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Local Communities – Diachrony and Synchrony

German Prison-of-War Camp No 38 (the town of Reni, 1944 – 1945)

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Abstract: On the basis of the archival documents the personal composition of the reception and transit front-line prisoner- of war-camp No. 38, which was established in 1944 in the vicinity of the town of Reni (Odessa region), is analyzed. The camp existed until the autumn of 1945. Most of the prisoners of war died of typhus in it. The main analysis falls on the group of German prisoners of war of this camp (age characteristics, military ranks)

Keywords: prisoners of war; the camp; typhus; Germans; Reni; the Second World War

The history of any war is not only ceremonial salutevolleys and shouts of “Hurray!” War is both the pain of loss and the bitterness of defeat. The inevitable component of any military company is prisoners of war, and the camps for their maintenance are an objective attribute of the war. Extreme camp conditions, in the opinion of the researcher N. Kalkutina, in one way or another left a tragic imprint on the psyche and worldview of the prisoners of war of all belligerent states (Kalkutina, 2014, p. 171).

Despite the fact that in 1907 the Hague Convention “On Laws and Ordinary Land Wars” (Pashchenko, 2010, p. 114) and in 1929 the Geneva Convention “On the Treatment of Prisoners of War”, which regulated the conditions for the maintenance of prisoners of war, medical care, conditions for repatriation, etc., were signed, rarely any of the parties involved in the military conflict, especially at the height of their power, complied with these requirements. The fact of capturing the enemy servicemen assumes a further responsibility for their maintenance and security. However, unfortunately, the war leveled the whole group of norms of international law and humanitarian principles of warfare, which resulted in the suffering of millions of prisoners of war, and many of them cost lives (Kalkutina, 2014, p. 172).

The study of the problem of military captivity during the Second World War is not one of the most popular historical themes, which can be explained by emotional and psychological factors and political and ideological conjuncture of different political regimes. As a rule, in the historical literature of the second half of the 20th century, the focus was on the military atrocities of the Nazis in relation to prisoners of war.

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The issues of the existence of prisoner-of-war camps on the territory of the USSR, the conditions of detention, the legal and cultural aspects of their maintenance were in fact banned. Since the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the general democratization of most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, historical research has attempted to study various aspects of Soviet military captivity. According to the calculations of the Ukrainian historian Alexander Potylchak, by the beginning of the 21st century there were already more than 1,500 works on this problem (Potylchak, 2005, 15).

Despite the quantitative and genre diversity of published studies, there are still the aspects that require additional consideration and coverage in the scientific literature. This applies to the prisoner-of-war camps, which were located on the territory of South Ukraine. In total, on the territory of the eastern, central and southern regions of Ukraine, according to the researcher Potylchak, there were 44 stationary camps for foreign prisoners of war, in which there were approximately 220,000 people (Potylchak, 2005, p. 19). According to other information, in 1943-1944, 26 stationary prisoner-of-war camps were organized in 17 regions of the Ukrainian SSR, and in 1945 there were only 13 stationary camps with a limit of 215,000 prisoners of war (Karel & Beddeker, 2004).

In total, during the war years (1941-1945), 2,389,560 German military personnel were taken prisoners by the Soviet troops, 376 of them were generals and admirals, 69,469 persons were officers and 2,319,715 persons were non-commissioned officers and soldiers (Goncharov, 2013). On the basis of certificates from the archives department of the Main Directorate of the Places of Detention of the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Russian historian V. Galitsky estimates that of the specified number of German prisoners of war, 350,678 people died in the USSR (Galitsky, 1990, p. 43). German historians hold a different view, believing that about 3.5 million people were in the Soviet captivity at the end of the war, of which approximately 1.15 million people were killed in the camps of the Soviet Union (Kaltsik & Aystermyulle, 2006, p. 179).

To maintain prisoners of war and internees, a system of bodies and institutions was formed within the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (the Ministry of Internal Affairs), united within the framework of the Administration, then The Main Administration for Affairs of Prisoners of War and Internees (UPV-GUPVI NKVD-MVD USSR) (Kuzminykh, 2014, p. 3). The system was finalized in January 1945, which resulted in the creation of the Main Administration of the NKVD of the USSR in cases of prisoners of war and internees (Kuzminykh, 2014, p. 22). In the structure of Soviet prisoner-of-war camps, there were front-line reception and transit, rear stationary camps. The peculiarity of the existence of the first group was that they were being organized in the context of intensive military operations, and the camps were located in close proximity (5-15 km.) from the frontline (Potylchak, 2006, p. 158).

