

Dr Ainars Bambals

The National Archives of Latvia

POW'S CAMPS FOR GERMAN SOLDIERS IN THE LATVIAN SSR: REFLECTION OF THE ISSUE IN THE DOCUMENTS OF THE SOVIET REPRESSIVE INSTITUTIONS.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an insight into the research of the topic: “*German prisoners of war in Latvia (1945 – 1950)*”.

The possible goals of the research of the issue might be:

- 1) exploration of sources;
- 2) exploration of German prisoners of war camps in the territory of the Latvian SSR;
- 3) awareness of source research problems arising from documents of the Soviet Commissariat for Internal Affairs – “the German Prisoners of war grave book” as a historic source

It must be noted that up to now the issue of World War II prisoners has not been studied properly in Latvia. This, however, cannot be said about the fundamental research undertaken in Germany, Austria, Russia and other countries.¹

Firstly, the reasons behind this are both objective and subjective. During the Soviet occupation studies of the issue were *taboo*. Secondly, many of documents were stored in special archives in Government’s custody and State Archive’s special library stocks, thus being inaccessible to researchers. Many of these documents were labelled Secret and Top Secret. Thirdly, both the above limitations also apply to studies of the issue of the prisoners of war from the Latvian legions of the German army. In addition, many documents of principal relevance to the study of the issue have been

1 See, for instance: Военнопленные в СССР:1939-1956.Документы и материалы / Под ред. М.Загорюлько и др. М.: «Логос», 2000. ; Архив новейшей истории России.Серия «Публикации». Т. II.Специальные лагеря НКВД / МВД СССР в Германии. 1945- 1950гг.Сборник документов и статей. – М.: «Российская политическая энциклопедия» (РОССПЕН), 2001.- 376 с. ; Карнер С. Архипелаг ГУПВИ: плен и интернирование в Советском Союзе 1941-1956. / -М.: Российский государственный гуманитарный институт, 2002.-303 с.

moved to Russia or are still kept in Russia's special archives, thus being inaccessible to researchers from Latvia.

Until now very few writings on the issue of German (and Austrian) prisoners of war in Latvia have appeared in historic literature. Mainly those are publications of documents and comments to these documents. The publication by Janis Riekstins, the Senior Desk officer of The National Archives of Latvia, State Archives of Latvia (NAL, SAL), “*German prisoners of war in Latvia (1945 – 1950)*” with comments and a brief summary in German, “*Deutsche Kriegsgefangene in Lettland*” must be noted from the recent ones. It was published in issue 2, 1995, of the “*Latvijas Arhīvi*” (Latvian Archives) magazine and dealt with the role of German prisoners' of war labour in restoration of the national economy of the Latvian SSR.²

The second is the publication of three documents with comments in the collection of documents “*Latvija padomju režīma varā 1945 – 1986*” (Latvia under Soviet regime 1945 – 1986), published by the Institute of Latvian history. The publication reflects exploitation of the German prisoners' of war labour, the poor work and living conditions in the camps of prisoners of war in Latvia.³

Admittedly, documents of State Archives of Latvia contain evidence of exploitation of German prisoners' of war labour in various reconstruction works of the towns and industrial sites, in construction and other areas devastated by war. Such evidence is mainly concentrated in the library stocks of the archives: “*Latvian SSR Council of Ministers*” and “*Central Committee of the Latvian Communist party*”.⁴ For most part, these are the reports of the leaders of the Latvian SSR and Communist party to the leaders of the Government of the USSR and the party, as well as correspondence between these institutions. Reports about prisoners of war who died and were buried in camps and specialised hospitals in the Latvian SSR can be found in the archive library stock “*Grave books of German prisoners of war buried in Latvia*

² Riekstiņš J. Vācu karagūstekņi Latvijā (1945. –1950.gads)// Latvijas Arhīvi .- 1995.Nr.2.-62.-72.lpp.

