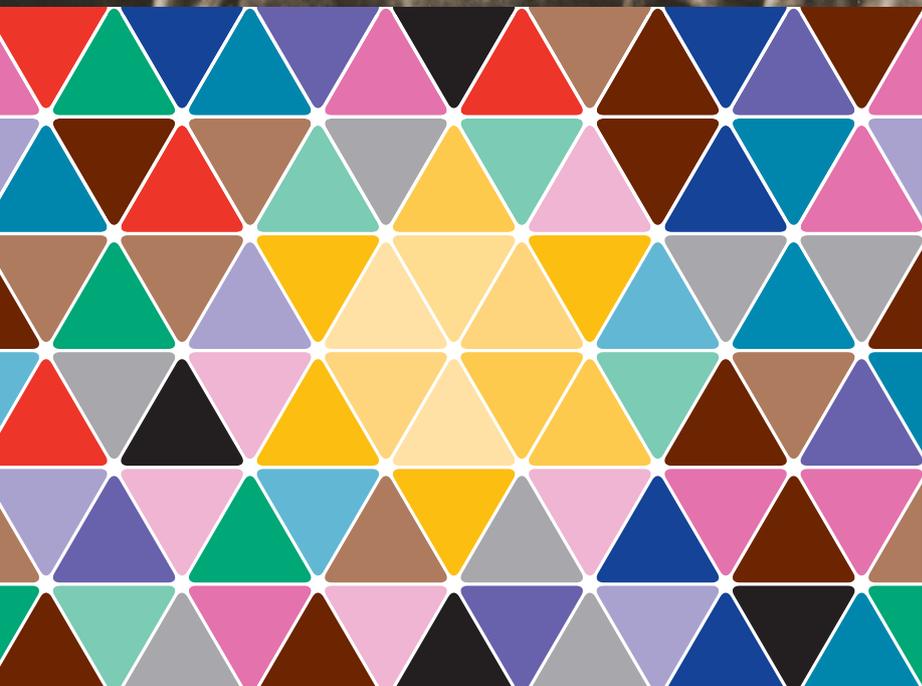




Soviet Prisoners of War



Mosaic – Victims
of Nazi Persecution



Soviet Prisoners of War

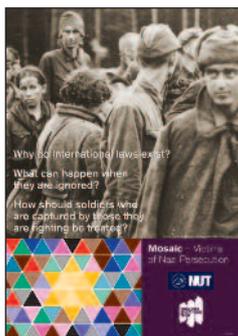
Throughout history, war has led to brutality and injustice. At the same time, however, most armies have attempted to follow codes of civilised behaviour for the conduct of war, including for the treatment of prisoners of war (POWs). Generally accepted principles that POWs should be treated humanely were eventually put into international law by the Hague Convention (1907) and the 3rd Geneva Convention (1929) which were signed by most countries in the world. However, these international laws were completely abandoned when Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1941.

For the Nazis this war was not a normal military conflict between two states but what they termed a 'war of annihilation'. This reflected two key Nazi ideas. The first was anti-Communism. Hitler and other Nazi leaders believed that Communism was part of a Jewish conspiracy to destroy Germany (even though they also believed that capitalism was part of this conspiracy). This linked to the second idea: racism. The Nazis regarded the Russians and other peoples of the Soviet Union as subhumans who had no fundamental right to live. Germany therefore felt it had the right to seek Lebensraum (living space) by invading the Soviet Union and settling its land with Germans. The supposedly inferior peoples of the USSR would be enslaved, expelled or simply left to die.

These attitudes did not stop Hitler from forming an alliance with the Soviet leader Stalin in the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939. This extremely cynical agreement gave both dictators the chance to expand their empires by dividing Poland between them at a time when neither was ready for war with each other. However, Hitler still intended to attack the USSR when the time was right and in late 1940 he decided that the invasion would begin in 1941. This decision was fully supported by the leadership of the Wehrmacht (German army). Many senior officers had opposed some of Hitler's earlier military gambles, such as the invasion of France, but they shared his prejudices against the USSR.

