

Graves of the ‘Other’: Norway and the commemoration of soviet prisoners of war

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Abstract

The memory of other nationalities and their wartime suffering on Norwegian soil are mainly part of a local narrative. While the subject of Soviet prisoners of war is common knowledge in local historical studies, both oral and written, there is virtually no space for a living memory about the Soviet POWs on a national level. Despite forming the largest group of casualties on Norwegian soil during the war, the Soviet POWs have not been included at the national level of the Norwegian history of occupation.

Key Words

Collective memory, Exhumation, Operation Asphalt, Soviet victims, War graves, War memorials

Between 1941 and 1945, nearly 100,000 Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) were transported to Norway. About 90,000 of them were soldiers of the Red Army and nearly 9,000 were so-called *Ostarbeiter* (RA, Kontoret for flyktninge-og fangespørsmål, eske 0417). The people in these two categories were Soviet citizens driven into forced labour by, and for, the Germans. Among them there were about 1,400 women and 400 children. In Norway alone, the Germans established nearly 500 prison camps for the Soviet POWs, most of them in the northern part of the country (Soleim 2018). The size of the camps varied from a few prisoners to several thousand in the same camp. According to the Norwegian War Grave Service and information from German prison cards, approximately 13,700 Soviet POWs died in Norway during the War (Soleim 2018; www.obd.ru). Other sources quote different figures: Soviet authorities claimed that the number of missing soldiers reached 16,000. German sources give a number of about 7,000 (RA, Krigsgravtjenesten, sovjetiske krigsgraver 1946–1952, boks 26). The history of Soviet POWs provides a good example of how dramatic war experiences from the Eastern front were transferred to Norway, with both individual and collective memories

connected to these prisoners indicating a will (or the lack of thereof) to remember ‘Others’ in a national context.

The memory of other nationalities and their wartime suffering on Norwegian soil are mainly part of a local narrative. While the subject of Soviet prisoners of war is common knowledge in local historical studies, both oral and written, there is virtually no space for a living memory about the Soviet POWs on a national level. Despite forming the largest group of casualties on Norwegian soil during the war, the Soviet POWs have not been included at the national level of the Norwegian history of occupation (Soleim 2010). One reason for this absence is the prisoners’ destiny after their repatriation to their homeland in 1945. Around 84,000 Soviet citizens were repatriated from Norway, and until the beginning of the 1990s there was almost no contact between Norwegians and former Soviet prisoners. Another, and perhaps a more important reason, points back to a set of politically charged practices that in the early post-war years evolved around the human remains of the Soviet POWs (Soleim 2016). Known under the codename Operation Asphalt, they involved mass exhumation and reburial of the bodies and, in the longer run, contributed to effective

removal of Soviet victims of the war from the national memorial landscape.

A few years after the surviving POWs were sent home, the dead Soviet victims of the German occupation received considerable publicity in Norway. In 1951, the Norwegian government decided to move graves of the Soviet POWs from Finnmark, Troms and Nordland to Tjøtta War Cemetery on the Helgeland coast outside Sandnessjøen. The work was given the codename Operation Asphalt probably because the excavated bodies were transported in asphalt bags. The planning of Operation Asphalt began in 1948 with the aim of establishing a joint graveyard to which all remains of Soviet POWs, exhumed from the burial sites spread throughout the northern part of the country, would be relocated. The excavations carried out within the framework of the Operation Asphalt constituted an extensive task for the Norwegian authorities. They covered approximately 200 grave sites, 95 of which were located in the three northernmost counties. The relocation of Soviet POWs was completed in 1951. In the aftermath, several further victims were buried at Tjøtta. In 1952, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that 8804 Soviet POWs had been transferred to the site, of whom 978 had been identified. Obviously, it was difficult to get an exact number from the material after the move was completed. The figures provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1952 do not correspond with information given at the monument at Tjøtta, which lists 6725 unknown and 826 identified victims.

