



Jerzy Kochanowski. *In Polnischer Gefangenschaft: Deutsche Kriegsgefangene in Polen 1945-1950.* Reihe Klio in Polen. Osnabrück: Fibre, 2004. 521 pp. EUR 37.80 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-929759-62-4.



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German POWs in Poland 1945-1950

This is an abbreviated and updated translation into German of Jerzy Kochanowski's *W polskiej niewoli: Niemieccy jency wojenni w Polsce 1945-1950* (2001). Kochanowski has written and edited numerous publications on German-Polish relations. His research draws heavily on Polish, German, and Austrian archives; numerous personal interviews; and some published Russian sources. This book is the most substantial analysis now available in German concerning the mutual experience of German prisoners of war (POWs) and their captor authorities in Poland. It fills an information void not addressed in recent works by Stefan Karner, Erwin Peter and Alexander E. Epifanov on German prisoners held by the Soviet Union.

Few people knew and fewer yet discussed the fact that Poland held between forty and fifty thousand German POWs for up to five years after the Second World War. The precise number is not known; nor is it clear how many of these inmates were captured soldiers, forced laborers left over from Nazi rule or displaced refugees. The collection of validated statistics was prevented by the chaos of war, tumults associated with

regime establishment in Poland, military occupation in Germany, international "Cold War" rivalries and leadership purges within the socialist bloc. All of these factors, plus administrative confusion and extreme secrecy, have obscured the topic of POWs in Poland.

Most western scholars, journalists and public officials assumed that German POWs held in Poland were Soviet prisoners. Indeed, Soviet forces captured almost all soldiers taken in the East, but they turned these particular prisoners over to the Poles in 1945-46. For a time, Polish authorities used this excuse to deny German POWs rights stipulated in the Geneva Convention of 1929. Poland had ratified the Convention but the USSR had not done so. When accused of violating prisoners' rights, Warsaw officials claimed that its German POWs were really prisoners of the Soviet Union and therefore had no Geneva Convention rights.

Under the Yalta and Potsdam agreements, the victorious Allies agreed that Poland should annex most German territories east of the Oder and Neiße Rivers, including Upper Silesia, coal-mining country with an extreme shortage of miners. The terrible conditions of the early

postwar period threatened the entire industrial economy of Poland. As the Soviet Union was planning to import, at very favorable rates, large stocks of Polish coal for its own economic recovery, Moscow agreed to transfer some of its German POWs to Polish control. Complaining that the Soviets had kept the ablest and healthiest prisoners for themselves, the Poles nevertheless accepted all the prisoners they could put to work. They even arrested for a second time some POWs the Soviets had released for repatriation.

In the West as well as in the East, scholarly research concerning all German prisoners of war in the east was only gradually pursued, sometimes suppressed and often distorted. In 1959, long after the POWs had been repatriated, the West German Federal Ministry for Expellees, Fugitives and War Victims finally created a special commission for the history of German POWs in the Second World War. The commission gathered documents and interviewed hundreds of former POWs. It produced a twenty-two volume collection entitled *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen des 2. Weltkrieges* (1961-73). These volumes were mostly ignored before 1976, when the Foreign Office eased its restrictions and permitted general publication. Almost all of these studies escaped timely scholarly review and attracted little public attention. The commission's archives remained classified until the 1990s with few objections from the academic community. Many historians avoided discussion of the suffering of Germans, including POWs, lest it soften perceptions of German guilt and cheapen the agonies of non-German victims of Nazi atrocities.

In the East, academic and journalistic publications put the best face on harsh conditions and the long delay in repatriation of German captives. Credit was bestowed upon the antifascist re-education program, "Antifa." Before the end of the war, Antifa created the Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland and the Bund deutscher Offiziere to function in Soviet camps and in 1948 a comparable movement called Selbstverwaltung der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen in Polish camps. Selbstverwaltung aimed to cleanse minds of Nazi ways and to replace them with socialist ideals, to recruit politically dependable activists to control POWs while in captivity and to function as socialist comrades after repatriation. Selbstverwaltung operated a POW newspaper titled "Die BrÄ¼cke," which tried to justify, even to glorify, the system and methods of postwar retention of German POWs in Polish camps and labor stations.

After the collapse of the Soviet bloc, western scholars

rushed to upgrade their linguistic and special research skills to exploit newly available archival and personal resources in the east, particularly in Russia. The process has been more difficult and time-consuming than expected, but it is still producing remarkable results, particularly regarding World War II POWs in Soviet hands. Compared to the treatment of approximately 2.1 million German prisoners held by the Soviet Union, Poland's exploitation of POWs is not impressive. Even so, an estimated forty to fifty thousand is by no means a small number of POWs, and for those who endured captivity, the five years between 1945 and 1950 were certainly not a short period of time. Kochanowski's work indicates that Germans in Polish captivity had a greater economic impact on postwar Poland than their limited numbers suggest.

