


**Prisoners of War**  
  
*On-Line Memorial and Museum*  
**HELP WITH RESEARCH**

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### **3. The Prisoner of War Experience.**

#### **3.1 Capture and the Move to the Camps.**

For most men captured, this period of time is a reporting void unless they made their own record of it. The protections offered under the Geneva Convention may have been theoretically in place but would not in practice start until they had reached their first long-term residential camp.

No in-depth study of the experience the experience of capture and move to long-term camps is known to have been published. Reports of this time are almost exclusively at an individual level. These reports are difficult to translate into the experience of others unless there is corroborating evidence for the second prisoner being present.

For prisoners captured in Belgium/France reference can be made to the book *Dunkirk: The Men they Left Behind* by Sean Longden.

For prisoners captured in North Africa and Greece/Crete reference can be made to <https://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-WH2Pris.html>

For air force personnel there was a more defined course of process. Air force personnel were to be interrogated by Luftwaffe interrogators before being moved on to prisoner of war camps. In general this meant an initial move to Dulag Luft Oberursel where the interrogation took place. The Luftwaffe also opened Dulag Frankfurt and Dulag Wetzlar for the same purpose. Reference can be made to [Footprints in the Sands of Time](#) by Oliver Clutton-Brock. Chapter 2. Dulag Luft: December 1939-April 1945.

#### **3.2 The Camps and Associated Facilities.**

Reference to the reporting by the Protecting Power (see 5 below) and International Committee of the Red Cross (See 6 below) provides the basis for most contemporary reporting.

Newspaper reporting of this period of time was limited by wartime censorship and was based on letters sent home by prisoners that had been subject to censorship by the detaining power. This started to change as the collapse of Italy and then Germany became inevitable although wartime censorship continued to provide a restraining hand on what was published.


Studies of this part of the prisoner of war experience may be coloured by whatever hypothesis the author wishes to set out; these include the books:

- *POW: Allied Prisoners in Europe 1939-1945* by Adrian Gilbert.
- *Hitler's British Slaves: Allied POWs in Germany 1939-45* by Sean Longden.
- *The Colditz Myth: British and Commonwealth Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany* by S.P. McKenzie.
- *Confronting Captivity: Britain and the United States and Their POWs in Nazi Germany* by Arieh J. Kochavi.
- *Captives of War: British Prisoners of War in Europe in the Second World War* by Clare Makepeace.

#### **3.3 The Long March West for Those in the East.**

For those in the east of Germany 1944 and 1945 posed a new threat to their camp life. The advance of the Soviet Army towards the pre-war German borders threatened the continued existence of their camps. The German authorities determined that prisoners held in the east would not be allowed to fall into Soviet hands and that prisoners would be moved west. For most this involved a walk west through the height of winter in 1945. Those too sick to walk were provided train transport but some were too sick to be moved. Some decided to take their chance by being liberated by the Soviet Army. Some in work camps not threatened by the Soviet advance remained at work camps until May 1945.

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Once in the west the German authorities faced a similar problem from Allied forces advancing from the west. Here again the Germans sought to avoid prisoners being liberated by Allied forces and new forced marches started away from the front line.

Reporting of these events is a comparative void barring short statements of advice from the Protecting Power and International Committee of the Red Cross that prisoners were on the move across Europe.

The book *The Last Escape - The Untold Story Of Allied POWs 1944-45* by John Nichol and Tony Rennell provides an overview of these marches.

<https://www.lamsdorflongmarch.com/> provides a study of the marches from Stalag 344 Lamsdorf and Stalag VIII B Teschen. The maps of this study are complimented by the book *The Long March In Their Own Words* by Philip Baker.

### 3.4 Repatriation.

#### 3.4.1. Medical Repatriations.

Ten formal exchanges of prisoners of war were agreed during World War II.

- Between the British and Italian Governments at Smyrna on 7 April 1942.
- Between the British and Italian Governments at Smyrna and Lisbon on 12 April 1943.
- Between the British and Italian Governments at Smyrna on 12 May 1943.
- Between the British and Italian Governments at Smyrna on 2 June 1943.
- The next repatriation which should have taken place in September 1943 but was upset by the Italian capitulation. The British prisoners, who were on the point of leaving Italy for Lisbon, were in the end sent to Germany, whence their repatriation met with all kinds of difficulties.
- Between the British and German Governments at Gothenburg, Barcelona and Oran in October 1943. The Oran exchange comprised only German nationals.
- Between the British and German Governments at Barcelona on 17 May 1944.
  
