
Reports

of the delegates of the Embassy of the United States of America in St. Petersburg on the situation of the German prisoners of war and civil person in Russia

A cura di

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Allo scoppio della prima guerra mondiale gli Stati Uniti, paese allora neutrale, assunsero il ruolo di “potenza protettrice” della Germania, rappresentandone gli interessi in Russia. Tra i principali compiti ebbero la responsabilità di assistere e aiutare le migliaia di prigionieri tedeschi internati nell'impero zarista. Fu così che tra il 1914 ed il 1917 l'ambasciata americana a Pietrogrado inviò propri agenti diplomatici e consolari in tutto il territorio russo con l'incarico di visitare i campi di internamento e le città e villaggi in cui erano confinati dei prigionieri del Reich. Risultato di queste missioni, rese spesso difficili dalle pastoie della burocrazia zarista e dall'ostruzionismo delle autorità militari, furono una serie di rapporti alquanto allarmanti che la sede diplomatica statunitense inviò a Berlino a partire dal settembre del 1914. Alcuni di questi resoconti furono pubblicati nel 1916 dal Ministero degli Affari Esteri tedesco con il titolo Reports of the delegates of the Embassy of the United States of America in St. Petersburg on the situation of the German prisoners of war and civil person in Russia¹ allo scopo di richiamare l'attenzione pubblica mondiale sull'inosservanza da parte delle autorità zariste della legislazione internazionale in materia di prigionia.

I documenti riportati qui di seguito, Extract from a report on the condition of the military and civil prisoners of war in the Volga region² e Extract from a report on the condition of the German civil prisoners of war interned in the government of Vyatka, by a delegate of the Embassy of the United States of America at

¹ *Reports of the delegates of the Embassy of the United States of America in St. Petersburg on the situation of the German prisoners of war and civil person in Russia*, Berlin, Auswärtiges Amt, 1916. Di questa pubblicazione esiste anche la versione tedesca, edita sempre nel 1916: *Berichte von Beauftragten der Botschaft der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika in St. Petersburg über die Lage deutscher Kriegsgefangenen und deutscher Zivilpersonen in Russland* Berlin, Auswärtiges Amt, 1916. Alcuni di questi rapporti furono in seguito inseriti in altre pubblicazioni ufficiali tedesche. Si veda ad esempio *Völkerrechtswidrige Behandlung der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen in Russland*, Berlin, Preuß. Kriegsministerium, 1918.

² *Extract from a report on the condition of the military and civil prisoners of war in the Volga region. (Arrived at Berlin, September 1915). Enclosure 10*, in *Reports of the delegates of the Embassy*, cit., pp. 36-39.

Petrograd³, illustrano in modo drammatico le precarie condizioni di vita dei civili internati nella regione della Volga e nel governatorato di Vyatka. Si tratta da un lato di sudditi tedeschi residenti in Russia al momento della dichiarazione di guerra e condannati con un provvedimento coercitivo al confino per presunta attività di spionaggio, dall'altro di civili prussiani catturati dall'esercito russo nella Prussia Orientale durante i primi mesi del conflitto⁴.

Extract from a report on the condition of the military and civil prisoners of war in the Volga region (Arrived at Berlin, September 1915)

Civil prisoners

Intelligenz

In nearly all the towns of the Volga region are to be found, living the more or less comfortable conditions which their own means allow, part of the members of the former commercial communities of the larger Russian towns. While I found the complaints of these people often based on their sense of misfortune, rather than on reasonable objections to the regime to which they must submit, I endeavoured to obtain from the local authorities that, whenever they belong to the class entitled to leave Russia, they be permitted with as little delay as possible to depart for their homes. The rare cases of active hostility exercised towards this class which were brought to my notice seemed generally to arise from the imprudent conduct and actions of individuals, usually where their dress or behaviour offend provincial prejudice.

I found repeatedly cases of persons who preferred to remain here on account of their business and other relations rather than return to Germany. While the relief afforded this class is always intended to be subordinated to the needs of the destitute, in many cases it has been possible to afford them aid, through the funds at the disposal of the Embassy, with some consideration for their former condition. This is nearly always in the case of aged persons and families with children.