³ Latvija padomju režīma varā. 1945-1986:Dokumentu krājums / Editor Irēne Šneidere.- Rīga:Latvijas Vēstures institūta apgāds, 2001.-463.lpp;-44.-66.lpp.

⁴ NAL, SAL (Latvian State archive), fund 270 “*Latvijas PSR Ministru Padome.1944.-1990.*”, case description 1 ; stock PA-101” Latvijas Komunistiskās partijas Centrālā Komiteja.1944.-1991.”, case descriptions 7.-8.

1945 – 1950”.⁵ These are the main sources on the issue of German prisoners of war that can be found in Latvia. Some of these sources have been used in the current research.

I. German prisoner's of war camps in Latvian SSR.

At the close of the World War II more than 89 000 German prisoners of war were in the Latvian SSR, 13 2000 of those were used in different works but the rest were considered to form the reserve of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the USSR (NKVD).⁶

Soviet Union had long-standing traditions in maintenance of prisoners of war and internees: two days after the September 1939 Red army's invasion in Poland, on 19 September the People's Commissar for Internal Affairs of the USSR issued the secret order No 0308 “About formation of camps for prisoners of war”. The order provided for the establishment of a War Prisoners' Board within the structures People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the USSR (abbreviation in Russian - *ВТБИ – Управление по военнопленным*).⁷

War prisoners' camps in the USSR were established on a larger scale after the beginning of the German – Soviet war, when the archipelago of these camps started to grow in numbers. The War Prisoners' Board of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs was reorganised into the Main War Prisoners and Internee's Board (in Russian – *ГВТБИ*). It was run by Lieutenant General M.Krivenko. The issues of prisoners' of war labour were dealt with by the Deputy Head of the People's Commissars Council of the USSR (later the Council of Ministers) L.Berijs, the USSR PCIA, later by the Deputy Minister of Interior, 2nd rank State Security Commissioner Cernisev. Whereas in Latvia the issues of utilisation of prisoners of war were supervised by the Commissar for Internal Affairs of the Latvian SSR (later Minister of Interior, Major General A.Eglītis and Head of the War Prisoners' and Internees board of the Latvian SSR PCIA (later MoI), Colonel N.Krastiņš. Undeniably, the

⁵ NAL, SAL, fund 1846 “Latvijā apglabāto vācu karagūstekņu kapu grāmatas.1945.-1950.”, description 1, cases 1.-31.

⁶ Riekstiņš J. Vācu karagūstekņi Latvijā (1945. –1950.gads).// Latvijas Arhīvi .- 1995.Nr.2.-62.-63.lpp.

⁷ Карнер С. Архипелаг ГУПВИ: плен и интернирование в Советском Союзе 1941-1956...-с. 67

major issues of utilisation of prisoners of war were decided by the USSR Council of Ministers and Latvian SSR Council of Ministers.⁸

Special camps with several sections and two specialised hospitals were established in Latvian SSR in order to accommodate prisoners of war. They were located in the largest Latvian towns or in centres of strategic importance: **Rīga** (277th and 317th war prisoners' camps with their sections, 3388th and 4379th war prisoners' specialised hospitals), **Daugavpils** (292nd war prisoners' camp with several sections), **Jelgava** (266th war prisoners' camp), **Krustpils** (Section 6 of the 292nd war prisoners' camp), **Kuldīga** (Section 4 of the 349th war prisoners' camp), **Liepāja** (349th war prisoners' camp with several sections, of which Section 20 was the biggest), **Ogre** (391st and 291st war prisoners' camps, Section 40), **Olaine** (Section 10 of the 277th war prisoners' camp), **Rēzekne** (Section 5 of the 292nd war prisoners' camp), **Salaspils** (Section 1 of the 277th war prisoners' camp) and **Ventspils** (Section 6 of the 350th war prisoners' camp).⁹

In addition, with a view of managing the USSR PCIA special control of the repatriates and prisoners of war, several filtration and transfer points were established in Latvia. Those were located in Daugavpils, Jelgava, Kuldīga, Liepāja, Rīga, Skrunda, Tukums, Vaiņode, Ventspils and Ugāle.¹⁰ The aspects of NKVD filtration camps will not be analysed in this paper.

