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VERDUN REFUGEE CAMP

(This Report consists of material obtained by four representatives of Advance Detachment, FWE, I & PW, 12 A.G. On 17 and 20 September, just after the above camp had been transferred to French administration. The reporting officers suggest that the group of refugees found there is fairly typical of thousands, or hundreds of thousands, of persons who will be liberated as the armies move into the industrial areas of Lorraine and Germany. All interrogations were conducted in the German language.)

A. DESCRIPTION OF GENERAL CONDITIONS

The Camp

1. The Verdun assembly point for refugees is located on the outskirts of the town in a military barracks formerly used by the Germans. The buildings form a large square and are divided into a series of chlong rooms, some of which have wooden bunks and some of which do not. Outwardly the buildings appear to be in fairly good condition, but actually they are in disrepair and the roofs leak badly in numerous places. The accommodations as to water, sanitation, etc., are those to be expected in a military barracks with the distinction that the people now quartered there are not military personnel, and consequently have not the discipline and training needed to use the available facilities with a maximum of cleanliness and efficiency.

2. Registration was in progress when the PW team visited the camp, so exact figures on the number of refugees were not available. However, the clerical staff estimated that the camp now holds 1800 people - men, women, children and babies - of whom the great majority are Russian. The other two major groups are Poles (about 500) and Serbs (about 200).

3. These people were brought to the camp after being screened through Prisoner of War channels, being picked up on the roads by the F.F.I., or having found their way by themselves.

4. Men and women live together in the rooms of the barracks, sleeping on the bunks or on the floors, often crowded together amid baggage and bedding of every description. They are divided according to nationality - the Russians together, the Poles together, and the Serbs together. They are fed en masse, the food being ladled out at a central point, and then hauled back to the barracks room to be eaten. A clean-up of the camp grounds and barracks was in progress when the PW team arrived. The cleaning was being done by the refugees under supervision.

5. The camp was visited under distinctly adverse physical conditions: it was a chilly, wet day, and rain was leaking into rooms and hallways. In addition, the camp was still in the process of being organized and hence everything was more or less at a loose end from the view point of the inhabitants. These facts are mentioned as having a bearing on the morale and outlook of the refugees whom we questioned.

The People

6. The people of the camp ranged in age from babes-in-arms to old women who could have been in their seventies. The vast majority are simple workers and farmers, with here and there a clerical worker, a student or a girl of the typist class mixed in. Some of them have been wanderers and refugees for years, others
for the past several months. One young man of 18, a Pole, had been taken from his home at the age of 14 and had been working as a virtual slave of the Germans ever since. One of the Serbs, a Tito partisan, had been captured and transported from Yugoslavia eight months ago.

7. Among these people the wildest melodrama is commonplace. A chance encounter in any of the barracks halls will bring a story of hairbreadth escape from the SS; of Nazi atrocities witnessed at first hand; of nights spent without food and water in the woods, hiding from prowling German soldiers; of agonizing journeys from the wheat fields of the Ukraine and the mountains of Serbia under the guns of German guards. The mere presence of every single individual in the Voron camp testifies to an uprooting of the most violent kind and to an acute personal catastrophe.

8. But the majority of the refugees, at least outwardly, seems to have made some sort of adjustment, because without adjustment their lot would be unbearable. Thus there are few, if any, obvious signs of bitterness, sullenness, or dismay. There is instead apathy or an air of getting along as well as possible under circumstances which can’t be altered. Among the Ukrainians there was, even on the wretched day on which the investigation took place, a certain amount of jollity. An accordion and a balalaika provided music in several of the rooms and there were impromptu sessions of dancing. Card games were in progress, and here and there a couple making love in the midst of an indifferent group of room mates.

9. On the whole, the spectator got the impression that as far as making out under grievous conditions was concerned, the refugees had reached a point of stolid resignation, frequently relieved by outbursts of animal vitality.

10. They were not without complaints. In one barracks we were shown a small can of fish and were told in derivative tones that this was to serve for 14 men. More than once the presence of guards with guns was commented on, usually to the effect that there was really no difference between being in a German concentration camp and being where they were. "When there’s a guard at the door, any place is a prison". A 22-year-old girl from Odessa, obviously well educated and intelligent, was appalled by the condition of the barracks and the bedding, and so on.

