

PhD student Dieter Bacher

*University of Graz, Ludwig Boltzmann-Institute for  
Research into Consequences of War, Austria*

**TRACES TO “SIBERIA”. PERSONAL FILES OF AUSTRIAN  
POWS IN THE RUSSIAN STATE ARCHIVES AND THE POSSIBILITIES OF  
RESEARCHING INDIVIDUAL FATES IN THE GUPVI**

- First of all I want to thank the organizers for the invitation to this very interesting and important conference. I'm here also on behalf of the director of our institute, Prof. Stefan Karner, who is very sorry that it was not possible to him to come, because of other urgent appointments in Austria at the same time. So, I'm also here on his behalf to present the research of our institute about the Soviet “Main Administration for prisoners of war and internees” GUPVI and the Austrian prisoners of war in the Soviet Union.

**The Soviet Main Administration for Prisoners of War and Internees (GUPVI) –  
establishment and development:**

- This part of my presentation I'm doing on behalf of the 20 years of research by Prof. Stefan Karner, director of our institute and expert on the Soviet GUPVI.
- When he began his research about the camp system for prisoners of war and internees in the Soviet Union and about the Austrian prisoners of war there in 1991, even in Russia hardly nothing was known about this camp system.
- Until Nikita S. Khrushchev's denouncement of Stalin in 1956, the camps of the other big camp system, the “GULAG archipelagos”, had not officially existed. Together with the GULAG, the camp system of the GUPVI was shrouded in a deathly silence.
- Until the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, information about both camp systems and their inmates, no matter if they were Soviet citizens, foreigners, POWs or internees, was rigorously suppressed. Nevertheless, the card indexes and the files with the information about the GUPVI camp system and its inmates was seen as very

important from the beginning, also for the future. The classifications “khranit’ vechno” (to be kept forever) and “Top Secret” (“soverchenno secretno”) on the card indexes show both the secrecy and the importance of the files. It was not until the end of the Soviet Union and the Glasnost’, that gradual access to Ex-Soviet archives and also to these materials permitted a detailed research about the extents of and the conditions within the GUPVI camp system.

- Besides the camp system of the “Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps and Colonies (GULAG), the GUPVI was principally responsible for foreign POWs taken between 1939 and 1953, and, from 1949 on, for POWs sentenced by Soviet Courts. Under the regime of the People’s commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), nearly five million foreign citizens of nearly thirty nationalities – generally under conditions of flagrant violations of human rights – have been detained, incarcerated and registered in the GUPVI camp system. The largest national group were the Germans (approximately 2,4 millions), the second biggest group were Japanese POWs (approx. 600.000) and Hungarians (approx. 500.000). They all suffered under the often harsh circumstances in the camps – bad food supply, very bad housing conditions, and insufficient medical treatment. The result was that many POWs in the GUPVI did not survive their detainment – they died because of starvation, exposure to freezing temperatures and various diseases. Even executions during foot marches or deaths during rail transports from one camp to another occurred.
- While the GULAG system, thanks to several publications and especially to Solzhenitsyn’s works, became a quite popular research topic, the existence of the parallel existing GUPVI system remained largely in the dark. Despite the fact that the GUPVI system included more than 4000 camps, special hospitals and forced labour battalions.
- Regarding its history of origins, the GUPVI is a lot „younger“ than the GULAG. The first POW camps were established right after the beginning of the Second World War in September 1939. On the strength of Order No. 308, dated 19 September 1939, Lavrentiy Beria, at that time People’s Commissar of the Interior, initiated the organization of POW camps, accompanied by issuing general directives to govern the “Administration of POWs and internees” (UPVI) under the People’s Commissariat of the Interior (NKVD, from 1946 on Ministry of the Interior, MVD). Within the NKVD,

a special department was created, with local organs to exercise operational and counter-intelligence control over the first camps.

