

THE PRISONERS OF WORLD WARS IN RUSSIAN PROVINCE (ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE ASTRAKHAN REGION)

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Abstract: The article discusses the humanitarian aspects of war captivity experience during the First and the Second World Wars. The focal points of our research are the analysis of the daily life practices of prisoners, POWs' (Prisoners of War) detention system in the USSR, issues of mutual perception of the prisoners and the local population, which helped better understand the deeper aspects of the wars. The purpose of the study was to identify the characteristics of the Astrakhan region as the host area of prisoners during the two world wars (Astrakhan region during the First World War, as well as the Astrakhan region during the Second World War). The authors of the study set a number of research objectives. Firstly, to study the issues of POWs' accommodation and provision, the body count, their living conditions, as well as, medical care. Secondly, to describe the typical relations of POWs with the local community, including women; to determine the characteristics of perception of others in the Astrakhan region. The main research methods are: synchronic and diachronic descriptions, chronological descriptions, statistical and comparative methods, methods of classification and evaluation. The study revealed key features of POWs' stay in the Astrakhan region. We've also introduced new data sources for further scientific analysis.

Keywords: World War, a POW (a prisoner of war), the Astrakhan region, a local population.

INTRODUCTION

The 20th century came into the history of mankind as the era of “conflict states’ interaction”, twice these conflicts were of global nature. The two world wars were accompanied by enormous destruction and casualties. They corrected the perception and interaction of representatives of different cultural practices. Captivity was an integral component of the first and second world wars and became a mass phenomenon after the war of 1914-1918. Captivity as a “mass practice,” “massive experience” influenced greatly the understandings of the fate of POWs (prisoners of war) at personal level, and at the level of the social structure.

Our research has shown that it is hard to find a comprehensive, comparative historical description of military captivity practices in the Astrakhan region in professional historical science. It is our belief that such description is the most important research task, aimed at the re-creation of the image of the military captivity practices in one of the most important regions of the Russian North Caspian area. Astrakhan is a unique historical and cultural space, characterized by the experience

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of interaction and mutual influence of different cultures, tolerant perception of strangers. This is largely due to the absence of the hostile attitude of the local population to POWs, alongside with various everyday communication practices of the Astrakhan prisoners, especially during the First World War.

At the beginning of the 20th century the Astrakhan region ranked 4th in size among the regions of Russia, it was a multi-national area, administratively divided into five districts, it consisted of the administrative unit of the Kalmyk and Kirghiz (Kazakh) steppe and the land of the Astrakhan Cossack troops. Total population amounted to 1527904 people.

The Astrakhan district was an administrative-territorial unit of the Lower Volga region and the Stalingrad area, which existed in 1928-1930 and 1937-1943 years. The population of the region in 1939 was 615.2 thousand people. On December 27, 1943 the district and the attached territory of the Kalmyk Autonomous Soviet Social Republic were abolished and transformed into an independent Astrakhan region.

The placement of POWs in the area of the Astrakhan region – a frontier area with intercultural contacts – stimulated the activities of diverse religious groups, affecting the functional orientation of the captivity, influencing the life in the provincial community.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

The method of the research is determined by the approach to military captivity as a multidimensional phenomenon. An “Astrakhan POW” is analyzed in two aspects: synchronic and diachronic, i.e., in particular horizontal and vertical historical and cultural paradigms. This approach reveals the “human history”, the personal side of the story. We were seeking to understand the specific problems of the era, which is possible to achieve through the description of the interaction of POWs with one another, with the representatives of the local community, especially within a framework of a “different” cultural space. The study of “subjective sources” (letters, diaries, memoirs), daily behavioral practices in specific historical circumstances contributed to the reconstruction of the history of “a man at war”, it allowed us to talk about the compatibility of the micro and macro analysis of the research problem.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

During the First World War, the Astrakhan region was at a considerable distance from the main war operations, it housed refugees from enemy states and prisoners of war. The first prisoners (611 people) arrived in Astrakhan, a month after the war began. The preservation of archives does not allow us to accurately track the changes in body count of prisoners. Quantitative dynamics of POWs’ body count is reflected in Figure 1.

