

**TERRITORIAL STRUGGLE IN EUROPE:**  
Polish and Soviet Civilians, and Soviet Prisoners of War



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**W**HEN HITLER LOOKED EASTWARD FROM GERMANY, HE SAW VAST TERRITORY and a wealth of resources vital to the survival of the “Aryan” German race. That land was populated mainly by Slavs (defined as Poles, Russians, Belorussians, Ukrainians), so-called Asiatics (people of Turkic, Tartar, and other Central Asian ethnic groups), and Jews—all of whom Hitler regarded as innately inferior to Germans. In his mind, it was in keeping with the natural course of history for the biologically superior “Aryan” German race to seize that land and to exploit its resources and manpower to build the German Empire.

Hitler viewed Slavs as a barbaric, uncivilized horde on the verge of winning the perennial struggle for living space in Europe. He regarded the Soviet Union as a particular threat, because he viewed it as a state run by Jews who planned to take over Europe by means of a Communist revolution. For Hitler and those who shared his obsession with racial struggle, Germany had no choice but to prepare for an aggressive war to seize the territory in the east.

From a strategic standpoint, it made sense to rebuild the nation’s strength, first taking over areas that were heavily populated by so-called ethnic Germans, meaning people who were culturally German but who lived outside the territorial boundaries of the Reich. Hitler began with two areas bordering on France: first occupying the Saarland, in 1935, after an election in accordance with the Versailles Treaty, and then occupying the Rhineland, in 1936, in violation of the treaty. Germany incorporated Austria in March 1938 and occupied the Sudetenland (part of Czechoslovakia) in October of the same year.

Throughout the 1930s, the major European powers appeased Hitler, in large part because they were not prepared for another world war. Publicly, they justified their actions by arguing that Nazi demands—though increasingly threatening—were aimed at regaining areas to which Germany had at least a demographic claim. The Munich Agreement of September 29, 1938, by which Italy, France, and Britain awarded to Nazi Germany the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia, was the epitome of this appeasement policy.

In March 1939, the Germans invaded and partitioned the rest of Czechoslovakia: they established a protectorate over the provinces of Bohemia and Moravia, set up Slovakia as a dependent state, and permitted Hungary to annex territory in the south and east of the country. Bohemia-Moravia had not been a historical part of Germany nor was it home to large numbers of ethnic Germans. Because the invasion was a direct violation of the Munich Agreement, Britain and France realized that Hitler’s plans were far more sinister than they had at first appeared. Those countries resolved to go to war if Nazi Germany attacked another eastern European nation. Correctly predicting the identity of Hitler’s next target, the Western powers offered a territorial guarantee to Poland within weeks of the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia.

In August 1939, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union stunned the world by signing a nonaggression agreement (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) which, in a secret addendum, called for the partition of Poland and the division of the Baltic region (including Estonia, Finland, Latvia, and Lithuania) and the eastern Balkans (Romania and Bulgaria) into respective spheres of influence. The agreement, surprising in view of Hitler's loathing for Soviet Russia, was a tactical maneuver that gave Germany the opportunity to attack and occupy much of Poland without fearing a two-front war. Furthermore, the pact called for the repatriation and settling of ethnic Germans in the new areas of the Reich, while at the same time expelling Poles from those same territories. This strategy was part and parcel of Nazi efforts to create German settlements throughout the occupied eastern territories.

#### THE GERMAN INVASION OF POLAND

Assured of Soviet neutrality, Hitler ordered the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, catapulting Europe into war. Although Polish troops fought hard against vastly better equipped German forces, the contest was not equal. After defending Warsaw fiercely and running out of food, water, and space into which to retreat, the surviving Polish units surrendered on September 27. Fighting ended in early October.

Germany directly annexed most of western Poland, where large numbers of ethnic Germans lived. The Germans formed the central and southern regions of the dismembered Polish state into a political entity called the General Government with Nazi party veteran and administrator Hans Frank as the top civilian authority.

The Soviet Union annexed the eastern provinces of Poland and, in 1940, drawing on further agreement with the Germans, incorporated all three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and the two eastern provinces of Romania: Bukovina and Bessarabia.