- The district chiefs, in whose areas the first eight UPVI camps were established, were ordered to cooperate — within the mobilization plan — with the Department for “Corrective Colonies”, that means with the administration for camps for Soviet citizen. In this “starting phase” of the GUPVI camp system, the already since nearly 20 years existing GULAG played an important role – “experienced” GULAG personnel should assist in the establishment of the first GUPVI camps.
- The administrative role of the GUPVI at that point should be to take over custody of POWs and internees at forward collection points in order to transfer them to permanent camps, receive and register them upon arrival, ensure their basic subsistence on arrival, and – already at that point one of the most crucial tasks – put them to work as early as possible.
- Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 made it necessary to extend the efforts, especially the collection compounds right behind the German-Soviet frontline. In accordance with the GULAG mobilization plan, from central Russia to the Western front, especially on Ukrainian and Karelian soil, thirty compounds were established. They should organise the collection of German POWs and their transport on to camps far behind the frontline, within the USSR. As the frontline moved eastwards quickly, these first compounds were overrun quickly – within one month, only 19 of them remained. Regarding the permanent camps, a similar reduction can be seen: by August 1941, only three of the original eight remained, with a capacity of about 8000 to 9000 POWs each.
- During the German advance towards Moscow, Leningrad, and the Donbas region, UPVI lived through a shadow existence. Secret police and counterintelligence work among POWs was in the hands of the 2nd Department (Counterintelligence) of the NKVD, and a political section to do political work in the camps did not exist. The GULAG administration played a significant role for the UPVI at that time, as it had to organise all aspects of camp logistics of the UPVI. How insignificant the UPVI was at that time can be seen by the fact that the UPVI staff consisted of barely thirty-nine people at that time.
- The passage of Soviet Defense Committee (GOKO) Resolution No. 1069 on 27 December 1941 marked a significant change in the development. In this resolution, the

14-15 MAY 2015, ŠILUTĖ

integration of 26 camps of „special significance“ was decided. The interesting point is that these camps were not planned for German, but for Soviet personnel. Just after the successful defence of Moscow, the Red Army got hold of thousands of Red Army personnel that either had deserted to the Germans or been captured by them. This made the set up of camps necessary where counter-intelligence screening, „sorting“ of these people and later their sentencing of usually five or ten years imprisonment in total isolation (because of desertion, spying, and treason to „Mother Russia“) could be done.

- The next significant changes came after the battle at Stalingrad in the beginning of 1943. After the beginning of the continuous withdrawal of the German troops and those of Germany's allies had begun, the number of German POWs in Soviet custody rose rapidly. The camp system, especially the camps right behind the Soviet front at Stalingrad, were not ready for the large numbers of prisoners. Because of this and because of the fact that most of the captured German soldiers were in bad condition, almost half of them could not be registered at the permanent camps – they died because of starvation, cold weather, injuries of the battle or even executions before they could reach a permanent camp of the UPVI. This, of course, ran contrary to the goal of the UPVI to provide workforce for the reconstruction of the country. So, measures had to be taken to prevent the POWs to die before they could be used for work.
- As a consequence of the events, more permanent camps were set up and the POWs were separated by rank (officers, general officers, enlisted personnel) and nationality. For medical treatment, a network of so called “special hospitals” (“Specgospitaly”) was set up to provide a basic medical treatment for wounded, injured and sick POWs and to prevent the spreading of infectious diseases. But it has to be said that the possibilities for treatment at these hospitals were very limited, lacks in medical supplies and medicine were often the case and often cost the lives of POWs.
- At the beginning of 1945, the administration of the camps for POWs and internees was enlarged, and the UPVI became, like the GULAG, a “main administration” (GUPVI) within the NKVD, with regional “branches” (OPVI) in all republics and regions. One month later, in February 1945, the GUPVI was reorganized and consisted now of three administrations (for POW affairs, for Affairs of internees and mobilized Germans, and for operational-intelligence administration) and seven independent departments (for

Management and security, medical, supply, accommodation and utilization, personnel, political matters, and veterinary service).