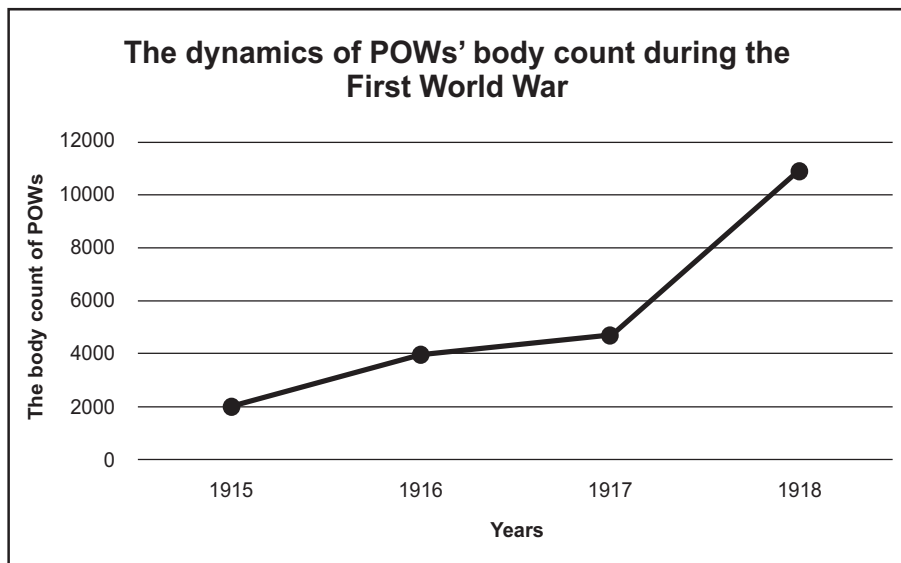


Figure 1: The dynamics of POWs' body count during the First World War (The Russian State Military Archive. Fund1n. Inventory 15a. Case 172)

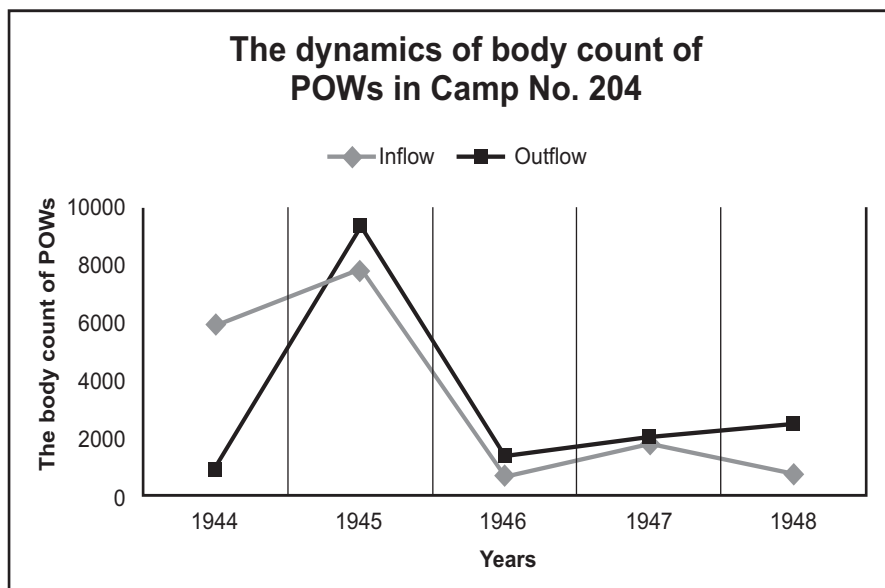
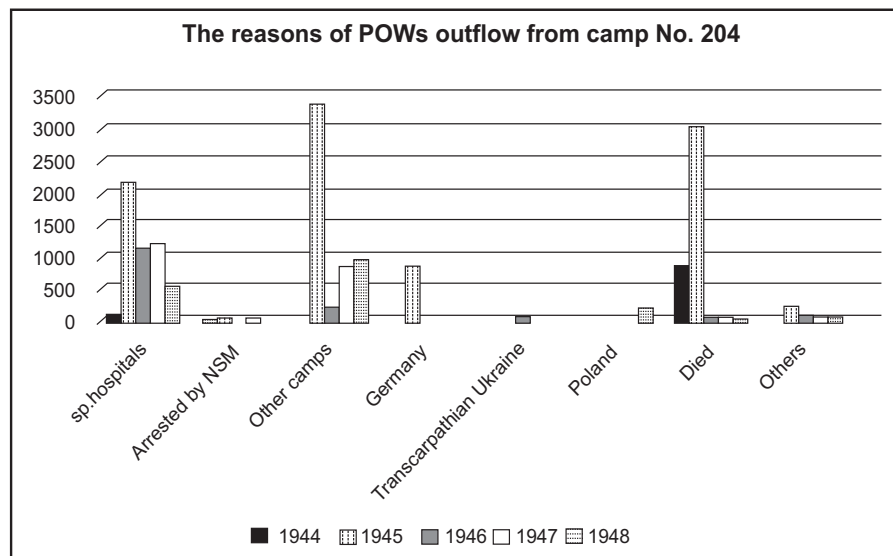


