

*In the Arena of Memories. Finnish Prisoners of War in Soviet Custody in 1939-1959*

More than seventy years have passed since the end of the Second World War. It is now possible to piece together a compilation of the images and ideas that Finland has formed of the war and the prisoners of war (POWs). But some memories of the war have faded, including those of the POWs. Each nation can present its different views on the memory of the war custody. Memories are in a constant process of construction. Some of the most forgotten and neglected memories are the fates of those taken captive: the POWs.

Although all POWs had equal rights according to Soviet domestic law, Finns were, nonetheless, treated better than other nationals in the camps. The Soviet propaganda machine failed to create the “image of the enemy”. Initially, the Finns were not seen as fascists, but as unfortunate victims of the evil Helsinki government, or as “White Finns”. It was only after Finnish troops crossed the old border between the two countries late in 1941 and began to occupy parts of Russian Karelia that the political terminology began to change. Nevertheless, not everyone regarded the Finns as enemies. The farther a POW camp was from the actual front, the more benign were the attitudes towards the inmates. Finns were not the “main enemy” for most Soviet civilians as were the Germans. This means that Finnish POWs were not subjected to the same systematic slaughter that many German prisoners faced. It needs to be stressed that there are no records of Finnish POWs being executed by NKVD (the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) officials when the Soviets ceded territory, unlike the case with Polish POWs in Ukraine and with Germans in Estonia in 1941. Moreover, the UPVI (Directorate General for the Prisoners of War and Internment Camps) evacuated Finnish prisoners from Tallinn and the Karelian cities of Petrozavodsk and Medvezegorsk before they lost them. But the Russian prisoners had been executed.

The topic of my report is to compare the treatment of Finns with that of the other nations in the Soviet NKVD camps and the interrelationships between the different nations. If during the Winter War, Finns had no contacts with other national groups of POWs (for example, Poles, Japanese), during the Continuation War the situation had changed greatly. In 1941-1955, more than 5 million POWs of 37 nationalities were in Soviet custody. Due to the large number of other POWs, it was not possible to separate Finns from all the other POWs as it was in 1939-1940. Documents in Russian and Finnish archives reveal that Finnish POWs were registered in more than 50 camps and hospitals on the territory of the USSR.

Thus, the report is also focused on the relationships between the different nationalities in the NKVD camps. And what was the situation of the Finns, did they really have a privileged position there and what were the differences between nations in NKVD camps?

Another aspect is the question of political education and the re-education of POWs, the different approaches to this work taken by the USSR towards different nationalities and of course the specifics of cultural life in the NKVD camps.

However, if most of the Finnish POWs were repatriated to Finland in November–December 1944 (the bulk of them were captured in June–July, 1944), Germans, Italians, Romanians and all other foreign POWs remained in Soviet custody until 1955. This was obviously the main difference between the Finns and all other foreign POWs.