German forces hold Polish civilians (right) at gunpoint during the invasion of Poland, September 1939.

POLAND, SEPTEMBER 1939. USHMM, COURTESY OF DOKUMENTATIONSARCHIV DES ÖSTERREICHISCHEN WIDERSTANDES

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This partition of Poland was a prelude to a massive reengineering of the population in the areas that the Germans controlled. Like Austria, the Sudetenland, and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, the Nazis regarded most of western Poland as an extension of Germany itself. Thus, their goal for this area was complete “Germanization,” thereby assimilating the new provinces politically, culturally, socially, and economically into the Reich. Above all, they envisioned a strictly German population. SS leader Heinrich Himler described the aim explicitly in the foreword to the June/July 1942 issues of the magazine *Deutsche Arbeit*, “It is not our task to Germanize in the old sense, that is, to teach the people there the German language and German law, but to see to it that only people of purely German, Germanic blood live in the East.”

In contrast, the Nazis conceived of the General Government as a giant reservation for the Polish civilian population, who were to be suppressed, enslaved, and exploited for the benefit of the Germans. Kraków became the capital city because the Germans planned to turn Warsaw into a backwater town. In a top secret memorandum of May 1940 titled The “Treatment of Racial Aliens in the East,” Himmler outlined the sinister plans for this part of Poland:

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*After a systematic implementation of these measures in the course of the next ten years, the population of the General Government will inevitably consist of a remaining inferior population, supplemented by those deported from the eastern provinces [the Polish territories annexed to Germany] and from all parts of the German Reich, who have the same racial and human characteristics.... This population will be at our disposal as leaderless laborers, and will furnish Germany annually with migrant workers and labor for special tasks (roads, quarries, construction of buildings).*

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The Germans wasted no time implementing their plans. Beginning in October 1939, SS and police units began to expel Poles and Jews from the German-occupied parts of Poland to the General Government. By March 1941, German authorities had evicted 465,000 people (365,000 Poles and 100,000 Jews) without warning and had plundered their property and belongings. Many elderly people and children died en route or in make-shift transit camps. The SS and police had to halt the deportations in March 1941 because the trains they were using were needed to transport soldiers and supplies to the front in preparation for the German invasion of the Soviet Union and because Governor General Frank refused to accept any more deportees.

Meanwhile, as planned, the German authorities in collaboration with Soviet leaders relocated ethnic Germans who had resided in the Baltic states, Bukovina, and Bessarabia into the homes and farms of the ousted Poles and Jews. The aim, as always, was to allow for the growth of the German population while simultaneously banishing, enslaving, or eliminating altogether so-called racial enemies and inferiors.

In addition to shifting the population in ways that suited the ideological goals of the Nazi regime, the leadership set out to dominate and exploit the Polish civilian population. To eliminate any potential for organized resistance, the Germans targeted Poland's middle and upper classes for annihilation: the intelligentsia, educated professionals, entrepreneurs, landowners, clergy, and activists in nationalist organizations. Behind the invading German troops, the SS and police deployed special action units called Mobile Killing Squads (*Einsatzgruppen*), who arrested or killed outright civilians who resisted the Germans or who were considered capable of doing so because of their position and social status.

When necessary, the SS could count on active support from units of the German army. Tens of thousands of wealthy landowners, clergymen, and members of the intelligentsia—government officials, teachers, doctors, dentists, officers, journalists, and others (both Poles and Jews)—were either shot en masse or sent to prisons and concentration camps. Army units and so-called self-defense forces composed of ethnic Germans also killed thousands of civilians. In many instances, the Germans perpetrated those murders as reprisal actions for the killing of individual Germans, for which entire communities were held responsible.

During the summer of 1940, SS and police units initiated a new roundup aimed at members of the Polish intelligentsia in the General Government. Within the framework of the euphemistically named Extraordinary Pacification Operation, they shot several thousand university professors, teachers, priests, and others. In Warsaw, the Germans perpetrated those murders in the Pawiak prison, outside the city in the Kampinos Forest near Palmiry, and in other locations.

