

Review on the work by Christoph Dieckmann *The Killing of Prisoners of War*

by Dr. Christian Streit

I know Christoph Dieckmann for quite a period of time as a young German historian engaging in the investigation of the history of the occupation policy the National Socialists conducted in the Eastern Europe. His work in the field has been very lively, introducing much of a fresh intriguing approach to a variety of issues. Dieckmann has already published a number of works on the subject and is currently working on a new highly promising overview of the German occupation policy conducted in Lithuania.

The soviet prisoners of war alongside with the Jews constitute a category of victims having suffered the most dreadful fate in the World War II. Over half of them perished in captivity - about 3.3 millions out of total 5.7 millions. In general, this applies to Lithuania as well, where, according to well-justified estimations made by Dieckmann, the number of soviet prisoners of war, who had perished or were killed, lies in between of 168.000 and 172.000, being similar to the number of the Jews murdered.

The policy Germans applied to the soviet prisoners of war breached the international law, as Dieckmann has justly noticed. The fact USSR had not ratified the 1929 Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War, or rejected the 1907 Hague Inland War Regulations, plays no role at all. The treatment of the war prisoners concerned breached all the core non-codified conventions of the international law applied universally in respect of prisoners of war, and namely, the obligation to protect the life of any prisoner of war, treat him/her in a human manner, provide him/her with adequate food and shelter. Moreover, Germany was explicitly bound by the 1929 Geneva Convention, which was ratified by Germany as well as by USSR, as regards the treatment of the wounded or the sick in a battlefield.

Dieckmann has rightly stated that the treatment of the soviet prisoners of war differed essentially from the treatment of other prisoners of war that were held by Germans. The difference is well highlighted by a comparison of the fate of the soviet prisoners to the fate of the Englishmen or Americans. Out of total 232.000 of the latter prisoners 8432 (3.6%) had died by the end of the war compared to as many as 14.000 soviet prisoners dying day by day in December 1941, solely.

In truth, the principal cause of the mass deaths of the soviet prisoners of war was inadequate feeding. In spring, 1941, the German command adopted a decision to assure a good feeding to the German people at any price - even at a price of the death of millions of the soviet prisoners of war or civilians. The decision was an outcome of the National Socialist ideology declaring any Slav to be a "sub-human" of little value.

The question what was the treatment of the soviet war prisoners like by Lithuanian people, Dieckmann might answer but with suggestions, as too little sources have been revealed dealing with the subject and no investigations have been carried out to date. One could not object his assumption that the Lithuanians from the support police, the order-maintaining

troops, self-defence battalions, etc. employed as the guards of the war prisoners, were equally cruel and merciless as the German guards. Moreover, there are plenty of sources proving a part of the local civilians willingly collaborated with Germans. On the other hand, the Lithuanian guards were nothing more than just an executive force fulfilling the Germans' instructions and having no independent decision-making power. Commenting on this issue, Dieckmann attempts to introduce a differentiation pinpointing that certain guards, and first of all civilians, used to help prisoners willingly.

The number of victims is stated by Dieckmann largely on the basis of the statements delivered by the soviet state investigations commissions in 1944-45, as other sources are hardly available. However, it seems to be true, as the figures do not contradict the overall view known from available sources and the statistics. By now, it has not been proved that these figures might be exaggerated.

In general, to my opinion, the Dieckmann's work is true in terms of any applicable professional standard. It has embraced the analysis of some sources left outside of the scope of previous works, including, firstly, the testimonies and the interrogation files of the prosecutors of the Federal Republic of Germany, as well as the recollections of the Lithuanian, soviet, Jewish and German witnesses. These sources have remarkably supplemented our knowledge on the subject that have been based but on an outline of the events.

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