Organisation and Leadership

11. Organisation and leadership among the refugees themselves seems to be negligible, both politically and for purposes of social betterment within the camp. We were told that one man had been appointed spokesman and leader for the Russians, but since the Russians were so numerous nobody knew who he was. The Poles were in the charge of a captain of the Polish army who seemed to concern himself about the welfare of his people and who took trouble to say that the Americans had seen to it that better food was now being served. No other refugee leaders were encountered.

12. The only outward manifestation of political bent or enthusiasm was noted in the Serb barracks. On the wall, in red, was drawn a hammer and sickle of the Soviet Union and under it, in Serbian, was written: "Hail to the people's army of Tito!"

13. There appears to be no political leadership or agitation in the camp. This may come later when everyone is settled down there, and the business of getting adjusted as to sleeping and eating conditions is over.

Attitudes

14. In a mixture of nationalities, races, backgrounds and classes such as prevails at the refugee camp, a synthesis of dominating attitudes, whether political or otherwise, would take weeks of careful probing to arrive at.
However, the following statements are reflections of attitudes most frequently encountered.

15. There is a widespread dislike of the French. The Tito group, for example, was dismayed that the administration of the camp seemed to be passing from American into French hands. This dislike rests on various factors, among them the feeling that, according to the observations of many refugees, the French people played a little too much ball with the Germans when the Germans were in power, and only switched over when it became obvious that our side was winning. Also, the French appear to the refugees to be too brusque and cold in their management of the camp, whereas the Americans gave some evidence of warmth and cordiality.

16. There is, as might be expected, a certain amount of international friction, which, however, does not appear to have reached an acute stage. The Poles and the Tito people are proud that none among their groups ever went into the German army as "Freiwillige." They point out that many Russians have done so, and so far as to claim that there are Russian "Freiwillige" in the camp right now.

17. The Poles, incidentally, wear small ribbons of their national colours. They do this partly out of patriotic pride and partly because many of them (end of the others in the camp) are wearing parts of German uniforms and could easily be mistaken for stray German soldiers.

18. Hatred of the Germans is prevalent and intense. It is, as might be expected, of a deeply personal kind. The Tito partisans would rather join the American army and fight again against the Germans than go home. The intelligent, cultured girl from Odessa, although she was treated kindly by some Germans in Germany, would have no pity on the Germans after victory. The Red Navy sailor is ready to strangle any German who comes his way with his bare hands. A Tito guerrilla says that if there were 60 million Germans before the war, there ought only to be 40 million left afterwards, and so on.

19. Everyone knows that the Germans are beaten, and thinks the war will soon be over. The refugees are, for the most part, pretty well up on the news, and in some instances ahead of it. Some believed, for instance, that Aachen had fallen several days ago, and that Metz was already taken. Their information seems to be rather catch-as-catch-can. The Tito people didn't know that Belgrade has been liberated.

20. In general, the attitude towards the Germans was not so much political and ideological as personal, the result of grievances individually suffered.

21. Further investigation has shown that the Germans divided people whom they thought were cooperative and those that would only work under strict military supervision.

22. For example, in north-eastern France there was a camp at Morfontaine (phonetic spelling) where so-called volunteers were housed. These were civilian workers mostly from Russia who without resistance followed the German call for foreign labour. The Germans believed that they could to a certain extent rely on these people and therefore allowed them more privileges and better food, than those kept at a camp in Arville (phonetic spelling) which consisted of political prisoners and prisoners of war. Members of this camp were all eventually enrolled into the Todt organisation and employed as defence workers. They were kept continuously under military supervision. All the non-cooperators were not employed inside Germany but only in occupied countries.

23. Altogether, the number of real collaborators is rather small and can mostly be found amongst the Ukrainians and Serbs, which are also the ones that grumble most about conditions and circumstances they are finding now at Allied refugee camps.
24. Volunteer workers were mostly employed in steel mines and on farms in the Saarbrucken area, where women and men alike had to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week. Most of these mines belonged to Frenchmen, and so these workers claim now that they did not work for the Germans, forgetting of course that all production was exclusively for Germany.

25. It is rather difficult to form an opinion on the percentage of volunteer and forced workers, but I should say that amongst the 2,000 people of the camp, of which has now been established are 20 per cent women, about 25 per cent were volunteers. Here again they only volunteered because they saw no other way of making a living and for some reason or other were not able to become partisans or hide from the Germans, which would have been their only other way out.

26. The morale of all these people is extremely low; firstly, because they do not know what is to become of them, they also have no knowledge of current affairs, and for some reason or other they imagined that now that they are in Allied hands, they would either be able to join the various armies, or go home and forget about the past. They have now been in the camp for almost two weeks without being able to do any work and so all their time is occupied with thinking and brooding.