Kochanowski traces the routes of the prisoners into captivity, describes and evaluates the variety of camps and the living conditions within them and does his best to explain the sources and results of the "organizational chaos" that dominated their lives. The central theme of his monograph is the impact of POW labor on reconstruction of Warsaw and revival of industrial, agricultural and other productive enterprises. No single authority controlled all the POWs. The Ministry of State Security established central camps in Warsaw, Sikawa, Potulitz and Jaworzno but prisoners listed on the rosters of these camps were frequently stationed elsewhere, a practice that was a major source of administrative and financial confusion. The military retained several thousand Germans to work on construction sites, farms, and in other places. The precise nature of their work is unknown but it is clear that the Ministry of State Security wanted these workers under its own control. Many special camps set up in the coal fields fell under the authority of the Central Administration of the Coal Industry. Finally, in 1948-49 a repatriation camp was organized at Gliwice, created ostensibly to assemble POWs for return to Germany and to enable Antifa and the Ministry of State Security to reinforce their messages of socialist loyalty.

The labor of POWs as miners was crucial to the integration of newly acquired Silesian mines into the postwar recovery of Poland. By 1945 the mines had been forced into idleness by military action, default of the railroad system and the death, disability or deportation of Silesian miners. POWs were rushed into the mines regardless of their inexperience or medical disabilities. Shortcuts in worker safety procedures accommodated the vengeful attitude that POWs should do the most dangerous work.

Predictably, high accident rates accompanied the reopening of the mines and lessened productivity.

POW workers were supposed to receive pay comparable to that of Polish miners, with deductions taken by camp authorities to cover food and shelter. Under Geneva Convention regulations, part of each worker's wages should be deposited in personal accounts to be returned to the worker upon repatriation. Kochanowski shows that no wages were paid and no credits were given to POWs until 1948 and that even then, after the POW workers had learned to meet standard production quotas, their wages were kept low even by Polish standards. Housing, food and clothing were of extremely poor quality and in desperately short supply everywhere in Poland in 1945. The situation improved slowly thereafter. Worker's insurance was promised but specific cases show that it did not exist. Medical care was rendered only in large base camps and in many of the approximately 130 sub-camps and worksites no treatment beyond emergency first-aid was available. The mortality rate in Poland was about 10 percent, far better than the 30 percent for POWs in Soviet hands, but worse than the estimated 3 percent in other states that held German prisoners.

Restrictive postal regulations and chaotic camp administration deepened the isolation of the captives. In some areas, particularly outside of Silesia, where people were not accustomed to Germans, intense hostility toward Germans discouraged inmates from venturing outside their barracks. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was not permitted to inspect the camps before 1947 and encountered much resistance during its inspection trips between December 1947 and November 1948. Camp authorities were eager, however, to receive donated supplies from the ICRC, although their distribution among the prisoners was at best uneven and subject to numerous complaints.

Some categories of prisoners had advantages. Military engineers and technical specialists received special attention and were permitted to work as contract employees. Improvement of their skills had the unfortunate effect of rendering them necessary for Polish reconstruction and probably delayed their repatriation.

Officers were denied Geneva Convention exemption from work. The Soviets had kept officers strictly separated from other ranks but when they turned over 1,441 German officers at the Sagan and Neuhammer camps, the Poles sent almost all of them to Silesian coal-mining camps. SS and police-unit officers were put to work in

the mines while other German officers received above-ground assignments considered appropriate for officers. The Poles quickly became uncomfortable with the political influence German officers retained over POW non-commissioned officers and enlisted men. In 1947 they transferred the officers first to a large camp at Jaworzno and thereafter in 1948 to an isolation camp at Sikawa, where most remained until repatriation in 1950. There Antifa, working with East German agents, intensified re-education of selected candidates for future political work.

For non-officers the center of political re-education remained located in several Warsaw camps. There Antifa's Selbstverwaltung recruited POWs with communist backgrounds as teachers and provided places for instruction and free time for POWs to take special indoctrination courses. Instruction was centered in Warsaw rather than in coal-mining camps because industry administrators kept the inmates too busy to participate and probably expected communist indoctrination to spread too many negative attitudes concerning long hours, low pay, overcrowded housing and miserable living conditions. As appeals for the repatriation of German POWs became more urgent, the need for political indoctrination of prospective returnees intensified. In 1948, nearly a thousand inmates completed the propaganda courses in Poland. The effectiveness of this re-education is disputed because some of the POW students were already communists, some had become disillusioned with Nazism and were in need of guidance and some hoped merely to earn favorable treatment in the camps.

Kochanowski's narrative generally follows the contours of his source material but he closes this study with an unusual topical exercise in comparative history. He compares prisoner-of-war experiences of Germans in Poland with those in France and Czechoslovakia. All three of these countries had been delivered from German control by the overwhelming power of their allies; annexed or reacquired large coal-mining regions; received from their allies large numbers of POWs; used these POWs to reactivate their coal mines and related industries; and attempted to re-educate the POWs. Differences seem to outweigh similarities regarding conditions, procedures and results. Nevertheless, this approach suggests new ways to examine the history of POWs from perspectives of captives and captors alike.

The book has several helpful features; these include approximately fifteen photos of indifferent quality; an indispensable guide to acronyms and abbreviations of Polish, Russian and German organizations; a list of all

camps and work sites including locations and characteristics; a full bibliography with translations of Polish titles into German; and separate indexes for persons and places. The reader will certainly appreciate the use of footnotes rather than endnotes, particularly because citations of archival sources are abbreviated and frequently combined with long comments. Nothing comparable to Kochanowski's book is currently available in English.

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