"The Last Soldiers of the Great War": Article from *Die Zeit* (October 13, 1955)

Abstract

One result of Chancellor Adenauer's trip to Moscow in the fall of 1955 was the release of the last 10,000 German prisoners of war from Soviet labor camps. Their arrival at the Friedland reception camp in Lower Saxony more than ten years after the end of the war was an emotional moment, not only for their families, but for many West Germans as well. However, this report in the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* suggested that integrating the former soldiers would be challenging, given the profoundly altered conditions of postwar society.

Source

The Last Returnees from Soviet Prisoner of War Camps Came Back to Germany in the Fall of 1955

A Report by Jan Molitor

Did we think there was peace? Peace for ten years already? The last soldiers of the Great War are only returning home now.

On Sunday at noon, when thousands of people waiting at camp Friedland suddenly turned their eyes to the distant country road on the hillside, they saw seventeen heavy buses slowly approaching, followed by a long line of private cars. The bell began ringing in the camp. The waiting crowd did not move. Tears were rolling down some of the faces. One after another, the buses finally reached the "welcome site" and circled around; now one could clearly see the passengers. They looked down out of the windows at us with serious expressions, young and old men, some had flowers in their hands; all waved with small, tight, helpless movements, held their lower arms stiffly and turned their hands at the wrist. One heard the scream of an old woman who recognized her son . . .

Was it this that made you choke up? Suddenly a man stood there in worn-out pilot's blue and looked at you, said something, too, some kind of meaningless soldier's words. One should have answered him! But one was all choked up. He turned away. I looked down at my suit. . . it's not that I was embarrassed about the creases in my pants, but . . .

When I had caught up with the man in pilot's blue, other returnees joined in the middle of the throng, and we pushed ourselves forward through the crowd; somebody would now give a speech of welcome. Finally, the men stood in fairly closed ranks. Suddenly the knot in the throat relaxes, because one finally understands that incomprehensible thing that had made everyone remain quiet at the sight of these men: they were still under the law of their soldiers' habits – ten years after the war. "In that outfit," I said very unnecessarily about the pilot's blue, "I ran around and flew around for years myself. Strange that the stuff lasts so long." – "It was lying in some box; I'm not a flier, am a tank man . . ."

He listened attentively to words of welcome from the Minister President of Lower Saxony, Hellwege, folded his hands when Bishop Lilje had the "Lord's Prayer" recited, nodded when the honorary president of the Bundestag, Mrs. Lüders, said: "Do not be impatient with your family members," and applauded excitedly and called "Bravo" and "Yes" when Vice-chancellor Blücher spoke of the need to thank the chancellor.

“We are the last soldiers of the Great War,” said the speaker of the returnees. “We cry and are not ashamed of our tears. . . ,” and he spoke of the many, many graves into which they placed their dead, and said that they themselves, the few survivors, had been sustained by the love of the Germans back home. When the national anthem was sung, the man standing next to me joined in with a strong voice: “*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*,” and then stopped suddenly when a young girl sang in a loud soprano: “*Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit*.” He looked around and turned his old soldier’s cap in his hand. He had missed ten years . . .

The pilot blue tank man, as well as all the others, tried to strike up a conversation with everyone who stood nearby. They were trivial conversations. “It’s nice that the sun is shining. You have some fine warm weather here . . . When we left Sverdlovsk ten days ago, it was twenty degrees below zero. . .” Such were the conversations. People spoke about the weather. Common soldiers spoke with civilians outside over the barracks fence: this is how it was. Women and children, and men with handmade signs on poles walked through the crowd as well: “Who knows something about . . . ;” followed by the name, rank, field post number. Sometimes women approached the last soldier: “Please, please, is Karl Müller among you?” – “Can’t be here, my dear woman. We are the letters A and B and W and H-G.” The last soldiers were released according to the alphabet, the Russian alphabet; and since the Russians have no H, but always use a G instead, they ended up with the combination H-G. The very last core of the German eastern forces, kept back for ten years, mostly against any human law, often thrown together in the penal camps with people of all the nations on Russian soil, in a confusion that nobody, not even the Russian jailers, could keep track of, and then released according to the alphabet: thus was barbarism married to bureaucracy.

Two scenes from the “welcome place” should also be recorded: “Man, Jupp, old buddy – that you also came on this transport!” – “Man, Paul, old goofball, I’ve already been here two years.” – The other, who is wearing a blue quilted jacket, slaps his forehead. “Right, Jupp! I was taken off the transport again two years ago. Well, how are things here? You are all spruced up, Jupp.” – “It’s what it is, Paul. And when you come to Bochum, you always have a place to stay. . .”