Many monuments dedicated to the dead POWs located at the local burial sites were demolished in the process, while some of those destroyed memorials are still visible near the roads in the mountains. The Norwegian authorities presented several arguments to justify the operation, with the monuments at the centre of their argument. It was claimed that the monuments made moving the corpses difficult, that they prevented local farmers from cultivating the land and, finally, that they spoiled the view for tourists along the main road. All these arguments had no basis in reality. The monuments were not placed above the graves, there were no farmers who needed to remove them in order to get access to their fields and, moreover, most of the monuments were not placed in central areas along the main road but rather in forests or in hidden places. The real, unofficial reason for exhumations, reburials, and destruction of the monuments was the Norwegian government's fear of Soviet espionage. The Norwegian officials did not want to give the Soviet authorities any opportunity to honour the memory of dead Soviet prisoners, considering their visits to the sites merely an excuse to tour sensitive military areas (Soleim 2016). At the beginning of the Cold War, this was a convincing argument to justify Operation Asphalt. While the local community in several towns in northern Norway tried to stop the operation, they only succeeded in one locality (RA, Krigsgravtjenesten, Notat, Gravsaken Mo i Rana, Oslo, 2 November 1951). Protests and demonstrations in these towns are indicative of the strong individual sympathy

among Norwegians towards the memory of the Soviet prisoners who died in Norway, but the operation also led to a weakening of collective memory of the prisoners on the local level.

Entangled in the political tensions of the Cold War, the conditions surrounding the relocation of Soviet war graves in Northern Norway contributed to the invisibility of the fate of Soviet POWs on Norwegian soil. Operation Asphalt briefly drew attention to the POWs – the destruction of memorials and the secrecy of the excavation work rendered locals in northern Norway into horrified spectators of what they described as macabre actions. But this, I argue, in the long term, resulted in an important aspect of Norwegian occupation history being forgotten. Physically, the excavation and destruction of the memorials removed the only anchor that could provide the basis for a worthy and lasting memory of the fate of the thousands of Soviet POWs who died in Norway during the war.

Immediately after the liberation in 1945, the Soviet POWs were generally afforded attention and sympathy. By the 1970s, they had disappeared from the Norwegian national memorial landscape. The politics of memory in the country has hardly included Soviet POWs. Until the 1990s, in cultural celebrations it was mainly Norwegian victims of the war that were remembered, while many schoolbooks still do not mention the Soviet prisoners. Since the late 1980s, awareness and knowledge of the Soviet POWs fate in Norway has been increasing. From the beginning of the 1990s, we have several examples of Soviet POWs who have contacted (or been contacted) by private individuals in Norway and returned to commemorate their wartime experiences. Academic research, local celebrations and Soviet veterans visiting Norway have provided an opportunity to inscribe the former prisoners into collective memory in the country. Several museums and local people are working with the preservation of the memory and history of the Soviet victims of the war, while in some places the monuments have been restored, becoming an important part of local remembrance. In several local communities in Norway, the culture of remembrance of the Soviet prisoners is strong. On May 1 (International Workers' Day) or May 8 (Liberation Day) there are often speeches or special arrangements at the Soviet war graves. One example is the Russian Embassy's participation at commemoration arrangements on May 1 at Ørmelen in Verdal and in the Falstad Forest. This kind of commemoration has continued since 1945 at Ørmelen and since the 1960s in the Falstad Forest. Yet, these efforts remain fragmentary and unfold mostly at the local level. Reflecting the conflicts of memory in Norway more generally, local memory is not visible on a national level and the forms of remembering are dependent on a local initiative.

War cemeteries are places invested with a certain symbolic value. The anonymity present there not only reminds us of the one soldier who died, but also about the bloodbath of the war. In Norway, the establishment and maintenance of war monuments and memorials dedicated to Soviet POWs are also dependent on local initiatives. The

absence of memorials or a lack of interest in them gives us a clear signal about the will of communities to remember the destiny of other nationalities that died on Norwegian soil during the Second World War. Nowadays, more than forty memorials have been erected to the memory of the dead Soviet prisoners in Norway. Where the victims' names are known, they have been listed on the monuments. A lot of local communities have taken care of the monuments where the names of the victims are known.

There are several monuments at Tjøtta International War Cemetery. The main memorial, a seven-metre-high monolith, was unveiled in 1953. It bears the inscription: "In grateful memory to the Soviet Russian soldiers that lost their lives in Northern Norway during the war 1941–1945 and who are buried here." (Helgelands Blad undated, 1953). Another, smaller monument cites the number of 7,551 victims buried at Tjøtta. At the graveyard, one can also find nameplates, placed on the ground, for the 826 identified victims. In 2002, all the nameplates were removed from the graves by the Central War Grave Service authorities in Oslo; the Soviet prisoners were again reduced to anonymous victims (Helgeland Arbeiderblad 2008). The quoted reasons for the removal were pragmatic: the nameplates sank down into the ground and damaged the lawnmower while maintaining the memory location. The decision to remove the plaques met with protests from local people and local authorities. Most of this local engagement had its background in the catastrophe of the ship *Rigel* in the autumn of 1944, which took place near the future cemetery. More than 2,000 Soviet POWs lost their lives as result of the British airstrike, killed by the bombs directly or by the ensuing fire on board the ship. Only the strongest and those who could swim were saved. Today, apart from some iron scrap by the sea, there are no visible traces of this catastrophe. The victims are buried at Tjøtta; a memorial that commemorates their tragic deaths was unveiled on December 1, 1977 (Helgelands Blad 1977). Representatives from the Russian Embassy in Oslo, the Norwegian Government, the Norwegian Defence and local authorities participated in the ceremony. The Tjøtta name plates were restored only at the end of 2008. Yet this solution is not permanent (Helgeland Arbeiderblad 2008).