Austrian professor Dr. Stefan Karner in his fundamental research about prisoners of war in the USSR gives mention of two camps stationed in Latvia¹¹, at the same time in the schematic map indicating that mainly camps that structurally consisted of 1 to 9 sub-sections and bigger, consisting of 10 to 19 sub-sections existed in Latvia.¹²

It must be noted that the precise disposition of German war prisoners' camps and their sections in the territory of Latvian SSR has not been explored and researched. This, obviously, is the task of more in-depth studies. Judging by the strictly secret decision (protocol No 123, # 26) of 7 July 1945 of the Bureau of Central Committee of the Latvian Communist (Bolshevik) party and its' attachment "Placement of

⁸ Riekstiņš J. Vācu karagūstekņi Latvijā (1945. –1950.gads).// Latvijas Arhīvi .- 1995.Nr.2.-62.lpp.

⁹ NAL, SAL,, 1846.f., 1.apr., 1.-31.l.

¹⁰ Beika A. Filtrācijas dokumenti liecina.// Latvijas Arhīvi.- 1994.Nr.1.-48.-54.lpp.

¹¹ Карнер С. Архипелаг ГУПВИ: плен и интернирование в Советском Союзе 1941-1956 ... -с.82

¹² Ibid, -с. 88 -89

German prisoners of war for labour in enterprises and structures of Latvian SSR”¹³, it can be seen that the 60 982 German prisoners of war referred to in the report worked throughout the whole territory of Latvia. Overall, they were employed in: preparation of firewood, reconstruction works, production of building materials and directly in the production process in enterprises. Section 3 of the decision of the Central Committee of the LCP *inter alia* says: “*To charge peoples commissars, ..., heads of boards, heads of towns’ and districts’ executive committees with the responsibility to: a) utilise prisoners of war principally in preparation of firewood, extraction of building materials and construction and restoration works; b) utilise prisoners of war in enterprises, organise self-sufficient shifts and teams of prisoners of war under the leadership and technical supervision of factories’ foremen; c) utilise prisoners of war in construction, allocating to them separate sites or teams, isolated from the population; d) allocate separate fellings and peatbogs for preparation of timber materials and peat.*”¹⁴

Top Secret Resolution No 8921 of 4 June 1945 of USSR State Defence Committee set the limit of 20 200 prisoners of war for the Latvian SSR, who were to be utilised in construction and industrial sites in the territory of Latvia. In fact, 43 000 prisoners of war above the set limit worked in Latvia. Those were employed in the reconstruction works of Ķegums and Rīga hydroelectric power stations, reconstruction works of Rīga, Ventspils and Liepāja ports, worked in the VEF electrotechnical factory and other enterprises.¹⁵

It follows from the Deputy Head of the People’s Commissars Council of Latvian SSR A.Petrusev’s letter of 29 August 1945 to the People’s Commissars for Internal Affairs of USSR L.Berija to revisit the issue of allocation of prisoners of war (increasing the quota) for the needs of Latvian SSR, that at that time more than 89 000 prisoners of war were held in camps in Latvia.¹⁶

In August 1945 the costless prisoners’ of war labour was used in the reconstruction of the economy of Latvian SSR in the following areas:

1) Restoration of towns in Latvian SSR – 5546 prisoners of war; 2) People’s Commissariat for Domestic Industry – peat extraction works – 6239 prisoners of war;

¹³ NAL, SAL, PA, 101.f., 7.apr., 31a.l., 26-29.lp.

