

“We Have No Place”: The Captivity and Homecoming of  
French Prisoners of War,  
1939-1947.

By

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"We Have No Place": The Captivity and Homecoming of  
French Prisoners of War, 1939-1947

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## Abstract

In 1940 1.8 million French soldiers were taken as prisoners of war by Germany. During the coming months most of these men were deported into Germany for use as slave laborers. Nearly a million were still held in Germany in 1945 when they were liberated by Allied and Soviet forces. This is a study the prisoners' life in captivity and their problems reintegrating into postwar society. Throughout the war the Vichy government led the French people to believe that its collaborative relationship with Nazi Germany ensured that the prisoners in Germany received proper treatment. This propaganda campaign misled the French people in several ways. One misperception shared by much of the population was that the prisoners' time in Germany was no more uncomfortable than life for them had been in occupied France. The French people also mistakenly believed that the prisoners had, by and large, remained loyal to the despised Vichy regime long after it had lost its support among the domestic population. In 1945 the prisoners were welcomed home, but not in the manner they expected. They were treated like refugees of a national catastrophe rather than as honorable veterans. The French provisional government did not recognize them as *anciens combattants* and initially did not extend to them the benefits traditionally associated with this status. A significant number found reintegrating into society difficult and developed dysfunctions that today would be associated with post-traumatic stress disorder. This work argues that the combined effects of years in captivity and a disappointing homecoming resulted in the widespread development of such problems among the ex-prisoners.

**Keywords:** France, World War II, Vichy, Prisoners of War, Nazi Germany, Henri Frenay, Deportees, Geneva Conventions, Charles DeGaulle, Fourth Republic, French Provisional Government, Displaced Persons, Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, Postwar Reintegration, Veterans, Anciens Combattants, French Resistance, Le Grand Retour, World War II Liberation Era, Forced Labor, Slave Labor, Labor Deportation, Stalags, Oflags, Gaullist Myth, Shared Sacrifice, World War I Economics, War Crimes, François Mitterrand, Henri Pétain, Pierre Laval, War Memoirs, cafard

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## Introduction

Few topics have received as much attention by modern historians as World War II. Despite this, some significant aspects of the conflict are rarely addressed. Among these is the captivity of French prisoners of war in Germany from 1940-45. When Germany conquered France in 1940 it took over 1.8 million French soldiers prisoner. The vast majority of these men were deported to Germany where they spent the remainder of the war as forced laborers.<sup>1</sup> For five years one in seven of all French males between 20 and 40 years of age were held inside Nazi Germany, almost completely cut off from contact with their homeland and loved ones. Practically no French family was left unaffected.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the war the Vichy government led the French people to believe that its collaborative relationship with Nazi Germany ensured that the prisoners received proper treatment. The propaganda campaign spreading this message was designed to increase the regime's domestic political support by portraying it as the protector of the prisoners. Direct links were established between proper care of the prisoners in Germany and support for the Vichy government and its policy of collaboration. The campaign misled the French people in several ways. One misperception fostered was that the prisoners' time in Germany was no more uncomfortable than life for most in occupied France. In actuality most of the prisoners lived a Spartan existence in Germany, defined by poor living conditions, social isolation and hard labor. The French people were also led to believe that the prisoners had, by and large, remained loyal

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<sup>1</sup> The only large group of POWs not deported into Germany were the approximately 200,000 non-white colonial soldiers taken prisoner. See Raffael Scheck, *Hitler's African Victims, The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Martin C. Thomas, "The Vichy Government and French Colonial Prisoners of War, 1940-1944," *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (2002), 665-6 or chapter two of this work.

<sup>2</sup> Yves Durand, *La Captivité: Histoire des prisonniers de guerre français 1939-1945*. 2<sup>e</sup> ed. (Paris: Fédération Nationale des Combattants Prisonniers de Guerre et Combattants d'Algérie, Tunisie, Maroc, 1981), 21-7.

followers of the Vichy regime long after it had lost its support among the domestic population. As this work establishes, the prisoners in Germany held the Vichy government, and almost everything associated with it, save Marshal Pétain himself, in low regard. Collaboration in particular received almost no support from the captives after 1941. Despite the disconnect between the prisoners' actual experience of captivity and their representation in the propaganda campaign, the reserved nature of their homecoming in 1945 demonstrated that a significant portion of the French people had accepted the false portrayal as accurate.

In 1945 the prisoners were warmly welcomed home, but not in the manner they expected. They were treated more like refugees of a national catastrophe than as honorable veterans.<sup>3</sup> The new provisional government did not even recognize the former prisoners as veterans, calling into question the whole nature of their service as honorable or valuable. A significant number of the returnees found reintegrating into society difficult and developed dysfunctions that today would be associated with post-traumatic stress disorder. This work argues that the combined effects of their years in captivity and disappointing homecoming helped bring about more widespread development of these problems than would have occurred otherwise. The prisoners were stigmatized by the messages contained in the wartime propaganda and struggled for years following their liberation to overcome the misconceptions and prejudices it caused.

This work is built around exposing the divergences between the prisoners' actual experiences of capture and captivity and the understandings the French population at large developed about these same topics, the motives and/or misunderstandings which caused the divergences to develop, and the long term consequences they carried. It is the story of one of Nazi Germany's war crimes, its massive program of deportation and slave labor, a crime often

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Megan Koreman, "A Hero's Homecoming: The Return of the Deported to France, 1945," *Journal of Contemporary History* 32, no. 1 (1997), 9-22 and François Cochet, *Les exclus de la victoire: Histoire des prisonniers de guerre, déportés et S.T.O. (1945-1985)*, (Paris: S.P.M., 1992).

given limited attention due to its being overshadowed by the horrific genocidal campaigns waged at the same time. This work also tells a specifically French story about the radical political goals of the Vichy regime, and that regime's willingness to sacrifice the welfare of many of its subjects in pursuit of those aims. Finally, it is a timeless story about the lasting damage war inflicts on individuals and societies. Damage that continues to play out well after peace has been declared.

While the French prisoners' captivity experience, the Vichy propaganda campaign, and the prisoners' homecoming in 1945 have been the subject of past scholarship, no single work has yet been produced uniting all three elements into a single narrative structure. This work achieves that goal by broadly conceptualizing the study of "the captivity" as extending from 1940 to at least 1947. Without the defeat of 1940 the Vichy regime would never have come to power. If the French people were to be convinced to continue to support the new regime after its radical domestic agenda and policy of collaboration became better understood by the population, it had to demonstrate the soundness of its policies. One way the Vichy government attempted to demonstrate the benefits of supporting it was by portraying itself as the government best positioned to ensure the prisoners were well cared for in Germany and negotiate for their release. This propaganda campaign, and the regime's intentionally deceptive representation of the prisoners, significantly contributed to the French public's misconceptions about the captivity. These misconceptions largely shaped the prisoners' disappointing homecoming in 1945, a reception which created or exacerbated many of the ex-captives postwar struggles. Beyond furthering our understanding of the three topics listed above, this work also makes a unique contribution by demonstrating how these elements were interrelated, thus increasing the relevance of each individual topic.

### **Elements of the Study: The captivity, the propaganda and the homecoming**

Through use of memoir literature and a careful examination of the conquest of France in May/June 1940 this work establishes that most French prisoners had limited control over *if* and *how* they were taken prisoner. In so doing, this work challenges a historical interpretation that became so prominent during the 1960's and 1970's that it remained largely unchallenged for a generation and which continues to inform the work of some scholars even today. This interpretation held that the internal political divisions and overall "decadence" of interwar French society had so eroded the nation's moral fiber that, when tested by war, French soldiers were eager to surrender soon after encountering enemy troops in combat.<sup>4</sup> This work shows why that point of view is at best overly simplistic, overlooking the actual experience of the vast majority of French soldiers that summer. These soldiers, most young men with little or no military experience, operated in a chaotic environment and received unclear and contradictory orders from their superior officers and government. Most soldiers taken prisoner during the first five weeks of the campaign surrendered reluctantly and only after receiving orders to lay down arms. The majority of the prisoners surrendered during the sixth and final week of fighting, after Marshal Pétain had already informing the French people via national radio address that he had taken the reins of government and was calling for an "end to the fighting." Many French soldiers

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<sup>4</sup> For some of the better known works sharing this interpretation see Alistair Horne, *To Lose a Battle: France 1940*. (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1969); William Shirer, *The Collapse of the Third Republic: An Inquiry into the Fall of France in 1940*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969); Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat, A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co. 1968); Jacques Benoist-Méchin, *Sixty Days that Shook the West; The Fall of France, 1940*, (New York: Putnam, 1963); Guy Chapman, *Why France Fell; The Defeat of the French Army*, (New York: Holt, 1969); and Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *La Décadence, 1932-1939*, (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1979). For more recent works which continue to hold to this interpretation see for example Benjamin Martin, *France in 1938*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2005) and Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley; A Panorama of the 1930's*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000). John C. Cairns supplies an overview and critique of this school of writing when it was cresting in "Some Recent Historians and the "Strange Defeat" of 1940," *Journal of Modern History* 46, no. 1 (1974), 60-85.

believed this announcement constituted a national surrender, making further resistance pointless.<sup>5</sup>

The French collapse of 1940 is much more convincingly explained as a military defeat caused by specific strategic miscalculations than as one caused by flaws in the French national character.<sup>6</sup> French soldiers in 1940 performed no better, and no worse, than did those from any other nation attacked by Germany throughout the first three years of the war. Britain was spared occupation in 1940 due to a body of water, not superior morality. Geography seems a more likely cause than virtue in explaining the Soviet Union's survival the following year. Nevertheless, this "decadent" interpretation supplied an explanation for 1940 which served the needs of certain segments of the French and British leadership, and perhaps the interpretation's political and emotional utility explains its widespread acceptance more so than does its validity. Presenting the defeat as caused by republican decadence served the Vichy's regime's purposes as an argument in favor of its program for national reform based on authoritarianism and socially conservative policies. French "decadence" as the primary cause for the defeat served the interests of British politicians and historians as it allowed them to distance themselves from shared responsibility. William Irvine eloquently summed up the debate with the statement, "it was not decadence that led to 1940; it is 1940 that has led us to view the late Third Republic as

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<sup>5</sup> Durand, 43.

<sup>6</sup> The key works here are Robert Doughty's works, *The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919-1939*, (Hamden: Archon Books, 1985) and *Breaking Point: Sedan and the Fall of France, 1940*, (Hamden: Archon Books, 1990) and Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac's two volume work, *Les Français de l'an 40, La Guerre, oui ou non?*, and *Ouvriers et soldats*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1990). Also of significant value are Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France, The Nazi Invasion of 1940*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Eugina C. Kiesling, *Arming Against Hitler: France and the Limits of Military Planning*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1996); Ernest May, *Strange Victory: Hitler's Conquest of France*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000); and perhaps the path finding work in this field, Robert Young, *In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning, 1933-1940*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

decadent.”<sup>7</sup> This work demonstrates that there is no need to resort to an argument as esoteric as that of the “decadence” school to explain why the Allies were defeated in 1940 and why so many French soldiers were taken that summer.

Few prisoners were prepared for the harsh conditions of their first weeks in captivity. They were even more surprised to find themselves deported to Germany for indefinite employment as forced laborers. This massive deportation took the French prisoners and public by surprise. From their perspective the war had all but ended on 24 June 1940 when the armistice between Germany and the new Vichy regime came into effect. What the French did not foresee was that Germany had always intended to plug the prisoners of war (POWs) into its growing slave labor economy to support the nation’s continuing war efforts. Most previous scholarship on the situation in France in 1940 has not satisfactorily addressed the background of this mass deportation. When the deportation has been addressed in more depth than simply as an event which “happens”, it has been either incorrectly treated as an ad hoc German response to an unexpectedly lengthy war, or as an evolving policy responding to an unforeseen situation.<sup>8</sup> By placing the deportation into the larger context of German prisoner of war and labor deportation policies as they had evolved since 1914 this work demonstrates why the captivity is best understood as a preplanned German policy, and though unknown to the French people at the time, likely the almost inevitable fate of the prisoners taken in 1940.

The prisoners’ lives in captivity have been reconstructed through use of Vichy mail censor reports, German, French and Red Cross reports, first-person accounts and historical

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<sup>7</sup> William Irvin, “Domestic Politics and the Fall of France in 1940,” from *The French Defeat of 1940, Reassessments*, ed. Joel Blatt, (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1998), 95.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Robert Paxton, *Vichy France, Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 53; Robert Gilda, *Marianne in Chains: Everyday Life in the French Heartland under the German Occupation*. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 74. Only Ulrich Herbert, a specialist on Nazi labor policy, has clearly presented the deportation as a pre-planned policy, and even in his work the significance of the point is obscured as it is made almost in passing. See, *Hitler’s Foreign Workers: Enforced Foreign Labor in Germany Under the Third Reich*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 95.

studies. By choice, this work focuses almost exclusively on the experience of enlisted POWs instead of those of captured officers. Enlisted men, who made up 98% of all French prisoners in Germany, experienced a much harsher captivity than did the officers. By sheer weight of numbers the enlisted experience must be seen as the normative one and that of the officers' as exceptional. Officers were held separately from enlisted men in permanent camps called Oflag. Unlike enlisted personnel, officers were not required to work. The biggest struggle for officers who did not volunteer to work was finding ways to fight depression and boredom until their liberation. It was not uncommon for Oflag prisoners to organize university level classes among themselves, put on theatrical productions and form groups to discuss political and social matters. The life of the enlisted prisoners was a far cry from this experience. Unlike the officers, relatively few of the enlisted prisoners lived in prison camps. Nine out of ten were assigned to smaller worksites, called kommandos. At first most prisoners worked as agricultural laborers. As the war progressed the French prisoners were more likely to find themselves assigned to industrial sites, often in factories directly employed in the German war effort. Research for this work revealed that the enlisted prisoners' lives were defined by sixty plus hour work-weeks, an almost obsessive preoccupation with food and the other necessities of life, and their struggle against feelings of isolation, helplessness and depression, a state of mind long referred to by French soldiers as *cafard*.<sup>9</sup> The same sources established how poorly informed the prisoners' were about events back in France, how little interest the enlisted prisoners had for political matters, and the increasing scorn they held for the Vichy regime as their captivity wore on.

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<sup>9</sup> For more on the living and working conditions of French prisoners of war, see Durand; Jacques Evrard, *La Déportation des Travailleurs Français dans le III<sup>e</sup> Reich*, (Paris: Les Grandes Études Contemporaines, Fayard, 1972); Ulrich Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers: Enforced Foreign Labor in Germany Under the Third Reich*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and chapters 3-9 of this work.

The Vichy government portrayed the prisoners' lives in captivity in a way that might have been fairly accurate for some of the officers, but certainly not for the typical enlisted prisoner. So divorced from reality was the Vichy portrayal of the captivity that historian Sarah Fishman concluded that the French people were "given the impression that the prisoners were at an extended summer camp of sorts."<sup>10</sup> This Vichy portrayal was strengthened in the postwar by a preponderance of memoirs and accounts of life in Germany written by former Oflag inmates as opposed to enlisted personal. Returning prisoners were frustrated by the almost complete lack of comprehension the French public had about their years in captivity.

The Vichy government prioritized keeping abreast of the prisoners' thoughts and opinions while they were in captivity, as well as those of their loved ones back in France. Throughout the war the government produced a surveillance report every two weeks compiled by reading tens of thousands of letters either written by the prisoners, or sent to them from France. Through these reports, supplemented by other archival reports and memoirs, the prisoners' state of mind and communal opinions on several key topics were reconstructed in this work. While the Vichy government continued to portray the prisoners as loyal supporters of the regime, the above sources clearly established that by the winter of 1941/42 support for the Vichy regime has almost entirely disappeared. Rather than remain stubborn supporters of the regime, the prisoners had followed nearly the same political trajectory as the rest of the French people, moving from a widespread embrace of Marshal Pétain's regime in 1940, quickly towards disillusionment, and finally arriving at nearly universal scorn for the regime within little more than a year.

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<sup>10</sup> Sarah Fishman, "Grand Delusions: The Unintended Consequences of Vichy France's Prisoner of War Propaganda," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Apr. 1991, 236.

Other surprising findings unaddressed in previous studies of the captivity also emerged from this archival research, among them the initial hostility between French POWs and deported French civilian workers inside Germany,<sup>11</sup> the prisoners' surprisingly rapid embrace of faith in an Allied victory during the winter of 1942/43,<sup>12</sup> and how this newfound hope emboldened greater defiance on their part to resist both their German jailers and Vichy attempts to exploit them.<sup>13</sup>

In 1945 nearly one million French prisoners still remained inside the crumbling Reich. These men were liberated by the advancing Allied and Soviet armies and arrived back in France, along with a like number of deported civilian workers and political and racial deportees, in one great wave dubbed *Le Grand Retour*. Previous scholarship has described the return as being poorly organized from an administrative standpoint; a finding confirmed in this work.<sup>14</sup> In 1945, much of the French population saw the prisoners of war as having failed in their military duty of protecting the nation and as not having suffered unduly while in German captivity. Their time in captivity was not seen as a sacrifice on the same level as that of the resistance members or soldiers of the reconstituted French army. The French government legitimized this perception by refusing to extend veteran status to the returning prisoners of war. The prisoners had expected to be treated like any other group of veterans and their sense of injustice in not finding this to be the

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<sup>11</sup> There is practically no secondary literature on the relationship between the French workers and prisoners in Germany during the war. Chapter six of this work expands on this topic as do two of the author's earlier works, "Shared Sacrifice and the Return of the POW's and Deportees to France, 1945," *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History*, Vol. 35, (2007), 277-288; and "The Long Holiday; The community of three million French captives in Germany 1940-1945," unpublished paper presented at the Council for European Studies Seventeenth International Conference, Montreal, Canada, April 2010.

<sup>12</sup> This is another topic for which there is practically no secondary literature. The findings presented in chapter seven of this work, based on French mail surveillance reports, challenge Ulrich Herbert's characterization of the detained foreigners in Germany continuing expectation of a German victory throughout 1943 and even into 1944. Herbert appears to have relied on German archival sources, which are convincingly contradicted by the French sources.

<sup>13</sup> See chapters seven and eight of this work.

<sup>14</sup> See François Cochet, *Les exclus de la victoire: Histoire des prisonniers de guerre, déportés et S.T.O. (1945-1985)*, (Paris: S.P.M., 1992); Christophe Lewin, *Retour des prisonniers de guerre français: naissance et développement de la F.N.P.G., 1944-1952*, (Paris: Publication de la Sorbonne, 1986); Sarah Fishman, *We Will Wait: Wives of French Prisoners of War, 1940-1945*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) and Koreman.

case was manifest in the wave of political protests they organized soon after their return. The prisoners' return and their postwar efforts have received both sympathetic, and somewhat critical, treatment by a small number of past scholars. François Cochet argued that the repatriation effort was riddled with poor planning and judgmental policies. His study encompasses not only the return of the POWs in 1945, but also that of the nearly one million other French citizens who had been deported into Germany either as workers, political prisoners or targets for genocide. The lack of unity between these different groups upon their return limited what each was able to accomplish postwar. Christophe Lewin found the former POWs effective in organizing on their own behalf following their liberation, but to have been out of step with the overall French community due to their long separation. The mutual lack of comprehension between the prisoners and the French public resulted in the prisoners pursuing an agenda which appeared to threaten national unity by promoting group specific over communal goals.

This work expands on the above earlier scholarship by contextualizing the administration of the return and the provisional government's treatment of the former prisoners within the full story of the captivity. Cochet and Lewin tend to treat the events of 1944-45 in relative isolation from the defeat of 1940 and the Vichy prisoner of war policies during 1940-44.<sup>15</sup> The prisoners were received by a nation predisposed by years of misinformation to think of them as having endured a relatively mild captivity,<sup>16</sup> a nation which had also been dealing with crisis and deprivation since 1940 and was ill-equipped to address the needs of any new specific group. The

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<sup>15</sup> While both excellent works in most ways, both Lewin's and Cochet's book suffer from this same problem of not placing the homecoming and postwar experience within its larger chronological context. Lewin's study focuses on the F.N.C.P.G., a federation formed in 1945, and openly states that he limited his study to 1944-52 (21). The subtitle of Cochet's work is "The history of the prisoners of war, deportees and S.T.O. (1945-1985)" with his scholarship focused on 1945-54. Neither works address the beginning of the captivity in 1940, and only briefly touch on the lives of the prisoners in Germany from 1940-45 and Vichy policies. Yves Durand's and Pierre Gascar's (*Histoire de la captivité des Français en Allemagne (1939-1945)*, (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1967)) works suffer from the opposite problem, both concluding their studies with the return of the prisoners to France.

<sup>16</sup> See chapter six.

prisoners' reception was also shaped by the government's prioritization of national unity over individual demands for recognition.<sup>17</sup> Henri Frenay, the man tapped by General DeGaulle to head the repatriation effort, in many ways personified these attitudes towards the former prisoners. The provisional government's ministry overseeing the prisoners' welfare was grudgingly headed by a man who looked down upon the POWs for their failures in 1940 and their passive acceptance of captivity. Frenay oversaw the development of a repatriation plan which foresaw no desire on the part of returnees to demand special recognition for their wartime sacrifices nor seek long-term public aid during their reintegration period. He envisioned rapidly and efficiently processing the returnees at the nation's borders, demobilizing them, and sending them off with a third class train ticket so they could quietly meld back into French society, putting the last six years of service and captivity behind them.<sup>18</sup> DeGaulle and Frenay did not see the prisoners as men deserving elevated recognition for their wartime service, and the provisional government's policies conformed to this judgment.

The former POWs unwillingness to conform to the above repatriation plan is the subject of this work's epilogue. Unlike the other groups of returning French citizens, the former prisoners of war were represented by pre-existing advocacy organizations. One of these organizations had developed originally under the Vichy government's sponsorship, later moving into the resistance, and two others as resistance movements from their creation, one Gaullist and the other Communist. These groups combined in 1944 to form a united prisoner of war movement in France, a movement that following the liberation transformed itself into a political advocacy organization. In 1945 this group took the name the Fédération Nationale des Combattants Prisonniers de Guerre (F.N.C.P.G.). Under the leadership of a young François

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<sup>17</sup> See chapter nine.

<sup>18</sup> For examples of these attitudes see Frenay's own autobiography, *The Night Will End*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1976), 314 & 341.

Mitterrand the F.N.C.P.G. began a long campaign to win increased recognition and benefits for the prisoners. The values and goals of this movement during the key years of 1945-47 were reconstructed through an examination of the federation's actions and membership newsletters. This work documents the former prisoners' struggles for recognition and benefits during the immediate postwar years. Judging by the F.N.C.P.G.'s priorities the ex-POWs found establishing their position in the nation's collective memory as honorable veterans at least as important as any of the more tangible benefits for which they fought.

### **A few notes on terminology and sources**

This work used the terms "forced labor" and "slave labor" almost interchangeably. While "forced labor" appears to be the more commonly used term by historians to describe the use of prisoners of war as workers within Nazi Germany during the war, I believe that "slave labor" is at least equally descriptive of their state, if not the more accurate term, as "slavery" more closely describes the conditions of the prisoners' captivity. Prisoners of war in Germany were forced to work 60 plus hours a week, often seven days a week, in assigned jobs. These jobs often put the prisoners' lives and health at risk. The prisoners were often not compensated at all for this work, and if they did receive payment the sum was meager and often in the form of "camp script" or via notation in an account book which they could never actually transform into cash. Thus the prisoners were either minimally compensated for their work, or completely uncompensated. The prisoners of war were not allowed to leave their jobs. Failure to satisfactorily perform their duties led to punishment, often of a physical or inhumane nature. Prisoners had no functioning legal protection in Nazi Germany after the Vichy government assumed the position as their "protecting power" in November, 1940. They could be, and frequently were, mistreated even to the point of murder, without consequence. In recent legal negotiations between war crimes

victims seeking compensation for forced labor and the German government, a distinction was made between forced labor and slave labor which argued that the former was a temporary condition, while the later permanent and thus more serious.<sup>19</sup> While this argument proved helpful in advancing negotiations within the specific context of that legal battle, it is problematic on many levels to historians. The first of these problems is the lack of compelling evidence that Nazi Germany ever intended to voluntarily set free productive POW laborers. If the overall history of German POW labor policy is examined, not just that of the treatment of western prisoners, one recognizes that more found release through death than by any other means prior to 1945. When Germany did liberate prisoners of war during the war they tended to send home sickly men who could not be used profitably as workers. The historical record indicates that Nazi German POW labor policy called for the indefinite use of prisoners as workers, until their usefulness (or lifespan) was used up, not their temporary utilization. A second reality the “forced” vs. “slave” laborer argument stumbles upon is its implication that Nazi German intended to keep its “forced laborers” alive, while intending to work its “slave laborers” to death. Undoubtedly Nazi Germany did practice a policy of exploiting the labor of its captives marked for extermination until their bodies gave out; however, that reality more argues against designating groups targeted for murder as “slave laborers” rather than simply as victims of genocide who happened to be used as slave laborers prior to their murder. The fact that French and many other groups of prisoners of war were not targeted for extermination does not invalidate their designation as “slave laborers.” An argument that contends that the usage of the term “slavery” is inappropriate as the prisoners of war were presumably not being placed into a category which was, or would become, hereditary, overlooks the fact that in most times and

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<sup>19</sup> See Stuart Eizenstat, *Imperfect Justice; Looted Assets, Slave Labor, and the Unfinished Business of World War II*. (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 206-7, for the background to this manner of distinguishing the two groups.

places slavery was not necessarily a hereditary state of being. Most historical references to slavery from outside the modern Western cultural sphere (i.e. classical world, pre-Columbian America, African, Chinese, etc.) treat slavery as a temporary state, most often fallen into by individuals who were captured during wartime. “Forced laborer” implies coercion and punishment, while “slave laborer” implies a reality closer to what World War II German captives experienced, a life almost totally devoid of power, protection and options. French World War II POWs were not meaningfully compensated for their work, had no legal rights, could not return home and faced a captivity of indefinite duration. Theirs was a slave-like existence.

While this work has primarily relied upon original archival research and past scholarship, it has also made extensive use of memoirs and shorter memory accounts (*témoignages*) to flesh out points or provide examples. In some cases, such as the character study of Henri Frenay in chapter nine of this work, memoirs have also been analyzed to help construct interpretations. The use of memoir literature is always a problematic exercise for historians. Memories can be subconsciously changed by later events, knowledge and influences, and often memories are intentionally censored by their authors. When used with caution, these works retain a significant degree of value. Isolated and perplexing comments found in individual memoirs are difficult to work with; however, when a specific point of view or telling of events is repeated in essentially the same manner in several sources, it can be afforded more weight and trust. The use of memory documents is perhaps even more problematic in the case of France and World War II than it is in other fields of historical research. Henry Rousso’s work has demonstrated how the French “collective memory” of the war years has been altered during the last two generations by changing cultural discourses. Since the liberation, France has gone through phases in which it was first in denial of its Vichy past and, later, unrealistically accepting of Vichy and

collaboration as representative of the nation as a whole during the war. As these cultural trends swept over the nation, the French collective memory of the war years changed accordingly.<sup>20</sup> Rousso does not belittle the value of memoirs despite his recognition of their shortcomings. He finds memoirs no less reliable than most other forms of historical interpretation of this era, and often valuable in their willingness to address in unique ways topics that the academic community has already either settled upon a standard interpretation of, or seemingly decided to ignore as a group. He argues that prior to the 1970's the French historical community tended to avoid the war years, making wartime memoirs more important in the development of a historical understanding of France during this period given that memoir writers were the only group willing to tread into this minefield of a topic.<sup>21</sup> Rousso reminds us that while memoirs confront historians with interpretive challenges, no form of representing the past comes without its own collection of complicating issues, or without its unique qualities.

Another factor that must be kept in mind when using memory texts produced by former prisoners of war is the issue of their psychological state when these memories were being formed. A common symptom produced by captivity in prisoners is a latent feeling of guilt at being captured, a feeling often transformed into extreme criticalness and even hate directed at organizations and other prisoners. Paranoid suspiciousness and strong moral condemnation can also result from this state of mind.<sup>22</sup> Taking these factors into account, direct expressions of opinions in the memoirs have been viewed with caution, while more concrete descriptions of events and conditions which span a cross-section of the works surveyed have been privileged as

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<sup>20</sup> Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome, History and Memory in France since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 10-11.

<sup>21</sup> Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome*, 258-265.

<sup>22</sup> Jonathan Vance, "From *Barbed-Wire Disease*" in *Encyclopedia of Prisoners of War and Internment*, ed. Jonathan Vance, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2000), 19-20.

more useful. A prisoner's expression of support for or derision of an individual leader or organization can be attributed to countless possible factors, some of which may be the result of the psychological consequences of their captivity. Widespread agreement in the memoirs on conditions, such as the lack of mail or insufficient food, contain fewer of these pitfalls. This work treats each memoir as the work of a single unique individual, and when necessary, contextualizes these individual accounts within the larger body of research conducted. The memoirs used in this study come from individuals spanning the ideological, regional and class spectrums of French society. All that they share in common is that they were all composed by men who fought in 1940 and played their small role in the captivity. Each contribute to this study by reminding us that history is the composite of countless all-too-human stories.

## **Chapter 1: The Evolution of Prisoner of War Policy**

Germany's conquest of France in 1940 and the huge number of prisoners taken during the campaign are well worn historical topics. Less well known is the fate of the prisoners following the defeat. During the summer of 1940 the victors began transporting approximately 1.5 million French prisoners of war into Germany. Most of these men would not see France again until 1945. During their five year captivity the French POWs were used as forced laborers to keep the Third Reich's war economy functioning while so many of Germany's young men were under arms. This massive deportation and lengthy captivity came as a surprise to the French people, but perhaps it should not have. The action was consistent with German policies developed during the First World War for the use of prisoners of war and conscripted foreign civilians as forced laborers during times of war.

This historical context is needed to properly understand why the French prisoners were deported and what plans Germany had for their usage. One limitation of previous studies of the captivity is their failure to demonstrate the larger historical context in which German policies were developed. Works by Yves Durand, Christophe Lewin and François Cochet which are in most ways excellent, present the captivity as an unexpected event which just seemed to have happened. In doing so these works leave the reader with the impression that deportation is an event unique to the Second World War and one which could not have been foreseen. This chapter demonstrates why the deportation should not have come as a surprise to the French people, why it was an act consistent with German policy from 1914-18, and, more recently, to policies enacted in Poland the previous year.

This chapter will also demonstrate that Germany's forced labor policies developed during World War I broke a consensus formed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century across the western world that

prisoners of war held certain natural rights while in captivity. This viewpoint developed during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as part of the larger discourse on “natural rights.” Later, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these rights were codified in a series of international agreements signed by all western nations. The emerging consensus held that nations were expected to respect the prisoners’ right to humane treatment and their freedom from being forced to work directly in support of their captor’s war effort. From 1915 through 1918 Germany employed over two million prisoners as slave laborers in jobs directly related to war aims. By employing the men in war related work, and reducing expenditures on their maintenance to a minimum, Germany transformed its prisoners from an economic burden on the nation into a significant productive asset. Even though Germany’s World War I slave labor programs violated international standards, after the war no Germans were held accountable. Given the benefits and lack of penalties, it was to be expected that Germany would return to, and if possible expand upon, its use of slave labor when it next embarked on war.

When the French prisoners arrived in Germany in 1940 they found hundreds of thousands of Polish prisoners of war taken the previous year already integrated into the German war economy. Through conquest Germany was building a pool of what would eventually become millions of slave laborers. This chapter demonstrates that the development of Germany’s prisoner of war policies during the First World War and its massive slave labor economy during World War II did not develop by happenstance, it was a product of planning. It also demonstrates how the German planners developed their policies in conscious violation of the international standards in order to increase productivity. The Third Reich’s slave-labor economy was not a new innovation; it was just a more expansive version of the policies Germany developed and implemented in World War I.

### **Background on the changing view of prisoners of war in the modern era**

Throughout history war captives faced uncertain fates. The capture and care of prisoners made demands on the conqueror's resources. Unless the capturing force had some expectation that these expenses would be offset by rewards, such as the likelihood that the captives could be transformed into loyal subjects, or of their being exchangeable for ransom or enemy held prisoners, their treatment depended upon little more than good will.

As the Western World entered the modern era two meta-historical transformations dramatically altered the status of prisoners of war. These transformations, products of the dual revolution, were the acceptance of the concept of "natural" or "human rights," and the emergence of industrial economies.<sup>1</sup> It is worth emphasizing at this point that the section below examines only changes happening in areas where the values growing out of the Enlightenment and Liberalism dominated international relations, specifically Europe, the Americas and Japan. The shared cultural influences of these areas produced a consensus viewpoint regarding proper treatment of prisoners of war. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it would seem that, in regards to war prisoners, all these nations were metaphorically speaking the same language.

### **Prisoners of war and Natural Rights during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries**

By the 19th century the concept that all humans possessed some form of "natural rights", among which was a right to life, was accepted, to one degree or another, throughout the western world. When this acceptance of a "natural right" to life was extended to warfare it followed that the indiscriminate killing of disarmed prisoners of war, or their inhuman treatment, was seen as uncivilized behavior. Historian Richard Speed summarized the traditional status of prisoners of

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<sup>1</sup> E(ric) J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848*, (New York: Mentor Books, 1962), 17-20. Hobsbawm presents the "dual revolution" thesis in the introduction to this book and then develops it throughout the first three chapters.

war in the opening statement of his study of World War I prisoners: “Throughout history the fate of a prisoner of war has been a function of his value in a financial, political, or military transaction.”<sup>2</sup> The widespread acceptance of the concept of natural rights during the modern era brought about a change which conflicted with Speed’s equation. If civilized behavior included respecting that all men possessed a natural right to life and humane treatment, then, treatment of prisoners in a manner consistent with these values could be expected independent of their “financial, political, or military” value.

Examples of this acceptance of prisoners’ natural rights to life and humane treatment can be found throughout the era of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. During the American Revolutionary War both the British and American governments made demands that their prisoners be treated humanely, and specific diplomatic posts were created to ensure that their treatment rose to “the most basic rights of humanity.”<sup>3</sup> During the Napoleonic Wars the French Directory passed a decree in 1799 which established, at least rhetorically, that all soldiers surrendering to the French would have their natural right to life recognized. Problems associated with prisoner-taking greatly expanded during these wars. Large battles resulted in the capture of over ten thousand soldiers in a single day - prisoners who might require care during several years of captivity. Despite the financial and administrative burdens the French and British generally provided their prisoners with at least minimally humane care in most instances.<sup>4</sup> Prisoners held by the French and British were provided with regular food, shelter and medical care. Even though Russia and Spain, at least officially, recognized that an acceptable level of care for

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<sup>2</sup> Richard B. Speed III. *Prisoners, Diplomats, and the Great War: A Study in the Diplomacy of Captivity*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Sanders Jr., *While in the Hands of the Enemy: Military Prisons of the Civil War*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 9.

<sup>4</sup> Rory Muir. *Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 257.

prisoners was proper, the high mortality rates of these prisoners attest to the gap between reality and rhetoric in these cases.

The widespread outcry stemming from revelations of poor treatment of prisoners during the Crimean War and the American Civil War gave further evidence to the growing acceptance that prisoners of war should be treated humanely. By the end of the war 30,218 Union prisoners died in Confederate captivity nearly matched by the 25,976 Confederates who died while in Union hands. So strong was the public and official outrage regarding the treatment of prisoners that Captain Henry Wirz, the commandant of the Andersonville prison, was tried and hanged in November 1865.<sup>5</sup>

The first international conventions on wartime codes of conduct addressed the treatment of prisoners in the 1860s. The Geneva Convention of 1864 stipulated that wounded and sick prisoners of war should be returned to their home forces as soon as their health permitted. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which was formed in 1864 in response to the what many Westerners saw as the needless excesses of cruelty and inhumanity displayed during the Crimean War, expanded its mission in 1870 to include ameliorating the conditions of captivity for prisoners of war. It is perhaps as a result of this growing wave of attention that the largest instances of mass war captivity up to that point in history, the German capture of 723,500 French prisoners during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, produced no examples of prisoner abuse comparable to those found in earlier conflicts. The Germans quickly mobilized the resources and bureaucracy necessary to provide at least a “humane” level of care for this enormous number of prisoners. While the prisoners were certainly not well-cared for, suffering

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<sup>5</sup> On public outrage caused by the Confederate treatment of Northern prisoners see Sanders 218-265. William Best Hesseltine’s *Civil War Prisons, A Study in War Psychology* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1930) is a full study of how Northern leaders used reports of prisoners of war abuse to maintain public support for the continuation of the war, and to justify the mistreatment of Confederate prisoners of war as a retaliatory tool to encourage the Confederates to improve conditions in their prison camps.

from lack of adequate food, shelter and medical care, their living conditions were significantly better than those of earlier conflicts. One indication of this is that the mortality rate among the French prisoners was somewhere between three and four percent, roughly a third of what it had been among prisoners during the American Civil War. While the French government itself could do little to help the prisoners, non-governmental organizations helped hold the German government accountable for the care of these captives. The ICRC and newspapers provided an unprecedented amount of information to the public by providing lists of known prisoners and reports on camp conditions.<sup>6</sup> The weight of international public opinion encouraged Germany to treat its prisoners in a humane manner, and, at least based upon mortality rates, Germany accepted this responsibility. The final example of mass prisoner taking prior to World War I produced more evidence that nation's had accepted the concept of proper treatment of prisoners of war. During the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 fewer than one percent of the 70,000 Russian prisoners in Japanese hands died in captivity. In stark contrast to World War II, during this war the Japanese treated their European captives with respect and humanity.<sup>7</sup> While Japan is not a western nation per se, its conduct in international matters during this period was heavily influenced by the cultural norms of the west and they openly modeled their treatment of prisoners of war on western examples.<sup>8</sup> The Russian treatment of Japanese prisoners was also generous.

The apparent consensus which had emerged in the West during the 19<sup>th</sup> century regarding prisoner treatment was codified in the Hague Convention of 1899. This convention established rules regarding prisoners' living standards, property rights, and access to medical care. The

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<sup>6</sup> Rachel Chrastil, *Organizing for War, France 1870-1914*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 34-5.

<sup>7</sup> Philip A. Towle, "Japanese Treatment of Prisoners in 1904-1905 – Foreign Officer's Reports," *Military Affairs*, 39, Issue 3 (1975): 115.

<sup>8</sup> Towle, 116-117.

convention placed restrictions on physical punishment and forbade forcing prisoners to perform excessive labor or work associated with military operations. Inspection of prisoner camps to ensure compliance with these rules was instituted. So universal was international agreement on the matter of humane treatment of prisoners of war, not only in words but also in the concrete examples of the Franco-Prussian and Russo-Japanese wars, that the international community only briefly addressed the matter during the follow up 1907 Hague Convention. All nations which took part in World War I signed the Hague Conventions and thus were bound to their guidelines in 1914. In the years just prior to World War I there was some justification in seeing the matter of humane treatment of prisoners as a settled issue. What would cause this consensus to fall apart was the second historical meta-trend mentioned above, industrialization.

### **Prisoners of War and the Era of Total War**

When confronting questions about the treatment of prisoners of war it is easy to skip over an earlier fundamental question – why do armies take prisoners in the first place? War pits two groups against one another, each intent on maiming and killing the other, until one achieves victory. What causes one, when it has gained such advantage over its opponent that resistances ceases, to stop killing and maiming? What causes two individuals to go from trying to kill each other one moment to becoming guards and prisoners the next? Compassion certainly plays a role in this matter, although its unpredictability and cultural variation makes it perhaps too much of a “moving target” to lend itself easily to historical arguments. Throughout most of history there have been two reasons for prisoner taking better suited to historical studies. Armies took prisoners because either they were valuable, or because they believed doing so encouraged more

enemy soldiers to surrender.<sup>9</sup> The relatively small numbers of prisoners taken in wars fought before the modern era bears witness to the weakness of these motivations.

It would appear that, until recently, armies saw the taking of prisoners as simply more trouble than it was worth. The acceptance of the concept of natural rights in the Western world changed this situation. By the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century almost all western nations agreed that they would accept the surrender of enemy soldiers, and care for them in a humane manner, until the war's end. Taking and caring for prisoners was a sacrifice. Prisoners were a drain on resources. Western states saw this sacrifice as part of the price of membership in the family of civilized nations. The employment of prisoners of war in work such as farming or infrastructure upkeep could partially offset the expense of housing, feeding and guarding them, but in no cases did it result in the prisoners "paying their own way." Even where prisoner agricultural or infrastructure labor was administered most efficiently, such as in the United States and Britain during World War II, the benefits derived did not come close to offsetting the cost of maintenance.<sup>10</sup> Returning to the question as to why armies take prisoners of war, the answer given by a western military leader in 1900 would be very different from the traditional answer summarized by Richard Speed's quote above. The modern western military leader would explain that armies took prisoners and cared for them in a humane manner because that is what was expected of "civilized" nations.

### **World War I**

When Europe went to war in 1914 all the belligerent nations found themselves under a common set of obligations based upon their signature of the Hague Conventions. When the war

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<sup>9</sup> Niall Ferguson's essay "Prisoner Taking and Prisoner Killing in the Age of Total War: Towards a Political Economy of Defeat," (*War in History* 11, no 2, 148-192) deals with some of these fundamental aspects of prisoner taking in stark military terms (see pages 148-154).

<sup>10</sup> Gerald H. Davis, "Prisoners of War in Twentieth-Century War Economies," *Journal of Contemporary History* 12, no. 4 (1977): 628-630.

did not end quickly the burdens of these obligations weighed heavy on the belligerents. By 1915 Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia found themselves burdened with hundreds of thousands of enemy prisoners. The war made greater and greater economic demands on the belligerents. Limited resources forced hard choices on nations. The 1916/1917 fiscal year budget of Austria-Hungary demonstrated the tension between resource allocation and care of prisoners. In that year 2.5% of Austria-Hungary's total war expenditures were consumed by the expense of caring for 1.8 million prisoners, more than what was spent on explosives, motor cars or aircraft.<sup>11</sup> The conundrum facing the combatants of World War I was how to continue to treat prisoners of war in accordance with international standards, while at the same time prevent them from becoming such an economic drain as to diminish their chances for victory. Modern industrial wars introduced a new dynamic into the matter of prisoner treatment – at what point did military expediency outweigh a nation's international commitments to civilized behavior.

In 1915 the three nations holding the largest numbers of prisoners of war, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia, had all implemented policies which violated international agreements, in the hope that through these transgressions they could transform their prisoners from economic burdens to assets. The amount and type of work these three nations demanded of their prisoners, and the level of their maintenance, all fell outside international standards. Over the next three years prisoners became an indispensable labor source for these nations in forestry, agriculture, road repair and mining. Left unchecked, this effort to maximize value while minimizing expenses would almost inevitably lead to abuse. Nowhere was the economic potential of captive laborers more systematically exploited than in Germany.

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<sup>11</sup> Davis, 629.

## **German Forced Labor practices during World War I**

The combined economic might of France, Britain, Russia and the United States was significantly greater than that of Germany and her allies in World War I. The Germans hoped exploitation of captive workers would narrow this gap. The German military leadership's tendency to make their first response to any setback an extreme one was demonstrated in the rapid adjustment they made in their prisoners of war policies in 1914-15.<sup>12</sup> Their desire for increased national productivity overpowered their desire to honor international agreements within a few months of the outbreak of hostilities.

Germany did not plan to use prisoners of war and civilian deportees for economic gain in 1914; rather, it was a response to the unexpected duration of the war. Once embraced, forced labor policy was tuned for greater efficiency from 1915 forward. As historian Odon Abbal stated, during World War I Germany developed a "system of internment which, through trial and error, was organized to produce a substantial yield of manpower from a source which was both unexpected and invaluable."<sup>13</sup> Previous studies of German prisoner of war policy in World War I agree on the lack of pre-war preparation. After inspecting several camps holding British prisoners of war in 1914 American doctor Daniel McCarthy concluded, "Evidently no forethought or provision had been made" for dealing with the incoming flow of prisoners in 1914.<sup>14</sup> Ulrich Herbert's later historical study confirmed this impression. "No thought had been given to [prisoners of war] by the War Ministry in its preparation for the war economy."<sup>15</sup> The lack of German planning in general regarding forced labor utilization during wartime is given further credence by the government's initial decision to expel all foreign seasonal agricultural

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<sup>12</sup> For more on the German military's tendency to immediately resort to extreme solutions see Isabel Hull, *Absolute Destruction; Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 143-58.

<sup>13</sup> Abbal, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel J. McCarthy, *The Prisoner of War in Germany*, (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1918), 22.

<sup>15</sup> Herbert, 16.

workers upon the outbreak of war, a decision reversed the following month. By October, German fears of labor shortages resulted in a third decree which prevented all foreign workers, not just agrarian workers, from returning home for the balance of the war.<sup>16</sup> This final decree transformed tens of thousands of foreigners, mostly Polish or Italian unskilled workers, into virtual captives for the next four years.

Another indication that the Germans had given little thought to prisoner of war policy before the war are the abysmal conditions of their prisoner camps during 1914 and 1915. The most notorious case of neglect occurred at Wittenberg where 15,000 prisoners were held in a rough 10-acre camp. So overcrowded was the camp that three prisoners shared each mattress. Typhus broke out in 1914 and ran rampant until February 1915 when the Germans sent a team of interned British doctors into Wittenberg to assess the situation. Upon receiving their report all German personnel abandoned the camp and refused to reenter it until August. During those six months the camp was run by the inmates, receiving supplies hoisted over the barbed wire fences by German cranes. Fortunately typhus tends to sicken, not kill, and only a few hundred of the thousands infected died before the outbreak was brought under control.<sup>17</sup> The international news coverage given to Wittenberg and other neglected camps embarrassed Germany into allowing neutral inspection to commence in March 1915. These inspections had initially been refused in violation of the rules of the Hague Conventions.<sup>18</sup>

German expectations for a quick victory in 1914 go a long way in explaining the lack of thought they put into prisoner of war policy. Their handling of prisoners during the first months

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<sup>16</sup> Herbert, 18. After this decree these workers became in effect stateless serfs. They had no access to the German legal system and were forbidden to negotiate with employers or abandon their jobs.

<sup>17</sup> McCarthy, 105-120.

<sup>18</sup> McCarthy, 4-9. Britain requested the United States act as its inspecting power in December 1914. Spain was the inspecting power for French prisoners. The Germans did not officially recognize the right of inspection for Russian prisoners, although Spain unofficially acted in this role. As Germany held prisoners of all nationalities in the same prison camps any inspections would presumably uncover prisoner abuse regardless as to the nationality of the victims.

of the war indicate that the Germans planned to simply house them in rough camps for a short period of time until peace settled the matter. Their decision not to exchange prisoners with France and Britain made sense only in a short war scenario. As Germany's population base was smaller than its adversaries, one to one prisoner exchanges would have disproportionately benefited Germany in a war determined by attrition and industrial production. Their refusal to exchange indicates their policy was based on the expectation that the war would be short.<sup>19</sup>

The military setbacks during the fall of 1914 caused the Germans to confront the problems, and opportunities, of holding hundreds of thousands of prisoners. Despite not planning on doing so before the war, Germany was the first nation to mobilize prisoners of war into units and assign them to long-term employment unconnected to their own maintenance. In April 1915, the Germans began using prisoners of war in the mining and iron industries,<sup>20</sup> and in September 1915 as POW labor companies in combat zones. Initially only Russian prisoners were used in this manner.<sup>21</sup> Prisoner labor quickly boomed into an enormous project. By August 1916, 1,625,000 POWs were working for the Germans. Roughly half of these prisoners were used in those areas which prisoners of war had previously worked: 45% were employed in agricultural jobs, 6% in maintaining prison camp services and 2% in public works. The innovation introduced by Germany in 1915 was the usage of 331,000 prisoners in industrial work (20% of working prisoners) and 253,000 (16%) in the war zone supporting the German army.<sup>22</sup> These practices violated the Hague Conventions as they forced the prisoners to work under life-threatening conditions and perform work with a military purpose.

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<sup>19</sup> McCarthy, 136-140.

<sup>20</sup> Ulrich Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers; Enforced Foreign Labor in Germany Under the Third Reich*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 16.

<sup>21</sup> Heather Jones, "The Final Logic of Sacrifice? Violence in German Prisoner of War Labor Companies in 1918," *The Historian* 68, no. 4 (2006): 773-778.

<sup>22</sup> Herbert, 17.

Recognizing that they were fighting a long war of attrition against a more populous and productive coalition Germany began shifting its economy to best support the war effort. In the spring of 1915 they began to experiment how best to mobilize the “unexpected and indispensable” manpower reservoir found in their prison camps. Even greater than Germany’s need for agricultural workers was its need for industrial workers. So many factory workers were called to military service in 1914 that Germany’s industrial output dropped to 63% of its prewar level in 1915. In October 1914, the German army was demobilizing arms workers who were more needed in factories than at the front line.<sup>23</sup> The Germans estimated prisoners of war to be between 50% and 75% as efficient as German civilian industrial workers.<sup>24</sup> Even at this reduced level of efficiency forced labor in industrial settings would be more productive than forced labor in jobs in which prisoners of war had been traditionally employed. To keep maintenance costs low the amount of food provided to the prisoners by the Germans was reduced to a level which should have resulted in malnutrition.<sup>25</sup> Logically, this insufficient diet should have resulted in reduced productivity due to the declining health of the workforce. This result was largely avoided because the prisoners’ rations were supplemented by aid from their home countries. Ninety-seven percent of western prisoners of war received supplemental food and clothing.<sup>26</sup> In effect France and Britain subsidized the German war economy by feeding and clothing their countrymen who were being forced to work for their enemy. Italian, Russian and Serbian prisoners of war, 94% of whom received no supplemental aid from home and thus had to get by solely on rations, suffered more from this policy of neglect. During the war 2.3% of prisoners

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<sup>23</sup> Peter Liberman, *Does Conquest Pay? The Exploitation of Occupied Industrial Societies*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 73.

<sup>24</sup> McCarthy, 139-141.

<sup>25</sup> Speed, 73.

<sup>26</sup> Speed, 74-75.

from Western Europe and America died in captivity. The mortality rate among Italians and Slavic prisoners was 5.34%, more than twice as high as their Western companions.<sup>27</sup>

A second German forced labor innovation during World War I which violated international agreements was the conscription of civilians in occupied territories. In October 1916, the Germans began forcibly relocating Belgian workers into Germany. German war minister Falkenhayn proposed deporting 400,000 Belgian workers.<sup>28</sup> An economic official was even more enthusiastic, hoping at least 700,000 Belgians would eventually be deported.<sup>29</sup> The deportees, referred to as “detachments of free laborers” by the Germans, were held in detention camps. These civilians were not technically forced to work; instead they were compelled to volunteer in order that they might be released from their detention camps. Lack of food and unsanitary conditions leading to the spread of epidemic diseases made escape from these camps a compelling reward.<sup>30</sup> A combination of resistance and international outrage caused the Germans to discontinue civilian deportations in February 1917.<sup>31</sup> The International Committee of the Red Cross estimated that 100,000 French and Belgian civilians were deported to Germany during this five month experiment in forced labor.<sup>32</sup> Eight hundred of the 61,000 Belgian workers taken into Germany died.<sup>33</sup>

While deportations to Germany ceased, the German exploitation of labor within occupied territories intensified during the last two years of the war. Over sixty-two thousand Belgian

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<sup>27</sup> Speed, 73-74.

<sup>28</sup> Isabel Hull, *Absolute Destruction; Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 235.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Liberman, *Does Conquest Pay? The Exploitation of Occupied Industrial Societies*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 78.

<sup>30</sup> Carl P. Dennett, *Prisoners of the Great War*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1919), 203-205.

<sup>31</sup> Liberman, 78. Isabel Hull concluded that “No issue [more so than the Belgian deportations] did more to turn American public opinion against Germany,” 241.

<sup>32</sup> Annette Becker, *Oubliés de la grande guerre. Humanitaire et culture de guerre. Populations occupées, déportés civils, prisonniers de guerre*, (Paris: Éditions Noësis, 1998), 233.

<sup>33</sup> Liberman 78.

workers joined more than one hundred thousand French civilians taken from their homes and forced to work for the German Army behind the lines.<sup>34</sup> These workers remained in captivity throughout the war and suffered a mortality rate between two and four percent.<sup>35</sup> By January 1918, 372,318 Belgians were either working inside Germany or for the Germans in occupied territories.<sup>36</sup> While not all civilians in occupied France, Belgium and Luxemburg were deported or turned into forced laborers, Germany saw their ability to do so as a “presumptive right” from the beginning of the war.<sup>37</sup> Germany’s inability to profitably utilize these civilian deportees in industry was probably more important than international outrage in limiting the scale of its civilian deportation program.

If the Germans were somewhat disappointed in the contributions of civilian deportees, their hopes of transforming the prisoners of war into a productive element of their national economy were borne out. Forced labor by prisoners and deported civilians played a major role in propping up their economy during the last three years of the war. Each German worker replaced by a forced laborer freed up one more body for military service. The yearly drafts cut deeper and deeper into Germany’s manpower reserve, eventually making the nation heavily dependent on its growing army of slave laborers. German dependence on slave labor was perhaps most starkly displayed by their treatment of Russian prisoners in 1918. One stipulation of the peace treaty between Germany and the newborn Soviet Union was a full exchange of prisoners. In November 1918, eight months after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk ended hostilities between the two nations, more than one and a half million Russian prisoners were still working for the Germans.<sup>38</sup> Eight

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<sup>34</sup> Alan Kramer, *Dynamics of Destruction; Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 44 and Hull, 240, 253.

<sup>35</sup> Kramer, 45.

<sup>36</sup> Liberman 78-79.

<sup>37</sup> Hull, 252. For overviews of German’s usage of civilian laborers from occupied territory see Becker (57-65), Kramer (41-50) and Liberman (69-86).

<sup>38</sup> Speed, 171.

months after the war between the two nations had officially ended, Germany continued to refuse to allow the Russian prisoners to leave. By 1918 forced labor by prisoners of war and civilians had become absolutely crucial to Germany. In that year approximately 400,000 prisoners of war worked directly for the German army, while another two million worked within Germany itself.<sup>39</sup>

### **Two Pathways**

Germany was not the only nation to use prisoners of war as laborers during World War I. The need for manpower was strong enough that, by 1916, all nations employed their prisoners in some way. Germany, Russia and Austria-Hungary developed policy largely along similar lines. France and Britain took a different path. With the limited exception of a twelve-month period from June 1916 to May 1917 when the French and British armies used German prisoners of war as laborers in the war zone, the Western Allies' treatment of prisoners largely conformed to international standards.

The British and French used prisoners as laborers on a smaller scale than did Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia. The Western Allies also used prisoners only as general laborers, while Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia used them in industrial work when possible. France and Britain assigned prisoners to specific projects for limited periods of time, such as in 1918 when the French used approximately 50,000 German prisoners to help bring in the harvest. By way of comparison Austria-Hungary employed more than twenty times that number as year-long agricultural workers throughout 1917 and 1918.<sup>40</sup> Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary each used more than a million prisoners of war as laborers from 1916 forward. In addition to agricultural work, Germany, Russia and Austria-Hungary also used prisoners in mines, on

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<sup>39</sup> Jones, 774-777.

<sup>40</sup> Davis, 628.

railroads and in other industrial settings. The proportion of prisoners working in agriculture vs. industry was roughly two to one in Germany and Russia.<sup>41</sup> France and Britain used prisoners as temporary replacements for specific needs, while Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary integrated them as permanent fixtures in centrally controlled war economies.

As had been the case in the past, the British and French spent more feeding, housing and guarding their prisoners than they received in return from the prisoners' labor.<sup>42</sup> So profitable had the prisoners in German hands become that Germany, as mentioned above, refused to part with their Russian prisoners of war in 1918 and were planning to massively expand their usage of Italian prisoners and civilian deportees in 1917-18 when they thought Italy near collapse.<sup>43</sup> It appeared that treating prisoners in accordance with international standards and employing them in a profitable manner were mutually exclusive practices.

The prisoner of war policies between Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia on the one hand, and the Western Allies on the other, were also distinguished by the relative levels of violence and neglect prisoners' were subjected to in the different systems. The clearest example of French and British abuse of German prisoners occurred between June 1916 and May 1917 when German prisoners were forced to repair trenches and roads near the front line.<sup>44</sup> This practice violated the Hague Conventions as it forced the prisoners to work under life-threatening conditions and perform a military task. Germany had been using Russian prisoners as laborers along the western front in the war zone since September 1915, but had held French, British and

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<sup>41</sup> Alon Rachamimov, *POWs and the Great War: Captivity on the Eastern Front*, (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 108; and Speed, 77.

<sup>42</sup> Odon Abbal, "Les Prisonniers de la Grande Guerre," *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, no. 147 (1987): 11.

<sup>43</sup> Kramer, 61.

<sup>44</sup> Heather Jones, "The Final Logic of Sacrifice? Violence in German Prisoner of War Labor Companies in 1918." *The Historian* 68, no. 4 (2006): 771.

Belgian prisoners inside Germany.<sup>45</sup> The Germans retaliated against the Allied use of German prisoners near the front by forcing British and French prisoners to work alongside the Russians in the war zone. The publicity the Germans gave their retaliatory campaign captured the attention of the French civilian government. In March 1917, the National Assembly intervened and ordered the army to withdraw all German prisoners at least thirty kilometers behind the front lines. After this French decision was announced the German government agreed to follow suit but failed to follow through on the agreement and continued to use French and British prisoners and civilians in the combat zone throughout the remainder of the war.<sup>46</sup> The French used 33,112 German prisoners of war as laborers in combat zones in 1917, about 8% as many compared to the 400,000+ prisoners and conscripted civilians the German Army directly employed in 1918.<sup>47</sup>

While in 1917 the French and British governments reigned in prisoner abuse, it escalated in Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia throughout the war. Prisoners in German captivity had always been subjected to selective violence. Its use grew in 1917 and 1918 in tandem with German and Austro-Hungarian desperation. Heather Jones, the foremost historian on prisoner abuse by the German Army during World War I, described the situation during the final year: “[The German army’s] use of violence had become less and less rational... [it] was indiscriminate and no longer understood as a punishment for a specific deed... From the [German military high command’s] standpoint violence against prisoners had become irrational.”<sup>48</sup> During the fall of 1918 the prisoners in Germany and Austria-Hungary received so

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<sup>45</sup> Jones, “The Final Logic of Sacrifice?” 773.

<sup>46</sup> Heather Jones develops this argument over two articles, “The German Spring Reprisals of 1917: Prisoners of War and the Violence of the Western Front,” *German History* 26, no. 3 (2008): 335-356, and “The Final Logic of Sacrifice? Violence in German Prisoner of War Labor Companies in 1918.” *The Historian* 68, no. 4 (2006): 770-791. Jones concludes that the German government, unlike the French and British, was either unwilling or unable to force the army to comply with its orders. Dennett, 216-221, describes the dangerous conditions in these frontline prisoner labor companies and the German government’s acquiescence of the violations.

<sup>47</sup> Jones, “The Final Logic of Sacrifice?” 774-777.

<sup>48</sup> Jones, “The Final Logic of Sacrifice?” 782.

little food that their situation became critical. Photographs of Italian prisoners held in Austria, who during the last year of the war had been rationed as little as three hundred calories a day at times, could easily be confused with images of death camp inmates from the next European war.<sup>49</sup> Following the armistice the German Army freed French and British prisoners of war by driving them across no man's land into Allied lines. A French 10<sup>th</sup> Army message described their reception: "These unfortunates are in a terrifying state of thinness and of exhaustion. ... A great number of them have not even had the strength to reach our lines and lie in ditches along the roads in front of our front lines."<sup>50</sup> French aid workers found desperate conditions in the camps located within Germany. Starvation, lack of shelter and medical neglect had left many prisoners emaciated and apathetic. In some cases the camps had simply been abandoned by their guards and administrators during the final days. Food parcels sent from the prisoners' home countries several months earlier were found in warehouses.<sup>51</sup> Judging by conditions in November 1918, had the war continued into the spring, the mortality rate in the camps would have certainly grown considerably.

What seems to have developed during the war was a split in how prisoners of war were treated in Central and Eastern Europe versus how they were treated in Western Europe. While each nation developed their prisoner of war policy independently, and undoubtedly there are many unique factors to consider in each case, it is noteworthy that the most exploitative and abusive practices were found in nations governed by authoritarian regimes, while democratically governed nations more closely followed pre-war humanitarian guidelines. The British and

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<sup>49</sup> Kramer, 66-67. For photographic examples see those inserted between pages 46 and 47 of Carl Dennett's 1919 book. The living men photographed are visibly suffering from starvation. Their rib cages and shoulder bones protrude from their skin and their kneecaps are wider than their thighs and calves. A photograph of a row of corpses with similar features is also included in this book.

<sup>50</sup> Jones, "The Final Logic of Sacrifice?" 790.

<sup>51</sup> Abbal, 19; and Jones, "The Final Logic of Sacrifice?" 789-790.

French governments, responding to popular sensibilities, ordered their armies to halt specific forms of prisoner abuse. These Allied interventions reversed a trend of escalating violence. The German, Russian and Austro-Hungarian governments lacked the democratic underpinnings of the Western governments. In these nations the level of violence directed against prisoners of war and civilians escalated, almost unchecked, throughout the conflict.<sup>52</sup> After the failure of their 1918 offenses, defeat was at the Central Powers' doorstep. Increasingly unchecked by public opinion and international condemnation, the German government and military vented their frustration through pointless acts of destruction and violence throughout 1918.<sup>53</sup> The prisoners of war were but one of many defenseless targets during this *endkampf*. This was a pattern to be tragically repeated in 1944/45.

## **Lessons Learned from World War I**

### **The Economic Potential of Forced Labor during Wartime**

Any doubts as to the ultimate success of the German effort to profit from their usage of prisoners of war were settled in their postwar accounting. The Reichstag Investigative Subcommittee on International Law reported in 1927 that, "only a future age looking back will be able to fully and properly evaluate what was achieved by using POW's as laborers, and to recognize what an essential contribution their work was to the maintenance of the war economy."<sup>54</sup> During World War I the Germans learned that an efficiently organized program of

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<sup>52</sup> Heather Jones' article "The German Spring Reprisals of 1917: Prisoners of War and the Violence of the Western Front." *German History* 26, no. 3 (2008), calls into question the assumption that the level of violence directed at prisoners of war was driven by the processes of totalization and brutalization at work during the war. If that were the case then the level of violence and abuse would presumably "inevitably" and consistently increase throughout the conflict. Jones demonstrates that instead of following a "constant, linear, increase," violence against prisoners came in cycles which were largely controlled by government decisions. During the spring of 1917 the German, French and British governments effectively reigned in specific forms of prisoner abuse. She argues that the rapid escalation of violence against prisoners in German hands during the last year of the war is better understood as a German policy rather than as an impersonal process which was beyond the German government's ability to shape or control.

<sup>53</sup> Kramer, 268-78; Hull 257-62, 299-320.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Herbert, 16-17.

forced labor coupled with low maintenance costs could transform prisoners of war from a burden into a significant economic asset. Looking back on what they had accomplished from 1915 to 1918 the Germans saw, “the cost-benefit ratio was from [their] point of view, very favorable.”<sup>55</sup>

While the Germans saw their wartime usage of prisoners of war as an economic success story the same could not be said about their civilian labor program. Several factors contributing to the failure of the civilian program were connected to the German proclivity to ignore the importance of logistics and planning during wartime.<sup>56</sup> The Germans paid little attention to the administrative needs of their labor deportation programs before implementation. The first group of Belgian workers was actually rounded up and deported several weeks before written guidelines had been issued.<sup>57</sup> The Germans had not cultivated relationships with Belgian officials and so the Germans had to identify and round up the workers themselves. The deportations took on more of the form of a crude sweep rather than a selective conscription. The Germans had also failed to prepare adequate transportation and housing for the deportees. After being shipped via cattle cars to unprepared concentration camps, or “collection areas” as the German Army instructed them to be called, many more workers became sick and combative than would have had the program been more humanely organized. After being taken into custody the deportees went unfed for days while being herded into camps that lacked food stores, clothing and even blankets.<sup>58</sup> The German government had failed to liaison with specific business to integrate the deportees into the workforce. Most German businesses, fearing resistance and sabotage, were reluctant to use the deportees unless they were accompanied by army security personnel, a

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<sup>55</sup> Herbert, 18.

<sup>56</sup> Liberman, 78-85 and Hull, 233-44. Liberman also notes the effect of food distributed to Belgians by the Committee for Belgian Relief as another important element which allowed Belgian civilians to resist German demands. Unlike most cases of occupation the Belgians were not entirely dependent upon their occupiers for food. International charity prevented the Germans from forcing Belgian compliance through the threat of starvation.

<sup>57</sup> Hull, 238.

<sup>58</sup> Hull, 238-239.

service the army provided for prisoner of war laborers, but failed to anticipate would be needed for civilian laborers. In sum; lack of planning resulted in the Germans deporting tens of thousands untrained, sick and hostile workers into Germany where they were shunned by the businesses for whom they had originally been conscripted. Before the program was canceled in March 1917 more Belgians died or were sent home due to poor health (13,950) than agreed to sign work contracts with German firms (12,000).<sup>59</sup>

The Belgian deportation program contained the characteristic flaw of so many programs emerging from the German militaristic culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the coupling of great expectations and inadequate means.<sup>60</sup> One lesson which could logically be drawn from this program's failure was that if the Germans hoped to use deported civilian workers productively during subsequent wars they would need to invest more heavily in administration and more actively involve employers within Germany in the planning and implementation stages of the program. A larger program of forced conscription would be needed to justify this greater effort on the German's part. A program of forced civilian labor might work if done on a grand scale, but was unlikely to succeed if done on a limited scale. As Herbert concluded in his study of the World War I forced labor program; "It became evident that workers could be forced to work only at great effort and expense – there was no such thing as a 'little bit' of forced labor."<sup>61</sup> The organization of the civilian labor program implemented by Germany in 1939 indicates that the program's planners may have taken this same lesson from the failed World War I program.

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<sup>59</sup> Liberman, 78-79.

<sup>60</sup> This dynamic, and how it frequently led to escalating levels of violence and extreme behavior, is the overall thesis of Hull's study of German military culture from 1870-1918, *Absolute Destruction*.

<sup>61</sup> Herbert, 24.

### **The German Public Reaction to Foreign Forced Labor**

Ever conscious of the importance of maintaining public support for their regime, the Nazi party recognized that social, as well as economic, factors had to be taken into consideration while determining the viability of a program which would forcibly import millions of foreigners into Germany. A program of civilian forced labor would require more than just a large investment of state resources; it would also require the acquiescence of the German population. Only a few thousand civilian deportees had gone to work in German factories during World War I. A group of this size, working in a small number of sites, garnered little attention in a nation of sixty-seven million at war. A future importation of millions of forced laborers would affect a far larger number of Germans. The German people had accepted working side by side with approximately two million prisoners of war during World War I. Would they also accept working alongside millions of deported civilians? German authorities noted that the virtual enslavement of hundreds of thousands of Slavic agricultural workers during 1914-18 had sparked almost no public protest. While there were indications that the Belgian deportation program caused more discomfort to public sensibilities, it appeared that the German people were likely to accept the forced importation of foreign workers during future times of crisis.<sup>62</sup> As World War I dragged on the German population increasingly came to accept as “normal” the use of foreigners as forced laborers. War demanded sacrifices from the German population, and so naturally the German people could expect other populations to join in the “normal” sacrifices which accompanied wartime. “Basically, this was simply because of the war: the German public’s threshold of tolerance for injustices in the civilian sphere had dropped rapidly in view of the evident state of emergency. ... As the war expanded and intensified, the German public became

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<sup>62</sup> Herbert, 25.

more willing to accept coercive measures against the foreign [Polish civilian forced laborers] which might have triggered vehement protest at the beginning of the war.”<sup>63</sup>

Following the First World War it seemed likely that the creation of a large program of forced labor, especially one which drew most of its workers from Eastern Europe, would be accepted by the German public during future times of crisis. The launch of just such a program within days of the start of World War II supplies circumstantial evidence that this was the conclusion of German military and economic planners during the interwar years. By the end of 1939 almost every prisoner of war in German hands was employed and already the nation had imported more foreign civilian workers than it had during the entirety of the First World War. The slave labor segment of the workforce in Germany only grew throughout the war. By 1944 7.6 million foreign prisoners of war or civilians were working inside Germany.<sup>64</sup> While historians debate to what degree the massive German usage of foreign forced labor by civilian deportees during the Second World War was planned versus an ad hoc response to manpower shortages,<sup>65</sup> clearly many German leaders looked back on the 1916-17 program as something to be improved upon, not relegated as a failed project. Responding to problems which plagued them in 1916-17 the 1939 civilian deportation program was more organized, and on a much larger scale, from its inception. A wide variety of organizations, including the army, the SS and the interior ministry, worked together to plan and implement the 1939 program. The program’s labor procurement officials worked with German businesses and foreign collaborators to ensure workers would be efficiently procured and put to work. As the design of the 1939 program corrected several of the major shortcomings of the 1916-17 program, it appears that the later program evolved from the former.

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<sup>63</sup> Herbert, 24.

<sup>64</sup> Herbert, 1.

<sup>65</sup> For an overview of the debate regarding Nazi German foreign labor planning, see Herbert, 27-69.

Admittedly a historiographic gap exists which would more directly connect the German prisoner of war and forced labor policies developed during 1914-18 and those put into practice in 1939-40. Indeed, if the interwar years could be ignored then German POW/forced labor policies seem to have developed on a in a smooth consistent manner. Lessons learned in the First World War were applied immediately during the Second World War. Shortcomings of the First World War policies identified in the aftermath of the conflict were corrected in the later program. Of course historians cannot ignore the possibility that the similarities between the program as it existed in 1918 and the new program which was implemented in 1939 are circumstantial; however, the high degree of continuity between the two programs does make a compelling circumstantial case that during the interwar years the German government (and perhaps military) embraced the 1914-18 program as profitable and planned to return to this usage of POWs and conscripted laborers in the next war.<sup>66</sup>

### **Lack of Postwar Repercussions for Prisoner of War Abuses**

Another lesson learned by the Germans from the war was that those individuals involved in the abuse of enemy prisoners of war and civilians had little reason to fear being held accountable for their behavior after the conclusion of hostilities. Throughout World War I the Allied powers publicized their intention to hold enemy soldiers and leaders responsible for acts which violated “international law” and “customs of war.” In 1915 the British government announced it planned to hold individuals responsible for “atrocities,” such as U-boat attacks on merchant ships, the execution of British nationals accused of espionage, and the abuse and murder of civilians and prisoners of war. The French government announced their plans to

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<sup>66</sup> The gap in scholarship connecting the WWI and WWII programs is recognized as problematic by scholars working in this field. Conversations between the author and Heather Jones and Michael Geyer in January, 2011 during the annual meeting of the American Historical Association verified that this remains an area in need of additional research, a project Irish historian John Horne hopes to undertake in the coming years.

prosecute those responsible for the deportation of French civilians for forced labor. Support for the prosecution of what came to be known as “war crimes” built throughout the conflict. A 1917 French Ministry of Justice draft-plan to prosecute German war criminals before an international tribunal was embraced in 1918 by the French and British governments.

When the Paris peace conference opened in January 1919, war crimes trials were placed high on the agenda.<sup>67</sup> The German delegation had little negotiating room at this conference. Refusal to sign the final treaty meant a return to hostilities. The German General Staff had informed the government that the army was in no position to defend the nation, although this same admission was never made to the Reichstag. Much of the opposition to the treaty came from a small but influential group who favored a resumption of hostilities, even though they understood the military position was hopeless. This group had adopted an apocalyptic outlook. They believed it would be better for the German Army to be absolutely destroyed, and for Germany to suffer foreign occupation after engaging in a “people’s war” of civilian resistance, to accepting peace terms which shamed Germany’s honor and restricted its ability to rebuild after hostilities. They pictured a scenario in which a stronger Germany, less compromised by weak-willed and pessimistic leaders, would be reborn from the ashes of destruction. They believed that accepting a compromise peace would leave in place the same leadership and national mentality which had caused Germany to lose the war.<sup>68</sup> While the new German republic never appeared to have seriously considered restarting the war in 1919, the public demonstrations and print campaign organized by treaty opponents may have made this unclear to the Allied delegations at the peace conference.<sup>69</sup> Even though the Allied nations were in a commanding military position,

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<sup>67</sup> Horne, John and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 331.

