

## **Review on the study *Murders of the Prisoners of War* by German historian Christoph Dieckmann**

**by Dr. Arūnas Bubnys**

Ch.Dieckmann's study on the soviet war prisoners in Lithuania during the years of Nazi occupation is a very valuable and objective piece of work. Ch.Dieckmann has performed a detailed analysis of nearly all the key aspects of soviet war prisoner elimination. The author has illustrated which German military and political institutions had been in charge of custody and extermination of war prisoners, and what methods had been applied to eliminate the prisoners of war (most war prisoners died of starvation, diseases, and emaciating labour). Moreover, Ch.Dieckmann has reviewed the history of all the prisoner of war camps that used to be operating on the territory of today's Lithuania: the terms of their existence, the people who used to run them, the numbers of prisoners detained and eventually killed therein. The author has both analysed the direct process of war prisoner elimination, and reviewed other aspects of existence of the prisoners of war – employment of the war prisoners in labour in Lithuania and their transport for work to the Reich, the approach of the Lithuanian population towards the soviet prisoners of war, release from camps of Lithuanian nationality red army soldiers in 1941, and use of the Lithuanian police battalions to secure soviet war prisoners.

It is very important that Ch.Dieckmann has gone through virtually all archive resources available: documents of archives in Germany, Lithuania, Moscow. A lot of archive data held in Germany (esp. Ludwigsburg and Freiburg) have never been analysed by and familiar to Lithuanian historians. Therefore, the author was able to produce more accurate statistic data and more arguments for his conclusions.

Ch.Dieckmann was right to admit that it was impossible to arrive at a precise figure of prisoners of war that had been killed in Lithuania, since the remaining archive documents were incomplete and contain a lot of errors. Nonetheless, the approximate data supplied by the author (at least 168 – 172 thousand) are very close to the reality, in my opinion. By the number of casualties in Lithuania, soviet prisoners of war yielded the first place only to Jews.

Without diminishing value to Ch.Dieckmann's work it must be added that the author could have provided more precise information regarding the attitude and behaviour of Lithuanian population to and with the soviet war prisoners. Lithuanian archives contain a lot of documents that evidence the human behaviour of the civil population with the prisoners of war (there are a few police reports remaining that concern Lithuanian citizens arrested on the grounds of assisting prisoners of war). For helping escaped war prisoners, on March 18, 1941, residents of Ažuolaičiai Village in Dotnuva rural district Steponas Daukša and Antanas Daukša were arrested and sentenced to a prison term of 3 months.

For providing a hide-out to a prisoner of war, on January 5, 1943, Anelė Vainorienė was arrested and imprisoned for 6 months.<sup>1</sup>

While analysing the views of the local population towards the prisoners of war, this aspect should be differentiated by nationality. The sympathy of Lithuanian Russians and Jews with the war prisoners was stronger than that of Lithuanians. At least at the beginning of the War, a lot of Lithuanians viewed the prisoners of war with distrust, like remnants of ex occupation troops. Eventually, after they had witnessed the appalling situation the war prisoners were in, Lithuanian farmers would gladly take on war prisoners to work at their farms (provided a permit by the occupation government) thus helping the war prisoners to evade certain death of starvation. Ch.Dieckmann provides but abstract description of such instances, without stating the concrete numbers of the battalions. However, Lithuanian police battalions (with the exception of the 2<sup>nd</sup>

(12<sup>th</sup>) in Byelorussia) did not participate in the slaughter of the prisoners of war. Furthermore, facts are available that police battalions would be engaged in chasing fugitive prisoners of war.

I think that Ch.Dieckmann has skipped one quite important aspect – the escapes made by the prisoners of war, and their role in the soviet partisan movement. It is known that part of the soviet partisan units were formed of fugitive prisoners of war. In some of the red partisan squads, former prisoners of war accounted for 50 per cent and more of the whole company. The role of the prisoners of war in the soviet partisan movement (especially during 1941 to 1942) is very important.<sup>2</sup>

Sometimes small groups of war prisoners managed to escape captivity. On April 17, 1942, 60 war prisoners jumped out of a moving train on its way from Kaunas and Kazlų Rūda.<sup>3</sup>

During the night on November 6, 1943, while transporting the prisoners of Kaunas war prisoner camp, 30 prisoners of war escaped on the route from Kaunas and Vilkaviškis.<sup>4</sup>

The extent of escapes performed by the prisoners of war is reflected in the letter of the Head of Ostland war prisoner camp, telling that in Ostland 2,813 prisoners of war escaped, of which 1,556 were recaptured during March to June 1942.

During the years of Nazi occupation, the *Criminal Police News* was published in Lithuania, providing lists of wanted prisoners of war. According to my own calculation, these list show that in 1941 to 1944 the number of escaped war prisoners totalled 2,340. It is quite possible that this number was larger, as the *Criminal Police News* was started in October 1941, and provided no news of July – September. Most of the fugitives joined the soviet partisans or established their own squads. According to historian P.Štaras, former soviet troops, commanders and political staff members accounted for 22 per cent (approximately 200) of members of the communist partisan movement in Lithuania.<sup>5</sup> Besides, one must consider the fact that some of the fugitives were recaptured, gunned down, or would hide without being involved in any major activity.

In the author's opinion, the study done by Ch.Dieckmann is a valuable piece of work on the topic of soviet prisoners of war in Lithuania in 1941 to 1944.

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<sup>1</sup> LCVA, f.R-1399, ap.1, b.25, 1.26.

<sup>2</sup> Telephoned message No. 66 of the Chief of Criminal Police of Vilnius District, as of April 20, 1942, LCVA, f.R-91, ap.1, b.43, 1.77.

<sup>3</sup> Radiogram No. 164 of the Police HQ of Vilnius City, *ibid.*, f.R-689, ap.1, b.49, 1.379.

<sup>4</sup> LCVA, f.R-659, ap.1, b.1, 1.96,97.

<sup>5</sup> P.Štaras, *Partizaninis judėjimas Lietuvoje Didžiojo Tėvynės karo metais*, V., 1966, p.232, 294.