

The Concentration Camps near Ozarichi

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The concentration camps near Ozarichi were set up on March 12, 1944 in the 9th Army sector, about 75 miles south of the town of Bobruisk in Belorussia. They were, however, only in existence until March 19, since their sole purpose was for the 9th Army to rid itself, during a coordinated military retreat, of those civilians who were incapable of labor, by shifting them into the no-man's land between the retreating German troops and the advancing Red Army.

The history of this group of concentration camps is unlike that of other concentration camps and death camps or ghettos involving forced labor and in that it is tightly interwoven with the military situation of the 9th Army at the onset of 1944 as well as with the general situation of the German troops and the German policies of occupation, exploitation and extermination. It is thus a history closely connected with the civilian population, which was crowding together in increasing numbers in the shrinking territories under German control on the Eastern Front. In early 1944, the 9th Army conceived a radical solution to a problem that it had itself incurred. In a planned, large-size operation, all remaining civilians incapable of labor were to be deported out of the German area of command and placed in three concentration camps, which had been set up for this specific purpose, in the no-man's land between the German and the Soviet front lines.

In March 1944, the forces of the 9th Army were positioned in a perimeter of about 60 to 70 kilometers east of the town of Bobruisk. Amongst them were the LV Corps with the 20th Tank Division (Panzerdivision) and the 5th Tank Division, the XXXV Corps with the 383rd, the 6th and the 45th Infantry Division, the XXXXI Corps with the 36th and 253rd Infantry Division and the 4th Tank Division as well as the LVI Corps with the 134th, the 110th, the 35th and the 129th Infantry Division.

The root cause of the dire situation in the sector of the 9th Army during the winter of 1943/1944 was that the enforced recruitment for labor of all able-bodied men and women in its area of command had resulted in left-behind family dependents, who were incapable of fending for themselves.

At the beginning of March, Adolf Hitler authorized a front line adjustment within the command area of the 35th Infantry Division, due to an eastward pointing nose in the German front line that was proving difficult to defend. This provided the 9th Army with an opportunity to implement its radical plan: the deportation of what the Wehrmacht regarded as "superfluous" civilians - in as far as these persons were incapable of labor - from the entire territory under its occupation.

Directly pursuant to this authorization of retreat, the 35th Infantry Division began to set up the first camp.¹ Starting the joint operation, General Josef Harpe, the Commander of the 9th Army, who had vigorously pressed ahead with the enforced recruitment of civilian manpower for the Wehrmacht and for the German war effort in 1943 and 1944, and who was fully aware of the demographic

¹ Interrogation of Generalleutnant Johann Georg Richert on January 16th, 1946, p. 37, Privatarchiv Paul Kohl, Berlin.

consequences of such actions,² issued Order No. 233/44. This order, due to be carried out in an operation commencing at 4 a.m. on the morning of March 12, decreed that those persons incapable of labor be deported into the front area from which the Army was retreating. Particularly relevant for the elaboration of the operational plans was the attempt of the German occupying forces to contain the spread of typhus fever within their area of control. Thus, all civilians suffering from the disease were to be indiscriminately deported, in the hope that this would prove to be a decisive step towards stemming the disease.³

The Quartermaster sections of the Army, its Corps and the Divisions were to organize and implement the operation. Besides the divisional troops, forces which reported directly to the Corps, and 150 men from the Sonderkommando 7a of the SD were to be involved.

On account of the local geographical conditions and the available means of transportation, the LVI and the XXXXI Tank Corps (Panzerkorps) who were stationed nearest to the planned disengagement zone (Absetzzone) to the south of the 9th Army sector were to round up the civilians and bring them either on foot or by truck or horse-driven cart to the camps. The XXXV and LV Army Corps (Armeekorps), who were stationed further away to the north, had the rail network at their disposal for the transport. Further to these organizational issues, the Order also regulated the deployment of Wehrmacht units under the Sonderkommando 7a to manage the march of the victims from the unloading railheads to the collection camps (Sammelager) and from there to the final concentration camps (Endlager).⁴ Apart from regulating issues relating to the supply of provisions, the Order of March 9 further stipulated that, in the event of a retreat of the German front line forces, the camps were to be shelled by artillery in order to prevent civilians from escaping and from approaching the German lines.⁵

