

# BRITISH ARMY OF THE RHINE

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## No. 2

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*(In the first of these pamphlets an outline was given of the tasks facing the British Occupation Forces in GERMANY. In this pamphlet an answer is given to the question "What are these people really like?")*

What are the Germans today really like? How are they living? What are they thinking about the war they have lost? What do they think of their conquerors? Which are the problems that worry them most? How do they regard the future of their country and themselves? Unless we know the answers to these questions we shall not be able to set about the tasks that face us in a realistic way. The first question to consider is "What are the main characteristics of the Germans?"

### The German Character

The British soldier has now had many opportunities of judging the German at his face value. He has seen him at work and he has seen him in his home. What is our opinion of the German character? We have found him obedient, hardworking and, on the whole, friendly and co-operative. When he has been willing to discuss politics, he has usually expressed strong anti-Nazi feelings. "He wants, like us," he says, "to live in peace with his neighbours." There is a superficial likeness between the Germans and the Anglo-Saxons which has often led to a mistaken assessment of the German character. The mentality and the outlook on life of the average German differ widely from those of the Englishman. And the Englishman should be on his guard that he is not beguiled, as he has been in the past, into thinking that the differences between himself and the German are only superficial. The likeness is superficial; the differences are fundamental. These differences can best

be seen in the different ways in which the British and the Germans approach any particular subject. The British insist on their right to an individual opinion; they are practical and like to know the why and the wherefore of any course of action; they like to judge each problem on its merits and are always willing to accept improvisation and the exception that "proves the rule". The Germans are not so flexible; they like to have everything governed by "hard and fast" rules and dislike any departure from the letter of the law; they are prepared to accept without question their position as pawns in a game, the direction of which is beyond their knowledge or their control. That is why the re-education of the Germans is such a big task. We have to change the mentality and outlook of a whole nation, whose character has been moulded in a certain form for many generations. This does not mean that the Germans are incorrigible or that fundamental differences cannot be reconciled. But many years are required to remould the work of several centuries.

Now let us take a backward glance into the recent past and consider the state of mind of the Germans between our successful landing in NORMANDY and the firing of the last shot in EUROPE.

### **The Growing Awareness of Defeat**

Although many Germans by the summer of 1944 had doubts about their country's chances in the war and a few were quite certain of defeat, the great mass of the people, drilled and regimented in their habits by over ten years of Nazi rule, their power to reason and think for themselves wasted by long exposure to the propaganda blasts of Goebbels, continued to work and fight for victory. As the Allied advance rolled forward over FRANCE and BELGIUM and the first German towns were occupied, the Germans became more and more bewildered. But their bewilderment was allayed by the Party's demand for a supreme effort by the people, and those who continued to doubt were confounded by vague promises of new and better secret weapons.

### **Defeat and Disillusionment**

The final German offensive of December, 1944, with the object of cutting the Armies of the Western Allies in two, culminated in the bitter struggle in the ARDENNES and became a costly defeat for the German armed forces. With the spring the end came quickly. Abruptly the propaganda ceased, and

the Germans found themselves face to face with the reality of Allied tanks and troops in their towns and villages. But the full implications of their defeat had not started to dawn on most of them. Their minds numbed by the speed of events, they were conscious only that the bombing and shelling had stopped. The High Command had accepted defeat and they had no further obligations except to their families and themselves.

The weeks immediately following the capitulation brought little apparent change. The Germans were too busy licking their personal wounds and thinking about their own private problems to face the larger issues. Only the Allied insistence that the whole German nation was responsible for the war and the atrocities committed in its name succeeded in shaking them a little out of their apathy. They protested their ignorance of the atrocities in the concentration camps, and their innocence of any share in the war guilt. The most they would admit was that their leaders were wrong or that they had been misinformed and misled. The idea that a people is responsible for the leaders it puts into power they were either unwilling or unable to understand. It is true, they said, that they put the Nazis into power as the result of an election, but how much choice had the people in that election? How could they be held to be responsible? They admitted that they were glad and relieved that the fighting was over, but they showed few signs of a repentant spirit. They acknowledged that they had lost the war, and that therefore their leaders were mistaken and to blame.