The German conquerors targeted representatives of the Roman Catholic Church because it was a symbol of Polish nationalism (as a result of its association with the movement to reestablish the Polish state during the nineteenth century). Between 1939 and 1945, the Germans killed an estimated 3,000 members of the Polish clergy in the General Government. In those areas of Poland annexed to Germany, the Germans systematically closed houses of worship and deported, imprisoned, or killed hundreds of priests. They also shut down seminaries and convents as they persecuted monks and nuns.

The Nazis also sought to destroy Polish culture in order to keep the masses uneducated, ignorant, and, therefore, paralyzed. The Germans closed or destroyed universities,

schools, museums, libraries, and scientific laboratories. They demolished hundreds of monuments to Polish national heroes. German officials decreed that the education of Polish children must end after a few years of elementary school. Himmler put the policy succinctly in his May 1940 memorandum:

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*For the non-German population of the East, there cannot be schooling beyond the fourth grade of elementary school. The sole goal of this basic schooling is: simple arithmetic to the number 500 at most; writing one's name; and the doctrine that it is divine commandment to obey the Germans.... I do not consider reading to be necessary.*

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Those policies dovetailed with the German occupiers' view that the Poles were valuable only as a reservoir of inexpensive manual labor. The Nazis exploited Poland's peasants and industrial workers as unskilled laborers, uprooting them from their homes and sending them—almost always against their will—to farms, factories, and labor camps throughout the Reich. There they worked for little or no wage, were subjected to humiliating measures to maintain racial segregation, and were punished brutally for perceived violations of labor discipline or fraternization with the “Aryan” German population.

In the General Government, in conjunction with an effort to “Germanize” Zamość province in 1942–43, the SS and police rounded up 110,000 Poles from 300 villages in this region. Families were torn apart when teens and adults were taken for forced labor and when elderly, young, and disabled people were moved to other localities. Tens of thousands of Poles were incarcerated in the Auschwitz and Majdanek concentration camps. Over the course of the war, the Germans deported more than a million and a half Poles, many of whom were teenagers, to work as forced laborers in the Reich.

Although Germany also used forced laborers from western Europe, the authorities imposed especially harsh discriminatory measures on Poles and, later, on civilians deported from the occupied Soviet Union. Regulations required Poles to wear identifying purple P sewn to their clothing and to observe a curfew; those laws forbade them the use of public transportation. Although enforcement depended on the resolve of the individual employer, Polish laborers as a rule were compelled to work longer hours for lower wages than west Europeans, and in many cities they lived in segregated barracks behind barbed wire. Social interaction with Germans outside work was strictly forbidden, and sexual relations with them constituted a crime that was punishable by death. During the war, German authorities executed hundreds of Polish men for actual and alleged sexual affairs with German women.

Poles were prisoners in nearly every concentration camp throughout German-occupied Poland and the Reich. Until 1942, Poles made up the overwhelming majority of prisoners at Auschwitz concentration camp. Whereas German political prisoners were incarcerated as punishment for nonconformity and could sometimes regain their freedom, Poles had no such status or power with which to bargain. They were rounded up, summarily imprisoned, and put to work. Unlike policy toward other “racial” enemies, such as Jews and Roma (Gypsies), the Nazis did not intend to systematically annihilate the entire Polish population, though they did seek to eliminate the leadership classes. Rather, they planned to use the Poles as a labor force and to allow the natural course of time and events—helped along by meager food rations and abysmal living conditions—to result in their gradual but inevitable demise as an independent people carrying a national culture. Malnutrition, exhaustion, and mistreatment led to an extremely high rate of death by attrition, in turn making more room for Germans to populate the region.

German authorities also executed thousands of Poles who had been “convicted” of minor offenses or violations of labor discipline; in concentration camps and some medical institutes, those authorities subjected Poles to cruel and lethal medical experiments.