A system of fenced off areas with no buildings and no sanitary facilities was established in the area designated for the deportations. It was intended to enable the rounding up of the civilians and their transport over the last few kilometers to the three concentration camps. The 129th Infantry Division set up a collection camp in the vicinity of the "unloading railroad station" Rudobelka, which held a key position for the transport via rail. The camp was planned to hold 6,000 people. In fact, between March 13 and March 15 about 12,000 to 16,000 people were herded into it. From there, they were to be transported further via a transit camp (Zwischenlager) to the so-called "Endlager Süd", which had been set up by the 35th Infantry Division and was to accommodate 12,000 people. The Sonderkommando 7a of the SD, aided by units of the Wehrmacht, were to guard the civilians during the last phase of the operation, the foot march from the "unloading railroad station" into the concentration camps.

In addition to this main axis for the transportation of the civilians, the 35th, the 129th and the 110th Infantry Divisions set up smaller camps near to the villages of Nestanowitschi, Porosslichsche and Mikul Gorodok, to take in those civilians brought in from the sectors for which the LVI and the XXXXI

² Befehl über die Aufstellung von Arbeitsabteilungen, 23.5.1943, NARA T-314 Film 688 Frame 1235; see BA MA Msg 109/946 for more information on Harpe.

³ Berat. Hyg. Prof. v. Bormann, 9. Armee, Erfahrungsbericht Fleckfieber 31.12.1943-15.5.1943; Erfahrungsbericht Fleckfieber-Evakuierung 31.12.1943-15.5.1943, BA MA H 20 5 8.

⁴ Sicherheitspolizei und SD, Sonderkommando 7a, geh.Tg.B.Br. 17/44g, 30.3.1944, NARA T-314 Film 1440 Frame 990.

⁵ Kriegstagebuch der Quartiermeisterabteilung des LVI. Korps, 9.3.1944, NARA T-314 Film 1438 Frame 914.

Tank Corps were responsible. Later on, they were moved on to Endlager I near Mysloff Rog or to Endlager II near to Litwinowitschi.

The so-called Endlager consisted of a double-strand barbed wire fence and simple guard towers. The surrounding area was marshy woodland. In order to avoid the Red Army discovering the operation before the retreat had taken place, the civilians were forbidden to make fires, despite the severe cold.

According to the original plans, on which the order of March 9, 1944 was based, the intention was to deport 20,000 “diseased persons, crippled persons, old persons, women with more than 2 children under 10 years of age, and other persons incapable of labor” out of the 9th Army sector.⁶ However, analysis of the available records shows that at least 30,873 persons were accounted for in the sector under the two northern Corps alone, 23,519 of whom were brought by rail to Rudobelka. This is twice the number that was intended for this area. Correspondingly, conditions for the civilians in these camps became more acute, since food provisions were inadequate, as were the available means of transportation. As a measure against the typhus fever epidemic, those civilians who had already contracted the disease and were being held in quarantine in so-called “disease villages” were included in the deportations. A total of around 7,000 sick persons were brought to the camps, where they were not segregated from the still healthy victims. Coupled with the catastrophic living conditions, this led to an epidemic spreading of the disease and an extremely high death rate amongst those who contracted it.

The military log of the Quartermaster’s section contains information on the filling up of the camps between March 14 and 16. It states that a total of 39,597 adult civilians and in addition “several thousand small children” were deported into the three concentration camps.⁷ Furthermore, the Sonderkommando 7a registered a total of 47,461 persons.⁸ After liberating the concentration camps, the Red Army spoke of 33,000 survivors and 9,000 dead.⁹ It is not possible to verify the accuracy of these figures but they clearly indicate the deportation of up to 50,000 civilian victims.

