Prisoners Of War

(Jewish and Soviet prisoners of war), two hundred thousand Jewish soldiers of the various Allied armies and more than five million Soviet soldiers taken prisoner by the Germans during World War II. The Jewish POWs were treated differently based on which army they belonged to.

Jewish soldiers from the armies of Western countries, including the United States, France, Canada, Australia, Great Britain, and its Jewish units from Palestine, were generally treated the same as any other POWs from those countries. The policy was very different for Jews serving in the Polish and Soviet armies. About 65,000 Polish-Jewish soldiers were taken prisoner by the Germans. The Germans separated out the Jewish prisoners; they tortured them, gave them meager food rations, and made them do hard labor. By mid-1940, 25,000 Jewish prisoners of war had perished. Prisoners of war from the German-occupied territories of Poland were sent to ghettos, where they shared the fate of the rest of the Jews there. Jews from the Soviet-occupied parts of Poland were sent to camps in the Lublin district, where no more than a few hundred survived. About 85,000 Jewish soldiers from the Soviet army were taken prisoner; all of them were killed by the Germans, no matter what rank.

After the Jews, the largest group murdered by the Nazis were Soviet prisoners of war. About 5.7 million soldiers of the Soviet army were captured by the Germans; 3.5 million perished. Given starvation rations and treated brutally, many succumbed, while others were murdered outright. This treatment was a direct result of Nazi ideology which considered Slavs (including Russians) to be subhuman. Russian soldiers were seen as especially dangerous because they were supposedly imbued with Bolshevism. Among other places, thousands of Soviet POWs were imprisoned in Auschwitz and Majdanek. In Auschwitz, they were the first victims of murder experiments using Zyklon B gas. In order to escape this terrible treatment, many Soviet POWs volunteered to become guards in the concentration camps, where some became notorious for their cruelty. A Jewish Soviet POW, Aleksandr Pechersky, led the Sobibor uprising.