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# REPATRIATION OF RUSSIAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN THE WORLD WAR I

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# Abstract

The article is devoted to the review of the problem of repatriation of Russian prisoners of war in the conditions of rough political events in the first post war years. We tried to give a global vision of the research problem based on the theories of civilization relating to linear interpretation of social development of history. The World War I is considered as result of crisis of an industrial civilization here. On March 3, 1918 in Brest-Litovsk the separate peace between the Soviet Russia and the Central powers was signed, the 8th article of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk provided the return of prisoners of war from both sides home. However the Conditions of the Brest-Litovsk treaty on exchange of prisoners of war weren't realized. In November, 1918 diplomatic relations between Germany and RSFSR were broken off, and the problem of return of prisoners of war home remained unresolved. The Russian prisoners' of war way home was long because of a civil war, red and white terror and emigration, secession of Ukraine, Belarus, Transcaucasia and their accession to Russia as the new federal Soviet republics. Due to all these circumstances it is impossible to determine how many prisoners of war of World War I returned home, went to other countries or remained in Germany. Some Russian prisoners of war in Germany remained even in 1926.

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# 1. Introduction

Mankind's development is closely linked with the military conflicts, and one of the components of the armed confrontation is captivity as a necessary measure, aimed at isolation of its participants from fighting. The historical phenomenon called "war prisoner" has relations not only to the history of warfare, it also covers internal politics of belligerent ruling circles, it defines interrelations of a government, society and the individual. Here the relevant questions arise about the importance of the fate of ordinary people - participants of the war rather than the role of States in the war. And it was the fate of prisoners of war (POWs) the most tragic of all participants in the war. Modern humanity is experiencing a time of rethinking of war and peace. Of course, this process will be long and difficult. Rethinking will concern understanding the relation of global policy objectives of belligerents and human destinies.

Studying the history of POWs of World War started during the war and until nowadays. The most complete picture of the situation of prisoners of war of the Entente in Germany we find in the book of W. Doegen published under the auspices of the Ministry of War in 1921 (Doegen, 1921). The paper gives a detailed description of the life of prisoners in the camps: their rights and obligations, using of labor, spiritual life, religious rites under the control of the Red Cross camps. The total number of prisoners, their ethnic composition, movement of contingent camps, the proportion of deaths in the camps, and other statistical data is presented in a tabular form. A comprehensive study of the problem of military captivity began in the 1990s. In this series, a worthy place is occupied by the collection "In the hands of the enemy: military prisoner from antiquity to the Second World War", which included articles on various aspects of military captivity (Overmans, 1999). The problem of prisoners of war of the First World War has intensively studied in recent years. The monograph by J. Oltmer presented the overall picture of the military captivity in Europe during the First World War (Oltmer, 2006). From recent studies it is necessary to allocate a collection of articles edited by S. Scheipers. This latest comprehensive study covers the history of prisoners of war and internees from the Crusades to the modern world and local wars. The fifth chapter on prisoners of the First World War, wrote A.R. Kramer (Kramer, 2010)

Intensive studying of a problem of prisoners of war has begun during the Post-Soviet period in Russia. A problem of keeping of prisoners of war in camps of Germany as well the general issues of military captivity of the period of World War I are investigated in works by O.S. Nagornaia (Nagornaia, 2010). E. Sergeyev and E.S. Seniavskaia research devotes to the living conditions of the Russian prisoners of war in Germany and Austria-Hungary, their psychological adaptation in the captivity. (Sergeev, 1997; Seniavskaia, 2013). In general studying the history of prisoners of World War I isn't characterized by a polyarization of researchers' positions.

# 2. Problem Statement

In this article the problem of repatriation of Russian prisoners of war under the stormy political events in the early post-war years is studied. The object of the research is the interstate agreements on repatriation of prisoners of war and results of their implementation. The material for the study is based on the texts of the Soviet-German interstate treaties, government notes and documents for the repatriation of prisoners of war of the First World War. At a dawn of formation of the Soviet Russia the problem of

repatriation of prisoners of war was an object of an ideological antagonism of Soviet authorities with the Western world.

# 3. Research Questions

The study analyzes the text of Treaty of Brest-Litovsk of March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1918, the Soviet – German supplementary agreement of March 7<sup>th</sup> 1918, Treaty of Versailles of June 28<sup>th</sup> 1919, Soviet – German agreements of 1920, also texts of decisions of German and Soviet governments on repatriation of POWs of World War I. The causes of the prolonged return of Russian POWs will be identified on the basis of analysis of text sources.

