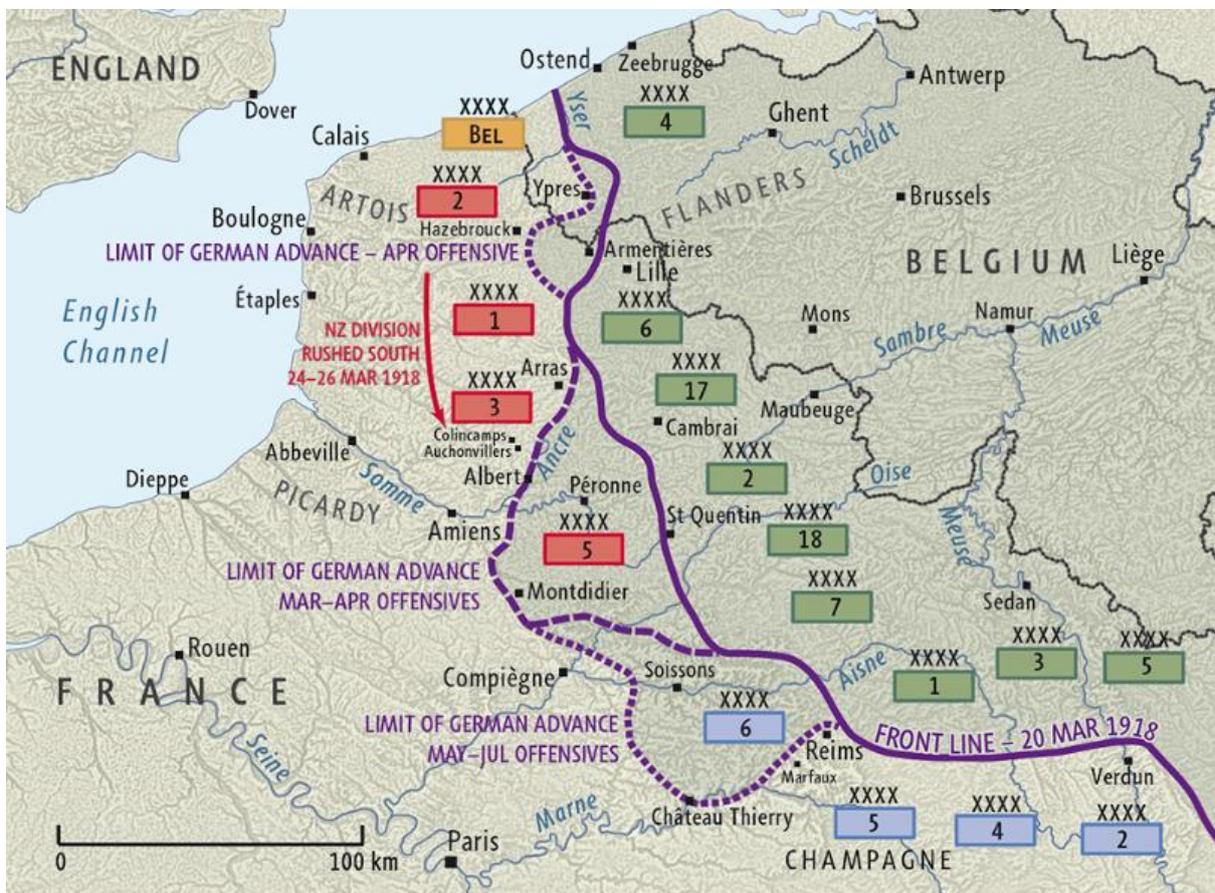




From the Front

Part 11

September 1918



At the end of August 1918 the Battle of the Scarpe was coming to a conclusion and this marked the continuation of the Allied success in the period known as the 100 Days. The Hundred Days Offensive was the final period of the First World War, during which the Allies launched a series of offensives against the Central Powers on the Western Front from 8 August to 11 November 1918,

beginning with the Battle of Amiens. The offensive essentially pushed the Germans out of France, forcing them to retreat beyond the Hindenburg Line, and was followed by an armistice. The term "Hundred Days Offensive" does not refer to a specific battle or unified strategy, but rather the rapid series of Allied victories starting with the Battle of Amiens.