Figure 2: The dynamics of the outflow of body count of POWs in camp No. 204 during 1944-1948. (The Russian State Military Archive. Fund1n. Inventory 15a. Case 172)

Even after the end of the war in January 1920 it was recorded that in the Astrakhan region there were 2337 POWs (State Archive of the Russian Federation. The Foundation 3333. Inventory 4. Case107. Sheet 88).

During the Second World War the special POWs' camp #204 was established in the Astrakhan region. The autumn of 1944 saw the first trainloads of "prisoners of war" (The Russian State Military Archive. Fund 1n. Inventory 13a. Case 9. Sheet 1). The analysis of the documents of the Russian State Military Archive from the State Archive of the Russian Federation and the State Archive of the Astrakhan region revealed a change in the body count of POWs in the Astrakhan region from 1944 to 1948. The change is shown in Figures 2 and 3 respectively.



Source: Arrested by NSM (National Security Ministry)

Figure 3: The dynamics of body count of POWs in camp No. 204 during 1944-1948.
(The Russian State Military Archive. Fund 1n. Inventory 15a. Case 172)

During World War I POWs were placed in the center of small towns and central cities of the Astrakhan region. The ordinary soldiers were accommodated in barracks and rooming houses; the officers - in hotels and private homes. The increase in the number of POWs forced the government in 1915 to build a special camp near the train station. To accommodate prisoners, the administration used the building of the former brewing plant "Bohemia". The supervision of prisoners was carried out by armed guards and foremen. The general security management was entrusted to the police (Fedin S.A., Timofeeva E.G., 2015).

The barracks rooms were dirty and cramped. The war-imprisoners suffered from lice and fleas. People slept on benches, covered with bags of straw and put in two rows. The prisoners washed clothes themselves. It was a characteristic feature of all Astrakhan camps. Gradually the local government came to the understanding of some problems which resulted in their correction (Timofeeva E.G. et al. 2014).

During the Second World War the Astrakhan region hosted 7 divisions of the camp #204, located in Astrakhan and its satellite areas. Except two divisions, the majority of camp branches were not prepared to accept prisoners. Prisoners were placed in areas unsuitable for habitation, houses without windows. Such buildings lacked food units, disinfection chambers, baths (The Russian State Military Archive. Fund 1п. Inventory 13a. Case 9). The rooms were poorly heated, there were not enough beds in them. In 1945 the situation improved: the administration repaired and insulated all barracks, and glazed the windows. Bedding fabric was produced in large amounts (The Russian State Military Archive. Fund 1п. Inventory 15a. Case 172. Sheet 50-59).

One of the most acute problems in the period of world wars was the task to provide prisoners with clothing and footwear.

For example, during World War II POWs were to have two changes of underwear in a year, as well as outdoor clothes and shoes, which they received during the year as needed. Local authorities tried to solve the problem at the expense of the recruits. However, that did not always led to the desired results. For example, during the rainy season of November the prisoners, assigned to daily labor in the city, could not go to work in the state-owned footwear they had.

At the same time POWs, recruited for canalization repair work, were equipped with boots and canvas as outdoor clothing. Noteworthy, in 1916, seven Austrian and German POW-mechanics arrived to Astrakhan from Siberia (namely, Gauzer K., Buck I., Kegler N., Rauhekker I., Mansfeld F., Tseh A., Bozhak A.). They were assigned to work at the city's power station. They were poorly equipped. In Astrakhan they were given boots, caps, coats, trousers, two sets of shirts and pants. As you can see, in different regions of Russia the problem of the supply of clothing and footwear was resolved differently.