# 4. Purpose of the Study

This work is devoted to

- the study of specific conditions of implementation of Soviet-German treaties of 1918-1920 on the repatriation of Russian POWs;
- the study of factors, including revolutionary events in Russia and changes in the boundaries of the former Russian Empire, that affected the implementation of the plan of repatriation of Russian POWs to their homeland;
- the study of ways and methods of effective organization of repatriation of Russian POWs to their homeland;
- the study of problem of using POWs in political goals by Soviet authorities.

### 5. Research Methods

In terms of a global vision of the research problem, we relied on the theory of civilization, related to linear interpretations of the history of human society development. The First World War is regarded here as the period of the crisis of industrial civilization.

The following philosophical methods were used in the research: hypothesis and refutation; general scientific methods, such as analysis, synthesis, abstraction, and also the historical-comparative method. Moreover the author was guided by the idea of extraterritoriality research, i.e., conclusions drawn from the analysis of sources and scientific works of the previous research, not limited to national or class factors.

# 6. Findings

# 6.1. Brest-Litovsk treaty and the problem of repatriation of POWs.

The echo of revolutionary events in Russia reached also camps in Germany, the Russian prisoners of war were excited by news of overthrow of the tsar that caused concern of the administration of the camps. On April 30, 1917 the Ministry of Defense published the circular letter about strengthening of protection of prisoners of war where "tendency of the Russian prisoners of war to revolutionary propaganda" was especially noted and it was offered to prepare "necessary measures against possible

revolts of the Russian prisoners which can happen as a result of purposeful propaganda" among them. To all organizations related to the keeping and the protection of prisoners of war were ordered to report about the taken measures by June 15, 1917 according to the circular letter of the Military ministry (Kriegsministerium. 1917:211).

On November 26, 1917 negotiations began between the Soviet Russia and the Central powers which ended on December 15, 1917 with a truce. On March 3, 1918 in Brest-Litovsk the separate peace with the Central powers was signed. The 8<sup>th</sup> article of the Brest treaty provided return of prisoners of war of both belligerents home. On March 7 "The German-Russian additional agreement", the chapter 5 determined the main terms of the exchange of prisoners of a war, was signed. The 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph of 17<sup>th</sup> article of the German-Russian additional agreement provided "sending prisoners of war of both belligerents home if they don't wish to remain with the consent of the state which took prisoner in its territory or to go to other country". In 3<sup>rd</sup> paragraph it was specified that "each of belligerent will compensate the costs for keeping their prisoners-citizens which were made by the opposite party as these expenses aren't extinguished by work of prisoners of war in the state or private enterprises". Compensation should be made in currency of the state which took prisoner, installments for each 50 thousand people (Russische Kriegsgefangene).

The German Ministry of Defense of developed "Executive provisions to 7th chapter of the German-Russian additional agreement". The Russian prisoners of war who were subject to releasing and sending home were listed in it. Provisions of the German-Russian additional agreement on exchange of prisoners of war didn't extend to citizens of Finland, Ukraine, the Aland Islands and the so-called "coastal states" (Poland, Lithuania, Kurland, Latvia and Estonia). Prisoners of war who had the Russian citizenship once should be also sent to Russia; the Russians of the German or neutral citizenship weren't subject to repatriation. If there were doubts concerning the prisoner's of war citizenship, then such cases shall be considered separately, taking into consideration all documentary evidences about the residence and economic activity, as well as other factors such as a native language, religion, family accessory and his statements (Kriegsministerium, 1918-1919:141-142). Thus, the German side in the conditions of the beginning disintegration of the Russian Empire objectively solved a complex problem of repatriation of prisoners of war on various territories. There were cases when the republican government of Germany helped to the certain prisoners of war who wished to emigrate to other country.