In addition to German suppression of potential resisters and exploitation of the rest of the population, a cornerstone of German policy in the east was to seek and win new blood for the “Aryan” race. Himmler described it as follows in a May 1940 top secret memo on the treatment of racial aliens in the east:

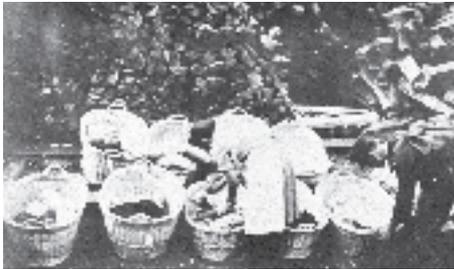
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*Obviously in such a mixture of peoples, there will always be some racially good types. Therefore, I think that it is our duty to take their children with us, to remove them from their environment, if necessary by robbing, or stealing them. Either we win over any good blood that we can use for ourselves and give it a place in our people, or ... we destroy that blood.*

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According to Nazi thinking, adults could not be adopted into the race (even if they had the requisite Nordic “Aryan” blood) because they had been hopelessly Slavicized by their extended immersion in Polish culture and language. Their children, in contrast, were young, impressionable, and easily molded: to the Nazis, those Polish children represented the potential for new members of the “Master Race.”

In the service of this program, Himmler planned “an annual screening of all children, ages 6 to 10, in the General Government to separate racially valuable and nonvaluable juveniles.” The SS seized thousands of Polish children and considered them for possible



adoption by German parents. “If a child is recognized to be of our blood,” Himmler went on, “the parents will be notified that the child will be sent to school in Germany and will remain permanently in Germany...” As promised, children who were deemed “valuable” by the Nazis were promptly taken from their parents and homes, assigned German names, forbidden to speak Polish, and sent away to be reeducated in SS or other Nazi institutions. Some of them ultimately died of hunger or disease, and few of the children who survived ever saw their parents again.

A group of Polish babies, (left) considered by the Nazis to be racially valuable because of their “German Aryan” features. They were forcibly taken from their mothers to be adopted into ethnic German families. POLAND, 1941–43. USHMM, COURTESY OF LYDIA CHAGOLL

Many more children were taken from home but ultimately rejected as unsuitable for Germanization after failing to measure up to the criteria established by SS “race experts.” Those unfortunate castaways were not returned to their parents but were sent to children’s homes or killed, some of them by phenol injection at Auschwitz. The Germans kidnapped an estimated 50,000 children, the majority of whom were taken from orphanages and foster homes in the annexed lands. They also abducted and Germanized infants born to Polish women working at forced labor on farms and in factories in the Reich. In contrast, if an examination of an expectant mother and the father of her unborn baby suggested that a “nonvaluable” child would result from the union, the German authorities generally forced the mother to undergo an abortion.

Within months of the Polish surrender in 1939, former soldiers and second-rank nationalist leaders, many of whom were unknown to the Germans, formed an active resistance movement whose ranks were swelled by the brutality of the occupation. Despite German efforts to quell organized opposition, the Polish resistance was one of the largest in occupied Europe: it was a virtual underground state apparatus, with more than 300 political and military groups working to subvert and sabotage the Germans. In the face of military defeat, the Polish government refused to surrender, establishing a government-in-exile in London in 1940.

Inside Poland itself, resistance groups established courts for trying collaborators and others, and they organized clandestine schools in response to the closing of educational institutions. In addition, the universities of Warsaw, Kraków, and Lwów (present-day L'viv, Ukraine) all operated underground. In December 1942, members of the Polish resistance in Warsaw formed Żegota, an organization that provided refuge, money, forged papers, and other means of support to Polish Jews. During the war, Żegota saved about 3,000 Jewish people, many of them children.

JULIAN NOGA (right) in his camp uniform, with the identifying prisoner patch bearing a P for Pole on the upper right of his jacket at Flossenbürg concentration camp. Julian was born to a Polish Catholic family in Skrzynka, Poland, on July 31, 1921. During the German occupation, Julian hid a rifle belonging to a Polish soldier but was betrayed and sent for forced labor as a farmhand for a wealthy Austrian family. He fell in love with their second-youngest daughter, Frieda, but Reich law strictly forbade romance between Germans and Poles. Julian persisted in seeing Frieda, despite repeated warnings; in September 1941, the German police arrested him and deported him to Flossenbürg concentration camp, where he was deployed at forced labor in the stone quarry.