With the front line broken, a number of battles took place as the Allies forced the Germans back to the Hindenburg Line. East of Amiens (after the Battle of



Amiens), with artillery brought forward and munitions replenished, the Fourth Army also resumed its advance, with the Australian Corps crossing the Somme River on the night of 31 August,

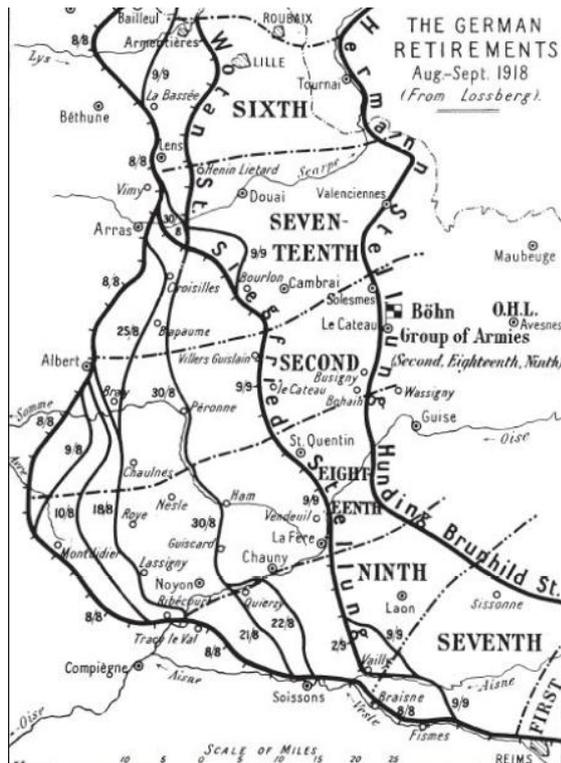
breaking the German lines during the Battle of Mont Saint-Quentin. On 26 August, to the north of the Somme, the First Army widened the attack by another 7 miles (11 km) with the Second Battle of Arras of 1918, which includes the Battle of the Scarpe (1918) (26 August) and the Battle of Drocourt-Queant Line (2 September).

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(*Wotan Stellung*) was a set of mutually supporting defensive lines constructed by Germany between the French towns of Drocourt and Quéant during World War I. This defensive system was part of the northernmost section of the Hindenburg Line, a vast German defensive system that ran through northeastern France.

It was attacked and captured by Canadian and British troops in the closing months of the war as part of Canada's Hundred Days of successful offensive campaigning that helped end the war.

The Drocourt–Quéant Line ran between the French cities of Drocourt and Quéant and was part of a defensive system that ran from a point within the



Hindenburg Line, eleven miles west of Cambrai, northward to within seven miles west of Douai and terminated along the front east of Armentières. The Drocourt–Quéant Line was a system in depth and incorporated a number of mutually supporting lines of defence. The system consisted of a front line with a support line, each consisting of two lines of trenches. The system incorporated numerous fortifications including concrete bunkers, machine gun posts and heavy belts of barbed wire.

At 5:00 a.m. in the morning on 2 September 1918, Canadian and British forces attacked the Drocourt–Quéant Line supported by tanks and aircraft. In twilight, the Canadian 1st Division attacked the line south-eastwards, on the extreme right, south of the Arras–Cambrai road, The Canadian 4th Division attacked in the centre between Dury and the main road and the British 4th Division attacked south of the River Sensee.

Seven Canadians were awarded VCs individually that day. The next day the Germans retreated to the Hindenburg Line with the Allies taking many

prisoners. The Canadian and British troops then moved on to their next battle, the Battle of Canal du Nord.

