

The fact that Soviet Union did not approve the Geneva Convention of 1929 caused a lot of suffering for Soviet prisoners during the Second World War. According to this the Germans asserted that they were not bound by the regulations of this Convention. In the second article is the treatment of prisoners appointed as follows: “They shall at any time be treated with humanity and be protected against violence, insult and public curiosity. Reprisals against prisoners are forbidden”¹². According to a view of human rights the Germans were bound to follow the Convention since they had approved the Convention. In article number 25 the regulation states that the countries are bound to this Convention despite that some countries in war have not approved of the Convention¹³.

The brutality had no limits during the War and therefore the Germans usually paid no attention to the Convention in the question of the treatment of Soviet prisoners. Such factors as prisoner’s ethnicity, nationality of the guards at the prison camps and the guard’s attitude towards prisoners, and whether they belonged to the Vlasov’s liberation Army or not, became very important factors for Soviet prisoners’ living conditions in the camps and the treatment they got in Norway. Especially in Northern Norway a high number of Soviet prisoners were suffering because of different diseases and malnutrition. In this area there were a lot of prisoners who died as a result of bad treatment and a minimum of food-supply. The Germans 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, the rations should be sufficient for maintenance of their ability to work. One day ration consisted of 750 grams of bread, 750 grams of potatoes, and in addition 100 grams of fish three or four times a week. And they should receive 20 grams fat three to four times a week¹⁴.

Prisoners in the camps were subjected to appalling conditions. Perhaps the greatest threat to the prisoners was sickness. Diseases such as diphtheria, tuberculosis, dropsy and pneumonia spread rapidly. Many also died from abuse and starvation. Many of the camps in northern Norway were virtual death camps due to the lack of food. In July 1945, a burial site was found at Trondenes in Harstad with 1800 bodies. Many of the victims were shot or they had starved to death. The pitiful food rations were not the only hardship the prisoners had to contend with, as the Germans were not too interested in furnishing their prisoners with adequate clothing. The miserable conditions were like extra punishment in addition to their imprisonment. Sufficient clothing meant the difference between life and death for the Soviet prisoners of war.

Many died in the quarry at Engeløya in Steigen, and the Germans often beat those prisoners who were too weak to work or disabled. «Death ruled everywhere,» says Viktor Petrashevskiy. Hard labour, poor food 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 fifty lashes of the whip. Theft or an attempt to escape earned 50 lashes.

The German occupation forces considered escaped Soviet prisoners to be a threat from the start of the war. They feared espionage, sabotage and organisation of partisan groups. The German guards would often order Soviet prisoners to walk ahead of them, and then shoot them in the back, later to report that the prisoners had been shot while fleeing. Soviet prisoners who were 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 were caught while on the run, and many died from hunger and cold. Some of the people who were neighbours of prison camps or construction sites would often report escaping prisoners to the police. Norwegian newspapers would carry warnings of the strictest punishments for helping Soviet prisoners escape. The Germans paid well for information about escaped prisoners.

Norwegian people displayed sympathy and care for the abused prisoners. Many gave them food and clothing, encouraged them with smiles and showed that they were friendly. Many also helped the prisoners, at great risk to their own lives.

Major Leiv Kreyberg was one of the first in Norway who in 1945 came to see the conditions the prisoners had suffered under in Nordland county: *"During the entire war the people in the local districts had seen prisoner transports coming and going, they had seen the ragged, hungry and miserable prisoners of war and seen the mass deaths, some from hunger, some murdered."*

Eli Holtsmark was a pre-teen during the war. The sight of prisoners close to the hospital in Bergen made a strong impression on her: *"We crept up to the fence. There were prisoners there, grey uniforms, thin and shabby, but surprisingly smiling. Food was slipped under the thick prison wire. The German guards noticed but turned a blind eye. We saw the prisoners eating the lunches we brought them with obvious relish. They looked old, with grimy grey and wrinkled skin. Strong*

worn hands. But their eyes looked young, looking at us with friendliness and thankfulness. Once when I passed food under the fence a large hand appeared and gave me a handshake. The German guards let it go without intervention. They turned half away with a friendly body language. We developed a habit of bringing food."