The Destitute

While the lot of the military prisoners and the "Intelligenz" of private means appears everywhere bearable, the policy pursued towards the poorer classes of civil

³ *Extract from a report on the condition of the German civil prisoners of war interned in the government of Vyatka, by a delegate of the Embassy of the United States of America at Petrograd. (September 22, 1915). Enclosure 11, in Reports of the delegates of the Embassy, cit., pp. 40-42.*

⁴ Per un'introduzione più ampia al tema dei prigionieri civili prussiani, rimando al mio saggio "...und nun waren wir auch Verbannte. Warum? Weshalb?" *Deportate prussiane in Russia 1914-1918*, pubblicato nel primo numero di questa rivista.

prisoners, notably on the lower Volga, and in other places where their labor is not needed, has rendered their position one of great hardship. In Kasan and along the upper Volga, the departure of able bodied men to the war has caused a large demand for labors, especially of skilled laborers, so that prisoners of a corresponding class are not only welcomed, but appear to receive good wages.

In view of the fact, however that in many sections the more satisfactory work of military prisoners has already glutted the agricultural labor market, it is with the utmost difficulty that peasant laborers can find the means to support themselves and their families. The unavoidable responsibility of the local authorities towards this class of civil prisoners does not seem to be fully realized.

The condition of the civil population from the East Prussian provinces a large proportion of whom are interned in the lower Volga region would appear to require immediate attention. Their exact status seems to be a matter of perplexity even to the local authorities and they are referred to under the descriptions of "prisoners," "hostages" or refugees." The majority of these people are old men, women and children.

They are generally supposed to form a separate category of prisoners and are held under special orders, at the disposal of the authorities in Petrograd, without being allowed to apply for permission to return to their own country.

At Krasny Jar, an unhealthy region, near Astrakhan, 277 women, 433 children and 894 men (the latter nearly all unfit for military service) are interned without any other resources than the money furnished by their own Government through the American Embassy and Consulate General. The mortality, according to figures furnished by the local physician, amounted to 15%.

Throughout the Astrakhan district the authorities have even felt obliged to forbid any form of labor which would compete with the usual activities of the local population, so that the able-bodied are unable to do anything for themselves - the source of their bitterest complaint.

Similar lamentable conditions exist at Vorpost, Nicolskoje, Tchorny-Jar, Bolchuny, Jenotajensk, Zaref, etc. although in the Government of Saratof, notably at Tsaritzyn, these people are allowed to work, when this is obtainable.

As these people are almost entirely drawn from the lowest class of the agricultural population, with a large proportion of aged and helpless, even were repatriation allowed by the authorities, it could not be left to their own initiative.

It would appear to be not only following the dictates of humanity, but also the clear duty of the authorities concerned either to afford these unfortunates means and opportunity to return to their own country, or immediately to take such steps as may ensure their comfort and indeed existence during the approaching winter, ends which cannot be obtained without the cooperation of the Russian Government.

Passports

It has been the policy of the Embassy and Consulate-General at Moscow to forward wherever possible the repatriation of all German and Austrian citizens entitled to this privilege under the arrangements made on behalf of the belligerent Governments. As a matter of expediency, the furnishing even of a considerable sum for this purpose to individuals is preferable to the indefinite process of paying

monthly “relief.” I therefore did my best wherever possible to secure from the Governors and other local officials their cooperation, especially to obtain that “destitute” persons - women and children - be aided to secure this privilege. Everywhere, however, official process is somewhat long and complicated. Moreover the custom of exacting from these applicants a sum amounting often to five roubles for the worthy purpose of the Russian Red Cross appears in view of the origin of the funds expended through the Embassy, of doubtful propriety.

Civil prisoners.

Astrakhan

East Prussians

In the prosperous suburb of Vorpost I came across a number of cases of very real suffering among the East Prussian prisoners or “refugees”. [...] These cases were brought to my attention by the authorities themselves-during a visit made to this village in company with members of the Committee appointed by the Governor - Messrs. M. (German) and R. (Austrian). These poor people appeared the victims of an administrative error, as they have received no help from the funds sent by the Consulate, and depend on the charity of their neighbours -Russians and Tartars. Messrs. M. and R. had just previous to my visit obtained permission to visit the poor of Vorpost. Their case is indeed a pitiable one. One woman had lost two children from “stomach trouble” (?). All complained most of not being allowed to work, and their faces betrayed lack of sufficient nourishment.