South of the BEF, the French First Army approached the Hindenburg Line on the outskirts of St. Quentin during the Battle of Savy-Dallon (10 September), and the French Tenth Army approached the Hindenburg Line near Laon during the Battle of Vauxaillon on the 14th September. The British Fourth Army approached the Hindenburg Line along the St Quentin Canal, during the Battle of Épehy on the 18th September. By 2 October, the Germans had been forced back close to the Hindenburg Line from which they had launched their offensive in the spring.



Foch planned a series of concentric attacks on the German lines in France (sometimes referred to as the Grand Offensive), with the various axes of advance designed to cut German lateral communications, intending that the success of an attack would enable the entire front line to be advanced. The main



German defences were anchored on the Hindenburg Line, a series of defensive fortifications stretching from Cerny on the Aisne River to Arras. Before Foch's main offensive was launched, the

remaining German salients west and east of the line were crushed at Havrincourt and St Mihiel on 12 September and at the Battle of Épehy and the Battle of the Canal du Nord on 27 September.

The first attack of the Grand Offensive was launched on 26 September by the French and the AEF in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive (this offensive includes the Battle of Somme-Py, the Battle of Saint-Thierry, the Battle of Montfaucon, and the Battle of Chesne. The offensive involved attacking over difficult terrain, resulting in the Hindenburg Line not being broken until 17 October.

On 29 September, the central attack on the Hindenburg Line commenced, with the British Fourth Army (with British, Australian and American forces) attacking in the Battle of St Quentin Canal and the French First Army attacking



fortifications outside St Quentin. Special tribute must now be paid to a small but very important element of the Allied make up.

As the Third Army followed the

retreating Germans, the New Zealand Division mopped up a succession of rearguards. They fought their way through Havrincourt Forest and Gouzeaucourt Wood before reaching Trescault Ridge. This position was part of a chain of enemy outposts and strongpoints screening the Hindenburg Line, just 4 km to the east.

On 12 September, the Third Army attempted to overwhelm the German positions along Trescault Ridge, capturing the villages of Havrincourt and



Figure 1 Havrincourt Bridge built by NZ troops

Trescault and some of the high ground during the Battle of Havrincourt (12–14 September). The New Zealand

Division, weakened from its efforts at Bapaume, struggled to advance on Trescault Spur, an offshoot of the main ridge defended by elite troops. After two days of bloody fighting the New Zealanders were relieved and moved back to Bapaume to rest.

In late September, the Allies launched a massive offensive against the Hindenburg Line, attacking simultaneously along more than half of the Western Front. On the 26th, American and French forces struck in the Meuse-Argonne



region in the north-east. The next day, the British First and Third armies pushed toward the city of Cambrai, capturing 10,000 prisoners and 200 field guns. In Flanders, the British Second Army and the Belgian Army punched through German defences near Ypres on 28 September, advancing

up to 9 km in 24 hours – more ground than was taken in three months of fighting at Passchendaele in 1917. Back on the Somme, the British Fourth Army

attacked the central sector of the Hindenburg Line on 29 September, crossing the St Quentin Canal and penetrating German support lines.

Stunned by the scale and ferocity of the Allied offensive, the German high



command implored the Kaiser to seek an immediate armistice to allow their troops to withdraw to Germany and regroup. On 4 October, the

German government asked the Americans to broker a ceasefire.

The New Zealand Division came out of reserve for the final phases of the Battle



of the Canal du Nord (27 September–1 October). Fighting their way through the main Hindenburg Line, the 1st New Zealand Infantry Brigade seized the town of Crèvecoeur on the final day of the battle, establishing a valuable foothold across the Scheldt (Escaut) Canal in the process. In effect, the New Zealanders had already broken through the ‘Masnières–

Beaurevoir line’, a trench system prepared hastily behind the Hindenburg Line on which the Germans hoped to hold the Allied advance in this sector



From the Front

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It has occurred to me, after all my research into the events and characteristics of the Great War that one neglected aspect has been the fate of those captured by the enemy and interned for the duration of the War to wit Prisoners of War.