On the territory of Odessa region during the Second World War, there were 4 prisoner-of-war camps. One of them was located practically on the border, near the town of Reni (Odessa region). It was the front-line camp No. 38 of the NKVD Department of Prisoners of War Affairs under the administration of the 3rd Ukrainian Front. At the end of 1944, the camp contained about 4 thousand people: Germans, Hungarians, Italians, Yugoslavs, Austrians and others. By Order No. 00257 of the NKVD of the USSR of March 27, 1945, the front reception and transit camp No. 38 was transferred to the category of stationary camps with the dislocation in the town of Reni, Izmail region and with a limit occupancy of up to 4,000 people (State Archives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, fund 45, inventory 1, case 73, sheet 80-82).

However, almost at the same time, the epidemic of typhoid fever that arose in the camp led to the mass death of prisoners of war and its liquidation on October 6, 1945. In the official information about the reasons of camp liquidation it is said, "... in connection with the transfer of camp facilities to other organizations" (State Archives of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine, fund 83, inventory 1, case 228, sheet 52, fund 45, inventory 1, case 135, note 50, sheet 1-back of page 1, case 138, note 6, sheet, 1-back of page). And there is not a word about the thousands of dead prisoners of war. For decades, the names of the deceased foreign military personnel were in oblivion, and only thanks to the search work conducted by local ethnographers at the dawn of Ukraine's independence, it was possible to extract bits of information about those foreign prisoners of war who lie in the Reni land.

At our disposal was a document entitled: "List of the deceased POWs in Camp No. 38 and buried on the territory of the town of Reni, Izmail region". Based on the analysis of the information from this list, we will give a description of the German group among the foreign prisoners of war who were held in the camp. The list does not have any dates; therefore it is presumably possible to refer it to the spring of 1945. The document is printed on 31 pages and signed by the deputy chief of the 1st special department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs for Izmail region, Major Orlenko. In the list, there are 1,717 family names, although a more detailed analysis of the document has made it possible to clarify this figure. In fact, the list contains the names of 1,711 people. The decrease in the number of surnames can be explained by the elementary inattention of the military official who compiled the list. There are a few examples. So, under № 31 and № 32 data of supposedly the same person are specified:

№	Surname, Name	Year of Birth	Nationality	Rank
31.	KRESCHER Gubert	1915	German	non-commissioned officer
32.	KREMER Hubert	1915	German	non-commissioned officer

Some numbers: No. 394, 475, 476, 477 are missing in the list; many numbers are repeated twice – No. 618, 812; some names are listed twice under different numbers (Alfredo Boski – No. 849 and No. 852, Mudaino Alfredo – No. 850 and No. 853).

As has already been noted, in the front-line transit prison camp No. 38 prisoners of various states were held. Their nationality was as follows:

Nationality	Number	%%
Germans	977	57,1
Italians	436	25,5
Hungarians	224	13,1
Yugoslavs	32	1,9
Poles	24	1,4
Frenchpeople	8	0,5
Austrians	5	0,3
Romanians	2	0,1
Czechs	1	0,06
Dutch	1	0,06
Bulgarians	1	0,06

From the table we see that the overwhelming majority were prisoners of war of the German army— almost 60% (List of the deceased POWs in Camp No. 38 and buried on the territory of the town of Reni, Izmail region). The minimum number of prisoners of war was represented by Bulgarians, Dutch, Czechs, which indicates the insignificant use of the data of national contingents in military companies on the Eastern Front.

Let us pass to the age characteristics of certain groups of prisoners of war in camp No. 38. To unify the counts, the year of 1944 was taken into consideration as the maximum time limit (in view of the fact that the exact date of the death of prisoners of war is not established).

In total, there are 977 names in the group of German prisoners of war. The age categories look like this:

Age (years)	Number	%%
till 18	1	0,1
18 – 20	75	7,7
21 – 25	208	21,3
26 – 30	133	13,6
31 – 35	172	17,6
36 – 40	225	23,0
41 – 45	130	13,3
46 – 50	28	2,9
51 – 55	4	0,4
older than 55	1	0,1
Total	977	100

Age characteristics of the German prisoners of war determine the following positions:

Firstly, the two largest age groups of prisoners of war were the most numerous: from 36 to 40 years old (255 people or 23%) and from 21 to 25 years old (208 people or 21.3%). In general, this group accounted for almost 45% of the total number of German prisoners of war that were held in Camp No. 38;

Secondly, most of the captured German military belonged to different age categories, the number of which ranged from 3 to 18 percent;

Thirdly, among the German prisoners of war were representatives of the “special” age groups: people under 18 (№ 951 – Corporal Burkhardt Jozef, born in 1928, who at the time of capture was only 16 years old), as well as the military of the older generation – older than 51 years (№ 624 – Sergeant-major Mikhail Pavlovich, born in 1893, № 644 – Chief Corporal Korvat Fritz, born in 1893, № 1096 – Chief Corporal Puricke Basil, born in 1891, № 148 – Chief Corporal Shilleng Herman, born in 1889). The oldest of the German prisoners of war in this camp was Captain Kutetsoid Otto, who was 56 years old in 1944 (List of the deceased POWs in Camp No. 38 and buried on the territory of the town of Reni, Izmail region).