<sup>68</sup> Hull, 304-19.

<sup>69</sup> Horne and Kramer, 340-45.

the aggressive posturing by German treaty opponents effected the peace talks as there was little appetite for further fighting.

Rather than simply sign the treaty when it was presented, the German government focused their objections on four articles which came to be called the “war guilt clauses.” Despite the name given to them, only one of the four articles, number 231 which required reparations payments, held the entire German nation responsible for the war. The other three “war guilt” articles required individual German citizens to stand trial for specific criminal accusations. Article number 228 required the German government to recognize the right of the Allies to bring persons accused of “having committed acts in violation of the laws and customs of war” before military tribunals. Article 229 specified the tribunals would be composed of members of the accusing nationality or nationalities. Article 230 required the German government to comply with requests for documents and information related to these prosecutions.

When the Treaty of Versailles came into effect in 1919 the Germans began a long, and eventually successful, campaign to avoid implementation of articles 228 through 231. While a substantial historiography has developed documenting the Weimer Republic’s successful avoidance of reparations payments, less has been written about the German Foreign Office’s even greater success in protecting German citizens from being held responsible for war crimes. This campaign began on 5 November 1919 when the German Foreign Office called for the Allies to drop extradition demands and instead allow the Germans to try the accused war criminals before the Supreme Court in Leipzig. This request was denied, and in January 1920 a list of 853 individuals was given to the German Foreign Office for extradition. Of the 853 individuals demanded, 53 were accused of killing captured soldiers, 151 of crimes in prisoner of war camps,

165 of deporting civilians and 15 of crimes against forced laborers.<sup>70</sup> After crimes committed during the invasion of Belgium, crimes against civilian laborers (16% of total) and prisoners of war (14%) made up the next two largest categories of accusations. The extradition list did not focus on lower ranking individuals. Among those demanded for extradition were many of Germany's highest ranking public figures including Generals Hindenburg, Bülow and Ludendorff; Crown Prince's Wilhelm and Rupprecht; Admiral Tirpitz; and Chancellor Hollweg. The German Foreign Office published the full list of accused individuals on 5 February 1920. Nationalist political organizations, many of whom supported a resumption of hostilities, staged protests opposing the extraditions. The German government claimed that if it complied with articles 228, 229 and 230 the republic would collapse into anarchy and again proposed trying the accused in German courts. The British government appears to have been unaware that the protestors represented only the extreme right-wing of German society, and that most Germans were either indifferent to, or in favor of, turning over the accused war criminals.<sup>71</sup> In February, 1917 the British independently announced they would accept the Leipzig alternative. Unwilling to proceed without British support at this point, the French government reluctantly agreed to allow 45 trials to proceed at Leipzig as test cases, while retaining their treaty right to extraditions should these trials prove unsatisfactory. France, Britain and Belgium sent delegations to observe but not participate in the proceedings.

During the period of time from the end of hostilities in November 1918, and the opening of the Leipzig trials twenty-nine months later, public demands for retribution against Germany declined in the Allied nations. This mood of reconciliation was stronger in Britain and the United States than in France and Belgium, perhaps because the former nations had not been invaded or

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<sup>70</sup> Horne and Kramer, 448-49.

<sup>71</sup> Horne and Kramer, 345.

occupied.<sup>72</sup> Those who stressed postwar reconciliation argued that holding Germany responsible for the war, and individual Germans responsible for war crimes, was unproductive and unfair. These people saw the war itself as the real atrocity, not individual actions committed during it. They believed that all nations had their share of responsibility in starting and prosecuting the war. Many rejected accounts of individual German atrocities as unreliable and likely created by the same propagandists who they believed were responsible for the “war mentality” which had manipulated public opinion throughout the conflict. The hope these individuals carried into the 1920s was that if the true culprits of the war were exposed, such as profiteers, propagandists and power driven politicians, the people of the world would never again allow themselves to be duped into supporting another such pointless bloodletting.<sup>73</sup> This point of view relativized even straight-forward crimes such as the abuse of prisoners and the deportation of civilian workers. The German complaint that the Leipzig trials were unfair as they held only Germans accountable for acts which were committed by individuals from all nations held some merit. Certainly there were many credible examples of crimes committed against German prisoners by French, British and especially Russian military personnel. The erroneous belief that Germany had treated prisoners of war more or less in the same manner as France and Britain treated German prisoners became so widely accepted after 1918 that it was rarely challenged even in scholarly works until the last decade.<sup>74</sup> By 1921 public opinion across Europe was divided as to the possibility of the trials accomplishing anything of much value. Most of the politically engaged public were conflicted over the topic and would just as soon have put the matters of war responsibility and atrocities behind them and instead focus on a more hopeful future.

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<sup>72</sup> Kramer, 321.

<sup>73</sup> Horne and Kramer, 366-75.

<sup>74</sup> Key works of this wave of recent scholarship cited in this chapter include Horne and Kramer (2001), Kramer (2005), Hull (2005), Becker (1998) and Jones (2006, 2008).

Due to the shifting political environment Britain, Germany, France and Belgium all arrived at Leipzig hoping to accomplish different things. For Germany, the “policy was that of damage limitation, doing the minimum necessary to fill the peace terms and avoid sanctions while minimizing nationalist hostility.”<sup>75</sup> The Germans wanted to frame the proceedings as inquiries into alleged unauthorized actions of a small number of under-officers. The trials would leave high-ranking leaders and overall war policies unexamined. As the Germans controlled the judicial proceedings, and since none of the forty-five “test cases” involved any officer higher ranking than a General of the reserves, the Leipzig trials were well-organized to realize these German goals. The British focused on the trials’ symbolic value rather than on them as actual criminal proceedings. Following the trials Sir Ernest Pollock, Solicitor-General of the British Mission at Leipzig, wrote that while he found the sentences given by the court “far too light” in terms of length of imprisonment; overall he was satisfied because of other intangibles.

To the Germans a sentence of imprisonment upon an officer carries a special stigma, and imports a blot upon the service to which he belongs. No sentence could be adequate or expiate the outrages committed; no time will efface the memory of their sufferings from those who underwent them. If we sought vengeance, no system of trial or punishment would have satisfied our thirst for it. ... The true object of a conviction and punishment is that it shall be a deterrent against the repetition of similar acts.<sup>76</sup>

To accomplish this goal of forcing the Germans to confront their wartime behavior the British delegation accepted the German handling of the trials on good faith. They believed a respectful attitude and lack of interference would increase the chances that the German people would accept the verdicts as fair. The British reasoned that if the Germans interpreted the verdicts as the products of “victor’s justice” they would dismiss them and not examine their own national behavior during the war. For the French and Belgians, the trials were not symbolic

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<sup>75</sup> Horne and Kramer, 346.

<sup>76</sup> Pollock provided the preface for Claud Mullins, *The Leipzig Trials: An account of the war criminals’ trials and a study of German mentality*, (London: H. F. & G. Witherby, 1921). For this quote see 10-11, 13.

exercises. They expected the trials to be conducted impartially and the courts to impose sentences on convicted individuals commensurate with the crimes they were accused of committing.

The Leipzig trials got underway on 23 May 1921. While the foreign observers described the court and judges as handling the proceedings with fairness and independence, the effort put forth by the German prosecution team was recognized to be lukewarm. The lead prosecutor, Dr. Ludwig Ebermayer, was openly reluctant “to proceed against career officers and servicemen whom he considered to be the embodiment of patriotic duty.”<sup>77</sup> The German government failed to arrest many of the men scheduled to be tried, or to produce much of the demanded documentation. German witnesses for the prosecution were attacked on character issues, while testimony by foreigners was written off as vengeful and deceitful. The Germans tried four cases brought by the British government first. The Germans recognized that the British were more accommodating than the French or Belgians and correctly predicted the British government would accept a less than vigorous prosecution effort and lenient sentencing. After the tone of the proceedings was set at these standards, later objections by the French and Belgian delegations could be more easily dismissed as unreasonable. The British cases resulted in one acquittal and three convictions with none of the convictions carrying a prison sentence longer than ten months. All three of the convictions came in cases involving prisoner of war abuse.

The most high profile case tried at Leipzig was brought by the French against General Kruska. Kruska commanded a prisoner of war camp at Cassel from September 1914 through July 1915. Of the 18,000 prisoners under his care 7,218 fell seriously ill. By German records 1,280 prisoners died at Cassel during Kruska’s ten-month command, the French believed the actual number of deaths was closer to three thousand. Kruska was charged with “intentional neglect of

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<sup>77</sup> Horne and Kramer, 346-47.

the duties of [his] office designedly furthered the spread of the typhus epidemic.”<sup>78</sup> The testimony of the primary French witness against Kruska was treated by the court “with a certain degree of caution,” because a German camp superintendent testified that the witness, who was a former French prisoner of war, “was well known to his camp comrades as given to making fantastic complaints.” The written judgment released by the court after the trial explained that all accusations against the accused were approached with skepticism as, “Kruska, as is well known, and as all who were associated with him in the work of the prisoners’ camp testify, is of a deeply religious character and a convinced Christian.”<sup>79</sup> The court found the accused “completely free of blame. ... a Camp Commandant must consider himself the father of the prisoners of war. The accused General Kruska, as the trial has revealed, came very near to realizing this ideal.”<sup>80</sup> On 9 July 1921 the French and Belgians withdrew their observers, the departure of which facilitated the rapid conclusion of the remaining cases. On 7 January 1922 the British, French and Belgian governments issued a joint condemnation, calling the trials “highly unsatisfactory.”<sup>81</sup>

Even though the British delegation was not satisfied with the Leipzig trials, they refused to consider joining the French in renewing their extradition demands. Instead the British let the matter drop after issuing a second joint statement of condemnation with the French on 22 July 1922.<sup>82</sup> The French and Belgian governments proceeded with their extradition demands but, now lacking British support, these demands appeared even more based on vengeance than they had been three years earlier. The Germans did not comply with the French and Belgian demands. Between 1922 and 1924 the French and Belgians tried and convicted over 1,200 Germans in

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<sup>78</sup> Claud Mullins, *The Leipzig Trials: An account of the war criminals’ trials and a study of German mentality*, (London: H. F. & G. Witherby, 1921), 176.

<sup>79</sup> Mullins, 179.

<sup>80</sup> Mullins, 181, 189.

<sup>81</sup> Horne and Kramer, 352.

<sup>82</sup> Horne and Kramer, 352.

absentia for war crimes. Outside of these convictions making foreign travel inconvenient, the accused German war criminals faced no penalties. Even these convictions were set aside during the Franco-German reconciliation talks late in the decade.<sup>83</sup>

The Germans learned during the war that prisoners of war could be productively employed if work and maintenance restrictions specified by the Geneva and Hague Conventions were ignored. At Leipzig they learned that it was unlikely that any German would be held accountable for abusing prisoners or civilian workers regardless as to how the next war ended. With a government in power in 1939 which repeatedly flaunted international agreements and derided the Enlightenment mentality on which the codes of wartime behavior were based, the massive program of forced labor implemented by the Nazis should have come as no surprise.

#### **Forced labor in Nazi Germany, 1939-40**

Given the high rate of unemployment during much of the interwar period, and the openly anti-immigrant policies of the Nazi government, the topic of employing foreign workers did not demand much attention in Germany until labor shortages began to hamstring the economy during the build up to war in the late 1930s. Despite the relative lack of pre-war public discussion regarding the utilization of foreign workers in the event of war, the rapid implementation of prisoner of war and foreign civilian labor programs upon the outbreak of hostilities reveals that, unlike in 1914, Germany entered war in 1939 with at least partially formulated plans for the immediate exploitation of foreign workers.

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<sup>83</sup> Horne and Kramer, 354, 389-90.

### **The Formation of Nazi Forced Labor Policies**

During the late 1930's Germany placed larger and larger industrial orders for military equipment while at the same time conscripted larger and larger numbers of young men into its armed forces. By 1938 the nation was suffering from a significant manpower shortage. The absorption of Austria, Bohemia and Moravia added millions of additional workers to the national economy but not enough to solve the problem. Even though war was certain to exacerbate this labor shortage the Nazi government was reluctant to deal with the issue due to ideological conflicts within the party. One of the core values of the Nazi Party was racial purity. Importing millions of non-Aryan workers into Germany ran contrary to this value. From 1933 until 1939 the Nazi government enacted policies which kept the number of foreign workers in the Reich low while predicting, in rather vague ways, that the manpower shortage was only a short-term problem which would be overcome in the near future through increased workplace efficiency. This non-solution left the Germany economy with a manpower shortage, but allowed the Nazis to avoid an internal debate which might have threatened party unity. Despite having a manpower shortfall of one million, Germany had only allowed 375,078 foreign workers into the Reich by mid-1939.<sup>84</sup> The invasion of Poland in September 1939 made it much more difficult to leave this problem on the back burner.

Pragmatists in the German labor planning offices took advantage of the outbreak of war to immediately expand foreign labor recruitment. Three days after the invasion, the first German labor recruitment office opened in occupied Polish territory. By October, one hundred and fifteen offices seeking civilian volunteers for agricultural work inside Germany were operating.<sup>85</sup> German economic planners viewed the expected influx of prisoners of war as another way to increase the size of their workforce. As early as January 1939, nine months before the invasion

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<sup>84</sup> Herbert, 50-1.

<sup>85</sup> Herbert, 61.

of Poland, the Germany army was already making detailed plans for the construction of prisoner barracks near worksites.<sup>86</sup> During the summer of 1939 Germany's chief economic planner, Hermann Göring, dealt with the topic of exploiting prisoner of war labor inside Germany as a settled subject.<sup>87</sup> Just prior to World War II, when faced with the certainty of manpower shortages during wartime, the Nazi government was operating under the hopeful assumption that the combination of forced labor by prisoners of war and voluntary recruitment of foreign workers would provide enough bodies to see Germany through what they expected would be a short war.<sup>88</sup>

The influx of newly recruited Polish workers brought the internal ideological conflicts over the use of foreign manpower to a head within the Nazi party. Now that the war had started, continuing forward with an undermanned economy was a much more problematic scenario for German planners. The shortage of workers diminished chances for Germany victory; however, at least in the estimation of much of the Nazi party faithful, the reason the war was launched in the first place was to maintain German racial ascendancy over its neighbors. Any victory which compromised the larger racial mission would be a hollow victory. If foreign labor was to be used fighting the war, Nazi racial dogma demanded a way be found to exploit this labor which did not bring into question German racial mastery. Nazi ideologies could accept Germany's temporary need for foreign workers, but wanted to ensure that during their employment in Germany these workers remained controlled populations, and that they and the German people understood that the foreign workers were in Germany as servants, not partners.

Historian Herbert Ulrich has dubbed the consensus which settled the internal Nazi debate over the usage of foreign labor the "terror" compromise. This compromise allowed as many

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<sup>86</sup> Herbert, 59.

<sup>87</sup> Herbert, 27.

<sup>88</sup> Herbert, 57-60.

foreign workers as needed to be brought into Germany; however, these workers were to be treated in such a way that there could be no doubt as to who was the master race and who were their servants. This arrangement satisfied the technocrats who supported the mobilization of foreign labor for war production, while mollifying the hard-line Nazi party membership who found compromise on matters of racial mixing particularly offensive.<sup>89</sup> Henrich Himmler, the man largely responsible for crafting the decrees which made up the “terror” compromise, explained to those responsible for carrying them out; “It would be better if [the foreign workers] were not here. We know that, but we need them. . . . There is no use indulging in theory.”<sup>90</sup> Foreign workers were segregated from German society. Poles were required to wear a special badge. They were forbidden from using public transportation, visiting public parks and swimming pools, attending the theater, entering restaurants, etc. Foreign workers lived in barracks and had an after-dark curfew. Catholic clergy agreed to hold separate services for foreign Catholics to prevent mixing. In at least one town foreigners were only allowed to shop on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from eight to ten in the morning so Germans did not have to wait for service.<sup>91</sup> Unnecessary socializing between Germans and foreigners was forbidden and “interracial” sexual relations were punishable by death for the foreigner and imprisonment for the German. To insure that these decrees were publicized and enforced the government distributed leaflets in German and Polish to all incoming workers and all German employers. They also instructed local police chiefs to carry out exemplary arrests as quickly as possible.<sup>92</sup>

After the ideological obstacles for the widespread introduction of foreign workers into Germany had been worked out by the “terror” compromise, the matter of controlling the amount

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<sup>89</sup> Herbert, 64-79.

<sup>90</sup> As quoted in Herbert, 70.

<sup>91</sup> Herbert, 109-10.

<sup>92</sup> Herbert, 72-4.

of economic disruption caused by these workers remained open. If millions of Polish workers were to be brought into the German economy German workers would almost certainly see their bargaining power compromised. Decrees had already been issued to pay foreign workers between fifty and eight-five percent what a German worker in a comparable job was paid. Nazi and labor leaders could not accept a program that might lead to the dismissal of German workers in favor of cheaper and more easily controlled foreigners. To prevent this occurrence the government imposed a “social compensation tax” on all foreign workers. German employers did not pay foreign workers directly; they employed them through government labor offices. The office charged the employer a fee which equalized the cost of employing foreign and German workers. Foreign workers received a portion of what their employer paid for their services, the remainder, the “social compensation” portion of their salary, was retained by the labor office. The legal justification offered for this special tax was that foreign workers did not have to serve in the German military or pay charity and political dues so higher taxation was in order. Equalizing salary expenses paid by employers for foreign and German workers caused a cascade effect which greatly eroded the foreign workers’ already marginal living standards. Since German employers could not save money on foreign workers’ salaries they cut expenses in those areas still open to them-working conditions, food and housing. As workers were paid a salary rather than an hourly wage the number of hours foreigners were forced to work increased.<sup>93</sup>

Nazi concerns that the German public might find harsh treatment of foreign workers objectionable appears to have had little substance. With approximately 700,000 Polish prisoners of war and civilians working throughout the nation in early 1940, facing pervasive discrimination, denied the ability to resign their employment or even leave their homes after dark, working 60+ hours a week for a salary designed to provide them with little more than that

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<sup>93</sup> Herbert, 91.

which was necessary to go on working, the government encountered almost no protest on their behalf by German citizens. “It was evidently possible to impose substantially worse working condition on a group of foreign civilian workers without sparking large-scale protest in the German public. Indeed, such measures were apparently not perceived as being at all special or remarkable.”<sup>94</sup>

The Germans were somewhat surprised by the small number of Poles volunteering for work in Germany. From September through December 1939 only 39,675 Poles were recruited.<sup>95</sup> The ongoing war prevented the release of German workers from military service. Just as had been the case in 1914, in 1939 the Germans found themselves engaged in a long war for which they were unprepared. By November the Germans had lost their delusions of filling their manpower needs with foreign volunteers and prisoners of war. On 16 November Göring ordered labor recruiters “to conscript civilian Polish workers, in particular girls, on a large scale. Their utilization and, in particular, the wages they are paid, must be such as to place productive workers at the disposal of German firms as cheaply as possible.”<sup>96</sup> Plans called for one to two million Polish workers to be “at the disposal” of German agriculture and industry in 1940.

By early 1940 the situation in Germany was sufficiently known in Poland that no one believed the labor recruiters wage and condition promises. In January 1940 Germany set quotas for each Polish district and town and required mayors to supply lists of workers. Unemployed men began slipping off into the forests to avoid conscription. By April only 210,000 of the demanded 500,000 Polish workers had been brought into Germany. More blunt tactics followed. All men between fifteen and twenty-five years of age were ordered to report for compulsory labor service. Men were simply detained on city streets. Movie theaters and whole villages were

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<sup>94</sup> Herbert, 92.

<sup>95</sup> Herbert, 85.

<sup>96</sup> Herbert, 63.

surrounded and conscripted en masse for deportation to Germany.<sup>97</sup> The fate of the 294,393 Polish prisoners of war largely coincided with the fate of their civilian countrymen. More than ninety percent of the prisoners of war were quickly put to work in agricultural jobs.<sup>98</sup> In February 1940 a “Führer decision” transformed these men from prisoners of war into civilian workers.<sup>99</sup> While probably little changed in their daily lives, this transformation placed all Polish workers in Germany under one administration and removed any potential complications which might arise from international conventions protecting the prisoners’ rights and preventing their employment in war related industries.

### **Conclusion**

When Germany attacked west in May 1940 they already had already made much greater social and economic preparations for the exploitation of foreign labor than they had throughout the entirety of the First World War. In May 1940 there were already 1.2 million foreign workers in Germany, roughly evenly split between those who volunteered and those who were brought there by force. Almost all these foreigners were publicly discriminated against; forced to work grueling hours in substandard conditions; and, were paid little more than subsistence wages. Faced with this reality the German population accepted the situation and went about their daily lives. By the time the first French and British prisoners began arriving, “it was evident that the German population would offer no serious protest.”<sup>100</sup> Before the Armistice was signed in July 1940 French and British prisoners were already at work inside Germany. By October 1.2 million French and British prisoners took their place alongside the 700,000 Poles already working for the Reich. Given the evolution of German forced labor policy since 1915, the employment of the

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<sup>97</sup> Herbert 81-4.

<sup>98</sup> Herbert, 62.

<sup>99</sup> Herbert, 70.

<sup>100</sup> Herbert, 93.

incoming French prisoners of war as forced laborers was a given, and French expectations that the prisoners would be treated as per international standards seemed naïve in retrospect.

## Chapter Two: The Fall of France and Beginning of the Captivity

### The Collapse of the Third Republic

France and Britain declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939 in response to the invasion of Poland. Of the five million men France mobilized, 2,776,000 served in combat army units and 2,224,000 served in non-combat army roles or in the navy or air force.<sup>1</sup> From September 1939 until May 1940 the French and German militaries engaged only in limited actions. This period of relative inactivity known as the “phony war” (“drole de guerre” in French), came to an end on 10 May 1940 when the Germans invaded France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxemburg.

So rapid and overwhelming was the German victory over the Western Allies in May and June of 1940 that shock was the dominant initial reaction. Looked upon with hindsight military historians have little trouble deconstructing the reasons for the Allied defeat in May 1940.<sup>2</sup> The Allied high command, under French general Maurice Gamelin, executed a high risk defensive maneuver as an immediate response to the German attack on 10 May. The mobile French 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Armies and the motorized British Expeditionary Force (BEF) were aggressively pushed north into western Belgium and the southern Netherlands in an effort to halt the German advance as distant as possible from economically vital areas in northern France. This maneuver played into the hands of the Germans who centered their attack further south than expected through the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Christophe, *Les Flammes du Purgatoire, Histoire des Prisonniers de 1940*, (Paris: Éditions France-Empire, 1979), 11.

<sup>2</sup> Julian Jackson's *The Fall of France, The Nazi Invasion of 1940*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) provides a good summary of the now dominate view on the Allied defeat of 1940. The key works on the topic include Robert Doughty's two works, *The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919-1939*, (Hamden: Archon Books, 1985) and *Breaking Point, Sedan and the Fall of France, 1940*, (Hamden: Archon Books, 1990); Ernest May's *Strange Victory, Hitler's Conquest of France*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000); and Eugina Kiesling's *Arming Against Hitler, France and the Limits of Military Planning*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1996). These works emphasis the strategic miscalculations made by the Allies in 1940 and the resulting military defeat. This wave of scholarship largely replaced, at least among the scholarly community if not among the general reading public, earlier interpretations of the defeat found in the works of Alistair Horne, Guy Chapman, William Shirer among others, which interpreted 1940 as the result of French moral and cultural shortcomings.

Ardennes region. A meticulously planned and forcefully executed attack by motorized and armored German units quickly pushed through the Belgian and French screening forces in the Ardennes and established bridgeheads across the Meuse River at Sedan, Dinant and Charleville. By 15 May the Germans had broken out of these bridgeheads and began a rapid advance laterally across northern France towards the English Channel, which they reached two days later.

Gamelin's aggressive response to counter the German attack into the Low Countries with an Allied advance into central Belgium required the employment of most of the French army's motorized and armored divisions. Gamelin stripped these units from the French mobile reserve and committed them to advance north. The German breakout from the Meuse bridgeheads isolated these units in Belgium, away from the bulk of the French army. Allied efforts to organize an effective counterattack on the German corridor, now stretching across the Franco-Belgian border from the Ardennes to the English Channel, failed largely because the units most capable of executing this attack were ironically those units which Gamelin had stripped from the reserves and sent into the German trap.

The daring German campaign plan and unexpectedly rapid advance of their independent armored units threw the Allied high command into confusion. A single coordinated counterattack by British and French units intended to break the encirclement broke down into a series of four limited and ineffective actions from 17 to 22 May. The British decision to withdraw their forces towards the port of Dunkirk on 22 May without coordinating the maneuver with French units amplified the disorder and ended any further counterattack possibilities. By May 27 effective resistance in the north had ceased with the exception of a perimeter around Dunkirk and a large pocket of French soldiers in Lille. The Lille pocket formed when a gap opened in Allied lines between the withdrawing British forces and French forces still holding defensive positions. A

massive ad hoc withdrawal of Allied troops from Dunkirk succeeded in evacuating 198,000 British and 139,000 French troops. On June 1<sup>st</sup> the remaining 35,000 French defenders in Lille surrendered, followed three days later by the 40,000 members of the French rear-guard which held the Dunkirk perimeter during the evacuation.

This defeat destroyed, at least temporarily, nine of the ten BEF divisions, forced Belgium and the Netherlands to capitulate and destroyed many of the most powerful and mobile divisions in the French army. The French, now fighting alone and fielding a greatly diminished army, attempted to establish a new line of resistance along the Somme and Aisne rivers. On 7 June, after two days of intense combat, the Germans broke through this line and began advancing into the heart of France. Paris was abandoned on 10 June. Premier Paul Reynaud resigned on 16 June and was replaced by a new government under Marshal Philippe Pétain. The following day Pétain issued a public call for the fighting to end. An armistice was signed on 22 June and came into effect two days later.

In total 1.85 million French soldiers were taken prisoner during this campaign. To put this number in perspective it represented 4% of the entire French population.<sup>3</sup> Slightly over ninety-five percent of the prisoners were between 20 and 40 years of age - one in seven of all French men fitting into this demographic group. Over half the prisoners were married; roughly forty percent had already started families.<sup>4</sup> Practically no French family was left unaffected.

### **The beginning of the captivity**

Given the massive number of French men in captivity the prisoners were a topic of great concern across the nation. Throughout June and July of 1940 France was a nation made up of

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<sup>3</sup> Yves Durand, *La Captivité, Histoire des prisonniers de guerre français 1939-1945*, 2<sup>e</sup> ed., (Paris: Édité par la Fédération Nationale des Combattants Prisonniers de Guerre et Combattants d'Algérie, Tunisie, Maroc, 1981), 21.

<sup>4</sup> Durand, 27.

millions of families desperately attempting to locate missing loved ones. The public wanted to know if missing soldiers were or were not in captivity. They wanted to know how the prisoners were being treated. Wives and family members sought information on the possibility of visiting prisoners held by the Germans. According to the Article 36 of the Geneva Conventions, when soldiers are taken prisoner they are to be given the opportunity of sending home a pre-printed Red Cross postcard within seven days of their capture informing their family that they were a prisoner and if they were seriously injured. In practice this policy was rarely followed. Some French prisoners were encouraged by their German captors not to bother to write as they would likely be home before the postcard arrived.<sup>5</sup> It was not uncommon for loved ones of servicemen to only learn that they were prisoners months after they had been declared missing from lists of prisoners of war published in newspapers.

Based on newspaper coverage, the fate of the prisoners of war were one of the great preoccupations of the nation in the months following the defeat. This can hardly come as a surprise. Nearly everyone in France had a family member, a husband, a father, or a close friend behind barbed wire during the late summer of 1940. This wave of concern for the well-being of the prisoners and the public's enormous desire to contact them overwhelmed thoughts about other aspects of the captivity that were to become significant during the coming years. In 1940 the French public saw the prisoners as a uniform bloc of unfortunate men suffering more than most from a national disaster which was not of their making.

While the French public had a homogenized view of the captives the prisoners themselves began to see themselves as belonging to different categories as earlier as their first weeks of confinement in the *frontstalags* in France and Belgium. While prisoners often sought out other captives with whom they shared pre-war ties, most notably regional ties, the new

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<sup>5</sup> Hanna Diamond, *Fleeing Hitler, France 1940*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 118.

categories which emerged were unique to the captivity. Historian François Boudot noted this distinctive prisoner of war society, which he dubbed the “civilization of the camps,” in a very early study published in 1955.<sup>6</sup> One early dividing point among the prisoners involved the manner in which they became prisoners. Soldiers who had surrendered after combat were seen by many of their fellow prisoners as more deserving of respect than were those who had surrendered without resistance. Men who had been ordered to surrender by a commanding officer were seen as less responsible for their captivity than those who had surrendered of their own free will. Prisoners who turned themselves in when escape was still possible, and those who surrendered without offering resistance, were held in lower regard.

Among the prisoners themselves, the manner in which an individual was captured declined in importance after the initial months of captivity. It was not until their liberation in 1945 that this method of categorizing prisoners regained its importance due to the French public’s reception of the returning prisoners and policies considered by the newly established French provisional government regarding their recognition as veterans.<sup>7</sup> This method of categorizing soldiers based upon their actions on the battlefield in 1940 will be referred to as the “capture identity” method in this work.

One aspect of the postwar debate regarding their eligibility for veteran status which many of the prisoners found particularly bewildering was that their honor, their loyalty to their homeland, was being judged, by-in-large, based upon what had happened during a few days in May or June of 1940, while their behavior during the subsequent five years in captivity was ignored. While the public discourse over recognition of the former prisoners as veterans focused on their service and capture in 1940, among the prisoners themselves, these matters had declined

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<sup>6</sup> François Boudot, “Aspects de l’histoire de la captivité,” *L’Actualité de l’histoire*, no. 10 (1955): 29.

<sup>7</sup> For more on this topic see the Epilogue of this work.

in importance as their captivity wore on. Within the “civilization of the camps” another method of categorization evolved which was more expansive than the “capture identity” method described above. Prisoners differentiated one another primarily based not on how they were captured, but on how they conducted themselves as a prisoner – on their mental approach to captivity. Some prisoners refused to accept their situation and fought against it, either through resistance activity or escape attempts. Other prisoners attempted to make the best of their fate and build as comfortable a life as possible in captivity. In his memoir “The Taxis of the Marne” ex-prisoner Jean Dutourd gave names to these mindsets. Men who more passively accepted captivity and placed their hopes of liberation on outside forces were dubbed the “optimists.” Optimists held onto hopes that the war would end soon, or that their government would arrange for their release, or that captivity would not be harsh. Those prisoners who more clearly understood that their captivity would be a harsh ordeal and that it would likely last until the end of the war, but who made little or no attempt to regain some control of their lives, Dutourd dubbed the “pessimists.”<sup>8</sup> While pessimists did not share the delusions of the optimists, both groups responded to captivity in a passive way. Prisoners who were unwilling to accept captivity passively, those willing to run risks to escape or strike back at their jailers, became known as resisters. This method of breaking into groups based upon prisoners’ approaches to captivity will be referred to as the “captivity response identity” in this work.

A prisoner’s “capture identity” was determined largely by events beyond his control, such as to which unit he was assigned or the orders he received from his commanding officers. We should also bear in mind that even those decisions which were left to individual soldiers in 1940 were often made by young men in an environment of confusion and fear. One shortcoming of the “capture identity” method of classification is that it placed a prisoner within a category

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<sup>8</sup> Jean Dutourd, *The Taxis of the Marne*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), 141-44.

which was determined by past events and decisions which could never be altered or undone. The “captivity response” method, on the other hand, allowed for individual growth and maturation. It recognized that a person’s actions in 1940 held meaning and consequences, but it also recognized that identity is a dynamic process, especially so for those parts of a person’s identity determined by their own actions and decisions. Prisoners who fought bravely during the war and made the greatest efforts to avoid capture would not necessarily become resisters in captivity. In fact, based on an examination of prisoner of war memoir literature, the opposite seems to have more often been the case.<sup>9</sup> Granted this conclusion must be seen as very tentative given the issues of sample size and the problems associated with using memoir literature for historical studies.<sup>10</sup> Based on examined POW memoirs, prisoners who engaged in combat and who resisted capture longer tended to become optimists once in captivity. The resisters tended to be prisoners who fell into captivity with less exciting stories about 1940. These memoirs allow us to make a closer examination of individual prisoners and the circumstances they faced in 1940, and help us understand the specific situations they faced at the time of their surrenders. These individualized accounts demonstrate that the circumstances of a soldier’s surrender in 1940 often proved to be a poor indicator of how he would conduct himself in captivity and allow us to examine some possible reasons why this might have been the case. I believe the prisoners’ quickly came to understand that how a soldier was taken prisoner in 1940 revealed less about their character than did their subsequent attitude towards their captivity and this explains why they came to judge the

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<sup>9</sup> For this work twelve book length prisoner memoirs as well as several dozen shorter *témoignages* were examined by the author. These sources were contextualized through the reading of secondary accounts, news paper accounts, and excerpts from prisoner correspondence held in the French national archives.

<sup>10</sup> See the introduction of this work for more on the benefits and problems associated with historians using memoirs in general, and some of the specific cautions which must be born in mind when using memoirs written by French men and women covering the World War II era.

honor of their fellow prisoners' more by their responses to captivity than by how they had originally been taken prisoner.

The term "identity" can be a problematic one when used in historical scholarship.<sup>11</sup> "Identity" can be seen as something permanent and unchanging in a person, as their "self." This work will use the term "identity" in a different sense, one referred to as a "soft" sense. "Soft identity" is something that is fluid, constructed and can be contested at times. A person's "soft identity" can change over time, based upon events, and even based upon their immediate situation. Since a person's "soft identity" is mutable, and since each person has multiple "soft identities" at any given time, it becomes a problematic analytic tool, especially if the author does not clarify how he or she is using it in their work. The most common understanding of what "identity" means in the social sciences, per Philip Gleason, was as "an artifact of interaction between the individual and society – it is essentially a matter of being designated by a certain name, accepting the designation, internalizing the role requirements accompanying it, and behaving according to those prescriptions."<sup>12</sup> By using this less nuanced definition of "identity," and by applying it only to situations related to a particular prisoner's connectedness to certain categories which have been defined in the work, hopefully the term will not prove to be too problematic. For example: the terms "capture identity" and "captivity response identity" relate only to an individual's connectedness to categories of people which have already been described in the work. As this work demonstrates, these designations often changed over time and were contested. Part of the French prisoners' story are their struggles to control how they were perceived by others, how they were categorized by official organizations, and ultimately, in

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<sup>11</sup> For a good summary of some of the problems the term presents see Frederick Cooper and Roger Brubaker's essay "Identity," in *Colonialism in Question; Theory, Knowledge, History*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 59-90.

<sup>12</sup> Philip Gleason, "Identifying Identity: A Semantic History." *Journal of American History* 69, no. 4 (1983), 918.

many cases, how they came to see their connectedness to, or separation from, other groups in postwar France.

An examination of the 1940 campaign focusing on where, when and how French soldiers became prisoners also helps highlight shortcomings of the “capture identity” method of classification, and demonstrates why the “captivity response” method was more accepted by the prisoners’ since it recognized identity as dynamic rather than static. “Capture identity” fixed a prisoner in a category based on choices made during stressful moments of combat. The scenarios prisoners faced at the time of their capture were largely shaped by factors out of their control, such as to which unit they were assigned or the orders they received from their commanding officers.

Ultimately a prisoner’s membership in the group of optimists, pessimists or resisters was the culmination of a series of individual choices. A better understanding of the events of 1940, reconstructed by a closer examination of the campaign and individual accounts, help us understand the settings in which these choices were made and, thus, will help us better understand the environment from which these different reactions to captivity emerged.

### **The dynamics of prisoner taking in France in 1940**

A study of 1,801 prisoner questionnaires, the results of which are reproduced below, serves as a starting point in understanding the dynamics of the 1940 campaign from the prisoners’ perspective. The first chart breaks down the 1940 campaign into six chronological phases and provides the percentage of the total number of French prisoners taken during each of these phases. The second chart breaks the campaign into geographic regions and provides the percentage of French prisoners taken in each region.

Chronological breakdown of the prisoner taking <sup>13</sup>	
Prior to 10 May 1940	1%
From 10 to 31 May (Note this percentage does not included the surrender in June of the Lille and Dunkirk pockets)	15.5%
From 1 to 15 June (Somme-Aisne battles from 5 to 11 June. Lille surrender 1 June, Dunkirk 4 June.)	25.7%
From 16 to 20 June (Petain's radio appeal for an armistice on 17 June ends most French resistance.)	25.4%
From 21 to 25 June. (Armistice comes into force 25 June)	24.1%
After 25 June.	5.1%

Geographical breakdown of the prisoner taking	
Belgium & the Netherlands	1.6%
Nord	26.9%
Vosges-Alsace-Belfort	27%
Lorraine-Champagne-Ardenne (Fighting from both the May and Aisne-Somme battles in this region)	13.7%
Bourgogne- Franche-Comté (South of Paris)	9.3%
Ouest (Overlap between the Aisne-Somme battles and the pursuit south of Paris)	7.8%
Centre (South of Paris)	5.6%
Unknown	8.2%

The information contained in the above charts allows us break the 1940 campaign into four distinct phases of prisoner taking: (1) The Battle in the North; (2) The battles along the

<sup>13</sup> Both charts based on the survey of 1,801 prisoners included in (Durand, 43).

Somme and Aisne lines; (3) The encirclement of the French armies stationed along the eastern frontier; and finally, (4) The mopping up actions south of Paris. How a French soldier became a prisoner and how they experienced their first few days of captivity was largely determined based upon during which of the four phases of the campaign they fell into German hands. Placing French prisoners into these phases allows the broad generalizations about how French prisoners were captured which are drawn below, and how the prisoners taken in each of the phases were likely to experience the first days of their captivities. These generalizations are supported by accounts drawn from individual soldier's memoirs. These individual accounts flesh out the generalizations and support their validity.

Breaking up the campaign into these phases also reveals that roughly 60% of French soldiers taken prisoner (those taken in the later two phases) had significantly less control over the circumstances of their capture than did soldiers taken earlier in the campaign (during the first two phases). Luck or fate determined to which unit a French soldier was assigned and thus it also played a significant role in the circumstances of that soldier's capture. The chances that an individual soldier would see combat or not was largely determined by the unit in which he served. The orders issued by a soldier's commanding officer also played a large role, also outside his control, in how he was captured. Many French officers surrendered their whole units before opportunities for resistance or escape had been exhausted. Other officers ordered their men to resist as long as possible and escape when further resistance was impossible. Still other officers left decisions about surrender and escape up to small groups. Serving in a military unit does not rob an individual of free will, but decisions taken by soldiers are strongly influenced by orders received and the actions of their companions. There are many instances of individual soldiers disregarding orders to surrender and instead attempting escape and/or continuing to fight;

however, these must be seen as exceptional actions, not as expected behavior. While soldiers' "capture identity" were not literally pre-determined by forces outside their control, the circumstances of their capture were strongly influenced by these forces. If a prisoner's military service was determined to be honorable or dishonorable based upon the circumstances of their capture then in most cases this was a matter which was largely pre-determined for most French soldiers.

### **Phase One: Battle of the North**

The first large group of French soldiers was taken prisoner during the May battles in Belgium and Northern France. On 10 May the Germans attacked along a broad front stretching from the Southeast corner of the Netherlands through Belgium and Luxemburg and into Northern France. The Allies responded to this attack by rushing two French armies and the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) north into Belgium to attempt to halt the German advance. This force was cut off by the German attack through the Ardennes region. The Allied high command attempted to organize a simultaneous counterattack from both the north and the south which they hoped would sever the German corridor and reestablish contact with the encircled forces. A series of three French attacks from 17 to 22 May and a British attack on 21 May failed to break the German encirclement largely due to the paucity of resources that could be organized and committed to these attacks and the inability of the Allied high command to coordinate them. When these attacks failed, Allied soldiers trapped in the north attempted to withdraw to Dunkirk for evacuation. Those unable to reach Dunkirk were isolated and forced to surrender. The prisoner of war survey referred to above found that approximately 16% (~300,000) of prisoners were taken between May 10 and 31. French forces trapped in the Lille pocket continued to resist until 1 June when the final 35,000 defenders surrendered. French forces also held the perimeter

around the channel city of Dunkirk during the Allied evacuation. On 4 June 40,000 French soldiers surrendered in the Dunkirk region one day after the last evacuation ship had left. Thus, from the attack on 10 May until the surrender of the forces covering the Dunkirk evacuation on 4 June approximately 375,000 French soldiers were taken prisoner during this first phase of the war, or roughly 20% of the final total.

Soldiers captured during this initial phase of the campaign were likely to be attached to combat units and to be captured only after their unit took part in active resistance. This first group of prisoners were often encircled and thus would have had less opportunity to avoid capture than would soldiers taken in the more open operations that followed later in the campaign.

Paul Fraise (1911-1996), who would go on to become a famed psychiatric researcher at the Sorbonne and president of the International Union of Scientific Psychology, was a thirty year old conscripted sergeant assigned to an observation unit when the Germans attacked in 1940. Fraise's duties were of an administrative nature. His physical conditioning and training were not up to infantry standards. His unit advanced north at the outbreak of hostilities. On 19 May, while in the Belgian town of Givry (roughly 10 km northwest of Bastogne), Fraise was informed of the Ardennes breakout and the encirclement. His unit withdrew to the southeast until 23 May when they were halted near Lille. Cut off from further movement south or towards the channel, Fraise's unit prepared to take part in a counterattack planned for 26 May. After the retreat Fraise described his unit as anxious but not in despair. The men waited for orders. Having not been directly defeated by a German force, and with the expectation of taking part in a counterattack, the men felt "assured of relief, and a fight". Knowing action was planned the men felt until events played out further, "nothing [was] totally lost." When the attack was canceled

and the men were instead ordered to attempt to escape toward the coast at nightfall the unit's discipline and moral began to break down.<sup>14</sup>

Unable to escape from the Lille pocket Fraisse took up a rifle and joined an infantry unit on 29 May. His administrative skills were no longer needed and he hoped to remain useful. The unit Fraisse joined held their position for seventeen hours under shelling and infantry attack before a messenger arrived and told them that the battalion commander had ordered a general surrender. The messenger was sent away until he could return with a written order, which he soon did. The men felt dejection but "we were too tired to suffer." Before raising the white flag they destroyed their weapons and munitions and burnt their personal papers and staff automobiles. "Through this we retrieved a little of our dignity as soldiers by knowing that we left nothing useful for the enemy." After the destruction Fraisse and the 20 or so men with him waited for the Germans to arrive. "We had nothing left to do, nothing more to say. The calm was agonizing."<sup>15</sup>

Following his surrender Fraisse was ordered to march to a temporary field internment camp, a *frontstalag*. This forced march was a common experience for all prisoners. Each prisoner's account is unique in many ways, but all agree that these forced marches were brutal. The marches could last over a week, during which time the men were driven up to sixty kilometers a day. Some soldiers describe receiving some bread and soup each day while on these marches; others describe going days without any food. Some accounts describe Germans beating men who were unable to keep up, while others record these men being forced to walk as far as they could go on their feet and then being transported by truck after exhaustion overcame them. Fraisse's march was of the more mild variety. Given that he was taken prisoner in northern

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Fraisse, *Écrits de captivité 1940-1943*, (Paris: Editions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme 1991), 33-35.

<sup>15</sup> Fraisse, 38.

France the distance between his point of capture and the *frontstalag* to which he was assigned was only eighty kilometers. Even though Fraisse's march was relatively short compared to that of many other prisoners, and he did record that during the four days he was marched he was fed rice twice and soup once, physically he was not up to the task. Fraisse describes himself as among the "stragglers." Late on the second day of the march a German soldier put him in a car with other struggling men and drove him the last stage of that day's march. Fraisse saw three French prisoners who had died during his march. He described other officers who, like himself, were not physically prepared for this introduction into captivity:

"No we should not see it," the soldiers whisper while passing in front of the old pot-bellied officers with gray hair. Brave officers for training or administration, functionaries but not soldiers. They had collapsed in the ditches, no longer able to walk."<sup>16</sup>

On 2 June 1940 Fraisse arrived at the *frontstalag* in Enghiem, Belgium where his five years of captivity began. Fraisse had been assigned to a combat unit and performed his duties to the best of his ability. He had attempted to evade capture when it was possible and fought bravely after being trapped by German forces. He and his unit reluctantly surrendered when ordered to do so by a commanding officer. His decisions over the next several years would show Fraisse to be an "optimist" by Dutourd's standards, and a supporter of the Vichy regime, but the first chapter of Fraisse's life as a prisoner is would seemingly place him among the group of soldiers who had performed their duty with honor.

Francis Ambrière, the author of "*The Long Holiday*," perhaps the best known French prisoner of war memoir, was also captured in the Lille area. Unlike Fraisse, Ambrière's account is that of a soldier who never engaged in combat and who quickly surrendered. After finding out his unit was cut off Ambrière's commanding officer had to be talked out of surrendering the unit "with proper military formalities" to the first German soldiers encountered on 19 June. Ambrière

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<sup>16</sup> Fraisse, 41-8.

and other soldiers discussed the possibility of individual escape should the unit be forced to surrender. Ambrière was told by the commanding officer that if he did attempt to avoid capture individually he would be disobeying orders and would be “denounced as a deserter and treated as such.” Two days later the commander disintegrated the unit by giving an “every man for himself” order. Ambrière was taken prisoner by German soldiers three hours later while trying to make his way south.<sup>17</sup> Ambrière’s campaign had included no combat and only a last minute disorganized effort to avoid captivity. “Later, in prison, I met comrades who had been captured in the heat of battle. They, at least, had expended their energy and anger in action. Our unit fared otherwise.”<sup>18</sup> Despite Ambrière’s almost passive march into captivity his activities over the next five years, including several dangerous escape attempts and involvement in Gaullist activities, clearly defined him as a resister. Ambrière’s behavior during his brief time as a soldier stands in stark contrast to his later behavior in captivity.

### **Phase Two: The battles along the Somme and Aisne lines**

After resistance ended in the north the Germans redirected their advance into the heart of France on 5 June. General Weygand, who had replaced Gamelin on 16 May, attempted to construct a defensive line along the Somme and Aisne rivers. After the dramatic earlier defeat in the north little hope remained of stopping the next German attack. After two days of intense fighting the Somme defensive line broke west of Paris. Order and discipline began to breakdown in the French army and many soldiers joined the enormous southbound civilian exodus. From June 1<sup>st</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> approximately 450,000 French soldiers were taken prisoner, the largest concentrations falling in the Nord and in the Lorraine-Champagne-Ardenne regions. Subtracting out the Lille and Dunkirk prisoners included in the total for the first phase of the campaign we

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<sup>17</sup> Francis Ambrière, *The Long Holiday*, (Chicago: Ziff-Davis Publishing Co., 1948), 10-14.

<sup>18</sup> Ambrière, 10.

are left with roughly 375,000 men taken prisoner during this second phase of the German invasion, or another 20% of the total number taken in the entire campaign.

This period saw some of the most intense fighting of the campaign and so many of the prisoners taken during this time would have been actively engaged in combat. The fighting that followed the German advance into the northern plains of France was more open than had been the case in the earlier battles in the North. The lower density of soldiers to terrain would have given defeated French units (and individual soldiers) more opportunity for retreat and avoidance of capture. Throughout the middle of June there was hope that should the Germans break the Somme and Aisne lines a new line of defense could be established along the Loire River. Retreating French soldiers and fleeing refugees headed south with the hope that the Loire offered safety.<sup>19</sup>

Gustave Folcher was a French soldier taken prisoner during this phase of the campaign.<sup>20</sup> An agricultural worker from southern France, Folcher was conscripted as an infantryman in 1939. His unit was stationed in Champagne near what was to become the southern neck of the German Ardennes attack route. He and his unit fought several pitched battles with German forces from 15 May until 13 June when it was encircled and defeated in the town of Buisson located between Reims and Nancy. This battle occurred after the Germans had already taken Paris. Folcher's unit was attempting to withdraw south when it was cut off. When it became clear that their position in Buisson was helpless the French commander ordered an evacuation of the town. Folcher, already badly wounded during a mortar attack, continued to demonstrate courage and a sense of duty by joining a group of soldiers who slipped through German lines during the night rather than surrender. His escape was brief as the next day his group was discovered and

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<sup>19</sup> Diamond, 63-5.

<sup>20</sup> Folcher's account is drawn from his memoir *Marching to Captivity, The War Diaries of a French Peasant, 1939-1945*, (London: Brassey's, 1996).

attacked. After a brief engagement in which he again saw companions killed Folcher surrendered at gunpoint in a cornfield.

We lay down for a few minutes and I looked over the corn which was not very high at that place and saw some German soldiers, who rifle or machine pistol in hand, were advancing in formation as if hunting for hares in the corn. The situation was very critical. I quietly informed my colleague; they had seen us go into the corn, perhaps there were others. We had only the rifle of my colleague to defend ourselves with, it was very little against five or six machine pistols and as many rifles; we only risked being killed, the best thing was to surrender... [A German soldier] came forward, coldly keeping us in his line of fire. We raised our arms. My left arm was hurting me for my wound had once more opened and a slight trail of blood was running down my back. I lowered my left arm, which was an imprudent gesture which could have cost me my life, for the soldier five paces away from me shouldered his rifle again and made as if to fire. I was not afraid however, for over the last few days we had become used to all kinds of emotions.<sup>21</sup>

Folcher was marched approximately twenty kilometers to an outdoor stadium in Saint-Dizier where he was held for four days. While the march was a relatively short one the men were not fed until 21 June, by which time Folcher had been in captivity for seven days. "Taking pity on us [many civilians] threw a bit of bread, a cigarette, a bunch of radishes, a lettuce or a bit of fruit over the railings. Then you saw some terrible scenes. Even before the object had touched the ground 20, 30 or even 50 people immediately threw themselves on it pell-mell."<sup>22</sup> The men survived off what field rations they had left in their kits and the bits of food French civilians were able to throw to them despite German prohibition of contact between prisoners and civilians. Folcher did not receive medical attention or even a dressing for his open wound. Not surprisingly, infection set in. On 22 June, his eighth day of captivity, Folcher was finally seen by a medic. He collapsed in the camp infirmary and was sent to a nearby hospital where he recovered his strength over the next few days.

Folcher saw significantly more combat than most French soldiers. For thirty days he and his unit remained often in contact with the enemy. He was involved in at least four engagements

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<sup>21</sup> Folcher, 124-25.

<sup>22</sup> Folcher, 140.

and saw many comrades killed or badly wounded. During these engagements Folcher performed his duties bravely and conscientiously. Despite his own injury he did all he reasonably could to avoid capture. He would certainly qualify as a combattant prisoner by capture identity standards. As in the previous examples, Folcher's conduct during the campaign did not prove to be a good indicator as to his behavior in captivity. As a prisoner of war, Folcher was an optimist. He spent five years working as a farm laborer in Saxony. He never engaged in resistance activity, nor attempted escape. Just as he had approached his job in the infantry, he was a conscientious worker in Germany. Folcher was well regarded by his masters and, in his small way, contributed to the German war economy for five years.

### **Phase Three: Rolling up the East**

As the French defensive lines on the Somme and Aisne collapsed many units stationed along the Franco-German border found themselves encircled by enemy forces advancing south. Twenty-seven percent of all French prisoners of war were captured in the Vosges-Alsace-Belfort region. Units stationed in these regions tended to be specialized fortification and defensive units and thus among the least mobile in the French army. Upon finding themselves cut-off officers in these units often arranged the full surrender of their commands after coming into contact with German units. Prisoners taken in this region would have been less likely to have seen combat, and more likely to have been ordered to surrender en masse, than would soldiers taken in the first two phases of the campaign.

Jean Malaquais (aka Wladimir Malacki) was born to a Jewish family in Poland in 1908. He was raised in an environment defined by economic and social instability. "I had the feeling that the end of the world was approaching in Poland, so I wanted to discover the life of other

lands before it disappeared entirely.”<sup>23</sup> Malaquais emigrated to France in 1926 where he struggled through life as an undocumented laborer. He became a Marxist of the Trotskyite wing and volunteered to fight as a member of the POUM militia during the Spanish Civil War, the same organization which George Orwell memorialized in his memoir “Homage to Catalonia.” After returning to France Malaquais gained fame as a writer for his 1939 novel *Les Javanais* which described life among immigrant mine workers in southern France.

Despite not being a French citizen Malaquais was drafted in 1939 and served in an anti-aircraft unit stationed in eastern France near the German frontier.<sup>24</sup> Malaquais’ unit was responsible for several bulky and expensive anti-aircraft cannons and so, when the Germans broke through French lines to the east of Paris and threatened to cut-off French forces along the Rhine frontier, his unit was unable to quickly withdraw. On 21 June Malaquais’ unit, along with several others, found itself completely encircled. Malaquais’ unit spent their last night of freedom in bacchanalian destruction.

The unspeakable, the savage joy of destruction. They set fire to the tank trucks and the repair trucks, each unit of which is worth several million francs. They set fire to a pile of paper money, after noting the numbers of the bills. Then they tear to bits the account sheets, the individual identification papers, and the laboriously kept inventories of material. ... Evening. What we cannot burn we smash with clubs. We fire volleys into the big tires, cut the inner tubes, pour out the lubricating oil, the edible oils, etc. etc. From all sides shots ring out; they are destroying the horses and cutting down the telegraph poles; and if a German wandered by this way – a small German, alone and not too hard to handle – I think they would roast him alive over a twig fire. Not a nut nor a bolt for the “Boches.” Ah, but that makes us feel fine!<sup>25</sup>

What followed this night of destruction is interesting. Malaquais does not record an actual surrender of his unit. His commanding officer gathered the men, “He tells us to keep our self-respect, and asks if we have all got rid of our weapons.” Shortly thereafter Malaquais and

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<sup>23</sup> James Kirkup, “Obituary: Jean Malaquais,” *The Independent*, 6 January 1999.

<sup>24</sup> Malaquais’ account is drawn from his memoir, *War Diary*, (Garden City: Double Day, Doran, 1944).

<sup>25</sup> Malaquais, 198-99.

the other men in the battery left the wooded area in which they had camped and joined a column of prisoners marching into captivity. “Thousands and thousands of men come down from all sides; it is as if the forest itself had been set in motion. For us, the war has completed its murderous cycle.”<sup>26</sup> At first the men were practically unguarded. Malaquais saw German soldiers from time to time standing on the side of the road. “Our ‘enemies’ stare at us curiously, with a hint of contempt, and from time to time one of them, as though repeating a password, shouts, *Wo ist aber der Tommy!*” (“Where are the British soldiers!”)<sup>27</sup>

Malaquais’ forced march was harsh. Over the next few days the number of guards increased as did a pattern of brutality. While the distance he traveled was relatively short (roughly eighty kilometers over thirteen days) the prisoners were forced to march in ranks throughout the day and lay on the ground when not marching. Malaquais described several instances of prisoners being beaten by guards when they fell out of rank. German soldiers walked among the men and stole personal items. The prisoners were not provided with food until the tenth day of their captivity, at which point they were given some soup and bread. Prior to this meal the men lived off their meager remaining field rations and, if lucky, on random bits of food thrown to them by civilians when guards were not present.

Malaquais cut his march short on 5 July when he and another prisoner escaped by hiding in a ravine just short of the Franco-German border north of Strasbourg. The two men had made two earlier half-hearted escape attempts. In both cases they slipped away from the column of prisoners and found a hiding place; however, not knowing what to do once on their own and having no plan on how to navigate the hundreds of kilometers to freedom, they voluntarily

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<sup>26</sup> Malaquais, 200.

<sup>27</sup> Malaquais, 201.

slipped back into the ranks and continued their slow march eastward. It was not until their third attempt that they accepted the full level of hardship required of escape and pushed on.

Malaquais' actions prior to being taken prisoner would place him within the capture identity group which commanded the least respect among the other prisoners. Prior to surrender he did not participate in combat. His actual act of surrender was so passive that it did not even involve the presence of an enemy soldier. Malaquais simply joined a human flow of bodies marching into captivity without resistance. It was only after several days of marching that he began a mental process that would move him out of his initial passive acceptance of captivity and into active resistance. Malaquais' abandoning of his first two escape attempts shows that this was a gradual process. At first he was only willing to risk resisting captivity provided doing so did not require too much risk and discomfort. A few days later he took the step of embracing resistance regardless as to risk and hardship. Malaquais' story is that of a prisoner who moved from the passive resignation of an optimist to a resister in the span of less than two weeks.

#### **Phase Four: Mopping up after Paris**

The prisoners taken during the initial battles in the North and along the Somme-Aisne line, together with those taken retreating from the Franco-German border, account for approximately 67% of the total number taken in 1940. Much of the remaining third were taken in areas south of Paris during the final two weeks of the campaign. This period of the conflict, roughly from 13 to 25 June, was one of great confusion for French military personnel. Once it was known that Paris had been declared an open city and taken without resistance the morale of the French military fell. Hopes pinned on the army making a renewed stand along the Loire quickly were dashed when the Germans crossed the river with little difficulty.<sup>28</sup> Pétain's speech

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<sup>28</sup> Diamond, 85.

of 17 June increased the confusion. In this speech Pétain informed the French people that he had taken the reins of government and was calling for an “end to the fighting.” Many French soldiers believed this speech constituted a national surrender which would have made any further resistance on their part pointless. More accurately, Pétain was informing the French and German people that he was ready to enter into talks which would put an “end to the fighting.” The actual armistice was not signed until 22 June, and did not come into effect until 24 June. From the 17<sup>th</sup> until the 24<sup>th</sup> of June the war continued. The Germans continued to advance and take prisoner large numbers of confused and demoralized French soldiers. The number of French prisoners of war taken during this “gray” week (the bulk of the prisoners taken in eastern and central France) was roughly equal to the number taken during the five previous weeks combined. Had the French soldiers more clearly understood that during this week they were expected to defend themselves and take whatever steps possible to avoid capture the total number of men taken captive by German forces might have been significantly lower. Instead of resisting or avoiding capture many French units simply let themselves be disarmed and taken prisoner under the mistaken belief that the war had ended and they were expected to follow their government’s example and surrender. In these closing days German forces, wishing to avoid conflict when possible, would inform the French units they encountered that the war was over and, provided they surrendered without resistance, all would be proper and they would be heading home in a few days.

Jean Héliion’s story is perhaps typical of this phase of the campaign. Héliion (1904-1987), an influential abstract painter, abandoned a successful career in New York to return to his native France in 1940 to volunteer for military service. Héliion’s unit was stationed behind the Somme line in June 1940 and managed to withdraw behind the Loire after the German breakthrough.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Héliion’s account is drawn from his memoir *They Shall Not Have Me. The Capture, Forced Labor, and Escape of a French Prisoner of War*, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1943).

The unit made its first contact with German forces outside the town of Billy in the Auvergne on 19 June. Billy fell very near the line in which France would be divided into German occupied and Vichy territory so Héliion stood a good chance of avoiding captivity provided he was not taken into custody before the armistice came into effect. Of course he could not have known about these details. When the Germans informed his commanding officer that the war was over and, provided the French soldiers all cooperated, they would be on their way home in three days, he surrendered the unit.<sup>30</sup>

Héliion's near escape from captivity, followed by his particularly unpleasant captivity, makes his story one full of regrets. During his first six days in captivity Héliion and his companions were forcibly marched from Billy to Orleans, a distance of 265 kilometers, an average of sixty-one kilometers (twenty-seven miles) per day. On this march Héliion was fed one meal of bread and barley soup. On the fourth day he and other men started to eat grass.<sup>31</sup> On the fifth day, for reasons unclear to Héliion, the Germans forced the prisoners to run the final stage of that day's distance. That evening Héliion saw several companions die of exhaustion. When later Héliion came to understand that most French prisoners had also been forced to march long distances without food or shelter in the first days after their capture he speculated the harshness of the marches were intentional to discourage escape attempts. The effort to keep up took "every atom of energy, . . . Day by day, I plodded through increasing darkness."<sup>32</sup>

After a brief stay in a *frontstalag* Héliion was deported to Germany where he spent the fall and winter of 1940 working as a farm laborer on a large potato farm in Pomerania and 1941 in Stettin billeted with approximately 750 other French prisoners in a converted British banana cargo ship. During his first year in captivity Héliion followed a political trajectory which would

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<sup>30</sup> Héliion, 44-45.

<sup>31</sup> Héliion, 53-61.

<sup>32</sup> Héliion, 53-54.

have placed him among the “resisters of the first hour” had he still been in France. According to his memoir he helped organize a resistance cell on the ship in 1941 and gathered and attempted to transmit intelligence to the Allies on ship cargo arrivals and rail usage. While we must rely on Héliion’s own account of his behavior in captivity, his successful escape in January, 1942 and subsequent actions alone would have categorized him as belonging to the group that would eventually receive the most honor in postwar France.

Even though Héliion had made professional sacrifices in returning to France from New York and volunteering for armed service in 1940 he fell captive in a way seemingly lacking in honor. He engaged in no combat and his unit surrendered passively to the first German soldiers they encountered. Within a year of these events, Héliion clearly had established himself as a resister. He became a public symbol of the resistance as early as 1942 when his memoir of captivity was published in the United States. Had Héliion’s war in fact ended outside Billy in June, 1940, he would have fallen into the most criticized group of prisoners in postwar France. Instead he fell into the most honored group, that of the early resisters.

Of all the prisoner stories highlighted in this chapter none entered captivity more passively than the man who coined the terms “optimist” and “pessimist” as they related to prisoners of war. In 1940 Jean Dutourd was an insecure nineteen year old young man wearing a uniform but far from transformed into a trained infantry soldier.<sup>33</sup> He was stationed in Brittany and, when the Germans overran the region, he and two other young soldiers along with a somewhat older sergeant, decided to avoid contact with German forces and try to steal a boat which they would use to sail south to safety. After eight days of wandering the Brittany countryside, during which time they carefully avoided the enemy, the “boy scout” adventure (as Dutourd called it) had lost its appeal. The four men had run out of food and were tired of living

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<sup>33</sup> Dutourd’s account is drawn from his memoir *The Taxis of the Marne*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957).

rough outdoors. The sergeant, feeling responsible for the safety of the young men, told them to destroy their weapons and walked with them to a military barracks in the town of Auray where they voluntarily turned themselves in as prisoners of war on 25 June, one day after the armistice came into effect.<sup>34</sup> Dutourd's description of his state of mind at this time exemplifies the optimist point of view well:

Haven and prison, Auray marked the end of our mean little epic. We hardly thought of prison: we told ourselves that they could not put a whole nation behind barbed wire, that since all France had been taken into custody it hardly mattered where we were, that it was better to rest at Auray than to tire ourselves out on the roads. We did not yet know that France was going to become one big cage.<sup>35</sup>

A few – but they were very rare – expressed surprise that men who had had the chance of remaining free should come voluntarily to give themselves up. This attitude shocked [Sargent] Cepi and astonished the rest of us. As we saw it, it was they who were lucky: to be part of a proper unit, to have a roof over their heads, to get two regular meals a day, and to share a communal life. They did not know what misery it was to be a tamp without commander or objective. “We will go and report,” said Cepi. “After that we’ve nothing more to worry about.”<sup>36</sup>

Dutourd would spend the next four days in this barracks with other French prisoners. Escape at this point would have been shockingly easy as Dutourd and his friends were given passes each day to go to town where they could purchase supplies, eat at restaurants and visit friends. Instead of taking one of these opportunities to escape Dutourd and his companions voluntarily returned to the barrack each night before the midnight curfew.<sup>37</sup>

Dutourd's time as a soldier was spent carefully avoiding contact with the enemy. He accepted captivity to a degree which, even at the time, surprised some of his fellow soldiers. So complete was his acceptance of captivity that not only did he turn himself in voluntarily on 25 June, he repeated the process on each of the four following evenings. Dutourd appears to be a

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<sup>34</sup> Dutourd, 97-100.

<sup>35</sup> Dutourd, 97-98.

<sup>36</sup> Dutourd, 99-100.

<sup>37</sup> Dutourd, 103.

perfect example of the dishonorable prisoner based upon the capture identity model. Rather than continue on his path of passive optimism Dutourd quickly began to look back on his early decisions with shame and regret. Two months after surrendering himself Dutourd jumped off a moving train which was transporting him into Germany for labor duty. Dutourd returned to Paris where he sought out the most actively engaged of the resistance movements, the communists, in order to restart his war story. During the 1950's Dutourd emerged as one of France's leading conservative commentators. His honest portrayal of his few months of military service in 1940 lent credibility to the harsh criticism he offered up as to how far, in his opinion, his generation of French men and women had fallen short of the examples set by their ancestors. Historian John Cairns described his war memoirs as written with "a wild kind of splenetic anger . . ." <sup>38</sup> He spent much of this life lashing out at his and his companions behavior in 1940. Dependent upon when his story is examined, Dutourd could be used as the embodiment of the optimist or the resister. His story demonstrates the problem of attempting to place soldiers into static unchanging categories based upon their service in 1940.

The accounts in this chapter represent the variety of experiences of French soldiers taken prisoner in 1940. Whether or not a soldier engaged in combat before becoming a prisoner was largely determined by which unit he was assigned, or which officer he served under. These factors played a role as important as any decision the soldier would make during the campaign. The prisoner of war survey found 45% of French prisoners of war became prisoners "after combat," while 50% were taken "without combat." <sup>39</sup> Had this been the standard used to determine which soldiers had earned recognition as veterans, as was proposed following the war, then only half the former prisoners of war would have qualified. This determination would have

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<sup>38</sup> John C Cairns, "Along the Road Back to France 1940," *American Historical Review* 64, no. 3 (1959): 592.

<sup>39</sup> Durand, 43.

been made based on the soldier's actions during a few days during the summer of 1940, a time in which his options were few and largely pre-determined. This method of categorization would have ignored the prisoner's behavior over the next five years of captivity, a period when he was afforded time to consider his options before setting himself on any particular course of action. Upon their return to France in 1945, many prisoners were surprised to find their evaluations of their service were made giving more weight to decisions they had made during a time of chaos, misinformation and extreme stress rather than those reached after consideration and reflection.

**Life during the initial weeks of captivity: *frontstalag* or escape**

The Germans held Allied prisoners of war in the *frontstalags* throughout the summer of 1940.<sup>40</sup> Across the board, soldiers' memoirs describe living conditions in these temporary camps in similar terms. Discipline was harsh. The men were fed sporadically, and the food was of very low quality. Little or no effort was made to provide the men with shelter or the means to construct their own living spaces. Prisoners often did not have access to medical care, and when they did receive attention, it came from French medical personnel. Drawing from the memoirs already introduced in this chapter, a portrait of life in the *frontstalags* can be fleshed out. After being marched for nine days Francis Ambrière and his fellow prisoners hoped to finally receive regular meals once they reached their *frontstalag* in the town of Saaralbe on 1 July. Instead the men found the diet they had been receiving during the march, "a few biscuits and a little oleo or grease, with a quart of barley water on special occasions," remained in place. By this time the starving prisoners were fixated on food. They spent their free time scavenging for wheat, clover and herbs or laying motionless to preserve their strength. "Fifty pairs of eyes followed my every move anxiously, when I distributed the broth at eleven o'clock and the bread and grease at six.

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<sup>40</sup> See (Durand, 59), for a list of the location of 57 of these camps.

They trusted me, but they were like dogs seated under their master's table, worried about the size of the mouthful that would be thrown to them."<sup>41</sup> After being separated from his fellow prisoners for a few days while in the hospital Gustave Folcher found them weak and starving upon his return. "I found three of my mates from my section who I had some difficulty in recognizing, for if the stay in the hospital had really benefited me, they by contrast had got even worse. Their cheeks were gaunt, their eyes surrounded by dark shadows,..."<sup>42</sup> Two weeks later, a month into their captivity, the food situation had not improved for Folcher and his companions. The mid-day meal consisted of one ladle of food per prisoner. "The food is immediately bolted down, but it is eaten only because we are so hungry, as it is worse than bad... That was such a sad spectacle, masses of men stricken by hunger. I saw some men from my company, two in particular who were big eaters, tortured by the shortage of food to the point where one of them had a nervous breakdown one night, and we couldn't restrain him."<sup>43</sup> A group of North African soldiers made soup from an unearthed bone. Hemlock was mistakenly mixed into the herbs that were added to the hot water. "Three died of poisoning while several others were taken off to hospital suffering atrociously."<sup>44</sup> Twenty eight days into his captivity Paul Fraisse recorded that his daily ration still only consisted of a fifth of a loaf of bread and a bowl of soup.<sup>45</sup> Those prisoners who came into contact with civilians begged for food, either while standing along camp fence lines or while outside in work teams. Civilians often defied the prohibition against giving food to the captives, an act of kindness deeply appreciated by the prisoners.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ambrière, 20-22.

<sup>42</sup> Folcher, 138.

<sup>43</sup> Folcher, 140.

<sup>44</sup> Folcher, 143.

<sup>45</sup> Fraisse, 52-53.

<sup>46</sup> See for example Malaquais, 219 & 239; Foucher, 140 & 150; Ambrière, 17 & 20; Hélon, 55 & 58; and Fraisse, 42.

Given the harsh treatment and poor diet it is not surprising that within weeks epidemic disease began to break out in the crowded camps. Gustave Folcher recorded an outbreak of dysentery in his *frontstalag* roughly three or four weeks into the captivity.<sup>47</sup> Jean Héliion remembered it took roughly the same amount of time for dysentery to break out in his camp. Héliion estimated that about one thousand of the 14,000 men held in his camp were infected.<sup>48</sup> Dysentery also broke out in Paul Fraisse's camp after three weeks.<sup>49</sup>

Much of the misery of the *frontstalags* was a direct result of the lack of interest the Germans showed in administering the camps. The guards tended to maintain the camp's perimeter but not involve themselves greatly with what happened inside. After his four days in the barracks at Auray, Jean Dutourd, along with thousands of other prisoners, was moved to a holding area set up around an old hanger. "We remained there just a month and a half, and nothing in the place was organized either then or later; the whole prison oozed improvisation, ignorance, inexperience, and misery."<sup>50</sup> The overcrowding and the lack of bedding in Dutourd's camp brought on a confrontation which illustrated the divisions which already existed among the prisoners along capture-identity lines. A corporal in the Foreign Legion demanded Dutourd give up his mattress, "he held that mattresses belonged by right to bemedaled veterans, not to raw recruits." Dutourd refused, the men fought, and Dutourd retained the mattress.<sup>51</sup> The *frontstalags* were a lawless environment controlled by strong men inside and nervous guards on the outside. Within a few weeks Gustave Folcher was writing about a "camp mafia."<sup>52</sup> Under conditions like this the basic needs of many of the men went unmet. No mail came into some camps, and mail

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<sup>47</sup> Folcher, 143.

<sup>48</sup> Héliion, 67.

<sup>49</sup> Fraisse, 51.

<sup>50</sup> Dutourd, 151.

<sup>51</sup> Dutourd, 158-60.

<sup>52</sup> Folcher, 139.

placed in outgoing bags sat uncollected indefinitely.<sup>53</sup> Dutourd remembered that in his camp medical care was only extended in crisis situations, that no building materials were provided to the men and that they fought with each other to establish claim over sheltered living areas.

Dutourd's memoir contains a description of perhaps an extreme example of how little the German guards concerned themselves with the prisoners. A visibly uncomfortable French general visited Dutourd's *frontstalag* towards the end of July. He was escorted by several German officers who showed him outward signs of deference. The prisoners were assembled for the visit. The general walked briskly past their ranks saying "Any complaints?" without pausing for replies. His unwillingness to connect with the men was perhaps caused by shame, or perhaps it was a small rebellion against being compelled to perform a humiliating duty. The prisoners took the visit as a sign of their impending release. That evening, after being sealed inside the hanger, the men spent the night drinking, singing and playing bugles. "The situation was too much for the Germans; they did not even try to interrupt us. They merely lighted the camp to daylight intensity with the searchlights on the guard towers, telling themselves, no doubt, that without arms we could hardly be dangerous. In which respect they were wrong; for on this memorable night of liberation revolvers, rifles, and even a Hotchkiss machine gun with its ribbon of bullets emerged from the straw of the hanger... Next day we could hardly understand why we had staged such a riot. We spent most of the day sleeping."<sup>54</sup> The only action that seemed sure to draw a forceful reaction from the guards was an escape attempt or rebellion. As is normally the case in prison settings where the guards are too few in number and untrained, extreme and immediate violence was the first response to challenges to the authority. Folcher remembers the

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<sup>53</sup> Folcher, 144.