This of course is no new phenomena there are reports of the taking of prisoners

as far back as the Greek

Peloponnesian War and great play is

made of the part of prisoners taken

during the age of the Roman

Empire. At Agincourt most of the

French nobility, if they had not been

killed by the “Bowmen of England”

were taken prisoner and held as



such, sometimes for many years, until

their families paid the ransom money.

Dartmoor Prison was actually built to

house French POW's during the

Napoleonic Wars and hundreds were

detained during the American Civil War.

However, the problem was highlighted



during the Boer War when many women and children perished in the



internment camps in an attempt to lure their husbands and fathers to return from the guerrilla warfare of the High Veldt and fight a more regulation war.

During the Great War the problem reached new heights, the number of soldiers imprisoned reached a little over seven million for all the belligerents, of whom around 2,400,000 were held by Germany.

Starting in 1915, the German authorities put in place a system of camps, nearly three hundred in all, and did not hesitate to resort to denutrition and other punishments and on a grand scale during the course of the War

At the end of the 19th century, Western nations reflected on the legal aspect of war and of captive soldiers. Tsar Nicholas II initiated the two conferences which fixed the terms of the laws and customs of war at The Hague in 1899 and 1907. Chapter II of the convention signed in October 1907 is entirely devoted to prisoners of war and begins: "Prisoners of war are in the power of the hostile Government, but not of the individuals or corps who capture them. They must be humanely treated. All their personal belongings, except arms, horses, and military papers, remain their property."



The twenty articles comprising this chapter regulate various aspects of life in captivity such as lodging, work, religion, nourishment, dress, and mail.

The principal nations of the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance signed the convention, with the exception of the Ottoman Empire, who was not among the 44 signatories in 1907. The Hague Conventions' dispositions entered into force

in the German Empire and France on 26 January 1910, but these agreements turned out to be unsuitable in the tumult of World War I. In October 1918, the number of prisoners held in Germany reached 2,415,043, and such a mass of men made it harder for a country at war to respect the conventions fully.

From the beginning of the war, the German authorities found themselves confronted with an unexpected influx of prisoners. In September 1914, 125,050 French soldiers and 94,000 Russian ones were held captive. Before 1915, conditions of detention in Germany were very harsh and marked by temporary lodging and the absence of infrastructure. The prisoners slept in hangars or tents, where they dug holes to keep warm. The humid forts requisitioned to serve as places of detention led to numerous cases of pulmonary illness. The German authorities also commandeered schools, barns and various other types



of shelters. Camps were established in the countryside as well as near the towns, which had consequences when epidemics of cholera or typhus threatened to spread to the civilian population.

Not all the camps were situated on German

territory; a certain number were built in occupied territories, notably in northern and eastern France. They began to be developed starting in 1915 when the number of prisoners being held captive in Germany reached 652,000. According to official directives, each prisoner had to have use of 2.5 m².

There were various types of camp which evolved during the course of the War,



the Mannschafts lager were the basic soldiers' camps, made up of wooden barrack huts 10m wide and 50m long, and covered with tar on the outside. Each hut held around 250 prisoners. A central corridor provided access on each side to bunk beds, with straw- or sawdust-

filled palliasses.

“All around the camp, there was barbed wire three metres high; the wires were spaced fifteen centimetres apart, a wooden post every three metres, and across other barbed wires every fifty centimetres, forming a mesh.”¹

From 1915, imprisoned officers were held in camps reserved for them (Offizierslager) By October 1918, the number of officers' camps had reached



73. Living conditions for officers were usually less harsh than those endured by troops. The "camps" themselves were usually located in requisitioned buildings (castles, barracks or hotels), rather than in

compounds of tents and huts. Officers had a higher allocation of space per man than other ranks, they had beds instead of straw-filled palliasses, specific rooms were fitted out for their meals, and they were exempt from labour. In addition, there were no officers' camps in East Prussia where weather conditions were often far worse than in the rest of Germany. One of the main burdens of camp

life for officers was tedium. Their daily lives tended to revolve around sport, amateur concerts and plays, lectures, debates, and reading. As the result of an agreement reached in 1916 between the British and German governments, British officers were even allowed to go for walks in groups outside the camp, provided they signed a document giving their word of honour not to attempt escape.