¹⁴ Ibid, p 2.-27

¹⁵ NAL, SAL, 270.f., 1-s.apr., 250.l., p. 59

¹⁶ Ibid

3) People's Commissariat for Road Traffic works – 2400 prisoners of war; 4) Restoration of the Rīga port – 7986 prisoners of war; 5) Airport construction – 300 prisoners of war; 6) Roads' Authority works – 7900 prisoners of war; 7) Restoration of the Ķegums hydroelectric power plant – 635 prisoners of war; 8) Restoration of the VEF factory, the production process – 2211 prisoners of war; 9) Chief Airfield Construction Authority works – 1822; 10) Military Construction Authority for the Baltic Republics works – 2270 prisoners of war; 11) The Railroad Carriages' Factory - 1469 prisoners of war; 12) Rīga Hydroelectric Power Plant works – 2241 prisoners of war; 13) Chief Authority for Installation works – 956 prisoners of war; 14) Textile factory – 1533 prisoners of war; 15) Superphosphate factory – 2583 prisoners of war; 16) Ceramics factory – 965 prisoners of war; 17) Factory “Sarkanais metālists” – 1000 prisoners of war; 18) Cement factory – 1986 prisoners of war; 19) Brick factory – 1506 prisoners of war; 20) Gypsum and brick factory – 552 prisoners of war; 21) Ship yard – 2582 prisoners of war; 22) Latvian Railway Reconstruction Works Authority – 2700 prisoners of war; 23) Bakery – 1200 prisoners of war; 24) Sugar factories – 300 prisoners of war; 25) Rīga City Traffic and Transport Trust – 750 prisoners of war; 26) Liepāja port – 2000 prisoners of war; 27) Ventspils port – 1000 prisoners of war; 28) Paper factory – 558 prisoners of war, in total - 63 200 prisoners of war.¹⁷

The prisoners of war played an important role in renovation of objects of national economy, construction and industry. It has to be noted that the percentage of war prisoners among the employees working in some branches and companies was considerable. For example, in 1945 there were 3084 workers in the VEF factory, including 453 war prisoners, making up approximately 15% of the total number of employees. In 1946 prisoners of war made up 16-30% of the total number of workers in the largest enterprises of the Local Industry Ministry of Latvian SSR.¹⁸

It is a telling fact that in the first post-war years the government of the USSR attempted to get as many prisoners of war as possible for carrying out different tasks, but after 1947, when the number of war prisoners went down for various reasons, as part of them were released home, part of them sent to other regions of the USSR, the

¹⁷ Ibid, 205.l., 60.-61.lp.

¹⁸ Latvija padomju režīma varā. 1945 – 1986; volume of documents – 61.lpp.

government of the Latvian SSR attempted to extend the terms for using prisoners of war in construction and industrial objects in Latvia.¹⁹

It is undeniable, that the role of cheap labour of war prisoners in the renovation of post-war economy in Latvian SSR was very important.

Documents from the Latvia State Archive witness that in many places the working and living conditions of the war prisoners had been very hard. Thus, for example, Mayor General A. Eglītis, Peoples' Commissioner for Internal Affairs of the Latvian SSR in his 24 December report of 1945 about the situation in the war prisoners' camp No 277 to the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party indicated that prisoners of war who were sent in hard labour did not receive additional food. Many had no special clothing, the hostels had no heating, people slept on naked boards, the working day was extended, but they got little rest. For this reason many fell ill and the mortality among prisoners of war was on a rapid rise. In November 1945, 342 persons in this camp had fallen ill, and five had died...15 people died in the first two weeks of December.²⁰ There are quite many similar reports in the archive documents.

The fact of rather high mortality in war prisoners' camps is also confirmed by documents from the archive of the former Latvian SSR Interior PC's (Peoples' Commissariat) Board of Prisoners of War and Internees which are in custody of the state in the State Archives of Latvia – the so-called “Grave books of German Prisoners of War”.

As this historical source confirms, 1910 prisoners of war died and were buried in the territory of the Latvian SSR, the names of several lithuanian prisoners of war are among them, but for many of the deceased the nationality is not indicated in the archive documents.²¹ These cannot be regarded to be absolute figures; it is possible that the number of dead prisoners of war is much larger.

II German War Prisoners' Grave books as a Historical Source

The origin of sources.