<sup>54</sup> Dutourd, 160-63.

body of one soldier he described as an “Arab” who had been killed during an escape attempt was “left exposed for the whole day at the entrance to the camp, as an example.”<sup>55</sup>

The lack of order in the *frontstalags* caused the prisoners a great deal of stress and discomfort, but in other ways it worked to their advantage. Both Héliion and Dutourd record that wives and girlfriends of prisoners who were able to locate their partners could arrange short meetings.<sup>56</sup> The Puy-de-Dôme newspaper *La Montagne* also reported on these meetings between prisoners and civilians at the *frontstalag* in Moulins.<sup>57</sup>

Another benefit of the lax German organization and control during the early months of the occupation was the ease by which many prisoners escaped. Of the 1,850,000 French prisoners captured during the campaign roughly one in eight (225,000) escaped during the initial weeks.<sup>58</sup> Héliion wrote of a friend who escaped while being marched to a *frontstalag* by simply slipping out of ranks and mixing with a group of refugees.<sup>59</sup> During the following weeks a number of prisoners escaped almost every day while outside the camp on work assignments.<sup>60</sup> French officers had even more opportunity to escape than did enlisted men as they were at times given day passes to leave camp without an escort.<sup>61</sup> Marc Bloch, already a famed historian when he was recalled to duty in 1939, took advantage of the initial disorganization not to escape from captivity but to avoid it in the first place. On 18 June Bloch was billeted in the city of Caen, the capital of Basse-Normandie, when the Germans arrived. Rather than turn himself in or retreat

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<sup>55</sup> Folcher, 143.

<sup>56</sup> Héliion, 83-4, 86; and Dutourd, 157.

<sup>57</sup> *La Montagne*, “Grâce au dévouement des habitants les prisonniers français de Moulins ont pu améliorer leur sort,” July 13, 1940.

<sup>58</sup> Durand, 21. This number of early escapes is taken from a postwar study by the secretariat d’État aux Anciens Combattants. Due to the chaos of 1940 it is likely that no reliable census was possible. German sources establish the number of French prisoners at 1,900,000 during 1940, the above study placed the number at the slightly lower figure of 1,850,000, while the International Committee of the Red Cross could only confirm 1,605,000 prisoners. The gap between the ICRC figure and that of the French and Germans is probably due to the large number of prisoners escaping during the initial weeks before they were officially registered as prisoners by the Germans.

<sup>59</sup> Héliion, 58-9.

<sup>60</sup> Héliion, 74.

<sup>61</sup> Héliion, 76.

south Bloch simply changed into civilian clothes and checked into a hotel under his own name. Due to his age (54) he was not questioned. A few weeks later, when the trains began running again, Bloch returned to his home in Guéret, in the Vichy zone.<sup>62</sup> This journey would not have been possible a few weeks later when the Germans established better control over the “line of demarcation” which divided occupied France from Vichy controlled territory.<sup>63</sup>

Henri Frenay was another officer who took advantage of the initial chaos of the occupation to avoid captivity. During the war Frenay became an important figure, first in the resistance and later in the provisional government. He began organizing resistance activity as early as November 1940. One year later he helped found Combat, one of the more important resistance movements.<sup>64</sup> His work in the resistance won him the trust of General De Gaulle who named him director of the Commissariat aux Prisonniers, Déportés et Réfugiés in November 1943.<sup>65</sup> From this post, and after September 1944 while serving as the first minister of the newly established Ministère des Prisonniers, Déportés et Réfugiés, Frenay headed the agencies responsible for the French prisoners and deportees in German captivity. When the Germans attacked in 1940 Frenay was still only a captain attached to the 43<sup>rd</sup> Army Corp in the Vosges region. As a staff officer Frenay saw no action during the campaign. His command surrendered as a unit on 25 June, one day after the armistice came into effect. Following the surrender Frenay and one other officer decided, on their own initiative, to attempt escape rather than join the eastward march of prisoners. That evening the two men slipped out of ranks and hid in thick bushes near the road. Over the next two weeks, with the aid of several civilians, the two men

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<sup>62</sup> Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat, A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1968), 19-24.

<sup>63</sup> Diamond, 156.

<sup>64</sup> John Sweets, *The Politics of Resistance in France, 1940-1944*, (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), 34-9.

<sup>65</sup> Marie-Thérèse Chabard, “Les organismes français chargés des prisonniers, déportés et réfugiés (Alger 1943 – Paris 1945),” *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, no. 42 (1961): 17-9.

avoided capture and made their way on foot to the Vichy zone.<sup>66</sup> While Frenay's escape was not easy, it involved hundreds of kilometers of walking and two narrow escapes from German sentries, it serves as another example that French soldiers determined to avoid captivity were often able to do so during the early months of the occupation. Frenay's experience perhaps also helped shape a certain lack of compassion he was to display later for French prisoners who passively accepted their situations.

Why did not more French prisoners take advantage of these circumstances and escape during the summer of 1940? The main reason is that, at this point, most French prisoners simply saw no reason to accept the risks and hardships that came along with escape. Most prisoners assumed the war would be over soon and that they would be free within days. This belief was fed by the German guards, most of whom probably also believed it to be true. As Dutourd remembered, "Being prisoners of recent date, we talked of demobilization and not of liberation. We were still using a prewar vocabulary."<sup>67</sup> The contact many prisoners had with loved ones and civilians during their time in the *frontstalag* only contributed to this temporary denial of their predicament. "[The] whole of the time we were in [the *frontstalag* in] Vannes we were never wholly cut off from free men... This hybrid life, ... the constant relations we entertained with the civilians outside, helped to soften us and to stamp out the last remnants of any will to escape."<sup>68</sup> Some prisoners even looked upon a successful escape as of dubious value. They reasoned that escapees would have to either walk home or pay for their own passage. Dutourd remembers one soldier's optimistic defense of prisoners who did attempt escape: "Why should they beat it? In a fortnight they'll be demobbed and their journey home will be paid for."<sup>69</sup> Gustave Folcher later

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<sup>66</sup> Henri Frenay, *The Night Will End*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1976), 5-9.

<sup>67</sup> Dutourd, 142.

<sup>68</sup> Dutourd, 157.

<sup>69</sup> Dutourd, 123-24.

recognized how possible escape was during these early weeks, but he decided against an attempt at the time because his home was, “a really long way away.”<sup>70</sup> Even weeks later when he was being transported into Germany Folcher decided not to follow the example of several other prisoners who took advantage of the evening and jumped off the slow moving train. Folcher was afraid of hurting himself (he knew some of the men had been killed by the jump) and he was also self-conscious of the deplorable state of his clothes and hygiene.<sup>71</sup> Folcher had five years to consider these lost opportunities while working in Germany as a forced laborer.

Another factor that may have discouraged many prisoners from attempting escapes during these first weeks was their weakened condition. With many men exhausted, sick and starving they had trouble formulating plans beyond basic daily survival. Major Edmund Booth of the Royal Engineers was captured twice in France during the campaign. Booth escaped the first time, but allowed himself to be taken prisoner again a few days later, “although escape would have been easy.” Booth explained that “his exhaustion was so great that he could not find the determination to [evade capture again.] ‘When one reaches an advanced stage of exhaustion, planned thinking becomes almost impossible and all one wants is to stick with one’s friend and go on doing what everyone else is doing almost automatically.’”<sup>72</sup>

In the end most Allied prisoners of war adopted either the optimistic or the pessimistic mindset and accepted their captivity during these early weeks. Most certainly did not understand that the window of opportunity for escape was slowly shutting with each passing day. As the weeks passed German security, both in the *frontstalags* and along the transit routes inside occupied France, became better organized. Increasingly in July and August prisoners were

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<sup>70</sup> Folcher, 138.

<sup>71</sup> Folcher, 148-50.

<sup>72</sup> Mark Connelly and Walter Miller, “The BEF and the Issue of Surrender on the Western Front in 1940,” *War in History* 11, no. 4 (2004), 434-35.

loaded camp by camp into cattle cars and transported into the Reich. Once in Germany they were put to work as forced laborers replacing the young men serving in Hitler's armed forces.

Separated from their native land the prisoner's chances for escape were greatly diminished.

It is perhaps safe to assume that those prisoners who took advantage of these early weeks to escape would have tended to be of the resister mindset. If that was the case then this early flow of resisters out of the prisoner population would have concentrated the proportions of optimists and pessimists among the one and a half million French prisoners who arrived in Germany during the late summer of 1940. At least in 1940 the optimists and pessimists seemed to outnumber the resisters in the "civilization of the camps."

Just as the prisoners remained optimistic throughout 1940 that they would soon be released, the same was true for the French public at large. By August most prisoners had been able to notify family members that they were alive and in captivity. Relieved to learn that their missing loved one was still alive, in most cases wives and families almost immediately began making arrangements for their return home.<sup>73</sup> Most information flowing from the government and newspapers encouraged the assumption that the prisoners would be home soon. Jean Hé lion remembers the first batch of mail from France reaching prisoners in Germany in October, 1940. "The newspapers say that you will soon come back," was among the common sentiments contained in these letters.<sup>74</sup> French armistice negotiators were surprised to learn that the Germans were transporting prisoners from France into Germany after 25 July, and argued that this deportation was a violation of the armistice terms.<sup>75</sup> Even after the prisoners had been relocated many French officials continued to make public and private statements which revealed their

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<sup>73</sup> Sarah Fishman, *We Will Wait, Wives of French Prisoners of War, 1940-1945*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 28-29.

<sup>74</sup> Hé lion, 144.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Paxton, *Vichy France, Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 60.

assumption that the prisoners' captivity would be a short one. Marshal Pétain's visit to a prison camp on 27 October received prominent newspaper coverage. While addressing the prisoners Pétain advised them, "Once more, be patient. Your liberation will possibly be soon."<sup>76</sup> During a meeting with German ambassador Otto Abetz in Paris on 30 October 1940 Georges Scapini discussed not *if* the prisoners would be released, but *when*. Scapini admitted to Abetz that, given the high rate of unemployment in France, it might "not be possible, or even desirable" for all the prisoners to come home *at once*.<sup>77</sup> Scapini was the highest ranking official in the Vichy government for matters related to the prisoners of war. That the highest officials in the Vichy government persisted in their belief that the Germans would release the prisoners this late in 1940 speaks to a certain naivety about the nature of the war in which they were involved and how Germany planned to exploit all the resources, material as well as human, of the territories they had conquered. Much of the French optimism for a rapid release undoubtedly stemmed from their perspective that the war had ended on 24 June 1940. Britain was expected to quickly come to terms with Germany. The possibility that the war might drag on for years and that Germany would hold over a million prisoners in captivity for that long simply did not enter into the public discourse during the fall of 1940.

The deportation of the French prisoners of war into Germany and their employment as forced laborers should not have come as a surprise to the French people but it did. As covered in the preceding chapter, the action was consistent with German policy for the use of foreign prisoners of war and conscripted civilians as forced laborers inside Germany during times of war.

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<sup>76</sup> "Votre libération peut ne pas tarder," *Le Moniteur*, October 28, 1940.

<sup>77</sup> Paxton, 77-78.

### **A Separate History. The treatment of colonial prisoners of war in 1940**

The treatment of colonial prisoners of war by the Germans in 1940 is sufficiently different from the treatment of the white prisoners that their history must be looked upon as a unique topic. Colonial prisoners of war were much more likely to be killed while attempting to surrender, or after being disarmed, than were white prisoners. Colonial prisoners were also singled out for harsh treatment and violence during the initial weeks of their captivity. These factors alone require they be treated separately by historians. The divergence between the experience of white and non-white prisoners became even greater in August 1940 when the Germans transported white prisoners east for use as slave laborers while at the same time leaving non-white prisoners in the *frontstalags* spread across occupied France, or, in some cases, singling out colonial prisoners from groups which had already been transported into Germany and returning them to France. In this case the Nazi quest for racial segregation took precedence over their need for manpower.

At the time of the German attack approximately 75,000 West African<sup>78</sup> (collectively called *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*), 70,000 North African<sup>79</sup> (*Indigènes*) and several thousand additional soldiers from Madagascar and French Indochina were deployed within France. These soldiers tended to be in combat rather than support units and thus were more likely than French units raised from the metropolitan population to see action. Colonial units were involved in many significant engagements during the campaign and gained a reputation as among the more effective in the French Army. This should not be surprising as these units were made up of professional soldiers while many of the units raised in France itself were populated by reservists. The experience of the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais* during 1940 bears out these generalizations. Of the

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<sup>78</sup> Raffael Scheck, *Hitler's African Victims, The German Army Massacres of Black French Soldiers in 1940*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2-3.

<sup>79</sup> Belkacem Recham, "Les indigènes nord-africains prisonniers de guerre," *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, no. 223 (2006), 110.

75,000 *Tirailleurs* in France in May 1940, 63,300 were in frontline units and approximately 40,000 experienced combat. Approximately 10,000 *Tirailleurs* were killed in 1940.<sup>80</sup> If one accepts the figure of 90,000 total military casualties suffered by all French military forces during the 1940 campaign, and divides that number by the total of 2,776,000 men in combat units, the overall casualty rate for the French combat troops in 1940 was approximately 3%.<sup>81</sup> The isolated casualty rate for *Tirailleurs* combat troops was five times higher than the overall rate for French combat forces.

One cause for the elevated casualty rate among colonial soldiers was the refusal by some German units to accept surrender from non-white soldiers. Nazi conceptions of a racial hierarchy factored into prisoner treatment in 1940. White prisoners were treated more or less in accordance with Geneva Conventions standards in France in 1940. North Africans were treated less well than whites. Black prisoners received the harshest treatment and were often killed by German soldiers after they had surrendered.<sup>82</sup> In 33 documented instances between 24 May and 25 June between 1,000 and 1,500 *Tirailleur* prisoners were murdered. If undocumented but credible instances are included this number rises to 3,000.<sup>83</sup> These executions took place with the knowledge and approval of the German high command, if not under the outright order of an officer. In several instances in 1940 the Germans separated the French prisoners into white and black groups shortly after they had surrendered. The blacks were taken to an area convenient for disposal, such as a ravine, and machine gunned to death. The Germans justified these massacres by contending that non-white soldiers were “illegitimate combatants,” and thus not covered by

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<sup>80</sup> Scheck, 2-3.

<sup>81</sup> Jackson, *The Fall of France*, 180. Jackson points out that the total number of French military casualties in 1940 remains a surprisingly open debate even today, with figures ranging from 50,000 to 120,000, but that the most recent studies tend towards the lower end of that range. Casualty figures for colonial troops remain even less well established than those for the French army as a whole. See Scheck, 3, n2.

<sup>82</sup> Scheck, 3-10.

<sup>83</sup> Scheck, 53-60.

the Geneva Conventions; or, that the murders were in retaliation for war crimes allegedly committed by colonial soldiers.<sup>84</sup> As historian Raffael Scheck concluded in his study of these massacres, “[The German army] dealt with the black Africans in a way that anticipated the horrors of the racialized warfare associated with the later German campaigns in the Balkans and the Soviet Union.”<sup>85</sup>

Colonial soldiers lucky enough to be taken prisoner and allowed to live faced a significantly harsher captivity than did their white companions. Colonial prisoners were singled out for physical and psychological abuse during their forced march to the *frontstalags*. Lieutenant Taillefer-Grimaldi, a regimental physician, witnessed a group of three black prisoners being prodded forward during the march. German guards repeatedly poked the black men with their bayonets. When one finally jumped out of ranks he was shot immediately.<sup>86</sup> Jean Malaquais’ memoir contains similar accounts. One German soldier singled out a black prisoner. “Those fellows, the blacks, and the Jews – we’ll exterminate them to the last man. But the rest don’t need to be afraid...”<sup>87</sup> A week later Malaquais saw a North African prisoner murdered. While he was squatting in a circle with other prisoners a German officer punched him in the back of the neck, causing him to fall face forward to the ground. The officer pulled his side arm out to see if the man could be goaded into responding:

[The prisoner] stood up, about faced, blind with anger, and made the first lunge at his aggressor: two pale rose flames leaped out at the level of his eyes, stopped him dead in his tracks; and he went down in a heap. Without a word, walking slowly, the officer turned his back and went away, with a faint, sad smile on his face, with his revolver in his gloved hand.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Scheck, 67-74.

<sup>85</sup> Scheck, 3.

<sup>86</sup> Scheck, 43.

<sup>87</sup> Malaquais, 203.

<sup>88</sup> Malaquais, 215.

German soldiers would seek out colonial prisoners to have their picture taken posing alongside them.<sup>89</sup> Often these pictures were staged in a way which dehumanized the black prisoners by making them appear uncivilized. During his forced march Jean Héliion saw two Germans approach a group of starving prisoners:

One carried a large bone, with about a pound of raw meat hanging from it. He threw it in the midst of a group of Moroccans, who fought desperately for it. One came out with the naked bone, and licked it. He had blood all over his face. The others were trying to swallow their strips of meat before it could be snatched away from them. The Germans used a whole roll of film on that scene. In an illustrated section of a German newspaper, I was to see later a picture that looked very much like it, with this title: "French prisoners eating..." If the bone had fallen by me, I would have fought for it too!<sup>90</sup>

While few colonial prisoners were killed after arriving in prison camps their situation remained critical. Colonial prisoners were targeted by German guards for random acts of petty violence. As badly as the white prisoners were fed and housed, the situation among the colonial prisoners was markedly worse.<sup>91</sup> The *frontstalag* at Le-Quesnoy-sur-Airaines only provided food to white prisoners. Had the white men not shared their meager rations with the colonial prisoners they would have received nothing.<sup>92</sup> There are numerous reports in the French military archives of colonial prisoners being denied medical treatment and being forced to sleep without shelter, including during periods of heavy rainfall. While white prisoners suffered from these same depredations it would appear that these conditions occurred more commonly with colonial prisoners.<sup>93</sup> This situation persisted through July and August. On 20 August Jean Héliion witnessed the arrival of 2,000 prisoners which he described as "Arabs" at his *frontstalag*. He remarked these men were "more famished than we had ever been... In spite of a chain of guards, they ran out towards us, asking for a bit of anything to eat. The sentries pursued them around the

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<sup>89</sup> Scheck, 45.

<sup>90</sup> Héliion, 57-8.

<sup>91</sup> Scheck, 41-52.

<sup>92</sup> Scheck, 43.

<sup>93</sup> Scheck, 43.

buildings, and beat them hard with their guns, not only in the ribs, but on the head. I saw two broken skulls, at least.”<sup>94</sup>

Héliion learned later that these starving North African prisoners were returning to France from Germany where they had been held for the last month. Initially the Germans began to transport all French prisoners of war into Germany to use them as forced laborers. This policy was amended in August when it was decided that only white prisoners would be taken into Germany. Colonial prisoners would be left in *frontstalags* in occupied France. Those non-white prisoners who had already been transported into Germany were returned to France.<sup>95</sup> This change was prompted by the Nazi wish to keep non-Aryan races outside German territory.<sup>96</sup>

Ironically, the conditions of captivity for colonial prisoners improved in many ways following their segregation. With the camps less crowded all the men were able to find living quarters which offered at least some level of shelter from the elements. The reduced crowding also led to improvements in sanitation and diet. Epidemic diseases that had rampaged the camps through the fall and winter of 1940 were brought under control by the spring of 1941. Red Cross inspections in January and February of 1941 found that roughly one in four prisoners still held in the *frontstalags* were tubercular.<sup>97</sup> A disaster was averted by a concerted effort of the French medical community to arrange for the transfer of sick prisoners either to hospitals or to camps located in warmer and dryer locations. The lack of adequate records prevents a full accounting of how many prisoners died from these outbreaks but the total was certainly substantial. A short-lived German effort to recruit collaborators from among the colonial prisoner population also led to improvements in some of their living conditions. The Germans had hoped to recruit a cadre of

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<sup>94</sup> Héliion, 91-2.

<sup>95</sup> Durand, 59 & Martin C. Thomas, “The Vichy Government and French Colonial Prisoners of War, 1940-1944,” *French Historical Studies* Vol. 25, No. 4 (2002), 665-66.

<sup>96</sup> Scheck, 46.

<sup>97</sup> Thomas, 684-87.

men who would be willing to work with them in undermining British (and, less explicitly, French) colonial control over their homelands. A small number of men responded, mostly of Tunisian and Algerian backgrounds. The appeal fell flat among the Moroccan prisoners and the Germans never extended the effort to include prisoners from sub-Saharan Africa. In the end this German effort at winning the hearts and minds of the *indigènes* led to some improvements in living conditions among the North African prisoners and the formalization of a racial hierarchy within the camps which placed light skinned North Africans above Sub-Saharan Blacks and Asians.<sup>98</sup> The camps also began to receive supplies and food from the Red Cross and *Amitiés Africaines*. By July 1941 conditions had improved to the point where a Red Cross mission declared that the housing, hygiene and food supplies within the camps were good.<sup>99</sup>

Despite numerous efforts no historian has yet produced an entirely satisfactory accounting of how many colonial prisoners were held by Germany during the war and how many died in captivity. By necessity we must work with rough numbers in attempts to determine how many died in captivity. Georges Scapini, head of Vichy's *Service diplomatique des prisonniers de guerre* (SDPG) estimated the number of colonial prisoners captured in 1940 to be about 80,000.<sup>100</sup> A German report from October 1941 estimated 68,550 colonial prisoners were still in the *frontstalags*. This total included 43,973 North Africans, 15,777 *Tirailleurs*, 3,888 Madagascans, and 2,317 Indochinois.<sup>101</sup> Through liberations and deaths this number was reduced to 41,962 by June 1942. During 1941 and 1942 15,800 colonial prisoners were freed by the Germans and approximately another 10,000 escaped.<sup>102</sup> If we take Scapini's estimate of 80,000 colonial soldiers taken into captivity in 1940 and subtract the 15,800 freed and the estimated

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<sup>98</sup> Thomas, 669-74.

<sup>99</sup> Scheck, 47.

<sup>100</sup> Durand, 59.

<sup>101</sup> Recham, 114.

<sup>102</sup> Recham, 115-16.

10,000 escapes we arrive at a figure of 54,200. This is the number of colonial prisoners one would expect to find still in captivity in 1942. The difference between this figure and the one contained in the German report from that year is roughly 12,000, or 15% of the original total. How many of those missing 12,000 prisoners died in captivity remains an open question. Of the 1,500,000 French prisoners taken into Germany in 1940, 24,600 died in captivity, a mortality rate of 1.5%. Historian Myron Echenberg estimated the mortality rate among Sub-Saharan soldiers taken prisoner in 1940 to be fifty percent.<sup>103</sup> Echenberg's figure would seem to be high, but certainly there are many reasons to believe the mortality rate among the colonial prisoners of war was much higher than among the white prisoners.

### **Conclusion**

The first chapter of the story of the French prisoners of war played out on the battlefields and in the *frontstalags* spread across France and Belgium. After the summer of 1940 the stage would shift east to the *stalags* and work *kommandos* of Germany. Even before the prisoners left France and Belgium behind it was clear that the story of their service and captivity could not related as a single common narrative. The individual soldiers entered the "civilization of the camps" differently, more based on where and when they were captured than on factors more under individual control. Prisoners quickly began to categorize themselves as belonging to different groups, often initially based on their battlefield experiences, but later more commonly upon their mentality towards captivity. German racial policies created a further division within the prisoners' community by physically separating white and colonial prisoners. Captured soldiers entered a new and complex social setting which they would have to learn how to navigate to make their existence more bearable.

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<sup>103</sup> Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Sénégalais in French West Africa, 1857-1960*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 1991).

There were many early signs that the French prisoners' captivity would likely be a long and hard ordeal. The forced marches, starvation, humiliation and neglect which characterized most French prisoners' introduction into captivity gave them an indication that life as a prisoner would be harsh and at times brutal. Poor staffing and general indifference on the part of their German jailors resulted in the horrible living conditions and unpredictable outbursts of violence in the *frontstalags*. The deportation of prisoners into Germany for use as forced laborers gave a strong indication that they would not be returning home soon. The tightening of security in the camps, on the roads and at the demarcation line in France transformed escape from a difficult but often successful undertaking into a more dangerous and doubtful affair. Three times as many prisoners escaped during the first few weeks of captivity (225,000) than did during the subsequent five years (70,000).<sup>104</sup> Those prisoners who most quickly lost their illusions about the captivity being a short and benign affair and who were willing to risk escape during this early period were often able to avoid long-term captivity. Those who came to understand their situation more slowly, or those unwilling or incapable of breaking free of their passive mentality were, in most cases, fated to spend the next years separated from their homeland and loved ones while laboring for benefit of their conquerors.

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<sup>104</sup> Durand, 21; & D'Hoop, Jean-Marie, "Note sur les evasions," *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, no. 25 (1957): 66-77.

### **Chapter 3: The Vichy Regime and its Prisoner of War Propaganda Campaign**

When Marshal Pétain, Pierre Laval and other leaders gained control over the French government in 1940, they inherited enormous economic, military and social problems. The two-pronged solution they offered for the revival of France included a program of domestic moral renewal coupled with collaboration with Germany. This plan lacked any widespread public support among the French people. Their plan for a moral and spiritual remaking of France, the *révolution nationale*, was largely based on principles the French people had been rejecting for generations, both at the ballot box and in their life choices.<sup>1</sup> Vichy's plan for reestablishing France's international position was based on entering into a collaborative relationship with Nazi Germany, a strategy that most French people found bewildering and difficult to accept. In short, the Vichy government was not representative of the character of the French population as a whole, and the program for recovery it instituted was based on a value system that was not in keeping with the hopes and beliefs of the bulk of its population.

The French electorate in 1940 leaned toward the center-left, as it had throughout almost the whole of the Third Republic. Consistently, French voters elected parties that supported a secular republican form of government. While there was considerable support for rightwing parties and movements, these groups never commanded enough support to come to power through elections. Public support for groups who openly espoused replacing the republic with a conservative authoritarian government crested after the February 1934 Paris riots which had been organized by anti-parliamentarian groups.<sup>2</sup> That these groups did not represent the majority

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Jackson, *France, The Dark Years 1940-1944*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 139-41. Jackson's work is used as a reference throughout this chapter. The work can be treated almost as one vast 600-page historiographic essay covering almost every key topic related to World War II-era France. Jackson consistently provides an excellent summary and list of key works for each topic. This book can be used as an excellent starting point for further reading on each topic.

<sup>2</sup> For more on anti-parliamentary and fascist groups in France and the level of support for these groups see Robert Soucy's works, in particular *French Fascism: The Second Wave, 1933-1939*, (New Haven: Yale University Press,

viewpoint in France was demonstrated by the political backlash the riots produced, a backlash which immediately resulted in a counter demonstration in support of the republic which dwarfed the earlier riots, and eventually in the 1936 election of a Popular Front government. While the French people were challenged to move either to the right or left during the tumultuous years of the depression, riots and the Popular Front government, by 1937 the political center had clearly held. Historian Nathaniel Greene eloquently described France as passing through a political “fever” from 1934-1937, emerging from the crisis still committed to a “republican synthesis” that had made the nation among the most political stable in Europe since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

The shock of the defeat of 1940 allowed the opponents of the republic to accomplish what they had not found possible through the ballot box. Immediately after assuming power, the Vichy leaders abolished the republic and replaced it with an authoritarian government based on socially conservative and traditionally Catholic principles. From the very beginning the Vichy government set itself in opposition to the former republic, which had supported a culture of individual rights and liberties. Vichy was a paternalistic state stressing the values of obedience and duty. Many freedoms the French people had come to expect were quickly stripped away by the new government such as the right to free political expression and assembly, the protection of religious and ethnic minorities, access to birth control and legal divorce, the removal of church control from publicly supported welfare and education programs, and the rights of women to work for wages and control their own property without a man’s approval.

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1995) and Bertram Gordon, *Collaborationism in France during the Second World War*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980). Alexander Werth’s *France in Ferment*, (London: Jarrolds Publishers, 1934) remains valuable for his first hand profiles of leaders and individual groups.

<sup>3</sup> Nathanael Greene, *From Versailles to Vichy, The Third French Republic, 1919-1940*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1970), 13-8 & 131-36. The concept of “republican synthesis” was developed by Stanley Hoffman in his 1963 work *In Search of France*. For more on French domestic politics from 1934-1940 see also Julian Jackson, *The Popular Front in France, Defending Democracy, 1934-1939*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1988); Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, *La Décadence, 1932-1939*, (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1979); and Martin Alexander, *Republic in Danger, General Maurice Gamelin and the Politics of French Defense, 1933-1940*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Like most 20<sup>th</sup>-century Western authoritarian movements or governments, it is perhaps easier to define the nature of the Vichy state by what it was against rather than by what it stood for.<sup>4</sup> At least initially the new state drew support from a fairly broad spectrum of constituencies, ranging from old line monarchists through modern social utopianists. Historian Phillippe Burrin has divided Vichy's original supporters into three categories. Social conservatives were the most recognized group. These men and women hoped to restructure French society around traditional Catholic and hierarchical values. Marshal Pétain's mentality most closely matched this group. The Marshal publicly interpreted the defeat of 1940 as a form of divine retribution for the nation's degeneracy during the Third Republic. After the armistice was signed, Pétain foreshadowed the form of medicine he planned to offer the sick nation: "Our defeat is punishment for our moral failures. The mood of sensual pleasures destroyed what the spirit of sacrifice had built up."<sup>5</sup> A second group, the technocrats, saw the collapse of the Third Republic as an opportunity to introduce social and economic reforms that would allow France to break free of what they saw as a seventy-year long quagmire. The technocrats blamed the weak central government for France's inability to keep up with its more dynamic neighbors, and believed that an authoritarian state such as Vichy could resolve this problem. The third group that rallied to Vichy included those to the far right of the ideological spectrum: hard-line nationalists, fascists and royalists.<sup>6</sup> Outside of dissatisfaction with the efficiency of the Third Republic, and a rejection of communism, only the almost mythical figure of Marshal Pétain and his vague ideological statements held these groups together.

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<sup>4</sup> For this conceptualization of fascism see Robert Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 3-23.

<sup>5</sup> John C. Cairns, "Along the Road Back to France 1940," *American Historical Review* 64, no. 3 (1959), 588-89.

<sup>6</sup> Philippe Burrin, *France Under the Germans, Collaboration and Compromise*, (New York: The New Press, 1996), 69-77.

If one accepts the premise that a government's values can best be understood by examining the programs it prioritized and enacted rather than by studying its ideological sources and public rhetoric, then the values of the Vichy state can be understood by looking at the values of its governing agenda, the *révolution nationale*. Using the *révolution nationale* to define the regime rather than the other broad policy agenda most often associated with it, collaborationism, makes sense in that relatively few supporters of the Vichy regime embraced collaborationism on its own merits, while almost all did support at least some elements of the domestic program. Collaborationism was broadly accepted by Vichy supporters because it was believed that it would be through this program that the new regime would receive the autonomy necessary from Germany to implement the *révolution nationale*.<sup>7</sup> The guiding principle of the *révolution nationale* was that individual liberalism was the root cause of most of France's problems, and to set the nation back on the right path French society had to be redirected towards what its supporters believed to be France's pre-revolutionary source of strength, the "natural communities" of family, workplace, region and Catholicism.<sup>8</sup> These "natural communities" were hierarchical, not democratic, and it was believed they would promote communal rather than individual goals. Attacks on these communities, something the Vichy leadership believed the Third Republic had engaged in throughout its history, were attacks on France as a whole. The motto of the new French state was "Family, Homeland and Work" replacing the more liberal ideals contained in "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity." Pétain preferred to use the term "renovation" rather than "revolution" when referring to this program.<sup>9</sup> In a grand sense, he and his followers were attempting to turn back the clock in France in social and political matters to at

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<sup>7</sup> Jackson, 139-41.

<sup>8</sup> For good summaries of the nature and background of Vichy's agenda see Jackson, 139-65; and Miranda Pollard, *Reign of Virtue, Mobilizing Gender in Vichy France*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1-8.

<sup>9</sup> Jackson, 149.

least 1871, if not to 1789. The Vichy state might be interpreted as the final attempt by the French right to undo the changes brought about by the revolution of a century and a half earlier.

Vichy's socially retrograde program was supported by an attempt to modernize the nation's administration and economy by the new regime's "technocratic" branch. This attempt was patterned after fascist modernization programs in Italy and Germany (while the *révolution nationale* seemed to draw its foreign inspiration from Salazar's Portugal). These modernizers thought the catastrophe of 1940 offered an opportunity to sweep away the corruptions and inefficiencies that had entrenched themselves in France. The old ways, which had prevented France from responding to the dynamic challenges of the interwar years, would be replaced with a new corporatist model. This model would control class antagonism and excessive individual profit-taking while promoting communal goals as defined by neutral administrators appointed by the state.<sup>10</sup> The *révolution nationale* was intensely paternalistic. It made no allowances for dissension. Those who disagreed with the state were silenced immediately, either through censorship, intimidation or persecution. Those who could not be assimilated into the French nation as it was defined by the new leaders, due to their race, religion or ideology, had no place in the France being built by the *révolution nationale*. Independent of outside pressure from Germany, the Vichy state almost immediately enacted a series of persecutory measures against Jews, Communists, Free Masons, and any other group whose "foreignness" set it apart from the "natural" French community.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jackson, 147-48.

<sup>11</sup> For Vichy's exclusionary and persecutory policies see Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews*, (New York: Schocken Books, 1983); Shannon Fogg, *The Politics of Everyday Life in Vichy France, Foreigners, Undesirables, and Strangers*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); John F. Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France, The French under Nazi Occupation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 99-136; and Jackson, 150-51.

How could a government espousing these principles and instituting these programs gain legitimacy and the support of the French people? When the French public came to understand the programs the Vichy government planned to pursue, in particular the policy of collaboration with Germany, they found the situation, in the words of Pierre Laborie, French historian of public opinion, “inconceivable.” “In the opinion that the majority [of the French] reached [by the fall of 1940], Vichy was perceived only as a temporary episode, a regime of circumstance, a strategy of wait and see...Common opinion found it hard to conceive that a new political and social order could be built in a stable way while the country was confronted with a situation of war. Thus, this logic of temporality and waiting, which initially aided in the rallying of people to Vichy, or, more accurately, to the image they had of Vichy, also contributed to its fragility and explains reasons behind the contempt for it.”<sup>12</sup> If the Vichy government was to maintain support beyond the period of crisis, it would need to win over the French people. Since it was unlikely this could be accomplished through shared values, it would have to be through demonstrated competence in governing the nation.

Obviously, the new Vichy government would at some point have to deal with the fundamental question of its own legitimacy, especially if it continued to pursue policies that had little support among the populace. A vast historiography already exists which attempts to explain the sources from which the Vichy government drew its initial support and how it attempted to expand this support.<sup>13</sup> One of these methods, the subject of this chapter, was the government’s exploitation of the concerns the French people had for the enormous number of young Frenchmen held in Germany as prisoners of war.

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<sup>12</sup> Pierre Laborie, *L’opinion française sous Vichy; Les Français et la crise d’identité nationale 1936-1944*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990), 241.

<sup>13</sup> See Jackson on legality and legitimacy of the Vichy government (133-136) and domestic propaganda (246-271).

While the German removal of the prisoners of war represented a social and economic catastrophe to France, it also provided the Vichy government with a cause they could use to solidify and increase their base of support among the people. Regardless of what a person's political or religious beliefs were, what their social or economic status was, what region they lived in, everyone in France shared a common concern for the welfare and safe return of the prisoners. If a person were lucky enough not to have a direct family member in captivity, almost certainly he or she had friends or acquaintances, co-workers or neighbors, held in Germany. An examination of French newspapers from the second half of 1940, as detailed below, reveals that, aside from stories about the continuing war and economic difficulties, no single issue received more coverage than that of the prisoners.<sup>14</sup> The prisoners represented one of those rare political issues that crossed all class, ideological and regional lines. If the Vichy government could convince the French people that it represented the group most capable of ensuring the prisoners were well-treated by the Germans and most able to win their rapid release, the political benefits would be obvious. Even a French person inclined to disagree with the Vichy government on all issues affecting the nation might still find it worth supporting if it could demonstrate its competence in taking care of the prisoners. If acceptance of the Vichy government and its policy of collaboration with Germany ensured that the unfortunate young men of France were treated well and would soon be allowed to return home, then perhaps the French body politic, despite all its differences with the new government, might still conclude that Vichy represented a government worth supporting.

As potentially beneficial as the prisoner of war issue was for Vichy, it also carried significant risks. If the French people were to compromise their values and support Vichy and

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<sup>14</sup> For more on newspaper coverage of the prisoners of war, see also Yves Durand, *La Captivité, Histoire des prisonniers de guerre français 1939-1945, 2<sup>e</sup> édition*, (Paris: Édité par la Fédération Nationale des Combattants Prisonniers de Guerre et Combattants d'Algérie, Tunisie, Maroc, 1981), 521-25.

collaboration, they would naturally expect to receive concrete benefits in return. A compromise as significant as accepting collaboration with Germany and an authoritarian government should produce a reward of the same magnitude. Freedom for the prisoners might rise to this level. If collaboration were truly to be a mutually beneficial policy, a policy worth entering into, the prisoner of war issue was an obvious test case. When the Vichy government publicly identified itself with the policy of collaboration, its fate became tied to the success or failure of this policy; and since no issue was more obviously tied to collaboration than that of the prisoners, to a large extent the legitimacy of the Vichy government would sink or swim based on what happened with the prisoners. Clearly, it was entirely up to the Germans how the prisoners were treated and when they would be released. By positioning itself as a group capable of working with the Germans, Vichy in effect put its fate in the Germans' hands. The French people quickly came to understand that collaboration was a one-sided agreement and the Vichy gamble failed. The treatment and exploitation of the POWs provides an excellent case study of the imbalance of the Franco-German relationship.

Vichy did not create the prisoner of war issue. The problem was of such a magnitude that any French government in 1940 would have had to deal with it. What is of historical interest is not that Vichy engaged the prisoner of war problem and afforded it prominence, rather, it is how the regime used this issue to buy increased support from the French people and how, by misrepresenting the prisoners' conditions of captivity and level of support for the regime, it laid the groundwork for many of the postwar struggles of the returning POWs.

### **The Nature of Vichy Prisoner of War Propaganda**

The messages supplied by the Vichy government regarding their handling of the prisoner of war issue evolved during the first five months of occupation. Initially, the message conveyed

to the French people was that the government was diligently performing its duties to ensure that the prisoners were well cared for and, as far as was reasonably possible, afforded their Geneva Convention rights. This message was supplemented time and again with the implication that the prisoners would return home soon due to the efforts of the French leaders. Following Pétain's meeting with Hitler at Montoire in late October of 1940 when it became clear that the Germans had no intention of releasing the prisoners any time soon,<sup>15</sup> the message evolved. No longer were the prisoners presented as likely to return home soon. Instead, they were presented as living a simple but not entirely unpleasant life, spending their days pursuing cultural and educational activities which would lead to long-term self-improvement. The prisoners' reasonably comfortable standard of living was presented as insured by the tireless work of the Vichy government and the self-sacrificing acts of the French people. The government now described hopes for the rapid release of the prisoners as childish, and instructed the people that as long as they thought of Germany as the enemy and refused to commit themselves to collaboration it was unreasonable to hope for a general release.<sup>16</sup>

While the government's attempt to shape opinion of what could be expected in terms of the release of the prisoners was evolving during 1940, a second message, this one of a more consistent nature, also was disseminated. The French public was led to believe that the prisoners were united in their support of the Vichy leadership, and that they were anxious to return home so they could participate in the moral rebuilding of France along the lines of the *révolution nationale*.

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Paxton, *Vichy France, Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 74-80.

<sup>16</sup> This and other aspects of the propaganda campaign will be referenced with specific examples later in the body of this chapter.

Neither the representation of the prisoners' austere but comfortable lifestyle, nor their offering widespread support to the Vichy government, were accurate reflections of the reality of the captivity.<sup>17</sup> Of this, the French population was largely unaware. Vichy was almost in complete control of how the prisoners were represented to the French people, as their own direct correspondence to home was limited to a handful of short letters and postcards each year, all of which were censored both by German then Vichy authorities. The prisoners had no real voice of their own.<sup>18</sup> The handful of prisoners who gained early release in 1940 and 1941 to become public spokesmen for the prisoners were often chosen based on their pro-collaborationist views.<sup>19</sup> Vichy's censorship provided no outlet for liberated prisoners who wished to speak out against collaboration, or describe the harsher reality of the captivity, the opportunity to do so. The result of this managed flow of information and misrepresentation was that if a French citizen publicly spoke out against Vichy, he or she might well be seen as opposed to the shared will of the prisoners suffering in Germany - opposed to the hopes and dreams of those men who were making a far greater sacrifice for the country than anyone still enjoying the relative freedom of France. It would be a short leap to the position: "If you are for the prisoners, then you are for Vichy," and conversely, "If you oppose Vichy, then you don't care about the prisoners." Seen through the prism of Vichy's prisoner of war propaganda, opposition to Vichy was disrespectful to the harshly won wisdom of the prisoner of war community, a shameful and self-indulgent attitude practiced only by those who were spared the worst sacrifices brought on by the defeat. Those who were truly making the greatest sacrifices for France, the young men suffering far

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<sup>17</sup> See Chapters five, seven and eight.

<sup>18</sup> A very well done examination of Vichy's efforts to portray the prisoners of war as supportive of their government is Sarah Fishman's "Grand Delusions: The Unintended Consequences of Vichy France's Prisoner of War Propaganda," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Apr. 1991, 229-254.

<sup>19</sup> See Sarah Fishman, *We Will Wait, Wives of French Prisoners of War, 1940-1945*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 93-100; and chapter eight of this work.

from home, were lined up in support of the Marshal. Vichy used this constructed image of the prisoners of war as a shield from public criticism.

### **Puy-de-Dome, 1940 - A Case Study**

The way Vichy prisoner of war propaganda was disseminated on the ground level can be demonstrated by examining one specific region of France in 1940, the department of Puy-de-Dôme. In many ways Puy-de-Dôme provides an excellent platform for this exercise. As this department lay within the unoccupied region of France censorship was under the control of Vichy, not German, authorities. The town of Vichy itself lay just north of this department, about 30 kilometers from Clermont-Ferrand, Puy-de-Dôme's largest urban center. This proximity makes it safe to assume that the government's control of the press was as tight here as anywhere in unoccupied France and unaffected by communication difficulties. Throughout 1940 two newspapers were published in Clermont-Ferrand. While both newspapers were censored by the Vichy authorities, they did maintain different characters. *Le Moniteur du Puy de Dome* had long been owned by Pierre Laval, one of the key figures of the Vichy government. Laval, serving as Marshal Pétain's Prime Minister through most of 1940 (and again from 1942-1945), was the architect of the policy of collaboration, remaining a strong and outspoken supporter of this Franco-German partnership throughout the war. In August of 1945, he was the most prominent Vichy official executed by the provisional French government for treason. Not surprisingly, *Le Moniteur* did not challenge the Vichy leadership's messages. Clermont-Ferrand's second newspaper, *La Montagne*, was owned by a stubbornly independent 70-year old former socialist deputy named Alexander Varenne. From 1906 to 1936 Varenne had represented the Puy-de-Dôme in the Chamber of Deputies, served as governor general in Indochina and, during World

War I, in the Censorship Office.<sup>20</sup> Not unexpectedly, the Vichy government found a man of this stature difficult to bring under control, and *La Montagne* clearly separated itself from *Le Moniteur* in its attempts to disseminate views independent from those of the Vichy leadership. In his study of life in the Puy-de-Dôme during World War II, John Sweets chronicled Varenne's life-long struggles against organizations he felt were trying to control his freedom of speech and political association.<sup>21</sup> Shortly after the formation of the Vichy state Varenne placed himself as a critic of what he perceived to be the "authoritarian drift" of the new government and, by August of 1940, had begun to publicly and privately offer policy advice to Marshal Pétain and his ministers. Sweets has written of Varenne's private correspondence with Pétain during the first few months of the Vichy regime, "It would be difficult to imagine a more fervent and eloquent testimonial to French republicanism, or a firmer defense of civil liberties and justice, than was contained in these letters."<sup>22</sup> The public side of Varenne's crusade can be documented in the pages of the newspaper he owned. Unlike *Le Moniteur*, *Le Montagne* made no effort to conceal from its readership stories that had been censored. Wherever the censors' red pencil had crossed through a passage or even a whole story, *Le Montagne* would indicate so by leaving a stark white empty space in its print version in the place the eliminated words had previously occupied. Varenne carried this practice so far that on 3 July 1940, suspended in the middle of an empty white box taking up the right side of *Le Montagne's* front page where his editorial normally was found, sat the simple announcement: "Alexandre Varenne's article was entirely censored."

Thus, in the Puy-de-Dôme there existed two separate daily newspapers with clearly divergent biases. An examination of the way these two newspapers handled a series of news topics related to the prisoners of war will be used below to construct a case study demonstrating

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<sup>20</sup> Sweets, 137.

<sup>21</sup> Sweets, 137-151.

<sup>22</sup> Sweets, 138.

how elements of the Vichy prisoner of war propaganda campaign were disseminated in France in 1940. Examples from *Le Moniteur* and direct government news releases exemplify the propaganda messages in more or less pure form, while those drawn from *La Montagne* bring to light the population's frustrations with the government's handling of the issue and concerns they had which were left unaddressed.

### **Early Attempts to Quell Public Anxiety over the Prisoners' Fate**

Immediately following the German conquest, France existed in a state of chaos. Millions of refugees had fled south, throwing the entire nation into a state of confusion. Throughout June and July, the *Puy-de-Dôme* newspapers were filled with heartbreaking classified notices of family members attempting to locate missing loved ones, a task for which the government was able to provide little assistance given its own disrupted state. Throughout these first weeks, the anxiety and dread of those searching for news of unaccounted loved ones serving in the military is one of the most common themes in newspaper coverage and postwar memoirs of what came to be known as "The Exodus."<sup>23</sup> It was not uncommon for loved ones of servicemen to learn that they were held prisoner months after they had been declared missing. Both *La Montagne* and *La Moniteur* did what they could to alleviate the suffering of these people as quickly as they could by publishing lists of men serving in locally raised military units who were known to be in captivity. The first of these lists appeared on 19 July, roughly a month after fighting had ceased. The lists, which appeared several times a week, contained only the prisoners' names, the units

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<sup>23</sup> The 1940 Exodus, and French civilian collective memory of the summer of 1940, has become a popular topic of scholarship over the last fifteen years. For an excellent short treatment of the Exodus see Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France, The Nazi Invasion of 1940*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), 174-77. For more extensive accounts see Hanna Diamond, *Fleeing Hitler, France 1940*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007); Nicole Ann Dombrowski, *Beyond the Battlefield, The French Civilian Exodus of May-June 1940*, (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1995); Shannon Fogg, *The Politics of Everyday Life in Vichy France, Foreigners, Undesirables, and Strangers*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Richard Vinen, *The Unfree French, Life under the Occupation*, (London: Allen Lane, 2006), 29-45.

they had been serving in, their hometowns, and in what camp they currently were held. One can easily imagine these lists being quickly passed from hand to hand, undoubtedly giving some peace of mind to distraught parents, wives and friends.

The new government began to demonstrate some control over the situation shortly after the above lists of prisoners were published. The *Puy-de-Dôme* newspapers began printing information released by the government of a practical nature, in an open effort to answer many of the common questions that were flooding their offices and could not be replied to individually. The public was instructed as to how they could write to a prisoner (only short letters directed to specific prisoners at known camps could be sent, and a reminder that the postal service was doing as well as it could, but was still in terrible shape), what could be sent to a prisoner in a package (only 5 kgs, food, cigarettes and photographs, no printed material and no personal notes), and how a citizen could donate money for prisoner relief (gifts to the government agency or the French Red Cross). All mail concerning the prisoners could be sent free of postage. Seeing official notices of this nature in the newspapers almost on a daily basis gave the impression that the government was proactive, capable, and doing everything it could during a very difficult time. Vichy was instructing the people to be patient and trust that their official organizations were making progress. A notice printed 28 July 1940 included the assurance, “Authorities are doing everything possible to put an end to the suffering of the families.”<sup>24</sup>

One matter not addressed by these official releases were the conditions in which the prisoners were being held. A very early news story published in Varenne’s *La Montagne* on 13 July addressed this topic. The story described a *frontstalag* in the town of Moulins. The prisoners held there, while not enjoying a comfortable life, were receiving plenty to eat thanks to donations from the local population. These prisoners were even allowed to see visitors who knew to come

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<sup>24</sup> “*La correspondance aux prisonniers de guerre*”, *Le Moniteur*, 28 July 1940, 1.

and ask for them by name: “No barriers separate the detainees from their visitors [in the guarded visiting room]. Many women have brought their children. Each group can speak freely.”<sup>25</sup> This certainly was the type of story that would have been of great interest to many Puy-de-Dôme readers; however, the story was not duplicated in Laval’s paper. As the *La Montagne* story explained, “...so many rumors abound, so much alarming news has been spread, that all fears seemed justified. Here now is the first comfort.” While it is possible that *Le Moniteur’s* decision not to print a story about these prisoners was due to the editors not finding it newsworthy, given the great level of anxiety about the prisoners at this time this is a difficult rationale to accept. Certainly, this story would have a generally calming effect on most people who were concerned about their missing loved ones. Perhaps the reason this particular story, or others about the living conditions and locations of prison camps near the Puy-de-Dôme, were not printed in *Le Moniteur* might be that some messages these stories gave out worked against the government’s desire that the French people simply place their trust in the new regime’s ability to manage the prisoner of war issue. The *Montagne* story encouraged people to act in ways that would undermine Vichy’s control of information by informing readers that if, instead of passively trusting in the government to take care of the situation, they proactively took matters into their own hands, they might find out if their loved ones were alive or dead, where they were being held, and might even be allowed to visit with them. Such a story might well result in more people leaving their homes in search of information, more direct communication between prisoners and the population, and less reliance on the direction of a paternalistic government. *Le Moniteur’s* decision not to print stories about these temporary prison camps indicates that, even as early as

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<sup>25</sup> “Grâce au dévouement des habitants les prisonniers français de Moulins ont pu améliorer leur sort”, *La Montagne*, 13 July 1940, 2.

July 1940, the new government may have considered control of information more important than providing their people peace of mind.

### **The Silent Deportation**

The most significant aspect of the prisoner of war issue from the French population's point of view was their removal from France. By August 1940 over a million prisoners of war had been deported into Germany. This move was a clear signal that the Germans had no intention of releasing the prisoners anytime in the near future. Amazingly, this million man deportation received no mention in either Puy-de-Dôme newspaper, something which can only be attributed to strict censorship. As shown below, news stories in the following months indicate that the people of the region were aware that the prisoners had been moved to Germany; however, this information must have come from sources other than the local press. That an event as significant as the systematic deportation of over a million prisoners of war during a few months was not reported can only be attributed to strict press censorship. Clearly, the Vichy government wanted to limit public awareness about the deportation; however, as was demonstrated by the Puy-de-Dôme's newspapers' later acknowledgment of the deportation as a *fait accompli* in November 1940, events of this magnitude could not be kept quiet altogether. As to specifically why the Vichy government suppressed reporting on the deportation remains an open question. No documentations speaking toward motivation or intention for this specific area of censorship were uncovered during archival research for this project, nor, to the author's knowledge, has such documentation been uncovered by other scholars. Given the government's larger propaganda goals one explanation for this censorship is that reporting on the deportation was forbidden as it would undermine the regime's propaganda message that it was effectively working with German authorities for the rapid release of all POWs.

Despite the ongoing deportation, multiple examples of Vichy government assurances that the prisoners of war could expect to be freed quickly were printed in the Puy-de-Dôme newspapers throughout July-November 1940. Among these were the frequent news stories about small groups of men returning home, normally due to government action. For example, on 21 July a story appeared in *Le Moniteur* about the government's successful arrangements with German authorities for the furloughing of some prisoners of war who possessed skills indispensable for the maintenance of public order.<sup>26</sup> The following week a story announcing the joyous repatriation of eighty-five injured prisoners, accompanied to their destination in Lyon by attentive French military and health workers, was prominently carried in both papers.<sup>27</sup> Several stories and official government communiqués in early September informed the public that the government had been successful in its talks with German authorities and that the people could soon expect the return of more injured prisoners and more specialists.<sup>28</sup> The pervasiveness of the government's message that it was doing all it could to gain the release of the prisoners can also be demonstrated in the gentle rebuke it received in an editorial in Varenne's *Le Montagne*. This editorial suggested that perhaps the government should place more priority on ensuring the prisoners were receiving mail and supplies, rather than focusing so intently on their liberation.<sup>29</sup>

The government's desire to communicate its high level of concern for the prisoners is perhaps best exemplified by a news release on 19 September. In this release the public was assured that the fate of the prisoners was the "strongest preoccupation" of the government and it was "utilizing every possible measure" to alleviate their "physical and moral struggles." The

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<sup>26</sup> "La libération de certains prisonniers de guerre", *Le Moniteur*, 15 August 1940, 1.

<sup>27</sup> "Le rapatriement des grands blessés français" *Le Moniteur*, 23 August 1940, 1 and "Le premier convoi", *La Montagne*, 24 August 1940, 1.

<sup>28</sup> "Libération de certaines catégories de prisonniers de guerre", *Le Moniteur*, 15 September 1940, 2. "Mis en congé de captivité catégories de prisonniers de guerre", *La Montagne*, 9 September 1940, 1.

<sup>29</sup> "Les prisonniers", *Le Montagne*, 9 September 1940, 2.

article did not focus on *if* the prisoners would be liberated soon, but rather on steps the government was already taking to ensure the prisoners would experience few problems reintegrating into society *upon their liberation*. These steps included ensuring that the POWs would be able to return to their previous jobs, that they would be treated the same as all other veterans in terms of benefits, and that their chances for promotion would in no way be hindered by their time in captivity. The prisoners and their families were assured that any fears they had of “being the object of a certain forgetting” were ill founded, and that any person living in France who attempted to profit from their absence would find no rewards in doing so.<sup>30</sup>

The cumulative effect of these messages was to leave in the public’s mind the impression that the Vichy government was successfully working with the Germans to secure the release of the prisoners, that these efforts had already resulted in some widely publicized successes, and that back home they were already occupying themselves with arrangements to ensure the return would go smoothly. These positive indications were further reinforced by the total absence of messages in the newspapers examined that might moderate hopes of an imminent return. No indication was given of the Vichy leadership’s knowledge of the scale of the deportation and the recognition on their part that this, in all likelihood, meant the prisoners were in store for a lengthy captivity.<sup>31</sup>

### **Refocusing the Propaganda from Liberation to Proper Care of the Prisoners**

On 20 October Marshal Pétain and Pierre Laval met with Adolph Hitler for the first time at the rail junction town of Montoire. This meeting and the negotiations of the following weeks

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<sup>30</sup> “*Le gouvernement se préoccupe de l’avenir des prisonniers de guerre à leur retour de captivité*”, *Le Moniteur*, 20 September 1940, 1.

<sup>31</sup> For the level of awareness within the Vichy leadership on German plans to use the prisoners as forced laborers see Raffael Scheck, “The Prisoner of War Question and the Beginnings of Collaboration: The Franco-German Agreement of 16 November 1940,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 2010, 369.

dramatically impacted Vichy foreign and prisoner-of-war policy. Pétain came to the meeting hoping to negotiate less onerous terms from the Germans in terms of the occupation and liberation of the prisoners. Hitler refused to come to any specific agreement with Pétain, but he made it understood that any concessions to France would only come as a result of active French support of German war aims, including the defeat of Britain. Pétain, unwilling to fully meet Hitler's demands, took the partial but politically disastrous step of announcing to the French people on 31 October that he had embraced the concept of collaboration as the official policy of the Vichy government.<sup>32</sup> When Pétain issued this announcement, his minister of prisoner of war affairs, Georges Scapini, was in Germany negotiating the prisoner of war issue. Pétain's public announcement of collaboration with Germany, but refusal to join them in their war with Britain, was seen as a half step in Berlin. At this same time, Scapini's diplomatic mission ended in failure. This can hardly be seen as surprising. While to many in France the war was over, from the German perspective, until Britain came to terms, it remained an unfinished job. From the German point of view, therefore, releasing the French prisoners while the war raged on was nonsensical. By doing so they would be discarding a significant economic resource when it was most needed (a large captive labor force to replace the German men serving in the armed services), while simultaneously creating a much less stable occupation situation in France by flooding it with bitter, unemployed, militarily trained young men. Following the twin failures of Scapini and Pétain in making progress towards the prisoners' release, by early November Vichy had to confront the fact that they were not coming home anytime soon, and this new reality would require a significant adjustment in their propaganda messages.

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<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the best treatment of the diplomatic aspects of the Montoire meeting remains Robert Paxton's *Vichy France*, 74-80.

The reworked Vichy message emerged in full in a news release on 19 November 1940. The release, primarily presented in the form of a speech given by Scapini, dominated the front pages of both Puy-de-Dôme newspapers that day.<sup>33</sup> Aside from the wording of the headlines, both Puy-de-Dôme newspapers carried Scapini's full address in a prominent location without editorial comment, implying that censors had given little leeway in how the new situation would be presented. Paradoxically titled "The Prisoners Will Return to their Homes" in *Le Moniteur* and, more accurately, "The Situation of the Prisoners" in *La Montagne*, Scapini initially highlighted the positive. Talks with the Germans regarding the furloughing of prisoners with four or more children, or for the oldest brother of four or more minor children when the father was deceased or unable to work, had gone well. In this instance Scapini's optimism was justified as eventually 18,731 men fitting into these categories were released.<sup>34</sup> The remainder of Scapini's address was of a less optimistic nature. Assuring the French people that he understood their personal anguish when it came to this issue, Scapini said he was going to clearly explain the situation so that anyone with "good old patriotic sense can measure, judge and understand it." Scapini found the sources of popular resentment understandable: letters were too slow and too few in number, there were too many restrictions placed on packages sent to prisoners, but primarily, "Why is he not free?" He exhorted: "My comrades!, Remember that there are close to two million prisoners and that we are beaten. Think of the gigantic material, moral, political and military problems that this poses..." He reminded his audience that the fact that Britain still pursued the war against Germany heavily influenced any prisoner settlement. Then speaking more sternly, he said: "If the French still consider Germany as an adversary, it is childish of them

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<sup>33</sup> All quotes in this paragraph from "Des prisonniers français vont rentrer dans leurs foyers", *Le Moniteur*, 19 November 1940, 1. "La situation des prisonniers, Une importante déclaration à Berlin de M. Scapini", *La Montagne*, 19 November 1940, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Durand, 324; and Chapter five of this work.

to ask for the liberation of the prisoners. On the other hand, how can one know if France has understood the harsh lesson that history has just given it? Within this incertitude, within this painful difficulty, I addressed myself to the generosity of Chancellor Hitler.... It is hard to ask with nothing to offer.” Scapini explained that all progress that had been made had come as a result of collaboration. For the first time the French people were being told by their government not to expect the rapid return of the prisoners, and that any longer range hopes for their return must be linked to collaboration. The reworked structure of the propaganda campaign was now in place. Return of the prisoners meant embracing collaboration → embracing collaboration meant support of Vichy → support of any group opposed to collaboration/Vichy meant dooming the prisoners to perpetual captivity. From July through October the French people had been told that the government was owed their support due to its progress in negotiating a release for the prisoners. Now they were being told that collaboration must also be embraced on the prisoners’ behalf, and that hopes for liberation had always been unrealistic. The government was now owed their support based on its ability to make the prisoners’ captivity more bearable through its partnership with Nazi Germany, not on its ability to bring them home.

### **The “Devotion and Fidelity” of the Prisoners**

While the message of what the people could expect the government to do in terms of liberating the prisoners changed during the course of 1940, a second message remained consistent. Vichy propaganda informed the French people time and again that the prisoners of war remained steadfast in their devotion to Marshal Pétain and his government. Just as the prisoners’ living conditions were misrepresented by Vichy propaganda, so was their overall political disposition. Certainly there were many supporters of the Vichy government to be found among the captives in Germany in 1940 but, just as in occupied France, this level of support

quickly declined. The Vichy leadership had ample evidence of the low regard the prisoners had for the regime by late 1941.<sup>35</sup> Despite this fact, Vichy propaganda continued to portray the prisoners as devoted followers throughout the conflict. For the Vichy regime to admit that the prisoners had developed no special sense of identification with the new government and the *révolution nationale* would be to admit that this ideologically and morally privileged group of people had not chosen to bestow the new government with the legitimacy their backing would provide.

Initially, this vision of the prisoners supporting Vichy carried special weight with the French public. The French soldiers had witnessed the debacle of 1940 more intimately than had any other group of French citizens. In 1940, no group was paying a greater price for the collapse than were those soldiers held in Germany.<sup>36</sup> These characteristics gave the French prisoners a seemingly higher moral position from which to address the causes of the defeat, and to recommend what measures should be put into place to correct whatever it was that had “gone wrong” in France and led to this unfortunate situation. Using this mindset, the Vichy government represented the prisoners as being well-informed of the tenets of the *révolution nationale* and united in their support for Pétain’s government. At least in 1940-41, many citizens would be naturally inclined to think that they had no place questioning the prisoners’ hard-earned wisdom; indeed, their opposition to the prisoners’ recommendations would be selfish and arrogant.

Newspaper stories depicting prisoners commonly represented them as responding patriotically and enthusiastically to Pétain and his leadership of France. The Vichy government provided the prisoners with framed photographs of the Marshal, and news stories depicting camp

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<sup>35</sup> See Chapter five.

<sup>36</sup> During the war several groups in France would suffer much more harshly than the prisoners of war, principal among these the Jews and Communists. During the time period under examination here, August, 1940 through mid-1941, the traumas of these groups were not yet evident to the French population. The hardships endured by the prisoners of war were of a more public and immediate nature.

life showed these portraits occupying a central place in the barracks.<sup>37</sup> The small number of prisoners lucky enough to gain early release from captivity (almost always due to serious health issues which had made them a burden rather than an asset to their German captors) were described as attributing their release to the efforts of the government, and responding patriotically and enthusiastically to Pétain and other Vichy leaders. The *Moniteur* story about the arrival of a train of 500 seriously injured soldiers in Marseille on 20 November 1940, had the newly repatriated men shouting, “*Vive la France! Vive Pétain!*” upon arrival.<sup>38</sup> When newly repatriated soldiers did not display as much enthusiasm for the government as might have been hoped, the regime resorted to falsification. One documented example of this involved a photograph of newly liberated prisoners waving from the windows of a train coach. When this photograph was reproduced the following month for a pamphlet, it had been doctored so that now the previously clean train coach bore the inscriptions “*Vive Laval,*” “*Vive le Marechal.*”<sup>39</sup> The Vichy depiction of the French prisoner of war community was greatly distorted from the reality of their lives. The prisoner of war community was represented as having learned from the disaster of 1940 that it was best for them to put aside all their previous class and ideological differences to unite behind the Marshal and his vision of a remade France. A Vichy pamphlet, assuming the voice of the prisoners, announced, “No more disagreements among us, only one word of order as we await our return: *Obey and Serve.*” The prisoners were depicted not only as united behind the government, but also, while in Germany, having successfully built a society

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<sup>37</sup> Fishman, “Grand Delusions”, 235.

<sup>38</sup> *Le Moniteur*, “500 soldates blessés a Dunkerque sont arrivés a Marseille retour d’Allemagne,” 21 November 1940, 1.

<sup>39</sup> Durand, *La Captivité*, 326-27.

based on the values promoted by the *révolution nationale*, thus providing an example to the people back home.<sup>40</sup>

This representation of the prisoners was most fully realized in a Christmas themed news release. On 29 December *Le Moniteur* published an article made up of quotes from letters Pétain was said to have recently received from grateful prisoners of war. Pétain had arranged to have each prisoner receive a small care package on Christmas to help him celebrate his first holiday separated from his homeland. Included in this package was a framed portrait of Pétain for each prisoner.<sup>41</sup> The first letter writer hopes to assure “the Marshal of France, head of the French state, of [his fellow prisoners’] respect and of their admiration and to swear to their great and venerable father devotion and fidelity.” This article continues that all the letters the Marshal received “testify,” as did the one above, to “the vibrant patriotism and the sincere loyalty of their authors.”

A naval officer held in Nuremberg wrote:

In the name of my fellow officers and in the name of our soldiers, I address to you my very intense and very respectful thanks for your Christmas shipment. It was doubly festive for us because it came from France and because it came from you. In a way, it is all one, because France incarnates itself in you today and we know that our fate can not be in better hands. It is very pleasant for me, as the oldest of all the officers present in Nuremberg, to have assured you of this. I pray you accept, Monsieur le Marshal, the assurance of my deep and very respectful devotion.

Vichy’s representation to the French people of the prisoners of war in full support of the government and the *révolution nationale* was supplemented with a second distorted image. The daily life of the prisoners was represented to the French people as being simple and austere, but not unduly so. The French were assured the prisoners were receiving enough to eat, were living in adequate if Spartan lodgings, and were being allowed to return home when their health was at risk. As historian Sarah Fishman summarized, “Readers in France were given the impression that

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<sup>40</sup> Fishman, “Grand Delusions”, 235.

<sup>41</sup> “*Des prisonniers de guerre écrivent au chef de l’Etat*”, *Le Moniteur*, 29 December 1940, 1.

the prisoners were at an extended summer camp of sorts.”<sup>42</sup> While at this camp the prisoners had to be coddled by government officials to use their time wisely. A *Le Moniteur* article from 28 October 1940, described a visit to a prison camp by the executive secretary of the S.D.P.G. “to discover what could be done to help the prisoners use their free time in a profitable manner.” At the camp he found prisoners organizing university classes among themselves, forming an orchestra of forty musicians, even studying to be priests. He assured those back home in France that the prisoners were in good morale and their living conditions were improving. With a little encouragement from people like himself, he offered a confident appraisal that the prisoners would use their time profitably pursuing intellectual activities.

The overall impression given by these and many other representations of the prisoners was that they were living a simple, but not entirely unpleasant, life. No indication was given that they were suffering from anything worse than boredom and a rather bland diet, situations which every French person could help relieve by either donating money to a relief fund to help fund the prisoners’ cultural pursuits, or by sending packages containing hard to obtain food items from which the prisoners could add variety to their meals. Vichy portrayed the prisoners as spending their enforced free time pursuing self-improvement programs or reflecting on their own and their nation’s shortcomings, shortcomings that had led to the decline of France and the defeat of 1940. The portraits of the Marshal hanging in places of honor, the warm assurances of fidelity and loyalty from the prisoners printed in papers, the enthusiastic pro-Vichy response of the lucky few who had been liberated, indicated to the reading public that the conclusions the prisoners had reached in their meditations were that Vichy’s policy of *révolution nationale* was the proper course for a rebuilding France to follow. The French people were being instructed that the hard

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<sup>42</sup> Fishman, “Grand Delusion”, 236.

won wisdom of the defeat of 1940 and the German exile had led the prisoners on a reflective journey which ended at Vichy's doorstep.

A separate article also published on 29 December described a short visit by Marshal Pétain to a prison camp.<sup>43</sup> There he informed the prisoners of his pleasure at finding their material conditions “not impossible.” He addressed the men as a group:

You might believe that we do not think of you, do not fear, you are the subject of all our preoccupations. You are prisoners and you suffer, I know this. But I can say to you that I suffer with you. Your pain is the same as our pain. We do our best to comfort your families. Know courage and patience. Your psychological conditions of existence are very trying, I well realize this. Punishment is very severe, but don't you think we deserve it! Once more, be patient. Your liberation may not be long off.

The prisoners' reaction to this address was not recorded in the news release.

### **Impact of the Propaganda Campaign on the Prisoners**

Vichy propaganda had linked proper care of the prisoners in Germany with the hated policy of collaboration. Almost by necessity the Vichy government had to ensure, through censorship and propaganda, that the prisoners' living conditions were positively depicted. If the actual conditions were widely known the French people would recognize that collaboration was not delivering its promised reward. After the immediate crisis of 1940 had passed, lacking a solid base of support for its radical domestic agenda, the success of collaboration had become Vichy's essential *raison d'être*. The reality of the prisoners' harsh life in Germany had to be kept from the French people. Instead, the French people were led to believe that the prisoners were reasonably comfortable. As time passed this false depiction of the captivity produced more resentment than satisfaction among the French population. Regardless as to who or what was to blame for the defeat of 1940, life had moved on in France. As this time passed, actions originally undertaken supposedly to ensure the proper treatment of the captives in Germany came to look

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<sup>43</sup> “*Votre libération peut ne pas tarder*”, *Le Moniteur*, 28 October 1940, 1.

more like a perpetual source of blackmail than a response to a temporary crisis. The prisoners' continued welfare had been the supposed reward for a long line of compromises demanded of the French people – compromises to their national dignity, compromises to their sense of morality, and daily compromises to their standard of living. To be informed that the prisoners were leading lives which seemed more comfortable than those led by many in occupied France fed into a growing sense of disenchantment among the people at the whole affair. One reflection of this dynamic was the significant decline after early 1943 in the number of locally organized activities and charitable drives in France to benefit the prisoners. At this time prisoner aide organizers began complaining about declining public interest.<sup>44</sup>

The prisoners of war were directly linked to the national humiliation of 1940 based on their service. By 1941 they were associated with the shameful policy of collaboration. They were also believed to be strong supporters of the increasingly despised Vichy regime. With the introduction the following year of the Réleve and S.T.O., Vichy programs of labor conscription for Germany allegedly created to speed the return of the POWs,<sup>45</sup> many men and women in France must have been more than ready to wash their hands of the dilemma altogether by 1942. During the first eighteen months of the captivity Vichy propaganda had played a role in transforming the public image of the prisoners from the most unfortunate victims of a national debacle into a growing burden on a most unfortunate nation.

The prisoner of war propaganda campaign tells us much about the Vichy government's weaknesses and insecurities. One should not conclude that the Vichy leadership did not care about the prisoners' fate, as almost certainly Pétain and other leaders did act in a manner which demonstrated at least some level of responsibility and concern for them. However, these sincere

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<sup>44</sup> Durand, 521-26.

<sup>45</sup> See Chapter six.

feelings did not prevent these same men from falsifying the reality of the prisoners' captivity and their collective mindset in service of their own political goals. Recognizing that perhaps it is unrealistic to expect a government to sacrifice its interests in pursuit of damaging honesty, one should still keep in mind the extent and seriousness of the Vichy campaign of misinformation. The welfare of the prisoners of war was not a minor issue; it was of immense importance throughout the nation, directly touching almost every French citizen's life. Due to the scale of the captivity and pervasiveness of abuse, covering up these realities required a considerable commitment of resources by an already badly stretched government. The systematic misrepresentation of the captivity was not a minor footnote in the Vichy leadership's attempt to solidify its hold on France, it was a priority project.

Any analysis of the government's propaganda campaign would be incomplete if the matter of its success were not addressed. Did the people believe what the government told them about the prisoners of war? Lacking quantitative polling information, historians are forced to rely on other methods to gauge what the French people believed about the captivity. One method of coming to grips with what people *thought* is to examine how they *acted*. Often groups of people will not leave behind reliable written documentation attesting to their beliefs and motivations. What they will leave behind is a record of their actions. If one accepts that, in most cases, people act in a manner consistent with what they believe, then a study of actions can be used to help construct an outline of their belief system.<sup>46</sup> Did the French people believe what the Vichy propaganda told them about the prisoners? Based upon how the prisoners were treated upon their return to France, I would argue that to a surprising degree, yes, the propaganda was accepted by

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<sup>46</sup> This methodology has been used by Peter Burke and Natalie Zemon Davis among others to interpret the meaning behind the actions of crowds or common people who left behind no written documentation regarding their motivations. Some better known examples of this methodology can be found in Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1978), xi-xiii; and Natalie Zemon Davis, "Rites of Violence" in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975).

many as accurate. Postwar memoirs and the papers of advocacy groups working on behalf of the returning prisoners of war are replete with examples of recently liberated prisoners receiving a bewilderingly cold reception.<sup>47</sup> The prisoners found most of the French people had absolutely no conception of how they had experienced captivity. Many however did share some common misconceptions. Examples abound of prisoners being informed by men and women who had spent the war in occupied France that the prisoners had nothing to complain about, because after all, they had been well cared for in captivity. Many in France treated the returnees with suspicion based on their belief that the returning wave of former prisoners would attempt to reintroduce elements of the *révolution nationale* once they were resettled in France. The prisoners were treated by much of the French population in a manner conforming to their representation in the wartime propaganda rather than in accordance with the reality of their wartime experiences. The people's fundamental misunderstandings about how the prisoners lived and what political opinions they tended to hold had to come from somewhere. If not the Vichy propaganda campaign, then where? While it may be impossible for a historian to know with certainty how much the French people believed the Vichy prisoner of war propaganda to be accurate, we can at least conclude that many in France at least acted as if they had accepted the validity of the propaganda.