Officers' camps accommodated, a smaller number of other ranks prisoners known as orderlies, whose role was to act as servants to the officers and to perform menial tasks around the camp

The rapid progression of the German offensive in the early part of the war led to a massive influx of prisoners. From 1915, transit camps, the Durchgangslager, were built to manage and redirect this wave toward detention camps. There was a special transit camp for Allied prisoners of war at the former Europäischer Hof at 39, Ettlinger Strasse, in Karlsruhe. This was known as "the Listening Hotel" by the inmates, who recognized that it was a camp devoted to intelligence collection.

The reprisal camps were often located in regions where the climate or the terrain made life difficult,



but also near the front, where the prisoners might be taken to rebuild trenches or cart away bodies.



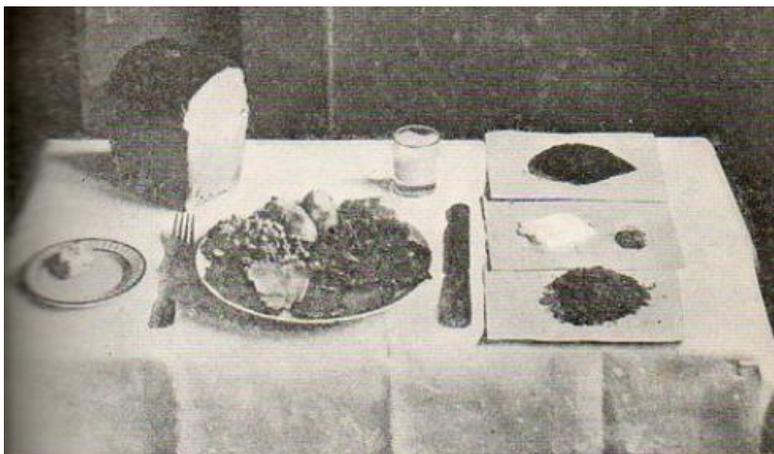
The camp guard personnel were divided into two categories: the officers and sub-officers who directed the camps, and the

sentinels who kept watch. This division was also found in the perception the prisoners had for these people, the second group receiving greater sympathy or indulgence. A German adjutant was responsible for prisoners' companies and was tasked with all the administrative measures. These German officers were most often unsuited for combat and were thus posted to the camps. In effect, they were either too old: "Saw the general commanding the camp: old fogey with black red-striped pants [...] and a big iron cross, he limps" or unfit due to alcoholism or war wounds.

According to the Second Hague Convention, "The Government into whose hands prisoners of war have fallen is charged with their maintenance. In the absence of a special agreement between the belligerents, prisoners of war shall be treated as regards board, lodging, and clothing on the same footing as the troops of the Government who captured them." Nevertheless, prisoners frequently suffered from hunger.

As a general rule, breakfast was served between 6:00 and 7:30 am, lunch around 11:00 am and dinner at about 6:30 pm. From the start of their captivity, the food

posed a problem for prisoners, who complained of a diet which was too inconsistent to ward off hunger. Soup became the symbol of this regimen: it might be made with beans, oats, prunes, beets, and



codfish. Bread was replaced by "KK bread" (from the German "Kleie und Kartoffeln": bran and potatoes), the ingredients of which remain unclear: potato flour, sawdust or ox blood. Malnutrition became a daily affair for the prisoner; after the war, many suffered serious digestive problems.

The Allied blockade of Germany played a role in this: from 6 November 1914, Germany was subjected to an economic blockade by the Entente nations. The military administration responsible for supplying the camps had much difficulty in feeding the troops, considered a priority, which partly explains the catastrophic state of supplies in the camps. Prisoners were not the only ones to suffer from the situation; the general population was also affected.