Overall, the deportations covered an area of about 5,000 square kilometers. However, only some of the deportees originated from the area controlled by the 9th Army. A lot of them had already been rounded up and brought there from other regions of the Soviet Union under occupation by the German Army. Some had been evacuated during the 9th Army’s recent retreating operations; others had been in different Wehrmacht camps for weeks. A survivor, speaking as a witness at the Military Tribunal at Minsk, told of how she been forced out of her village by the Wehrmacht in December 1943. After those surviving villagers capable of labor had been picked out, she was taken to a camp in which medical doctors of the Wehrmacht were apparently conducting research into the typhus fever by experimenting on human beings. From there, she was brought to a camp near to Porosslischtsche, about 20 kilometers North West of the Ozarichi camps, and in March 1944, at the end of a 4-month long odyssey, she was deported to one of the latter.¹⁰ Yet other civilians came from the direct vicinity

⁶ See Endnote 5.

⁷ Kriegstagebuch der Quartiermeisterabteilung des LVI. Korps, 16.3.1944, NARA T-314 Film 1438 Frame 922.

⁸ See Endnote 4.

⁹ Protokoll Nr. 29. Sitzung der Außerordentlichen Staatlichen Kommission vom 29. April 1944, Staatsarchiv Nürnberg, Dokument USSR-4.

¹⁰ See Endnote 1.

of the camps.¹¹

With regard to the conduct of the guards and soldiers during the implementation of the operation, survivors reported later that even during the rounding up of the civilians, divisional units had reacted to any attempt at escape or any form of resistance with brutal force. Sonderkommando 7a documented in writing the excessive brutality and killings, which took place above all on the marches from the railway station at Rudobelka to the concentration camp at Dert. During the march, Sonderkommando 7a guarded the front and the rear of the column of civilians, whilst units of the Wehrmacht marched at their sides.¹²

Those civilians who could not keep up with the rest were ruthlessly killed by the guards. There are no exact figures available, however the 9th Army itself states in its corresponding report that about 500 persons had perished during the rail transport alone,¹³ and advised that for similar operations in the future, the marching columns should be followed by burial commandos, who would dispose of the dead bodies.¹⁴ Within the camps, the guards shot without warning any persons who approached the fencing in search of water. Similarly, any attempt to light a fire was met with shots from the Germans in the watch-towers.¹⁵

Wehrmacht units – particularly the supply units –¹⁶ were actively involved in all these activities. For the transportation into the concentration camp at Dert, the escorting guards of the trains arriving in Rudobelka and “particularly resolute officers, NCOs and men” of the LVI Tank Corps reported directly to the Sonderkommando 7a.¹⁷ Testimony by surviving witnesses provide a horrid picture of how the marches to the camps, and the camps themselves really were, even without the dreadful conditions that can be interpreted from the available sober facts, such as the poor ratio between camp capacity and camp inhabitants, or the distances that the old, the sick, and the children were required to cover and the pace at which they were expected to walk.

A dramatic diary entry made by a German army chaplain when he arrived at the huge camp near to Dert, where at that time more than 20,000 civilians were already interned, reflects the dreadful reality of the deportations:

“I noticed that something had changed first of all because of a strange sound which I could not identify until I saw the camp in the distance. A continuous, low wail of many voices rose out of it up to the sky. And then I saw right in front of me how they were dragging the dead body of an old man as though he were a piece of cattle. They had tied a rope around his legs. An old woman lay dead by the wayside, a recent gunshot wound in her forehead. A man of the Military Police gave me further insight by pointing to a bundle that lay in the dirt: dead children whom he had covered up with a pillow. Women who could no longer carry their children left them at the roadside, where they were

¹¹ See Endnote 9.

¹² See Endnote 4.

¹³ See Endnote 7.

¹⁴ Erfahrungsbericht über den Abschub nichtarbeitsfähiger Zivilisten zum Feind, 28.3.1944, BA MA RH 20 9 197; see further Endnote 4.

¹⁵ See Endnote 1.

¹⁶ See Endnote 4.

¹⁷ See Endnote 5.

shot – “eliminated” like anybody else who cannot carry on due to illness, age, or infirmness”.¹⁸

In the areas under divisional control, the deportations were carried out by the troops of the Military Police (Feldgendarmarie) together with the units of the Supply Service, which reported directly to the Quartermasters.