It may be impossible to determine to what extent the prisoner of war propaganda campaign actually increased public support for the regime, if at all. We can be certain, however, that whatever support it did produce proved insufficient. Vichy could only have been fully successful in its original goal of brokering an agreement for the rapid release of the prisoners by agreeing to join Germany in waging war on Britain. The good will that the release of the prisoners would have brought the government would have been more than offset by the political

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<sup>47</sup> See chapter nine and epilogue.

cost of taking this hugely unpopular step. Faced with their inability to deliver the release of the prisoners, Vichy was forced to adjust its propaganda. Freedom for the prisoners, which the government had originally presented as a matter of course, was transformed into a reward that the people could only earn through their loyalty to the new government and its policy of collaboration. In its failed attempt to boost its own level of support, the Vichy government pursued a propaganda campaign that proved terribly destructive to the prisoners' long-term wellbeing.

Understanding some of the ways the Vichy government used the prisoner of war issue to gain and/or maintain domestic political support, illuminates the origins of some of the widely held but distorted visions many French citizens had in 1945 regarding the reality of the captivity. When the French people compared the Vichy manufactured representation of the prisoners of war to that of the reality of their own lives during the occupation and resistance struggle it is easy to understand why many saw the prisoners as not due admiration or recognition for their wartime service. In particular, compared to members of the *combattant resistance* the prisoners' level of sacrifice and devotion to republican values appeared meager. The Vichy campaign of intentional distortion may not have produced the result the regime hoped for, but it did help shape the prisoners' reception upon their return to France in 1945.

## Chapter 4 – The Experience of Captivity, 1940-1942

For the vast majority of French prisoners of war life in the *frontstalags* was only a brief introduction to their overall captivity experience. From June through August 1940 most of the prisoners were transported into Germany where they would spend up to five years working as slave laborers. Unlike many other deported groups the Nazis had no genocidal plan to exterminate the French prisoners. Ninety-eight percent of the French prisoners of war (POWs) taken into Germany eventually returned to France alive. When the French POW mortality rate of less than two percent is compared to that of more brutalized groups of prisoners, such as the sixty percent rate of the Soviet POWs,<sup>1</sup> or even the six percent mortality rate for disarmed Italian soldiers brought to Germany as forced laborers in 1943,<sup>2</sup> it is clear that the French were among the better treated prisoners in German hands. Even though the French captivity was less harsh in a relative sense, one must keep in mind what a high bar Nazi brutality had set during these years. The “average” French captivity lasted five years, years defined by slave labor, separation from their homes and loved ones, poor living conditions, an unhealthy diet and daily humiliations. Lacking control over their own lives, the prisoners could do little more than struggle through what seemed like an endless succession of days. What many people may remember as the best years of their lives were forever lost to these captives.

This chapter will describe the first half of the French captivity, from 1940 through the end of 1942. During these years the French prisoners were integrated into the German war economy, at first as a mass body of general laborers, and later as the vital industrial workers which Germany needed to continue the war. During these years the mentality of the French

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<sup>1</sup> G. F. Krivosheev, ed., *Soviet Casualties and Combat Losses in the Twentieth Century*, (London: Greenhill Books, 1997), 236.

<sup>2</sup> G. Rochat, *Una Ricerca Impossibile, Le Perdite Italiane nella Seconda Guerra Mondiale*, (Italia Contemporanea, 1995), 201, 687-700.

prisoners of war also went through an evolution. Through 1940 and 1941, most French prisoners remained optimistic that their trial would soon end, and they adopted a stoic attitude toward their exile. By 1942 this stoic optimism had been replaced by bitterness and cynicism as the standard mentality of the French prisoners.

### **Deportation into Germany**

During the months following the armistice most French POWs were transported from *frontstalags* in France to Germany for use as forced laborers. By early 1941 the only large group of prisoners left in the *frontstalags* by the Germans was 200,000 colonial prisoners.<sup>3</sup> This deportation is mistakenly described in some accounts as a concentrated event occurring mainly during August, 1940. Robert Paxton wrote that the prisoners “began to be moved in early August from temporary encampments in France to German *stalags*.”<sup>4</sup> Robert Gildea described the deportation as occurring only in response to the large number of prisoners escaping from the *frontstalags*.<sup>5</sup> If the deportation had in fact taken place in this manner, as a single wave about a month after the armistice, then the decision to relocate the prisoners would appear to be an unplanned German response to an unexpectedly prolonged war. In actuality, prisoners were being deported into Germany as early as May, 1940. After being captured on 29 May near Lille, Paul Fraise was marched from a *frontstalag* in Belgium into Germany sometime during the week

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Billig, “Le role des prisonniers de guerre dans l’économie du IIIe reich,” *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, no. 37 (1960): 62. The last major transfer of non-colonial prisoners occurred after a November, 1940 German decision to transfer 150,000 prisoners who had remained in the *frontstalags* working as agricultural forced laborers in the occupied territory. See chapter one for information on the colonial prisoners of war. A postwar study by the secretariat d’Etat aux Anciens Combattants concluded that 1,580,000 French prisoners of war were eventually deported into Germany. This figure seems likely to have been an overestimation given that after the initial wave of escapes from the *frontstalags* there were probably between 1,600,000 to 1,700,000 French prisoners in German hands, of which 200,000 were colonial prisoners, which were for the most part excluded from the deportation. According to German sources there were 1,490,000 French prisoners of war inside Germany in December, 1940. (François de Lannoy, *La Libération des Camps: Un million de prisonniers de guerre français, Mai 1945*. (Bayeux: Editions Heimdal, 1995), 34.)

<sup>4</sup> Paxton, Robert, *Vichy France, Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 53.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Gildea, *Marianne in Chains: Everyday Life in the French Heartland under the German Occupation*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), 74.

before the armistice came into effect.<sup>6</sup> Georges Hyvernaud was also captured as part of the Lille pocket. He remembers with irony that the train transporting him to a prison camp in Pomerania passed through Berlin on 14 June, the day German troops entered Paris.<sup>7</sup> The pace of deportations increased in August, but since prisoners had been relocated to worksites inside Germany even before the fighting had ended, it would seem that this deportation was not a late-emerging plan but rather, as German economic historian Ulrich Herbert concluded, an action the Germans had “planned well in advance.”<sup>8</sup> The Germans evidently had standing plans to treat Western prisoners in the same manner as they had treated the Polish prisoners eight months earlier, deportation and forced labor.

Most prisoners were transported by rail, although some were marched on foot or towed into captivity on river barges.<sup>9</sup> The prisoners received almost no warning of their relocation. They were simply marched to train stations and packed into cattle cars. Jean Hélicion’s *frontstalag* was deported into Germany on 21 August. When ordered to form into groups of one hundred men and march to the train station, Hélicion remembered the men were “naively sure that freedom had come.” Even after seeing a sign on a boxcar reading “Stolp y Pomern” some of the men stubbornly clung to their delusions, claiming they were sure they were simply being sent north to clear up demolition or south to help with the harvest before being sent home.<sup>10</sup> The cattle cars were often overcrowded with fifty or more men.<sup>11</sup> Hyvernaud described how he and the men in his car had to organize themselves to all face in one direction in order to have enough room for

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Fraisse, *Écrits de captivité 1940-1943*, (Paris: Editions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 1991), 52.

<sup>7</sup> Georges Hyvernaud, *Lettres de Poméranie, 1940-1945*. (Paris: Éditions Claire Paulhan, 2002), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Ulrich Herbert, *Hitler’s Foreign Workers; Enforced Foreign Labor in Germany Under the Third Reich*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 95.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Christophe, *Les flammes du Purgatoire, Histoire des prisonniers de 1940*, (Paris: Éditions France-Empire, 1979), 38.

<sup>10</sup> Jean Hélicion, *They Shall Not Have Me. The Capture, Forced Labor, and Escape of a French Prisoner of War*, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1943), 92-94.

<sup>11</sup> Yves Durand, *La Captivité, Histoire des prisonniers de guerre français 1939-1945*. 2<sup>e</sup> ed. (Paris: Fédération Nationale des Combattants Prisonniers de Guerre et Combattants d’Algérie, Tunisie, Maroc, 1981), 62.

everyone to lie down.<sup>12</sup> The train journeys normally lasted three or four days, during which time the men might be allowed a short break each day to disembark into an open field where they would relieve themselves and eat. Some prisoners were sealed inside their boxcar for the entire journey. Gustave Folcher's journey lasted 75 hours, during which time no food or water was provided for the prisoners.<sup>13</sup> Henri Laloux described his three days sealed in a sweltering cattle car, without food or water, simply as "a brutal time."<sup>14</sup> By the time the men disembarked at their destination they were starving, sick and filthy. Some German towns turned the arrival of these trainloads of French prisoners into veritable ceremonies. Many of the prisoners wrote of the humiliation they felt of being paraded in their broken down condition past German civilians. They remembered being taunted by children and noted the "great indifference" most Germans seemed to have to their suffering.<sup>15</sup>

Given the massive number of French men involved, and the widespread public interest in the prisoners, the lack of news coverage in France of their deportation to Germany can only reasonably be attributed to censorship. Given that many, if not most, French citizens expected the prisoners would be quickly released; their deportation would presumably be considered a newsworthy development. The two newspapers published in the unoccupied Puy-de-Dôme department in 1940 contained several stories most weeks regarding the prisoners. Surprisingly, none of these stories directly addressed the deportation. Despite this lack of newspaper reporting the French people were evidently aware of the deportation of their prisoners to Germany as, by

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<sup>12</sup> Georges Hyvernaud, *The Cattle Car*. (Marlboro: Marlboro Press, 1997), 95-96. French boxcars were called "forty and eights" as they were designated by the army to be large enough to transport either forty men or eight horses. Gustave Folcher remembers there being 35 men in his boxcar (154); Héliou remembered being packed more tightly, 55 in his car (93).

<sup>13</sup> Gustave Folcher, *Marching to Captivity, The War Diaries of a French Peasant, 1939-1945*, (London: Brassey's, 1996), 154.

<sup>14</sup> Henri Laloux, *Avril 1945, Libéré ar l'armée rouge. L'incroyable odyssée d'un prisonnier de guerre français K.G.*, (Paris: Editions Heimdal, 1997), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Durand, 64.

the end of August, news articles treated the topic as common knowledge. An article published on 30 August in *La Montagne* informed readers that they could no longer send mail to prisoners using their *frontstalag* address. Mail would henceforth need to be addressed to the prisoners in their “permanent camps” – *oflags* and *stalags* designated by number.<sup>16</sup> This information was repeated three weeks later with the explanation, “The number of prisoners [in the *frontstalags*] diminishes each day due to their continuing regrouping towards their permanent camps.”<sup>17</sup> *Le Moniteur*, the newspaper owned by Pierre Laval, published a list of the *stalags* and *oflags* in Germany on 12 December, 1940, information which was repeated the following weeks in *Le Montagne*. These were the first articles which directly addressed the whereabouts of the prisoners since the lists of individual inmates at various *frontstalags* had been published in June and July. News of the deportation worked against the Vichy government’s goal of assuring the French people that it was effectively protecting the prisoners and making progress towards their release. As noted earlier, their suppression of information on the deportation of the prisoners is one more example of how, in their effort to control information, the Vichy government put their political goals in front of allowing useful information to flow to anxious citizens.

### *Stalags vs. Oflags*

All prisoners were assigned to a permanent camp upon arrival in Germany. Enlisted personnel and non-commissioned officers (NCOs), who made up over 98% of all French captives, were distributed across Germany in 63 *stalags*. The 29,000 captured French officers were held separately in 14 *oflags*. International law recognized differing standards of treatment

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<sup>16</sup> La correspondance avec les prisonniers de guerre, *La Montagne*, August 30, 1940.

<sup>17</sup> Le courrier des prisonniers, *La Montagne*, September 22, 1940.

for officers and enlisted personnel.<sup>18</sup> One privilege afforded officers was that, unlike enlisted personnel, they could volunteer to work, but could not be required to do so. Non-commissioned officers could only be required to supervise working enlisted prisoners, unless they volunteered for work of a different nature. The Germans respected these rules throughout the conflict; although, beginning in 1942, they began to exert more pressure on officers and NCOs to volunteer for work. Few officers accepted this offer.

Because of their separate housing and exemption from work the officers experienced captivity very differently than did the enlisted personnel. If the oflag experience was defined by boredom and frustration, Yves Durand, the most prominent historian of the French captivity, reminds us, “work was the dominant reality of captivity for the simple soldiers.”<sup>19</sup>

A rich intellectual and cultural life grew in many *oflags* as the officers developed ways to pass the time as profitably as possible. During their captivity many officers took university-level courses taught by fellow prisoners, wrote books, staged theatrical and musical productions or participated in debate circles. The disproportionate amount of attention given after the war to accounts written by officers, as opposed to those authored by common soldiers, caused many people to develop a skewed vision of how most French prisoners spent their years in Germany. The vast majority of French prisoners had little opportunity or time to take classes, debate philosophy or stage plays. The standard workweek for a prisoner was fifty-six to sixty hours divided over six days, with additional Sunday hours once or twice a month.<sup>20</sup> The twice-daily roll calls and required assemblies ate into the prisoners’ remaining time. What little free time the prisoners had remaining often had to be given over to daily chores such as cooking dinner and

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<sup>18</sup> Per Article 21 of the 1929 Geneva Conventions: “officers and persons of equivalent status who are prisoners of war shall be treated with due regard to their rank and age.”

<sup>19</sup> Durand, 71.

<sup>20</sup> Herbert, 226.

mending clothes. Even had they been inclined to the type of pursuits common to oflag-life, most days the working prisoners would simply have had little energy or time for them. As enlisted personnel accounted for over 98% of all French prisoners this dissertation will focus almost entirely on the experience of these common soldiers.

### **Introduction to Stalag-life**

For most prisoners, arrival at a stalag actually brought welcome relief from many of the hardships they had experienced during their first weeks of captivity. Unlike the camps in France, the German *stalags* normally contained wooden buildings with floors. After sleeping on dirt, often in the open air or in improvised tents, simply having a roof over their heads and a floor underneath their feet was a welcome change for the prisoners. While not plentiful or particularly appetizing, the meals at the *stalags* were at least served on a predictable schedule and provided the men with enough calories and nutrition to maintain their health. The *stalags* were also often the first location in which the Germans made serious efforts to impose order and discipline. Life in the *frontstalags* had been full of chaos for the prisoners. Provided the men did not attempt to escape from these temporary camps, the Germans more or less allowed them to manage their own affairs. In most cases the military hierarchical system fell apart among the captives during this initial stage. The men had little idea when they would next be fed, when and where they would be able to sleep, and, without a functioning chain of command, no set way of maintaining internal order and solving disputes which arose among themselves. Once in the *stalags* the men were assigned to squads under a recognized leader and set sleeping quarters. The move from the *frontstalags* to the *stalags* resulted in less individual freedom but more order and comfort. After living rough for weeks followed by several days sealed inside a cattle car, many of the prisoners

remember their arrival at their stalag as the first time they could begin to relax since before the battlefield.

During their first few days in the *stalags* the prisoners were processed and made ready for work. The men bathed and had their clothes laundered, often the first time for either activity in months. Their heads were shaved and their bodies disinfected. The prisoners then queued in front of tables full of paperwork to be processed into the growing army of slave laborers inside Germany. Each man had his name, address, description, stalag number and occupation recorded on a card. They were then photographed in groups of five, each holding on his chest a chalkboard on which was recorded his prisoner number. These photographs were cut into sections so each prisoner would have an identification card with his picture attached. Most of this processing was done by other French and Belgian prisoners called functionaries. Rightly or not, functionaries were generally held in low regard by their fellow captives. They were seen as bootlicks, serving the Germans in exchange for extra food and preferential treatment. Functionaries were also often able to stay in the *stalags* on a permanent basis while the rest of the prisoners were shuffled around Germany from one worksite to another. Men captured early in the war and those who spoke German had more opportunity to find work as functionaries. These characteristics served only to confirm the suspicion most prisoners already held about their allegiance.

### **From Stalags to Kommandos**

The *stalags* were never intended to be the prisoners' permanent holding areas. While all prisoners were assigned to a specific stalag, only a relatively small cadre of functionaries was permanently housed in them. The only other residents of the *stalags* were men unable to work and those who were in the process of being transferred from one worksite to another. After being

cleaned up and processed, more than 90% of all enlisted prisoners were assigned to satellite worksites called *kommandos*.<sup>21</sup> This rapid and almost total employment of the French prisoners demonstrates how fully the concept of prisoners as economic assets to be fully exploited had been accepted in Germany. *Kommandos* varied in size from a single prisoner working on a family farm to several thousand assigned to a factory or mine. Guards and administrators, supplied by the German army, lived at the *kommandos*. Most of the Germans overseeing the *kommandos* were military reservists who were considered unfit for frontline military service.

The *kommando* a prisoner was assigned to, and the job given him, was more a matter of luck than logic. When asked their occupation, prisoners tended to claim one which they hoped would land them in a desirable job. The prisoners understood that agricultural and skilled craft work were among the best options open to them, and so they tended to identify themselves as coming from these occupations.<sup>22</sup> For a prisoner to declare himself a white-collar or service worker was equivalent to declaring himself bereft of skills. In most cases the prisoners' schemes proved to be wasted efforts as job assignments were given out haphazardly rather than based on a concerted effort to match up workers with suitable jobs.

Gustave Folcher's experience after arriving in Germany can serve as a relatively typical example of how the German distribution of prisoner manpower took place.

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<sup>21</sup> Durand, 96-97. In his survey of prisoners Durand found 93% of enlisted soldiers and 74% of all NCOs lived in *kommandos*. International Committee of the Red Cross reports documented a smaller percentage of stalag residents. ICRC reports from eleven *stalags* found 92.5% of all prisoners living in *kommandos* in 1941. In 1942 this percentage increased to 96.1%. Due to transfers and fluctuations no precise ratio of men in *stalags* and *kommandos* can be produced. An S.D.P.G. report dated 15 February 1942 estimated at that time that 92% of all French prisoners were assigned to *kommandos*. (AN F<sup>9</sup> 2320. Service diplomatique des prisonniers de guerre – Cabinet – État Moral. Folder: Rapports Psychologiques. Rapport à Monsieur l'Ambassadeur SCAPIN sur l'état moral des Prisonniers de Guerre," 15 Février 1942, 2). Durand concludes that "5 to 10 percent of effectives, at a maximum" lived in the *stalags* at any time.

<sup>22</sup> Durand, 92.

Ten days after arriving at Stalag XI-A Folcher, and several hundred other prisoners were marched to a German army surplus warehouse.<sup>23</sup> The most poorly dressed prisoners were given replacement clothes out of a stock of seized French uniforms. Some soldiers were given red pants dating from the early days of World War I. The men were told to gather all their belongings and be ready to be transported to their worksites. That afternoon, Folcher was one of roughly one thousand men gathered together in a courtyard just outside the stalag. As the men waited German civilians arrived in cars, trucks and tractors. These civilians registered at a table staffed by officers. Many of the arriving men were dressed in traditional forest-green suits with feathered hats. Some carried batons. Folcher believed these civilians had dressed to impress each other. The German officers began calling out numbers and names of factories or towns. The soldiers counted off groups of prisoners and separated them from the larger mass of men. Each group was assigned one to three guards. The guards loaded their rifles in front of the prisoners. During this process no effort was made to match up specific prisoners to specific types of work. Finally the groups were marched towards one of the waiting civilian vehicles. “The distribution continued like that, a sort of modern slave market, twentieth century style.”<sup>24</sup> Many other prisoners joined Folcher in describing this distribution process in the vocabulary of slavery. At some locations, under the eyes of armed guards, farmers would size up individual prisoners like livestock before making their selections.<sup>25</sup> The prisoners had almost no control over their fates and small decisions, unrecognized or ignored by their captors, went a long way in determining how bearable the next several years of their lives would be.

Since the first days of his captivity Folcher had taken some comfort in being a part of a small group of prisoners from his home region in southwestern France. Talking with friends

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<sup>23</sup> The following description from Folcher, 163-67.

<sup>24</sup> Folcher, 164.

<sup>25</sup> Durand, 93.

from a similar background in a shared dialect allowed the men to briefly forget the barbed wire and escape to their lives before the war. They spoke about their homes, their families and friends and recent events in their communities. When the prisoners were being distributed to the different *kommandos* Folcher was the second to last man counted off for one group. “The group was big enough when 25 had gone by, one of our mates, one alone was left behind, just one man from the Gard, from the Uzès area. We had been together from the beginning and abruptly, by a stroke of fate, we were separated.”<sup>26</sup>

Folcher and many other prisoners were loaded into two trailers pulled by a single tractor. It rained heavily and the men had no cover. Several stops were made over the next hours, at each of which a group of prisoners were removed from the trailers. Civilians gathered and stared at the prisoners at these stops. By nightfall Folcher’s group of twenty-five were the last remaining passengers. The men were soaking wet and their teeth chattered in the cold breeze. Well after nightfall the numb men arrived at their destination, the small Saxon village of Schorstedt. They were unloaded and taken to a dilapidated shed where they were each given a sandwich and told to sleep. Folcher wrote that when he entered the shed, he saw a few rough sleeping areas: “I take possession of one of them immediately because I guess that there won’t be enough for everyone and, my God, it’s still war and it’s the most resourceful people who get hold of things. My friend from Montpellier has a bed too. The others sort themselves out as best they can on the straw and the sacks, packed together like anchovies.”<sup>27</sup>

At five in the morning the men were woken and taken to the village square. There the *Bauernführer* (headman among the local farmers) supervised the distribution of the prisoners among a collection of local landowners. “He knew neither our ability nor our occupation. One

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<sup>26</sup> Folcher, 165.

<sup>27</sup> Folcher, 166-67.

man, big and strong, who seemed like he ought to get through everything, counted for nothing in farming, not even knowing how to pick up a fork handle, while the next man, skinny and weak-looking, could be an excellent worker.”<sup>28</sup> Folcher and one of his mates were assigned to a middle-aged farmer.

While the selection process Folcher went through was fairly typical for most French prisoners, the rest of his experience as a worker in Germany was not. From the point of his arrival in Schorstedt forward his life in captivity, while certainly not pleasant, was definitely more comfortable and stable than that of most of his fellow prisoners. He spent the next five years working on farms in this same village as a general laborer. He was treated relatively well by his bosses. In addition to the French prisoners of war, Schorstedt was home to forced laborers from Poland, Italy and Serbia. The foreign slave laborers were not treated with brutality, nor were they accepted as equal members of the local community. The foreign workers were not allowed to enter businesses through the front door, to worship in church alongside Germans; however, provided they were back in their *kommando* each night before curfew, they were at liberty as to how they spent their non-working hours. While he described his diet during these years as “nauseatingly” monotonous, Folcher recognized that he was fortunate in that he never suffered from true hunger.<sup>29</sup> During the fall of 1940 Folcher settled into a life not unlike that of a convict on work release.

Folcher’s story introduces several characteristics of the German handling of French prisoners, and can be used as a starting point for an examination of their life in *kommandos*.

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<sup>28</sup> Folcher, 167.

<sup>29</sup> Folcher, 198.

### **Disorganization during the Distribution of French prisoners**

The German distribution of French (and Belgian) prisoner labor was more dictated by speed than by efficiency. While the Germans made the minimal effort of asking each prisoner their occupation, outside of a few notable exceptions this information was not put to use. As exemplified by Folcher's experience, the Germans simply treated the prisoners as interchangeable workers and distributed them in body counts rather than based on skills. It was only at the *kommando* level that the prisoners might be sorted out and assigned to the most appropriate job available at that particular location. Despite the German labor ministry decree of 10 July 1940 that the French prisoners were to be used "to a far greater extent" in industrial jobs, the only group of prisoners singled out for skill-appropriate deployment were miners, a group constituting only about two percent of the entire French prisoner population.<sup>30</sup>

Perhaps the war situation in the fall of 1940 explains the minimal effort the Germans put into efficiently distributing the prisoners. German plans for utilization of Western prisoners anticipated a long war which would produce a long-term stream of prisoners. The unexpectedly rapid Allied collapse produced a massive single wave of prisoners. German concerns about a labor shortage must have seemed solved with the arrival of over one and a half million additional prison laborers. So optimistic were the Germans following the victory in the West that Ruhr mining officials briefly shut down their recruitment of foreign civilian workers and expressed concern of a coming "inundation" of workers once the German miners were demobilized by the victorious armed forces.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Herbert, 96.

<sup>31</sup> Herbert, 112.

## **Fields of Employment**

The prisoners understood that working on a farm, especially a small one, had many advantages over the other types of work to which they might be assigned.<sup>32</sup> Rural farming communities were less impacted by food rationing than urban areas; thus, farm workers generally ate better than did most other workers. On small farms prisoners often ate at the same table as the German family. Working and eating alongside the same farming family for years allowed prisoners lucky enough to be assigned to this type of work to develop friendships. Yves Durand found that French prisoners assigned to small farms were five times more likely to remain in contact with a German with whom he worked after the war than were prisoners assigned to industrial work.<sup>33</sup> Farm work, by its nature, afforded the prisoners more independence than they would have enjoyed in factory settings. Provided they remained productive, prisoners on moderate-sized farms were often left unsupervised and unguarded throughout the workday. Farm workers were less likely than industrial workers to suffer an injury on the job. Industrial workers were also much more threatened by Allied bombing raids. Prisoners working in factories were not even safe from these raids when they were not working, as their living quarters were customarily located close to their worksite. The impact bombing had on the foreign workers' living quarters at the Krupp factories in Essen serve as one example of how important a factor this is to keep in mind. From March 1943 through the end of the war, Krupp had to replace twenty-two thousand beds damaged due to bombings.<sup>34</sup> This meant that every sleeping area set aside for foreigners at Krupp had to be replaced twice over from 1943 through 1945 to keep up with those being destroyed by bombing raids. Prisoners in small communities often had a period of "free time" after they finished their workday and before they

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<sup>32</sup> Durand, 92-94.

<sup>33</sup> Durand, 420.

<sup>34</sup> Herbert, 214.

had to report back to their *kommando* living quarters. During this time the prisoners could mix fairly freely with German civilians and other foreign workers. These interactions broke up the monotony of life, brought in more news from the outside world, and provided the prisoners with opportunities to obtain food and other necessities through legal or black-market transactions. Prisoners working in urban areas were normally escorted in groups back and forth to their worksites and confined in their *kommandos* when not at work. Gustave Folcher benefited from all the above described advantages of rural life.

Even though German economic planners had intended to eventually employ most French prisoners of war in industrial work, initially, the majority were sent to farms. At the end of 1940 well over half of the French prisoners were employed in agricultural jobs.<sup>35</sup> From 1941 through 1943 this situation gradually changed as more and more French prisoners were transferred into industrial jobs. At the end of 1940 less than one in five French prisoners worked in industry.<sup>36</sup> In November German economic planners reaffirmed their intention of employing French prisoners of war in industry with the goal of eventually having 75 to 80% working in this field.<sup>37</sup> While the percentage of French workers employed in industrial work never reached this standard, the fact that it was set so high speaks to German intentions.

One issue which complicated the transfer of more French prisoners into industrial jobs at this time was the Geneva Conventions' prohibition against forcing prisoners to perform war-

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<sup>35</sup> Herbert includes a table dividing the French prisoners of war into fields of employment for December, 1940 on page 96. This table records 637,209 French prisoners working in agricultural jobs, or 54% of the grand total. It is unclear if this table also includes the 150,000+ French prisoners working in occupied France in agricultural jobs who were being transferred to Germany at this time. The table entry labeled "Other" employment constitutes 231,033 prisoners (19.6%). Billig writes of the difficulty in arriving at a reliable percentage of prisoners of war employed in agricultural work due to the shifting categories the Germans employed in determining if a worker was a prisoner of war or a civilian worker on page 56 of his article. He estimates that approximately 750,000 French prisoners were working in Germany as agricultural workers as late as March, 1942. By August, 1944 the number of French agricultural workers in Germany had declined to 405,897 - 351,307 POWs and 54,590 'civilian' workers. (Herbert, 298.)

<sup>36</sup> Herbert, 96.

<sup>37</sup> Billig, 64.

related work. This restriction precluded their employment in the German industries most in need of additional manpower. Throughout the first fifteen months of the war, the United States acted as the “protecting power” of the French prisoners in Germany. Any widespread violation of international law, such as a massive transfer of French prisoners into war-related jobs, would put the German military high command (the *Oberkommando der Wehrmacht* or O.K.W.), the organization directly responsible for maintaining the prisoners during their captivity, into direct conflict with the United States Department of State. To avoid this conflict the O.K.W. favored leaving the prisoners in non-industrial jobs. To overcome the O.K.W.’s objections and facilitate the transfer of the French prisoners from agricultural to industrial jobs, the German government brokered an agreement with Pierre Laval in which the Vichy government would replace the United States as the “protecting power” of the French prisoners. Laval agreed that once the American inspectors were removed, the French government would allow the prisoners to be employed in industries doing war-related work in exchange for unspecified political considerations.<sup>38</sup> By assuming the role of “protecting power” over its own prisoners, the Vichy government took direct control over a valuable political bargaining chip: the labor of over a million prisoners of war. Once the United States was removed from the equation, the German and French governments could directly negotiate matters related to the prisoners. As long as the United States had acted as their “protecting power,” the French prisoners were, at least theoretically, protected by the established Geneva Conventions standards. Once Vichy replaced the United States, everything about the prisoners’ lives, from the way they were housed and fed to the types of jobs they could be forced to perform, became open to bilateral negotiation between the German and Vichy governments. The power imbalance between the Vichy and German governments, and Vichy’s propensity to prioritize its political goals over the best

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<sup>38</sup> Billig, 60-2.

interest of the prisoners, insured that the prisoners would almost certainly suffer negative consequences as a result of this transformation. Before Laval accepted the transformation the French armistice delegation warned that, “If Germany has made this proposal it is beyond doubt that they see it as to their own advantage.”<sup>39</sup>

In a recent article, historian Raffael Scheck effectively demonstrated how both the Vichy and German governments benefited from Vichy’s replacement of the United States as the prisoners’ protecting power.<sup>40</sup> The Vichy government gained control over an important bargaining chip, the ability to negotiate directly with the Germans over how the prisoners could be utilized and treated. The French leadership also believed their new role would increase their legitimacy in the eyes of the French population. The Germans gained a more or less free hand in transferring large numbers of French prisoners into war-related industrial work without concerning themselves with international agreements prohibiting this usage. They were also freed of the annoyance of permitting ICRC and American officials to inspect the prisoner camps periodically. This was a “win-win” agreement for the Nazi and Vichy governments. Scheck is considerably less convincing in a third element of his thesis, that the transfer of the role of protecting power to the Vichy government, “despite the dangers, represented a lesser evil for the French POWs.”<sup>41</sup> Scheck argued that the United States would inevitably be removed as the protecting power when it went to war with Germany, and that the Vichy government, by proactively assuming the role in 1940, was able to prevent the prisoners of war from becoming “military internees” without any protecting power of any sort later in the war. Scheck also argued that the French government was able to win certain concessions from the Germans in their

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<sup>39</sup> Billig, 61.

<sup>40</sup> Raffael Scheck, “The Prisoner of War Question and the Beginnings of Collaboration: The Franco-German Agreement of 16 November 1940.” *Journal of Contemporary History* 45, Issue 2 (2010), 364-88.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 388.

treatment of the prisoners. Scheck acknowledged within the article that in their negotiations with the French regarding the prisoners, the Germans “did not agree to much that did not in some way work to their advantage or at least cost them nothing.”<sup>42</sup> This led him to conclude, in apparent contradiction to the above statement, that it was “beyond the framework of [his] article to evaluate exactly how the agreement of 16 November 1940 affected the prisoners.”<sup>43</sup> One must also bear in mind that Vichy initiated the transfer of protecting power to itself in November 1940- a full thirteen months before Germany declared war on the United States. In November 1940 an eventual conflict between the United States and Germany may have appeared likely, but it certainly was not an inevitability. The Vichy government was certainly under no immediate pressure to replace the United States as protecting power at the time of the negotiations. Vichy’s rapid assumption of protecting power appears more an opportunistic move for political gain than a proactive step taken with the prisoners’ welfare in mind. Scheck argued that, aside for reasons of state, “humanitarian considerations certainly played a role in the French consent to this agreement,....”<sup>44</sup> Given that the agreement did not provide any meaningful humanitarian relief to the prisoners, but rather forced them to work in more dangerous settings in jobs which directly aided their jailors’ war efforts, and that it eliminated any protection they might have received from American and ICRC supervision of their captivity, if the Vichy government was motivated by humanitarian concerns in striking this agreement those concerns certainly held much lower priority than did political advantage. The agreement made sense in Berlin and Vichy, but did not in the *stalags* and *kommandos* of Germany.

The Vichy government’s agreement to allow its prisoners to work in war-related industrial jobs removed the key political impediment to their transfer from agricultural to

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 378.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 385.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 388.

industrial jobs. An economic impediment to this transfer remained. Germany had not demobilized following their victory in 1940 as many industrial leaders had expected, and the nation continued to suffer from a significant labor shortfall. In September, 1941 German industrial planners found the national economy still had a manpower shortage of 2.6 million.<sup>45</sup> While the shortfall was most pronounced in the field of industry, the agricultural sector was short half a million workers as well. Removing the French prisoners already working on the farms was difficult simply because there was no one to replace them. The Germans did manage to transfer 150,000 French prisoners from agriculture to industry during the winter of 1940/1941, but were only able to do so by deporting a final group of 150,000 French prisoners from *frontstalags* in France into Germany. These prisoners had been left behind during the initial period of deportations as they were needed as agricultural laborers in the newly occupied territories.<sup>46</sup> After the fall harvest they became available for other employment. Presumably, Germany expected the French to find some way to replace them on the farms in 1941.

The German decision to use French prisoners primarily in industrial work was certainly motivated by their specific manpower needs, but it was also a reflection of Nazi racial ideology. Until at least 1943, German economic policies were developed in a process in which the most economically efficient methods were often not pursued due to ideological objections. When the Polish prisoners of war were introduced into the German economy in late 1939, they were employed almost exclusively in agricultural jobs. The Nazi leadership believed Poles were unsuitable for skilled or industrial work and, thus, only usable on farms. The Germans believed that this influx of Polish agricultural workers would free up German workers who could then move into more advanced fields of work. Nazi racial theory held that the most advanced race

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<sup>45</sup> Herbert, 143.

<sup>46</sup> Billig, 62.

(the Aryans) should be employed in the most advanced work (modern industry), while the lesser races were properly employed in less advanced jobs. From the Nazi perspective, the employment of Slavs in industry while some Germans continued to do unskilled work was a racially offensive situation and a waste of part of the Reich's economic potential. As would be the case in many Nazi era economic policy decisions, the skills and experience of individual workers was considered less important than their racial background in matters related to their employment. The Nazis considered Western Europeans to be racially superior to Poles and, thus, suitable for industrial employment. The arrival in 1941 of approximately 100,000 Yugoslav prisoners of war, whom the Germans considered racially equivalent to the Poles, allowed more French prisoners to be shifted to industry.<sup>47</sup> A much larger wave of over three million Soviet prisoners of war captured during the second half of 1941 theoretically could have entirely solved Germany's manpower shortage. Tragically for the Soviet soldiers taken prisoner in 1941, German planners did not foresee a long-term need for these men and women as workers, and implemented a policy of annihilating them in the *frontstalags* through starvation and disease rather than putting them to work. After suffering a series of military setbacks in late 1941, German leaders recognized their need for the labor of these prisoners and they altered their policy of genocide into one of forced labor exploitation. Even though the decision to bring Soviet prisoners into Germany as slave laborers was made in October 1941, so many had already died and those remaining alive were so physically wasted, that this latest wave of workers did not make an appreciable economic impact before April 1942. Of the 3,350,000 Soviet prisoners taken in 1941, two million had died by February 1942. So dire were the living conditions in the eastern *frontstalags* that only 5% of the remaining 1.4 million prisoners were classified as "deployable as workers" in March 1942. The Germans improved conditions in the eastern camps in an attempt to salvage as many Soviet

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<sup>47</sup> Billig, 64.

prisoners for slave labor as possible, a process they referred to as “fattening up.”<sup>48</sup> Like the Poles and Yugoslavs, the Soviet workers were initially seen as only suitable for agricultural and unskilled employment. Their arrival allowed the Germans to push more French prisoners into industrial work during 1942.

While Folcher’s initial assignment to agricultural work in 1940 was not uncommon, his remaining employed in the same small farming community for more than four years made him part of a fortunate minority. The experience of Jean Héliion was perhaps closer to that of most French prisoners. Like Folcher, Héliion was initially assigned to an agricultural job.<sup>49</sup> After a short stay in a stalag, Héliion and twenty-three other French and Belgian prisoners were sent to a large estate located near the present day Polish town of Borzęcin. There Héliion, a forty-year old impressionistic painter, dug potatoes, threshed rye, and performed general farm labor. During the spring of 1941 he was transferred to a much larger *kommando* in the Baltic port of Stettin. In Stettin Héliion and 750 other prisoners were confined to the prison ship Nordenham, a converted British banana cargo boat. Each day the prisoners were broken into teams and escorted to various worksites. Typical jobs included loading and unloading ships, factory work, construction of bomb shelters, and railroad repair. The camaraderie of the large community of prisoners did not offset the many disadvantages of Héliion’s new setting. Almost all the space in the ship was taken up by three-tier bunk beds. The damp environment in the ship’s hold proved to be an ideal breeding ground for lice and vermin. Wet shirts hung out would take three days to dry. The men had almost no privacy in these living conditions. Héliion’s diet decreased both in terms of quantity and quality. Rampant corruption in the camp administration made the men feel helpless

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<sup>48</sup> Herbert, 139-57.

<sup>49</sup> Account of Héliion’s captivity drawn from his memoir, *They Shall Not Have Me. The Capture, Forced Labor, and Escape of a French Prisoner of War*, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1943).

and insecure. Months after arriving in Stettin, Héliion observed that, while only a small number of men in his *kommando* died during their captivity,:

The prisoners are now accustomed to meager rations and hard work, but after a few years of privations, they will bring home tired bodies, weak hearts, rheumatism and neurasthenia troubles that may considerably affect the length of their lives.<sup>50</sup>

Vichy mail surveillance reports documented this transfer of French prisoners from agriculture to industry and established the negative consequences of these transfers. During September 1941 the reports recorded a downward trend in the number of work complaints in the prisoners' letters. This was true in particular for the prisoners working in agricultural *kommandos* where the hard work of the harvest had just been completed.<sup>51</sup> While the workload of the farm laborers was diminishing, prisoners working in industrial jobs, on road repair crews or in forestry continued to regularly work twelve to fifteen hour days, often seven days a week.<sup>52</sup> Just as life was apparently becoming more bearable on the farms, the reports record wide-spread reassignments of French prisoners into factories.<sup>53</sup> Ironically, these reports referred to the replacement of French prisoners on the farms by recently captured Slavic prisoners as the "relève," the same name which would later be used by the Vichy government for their program of recruiting French civilians for work in Germany. This initial "relève" was wrapping up in March 1942, just weeks prior to the well promoted announcement of the domestic French program.

It was during the winter of 1941/1942 that industrial work replaced agricultural work as the norm for French prisoners in Germany. A March censor report concluded, "The greater part

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<sup>50</sup> Helion, 221-22.

<sup>51</sup> Archives nationales de France, Fond 9, Box 2907 (Hereafter AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907). Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 37 (16-31 Septembre 1941), 11.

<sup>52</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 36 (1-15 Septembre 1941), 15. This workload seems to have been typical as reports of 12-15 hour workdays, six to seven days a week, reoccur in the next several reports.

<sup>53</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 40 (1-14 Novembre 1941), 11.

of our men now seems to be employed within an innumerable number of industrial *kommandos*.”<sup>54</sup> The French prisoners “understood perfectly” the part they were playing in Germany’s war effort – as they were being transferred into industrial jobs they were “replacing the enormous number of [recently drafted German] civilians who were being sent down the broken pipe.”<sup>55</sup> Germany’s attack on the Soviet Union had not gone according to plan and, to rectify the situation, it called more men into military service, increased its demands on an already overstretched workforce and brought in more foreign workers. By the end of 1941 so many foreigners were working in German factories that one French prisoner joked in a letter, “We have found workers from all nations in Germany, save the Germans.”<sup>56</sup>

Aside from agricultural and industrial work large numbers of French prisoners of war remained employed in forestry, infrastructure repair, excavation, fishing and skilled craftwork throughout the war. As time passed a significant number of French prisoners, in particular NCOs who had volunteered for work, were employed in supervisory or administrative jobs. While accounts of French prisoners of war working as horse breeders, or living with wealthy German families while restoring their country chateaus, make for fascinating reading, one must keep in mind the standard French experience was one of hard, forced labor.<sup>57</sup>

Mining was the most despised field of employment among the prisoners of war.<sup>58</sup> The danger and rigor of the work made it very difficult to recruit domestic or foreign volunteers into the job; thus, mining was a logical field of employment for forced laborers. The war significantly increased demand for coal. In addition to the great need for trained miners in Germany, there was

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<sup>54</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 48 (1-15 Mars 1942), 16.

<sup>55</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 50 (1-15 Avril 1942), 15.

<sup>56</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 42 (1-15 Décembre 1941), 15.

<sup>57</sup> Durand, 99, 115-16.

<sup>58</sup> Herbert, 246.

also a significant shortage of unskilled and semi-skilled mine workers. Throughout the war German labor planners treated mining as the test case industry for the experimental employment of foreign workers. In 1939 mining was the first industry to be assigned Polish workers. Miners were the only occupational group the Germans made a significant effort to separate from the general mass of Western prisoners of war in 1940 for skills appropriate work assignments. In 1941 mining became the first industrial field allowed to use Soviet prisoners and workers. Past productivity studies had shown that foreign mine workers, provided they were adequately fed, housed and supervised, could be nearly as productive as German workers. Studies in the Ruhr in 1940 determined that French and Belgian workers and prisoners employed in mines were between eighty and one-hundred percent as productive as their free German counterparts.<sup>59</sup> Even Polish workers with no prior mining experience were determined to be sixty to seventy percent as productive as German miners after a few months.<sup>60</sup> By 1942 mining had become the preferred field of employment for foreign workers in Germany. The percentage of foreign workers in the Ruhr mines grew from sixteen in May, 1941 to almost fifty in December, 1943.<sup>61</sup>

Foreign workers feared being assigned to mine work for good reason. Prisoners would often have to work extended shifts underground. The mines had a well deserved reputation as a brutal work environment. Once underground each small work team was dominated by a foreman. Even before the war these foremen had traditionally been allowed to discipline their men as they saw fit. Workplace violence was an established part of the mining culture even before the arrival of the forced laborers. The extreme methods taken by some foreigners to escape from mine work are an indication of the working conditions found in this field. Some foreign workers fled to wooded areas and attempted to live off stolen food for the remainder of the war. Self-mutilation

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<sup>59</sup> Herbert, 113.

<sup>60</sup> Herbert, 88.

<sup>61</sup> Herbert, 239.

was not uncommon among foreign mine workers. Workers hoped that a crushed hand or severed fingers would lead to a reassignment.<sup>62</sup> No other field of work inspired these forms of extreme passive resistance among the foreign workforce in Germany. While the number of French prisoners assigned to mine work at any given time remained relatively small, between twenty and twenty-five thousand,<sup>63</sup> the high turnover rate meant that a much larger overall number had to spend part of their captivity in this field.

### **The S.D.P.G.**

The Vichy government created a new agency, the *Service diplomatique des Prisonniers de guerre*, or S.D.P.G., when it replaced the United States as the protecting power for the French prisoners of war. The S.D.P.G. was assigned so many conflicting roles that it was practically assured that it would not always act in the prisoners' best interest. In addition to taking over from the American inspectors the role of monitoring prisoner living and work conditions to ensure they were in compliance with international law, the S.D.P.G. also represented France in negotiations related to the prisoners' treatment and liberation. These two roles - inspector and negotiator – conflicted. When a neutral inspector from the United States discovered a violation in prisoner treatment, he or she could simply demand the Germans rectify the situation by complying with the standards set down in the Geneva Conventions. When the S.D.P.G. discovered a treatment violation, it became one of many issues to be discussed during wide-ranging negotiation sessions between the German and Vichy governments. German compliance with international law now came in exchange for French concessions. The S.D.P.G. was also tasked with acting on behalf of French workers in Germany and protecting the financial interests

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<sup>62</sup> Herbert, 241.

<sup>63</sup> Herbert, 96. In December, 1940 23,627 French prisoners were assigned to mine work. In August, 1944 there were 21,844 French workers in German mines. Of the later figure about a third were listed as "civilian" workers, although undoubtedly a large portion of these men were administratively relabeled prisoners of war.

of French citizens who owned real estate in Germany, Poland, Bohemia and Moravia. The German government could play the S.D.P.G.s interests off each other, such as pressuring it to overlook poor treatment of POWs by threatening the financial interests of French firms in Germany. The S.D.P.G. was also given the political mission of promoting loyalty to the Vichy government among the prisoners of war. To do this it distributed pro-Vichy propaganda among the prisoners and assisted in the establishment of political groups know as *Cercles Pétain*. The S.D.P.G.'s political mission conflicted with its responsibility of ensuring that the Germans properly treated the prisoners. When the S.D.P.G. had to choose between the prisoners' well being and the government's political goals, they often favored the later. One example of how the prisoners suffered due to this conflict of interest within the S.D.P.G. was the Vichy agreement to allow POWs to be transferred into war related industrial jobs.<sup>64</sup>

The choice of Georges Scapini to head the S.D.P.G. increased the likelihood that the agency would prioritize political goals over the prisoners' well-being. Scapini was blinded during World War I while serving as a pilot. He remained active in socially conservative political groups during the interwar years. During the 1930's he was among the directors of the *Comité France-Allemagne*, an association which promoted friendship and understanding between France and Germany. Scapini remained active in this organization after the Nazis took power in Germany. In 1938 he visited Berlin as the guest of Nazi Foreign Minister Ribbentrop. Before the war Scapini had also developed a good relationship with Otto Abetz, the German ambassador to occupied France, through his work on the *Comité France-Allemagne*. As a National Assembly deputy Scapini voted full powers to Marshal Pétain in July, 1940.<sup>65</sup> Scapini was one of the

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<sup>64</sup> For more on the S.D.P.G. and its conflicting missions see Durand, 315-20 and Marie-Thérèse Chabord, "Les organismes français chargés des prisonniers, déportés et réfugiés (Alger 1943 – Paris 1945)," *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, no. 42 (1961): 17-26.

<sup>65</sup> For Scapini's political background see Durand, 315-18.

leaders of the socially conservative wing of the Vichy leadership and a strong supporter of the National Revolution. Scapini may have looked like a good choice to head the S.D.P.G. given his connections in Germany and due to his being a disabled veteran, but his political leanings caused him to place the success of collaboration and the National Revolution above the welfare of the prisoners throughout his tenure. The irony of having a blind Germanophile as the man responsible for protecting them was not lost on the French prisoners of war. Jean Héliion joked in his memoir that the prisoners expected if Scapini was ever replaced as head of the S.D.P.G., “his successor will be deaf and dumb too.”<sup>66</sup>

The S.D.P.G. was limited to having no more than sixteen inspectors. These men, accompanied by German officers, were responsible for inspecting the thousands of *oflags*, *stalags*, *kommandos* and prisons across Germany. The inspectors always traveled in groups of two, which further reduced the number of sites they could visit. In a given month the S.D.P.G. might inspect five or ten *oflags* and a dozen or so *stalags*.<sup>67</sup> They rarely visited the *kommandos*. Prisoners often went through the entire war without ever seeing an S.D.P.G. delegate. During their inspections the S.D.P.G. deputies remained in the company of German officers and only spoke with a small number of confidence men elected by the prisoners. The French prisoners of war held the S.D.P.G. in very low regard and judged the benefits they derived from this service to be insignificant.<sup>68</sup> The prisoners quickly came to distrust any information supplied by the S.D.P.G. All in all, the S.D.P.G. probably did more harm than good for the prisoners’ morale due

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<sup>66</sup> Héliion, 234.

<sup>67</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2320. Service diplomatique des prisonniers de guerre – Cabinet – État Moral. Folder: Rapports Psychologiques. Reports dated 15 Feb 1942, 1; 15 Avril 1942, 2; and 15 Août 1942, 1. According to S.D.P.G. reports in January, 1942 it conducted inspections at 10 *oflags* and 23 *stalags*. In March, 1942 it only visited 4 *oflags* and 13 *stalags*. During April, 1942 only 3 *oflags* and 12 *stalags* were inspected.

<sup>68</sup> Durand, 318.

to their pattern of spreading false news and raising hopes among the men that negotiations for their liberation were progressing well.<sup>69</sup>

### **Pay and Discipline at Work**

French prisoners of war were paid for their work while in Germany; however, after deductions, taxes and institutional theft, relatively little money actually made it to the prisoners. By way of example, a foreign worker assigned to a job which would pay a German worker a monthly salary of 150 Reichsmarks (RM) received a reduced salary of 84 RM. In order to equalize the cost of employing a foreign worker with that of a German the employer was assessed a surtax of 67.5 RM. The worker's 84 RM salary would have 45 RM deducted to pay for room and board, leaving only 39 RM.<sup>70</sup> Further deductions would then be made for compulsory labor-front donations and canteen purchases and clothing allowances. What money remained was then often issued to the prisoners in the form of camp coupons which could only be spent at the worksite or in the *kommando* canteen. Historian François de Lannoy found that an average French prisoner of war was paid 1.8 RM per day. From this total .80 RM was deducted for food, .20 for housing and .10 for camp fees, leaving each prisoner a daily net of .70 RMs for ten hours of work<sup>71</sup> (very roughly equivalent to \$14US today). It was also common for employers to withhold half or more of the prisoner's pay as "savings." This policy of forced savings was justified by the employers as a way of preventing the foreign workers from buying up scarce commodities needed by the German population, or from funneling their money illegally into the black market.

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<sup>69</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 44 (1-15 Janvier 1942), 24.

<sup>70</sup> Herbert, 184-85.

<sup>71</sup> François de Lannoy, *La Libération des Camps: Un million de prisonniers de guerre français, Mai 1945*. (Bayeux: Editions Heimdal, 1995), 49.

Jean Héliion's work as a bookkeeper in his *kommando* allowed him to describe in detail the actual compensation French prisoners of war received for their labor. For a ten hour workday a French POW received a final take-home salary of between 70 and 150 pfennings, dependent upon the work assigned. To put this amount in perspective, a small bottle of reduced alcohol beer cost 30 pfennings. If a prisoner chose to save his earnings, he could send it to his family back in France once he had accumulated a sum of thirty or more RMs. The thriftiest prisoners managed to save this amount after three months. If all went well the families received money sent to them in five months.<sup>72</sup> The 30 RMs these men managed to scrape together and send home a few times a year was a modest amount, but certainly helpful to any family struggling to get through the occupation. It equaled 600 Francs, or roughly what an unskilled laborer in France earned every two weeks.<sup>73</sup> By extrapolation we can conclude that French prisoners of war working sixty-hour weeks in Germany actually received about one-sixth the take-home income they would have earned had they been working as a forty-hour a week general laborer in France. All the additional income their labor produced went to paying for their own captivity and feeding the German war economy.

In their attempt to control almost all aspects of daily life, the Nazi government issued a seemingly countless number of regulations and dictates. Many of these orders contradicted each other, or were practically impossible to implement. It was virtually impossible for anyone living in Germany not to engage daily in some form of "criminal" behavior. The workplace was particularly bombarded by these rules and regulations. The Nazi government considered it a political crime for a worker not to do his or her utmost to contribute to society and support the

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<sup>72</sup> Héliion, 197-206.

<sup>73</sup> Héliion estimated that every month roughly 4,000 RM were sent to France by the roughly 750 prisoners in his *kommando*. This would mean that perhaps one out of every three prisoners was sending money home. This rate of participation speaks to the high desire the men had to do whatever was in their power to remain supportive to their families back home.

national goals. Any person working in Germany could be punished for refusing to work, “indiscipline” at the workplace or, simply for “loafing.” While workplace rules were often issued in a blanket fashion applying to all workers, prosecutions fell disproportionately on foreign workers.<sup>74</sup> Even channeling the paperwork for the tens of thousands of workplace “crimes” which occurred each week through the German criminal justice system would have overwhelmed it. For this reason, work “crimes” committed by foreigners were handled almost exclusively by on-site security personnel. Typical punishments given to foreigners for work crimes included denying them food, forcing them to work additional shifts, fines, short-term imprisonment at the worksite, or, very commonly, physical beatings. French POWs charged with work crimes were treated in this same manner rather than through the military court system.

### **A Restricted and Controlled Life**

As the years dragged on the Germans and, to a degree, the Vichy government, attempted to treat the French prisoners more like foreign workers than war captives. The prisoners’ lives were restricted in so many ways that, no matter how long they remained in Germany, they could never forget that they were prisoners not workers and, as such, had little control over their own fates. The French prisoners angrily rejected attempts by the Germans and their own government to re-categorize their status. Nowhere was this attitude made more obvious than in the prisoners’ widespread refusal of the 1943 German offer to allow them to voluntarily re-categorize themselves from prisoners of war to voluntary workers.<sup>75</sup> Despite promises to those prisoners who accepted the transformation of higher pay, more freedom and the possibility of returning to France for a two week furlough, only a small percentage of the French captives accepted the

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<sup>74</sup> Herbert, 106-32.

<sup>75</sup> See chapter 7.

offer. The daily humiliations, restrictions and injustices which the French prisoners lived with never let them forget that they were prisoners held against their will, not workers.

Undoubtedly the most significant of these restrictions was the prisoners inability to move about freely. Most prisoners' first wish was simply to return home. Once brought into Germany the majority of the prisoners spent the next five years separated from their loved ones.

Restrictions on their movements went well beyond their inability to return to France. Most were confined in enclosed *kommando* compounds when not at work. Even those prisoners who could enjoy a few hours of relative freedom after they had finished their work had to report back to their *kommando* for a nightly curfew. The living spaces set aside for the vast majority of the men afforded little privacy. Some prisoners never adjusted to the constant presence of other men. In his memoir, Georges Hyvernaud described how over time this constant state of forced intimacy wore down the men's dignity and sense of self-worth. The men had no place they could claim as their own. Their possessions were limited to what could be carried in a duffle bag. Hyvernaud described how, in time, even a prisoner's thoughts no longer felt like his own:

The whole business [of my lack of privacy and being forced to remain in the constant presence of the same group of men for years] enters me and takes up all the room inside. No way of protecting yourself. We lie exposed, open to all and sundry. We could just as well have *Entrée libre* written across our foreheads, the way it is on the door of those stores where whoever happens along has the right to fondle and paw any merchandise within reach. . . . And people will be found who claim that these years of captivity were a time spent in thoughtful self-scrutiny. This same time during which one is at the complete mercy of others. Condemned to others. . . Captives of captives – of others.<sup>76</sup>

The prisoners had too much contact with their fellow prisoners, and too little with their loved ones. Each prisoner was restricted to sending two letters and two postcards per month. All their correspondence had to be written on standard forms, twenty-five lines per letter, five on a postcard. The prisoners were told that if their letter was not written on an official form, or if

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<sup>76</sup> Georges Hyvernaud, *Skin and Bones*, (Marlboro : Marlboro Press, 1994), 36-37.

their printing was small and difficult to read, that it would be destroyed by the German censors. The prisoners knew that everything they wrote might be read by both German and Vichy censors. They actually over-estimated the intrusiveness of the censors. A smaller portion of their correspondence was actually opened and read than they believed to be the case. Nevertheless, the amount they could write, the double line of censorship, as well as their desire to not burden their loved ones with additional worries, resulted in quite a bit of self censorship. At least some of the prisoners were informed of written regulations forbidding them from complaining about their treatment, or criticizing Germany in their letters. Only favorable political commentary could be included in their letters.<sup>77</sup> Given the contents of the Vichy mail surveillance reports described below, if these regulations were widely promoted they were ignored by the prisoners often enough.

Every letter or package a prisoner received from France was prized. The prisoners had a deep longing to make contact, in any way, with things French. Envelopes with French postmarks were studied with pleasant melancholy by the men on delivery days. Objects and letters sent from their homeland were passed among the men, each feeling pleasure at being able to connect, even in this indirect way, with their homes. In his memoir Francis Ambrière described prisoners “devouring” the rare letters that arrived, reading and sharing their precious words with the other prisoners, “with no other purpose in mind than that of satisfying a blind need to maintain some contact with France.”<sup>78</sup> Outside of letters the prisoners were limited to receiving one five-kilogram package (*colis*) every two months; and two one-kilogram packages each month. No personal notes or information could be included in these packages. Food and small items of individual significance made up their contents.

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<sup>77</sup> Héliou, 306.

<sup>78</sup> Francis Ambrière, *The Long Holiday*, (Chicago: Ziff-Davis Publishing, 1948), 59-61.

Sending mail from France to a prisoner was not a simple process. Incoming mail was subject to the same two layers of censorship as was the outgoing mail. Each letter a prisoner sent to France included a “reply” form. In most cases letters sent to prisoners had to be written on these reply forms. Each prisoner was also given a small allotment of *colis* stamps each month. These stamps had to be mailed home so they could be attached to the outside of the packages sent to them in Germany. Unstamped packages were liable to be confiscated by the German authorities. If a prisoner lost his allotment of mail forms or *colis* stamps, or if he simply did not receive them due to administrative incompetence, he was cut off not only from sending letters to France but also of receiving incoming mail, until he received more forms the following month. Given that the transit time for letters and packages was two to five weeks, this might mean that a small oversight could cause a prisoner to be cut off from all contact with his family for months. Each year regular mail service for the prisoners was suspended from December 14<sup>th</sup> through the 25<sup>th</sup>. Christmas was the time of year the prisoners felt the separation from their loved ones the most deeply, and so this mail suspension took away one of their few sources of joy when it was most needed.

Letters and packages from home were vital not only for the prisoners’ mental state, they were also vital for their physical health. As was the case in World War I, the diet the Germans allotted the prisoners of war was of insufficient quantity and nutritional value to sustain an active adult. French POWs assigned to agricultural work normally received extra food beyond their official rations and remained well-fed throughout the conflict. French prisoners working in non-agricultural fields had to rely on their German-supplied rations and food sent from home. Absent the food contained in the packages from home and from the Red Cross, most French prisoners

would have suffered from malnutrition.<sup>79</sup> Red Cross packages, which generally came from the United States, normally contained a pack of cigarettes, a small package of coffee and a chocolate bar. Cigarettes were the currency of the prisoners' black market economy. They could be exchanged with fellow prisoners for food or clothing items or, more commonly, with German guards and civilians for just about anything. Throughout the war Germany was cut off from its traditional sources of tobacco and thus cigarettes, especially those coming from the United States, soared in value. Chocolate and coffee were also very difficult to come by, so these items were frequently exchanged on the black market. Given the above situation one might expect the Germans to have frequently pilfered the packages sent by the Red Cross to the prisoners. Apparently this was not the case. The Germans recognized that an unacceptably high rate of theft might result in either the French or the Red Cross reducing the amount of aid sent to the prisoners. The packages not only indirectly supplied the German people with rare commodities; they also reduced the amount of food which needed to be set aside to maintain the health of the prison laborers. In the case of packages sent to the prisoners, German self-interest controlled the level of theft until the final months of the war. Of course, instances of theft which came to the attention of the prisoners or the authorities produced outrage and calls for greater scrutiny.<sup>80</sup> Given internal correspondence between the S.D.P.G. and the Ministry of Justice and national rail service, it appears the S.D.P.G. believed that most of the violation of the prisoners' mail was

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<sup>79</sup> The insufficiency of the diet provided by the Germans and vital role outside aid played in maintaining the prisoners' health is mentioned in almost every Vichy surveillance report. See for example, AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 36 (1-15 Septembre 1941), 9-10.

<sup>80</sup> See for example the March 1942 correspondence No. 20257/BE from S.D.P.G. head George Scapini to Marshal Pétain on the matter found in AN F<sup>9</sup> 2320. Service diplomatique des prisonniers de guerre – Cabinet – État Moral. Folder: Rapports Psychologiques.

occurring before the packages left France, and thus, presumably, the perpetrators were French citizens.<sup>81</sup>

### **Living Among the Germans, 1940-1942**

The Nazi government's desire to control all contact between Germans and foreigners was an undertaking completely beyond its limited resources. With millions of foreigners living in Germany for years, working side by side with Germans, it was inevitable that individual relationships would develop. This was as true in the case of the French prisoners in Germany as it was for any other group. Describing relations between French prisoners and the German population in blanket statements is not helpful. Each French prisoner developed a unique set of relationships with German people. The story of Franco-German relationships during the captivity is made up of hundreds of thousands of individual experiences which contradict as often as they conform to one another. Even seemingly safe generalized assumptions about these relationships, such as the years of daily contact causing prejudice to diminish, often do not stand up to scrutiny. In his post-war survey of former French POWs, Yves Durand found that nearly as many prisoners remembered becoming more hostile towards the German people during their captivity (31%) as became more favorably inclined towards them (34%).<sup>82</sup> For every French man who returned from Germany with memories of humane treatment and positive relationships was another bearing mental and physical scars that would never fully heal. Some French prisoners remember their time in Germany as an exciting adventure, others as a time of misery and toil. It is as accurate to say that French prisoners were treated by the German population with kindness as it is to say they were treated with contempt.

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<sup>81</sup> Correspondence No. 18207/BE from Georges Scapini to Monsieur le President du Conseil, Chef du Gouvernement (Secrétariat Général). 18 Mai 1942, found in AN F<sup>9</sup> 2320, Service diplomatique des prisonniers de guerre – Cabinet – État Moral. Folder: Rapports Psychologiques.

<sup>82</sup> Durand, 420.

Throughout the war the German government did what it could to prevent interpersonal relationships from developing between Germans and foreigners. When foreign workers and prisoners began to pour into Germany in 1939, the Nazi government attempted to prohibit any contact between these foreign people and the German population except for absolutely essential workplace interactions.<sup>83</sup> The German experience in controlling contacts between German citizens and Polish workers and prisoners during 1939 and 1940 was mixed. Reports from the Sicherheitsdienst (SD), the Nazi intelligence service, urged that Poles be housed in segregated camps and employed in separate work gangs to keep them apart from the German people. Where these policies were not practiced, in particular in rural areas where the Poles more freely mixed with Germans, the SD believed the amount of social mixing occurring to be unacceptably high.<sup>84</sup> Treating the Poles according to the SD recommendations would have destroyed their economic value. The accepted point of view during the first year of the war was that the economic benefits of foreign labor trumped the race-mixing fears of the more hard-line Nazi ideologues. After all, with Germany still at war with France and Britain, some degree of ideological flexibility could be expected in pursuit of victory. The victory in the West unsettled this compromise situation. If the German authorities had not been able to adequately segregate a few hundred thousand Polish workers and prisoners from the German population, they certainly would be no more capable of segregating the millions of incoming Western prisoners. The SD assumed that social mixing between Germans and the incoming Western prisoners would be harder to control than had been the case with the Poles given that the German people were less prejudiced towards Western Europeans than they were towards Eastern Europeans. Making the situation even more worrisome from the hard-liners' point of view, the already accepted policy of employing

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<sup>83</sup> Herbert, 124.

<sup>84</sup> Herbert, 64-5.

Western Europeans alongside Germans in industrial settings rather than in segregated work gangs would make the policing of social interactions at the workplace very difficult. The demands put forward by party hard-liners, those members who believed the war was being fought to protect and further Nazi social revolutionary goals, were more difficult for the party pragmatists to put off after June, 1940. Now that Germany faced no direct military threat, these true-believers argued that Germany should focus on building a racially pure society by expelling foreigners rather than expanding their presence inside Germany. German economic planners believed the foreign workers were still of great value to the nation, especially as long as eight million men remained mobilized in the armed services. In order to placate the true believers the German leadership re-emphasized the race-mixing prohibitions of the terror compromise<sup>85</sup> while moving forward with the integration of the Western prisoners into the workforce. As had been the case when the Polish prisoners were brought into the Reich as slave laborers, the Nazi leadership attempted to resolve an internal ideological debate on the use of foreign workers by assuring opponents of the policy that while the foreign workers were in Germany, they would be carefully supervised and always treated in a manner which reaffirmed their inferiority to the German race. This reinforced the message that any admission by the Nazis regarding Germany's dependence on foreign workers did not also entail an admission of the human worth of those same workers.

No aspect of the French prisoners' lives received more attention from the German authorities than their sex lives. Beyond the political considerations described above, this veritable obsession was driven by the Nazis' fixation on racial purity and their rather extreme patriarchal viewpoint that the virtue of the German nation, as personified by German women, had to be protected against not only foreign attack but also internal depravity. The French

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<sup>85</sup> For details on the terror compromise see Chapter two.

prisoners of war were seen as particularly menacing in this regard. In Germany, “the sex appeal of French men had apparently an almost mythic dimension.”<sup>86</sup> This was undoubtedly threatening to the Nazi leadership. With so many young German men away from home serving in the army, the government’s perceived responsibility to protect German women and police their sexual activity would have seemed even more compelling. So fixated did the Nazi government become on this issue of sexual control that by 1942 it replaced internal political dissent as the primary focus of the internal security service, the Gestapo. In 1940 roughly one quarter of all sentences for “political crimes” in Germany involved “prohibited contact with foreigners and prisoners of war.” By the summer of 1942 eighty percent of all Gestapo arrests fell under this heading. An August 1942 report by the S.D.P.G. found that of 1,197 French prisoners tried for “political crimes,” 915 (77%) of them were charged with improper contact with German women, and a further 61 (5%) with rape. Only 116 French POWs were tried for assaults, 10% of the total, and espionage was not even included as a category.<sup>87</sup> In Gestapo investigations any contact between a German woman and a foreign male was assumed to have involved a sexual act until proven otherwise.<sup>88</sup> Slavic men found guilty of engaging in sexual intercourse with a German woman were executed. Western prisoners of war were sentenced to three years’ imprisonment. French prisoners convicted of “political crimes” served their sentences in the military prison at Graudenz. Conditions at Graudenz were exceptionally harsh. Prisoners were fed very little, forced to perform hard labor for twelve hours a day, and were forbidden from reading, writing or talking with one another while at work. French prisoners considered a sentence of more than one

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<sup>86</sup> Herbert, 125.

<sup>87</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2320. Service diplomatique des prisonniers de guerre – Cabinet – État Moral. Folder: Rapports Psychologiques. Rapport sur l’état moral des Prisonniers de Guerre, 15 Août 1942.

<sup>88</sup> Herbert, 125-30.

year to be equivalent to a death sentence.<sup>89</sup> German women found guilty of sexual contact with a foreigner could be sentenced to public humiliations, such as having their heads shaved, and imprisonment of several months in a labor re-education camp.

Intercourse was not the only prohibited form of contact which might result in an arrest. Practically any unnecessary contact between a German woman and a foreign man might lead to an arrest. Below are some cases documented by the S.D.P.G.:

Lucien Bureaux (Stalag V/C): Condemned on 22.4.42 to 4 months in prison for having been embraced on his birthday by a female factory coworker.

Guerbert et Quarez (Stalag XI/B): Condemned on 2.12.42 to 18 months in prison for having embraced ten times a woman and a young German girl, and for admitting to having only a single kiss.

Maurice Luisier (Stalag XI/A): Condemned on 10.12.42 to a year in prison for having exchanged four or five letters with a German female factory co-worker and for having spoken with her one time in the canteen.

Alfred Ortega (Stalag XI/B): Condemned on 25.2.42 to one year and two months in prison for having several times, on the street, spoken with a young German servant girl and for one time taking a walk with her.

Jean Vernet (Stalag VI/G): Condemned on 28.3.42 to one year and six months in prison for having approached two female German co-workers, and for having accepted some butter from them, and for having hugged them and for giving them each a kiss on the cheek.<sup>90</sup>

These case studies were drawn from a larger document prepared by the S.D.P.G. and sent to the German government in June, 1943 in an attempt to have the rules regarding contact between French prisoners of war and German women revised. The S.D.P.G. argued that the German prosecution of French prisoners for “prohibited contact” with German women was contrary to international law based on articles 45 and 46 of the Geneva Conventions. Article 45

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<sup>89</sup> Durand, 417, 421.

<sup>90</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2320. Service diplomatique des prisonniers de guerre – Cabinet – État Moral. Folder: TP mo-71, "Note verbale relative aux condamnations des prisonniers de guerre pour relations avec des femmes allemandes," 12 Juin 1943, 5-7.

held that prisoners of war were covered by the legal regulations and orders enforced in the army of the detaining power, i.e., Germany. Article 46 held that prisoners of war could not be prosecuted for offenses which were not also enforced by the detaining power against its own soldiers. The S.D.P.G. argued that since there was no law or order prohibiting German soldiers from having personal relationships, including sexual ones, with foreign women, unless the woman in question was married to another German soldier, that it was thus illegal to prosecute French soldiers for engaging in this activity.<sup>91</sup>

The effort the S.D.P.G. put forth in defending the right of French prisoners to have relationships with German women is interesting in that it highlights the double standard the Vichy government applied to matters of sex and gender. Throughout 1941 and 1942 the S.D.P.G. urged the Vichy government, in very strong terms, to make the prosecution of unfaithful wives of POWs a priority.<sup>92</sup> In February, 1942 the S.D.P.G. recommended the Vichy government expedite prosecutions of prisoners' wives charged with adultery and to make examples of the guilty with harsh sentences.<sup>93</sup> In a report sent directly to Marshal Pétain, Ambassador Scapini pointed out how much damage news of these affairs did to the prisoners' morale, including causing several to commit suicide. After urging the government to increase its sanctions against unfaithful wives and of the men who had seduced them, Scapini added, "In all cases, it is indispensable that the current punishments for these crimes be applied with maximum

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<sup>91</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2320. Service diplomatique des prisonniers de guerre – Cabinet – État Moral. Folder: TP mo-71, "Note verbale relative aux condamnations des prisonniers de guerre pour relations avec des femmes allemandes," 12 Juin 1943, 1-4.

<sup>92</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2320. Service diplomatique des prisonniers de guerre – Cabinet – État Moral. Folder: Rapports Psychologiques. Rapport à Monsieur l'Ambassadeur SCAPIN sur l'état moral des Prisonniers de Guerre," 15 Février 1942, 2.

<sup>93</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2320. Service diplomatique des prisonniers de guerre – Cabinet – État Moral. Folder: Rapports Psychologiques. Rapport sur l'état moral des Prisonniers de Guerre, 15 Février 1942, 4.

severity.”<sup>94</sup> A follow-up report from June, 1942 expressed considerable frustration that the above recommendations had not been acted upon immediately, and blamed several additional suicides on the government’s inaction. Throughout 1942 and 1943 two of the S.D.P.G.’s diplomatic priorities were attempting to expand the freedom of French prisoners to develop relationships with German women, while at the same time lobbying the government in Vichy to step up its prosecution of the prisoners’ adulterous wives.

### **Conclusion**

From 1940 through 1942, the material realities of the French prisoners’ captivity were established. As the value of the prisoners’ labor to the German economy increased, their chances for liberation prior to the end of hostilities decreased. The economic and, to a lesser degree, the political value of the prisoners encouraged the Germans to maintain them moderately well. Unlike Slavic POWs, French prisoners generally did not suffer from starvation, mass violence or epidemic disease outbreaks. While most French prisoners maintained, at least at a minimal level, their physical well-being through the first two years of captivity, as will be seen in the following chapter, the same cannot be said about their mental well-being.

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<sup>94</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2320. Service diplomatique des prisonniers de guerre – Cabinet – État Moral. Folder: Rapports Psychologiques. Coorespondence No. 20257/BE from Georges Scapini to Monsieur le Marechal, Chef de l’État.