I am glad to be able to report that the Governor gave orders in my presence to include the district of Vorpost in that of Astrakhan for all purposes of “relief work.” Under the ordinary administrative classification it forms part of another district - which probably accounts for the conditions mentioned above.

Civil prisoners.

Krasny Jar Inspected August 5, 1915

Intelligenz

Through the authorities at Astrakhan I was given every facility for visiting the interned civil population (mostly East Prussians) in the village of Krasny Jar. This wealthy little fishing village, while only three or four hours from Astrakhan by direct route, can only be reached after six hours by steamboat. I was met by the Ispravnik who freely gave me all available details concerning his administrative district (which is larger than Belgium and Holland). The *intelligenz*-merchants, etc. interned here, seem to be treated somewhat more severely than Astrakhan, and on my calling this to the Ispravnik’s attention, he said that the rules were generally speaking the same, and he would consult further with the Governor about their enforcement. There were a number of families in town regularly receiving money from private sources in Germany.

East Prussians

The principal problem in Krasny Jar concerns the interned civil population of the East Prussian provinces, removed from the seat of war. The exact status of these unfortunate people numbering

277 women,	besides Austrians:	86 women,
433 children,		17 children,
594 men,		15 men

seems scarcely understood by the local authorities. The Governor has apparently received no orders from the Central Authorities in Petrograd to extend monetary or other relief. The only funds at the disposal of the Authorities and the Committee are those furnished by the American Consulate, and these are needed for communal houses, food and relief, and will not suffice without more direct official aid for the coming winter

Work

In the Astrakhan district the authorities have been obliged to limit the permits to work in the interests of the local population. This practically prohibits these unfortunates from doing anything for themselves, and is the source of their bitterest complaint. The situation would seem to demand that paid relief work - on roads, etc. - be organised, where work for private persons fails or is impracticable [...].

Hospital

With the permission of the authorities the Committee has also established a hospital for the accommodation of the sick. There is a high percentage of disease and mortality, especially among the aged persons and children, who form such a piteously large percentage of these "Prisoners". The present state of health is better than for some time past. During an epidemic of typhus which raged among the East Prussians during the early spring, the local Zemstvo came to the assistance of the gentlemen of the Committee and the local authorities.

Extract from a report on the condition of the German civil prisoners of war interned in the government of Vyatka, by a delegate of the Embassy of the United States of America at Petrograd (September 22, 1915)

Attacks and Ill-Feeling against Prisoners by native Population

In general it may be said that the native are not ill-disposed towards the prisoners. Two notable exceptions, however, stand out where exist a decidedly hostile attitude, resulting in many attacks, some of them serious - to say nothing of insults - i.e. at Bieloholounitzky Zavod and Sinigoria. As a rule these are brought about by the rowdy and younger element, often by young recruits, inflamed by

drink. Twenty of such attacks occurred at Bieloholounitzky Zavod in one month (one was that of a woman kicked in the stomach by a drunken peasant) and the situation has been growing more and more serious. One attack, examined at length by the Russian official detailed from the Governor's office, as well as by me, implicated a policeman.

Complainants declared that no redress was to be had from the police officer; that either they were not allowed by the policemen to present their cases, or that in the few cases that the officer did investigate nothing was done; that no punishment of the attacking Russians had been meted out, and that by his passive attitude the attacks were becoming more frequent.

The situation at Sinigoria was also bad in the same respect, but not to such an extent.

The subject was strongly presented to the Governor that something should be done immediately to remedy matters if, upon investigation, he found that the facts were as stated. I was informed privately by the Russian official from the Governor's Chancery that he would recommend that the police officer in charge at Bieloholounitzky Zavod should be removed.

It may be mentioned that there appears to be some fear among the prisoners in Vyatka of a general outbreak, or demonstration against them in the indefinite future.