The Astrakhan city government allowed funds for the repair of war prisoners' clothing. According to the receipts, it is known that, for instance, the senior member of the prisoners' group, working in the city canalization system, Corporal Berdyani Desiderius, received 16 rubles 75 kopecks to buy threads, needles, buttons for the lower ranks of the prisoners who worked in the mill town from August 15, 1916 till June 17, 1917. In June 1917 the sergeant of the camp "Bohemia", Otto Walter, was assigned to purchase necessary goods for "high boots' repair" which amounted to 69 rubles 34 kopecks (Timofeeva E.G. et al. 2014).

A similar situation was observed in the years of World War II in camp #204. About 50% of prisoners there were given coats, jacket, shoes and underwear. Due to the lack of warm clothing and footwear, many prisoners were hampered from access to their work. Heavily worn clothing required major repairs. Most of the prisoners had no underwear (The Russian State Military Archive. Fund 1п. Inventory 13a. Case 9. Sheet 4). However, in 1945 the situation with the clothing improved significantly: large supplies of winter uniforms arrived, a workshop for clothes' and footwear repair was organized (The Russian State Military Archive. Fund 1п. Inventory 15a. Case 172. Sheet 50-59).

The primary concern for the administration of POWs was their food security. During the First World War, the lower ranks of prisoners ate the same food as Russian soldiers. However, with the deepening of the economic crisis the situation with the food for POWs deteriorated. In the summer of 1915 the governor of the Astrakhan I.N. Sokolovsky advised to reduce the accepted norms. Noteworthy, that there was an essential condition to observe fast days.

As the food crisis continued, the governor started to buy products for prisoners from urban markets. High food prices exacerbated the problem. Thus, the workers from the Road Department reported to the city council that "they were forced to buy food from the markets for triple the prices."

Captured officers were in different circumstances, they received salaries from 50 to 100 rubles, depending on their rank. With the sharp deterioration of the food situation in 1917, the officers were allowed, at their request, to eat with the soldiers (Timofeeva E.G. et al. 2014).

During World War II POWs from camp #204 in the Astrakhan region, were fed according to the established norms. Most prisoners ate a monotonous diet, which consisted of cereals and noodles. The greatest difficulties in food security happened in 1946, when the Soviet Union was swept by the terrible famine, caused by the crop failure. Systematically there were shortages of fats and potatoes. Prisoners did not get enough salt, fresh fish. Millet was the only cereal, while cabbages were the only vegetables, available to prisoners. Fresh meat was replaced by canned (The Russian State Military Archive. Fund 1п. Inventory 15a. Case 172. Sheet 50-59).

The organization of health care of prisoners was another major concern of the camp administration. They had to organize the treatment of the wounded and the sick, conduct anti-epidemic measures.

Prisoners received their medical care in local hospitals. The acute need for specialists required to resort to the services of imprisoned doctors and nurses. For instance, in September 1917 in the Astrakhan region among POWs there were 14 doctors and "medical students" from Austrian and German armies. 2 doctors were officially employed in the city war hospital (The State Archive of the Astrakhan Region. Fund 700. Inventory 2. Case 157. Sheets 319, 423, 657).

Tuberculosis and typhus were the most common diseases among POWs, which was explained by the conditions of their captivity and the depletion of their bodies. In May 1915, typhoid outbreak was noted in the camp “Bohemia” (The State Archive of the Astrakhan region. Fund 1. Inventory 2. Case 1495. Sheet 82). In February 1916, the Governor I.N. Sokolovsky reported that there were patients with typhoid among those prisoners, who had returned to the camp after remote agricultural work. (The State Archive of the Astrakhan region. Fund 94. Inventory 1. Volume 8. Case 35454. Sheet 44). In December 1915, 32 cases of typhus were recorded in Tsarevsky district of the Astrakhan region (The State Archive of the Astrakhan Region. Fund 1. Inventory 2. Case 1437. Sheet 123).

The year 1917 brought the biggest numbers of POWs, infected with typhus and tuberculosis. In March 1917, among 4105 POWs there were only 298 healthy persons (The State Archive of the Astrakhan Region. Fund 700. Inventory 1. Case 114. Sheet 113). In September 1917, 80 prisoners of the lower ranks, infected with tuberculosis, were sent to Totski camp of the Samara region (The State Archive of the Astrakhan Region. Fund 700. Inventory 1. Case 115. Sheet 19-22).

During the Second World War, the predominant health care problems were connected with degeneration, typhus and dysentery.