## Chapter 5 - The French Prisoners' State of Mind

Historical descriptions of the French captivity focus primarily on the materialistic aspects of the prisoners' lives in Germany, and understandably so, as this information can be presented in a fairly straight-forward manner. We know that the prisoners generally lived in small or moderate sized *kommandos* spread across Germany. We know they performed a wide variety of work, at first predominantly of an agricultural nature, later mostly in industrial settings. We know that the men worked very long hours and the pay they received amounted to very little. We know that, while the men were not starved, the diet provided by the Germans would not have been sufficient to maintain their health had it not been supplemented by packages sent from home or the Red Cross. We know that their lives were restricted in many ways, most notably by their inability to return to, or even fully communicate with, their loved ones. These aspects of their captivity are somewhat quantifiable. They lend themselves to comparisons with "normal" life.

Harder to get at are aspects of the prisoners' state of mind. What matters preoccupied the prisoners' thoughts while they were in captivity? What was their opinion of the Vichy government? Did they support the national revolution? Did they support collaboration? What were their greatest collective hopes and fears? What was the state of their morale? We know that the Vichy leadership found these important questions as they conducted extensive surveillance on the prisoners to find answers to them. One way the government collected information on the prisoners' state of mind was by reading their mail. Every fifteen days Vichy mail censors compiled a report drawn from the contents of seven to eleven thousand letters which either went to, or came from, the prison camps in Germany. In total about three percent of the prisoners' mail was examined for these reports. This surveillance program, which may have been in

operation even before the armistice was signed, continued until the Vichy government was evacuated from France in 1944. The program's reports are very helpful in allowing us to understand much of the prisoners' collective mentality during their captivity. Even though the reports were produced by an agency with an obvious pro-Vichy bias, much of the information contained in them remains trustworthy. The reports were confidential and intended to be seen only by a small group of government officials. They were marked as distributed to only seven recipients.<sup>1</sup> As one of the core purposes of these reports was to determine the prisoners' actual thoughts and opinions, misrepresentation in them would have been counterproductive. The conclusions reached in these reports also speak to the effort made by their authors to accurately reflect the prisoners' opinions. Indeed, the reports must have been depressing reading for Vichy leaders. Throughout 1941 and 1942 these reports documented the abject failure of one government effort after another, and the growing disdain the prisoners had for everything associated with the Vichy state, save Marshal Pétain.

Vichy POW mail surveillance reports came in two forms. The reports produced through 1943 were long prose forms of forty to fifty pages length which contained a generalized summary of findings divided under standardized topic headings, such as the prisoners' "employment of time," or their thoughts on "Franco-German relations (Collaboration)". The authors supported their generalized conclusions with specific quotes or examples drawn from the correspondence. A shorter form, normally of about ten pages, was produced monthly from December 1943 onward. These shorter reports drew on a larger number of letters. They documented how often specific topics were referenced in letters, and how often the reference was of a positive or negative nature. The shorter reports contained only a small number of

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<sup>1</sup> Listed recipients include Général d'Armée (both Vichy and Lyon), Ministre Secrétaire d'Etat à la Guerre, Service des Contrôles Techniques, Directeur du Service des P.G., Général de Corps d'Armée Commandant la XIVe Division Militaire E.-M. Coordonnateur, and Président de la Commission Centrale de Contrôle Postal.

specific quotations or examples, and so were mostly quantitative in nature. For example, in December 1943 only fourteen of over eighty-one thousand letters examined contained direct statements of opinion on Pierre Laval. Of these fourteen references, twelve contained sentiments of distrust, and two expressed confidence.<sup>2</sup> An almost complete run of these reports covering September 1941 through July 1944 are preserved in the French national archives, the earlier reports could not be located.

The two core questions the POW surveillance program was attempting to answer were interrelated: 1) How were the prisoners being treated; and, 2) What was their state of morale. The men compiling these reports seem to have defined positive morale as having hope for a better future and confidence in the Vichy government. Bad morale was defined by the lack of hope and/or rejection of the Vichy government. Apparently, in the estimation of the officials producing these reports, “optimistic” prisoners, those who passively endured and had faith that somehow, through means beyond their control, things would work out well in the end, were considered to possess good morale. “Pessimistic” prisoners, those who had no faith in Vichy’s ability to take care of them, had poor morale. “Resistant” prisoners, men who attempted to take control over their own fate, were also considered to have bad morale. Frames of mind one might assume to be pro-French or hopeful, such as desiring an Axis defeat, happiness for Soviet or British victories, hatred for Germans and lack of enthusiasm for work, were seen by the Vichy officials producing these reports as either value-neutral or negative ways of thinking. By the above standards, attempted escape was perhaps the only way a prisoner might attempt to proactively control his own life which would not produce a negative judgment.

After the Vichy government recognized that the general liberation of the prisoners was most likely an unobtainable goal as long as the war continued, their efforts to maintain support

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<sup>2</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Décembre 1943. No XII, 2.

among the prisoners focused on improving their living conditions in Germany, assuring them that the National Revolution's reforms were helping France to quickly recover from the disaster and, finally, that the French people had not forgotten about their exiled countrymen. Even had the Vichy government been successful in all three of these areas, their hope to sustain the prisoners' morale (or, more specifically, in keeping them hopeful and supportive of the government) was doomed to failure. A clear message contained in the surveillance reports was that the one thing the Vichy government could not provide to the prisoners, their liberation, was the only thing that really mattered to them. No improvements to their lives in captivity, and no reforms made to France in their absence, mattered to them a fraction as much as did their freedom to return home. A report from December, 1942 summed up the situation in plain language. The report found that month's correspondence had been almost completely bereft of political commentary and concluded, "the themes of the National Revolution leave the great majority [of the prisoners] indifferent." The prisoners had no interest in events or developments except those which might relate to their liberation. In the words of one prisoner: "After 28 months of captivity, we have come to accept that nothing is important unless it can be traded for our freedom."<sup>3</sup>

The prisoners' morale, at least as defined by the standards described above, was not always as grim as it was in late 1942. Judging by the reports from the last months of 1941, "optimism" may still have reigned as the majority mind-set eighteen months into captivity. The men frequently complained about their harsh working conditions, their long absence from home, their poor diets, etc., but hope for liberation remained widespread and this seems to have been enough to carry most from day to day. Even as late as January 1942 the overall morale of the

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<sup>3</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Mensuel. No 11, 9.

prisoners was described as “all in all, satisfactory.”<sup>4</sup> Surveillance reports from late 1941 frequently alluded to the prisoners’ growing impatience and the difficulty they had in reconciling the concept of Franco-German rapprochement with their treatment; nevertheless, the authors maintained that most prisoners continued to see collaboration as a logical policy. To exemplify the prisoners’ growing disillusionment, a quote from a letter written by an inmate in Stalag I/B was included in a September 1941 surveillance report: “One more winter will mean disaster for collaboration.”<sup>5</sup> This prisoner had correctly sized up the situation. Over the next several months morale went into steep decline. By April the surveillance report’s estimation of the prisoners’ morale was almost entirely negative.

It truly seems that in some camps the weariness and lassitude cannot get much worse. For example, a former chief of a *kommando* in Stalag VII/B was so discouraged of being able to rebuild the morale of the men under his charge that he asked to be relieved of his duties. ‘I thought I would be able to change the mentality in the camp a bit. Nothing can transform it even a little. I thought I could get them to understand the voice of common sense, but the result has just been more negativity. After two years of captivity, we are all bitter and nothing can awaken the young people.’

[A priest at Stalag III/D wrote]: “The great majority of us prisoners are inert. We no longer react like we did at the beginning. Based on my impressions from talking with others it is the same in other *kommandos*. This inertia, this indifference, it is the lot of a great number of prisoners. In this morose life, we just settle in, we try to get by as best we can. We just go brain dead.”<sup>6</sup>

By July the report simply stated, “We believe that their spirit is broken. They no longer have the strength to be passionate for or against anyone, for or against any thing. . . . Never have we seen so few words of hope in the outbound mail.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 44 (1-15 Janvier 1942), 21.

<sup>5</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 36 (1-15 Septembre 1941), 25.

<sup>6</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 50 (1-15 Avril 1942), 25-26.

<sup>7</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 56 (1-15 Juillet 1942), 22, 28.

The length of their captivity and their transfer to industrial jobs undoubtedly contributed to the collapse of morale among the prisoners; however, probably the factor which carried the most weight was their loss of faith in the Vichy government's ability to win their liberation through collaboration.

### **The Prisoners' View of Collaboration**

Until the spring of 1942 the Vichy policy of Franco-German collaboration seems to have maintained a fair level of support among the prisoners in Germany. The Vichy leadership wanted the prisoners to fully embrace collaboration as the foundation of a new and hopeful future in which Germany and France would set aside past differences and work together in building a new Europe. To their frustration, this remained a distinctly minority point of view among the prisoners. What appears to have been a more common mindset, perhaps even the point of view of a majority of the prisoners until the winter of 1941/1942, was that collaboration was a humiliating and odious policy, but that it was probably also a necessary price that France would have to pay to buy their freedom. This point of view appears to have been even more widely shared by those in France writing letters to prisoners in Germany. A September 1941 surveillance report stated, "Partisans of collaboration have never been more numerous than today among the correspondents to the prisoners of war [in Germany.]"<sup>8</sup>

The support collaboration received from the prisoners and their families was a soft support. Collaboration was not embraced as a desirable program on its own merits. Most who supported it only did so based on their belief that the policy would lead to the return of the prisoners. By the winter of 1941/42, the prisoners and their families increasingly came to recognize that collaboration was a one-sided agreement in Germany's favor. Their perception

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<sup>8</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 36 (1-15 Septembre 1941), 41.

was that the Vichy government had made concession after concession; embraced a policy of Franco-German rapprochement with sincere good will, only to be stone-walled time and again by the stubborn victors. Their support for collaboration was tied to results, and collaboration was not producing results. The growing frustration and declining patience of the prisoners and their families is found throughout the correspondence of late 1941 and early 1942. A man from Lyon very articulately described the conditional nature of his support for collaboration in a September 1941 letter written to a prisoner:

There is nothing to do but enter into collaboration in order to get the prisoners out of their captivity. If collaboration is properly understood as the primordial condition for the prisoners' liberation, it is equally obvious to the public at large that this liberation represents the logical and necessary outcome of the policy; a policy which I must say current public sentiment finds somewhat offensive. The Germans have shown that they fail to understand the state of public opinion in France by delaying the return of the prisoners, a return which has been so patiently awaited until now. They risk discouraging even the most sincere partisans of rapprochement.<sup>9</sup>

A letter written to a prisoner by his wife shortly after she spent her second Christmas alone expressed this same frustration in more emotional terms: "Your painful existence tears up my heart. My poor captive. I want to come to you – why all these boundaries, all this barbed wire? Is collaboration not enough?"<sup>10</sup> A prisoner's wife from Villeurbanne showed more anger in her letter: "Nothing surprises me now, not after seeing you behind barbed wire for twenty months. And still they have found no solution for your return. This truly was not worth climbing into bed with collaboration."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 36 (1-15 Septembre 1941), 42.

<sup>10</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 44 (1-15 Janvier 1942), 44.

<sup>11</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 50 (1-15 Avril 1942), 36.

Throughout 1942, support for collaboration declined among the families of the prisoners. The support that was described as “nearly unanimous” in September 1941 was characterized as “divided” by April 1942.<sup>12</sup>

The prisoners’ letters from this period indicate that the exiles in Germany became frustrated with collaboration more quickly than did their loved ones back in France. A letter written by a prisoner in Stalag XVII/A in January 1942 reflected their waning patience:

Who is collaboration serving? After we received the newspapers today, I believe we are very likely to be prisoners for life. I do not understand what our “hosts” mean by collaboration. I’ve been here eighteen months working for them. I don’t know what more they want. We’ve had enough of this sales pitch.<sup>13</sup>

The breaking point in the prisoners’ faith in collaboration was reached sometime during the winter. Spring found the process of disillusionment complete. By April 1942, surveillance left no doubt as to what the prisoners thought of collaboration:

What the prisoners were expecting to come from rapprochement between the two peoples, we have known well enough, it was their liberation - a liberation which seemed so close last summer, and again during the early winter. The prisoners had no doubt that they were going to be allowed to return to their homes in great numbers. But now, with the bulk of them still in Germany, more than a million men have lost all hope of returning for a long time. Their disappointment is intense and arouses anger that many of the unfortunate men do not bother to conceal. . . Liberation, reconciliation, the reconstruction of Europe on the basis of mutual understanding and respect between the victors and the vanquished, a respect for each others rights and legitimate interests, this was the idea the prisoners clung to despite everything for so long. Today this dream is fading. . . All the letters reflect sentiments, often in very strong terms, which beyond any doubt are shared by the vast majority of the prisoners. In the words of one prisoner from Stalag IV/E: ‘We were to become friends with our jailors if we just collaborated. There was no question about it. Outside of a few cranks, 90% of the prisoners in Germany now oppose collaboration.’ This is the same percentage estimated by an inmate at Stalag XIII/A regarding the strength of his companion’s opinion on rapprochement, “Ninety percent of

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<sup>12</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 44 (1-15 Janvier 1942), 44.

<sup>13</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 44 (1-15 Janvier 1942), 19.

my comrades cannot consider a power that has held us prisoner for so many years as a friend.’<sup>14</sup>

It is worth noting that the prisoners’ support for collaboration had collapsed by the first months of 1942, well before the announcement of Vichy’s most ambitious attempt to jump-start a Franco-German partnership, the *Relève*. The *Relève* allowed one prisoner of war to return to France for every three skilled French workers who volunteered to work in Germany. While the prisoners initially greeted the *Relève* program with some enthusiasm, nothing in the surveillance reports from the last six months of 1942 indicated a widespread renewal of support for collaboration as a whole.<sup>15</sup> The prisoners gave collaboration a year and a half of qualified support. By early 1942 they had given up on the policy and, as the Vichy government would discover during the summer of 1942, more was needed than fresh promises and new schemes to win them back. By the time the *Relève* was announced most prisoners were already cynics when it came to promises from Vichy regarding their release and it seems most never expected the *Relève* to deliver on its promises and thus were not surprised when it failed to do so.

Just as the prisoners’ support for collaboration was conditional based on its ability to win their liberation, so was their support of the Vichy government as a whole. All that the prisoners truly cared about was their freedom, and the Vichy government had promoted collaboration as the method by which this freedom would be won. The prisoners had swallowed their pride, put aside their principles, and supported the program. Now, after a year and a half of humiliation they saw they were no closer to returning home than they had been when they first agreed to work alongside the Germans. Not surprisingly, the disappointment and shame they felt quickly transformed into anger. With increasing frequency prisoners attacked the Vichy government in

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<sup>14</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 50 (1-15 Avril 1942), 21.

<sup>15</sup> See chapter five.

pointed terms. “Our current leaders are made to make us suffer,” wrote one prisoner in January 1942. “Not one of them is worth the rope from which to hang them.”<sup>16</sup> A prisoner in Stalag V/A vented this same combination of self-pity and anger in a July 1942 letter:

If instead of having been made prisoners we had all been killed in June 1940, France would have moved on just the same, and our deaths wouldn't have bothered these gentlemen, the current leaders of our country. In our opinion, these men care very little about us. . . The poor soldiers were betrayed by the corruption of 1939 and now we suffer in exile. But all of those responsible will pay when we return. Pay hard for our suffering, and it will be very expensive.<sup>17</sup>

Exactng revenge on men still in France who had taken advantage of the captivity for personal advancement was a common enough theme in the prisoners' letters. One prisoner's attack on Vichy's blueprint for national renovation took on a personal tone when he wrote that the French back home shouldn't expect the prisoners, once they finally did return home, to simply roll up their sleeves and join in the rebuilding out of a sense of patriotism. “Maybe we will have different ideals. Slowly, we will take our time to take our shots.”<sup>18</sup>

As they saw more promises go unfilled, and more hopes dashed, the prisoners developed a very cynical view of the Vichy government. Some prisoners came to believe that all talk of liberation was nonsense because, after all, Germany still clearly needed them as workers.<sup>19</sup> A prisoner's wife in Nice wrote to her husband that she found prisoners who still had faith in collaboration as “singularly naïve” for, “One would have to be naïve to continue to believe after all the promises that have been made to you for so long, and with not one of them realized.”<sup>20</sup> A

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<sup>16</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 44 (1-15 Janvier 1942), 22.

<sup>17</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 36 (1-15 Septembre 1941), 30.

<sup>18</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 56 (1-15 Juillet 1942), 30.

<sup>19</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 56 (1-15 Juillet 1942), 30.

<sup>20</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 50 (1-15 Avril 1942), 36.

surveillance report in November 1942 concluded that the majority of the prisoners in Germany believed that the government had given up trying to win their freedom and was now content to do no more than assure them that it remained concerned about their situation. This same report pointed out the special dislike the prisoners had for Pierre Laval. “They do not spare him disparaging reflections. Some [prisoners] bitterly reproached the “deal” he made with Germany and think they were “sold out.” The criticism goes so far as to accuse the Chief of Government of having lied to the prisoners for his own political ends. Others simply think that Laval was “played” by the Germans.<sup>21</sup>

Expressions of the prisoners’ anger were not limited to the government. Increasingly, the captives lashed out at all French men and women who had avoided captivity. Many prisoners saw themselves as the patriots of France. They had been abandoned to a life in exile, and France was being run by the cowards and shirkers who had not even tried to defend it in 1940. A prisoner in Stalag II/A wrote: “We are the sacrifices, the convicts. And our only crime was to stay at our posts.”<sup>22</sup> One prisoner from Stalag X/C wrote in January 1942: “The mentality that we prisoners have here is not at all like it is described by some journalists. When we get back, France will know how we really feel. For seventeen months we have rotted here. And still we can’t weep for joy [on returning home]. We’ve been jerked around for seventeen months. I am not under any illusions. But one day, we will come home, although I know many French prefer us to stay in captivity.”<sup>23</sup> In November 1942 a surveillance report noted that “a certain number” of prisoners were taking a perverse joy in the deportation of French workers to Germany, and

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<sup>21</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Mensuel. No 10, (Novembre 1942), 10.

<sup>22</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 44 (1-15 Janvier 1942), 22.

<sup>23</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 44 (1-15 Janvier 1942), 21.

that these prisoners hoped the government would use “coercive measures” to ensure privileged members of society were finally forced to answer the call of “duty.”<sup>24</sup>

It is impossible to say with any statistical accuracy what the degree of support was among the prisoners for the Vichy government and collaboration in 1940 and 1941. What emerges from the surveillance reports is that, while the support the prisoners gave the government in 1940 and 1941 may have been widespread, it was also shallow. As had been the case with the French population back home, the Vichy government had staked its legitimacy with the prisoners on the success of collaboration. When collaboration failed, the government had no plan B on which to fall back. Collaboration’s failure discredited the government. Disillusioned prisoners thought they had been misled into supporting a shameful policy, and an angry backlash against this perceived deception dominated their correspondence throughout 1942. The passive “optimistic” mentality of 1941 was replaced by an equally passive “pessimism” as the majority state of mind in 1942.

### **Prisoners’ Response to Propaganda**

One key theme of the Vichy government’s prisoner of war propaganda campaign was the claim that, in a spiritual sense, captivity would do the prisoners some good. The propaganda conveyed the message that the defeat in 1940 had been caused by the moral and spiritual weakness of France. The prisoners could use their time in captivity to reflect on their own, and their nation’s, shortcomings. Presumably these musings would lead the prisoners to support the National Revolution. In fact, throughout 1941 and 1942 Vichy propaganda claimed that the prisoners overwhelmingly supported the government and its reform program. In this discourse, the captivity represented both a punishment and an opportunity. It was the price the French had

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<sup>24</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Mensuel. No 10, (Novembre 1942), 11.

to pay for their past weaknesses, and it also gave the prisoners an opportunity to spiritually purify themselves. After undergoing this purification the prisoners could return to France and serve as the shock troops of the National Revolution. Given how often Marshal Pétain returned to the theme of the captivity as both punishment and method of purification in his public statements, it was central to his personal vision for the path France should follow in its quest for national renewal.<sup>25</sup>

Another key Vichy propaganda theme was to assure the French people that the government effectively protected the prisoners while they were in Germany. Unless properly balanced, these two themes in the government's representation of the captivity might seem contradictory. On the one hand, the government had to convey the message that the prisoners' life in Germany was austere - that their punishment was commensurate with their past crimes. On the other hand, they also had to convince the people that the prisoners' living conditions were not so harsh that they might be considered cruel or unreasonable. The government was largely successful in this balancing act, at least with its domestic audience in France. Most of the people in France writing to the prisoners seemed to believe that their life in Germany was simple and hard, but no more so than a defeated soldier should expect. The prisoners in Germany universally reacted with anger and exasperation to how they were portrayed in the French media. "We look like idiots in our newspapers. Especially in that ignoble Paris-Soir!" wrote one prisoner in January 1942.<sup>26</sup> In April 1942 surveillance reported that the prisoners found newspaper stories about their life in captivity so ridiculous that they had become the subject of bitter humor. Stories from newspapers published in occupied France which described the good living conditions the

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<sup>25</sup> For more on Vichy prisoner of war propaganda see Chapter three.

<sup>26</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 44 (1-15 Janvier 1942), 21.

prisoners enjoyed in Germany provoked in them “the greatest indignation.”<sup>27</sup> The Vichy-sponsored documentary about the captivity named “Prisoners” produced a “deplorable impression” across the camps in Germany. One inmate of Stalag XIII/A described the humiliation and rage this film produced among the exiles:

I understand that a film called “Prisoners” is currently showing across France, and that at each showing it is warmly applauded by the audience. And why wouldn’t it be? People hurry to the zoo to see their favorite animals. And they take up a collection for the animal trainer. Just because this film uses human material, the quality of the spectacle loses nothing. On the contrary, the show is all the better when the audience sees their advanced compatriots in the arena.<sup>28</sup>

Far from seeing their captivity as a time for spiritual purification, the prisoners saw it as a pointless hardship. In response to a newspaper story from *La Gerbe* entitled, “Prison Camp: A School of Spirituality,” an inmate of Stalag III/B wrote home: “Who are they kidding? Us or you? . . . I believe the Marshal is mistaken when he says that we will become greater and stronger through this trial. It is nice to want to see us as supermen. And without a doubt that is how he wants us to see ourselves. But, in truth, we are just men. Unhappy men.”<sup>29</sup> By July 1942 chaplains working among the prisoners found fewer men seeking solace in religion. The report continued: “[The chaplains] no longer expect that the captivity can make unhappy men better than they were. On the contrary, as one of them put it, ‘the captivity has become a disaster, a physical and moral disaster.’”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 50 (1-15 Avril 1942), 25.

<sup>28</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 50 (1-15 Avril 1942), 26.

<sup>29</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 44 (1-15 Janvier 1942), 23.

<sup>30</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 56 (1-15 Juillet 1942), 30.

### **Fear of Being Forgotten**

The greatest fear of the French prisoners of war was that they had been forgotten by their countrymen. This fear surfaced so often in the prisoners' correspondence that the surveillance report authors described it as a "veritable obsession."<sup>31</sup> Separated from their loved ones for so long, limited to only a handful of letters and postcards each month, the prisoners felt helpless to manage their affairs and to hold together the lives they had built before the war. They worried about losing the affection of their wives, powerless to hold their families together during their long absence. They resented the "shirkers" back home who took over their jobs while they remained in Germany. Since most of the prisoners adopted the passive attitude of relying on outside intervention to secure their release, fears that their liberation was no longer a top priority in France caused feelings of hopeless abandonment. France was moving forward, their families were moving forward, their jobs were getting done, and all the time they were trapped thousands of miles away. Perhaps reflecting their own sense of helplessness, the prisoners frequently expressed concerns about being scorned by the French population back home alongside their fears of being forgotten. Many prisoners felt that, not only were they useless to their families as long as they remained in captivity, but that they were actually a burden. This confluence of anger, fear, self-pity and self-loathing produced an almost hysterical tone in many letters.

The prisoners' fear of being forgotten was not entirely groundless. By 1942 the government had changed its focus from efforts to win the prisoners' global release to one of negotiating releases for specific groups. Letters from family members in France and former prisoners who had been repatriated often confirmed the fears of the exiles. One example of these sentiments came from a letter sent to a prisoner in July 1942: "The prisoners interest only those of us who have a loved one over there. As far as what other French people think about the whole

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<sup>31</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 56 (1-15 Juillet 1942), 45.

matter, well, it is better to not talk about them! It is sickening that there can be so much selfishness. If it were up to them it would be a long time before you would return among us.”<sup>32</sup> A letter describing the government officials working on the prisoners’ behalf written by a repatriated prisoner to his companions left behind in Germany provided no hope: “[The bureaucrats] are the ones who spent the war sitting in a chair. They have no idea what it is like to spend so many months far from their loved ones.”<sup>33</sup> This letter was not an isolated instance of negative reports coming back to the prisoners from their repatriated comrades. In January 1942, the surveillance reports noted that many repatriates described their welcome back in France as “cold.” One repatriate wrote to a friend still in Germany that most French people “had absolutely no comprehension” of the “suffering of the prisoners,” and that he was “scandalized to see that already the same old selfish attitudes had returned” to their homeland. Another repatriate described his poor treatment by civil servants - “Nothing has changed. The indifference for the prisoners is total.”<sup>34</sup> Another prisoner received a letter warning him not to expect too much from the population at large when he did finally return. “Don’t expect anyone to thank you for the two years you spent behind barbed wire for them.”<sup>35</sup> A letter from a prisoner in Stalag V/B gives an indication of how widespread this mentality had become by early 1942: “I believe that France has forgotten us. It is a general belief among all the prisoners here.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 56 (1-15 Juillet 1942), 44.

<sup>33</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 56 (1-15 Juillet 1942), 45.

<sup>34</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 44 (1-15 Janvier 1942), 44-45.

<sup>35</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 44 (1-15 Janvier 1942), 43.

<sup>36</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 50 (1-15 Avril 1942), 26.

## **Conclusion - Cafard**

If one word were used to describe the mentality of the French prisoners of war in 1942, “*cafard*” would be a good choice. Translated literally into English *cafard* means cockroach. To the French, *cafard* was the despondency, the overwhelming sense of hopelessness and depression which infected the minds of soldiers who had stopped thinking about the future. In modern American terminology, *cafard* might be referred to as combat stress reaction, or post traumatic stress disorder, or perhaps in a non-military setting, as clinical depression. Virtually every surveillance report on the state of the prisoners’ morale in 1942 remarked on the spreading epidemic of *cafard*. A prisoner from Stalag II/E described his *cafard* in July, 1942: “We watch with horror as the days, months, the years, carry away our desires, hopes, our youth, in a raging torrent. Yet nothing can be done except to keep on waiting.” An inmate of Stalag IV/C tried to prepare his wife for what she would see when he finally returned to her: “We have to resign ourselves to lowering our heads like we are animals. You will see when I return what this type of life does to a man.”<sup>37</sup> As winter arrived in 1942, and the men faced the knowledge that they would be spending a third Christmas separated from their families, the surveillance report described the majority state of mind as “lassitude, disgust and indifference.”<sup>38</sup>

As long as hope remained for their liberation, most of the men fought off *cafard*. When that hope left their minds *cafard* made a home in the vacuum. During the second half of their captivity the prisoners turned to hatred of the Germans, hope for an Allied victory and, in growing numbers, to forms of resistance open to them, to give their days some sense of purpose. Christmas 1942 was probably the nadir of the captivity, at least from a psychological perspective.

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<sup>37</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 56 (1-15 Juillet 1942), 28.

<sup>38</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Mensuel. No 10, (Novembre 1942), 11.

## **Chapter Six - The Relève and the STO.**

From 1940 until 1942 the Vichy government attempted to foster a collaborative relationship with Nazi Germany. The Vichy leadership and their defenders claimed this policy was a reluctant but realistic response to the national disaster of defeat and occupation. France had no means to resist German exploitation and repression. The Vichy government claimed that by acting as a middleman between the Nazi Reich and the French people they could both satisfy German demands and shield the French people from the more brutal form of direct occupation suffered by many other conquered nations. Having French institutions carry out German dictates would benefit the occupiers as it would be more economical than direct administration and presumably would produce less resistance. Collaboration would be beneficial to the French people because the state could negotiate with the occupiers to moderate their demands and encourage predictable and restrained behavior. As long as the Vichy government could convince the Germans that French institutions existed that could maintain stability in France and reliably meet German economic and material demands the French could retain a large degree of autonomy. Both the French and Germans would profit from this arrangement.

The Vichy leadership's claim to have been the "shield" of the French people during the occupation was the basis of their post-war defense. As the Allies liberated France Pétain was forced to accompany the Axis forces into Germany. Before leaving French soil he declared:

For more than four years, resolved to remain in your midst, I tried every day to serve the permanent interests of France. Loyally, but without compromise, I had only one goal: to protect you from the worst ... If I could not be your sword, I tried to be your shield. Sometimes my words or acts must have surprised you.

Know that they hurt me more than you yourselves realized. But ... I held off from you some certain dangers; there were others, alas, which I could not spare you.<sup>1</sup>

During his 1945 treason trial Pétain echoed this defense. “I used my power as a shield to protect the French people ... Every day, a dagger at my throat, I struggled against the enemy’s demands.”<sup>2</sup>

Pétain’s shield and sword analogy describes a form of collaboration that shares little similarity to Vichy’s actual interactions with the Germans. In practice Pétain and his associates did not make the welfare of the French people their first priority; they valued retention of power and the enactment of their ideological programs more than what they saw as the temporary discomfort of the French people. Consequently the French population benefited little from Vichy-Nazi negotiations.

Even if one accepts Pétain’s claim to have attempted to shield France from excessive German demands, he and the Vichy regime proved remarkably inept in the effort. While France was not subjected to the same level of systematic violence found in the East, it was the most economically exploited nation.<sup>3</sup> France was compelled to pay to Germany monthly occupation costs that consumed 49% of the government’s total budget over the course of the war.<sup>4</sup> The monthly “occupation” bill overstated the actual German military expenditures by a factor of approximately five, leaving a huge surplus that Germany used, along with money extracted through other financial mechanisms, to

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Robert Paxton, *Vichy France, Old Guard New Order, 1940-1944* (New York: Borzoi Books, 1972), 358.

<sup>2</sup> Paxton, 358.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Milward, *The New Order and the French Economy*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1970), remains the key work regarding the German economic exploitation of France during the occupation. For briefer treatments see Julian Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001), 233-34; and Peter Liberman, *Does Conquest Pay; The Exploitation of Occupied Industrial Societies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, 36-68.

<sup>4</sup> Milward, 272.

harness the French economy to the war effort.<sup>5</sup> By 1943 roughly half of France's productive capacity was used for German purposes. At the same time more than half of all employed French citizens worked in service of German economic purposes.<sup>6</sup> By the autumn of 1943 many German economic planners, among them Albert Speer, believed that the degree of exploitation in France had reached such a level that it was not sustainable long term and that any increase risked collapsing the entire French economy.<sup>7</sup> German exploitation of France was not held in check by the Vichy shield, it was held in check by German fears that they might kill their "golden goose." Such was the dearth of agricultural goods in France during the occupation that many, if not most, French citizens suffered from malnutrition despite the purchase of food being their single largest expense.<sup>8</sup> Simply in terms of caloric intake, the French ate less than did every other occupied nation in Western Europe.<sup>9</sup> Even if one measures the average French person's diet based on official ration allotments, and few ever managed to locate and purchase all the goods to which they were theoretically entitled, the average daily caloric intake of adults dropped from over 3,100 to under 1,500 between 1938 and 1943.<sup>10</sup> Citizens of nations under direct German occupation that lacked collaborationist "shields," such as Belgium and the Netherlands, found the years 1940 through 1944 more bearable than did the French. While collaboration may have benefited the Germans, and perhaps, at least

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<sup>5</sup> Milward, 287. In the autumn of 1942 Germany demanded a monthly payment of 700 million reichsmarks for occupation costs. Of this total 150 million went towards military expenditures; however, the true cost of these expenditures probably was no higher than 75 million per month.

<sup>6</sup> Milward, 136-37.

<sup>7</sup> Milward, 111, 134-38.

<sup>8</sup> On food shortages in France see Dominique Veillon, *Vivre et survivre en France 1939-1947* (Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages, 1995), 101-32; Éric Alary, Bénédicte Vergez-Chaignon and Gilles Gauvin, *Les Français au Quotidien, 1939-1949* (Paris: Perrin, 2006), 209-77; John Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France, The French Under Nazi Occupation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 14-17; Alfred Sauvy, *La Vie Économique des Français de 1939 à 1945*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), 110-38 and Richard Vinen, *The Unfree French; Life under the Occupation* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), 215-46.

<sup>9</sup> Paxton, 359-60.

<sup>10</sup> Sauvy, 111-12, 122-23.

initially, the Vichy government, it almost certainly caused the average French citizen more harm than good. In his landmark study of France during the occupation historian Philippe Burrin concludes that after Hitler rebuffed the Vichy leadership's ambitious proposals for a more equal partnership between France and Germany in the "new European order," the Vichy State became little more than "a shield for the Germans on French soil, and above all a shield for its leaders."<sup>11</sup>

The story of one specific program intimately related to the prisoners of war in Germany, the Relève, provides an excellent case study of how the Vichy government's focus on its own power and political goals defined the policy of collaboration more truly than did any effort to shield the French people.

### **The Structure of the Relève**

By mid-1942 the main commodity France held that Germany needed was manpower—specifically, skilled manpower. With so many of its young men enlisted in the armed forces, Germany was starved for industrial workers. At this same time much of French industry had been shut down and the nation's industrial workforce was experiencing a high rate of unemployment. German requisitioning of French workers was a foregone conclusion. Germany had already forcibly conscripted workers throughout Europe and undoubtedly would do the same in France. When Fritz Sauckel, the German commissioner-general for labor allocation, presented a demand for 350,000 French workers to Prime Minister Laval in May of 1942, labor deportation was already a settled issue. All that remained for Vichy to negotiate were the details. Laval did negotiate two concessions. First, the Germans agreed to reduce the requisition to 250,000 workers. The

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<sup>11</sup> Philippe Burrin, *France under the Germans, Collaboration and Compromise* (New York: The New Press, 1996), 174.

second concession was a politically ingenious plan developed by Laval called the Relève. Under this plan the Germans agreed to free one French prisoner of war for every three French skilled workers who came to Germany. Laval argued that by linking the labor program to the return of the prisoners of war, and by appealing to the French workers' patriotic and material desires, enough bodies could be found on a voluntary basis to fill German demands. Ultimately, neither of these concessions benefited the French people.

Laval had not really been able to limit the German appetite for French laborers. The initial German demand for 250,000 French workers had been simply their opening offer. Every six months Sauckel returned with a new demand for hundreds of thousands of additional workers. Under the terms of the Relève, convincing workers to voluntarily work in the nation that was occupying their homeland became a Vichy responsibility. The Relève saved the Germans the trouble of recruiting, or simply rounding up, the desired workers.

The second part of the Relève, the three-to-one exchange of workers for prisoners, worked equally in Germany's favor. Under terms of the agreement, the Germans were given the freedom to identify 80% of those prisoners who would be allowed to return to France.<sup>12</sup> By and large, the Germans returned prisoners who were sickly, crippled or nonproductive. In captivity, these prisoners represented a drain on the German economy. The Relève transferred this burden to an already desperately poor France. Prisoners who openly supported fascist organizations constituted a second identifiable group of prisoners picked for release by the Germans. These men desired to return to France to

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<sup>12</sup> Archives Nationales (hereafter AN) F<sup>9</sup> 2191, Folder "Relève, Divers 1941-1944." Correspondence between Corporation Nationale de la Press Français (Zone Occupée) and SDPG Minister Scapini, 9 Avril and 30 Avril 1943, and correspondence between Directeur du Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle and Minister Scapini, 21 Mai 1943.

help bring about a fascist revolution. Many scorned the Vichy government and hoped, with German backing, to replace it with a more ideologically pure state.<sup>13</sup> From the German perspective, these men were valuable in that they represented a political alternative which could be used to threaten the Vichy leadership. While the threat seemed real to many in the Vichy leadership it was one the Germans never seriously considered employing. The Germans understood that the fascist groups had no organic political power in France, as they lacked a significant domestic following. It was much easier for the Germans to continue working through the Vichy government, provided it remained compliant, than to deal with the inevitable rise in resistance that would accompany the imposition of a more openly pro-German fascist government.<sup>14</sup> The fascist groups were little more than negotiating pawns in the larger German game of maximizing exploitation while minimizing investment.

It quickly became clear to both the French people and the Vichy leadership that little if any benefit would come from the Relève exchange agreement. Vichy had to bear the administrative costs and public scorn of providing Germany with laborers, and in return the French were receiving dependents and agitators whom the Germans were all too happy to return to France. Despite the one-sidedness of the agreement, the Vichy leadership continued to support it, as they believed it provided the regime with a *raison d'être* from the German perspective. The Vichy leadership understood that Germany would allow them to continue to exercise power in France only as long as they remained useful. To Germany, a French-run labor procurement program such as the Relève was preferable to committing their own resources to round up workers.

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<sup>13</sup> Bertram Gordon, *Collaborationism in France during the Second World War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 20-27.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon, 24-26.

### **Selling the Relève to the French People**

The administration of the Relève demonstrates not only the general ineptitude of Vichy administration but also its penchant for deception. The French government engaged in a highly deceptive propaganda campaign in an effort to recruit the promised workers for Germany. At the same time, Vichy proved either incapable or unwilling to ensure that the French laborers it encouraged to leave for Germany would receive proper treatment once inside the Reich. Instead it attempted to conceal the true living and working conditions in Germany so as not to depress recruitment.

The Relève was not the first labor recruitment agreement the Vichy government had entered into with Nazi Germany. Prior to the summer of 1942, the Vichy government had cooperated with German efforts to recruit French volunteers for work in Germany. In exchange for allowing the Germans to recruit workers with its blessing in both the occupied and unoccupied zones, Vichy had been allowed to monitor the workers while they were in Germany.<sup>15</sup> The Germans had found this directly administered program unsatisfactory. It had not produced enough volunteers to satisfy demands, and the workers who had volunteered tended to be unskilled. It was this program that the Relève was intended to supplement.<sup>16</sup> The surveillance information Vichy acquired while working with the Germans in this initial labor recruitment plan gave them a good understanding of the distressing living and working conditions of their citizens in Germany.

An April 1942 French report entitled “On the situation of French workers in Germany” detailed the difficult life of the workers; however, the report focused as much

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<sup>15</sup> Burrin, 139.

<sup>16</sup> Milward, 114-118.

attention on Germany's dissatisfaction with the quality of workers they recruited in France as on their miserable living conditions. Of the 157,000 workers who had crossed into Germany by that time, only 13,000 were considered by the Germans to be "qualified." The French report describes their citizens working in Germany:

...the rest are not great, in particular the women. Among them you find a lot of wives of prisoners who come to work in Germany in hope of seeing their husbands. Some arrive and try to escape. A lot of women are without defined occupations, attracted by the advertising, and arrive there with the firm intention of working as little as possible and earning a living as a prostitute. Among women lacking specialized skills, the majority receives starvation wages and their basic needs push them into prostitution as well.<sup>17</sup>

What makes this document significant is that it is a French report focused primarily on the level of German satisfaction with its foreign workforce rather than on the welfare of those workers. The report details many ways in which French citizens were being mistreated and misled by their German employers. One cause of unhappiness among French workers was that they were shunned by German society. Germans had come to consider French laborers as "cheaters, pimps, prostitutes, etc." due to the large number of undesirable recruits who arrived in the early wave.<sup>18</sup> As the above excerpt makes clear, the French government was aware that many French female workers in Germany had already been reduced to poverty and prostitution. Despite this knowledge, the government continued to encourage workers to volunteer for work in Germany, ensuring them that they would find high-paying jobs and comfortable living conditions there.

The Relève was announced to the population with great fanfare in June of 1942. The people were told that by volunteering for work in Germany they would enjoy more

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<sup>17</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2191, Folder "Relève, Principale". Situation des ouvriers français travaillant en Allemagne.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

income and a better standard of living, all the while doing their patriotic duty by liberating long-suffering prisoners of war who had already fulfilled their wartime obligations. The government news agency produced newsreels promoting the Relève that were shown in theaters in both the occupied and Vichy zones.<sup>19</sup> Lack of information and misinformation combined and caused much confusion among the French people regarding the specific terms of the Relève. Many workers, perhaps most, did not understand that the one-year contract they signed could be unilaterally renewed by their German employers. The wages they were promised were reduced by up to 70% through German and Vichy payroll deductions. Upon arrival in Germany many workers were reclassified by their employers and paid a lower rate. French workers in Germany were denied legal rights. They were not permitted to resign or travel without permission. They often lived in communal settings that afforded little privacy. Their shelter and food were often insufficient and their work week was either 60 or 64 hours.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the biggest misunderstanding of the Relève program regarded the actual prisoner exchange. Some workers believed that they could specify which prisoner they were replacing. Many relatives of prisoners volunteered for the Relève in the mistaken belief that they were selflessly exchanging a year of labor in Germany for the freedom of a specific loved one. One way this false belief was spread was through an unsigned and undated article that appeared in numerous newspapers throughout Western France titled “The Relief of the Prisoners-Finally on the Agenda.” This article informed readers that those workers who volunteered “can request the liberation of designated prisoners by

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<sup>19</sup> Steve Wharton, “Unwilling Film Stars, Service de travail obligatoire and its filmic representation,” *Western Society for French History Proceedings* 26, (1998): 373-82.

<sup>20</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2191, Folder “Relève, Principale”. Situation des ouvriers français travaillant en Allemagne.

writing directly to Minister Scapini.”<sup>21</sup> Some workers were given official and stamped work contracts from German-staffed recruitment offices that included a notation identifying the specific prisoner they were volunteering to free.<sup>22</sup> When these workers learned later that the person they believed they had freed remained in captivity, their complaints were directed not to the Germans but to the Vichy government, which was supposedly administering the program. This pattern of deception was addressed in a July 1942 memo written by Scapini’s deputy in Paris, Jean Desbons, to the German embassy in Paris. Desbons encouraged the German ambassador to instruct his recruiters to halt this practice—not because it was false, but rather because when more French people found out about the deception it would become harder to find enough volunteers to fill the quotas.<sup>23</sup> While it is unclear where the newspaper article which spread the false hope that workers might free specific prisoners had originated, there are many examples of materials produced by the Vichy government that contain clearly deceptive descriptions of conditions in Germany. The government also instructed regional officials to avoid disclosing the full terms of the agreement to the French people.<sup>24</sup>

For the 20% of prisoners of war it could select for release, the Vichy government decided early that it would give priority to those prisoners who were heads of households having at least three children. Only after all these prisoners were free would it then begin to look into other cases. Apparently this policy was largely followed; however, rumors of official corruption abounded. The symbol of this corruption were the rumored trains full

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<sup>21</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2191, Folder “Relève”. La Relève des prisonniers, enfin à l’ordre du jour.

<sup>22</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2191, Folder “Relève, Divers 1941-1944”. Memorandum 20 Juillet 1942, J. Desbons to the attention of the German embassy.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Zaretsky, *Nîmes at War: Religion, Politics, and Public Opinion in the Gard, 1938-1944* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 212-14.

of young men from privileged families and germanophile prisoners coming home instead of those seen as more deserving.

Gustave Folcher, an agricultural worker from southwest France, wrote of how the Relève played out among the prisoners as a public relations disaster for the Vichy regime. The program was initially welcomed by the prisoners with enthusiasm; however, when they learned the rough details of the exchange agreement and then witnessed the manner in which it was administered, their excitement turned to cynicism. Folcher relates how sick and “deserving” prisoners were not among the lucky few picked to return to France. Rather, celebrities and “sons of privilege” were the first to be released:

One can add to this list film stars and actors, some friends of important doctors who manage to get their sons returned home as healthcare workers while real nurses wait behind barbed wire. Those were practically the only winners from the Relève. Who would it have helped had they returned fathers or ordinary peasants? France may be dying from hunger but it seems to have more need of leisure men filling movie theaters.<sup>25</sup>

Folcher’s disgust at the corruption behind the selection process by which prisoners were freed was widely shared. Vichy postal censor reports drawn from the correspondence prisoners sent home revealed that many of the imprisoned believed “position” determined who was selected for repatriation. Prisoners who “had more possibilities to work the system” were more likely to win their release. “It is not useless, according to some correspondents, to display some political sense, above all to talk in favor of collaboration.”<sup>26</sup> By May of 1943 many prisoners held the “deep view” that the entire project was deceptive—a “bluff” or a “brain washing” by the Vichy government.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Gustave Folcher, *Les carnets de guerre de Gustave Folcher, paysan languedocien, 1939-1945* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 2000), 199-200.

<sup>26</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Synthèse des renseignements, Avril, 1943, 6.

<sup>27</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Synthèse des renseignements, Mai, 1943, 6.

### **Political motivations behind Vichy support of the Relève**

The story of Vichy's role in the deportation of French workers cannot be reduced simply to the inevitable bowing of the weak to the demands of the strong. The story is more complex than the Vichy leadership's claims that they were making the best of a bad situation. At least in the case of Prime Minister Laval, designated by the government to be the chief negotiator with the Germans in this matter, Vichy's participation had a strong component of complicity. Beyond offering a rationale for continued French sovereignty, the Relève bought the Vichy leadership political capital with the Germans.

Laval's conception of the war and France's role in it were plainly stated in a letter he wrote to German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop in May 1942. In it Laval described the German-Soviet conflict as a "gigantic struggle" against bolshevism, a struggle within which he knew France was ready and willing to play a supporting role.

For this greatest battle in history, Germany has mobilized the youngest and most active elements of her population and is therefore short of manpower. I am aware of these needs and am prepared to place my support at your disposal. I therefore desire that Frenchmen will, in as large number as possible, take the place in your factories of those who go to the eastern front. The Frenchman is attached to his native soil, but I know he would be prepared to leave it for a purpose whose national and historical importance has been made clear to him.<sup>28</sup>

Laval did not hold his political cards close to his chest when announcing the Relève to the French people on 22 June 1942. He informed the public that they could "not remain passive and indifferent in the face of the huge sacrifices Germany is making to construct a Europe in which we must assume our place." To the French workers volunteering for labor, he said "It is for the freedom of the prisoners that you will go to

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<sup>28</sup> As quoted in Geoffrey Warner, *Pierre Laval and the eclipse of France* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1968), 299.

work in Germany! It is for our country that you will go in large numbers! It is in order that France may find her place in the new Europe that you will respond to my appeal!”<sup>29</sup>

The French State had not constructed a labor deportation agreement primarily focused on minimizing exploitation of French citizens. Rather, Laval understood that labor deportation was unavoidable and worked within this reality to further one of the key political goals of the Vichy leadership: French collaboration with Germany in the construction of a new multi-polar authoritarian Europe that would exterminate the Marxist virus. With this shared ideological mission, it is little wonder that Nazi Germany found minimal resistance in principle from the Vichy government to its ever-increasing human-trafficking demands. Vichy resistance to German demands addressed the scale and timing of deportation, and who would administer the program, not the basic questions of morality.

Laval was not unique in preferring a German to an Allied victory. Evidence that ideological sentiments similar to Laval’s found wide acceptance within the Vichy government is found in the public and private statements of the two other most prominent figures in the government, Marshal Henri-Philippe Pétain and Admiral Jean-François Darlan.

As early as 1936 Pétain made know his preference for a French alliance with Nazi Germany over a continued alliance with Britain. In a conversation with the Italian ambassador in Paris during the diplomatic crisis caused by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, Pétain praised Mussolini and referred to Britain as France’s “most implacable enemy.” Pétain described Germany as a “hereditary” enemy of France, but said that if he had to choose between a French alliance with Britain or Germany, he would prefer

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<sup>29</sup> Warner, 301.

Germany.<sup>30</sup> Nothing that had happened between 1936 and 1942 seemed to cause Pétain to change this preference. In a public interview with the periodical *Europäische Revue* in October 1942, just weeks prior to the German occupation of southern France, Pétain restated his position. He told the interviewer that he hoped Germany would restore full sovereignty to France so the country could act as Europe's western barrier. He said that "for his own part," he would gladly go to war with the British should they attempt to land in France.<sup>31</sup>

In the broadcast during which he announced the *Relève*, Laval told the French people, "I desire the victory of Germany, for without it, bolshevism would tomorrow install itself everywhere." At the time this statement shocked many French citizens, and in 1945 it was introduced as damning evidence during Laval's treason trial. It did not have the same effect on Admiral Darlan. In addition to retaining the naval ministry post he had held since 1937, Jean-François Darlan held the ministries of foreign affairs and information in the Vichy government from February 1941 until April 1942. In February 1941 Pétain identified Darlan as his *dauphin*, his heir apparent. After the *Relève* speech Darlan wrote Laval a congratulatory note describing it as "moving and courageous."<sup>32</sup> This sentiment was consistent with positions Darlan took in negotiations with the Germans. In these talks he advocated a final peace settlement between the two nations to allow Germany a free hand in the east and allow France to focus on defending her colonial interests from British and American encroachment.<sup>33</sup> In November 1941 Darlan successfully demanded the removal of General Maxime Weygand from command of the

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Burrin, 60-61.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Burrin, 160.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Warner, 301

<sup>33</sup> Paxton, 109-31.

French Army in North Africa due to his reluctance to aid the German military effort against the British. In a letter to Pétain Darlan plainly stated his decision to remove Weygand was motivated by his desire to “draw France closer to her conqueror . . . I have chosen the path of integrating France into the European bloc.”<sup>34</sup> During his 1945 trial Laval attempted to minimize his individual responsibility for the content of his Relève speech by claiming it had been approved by Marshal Pétain prior to broadcast. Pétain did agree that he had vetted the speech but claimed he had instructed Laval to not include the passage referring to German victory. With regard to the specific topic of the Relève, apparently Pétain did not object to passages encouraging French workers to volunteer for labor in Germany based on political and patriotic reasons, only to those passages that directly stated that the goal to which these workers would contribute would be German victory. If we accept Pétain’s claim to have approved the contents of Laval’s speech minus the direct reference to German victory, then we can conclude that he offered his full public support to a program that would contribute to German victory but believed it inadvisable to publicly admit that such a victory was in fact the desired outcome.

Laval’s speech and the reactions to it demonstrate that all segments of the Vichy support base – the social revolutionaries (Pétain), authoritarians (Laval), technocrats (Darlan) and the fascists – were in agreement on the concept of bartering French workers to the Germans in exchange for political currency. That these workers would play a supporting role in an ideological conflict embraced by the Vichy leadership made the transaction that much more appealing. The Vichy government was not attempting to protect French workers; they were attempting to convince them that working in support of the German war effort was good for France because it liberated prisoners, and good for

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944*, 182-83.

humanity because it supported the Nazi effort to eradicate communism. The intention of the Vichy program was not to minimize the number of French workers sent to Germany, it was the opposite.

### **The Relève and the urban-rural divide in wartime France**

Many supporters of the National Revolution initially welcomed the Relève on ideological grounds. They saw it as a program that would help purify French society. Much of the rhetoric of the National Revolution focused on old values believed by its adherents to be found in *la France profonde*, - the “deep France” of small rural towns and traditional ways of life. Supporters of the National Revolution correlated the decadence of the modern state with the urban and cosmopolitan, while believing the “true” France was preserved in the values and lifestyle of the simple, self-reliant peasant.<sup>35</sup> The segment of the French population the Germans were most interested in, urban industrial workers, was the same group that the French State saw as the most socially undesirable, the group most prone to disloyalty and selfish demands, perhaps a group already lost to the temptations of modernity. Urban workers were seen as vulnerable to communism, short on patriotism and lacking respect for the traditional pillars upon which Vichy hoped to rebuild French society. Shipping off large numbers of urban workers in exchange for aged veterans and rural family men was seen as a positive transaction by many adherents of the National Revolution. Pétain told Pastor Marc Boegner, the representative of the Protestant community in Vichy’s Conseil national, that “one of the good effects of the

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<sup>35</sup> On connections between the philosophical foundation of Vichy’s National Revolution and nostalgia for an imagined French rural past see H. R. Kedward’s “Patriots and Patriotism in Vichy France,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Fifth Series, Vol. 32 (1982): 175-92.

workers' departure [to Germany] will be to weaken communism, which is 'all the rage' in France."<sup>36</sup>

Rural resentment against urban workers was a theme that found common expression in the initial wave of Relève propaganda. The same July 1942 newspaper article which incorrectly claimed that Relève volunteers could designate a specific prisoner for release asserted that the program would remedy the problem of the "same people" always having "to pay the debt of the entire nation." The Relève would allow workers (i.e. urban wage laborers, not agricultural workers) to "generously give of their freedom" to aid the "agriculturalist prisoners." "Finally the French will retrieve their sense of community," through these sacrifices of industrial workers.<sup>37</sup>

The Vichy government legitimized the town vs. country interpretation of the Relève in their own propaganda. Léon Marchal, Vichy France's counselor in Washington, D.C. until he broke with the regime in early 1942, described much of the Relève promotion as advancing an image of a martyr farmer in German captivity who could only be saved if selfish city dwellers finally assumed their fair share of the national burden.<sup>38</sup> Marchal saw this as an ill-conceived effort by the Vichy government to divide the French population and thereby bolster its support base among one of its core constituencies, rural farmers, at the expense of the country's urban citizens.

The Relève as a social balancing tool favoring the rural over the urban was an idea that did not only exist in the offices of Vichy officials. Throughout France this same social interpretation was expressed in terms linking it to age-old town vs. country debates. The 1939 military draft hit rural areas harder due to exemptions extended to

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<sup>36</sup> Burrin, 81.

<sup>37</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2191, Folder "Relève." La Relève des prisonniers, enfin à l'ordre du jour.

<sup>38</sup> Léon Marchal, *Vichy: Two Years of Deception* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1943), 205-09.

industrial workers needed for military production. Much of the French people thus assumed the prisoner of war population in Germany was consequently disproportionately made up of peasants. Although this belief was widely held, at least by 1943 it apparently was not accurate. A census of the prisoners in German in that year found that 31% of them came from the agricultural sector, while within France itself 36% of the population fell into that category. Thus, in reality, peasants were likely an under-represented group among the captives in Germany.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless rural resentment growing from the popular perception resulted in the Relève's receiving a somewhat different reception at first in the countryside than it did in urban areas. Some saw the Relève as an opportunity to finally make urban workers shoulder their fair share of the national burden. The Relève would draw mainly from the urban work force, sending "city shirkers" to Germany while allowing "more responsible" rural farmers to return home and contribute to relieving a growing food crisis. This understanding of the situation did not last past 1942, however, as it did not correspond with reality. The most common beneficiaries of the Relève were the sickly and unproductive, not agricultural workers; and the food shortage in France was not the result of the large number of rural prisoners of war but rather of German requisitions. The Relève did not bring home the expected wave of rural workers, and life in the French countryside did not improve after the program was implemented.

If the Vichy government hoped the Relève would solidify its rural support base, they badly miscalculated the political landscape. Officials living in rural areas informed the leaders in Vichy that the program was not received any better in these regions than it was across the country. "Vichy officials expected any opposition to the Relève to be

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<sup>39</sup> François de Lannoy, *La Libération des Camps: Un million de prisonniers de guerre français, Mai 1945*. (Bayeux: Editions Heimdal, 1995), 36.

urban based. But the tenor of prefectural reports suggests that the antagonism they had encountered to the Relève constituted a surprisingly widespread rebuke for the government in both town and country, a final collapse in the credibility of the already unpopular Laval, and a worrying decline in the public estimation of Pétain.”<sup>40</sup> British and resistance propaganda labeled the Relève “slave trading,” and this characterization stuck. The prefect of Marseille informed the Vichy government two months into their pro-Relève propaganda campaign that it was based on a “total misreading of French psychology.”<sup>41</sup>

### **From the Relève to the S.T.O.**

Despite Vichy’s promotion of the Relève, recruitment was slow, and it soon became clear that additional measures would need to be taken to meet German demands. Laval’s acknowledgment that Vichy could not satisfy those demands through *voluntary* enlistment did not necessarily mean that he was also willing to concede that direct German involvement was needed. What Vichy could not convince the French people to do *willingly* Laval still hoped to convince the Germans it could accomplish *through force*. Rejection of the Relève demonstrated the French people’s rejection of Vichy’s ideological values, but Laval still hoped to retain as much direct Vichy sovereignty over the French citizenry and territory as possible within the German-dominated “New European Order.”

In September 1942 Vichy required all French males between 18 and 50 years of age and all unmarried females from 21 to 35 to register with the government to carry out

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<sup>40</sup> H.R. Kedward, *In Search of the Maquis: Rural Resistance in Southern France, 1942-1944* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>41</sup> Kedward, 4.

work deemed “useful in the superior interest of the nation.” No mention was made at the time that this work might take place in Germany.<sup>42</sup> This list was used in February 1943 to conscript males born between 1920 and 1922 for compulsory work in Germany. By March the government had deported enough of its citizens to fill the second demand for 250,000 workers. Fritz Sauckel quickly demanded a further 270,000 workers to be delivered by June, followed by another 500,000 before the end of the year. In this final group women were to be included for the first time.<sup>43</sup> Resistance grew with each wave of deportation. Laval attempted to make Sauckel understand that his demands were unreasonable. During a meeting on 6 August 1943 Sauckel told Laval he would not make any concessions. Sauckel left with Laval’s assurance that the Vichy state would help in conscripting the half-million workers in the second half of 1943, but Sauckel had lost faith in Laval’s ability to deliver on his promises.<sup>44</sup> Sauckel reported to Berlin that he no longer believed Laval to be useful.<sup>45</sup>

Vichy made enormous efforts to sell the Relève. The government widely publicized the return of prisoners freed due to the program. Newspapers were obligated to publish stories and photographs of returning prisoners. In one well-documented incident, a photograph of a train car full of returning prisoners was retouched. Pro-Vichy messages were added to the side of the car to make it appear that the prisoners themselves had painted them to thank the government for their liberation.<sup>46</sup> Vichy also produced a series of short newsreels and promotional films on work in Germany in 1942 and 1943, and a full-length documentary titled “French Workers” in 1944. This film showed the high

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<sup>42</sup> Burrin, 152.

<sup>43</sup> Milward, 118-122.

<sup>44</sup> Milward, 123.

<sup>45</sup> Jackson, *France: The Dark Years, 1940-1944*, 228.

<sup>46</sup> Durand 326-27.

living standards of workers in Germany and that the French workers and prisoners had formed a “fraternal community” with German workers as they worked side by side to “save civilization.”<sup>47</sup> The government distributed over a million promotional pamphlets and posters extolling the high wages, good working conditions and sense of purpose experienced by French workers in Germany.<sup>48</sup> Pétain, Laval and many other Vichy leaders made personal appeals to the French people in support of the program.

Despite the intense promotion of the program and the fanfare associated with each return of liberated prisoners, recruitment remained meager. Over five months into the initial six-month drive, only 17,000 skilled workers had come forward.<sup>49</sup> In August the Vichy government consented to localized forcible conscription of skilled workers in the occupied zone, provided these roundups were kept quiet.<sup>50</sup> When the willing could not be found, workers were forced to “volunteer” for the Relève and were escorted to departure sites under armed guard. These roundups happened anywhere from at work sites to movie houses. Buildings were surrounded and everyone inside conscripted. Not surprisingly, the French population resisted these roundups whenever possible. On 6 January 1943 a large crowd stormed the train station in Montluçon, overwhelmed the guards and freed the workers who were to be deported that day.<sup>51</sup>

The French people had not responded to the Relève as the Vichy leadership had hoped, and the government struggled to meet even the initial German demand of 250,000 workers. When the second demand arrived in January 1943 for a further 250,000

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<sup>47</sup> Wharton, 378-79.

<sup>48</sup> Wharton, 374-77.

<sup>49</sup> Warner, 307.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, 309.

<sup>51</sup> John Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France: The French Under Nazi Occupation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 25.

workers, the government knew it could not be met through Relève recruitment. On 16 February 1943, nine months after its introduction, the Relève was abandoned as failed experiment and replaced with an openly acknowledged program of compulsory labor named the Service du Travail Obligatoire (S.T.O.). Like the Relève, the S.T.O. was a French-administered program. By the time the French government implemented the S.T.O., “it was widely believed in France that labor conditions for foreigners in Germany were abysmal and that the chances of returning alive from such service were slim.”<sup>52</sup> Ultimately the main legacy of the Relève and the S.T.O. was an acceleration of the erosion of domestic support for the Vichy government.

Implementation of the S.T.O. ended any possibility of credence for Vichy claims to be acting as the shield of the French people. The S.T.O. transformed the indifference or tolerance most French citizens had for the regime in 1942 to outright hostility in 1943.<sup>53</sup> The number of French workers departing for Germany declined sharply in the months after the initial S.T.O. draft. This decline was not caused by the lackluster Vichy commitment to the deportation programs; rather it was due to the unprecedented level of civilian resistance. During the first three months of 1943, the period when the S.T.O. came into effect, 250,000 French workers departed for Germany. This level of departures was never again reached. During the next four months (April through July 1943) Vichy was only able to deliver 141,000 additional workers. Deportations continued for eleven more months (until April 1944) but only an additional 50,000 French workers could be compelled to report for work in Germany.<sup>54</sup> Vichy proved unable to enforce its S.T.O.

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<sup>52</sup> Gordon, 144.

<sup>53</sup> Kedward, 2.

<sup>54</sup> Milward, 123-24.

draft, and German lacked the manpower to implement their own deportation program before the Liberation of 1944.

Fugitives from S.T.O. drafts swelled the ranks of the militant resistance groups throughout the last two years of the occupation. Initially S.T.O. fugitives were wary of trusting rural communities, many of them believing what the Vichy government wanted to be true, that the countryside remained solidly in support of the regime. The winter of 1942-43 had been the final breaking point between the Vichy regime and what support it still had among the French population. The combination of the labor conscriptions, the worsening economic conditions within France, the deportation of Jews and other minority groups and, finally, the direct German occupation of southern France, all within a few months' time, drove all but the most committed followers away from Vichy and toward passive or active resistance.<sup>55</sup> S.T.O. fugitives found a temporary accepting home in the same rural French communities Vichy had once expected would form the regime's political support base.

Anti-fascists and resisters from Eastern Europe, from Spain, from Alsace, from Lille, and Paris, as well as from the southern conurbations, were hidden almost as readily as those from the immediate vicinity. In early 1943 the most that many peasant farmers demanded from those on the run was a readiness to work.<sup>56</sup>

The labor conscription campaigns transformed the political environment of rural France in early 1943 into a region hostile to Vichy administration. The government had attempted to promote the *Relève* to the rural population as a method of shifting the burden of defeat more onto the shoulders of urban workers. Paradoxically, when urban French workers attempted to evade labor conscription, they found refuge in the *maquis* groups of the countryside. Vichy had expected *la France profonde* to be the center of their

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<sup>55</sup> Kedward, 2-18.

<sup>56</sup> Kedward, 17.

support base. Instead, that area became the incubator of the militant resistance movement. The introduction of forced conscription sent large numbers of young men and women into the ranks of the resistance, transforming a small but committed force, mostly concentrated in cities, into a mass national movement that would take much of France effectively out of governmental control during the following year.

### **The Prisoners of War Respond to the Relève**

The utter failure of the Relève is further amplified when it is examined from the perspective of those it was supposedly intended to benefit - the prisoners of war. Instead of being welcomed as selfless saviors, as Vichy propaganda assured them they would be, the Relève volunteers were greeted with open scorn.

French prisoner of war Paul Fraisse describes in his memoir how the arriving workers were seen as lackeys of the Germans. They were resented because it was believed they were taking up many of the easier jobs, thus pushing the prisoners into more demanding work. Fraisse explains that the prisoners were confused as to what had motivated these workers to volunteer for work in Germany. This situation was made even more contentious when a rumor spread among the prisoners that the workers were supplied with brothels.<sup>57</sup>

Vichy could have predicted the poor reception the workers received from the prisoners. Postal censor reports from as early as September 1941, nine months before the Relève was implemented, document that those prisoners who worked side by side with “free compatriots” were “understandably jealous of them. [The prisoners of war] do not hide their resentment against them and some are surprised that the French government

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<sup>57</sup> Paul Fraisse, *Écrits de captivité, 1940-1943*, (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 1991), XIV.

has allowed such an injustice.”<sup>58</sup> This attitude was confirmed the following month in a second report, which compiled pointed comments about the workers taken from various letters sent home by prisoners.

“This is the worst insult possible!” exclaims one.  
“It is shameful to see this.”  
“They are ashamed of us.”  
“They are not the cream.”<sup>59</sup>

These postal censor reports provided clear evidence that the prisoners almost universally continued to hold the workers in low regard well into 1943. An April 1943 report summed up the majority opinion:

Recently taken government measures, such as the S.T.O., are considered [by the prisoners] as “acceptance of demands made by the occupiers” and, as such, are judged with severity. The prisoners are especially outraged when these measures are presented to the public as efforts to improve [the prisoners’] lot, when in fact they are only intended to benefit “the victor.”

The S.T.O. is the object of much hostility from prisoners who watch the arrival of young people “with emotion.” A few letters express the idea that [the S.T.O.] will “be good for a lot of them”; on the other hand, most correspondents make no secret how much this “deportation” saddens them and deplore the “useless sacrifice” of this “new exodus.”<sup>60</sup>

Despite the fact that most of the workers had not come to Germany of their own free will, the prisoners of war seemed slow to grasp this, or slow to accept it. Perhaps this was due to Vichy propaganda which portrayed the program as voluntary. However, even if the prisoners believed the workers had come to Germany voluntarily, one might still expect warm relations to have existed between the two groups. After all, one of the reasons French workers were supposedly volunteering for work in Germany was to allow the prisoners to return home. Rather than see the workers as selflessly volunteering a year

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<sup>58</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 36 (1-15 Septembre 1941), 33.

<sup>59</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 38 (1-15 Octobre 1941), 33.

<sup>60</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Synthèse des renseignements, Avril, 1943, 11.

or more of their lives to speed their liberation, the prisoners instead saw them as traitors and collaborators. In a July 1942 letter one prisoner described how he and many of his comrades saw the workers: “Those who are here are the garbage of our country.”<sup>61</sup>

While the postal censors report a growing sense of shared suffering between the prisoners and the workers through 1943, relations between the two groups remained stressed. A May 1943 report summarized the situation succinctly: “Certain prisoners . . . have little sympathy for the French civilians who work in Germany. Clashes between them are frequent.”<sup>62</sup> This hostility went both ways, with many of the workers returning the prisoners’ scorn.

The rapport between French workers and prisoners is still tense. “There is a pit” dug by the differences between their material conditions and certain differences of opinion. The mentality of the newcomers is “increasingly” negative towards the prisoners because they believe that they were brought to Germany “because of them.” Also the behavior of the workers, especially that of the women, many of whom display easy morals, raises general indignation among the prisoners.<sup>63</sup>

The prisoners found especially hurtful remarks made by workers that indicated to them that the French population back home had little idea what their living conditions in Germany were like. An April 1943 censor report held that an opinion commonly expressed by French workers was that the captivity “would do the prisoners some good.” The prisoners found this point of view offensive and feared that it was common back in France. Prisoners more sympathetically viewed those workers who complained that they had been brought to Germany by force.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 56 (1-15 Juillet 1942), 31.

<sup>62</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Synthèse des renseignements, Mai, 1943, 6.

<sup>63</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Synthèse des renseignements, Mai, 1943, 11.

<sup>64</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Synthèse des renseignements, Avril, 1943, 12.

As time passed the hostility between the prisoners and the workers decreased. The prisoners came to see the workers as fellow “unfortunate victims” of a single large “organized deportation.”<sup>65</sup> In the final year of captivity a fraternity born of shared misery overcame the divisions that had separated the workers and prisoners. An October 1943 report concluded, “relations are improving between the French workers in Germany and the prisoners of war. The latter, forgetting their past grievances, now more often see their compatriots as ‘companions in misery.’”<sup>66</sup> That phrase, “companions in misery,” is particularly poignant when one recognizes its inclusion in a governmental censor report at the same time when Vichy was encouraging French men and women in print, speech and film to volunteer by stressing the high wages and comfortable working conditions in Germany. By June 1944 Vichy mail censors recorded that relations between prisoners and workers had become the least commonly brought-up topic of the forty they tracked. Only five of 47,554 letters sent by prisoners to France included an opinionated statement regarding the workers, four of which were negative.<sup>67</sup>

If the Vichy leadership hoped the Relève would, at minimum, buy the regime increased support among the prisoners, they were disappointed even in this regard.

### **Conclusion**

The Relève and S.T.O. stand out as powerful examples of what values and goals the Vichy government prioritized and what means they were willing to use to achieve their ends. The Relève was sold to the French population as a patriotic program that would bring volunteers financial rewards while also helping free loved compatriots held in foreign captivity. In reality the British and resistance propaganda described it more

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<sup>65</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Synthèse des renseignements, Avril, 1943, 12.

<sup>66</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Synthèse des renseignements, October, 1943, 12.

<sup>67</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport statistique Mensuel, Juin 1944, Stalags, 5.

accurately. The Vichy regime played a willing role in a modern version of the slave trade. In return for aiding in the forcible deportation of hundreds of thousands of its citizens, the regime hoped to prove its value to Nazi Germany and thus maintain sovereignty over the French people. In the end they failed in all regards. Their return instead was the discredit of their ideals and the scorn of their people.

## **Chapter 7: The Experience of Captivity 1943-1945**

During the second half of the captivity the prisoners in Germany demonstrated almost no support for the Vichy government. They either ignored government programs and propaganda, or regarded them with open cynicism. The men saw the government not as an institution capable of addressing their concerns. Rather, they saw it delivering nothing more than shameful concessions and empty promises. Despite their lack of faith in the government, the morale of the men actually improved during 1943 and remained relatively high throughout the last years of the war. The POWs' ability to maintain relatively good morale is even more surprising given that their living and working conditions gradually declined during these years. This chapter argues that the main reason the prisoners were able to maintain their spirits is that they had an inside view of the collapse of the Third Reich and came to believe that a German defeat was near at hand as early as the spring of 1943. As Hitler's empire crumbled, the prisoners' lives became less comfortable and less predictable, but they accepted the growing chaos around them with a stoic optimism. Throughout the war the prisoners had been fixated on their return, and they regarded the disintegration occurring all around them as a sign of the approaching end.

### **The Prisoners' State of Mind from 1943 forward**

An examination of the rising and falling morale of the French prisoners during their captivity produced a surprising result. One might expect the morale of the prisoners to wear down over time - to slowly decline with each passing month. This was not the case. The mail surveillance reports show that the men's morale did indeed follow a pattern of decline from the time they were brought into Germany until the end of 1942;

however, during the spring of 1943, morale rather suddenly improved. This improvement was not an isolated spike. Morale remained at a fairly high level from early 1943 onward. The reason for the slow decline in morale up to 1942, and the reversal of this trend in early 1943, becomes clear when extraneous factors are stripped away from the topic. Throughout the war the prisoners' morale was almost exclusively tied to their hopes of liberation. The Vichy government kept abreast of the prisoners' morale through mail and on-site surveillance reports. These reports did not simply track the prisoners' mindset, they also tracked their views on several topics which the Vichy leadership apparently expected would significantly shape the POWs' morale. The specific opinions tracked in these reports revealed those areas on which the Vichy leadership believed the prisoners would be evaluating the regime's performance. The reports kept abreast of the men's opinions on collaboration and the reforms being introduced in France as well as the prisoners' recognition of the relatively mild conditions of their captivity. The men's views on the government's efforts to care for their loved ones back in France were also recorded. It was not until 1944 that the Vichy surveillance officials acknowledged that for years they had been making their task of tracking the men's morale and understanding what factors contributed to rises and declines by taking into consideration all the above topics. They came to understand that the prisoners' morale was almost entirely tied to one subject- their hopes for liberation. Nothing the government did in France, or for the prisoners, mattered to them a fraction as much as did their freedom. Rises and declines in the men's morale could almost entirely be explained by rises and declines in how close they believed their liberation to be.