- When the biggest number of POWs was transferred to the GUPVI within the last months of the war in 1945, 102 camps (12 Front-entry-transit-camps (FPPL), 43 collection points (SPV) and 72 reception points (PPV)) existed only in the forward area behind the front to organise the transfer of the POWs eastwards to the permanent camps in the USSR. During short periods, these camps had to supply, accommodate and “process” 1,5 million POWs. Understandably, it took a great effort to transfer them to the permanent camps in the USSR. According to Soviet estimations, the transfer of these POWs from the final phase of the war was not completed until 1 November 1945, that means nearly 6 months after the war had ended. Due to the fact that the supply with food, clothes, accommodation and medical treatment could not always be guaranteed in these forward camps, thousands of POWs also here died before they could be brought to permanent GUPVI camps.
- On 4 July 1945, along with a reorganisation and expansion of frontline camps, the repatriation of the first POWs via collection points in Germany (for example, at Frankfurt/Oder and Fürstenwalde) and Hungary (at Sopron and Szeget) began. These first repatriations affected only prisoners who were not categorized as suitable for labor. For future repatriation matters, two NKVD departments were set up in the Soviet zone of occupation in Germany and in Romania. To administrate the returning POWs, three camps were set up: camp No. 69 at the prior collection point in Frankfurt/Oder, and the two camps especially important for Austrian homecomers, camp No. 36 at Marmaros Sziget, today's Sighetu Marmatiei in Romania, and camp No. 176 in Foksany.
- According to international law, the POWs in the GUPVI should be repatriated not later than a year after the end of the war. But, the need for labour force for rebuilding the Western Soviet Union and for restoring the economy was seen more important, so Soviet administration had to find a problem for this – and found it in the measure of mass convictions of prisoners of war, beginning in 1949.
- How important the workforce of the POWs was, can be illustrated by a simple fact: In total, the prisoners of war yielded 8 to 10 percent of the output of the fourth Five-Year Plan between 1945 and 1950. The camp system GUPVI was in itself economically

14-15 MAY 2015, ŠILUTĖ

efficient. The economic performance consisted, therefore, of the delivery of the cheapest and most well-qualified labor force.

- POWs who had received prison sentences, mainly because of accused war crimes by verdicts of Soviet courts were retained by GUPVI camps. Research in this matter had shown that these convictions mainly served the purpose to keep the prisoners in the country. These verdicts were mainly based on accusations against organisations declared “criminal” by the Soviet side such like dozens of divisions and regiments of the German Wehrmacht, units of the SS, Waffen-SS, military police and corrective and counter-intelligence units. Evidence to prove the personal guilt of the accused POW was not necessary and in most cases also not available. It was enough that one POW had fought in the “wrong” units to declare him a war criminal. The common punishment for convicted POWs were 25 years imprisonment, which meant labor in one of the remained GUPVI camps.
- The year 1951 brought another changes for the GUPVI: The administration was as „UPVI“ implied in the Ministry for State Security (MGB) of the USSR, under the command of the former 1st Deputy Chief of GULAG, Lieutenant General A.S. Kobulov. In fact, with this step, the GUPVI was again subordinated to the GULAG. An understandable step – following the repatriation of the POWs, only POWs under criminal court sentences remained in the camps of GUPVI; sentenced civilian internees were detained there only in rare instances.
- In 1954, when MGB and MVD were forged into one ministry (MVD) and intelligence tasks were given to a newly formed committee (the KGB), the administration for POWs and internees ceased to exist. GULAG itself was absorbed by the Ministry of Justice of the USSR. Only the management of camps containing sentenced POWs remained subordinate to the MVD, for which purpose a small section for POWs and internees was created within the MVD’s Department for Prison Administration.
- In the course of 1956 and the following years, the last POW camps of the former GUPVI (No. 48 near Ivanovo, east of Moscow, and No. 476 at Asbest, east of the Ural Mountains, and Special Hospital No. 1893 at Chor near Khabarovsk) were disbanded. Camp No. 16 in the Khabarovsk region and the outpost camp in Pot’ma (Mordovia) were absorbed by the corrective labor colonies of the MVD of the USSR (ITK). The last formal step of liquidating the GUPVI administration was the transfer of Special

Object No. 16 to the Main Administration of Penal Installations (GUMZ) of the MVD of the USSR in 1960.

- The tasks of GUPVI can be summarized as:
  - 1.) the transport and delivery of the prisoners of war and internees;
  - 2.) the maintenance of accommodations in the camp;
  - 3.) the, from the Soviet point of view, maybe the most important: putting the prisoners of war to work in the Soviet people's economy in the areas of reconstruction, armaments, and technical facilities;
  - 4.) the delivery of scientists and technical know-how.
- And GUPVI fulfilled its tasks quite efficiently, on the back of millions of suffering POWs and internees.