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*There [were] just so many, so many bad things happening in Flossenbürg. The life, daily life was terrible. You get up 4:30 ... quick, quick, quick, quick, and go to the quarry, work twelve hours, six days a week, twelve hours a day. Sunday ... Sunday before noon we do the chores, so-called, you know. Clean out your lockers, clean out the barrack, clean up yourselves, and everything. Then we had inspection, you know. If you had [a] button missing or something like that, you [were] punished for that.*

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Julian was liberated on April 23, 1945, while on a forced march from Flossenbürg. Frieda also survived, having spent two years in Ravensbrück concentration camp. The two were reunited, and they married in 1946 and emigrated to the United States.

FLOSSENBÜRG, GERMANY; AUGUST 1942–APRIL 1945. USHMM, COURTESY OF JULIAN AND FRIEDA NOGA

The Polish military also continued to fight on after the country was occupied. Officers of the regular Polish armed forces headed the underground Home Army (*Armia Krajowa*), in which they trained recruits, stockpiled weapons, and engaged in partisan operations. In



addition, the smaller Polish Communist movement organized the People's Army (*Armia Ludowa*), which also conducted partisan strikes. After the massive expulsions from the General Government in late 1942 and 1943, both Communist and non-Communist members of Polish partisan units—whose ranks were filled with terrorized peasants—attacked ethnic German settlers. The price was a heavy one, because the Germans carried out reprisals in the form of mass killings of Polish civilians. Throughout the occupation, the Germans applied a ruthless retaliation policy, destroying dozens of villages and killing men, women, and children. In the cities, public hangings and shootings were an almost daily occurrence as the Germans sought to deter Poles from engaging in further resistance.

As Soviet troops reached the east bank of the Vistula River opposite Warsaw on August 1, 1944, the Home Army launched an uprising in the capital city. After 63 days of bitter fighting (with little aid from the Soviet army), the leaders of the insurrection were forced to surrender to the Germans. Although they treated the leaders of the uprising as prisoners of war, the Germans killed or deported thousands of civilians. Acting on Hitler's orders, German forces reduced Warsaw to rubble.

Reliable statistics for the total number of Poles who died as a result of German policies do not exist; documentation on this subject is fragmentary. Most scholars estimate that close to two million non-Jewish Polish civilians lost their lives as a direct result of German occupation policies and military or antipartisan operations. Among them were Poles who were murdered in executions or who died as a result of being incarcerated in prisons, becoming part of forced labor, and being placed in concentration camps. Still others lost their lives in military battles, including an estimated 50,000 civilians killed during the German conquest of Poland in 1939; 225,000 civilians killed during the 1944 Home Army uprising in Warsaw; and an undetermined number killed in 1944–45 during the Soviet military campaign that drove the Germans out of Poland. It is important to mention, too, that the figure of nearly two million civilians does not include Poles who were victims of the 1939–41 Soviet occupation of eastern Poland and of deportations to Central Asia and Siberia. Records on that subject are incomplete, and the Soviet control of Poland for 50 years after the war has impeded independent scholarship in this area.

#### THE GERMAN ATTACK ON THE SOVIET UNION

On June 22, 1941, Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, an attack on the Soviet Union that violated the nonaggression pact the two countries had signed less than two years before. Within weeks, German divisions swept through the eastern part of Poland and conquered Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In September, the Germans laid siege to Leningrad; by the end of October, they had captured Minsk, Smolensk, Kiev, Odesa (Odessa),

and Kharkov (present-day Kharkiv). After pacifying most of the Crimean peninsula, the Germans had besieged Sevastopol. Millions of Soviet soldiers were encircled, cut off from supplies and reinforcements, and forced to surrender.

For Nazi Germany, this attack was not an ordinary military operation; it was the next step in the Nazi plan to destroy Soviet Russia (and the Jewish-Communist threat Nazis believed it contained) and to colonize eastern Europe for the expansion of the “Aryan” German race. It was the long-awaited final battle between German national socialism and Soviet communism—the decisive racial war between the Nordic peoples, led by the “Aryan” Germans, on the one hand, and the Slavs and Jews on the other hand. General Erich Hoepner, the commander of the 4th Panzer Army, outlined clearly the fundamental principles of the Nazi crusade in a memorandum dated May 1941. “The war against Russia is the inevitable result of a struggle for existence that has been forced upon us,” he wrote.