Assessing the internal structure of the German army before the outbreak of the Second World War, we agree with the conclusions of the researcher O. Kurylev, who claims that by the time the Nazis came to power in Germany in early 1933, the Reichswehr had already been ready for deployment to the modern army. In March 1935, the Führer announced the cancellation of all restrictions on the German army, restored universal military service and announced the formation of new divisions. The Reichswehr was renamed the Wehrmacht, and included: the Ground forces (das Heer), the Air Forces (die Luftwaffe) and the Navy (die Kriegsmarine) (Kurylev, 2007, p. 14).

Some information about the system of military ranks in the German army. The very concept of “nonrated personnel” was absent in the hierarchy of army ranks. In the Wehrmacht the lower ranks were called Mannschaften, and conditionally we can refer them to the nonrated. In the analyzed archival document, the word “nonrated man” can be considered the equivalent of the word “soldier”. The next category is non-commissioned officers. This included (in increasing order) non-commissioned officers, non-commissioned sergeant-majors and staff sergeant-majors. Further, there were junior rank officers (subaltern officers), senior rank officers (staff officers) and generalship (higher rank officers) (Kurylev, 2007, p. 20).

The archival document allows us to distinguish groups of military ranks and ranks in this category of German prisoners of war.

Militaryrank	Number	%%
soldier	132	13,5
sailor	3	0,3
corporal	370	38
chief corporal	250	25,6
senior corporal	67	6,8
non-commissioned corporal	2	0,2
staff corporal	26	2,7
senior sergeant	3	0,3
sergeant-major	33	3,4
senior sergeant-major	3	0,3
staff sergeant-major	1	0,1
non-commissioned officer	83	8,5
lieutenant	1	0,1
captain	2	0,2
colonel	1	0,1
Total	977	100

What is the evidence of archival materials?

Most of the German prisoners of war, who were held in the reception and transit prisoner-of-war camp No. 38 (Reni), represented the nonrated personnel or non-commissioned officers (more than 90% of the total).

Nonrated personnel or soldiers (listed) amounted to 13.5% of the total number of German prisoners of war of this camp. The soldiers were represented by different age groups: from 18 years old (5 people) to 49 years old (1 person). The most numerous age groups of captured German soldiers fell into the category of those who were from 30 to 40 years old – their number was 59 people (44.7% of the total number of nonrated prisoners).

Non-commissioned officers are represented by several categories of military ranks: from corporals to staff sergeant-majors. The largest number of prisoners of the Germans had the military rank of corporal (370 people) and the chief corporal (250 people).

Of the officers in the camp there were 83 German non-commissioned officers, which was 8.5%. The middle and high rank officers were represented by 4 names: lieutenant – No. 357 Schiltz Oscar, born in 1913; captains – No. 700 Kutetsoid Otto, born in 1888, No. 886 Gabesraiter Hans, born in 1900; colonel – No. 56 Proistbudo Albert, born in 1894. For the sake of justice, it should be noted that there were no captains and colonels in the German army during the Second World War at all (Kurylev, 2007, p. 22). The appearance of these ranks in our “List” can probably be considered a loan translation from the Russian language and the Soviet system of military ranks.

The prisoners lived in barracks fenced with barbed wire, without any basic amenities. A significant number of names in the “List of the Dead ...” and the quickcamp closing suggest that the epidemic of typhoid fever was of a massive nature, which, in the absence of basic medical care, led to the death of the majority of prisoners of war. The dead were buried almost next to the camp, and according to local historians there were only five camp burial mounds. Anonymous burials of the deceased in common pit-graves, without coffins, outerwear and body clothes, without the necessary registration of relevant documents, and other obvious violations – all this became the inevitable reality of the tragic ending for many foreign prisoners of war in the Soviet camps. And in the future, the cynicism of the Soviet totalitarian system had no borders: there were no signs or memorable signs, and even burial mounds were used as elements of the speedway.

During the years of Ukraine’s independence, at the expense of the indifferent inhabitants of the town of Reni, several memorable signs were erected on the site of mass graves, one of which has the inscription: “To foreign citizens – prisoners of war of the transit camp No. 38, who died in 1944-1947 from the inhabitants of Reni. Peace be with you”. The monument was erected in May 2008. It’s surprising, that none of the foreign states, whose servicemen died and were buried near the town of Reni, showed proper attention to the memory of their fellow citizens. It is possible that this publication will serve as a source of information for those who are still looking for their deceased relatives.

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