An elderly man with white hair and a woolen jacket stands next to bus number 15; he has a bouquet of wildflowers in his chapped hand, carries the flowers upright, and it looks as though he is holding onto them. Stared at by those around him, he cries uncontrollably and groans: “We drove through my homeland, and now I am here.” – “And why not,” Paul comforts him. “You’ve got your family in the West! Man, you were completely sensible during the trip. And now you’re flipping out?” – “I hadn’t though about it,” says the sobbing soldier, “I drove through our district city. I kept thinking: home is home. . .” – “Yeah, you don’t need to think.”

Slowly the contact between “soldiers” and “civilians” broke off. The returnees stood around in groups. They retrieved their belongings in groups from the parked buses; they walked over to the barracks in groups. For them, the war has just now ended. We others watched them. Their movements, their posture, their groupish togetherness were at once familiar and simultaneously alien to us. We were seeing once more the final stage of the Great War.

“Boys, you’re lucky,” called a brisk voice. “You’re getting 6,000 Marks and a *Kulturbeutel* [toiletry bag].” – One of the men in a blue cotton wool jacket stopped, looked at the man who had called out, and tapped his forehead . . . (The 6,000 Marks, of which those who came to welcome the returnees spoke fairly often, are state grants. “*Kulturbeutel”* must be a term that came to Friedland from the Russian language: it contains soap, a sponge, shaving supplies, toothpaste, and the like, and the phrase reminds me that the Russians call a park with monuments and lemonade stalls a “culture park,” and that they call a water closet a “culture loo”.)

Between the barracks and behind the camp fence, elderly, shy gentlemen are walking about, wearing,

not wool jackets, but quilted blankets, or faded uniform jackets, but blue . . . “Sunday suits” with hats: from that you can recognize the returnees from the general transports from camp Voikovo. Thus dressed up in bourgeois guise, they had been allowed to go on a tour of the city at the transit stop in Moscow, and experienced that representatives of the Soviet authority quickly tried to make nice with them. It is not only that in the classless state the generals’ ranks were marked by bourgeois suits and packets of caviar – some of the men, who were thought to be prominent individuals, were even asked to sign a guestbook. One of the generals responded: “Since when do hangmen ask their offenders to sign the guestbook?”

Only Seydlitz thanked the Soviets for their benefactions, Seydlitz, about whom one was warned at parties during the “Third Reich”: “Not a word against Hitler, Seydlitz is coming: he is loyal to Hitler!,” and who then, in captivity, signed the black-white-red bordered flyers that called upon German troops to defect to the Soviets. Having arrived in Friedland, he then gave those now all-too-well-known speeches about the “German Reich” and Soviet-German friendship, which he supposedly discovered a decade before Adenauer did . . . In Friedland he said: “I want to become a politician,” in Verden: “I have no intention of becoming a politician.” – But one of the returnees, a former colonel, said about all of this: “There are more of these gentlemen, who once wore black-white-red with the swastika and today think that black-white-red with the hammer and sickle is a flag with a future. They then talk about Rapallo and the Seeckt tradition. Oh, my friend, there is much in the making that is more interesting than the idle question of why we – we, of all people – were kept for ten years in penal and hush-camps. . .”

The matadors among the first transports were Baur, because he was the “Führer’s” pilot, and a harmless and shabby-looking little man who had been Hitler’s valet and who now promised the foreign journalists that he would soon write his memoirs. And he was already eagerly writing down addresses of people he should contact once his work was finished. . .

Incidentally: the Soviets keep their word. About 2,000 returnees have come to Germany by now; the majority came to the West; many, who belonged to central Germany [i.e. East Germany] kept going westward when they saw that the officers of the People’s Police forbade the population from welcoming their last soldiers of the Great War. One said: “I calmly told the policeman who wanted to keep me in Fürstenwalde: ‘There are twenty punches hanging in the air. How many shall I pick for you?’ . . . But now? What do we do now? I don’t know a soul here in the West, nobody.’” – “There is plenty of work.” – “Good, then we’ll see,” said the soldier and gave his soldier’s cap to a child: “Do you want a souvenir? Here you are . . .”

Source: “Die letzten Soldaten des Großen Krieges”, *Die Zeit*, October 13, 1955.

Translation: Thomas Dunlap

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