The morale of the POWs hit its nadir during the winter of 1942/1943.<sup>1</sup> In the spring the men began to shake off their *cafard* and regain a more hopeful mentality. This rise in morale was not tied to any improvement in their treatment; indeed, throughout the next sixteen months the POWs' standard of living declined gradually before diving sharply starting in May of 1944. Morale had improved during 1943 because of the prisoners' growing conviction that the war was finally nearing its conclusion. Better still, the prisoners believed that Germany was now losing the war. That the French prisoners overwhelmingly embraced a belief in German defeat at such an early date is surprising as the war would continue for over two more years. Historian Ulrich Herbert, who relied largely on German security reports which spoke to the opinions of foreign workers and prisoners inside Germany during the war, wrote that he believed few foreigners expected the Axis to be defeated until well into 1944.<sup>2</sup> The archival documentation of French POW correspondence on this topic clearly contradicts Herbert's conclusion- the French captives expected the war to end with an Allied victory from early 1943 onward.

With hindsight, historians recognize that the winter of 1942/1943 was the turning point of World War II. The French prisoners inside the Reich, who were able to remain roughly informed about the progress of the war through their interactions with German civilians, were heartened first by the Anglo-American landings in North Africa in November 1942, and then later by the German defeat at Stalingrad. During their first year of captivity the prisoners clung to the belief that since the war between France and Germany had ended their liberation was near at hand. As this delusion faded, new hope

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter six.

<sup>2</sup> Ulrich Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers; Enforced Foreign Labor in Germany Under the Third Reich*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 351. It is worth noting that Herbert appears to have formed this impression through his examination of archival German security documentation rather than through an examination of documentation approaching the topic from the captives' points of view.

arose in 1941 that, through concessions and collaboration, the Vichy government could negotiate their release. By late 1942 the prisoners had lost faith in the Vichy government and saw collaboration as a one way street only benefiting the Germans. The sense of hopelessness which accompanied this recognition resulted in the *cafard* epidemic described in chapter five. With hopes of liberation through German goodwill and collaboration all but dead, the prisoners came to accept that their captivity would last until the end of the war. German defeats in North Africa and the Soviet Union made this eventuality suddenly seem much closer than it had just a few months earlier. Historian Yves Durand noted that the standard Anglophobic and anti-communist propaganda served to the prisoners following these German defeats could not obscure or minimize their implications. The twin defeats were “widely hailed as one of the first signs that Germany was weakening. . . everyone knew it marked the turning point of the war.”<sup>3</sup> The German government announced the surrender of the Sixth Army in Stalingrad on 3 February 1943 followed by three days of national mourning. Working alongside the Germans, the prisoners were well aware of the wave of doubt which swept through the nation following this announcement. Prior to this defeat most Germans appear to have believed that victory was inevitable and probably achievable without great sacrifices on the part of the common people. The prisoners noted a new mood of anxiety and resignation arose after the announcement. Faltering German self-confidence aside, the prisoners’ embrace of the expectation that Germany would be defeated still came surprisingly early. Prior to the spring of 1943 Germany had suffered no significant

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<sup>3</sup> Yves Durand, *La Captivité, Histoire des prisonniers de guerre français 1939-1945*, 2<sup>e</sup> ed. (Paris: Édité par la Fédération Nationale des Combattants Prisonniers de Guerre et Combattants d’Algérie, Tunisie, Maroc, 1981), 461.

defeats, and even after Stalingrad and the Allied African invasion Axis armies still occupied almost all of Europe west of Moscow and much of North Africa.<sup>4</sup>

Rising morale among the French prisoners was first noted in a Vichy prisoner of war mail surveillance report in February, 1943. The report described the prisoners' mindset: "Optimism remains the dominant state of spirit . . . *They expect things to wrap up quickly now.* (italics added)" The report noted the prisoners simply did not discuss political events and ideas which the Vichy government expected to be of importance to them. "The only opinion which seems to be openly held by a majority of the prisoners of war is open satisfaction for the troubles which the Germans face. . . . Many letters convey that the general state of the captives is confidence and optimism and barely concealed hope that an Axis defeat is near."<sup>5</sup> These same findings were repeated in the next monthly report: "Morale is rising within most of the camps. The majority of the captives think that 'the end approaches' and this perspective raises all their spirits."<sup>6</sup>

From this point forward the prisoners' state of morale and their expectation that the war would soon end become essentially a single topic. Morale rose and fell based upon the latest news from the battlefronts, with optimism riding out these fluctuations to remain the dominant mentality of the prisoners from early 1943 forward. The September, 1943 surveillance report concluded: "Morale is good, or very good, in most camps. Optimism dominates. The volunteer medical workers, 'best placed to judge,' declare that the men are showing the most beautiful energy."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the significant drop in morale across Germany during the spring of 1943 see Ian Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth, Image and Reality in the Third Reich*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 189-99.

<sup>5</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Février, 1943, 10-12.

<sup>6</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Mars, 1943, 10.

<sup>7</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Septembre, 1943, 10.

Morale did suffer widespread but temporary dips during the last two winters of captivity. Spirits dropped notably in December 1943 when the men realized they would be spending a fourth Christmas separated from their homes. The surveillance report that month described their disposition as similar to previous winters, but unlike those earlier reports the prisoners were depicted as only disappointed, not in despair:

The final defeat of Germany is not in doubt, but they find that the war drags forward slowly. The slowing down of operations in Italy has caused disillusionment and provokes impatience. Morale is down, but optimism has not disappeared, and most men have postponed their hopes of liberation until the spring of 1944. The prospect of passing another winter behind the barbed wire has caused discouragement and many prisoners of war are tired, embittered and bewildered.<sup>8</sup>

This dip in morale was relatively short lived. By January the overall state of the prisoners' morale was once more described as "fairly good."<sup>9</sup> In July, 1944 the report's authors acknowledged the obvious trend. "On the whole, the prisoners of war have good or bad morale based only on their belief, or lack of belief, that their liberation is near."<sup>10</sup>

There appears to have been another dip in morale during the winter of 1944/1945; however, as surveillance reports were no longer compiled after August, 1944, we are forced to use anecdotal evidence to construct an understanding of the prisoners' overall state of mind during the final eight months of captivity.<sup>11</sup> A temporary drop in morale at this point in the war would not be surprising. The men's spirits tended to drop during the holiday season each year. Also, by late 1944 the prisoners' living conditions had greatly deteriorated. As discussed later in this chapter, they were receiving less food from official sources than they had at any previous point in their captivity. Finally, the prisoners'

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<sup>8</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Décembre, 1943, 11.

<sup>9</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Janvier, 1944, 11.

<sup>10</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Juin, 1944, 30.

<sup>11</sup> Durand, 468-72.

hopes to be back home by Christmas 1944 had recently been dashed when the Allied and Soviet offenses stalled near the German borders in October and November of 1944.

The Vichy government's recognition in 1944 that the prisoners' morale had ultimately been tied almost exclusively to their liberation all along was also a recognition of the futility of their own efforts to retain these men's support over the last four years. After recognizing late in 1940 that they would most likely not be able to negotiate a general liberation of the prisoners, the Vichy leadership attempted to maintain the men's hopes, and by extension their loyalty, by arranging for selective liberations and improvements in their living and working conditions.<sup>12</sup> The leadership attempted to maintain the prisoners' support by assuring them that the government was taking care of their families, preparing France for their return and leading the nation towards a more hopeful future. In 1944 the surveillance report authors acknowledged that the prisoners either did not put much value in these efforts, or that they simply did not believe that the government was actually doing the things it claimed. From the prisoners' perspective, Vichy had proven itself capable of providing shameful collaboration, corrupt administration and undelivered promises, but not the one thing that really mattered to them: their freedom. The prisoners had given Vichy more than two years to negotiate their liberation, they had accepted collaboration as a price to be paid for their freedom, and still they felt no closer to returning home than they had two years earlier. Their hopes from here forward would be placed in Allied victory, not in the actions of their own government.

The POWs nearly universal acceptance of German defeat occurred before such an outcome appeared likely given the military situation. If their expectation of an Allied

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<sup>12</sup> See Chapter three.

victory was not based on a rational evaluation of the current war situation, then what was the foundation of this belief? Perhaps the prisoners' rapid acceptance of an Axis defeat can be explained on psychological rather than rational grounds. The men needed to believe that someone was effectively working for their liberation. The Vichy government had effectively forfeited this position during 1941 and 1942. As they could no longer harbor expectations that Vichy would win their freedom, the prisoners had to find some new depository for their hopes. Their disillusionment with Vichy's schemes created a void inside them, a void which was filled by faith in Allied victory. Even though, on an objective level, Allied victory must have seemed far from a certain outcome in the spring of 1943, the men readily invested their hopes in this result because they had nothing to lose. Most of the prisoners faced a stark choice in 1943- either to place their hopes in Allied victory or surrender themselves to *cafard*. Seen in this light, the almost immediate and universal embrace in early 1943 of faith in an Allied victory says more about how little faith the French prisoners retained for the Vichy regime and its discredited promises than on their objective evaluation of the military situation. In the spring of 1943 the men showed themselves more willing to place their hopes in the long-shot chance of Allied victory rather than in their own government's continuing schemes.

This transfer of the prisoners' focus away from Vichy diplomatic efforts on their behalf and towards Allied military efforts was the concluding chapter in the story of the regime's attempt to build and maintain support among the captives. From the spring of 1943 forward these efforts were a lost cause. Increasingly Vichy competed with the Anglo-American and their "Free French" allies for the loyalty of the French people. Vichy's hostility towards the Western Allies, most dramatically exemplified by its

ordering of French soldiers in North Africa to oppose the British and American landings, virtually forced the prisoners to choose between the two alternatives. The Vichy government's hostility towards the Western Allies made it possible for a person to reconcile his or her support for the Allied war against Germany along with loyalty to Pétain's regime only through the most complex of mental gymnastics. Vichy's failures, coupled with the Allied victories over their German jailors, inevitably shifted the French prisoners' support away from Vichy and toward the Allies. Hope had become the sole province of resistance.

### **The "Transformation"**

The topic of the "Transformation," the Vichy and German attempt to convince prisoners to voluntarily transform themselves from military captives into civilian workers, provides an example of how the prisoners' growing sense of optimism led to more defiance on their part. The prisoners' negative response to this program also demonstrated the low amount of confidence they retained for the Vichy government.

In January 1943 Pierre Laval proposed "transforming" 250,000 French prisoners of war in Germany into "free laborers" in exchange for a reduction in the number of French civilian workers which France would need to send to Germany to fulfill Sauckel's latest labor demands. "Transformed" prisoners were promised higher pay and more freedom in exchange for voluntarily giving up their military status and remaining in Germany as civilian workers.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> For more on the Transformation see Yves Durand, *La Captivité: Histoire des prisonniers de guerre français 1939-1945*. 2<sup>e</sup> ed. (Paris: Fédération Nationale des Combattants Prisonniers de Guerre et Combattants d'Algérie, Tunisie, Maroc, 1981), 331-34, 458-61.

The transformation scheme was an attractive idea to both the French and German governments. From the French perspective, each prisoner of war transformed would theoretically mean one less French civilian worker who would have to be sent to Germany. This view of the transformation as a zero sum exchange would have been accurate only if Germany's appetite for French workers was finite. This, of course, was not the case. In reality, all the transformation scheme was likely to produce was a temporary slowing down of the pace of civilian labor deportations. Even though transforming French prisoners of war into civilian workers would produce no more foreign workers in Germany, the scheme remained attractive to the Nazi government from an administrative standpoint. "Free workers" required no military guards. The firms employing foreigners were required to provide their own security. Thus, the transformation of 250,000 French prisoners would free up tens of thousands of German military personnel for other duties.<sup>14</sup> Civilian workers were also not covered by the Geneva Conventions, thus re-categorizing the French prisoners would allow the Germans to finally put to rest any lingering questions regarding their compliance with international standards in their treatment. The transformed prisoners would also no longer receive Red Cross inspections, eliminating still more administrative hassles.

French prisoners who were transformed into "free workers" were treated essentially the same as S.T.O. or *Relève* workers. The transformed prisoners stopped wearing their uniforms, moved from their *kommandos* into the foreign worker living quarters, and received the same pay as foreign civilian volunteers. At least on paper, foreign volunteers were paid more than prisoners, so transformation appeared to have

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<sup>14</sup> Pierre Gascar, *Histoire de la Captivité des Français en Allemagne (1939-1945)*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 271-72. Gascar estimated that the transformation of more than 200,000 prisoners freed up more than 30,000 German military personnel.

financial advantages. Transformation also appeared to have many social advantages as well. “Free workers” often had more ability to do such things as shop, attend movies, go for walks, and attend church services, during non-working hours than did prisoners. Prisoners were also told that if they volunteered they would be granted a fifteen-day leave. This leave would allow them to return to France and enjoy perhaps a week with their families before returning to Germany to finish out their work contracts. Given these enticements, both the German and Vichy governments expected the 250,000 transformation slots would be claimed by volunteers quickly. Once those slots were filled the process could then be repeated. By progressively transforming most of the prisoners into free workers, the problems caused by the international legal standards regulating their treatment would largely fade away as their numbers diminished through this method of voluntary demobilization.

The overwhelmingly negative response of the French prisoners to the transformation caught both the German and Vichy authorities by surprise. Vichy reports from April 1943 estimated that only 12 to 15 percent of the prisoners would volunteer to be transformed.<sup>15</sup> As there were roughly a million eligible French prisoners in Germany, this rate of voluntary transformation would need to be doubled if all the 250,000 slots were to be filled. The estimations proved to be accurate. When recruitment lagged the Germans began to apply coercive pressure, including threatening those who refused to accept transformation with reassignment to mining jobs. When this coercion also proved ineffective, many full *kommandos* were simply transformed as groups against the prisoners’ will. Even with these measures the goal of 250,000 transformations was never

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<sup>15</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2191. Folder : Relève, divers 1941-44. “Opinion des prisonniers de guerre sur la transformation de 250,000 d’entre eux en travailleurs civils”; and AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Avril, 1943, 12.

reached. By June 1944, after a year and a half, only 221,443 French prisoners had been transformed into free workers.<sup>16</sup> From the German perspective, apparently the benefits of transformation did not outweigh the perceived consequences of continuing to violate international law by transforming larger numbers of prisoners against their will.

As details of the transformation scheme became better known to the families of prisoners back in France, most developed unfavorable opinions. The families feared that transformation might delay the eventual liberation of their prisoners, cause them to be reassigned to more dangerous worksites, or make them ineligible for *colis* shipments.<sup>17</sup> By February 1944 families were counseling prisoners against transformation by a five to one margin in their correspondence.<sup>18</sup> The rejection of the scheme by the prisoners' families is particularly noteworthy given that the program would theoretically enable prisoners to return home for a visit after a three year absence and enable them to send more money back to their families from Germany.

Vichy surveillance personnel attributed the prisoners' rejection of the transformation to two causes. The primary reason was that the concept of giving up their military status in exchange for money and benefits offended the prisoners' personal dignity. The second reason was that the prisoners simply did not believe they would receive the promised benefits.

After over two years of undelivered promises and deception, the prisoners greeted the transformation scheme with cynicism. Comments drawn from prisoners' letters left little doubt as to how little trust remained for the Vichy government: "It's nothing but a

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<sup>16</sup> Durand, 332-33.

<sup>17</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Avril, 1943, 6-7.

<sup>18</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Février, 1944, 7-8. In this month 107 letters from France to prisoners of war contained unfavorable opinions regarding the transformation versus 22 favorable. This ratio remained fairly consistent through the remaining five monthly reports.

scam.” “It is the latest tall tale” to keep us “amused in 1943.” “I won’t fall for this sales pitch. I am not ripe for the trick.”<sup>19</sup> The most attractive benefit of transformation was the furlough. The prisoners’ skepticism regarding this benefit proved to be warranted. The prisoners were suspicious of this promise immediately due to the transformation contracts not specifying exactly when a furlough could be taken. A lucky few hundred prisoners received permission to return to France almost immediately after signing their work contracts. When up to two-thirds of these first groups failed to return to their worksites in August 1943 the German government gave employers the power to void the furlough section of contracts if either the workers’ labor was needed or if there was fear that they might not return to Germany at the end of their vacation. Since these conditions applied to virtually every French worker in Germany, the Nazi government effectively reneged on the furlough clause in the vast majority of all transformation contracts.<sup>20</sup>

Even stronger than the French prisoners’ skepticism that they would ever receive the promised benefits was their widespread conviction that the entire scheme was beneath their dignity. “Are we prisoners of war or slaves passed from hand to hand?” wrote one captive in April, 1943.<sup>21</sup> Another described why he and his companions refused to be transformed, “Soldiers first. We have been soldiers for the last two years, and we will remain so until the end.”<sup>22</sup> Another explained why he had turned down the offer, “I prefer to remain a prisoner so I can hold my head high later.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2191. Folder : Relève, divers 1941-44. “Opinion des prisonniers de guerre sur la transformation de 250,000 d’entre eux en travailleurs civils.”

<sup>20</sup> Herbert, 341.

<sup>21</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2191. Folder : Relève, divers 1941-44. “Opinion des prisonniers de guerre sur la transformation de 250,000 d’entre eux en travailleurs civils.”

<sup>22</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Avril, 1943, 11.

<sup>23</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Avril, 1944, 23.

French prisoner Gustave Folcher's account of the transformation brings out the surreal qualities of the scheme well. Folcher wrote that after being captured in battle and watched over by armed guards for 40 months, he found it hard to believe that suddenly the prisoners were being asked to sign contracts to voluntarily work and live alongside their jailers as if the past three years had not happened. One day Folcher and his companions were gathered together and brought in front of a group of German officers to sign their work contracts. The officers informed the men of the advantages of the transformation and of the great favor Germany was according them, and reminded them that they must prove themselves worthy of this favor through their work after signing their contracts. The men were then called forward to sign. Only five of the twenty-five stepped forward. "The [German] officers can't get over it. They seem to be saying, What? You are refusing the freedom that's on offer, we've never seen anything like it!" Folcher and the other men who had refused to sign were then led back to their barracks by an armed sentry who told them how bitterly they would come to regret refusing this favor.<sup>24</sup>

Surveillance reports record that those French prisoners who did agree to be transformed were "relentlessly criticized" by their fellow captives for becoming "servants of the enemy." Some transformed prisoners became victims of "regrettable incidents" at the hands of their fellow captives.<sup>25</sup> Criticism often came from loved ones back home as well. Upon learning that her husband was considering signing a transformation contract an officer's wife strongly advised him against doing so, for honorable as well as practical reasons:

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<sup>24</sup> Gustave Folcher, *Marching to Captivity, The War Diaries of a French Peasant, 1939-1945*. (London: Brassey's, 1996), 187-89.

<sup>25</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Septembre, 1943, 5-7.

You cause me pain, because I thought you were a French man first. Do not accept being turned into a free laborer. I would never accept that from you. You are an officer, you fought valiantly and now you are going to work for them! No, no and no! Do you hear me! Refuse your place and remain in camp as a French soldier – proud of his title and his honor. A free worker is debased. Stay a prisoner, it is honorable. Don't you know that if you give up your military status as a prisoner of war I will not receive support payments? Will that make you happy?<sup>26</sup>

By the time the transformation was introduced, most French prisoners expected that they were in their last year of captivity. Hardships are endurable if there is hope that they only need be suffered for a relatively short period of time. The material benefits and the prospect of returning home to see their loved ones would have been much more tempting for the prisoners if they saw no prospect of liberation in the near future. That the prisoners' sense that the war would soon be over had fortified their resolve was demonstrated by their rejection of this scheme.

### **Deteriorating Conditions in Germany**

Throughout the last half of the captivity the living conditions of the French prisoners in Germany declined. At first the erosion was steady. As the food stocks in Germany diminished and imports from decimated occupied areas declined, the prisoners' diet suffered. Allied bombing and material shortages reduced the prisoners' housing. The permanent camps were not maintained. Not much thought was given to long-term upkeep when buildings were constructed in *stalags*, *oflags* and *kommandos*. During the war many become dilapidated and infested.<sup>27</sup> Work demands on the prisoners steadily increased as Germany demanded more productivity from fewer and fewer workers. The prisoners were increasingly directly employed by the German military performing tasks which were forbidden by international law such as constructing anti-tank defenses, digging

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<sup>26</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Février, 1944, 7-8.

<sup>27</sup> Durand, 90.

trenches and disposing of corpses.<sup>28</sup> The gradual rate of decline appears to have sharply increased in the spring of 1944. Shortly before this time the Germans stopped liberating sick and injured prisoners. No French prisoners were returned after the Allied landings in June 1944. What this meant is that during the time period when the French prisoners were at high risk of contracting disease due to poor diet, housing and sanitation, their opportunity to return to France to regain their health closed.

Ultimately the prisoners' declining living conditions were tied to the declining fortunes of Germany in the war. With too few resources to meet their own military and civilian needs, the care of POWs was simply a low priority for the German government.

One specific way this reduction in resources can be measured is the rapid decline in the prisoners' mail and *colis* service from May 1944 forward. Prisoner Henri Laloux remembered that starting in the fall of 1944, "The *colis* from our families became rare and meager (sadly, for good cause) and they were often pilfered (and not only by the Germans!)" From this point forward Laloux and his companions had to carefully conserve what little supplemental food they obtained from the Red Cross and the black market until the end of the war.<sup>29</sup> The Vichy mail surveillance program had tracked the functioning of this service throughout the war. Prior to May 1944 the number of complaints about slow mail service and/or pilfered *colis* remained small, occurring in less than one percent of all correspondence. This trend dramatically changed in May 1944 when the number of complaints increased over ten-fold, and remained high through the final three months covered by the reports. In May 1944 complaints from prisoners' families regarding slow mail service from Germany also became an issue for the first

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<sup>28</sup> Durand, 468.

<sup>29</sup> Henri Laloux, *Avril 1945, Libéré par l'armée rouge*, (Paris : Editions Heimdal, 1997), 19.

time in the war.<sup>30</sup> As this breakdown in the prisoners' mail service began months prior to D-Day, it is unlikely that it was caused by the chaos brought to the French infrastructure by Operation Pointblank, the intensified bombing campaign which preceded the cross-channel invasion. A probable cause for the breakdown was the German shifting of rail-stock away from non-essential tasks, such as POW mail, towards meeting the desperate needs of the crumbling situation in the East.<sup>31</sup> In 1944 German usage accounted for 57% of an already drastically reduced French freight rail service.<sup>32</sup> There simply was not enough rail traffic in France to meet the nation's basic needs while also meeting the demands placed on it by the Germans.

The reduction in mail service was not simply an inconvenience for the French prisoners. By 1944 they were more dependent than ever on the food supplements received from the Red Cross and family *colis*. After the cross-channel invasion all family and Vichy *colis* shipments from France were halted. This source of nourishment was not replaced until early 1945 when the German government agreed to allow the new French government and other nations, notably the United States, to send humanitarian aid packages to the prisoners.<sup>33</sup> With food supplement packages arriving inconsistently, if at all, the prisoners were forced to find other means of supplementing their insufficient

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<sup>30</sup> Monthly reports contained in Rapport Statistique Mensuel collection (AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907). The raw numbers of complaints about mail service to stalags are as follows: April, 1944: 100 out of 21,993 total correspondence read (0.5%); May, 1944: 1,097 out of 25,992 (4.2%); and June, 1944: 2,014 out of 47,554 (4.2%). The raw numbers for complaints about late or violated *colis* for the same period are: April, 1944: 45; May, 459; and June, 580.

<sup>31</sup> From December 1943 through April 1944 the Red Army launched a series of operations which pushed the Axis out of Ukraine and broke the siege of Leningrad. During these operations more than 70 German divisions were demolished. Operation Bagration, which brought Soviet forces to the doorstep of Germany, was launched in June 1944. For a good short summary of the collapsing German position in the Soviet Union during the spring of 1944 see David Glantz and Jonathan House, *When Titans Clashed: How the Red Army Stopped Hitler*. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995), 179-94.

<sup>32</sup> Jean-Pierre Azéma, *From Munich to the Liberation, 1938-1944*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 179.

<sup>33</sup> Durand, 466-68.

rations. Lucky prisoners could barter on the black market. The less fortunate had to steal or forage to obtain enough to eat. They took opportunities to pocket extra food while at work or on their way to or from the worksite. Agricultural prisoners or those who had access to open areas could often find some additional food by spending their free time looking for edible plants or rooting through refuse. The breakdown of the mail service forced the prisoners to either resort to means such as the above to add to their diet, engage in risky criminal activity, such as theft or black marketeering, or go hungry.

Based on how often the prisoners brought up the subject of food in their correspondence, we can correlate a growing preoccupation with having enough to eat on their part with the breakdown of the mail service. Sufficient nutrition, always a concern for the prisoners in Germany, became a much more frequently mentioned topic in their correspondence starting in May 1944. In April 1944 less than one percent of the prisoners' letters contained substantial comments about their diets. In May comments about food increased five-fold, and remained at this level through the final two monthly reports. Even though comments about food in these letters were twice as often reassuring as negative, the sudden jump in how often food was mentioned is evidence that the prisoners were thinking about food more often. With their rations already reduced and less arriving from overseas, the prisoners were tightening their belts during these months. Knowing that their families back in France were also struggling with the same problems would presumably have made the prisoners loath to complain in their letters about their own insufficient diet. Just the same, people write about what is on their minds, and starting in May 1944 five times as many prisoners were writing about food. While most

prisoners did their best not to cause their loved ones additional worries, their obsession still found its way into their letters.<sup>34</sup>

As was true for every person inside Germany, Allied bombing put the prisoners at risk and adversely affected their living conditions during the last two years of the war. POWs were often used to construct and repair German bomb shelters, although they were forbidden to use these shelters themselves in most instances. Prisoners and foreign workers were typically left inside their barracks, or only allowed to take shelter in slit trenches, during bombing raids. Among those prisoners most exposed to bombings, such as those working in large factories or transportation hubs, the frequent bombings became a depressing obsession which left them with rattled nerves and inadequate sleep. In some cases the International Red Cross intervened on the prisoners' behalf to pressure the Germans to at least allow the captives to leave their barracks during raids and take shelter in trenches. In violation of international law, the Germans often exposed POWs to danger by forcing them to clear rubble and fight fires during raids, or by placing anti-aircraft batteries within the prisoners' living compounds.<sup>35</sup> A postwar study of the city of Essen concluded that foreign workers and prisoners of war were nearly twice as likely to be killed by Allied bombs as were Germans.<sup>36</sup>

The Vichy government kept track of the prisoners' views on Allied bombing raids throughout the war. Judging by these reports, the government expected the bombings would turn the prisoners against the "Anglo-Americans," the group with whom Vichy

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<sup>34</sup> Monthly reports contained in *Rapport Statistique Mensuel* collection (AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907). The raw numbers of letters containing substantial comments about food are as follows: April, 1944: 185 out of 21,993 total correspondence read (0.8%) with favorable comments outweighing complaints 12 to 7; May, 1944: 1,068 out of 25,992 (4.1%) with favorable comments outweighing complaints 478-296; June, 1944: 1373 out of 47,554 (2.9%) with favorable comments outweighing complaints 531-205; and July 1944: 3067 out of 71,807 (4.2%) with favorable comments outweighing complaints 634-295.

<sup>35</sup> Durand, 464.

<sup>36</sup> Herbert, 317.

leaders thought they were competing for the prisoners' hearts and minds. Despite seeing the horrid effects of the bombings first-hand, and often being in harm's way, the surveillance showed that most French prisoners accepted these attacks as a necessary part of war. Allied bombing was one of the more frequently mentioned topics in prisoners' letters. By July 1944 more than one in ten of the prisoners' letters brought up the topic of bombing attacks.<sup>37</sup> Censors classified the vast majority of these remarks as of a neutral nature. Rather than condemn the bombardments, the censors noted that many of the prisoners took satisfaction in the damage it inflicted and that they expected the campaign would hasten the end of the war. A surveillance report from September 1943 explained that French prisoners in heavily targeted areas believed the Germans were "terrified" by the attacks, and showing signs of being greatly worn down. The report noted these prisoners were pleased to see the German people finally being reduced to the point of joining them in calling for an end to the war.<sup>38</sup> Even regarding Allied bombing of targets in France, the prisoners were of divided opinion. They were concerned about the damage caused by these bombings, and worried about the safety of their loved ones, but outright condemnations of the attacks were rare.<sup>39</sup>

Another aspect of the prisoners' life which took a significant turn for the worse during the final year of the war was their treatment by the German people. As the German people became more and more aware that they were likely to lose the war, their treatment of foreigners inside the Reich became more brutal. The violence directed at

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<sup>37</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Juillet, 1944, Ex. No. V. Until May, 1944 most references to bombings in the prisoners' letters referred to attacks on targets in Germany. That month 2.8% of all letters made reference to bombing attacks on Germany, while 2.1% made reference to attacks on targets in France. In July, 1944 2.8% of all letters made reference to attacks on Germany and 10.0% made reference to attacks on France.

<sup>38</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Septembre, 1943, 9.

<sup>39</sup> See for example AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Janvier, 1944, 11. See also Durand, 466.

foreigners in the final year was less organized than the earlier systematic abuse POWs had suffered at the hands of guards or security personnel. Just as had happened in the closing months of World War I, prisoners and foreign deportees in Germany were subjected to irrational, in some cases even hysterical, outbursts of violence.<sup>40</sup> Until this point violence inflicted on foreigners by Germans normally could be rationalized as connected in some way to productivity or control issues. Increasingly in 1944 and 1945 the violence inflicted on foreigners was driven by fear or anger and served emotional needs more than concrete war goals. Late in the war German civilians often joined guards and security officers in physically attacking foreigners. Unable to defend themselves against the advancing Red Army and Allied bombers, Germans directed their rage against an available target – foreign captives. In many cases foreigners suspected of minor crimes, such as stealing food, were assaulted by civilian vigilante mobs. Even the minimal legal protections covering foreigners were invalidated in September 1944 by a decree which authorized German security personnel of even the lowest rank to kill any foreigner believed to be guilty of looting. Many civilian vigilantes took this decree as applying to them as well as to uniformed security personnel and treated it as a *carte blanche* to commit unlimited violence on any foreigner suspected of any crime. From the fall of 1944 forward there were increasing instances of the German people serving out “street justice” to foreigners who they blamed for the destruction of their country and the approaching calamity. At the same time as the level of anti-foreigner violence in Germany was escalating, insufficient rations, lack of housing and increased work demands drove more and more captives into committing desperate actions. To live, the captives often had to obtain food and shelter illegally, and these illegal acts brought on

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<sup>40</sup> See Chapter two.

more violence. A deadly cycle of criminality and retribution played out as the war limped to its conclusion. Order was breaking down and mere survival was becoming the only goal for many deportees. In the fall of 1944 thousands of foreigners abandoned their jobs and collected in the seemingly safer rural areas to wait out the final act of the war. With Allied and Soviet armies rapidly advancing in the fall of 1944 many foreigners in Germany assumed the end was very near. When the two fronts stabilized in late 1944 near the pre-war German borders, those foreigners who had abandoned their jobs found they had to fend for themselves not for a few weeks as they had expected, but for up to eight months. The German authorities, overwhelmed as their nation crumbled around them, could not cope with this movement, and groups of fugitive foreigners established themselves in the countryside and in abandoned urban areas. Systematic institutional abuse had driven the foreigners into fending for themselves by any means possible, and these acts of self preservation only inspired more unrestrained violent responses from panicked Germans. The German people, who had been predisposed to expect “improper” behavior from foreigners throughout the war, saw this rise in escapes and thefts as late validation of their prejudices. The foreigners’ criminality was used as justification for even further escalations in the employment of violence to reassert some control over a situation which was rapidly falling into chaos. The bulk of this violence was directed at Slavs and Italians, but no foreigner in Germany was immune.<sup>41</sup> The confluence of these

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<sup>41</sup> Herbert, 359-70. Scholarship on the treatment of foreign workers and prisoners inside Germany during the war tends to focus on the abysmal treatment of eastern victims while giving considerably less attention to westerners. When western workers and prisoners are addressed it is often to compare their treatment favorably with that of their eastern companions.

many factors took their toll on the French captives. Of all French POWs who died in captivity, half lost their lives between August 1944 and May 1945.<sup>42</sup>

By 1944 the Vichy government had become all but irrelevant to the prisoners, and judging by the government's behavior during the second half of the captivity, the prisoners as actual people with real needs had also become an irrelevant topic to the government. As conditions deteriorated around them the prisoners must have recognized that they were an abandoned people. Had the Western Allies or the Free French initiated a serious program at this time to organize a resistance movement among the prisoners in Germany, the situation indicates they may well have found a larger number of volunteers than would have been true earlier in the war. The prisoners were attempting to navigate a desperate situation in a virtual political vacuum. As will be demonstrated in the following chapter, no concerted effort was made from the outside to fill this leadership vacuum. Left to their own devices, the POWs continued on as individuals or as parts of small groups, doing what they could to survive the *endkampf* by wit, luck or quiet action. Unlike their countrymen in France during these same months, the prisoners' thoughts were not focused on collective action or larger political questions. The captives had hope, but lacking leadership and organization their optimism took a passive form. While the resistance struggle was exploding inside France and the future shape of their nation was the topic of hot debate, the prisoners focused on simpler goals – staying alive, returning home and seeing their loved ones again.

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<sup>42</sup> Gascar, 276.

## **Chapter 8: The Politics of Resistance and Repatriation**

Even though the French prisoners of war were cut off from their homeland for five years, in many ways their political evolution mirrored that of their countrymen living under German occupation. Like their countrymen in France, the POWs quickly moved from initial acceptance of the Vichy regime to disillusionment. By late 1942, like the bulk of the French population, the dominant political mentality of the prisoners in Germany was one of indirect resistance to the government and its policies. Despite their rejection of the Vichy regime, the government continued to represent the prisoners in their propaganda as loyal followers of Pétain and the National Revolution. Given the prisoners' relatively passive acceptance of their captivity, as described in the closing section of the previous chapter, this representation of the prisoners' mindset might have seemed plausible to the French people. Indeed, upon their return to France, the prisoners were often welcomed back in a manner which indicated much of the French population had accepted the propaganda as accurate. As the Vichy leadership itself was well aware, or at least should have been based on its own surveillance program, the prisoners supported neither the regime nor its policies. Even though there was relatively little active resistance among the prisoners in Germany, as was true of the overall French population, the prisoners almost uniformly viewed the Vichy regime with hostility or indifference by late 1942.

### **Resistance and the Prisoners of War**

Among the prisoners in Germany there was no organized *combattant* resistance activity. In fact, among the French POWs, there was no organized resistance activity of any kind until the final months of the war. This reality is at odds with much of the

prisoners' memoir literature which frequently stressed the prisoners' involvement in the resistance. By and large the activities these memoirs describe were of a passive and indirect nature and often had such limited effect that the Germans did not recognize them as resistance at all. The prisoners' tendency to exaggerate the prevalence and impact of resistance work in their memoirs perhaps reflected a desire on their part to justify their relatively passive acceptance of captivity when it was unfavorably compared to the *combattant* resistance found inside France itself. This comparison was problematic, as the situations faced by the prisoners and the civilian resisters were quite different. Further, objectively the prisoners had no real cause to defend their level of resistance activity vis-à-vis the overall French resistance, as in most ways the indirect resistance offered by the POWs was similar to the resistance the Germans encountered in France throughout most of the occupation. "Survivor Guilt" may have also motivated former prisoners (as well as labor deportees) to exaggerate the level of resistance found among themselves inside Germany. When these groups became more aware of how many political and racial deportees had died in captivity, and how much worse these groups were treated than the prisoners of war, many may have attempted to present justifications for their own survival. This is a common psychological reaction, and one that has been widely documented among post-WWII camp survivors. Exaggerations to their resistance activity might have been attempts by some returnees to demonstrate that they had "earned" their survival, perhaps even done at a subconscious level.<sup>1</sup>

While there was some *combattant* resistance activity in France and almost none among the prisoners in Germany, one must keep in mind that even in France only a small

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<sup>1</sup> See for example François Cochet, *Les exclus de la victoire: Histoire des prisonniers de guerre, déportés et S.T.O. (1945-1985)*, (Paris: S.P.M., 1992), 191-94.

minority of resisters could claim to have engaged in this most direct form of opposition. *Combattant* resistance is resistance of a direct nature which involves actions which could, in a concrete way, contribute to the defeat of the Axis powers. Indirect resistance is of a more passive nature. It involves such activities as the refusal to support enemy goals, the distribution of banned information, the bringing together of individuals opposed to the enemy, etc. Indirect resistance can be thought of as one of the “weapons of the weak,” which, while it does not concretely contribute to the enemy’s defeat, may help undermine its powerbase or hamper its functioning on a social and/or economic level. Indirect resistance may also contribute to the formation of a movement which can eventually engage in direct *combattant* activities. Overwhelmingly, in both France and Germany, resistance was of an indirect nature.

While there was no combatant resistance movement active among the French prisoners of war in Germany, until late 1944, there was an active culture of resistance among the prisoners throughout the war. Lacking arms, organization and the means to communicate with Allied forces outside the Reich, French prisoners channeled their urge to resist into activities intended to frustrate German and/or Vichy designs or into building up a movement capable of future collective action. The prisoners considered this widespread collective and individual dissonant activity as resistance; however, since these activities did not involve direct confrontation with German forces, and since ultimately they did not hasten the war’s end, they cannot be considered *combattant* acts. Some of the more common forms of non-*combattant* resistance activity in which the prisoners engaged included the distribution of banned information, sabotaging or

hampering work productivity and escape. Black market commerce was also considered a form of resistance by some prisoners.

Were the prisoners proper in calling actions of indirect opposition resistance? The answer to this question lies in how broadly one defines resistance. A liberal definition of resistance includes all acts done in defiance of German and/or Vichy authority. A more restrictive definition insists that the defiant acts must be intentionally connected to the larger political struggle against German and/or Vichy authority. The first definition argues that all defiance is resistance, while the second argues that defiance is only resistance when it has a political motivation. A third and even more restricted definition defines resistance solely as those acts taken against the German and Vichy forces which conceivably could have hastened their military defeat. Under this third definition, only *combattant* actions would qualify as resistance.<sup>2</sup>

If one uses the first and most expansive of the above definitions of resistance, then almost every prisoner of war participated in resistance activity on a daily basis throughout the captivity. Under this definition activities such as black market commerce and non-work related conversations between prisoners and civilians would qualify as resistance activity, as both were acts of defiance against German and Vichy rules. Per German dictates, prisoners were not allowed to conduct any private commerce with German civilians, and were to talk with German civilians only about essential work matters. Granted, these rules were not practically enforceable, but they did remain officially in effect throughout the conflict, and prisoners and civilians were sporadically prosecuted for transgressing them. Almost every French prisoner, and for that matter

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<sup>2</sup> For examinations of different definitions of resistance, see for example, Julian Jackson, *France, The Dark Years, 1940-1944*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 387-88; and John F. Sweets, *Choices in Vichy France: The French Under Nazi Occupation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 224.

almost every German civilian who had regular contact with French prisoners, engaged in at least some banned commerce and/or social mixing every day, be it through a prisoner trading a few cigarettes to a co-worker or through the two of them chatting during a work break. Since part of the reason for categorizing individuals as resisters is to allow persons to be singled out for laudable behavior, as was certainly true in the French case, then the use of the first definition makes little sense as it encompasses “normative” behavior of both French prisoners and German civilians.

The example of defining black market commerce as resistance activity, admittedly a most extreme stance, but one that was nonetheless invoked following the war by some prisoners and workers, helps demonstrate why the first definition is problematic. Almost all prisoners and German civilians had some dealings with the black market. While the black market subverted German laws and undermined authority, in almost all cases prisoners engaged in it for personal, not political, reasons. The German and Vichy governments certainly disapproved of the prisoners’ black market activity, but seem to have considered it as petty criminality or poor discipline, not resistance.<sup>3</sup> If one accepts the ideal that what distinguishes resistance from other forms of dissonance is a political motivation, can self-centered behavior performed in service of individual needs be considered resistance? I suggest memoirs and histories which include activities such as the black market and social mixing as examples of resistance reveal more about the prisoners’ great desire to justify their behavior than they do about the actual extent of

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<sup>3</sup> See Durand, 369 and Herbert, 326. Durand and Herbert do not entirely agree with one another on this topic. Durand’s list of French POW resistance activities includes “preparation for the Liberation” and “liaisons with exterior resistance.” I have left liaisons off the list as, until very late in the captivity, no organized method existed to facilitate these communications or to put any information which was passed along to use. Herbert included black market commerce and evading German work demands as resistance activity, two items left off Durand’s list.

resistance practiced in Germany. I believe it was the prisoners' desire to present themselves as patriots that resulted in behaviors such as these being presented as resistance.

If one uses the second definition of resistance supplied above, opposition consciously linked to a larger political struggle, then the percentage of French prisoners engaged in the resistance would drop, but most would still likely qualify as having participated in it on a fairly regular basis. Prisoners were only allowed to possess printed material approved by German officials, and were forbidden to listen to unapproved radio broadcasts. Few prisoners wrote or printed banned information or possessed contraband radios, but almost every prisoner read or listened to banned information when given the opportunity to do so. Further, they actively sought to share this information with their companions. Likewise, few prisoners actually committed sabotage, but most prisoners, at least when they remembered to do so, went about their work in a half-hearted fashion, purposely accomplishing as little as they thought possible while at the same time avoiding punishment. These activities were not organized or directed, they were simply normal behaviors for most French prisoners. As these activities were intentional acts of opposition to authority and were motivated, at least in part, by political considerations, even mundane examples of these activities would fall under the second definition of resistance. As prisoners had very little opportunity to engage in direct conflict with German and Vichy forces in ways which might conceivably hasten the Axis defeat, indirect opposition was the only form of resistance open to them most of the time. Performing resistance activity which met the third definition, direct confrontation, would

have been suicidal and, given their lack of weapons, most likely ineffective, for French prisoners in Germany.

Perhaps the prisoners' postwar exaggeration of their resistance's impact was an unnecessary response to exaggerations often made by French civilians on the same topic. At least in regards to the matter of direct versus indirect resistance activity, the practices of resistance among the prisoners in Germany and the civilians in France mirrored each other until mid-1944. Only a very small number of French men and women were actively engaged in combatant resistance movements prior to the Allied *debarment*. Most French citizens were opposed to the Vichy regime and its policy of collaboration by mid-1941, if not sooner.<sup>4</sup> They increasingly showed their opposition by indirectly subverting Vichy and German authority. French citizens resisted by refusing to participate in collaborative or repressive programs or by ignoring and/or transgressing laws they saw as unjust. A French person saw him or herself as part of the resistance based upon his or her active refusal to support the Vichy regime and the Germans, not necessarily based upon his or her membership in a specific organization or by acts of direct confrontation. By 1943 indirect resistance became so commonplace that, even though only a relatively small number of persons directly engaged German and/or Vichy forces, France as a whole has been described by historians as dominated by the social and political "phenomenon" of resistance.<sup>5</sup> Much like France, indirect opposition to authority was the primary form of resistance among the prisoners in Germany. Indeed, the prisoners in Germany were actually dissuaded from engaging in direct resistance by the Allied military command.

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Laborie, *L'opinion française sous Vichy, Les Français et la crise d'identité nationale 1936-1944*. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001), 253-65.

<sup>5</sup> Julian Jackson, *France, The Dark Years, 1940-1944*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 387-88 & John F. Sweets, John F. *Choices in Vichy France, The French Under Nazi Occupation*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 223-230.

Dwight Eisenhower, the supreme commander of Allied forces, discouraged *combattant* resistance activity inside Germany throughout the war. He believed the cost in prisoners' lives would outweigh any military benefits these activities would bring. In a radio speech in September 1944, Eisenhower encouraged foreigners in Germany to boycott their jobs but not allow "the Gestapo to provoke you into unorganized action."<sup>6</sup> The French prisoners had no weapons and were under extensive surveillance by a brutal regime. Under these circumstances French prisoners recognized the futility of direct confrontation and looked instead for opportunities for indirect opposition. Thus, at least until 1944, the nature of resistance among the prisoners and the French civilians was actually quite similar. Perhaps the main difference between the resistance among the POWs in Germany and the civilians in France was the existence in the latter of a small cadre of active combatants.

The almost complete absence of *combattant* resistance activity among the prisoners is confirmed by Vichy and German surveillance reports. Throughout the war Vichy mail censors carefully tracked the political dispositions of the prisoners. In the spring of 1943 the three most widespread political opinions among the prisoners were: 1) an almost complete lack of confidence in the Vichy government; 2) a deep distrust in all Vichy leaders outside of Marshal Pétain (who seemed to maintain a fair amount of prestige among the prisoners even as late as 1944); and, 3) a hatred of Germany. The censors tracked the number of positive references in the prisoners' correspondence to leftist and resistance movements which were actively opposed to the Vichy government. They referred to these references as examples of "anti-national sentiments." The reports found almost no expression of these sentiments or, in other words, almost no evidence of

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<sup>6</sup> Herbert, 356-57.

organized opposition to the Vichy government. A March 1943 report simply concluded, “There is no open opposition” among the prisoners.<sup>7</sup> The April 1943 report repeated this conclusion: “Activity of elements hostile to the government, followers of the former political parties, is not directly detectable.” These reports are very frank in how hostile the prisoners’ opinion had become towards the government in a general sense, and how conducive the environment had become for “revolutionary propaganda,” but despite looking for organized resistance, the censors found the prisoners had not seized on any movement through which they were collectively channeling their discontent.<sup>8</sup> In the spring of 1943 the overall political mood of the prisoners seems to have been similar to the overall mood found in France at the same time- an overwhelming rejection of the Vichy government and the policy of Franco-German rapprochement by the people. There was, however, very little actual resistance activity. If the prisoners were engaging in resistance activity, they were doing so as individuals or as parts of small, informal groups. There may have been an *atmosphere* of resistance among the prisoners in Germany, but there appears to have been no active resistance *movement*.

Eliminating resistance activity by foreigners in Germany was one of the highest priorities of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (RHSa), the Reich security main office. Guarding against the growth of an organized resistance movement among foreigners inside the Reich was a German security obsession throughout the war. With six million foreigners inside Germany, many of whom were young men with prior military experience, this was an understandable concern. The RHSa was charged with surveying the foreign workers and prisoners inside the Reich and investigated allegations of

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<sup>7</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Mars, 1943, 9.

<sup>8</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Avril, 1943, 10.

organized resistance activity by prisoners of war. In the fall of 1943, German industrial leaders alleged that the French workers and prisoners had organized a vast “go slow” campaign to sabotage productivity. When the RHSA investigated this allegation they found no evidence of any organized campaign. Historian Ulrich Herbert speculated that the entire affair was likely invented by factory managers to excuse their failure to meet productivity goals.<sup>9</sup> Several small and one moderate-sized resistance organizations were discovered and broken by the RHSA; however, perhaps the most salient fact to emerge from all these investigations, in regards to the topic of organized combatant resistance activity, is that not a single weapon was discovered in any prisoner of war resistance group until after the spring of 1944.<sup>10</sup>

In 1943 both the RHSA and the Vichy surveillance office concluded there was no evidence of an organized resistance movement among the French prisoners. No evidence came to light during the research for this project which indicated that this finding was revised later in the war. Thus, as far as the agencies charged with policing the prisoners were concerned, there was no organized resistance movement to be found in Germany.

Based on the above evidence we can conclude that acts of organized *combattant* resistance among the prisoners in Germany were extremely rare. This lack of a *combattant* resistance movement among the French prisoners is easy to understand given the circumstances. Split up as they were into *kommandos* the French prisoners had little ability to organize. Until the final year of their captivity Allied forces made little effort to communicate with the prisoners and, thus, unlike the resistance inside France itself, outside assistance did not foster organized resistance among the French in Germany as it

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<sup>9</sup> Herbert, 330, 336.

<sup>10</sup> Herbert, 326-52.

had among the resisters within France itself. Almost by definition *combattant* activity must be organized. Unorganized *combattant* acts would almost certainly be ineffectual and hard to distinguish from simply criminality. Thus, since the POW resistance was unorganized, it almost had to be indirect. A *combattant* resistance movement would have required a level of organization which simply did not exist in Germany prior to 1944.

Despite their predicament there were at least two forms of resistance open to prisoners before late-1944 which were of an active, if not exactly *combattant*, nature - escape and sabotage. French prisoners engaged in both these activities often enough when they judged the benefits of the acts to outweigh the risks. Escape and sabotage were clearly acts of resistance directed against the Germans. Some sources characterize escape as an act of resistance also directed at Vichy authority.<sup>11</sup> The French government, in keeping with the spirit of collaboration, directed the prisoners not to attempt escape. Many POWs, probably correctly, believed this order was only issued for political purposes and was never intended to be taken seriously. The treatment of prisoners who successfully escaped and made their way back to France reinforced this point of view. The Vichy government treated escapees with honor rather than arresting and extraditing them back to Germany. Internal Vichy reports refer to prisoners who attempted escape as “freedom loving,” and treated the large number of prisoners willing to run this risk, despite “draconian” punishments, in positive terms.<sup>12</sup>

The case of Henri Descombes provides an example of how the Vichy government treated escapees. Descombes escaped in 1943 and made his way back to his wife and

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<sup>11</sup> See for example D’Hoop, Jean-Marie, “Note sur les evasions.” *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, no. 25 (1957): 75.

<sup>12</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Commission de contrôle postal des prisonniers de guerre. Rapport bi-mensuel, Nr. 44 (1-15 Janvier 1942), 19.

family in the department of Saône-et-Loire. Upon his return he presented himself to the French authorities and told them he was an escaped prisoner. The authorities told him that from their perspective he was simply a French soldier presenting himself for demobilization. While the government officials let Descombes go about his life, he feared he would be denounced to the Germans who now operated freely in his region after their occupation of the southern zone. Six months later a German officer, a soldier and a “civil” came to take him back into custody. When they found he was not at home they arrested his mother and a man he employed and told his neighbors that these two hostages would either be executed or deported if Descombes did not turn himself in within twenty-four hours. Descombes surrendered and was sent back to Germany where he spent the remainder of the war working in a disciplinary *kommando* alongside other recaptured prisoners. He was certain that he had been denounced by a French informant for a reward.<sup>13</sup> At least in regards to escape, Vichy did appear to have played a “double game” with the Germans; making public statements condemning escapes while at the same time quietly treating escapees in a favorable manner.

Escape was a common enough activity that it can safely be assumed it was a regular topic of conversation, if not active planning, for most prisoners throughout their captivity. This is borne out not only by how often it was mentioned in the prisoners’ memoirs, but also by the large number of men who either escaped or attempted to do so during the war. Practically all prisoner memoirs recount stories about how full *kommandos* supported individuals or small groups preparing for an escape. Before a man attempted an escape his companions would pool their resources to help him acquire a stock of non-perishable food, civilian clothes and German marks. Jean Hélicon wrote of

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<sup>13</sup> *Les KG parlent*, (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 1965), 140-51.

how escape attempts felt like communal efforts: “A man preparing an escape is taboo in the camp. He is a sort of saint, and symbolizes the hopes of the others. Doing anything to ruin his chances is a crime against the whole camp.”<sup>14</sup> In much the same way, each successful escape was greeted as a group triumph. Recaptured escapees shared stories of their successes and failures after returning to camp, thus helping plan the next attempt. In this way each unsuccessful escape was the start of the next, potentially successful, attempt.<sup>15</sup> Even after being recaptured some prisoners remembered the euphoria they felt while on the run. Even though they failed to get back to France these men felt as if they had, if only briefly, retaken control over their own lives while they were free. They knew their attempt had caused their captors much inconvenience through such things as generating extra paper and administrative work and forcing the Germans to conduct additional patrols along rail and road lines. Escapes also embarrassed camp guards and administrators. Even after recapture escapees would feel they had provided a useful service and that, even if only for a few days, they had retaken their post alongside the other fighting men.<sup>16</sup>

Of the French prisoners taken into Germany, over seventy thousand managed to escape back to France. This equaled nearly five percent of all men deported. The most active year was 1943 when thirty-three thousand men successfully escaped.<sup>17</sup> The large

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<sup>14</sup> Jean Hé lion, *They Shall Not Have Me. The Capture, Forced Labor, and Escape of a French Prisoner of War*, (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1943), 351.

<sup>15</sup> On prisoners sharing information about escape attempts see for example Hé lion, 408.

<sup>16</sup> See for example Francis Ambrière, *The Long Holiday*, (Chicago: Ziff-Davis Publishing Co., 1948), 142-43.

<sup>17</sup> D’Hoop, Jean-Marie, “Note sur les evasions,” *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, no. 25 (1957): 66-77. According to a 1955 *Ministère des Anciens Combattants* study the rate of escapes per year: 1941 – 16,000 (1% of the total number of prisoners in Germany at that time); 1942 – 19,000 (1.5%); 1943 – 33,000 (2.9%); and, 1944 – 3,000 (0.3%). No numbers were provided for 1940 or 1945. This study only covered those prisoners who had been taken into Germany, not those who escaped from camps within

number of escapes and the amount of work prisoners in Germany put into escape projects must have had a significant impact on the overall culture of resistance among the prisoners. Perhaps the steady flow of 1,500 to 2,000 monthly escapes hampered the development of a resistance movement in Germany by draining the camps of the men most likely to become active resisters. Those prisoners who ran the risks associated with escape would presumably be the same men who would likely have formed the leadership cadre of a combatant movement had one emerged in Germany. Perhaps the opportunity for escape is one reason a more active resistance movement did not form in Germany. The prisoners most inclined to take direct action often chose to escape and join the resistance movement in France rather than remain and attempt to develop such a movement in Germany. Or perhaps the large number of successful escapes nurtured, rather than drained, the resistance in Germany by providing the captives with inspiration and hope.

Unfortunately resistance and escape tend to be overemphasized topics in French prisoner of war memoir literature and under-represented topics in the more scholarly works. These topics are romanticized in memoirs. Resistance and escape are paradoxically depicted as serious undertakings motivated by deep moral convictions on the one hand, and almost as a game played between the prisoners and guards on the other. Memoirs also tend to depict the prisoners' resistance activities as having a greater impact on the Allied war effort than was the reality. Prisoners might collect potentially useful information while in Germany, but in almost all cases prior to late 1944, they had no way of getting this information to Allied forces. Informal resistance cells provided the

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France or from internment in Switzerland. Roughly a quarter of a million prisoners escaped from *frontstalags* in France during the war, most during the weeks following the armistice.

prisoners with a sense of solidarity, but none were called into action until the final days of the war.<sup>18</sup> As these fairly direct forms of resistance have not been shown to have hampered the German war effort in any significant way, they were probably of more benefit in keeping up the prisoners' morale than in contributing to victory in any tangible sense. Two of the more widely read memoirs, both of which are used in this work to describe other aspects of the captivity, Francis Ambriere's "The Long Holiday" (originally published in French in 1946) and Jean Hé lion's "They Shall Not Have Me," (1943) are particularly good examples of this tendency to romanticize. Similarities and differences between how the prisoners of war and the French population came to understand the concept of resistance and the role of individual responsibility during the war, and what effect the culture of resistance had on the prisoners' labor productivity, remain areas open to significantly more historical research than has yet been conducted. Undoubtedly a better understanding of the impact the culture of escape had on the men in Germany will be a key aspect of coming to grips with this topic.

Another form of more direct resistance open to the prisoners was sabotage. Judging by memoir literature it was not uncommon for prisoners to commit small acts of sabotage on the job. These memoirs would recount how French workers would purposely break equipment to slow or temporarily shut down worksites. Some prisoners considered intentionally reducing their productivity on the worksite as a form of sabotage. While sabotage was certainly a reality among the prisoners in Germany, one should keep in mind that, just as was true for most resistance related topics, the memoir literature exaggerated its impact. The French prisoners going about their duties at a slow pace and taking an indifferent attitude as to the quality of their work is a common theme in the

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<sup>18</sup> See Chapter nine.

memoir literature; however, these efforts apparently rarely rose to the level that German foremen and supervisors found them unacceptable. The German government considered *arbeitsbummelei* (loafing on the job) a political crime, and Albert Speer encouraged factory managers to punish lazy workers with fines or reduced rations “rapidly” and “expeditiously” for maximum pedagogical effect. These penalties were applied most often to foreign workers. At Krupp, 10 to 15% of foreign workers received loafing penalties each month.<sup>19</sup> The high rate of loafing penalties given out at Krupp aside, in general the Germans considered the French prisoners to be good workers. Many German firms preferred French prisoner laborers over foreign volunteers, and believed them to be the most productive of all foreign workers in Germany, perhaps even as productive as the German civilians they worked alongside.<sup>20</sup>

A large organized resistance movement did finally arise among the French prisoners in Germany in 1944 when it was organized from the outside. Liberated prisoners of war and escapees, with the administrative support of the Free French government in exile, set up an umbrella resistance movement in March 1944 called the *Mouvement de Résistance des Prisonniers de Guerre et Déportés* (MRPGD). The MRPGD was the first resistance organization which attempted to develop ties with prisoner of war and deportee resistance cells inside Germany. The movement the MRPGD helped organize in Germany, called the *Front Intérieur Allemand* (FIA), only became fully active in November 1944. It focused its efforts on gathering information from within Germany and conveying it to the Free French forces, supporting escape attempts and laying the groundwork for the French prisoners to take collective action

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<sup>19</sup> Herbert, 331-32.

<sup>20</sup> Herbert, 112-13, 124-25 & 299-305.

when called upon to do so by Allied forces.<sup>21</sup> In the end this call never came, although some FIA groups did perform useful work as guides, police and guards during the final days of the war.

While the French prisoners in Germany were prevented from partaking in the combatant resistance movement which came to strength in France in 1943 and 1944, they probably partook in the social “phenomenon” of resistance as much as did their compatriots back in France. The lack of military resistance activity in Germany did cause at least one important distinction to arise in how the prisoners and the French population at large came to understand the socio-political meaning of “resistance” to the French people. The combatant resistance came to symbolize the highest level of patriotism and self-sacrifice to most people in France. Lacking such examples, the prisoners in Germany were largely unaware of the emergence of this group, a group which supplanted a role in French society which had traditionally been filled by soldiers like themselves. When the prisoners returned to France they discovered the role of fighting patriot was no longer accorded to soldiers by default, it had been claimed by the resistance while they were in captivity. Patriotism was now not only associated with national service, it was now also linked to adhering to the “correct” anti-collaboration (and by extension, anti-Vichy) political position and pro-actively advancing that cause. Much more so than had been the case in 1940, by 1944 patriotism was inescapably entangled with politics.

### **The Politics of the Repatriated**

Cut off from their homeland and Allied support, the French prisoners in Germany did not take part in the *combattant* resistance movement until very late in the war.

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<sup>21</sup> Pierre Bugeaud, *Militant Prisonnier de Guerre, Une bataille pour l'histoire*. (Paris: Les Nouvelles Editions du Pavillon, 1990), 73; and Lewin, 42.

Prisoners who had managed to return to France, either through one of the various liberation programs or via escape, did not suffer from this same isolation. Starting in 1943 groups made up of former prisoners of war organized into resistance groups. While these groups were slow to join the larger Gaullist movement, the community of former prisoners made up an active element of the resistance in France during the last two years of the occupation.

Former POWs who had spent at least some time in Germany made up a substantial population group in France from 1941 forward. During the war over half a million deported prisoners returned to France through a variety of means. More than a third of those repatriated (183,381) were freed due to injury or poor health, as was required by international law. From the German perspective caring for these unproductive men was an economic drain which they were happy to pass on to the French state. The second largest group of 90,747 was made up of men liberated as part of the *Relève*. Many of these repatriates were also sickly and perhaps would have been repatriated even had they not been selected by the Germans for inclusion on the *Relève* lists. Vichy diplomatic negotiations with Germany won the release of two other sizable groups, 59,359 veterans of the First World War and 18,731 fathers with five or more children. Somewhat more than 50,000 prisoners who possessed skills and/or training which the Germans deemed essential to the proper functioning of the French government and economy were also released. Included in this group were public administrators (17,751), selected farmers (18,127), railroad employees (1,710) and roughly 15,000 other specialists. All told approximately 475,000 prisoners were repatriated through official channels. To this total

we can add the seventy-plus thousand prisoners who made their own way home as escapees.<sup>22</sup>

The Vichy government expected the returning prisoners of war to be among the regime's staunchest supporters. The French military was a politically conservative body, and so the Vichy leadership assumed that most of the returning prisoners were likely to ideologically lean in their direction. As detailed in Chapter three, the government had attempted to cultivate political support among the prisoners while they were in Germany by distributing information promoting the National Revolution and through the *Cercles Pétain*. Beyond their assumed favorable political inclination the Vichy leaders expected the returning prisoners would feel a debt of gratitude towards the government for facilitating their liberation. The regime's leaders also assumed that most soldiers who had fought in 1940 would be critical of the former republic after seeing first-hand the disaster for which it was widely blamed. Finally, recognition must have been expected for the concrete actions the Vichy government had taken on behalf of the returning prisoners and their families.<sup>23</sup> In 1941 the *Commissariat Général au reclassement des Prisonniers de Guerre Rapatriés et aux Familles de Prisonniers* (CGPGR) was set up specifically to assist returning prisoners. The following year the CGPGR began to establish *Maisons du Prisonniers* and *Centres d'Entraide* (CEA) across occupied and unoccupied France. The *Maisons du Prisonnier* provided assistance to men readjusting to life in France following their return. The CEAs, staffed mostly by former prisoners, gave repatriates an organization (and at times a paid position) through which they could work for the benefit of their compatriots still in captivity and their families in France. At the time of liberation

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<sup>22</sup> Durand, 324.

<sup>23</sup> See Lewin (p 24-37) for a list and explanation of the multiple agencies set up by the Vichy government and private agencies to assist the prisoners and their families.

there were 151 *Maisons du Prisonniers* and over 2,500 CEAs operating in France. The worth of these organizations was validated in 1944 when the newly installed French provisional government took over their operation with minimal purging of staff and administration and incorporated them into the newly formed *Ministère des Prisonniers Déportés et des Réfugiés* (MPDR).<sup>24</sup>

The Vichy leadership's expectations that the repatriates would strongly support the regime were not fulfilled. The government continued to conduct mail surveillance on the repatriates after their return home. The importance Vichy officials placed on these men's political views was demonstrated by their being given their own heading in their monthly surveillance reports, separating their views from those of the prisoners still in Germany and from the rest of the population of France. These reports revealed that the repatriates had a very negative impression of the state of their country and considered the government ineffective. An April 1943 report stated that the repatriates' collective mindset was "strongly pessimistic" about the state of the nation.<sup>25</sup> This finding was repeated in September 1943. The later report explained that the repatriates saw France as "wracked with political divisions, corruption and selfishness."<sup>26</sup> During the seven months in which the government quantified its surveillance findings, negative or pessimistic opinions among the repatriates outweighed positive comments by a ratio of approximately five to one.<sup>27</sup> The most commonly highlighted complaint in these reports were the poor living conditions in France, a problem which realistically the Vichy

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<sup>24</sup> Lewin, 36-7.

<sup>25</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Synthèse des renseignements. Avril, 1943, 7.

<sup>26</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Synthèse des renseignements, Septembre, 1943, 5.

<sup>27</sup> These findings cover December 1943 through June 1944 and can be found in the Rapport Statistique Mensuel collection (AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907). The raw monthly numbers are: December, 1943: 51 positive vs. 196 negative; 1/44: 21 vs. 50; 2/44: 22 vs. 107; 3/44: 12 vs. 69; 4/44: 11 vs. 72; 5/44: 8 vs. 76; and 6/44: 9 vs. 34.

government could not be expected to remedy given the circumstances. Two other oft-cited complaints of the repatriates, the lack of interest shown in the prisoners' fate by the government and the public at large and the divisive political climate, were criticism directly related to the government's competence and values.

As detailed in Chapter five, the repatriates were disturbed to find most people in France did not consider the liberation of the prisoners a top priority. The repatriates believed this attitude extended to the government. As early as January 1942 surveillance reports noted the repatriates' frustration with the indifferent treatment they received from civil servants.<sup>28</sup> In a March 1944 letter one repatriated prisoner described his impression of the *Maisons du Prisonnier*: "They are worthless, a joke. A lot of offices and typists - the type who don't give a shit. The result - absolutely nothing gets done!"<sup>29</sup> This may be an extreme example of the repatriates' dissatisfaction, but it was not an isolated one. The repatriates' correspondence contained many complaints about how they were treated by the government, and almost no expressions of gratitude. Largely because of how they were run, the government aid programs perhaps became more a source of division than unity between the regime and the returnees. Administrative indifference was only the initial source of the returnees' frustration. Starting in 1943 Vichy POW aid programs began to function as ideological indoctrination centers, further antagonizing the former captives who had to deal with them.

The Vichy government bears a great deal of responsibility for the politically divisive atmosphere the repatriates found upon their return. As demonstrated in Chapter three, the socially conservative and authoritarian tenets of the National Revolution never

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<sup>28</sup> See Chapter five.

<sup>29</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Rapport Statistique Mensuel du mois de Mars, 1944, 8.

had support from the majority of the French people, yet the government began pushing through legislation and reform based on these values while the nation was still in shock from the defeat of 1940. Much of the government's decision making and planning was ideologically informed, and the paternal authoritarian ideology it was drawing upon was one rejected by the population at large. In the summer and fall of 1940 the French people simply had too many concerns to devote close attention to much of the government's politically motivated doings. When life returned to a more normal pace the population began to push back against Vichy's program of retrograde social engineering, first through dissent and later through open opposition. Time and again the Vichy leadership unnecessarily brought the government into conflict with the people by pursuing its ideological goals. Rather than simply trying to manage the disaster and help the French people get through the occupation, the Vichy leaders did not see their role as that of a caretaker, they saw their rise to power as an opportunity to remake France along traditionally conservative lines. For Pétain, Laval, Darlan and many other leading figures in the government crisis meant opportunity rather than danger. The two most obvious examples of this attempt to rule contrary to the values of most French people were Vichy's embrace of collaboration and its enforcement of discriminatory legislation, particularly its persecution of Jews and leftists. In a similar manner the Vichy government alienated much of the repatriate community in January 1943 by injecting its divisive ideological views into the public aid programs set up to serve prisoners and their families.

Throughout the first half of the war the POW aid programs were run with little controversy. Maurice Pinot, a reserve officer, was freed from his captivity in a German

*oflag* to run the CGPGR when it was created. Pinot was a loyal follower of Marshal Pétain and a supporter of the Vichy government. He was not, however, an ideologue. Pinot strove to keep the CGPGR “autonomous” from political influences to have it function effectively for all repatriates, regardless as to their political opinions. In January, 1943 Laval removed Pinot and replaced him with André Masson, an outspoken advocate of collaboration who had already published numerous newspaper articles and books on the subject. The official reason given for the move was that Masson had just recently been liberated and so would be more in touch with the mood of the captives and conditions in Germany. Pinot correctly believed this was an effort to politicize the CGPGR and he refused to resign, forcing Laval to fire him. The replacement of Pinot with Masson set off a minor political firestorm. The prisoners in Germany greeted the announcement that Masson would replace Pinot with almost universal criticism. They were unhappy that a notorious collaborator had been placed at the head of the organization upon which many of their families relied to navigate government bureaucracy.<sup>30</sup> At least one group protest was sent to the Mission Scapini. Back in France the entire upper administrations of the CGPGR, CEAs and the *Maisons du Prisonnier* resigned as a group in protest. Once in power Masson began using the CGPGR and the various agencies it oversaw to promote collaboration and the National Revolution. The CGPGR also attempted to coerce repatriates and prisoners’ families into joining a pro-Vichy political movement called the *Mouvement “Prisonniers.”* The repatriates and the prisoners’ families rejected Masson’s efforts by refusing to join and by ignoring meetings and calls to action. Many prisoners in Germany were offended by Masson’s focus on politics instead of the CGPGR’s mission of providing social assistance to the repatriates

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<sup>30</sup> Durand, 347-48.

and their families.<sup>31</sup> Masson's tenure as head of the CGPGR ended in failure after one year. Laval's attempt to use the CGPGR to mobilize more support for the regime out of the repatriates and the prisoners' families had failed and the prisoners had been driven away from an organization which, had it been administered apolitically and competently, had great potential to bond an important segment of the population to the regime, if only on the basis of its effective administration of assistance for needy former prisoners and their families.<sup>32</sup>

The attempt to politicize the CGPGR not only drove the prisoners away from government agencies, it actually was the catalyst for the creation of a new resistance movement. After being forced out of the CGPGR, Pinot and several of his close associates began working in opposition to the Vichy government. Perhaps the most outspoken of the former CGPGR administrators who helped form this new movement was François Mitterrand. In 1943 Mitterrand dramatically interrupted a speech Masson was delivering to a group of recently repatriated prisoners in Paris by denouncing him and his political misuse of the agency. Initially the POW resistance movement formed by the CGPGR exiles went by the name "Pinot-Mitterrand group." Later, when it joined the larger Gaullist movement, it changed its name to the *Movement National des Prisonniers de Guerre et Déportés* (MNPGD). This case study of the regime's mishandling of the repatriate community demonstrates how its political heavy-handedness contributed to the divisive atmosphere in France and how its attempts to govern ideologically transformed potential supporters into resistance organizers.

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<sup>31</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Synthèse des renseignements. Septembre, 1943, 5.

<sup>32</sup> For a good account of the politics of the CGPGR under Pinot and Masson see Sarah Fishman, *We Will Wait, Wives of French Prisoners of War, 1940-1945*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 84-98.

Perhaps part of the Vichy leadership's mishandling of the repatriates can be attributed to their mistaken expectations as to what political mentality the prisoners would hold. Where the Vichy leadership had expected to find the ranks of the repatriated POWs full of socially conservative young men indoctrinated into the tenets of the National Revolution, they instead found a bitter and cynical lot. During their time in Germany the repatriates had not been energized into enacting the program of the National Revolution. Instead they had been soured to any political appeal. While the former republic was held in low regard by most captives, they quickly came to see the Vichy regime as guilty of the same incompetence, corruption and elitism which they believed had tarnished the former government. Many prisoners held the former republic responsible for the disaster of 1940, but this belief led them away from putting their faith in politicians as a whole, not into embracing the next crop. The new regime's first year in power did nothing to encourage the prisoners to put their trust in the men who now made their home in Vichy, but who had, by and large, spent the pre-war years performing similar duties in Paris for a government they now loudly condemned. Prisoners tended to see the small number of their compatriots who participated in the *Cercles Pétain* as bootlicks and opportunists, not as men of conviction.<sup>33</sup> Cynicism continued to have a hold on even those men who managed to return to France. They saw the lack of unity, the material shortcoming, the rampant corruption and abuses of power, and concluded that the new government had given them no reason to think it an improvement over the former republic.

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<sup>33</sup> Durand, 334-45. See for example AN F<sup>9</sup> 2907. Synthèse des renseignements. Avril, 1943, 10, which describes the activity of the *Mouvements Pétain* in Germany as slow, perhaps even idle, and to be producing almost no enthusiasm. The few adherents are referred to as being "unpopular" with the other prisoners.

The returning prisoners' rejection of the Vichy regime and its policies stand out as a particularly poignant example of the regime's almost complete failure to win anything more than temporary acceptance from the French people. For the reasons explained above, of all segments of the population, the Vichy leadership seemed justified in expecting the repatriated prisoners of war to be among its most likely supporters. Given that the regime failed to win long-term support from even this group indicates just how little support Vichy maintained among the French people after its initial period in power. Considering the hand it was dealt and the course of the war, the Vichy government would have been hard pressed to have retained wide public support even had it governed in a less divisive manner. The new state had few resources to rebuild the nation, and had to govern under the unfavorable terms of the occupation. The Vichy leadership's decision to govern France based upon their unpopular ideological views transformed a difficult job into a hopeless one. Even actions the regime did take which one might expect it to have received some recognition for from the prisoners, such as the setting up the *Maisons du Prisonniers* and CEAs, came to be seen for their shortcomings and politically compromised nature as much as for the services they did provide. It is not surprising that in trying to navigate the realities of the occupation the Vichy government could not help but pale when compared to pre-war life in France. The growing resistance movement, as yet unburdened by the responsibilities of power, looked more and more attractive with each passing month as the Vichy government demonstrated time and again its shortcomings and alienation from the French people.

### **Vichy deception regarding the prisoners during last two years**

During the last two years of the war the Vichy government could find very little support among the French prisoners in Germany, or among those who had returned to France. During this same time the government's stewardship of the prisoners' welfare came more and more into question as their living conditions declined. Yet despite the lack of support it received from the prisoners and its inability to shield them from a worsening situation in Germany, the regime's propaganda campaign continued to consciously misinform the French population that the POWs remained supportive of the government and that the men were living under very tolerable conditions in Germany. Notable examples of this falsified depiction of the prisoners' lives can be found in film, print and public exposition.