In the town of Ålesund, Johan Hjelmeland, a housepainter, was a good helper for the Soviet POWs. He tells about the sight of the first group of 200 Soviet prisoners of war who came to the town at Christmas in 1942: "It was biting cold, and the prisoners were only dressed in rags. Their feet were wrapped in sacking. Some were sick, some were slung ashore like pieces of wood. When they were to stand to attention, many were so exhausted that they simply fell. Those who were unable to get up again were tossed into the back of a truck and taken away. It was so disgusting and gruesome, and I promised myself that I must help even if I would have to beg for the rest of my life."

When liberation came in 1945, there were around 84,000 Soviet prisoners on Norwegian soil, many of them in need of medical treatment. In June 1945, the Swedish Red Cross took over the German "Ortsslasarett" (local field hospital) at Klungset close to Fauske. Within a short period of time 400 Soviet patients were treated by Swedish and Norwegian doctors and nurses. There were many cases of severe tuberculosis and hunger oedema. The Swedish Red Cross supplied as much food as possible to all the camps in Nordland county.

Irina Skretting was an interpreter when the Norwegians took over the camp at Jørstadmoen: "I never saw worse conditions than at Jørstadmoen. What we found in this camp was indescribable. Particularly the barracks with POWs with tuberculosis. They were basically isolated from the others. The Germans were also afraid of becoming infected. The prisoners were lying in bunks along the walls. The lack of space almost prevented people from getting in and out of their bunks. Nor is it possible to describe the sanitary conditions. It is appalling to think that these barracks have been used as a place for people to live in."

Approximately 13,000 of 100,000 Soviet prisoners died in Norway during the war. The Soviet authorities claimed that the number of missing soldiers in Norway was 16,000. German source material gives a number on about 7000 perished Soviet prisoners in Norway¹⁵. The death rate among Soviet prisoners in Norway, 13%, is a comparatively low number since the death rate for this group in all the German POW camps in Europe was nearly 60 % (57.8 %)¹⁶. The Yugoslavian prisoners of war death rate in Norway was as high as 70 %, and among the Polish prisoners about 10 % died.

Forgotten memories

In spite of the fact that Soviet prisoners of war represented the nationality with the largest casualties on Norwegian soil during the war, they have not been included in the national context of Norwegian history of occupation.

One reason for this absence is the prisoner's destiny after the repatriation to their homeland in 1945. A total number of 87,000 Soviet citizens were repatriated from Norway, and until the beginning of the 1990s there was almost no contact between Norwegians and former Soviet prisoners. 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 bad treatment of the repatriated. Because of this there was established a myth about their destiny and a lot of researchers claimed that all prisoners were forced into working camps in northern Russia or killed. Russian researchers have recently presented a different picture. They claim that 58 % of the former prisoners of war were sent home and only 14 % to working battalions¹⁷. This material is based on primary sources in Russian archives, but still there is a lot of discussion about these numbers in Russia today.

The politics of memory is activities with the aim of a certain collective memory, and the motivations for this activity are often controlled by interests of different parts. The authorities are the main part of this politic and there are several fields of expression. Such fields are school, research and cultural celebrations. Soviet prisoners of war have hardly been included in this activity. Several Norwegian schoolbooks do not mention Soviet prisoners and by cultural celebrations until the 1990s there were mainly the Norwegian victims of the war that were remembered.

On one hand the subject 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 orally and written. But this knowledge is not used in a broader perspective and the result is a limited memory. There is no space for a living memory about Soviet prisoners of war on a national level in the Norwegian community. Graveyards of the war are places with a certain value of symbolic. The anonymity at military graveyards does not only remind us of the one soldier that died, but about the bloodbath from the war¹⁸. Establishment and maintenance of war monuments and memorials dedicated to Soviet prisoners of war that died on Norwegian soil are dependent on local initiative. Absence of memorials or no interest in such gives us an evident signal on the communities will to remember the destiny of other nationalities in Norway during the Second World War.