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*It is the old fight of Germanic peoples against the Slavic peoples, the defense of European culture against the Muscovite-Asiatic flood, and the defense against Jewish Bolshevism. This war must have as its goal the destruction of today's Russia and must therefore be waged with unprecedented harshness. In conception and execution, every battle must be guided by the iron will to completely and mercilessly annihilate the enemy. In particular, the sponsors of the current Russian-Bolshevik system are not to be spared.*

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The Nazis approached the Soviet civilian population in much the same way as they had regarded the Poles nearly two years earlier. Their ideological position regarding both groups was fundamentally the same: Slavs were seen as *Untermenschen*, which roughly translates as “subhumans.” In keeping with the Nazis’ hierarchical view of racial groups, they regarded the Slavs as nothing more than useless bodies occupying land and resources that rightly belonged to the “Aryan” German race. As such, Soviet state and Communist Party officials were to be killed to prevent resistance and to stop the spread of what the Nazis considered to be “Jewish” Bolshevism.

Insofar as possible, the Germans would exploit the masses for labor; otherwise the Germans would eliminate them to make room for German settlement or expel them farther eastward, denying them essential food and shelter to survive the Russian winters. In bringing those plans to partial fruition, the Germans killed or directly caused the death of millions of Soviet civilians, deported millions more for forced labor in Germany, and enslaved still more millions in the occupied Soviet Union.

One of Germany's major war aims in the Soviet Union was the ruthless plunder of economic resources, especially agricultural produce. Hitler remembered the food shortages in Germany at the end of World War I and the resulting riots in Berlin, and he blamed them for the collapse of domestic morale. Along with other right-wing politicians, he saw a direct link between those events and Germany's eventual capitulation. In fighting *his* war, Hitler was determined to maintain civilian confidence, averting any internal crises that could lead to a repeat of those events in 1918. German planners were well aware that the spoliation of Soviet resources would inevitably result in drastic food shortages for the native population—in fact, they counted on it. In their determination to keep the German population well fed at home, Nazi leaders calculated and accepted that—as a result of this policy—as many as 30 million Soviet civilians would die of starvation.

As in Poland, the Germans crushed any show of opposition by the Soviets without mercy. Hitler's directive for the attack on the Soviet Union was specific on this point: he called on his troops to react to any type of resistance by shooting. In retaliation for partisan attacks, German forces burned whole villages and shot the rural populations of entire districts. At the same time, German military authorities made it clear that crimes committed by their soldiers were not to be punished if they were ideologically motivated. This policy was an open invitation for soldiers to behave brutally toward civilians, and it gave them not only the license but also the obligation to terrorize the population to secure the occupation and to guarantee the long-term German future.

The deeply ideological nature of the Germans' fight against the Soviet Union was reflected in the "Commissar Order" issued by the German Armed Forces High Command on June 6, 1941. Political commissars were Soviet Communist Party officials who oversaw its military units and reported directly to party leaders. Operating as they did outside the military hierarchy, commissars acted as a conduit from the party to the ranks of ordinary soldiers, transmitting political propaganda and preventing dissension. To the Germans, they represented the true "pillars of opposition," the link between the Bolshevik ideologies and the minions in the military who the Nazis believed fought blindly on Bolshevism's behalf. For that reason, German soldiers were ordered to shoot any political commissars who were taken prisoner.

The Commissar Order read: "The originators of barbaric, Asiatic methods of warfare are the political commissars.... Therefore, when captured either in battle or offering resistance, they are to be shot on principle." During the initial attack on the Soviet Union throughout the summer and autumn of 1941, the German armed forces generally complied with this order. In May 1942, however, the Commissar Order was rescinded at the urging of German field commanders, who came up against much stronger resistance when the routine shooting of the commissars became known to Soviet soldiers.