By early 1943 the Vichy government's own surveillance reports were very clear that the regime's programs and reform plans had become irrelevant topics to the prisoners in Germany. Nevertheless, the government continued to portray the prisoners in Germany as almost universally in support of the regime and the National Revolution. In April 1943 Marshal Pétain returned to a theme he had been promoting since 1940, that France could be revived only by returning to its traditional values. He tied this message specifically to the prisoners' situation by shaming the French people for not acting more like their brothers, fathers and sons in German prison camps where, he claimed, the proper attitude was on display. He explained, "Our prisoners set us the example. In the camps, they meditate, they work: far from partisan passions and struggles of influence, they prepare what, tomorrow, will be France's sole chance for salvation."<sup>34</sup> A profile of the prisoners' life in Germany published in the popular magazine *L'illustration* in July 1943 focused on

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<sup>34</sup> Sarah Fishman, "Grand Delusions: The Unintended Consequences of Vichy France's Prisoner of War Propaganda." *Journal of Contemporary History, Guerres*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (1991): 240.

cultural and athletic pastimes, giving the reader an impression that the prisoners in Germany were, in Sarah Fishman's words, "at an extended summer camp of sorts." An exposition in Lille in the fall of 1943 informed the French people that the prisoners had put aside all class, regional and political differences and united behind one motto, "Obey and Serve." The prisoners' unity and devotion to the National Revolution was again stressed in an exposition in Reims the following year.<sup>35</sup> The Vichy government's traveling exhibition on the prisoners' life in Germany was named *l'âme des camps* ("The Soul of the Camps"). This exhibition stressed the moral renewal the prisoners were supposedly undergoing while in captivity. After seeing the exhibition, one former prisoner wrote:

Our captivity, the suffering of millions of comrades who have experienced and continue to experience hunger, beating, painful separation, forced labour, bombing and threats became a joyful fresco of an operetta captivity full of spectacle and literary conferences; a world apart, a happy world, without complications, a perfect opportunity for meditation.<sup>36</sup>

If one believed the government's propaganda, the prisoners had spent their years in captivity preparing themselves to serve as the vanguard of the National Revolution upon their return to France. Closer to the truth, the prisoners were almost universally hostile or indifferent to the National Revolution and desired nothing more than to return to a quiet private life in France so they could try to make up for the lost years they had spent in Germany.

The Vichy government produced two feature-length documentaries in 1943 to encourage more French citizens to volunteer for work in Germany. Both films were

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 236-41.

<sup>36</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 3117, *L'exposition 'le front des barbelés,'* as quoted in Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation; Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 118.

widely distributed and one of them, *Travailleurs de France*, was still being shown in French theaters as late as June 1944.<sup>37</sup> These films depicted working conditions in Germany as very comfortable and claimed a strong fraternal bond existed between French workers, prisoners of war and their German co-workers. By 1944 the government's own surveillance program had clearly established the fantastical nature of this depiction of life in Germany. Still, there were worker quotas to be met, and the regime had never demonstrated qualms about deceiving the public in service of state aims, and so the practice continued.

The government's continued depiction of the prisoners as well-cared for served to calm public anxiety. The French people were encouraged to believe the regime was performing its duty of protecting the prisoners while they were in Germany. Presenting the prisoners as supporters of the government allowed the regime to claim increased legitimacy. This campaign of misinformation paved the way for the cool reception many of the prisoners received upon their return to France in 1945, as will be chronicled in the following chapter.

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<sup>37</sup> Jean-Pierre Bertin-Maghit, *Les Documenteurs des Années Noires*, (Clamecy: Nouveau Monde Éditions, 2004), 157, 254-55.

## Chapter 9: Liberation and Return

The final months of captivity were among the harshest of the war from the prisoners' perspective. They remembered the shock of their arrival in Germany and the chaos of the last months as two brutal bookends to their long ordeal. As the Reich crumbled around them the prisoners' rations were cut and their mail service and other links to their homeland were disrupted. In the face of Allied and Soviet advances the prisoners were driven out of their barracks and onto roads already choked with civilian refugees. Throughout the spring of 1945 enormous ranks of slave laborers and prisoners of war were marched towards central Germany. More than ever the POWs were exposed to air attacks and the unregulated violence of panicked guards and vengeful civilians. The prisoners welcomed the first sighting of Allied soldiers with tremendous emotion, not only because their arrival meant an end to their long captivity, but also because it meant an end to the immediate apocalyptic situation of the closing months of Hitler's thousand year Reich. For many the liberation arrived too late. Of the roughly 24,000 French prisoners of war who died in German captivity, half were lost during the *Endkampf*.<sup>1</sup>

Despite their hopes, liberation did not mean an immediate end to their ordeal for most of the prisoners. The men often had to wait several weeks before they were transported back to France- a frustrating period dubbed the "semi-captivity" by historian François de Lannoy.<sup>2</sup> During this period the men were no longer prisoners, yet nor could they consider their captivity at an end. Prisoners reacted to this waiting period in a number of ways. Some volunteered to act as security personnel and help restore order to

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Gascar, *Histoire de la captivité des Français en Allemagne (1939-1945)*, (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1967), 276.

<sup>2</sup> François de Lannoy, *La Libération des Camps: Un million de prisonniers de guerre français, Mai 1945*, (Bayeux: Editions Heimdal, 1995), 114.

Germany. Others just kept a low profile and waited for transportation to be arranged. Still others took matters into their own hands and started walking west. For those who waited to be transported the duration of their wait varied based upon location, luck and opportunity. Some prisoners were home in their living rooms the same week of their liberation. Less fortunate comrades had to wait a month or longer before they set foot back in France. Between the violence, chaos and frustrating delays, the prisoners' final months in Germany were among the most memorable of the war. The excitement of these months was a final unwelcome trial for the vast majority of the POWs, men who wanted nothing more than to safely return to a more quiet life.

Many of the prisoners found their actual homecoming to be a confusing and disappointing experience. After an absence of five years the men expected to be welcomed as their fathers had been in 1918. Instead they found themselves warmly received, but treated more as refugees than as honored veterans. This surprising reception was caused by a number of factors, among them the dire economic conditions in France in 1945, the perception among much of the population that the prisoners did not deserve recognition for their wartime service, and finally and perhaps most importantly, because singling out the returning prisoners for recognition might have threatened the fragile sense of unity which had been constructed since the liberation based on the discourse of "shared sacrifice."

### **The Final Months of Captivity**

The factors which had been wearing down the prisoners' living conditions since 1942 were greatly exacerbated from the autumn of 1944 forward by the collapsing German situation. The German army suffered its most complete defeat of the war in

June-August of 1944 when the Red Army destroyed Army Group Center and drove to near the 1940 frontier in central Poland. Just as this operation was concluding the Western Allies broke out of their Norman beachhead and liberated most of France and the Low Countries. These two defeats decimated what remained of the German army and denied the Reich the resources it had been plundering from previously occupied territories. Just as had been the case during the last year of the Great War, Germany, now forced to rely on a diminished pool of human and economic resources, cut further into the already insufficient resources allotted to the care of prisoners of war and deportees.<sup>3</sup> Just as had been the case in 1918 the increasing German neglect of 1945 transformed the marginal conditions of life endured by most captives into truly desperate situations.

Greatly adding to the prisoners' and deportees' troubles were a series of barely organized relocations forced upon them during the last year of the war. As the Soviet and Allied armies advanced to the German borders the Reich relocated its captives towards the center of the country to prevent their liberation. As historian Pierre Gascar put it, the Germans wanted to hold on to their "human livestock" for as long as possible, thinking they could be put back to work in factories or constructing fortifications. Even if they could not be used as workers any longer the captives remained valuable as hostages.<sup>4</sup> These relocations came in two large waves. The first evacuations from the east started in the summer of 1944 as the Red Army broke into East Prussia, the Baltic States and central Poland. Sizable German populations had lived in these regions before the war, and more had migrated into them as part of the Reich's ethnic cleansing and resettlement programs. Prisoners and labor deportees who had been brought to these settlements to

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<sup>3</sup> See chapter two.

<sup>4</sup> Gascar, 288.

provide cheap labor now had to be relocated. The pace of evacuation greatly sped up in January-February 1945, at times just a few days ahead of the Red Army. The POWs marched alongside long columns of German civilian refugees, a sight that reminded many French soldiers of scenes they had seen in their own homeland in 1940. These marches were trying on the prisoners, many of whom were less than fully healthy after years of poor nutrition, poor housing and almost no health care. Forced onto the roads, often in freezing temperatures, driven at times hundreds of kilometers without evening shelters or regular meals, the weakened men were hard-pressed to simply stay alive.<sup>5</sup> More direct threats added to these hardships. Marching prisoners were exposed to air attacks. At least in some instances, French or Red Cross flags were parachuted to columns of prisoners and workers when Allied aircraft identified them as such. The men could hold up these flags when they were threatened with air attack.<sup>6</sup> That these flags were either not commonly distributed, or not effective, was evidenced by how many prisoners reported after the war that their columns had been harassed.<sup>7</sup> The prisoners were also subjected to assault by guards and civilians during these marches.

Upon their arrival in their new holding areas inside Germany the prisoners often found the housing to be even more crowded and dilapidated than their previous barracks. As more and more prisoners of war, deportees and German refugees concentrated into central Germany, all relying on the region's already overstretched resources, housing and supply problems only grew. An ICRC report from October 1944 described the living

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<sup>5</sup> For more on these evacuations see François de Lannoy, *La Libération des Camps: Un million de prisonniers de guerre français, Mai 1945*, (Bayeux: Editions Heimdal, 1995), 84-91.

<sup>6</sup> Durand, 474.

<sup>7</sup> de Lannoy, 91. After studying POW témoignages from this period de Lannoy stresses how fear of air attack was among the most common topics. He writes that the prisoners saw Allied air attack as "a constant source of danger" as long as they were on the road. Gasca records that 180 French men were killed in East Prussia during just two air raids during these January evacuations (290).

conditions some of the earliest of the evacuated prisoners faced once they arrived at their new living quarters near Münster. The men were housed in unlighted and unheated basements without beds or water. Many were infested with lice and already ill. The report concluded, "It is difficult to imagine living conditions worse than those imposed on these prisoners."<sup>8</sup> Prisoners would often have to repeat this forced march during the spring of 1945 when Allied and Soviet troops resumed their advance.

The example of the men assigned to Stalag 369 serves as an example of how French POWs living in the eastern frontiers of the Reich experienced these marches. Stalag 369 was located just outside of Krakow in south-central Poland. The POWs were evacuated on 6 August 1944 and temporarily relocated to Stalag VIII-C outside of Sagan. The Germans again drove the men on to the road on 8 February 1945 after another Soviet advance, eventually marching 1,118 POWs all the way to Stalag XVIII-C in Markt-Pongau in western Austria. This would have been a march of approximately 850 kilometers provided no detours were taken and only main roads were used, both highly unlikely occurrences. The men were probably marched over a thousand kilometers in stages. The final group marched at least 526 kilometers over a 28 day period, or about 12 miles per day. The prisoners were poorly fed during this march and often had to sleep out of doors despite the freezing temperature. On 7 March 1945, 967 of the men arrived at their new home, 151 fewer than had set out. Another group of roughly 2,000 POWs left the same Krakow region two weeks before the above group and were marched to Kassel (approximately 620 kilometers along the most efficient route) over a period of 46 days.

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<sup>8</sup> Copy of report in Yves Durand, *La Captivité: Histoire des prisonniers de guerre français 1939-1945*. 2<sup>e</sup> ed. (Paris: Fédération Nationale des Combattants Prisonniers de Guerre et Combattants d'Algérie, Tunisie, Maroc, 1981), 472.

The column was attacked by American aircraft near Weimar and 117 of the prisoners were killed, 34 of whom were French.<sup>9</sup>

A second large wave of evacuations moved prisoners held in western Germany eastward. As this wave occurred a bit later than the eastern evacuations, during March and April of 1945, prisoners on these marches suffered less from the cold. They also were generally marched shorter distances over roads less packed with fleeing refugees. By the end of March about a quarter of all former prison camp sites were in Allied or Soviet hands; however the vast majority of prisoners and deportees remained under German control. By this point most prisoners were no longer working, they were simply left confined in neglected camps or were being marched from one destination to another.<sup>10</sup> At this time, as in so many others during the captivity, POWs assigned to rural areas were in much better situations than their compatriots in urban areas. Rural prisoners were less likely to be forcibly relocated, subjected to air attacks or caught in a combat zone than were prisoners working in industrial or transit centers.<sup>11</sup>

Lloyd Martin Jones, an American prisoner of war captured on 19 December 1944 during the German Ardennes offensive, experienced the last months of the war in much the same way as did the French prisoners held in western Germany. He remembered April and May 1945 as a chaotic and deadly time when his life, along with those of his fellow captives, felt very cheap. Jones spent the last thirty-five days of his captivity on the road, marching from one temporary destination to another. His weight dropped from about 155 to 125 pounds. Jones and the other prisoners were fed sporadically, so when

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<sup>9</sup> Based on témoignages reproduced in de Lannoy, 84-5.

<sup>10</sup> de Lannoy, 89-91.

<sup>11</sup> On the contrast between the relatively peaceful and stable life in rural areas compared to urban areas or areas being overrun by Soviet forces see for example Gascar, 282-87.

possible they stole potatoes and bread. The guards knew the prisoners were stealing food, but there were too few of them to control the large number of desperate men under their watch. Some of the men in Jones' column were killed during an Allied air raid on 15 April while they were waiting to cross the Danube River. As badly as he was treated Jones remained aware that the Germans treated the western prisoners better than the other captives. It was only during the last ten days of his captivity that he believed most Germans came to accept that all hope was lost for Germany. Jones believed that his guards had been ordered to kill all the prisoners before allowing them to be liberated, and was also aware of the large number of prisoners dying on these marches, and so he was enormously relieved when his column was liberated by American soldiers on 2 May in the town of Gars-am-Inn, fifty miles east of Munich. The liberating soldiers immediately fed the starving prisoners as much food as they could eat. Jones, who had not suffered from digestive problems throughout his captivity, finally fell ill at this point from over-eating this sudden abundance of rich food. Seven days later he was airlifted to a POW recovery camp in La Harve where he was disinfected and fed six small meals a day until he was well enough to sail back to New York a few weeks later.<sup>12</sup>

### **Liberation**

Prisoners were liberated during April and May of 1945 in three main ways. Many simply waited in the camps into which they had been concentrated during the spring for the arrival of Allied or Soviet troops. In most cases the German guards simply disappeared as enemy troops neared these camps, leaving the men to govern themselves. In a few cases the prisoners overwhelmed the guards and held them captive until their

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<sup>12</sup> Lloyd Martin Jones, interview by author, Lawrence, KS, 2007.

liberators arrived. In his radio address of 5 September 1944 General Eisenhower had instructed the prisoners not to allow themselves to be provoked into ill-advised action by their German captors and to do no more than escape into the countryside and wait for the arrival of Allied troops.<sup>13</sup> While a fair number of Slavic prisoners and deportees did escape and attempt to wait out the war as fugitives most French prisoners remained with their kommandos until Allied or Soviet troops arrived. A second common way prisoners were liberated was while they were trudging down a road or living rough alongside a route during their final forced march. A third way was through the prisoners' own initiative. Many POWs and foreign deportees took advantage of the chaos of the final weeks of the war to slip away from their guards and to try to make their own way back home. Relatively few French prisoners and labor deportees took this third option until they knew their liberation was imminent. The harsher conditions endured by Slavic captives drove more men and women from this group to choose a life as a fugitive earlier in the war. Groups of foreigners started forming across Germany as early as mid-1944. At first these "foreign gangs," as the Germans referred to them, tended to establish themselves in a defensive location, such as an isolated farmhouse or in an abandoned building, and wait for the arrival of Allied or Soviet troops. These gangs fed and equipped themselves through theft and violent seizures. That these groups began forming as early as 1944 gives evidence that many of the prisoners expected the war to end that year and that German security forces had started to lose control over some areas well before the arrival of Allied soldiers. The Germans relied increasingly on paramilitary groups, often made up of Hitler Youth, to control these gangs. The battles fought between

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<sup>13</sup> Ulrich Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers: Enforced Foreign Labor in Germany Under the Third Reich*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 357.

these groups and ad-hoc German security groups made up a veritable war within the war during the last year of the conflict. While the foreign gangs did not have ties to outside resistance movements or military commands, at times they were as well-armed and organized as the German forces facing them. These gangs were particularly active in Cologne, Essen and the Ruhr valley.<sup>14</sup> As the German military position collapsed in the spring of 1945 these gangs became more common. Unlike the earlier gangs, the later ones tended to be migratory, slowly making their way either East or West, hoping to free themselves rather than wait for their liberators. French prisoners and deportees only made up a small percentage of these groups' membership, most being Slavs. The biggest impact the "foreign gangs" had on the French captivity experience was that it further contributed to the chaos and violence of their last year in Germany.

Gustov Folcher's description of his last weeks of captivity brings out the chaos of the situation. Folcher was fortunate to be assigned to a rural area and never actually had to leave the village in which he had been assigned as a farm laborer in 1940. On 12 April he went out to sort potatoes and could hear machinegun fire in the distance. The roads were full of German soldiers retreating in disarray. The German civilians were in shock, but most were staying at home instead of taking to the roads. By this point all but the most delusional had realized there was nowhere left to retreat and understood it was probably best to stay as far away from the roadways and columns of troops as possible. That evening order broke down in Folcher's town. Organized gangs of looters, mostly made up of Germans but also including some foreign ex-captives, broke into storage areas and carted away food, arms and equipment. Folcher and the other French prisoners claimed new coats, pants, tunics and boots out of an abandoned German army depot. The

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<sup>14</sup> Herbert, 351-54, 364-70.

town was draped in white flags and the fleeing German soldiers made no effort to prevent the looting. The following day American and French soldiers arrived and Folcher's liberation became official. A French officer armed the French and Belgian POWs and ordered them to place the town under martial law until regular troops arrived. For five days Folcher and sixty other POWs were responsible for maintaining order over approximately 30,000 German civilians. They ordered the German civilians to turn in their arms and began taking SS soldiers prisoner. After a few days the ex-POWs had over thirty SS soldiers confined in a barn. Folcher recorded that some of the Polish and Ukrainian deportees had begun to "settle scores" with German civilians. The Germans complained about this situation to the French prisoners, "convinced that it is we who ought to protect them." The irony of his former captors now coming to him expecting protection was not lost on Folcher. Did they expect him and his companions to just forget about the last five years? At first Folcher and his companions turned a blind eye towards the situation, focusing instead on the many German soldiers still wandering the area. He wrote, "the Boche are only getting what they deserve." After a few days the French prisoners put an end to this period of violence and drunkenness by disarming the Polish and Ukrainian deportees. Five days after the arrival of the first Allied troops Folcher and his companions were relieved by regular French soldiers and allowed to begin making arrangements for their voyage back to France.<sup>15</sup>

The dynamic Folcher described of German civilians looking towards western European prisoners of war for protection in the last days of the war is repeated in several other accounts. As early as 1943 the SD was aware of a growing sense of anxiety among

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<sup>15</sup> Gustave Folcher, *Marching to Captivity, The War Diaries of a French Peasant, 1939-1945*, (London: Brassey's, 1996), 224-244.

the population, especially among women, about how civilians would be treated should Germany be occupied. German authorities noted that this anxiety contributed to the breakdown of the social barriers they had attempted to construct between German civilians and foreign detainees. This growing German anxiety in regards to their foreign captives contributed to two very different dynamics. On the one hand, the level of violence directed at foreigners by German civilians increased during these months, presumably an attempt to maintain discipline through fear. Historian Ulrich Herbert described the season of primitive violence between German civilians and their former captives as “the last act of this drama, the awful outcome of German foreign labor policy under National Socialism.”<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, many other Germans adopted a different tactic and attempted to improve their relationships with foreigners as insurance against retribution and/or prosecution.<sup>17</sup> Pierre Gascar wrote that many prisoners noticed the more friendly and helpful attitude German civilians had towards French POWs as the end approached. French prisoners were suddenly fed better, offered hiding places from particularly brutal German guards, excused from work, etc. He leaves the question open as to whether these acts were motivated by charity, by calculation, or if they were true expressions of anti-Nazi feelings which had previously been repressed.<sup>18</sup> In particular German civilians feared retribution by Slavic prisoners. As these men and women had been treated inhumanely for years their concern was understandable. German racial prejudice further contributed to this particular anxiety. Germans had long been predisposed to think of Slavs as semi-barbaric people, a prejudice that became an open part of German national identity during the Nazi era. Within this mindset uncivilized

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<sup>16</sup> Herbert 358.

<sup>17</sup> Herbert, 355.

<sup>18</sup> Gascar, 293.

violent behavior by sub-human Slavs and other lesser races was only to be expected. As in many ways, Nazi racial prejudice became a self-fulfilling prophecy by promoting barbaric responses from people who had been treated barbarically for six years. It was lost on many Germans that perhaps their own inhuman treatment of their captives might have been responsible for the violent retribution these same people took upon them when they were finally free to act. For many Germans 1945 only confirmed in their minds that the Nazi Reich had been the great defender of civilization, not its destroyer. Fearful German civilians turned to their western captives, men they saw as more civilized, for protection. The Germans must also have been aware that the western prisoners would have less cause for vengeance than the Slavs as they had been treated more humanely. Folcher's reaction to retributive violence seems to have been typical of most French prisoners of war; they found this period of violence upsetting and cruel, but they also saw it as understandable and perhaps justified.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> For other examples of French views of retributive violence see Cochet, 53; de Lannoy, 108-11; (Louis Pelletier in) *Les KG parlent*, 88-9; and Henri Laloux, *Avril 1945, Libéré par l'armée rouge*, (Paris: Editions Heimdal), 41-5.

## Le Grand Retour



*“Marshal, here we are!” (France au la Combat, June 7<sup>th</sup>, 1945, p 6.)*

The troubles faced by the French prisoners did not end with their first sight of Allied or Soviet troops. Like Folcher, many French prisoners were put back to use by their liberators, acting as laborers, security guards, guides, interpreters, etc. One group of French prisoners of war took advantage of the German retreat in the east and escaped in December 1944. They served out the remainder of the war as a volunteer unit in the Red Army.<sup>20</sup> Most liberated prisoners were happy to do their part in these ways, but only for a short while. Once the situation around their site of liberation appeared to be under control the freed men and women simply wanted to get back home to their loved ones as soon as possible. One of the ex-captives’ great frustrations during this time period was the

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<sup>20</sup> de Lannoy, 95.

mismanagement of their repatriation by the French armed services and the newly created *Ministère des prisonniers, déportés et réfugiés* (M.P.D.R.). The M.P.D.R. had developed an unworkably complex repatriation plan which confused and delayed the return of hundreds of thousands of French men and women. The two core flaws of the M.P.D.R. plan were its unrealistic attempt to force a huge body of frightened and desperate men and women to act in a rational and organized manner, and its inflexibility in responding to unexpected developments. To better understand why a plan so flawed in these fundamental ways was adopted it is necessary to first understand the personality of the man charged with heading the M.P.D.R. and organizing the repatriation effort, former resistance leader Henri Frenay.

### **Henri Frenay: A Personal Profile**

From the prisoners' perspective the key official in the French provisional government was Henri Frenay, the head of the M.P.D.R from November 1943 through November 1945. Frenay was a man of great qualities, but also of significant shortcomings. His post at the M.P.D.R. did not allow him to use his better qualities to their best effect and exacerbated his faults.

Frenay was a resister of the first hour and one of the heroes of the internal resistance. He was from a traditionally conservative Lyonnais family and, like his father, a career military officer. He described himself as belonging “unconsciously to the traditional French right, with its poverty, patriotism and paternalism.”<sup>21</sup> Perhaps in keeping with military expectations, the Frenay family practiced a type of conservatism defined by patriotism and tradition rather than active involvement in politics. Henri and

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<sup>21</sup> Henri Frenay, *The Night Will End*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1976), 28.

his parents remained largely aloof from politics, even during the heated interwar years.<sup>22</sup> Henri enlisted as a nineteen year old in 1924, attended Saint-Cyr and rose through the ranks quickly. When war broke out Captain Frenay was a staff officer in the Vosges region. After avoiding capture in June 1940, Frenay made his way on foot to the free zone. Once in Vichy territory Frenay reported for duty and accepted a posting with the Armistice Army. On his own initiative he immediately began secretly organizing an anti-German movement in Lyon. The movement he founded, eventually to be called Combat, became one of the largest and best organized of the resistance groups. Frenay demonstrated great personal courage and self-sacrifice in building and holding this organization together, in the process of which he sacrificed his military career, estranged himself from his family and saw many of his friends captured and killed.

Even though Frenay was among the first resisters, he stubbornly clung to a pro-Pétain mindset much longer than did most of his fellow resisters. Patriotism, not a hatred of fascism, drove Frenay into resistance activity. Frenay believed the different resistance movements needed a remote authority figure, unaligned to any specific political movement, to rally and unify behind. He quickly identified Charles De Gaulle as the best man to fill this role. Even though Frenay promoted unity behind De Gaulle as early as 1941, it took him a surprisingly long time to set aside his entrenched political sensibilities and to fully break off his attachments to Marshal Pétain and the larger Pétainist mindset defined by traditionally conservative social values, nationalism and a distrust of leftist politics and social change. Frenay dedicated his first resistance manifesto to Pétain and wrote in his memoir that he saw himself as a Pétainist until at least the later part of 1941. Like many Pétainists Frenay remained in denial for years that the Marshal's government

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Belot, *Henri Frenay de la Résistance à l'Europe*. (Paris : Éditions du Seuil, 2003), 25-7.

actually did support collaboration with Germany. It was not until September 1942 that he finally came to accept that Pétain was not secretly supportive of the resistance and playing a “double game” with the Germans.<sup>23</sup> One must keep in mind that by this time Frenay had already been living as a fugitive from Vichy authorities for many months and had already seen many of his companions taken away and tortured by Vichy security personnel. Frenay’s long work in the underground resistance caused him to accept that even some communists were patriots. While his reflexive distrust of communists never died, after seeing the sacrifices made by many communist resistance members, he did slowly come to respect and trust many *individual* leftists. By 1942 Frenay supported allowing individuals from across the political spectrum to serve in positions of authority provided they had proven their loyalty to France. That Frenay moved away from Pétanism and toward the center/left political coalition being constructed in the Gaullist camp perhaps says less about his evolving political disposition as it does about his willingness to subordinate politics to patriotism when the two became incompatible. For approximately a year Frenay found a way inside himself to both work for De Gaulle and remain a supporter of Pétain. His emerging toleration of differing political viewpoints was driven by his recognition that love of *patrie* was not the sole province of the right.

As the Gestapo closed in on Frenay he was air-lifted out of occupied France in June 1943 and transported to Britain. Frenay initially expected to quickly return to France, but instead he accepted De Gaulle’s request that he remain in London and assume a post on the Free French organized *Comité Français de la Libération Nationale* (CFLN) as a representative of the internal resistance.

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<sup>23</sup> Frenay, 97-8 & 200.

Frenay's work with Combat had shown he excelled at organization but struggled while working with partners whose opinions differed from his own. Throughout 1941-1943 Frenay frequently clashed with other leading resistance figures such as Emmanuel d'Astier and Jean Moulin. Frenay became convinced that his disagreements with d'Astier and Moulin were not based on honest differences of opinion over the best way to conduct the resistance struggle but rather that these other leaders were "crypto-Communists" playing a role in a secret plot to take over the resistance, this despite the fact that neither d'Aster or Moulin were communists.<sup>24</sup> Throughout his life Frenay seemed to see individuals with whom he worked as either "with him," and working in the best interest of France, or "up to something," and working against the common good. While Frenay came to accept persons from all political backgrounds as potential partners in the resistance struggle, he never fully put aside his distrust of leftists, in particular of communists. An example of his lingering weariness of leftists was his immediate hostile reaction towards the *Front National* upon learning of the existence of this Communist resistance movement. Throughout his memoir Frenay referred to communists working within other resistance organizations not as volunteers, but as "infiltrators."<sup>25</sup> Frenay was quick to attribute disagreements with colleagues as driven by hidden political agendas rather than simply by differences of opinion. His distrust of anyone who challenged his opinions bordered on paranoia.

Given Frenay's background in the army, his habit of issuing orders rather than working for group consensus, and his penchant for direct action, one might be tempted to describe him as having a military mindset, but this would not be exactly accurate. Those

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<sup>24</sup> Frenay, 443-46.

<sup>25</sup> Frenay, 104-5; and 222-23.

with a military mindset are used to working within a hierarchical organization in which orders are passed down and enacted without discussion. Frenay's mindset was more that of a *patron*. When he passed down orders he expected them to be obeyed, but he was not in the habit of following orders himself. Throughout his military career his superior officers consistently noted an independence and rebelliousness in Frenay's evaluations. His 1931 evaluation, which was on the whole very positive, described Frenay as "full of self righteousness and very arrogant," and having a "very well developed spirit of criticism towards his superiors." Three years later General Lafforgue described Frenay as "a bit tricky to handle."<sup>26</sup> Frenay's excellent qualities, his enthusiasm, his hard work, and his commanding charisma, drove his career forward throughout the interwar years. All the while his superiors seemed to expect that with time he would grow out of his willfulness.

Frenay's behavior in 1940-41 reveals that in his mid-thirties he was no more compliant than he had been earlier in his career. In 1940, when ordered by General Lescanne to surrender along with the rest of his unit, Frenay disobeyed and escaped on his own initiative. A few months later, when ordered by his superiors within the Armistice Army to cease his resistance activities, Frenay again disregarded his instructions and continued to secretly lead Combat. When he was finally directly confronted about his resistance work and forced to choose between following orders from his military superiors and continuing his activities, he chose Combat over the army and resigned his commission. Frenay continued this pattern of stubbornly independent behavior into his work with the resistance and the Free French. In 1943 rather than work through Jean Moulin to obtain money for Combat from a collective fund, Frenay

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<sup>26</sup> Belot, 34-5.

bypassed De Gaulle's official representative and engaged in unilateral negotiations with the Americans for direct outside funding. That same year Frenay attempted to undermine an order to cede his direct control over Combat's paramilitary groups to General Delestraint after De Gaulle appointed Delestraint overall commander of all the internal resistance military units.<sup>27</sup> When Frenay was called to account for his continued interference in military matters he initially refused to back down. He violently argued with Jean Moulin and cursed General Delestraint in what Moulin described as "inadmissible language" before finally giving way.<sup>28</sup>

Nowhere was Frenay's stubborn independence in the face of superior authority more clearly displayed than in his direct dealings with Charles De Gaulle. Frenay was one of the first internal resistance leaders to recognize De Gaulle as France's national leader, however this recognition did not stop him from butting heads with De Gaulle and his representatives. The two men quarreled over their differing political visions for the future of France during their early meetings. De Gaulle planned to return a republican form of government to France, while Frenay argued for a government which would refashion French political institutions based upon the political aspirations of the

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<sup>27</sup> De Gaulle and the Free French attempted to compartmentalize the internal resistance movements into separate political, propaganda/recruitment and military groupings in order to improve security. All the resistance paramilitary groups were to be combined into a "Secret Army" under the command of a single general unattached to any of the existing resistance movements. This plan may also have been put into action to prevent any single leader (or movement) from dominating all internal resistance activity. The fear was that by imposing his or her viewpoints on the entire resistance a single dominate figure might fracture the unity which had been built up across the internal resistance movements in 1942 and 1943. If this fear of disunity was the reasoning for the order, than the frequent clashes between Frenay and Emmanuel d'Astier (the leader of *Libération Sud*) might have been its inspiration. Neither of these men would submit to the other. It has also been suggested that this effort to compartmentalize the internal resistance might have been motivated by the Free French's fear that a rival figure might arise out of the internal movement and challenge De Gaulle's position as national leader. Regardless as to its advisability, the compartmentalization of the resistance was bitterly contested by several resistance leaders besides Frenay and appears to have eventually been shown to have been unrealistic and counterproductive.

<sup>28</sup> John F. Sweets, *The Politics of Resistance in France, 1940-1944*. (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1976), 94-5.

resistance movements. Frenay wrote that when the two men reached an impasse in one of their political conversations De Gaulle said that in the end he would have his way, even if it came down to his simply issuing an order for the reestablishment of a republic. Frenay continued to push. He replied to De Gaulle, “We are resisters, free to think and do as we choose. Our freedom of choice is an inalienable right. It is up to us to decide whether, in the political domain, we shall carry out your orders or not.” Using Frenay’s *nom de guerre*, De Gaulle responded, “Well then, ‘Charvet,’ it seems France must choose between you and me.”<sup>29</sup>

Frenay moved from the world of *combattant* resistance towards that of politics reluctantly and, perhaps surprisingly, under the insistence of De Gaulle. After the Allied occupation of North Africa and the transfer of the Free French government to Algiers, French officials began planning in earnest for the work they would face upon their return to Metropolitan France. A Consultative Assembly composed of 84 representatives was created in November 1943. This Assembly advised De Gaulle and began to transform the Free French movement into a more democratic movement which the United States and other Allied nations could more readily recognize as the legitimate representative of the French nation. De Gaulle tapped Frenay to become the first *commissaire* of the M.P.D.R.,<sup>30</sup> the organization responsible for all matters related to French prisoners, deportees and refugees. The M.P.D.R. would replace the S.D.P.G. as soon as the provisional French government was established in France. For the last nine months of the war the M.P.D.R. was responsible for sending supplies to French nationals inside Germany, negotiating with the German government on their behalf, and for making

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<sup>29</sup> Frenay, 217-18.

<sup>30</sup> The P.D.R. was raised to ministry status in 1944. From this point forward it was known as the M.P.D.R. For clarity’s sake I will refer to the organization as the M.P.D.R. throughout this work.

preparations for the exiles' return and reintegration into French society. In his memoir Frenay wrote that he was reluctant to accept the posting. He preferred to return to France and continue his clandestine resistance work. When De Gaulle insisted that he could do much more for French national interests heading the M.P.D.R. than he could hope to accomplish as a well-known fugitive back in France, Frenay accepted the post.<sup>31</sup>

In the end Frenay was a man gifted with great leadership skills, courage and dedication, but he was not mentally flexible, and he was not willing to gracefully accept orders or collective decisions with which he disagreed. When overruled Frenay would eventually give way in service of unity and the greater goal, but he stepped down with great reluctance. Frenay seemed to see these disagreements as tests of will rather than open exchanges, and when he did not have his way he accepted the decisions as only temporary setbacks rather than as final resolutions. Due to his slow break with Pétainism and his open dislike of republicanism it is understandable why many Free French and resistance leaders distrusted Frenay during the war years. Throughout his tenure as head of the M.P.D.R. Frenay was both one of the most respected national leaders and very much an outsider. Historian François Cochet goes so far as to speculate that De Gaulle pushed Frenay into heading the M.P.D.R. because he saw him as a rival, and believed that heading the M.P.D.R. was a job in which Frenay was almost certain to perform badly and thus damage his political future.<sup>32</sup> Regardless as to why he was chosen to head the M.P.D.R., Frenay proved to be a poor choice for the position.

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<sup>31</sup> Frenay, 305-7.

<sup>32</sup> François Cochet. *Les exclus de la victoire, Histoire des prisonniers de guerre, déportés et S.T.O. (1945-1985)*. (Paris: S.P.M., 1992), 131.

### **Frenay as head of the M.P.D.R.**

Nearly thirty years after agreeing to head the M.P.D.R. Frenay reaffirmed that it was a role for which he, “felt no inclination. We were still at war. It was inconceivable that a soldier like me should not serve at the front.”<sup>33</sup> Frenay was not only a reluctant administrator; his temperament made him a particularly poor choice for the specific M.P.D.R. post. In modern parlance, Frenay could probably be described with some accuracy as a “control freak.” One of his greatest strengths was his ability to organize men and women behind a common effort, but he had an almost obsessive need for structure and organization. When he faced a task which did not lend itself to structure and order, such as heading the M.P.D.R. during the repatriation phase, his greatest strength became also his greatest weakness. While setting up the different branches of Combat in 1942 Frenay admitted “I’ve been accused of taking a freakish delight in organizational charts, and I suppose there’s some truth in that charge.”<sup>34</sup> His attempts to impose order and structure to the task facing the M.P.D.R. in 1944-45 were doomed to fail, and his reluctance to modify plans as conditions demanded limited his effectiveness in the post.

Frenay headed a commission, later a full ministry, which faced an enormous task of uncertain dimensions and for which it was provided with extremely limited resources. To organize, repatriate, process and care for approximately two million French prisoners and deportees in Germany the M.P.D.R. had to quickly assemble a staff limited to 8,450 civilians complimented by the temporary assignment of a variable number of men and women from the French armed services between 1,300 and 11,000.<sup>35</sup> It was a job best suited to an adaptable and creative leader, characteristics which Frenay lacked. The

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<sup>33</sup> Frenay, 306.

<sup>34</sup> Frenay, 188.

<sup>35</sup> Ministère des prisonniers, déportés et réfugiés. *Bilan d’un effort*. (Paris: Éditions du Rond-Point, 1945), 39 and Cochet, 80.

M.P.D.R. had to be capable of responding to rapidly changing and unexpected situations. No one even knew with any certainty how many prisoners, deportees and refugees there were outside France. When Frenay accepted the job he could only estimate the number of French nationals held in Germany within a margin of error of a *few hundred thousand*. None knew when these exiles would be capable of returning to France, or if they would return in stages or in one massive wave. No one knew how the war would develop and thus, no one knew if the repatriation would occur in a structured, organized manner, or amidst chaos. Given the information available there was no way a detailed plan for the prisoners' return could be developed.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, under Frenay, the M.P.D.R. developed a complex plan to process the returning French men and women, a plan which almost immediately proved unworkable when confronted with the first wave of returnees.

### **A Poorly Conceived Repatriation Plan**

The M.P.D.R. plan which Frenay put into action was based on a Vichy plan developed in 1941<sup>37</sup> and refined in London during the spring of 1944. During the London meetings repatriation officials openly acknowledged that there were too many variables and unknowns to develop a firm plan,<sup>38</sup> yet paradoxically went ahead and delivered a complex and inflexible plan.

One of the key problems with the plan was its mistaken assumption that the prisoners and deportees would be liberated from large camps. The Americans requested that the French prisoners be kept confined in these camps, even after they were liberated,

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<sup>36</sup> Frenay, 339-40. See also Cochet, 90. For estimations on labor deportees see AN F<sup>9</sup> 3168. Ministère des prisonniers, déportés et réfugiés. Cabinet. Service psychologique – Information. “Entr’aide et assistance pour les travailleurs déportés et leurs familles,” 13 Nov 1944.

<sup>37</sup> Cochet, 90.

<sup>38</sup> Cochet, 73.

in order to keep roadways clear for military operations. The French officials apparently found this non-problematic.<sup>39</sup> Neither the French nor the American officials seemed to have understood that most prisoners and deportees were spread out across the country in *kommandos* or would be held in open areas at the time of their liberation. The plan envisioned that after the prison camps were liberated the prisoners would remain inside them for an undetermined amount of time while being deloused, categorized and processed. When rail transport was arranged by the M.D.P.R. the liberated men and women would be transported for further processing to one of 73 administrative assembly-line welcome centers which were to be set up along the French border.<sup>40</sup> The M.D.P.R. also unrealistically envisioned being able to repatriate prisoners in categories. Those prisoners which belonged to categories most essential to French national needs were to be liberated first, while less essential groups would be brought home as circumstances permitted. This was an unnecessary and unworkable part of the plan. The French feared the food supply would be a primary concern in post-liberation France and thus wanted agricultural workers returned first.<sup>41</sup> Apparently no serious thought was given to the practical impossibility of detaining hundreds of thousands of French men and women in German camps while attempting to categorize them for a systematic repatriation. All the prisoners and deportees were desperate to return home as soon as possible, and any attempt to prioritize certain groups based on occupational information volunteered by the liberated men and women themselves would be a monumental task doomed to flounder in the sea of misinformation provided by the huge numbers of prisoners who would undoubtedly represent themselves as belonging to the highest prioritized groups. Almost

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<sup>39</sup> Cochet, 57.

<sup>40</sup> Lewin, 61-2 & Cochet 57-60.

<sup>41</sup> Cochet, 73.

needless to say, this plan fell apart on first contact with reality. In the end there is no evidence that the prisoners or deportees were returned to France in any order other than that determined by luck and/or convenience.

Rather than being liberated from large camps where they could be housed most prisoners were liberated in small groups or while on the road. Even if these liberated men and women had been willing to remain in Germany while awaiting processing, in most cases there simply were no camps in which to hold them. Those prisoners who did have a home base of sorts had no inclination to remain there for one day longer than was absolutely necessary. After waiting for five years, many of the men and women did not wait for the M.P.D.R. to process and organize them and instead simply began making their way towards France by any means possible, often on foot. The M.P.D.R. planners had not taken into account the prisoners' overwhelming desire to get back home, and their understandable fear of remaining in a situation as violent and unstable as the one surrounding them in Germany in April and May of 1945.

When prisoners and deportees did arrive at frontier welcome stations, either on M.P.D.R. transport trains or on foot, they went through an assembly line processing which occurred per the ministry's postwar report "in an orderly fashion with a rigorously fixed rhythm."<sup>42</sup> They were questioned to ensure that criminals, German fugitives and/or collaborators had not infiltrated among them. They were given a medical exam to ensure they were not bringing epidemic disease back into France. At this time the POWs were demobilized. Each prisoner was allowed to exchange 100 marks for French currency. Any amount held over that amount could not be exchanged. Finally, each returnee was given a train ticket back to their home village or city and a packet of food to hold them

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<sup>42</sup> *Bilan d'un effort*, 92.

over until they arrived at their destination. Frenay envisioned each returning deportee or prisoner to only require approximately seventy minutes of care before they could either be handed a 3<sup>rd</sup> class train ticket back home or directed to one of the short term lodgings (*Maisons du Prisonnier*) set up across the nation.<sup>43</sup> On paper this process looked logical; each step served an important purpose. In practice it proved to be a slow and inefficient experience. The men and women had little patience for delays, processing and formalities, no matter how necessary they might have seemed to the planners in Paris. The POWs were surprised to be demobilized, and the amount of money each was given quickly seemed rather meager for five years of service. Finally, as described below, the medical exams revealed that contagious diseases were less prevalent than the M.P.D.R. had feared, but that a large percentage of returnees suffered from stubborn illnesses for which the ministry was unprepared. Historian François Cochet study of the organization of the M.P.D.R. concluded that the welcome centers fell, “midway between a joke and a tragedy.”<sup>44</sup>

Another flaw in the M.P.D.R. plan was that it had envisioned the liberated men and women arriving at the French border in a steady and organized manner in scheduled groups. The war ended more suddenly than expected, and when the prisoners’ and deportees’ migration towards France became a spontaneous undertaking, the welcome centers were overwhelmed. In April 1945 313,000 prisoners and deportees arrived at the French border. This number grew to 900,000 the following month. Rather than arrive in a predictable steady rate the weekly intake at the welcome centers went from about 15,000

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<sup>43</sup> Frenay, 340.

<sup>44</sup> Cochet, 105.

in early April to over 200,000 by mid-May.<sup>45</sup> For those prisoners who acted more like the plan envisioned and waited for M.P.D.R. transportation, the ministry's arrangements proved to be very poorly organized. On average French prisoners liberated by Allied forces had to wait 17 days before arriving at one of the welcome centers. Prisoners liberated by the Red Army and turned over to French officials for rail transport back home had to wait an average of 38 days to return home. The most unfortunate were those who were liberated by the Red Army and marched east for return via sea. These men and women had to wait an average of 116 days from their liberation before they once more set foot on French soil.<sup>46</sup> Given these delays, those who walked home, hitched rides with Allied forces or, in some rare cases, had friends or relatives drive to Germany to pick them up in automobiles,<sup>47</sup> reached France much more quickly than did those who acted as ordered by French officials.

The American armed forces helped thousands of French prisoners and deportees to overcome these transportation delays by allowing French nationals to board westbound trains and trucks when space was available and by organizing an airlift operation. An average of 8,000 French men and women were flown to Paris daily during this operation. These returnees, along with those arriving on rail transportation not arranged by the M.P.D.R., unexpectedly made the capital the primary arrival point for repatriates rather than any of the border welcome centers. Despite Frenay's later claims in his memoir that he had long argued for aerial repatriation *against stubborn American resistance*,<sup>48</sup> the M.P.D.R., had made no preparations for the possibility of an airlift and did not have a

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<sup>45</sup> Christophe Lewin, "Le retour des prisonniers de guerre français (1945)," *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, no. 147 (1987): 53-4; and *Bilan d'un effort*, 108-11.

<sup>46</sup> Cochet, 68-9.

<sup>47</sup> de Lannoy, 116.

<sup>48</sup> On Frenay's later claims regarding his support of an airlift see his memoir (340, 390-92)

welcome center constructed in Paris until seventeen days after the repatriates began arriving.<sup>49</sup> This resulted in groups of men and women arriving daily in Paris with no French officials or family members to greet them for weeks. There was perhaps no more powerful image of M.P.D.R. failures than seeing thousands of weak, hungry and confused returnees, still dressed in prison rags, simply getting off trains and wandering into the streets of Paris. Any protest by M.P.D.R. officials that these men and women would have been properly welcomed and cared for if they simply had stayed in Germany and followed the ministry's plan could not excuse this situation, especially given the poor functioning of the ministry's own transportation arrangements.

Despite expecting the returning prisoners to be in even worse health than they in fact were, the M.P.D.R. plan failed to make preparations for the large percentage of returning prisoners who would need more than a few good meals and a bit of rest to regain their mental and/or physical health. Approximately one in five liberated prisoners needed more extensive medical care than the repatriation stations were prepared to provide. Prisoners needing longer term care were simply sent back to their home departments, passing the problem on to the *Maisons du prisonnier*. In May 1945 the provisional government partially responded to the problem of prisoners suffering from long-term ailments by granting them nine months of state sponsored health care. As part of the same legislation each returnee was to be given two follow-up medical exams intended to detect deficiencies stemming from their captivity; however, credits for these exams were never allotted and the program was stillborn.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Lewin, 63 and de Lannoy, 115.

<sup>50</sup> Lewin, 68-70.

The prisoners also were surprised to find that the military benefits they received upon their demobilization much smaller than expected. The combination of their demobilization bonus and compensation for five years of military service resulted in an average award of ten to twelve-thousand francs.<sup>51</sup> Even in the best of circumstances this provided for only four or five months' living expenses. Since the prisoners were demobilized immediately upon their liberation, France had, in effect, dumped nearly a million additional unemployed men into an already struggling economy. The prisoners were expected to readjust to civilian life and find gainful employment to provide for themselves and their families before their small financial cushion was exhausted.<sup>52</sup>

The apparent incompetence of the M.P.D.R. became a topic of newspaper coverage in early May 1944. Journalist Janet Flanner wrote that the newspaper *Franc-Tireur* "had the disagreeable courage to say what thousands of prisoners' families know is the truth- that the Ministry of Prisoners and Deportees functions, as it has functioned from the start, with inefficiency and confusion. Many prisoners have arrived without being met by officials, or even by their unnotified families, at the railway stations; the Ministry has not provided trucks, or even ambulances, for transportation . . ."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Lewin, 82-3.

<sup>52</sup> Lewin, 79-80. Per a government ordinance of May 1945 former prisoners of war were entitled to return to their old job, or to an equivalent position within the same company, upon their return. However, this ordinance only covered a minority of prisoners, leaving out the self-employed and those who had been employed by companies which had folded during the war. Lewin downplays the problem of joblessness among the returned prisoners as a minor concern despite these men suffering higher rates of unemployment than the population at large.

<sup>53</sup> Flanner, 28.



The seated man asks the former POW, “Are you a nudist enthusiast?”

“Not exactly, but I can’t clothe myself with my repatriation bonus.” (*La France au Combat*, July 5, 1945, p. 5.)

Even some simple and easily foreseeable problems caught the M.P.D.R. by surprise. One example of this was the ministry’s failure to stockpile new clothing, which resulted in the returnees having to redress in their prison uniforms after being processed and examined in the welcome stations.

While still dressed in these reminders of their captivity, the prisoners had to

complete the final leg of what Frenay had somehow envisioned as a seamless transition back into civilian life. The government’s slow reaction to this oversight caused the problem to take on a public nature and become a symbol of the perceived unsympathetic nature of the M.P.D.R. As late as May 30<sup>th</sup>, by which time over 1.2 million returnees had been processed, the arrival of 70,000 donated suits from the American Red Cross for the returning deportees and prisoners was still a newsworthy item.<sup>54</sup> The ability of the public to grasp this issue earlier than Frenay’s ministry was illustrated in the newspaper coverage of the situation during the summer of 1945. An appeal for donations of used clothing, reproduced below, showed a striped prison uniform being held out by a gaunt arm, and read: “They have only this suit. Help us offer them the clothes of a free man.” This donation will help assure that their “return to France is also, without delay, their return to life.”

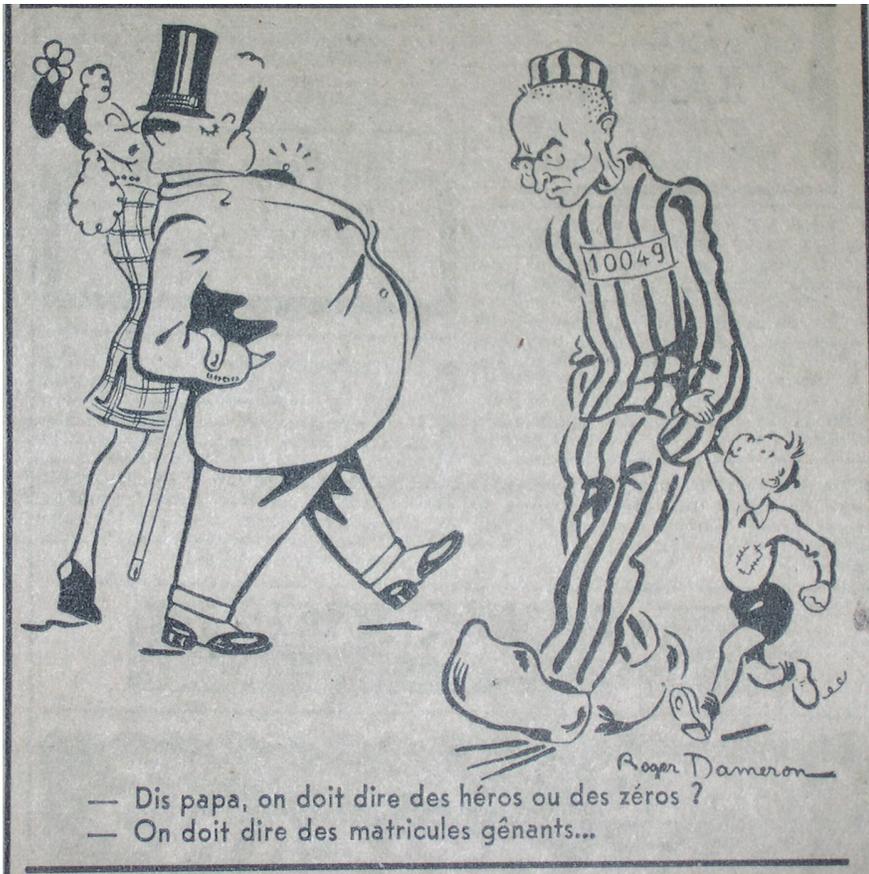
<sup>54</sup> “70.000 costumes américains pour nos déportés,” *Franc-Tireur*, May 30, 1945, 2.



Above, "Don't you have another design?" (*La France au Combat*, June 21, 1945, 6.)

Left, (*Franc Tireur*, 5/29/45, 2.)

The sight of returning deportees and prisoners of war wearing tattered prison uniforms was apparently not uncommon in Paris during the spring of 1945. *Combat* drew on this situation in June of 1945 by publishing a cartoon of a sickly man dressed in a numbered prison uniform walking with his son. As they pass a wealthy couple trying to ignore them the boy asks his father, "Father, how can I tell the difference between the zeros and the heroes?" as both words sound identical in spoken French. The father, replies, "I'd have to say by the serial numbers." The father's reply transformed his tattered appearance into a symbol of heroism, not a point of shame and inferiority, when in the company of his better off neighbors.



(*La France au Combat*, June, 28, 1945, p. 6.)

The M.P.D.R.'s failure to acquire replacement clothing for the returning prisoners and deportees was a universally understandable issue which engaged the public with the complex problems growing out of the government's poorly administered reintegration program on a basic level. Such an obvious oversight seemed to point to either incompetence or a lack of comprehension among the ministry's personnel about the sensitive nature of helping victims rebuild their dignity.

Criticism of the M.P.D.R's repatriation effort was not restricted to newspaper editorials; it also came from members of the provisional government and later from the *Mouvement national des prisonniers de guerre des déportés* (M.N.P.G.D.), a formally clandestine resistance organization made up of former POWs that after the liberation took on the role of representing former prisoners and deportees. Frenay responded to these

critiques, as was his habit, as if they were insincere personal attacks by his political enemies. In March 1945, before these criticisms found much traction in the French press, Frenay characterized early criticism of his ministry as insincere and unjustified in an address to the Provisional Consultative Assembly. Responding to questions about the administration and spending of the M.P.D.R. Frenay declared; "...it is not for demagoguery that we fought, but for democracy." He referred to accusations that his ministry's poor relationship with the M.N.P.G.D. was due to his lack of respect for the group as slander. He assured the Assembly that preparations had been taken to properly care for the returning prisoners and deportees (most likely to his later regret, he emphasized the good work his ministry had done in stockpiling clothing) and dismissed complaints against the ministry as trifles exploited by those with "motives easy to discern."<sup>55</sup>

On 18 May 1945, the first of what would eventually be many demonstrations against the administration of the M.P.D.R. occurred when four to five hundred liberated prisoners marched in Paris to protest what they saw as an inefficient and inflexible ministry<sup>56</sup> that was reacting too slowly to a growing threat of epidemic disease among prisoners still waiting in Germany for medicine and transportation back to France.<sup>57</sup> Four days later several more protests were conducted throughout the city. Despite Frenay's tacit acknowledgement of the real nature of the prisoners' complaints in his public appeal for charitable donations on May 26<sup>th</sup>,<sup>58</sup> his reaction to a 5,000 person march on 2 June failed to positively address the protestors' complaints. Frenay explained that the

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<sup>55</sup> "M. Frenay expose devant l'Assemblée consultative l'œuvre du ministère des prisonniers et déportés," *Le Monde*, March 24, 1945, 2.

<sup>56</sup> "Manifestations de prisonniers rapatriés," *Le Monde*, May, 19, 1945, 2.

<sup>57</sup> "Le grave problème du rapatriement des prisonniers et déportés," *Franc-Tireur*, May, 16, 1945, 2.

<sup>58</sup> "Pour les prisonniers, les déportés, les réfugiés, Un appel de M. Frenay," *Franc-Tireur*, May, 26, 1945, 1.

M.N.P.G. organizers of the demonstration were preventing him from speaking directly to the former prisoners, and thus preventing them from understanding that his ministry was doing everything within its ability to help them. Frenay reminded the French people that the prisoners of war were only one group of citizens, and that they must recognize that all of France was suffering and be mindful of the government's limited means.<sup>59</sup> Again in this instance Frenay treated criticism of his own and his ministry's performance as personal and politically motivated. He saw the M.N.P.G. as a puppet organization of the Communist Party and, thus, all criticism from this group as invalid and insincere. To a degree Frenay's point of view is understandable. Many of the more virulent attacks came from Communists and that party's newspaper, *l'Humanité*. However, criticism was also coming from sources independent of the communists, and these criticisms were bringing to light real problems in the operation of the M.P.D.R.

### **Deconstructing a flawed repatriation**

Frenay's plan for the repatriation involved a highly organized and rapid transition of liberated individuals from captivity to civilian life, with no allowance made for special recognition or long-term government support. Frenay's vision of the repatriation did not envision any desire on the part of the returnees to express individual desires or goals, to seek recognition for their sacrifice, or to advocate in an organized fashion for public assistance. Frenay seems to have envisioned his ministry efficiently processing a wave of weakened but not seriously ill French citizens, grateful to be home, and desiring nothing more than to quickly disappear back into the fabric of society.<sup>60</sup> When the liberated

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<sup>59</sup> "Le retour des prisonniers et déportés, une interview de M. Henri Frenay," *Le Monde*, June 21, 1945, 5.

<sup>60</sup> Frenay, 379-384, 389-395 and Christophe Lewin, *Le Retour des prisonniers de guerre français*, (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1986), 82-7.

POWs did organize public protests to advocate for recognition, benefits and a more effective ministry working on their behalf, Frenay interpreted their manifestation as a conspiratorial plot orchestrated by his political enemies designed to embarrass him rather than as an expression of the unique grievances and needs of this group and his response to the protest was equal parts hostile and dismissive.<sup>61</sup> The M.N.P.G. marches of the summer of 1945 were the opening act for what would eventually become a long political lobbying effort by former POWs and deportees to undo some of the disappointments of their homecoming by winning increased benefits and late recognition.

Moving from the more simplistic to the more complex, the reasons behind the flaws in the homecoming can be explained on three levels. Frenay's shortcomings as head of the M.P.D.R. explain some of the most obvious problems of the prisoners' and deportees' homecoming. By skill-set and temperament, he was not well suited to his job. The economic conditions of France in the liberation era also help explain some of the shortcomings of the homecoming. France had very few resources in 1944 and 1945, and the nation's needs were great. The third and most complex element necessary to understanding the homecoming's shortcomings is an understanding of the position within the Gaullist myth and the reconstruction of the French national community of the returning prisoners and deportees. After the trauma of the war, occupation and the Vichy era, De Gaulle and the provisional government's prioritization of national unity stymied attempts by the returning prisoners and deportees to have their unique needs addressed. Each of these causes will be addressed below.

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<sup>61</sup> Frenay, 410-15.

### **Frenay as a cause of the flawed homecoming**

The similarities between Frenay's personality and the M.P.D.R. repatriation plan are too aligned to ignore. It is almost as if the ministry's plan was an administrative manifestation of Henri Frenay himself. Like Frenay, the plan expected its subjects to follow directions without question. When the prisoners and deportees deviated from these directions, like Frenay, the plan lacked the flexibility to adapt to the unexpected appearance of human agency. The M.P.D.R. administration, like Frenay, responded to unexpected developments with frustration rather than creative action. Perhaps most importantly, the M.P.D.R. plan treated the returning prisoners and deportees as subjects to be processed as efficiently as possible rather than as physically and mentally traumatized humans in need of more than seventy minutes of bureaucratic attention.

Beyond his overseeing of the development and implementation of the flawed repatriation plan itself, Frenay's personality also made him ill-equipped to perform many daily aspects of his job. His lack of ability to work well with partners handicapped his effectiveness. The ministry had to coordinate its efforts with organizations from other nations- it could not simply dictate events. Frenay's initial reaction to the "outside interference" of the United States airlifting French prisoners and deportees out of Germany is an example of how this trait limited his effectiveness. Even though this operation returned tens of thousands of men and women, many in poor health, to France weeks earlier than would have been possible had they relied upon M.D.P.R. transport, Frenay initially attempted to delay the start of the airlift and direct the aircraft toward landing strips near welcome centers, which if they existed at all would presumably be in rough shape, rather than Paris.<sup>62</sup> Ultimately Frenay's attempts to control the parameters

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<sup>62</sup> Frenay, 390-92.

of the airlift were moot as it was presented to him by S.H.A.E.F. as a *fait accompli*.

Frenay's initial resistance and his ministry's slow reaction to the airlift call into question his later claims to have always been a strong supporter of the program. Perhaps Frenay's reluctant response to the airlift was caused by its implementation having bypassed his careful planned procedures, or perhaps his pride was injured because the airlift dramatized the enormous gap between French and American means. Frenay was very aware he headed an under-staffed and under-funded agency while American resources seemed limitless. Regardless as to the reasons behind it, the M.P.D.R.'s sluggish response to this unexpected source of assistance resulted in tens of thousands of confused and haggard ex-captives arriving in Paris with no one present to greet them for weeks.

Frenay's distrust of people who did not share his political mindset also handicapped his performance. He was only comfortable working within a strict hierarchy in which his orders were passed down and acted upon. As a service ministry within the government the M.P.D.R. inevitably worked with politicians of all persuasions, men and women who could not be expected to simply put their political inclinations aside and follow orders. In his haste to staff the ministry Frenay wrote that he "decided to use any Vichy official I could find who had not acted in a blameworthy way."<sup>63</sup> The resulting high prevalence of former Vichy officials working for the M.D.P.R., coupled with Frenay's hostility toward leftists, seemed to justify his critics who saw him as a reactionary authoritarian. Frenay treated other state employees who had their own ideas about how the repatriation should be organized as enemies rather than men and women with the prisoners' and deportees' best interest in mind. Notable among these clashes were Frenay's hostile and suspicious attitude towards one of the early organizers of the

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<sup>63</sup> Frenay, 360.

former prisoners, François Mitterrand. Frenay immediately dismissed Mitterrand's work with the M.N.P.G.D. as no more than a stepping stone the ambitious young man was using to advance his own political career.<sup>64</sup> As he had while working in the Resistance and with the Free French, Frenay interpreted differences of opinion regarding his administration of the organization as plotting and political gamesmanship rather than as valid criticisms. When it became almost immediately clear that the ministry's repatriation plan was not executable, rather than simply scrap the plan and reallocate his resources, Frenay initially attempted to master the situation and force the repatriation to conform to his plan rather than change his plan to conform with reality. Later he fought against, rather than worked with, federations representing former prisoners of war during the readaptation phase despite the very real problems these organizations had brought to light.<sup>65</sup>

Another aspect of Frenay's personality which made him ill-suited to head the M.P.D.R. was the low regard which he held for many of the people his agency had been created to serve. Like many members of the internal resistance, Frenay was suspicious of French men and women who had volunteered to work in Germany or who had allowed themselves to be deported rather than escape and join the *maquis*. He was also judgmental towards soldiers who had been taken prisoner and who had remained in Germany rather than escape. After all, he had managed to avoid captivity and deportation himself through his courage and willingness to take risks as a soldier. Frenay's somewhat contemptuous attitude towards the prisoners is easily recognized in his memoir. He incorrectly described the prisoners as having, for the most part, been "seized in their

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<sup>64</sup> Frenay, 356-7.

<sup>65</sup> See the Epilogue for more on Frenay's conflicts with the F.N.C.P.G.

barracks,” and then “led like sheep” to Germany where they spent the next years “vegetating” in prison camps.<sup>66</sup> As head of the M.P.D.R. he was responsible for working on the behalf of these prisoners, still he looked down upon his constituents. He described the workers, prisoners and deportees as having a “claim on our compassion, however *unequally* they had served the nation,” and later admitted, “It was tempting to mete out praise *and* blame” toward his constituents.<sup>67</sup> This attitude may explain Frenay’s dismissal of efforts by federations representing former prisoners arguing for increased benefits and recognition for their constituents, a duty that one might expect the head of the M.P.D.R. to be performing himself.<sup>68</sup>

In total, Frenay appears to have been a very poor choice to head the M.P.D.R. He defended his ministry’s, and by extension his own, performance with an aloofness which appeared arrogant to many. Frenay refused to accept responsibility for the obvious shortcomings of his agency. When confronted with a problem Frenay would deny it if possible, and when denial was no longer an option, he blamed the existence of the problem, or the perception that the problem existed, on leftist political maneuverings against him. In 1945 the M.D.P.R. published a public report entitled *Bilan d’un effort* which defended the ministry’s performance under Frenay by comparing how many more prisoners and deportees it had liberated compared to the 1918 homecoming, and how much more quickly it was able to accomplish this task. The public release of the report suggests that Frenay and the ministry were using it as a way of responding to the low

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<sup>66</sup> Frenay, 313, 341.

<sup>67</sup> Frenay, 314 & 341. Italics added.

<sup>68</sup> Frenay certainly was not alone in holding a somewhat contemptuous attitude towards the returning prisoners of war and labor deportees. In June, 1945 De Gaulle received the three principle figures representing the prisoners of war in the Parisian area, one of whom was François Mitterrand. Jean Vedrine, who witnessed the meeting, described De Gaulle’s attitude as “belligerent and arrogant.” When De Gaulle was reminded of his own captivity during the First World War he erupted in anger. See Cochet, 130-31.

public perception of the ministry's performance. The tone of the report leaves the impression that Frenay left his post as head of the M.P.D.R. relatively unburdened with regrets or self-examination.<sup>69</sup>

### **Limited resources as a cause of the flawed homecoming**

Throughout the second half of 1944 and 1945 France struggled through a period of intense deprivation, in many ways even greater than that of the German occupation.<sup>70</sup> In 1944 French industrial output was only 38% what it had been in 1938. In 1945 the franc's value was reduced to one-sixth its pre-war level. The national railroad network was in an abysmal state with less than half serviceable. The rail and road networks were not the only things in need of repair in 1945- 460,000 buildings had been destroyed and another 1.9 million were damaged, leaving over a million citizens homeless. In 1946 the French ministry of reconstruction estimated that the cost of simply repairing the material damages of the war would cost the nation the equivalent of between two and three years of its total gross national product. In total World War II inflicted considerably more material damage to France than the First World War. Food was also in dramatically short supply. In 1945 the wheat harvest was approximately half the pre-war average, causing bread, the staple of the nation's diet, to be strictly rationed. In 1945 the French

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<sup>69</sup> Ministère des prisonniers, déportés et réfugiés. *Bilan d'un effort*. (Paris: Éditions du Rond-Point, 1945). See also Cochet's treatment of this report (135), and Lewin's remarks of Frenay's early obsession with comparing the performance of his ministry with the 1918 repatriation program (64). Upon accepting the post as head of the ministry Frenay promised to return three times as many prisoners and deportees as 1918 in one-third the time.

<sup>70</sup> For France's post-liberation economic difficulties see Steven Philip Kramer, "La crise économique de la libération." *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, no. 111 (1978): 25-44; Jean-Pierre Rioux, *The Fourth Republic, 1944-1958*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 18-25; Tyler Stovall, *France Since the Second World War*, (London: Pearson Education Ltd., 2002), 12-13; Maurice Larkin, *France Since the Popular Front, Government and People 1936-1986*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 117; and Dominique Veillon, *Vivre et Survivre en France 1939-1947*, (Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages, 1995), 289-316.

government determined that after the deprivations of the occupation and the postwar fourteen year old French boys and girls were seven to eleven centimeters shorter and seven to nine kilograms lighter than the same age group had been in 1935. Coal production had fallen from 156,000 tons in 1938 to 67,000 in 1944, which allowed only for a few hours of electricity per day in Paris and a coal ration so low that only one room could be heated in most homes. Journalist Janet Flanner wrote in December of 1944, “Except for the first winter after the defeat, this is the most uncomfortable winter of the war.”<sup>71</sup>



*The rare sight of a working chimney in Paris during the first winter after liberation causes these pedestrians to confuse it with a German rocket attack. (La France Au Combat, January 11, 1945, p .8.)*

Further stretching the nation’s limited resources was the expense of constructing a new army so France could play its desired role in the final defeat of Germany and maintain control over its empire. De Gaulle not only accepted these burdens, he demanded them, and there is little evidence that the French population would have preferred him to do otherwise. When U.S. military planners attempted to funnel French

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<sup>71</sup> Janet Flanner, *Paris Journal, Volume One, 1944-1955*, (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1965), 7.

mobilization efforts into the formation of 175 battalion-sized light infantry units suitable only for garrison, internal security and mop up work, De Gaulle insisted instead on the development of a modern force of 25 additional combat ready divisions in 1945 to complement the eleven already in action.<sup>72</sup> Simply put, the government had decided that restoring France's position as a European and global power would take precedence over the material needs of her civilians. This was expressed not only through the prioritization of scarce resources, but also in the expressed displeasure of the government and the people when France was treated as a junior partner by the British, Americans and Soviets, such as by not being invited to the Yalta conference or initially not being assigned an occupation zone in Germany. The government's message in response to these slights was that France had an essential role to play in the future of Europe, and was willing to do what was necessary to assume its fair burden despite its diminished state.

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<sup>72</sup> Marcel Vigneras, *United States Army in World War II, Special Studies, Rearming the French*, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1957), 306-18.



*“One can never make a stable construction without the fourth pillar!” (La France au Combat, February 2, 1945, p. 1.) France represented as being foolishly left on the sidelines while the post-war settlement is worked out by the “Big Three.”*

Frustration caused by deprivation was a dominant theme in the French popular press during the post-liberation months. While the scarcity of food, fuel, consumer and luxury goods during the occupation could be blamed upon the Germans, its persistence into the liberation era came as a depressing surprise to the population. As late as 1949 nearly half of French citizens continued to rank “satisfaction of basic daily needs” as their primary daily concern, three times higher than the next ranked item.<sup>73</sup>

Given the accumulation of deprivations and burdens described above, the French people had little energy left after dealing with their own individual hardships to spare in the form of compassion for the prisoners and deportees during the immediate postwar

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<sup>73</sup> Rioux, 27.

years. There is a limit to the number of social problems a person can focus upon at any given time, and the French people had reached that limit. In modern psychiatric terminology, the French people had reached the point of “compassion fatigue” by 1945.<sup>74</sup> The government had few resources available to deal with the nation’s immediate needs, much less additional funds to help the returning captives reestablish themselves at their own pace. Added to this was the emerging official discourse of “shared sacrifice” described below which discouraged the airing of individual grievances. In 1945 deportees and prisoners returned to a country certainly relieved to have them home, but also one perhaps not capable or willing to extend them privileged status or benefits based upon their wartime sacrifices.<sup>75</sup>

#### **“Shared Sacrifice” as a cause for the flawed homecoming**

Despite the liberation, most of France was hardly in a celebratory mood in 1945. Beyond the economic problems and physical devastation from the war and occupation, France’s social and political foundation appeared fragile. The people were struggling to find an acceptable narrative encompassing the defeat, occupation and liberation with which to come to terms with their recent past and from which to form an adjusted national identity which could unify the nation and provide it with a vision of a hopeful future.<sup>76</sup> This process was complicated by two waves of retributive violence which swept the nation. The first coincided with the liberation of most of the national territory in the

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<sup>74</sup> For more on the concept of compassion fatigue, or secondary traumatic stress disorder, see Charles R. Figley, ed., *Compassion Fatigue, Coping with Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder in Those Who Treat the Traumatized*, (London: Brunner-Routledge, 1995), xiii-xvi.

<sup>75</sup> For more on the returnees reception being shaped by the economic situation and return of the racial and political deportees see Cochet, 171-75; Megan Koreman, “A Hero’s Homecoming: The Return of the Deportees to France, 1945,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 32, no. 1 (1997), 9-22 and Durand, 526-28.

<sup>76</sup> See for example Andrew Shennan, *Rethinking France, Plans for Renewal 1940-1946*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989) & Megan Koreman, *The Expectation of Justice: France 1944-1946*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

summer of 1944; the second was sparked by the repatriation of victims and suspected collaborators from the crumbling German Reich the following spring. Roughly ten thousand summary executions were carried out during this era,<sup>77</sup> and several times more that number of acts of orchestrated humiliation and violence were committed as communities purged themselves of compromised individuals.<sup>78</sup> Most French citizens were left unconvinced that justice had been restored to their nation due to the chaotic and uneven nature of this purge.<sup>79</sup> France was split between those who desired a deep purge of collaborators and fundamental change, and those who simply desired a return to normalcy. The first hints of the post-war political divisions that would define the 4<sup>th</sup> Republic's short history took shape even before the end of the war.

In a conscious effort to provide the French people with a pathway to move past the internal divisions brought so dramatically into the open during the war years and being acted out in the purge violence, De Gaulle and the newly formed French provincial government promoted the view that during the occupation French citizens had overwhelmingly remained true to the nation's republican heritage. The Gaullist vision (or "myth" depending upon your interpretation of its validity) acknowledged the existence of only a small number of traitors making common cause with the German occupiers. It was this small group of collaborators who had formed the illegitimate Vichy regime, while the remainder of the French population, always resisters at heart, suffered through the occupation. This way of remembering their recent past allowed the French people to see themselves as a nation of resisters/victims, soiled only by a small number of

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<sup>77</sup> Peter Novick, *The Resistance Versus Vichy, The Purge of Collaborators in Liberated France*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968), 202-14.

<sup>78</sup> Fabrice Virgili, *Shorn Women, Gender and Punishment in Liberation France*, (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 113-19.