The food served in the camps, often the cause of illness, weakened the prisoners more than it kept them in shape. Only parcels and shipments from charitable bodies including the Central Prisoners of War Committee (in Britain), the *Vêtement du Prisonnier* (in France), and the Red Cross, allowed them to hang on.

From the beginning, questions of hygiene posed a problem in the camps, built in haste. The goal was to quickly build a maximum number of installations, which relegated sanitary considerations to the back burner. Camps in Germany featured only a simple standpipe in the yard for thousands of people. Very



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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often, latrines consisted of a simple board with a hole in the middle above a pit, which the prisoners were tasked with emptying at regular intervals. Because of their basic construction, the toilets often overflowed during powerful

rains, making an unbreathable atmosphere prevail in the camps. Diseases such as typhus or cholera appeared very quickly. The close confinement of the

accommodations and the number of prisoners per barrack, on average 250, partly explains the phenomenon, as the foul air circulated very little. An official policy of integration of different nationalities meant that typhus tended to spread rapidly from Russian troops, amongst whom it was endemic, Cemeteries for deceased prisoners were gradually opened near the



deceased prisoners were gradually opened near the camps. It was a point of honour for the survivors to take care of their comrades' final resting places. Russia suffered the heaviest losses (perhaps explained by the poorer nutrition of Russians, most of whom did not receive packages from their families) with a little over 70,000 dead, followed by France with 17,069 deaths, Romania with 12,512, and then Italy and the United Kingdom.



A confinement that was visual as well as physical very quickly led to psychological illnesses among the prisoners, illnesses generally grouped under the heading of “barbed-wire psychosis” or “prisoner’s syndrome” In addition, cases of epilepsy and of madness were identified due to physical or moral persecutions undergone in the camps. As for suicides (by hanging, throwing oneself onto the barbed-wire fences, etc.), as no formal statistic was drawn up, it is difficult to give a precise figure

Mail was vital for the prisoners of war. Letters allowed them not only to receive news from home but also to ask their families to send parcels and inform them of their receipt. Every month, a prisoner had the right to write two letters



(limited to six pages each for officers, and four pages for other ranks), on paper that he had to buy at the camp, and four postcards. As can be witnessed by the black lines a strict censorship was imposed. As the rations distributed in the camps were not sufficient to live on, and the prisoners wanted more than biscuits from the Red Cross, they survived thanks to parcels. Although French and British detainees tended to receive enough food in the mail, this was not the case for the Russians, the majority of whom were condemned to eat from rubbish bins or die of hunger.

In most camps, libraries were opened at the end of October 1915. The books were generally offered by prisoners' aid committees. Then around January 1918, the CPWC (Central Prisoners of War Committee) started the monthly journal, The British Prisoner of War, which ran until end of the war.



Sometimes, theatrical troupes and orchestras performed, while camp newspapers saw publication

Religious practice had a place in prisoners' lives. From 1915, prayer rooms were built for Christians, Jews, and Muslims. If no prisoner capable of

celebrating services or practicing ceremonies was found, it was prescribed that German clergymen fill that role on the premises.

Falling foul of camp rules exposed a prisoner to sanctions, which could come about for various reasons: refusal to salute, refusal to answer during roll call, insubordination, possession of banned objects like paper, wearing civilian clothes, escape or attempted escape.