After 1947, as a result of the Norwegian-Russian committee work in Norway on the Soviet victims, the politics of the Cold war affected the collective memory of Soviet prisoners in Norway. The main graveyard with nearly 8,000 Soviet victims at Tjøtta International graveyard in Norway represents a conflict of memory which started with the Cold War.

A dramatic incident connected to the memory of the prisoners, is the so-called "Operation Asfalt" in 1951. The Norwegian authorities decided this year that all Soviet war graves should be moved to one graveyard at Tjøtta in northern Norway. A lot of monuments were destroyed to give place for the operation. Norwegian authorities presented several arguments for their decision to destroy the monuments. They claimed that they prevented moving of the corpses, they

prevented the local farmers in cultivating the land and finally that the monuments were destroying the view for the tourists along the main road. All these arguments were without any connection with the reality. The monuments were not placed above the graves, there were no farmers who needed to remove any monuments in order to get access to their fields and most of the monuments were not placed in central areas along the main road. A lot of them were placed in the forest or at much hidden places. The unofficial reason for destroying the monuments was Norwegian authority's fear of Soviet espionage. They did not want to give Soviet authorities any opportunity to honour the memory of dead Soviet Prisoners, when they in reality wanted to visit sensitive military areas was the main argument. Being at the beginning of Cold War, this was a convincing argument to start "Operation Asphalt".

The local community in several towns in northern Norway tried to stop the operation, but they only succeeded in one town. Protest and demonstrations in these towns represent the strong individual sympathy among Norwegians towards the memory of the Soviet prisoners that died in Norway, but the operation led to a weakening of Norwegian collective memory of the prisoners. In the last 10-15 years there has been a growing interest around the history of Soviet prisoners in Norway. Academic research, local celebrations and Soviet veterans visiting Norway have given an opportunity to include the former prisoners in Norwegian collective memory. Memorial sites and monuments are important in the process of this remembrance both present and in the future.

In 2002 all name plates of the 826 identified Soviet victims were removed from the war graves at Tjøtta and Soviet prisoners were reduced to anonymous victims. On the 7 metres high monolith at Tjøtta unveiled in 1953 it is written: "In grateful memory on Soviet Russian soldiers that lost their lives in Northern Norway during the war 1941-1945 and who are buried here". The monolith became a symbol on the grave on the unknown soldiers. The local people and local authorities protested highly after the removal of the identified victims. Mostly of this local engagement have background from the catastrophe of the Ship "Rigel" in autumn 1944 nearby the graveyard. Over 2000 Soviet prisoners of war lost their lives in the catastrophe. By the attack of the ship a lot of prisoners were killed by the bombs of British airplanes or they died in the fire at the ship. Only the strongest and those who could swim saved their lives. The history of "Rigel" is one of many examples on how the victims of war very often were totally innocent people who by accident happened to be there when the bomb fell. This catastrophe is a history of ignorance, meaningless suffering and cruelty towards prisoners of war. Yet, at the same time it is a history of heroism, readiness to help and sympathy across of German, Soviet or Norwegian background. Apart from some iron scrap by the sea it is no visible traces today after this catastrophe. The victims are buried at Tjøtta international war graveyard.

First at the end of the year 2008 the name plates were put in place again on the graveyard, but this is not a permanent solution. The Norwegian authorities and the Falstad Centre

have established a database with information about Soviet war graves in Norway. Exact mortality figures are still uncertain as the source material was destroyed when the Germans capitulated. Until the year 2009 only 2,700 of the Soviet victims in Norway have been identified by name according to the register of the Norwegian war grave service. With the help of the identification project we have now identified over 4,000 new names of the Soviet victims. In this work we use the Russian database OBD Memorial with digitalized prison cards from Russian and German archives to identify more Soviet victims on Norwegian soil. The database www.krigsgraver.no with identified victims on Norwegian soil was opened at 23th March 2011. According to the plan of the war grave service will all the new identified names of the victims who died in Northern Norway during the war will be set up at Tjøtta war graveyard when the project is finished¹⁹.