Soviet government tried to support its prisoners of war in Germany due to a difficult situation of the German economy which could not afford to provide the camp with necessary food. On June 10, 1918 the National Commissioner of foreign affairs G.V. Chicherin sent to the German envoy count Mirbakh the letter with a request to aid to emissaries of the Central Board for prisoners of war and refugees Ya.Ya. Preys, K.I. Grivin, B.S. Skibinevsky in delivery of the train with food and linen for the Russian prisoners of war in Germany. Soviet government also cared about the soldiers and officers of the former Russian army who were in France at the time of an exit of Russia from the war. This group arrived to Switzerland after the truce between the Entente and Germany. The Soviet Russia through Germany transferred 1 million rubles for their support (Kriegsministerium, Allgemeine: 337). However the civil war did not only hinder to return prisoners of war home but also contributed to it. POWs lost material support from Russia. On June 28, 1918 the German government informed all organizations responsible

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for keeping and using prisoners of war labor about the results of negotiations with the Russian government: since July 1, 1918 Russia will not going to refund expenses for keeping prisoners of war therefore it is necessary to prepare the disabled prisoners of war to send home. Remain prisoners of war engaged in German industry, agriculture and other spheres of economy should be retained until full reimbursement of their expenses (Kriegsministerium, 1918-1919:241).

In all camps expenses on food for the Russian prisoners of war were cut down. During the Berlin conference, May 1920 the prisoners of war told that since 1918 in the camps the Russian prisoners of war suffered from bad food, violation of their rights, outrage of the camp's staff and exploitation by private businessmen (Russische Kriegsgefangene, Bd. 1:4).

The Conditions of the Brest treaty on exchange of prisoners of war were not completely realized. The Compiègne truce and the Versailles peace treaty demanded that Germany should refuse from the Brest treaty and supplementary agreements to them. But the Brest-Litovsk treaty and additional agreements could not be eliminated by Germany with other states agreement if the Soviet Russia didn't initiate to cancel them. On November 13, 1918 the Soviet government annulled the Brest-Litovsk treaty and supplementary agreements. Thus, the diplomatic relations between Germany and RSFSR were broken off, and the problem of return of prisoners of war home remained unresolved.

# 6.2. Versailles treaty and repatriation of Russian POWs.

According to 214<sup>th</sup> article of the Versailles peace treaty repatriation of prisoners of war should be started immediately after this agreement came into force. The expenses on transportation of prisoners of war home shall be paid by Germany. The countries of the Entente and Germany mutually refused from refunding for keeping the prisoners of war. On January 17, 1919 the Inter-Allied Commission informed the government of Germany about the sending of the representatives dealing with issues of returning the Entente prisoners of war home. They ought to form the commission on repatriation of the Russian prisoners of war. The soviet government declared the protest to this decision, it was afraid of the Entente's propaganda among the Russian prisoners of war in the favor of White Guards. On April 10, 1919 the Inter-Allied Commission gave the permission to return the Russian prisoners of war home. However due to the lack of the arrangement on transportation of the Russian prisoners of war on the territory of Poland, Lithuania and Latvia prisoners of war could not return home.

There was one circumstance which complicated the problem of repatriation of Russian prisoners of war. In Germany there were three categories of prisoners: 1) armed forces of the Russian army, 2) P.M. Bermondt-Avalov's army which were imprisoned during World War I and 3) interned part of the Red Army.

In August, 1919 in Lithuania there was the meeting with the participation of the Commander of the German reserve corpse Major-General von der Golza and the representatives of the White Guard West Russian government. At the meeting they discussed about the formation of military army consisting of 7 000 Russian prisoners of war under P.M. Bermondt-Avalov's command. Equipment of these troops was financed by Germany. Military mission of the Entente in the Baltic tried to bring Bermondt-Avalovs army under the control of the general Yudenich. However the German command had other plans. In September, 1919 when the Entente demanded to withdraw von Golz's troops to Germany, the German command

transferred them under Bermondt-Avalov's command as "the German volunteers". "A voluntary army" appeared which consist of German soldiers and Russian prisoners of war. According to the agreement between the representative of the German government admiral Mr. Hoffmann and P.M. Bermondt-Avalov with approval of Allied and United powers' Bermondt-Avalov's army was accepted by Germany as guests. Therefore officers were not disarmed, they could leave the camp, some of them went to Serbia and Hungary to recruit people for Bermondt-Avalov's army in order to enter on the territory of Ukraine later. Bermondt's army was financed and supplied with food by the German side so they had money, visited game clubs, they had even the machine for printing money. The Ministry of Finance considered that Bermondt's money – useless paper, however they had the firm course making about 20% of the German money (Russische Kriegsgefangene, Bd. 1).