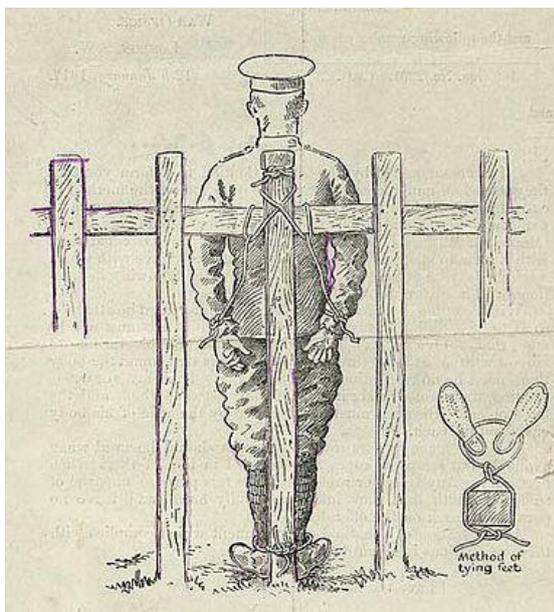
Detention could take three forms. First, the Gelinder Arrest (“mild detention”)



of up to nine weeks simply involved locking up the prisoner, but theoretically with no further deprivation. Second was the Mittelarrest, lasting up to three weeks. The prisoner could receive nothing from the outside except 10000 grammes of potato bread and a

supplement on the fourth day of captivity. Finally, the Strenger Arrest, lasting two weeks, was similar to the Mittelarrest but included light deprivation. If no detention cell was available in the camp, standing at a post was used as punishment, in which case German military regulations specified that prisoners

punished with Strenger Arrest must also stand at a post for two hours a day.



Post punishment would become the symbol of this detention. The principle was simple: the prisoner was attached to a post, a tree or against a wall, hands behind his back, and had to remain in this

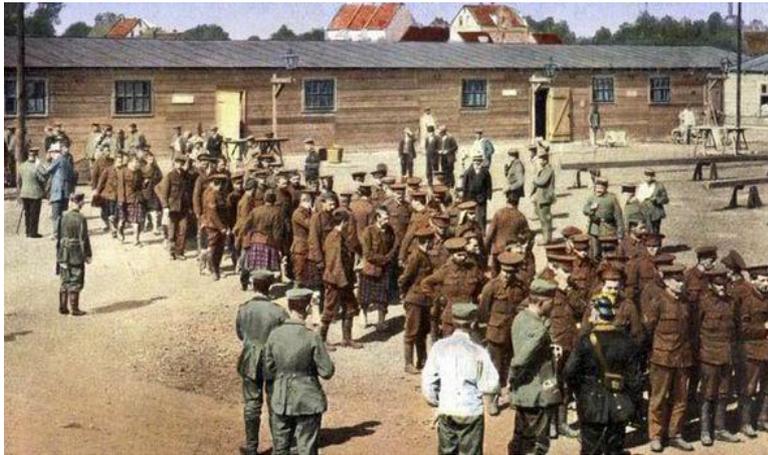
position, which prevented him from moving, for a certain amount of time, without eating or drinking. Several variations on this punishment were invented, such as one where the prisoner was raised onto bricks while being attached and once he was solidly attached, the bricks were removed, rendering the punishment even more painful. Sabotage, espionage, sexual crimes, and murder were the most serious crimes, consequently judged by military tribunals. These could impose the death penalty, which, however, was never used except in the case of four British prisoners shot on 24 June 1918 upon the order of two German military tribunals for having killed a German guard during an escape attempt.

“The State may utilize the labour of prisoners of war according to their rank



and aptitude, officers excepted. The tasks shall not be excessive and shall have no connection with the operations of the war." A huge number of prisoners were used to work for the German Reich. Of 1,450,000 prisoners, 750,000 were employed in agricultural labour and 330,000 in industry. As able-bodied men were at the front, the lack of manpower was felt in all European belligerents and especially in Germany.

Escapes had been discussed by the Hague Convention: “Escaped prisoners who



are retaken before being able to rejoin their own army or before leaving the territory occupied by the army which captured them are liable to disciplinary punishment. Prisoners, who, after succeeding in

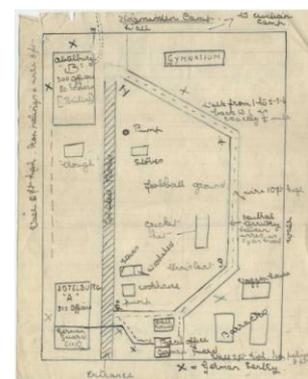
escaping, are again taken prisoners, are not liable to any punishment on account of the previous flight.”