One of the reasons for this is the fact that in 2009, the Norwegian governmental War Grave Service and the Falstad Memorial and Human Rights Centre launched a project *War Graves Seek Names* that seeks to establish the identity of the unknown Soviet POWs buried in Norway (a project in which I was personally involved). It is based on research into prison cards obtained from Russian archives. By 2009, only 2,700 of the Soviet victims had been identified by name thanks to material available in the register of the Norwegian War Grave Service. With the help of the newly launched identification project, we have been able to establish over 4,000 new names of

the Soviet POWs. For this purpose, we make use of the Russian database OBD Memorial with digitalized prison cards from Russian and German archives. The database www.krigsgraver.no which provides information on the identified dead, was inaugurated on March 23, 2011. According to the plans of the War Grave Service, once the project concludes, all newly identified names will be set up at the Tjøtta International War Cemetery (FAD, Merking på Tjøtta sovjetiske krigskirkegård, Høringsnotat, 4 June 2012).

The Falstad Memorial and Human Rights Centre represents another local memorial site with national and international perspectives. Situated in mid-Norway, in the main building of the former Prison Camp *SS Strafgefängenenlager Falstad*, this national education and documentation centre was officially opened in October 2006 (the foundation was established already in 2000)¹ The museum exhibition *Face to Face* consists of eleven rooms covering the development of Nazism, the establishment of the Third Reich, the SS and the concentration camps, the politics of race and the euthanasia programme, the war on the Eastern Front, the Norwegian Holocaust and the history of SS Strafgefängenenlager Falstad. The fate of the Norwegian Jews and Soviet POWs form an important part of the exhibition. The post-war years, including the trials against German war criminals, the development of the United Nations and human rights, genocide, crimes against humanity and mass murder after 1945 are the topics addressed in the final rooms. The exhibition highlights the development of modern human rights. The material used in the exhibition comes mainly from the collections of the Falstad Museum archive, including letters, diaries, paintings, uniforms and interviews with former prisoners.

The Centre's focus on the wartime and post-war fate of the Soviet POWs is articulated most powerfully in the Falstad Forest – a former execution and burial site located one kilometre south of the museum building. Approximately 220 prisoners of the camp were killed there between 1942 and 1943: about 100 Soviet POWs and 74 Yugoslavian and 43 Norwegian political prisoners (Reitan 2006). Every year on May 1, representatives of the Russian Embassy in Oslo take part in commemorations of the Soviet prisoners of war at the site. Many local people also participate in the ceremony. This connection between the embassy and the local residents is crucial for preserving the memory of both Soviet and Norwegian victims shot in Falstad Forest. Two monuments erected in the forest are dedicated to all victims, regardless of their nationality.

In the Mo i Rana area of northern Norway, too, the memory of the Soviet POWs has been preserved through local efforts. In 2004, the local historical society together with the residents restored and unveiled a previously destroyed monument for Soviet victims at Hjartåsen in Rana.² This type of commitment to local history, which includes victims from a foreign country, invests collective

1 (http://falstadsenteret.no/3_stiftelsen/arsberetning%202002.pdf and <http://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dep/ud/aktuelt/taler> 12 May 2018).

2 <http://www.russia.no/s/rb-06-minnet-lever.pdf> (12 Mai 2018).

memory with a broader perspective. The remembrance of the Soviet victims in local communities in northern Norway demonstrates that it is possible, and desirable, to remember the destiny of other prisoners who died on Norwegian soil. Such local remembrance offers us a good opportunity to examine how efforts undertaken by small communities transform broader awareness and memory of the war. The work of local communities and museums to maintain the memory of the Soviet victims is also important in the education of younger generations. Yet, despite this growing interest in the history of the Soviet POWs, there is still a lot of work to be done in order to transfer this remembrance from the local to national level.

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Archive

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