During the Soviet-Polish war a part of Red Army was forced to cross border of East Prussia. According to the state of peace between Germany and the Soviet Russia and in view of the announcement of a neutrality from the German government in the Soviet-Polish war, these troops were subject to disarmament and internment in Germany. The government of RSFSR undertook the liability to refund maintenance costs the intern parts of Red Army. The German side disarmed this group of troops number of 60 000 people and contained them in the Aruzsk camp (Russische Kriegsgefangene, Bd. 1, 2). On October 5, 1920 the address of CPG to the interned Red Guards was published in the Rote Fahne newspaper. On October 18, 1920 the minister of armed forces sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Central bureau on prisoners of war the report on preparation of a revolt of the interned parts of Red Army together with the German communists in camps (Russische Kriegsgefangene, Bd. 2).

On April 19, 1920 "The agreement between RSFSR and Germany on sending home prisoners of war and the interned civilians of both sides" was signed, providing immediate homecoming of prisoners of war and the civil interned citizens of both sides. The exchange should be made transport to transport, each side must be ready to send a transport after being informed from another side that it did the same. The International Red Cross was responsible for the transport passage through others states territory. In article 7 it was said that "each belligerent provides freedom from punishment for those who was sent home who fought against a state system of the fatherland by political actions or up in arms" (Russische Kriegsgefangene, Bd. 11). For the purpose of the effective organization of In May, 1920 the conference of the representatives of 43 camps where the Russian prisoners of war accommodated was organized to solve effectively repatriation of prisoners of war. At the conference the concrete decisions on improvement of the prisoners' of war conditions and the organizations of transportation were made. Also the Bureau for prisoners of war which included 14 Russian prisoners of war was formed (Russische Kriegsgefangene, Bd. 1).

The soviet government required repatriation of Bermondt-Avalov's group as prisoners of war of the former Russian army according to the 3<sup>rd</sup> article of the German and Soviet agreement of April 19, 1920, "the Russian prisoners of war considered all Russians or the former Russian citizens who imprisoned by Germans, who fought for the former Russian empire or for the Russian Soviet Republic or against the Russian Soviet Republic" (Russische Kriegsgefangene, Bd. 1). On June 8, 1920 in Berlin there was the meeting of representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense and

Reich with Imperial commissioner on prisoners of war D. Shtuklen. They discussed the legal status of Bermondt-Avalov's troops. At the meeting they decided to disarm this army totally, to divide the officers and the soldiers from each other in general to destroy the name "troops, Bermondt's army", to forbid them trips around the country and to contain them in different camps as prisoners of war, to strengthen protection of officers. On June 26, 1920 the disarmed Bermondt-Avalov's troops contained in the camps located in Altengrabov and Havelberg (in Altengrabov there were 708 officers, 84 officials, 422 soldiers, 205 women and 58 children; in Havelberg – 1 482 soldiers). They were prepared for exchange for the German prisoners of war at the rate of transport to transport. In July, 1920 the first train with 700 Bermondt soldiers was sent already (Russische Kriegsgefangene, Bd. 1).

On July 7, 1920 the supplementary agreement was signed, in which the sides agreed about creation German (in Moscow) and the Russian (in Berlin) missions for affairs of military and civil prisoners. Missions had the right to contact with military and civil prisoners, their officials are responsible for visiting camps and working groups. They could also draw the attention of the governments to shortcomings of content and transportation of prisoners, Missions could publish the newsletter for prisoners of war on condition of compliance with laws of this country, this bulletin should be used as propaganda. However this period was marked by intensive propaganda works by communists among the Russian prisoners of war in Germany. So, on May 4, 1920 the chief of police in Frankfurt an der Oder submitted the official report to the Ministry of Internal Affairs about frequent cases of carrying out Bolshevist propaganda in prisoner-of-war camps. In July, 1920 the Minister of Defense of Germany informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Internal Affairs that almost all the camps of the Russian prisoners of war on the territory of Germany are under the influence of Bolshevist propaganda including German communists. On January 11, 1921 the chairman of the Central bureau for prisoners of war Schlesinger reported to the administrations of the camps that in some camps among prisoners of war and interned the Russian newspapers with Bolshevist propaganda were spread (Russische Kriegsgefangene, Bd. 1, 2, 4).