<sup>79</sup> A good recent examination of this topic can be found in Koreman's study cited above.

collaborators/criminals.<sup>80</sup> This simplified but not entirely inaccurate vision of the war years helped France recover quickly in an emotional sense. However, since from this perspective *all* of France had sacrificed and suffered, there was not much room for *individual* groups to identify themselves as deserving elevated recognition for their wartime experiences. When transformed into government policy, this view of shared sacrifice also made the efforts of any particular group which sought individual compensation for wartime sacrifices appear invalid. Since all of France had suffered, and since the government representing the damaged nation had few resources to spare, the narrative of shared sacrifice made the decision to refuse the extension of public benefits to specific groups logical.

It was into this highly charged and stressed environment that the French prisoners returned, along with three other groups who had also been in German captivity; 300,000 S.T.O. and volunteer workers; 37,025 men and women freed from prison camps to which they had been sent for suspected resistance activity; and, finally, 2,500 Jews, all that remained of the 75,721 taken during the occupation.<sup>81</sup> Each of these groups had found their way into captivity and experienced the war in different terms. Despite the fact that these groups were so disparate, the French government preferred to deal with them as if they were one cohesive block. This decision was most concretely expressed with the formation of a single ministry, *Ministère des prisonniers, déportés et réfugiés*, to administer to the needs of all captive groups. A commonly reprinted M.P.D.R. poster from the era shows three returnees supporting each other as they walk out of a destroyed

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<sup>80</sup> For a good summary of the Gaullist myth see Julian Jackson, *France, the Dark Years, 1940-1944*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 601-05.

<sup>81</sup> Annette Wieviorka, *Déportation et génocide, Entre la mémoire et l'oubli*, (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 1992), 21.

background and towards a more brightly lit horizon. Each group of returnees is represented in the poster, a worker with a suitcase, a camp inmate of undetermined nature, and a prisoner of war. The caption: “They are united. Do not divide them.”



(Reprinted from Durand, *La Captivité*, p 514.)

This meshing together of the different groups promoted viewing all the returnees as belonging to one large group of unfortunates. There was no precedent in French history for dealing with the aftermath of a massive deportation program. There were however several recent examples of the nation responding to large waves of refugees. In this way, France responding to the *Grand Retour* on the model of a refugee crisis made sense. Refugees were due compassion, short term assistance, but were not necessarily entitled to elevated national status or long-term public assistance. This form of response might appear an appropriate homecoming for the political and racial deportees as well as

the workers, but it conflicted with how soldiers had traditionally been welcomed home. During the last two years of their captivity a communal bond had developed between the prisoners of war, the deportees and the workers. They were brought together by their shared nationality, common suffering and a willingness to rely upon each other during their journeys back to France. As this was a unity which Historian François Cochet described as one made through “ugliness and closeness to death,”<sup>82</sup> it was not necessarily a unity which would endure after the trauma had passed. What the prisoners, workers and deportees shared in common was an experience of suffering, and this common experience would only continue to unite them so long as they continued to recognize the captivity as central the central focus of their lives. The prisoners expected to embrace a new form of identity, that of honored veterans, upon their return to France, and thus quickly shed their bonds with the workers. Upon their return to France the prisoners were surprised to find the French government treated them in a very similar manner to the returning workers. Shared sacrifice dictated that the returning prisoners of war were to be treated just as the rest of their countrymen, as unfortunate victims of a long ordeal. The prisoners must have wondered when their military service was stripped of its recognition- when veterans became refugees.<sup>83</sup>

While each of these groups expected acknowledgement by their countrymen commensurate with their unique sacrifices, they instead found a nation too marginalized by its own political, social and economic trauma to afford them the compassion and recognition for which they looked. These groups found themselves treated in a manner

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<sup>82</sup> Cochet, 36.

<sup>83</sup> For more on the French public’s encouraged tendency to not differentiate between the different groups of deportees see also Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation; Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 118-20.

consistent with the officially articulated vision of shared sacrifice. The only distinction between individual French wartime experiences given weight in this discourse was that between true French citizens who remained loyal to the republican principles enshrined by the nation's past, and the relatively small number of traitors who betrayed France and collaborated with her enemies or who had taken advantage of the nation's misfortunes for personal gain.

Always an element of concern for the French public, the fate of the prisoners and deportees increasingly played a role in public discussion after news of war crimes and camp conditions became more widely known. To the French people the continuing suffering of the prisoners and deportees became an ongoing symbol of Nazi barbarity and the crimes committed against the French people. While this view of the captives made them important to the French people during the final months of war, it did not actually bestow them with special status. While the deportees and prisoners were continuing to suffer in German captivity, within the context of the shared sacrifice discourse, their plight symbolically represented the plight of all of France, not a unique experience.

In a way Frenay's and the M.P.D.R.'s handling of the return can be seen as a metaphor for the reaction of the entire French nation towards the deportees and prisoners. While often shocked by, and at times even moved to vigilante violence by the poor state of mental and physical health found in many of the returning deportees, the French people did not encourage outspokenness on their part about their experience.<sup>84</sup> The French public reacted to the return of these groups with sympathy, but sympathy of a finite nature. While the nature of the homecoming was partially shaped by the nation's economic limitations and by Frenay's administration, it was also shaped by the discourse

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<sup>84</sup>Virgili, 116-19.

of shared sacrifice and the public's perception of how deserving the returnees were of elevated national status. The two largest groups of returnees, the workers and the prisoners of war, were seen by much of the public as compromised, and this qualified any compassion they might receive.

Returning labor deportees were often held in suspicion by members of their community for their failure to evade conscription and join the *maquis*. Those laborers who had left voluntarily to work in Germany at the encouragement of the Vichy government were often seen as collaborators and at times greeted with violence upon their return.<sup>85</sup> Even though only a minority of the returning workers had gone to Germany of their free will, many French citizens seemed to have simply treated the whole group as suspicious rather than attempt to determine who had been and who had not been deported. A November 1944 M.P.D.R. report prepared by Frenay himself appears to demonstrate that the minister shared much of the public's divided mind on the returning workers. In the report Frenay encouraged his ministry to act with restraint regarding returning workers, "to avoid real misunderstandings," but also wrote that "it remains well-established that in several cases voluntary work for German victory was done by a few fanatics who are candidates for treason."<sup>86</sup> Based on subsequent reports prepared by the M.P.D.R. (but unlike the above document, not signed by Frenay himself) the search for traitor workers which Frenay's November report appeared to favor was not acted upon. By the following month the ministry was encouraging a proper welcome for all returning workers. In December 1944 an unsigned M.P.D.R. report determined that efforts would not be made by the ministry to distinguish between workers who had

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<sup>85</sup> See for example Virgili, 117, and Vinen, 362-363.

<sup>86</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 3168. "Entr'aide et assistance pour les travailleurs déportés et leurs familles." 13 November 1944.

volunteered to go to Germany from those who had gone against their will.<sup>87</sup> On 15 February 1945 the M.P.D.R. sponsored a radio address reminding the French people that most of the workers who went to Germany were not volunteers and so returning men and women should not be mistreated by “those who want to find scapegoats.”<sup>88</sup> Despite these efforts, many returning workers received a cold, if not outright hostile, reception. Even after generations of sporadic work by former labor deportees to rehabilitate their image the workers remain seen in France today as a group of “ill-loved exiles” in the words of historian Philippe Buton.<sup>89</sup>

The POWs were also seen by many of their countrymen as tainted. As demonstrated earlier, during the war Vichy propaganda portrayed the prisoners’ standards of living as higher than in fact they had been, and exaggerated the degree of loyalty they held for the Vichy government. This was done for purposes of increasing domestic support for the regime and its pro-collaboration policies.<sup>90</sup> The result of these false representations was that many French citizens viewed the POWs as not having suffered a difficult captivity and as stubborn supporters of a dictatorial regime.

Prisoners of war were also inevitably unfavorably compared to those veterans of 43-45 and resistance *combattants*. Some saw the prisoners of 1940 not as a group to which gratitude was owed but as the ones who had failed to defend the nation and, thus, associated them with national shame and weakness. Historian Christophe Lewin

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<sup>87</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 3168. “L’aide matérielle, intellectuelle et morale aux prisonniers de guerre, aux internés politiques et aux travailleurs déportés in Allemagne.”

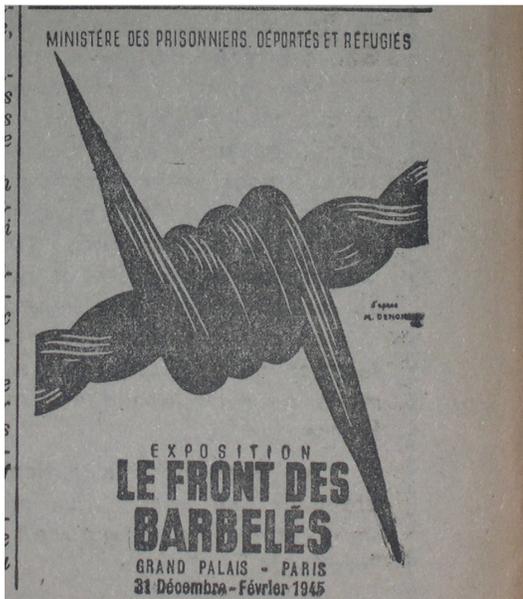
<sup>88</sup> AN F<sup>9</sup> 3168. “Allocution prononcée à radiodiffusion Française le 15 Febrier 1945 par Monsieur Guy Tassigny, Secrétaire Général de la Federation Nationale des Centres d’entr’aide et assistance pour les travailleurs déportés et leurs familles.”

<sup>89</sup> Philippe Buton, “Occupation, Liberation, Purges: the Changing Landscape of French Memory,” in *The Uncertain Foundation; France at the Liberation, 1944-47*, ed. Andrew Knapp (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 240.

<sup>90</sup> Fishman, 229-54 and Chapter 3.

eloquently summarized the returning POW's situation: "The Resistance, The F.F.I., The Soldiers of 43-45- those who history had accorded a second chance- the artisans of the victory, occupied the honored positions. [The prisoners] were regulated to the role of the eternally vanquished."<sup>91</sup>

The M.P.D.R. did attempt to counter the view that the prisoners were a shameful group. During the winter of 1944-45, it sponsored an exposition in



(*La France au Combat*, January 11, 1945, p.2)

Paris about the French prisoners and deportees still held in Germany. Pierre Lamblin, himself a former prisoner, wrote a weekly column in the weekly newspaper *Combat* to keep the memory of the prisoners and deportees fresh in his readers' minds. Lamblin's description of the Paris exhibition demonstrated its purpose of countering the years of

Vichy propaganda. After visiting the exhibition, Lamblin wrote, one would understand that the prisoners held no love for the Vichy government, that De Gaulle and the "flame of the resistance" within them had kept their hope alive during the final years of their exile.<sup>92</sup> The M.D.P.R. also organized a national information campaign dubbed "The Week of the Absent One" to help the nation prepare for the great return. By March 1945 Frenay was satisfied with the work his ministry had done in these regards. By that point

<sup>91</sup> Lewin, 19.

<sup>92</sup> "Dans les chaines; "Front des barbelés", *France au Combat*, Jan. 25, 1945, 2.

he believed “the nation was psychologically prepared to welcome its sons home.”<sup>93</sup>

Through this propaganda campaign the M.P.D.R. attempted to de-stigmatize the prisoners prior to their return; however, in one prominent way, the French provisional government also strongly reinforced the view of the prisoners being less than deserving of special status. Returning prisoners of war were immediately demobilized upon their return to France and were not recognized as veterans. As will be examined in more detail in the epilogue, many of the prisoners of war were surprised and deeply wounded by the government’s decision to deny them recognition as veterans. While much of the former prisoners’ lobbying efforts in 1945 focused on winning concrete forms of assistance from the government, such as health care and housing allowance, their main focus quickly became winning something much less tangible, the right to call themselves veterans.<sup>94</sup>

The prisoners’ efforts to win increased benefits and recognition were handicapped by the dire economic conditions of the nation in 1945, and by the discourse of shared sacrifice, which labeled efforts such as theirs to gain unique group recognition for wartime service as selfish and damaging to national unity.

The homecomings of the two smallest groups of returnees, the political and racial (in almost all cases Jewish) deportees, were also affected by the discourse of shared sacrifice. While the political and racial deportees were, in reality, two separate groups brought into captivity for different reasons, in practice the French media and government tended to meld the two. In most newspaper representations Jewish and political deportees were combined in the form of the undistinguished concentration camp survivor. While at first this may seem nonsensical, given the context of 1945 it is more understandable. In

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<sup>93</sup> Frenay, 381.

<sup>94</sup> See Epilogue

the immediate aftermath of World War II concentration camps were not understood to be as closely associated with the Nazi anti-Jewish genocidal program as they are today.

Concentration camp inmates were assumed to be a diverse mix of victims, of whom the Jews were certainly a part, but not a defining part. For this reason the French viewed all persons interred in Nazi concentration camps as victims of the same fate, not aware of the distinction that existed between labor camps and extermination camps.

The few Jewish deportees who returned were encouraged by the Jewish community to define their captivity not in racial terms, but as their part of the overall French trauma. In effect they were encouraged to shed the ethnic identity that had made them a target of genocide, and instead continue the long Jewish pursuit of acceptance by the French population at large by recommitting themselves to a national identity rather than a racial or religious one. Add to this lack of advocacy on their own part the degree of shame many in France undoubtedly felt after learning what had happened to the Jews whom they had allowed to be deported, and it is easily understandable why few non-Jewish persons cared to emphasize the plight of this group.<sup>95</sup> While the French people cannot be held responsible for the murder of Jews deported from France during the war, it must be recognized that all French men and women were aware on some level of the targeted persecution Jews received during the war, both from the Vichy government and the German occupiers. Undoubtedly many were aware of much more. A strong moral condemnation of Nazi murder of French Jews could not be frankly delivered without some degree of self examination, an exercise the French people were not ready to accept in 1945.

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<sup>95</sup> Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton. *Vichy France and the Jews*, (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

For the Jews to emphasize their unique suffering during the war would be a challenge to the discourse of shared sacrifice. A community which had spent generations attempting to meld into the French body politic would have been especially reluctant to position themselves as a group disruptive to national unity. Indeed the Jewish community harbored reasonable fears of igniting a renewed wave of anti-Semitism within France itself.<sup>96</sup> The Jews sense of vulnerability was reinforced by a brief wave of anti-Semitism in Paris during the spring of 1945.<sup>97</sup> Having only recently observed firsthand the lack of fraternity (if not outright hostility) some of their neighbors held for Jews, security may have seemed a higher virtue than recognition among many.<sup>98</sup>

Unlike the POWs and workers, the status of the political deportees was actually elevated by shared sacrifice. Upon their return to France, unlike the prisoners and labor deportees, political deportees held no ‘taint’ to qualify their embrace by the French nation. In reality many persons who fit into the category of political deportee had not actually performed acts of bravery or patriotism to cause their deportation. Many had found their way into camps simply by being hostages or common criminals sent by Vichy officials into Germany to meet Nazi demands for specific numbers of reprisal victims to punish resistance attacks. Despite these distinctions all political deportees were treated as the embodiment of French patriotism and courage. In general, French political deportees were sent to labor camps where they suffered an extremely harsh captivity defined by intense physical labor, unpredictable violence, and the virtually unchecked spread of

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<sup>96</sup> Reneé Poznanski, “Jewish Voices in a ‘Strange Silence.’ Jews and the Shoah in France after Vichy.” Presentation at the University of Kansas Hall Center, September, 15, 2006.

<sup>97</sup> Poznanski, *Jews in France*, 465.

<sup>98</sup> Marrus and Paxton provide details on the pre-war anti-Semitism in France and explains Vichy’s role in the overall Holocaust as consistent with this aspect of French society. While certainly only a small minority of the French population was anti-Semitic, when Jews were rounded up in France for deportation to concentration camps the manpower for these efforts were supplied by the Vichy government and, before 1942, few French citizens protested these actions.

contagious disease. The resulting mortality rate among the political deportees reflected this experience. Of the 63,085 persons who can be classified as belonging to this group, only 59% (37,025) returned to France.<sup>99</sup> This number is even more telling given that most French political deportees were in captivity for nine months or less.<sup>100</sup>

Megan Koreman writes in her study of the return of the deportees, “The [political] deportees reached the apex of the moral hierarchy by combining in one person Resistance engagement with the type of patriotic suffering thought to ennoble the soul.”<sup>101</sup> British historian Julian Jackson supports this point of view, “In the hierarchy of virtue in post-war France, the [political] deportees had come to occupy a central place only just below the resisters. They symbolized the suffering of the French nation in the war, and were depicted as having been spiritually purified by their terrible experience in the camps.”<sup>102</sup> Political deportees represented the “true France,” and like the mythical Jewish *lamed vovniks*,<sup>103</sup> through their suffering they purified the nation of its sins and, with their persons, provided a refutation of France as a morally depraved nation of collaborators. Within the Jewish community, the few thousand returning Jewish deportees were encouraged to not challenge the view that their deportation had been motivated by factors other than their French patriotism and resistance to Nazi tyranny.<sup>104</sup> “[For the Jews] the tacit – and sometimes specifically stated – condition for being reintegrated into the [post-

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<sup>99</sup> Wieviorka, 20-1.

<sup>100</sup> Koreman, “A Hero’s Homecoming,” 10.

<sup>101</sup> Koreman, “A Hero’s Homecoming,” 10.

<sup>102</sup> Julian Jackson, *France, the Dark Years, 1940-1944*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 611.

<sup>103</sup> According to Jewish myth the *lamed vovniks* are the 36 individuals who shield the rest of humanity by absorbing much of the world’s sinfulness and pain. They also hold God’s displeasure of man in check by ensuring that at least a small number of righteous individuals exist even in the most sinful of times.

<sup>104</sup> Wieviorka, 169-82.

war] national community was conforming to prevailing conditions and toning down any specific demands.”<sup>105</sup>

### **The impact of shared sacrifice on the Grand Retour of 1945**

If the Gaullist narrative of shared sacrifice had not been promoted, the French government might have reacted differently to the returning groups of prisoners and deportees. Given the prevailing discourse any group demanding individual recognition threatened to break apart the fragile unity fostered in 1945, and also threatened the unique heroic status of the only group of French citizens who were granted an elevated form of honor, the living and dead members of the resistance. After the war resistance organizations closely guarded their status, unwilling to see it diluted or diminished through reexamination. In the Resistance’s black and white vision of the war, prison gray could only bring unwanted confusion. Megan Koreman concludes in her study that the deportees did more than simply discomfort the nation, “...they posed an unbearable contradiction to the founding myth of postwar France... [by] ... subverting the myth’s assertion of equal victimhood, because their physical presence made it quite clear that some French men and women had suffered extraordinarily for France’s liberation while others had profited from its occupation. One could not consider the deportees and believe the Gaullist myth at the same time.”<sup>106</sup>

De Gaulle consciously provided France with a comforting historical narrative in order to foster national unity. France’s relatively rapid recovery from the war lends support to remembering this era of apparent domestic unity as successful. Of course,

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<sup>105</sup> Pozanski, *Jews in France*, 463.

<sup>106</sup> Koreman, “A Hero’s Homecoming,” 21.

success is the product of sacrifice and, in this case, the sacrifice was paid in large part by the returning deportees and prisoners.

On 11 November 1945, the first Armistice Day of the post-war era, France honored its heroes of World War II. Fifteen individuals who had died for France were buried in a state ceremony at Mont Valérien, the site of numerous German executions of French hostages. Laid to rest were the remains of nine soldiers, three resisters, two political deportees, and one prisoner of war who had been killed in an escape attempt. The categories and proportions of remains to be interned, symbolically determining those who belonged in the hierarchy of honor, and those whose war experiences were too murky to be rendered full honor, had been originally suggested by Henri Frenay.<sup>107</sup> Absent from the burial ceremony were the laborers, the Jews, and the prisoners who had failed in their duty to escape.

It would be another nine years before the French nation decided to add a sixteenth plot to the Mont Valérien site to commemorate the deportees. In keeping with their official discourse of undifferentiated sacrifice, the plot was not filled with the body of a single deportee but; rather, an urn carrying the mixed ashes of representatives from all deportee groups. Recognition of the unique nature of the Jewish experience would not be addressed for another generation, the era of France's obsessive reanalysis of its dark years which Henry Rousso has dubbed as the "return of the repressed."<sup>108</sup> In France it was only at this point, 30 years after the return, that the unique nature of the Jewish Holocaust began to be separated from that of the overall deportation.

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<sup>107</sup> Frenay, 429-30.

<sup>108</sup> Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome, History and Memory in France since 1944*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 10.

If the nation were not as economically distressed as it was in 1945 perhaps the attempts by the POWs to gain military benefits might have received a more open reception by the government and thus encouraged other groups, the labor deportees in particular, to explore this indirect path to official recognition. As it was the French nation was not in a position, economically or psychologically, to more satisfactorily address the problems of the returnees of 1945 and, thus, almost two million individuals experienced a homecoming that failed to provide them with the recognition and individualized compassion that would have helped them move forward from trauma and rebuild their lives. The return could have been the first chapter of a new beginning; instead it was remembered by many as the last chapter of a long nightmare.

In April of 1945 Simone Rohner, recently liberated from Ravensbruck, arrived back in France. Weak from violence and disease, head shaven to rid her body of lice, she was mistaken by civilians as a collaborator reeling from the just punishment served out on those who had attached themselves to the occupiers. She remembered:

Civilians looked at us with an air of disgust, some insults were flung at us. We looked at each other in surprise. What? France did not know about the deportees?... We had to endure scathing words; we cried in rage from it... we received a hostile reception... [and] we were shocked.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Workman, quoting from Caroline Brugvin's, "*Témoigner sur Ravensbrück: miroir de la réalité ou prisme déformant?*" 64.



“They will never reach 89 years!” This refers to the age of Marshal Philip Pétain, which he evoked at his arrest as a mitigating factor in shielding him from prosecution for crimes of collaboration. (*La France au Combat*, 24 June 1945, p 1.)

## Epilogue: The Prisoners in Postwar France

Upon their return to France the prisoners were surprised by the lack of comprehension their countrymen and woman had about their captivity. Many believed the captivity had not been a harsh experience, believing perhaps that the prisoners had suffered less in Germany than had those who spent the war in occupied France. Many also believed the prisoners had been strong supporters of the Vichy regime. Both of these misconceptions had been fostered by the Vichy government's wartime propaganda.<sup>1</sup> The returning prisoners were greeted warmly but not as their fathers had been in 1918. Instead the provisional government grouped the prisoners together with the other returning deportee groups and treated them more as returning refugees.<sup>2</sup> The prisoners were also surprised to learn that the new provisional government did not recognize them as *anciens combattants*.<sup>3</sup> France had changed a great deal while they were in Germany. The prisoners had to learn the new political and social landscape. They also had to come to accept that they would not receive the joyous homecoming they had dreamed of while in Germany. Adoration of the type displayed in 1918 was reserved for the soldiers of De Gaulle and the resistance. The France the prisoners returned to was not the France of

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Fishman, "Grand Delusions: The Unintended Consequences of Vichy France's Prisoner of War Propaganda," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 26 (April 1991), 229-33. See also Yves Durand, *La Captivité: Histoire des prisonniers de guerre français 1939-1945*. 2<sup>e</sup> ed., (Paris: Fédération Nationale des Combattants Prisonniers de Guerre et Combattants d'Algérie, Tunisie, Maroc, 1981), 526-28, 531-32 and chapter three of this work.

<sup>2</sup> Megan Koreman, "A Hero's Homecoming: The Return of the Deportees to France, 1945," *Journal of Contemporary History* 32, no. 1 (1997), 9-22; François Cochet, *Les exclus de la victoire, Histoire des prisonniers de guerre, déportés et S.T.O. (1945-1985)*, (Paris: S.P.M., 1992), 167-75; and James Quinn, "Shared Sacrifice and the Return of the POW's and Deportees to France, 1945," *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History*, Vol. 35, (2007), 277-288; and chapter nine of this work.

<sup>3</sup> See Christophe Lewin, *Retour des prisonniers de guerre français: naissance et développement de la F.N.P.G., 1944-1952*, (Paris: Publication de la Sorbonne, 1986), 82-95, 178-89; and Cochet, 137-40.

1918, nor even the France of 1940, and they were seen more as part of the defeat of 1940 than the victory of 1945.<sup>4</sup>

The prisoners were not alone in receiving a disappointing homecoming. The 700,000 workers who returned at their side received less financial support from the government than the prisoners and political deportees, and, in many cases, were greeted more as collaborators than as deported citizens. One worker remembered the “amused expressions” he received from those he talked with about his deportation following the war. “I am not comparing myself with a concentration camp survivor, but I spent two years and three months as a forced laborer, abused and deprived throughout. It was a hard time.”<sup>5</sup>

Only the political deportees and the few returning racial deportees associated with them- men and women who were assumed to have been deported due to their resistance activity- were afforded unqualified recognition in postwar France. The elevated status of the political deportees did not stem from their suffering in captivity, but rather from the patriotism and bravery they were assumed to have displayed which caused their captivity.<sup>6</sup> If the prisoners and workers were recognized primarily as victims of war who

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<sup>4</sup> François de Lannoy, *La Libération des Camps: Un million de prisonniers de guerre français, Mai 1945*, (Bayeux: Editions Heimdal, 1995), 158-59 ; and Cochet, 167-75.

<sup>5</sup> Cochet, 170-71. For more on the reception of the workers see also Fabrice Virgili, *Shorn Women, Gender and Punishment in Liberation France*, (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 117; and Richard Vinen, *The Unfree French: Life under the Occupation*, (New York: Allen Lane, 2006), 362-63.

<sup>6</sup> Time has shown that, although they did not organize in protest in 1945, some Jewish and female political deportees remembered their repatriation experience as a time of encouraged silence and forgetting rather than recognition. See for example, Renée Poznanski, *Jews in France during World War II*, (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2001), 462-73. For the woman political deportees see Debra Workman, “Refusing the Unacceptable: The Women of the *Association Nationale des Anciennes Déportées et Internées de la Résistance* (ADIR)”, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Kansas, December, 2006.

had played some part in their own misfortunes, the deportees were seen as unqualified national heroes.<sup>7</sup>

The focus of this epilogue is the prisoners' organized effort to overcome the stigma of their captivity and establish themselves as honorable veterans and secure the same benefits and recognition extended to other veterans. In pursuit of these goals the prisoners challenged the official discourse of shared sacrifice (defined in the previous chapter) as well as popular perceptions regarding their military service in 1940. The former POWs believed they had to define themselves as separate from the workers, and even from the honored political deportees, in order to establish their claim as being "*anciens combattants*" rather than "war victims." This campaign had to be waged at the same time the prisoners were rebuilding their family and professional lives as well as, in many cases, restoring their physical and mental wellbeing. The story of the French POWs captivity did not end with the arrival of a tank at a prison gate and cheers, or even with their arrival back at their family's doorstep. Their story, like most that involve trauma long drawn out, had a long coda made up of compromise victories and partial resolutions.

### **The Formation of the M.P.G.D.R. and the F.N.C.P.G.**

In 1945 the former POWs organized behind François Mitterrand, himself a former prisoner and resistance leader,<sup>8</sup> to begin what would be their long struggle to win rights and recognition. The prisoners were fortunate to have an advocacy organization established prior to their liberation, the existence of which goes a long way in explaining why the POWs were more successful in winning benefits and recognition than were the

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<sup>7</sup> See chapter nine.

<sup>8</sup> See chapter eight.

less organized workers.<sup>9</sup> During meetings in 1944 in London two POW resistance groups operating in occupied France- the *Rassemblement National des Prisonniers de Guerre* (R.N.P.G.) (aka the “Pinot-Mitterrand” group), and the communist *Comité National des Prisonniers de Guerre* (C.N.P.G.), were fused with a group organized overseas by the Free French and led by Charles De Gaulle’s nephew Michel Cailliau.<sup>10</sup> This new united organization was named the *Mouvement de Résistance des Prisonniers de Guerre et déportés* (M.R.P.G.D.). Mitterrand returned to France in February 1944 and made the paper unification achieved in London a reality inside occupied France through his organizational work. He acted as the leader of the combined movement throughout the next year. Mitterrand and the M.R.P.G.D. played an active role during the Paris insurrection. Following the liberation of the capital Mitterrand was named the acting secretary-general of the M.P.G.D. inside France by the provisional government until he was relieved by Henri Frenay on 1 September 1944. Thus, briefly, Mitterrand headed

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<sup>9</sup> John Woodall, “Challenges to Ethical Social Development After War,” Lecture delivered as part of the University of Kansas’ Peace and Conflict Studies series, November, 10, 2006. Woodhall, an expert on post conflict recovery with many years field experience, argues that traumatized individuals are unlikely to focus on any needs beyond the basics- food, shelter and safety. Demands can only effectively supersede this level when channeled through organized bodies which permit disaster or war shattered individuals to formulate and pursue non-primal goals. The workers lacked such an organized body when they returned to France in 1945, and the federation they later formed, the *Fédération Nationale des Déportés du Travail*, did not even hold its first national meeting until January, 1946 and never commanded near the same level of influence or membership as did the prisoners’ federation. See Cochet, 200.

<sup>10</sup> The Gaullist group led by Cailliau was already known as the *Mouvement de Résistance des Prisonniers de Guerre et déportés*. As this group operated out of Algeria, and had no contacts with the active C.N.P.G. and R.N.P.G., it had very few members. Mitterrand had a brief struggle convincing De Gaulle that he represented an already organized prisoners’ resistance movement and an outsider like Cailliau could not simply be placed in charge of the movement when the two men met during Mitterrand’s overseas mission of November 1943-February 1944. Whether De Gaulle was unaware of the C.N.P.G. and R.N.P.G., or if he was aware of these groups but did not trust their leadership, or if he was attempting to gain control over an internal resistance movement by placing his nephew as its head, remain questions open to debate. In any case, Mitterrand’s active leadership of the M.R.P.G.D. within occupied France from February – August 1944 and the important role he played during the Paris insurrection made this a moot point. Mitterrand built a reputation and a following during 1944 and 1945, while Cailliau faded out of the story by mid-1945. For more on this topic see Cochet, 97-100 & Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation; Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 114-22.

both the official government ministry and the independent prisoners' federation at the same time.<sup>11</sup>

After the Germans were driven out of most of France the accumulated frustrations of the prisoners and their lack of faith in Frenay's ministry led to friction between the M.P.G.D. (the provisional government ministry) and the M.R.P.G.D. (the independent prisoners' movement). As described in chapter nine, the M.R.P.G.D. began organizing a legislative lobbying campaign and a series of public protests in early 1945 to pressure the provisional government into addressing the returnees' concerns. The prisoners' protests were widely reported in newspapers and, judging by the coverage, not seen as unreasonable acts.<sup>12</sup> As the M.R.P.G.D.'s role morphed from that of a resistance movement into that of an advocacy organization for former POWs it was reformed into the *Fédération Nationale des Combattants Prisonniers de Guerre* (F.N.C.P.G.) in April 1945.<sup>13</sup>

Two of Mitterrand's earliest publications, an essay published shortly after his escape in the pro-Vichy literary journal *Revue de l'État Nouveau*,<sup>14</sup> and his first substantial political statement, a bound essay named "*Les Prisonniers de Guerre Devant la Politique*," published in late 1945,<sup>15</sup> both expressed his conviction that the prisoners and other French citizens who had been deported to Germany could assume a leading role

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<sup>11</sup> Lewin, 43-6; Cochet, 88-9; Julius Friend, *The Long Presidency; France in the Mitterrand Years, 1981-1995*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 10-11; and David Bell, *Francois Mitterrand, A Political Biography*, (Cambridge, Polity, 2005), 12-17.

<sup>12</sup> For examples see Chapter nine.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Péan, *Une jeunesse française; François Mitterrand, 1934-1947*, (Paris: Fayard, 1994), 509. Originally the organization was called the *Fédération Nationale des Prisonniers de Guerre* (F.N.P.G.), with *Combattant* added later. For clarity's sake I will refer to the organization as the F.N.C.P.G. throughout this work.

<sup>14</sup> François Mitterrand, "Pèlerinage en Thuringe; Notes d'un Prisonnier de guerre," *Revue de l'État Nouveau*, No. 5, December 1942, 693-97.

<sup>15</sup> François Mitterrand, *Les Prisonniers de Guerre Devant la Politique*, (Paris: Éditions du Ront-Point, 1945).

in revitalizing French society. Mitterrand believed the captivity had forced the prisoners and deportees to confront the flaws in French society, and had reminded them to put aside their differences in service of working for a better future for their nation. While Mitterrand's political vision was similar to one of the central elements of the Vichy regime's prisoner of war propaganda campaign- the notion of the captivity being a purifying process preparing the prisoners to play a key role in reforming France upon their return- Mitterrand did not share the regime leadership's view about what a reformed France should look like. His 1942 essay is too brief and sentimental to provide a clear picture of his thinking. The vision he laid out in his 1945 pamphlet for a revitalized France had much more in common with the *Conseil national de la Résistance* charter of 1943 than with the values of the *Révolution Nationale*. Mitterrand did think the captivity might have helped purify him and his companions, but not in the manner which the Vichy leadership had expected. Mitterrand's political sensibilities changed radically during the war and his captivity. In 1939 he was a socially conservative young man who politically identified with the traditional right. By 1943 he had abandoned his prewar political beliefs and reestablished himself as left leaning political leader who envisioned a national renewal based upon secular and patriotic communal values.

Mitterrand was not alone in his vision of mobilizing the captivity as the base for a postwar political movement. Cailliau, Frenay and others leaders held similar hopes of creating a larger movement which would hold the former POWs, workers and political and racial deportees together following their return.<sup>16</sup> Just as the unity which had formed between these different groups in Germany crumbled after their return to France, so did hopes for a unified movement. Perhaps this fracturing of the groups was actually brought

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<sup>16</sup> Cochet, 97-100; 156-75 & 197-206.

about by their liberation. What had originally united these groups while they were in Germany were their shared hardships.<sup>17</sup> After the war the prisoners wanted to be seen as veterans, not as victims of deportation. The veteran identity the prisoners worked to establish transcended the captivity and, in doing so, de-emphasized similarities they had with the other deported groups. The prisoners' efforts to win recognition as veterans would have been complicated had they identified themselves first as deported captives rather than as soldiers. Internal divisions among the prisoners, workers, and deportees were becoming evident even before the *Grand Retour* had concluded.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Mitterrand, Cailliau and others continued to attempt to fashion a unified political movement out of the combined returnee community throughout 1945 and 1946. These efforts were held back largely by the lack of interest the political deportees and POWs had in association with the workers. The deportees were already an honored group in France upon their return, and the prisoners hoped to secure their position in postwar society through recognition as honorable veterans. The workers were widely perceived as politically compromised by their work in Germany.<sup>19</sup> Association with these men and women offered no benefit to the deportees and POWs. In historian François Cochet's words, despite its prominent backers, the larger returnee movement never amounted to anything that rose above the level of being "a little noisy" before it faded into a historical

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<sup>17</sup> For more on shared suffering being the basis of the early unity between the different groups see Cochet, 35-6; and James Quinn, "Shared Sacrifice and the Return of the POW's and Deportees to France, 1945," and "The Long Holiday; The community of three million French captives in Germany 1940-1945," unpublished paper presented at the Council for European Studies Seventeenth International Conference, Montreal, Canada, April 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Cochet, 97-8.

<sup>19</sup> See for example Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation; Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 131-43; Cochet, 170-71; Virgili, 117; and Vinen, 362-63.

footnote.<sup>20</sup> As documented in chapter nine, government posters and repatriation programs might have treated the workers as part of the same *Grand Retour* community that also included the prisoners and the deportees, but this is not how the prisoners and deportees saw the situation. The deportees saw themselves as heroic patriots. The prisoners saw themselves as veterans. Neither group wanted to be associated with the “victim” workers.

### **The Work of the F.N.C.P.G. 1945-1947**

Even if the F.N.C.P.G. could not claim to be the core of a national political movement it could claim to speak on behalf of the former POWs. The federation gained *de facto* official status when it was recognized by Frenay and the M.P.D.R. in 1945 and provided with substantial government subsidies for administrative costs and social projects.<sup>21</sup> The F.N.C.P.G.’s membership numbers also argue for its recognition as a valid representative for the POW community. In 1945 the F.N.C.P.G. already had a membership of 952,108. The following year membership rose to 1,027,111.<sup>22</sup>

The F.N.C.P.G.’s postwar efforts initially focused on immediate tangible goals, such as winning medical care for the prisoners and securing emergency short-term housing and financial aid for destitute former prisoners. Within a relatively short period of time its focus shifted towards less tangible goals, chief among them recognition of the prisoners’ as *combattants* and increasing awareness of the long-term medical and “social” ailments from which former POWs continued to suffer.<sup>23</sup> This focus on long-term projects was evident during the federation’s first national congress, held in November 1945. Judging by the topics addressed at this conference and their continuing coverage in

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<sup>20</sup> Cochet, 161.

<sup>21</sup> Lewin, 84, n101. Government subsidies amounted to 47% of the F.N.C.P.G.’s total budget in 1945.

<sup>22</sup> Lewin, 20-21 and 95, n149.

<sup>23</sup> Lewin, 178.

the federation's newsletter, *Le P.G.*, from late 1945 the F.N.C.P.G. focused on four projects: 1) caring for prisoners with lingering problems stemming from their captivity; 2) organizing a national community of former prisoners through mutual support programs; 3) securing financial aid for destitute former POWs; and, 4) their "Battle for Honor."<sup>24</sup> The "Battle for Honor" involved not only the former prisoners' fight to win recognition as *combattants*, but also their contesting derogatory stereotypes and misconceptions about their service in 1940 and the conditions of their captivity.<sup>25</sup> Each issue of *Le P.G.* featured a column updating the readership on the federation's efforts in these areas.

Benefiting from the F.N.C.P.G.'s organization, the prisoners were able to win partial redress of some of their immediate postwar concerns. On 15 June 1945 several prisoner and deportee representatives were added to the Consultative Assembly.<sup>26</sup> At this same time the prisoners were assured of continued health care at public expense for at least the next nine months.<sup>27</sup> Another area of success was the federation's growing ability to have the national government take its views and demands seriously. The federation enjoyed a string of favorable political developments in 1946 and 1947, all of which can be, at least to some degree, attributed to its growing influence. The first of these developments was the creation of the *Ministère des Anciens Combattants et Victimes des deux Guerres* (M.A.C.V.G.) in 1946. Laurent Casanova, a man much more favorably inclined to the F.N.C.P.G. than Henri Frenay, was appointed the first head of this new

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<sup>24</sup> The twelfth issue of *Le P.G.* (December 1945) was roughly twice as large as its usual size and entirely devoted to recounting events, debates and decisions which had occurred at the national congress.

<sup>25</sup> For more on this topic see Lewin, 90-91 and 143-57 & Cochet, 167-76.

<sup>26</sup> "*Les deportees et les prisonniers seront representes a l'Assemblee consultative,*" *Le Monde*, June, 16, 1945, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Lewin, 68-70.

ministry. In 1947 Casanova was replaced by an even more sympathetic figure, one of the founders of the F.N.C.P.G., François Mitterrand. The irony of a former F.N.C.P.G. vice president presiding over a ministry which little over a year earlier the federation had publicly demonstrated against provides one indication of the growing political prominence of the federation. Mitterrand and the members of the F.N.C.P.G. must have felt a great sense of satisfaction in the work they had done during the previous two years to bring about this turn in events. While each of these three developments were political victories for the F.N.C.P.G., a closer examination of each demonstrates why they are best understood as partial or compromise victories.

In 1946 Frenay, believing he had completed the work of the government in the repatriation and reintegration of the prisoners, workers and deportees, resigned as head of the M.P.G.D. In the spring of 1945 Frenay's ministry had opposed bringing the returnees together under the same ministry with the *anciens combattants*, arguing that the two groups lacked a "common link," and were best administered separately.<sup>28</sup> Rather than simply eliminate the ministry, as Frenay had urged, the government instead retained the offices working on behalf of the returnees and folded them into a reestablished ministry representing veterans. The combined organization was named the *Ministère des Anciens Combattants et Victimes des deux Guerres* (M.A.C.V.G.) with Laurent Casanova named as head. The creation of this ministry was a mixed result for the F.N.C.P.G. On the one hand it demonstrated the government's acceptance of the need for long-term, if not permanent, programs to address the needs of the returnees; on the other hand, as the former POWs were not recognized as *anciens combattants*, they now had a recognized category in the government's bureaucracy, that of "victims of war." Perhaps the creation

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<sup>28</sup> Cochet, 198-99.

of the M.A.C.V.G. can be seen as a way the government expanded the concept of public support for the prisoners, workers and deportees while avoiding the divisive political debate regarding who did and who did not qualify for veteran status. The creation of the ministry could also be seen as a repudiation of the point of view promoted by Frenay and others which held that the problems of the returnees should be handled as no more than a temporary humanitarian project. It was through this new ministry that the prisoners were able to secure many of the tangible benefits they sought.

Although Casanova was a communist and thus of a very different political mindset than Frenay, in ways his appointment served as confirmation of the already established molds of prejudices within the government for the prisoners. The new minister had been a POW from 1940-42, but he had escaped and spent the rest of the war actively engaged in the resistance. His appointment reinforced the viewpoint that honorable prisoners escaped. Those who remained in Germany were victims, not men meriting consideration for leadership positions in the newly reconstituted nation. Further reinforcing this pattern was the naming of Mitterrand, another escapee, as Casanova's replacement the following year.

The F.N.C.P.G. reacted positively to Casanova's appointment, if for no other reason than after its frustrating relationship with Frenay almost any change was likely to be greeted by the federation as one for the better. In an editorial published in *Le P.G.* François Mitterrand praised Casanova's early efforts to meet with federation representatives so as to better stay informed on the merits of the prisoners' concerns. The editorial implicitly contrasts Casanova's respectful attitude toward the F.N.C.P.G. and his

recognition of their concerns as legitimate with Frenay's dismissive attitude.<sup>29</sup> *Le P.G.*'s legislative update report also praised Casanova in that same newsletter, reporting on his "desire to work with the diverse organizations and, more specifically, the *quality* of his rapport with the federations and movements...." As part of this new relationship Casanova decided to take weekly meetings with the F.N.C.P.G.'s national representatives, through which "he hoped to form an effective and practical collaboration."<sup>30</sup> Almost immediately after Frenay left the ministry the tenor of dealings between the government and the F.N.C.P.G. radically changed. Where Frenay had acknowledged the existence of the F.N.C.P.G. but reacted with hostility to the federation's efforts to advocate on behalf of the prisoners, Casanova talked of his relationship with the federation as a "collaboration."

Under Casanova the former POWs made progress in several areas targeted by F.N.C.P.G. lobbying. Medical benefits, which had already been extended for political deportees but were due to expire in February 1946 for former POWs, were extended.<sup>31</sup> Some rehabilitation centers used by former prisoners suffering from long-term ailments were kept open after their original scheduled closure date.<sup>32</sup> President Félix Gouin met with representatives of the F.N.C.P.G. in February 1946, the first time the federation had been given an official audience by the head of state. Housing assistance from the government was extended for an additional twelve months, through April 1947.<sup>33</sup> The government also opened preliminary discussions with F.N.C.P.G. representative on the topics of pensions and public housing benefits. The national committee of honor

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<sup>29</sup> François Mitterrand, "A propos du nouveau ministère," *Le P.G.*, No. 17, February 15, 1946.

<sup>30</sup> "Bilan de Travaux du Comité Fédéral," *Le P.G.*, No. 17, February 15, 1946.

<sup>31</sup> R. Prigent, "Les services medico-sociaux ont obtenu un sursis," *Le P.G.* No. 18, February 1, 1946.

<sup>32</sup> "Certains centres de repos pourront rester ouverts. . ." *Le P.G.* No. 3, July 15, 1946.

<sup>33</sup> "Le problème du logement," *Le P.G.* No. 22, May 5, 1946.

instructed its regional juries to begin hearing petitions of former prisoners who were seeking recognition as members of the resistance. Apparently up to this point these juries had tabled most petitions filed by POWs without examination of their merits.<sup>34</sup>

The collaborative relationship between the F.N.C.P.G. and the government perhaps reached its peak in 1947 when François Mitterrand replaced Casanova as head of the ministry. Mitterrand, a founder of the F.N.C.P.G. and its directing vice president in 1945-46, had left his post at the federation to pursue elected office in 1946. After winning a seat in the Chamber of Deputies, Mitterrand he was named minister of the M.A.C.V.G. in Paul Ramadier's cabinet in January 1947. Taking into consideration Mitterrand's inexperience and his youth, (at 30 years Mitterrand was the youngest cabinet member) one might be tempted to read his appointment as strong evidence of the political power the returnee movement<sup>35</sup> had accumulated over the last two years. While his ties to the returnees were certainly a factor working in his favor, Mitterrand's core value to Ramadier was more likely his ability to position himself as an anti-communist left-centrist. Another consideration which calls into question the view that Mitterrand owed his appointment primarily due to his influence over the F.N.C.P.G. membership is that his relationship with much of the federation's leadership was rather cool at the time of his appointment. In late 1946 Mitterrand had precipitated a divisive debate within the federation by pushing for it to engage the government on a wide spectrum of political issues, many of which were not directly related to the former prisoners' specific needs. Mitterrand's ambitious program brought him into conflict with those federation leaders

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<sup>34</sup> Jean Bertin, "L'Honneur "Prisonnier," *Le P.G.* No. 21, April 20, 1946.

<sup>35</sup> The "returnee movement" included not only former prisoners of war, but also men and women deported as laborers, and for political or racial reasons. As covered later in this chapter, Mitterrand consistently positioned himself as the spokesperson for the larger returnee community.

who wanted to keep the organization politically neutral, and also with communists who opposed any attack which might destabilize the new republican government.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps Mitterrand's inability to have his wide-ranging vision accepted by the federation at its second national congress redirected him towards elected office in the coming months. Upon entering office Ramadier, a socialist, began a program of reducing communist control over French governmental agencies. Casanova had appointed many communists to posts within the M.A.C.V.G. and Mitterrand, upon taking over the ministry, was expected to reduce this group's influence. Rather than immediately begin work on issues prioritized by the F.N.C.P.G. Mitterrand spent his first days in office breaking a communist organized strike among ministry personnel.<sup>37</sup> Mitterrand's willingness to engage the communists was probably at least as important a factor in his securing the appointment as was his familiarity with the concerns of veterans and former POWs and his ability to mobilize these men behind the new government.

Regardless as to why Mitterrand was named minister of the M.A.C.V.G., and regardless as to the positive relationship the federation had with the outgoing Casanova, the F.N.C.P.G. immediately recognized his appointment as a triumph. *Le P.G.* article announcing Mitterrand's appointment was simply entitled, "Our Minister." Federation president Jean Bertin, while acknowledging his past differences with Mitterrand, enthusiastically embraced the new minister, writing, "It is with full confidence that we, veterans of 1939-1940, former prisoners of war, join with François Mitterrand, who recognizes our status as combattants, and our rights as prisoners." In a hand written note published by *Le P.G.* under his portrait Mitterrand positioned himself as still very much

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<sup>36</sup> Péan, 526-31.

<sup>37</sup> Bell, 24-5.

part of the prisoners' movement. "Each of us, no matter what his place, must continue to endlessly serve the goal for which we have fought so long. And for my part, this I will do."<sup>38</sup>

Mitterrand's warm note to the federation upon taking his seat at the M.A.C.V.G. was the last time he would be featured so prominently in the newsletter. A frequent theme in Mitterrand biographies is his political expediency. Outside of remaining in the left-center of French politics and his advocacy of a somewhat vaguely defined Marxist model for society, Mitterrand seemed to have very few consistent political positions throughout his forty plus years in elected office. Mitterrand built coalitions and alliances to advance his own career, or his legislative agenda, but did not display much loyalty towards parties or individuals. As he explained towards the end of his life, "I was attracted to socialism, but not by the parties that represented it."<sup>39</sup> Dogma and blind loyalty were of no use to Mitterrand. The malleability of Mitterrand's politics and alliances have made him a despised figure in French politics by many who value ideological consistency and party loyalty over pragmatic governance. It was this same pragmatism and ability to form temporary coalitions which allowed Mitterrand to build a very successful political career spanning five decades. This trait was already evident in 1947. While the F.N.C.P.G. continued to have a good working relationship with the M.A.C.V.G. throughout Mitterrand's tenure, and progress was made in some of the federation's targeted areas, such as pensions and recognition, overall the working relationship between the federation and the ministry does not appear to have significantly changed from what it had been during Casanova's ministry. Rather than be "Our Minister" as the F.N.C.P.G. had hoped,

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<sup>38</sup> Jean Bertin, "Notre Ministre," *Le P.G.*, No. 22, February 1, 1947. Underlining added by author.

<sup>39</sup> Pierre Péan, *Une jeunesse française; François Mitterrand, 1934-1947*, (Paris: Fayard, 1994), 528.

in office Mitterrand balanced the needs of the government he served with those of his former colleagues. His tempered style of administration allowed him to spend ten of the next fourteen years serving in a variety of ministerial posts under a series of governments.

While the F.N.C.P.G. was able to incrementally win tangible benefits for the former POWs, their “Battle for Honor” was less successful. As this campaign developed it increased the separation between the prisoners and the larger deportee community. Rather than embrace the communal legacy of suffering and join with the labor deportees to work on mutually beneficial goals, the prisoners instead attempted to put the captivity behind them, to rid themselves of what many among them saw as the lingering shame of being defined by their defeat and captivity instead of being simply remembered as veterans. The ability to carry a card identifying oneself as an *ancien combattant* carried great weight with many former prisoners. Few countries match the level of reverence France holds for her veterans. Free admission to museums, reserved seats on trains, the respectful attention of civil servants, these are just some of the small ways honor is rendered in France to a veteran. The status of veterans in French society reached its peak during the late-1920’s and 1930’s. During these years large veterans associations won for their members benefits and the deference of political and cultural leaders. Veterans were looked upon as men who had earned an elevated moral position within French society, men due respect.<sup>40</sup> Winning recognition as *anciens combattants* would provide the former prisoners with tangible benefits, but more important to the members of the F.N.C.P.G. were the moral aspects of this recognition. A government decision to deny the former

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<sup>40</sup> See for example Antoine Prost, *In the Wake of War, Les Anciens Combattants and French Society 1914-1939*, (Oxford: Berg, 1992), 27-50 & 95-115.

prisoners this status in 1945 was seen by many as tantamount to a declaration that their military service had not been valuable, not worthy of recognition, perhaps not even honorable. When this policy decision was challenged by the F.N.C.P.G., the government quickly recognized that treating all former POWs without any regard for their service was an untenable position.<sup>41</sup>

The former prisoners had expected to spend their first years back in France helping rebuild the nation, not fighting for a recognition they had expected as a matter of course. As documented in chapter two, the vast majority of the former POWs had either surrendered under the orders of superior officers or during the gray week following Marshal Pétain's national call for an end to the fighting and the actual armistice. Most could argue, with considerable justification, that they had relatively little control over the circumstances of their surrender. The F.N.C.P.G. referring to this campaign as their "Battle for Honor" was a telling word choice. The former prisoners were not only fighting to overturn a government policy decision related to tangible benefits, they were also engaged on the intangible plane where shared memory is constructed. To serve the former prisoners' postwar needs the F.N.C.P.G. found it necessary to defend their service in 1940 by combating misconceptions and negative stereotypes. Starting in 1945 the F.N.C.P.G. was engaged in the construction of history, or, if you prefer, in the deconstruction of an early draft of history.

The provisional government went through a slow process of re-examining its policies towards the former POWs, evidenced by the expansion of benefits offered from 1945 forward. As this re-examination process was beginning, a public debate centering upon the appropriateness of recognizing the former prisoners as veterans on an equal

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<sup>41</sup> For more on the F.N.C.P.G.'s campaign for the "*carte du combattant*" see Lewin, 178-89.

basis with veterans of other conflicts was also underway. Several important political groupings in France, among them veterans of the First World War and spokespersons of the *combattant* resistance, urged that if the prisoners were to be treated as *anciens combattants* this deference should be granted selectively based upon what the individual had done in 1940 while in uniform.<sup>42</sup> Some of the criteria proposed included only granting veteran status to men who had served in combat units for a period of 90 days, and only to men who had served in units which had actually been involved in combat. These restrictions were proposed by the *Union Française des Anciens Combattants* (UFAC), the World War I veterans association and were similar to the standards used by this organization to determine qualification for membership. For a World War I soldier to qualify for a *carte du combattant* he had to have served for at least 90 days in a combat zone. Since the 1940 campaign only lasted six weeks, and since the UFAC did not recognize time spent in captivity as service time, this 90-day restriction would have disqualified almost all French soldiers who fought in 1940 from being recognized as *combattants*.<sup>43</sup>

The value judgment driving the debate over the awarding of the *carte du combattant* was that soldiers who did not fight, or who only fought for a short period of time, did not deserve to be recognized as having served the nation. Under the UFAC proposal the only French soldiers who served in 1940 who would have received recognition would have been those few who had managed to somehow rejoin the struggle against Germany after 1940 by joining a recognized *combattant* resistance organization or the reformed French Army. These were possibilities simply not open to the majority of

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<sup>42</sup> Cochet, 167-71.

<sup>43</sup> Lagrou, 42-3.

prisoners who spent the war in Germany. Much of the public discourse surrounding this debate belittled the efforts of the French soldiers of 1940. The former prisoners saw themselves represented as ineffective and cowardly soldiers who had failed to live up to the standards set by their fathers in the trenches of World War I, and who now lacked the grace to quietly fade back into civilian life. A regular feature in *Le P.G.* was the reprinting of particularly disparaging articles about the former prisoners which had been printed in other French newspapers, followed by a brief editorial response. A particularly prominent example of the low regard many French leaders held for the prisoners was Charles De Gaulle's reaction at being reminded of his own captivity during the First World War by a delegation of former prisoners in 1945. According to a witness, the normally detached head of state "unleashed his fury" at the reference. To De Gaulle, Frenay, and many others, the prisoners were a reminder of defeat and Vichy politics.<sup>44</sup>

The central goal of the F.N.C.P.G.'s "Battle for Honor," winning official recognition of the prisoners as *anciens combattants*, was never fully achieved. At least the government ensured that the former prisoners would not be recognized as belonging to the same category as the veterans of their father's generation. Before 1945 the French government had issued a *carte du combattant* to all wartime veterans. Rather than issue this card to the former POWs, the government initially printed and awarded a new card to the ex-captives which identified them not as *anciens combattants* but as former POWs. When the F.N.C.P.G. took issue with these cards the government then proposed replacing them with a card which identified their holders as "*combattants du 39/40.*" This card would have effectively denied time spent in captivity was also time spent in military service and would have separated French soldiers who fought in 1940 from those who

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<sup>44</sup> Cochet, 130-31.

fought in World War I and in the later stages of World War II. In the end the federation's efforts stalled with the government's agreement, facilitated by Mitterrand, to issue a newly created identity card to all former prisoners which identified them as a "*combattant de 39-45*." Missing from this card was the simple identification of their holders as *anciens combattants*, as was any association they had with other veterans.<sup>45</sup> Included on the "*combattant de 39-45*" cards were dotted lines on which were recorded the unit the card holder was attached to, his induction date, and his dates of captivity. When this information was included the card could not be presented without identifying the holder as a former POW.

The F.N.C.P.G. saw the recognition of the former POWs as *combattants* on their identification cards as a victory, but a partial one, due to the qualified manner in which the recognition was offered. The men who served in 1940, and who in many cases spent the next five years in German captivity, were categorized as a separate type of *combattants*, distinct from the larger community of veterans that had been held in such high regard. Nevertheless, the F.N.C.P.G. recognized the recognition of the former POWs as *combattants* as a meaningful improvement over the initial government plan to leave them completely unrecognized, and later to issue them a card which only identified them as prisoners of war. The inclusion of the term *combattant* removed some of the stigma from these cards.<sup>46</sup>

One aspect of the entire "Battle for Honor" and the F.N.C.P.G.'s long fight for the *carte du combattant* which many of the prisoners found particularly bewildering was that their honor, their loyalty to their homeland, was being judged, by-in-large, based upon

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<sup>45</sup> Lagrou 41-7.

<sup>46</sup> Lewin 178-79.

what had happened during a few days in May or June of 1940, while their behavior during the subsequent five years in captivity was ignored. The arguments against their being recognized as veterans harkened back to the distinctions between prisoners based on their “capture identity” described in chapter two. While the public discourse over recognition focused on their service and capture in 1940, among the prisoners themselves, these matters had declined in importance as their captivity wore on. Within the society formed by French POWs in Germany, the other method of categorization described in chapter two, their “captivity response identity,” had much more come to define how they saw their conduct during the war. Prisoners differentiated one another primarily based not on how they were captured, but on how they conducted themselves as a prisoner- on their mental approach to captivity. The postwar public discourse described above overlooked all aspects of the prisoners’ behavior from 1940 through 1945 save successful escape attempts. Prisoners who had happened to be assigned to a unit which saw extensive combat would have presumably been recognized as more deserving of honor and benefits than those who had been assigned to units which saw less or no combat. This would have been true even if the first prisoner spent the entire war actively promoting collaboration and the later had spent the same years working to the best of his abilities against German war aims. While this debate was going on the F.N.C.P.G. conducted a similar process of passing judgment on the conduct of individual prisoners. The F.N.C.P.G. evaluated the men based not upon their conduct during 1940, but upon their conduct throughout their captivity, on their “captivity response identity.” The F.N.C.P.G. formed an “Honor Jury” to review and pass judgment on former prisoners suspected of dishonorable conduct. These juries reviewed charges against former

prisoners for such activities as active collaboration, denunciations, buying favor with the Germans for early release or special treatment, spreading Vichy and/or German propaganda, and, in the case of officers, volunteering to work. These “trials,” or perhaps more properly “reviews” as these evaluations were not state sanctioned, resulted in a list of approximately 5,765 former POWs guilty of dishonorable service from the federation’s perspective. If these men were members of the F.N.C.P.G. they were expelled and the list was turned over to the government as individuals which the F.N.C.P.G. did not believe were due recognition as veterans. Based on surviving records it appears that the most common offenses were denunciation of fellow POWs (or informing) and collaboration with the Germans.<sup>47</sup>

While the F.N.C.P.G. was unable to win the full recognition as *anciens combattants* which the former prisoners’ desired, it found more success in its pursuit of another intangible goal- increasing the public’s and medical community’s awareness of the long-term physical and mental dysfunctions many of prisoners had developed while in captivity or shortly after their return to France.

A large portion of the French returnees of 1945 suffered from conditions which today would likely be recognized as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (P.T.S.D) or Chronic Depression. The nature of a soldier’s homecoming is considered by many researchers to be one of the key factors in determining if he or she will develop post-war social or psychological dysfunctions. According to this view, a homecoming which provides a veteran with stability, support and validation will decrease the likelihood of developing

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<sup>47</sup> Lewin, 144-57. To the best of the author’s knowledge the French government did not treat those prisoners included on this list differently from other prisoners. The list was treated as the creation of a private institution.

these problems. A homecoming lacking these attributes produces the opposite result.<sup>48</sup> I believe the disappointing homecoming experience of the prisoners is linked to the development or exacerbation of the problems which plagued many of them.

It was quickly noticed that a significant number of the returnees were not bouncing back from their captivity. Alexander Werth, a resident of Paris in 1945, wrote that it was clear to him and many other French citizens that the captivity had “done something” to many of the former POWs, men he describes as having returned from Germany “more or less alive.”<sup>49</sup> Many of the former prisoners felt they were looked down upon. They remembered being referred to as the “soldiers of the raised hands,” “collaborators” or even as “traitors.” They believed that an enormous gap had developed in the people’s perception between the “glorious victors of 44/45” and the “shameful combatants of 39/40.”<sup>50</sup> Historian Yves Durand wrote of a widespread culture of “anxiety” among the newly returned men, a sense among them that they had to justify themselves to their countrymen. Many returning prisoners formed the impression that the nation did not accept their problems as real, and that following their liberation they were on their own in sorting out their lives.<sup>51</sup> Many developed the sense that their sacrifices, even the sacrifices of their companions who had died during the war, were forgotten.

Even among loved ones many prisoners felt completely alone and had little hope of

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<sup>48</sup> See Shira Maguen et al., “Predictors and Prevalence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Among Military Veterans,” in Adler, Amy, et. al. eds., *Military Life: The Psychology of Serving in Peace and Combat, Volume 2: Operational Stress*, (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006), 160-62; Ben Shephard, *A War of Nerves: Soldiers and Psychiatrists in the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 390-96; Donald Meichenbaum, “Core Psychotherapeutic Tasks With Returning Soldiers: A Case Conceptualization Approach,” In Sharon Morgillo Freeman, et. al. eds., *Living and Surviving in Harm’s Way; A Psychological Treatment Handbook for Pre- and Post-Deployment of Military Personnel*, (New York: Routledge, 2009), 202-03.

<sup>49</sup> Alexander Werth, *France 1940-1955*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956), 250-51.

<sup>50</sup> François de Lannoy, *La Libération des Camps: Un million de prisonniers de guerre français, Mai 1945*, (Bayeux: Editions Heimdal, 1995), 158; Durand, 515-28; and Cochet 168-71.

<sup>51</sup> Durand, 521.

bridging this chasm of incomprehension. Many who wanted to speak about their captivity believed they would be hard pressed to find a willing audience. They believed they had become, in historian François de Lannoy's words, "the scapegoats on whom the French people pushed off the sins of a shameful period in their history, a period they would rather forget."<sup>52</sup> Many prisoners soon learned that, to reintegrate into French society, it was best that they ignore the insults and slights, rid themselves of the hopes they had built up in captivity, and accept the new order of things.<sup>53</sup> François Mitterrand remembered a less humiliating reception in 1942, but one that encouraged silence on the prisoners' part none the less: "I fear that they speak about the prisoners like they speak about the dead; praising their merits, singing their praises, but seeing as their best quality that they no longer interfere with the living."<sup>54</sup>

Not surprisingly many returning prisoners fell into a dysfunctional mental state upon their return. The former prisoners suffered from elevated levels of substance abuse, higher levels of unemployment and divorce, and tended to be more likely to commit domestic abuse and suicide, or engage in criminal activity.<sup>55</sup>

With the recognition that something was "not right" with many of the prisoners, and the desire to help them recover, the government initially focused on lingering problems believed to be the result of damage done to the former captives' respiratory, digestive and nervous systems by poor living conditions and diets of the captivity. A voluntary health survey conducted by the Department of the Seine and the Ministry of Public Health between July and November 1945 on the department's 205,905 returnees

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<sup>52</sup> de Lannoy, 158.

<sup>53</sup> See for example Durand, 520-21; Cochet, 192-94 & de Lannoy, 159.

<sup>54</sup> François Mitterrand, "Politiques," 11, as quoted in Lewin, 284, n22.

<sup>55</sup> Fishman, 150-65 & Cochet, 177-94.

(86,624 of who participated) found approximately a third of the former prisoners who responded (11,705 out of 31,354) suffering from some lingering malady. While only two were listed as suffering from serious mental illness, large numbers reported problems which are associated with P.T.S.D. and depression, such as excessive fatigue, high-blood pressure or hyper-tension and the apparently catch-all condition of “injured nervous systems.” A follow up study the following year found about half as many reported problems (14,805 out of 86,006), but perhaps surprisingly, the number listed with severe mental illness had grown to fifty-three.<sup>56</sup> Additional planned follow-up surveys of these same returnees were not conducted, perhaps due to budgetary constraints. Other studies on French POWs during the next five years also indicate a high rate of problems likely of a psychiatric nature. A study of six hundred former POWs conducted between 1946 and 1950 reported finding subjects suffering from “melancholia, manic fits, hyper-emotionality, anxiety attacks, nervous crises, crying fits, profuse sweating, . . . trembling, . . . and sexual dysfunction.”<sup>57</sup> In her invaluable study of the prisoners’ wives, Sarah Fishman found that sixteen of the forty-nine women she spoke with reported their husbands suffering from what she described as “analogous psychological states.” “Most frequently, the women described the repatriated prisoners as bitter (*aigri*); other descriptions included hardened, uncommunicative (*renfermé*), irritable, and aggressive. . . others fell into a state of depression and became somber and oversensitive.”<sup>58</sup>

The issue of prevalence is highly relevant to this discussion. It is not surprising at all that one would find large numbers of former POWs suffering from some form of

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<sup>56</sup> Ministère de la Sante Publique, *Le contrôle medical des rapatriés dans le department de la Seine; Bilan sanitaire et social*, (Paris: Louis Arnette, 1947).

<sup>57</sup> Sarah Fishman, *We Will Wait: Wives of French Prisoners of War, 1940-1945*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 153.

<sup>58</sup> Fishman, 153.

psychiatric dysfunction following their captivity. That these types of problems were an almost inevitable consequence of war and captivity was a reality not lost on the provisional government officials planning for the repatriation. A study by the M.P.D.R. in August 1944 warned that insufficient attention was being paid to preparations for psychiatric care for returning prisoners and deportees.<sup>59</sup> Despite the experience of the First World War and the 1944/45 preparations, insufficient though they proved to be, the French government and medical community reacted as if they were surprised by the extent of the problem. An analytical study of the prevalence of psychological problems among the returning prisoners is simply not possible. Psychiatric diagnosis common today, such as P.T.S.D. and depression, simply did not exist in 1945. Even if these diagnoses had existed, no study more comprehensive than the Seine survey was undertaken, and this survey suffered from several methodological shortcomings. It was voluntary, so individuals could self-select out. Of those individuals who did participate, some did so via paper forms, other via office visits, and still others via home visits. The examiners had no expertise in identifying psychiatric problems, and for the most part were focused on better defined ailments such as tuberculosis and ulcers. The other studies suffer from small sample size limitations.<sup>60</sup>

While the prevalence of psychiatric problems among the prisoners' can not be established with any degree of accuracy through analytical means, other evidence indicates that the French people perceived more of the former prisoners as having trouble reacclimating to civilian life than they had expected. In addition to the studies described above, and the attention given to troubled former captives in *Le P.G.* and other

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<sup>59</sup> Cochet, 93.

<sup>60</sup> For more on the difficulties this topic poses to historians see Cochet, 177.

contemporary sources, a whole new area of medical research developed at this time in response to the common perception in France that the former captives were suffering long-term ailments due to their captivity.

Early accounts of these long-term ailments very possibly resulting from respiratory disease and malnutrition were grouped together with dysfunctions that today would be more likely recognized as of a psychological nature under the umbrella diagnosis of the “pathology of the deportation.” This new area of medical interest was chronicled in the pages of *Le P.G.* as early as 1946. The early research, originally prompted by the slow recovery of many of the French returnees, soon blossomed into a wider field of research which included studying similar problems in war victims in Britain, the United States, Germany, Belgium and eventually by the 1950’s, Poland. The term “pathology of the deportation” was retained into the 1950’s to describe the collective health and “social” problems war victims suffered from long after the end of the war. Following the publication of a study of 2,300 former deportees which focused on the persistent digestive problems which more than half of them were still suffering from, the first *Congrès de la pathologie des déportés* met in Paris. Beyond the digestive problems, this research concluded that a “great number” of the subjects “had succumbed” to “psychological misery.”<sup>61</sup> In 1956 the French national office for *Anciens Combattants* and the National Center for Scientific Research jointly published a book length study edited by Doctor Charles Richet. By this point former POWs had been replaced by concentration camp survivors as the primary focus on medical research, however the work stressed that military prisoners, specifically those held in WWII Stalags and Oflags, were susceptible to this pathology. The pathology was defined as involving both

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<sup>61</sup> Cochet, 189.

“medical” and “social” issues, which combined to leave its victims, even more than a decade removed from captivity, “defeated by life.” Those suffering from this pathology were described as having prematurely aged between ten and thirty years. Several of the ailments considered to be part of this pathology would today most likely be considered to be psychiatric. Among these were claustrophobia, social anxiety, avoidance of society, obsessions related to food and shelter, manic and excessive work habits, or, extreme general fatigue, feelings of excessive anguish and the desire for solitude. The report argued for recognition of these men and women as “victims of war” and thus due the same government benefits as any other individual suffering from war injury. An international conference on the pathology was held in Copenhagen in 1954 to bring together researchers from across the world, and their findings were presented at the *Conférence medico-légale internationale* later that year.<sup>62</sup>

France in 1945 was certainly not a society unaccustomed to dealing with postwar recovery. After the experience of World War I the French people and medical community had a pre-existing idea of what to expect from returning veterans and war victims. Their apparent surprise at the prevalence and depth of the prisoners’ postwar problems argues that likely more of these returning men were suffering psychiatric problems than what the French had come to expect.

Former POW Georges Hyvernaud chronicled his own struggles eloquently in his auto-biographical novel “The Cattle Car.” The book is a testament to the prisoners’ sense of waste when they looked back on the five years they left in Germany, a testament to their feelings of profound disappointment in finding their homecoming so much less than the one they had dreamed of, and their sense of helpless rage over their complete inability

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<sup>62</sup> Charles Richet and Antonin Man, *Pathologie de la Déportation*, (Paris: Plon, 1956), 11-47.

to make their fellow citizens understand the captivity. There was no romanticizing of the captivity in his work. He did not remember it as a time of purification or camaraderie. He described it as “the experience of the absurd endured on the level of daily misery by the most ordinary individuals.”<sup>63</sup> Hyvernaud used the cattle car in which he had been transported into Germany as a symbol for the inhumane journey all of Europe had embarked upon in the twentieth century. It was not a journey he had chosen, and one that as an individual he had almost no ability to control:

Maybe we are not going anywhere. We are there. That’s the way it is. A freight train crawling though an enormous silent disaster. Into it they have packed men instead of goods. The doors of the cars are fastened shut, bolted, pad-locked. Nothing like it to instill in you the feeling of an inevitable fate. . . [It is a title] that show[s] how we people are jammed into and lost inside the unintelligible, inside dark emptiness. Those who struggle and those who don’t put up a fight. And those who explain where they are and where they are going, as if they knew, as if the situation their buddies were in didn’t apply to them.<sup>64</sup>

When asked by a friend why he had titled his book “The Cattle Car” Hyvernaud went blank. How to explain the symbol to a man who had spent the war in his hometown? A man who had joined the resistance at the last possible moment, and was now lauded as a local hero and charged with designing the town’s new memorial honoring the men and women who died in their struggle against German oppression.

You submit uncomprehendingly, you scream justifications in the face of people who are deaf, . . . In the end you resign yourself and shut up. I thought of my landlady. Of the masses. Of all those people buried inside the mass of people locked up within events and things. I thought of [my fellow prisoners], of my buddies from 1940. Of the snow-covered plains [of his Pomeranian work site.] Of the freight trains that used to flow like slow gray worms over the dead face of Europe.

Hyvernaud’s captivity did not end with his return to France in 1945. Nor did that of so many of his compatriots. Lacking the Vichy-era misrepresentations of the captivity;

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<sup>63</sup> Georges Hyvernaud, *The Cattle Car*, (Evanston: Marlboro Press/Northwestern, 1997), 98.

<sup>64</sup> Hyvernaud, 95, 144.

lacking the official and daily attacks on their honor; perhaps benefiting from the support of a ministry more prepared and willing to help them re-acclimate to civilian life, Hyvernaud and his fellow prisoners might have found communicating with their fellow countrymen a less insurmountable undertaking.

### **Conclusion**

By documenting the circumstances of capture in 1940, the conditions of captivity from 1940-45, the adverse effects of the Vichy regime's propaganda campaign and the provisional government's repatriation policies, this study has demonstrated why the captivity is best studied as an event which started in the battlefields of France and Belgium in 1940 and continued well after the end of hostilities. It has challenged misunderstandings about the mass surrenders of 1940 and the treatment of the prisoners in Germany. It has placed their reception back in France within the context of their full war experience, and in so doing, has made the provisional government's policies and the French people's attitudes towards the prisoners more comprehensible. It has shown that the primary goal of the prisoners' postwar political lobbying campaign was recognition as honorable veterans. The chronological and geographic scope of this study, as well as the enormous number of individuals, policies and events involved, inevitably has resulted in some areas being less fully explored than the author would have hoped for in a more perfect situation. Despite its imperfections, this study makes a significant and original contribution to the study of France during the era of the Second World War, the treatment and employment of prisoners of war during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Vichy regime domestic policies and practices, the reconstruction of French national identity during the liberation era, and the consequences of governmental policies on veteran reintegration.

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