

What must not be forgotten: death in the marshes

by Ralph Bosshard,* Switzerland



Ralph Bosshard (Photo nachdenkseiten.de)

On Monday, 27 January, the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz was commemorated, but other places of horror must not be forgotten – or made to be forgotten. There are still many such places, especially on the map of Belarus, that remind us of the pain and horror of the terrible tragedies

and cruel crimes of the Nazis during the Second World War, known as the Great Patriotic War. In addition to the Khatyn memorial, the village of Ozarichi in the Gomel region deserves a prominent mention.

In a marshy area near Ozarichi, north of the city of Mozyr, the German army operated a “camp” for civilians unfit for labour from 12 to 19 March 1944, where, in the freezing cold, without food, sanitary facilities or medical assistance, thousands of people froze and starved to death within a week. The camp had been set up on the initiative of the then commander-in-chief of the 9th Army of the Wehrmacht, General *Josef Harpe*, who was never held accountable for this crime.¹

While the homepage of the German Bundeswehr addresses the massacre of Oradour-sur-Glane in France, one searches in vain for a reference to the crime of Ozarichi.²

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Only those who consciously search for the former so-called “camp” Ozarichi in Belarus will find it. Here the cordoned off entrance. (Picture: Ralph Bosshard, see note no. 3)

Life expectancy: three days

By 12 March 1944, three areas in the marshy terrain around Ozarichi had been fenced off with barbed wire, without any shelters or sanitary facilities. Therefore, the term “camp” is misleading.

Between 12 and 14 March, German soldiers herded civilians from the Belarusian regions of Gomel, Mogilev and Polesia, as well as the neighbouring Russian regions of Smolensk and Orel, into this “camp” in groups of 5,000 to 6,000 people each. At least 500 people, including children, were shot by the accompanying troops while still marching, because they could not walk much further. Life expectancy under the catastrophic conditions in the “camp” in the freezing cold was three days on average. In addition, German guards sometimes shot at people who, in their desperation, tried to drink water from the swamp. The captives were also forbidden to light fires so that the Red Army could not locate the “camps”.

Crimes and miracles

Various data about the number of victims are in circulation: Of the 46,000 people deported, 9,000 to 20,000 died of cold, hunger and disease during the 10 days of the camp’s existence.

Arkadiy Shkuran, a former prisoner of the Ozarichi concentration camp, speaks of 20,000 vic-

tims in an article in the Belarusian military magazine.⁴ According to his information, on 19 March the *Red Army* liberated 34,110 people, including 15,960 children under the age of 13, 517 orphans, 13,702 women and 4,448 elderly people. According to his information, more than three hundred of the released prisoners had bullet and shrapnel wounds, which supports the claims that the guards shot at imprisoned people of the “camp” and that escape attempts after the retreat of the Wehrmacht were prevented by mortar fire.

Particularly touching is the story of a man who has since passed away, but whose birth certificate listed the Ozarichi camp as his place of birth. The Germans deported his pregnant mother from the Zhlobin district. She gave birth to a boy in Ozarichi and died. The prisoners present laid her and the child under a bush and covered them so that the Germans would not notice them. And it was as if the child had sensed everything: it did not cry once. The next day, it was thought that the baby was dead, but it stirred. The only thing the prisoners could do for the child was to put a little snow on its lips to give it some water. Miraculously, the baby survived. Red Army military doctors saved the infant and named him *Valentin* in honour of his mother.

Overzealous perpetrators

The Wehrmacht troops of the 9th Army had been ordered to deport the local population, namely the 35th, 36th, 110th, 129th, the 134th and the 296th Infantry Divisions, as well as the 5th and the 20th Panzer Divisions, the latter being overzealous and deporting more people than it had been ordered to.⁵

The war diary of the 9th Army on 8 March 1944 provides the rationale for this crime:

“The plan is to bring all non-working locals from the zone near the front to the area to be abandoned and, if the front is retreated, to leave them there, in particular the numerous typhus patients who have so far been accommodated in special villages, in order to eliminate any health risk to the troops as far as possible. The decision to rid itself of this considerable burden, which also has a significant impact on nutrition, in this way has been taken by the AOK after careful consideration and examination of all the consequences that would arise from it.”⁶

Whether the Germans actually wanted to use children, old men and women infected with

typhus as human shields against the advancing Soviet soldiers has never been proven beyond doubt in a court of law and must remain a matter for speculation. In any case, it cannot be ruled out.

Some got off cheaply

Dieter Pohl, a historian at the *Munich Institute of Contemporary History*, characterised the establishment of the camp as “one of the most serious crimes against civilians ever committed by the Wehrmacht”.⁷

The commander of the *35th Infantry Division* (ID), which played a leading role, Major General *Johann-Georg Richert*, was sentenced to death and executed in the Minsk Trial at the end of January 1946.⁸ Lieutenant General *Karl Decker*, commander of the 5th Panzer Division, and Lieutenant General *Ernst Philipp*, commander of the 134th ID, committed suicide towards the end of the war after their troops had been wiped out or forced to surrender.⁹ Lieutenant General *Arthur Kullmer*, the commander of the 296th ID, died in Soviet captivity in 1953.¹⁰

Major General *Alexander Conrady* (36th ID), Lieutenant General *Wilhelm Ochsner*, Lieutenant General *Hans Traut* (78th ID), Major General *Johann Tarbuk*, and Lieutenant General *Eberhard von Kurowski* (110th ID) were convicted of war crimes after the war and sentenced to a maximum of 25 years in a labour camp, from which they returned in 1955.¹¹