B. INDIVIDUAL INTERROGATIONS

27. I spoke with a group of Polish men. I first asked them if they were happy to be free from Nazi tyranny and they replied that they still didn't feel free, that as long as a guard stood at the gate, it made no difference whether they were in Allied hands or Nazi hands. Most of these men had been drafted to work in Germany as early as 1939.

28. One of the men was only 15 1/2 years old. He had worked for the Germans for 4 1/2 years making munitions. He showed me scars on his hands and knees which were the result of Nazi torture whenever he refused to do a certain job. He worked twelve hours a day, seven days per week, and received 60 Reich Marks per month plus food. The food, he claims, was unbearable, and so he had to use most of his own money to buy additional food. All Poles were given the same ration cards as the German civilians received and so were entitled to buy food from their wages.

29. The food they received at this camp was highly sufficient and they had no complaints to register on that subject.

30. Most of the younger boys are exceedingly anxious to join the Polish army and have made inquiries concerning their immediate enlistment. They all uphold the pre-war Polish government. One of the boys asked me whether America, who he is sure will be the greatest power after the war, will declare war on Russia. They all dislike the Russians. They claim that the "real" Russians are still bearable, but that the Ukrainians especially are deceitful, dirty and can't be trusted. They refuse to believe that America, England, and Russia are completely allied and are fighting for the same purpose.

31. They claim that the older German soldiers are convinced that the war is lost for Germany, but that the S.S. prevents them from surrendering to the Allies. The S.S. are known throughout Germany as being "blood thirsty". These men claimed that there was no underground organisation of any kind while they were working for the Germans, but that the Poles were better disciplined than the Russians. Sabotage was impossible as the Germans watched too closely. These men claim that although the German youths of 14 or 15 years are over-anxious to enlist in the Wehrmacht, the war should be over with Germany in about a month, and the war in the Pacific will last an additional two to three years.

32. The younger of these men were offered the opportunity to become members of the S.S. and to be returned to Poland. They were also promised additional food for their families if they accepted. Quite a number of the men accepted this offer, because they "didn't see any other way out".
33. All the news they had in Germany was restricted, but whenever there was an opportunity they would listen for the Polish transmissions from London.

34. A young Russian woman, eighteen years of age, has worked for the Germans for one year and two months. She was born in Leningrad and when the city fell to the Germans she went, together with her sister, to join the Russian partisans fighting in the woods. Her sister, however, felt that she was too young for this sort of warfare and sent her back. The Germans seized her as she was about to rejoin her parents.

35. She, as well as 1500 other women, were sent to Fuerstenberg, Germany, and put to work in the mines. She lived in billets with three thousand other people, but was not permitted to talk to any of the 1500 men. She claims that all the people at this camp were from the Leningrad-Odessa area, that there were no Ukrainians and no Poles. While working in the mine on a shift, reaching from 3 in the morning until 7 in the evening, she claims much sabotage took place. Coal barrels were turned over, electric wires cut, and on one occasion, on an inspection tour, five German sculptors were severely beaten up with rubber truncheons. Three men were hanged for this act and others brutally beaten. The people in this camp received no salary whatsoever and were allowed no extra rations. All the women in the camp had their hair snip off.

36. When Fuerstenberg was heavily damaged by bombs, the camp was moved to Mina (phonetic) in France. Mina is located equidistance from Lorraine, the Belgian and the German border. These people were not allowed to listen to news of any kind and so did not have any idea of the military situation until some German soldiers were overheard saying that American troops are only 10 km. away. This woman, together with many of her co-workers, escaped from the camp and hid in the woods without food for ten days until they saw the American units.

37. The Polish steel workers were questioned as to the location of workers' camps in Germany proper, but knew nothing, having been brought directly, first to Srobrozen, and later to Lorraine. They stated that they were under entire German supervision, partly carried out by the military. They were treated "more than cattle", had to work 12 hours a day 7 days a week, and were often beaten without cause. These two men were very young, not over 18. There seems to be a strong wish, among the Poles at least, to join the military forces and continue the fight against Germany.

38. A Russian girl questioned, told of incidents which took place yesterday (19 September) when many of the German-speaking people were manhandled by some of the others, who accused them of collaborating with the Germans by acting as interpreters. She herself had been threatened, and was determined to leave the camp at all costs. She also criticised the disciplinary state of the camp, where, she said, one could walk about with sticks, or Even guns, without the authorities taking any steps to prevent it.

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