#### **Researching individual fates in the GUPVI – The Personal files:**

- In the case of Austrian POWs in the Soviet GUPVI, many of their fates are still unknown. So one of the main focuses of the research on our institute deals with researching the fate of Austrian prisoners of war in the Soviet Union, most of the time on behalf of their relatives who want to know more about his fate during his captivity.
- The material necessary for it still exists. Theoretically, for every of the mentioned five prisoners in the GUPVI camp system exists a personal file. These files, together with the administrative files from the GUPVI, are held today by the former „special archives“, today's „RGVA“ „Rossijskij Gosudarstvennyj Voennyj Archiv“, „Russian State Military Archives“ in Moscow.
- These files are still under protection of data privacy, and the files can only be used with the permission of the former POWs themselves or their relatives.
- These files were opened when the POW arrived in a permanent GUPVI camp in the Soviet Union. Soon after their arrival in the camp, they were questioned by a Soviet officer, together with a translator and a clerk.
- This is the first reason why I said „theoretically“ in the first place: Regarding our research about Austrian POWs in the Soviet Union, we had many cases about Austrian members of the German „Wehrmacht“ which clearly were captured by Soviet military forces, but we were not able to find a trace of them in the Soviet archives. In many cases we have the problem that prisoners, because of malnutrition, wounds or diseases, died during their transport to the Soviet Union, before they were registered by the

GUPVI. And in the camps right behind the Soviet frontline where the POWs were first allocated, no records were made.

- The result of the questioning in the camps was a five page questionnaire, which we can find in the archives until now.
- The file you can see here is a file about an Austrian POW named Josef Frei, born in the year 1915 in Bludenz, Vorarlberg. As you can see on the top of the second page, from the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 1946 on he was a prisoner here in Šilute, in camp No. 184. He stayed here until the 17<sup>th</sup> of September 1946, when he left the camp on a transport to camp No. 176 in Foksany, Romania, from where he returned home to Austria.
- Questionnaires like this here contain broad-scale biographical information about the prisoner and his family (for example place and date of birth, physical address, occupation, religion, education, family members, parents, possessions etc.) and even information about his service in the „Wehrmacht“ (military education, last unit he served in, rank, occupation in the military forces, date and place of capture). For most of the Austrian POWs, it is possible until today to find this questionnaire, which provides the most important information about the prisoner himself and his capture.
- Especially interesting for us as researchers as well as relatives of the POWs is the last page of the questionnaire. On this page, the POW was asked to sign the form. Under his signature, information about the camps he was in can be found. Most of the questionnaires we found so far contained very detailed information, every camp he was in was mentioned here, together with the dates of his arrival in and his departure from the camp. Sometimes, even the numbers of the transports he was on are mentioned. The problem is that the camps are only mentioned with the numbers of the camp administration and the number of the camp. But with the camp list we have worked out through our research based on plans and reports on GUPVI camps, with these numbers it's possible to decode the number, to identify and to locate the camp where he had to stay. And this location is often a very important information for relatives – they just want to know where their brothers, uncles, fathers, grandfathers were imprisoned.
- In many cases, the personal files contain additional materials. Some contain interrogation reports from interrogations with the POW, medical reports, reports with political estimations, reports and notes about incidents in the camp, and others.

14-15 MAY 2015, ŠILUTĖ

- Also German documents can sometimes be found in the personal files, for example documents that were taken from the POWs right after his capture like “Soldbücher” (small booklets with information about his military service in the German Wehrmacht), letters from the POW to camp administrations etc.
- These additional materials are especially important when it is necessary to conduct research on POWs who lost their lives during captivity. In these cases, it is always very important for the family to know why they died and where their relatives were buried.
- In the case of a deceased POW, his personal file contains usually two additional documents: a patient history and two half-page notes, one about when the POW had died and one about when and where he was buried. Of most of the POWs who died in a camp or in a so called “special hospital” (“Specgospital”), these documents still exist. The two-page summary at the beginning of the patient history usually gives the cause of death, and the protocol from the camp or hospital he was in documents the treatment until his death. The two mentioned notes contain, again, the cause of death, the graveyard and the numbers of the quadrant and the grave. With this information, it’s possible to locate the grave today, with the help of graveyard plans and current plans of the region, as I will show with this example.