In fact, Wehrmacht commanders were heavily involved in plans for genocide in the USSR. In the spring of 1941, the army, along with the Food Ministry, developed the so-called Hunger Plan which intended to let 20 to 30 million people in the USSR starve to death in order to provide food for Germany. The plan was never fully carried out because of Germany's military failure but it played a major role in the treatment of POWs. The army leadership also issued the Commissar Order of 6th June 1941 which said that any political commissars (Communist propaganda officers) found amongst captured soldiers should be immediately shot. This was

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Photos: National Archives and Records Administration, College Park and Archiv der KZ- Gedenkstätte Mauthausen.

a clear breach of international law which reflected the belief of Hitler and his generals that the laws of war should not apply to the Soviet Red Army. The official reason was that the USSR had never signed the Geneva Convention; the real reason was that the Nazis regarded the lives of Soviet citizens as worthless.

The consequences of these attitudes were evident as soon as the invasion, codenamed Operation Barbarossa, began on 22nd June 1941. Within weeks the Germans had captured huge numbers of prisoners; tens of thousands of them were shot under the terms of the Commissar Order. As it was often difficult to tell who was a political commissar, the army agreed to let the Gestapo (the Nazi secret police) visit POW camps to find prisoners who were considered 'politically and racially intolerable'. Suspected commissars, other Communists, Jews and intellectuals were taken by the Gestapo and killed. Many were shot near the POW camps but others were taken to concentration camps to be murdered, including 600 POWs who became the first people to be gassed in Auschwitz, in September 1941.

They were only a fraction of the total number of victims: by February 1942, 2 million Soviet soldiers (out of 3.3 million captured up to that point) had died. Many died in transit to POW camps, travelling hundreds of miles on foot or in open freight trains with hardly any food or water. Those who were unable to continue were shot. When they finally arrived, most of the 'camps' turned out to little more than fields surrounded by barbed wire, forcing the POWs to live in the open air or in holes in the ground with virtually no food; many ate grass and leaves in desperation. Even when barracks were built, they were hopelessly overcrowded. The resulting starvation and disease produced staggering death rates. In the camp at Dęblin in Poland, for example,

approximately 80% of the more than 100,000 prisoners died in the winter of 1941-42.

German policy changed at the end of 1941 but not for humanitarian reasons. The failure to defeat the USSR quickly meant that the war would be longer than expected so Germany needed more workers. It was decided to use surviving POWs as forced labour: their food rations were increased and they were sent to concentration camps and factories, where they were used as slaves. Despite the slightly better conditions, starvation and disease remained. Unsurprisingly, many POWs escaped and they played a leading role in partisan resistance against the Nazis in eastern Europe. However, those who were recaptured were treated appallingly. For example, 4,500 officers who had previously escaped were taken to Mauthausen concentration camp in 1944 and left to starve.

It is estimated that 3.3 million Soviet prisoners of war lost their lives under the Nazis, out of 5.7 million who were captured (57.9 % compared to 3.6 % for British and American POWs). They were therefore the second largest group of victims (after Jews) of Nazi genocide. The suffering of those who survived did not end in 1945. Stalin regarded Red Army soldiers who were captured as traitors to the USSR, even though most of them had been caught because of his military blunders in the early months of the war. More than 200,000 former POWs were sent to Soviet concentration camps after the war where many died; the survivors were only released in the mid-1950s after Stalin's death. Hundreds of thousands of other former POWs were used for forced labour. Even those who were supposedly not punished found themselves treated as second-class citizens, with restrictions on their work, housing and education. Soviet prisoners of war thus became victims of two dictatorships.

Further materials will become available through the course of this joint project.

For further information go to

National Union of Teachers

www.teachers.org.uk and

Holocaust Educational Trust

www.het.org.uk