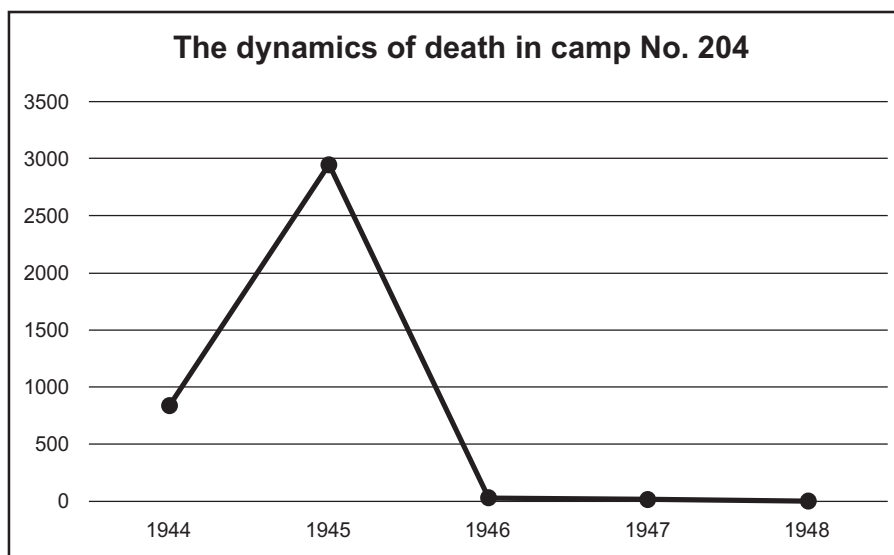


Figure 4: The dynamics of deaths in camp No. 204 in 1944-1948. (The Russian State Military Archive. Fund 1n. Inventory 15a. Case 172.)

In January 1945, the administration of the city organized the central hospital with 485 beds. The hospital employed 12 doctors and 16 medical experts. Noteworthy, that 17 POW-doctors and 2 POW-medical workers were also working there (The Russian State Military Archive. Fund 1п. Inventory 15a. Case 172. Sheet 5, 32).

Despite the preventive measures high mortality rate remained in the camp (see. Figure 4).

The high level of morbidity and mortality can be explained by the following reasons: 1) the arrival of POWs, sick with typhus and dysentery; 2) low temperatures during the winter period in the Astrakhan region; 3) poor environmental situation; 4) the lack of seasonal clothing.

Each camp branch had a special health department to improve the situation. Sick prisoners were sent to such departments. Most of them did not work outside.

The administration of the camp performed preventive treatment of prisoners against malaria and diarrheal diseases. Temperature monitoring was done regularly to control typhus-affected POWs.

In January 1946, a special recreation department was organized on the basis of the central hospital. The department allowed to significantly reduce morbidity and mortality among the prisoners. In 1947, the positive dynamics of the physical condition of the prisoners was recorded (The Russian State Military Archive. Fund 1п. Inventory 15a. Case 172. Sheet 32-36).

The study showed that in the years of world wars the captivity conditions were adequate to the rules, existing in the whole country. Much was done to insure a decent living for POWs.

The government sought to completely isolate the prisoners and prevent their contact with the local population, as well as, to reduce the communication among officers and lower ranks of POWs. However, it was not possible to solve this problem in practice. During the First World War, the imprisoned officers enjoyed the greatest freedom. They had a relative freedom of movement within their placements, on top of that, they were not forced to compulsory labor. For example, the German POW, Lieutenant Gildenbrandt, regularly attended the Red Cross Hospital, bath, led the conversation with the pastor Lopp, bought medication from the city's chemists' shops, used the services of a hairdresser, a dentist, a photographer, dined in the best restaurants in town, and, despite the ban, talked with other military people (Timofeeva E.G. et al. 2014).

The obvious places of communication of prisoners with the locals were the labor places of prisoners: city enterprises, streets, roads' building sites, the construction of the shafts to protect the city from flooding, agricultural fields (Timofeeva E.G. et al. 2015).

According to the newspaper, "Astrakhan Vestnik", "merciful Astrakhan citizens did not leave prisoners without an offering. Watermelons and whole packs of cigarettes were transferred to prisoners. The prisoners gently smiled and said: "Thank you." All the prisoners were moved by the kindness and hospitality of the local people".

The Austrian captive soldier, Anton Gaken, noticed in his diary that he enjoyed a good attitude from Kyrgyz people, who supplied the prisoners with bread, tea and fish (Timofeyeva E.G. et al. 2014).

