

Methodism and the War Prisoners

BY REV. FRANK BAKER, B.A., B.D.

THIEF inhuman number of German and Japanese soldiers still captive in the hands of the United Nations, a year after hostilities have ceased, has caused consternation in many quarters. The realization that the prisoners are uncultured and in some cases the unwisdom, of speedy repatriation. One realizes, also, that the lot of the modern prisoner of war is not one of unrelieved misery. Many of them are able to use his energy or his skill—and earning a few tiny extras for himself—in agriculture, building, and other occupations. The prisoner of war can be a more useful and harmonious part in his community when he does eventually return home. Many people are concerned that the United Nations are slow and feel urgently that the time has come for providing better conditions of captivity and for ending that captivity speedily. The civilised conscience has been made sensitive about the rights of the underdog.

It was not always so. Primitive peoples slaughtered their captured enemies without compunction, whether in the fighting zone or not. We can see this in the Old Testament. For many days prisoners of war provided a source of cheap slave-labour. Only gradually did the idea of the rights of the captured soldiers develop, and it was not until the Hague Convention of 1907 that the best international customs in this regard were adopted by the signatory nations. Article IV of the Convention laid down the basic principle that captives must be humanely treated, and that they are to be given detailed regulations to achieve this end. Tested out in the 1914-18 war, and found to be sound, the Convention provided a code was drawn up by the International Law Association and adopted at the 1921 Hague Conference. But the Convention was not a deterrent to the terrible outrages on prisoners during this recent war, and in addition to revising the means of enforcing the law, it is urgently necessary to

Great Britain's record has on the whole been one of which we can be proud. Errors of judgment, examples of individual harshness, there have undoubtedly been, but they have been comparatively few and unimportant, and the signal for public outcry. Citizens of other countries, through blunders of their own, have been obliged to avert their eyes from prison-camp sadism, or just pretend it wasn't there. But we have learned Christ differently. The bludgeoned stranger, even though he be a Jew, and we Samaritans, demands our attention and our help. We will not let our battle with the fellow-citizens to see that he is given fair treatment.

THIS British love of "fair play," for the prisoner of war as well as for others, owes its being to our respect for practical Christianity, and in its development Methodism has played a worthy part.

At the opening of the Seven Years

War in 1756, when fear of invasion from France mounted to panic proportions, John Wesley could offer to raise a Methodist Militia to drive the French back into the sea. But when three years later the bedraggled French soldiers landed in their thousands on these shores—as captives—that was quite a different matter. He was soon to be their outstanding protector and champion.

There had been the usual crop of atrocity stories about how our prisoners had been treated. Trustworthy Englishmen in France even suggested that the Germans had been deliberately killed in battle. One topical book issued that year, by a certain Richard Lee, Esq., was *Treatise on Captures at Sea*.

"It has been an almost generally received opinion among all the writers upon this subject, that the conqueror is to do what he pleases with the vanquished, and therefore has the power of life and death over him . . . and though the greatest of crimes, being equally as now disused among all who call themselves civilised nations, yet it is not less a general principle of the will and clemency of the conqueror, who may yet exercise that power, notwithstanding the disuse of it."

Reviewing this publication, the *Gentleman's Magazine* gently reprimanded the author for this theoretical return to barbarism, though his thesis was sound. The conditions of prisoners of war did depend on the victor's mercy—or lack of it.

SOON John Wesley was hearing terrible rumours about the treatment meted out to the French soldiers, especially in the prison-camp at Knowle, near Bristol. The rumours took various forms:—

"as that 'they were so wedged together that they had no room to breathe'; that 'the stench of the rooms where they lodged was intolerable'; that 'their food was only fit for dogs'; that 'their meat was carrion, their bread rotten and unwholesome'; and that 'in consequence of this inhuman treatment, they died in whole shoals'."

While Wesley always distrusted rumours, he felt that there was a real need for investigation. He therefore assembled a little deputation, including Mr. John Salter, of Bedminster, and Mr. James Ireland, of Horsleydown Street—the latter a fluent French

linguist. (Wesley himself, of course, looked on the French language as "the poorest and meanest in Europe.")

"...and I must needs in elzrope;"
On Monday, October 15, 1789, the self-appointed "inspector" came to prison and hospital. For Wesley cleanliness was next to godliness, and had he found the crowding and stench which he half-expected, the country would have been his. But there was no. They visited every room, and found them "all sweeter and cleaner than any prison I have seen either in England or elsewhere." The ladies were so kind as to send him some good as I ever desire to eat," while the party actually sampled the wholesome bread. As for the hospital—where there were fewer than thirty patients at the time—the twelve hundred prisoners—it was "sweeter and cleaner throughout than any hospital I ever saw in London." Wesley returned to Bristol cheered in spirit, ready to tell among his friends how good and innocent and the honour of the English nation."