Just as the Nazis targeted political commissars as agents of the Soviet Communist Party, they regarded Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) as an integral part of the so-called Bolshevik menace. The Germans killed POWs in massive numbers, not as a result of military operations but as a part of Nazi racial policy. Indeed, the German treatment of Soviet POWs differed significantly from policy toward POWs from Britain and the United States, countries the Nazis regarded as racial equals of the Germans. Of the 231,000 British and American prisoners held by the Germans during the war, about 8,300 died in German custody. Even Polish POWs fared better; provided they were neither Jewish nor leaders of nationalist organizations, they were generally released.

The treatment of Soviet POWs by the Germans violated every standard of warfare. The Nazi regime claimed that it was under no obligation to provide for their humane care because the Soviet Union had neither ratified the 1929 Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War, nor specifically declared its commitment to the 1907 Hague Convention on the Rules of War. Technically, both nations, therefore, were bound only by the general international standard of waging war as it had developed in modern times. Yet even by that measure, prisoners of war were guaranteed certain protections. With the Soviets, however, the Nazis dropped those as well.

From the outset in August 1941, the Germans implemented a policy of mass starvation, setting a ration of just 2,200 calories per day for captured Soviet soldiers deployed at forced labor. This amount was not enough to sustain life for long, but the reality proved even worse because prisoners typically received much less than the official ration. Many prisoners received at most a ration of 700 calories a day. They were often provided as food, for example, only special “Russian” bread made from sugar beet husks and straw flour. Within a short period of time, the result of this “subsistence” ration, as the German army termed it, was death by starvation. Numerous accounts from the late summer and fall of 1941 report that the desperate POWs, suffering from malnutrition and wild with hunger, tried to ease their craving for food by eating grass and leaves.

The prisoners’ suffering from starvation was compounded by a lack of decent shelter and clothing. In the makeshift camps established by the Germans, many prisoners had to dig holes in the ground to improvise shelter from the elements. In October 1941 alone, almost 5,000 Soviet soldiers died each day; by the end of the year, the prisoner population was ravaged by epidemics of typhoid and dysentery. The onset of winter accelerated the mass death because so many victims had little or no protection from the cold. POWs held in camps in the General Government were left to linger for months in trenches, dugouts, or sod houses; in occupied Belorussia (present-day Belarus), the Germans provided only pavilions (structures with roofs but no walls) to house them. Throughout the unusually



cold winter of 1941–42, starvation and disease resulted in death of staggering proportions. Between the summer of 1941 and February 1942, more than two million Soviet soldiers died as victims of the Nazi racial policy.

A column of Soviet prisoners of war under German guard (left) marches to an internment camp. KHARKOV, [UKRAINE] USSR, CIRCA 1941. USHMM, COURTESY OF NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION

Many captured Soviet soldiers—especially the wounded—were scheduled to arrive at transit camps and collection centers, but instead died on the way as a result of gross neglect and inadequate provisions. Most of the prisoners caught in 1941 had to march west behind the German lines across hundreds of miles; those who were too exhausted to continue were shot where they collapsed. When the Armed Forces High Command permitted POWs to be transported by train, it provided only open freight cars and allowed days to go by without any distribution of rations. According to army reports, between 25 percent and 70 percent of the prisoners on those transports died en route to POW camps in Germany and the General Government.

The Germans not only allowed POWs to die as a result of deliberate neglect, but also shot them outright in some cases, especially those who had been wounded, because their deaths freed the German army of their care. At the urging of the German leadership, military personnel issued a directive on September 8, 1941, urging “energetic and ruthless action ... to wipe out any trace of resistance” from prisoners. Thus, they should shoot without warning any who attempted to escape. Moreover, a decree issued on September 8, 1941, stated that the use of arms against Soviet POWs was, “as a rule, to be regarded as legal,” thereby providing a clear invitation for German soldiers to kill Soviet POWs with impunity.

In cooperation with the SS-led Security Police and Security Service (SD), the German army also engaged in more direct, systematic, and selective killing of groups of Soviet soldiers in the POW camps. In mid-July 1941, just weeks after the German invasion, General Hermann Reinecke, the officer in charge of prisoner-of-war affairs in the Armed Forces High Command, ordered that all Soviet POWs be screened for “politically and racially intolerable elements.”