Major General *Heribert von Larisch*, the commander of the 129th ID, and Lieutenant General *Mortimer von Kessel* of the 20th PD settled in West Germany after the war and were never held accountable for their role in the Ozarichi crime.¹²

“Wherever you go, wherever you travel, do stop here”

For a long time, only a lonely wooden watchtower and a barbed wire fence reminded of the terrible events of spring 1944 in Ozarichi. In 2023, work began on a proper memorial, which was able to receive its first visitors on 9 December 2023, the *International Day of Remembrance of Victims of Genocide*.¹³

In the meantime, a pavilion with an information museum and the Tower of Remembrance, in which the memories of former prisoners are engraved, has been erected. Today, a Wall of Mourning with crosses stands on the edge of the marshy terrain. The so-called “Stones of En-

lightenment” are plaques with enlarged archive photos of prisoners. And the military orderlies of the Red Army, who prevented the spread of the typhoid epidemic, are now being remembered for the first time.

After the war, the Americans in particular were interested in using the war experiences of their former German opponents. The historical department of the US Army General Staff temporarily included a German section led by former Chief of Staff *Franz Halder*. Under Halder’s leadership, this department became a central part of the dissemination of the myth of the “clean” Wehrmacht in the United States – and in Germany.¹⁵

On the anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp, present-day Israel will once again cast itself in the role of victim, and Germany will unconditionally agree, in line with its supposedly morally superior foreign policy. It’s a shame that Ozarichi is not remembered in Berlin either.

Source: <https://globalbridge.ch/was-nicht-vergessen-gemacht-werden-darf-der-tod-im-sumpf/>, 24 January 2025

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

1. Die The most important accounts of this are by Dieter Pohl: *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht: deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941–1944* Munich 2008, especially p. 328., and by Christian Gerlach: *Kalkulierte Morde. The German Economic and Extermination Policy in Belarus 1941 to 1944*, dissertation, TU Berlin 1998, study edition, ed. Hamburg 2000. Review by Isabel Heinemann, online at <https://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/200.pdf> and by Hans Heinrich Nolte: *Osarici 1944*, in: Gerd R. Ueberschär (ed.): *Orte des Grauens; Verbrechen im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Darmstadt 2003. Harpe’s personal file in the German Federal Archives online at http://www.bundesarchiv.de/oeffentlichkeit-sarbeit/bilder_dokumente/01163/index-29.html.de. See corresponding entry in the Wehrmacht Lexikon at <https://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/H/HarpeJ-R.htm>.
2. See «Das Massaker von Oradour 1944», on the website of the German Bundeswehr, 09 June 2022, online at <https://zms.bundeswehr.de/de/mediathek/zmsbw-podcast-38-oradour-5442988>.
3. Picture taken by the author in the course of a search for memories of the fate of ancestors of his family.
4. See Аркадий Шуран: *Озаричи, Март 1944-го...*, bei *Белорусская Военная Газета (Belorusskaja Voennaja Gazeta)*, 15 March 2013, online at <http://vsr.mil.by/2013/03/15/ozarichi-mart-1944%E2%80%91go%E2%80%A6/>, in Russian language.
5. See Hans Heinrich Nolte: *Osarici 1944*, in Gerd R. Ueberschär (Hrsg.): *Orte des Grauens. Verbrechen im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Darmstadt 2003, p. 186–194.



The watchtower of the Ozarichi “camp”.
(Picture Ralph Bosshard, see comment 14).

6. Federal Archives – Military Archives Freiburg i.B., RH 20-9/176, quoted from Hans Heinrich Nolte: *Osarici 1944*, in: Gerd R. Ueberschär (Hrsg.): *Orte des Grauens. Verbrechen im Zweiten Weltkrieg*. Darmstadt 2003, p. 186–194
7. See Dieter Pohl: *Die Herrschaft der Wehrmacht: deutsche Militärbesatzung und einheimische Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion 1941–1944* München 2008, p. 328.
8. See Wehrmacht Lexikon at <https://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/R/RichertJG.htm>.
9. Ibid. at <https://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/D/DeckerK.htm> und <https://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/P/PhilippErnst.htm>.
10. Ibid. at <https://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/K/KullmerA.htm>.
11. Ibid. at <https://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/C/ConradyA.htm>, <https://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/O/OchsnerWilhelm.htm>, <https://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/T/TrautH.htm>, <https://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/T/TarbukSensenhorstJohann.htm> and <https://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/K/KurowskivonEberhard.htm>.
12. Ebd. at <https://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/L/LarischHeribertvon.htm> and <https://www.lexikon-der-wehrmacht.de/Personenregister/K/KesselMv.htm>.
13. Ibid. «Сберечь мир и защитить память». Лауреаты спецпремии Президента о реконструкции мемориала в Озаричах, bei Belta, 08.01.2025, online unter <https://belta.by/society/view/sberech-mir-i-zaschitit-pamjat-laureaty-spetspremi-prezidenta-o-rekonstrukcii-memoriala-v-ozarichah-687455-2025/>, in Russian Language.
14. Picture taken by the author in the course of a search for memories of the fate of ancestors of his family.
15. See Ronald Smelser, Edward J. Davies: *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture*. New York, p. 65, online at <https://dokumen.pub/the-myth-of-the-eastern-front-the-nazi-soviet-war-in-american-popular-culture-0521833655-9780521833653.html>.