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The Mass Murder of Soviet Prisoners of War and the Holocaust: How Were They Related?

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The Mass Murder of Soviet Prisoners of War and the Holocaust

How Were They Related?

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On 22 June 1942, the first anniversary of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, *Pravda* carried a long essay by Mikhail Sholokhov, "Nauka nenavisti" (The Science of Hatred). It included the Russian writer's rendition of the tale of a Siberian lieutenant in the Red Army, Gerasimov, who had survived as a prisoner of war in German captivity. The possibly fictional Gerasimov related how immediately after he and his comrades were captured, they were lined up. Then the following happened:

A German lieutenant asked in poor Russian if there were any commissars and commanders among us. Everyone was silent. Then he said again, "Commissars and officers, two steps forward." No one left the line. Walking by slowly, the lieutenant picked out about 16 people who looked like Jews. He asked each one, "*Jude?*" and without waiting for a response, ordered them out of line. Among those selected were Jews, Armenians, and simply Russians with a dark complexion and black hair. Before our very eyes, all of them were taken aside and shot with sub-machine guns.¹

Pavel Polian, the author of several valuable historical monographs, is right to state that the selection and murder of Soviet-Jewish prisoners of war, which could have happened according to Gerasimov's description, have received too little attention. So in principle his contribution is most welcome. Having written about Soviet POWs myself, I read Polian's article "First Victims of the Holocaust: Soviet-Jewish Prisoners of War in German Captivity" with great interest.² Yet the complicated article has not convinced me. **[End Page 789]**

All historical research needs a focus, and Polian's focus on the Soviet-Jewish POWs is legitimate. But we are told too late in this article that "in the very first days of the war [between Germany and the Soviet Union], not only Jews but all Soviet prisoners of war, including even deserters, became victims in formal legal terms" (780). It is more relevant than Polian indicates that most Soviet victims of war crimes by the German military were not Jewish and that in the first nine months of the war in the "East," German leaders and rank-and-file soldiers shot and starved to death about two million captured Red Army members, most of whom were not of Jewish descent. This massacre started with the shootings on the battlefield (also mentioned by Polian [780–81]) of Red Army members who had made clear their intent to surrender or had just surrendered and of soldiers who evidently could not fight any longer.³

At first, the SS and the Wehrmacht also eagerly shot many "Asiatic" prisoners, while a Nazi propaganda campaign raged in the German press with photographs of "Asiatic, Mongol physiognomies from the POW camps," which it described as "truly subhuman."⁴ Most members of the Wehrmacht actually called the captured Red Army soldiers and commanders "Russians." I myself have argued elsewhere, in a thesis that Polian does not seriously engage, that the imposition of a Russian identity on the multiethnic Soviet prisoners shaped their fate: "From the Nazi perspective, the inferior Slavs could be useful, and that was why POWs identified as Ukrainian often were released, especially in 1941. As for 'the Russian,' however, many soldiers in the Wehrmacht evidently assumed that Bolshevism, the vicious ideology and political party created by 'Jewry,' had irreversibly 'infected' him. In this Nazified frame of mind, 'Russians' were either superfluous or positively dangerous."⁵ Anti-Russian racism produced what I have called a *genocidal massacre* (not "ethnocide," a term that Polian ascribes to me [764 n. 1]), in the sense of a deliberate mission, which tended toward genocide, of destroying most of the "Russian" prisoners. The general attitude...

Reaction

The Mass Murder of Soviet Prisoners of War and the Holocaust How Were They Related?

KAREL C. BERKHOFF

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¹ Mikhail Sholokhov, "Nauka nenavisti," *Pravda*, 22 June 1942, 3; also in *Kuzmaia zvezda*, 23 June 1942. The quoted passage is missing from the English translation: Mikhail Sholokhov, *The Science of Hatred* (New York: New Age Publishers, 1943).

² Karel C. Berkhoff, "The 'Russian' Prisoners of War in Nazi-Ruled Ukraine as Victims of Genocidal Massacre," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 15, 1 (2001): 1-32, xv. and repr. in



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