

Review of the Study by Christoph Dieckmann The Murders of Prisoners of War

by prof. dr. Wolfgang Benz

A historical inquiry into the fate of the soviet prisoners of war taken by Germans was largely postponed with actually no attention paid to the territory of Lithuania. There is one simple reason for this: the sources are in a bad condition over here. To some degree, the lack of original documents or similar materials is compensated by the materials accumulated by police and the courts of law, as well as the opinions by the judicial bodies of penal trial of the Federal Republic of Germany. These materials are currently at the disposal of the Centre for Investigation of the Nazi Crime of the Administrations of Justice of the Ludvigsburg Federal Lands. These sources make the basis for the Christoph Dieckmann's study on the killing of the soviet prisoners of war in Lithuania.

The introductory presentation of the aims and the institutions of the German policy in respect of the soviet prisoners of war is followed by the analysis and descriptions of individual camps of the prisoners of war located in Lithuania, on the Lithuanian and German border, in the Memel region. The German policy adopted in respect of the soviet prisoners of war primarily was based on racism (extermination by pre-planned exhaustion and shooting to death), compulsory labour and feeding policy.

Deadly starvation, absence of medical care, pre-planned exhaustion, shooting to death largely reduced the number of the soviet prisoners of war. The statement it was an outcome of a political intent, thus meaning a war crime, is well-founded. The data obtained from the camps investigated shows there might have been about 168.000-172.000 of victims in the camps concerned only.

Dieckmann has also expressed a desirability of the investigator. Therefore, the question on the treatment of the soviet prisoners of war by the people of Lithuania may not be answered clearly for the time being. There were three prevailing trends in the behaviour of Lithuanians: the Lithuanian guarding troops collaborated with the occupation government against the soviet prisoners of war. The civilians used to help the prisoners of war on one hand, while on the other hand, they would report on those who'd manage to escape. After all, the partisan movement shows there existed a different pattern of civilian behaviour. Doubtlessly, the behaviour of the Lithuanians at the beginning of the German occupation should be distinguished from such by the end of the occupation. Just before the Germans invaded, the Lithuanians had lively memories of the soviet era that made a different impact on their behaviour as opposed to the experience of the German occupation by the moment the Red Army marched in 1944. The approval of the Wehrmacht intentions was replaced with the fear of repression followed by rather pragmatic interest nourished towards the future rulers. The difference in the pattern of behaviour between rural and urban area should be taken into account as well. A comparison to other categories of victims (Jews and Lithuanian civilians in the partisan war), of which Dieckmann makes a note, might be a promising plot for further inquiry.

The Dieckmann's study leaves no doubt that the responsibility for the killing of the soviet prisoners of war falls on the German side, even if there was a collaboration from the side of the Lithuanians. The study, as far as the available sources make it possible, provides a thorough overview of one of the largest of the World War II crimes - the killing of the soviet prisoners of war that were taken by the Germans.

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