

World War I - German prison camps

ENG241 - Professor Grogan ; By Elise Benamer and Afrika Hurtado Vazquez

An introduction to German camps

During World War I, many soldiers who were found or captured on the battlefield were taken prisoner by the enemy. The **Geneva Convention of 1864** stipulates that wounded prisoners should be taken care of "without any distinction as to nationality." However some of the camps did not follow the Convention.

There were different types of camps depending on the soldiers' status, age, health etc. Until the 1990's, the case of prisoners of war was not a central point of study for different reasons:

- The deaths on the battlefield were more important than the prisoners.
- The horrific treatments of soldiers during World War II in Germany

- 7 to 9 million soldiers were taken prisoner between 1914 and 1918.

- In Germany, specifically, 2.4 million from 13 different nationalities.



POW camp in Dulmen

The conditions in camps

- Food

The **Hague Conventions** of 1899 and 1907 declared that the captor army had to feed the prisoners the same rations as their own troops. However the bad conditions of the war and the **economic blockade of Germany** from late 1914 prevented it.

From 1915, with the huge number of prisoners and shortage of food, Germany could not provide healthy conditions for their prisoners. Because of that, it became hard to fight **epidemics as typhus and Spanish Influenza**.

- Labor

Prisoners would work in **mines**, doing heavy labour, fixing **railways** but also in economic sectors such as **agriculture**. Some of them were paid, if not in real money then with coupons that they could exchange for food, or tobacco. Sometimes prisoners worked under freezing conditions or in dangerous situations- often close to the battlefield.

Punishments were often applied if the prisoners were not able to do the work. One of the punishments in Germany, called *Anbinden*, consisted of tying the soldiers in an upright position to a post for a long period of time. They were also beaten.



"British prisoners at Doberitz appear to be treated well - sitting together at a table as they enjoy their lunch"

The Red Cross - A precious ally



Red Cross poster

The Red Cross was created in 1863 in Switzerland (a **neutral ground**). The primary purpose of the organization was to open committees in each country that would **help the military health services** with wounded soldiers in times of war.

In order to transfer the soldiers they used **ambulances, boats, and sanitary trains**. By the end of the war, the Red Cross assisted in various other ways:

- Inspected camps and produced reports about the living conditions
- Helped the International Agency for Prisoners of War to re-establish contact between prisoners and their families
- Sent food, clothing, hygiene items and books
- Negotiated the repatriation of wounded soldiers
- Assisted civilians in occupied lands



In 1914, there was only **10 members** around the world. In **two months** they had 1200 men working for them. At first they were volunteers, especially from soldiers families. As the war went on, the Red Cross started training women for nursing and other services amongst the committees.

Other organizations like Churches and the YMCA would join the Red Cross in the task by helping with **material and spiritual relief**.

About R. J. Meekren . . .

- Studied for a LST in Divinity at Bishop's
- Was a graduate student
- Wrote controversial essays on Religion

- Enlisted in 1915 with the 117th (Eastern Townships) Battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force
- Was reported Missing In Action in June 1916 (and presumed dead)
- Later reported as a prisoner of war in Germany in 1917

"I have practically recovered from my premature burial, a little shaky and deaf [...]. My experience of war was short and sharp. ... I am tackling the German language"

"My ears are being treated now [...] It has been dull, wet weather for more than a week . . . It is depressing, which I can assure you all we do not need in the least"

"I smell dinner. You would laugh to see us waiting for dinner"

"I was moved up to the top floor. I am delighted with the change. I have a large window that looks to the West over wooded country. The sun when visible shines in [...]"

"I have been reading *Robinson Crusoe*. I have ... made myself a pipe [...] there is a kind of raw taste about it. However, it is better than no pipe at all" (*Mitre* 1917)