- Between British and German Governments at Gothenburg on 8 and 9 September 1944.
- Between France and Germany at Constance on 1 November 1944.
- Between the Allies and Germany at Kreuzlingen in January 1945.

Some repatriations including the run-up to a repatriation were extensively covered by UK newspapers; reports of individuals repatriated appearing in local newspapers in the following weeks. A situation no doubt reflected through the Dominion and Colonial countries.

The UK National Archives catalogue shows few documents that are linked to these repatriations.

#### 3.4.2. 1945.


Consideration of plans for the repatriation of prisoners of war from Europe following the defeat of Germany commenced in 1944 under the code names ENDOR and then ECLIPSE. The presumption was an orderly collection from prisoner of war camps and movement west by land and by sea across the English Channel.

The War Office also considered the problem of the processing and treatment of prisoners of war on their return to the UK. Surviving files on ENDOR and ECLIPSE are to be found at the UK National Archives as are various versions of documents on the processing and treatment of prisoners of war after liberation.

Late in 1944 responsibility for the collection and repatriation of prisoners of war was devolved by the UK and USA Governments to SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) and in particular the Prisoner of War Executive (PWX), G1 Division which drew up the final detailed plan for repatriation activities in continental Europe.

The chaos of war as the German war machine collapsed in 1945 led to the need to abandon the collection and movement strategies of Operation ECLIPSE. Thereafter operations were conducted under the name of Operation EXODUS and emphasised repatriation by air where possible.

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Surviving files, few in number and limited in content, on Operation EXODUS are to be found at the UK National Archives.

The possible political strategy and demands of the Soviet Government had not been considered. The Yalta Agreement and subsidiary documents agreed by the UK, USA and Soviet Governments in February 1945 included arrangements for the repatriation of prisoners of war liberated by Soviet armies. While the Soviet authorities were responsible for moving liberated prisoners of war to Odessa the repatriation of prisoners of war from Odessa was added to the responsibilities of SHAEF. In practice it fell to the British War Office/Admiralty to provide shipping away from Odessa; documentation on shipping movements is found in the UK Archives Series FO, WO and ADM. See also 4.9 SHAEF (Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force) below.

### 3.5 Crime and Punishment.

As with every part of society, crime and punishment was part of the prisoner of war experience but with an added dimension; attempted escape, sabotaging the detaining power's war economy and refusal to obey orders were punishable. Prisoners of war were also subject to arbitrary mass punishments dictated by the higher echelons of the military and civilian authorities.

Within camps judgement and punishment for what were considered minor offences was the camp commandant's responsibility and in the main meant solitary detention in the camp "cooler" barracks.

#### a. In Germany.

Repeat offenders could be dealt with by German commandants by sending them to strafkommandos (punishment camps)/sonder commandos (special camps); work camps dedicated to holding repeat offenders.

For serious crime, the alleged criminality was referred to the German Military Court system. Those found guilty were sentenced to imprisonment in German Military Prisons where, as at Stalags etc, they were expected to work. There is evidence that this included being sent to work camps away from the main prison itself.

For men held in Germany punishment records may be found in German Record Cards if the Personalkarte I survives, and Liberation Questionnaires. Records of trials are rare and may simply be a summary saying that a trial was held, and the accused found guilty/not guilty together with the sentence to be served.

#### b. In Italy.

For men held in Italy the only records seem likely to be found in Liberation Questionnaires.

The Protecting Power and the International Committee of the Red Cross both visited prison facilities. Visit reports can be found at the UK National Archives for military prisons in Germany at

- Graudenz.
- Fort Zinna, Torgau.
- Brandenburg-Görden.
- Bernau am Chiemsee
- Zwickau.
- Warthenburg [now Barczewo].

And, in Italy, San Vittore prison, Milan.

All are presumed to have held British prisoners of war.