On October 5, 1920 the meeting of the commission on repatriation of prisoners of war was in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Germany. At this meeting there was a major Mensh who arrived from Russia. When the major Mensh told that he represents Wrangel's government, the chairman of the Central bureau of prisoners of war Schlesinger warned attendees that repatriation is made on the basis of the international convention and the German-Russian agreement of April 19, 1920. So the transports with the Russian prisoners of war will not be sent to the areas controlled by non recognized authorities from the side of German government. After the message of the major Mensh the representative of the Soviet Russia V. Kopp was afraid of accusation in a propaganda of Bolshevik ideas among the Russian prisoners of war. So in camps he promulgated the circular letter which said thatt before landing to the ship in Stettin it is forbidden to carry the signs of "red" (Russische Kriegsgefangene, Bd. 2). The Soviet party reported the German commission in advance about the destination of each transport with the Russian prisoners of war. So, in May, 1920 the first transport went to the central provinces, the second – to the Urals and the Volga region, the third – to the western provinces, the fourth – to Siberia, the fifth – to the southern provinces. Based on this information the German side in advance grouped prisoners of war on the basis of belonging to these regions to facilitate their sending to native places.

On November 3, 1921 in honor of four-year anniversary of the October revolution under the resolution of UCRC it was announced amnesty to Russians who fought in Kolchak, Wrangel, Savinkov, Petliura, Peremykin, Yudenich's troops and other White Guard armies against the Soviet power. It was promised that upon an amnesty after returning to Russia they will be accepted as prisoners of war of the former Russian army. On January 10, 1922 the head of Consular department of RSFSR representative S. Ayzenbukh reported about it his German colleagues and asked to find out a location and number of the Russian prisoners of war and the interned soldiers. The Ministry of Internal Affairs of Germany found out that 4 005 Russian prisoners of war and interned are in camps in Kelle, Vunskdorf, Quedlinburg and Mikhtenkhorst, there also officers and soldiers of Bermondt-Avalov's troops in Altengrabov. 250 Hungarian communist activists from crushed Hungarian Soviet Republic were among one of groups of the prisoners of war from Germany to the Soviet Russia. Austria exchanged them to their own prisoners of war in Russia (Russische Kriegsgefangene, Bd. 8).

The way of the Russian prisoners of war home was long. During the World War I 1 434 529 servicemen of the former Russian army were imprisoned, among them 72 586 died from disease and wounds, 453 committed suicide (Doegen, 1921:58). Due to a civil war, red and white terror and emigration, department of Ukraine, Belarus, Transcaucasia and their accession to Russia already in new quality of the federal Soviet republics it is impossible to determine how many prisoners of war of World War I returned home, went to other countries or remained in Germany. Some part of the Russian prisoners of war in Germany remained even in 1926. On May 11, 1926 the Ministry of Finance of Germany informed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that to the government of Germany content and repatriation of the Russian prisoners of war is burdensome. According to of the Treaty of Rapallo of the Russian prisoners of war in Germany entirely depended on the funds allocated by the German government. The Treaty of Rapallo provided mutual refusal of Germany and the Soviet Russia of expense recovery for content of prisoners of war. However the content and the transportation of the Russian prisoners of war and interned cost much to Germany encumbered with heavy reparation payments. After ratification of the Treaty of Rapallo at a meeting of representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Finance of Germany, and also Embassy of the Soviet Russia the parties agreed that Russia since November 1, 1922 will foot the bill on homecoming of the former Russian citizens. However this agreement wasn't confirmed with soviet government in writing form. In 1923 the Russian Embassy transferred 900 million marks for content of the insane of Russians in a clinic Nikolaszee and until 1926 no more money was sent to Germany (Russische Kriegsgefangene, Bd. 11).

### 7. Conclusion

Under the terms of the Hague Convention, "after conclusion of peace sending of prisoners of war home shall be made in possible short time". Revolutions and change of the authorities in Russia and Germany, separate peace and an exit of Russia from World War I, belief of Bolsheviks in a victory of world revolution and their attempt to use prisoners of war in the political goals exerted impact and on destiny of prisoners of war. Our research results show that even at the dawn of Soviet Russia the issue of POWs was an object of ideological confrontation of the Soviet regime and with the Western world. Besides during the civil war the country was divided into the separate territories controlled by "red" or

"white" that complicated transportation of prisoners of war in certain points. Quick return of prisoners of war home depended also on timely cost recovery for their content and transportation. Homecoming of the Russian prisoners of war dragged on for many years.

During World War I all countries guided by the rules of international law concerning the keeping of prisoners of war; there were, of course, violations the some articles of the Hague convention of 1907, however these violations proceeded from the objective reasons, they did not connect with the general orientation of internal policy of the warring states. The Weimar Republic fulfilled all the requirements of the countries of the Entente based on the rules of the Hague convention of 1907. Thus, the new republican power of Germany, unlike the Bolshevist power, recognized itself as a successor of former power of monarchic Germany, thereby proved its legitimacy.

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