THE Methodist investigators discovered one real grievance, however:—
 "A great part of these men are almost naked; and winter is now coming upon them in a cold prison and a colder climate than most of them have been accustomed to."
 Something must be done about this.

The next day at the New Room, Bristol, Wesley preached on Exodus xlii. 9—"Thou shalt not oppress a stranger"—and appealed on behalf of the French prisoners to such good effect that £18 was contributed immediately being made up to £24 on the following day. This money was spent on stockings and materials which were made up into shirts, waistcoats, and breeches for the labour; being provided partly by poor women paid at current rates, and partly by wealthier volunteers. Ireland and Salter were put in charge of the organisation, and instructed by Wesley.

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Wesley continued his campaign by "writing to the papers about it," first of all to his favourite *Lloyd's Evening Post*, pleading:—

"Will not the humanity and generosity of the gentlemen of Bristol prevent or relieve this distress? . . . Will it not be both for the honour of their city and country, for the credit of our religion, and for the glory of God, who knows how to return it sevenfold into their bosom?"

This was followed up by a letter in which he completely answered the hostile suspicions that were already aroused against him by giving details from his account-books (now, alas, lost!) of the way in which the money had been spent—even to the names and addresses of the shop-keepers! The response was good. Soon Wesley could record in his *Journal*:—

"the Corporation of Bristol sent a large quantity of mattresses and blankets; and it was not long before contributions were set on foot at London, and in various parts of the kingdom, so that I believe from this time they were pretty well provided with all the necessaries of life."

THE Frenchmen knew perfectly well who was their real benefactor, and sent him a letter of thanks. Wesley's reply to this, hitherto unpublished, is available by permission of the National Library of Scotland, and through the kindness of the Rev. Reg Hubbuck, of Edinburgh. The letter is addressed "To Mr T'ans, in Bristol," and is endorsed "Parson John Wesley's thanks for sending him the French Prisoners Letter of thanks for his collection on their behalf." The actual letter is typically brief—

"London, 11th Dec., 1759.

Sir,—I return you thanks for transmitting that Letter to me. I am glad our little service was so well accepted. If I should see Bristol again before those poor men return home, I would use what Interest I have in order to assist them a little farther. I am,

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Twenty years later, with England engaged in the War of American Independence, his *Journal* records a visit to Winchester, "where there are four thousand five hundred French prisoners." His eagle eye was satisfied with his inspection, however for he adds:—

"I was glad to find they have plenty of wholesome food, and are treated, in all respects, with great humanity."

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“Methodism and the War Prisoners.” *Methodist Recorder* (August 29, 1946): 7.

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It was not always so. Primitive peoples slaughtered their captured enemy without compunction, whether actual fighting men or not. We can see this in our Old Testament. In later days prisoners of war provided a source of cheap slave-labour. Only gradually did the modern attitude towards captured soldiers develop, and it was not until the Hague Convention of 1907 that the best international customs in this matter were made binding on all signatory nations. Article IV of the Convention laid down the basic principle that captives must be “humanely treated,” and proceeded to give detailed regulations to achieve this end. Tested out in the 1914–18 war, and found inadequate in some respects, an improved code was drawn up by the International Law Association and adopted at the 1921 Hague Conference. This, however, has not prevented some terrible outrages on prisoners during this recent war, and in addition to revision, some means of enforcing the law is urgently needed.

Great Britain’s record has on the whole been one of which we can be proud. Errors of judgment, examples of individual harshness, there have undoubtedly been, but they have been comparatively few and unimportant, and the signal for public outcry. Citizens of other countries, through callousness or fear, may have been able to avert their eyes from prison-camp sadism, or just pretend it wasn’t there. But we have learned Christ differently. The bludgeoned stranger, even though he be a Jew, and we Samaritans, demands our attention and our help. We will even do battle with our own fellow-citizens to see that he is given fair treatment.

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“It has been an almost generally received opinion among all the writers upon public justice, that the conqueror can do what he pleases with the vanquished, and therefore has the power of life and death over him ... and though

the practice of killing captives is now disused among all who call themselves civilised nations, yet, that it is not used, is generally attributed to the will and clemency of the conqueror, who may yet exercise that power, notwithstanding the disuse of it.”

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