

# The Psychological and Physical Condition of Prisoners of War Returning from the East (undated report)

## Abstract

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At the end of World War II, millions of German men were being held as prisoners of war in Allied camps. While the Western Allies released their prisoners fairly quickly, the Soviet Union put its prisoners to work as part of German reparations and did not release the last Germans until 1955. This report from the returnee hotel Willingen, a church-run facility in Hesse, describes the disastrous physical and psychological effects of the harsh living conditions in Soviet labor camps.

## Source

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### Observations and Experiences in the Returnee Hotel Willingen

#### I. The Eastern returnee

His psychological makeup. He is a person who has been affected to a special extent, in part by his terrible existence as a prisoner in Russia, in part, however, also by the completely different way of life in that country. His nature and facial expression have become Russian.

He arrives in tatters. Deep-set eyes peer out of a pale, yellow face, as though his life and soul have been extinguished. Without any apparent inner interest he stands where he is put and waits indecisively for commands, which he then mechanically carries out. In terms of emotional stirrings, he knows only strong insecurity and mistrust toward everyone. If he sees things that seem desirable or somehow useful to him, an unrestrained yearning breaks out (food, clothing, gadgets).

Psychological explanation: the terrible experience compelled

emotional withdrawal;

the most brutal exploitation of all possibilities of preserving one's own life. – Wolf pack morality –

Serious psychological complexes and repressions have developed. Captivity did not chasten or improve these men. They have lost much of their real humanity. They have become Dostoevskian natures. The 'flotsam' of the Eastern returnees comes to us: the homeless, people who are completely bombed out, people who have lost their families. Anyone who still has someone [to go to] is rarely willing to come to us, since the last ounce of energy drives him to his relatives.

Examples of what has been described:

In the Munster camp, two returnees who were fighting over a cigarette butt were rebuked by an English sergeant. Both dropped to their knees, lifted their hands, and cried out beseechingly: "Have mercy, master!"

After being unloaded in the Munster camp, figures wrapped in rags stood cold and shivering and waited completely apathetically for further directives, while the prisoners from England who

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arrived at the same time were impatiently demanding transportation and making the necessary preparations. When their duffel bags were unloaded, several prisoners coming from Russia pushed forward and were staring with greedy eyes, lurking around to see if they might be able to abscond with something.

A young returnee arrives at the hotel on the night train, does not dare to enter the lit-up rooms, crawls into a dark room and waits until he is discovered the next morning.

**Mental support:** As the physical condition improves, the demeanor becomes more secure, the interest grows. The returnee no longer sits around for hours staring straight ahead and mentally absent; he likes to read entertaining books, is trying to get a job, likes to play a kind of table billiards (a gift from the YMCA), makes music with a variety of instruments, takes part in events: church services, music evenings, lectures, youth evenings, talks more easily now about the past, and takes a lively interest in press reports. He criticizes those who have not yet been able to give up the "Russian culture," and feels like a new, civilized person, especially after being furnished with new clothes by the Protestant relief organization in Korbach.

The returnee is broadly supported in his search for work. Job offerings from farmers, artisans, and construction companies are abundant. Permission to move in is granted by the commissioner of refugees in Giessen. So far, all 150 have been placed in accordance with their wishes. Two amputees were sent on to the retraining facility in Rotenburg o. d. Tauber (one-year training period).

Every returnee is given pocket money and paper for writing letters, as well as reimbursement for travel costs while he looks for a job. The home continues to try and establish the connection with family members that has been missing so far.

**Emotional support.** The goal is to make the especially hard-hit Eastern returnees into full members of the nation. The symptoms of psychological illness (complexes, repressions) are to be neither abreacted, nor uncovered or covered up, but should slowly attenuate. The realization that he cannot be a full human being without Christ shall be awakened in him.

Initially, the returnees are surprised by the possibility that they can recover in our home and say in astonishment: "That something like this still exists!" They feel secure, lose something of the fear of being thrown into the ruthless struggle for existence without adequate strength. They feel grateful that there still are "Christians" and are for the most part willing to participate with an open mind in the morning watch. They happily accept the letters sent to the home.

Starting points for religious care: interpretation of the Biblical text by looking at contemporary conditions and at man as he is. The Eastern returnee has lost faith in humankind. Because of his experiences, he has become a skeptic or a pessimist. We want to help him become a life- and humanity-affirming realist. He should recognize the shortcomings and abject nature of man and his institutions, and know that he himself is in need of salvation. We are to be moved by the question: "How can things be and become better in and around us?" He should experience that Christianity of action ("But be ye doers of the word") is not possible by one's own strength: "Without you we can do nothing."

Returnees enter the door, wait until they are spoken to, and then follow all orders willingly and eagerly.

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One confesses after weeks that he must make a great effort to pass by a garbage heap without rooting around in it for “useful stuff.”

At meals, all rush to the bowls, overload their plates and do not ask whether the next person will get something, even though they can all eat their fill.

They have become “stubborn,” do not make any independent decisions, shirk work if there is nothing to be “had.”

The work ethic that is otherwise part of the Germans has been lost through years of meaningless activities. (Raking leaves during a fall storm, only to have the wind immediately disperse them again; erecting walls that are then torn down the following day because of different orders . . .)

b) The physical state. All show serious famine edemas (face, abdomen, feet), some have heart and lung ailments, muscular atrophy. Ten percent were amputees.

## II. The care

a) Medical care. Following admission (creation of a personal file), a medical check-up takes place on the first day. The necessary medications are procured. The following supplementary nutrition is granted:

From the Office of Economic Affairs, a predetermined amount of butter, meat, cheese, and nutriment, as well as 1/3 of a liter of whole milk every day.

Supplements from the Protestant Relief Organization in the form of a daily morning soup (per day 100g grits, 25g sugar), and each month a total of 10kg flour for sauces (for 40 men).

Additional potatoes from voluntary donations.

Treatment of dropsy: Carell milk day, 3/4 liters of whole milk, excretion of up to 5 1/2 liters water, low-salt fare, little fluid intake (no drinks in the evening), medication.

For those whose lungs are at risk: examination at the lung sanatorium Brillon-Wald, on average 1/3 of returnees.

Those suffering heart ailments: 15%, dental treatment: 80%, directives for those wearing glasses: 10%

Success: Initially weight loss (excretion of water), then rapid weight gain within the first week. In four weeks, 25 pounds on average. The water disappears from the face, later from the abdomen, for the most part not completely from the feet. The appearance becomes fresher, the strength soon increases. In general, substantial improvement but not yet complete restoration of the former strength. Physical work begins in the third week. (Help around the house, chopping wood, helping local residents).

Source: Die psychische und physische Situation der Ostheimkehrer. (Beobachtungen und Erfahrungen im Heimkehrerhotel Willingen). Evangelisches Zentralarchiv Berlin, 39/29/47, 2/529.

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