After determining through interrogation those who were “important” state and Soviet Communist Party members, intellectuals, devoted Communists, and Jews, the German camp authorities transferred those prisoners to the custody of the Security Police and SD. Once in the hands of the SS, such prisoners were shot. The SS did not carry out the killings in the POW camps or the immediate vicinity, but rather in a secure area such as a concentration camp. As many as 500,000 Soviet soldiers were shot by the Security Police and the SD by 1942. Even after the direct killing operations ceased, Soviet POWs who had been transferred to concentration camps continued to suffer under extreme and brutal oppression; the SS murdered more than 55,000 Soviet POWs in various concentration camps.

Emaciated and half-dressed outside in the winter of 1942, Soviet prisoners of war (right) stand for a picture in the Mauthausen concentration camp. MAUTHAUSEN, AUSTRIA, JANUARY 1942. USHMM, COURTESY OF DOKUMENTATIONSARCHIV DES OESTERREICHISCHEN WIDERSTANDES

In September 1941, Rudolf Höss, commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp, conducted the first experiments of mass murder by gassing, using Zyklon B, or hydrogen cyanide, in a gas chamber constructed in Auschwitz specifically for that purpose. Höss used 600 Soviet POWs and 250 Polish civilians as victims. Beginning in the autumn of 1939, the Germans had been using carbon monoxide gas as a killing agent on people whom they considered to be disabled and who were institutionalized in Germany and Austria (see chapter 4). In those operations, the Germans found that they could kill large numbers of people in an assembly-line fashion with minimal effort and personnel. Ultimately, they would apply this technique to murder millions of European Jews.

The killing of Soviet POWs would likely have continued had the fortunes of war not changed in the winter of 1941–42. Hitler and his military planners, victims of their own ethnic and racial stereotypes, had expected a quick campaign against the Soviet Union. They viewed Slavs as dull and incompetent and believed that the Soviet Union was in the



The treatment of Soviet prisoners of war by the Nazis

violated every standard of warfare.

grip of Jews, whom they regarded as cowardly and perfidious. As a result, the Germans severely miscalculated the strength and conviction of their military opponents and failed to prepare for a protracted campaign, part of which would be fought during the brutal Russian winter. The impressive initial successes of the German army only added to the German's sense of overconfidence. But as the invasion slowed and the army grew exhausted from months of campaigning, the German forces found themselves overextended, because they lacked winter clothing and equipment and had outrun their desperately needed supply lines. The Soviets began to resist more bitterly than expected, and they proved to be far better equipped than the Germans for the cold weather.

In December 1941, the Soviet Union launched a major counterattack, driving the Germans back from Moscow in chaos. Only after several weeks and tremendous losses in soldiers and equipment were the Germans able to stabilize the front east of Smolensk. Nevertheless, Hitler and the German leadership understood that the war would last much longer than anticipated. The economic requirements of a longer war and the critical labor shortage in the German economy created a desperate need for labor. In that context, the Nazi leadership realized that using Soviet POWs as laborers for the war effort was more practical than killing them. Beginning in 1942, therefore, Hitler authorized better treatment and slightly increased rations for Soviet POWs so they would have the strength to work. Although the enormous death rate among the Soviet POWs declined, it nevertheless remained higher than that among other groups of POWs. In 1943 and 1944, however, the death rates soared again as a result of starvation and disease. In total over the course of the war, the German army captured more than five and a half million Soviet POWs. Of those, more than three million died or were killed in German custody.

After the war, the ordeal of Soviet POWs who survived German captivity did not end. Soviet authorities, often without justification, tended to view returning POWs as collaborators or even traitors, because they had "allowed" themselves to be captured. After their repatriation, most POWs underwent a debriefing in which they had to justify the circumstances under which they had been caught. Some who had been liberated by British or U.S. forces had to convince the Soviet authorities that they were not Western intelligence agents. Others faced prolonged interrogation, arrest, and trial in Soviet courts. Thousands were convicted of collaboration or treason and were either executed or sentenced to confinement in a forced labor camp. Most of those who were imprisoned remained so until the death of Josef Stalin in 1953.