There were many Polish people among the POWs in Astrakhan. According to the memoirs of Janina Rafalski, "... all Polish families considered a sacred duty to care for their compatriots. Doing this was easy, since the prisoners could easily go out of the camp, walking around the city, as much as they liked ...

... It all ended in 1917, when the political regime changed, prisoners were taken under strict arrest, and many were deported to the east. Only on Sundays they were allowed to go to the Catholic church, and only there it was possible to pass a note to a family or take a parcel "(Nagajkina S.I. 2013. Pp. 316-317).

Such warm attitude towards the prisoners remained in the Astrakhan region long before the end of the war. Russian people showed sympathy to those, who found themselves in the harsh conditions of captivity. Such compassion emanated primarily from Russian women, they felt sorry for the prisoners. In January 1915, the "Astrakhan Herald" correspondent noted that "... some of compassionate local women brought baked pies to the marketplace and distributed them among Austrian and German captivated soldiers, who were frequent in such markets "(Timofeyeva E.G. et al. 2014). "The city people were doing it out of compassion for those who were "malnourished", rightly emphasizes Semyenova E.Y. (2012).

The emotions of compassion and respect for prisoners were common among Astrakhan people in the time of the Second World War, too. The bitter struggle with Nazi Germany had removed all restrictions on the use of tools and methods of ideological confrontation. The word "German" was equivalent to the word "enemy" (Kuz'minyh A.L. 2014). However, in the eyes of the layman, former enemy, who had become a POW, needed support and sympathy.

The citizen of Astrakhan, Yuri Yarovoy, described the attitude of Astrakhan people to the defeated Germans, leaving the battle field at Stalingrad: "On each side of the column there were Soviet soldiers with rifles. Some were with police shepherd dogs.

The clothes of officers and soldiers were shabby and dirty. Some walked in sandals. Many of the prisoners were tied up in bandages. Someone walked on crutches, many were supported under arms. Everyone had a worried pathetic look ...

... The whole picture was unbearable. The majority of people apparently thought that way. To my great astonishment, Astrakhan citizens on all sides began throwing pieces of bread, dried fish and something else edible to German prisoners. The prisoners were grabbing these gifts of mercy from the ground and then tried to eat them quickly” (Shein O.V, 2010. Pp. 225-226).

Klaus Fritzsche, a German POW, in his memoirs also pointed out the good nature of the Soviet camp authorities. For instance, he mentioned the fact that at the request of the imprisoned German pilots the administration conducted a tour of Astrakhan. During the sightseeing tour, the imprisoned were surrounded by a crowd of curious Astrakhan citizens, whose faces did not express hatred (Fritzsche K. 2006. P. 24).

“The population in general treated us kindly,” testified other Germans who were held captive in Astrakhan (Karel’ P. and G. Beddeker 2004).

As POWs had become a part of everyday life of Astrakhan, inevitably there were relationships between men and women.

Young Astrakhan ladies reacted to the appearance of the prisoners of war with particular curiosity. As it is seen from a letter “to the army,” from Alexandra F. to Alexander Martemyanov, dated January 27, 1915, some Astrakhan women used any chance to see imprisoned foreigners: “Grunya and Shura (Russian female names) ... swept all greenhouses, buying up red carnations, then bought chocolate, about 10 lbs... and with these gifts went to visit the Austrians-sweet darlings; came to their prison... and ... saw that the sentry was somewhere away ... [girls] ... just did what they wanted.” The date with the prisoners ended in the visit to the police (Katrutsa M.Y. 2014. Pp. 284-285).

For instance, it was stated in the report of the commander of the 4th squadron of the 692nd walking brigade from Saratov, who were guarding prisoners of war in Astrakhan in April 1916, that the captive officers, stationed in the building of the female school, communicated and had fun with the women from the house, adjoining the college (The State Archive of the Astrakhan Region. Fund 290. Inventory 3. Case Sheet 9).

During the Second World War such incidents also occurred. The work of Russian and Germans, often employed in the same production department, inevitably caused people to come into contact with one another. The mass character, as noted in the special reports of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs, prompted friendly conversations, flirting, secret meetings, joint drinking and other “intimate relationships” (Kuz’minyh A.L. 2014).