#### **How to find a grave – the example of the Austrian POW Alois Fassl:**

- In cases when a POW died during his captivity, the first and most important question for his relatives is always where his grave is. If and how detailed we can answer this question, depends of course on the materials we have available from the personal file of the prisoner and from the file about the camp or special hospital where he died. In the case of Alois Fassl I did research on in 2011, we were lucky enough to be able to find the exact location where he was buried.
- In 2011, our institute was contacted by the daughter of Mr. Fassl. She wanted to know more about the fate of her father, who, according to the information known in the family, has gone “missing in action” during his military service in the German Wehrmacht on the Eastern front a short time before the end of the war in May 1945. She had no details about it, as the family got absolutely no information about his whereabouts. The family thought he died during the last fights of the war, but they wanted to have more detailed information about it.

- As we always do when we get such a request, we first check our databases which contains information about nearly 130.000 Austrian POWs in the Soviet Union. This database was started at the beginning of our institute's research about Austrian POWs by Prof. Karner and my colleague Harald Knoll. If the person we search for eventually got captured, as until today, when we speak about Austrians gone “missing” on the Eastern front, there is still a chance of approximately 5 percent that he got captured by the Soviet side and died before he could write to his family at home that he got captured. In this case, with the biographical information of the family, I was soon able to find an entry in our database that proofed that Alois Fassl was captured in May 1945 near the German city of Freistadt. For the family, it was quite a surprise that Mr. Fassl was captured, and with their allowance, we retrieved his personal file from the archives in Moscow.
- This is the first page of his personal file. As you can see here on the last page of the questionnaire, he was transferred to the camp No 3 of the camp administration No. 323 located in the Tula region. Camp No. 3, according to a camp characteristic we were able to find, was located near a railway station called “Tovarnovo” in the Tula region.
- Also, a handwritten note could be found that on 8<sup>th</sup> September 1945 he died in the sick bay of this camp because of dysentery, an inflammation of the intestine. According to a second note, he was buried a few days later on the cemetery of the camps 3, 8 and 11 of the camp administration 323.
- We were able to find a map in the archives with the exact location of this cemetery. On this map you can see that the cemetery was located between two small villages close to the city of Bogorodick, around 50 kilometers southeast from Tula. With Google maps, it was no problem to locate these two villages east of Bogorodick.
- Here you can see a map with the two villages mentioned in the plan. When you now compare this big street here and this river with the map of the cemetery, you see that this is the place we were looking for – between the two villages, with the river on the north, and the big street which runs parallel to the river, with this crossway to the south.
- Google Earth makes it possible today to have a look how the site looks like today or at least a few years ago. This is an image from this site from Google Earth. In this case, as you can see, the cemetery is not existing anymore. In other cases, we found out that

14-15 MAY 2015, ŠILUTĖ

the cemetery we were looking for was still existing, and we could identify it clearly as the right one to look for the grave.

- With this information, it's possible to continue the research in the region itself, to get further information where the exact location of the grave could be.
- As you can see on this example, if the materials from the RGVA are used in combination and the documentation is detailed enough, it's possible to find the location of the grave of a single POW in today's Russia.

**Conclusions:**

- As much as we know already about the GUPVI camp system and the Austrian prisoners imprisoned there, there are still some details about which hardly nothing is known about, like the transport to the permanent camps and between the camps, materials about prisoners who died during a transport and information about their graves, the exact locations of some camps and special hospitals.
- With the materials about Austrian POWs and the camps they were imprisoned in, we are able to find out detailed information about their fate in the GUPVI camp system, about their captivity, and, in case they died, about their whereabouts, so that we can end the uncertainty for their families, one of the most important tasks of our work.
- There are still many families who do not know about the fate, the whereabouts of their relatives during the Second World War, but this research is one important step against this uncertainty.