It has to be noted that the soviet institutions in the Latvian SSR did not care much for the health of war prisoners. It has already been mentioned that two special hospitals in Rīga, No 3338 and No 4379, were envisaged for sick prisoners. The

¹⁹ Riekstiņš J. Vācu karagūstekņi Latvijā (1945. – 1950)// Latvijas Arhīvi,1995, No 2 – 62.lpp.

²⁰ NAL, SAL, PA, 101.f, 8 apr., 34.l., 33-34.lp.

prisoners of war who died in camps and their subdivisions from wounds, diseases, work traumas (in the regions of Latvia) were buried in ordinary cemeteries, where local government institutions, the executive committees, allotted places for burial after an initial agreement with the administration of the respective camp.

Special accounting was made about the dead in special grave books envisaged for this purpose. They were set up in chronological order with an enclosure in alphabetic order (the so-called “alphabet books”). As a historical source, they are classified as a sample of special filing of documents of soviet repressive institutions (Int PC).

The State Archive received a number of incomplete and not completely filled in grave books of German POWs buried in Latvia (19 files), in November 1993. These items were directed to SAL (Latvia State Archives of Latvia) fund No 1846. The grave books contain information about the camps under the authority of the War Prisoners’ Camps Board of the USSR (Latvian SSR) Peoples’ Commissariat for Interior Affairs (later – the Ministry of Interior), from 1945 to 1950.²²

The documents of SAL Fund No1846 consist of grave books for the registration of dead prisoners of war together with subordinate alphabetic books, which have acts of local government institutions about land plot and segment allocations for burying the dead persons, materials of correspondence between local government institutions, plans and schemes of placement of graves as enclosures. In separate cases the alphabet books for war prisoners buried in the cemeteries are registered as separate files.

The expertise of value of these documents, their description and technical processing were carried out in the State Archive in 1995. 31 file was formed from the initial 19 files, chronologically taking up the period from 1945 to 1950. The documents are systematised according to territorial – nominal principle and arranged by alphabet after the location place of war prisoners’ camps.²³

The content of documents.

Grave books. Their titles are different: “Grave book”²⁴ “Registration book of the dead prisoners of war who have died in the camps, special hospitals and sub-units

²¹ NAL, SAL, 1846 fund Historical Certificate, 1. – 2.lpp.

²² NAL, SAL,, Historical Note, Fund 1846, p. 1-2

²³ Ibid, p. 2

²⁴ NAL, SAL, f. 1846, 1. descr., file cover 4.1

of the War Prisoners' and Interned Persons' Board”²⁵ “Burial Book of the Deceased of Camp No”²⁶, etc. The right corner of grave books' covers is marked “Top Secret” or “Secret”. The cover notes the title of the camp, the location of the cemetery and the time when the registration of the dead has been started and finished. For the majority of grave books in the beginning of the file inside the ledger there is the internal description of the ledger with information about the title of the camp (the number in succession of the war prisoners' camp according to general numeration in registers within USSR Int PC/Int Min), its location, the location of the burial site, the number of dead registered inside the book, documents about land plots allocation for the cemetery and cemetery plans – schemes. These documents are placed in envelopes that are glued to the inside of the top cover of the ledger. The internal description was signed by the respective inspector of registration data of the War Prisoners' Board of the Latvian SSR.²⁷

What follows inside the grave book are lists of dead prisoners of war, structured according to the following graphs: No in order, the name, surname and the father's name of the dead, year of birth, nationality, military rank, date of death, date of burial, and the number of the grave, the number and sector number in the cemetery. Regardless of the scarcity of this information, it is valuable for the researcher of history for providing certain sociometric data that enable analysis.

The news about the Lithuanians who died in war prisoners camps and were registered in grave books have been acquired precisely from these lists.²⁸

The dead Lithuanians make up 0.6 % of the total number, Latvians make up 1.8 % of the total number of deceased prisoners of war, 1910 persons. The author of the report has no other available data for comparison, but these figures indicate a certain trend. For example, in austrian prof. Dr. Stefan Karner's research one of the tables also shows that Austrian POWS made up approximately 3% from the total number of the prisoners of war locked in the USSR camps.²⁹ The main part of POW s were Germans.