In agreement with the head of the Sonderkommando 7a – Sturmbannführer Helmuth Loos – the 110th Infantry Division took on the supervision of the northern transit camps and concentration camps. During the first days of the operation, the Division supervised the civilians of the XXXXI Tank Corps in the “Zwischenlager Nord” near Mikul Gorodok and implemented their own truck transports from Rudobelka to the “Zwischenlager Mitte” near Porosslischtsche. The Sonderkommando 7a, on the other hand, concentrated on the southern route, which was most heavily used and which served as the main axis for the deportations. In order to guard the camps, the Supply Services of the Field Replacement Bataillon (Feldersatzbatallion) of the 129th and 110th Infantry Divisions and reserve units of the Army Weapons Training School (Armeewaffenschule) and of the 35th Infantry Division were called in.

After transportation of the victims into the camps was completed, the camp entrances were blocked with mines and the units of the Wehrmacht left, leaving behind some small surveillance commandos. On March 17, the last remaining guards also drew back to the new front line of the 35th Infantry Division, shelling the camps to prevent any of the internees from escaping.

On March 19, reconnaissance units of the Red Army discovered the three camps near Ozarichi. After removing the German mines, which, following the withdrawal of the German guards, had killed numerous camp internees as they attempted to leave the camps, the survivors were moved to different military hospitals in the surrounding area. The 9th Army, in its final report to the Army Group Center (Heeresgruppe Mitte), stated that Luftwaffe aircraft had observed the survivors being transported into the Soviet rear some days later.¹⁹

As the extent of the deportations became clear following the liberation of the camps, the Soviet officials directly began to carry out investigations and to secure evidence. The “Extraordinary State Commission for ascertaining and investigating crimes perpetrated by the German-Fascist Invaders” demanded in its report of May 6, 1944 that charges be brought against the eleven German officers responsible for the crime. At the Nuremberg Trial, Chief Counselor of Justice Smirnow, acting on behalf of the UDSSR, provided evidence in the form of a detailed report in February 1946.²⁰ In a Soviet war crimes trial in Minsk, General Johann-Georg Richert, Commander of the 35th Infantry Division, who had been taken into Soviet captivity at the end of the war, was only one of those sentenced to death. Amongst other things, he was accused of involvement in the deportations near Ozarichi. He was executed at Minsk on January 30, 1946. Some lower ranks, whose involvement in the deportations was proved, were all sentenced to 25 years hard labor. However, most of the men directly responsible for the planning and execution of the Ozarichi deportations, first of all Helmuth

¹⁸ Perau, Josef: *Priester im Heere Hitlers. Erinnerungen 1940-1945*, Essen 1962, S. 160.

¹⁹ See Endnotes 4, 9 und 14; and *Der Prozess gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher vor dem Internationalen Militärgerichtshof*, Bd. VIII. Verhandlungsniederschriften 5. Februar 1946-19. Februar 1946, Nürnberg 1947, p. 635.

²⁰ See Endnote 19.

Looss, commanding officer of Sonderkommando 7a, Josef Harpe, commanding General of the 9th Army, Friedrich Hoßbach, commander of the LVI Corps, and Werner Bodenstein, chief quartermaster of the 9th army, were never held accountable for their crimes.

Sources

The events at Ozarichi are well documented by Wehrmacht records. Evidence can be found in different types of operational files dealing with both military actions and administrative decisions. The principal sources were three field reports, which provide information about the motivation behind the operation, as well as its objectives and implementation. The field report by the 9th Army provides the clearest insight, because it is grounded on the reports of the subordinate units, of which only those of the LV Army Corps and the Sonderkommando 7a of the SD still exist. The field report by the Consultant Hygienist (Beratender Hygieniker) of the 9th Army provides supplementary information from a military medical perspective.