Officers were more likely than other ranks to attempt to escape: first, from a sense that it was their duty to return to active military



service, or at least to divert German manpower into searching for them; second because, exempt from labour and in more regular receipt of parcels from home (in which escape equipment was often smuggled), officers had more time and opportunity to plan and prepare their escapes; and third

because the punishment on recapture was generally limited to a period in solitary confinement, considered by many to be an acceptable risk. One of the best-known escapes of the war was from Holzminden officers' camp on the night of 23/24 July 1918, when 29 British officers escaped through a tunnel which had been under excavation for nine months: of the 29, ten succeeded in making their way to the neutral Netherlands and eventually back to Britain.



Ever since the Red Cross was founded in 1863, humanitarian societies have



played an important role in wartime, and World War I, together with its prisoners, was no exception. It was first and foremost responsible for feeding them; the distribution of food packages from the Red Cross, most of the time containing biscuits, was highly anticipated. By December 1915,

15,850,000 individual packages had been distributed and 1,813 railcars chartered for the transport of collective shipments.

The Red Cross, not content merely with helping prisoners, also lent assistance to families who did not know where their loved ones were being held, by ensuring that the latter received mail or money intended for them. Its International Prisoners-of-War Agency in Geneva was the largest non-governmental institution to have come to the prisoners' aid. With a daily average of 16,500 letters asking for information on prisoners over the course of the war, this organisation became a *sine qua non*.

The camps were also inspected by delegations from neutral countries, notably



Switzerland, and most often by representatives of the Red Cross. During these visits, most prisoners noticed a perceptible improvement in (for instance) food quality,

the German authorities seeing to it that the inspectors were fooled. At the end of the war, the Red Cross took part in prisoners' repatriation, but it also helped initiate prisoner exchanges and internments in Switzerland.

Wounded prisoners benefited from the 1864 Geneva Convention, article 6 of which stated: "Wounded or sick combatants, to whatever nation they may belong, shall be collected and cared for." Amputation was commonplace, even when unnecessary, and care quite rudimentary. Some of the wounded, instead of being transported to the hospital, were finished off on the field of battle:



"Men wounded the day before were calling them from afar and asking to drink. The Germans finished them off by butting them with their rifles or bayoneting them, then despoiling them. I saw this from several metres away.

In all, 219,000 prisoners were exchanged.

During the war, some prisoners were sent to neutral Switzerland on grounds of ill health. Internment conditions were very strict in Switzerland but softened with time. Only the following illnesses could lead to departure from Germany:

diseases of the circulatory system, serious nervous problems, tumours and severe skin diseases, blindness (total or partial), serious face injuries,



tuberculosis, one or more missing limbs, paralysis, brain disorders like paraplegia or haemiplegia and serious mental illnesses. Those who managed to pass the controls did not begin lives of relaxation in Switzerland. Prisoners

interned in Switzerland had to perform obligatory labour. Some were released early and managed to rejoin the French Army before the Armistice was signed.

In order to relieve the pressure on Switzerland, from the middle of 1917 British and German prisoners also began to be interned on similar terms in the Netherlands.

Early in 1918, France and Germany, followed in July by Britain and Germany,



reached agreement on the repatriation, subject to conditions, of older soldiers and NCOs (those over 45), those over 40 with at least three children, and those who had been in captivity for at least 18 months. These arrangements did not apply to officers, who were to remain in internment.

One clause of the 11 November 1918 Armistice dealt with the matter of prisoner-of-war repatriation: "The immediate repatriation without reciprocity, according to detailed conditions which shall be fixed, of all allied prisoners of war, including persons under trial or convicted.

A.S.K. 11/07/2018