The reports of camp #2004 management contained the following facts: “In January 1945, the prisoner of war K. using free entry and exit from the zone, went to the citizen N., with whom he had an intimate relationship (The State Archive of the Astrakhan Region. Fund 2609. Inventory 1. Case 3. Sheet 8). In July 1946

the prisoners H. and G. went out of the zone with the permission of the officer, went for a walk with Russian girls, and walked up to one o'clock. After the arrest the prisoners were sent to the penal squadron (The State Archive of the Astrakhan Region. Fund 2609. Inventory 2. Case 7. Sheet 108-109).

The most common were the contacts between POWs and medical staff members. The camp records contain numerous references to such "nonregulated relations". Taking advantage of the patronage of women doctors, POWs received additional food and a chance for an earlier return to home (Kuz'minyh A.L. 2014).

Medical staff members, caught in "discredit relations", were subjected to the communist party expulsion and a job loss. For example, in 1947, there was an episode when three nurses, who were dismissed from their jobs in the camp hospital, on the grounds of "the sexual relations with prisoners of war" (Astrakhan Information Centre of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Astrakhan Region. Fund 21. Inventory 2. Case 17a. Sheet 97).

The study suggests that POWs' contacts with the local population were not confined to the camps' premises.

CONCLUSION

Our research has shown that historical experts manifested a deep interest in the problem of military captivity in line with the general problems of history of world wars. It is possible to treat captivity as an independent object of scientific research.

The problems of captivity during the First World War were represented in a scientific monograph and a thesis research by Ikonnikova T.Y. (2004), Surzhikova N.V. (2014), Vasilyeva S.N. (1999), Talapina A.N. (2005). The authors analyze the topic of military captivity, according to the following patterns: the body count of prisoners, their legal status, material support, labor activities, participation in political processes and repatriation with the help of the examples of different Russian regions.

In his papers the German researcher Nachtigal R. (2014) offered a variety of subjects, regarding the stay of foreign POWs in Russia during the First World War period. The controversy of his conclusions needs special attention.

Various aspects of the prisoners' in captivity in the Volga region are considered in the works by Nimanov B.I. (2009), Hasin V.V. (1999) and Kalyakina A.V. (2014).

The results of the study of the concept of military captivity during World War II are given in the works by Popov A.B. (2000) and Konasov V.B. (1996). Yepifanov A.E. (1999) wrote about the fate of German POWs in Stalingrad. Sidorov S.G. (2001) described the practice of bringing former enemy soldiers to the repair works in the Soviet cities.

Of much interest is the work by Karel' P. and G. Beddeker (2004), which is based on the memories of Wehrmacht soldiers, who returned from the former Soviet Union, and the Russian State Archive's materials. Among a large number of memoirs, we distinguish the book by Fritzsche K. (2006), which contains vivid descriptions of the author's stay in camps on the territory of the Lower Volga region.

However, in Russian and foreign historical science there are very few specific studies on the comparative analysis and the identification of typical and special characteristics of military captivity of the two world wars: the war of 1914-1918 and the war of 1939-1945 (Bondarenko E.Y. 2004)

In our research we arrived to the following conclusions and generalizations:

The life of POWs in the Astrakhan region had a strong connection with the specific features of the region. Being a frontier region, Astrakhan is filled with the experiences of interaction and mutual influence of different cultures, tolerant perception of strangers. This was largely due to the absence of hostility to the POWs. In their turn POWs took to the local population.

The practice of captivity offered a mutual perception of war among prisoners and Astrakhan citizens. It demonstrated a cross-cultural exchange experience. In Astrakhan there was a visible "zone of mercy" towards prisoners. The empathy, compassion, financial support of local people helped balance the hardships of captivity.

Regional space was filled with a variety of practices, related to POWs. Those practices during the First World War were not limited to the premises of a camp. They contained the elements of a social institution. During the Second World War the attitude to prisoners were "less humane", but did not rule out a "breakthrough" to the everyday local environment, building a line of interaction with the Astrakhan public.

A study of the quantitative dynamics among the prisoners of the First World War and the Second World War revealed the fact that the Astrakhan region, with all its territorial and administrative subdivisions, absorbed almost the same number of "prisoners of war": about 10 thousand people during each war period. This is due to the economic potential of the territory, the local resources of employment and the use of POWs, the political processes in the region.

The "Astrakhan captivity" was not homogeneous, it demonstrated the diversity of forms at the regional level.

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