The military logs of the LV Army and the XXXXI and LVI Tank Corps are also still in existence. They contain key information and comments on the operation. The Order issued by the 9th Army, which stated that the operation be implemented, is no longer available in the original, because a supplementary order required for it to be destroyed after completion of the operation. However, the content of the Order is recorded in detail in the military log of the LVI Tank Corps quartermaster section, including the supplementary commands elaborated by the Quartermaster of that Corps while planning the details. The military logs also convey an accurate impression of the institutional collaboration between the individual units. One of the most valuable finds is that of two differently scaled maps, showing the area between Choino – west of the River Ptitsch – and Marmowitschi, which was held by the LVI Tank Corps, and which was the focal point of the operation. On these maps are marked the locations of the Divisions and Corps, partisan activities and the network of transportation channels and camps involved in the mass deportation.

Information about the deportation at divisional level is only available from the few surviving records of one Infantry Division. Comprehensive documentation on some of the officers responsible for the operation is available through personnel files and in some judicial records.

In the National Archives of the Republic of Belarus in Minsk, and in the similarly located archives of the Belorussian KGB, interrogation records are kept which contain statements made by members of Wehrmacht units who became - at a later date - Soviet prisoners of war. Furthermore, there are court transcripts which were made during the trial in Minsk of the commander of the 35th Infantry Division Johann-Georg Richert. In addition to his statements on the operation, there are also witness statements made by survivors of the deportations.

Moreover, the Belorussian Regional Archives, such as the Regional State Archives in Shlobin, contain fragmented documentation from captured German records. Information on events related to the evacuation of Shlobin is only available in the form of oral statements which were given by on-the-spot witnesses a few weeks after the liberation of the camp, some of which have been published.

In the Belorussian State Archive of Films, Photographs and Sound Recordings in Dzerzhinsk photographs and film footage exist which the Red Army took during the liberation of the camp near Ozarichi. They also document the conditions in the surrounding area in March 1944.

A particularly valuable contemporary document, which highlights the discrepancy between “perpetrator” and “victim” perspectives is the entry made by the Division chaplain, who found

himself by chance at the largest concentration camp (Endlager) near to the village of Dert during the most intensive phase of the operation, where he witnessed the deportations.

Only excerpts of the documentary evidence produced by Chief Counselor of Justice Smirnow during the Nuremberg Trial of the Major War Criminals in 1946 – document no. USSR-4 – are available in the published records of that trial but a complete copy of that document is available in the State Archive Nuremberg.

Selected archival sources

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The Bavarian State Archives (Staatsarchiv) Nuremberg

USSR-4

The Literature

Although there has been international awareness of the Ozarichi deportations since the Nuremberg Trials in 1946, research into these occurrences has been at a superficial level for many years. A few accounts, which fail to reflect upon their originators' involvement, may be found in the so-called German post-war veteran literature. These accounts deal with the history of those Divisions and some minor units involved in the deportations.

German historians started to focus on this area much later, despite the fact that no comparable operation involving the Wehrmacht targeting Russian civilians had ever been documented. An earlier attempt at analysis had been made by the GDR historian Norbert Müller, who referred to the deportations in 1971 on the basis of Soviet documents. After him came Christian Gerlach, who in both his dissertation and in an essay on the crimes of German frontline troops in Belorussia from 1941 to 1944, used principally Soviet archives and scattered German records. Gerlach did not, however, fully incorporate the existing German operation files into his analysis. The brief survey given by Hans-Heinrich Nolte entails little detail. In particular, any Wehrmacht documentation is missing from his listed sources. He does, however, include key sources from the Belorussian archives. Neither of these authors, then, could provide a comprehensive picture of the structuring and full extent of this war crime.

Christoph Rass investigated the occurrences in Ozarichi based on a very large share of the existing records in German archives. His portrayal finally reveals the "anatomy" of one of the most large-scale war crimes committed by the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front, showing it to have been the sum total of several centrally planned and coordinated individual actions that culminated in a complex criminal operation. It was on this foundation that an unpublished documentary film was created in 2006. The film supplemented the existing sources with new interviews of contemporary witnesses and further documentary findings, thus providing for the first time a comprehensive audiovisual documentation of the crime and the crime-scene. The USHMM holds a copy of this film.

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