Otto Schumacher-Hellmold on the British Occupation of Bonn, 1918–1920 (Retrospective Account, 1990)

Abstract

Otto Schumacher-Hellmold (1912–2006) reported on politics for a number of newspapers in West Germany and helped to found the centrist, liberal-democratic political party that became the FDP, later representing it as a local official and then mayor of the city of Bonn.

As a native resident of Bonn, Schumacher-Hellmold recalled in these passages some of his memories as a young boy living under the Canadian and then English occupation of his city from December 1918 to February 1920. He recounted restrictions and indignities that came with the occupation, and he pointed out the fact that the English seized some of the best buildings and facilities for their exclusive use. Still, Schumacher-Hellmold mostly remembered that he and his fellow Bonners ultimately developed a grudging respect and even affection for the English, and he fondly described his first encounter with a toaster in one of the dining halls to which some friendly English soldiers had invited him.

Source

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On December 8, 1918, the British troops occupied Bonn. The leader of the supreme army command, General Field Marshall Hindenburg, had called upon the population to receive the Entente soldiers cordially. In accordance with his wish, a city councilor in Bonn had urged the citizens to display "dignified German behavior" toward the foreign troops, and the local coalition of women's associations had issued an appeal to the women in the city that included the following sentences: "...Shame upon every citizen of Bonn who does not stay with his wife and children within his own four walls on this unfortunate day, and, should he have to go out, does not steadfastly go about his way without looking left or right. Shame upon every girl who, at late parades or similar events, does not know to contain her carnal appetites and protect her dignity from the occupiers! Our manner should be cordial, but cool and reserved!"

The behavior of population at the time was already characterized by a strong nationalistic attitude. Many did not want to acknowledge that the German army had been defeated in battle. Like the 18th Army, which had passed by Bonn during its retreat, the entire German army was considered "undefeated in the field."

Initially, it was the staff of the Canadian Expeditionary Force that settled in Bonn. The commander-in-chief, Lieutenant General Sir Arthur Currie, took up quarters in the Palais Schaumburg, the residence of the lively Princess Viktoria of Prussia. There were reports that Currie, a farmer's son, especially reveled in the fact that he was occupying the suite in the palace used by Wilhelm II on his visits to Bonn.

Little was known about closer contacts between the population of Bonn and the Canadians. When General Currie inspected a parade of the Second Canadian Division on the Rhine Bridge on December 13, 1918, the public was practically excluded. Just a few weeks later, on January 26, 1919, the Canadian troops left Bonn. The English units which followed not only occupied the barracks, but also hotels, dance halls, and private quarters, as well as hospitals and eight schools, including the convent school. Entertainment facilities, sports grounds, and bathing establishments were seized, traffic and

communications were monitored, and an obligation to salute British officers was introduced.

The reserved, formal manner of the English rubbed the population of Bonn the wrong way at first. Over time, however, the relationship improved. As a seven-year-old, I had nothing to complain about. I was a frequent guest of the British unit which was quartered in the Catholic apprentices' dorm between the Stiftskirche and the Beethoven House. My "Tommys" took me along to lunch in their dining hall several times. I found this invitation to be something extraordinary. I still vividly remember sitting there with nearly thirty soldiers at a long, bare table and being presented with dishes that were at that time rare delicacies.

Soon there were also little glimpses into the British way of life. Square, white slices of bread were unpacked before my eyes and lowered, with a squeaking sound, into a metal device that, as I later reported at home, "glowed like our kitchen stove when it had been stoked all the way up." A short while later, the bread, lightly brown, sprang out of the box with a "click," and they spread it with butter and a tart, aromatic marmalade that tasted like nothing I had ever had. A slice of toast with jam has never again tasted as good to me as it did in those days.

After that, my "Tommy" took out a square wooden board, about as big as the palm of your hand, with a slit in the middle. He lined up the golden buttons of my sailor suit in the slit and polished them with a paste until they shone.

From 7 o'clock in the evening until 6 o'clock in the morning was curfew, and it was strictly enforced. What were my mother and brother Willy to do when, upon their return to Bonn one evening from a successful foraging trip, their train was significantly delayed and the curfew had begun?

Because they did not see any control points in front of the station, they hurried along their way, up the Poststrasse, turned, out of breath, into Münsterstrasse, and stopped for a short break on the right side in front of the Berliner Hof (today a Hertie department store), where they put down their heavy purchases. They thought they would be safe in this side street, but disaster was already approaching. Suddenly a British officer was standing in front of them: "Inspection!" My mother, who spoke English quite well, explained truthfully to him that the train had been late and that the unusually large quantity of potatoes was meant for her six children in age from 3 to 16, and that their father had not yet returned from the war.

And then the unbelievable happened: in order to prevent the two "hamsters" from being stopped for any further checks on their way home, the officer accompanied the two of them home, having hoisted the heavy sack himself and carrying it up to the front door. My brother kept in touch with him until the British troops left at the end of February 1920.

When the British entered Bonn in 1918, the *Deutsche Reichszeitung* wrote: "The behavior of the English was beyond reproach." And when they left in February 1920, they reported: "From the very beginning, they approached their task with fairness."

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Source of original German text: Otto Schumacher-Hellmold, „Prügelstrafe für Separatisten. Puck, die Patrioten und die ‚Poilus' – Bonn zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen", in *Alltag in der Weimarer Republik: Erinnerungen an eine unruhige Zeit*, ed. Rudolf Pörtner. Düsseldorf: ECON Verlag, 1990, pp. 376–78.

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Recommended Citation: Otto Schumacher-Hellmold on the British Occupation of Bonn, 1918–1920 (Retrospective Account, 1990), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/weimar-germany-1918-1933/ghdi:document-5391> [March 16, 2026].