(All data of representatives will be show at presentation at Conference).

²⁵ Ibid, file cover 2.1.

²⁶ Ibid, file cover 10.1

²⁷ See, e.g. the Grave book of the USSR POW camp No 317: 7.1., 1- 4.lp.

²⁸ See the list of dead Lithuanian POWs in the enclosure

²⁹ Карнер С. Архипелаг ГУПВИ: плен и интернирование в Советском Союзе 1941-1956 ... -с.81.

Alphabetic books. From outside they are slightly different, but they are identical in terms of content (reminding of address books a little). What they really are is a register of dead prisoners of war, where the dead are registered according to their surnames per each letter of alphabet with more detailed distribution in three groups: 1) number in sequence; 2) surname, name, father's name; 3) number of record in the grave book (in order).³⁰ The alphabetic books serve as “enclosures” to the grave books. Without the grave book, the alphabetic book, and the grave scheme it is almost impossible to locate the graves of the dead and buried persons.

Documents containing correspondence and schemes of location of the graves. These documents vary both in their format and by scope of information. Usually it is a resolution from the local government – executive committee or a copy of the resolution about the allocation of a land plot for a graveyard, a plan of the graveyard or a scheme (a layout plan) with detailed placement of sectors of graves, squares or rows with indicated numbered separate graves.³¹ The number of each separate grave corresponds to the records in the ledger and the alphabetic book. Generally it has to be concluded that this kind of records made about the places of burial of the dead prisoners of war have been quite precise.

The degree of credibility of the documents is high. There are some differences in the formatting of these documents: in some camps the registration has been more accurate, in others, more careless. To a certain extent this demonstrates the attitude of officials at that time towards the formalities observed with regard to documentation on burial places of dead prisoners of war.

All in all it has to be admitted that the grave books are a valuable source of reference, since they give information about the time of death of persons who died in war prisoners' camps and special hospitals, which is essential for the relatives of the deceased nowadays.

Some conclusions.

First, the issue of prisoners of war who were imprisoned in USSR IntPC/IntMin camps of war prisoners in the territory of the Latvian SSR after the Second World War, is a comparatively less researched theme. Second, the documents

³⁰ E. g. see NAL, SAL, f. 1846, 1. apr. file 16 “Karagūstekņu nometnes Nr. 292 apakšnodaļā Nr. 5 mirušo personu kapu grāmatas alfabēta grāmata”

³¹ NAL, SAL, f. 1846, 1. apr. 4.1., 2.-4.lp.

in the State Archive of Latvia contain information about utilisation of German prisoners of war, including prisoners of war of many nationalities in the renovation work in the cities and industrial objects devastated by the war. The above-mentioned documents were classified secret or restricted during the soviet period, therefore they were not researched and were not available for a wider circle of researchers. Another reason why the theme about prisoners of war was not researched, were ideological considerations.

Third, as the information in the archives confirms, there were more than 89 000 persons imprisoned in war prisoners' camps in the territory of the Latvian SSR. Their contribution into the renewal of the national economy of Latvia from 1945 - 1950 is extremely important.

Fourth, the work and living conditions in war prisoners' camps have been extremely hard, this is confirmed by the high mortality among the prisoners of war. It is also confirmed by the prisoners' of war grave books with 1910 registered dead. There is a reason to think that the number of dead has been even larger in reality, but it is hardly possible to find out the real number of people who perished in prisoners of war camps.

Fifth, the documents of Soviet repressive institutions are new Historical Sources in principle, which have become available to the circles of researchers quite recently. They provide new information about the Soviet repressive regime and the diverse aspects of its activity. As historical sources they should yet be examined from the aspects of source research and source criticism.

That is the objective of future research.