In several local communities in Norway the culture of remembrance of Soviet prisoners is strong. On 1st or 8th of May there are often speeches or special arrangement on Soviet war graves in Norway. Several museums and local people are also working with the preservation of memory and history of Soviet prisoners of war, and in some places the monuments have been restored and they are an important part of the local remembrance of Soviet prisoners of war. The memory of Soviet prisoners in the area of Mo i Rana have been kept very strong for decades and the local history association and the local people restored and unveiled in the year 2004 a destroyed monument over Soviet war victims at Hjartåsen in Rana²⁰. This type of commitment to the local history including victims of a foreign country gives the collective memory a broader perspective. By the remembrance of Soviet victims in a local community in Northern Norway it is possible to include remembrance of other prisoner's destiny on Norwegian soil. Such local remembrance gives us a good opportunity to examine how small communities is a part of the Norwegian collective memory of the war and whether they are a part of a national remembrance or not. The work of local communities and museums to maintain the memory of Soviet victims is also important for the education of younger generations.

In former Soviet Union, Norway and Finland there has been done a lot of research connected to identification of the Soviet victims during the war. With the use of Internet the search for information has been made easier for the relatives of the victims. With this research there is a possibility to change these huge memorial sites and graveyards from places with 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 and cemetery in Berlin are connected to the military losses of the Red Army in the city in 1945. These places 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. It gives also a good opportunity to give more attention to the fallen of a foreign nationality in these countries.

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Soleim M. N. Soviet prisoners of war in Norway 1941–45 – destiny, treatment and forgotten memories

ABSTRACT: The article examines the history of the Soviet POWs, who were transported to the German concentration camps in Norway in 1941–1945. The author points to about 100 000 people, sent by the German authorities in the Norwegian camps, of which about 90 000 were prisoners of war, and the rest - the civilian population, which had been taken out by the Nazis from occupied Soviet territories. Soviet prisoners of war were forced to work in the construction of various facilities, including the railway in northern Norway and highway infrastructure. There were four main camps (Stalags), each of them provided labor force to the building projects in various regions. All works were supervised by German military construction organization Todt. The author emphasizes that Soviet prisoners of war were kept in appalling conditions: they suffered from cold in the harsh climate of Norway, from hunger, poor sanitation, medical care's lack. It was impossible to fix POWs up after hard work because of short commons. What is more, specific ill-treatment of Soviet prisoners of war was justified by the racist ideology of German Nazism. Soviet POWs were punished ruthlessly for attempts to escape as well for the slightest resistance and disobedience. The Geneva Convention of 1929 was no help to Soviet POWs, since Soviet

Union had never ratified it. Such factors as prisoner's ethnicity, nationality of the guards at the prison camps and the guard's attitude towards prisoners, and whether they belonged to the Vlasov's liberation Army or not, became very important for Soviet prisoners' living conditions in the camps and the treatment. Norwegian people displayed sympathy and care for the abused prisoners. Many people gave them food and clothing, encouraged them with smiles and showed that they were friendly. Locals also assisted prisoners during their escape, at great risk to their own lives. Author focused on the problem of preservation of historical memory and described the place which memory about Soviet POWs taken in the social memory of the Norwegian people, how the attitude of society and the state to these pages of the mutual history changed. Government policy is often determined by foreign factors, especially in the era of the Cold War, while the citizens, especially in the northern provinces, have kept the memory of Soviet prisoners of war. The situation changed in the 1990s. The increased interest in the topic of scholars and public has given rise to projects for the creation of a unified database of Soviet prisoners of war in Norway and international cooperation in this field.

KEYWORDS: Soviet POW, Norway, 1941–1945, memorials, Soviet soldiers, Soviet-Norwegian relations.

AUTHOR: Ph.D., Head of the Barents Institute, University of Tromsø (Norway); marianne.n.soleim@uit.no

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