FALLING INTO RUSSIAN HANDS
German Prisoners of War in Soviet Captivity

Each battle the Germans lost during World War II resulted in more captured soldiers. Many German soldiers became Soviet Prisoners of War (POWs). In 1942, after the Battle of Moscow, 120,000 were captured, and in 1943, after the Battle of Stalingrad, another 91,000. Of these 211,000, all but 6,000 died in Soviet camps by 1945 from disease, starvation, and lack of medical treatment.

The Soviets sent non-military ethnic Germans to the Russian Gulag as well. Beginning in December, 1944, the Red Army deported all able-bodied Germans (men 17-45 and women 18-30) from Soviet-occupied territories such as the Balkans, Romania, Hungary, and Yugoslavia, to the USSR for forced labor. In all, about 271,600 non-military ethnic Germans were deported to the Russian Gulag, with 66,500 (24%) of these dying before they could be repatriated in 1949.

German POWs in Allied custody are marched through a town after surrendering in 1945.

The numbers of POWs grew exponentially as the Germans were defeated. By April 1945, 2 million German soldiers were prisoners of war in Soviet custody. The last battles in central Europe after the war's end on V-E Day (May 8, 1945) were caused by Axis soldiers trying to surrender to British or American troops instead of to the Soviets. The Soviets weren't known for their kindness, and treated their own surrendered soldiers like traitors (Order No. 270, 1941). In all, however, the Soviets would end up with 2.8 million POWs. In May, 1945, the US turned over hundreds of thousands of captured Germans to the Soviet Union as a "gesture of friendship." This meant death and retribution for thousands of these POWs, especially if they were Soviet-born and had sided with the enemy.

Peter Loewen, Gerhard's brother-in-law Isaac Loewen's brother, was one of these. He had been drafted into the German Army in occupied Ukraine, along with his brother Isaac, in 1942. At the war's end, he was captured and returned to Russia. The train stopped, the soldiers were ordered off, and they were all shot as traitors, their bodies thrown into a mass grave. (A survivor who escaped related the story to his family).

Peter Loewen, back right, was repatriated to the Soviet Union in 1945 and promptly executed upon his return. Here he is in Poland in 1943 with his wife and child (also standing in back), his mother (seated, right), and his sister-in-law Neta Loewen (Gerhard's sister), and her four children.

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German prisoners massed in a temporary holding area in May, 1945, prior to being moved to formal POW camps.

Gerhard Dyck was in the same predicament. His survival depended upon being able to pass as a regular German soldier, rather than a Soviet-born German who had sided with the enemy.

In a strange twist of fate, Gerhard and his future brother-in-law, Karl Kessenich (who married his sister, Anni, in 1995), were in the same large group of German soldiers in southern Czechoslovakia that the Americans turned over to the Soviets. (Karl and Gerhard first met in the 1990s.) Karl's account highlights the danger Gerhard was in as a Russian-born German:

"I was sent to an American prison camp for two days. The second night, the Americans told us that the next morning we would break camp and march 15 kilometers west; but when we started marching, they had us go east instead. The soldiers detected it right away. After we had marched five kilometers, we walked into a clearing where the Russians stood with their guns trained on us. It turns out that the Americans had given us up to the Russians (in keeping with the Yalta Agreement, 1945).

The Russian commissars separated us into groups of about 100 men. They said, "We want to know who was born in Russia. We need your names." They separated out about 50 people born in Russia and shot them.

Then we began marching in our groups of 100 men. There were a lot of us POWs, maybe 2000. Your Uncle

Gerhard and I think we were in the same bunch of POWs. A Russian guard beat us with a rifle as we marched, and we marched a long time. After two days, I escaped."

Gerhard was not so fortunate. He was sent to the Gulag for 10 years. For a time, however, the Soviets thought he was a German, which saved his life.

Many of the captured, like Gerhard, were sent to the Donets Basin to reconstruct the mines and other heavy industry in the region that had been damaged during the war; others were sent to the Ural Mountains, or other regions. The workers lived in concentration camps. Conditions were harsh, rations were scarce, and the prisoners were continually subject to mistreatment, overwork, exposure, and torment from the guards. Forced labor was inefficient and unprofitable because starving prisoners quickly became weak and production fell off. If the prisoners had been better nourished, clothed appropriately, and given proper tools for their tasks, the Soviet camps might have rendered more substantial returns. They remained, however, inefficient and unprofitable, places of torment and despair.

Once East Germany (GDR) was created in 1949, the Soviet Union released most of their German POWs to another Communist power. Eighty-five thousand, who had been convicted as war criminals, and ethnic Germans like Gerhardt, remained in Russia. They had been sentenced to 25 years or life imprisonment. These Germans were used to build up the industrial strength of the USSR.

WWII German POWs captured by the Soviets and headed for 10 years of labor camps.