Forced labor: Prisoners, in nearly all cases those of the working classes, are forced to work, where labor is needed, by one of four means: by deportation to a distant village where the conditions of life are hard, by imprisonment for several days, by beating or by threats of one of these punishments. This statement should not be taken to mean that many laborers do not work willingly, particularly in those places where the wages earned are more than could be expected from the relief fund. But in general labor is enforced.

In some places the pay and treatment are good, as at Vachroruheff (9 hours work at R.1 a day) where the only complaint is forced labor in a factory making boots for the Russian army. At other places, in the Serapul ouyesd, the road workers receive 80 kopecks per day, and, though not working regularly, live fairly comfortably and are well treated. But in certain villages of that ouyesd, either as workers on the road or as stevedores loading and unloading river cargo, the treatment is exceedingly harsh.

Particularly at Galevo is the situation bad. The work is very heavy in handling iron cargo, and the pay while good, is not regular; consequently the prisoners appear to be badly over-worked, under-fed and in a ragged condition. Moreover, there are many cases of imprisonment, and beating by the police when the prisoners refused for some reason to go to work, perhaps claiming that they were sick or that they would not work on a Sunday. The marks made by the beatings were seen on several prisoners. Eleven such cases were examined by me as well as by the Russian official to report to the Governor.

At Iaktchur-Bodja there were also received many complaints of harsh treatment at the hands of the police, that here the penalty for not working was imprisonment and later deportation. The appearance of the prisoners was bad.

At Zavyaloga the police officer admitted that the pay of Russian workmen on the road, for which the prisoners were receiving 80 kopecks per day, was R. 1.10 per day.

The above matters were brought to the attention of the Governor. It was pointed out that the principal police officer of the Serapul ouyesd seemed to be ignorant of conditions prevailing among the prisoners, their whereabouts in his district, and evinced little interest in their welfare. The root of the bad conditions, however, lay in the system permitted by the police officer in turning over numbers of prisoners, through labor contractors, to the Zemstvos for road work, and to the Bureau of Mines in the cases of stevedores, the result being that these prisoners were out of his direct control and their labor was exploited.

The Governor promised to investigate. The matter has also been taken up with the Foreign Office.

Prisoners in distant villages

Prisoners, either as a punishment for not being willing to work when ordered, or for a minor offence, or because quarters in larger places are riot available, are often sent to live in far off isolated hamlets. Sinigoria is an example of this. It is 200 versts from the railway, and 75 versts from a village of any size where can be bought clothes or conveniences there is but one very small shop; food is scarce; the roads are beyond description; the inhabitants illiterate and no regular medical attendance. Much drinking is going on and fights are of frequent occurrence. The fact that there is no regular medical attendance is an especially serious matter. At all events the place is entirely too far distant from a responsible police officer to be under effective control, especially as here are quartered a rather lower class of prisoners.

It was recommended to the Governor, both by me and the accompanying Russian official that the prisoners should be removed from Sinigoria and none sent there again; this recommendation will probably be followed. The Governor admitted that it was a hardship to send prisoners to distant villages, especially where there lived no doctor, and he promised to do all that was possible to prevent it, but that it must be remembered that lodgings in the larger towns and villages were available, now more so than ever, since the Russian refugees from Poland and the Baltic provinces were being distributed throughout interior Russia.

Transfer of prisoners from village to village

This is of frequent occurrences especially in the Glasoff ouyesd police officer, to whose charge a lot of prisoners are consigned, finding that quarters cannot be found in his district, or that workmen are needed in another district, orders their transfer. Cases were noted where prisoners within seven or eight months were transferred seven times. This causes not only inconvenience, but hardship in case of old men, women or children are deported. One case was noted where a prisoner, his wife who appeared to be very delicate, and three children of 5, 7 and 11 years of age were deported as a punishment for the reason that the husband refused to work, to Sinigoria from a village 86 versts away, making the journey on foot. One other child had died from lack of medical attention.

It was pointed out to the Governor that many such transfers could be obviated by instructing the police officers to ascertain definitely what quarters were available in a village before deporting them there. The Governor agreed and before I left had issued instructions that no large body of prisoners should be transferred from one place of internment to another without previously requesting his permission, and giving reasons therefore.

The Governor further agreed that money necessary to travel in case of transfer should be furnished by the police officer in charge (from Embassy funds), and not by the prisoners out of their relief allowance.