The first few months of occupation do not therefore seem to have produced any major development in the attitude of the German people to the war, but in that time their reactions to the consequences of defeat have developed considerably. Their attitude to us as occupying troops, for example, is very different now from that which was apparent at the beginning of May. Goebbels had told them that if GERMANY lost the war it would mean the annihilation of the German people, that the Allies would be merciless. They were bewildered therefore when British troops went about occupying the country in a business-like manner, for the most part paying little heed to the inhabitants.

Because of this agreeable surprise it took many Germans a considerable time to notice that the apparently negative attitude of their conquerors to them was part of a deliberate policy. When, at last, they did see it, they did not like it. Here was a further reminder that we regarded all Germans as sharers in the blame for Nazi treachery, for all the acts of inhumanity committed by their country in Hitler's time and for the war.

itself. But the initial rigid ban on fraternisation also showed them that the British meant business, that we had not gone through nearly six years of bitter, costly war on a few meaningless slogans. It showed them that we were not prepared to accept the Germans until we were sure of our ground and convinced that we were not dealing with the same people who shortly before had been ardent Nazis.

The people the soldier first came in contact with when he began to occupy GERMANY consisted largely of women, children and old men. The people he met were just those most likely to arouse his sympathy. They were not the enemy soldiers he had fought against; they were the luckless sufferers of the evils of war and the depredations of the countless DPs that had suddenly been let loose on the country. Although he showed sympathy, the soldier remained sceptical. These were the people who were responsible for all the trials and tribulations of the last six years. How could he risk being too free with his forgiveness until he was certain that it had been truly earned. The other nations which had deserted the Nazi cause as soon as they saw that the game was up had been told that they must "work their passage". The Germans had a much longer passage to work.

There is little doubt that this attitude has contributed with other factors such as the fair though firm treatment of the Germans by the occupying army and the generally scrupulous behaviour of our troops, to the respect which they apparently now feel for the British soldier.

### Early Reactions

A similar development has occurred in the German attitude to British Military Government. It started with a somewhat negative acceptance of Military Government arrangements for public administration, which coincided with the period when their minds were numbed by the sudden completeness of their defeat; since then this attitude has considerably altered. From first one district, then another, criticism began to arise. It started with minor local complaints about food distribution and the lawless behaviour of DPs. Then, with the gradual return of an ordered, if somewhat bare, way of life, this critical attitude became more pronounced and more ambitious. Germans in many places in the British Zone became impatient with our methods. In particular, now that they had got used to the idea of being free from Nazi control, they asked for a more sweeping purge of the Nazis from official positions. Ignoring the importance of examining the records of the officials we were

deposing and the difficulty of finding capable men to replace them, they felt that we should immediately discharge whoever was denounced and appoint whoever claimed to be an anti-Nazi. Many Germans, of course, claimed to be anti-Nazis, but few had any means of proving it before May, 1945, and not all of those would have made capable administrators. Such criticisms continue, but the German people are beginning to have confidence in British methods. They are beginning to realise that what they took to be a slow method at first is turning out to be the surest method in the long run.

### German Anxieties

Meanwhile the Germans are acutely aware of their urgent personal problems—food, shelter, and warmth for the winter. We know and they are beginning to know that food, coal and transport for their distribution are world problems, part of the price the Germans in common with all of us are having to pay for Hitler's war. At first they assumed that from our "unlimited" resources we should be able to satisfy their immediate needs. It was not until they realised that we were in earnest when we told them what sort of a winter was ahead of them, that they began to appreciate the true state of affairs in the world and to understand how limited would be the assistance which would be available for GERMANY. Housing too is a problem of major importance throughout EUROPE, but in no country is it more acute than in GERMANY, the land of ruined cities. These are the major worries of the German people at the moment. They are likely to remain so for many months, possibly for years, though the critical period is this winter (and possibly next winter) when conditions are at their worst and the Germans no longer have the war or the Party to distract their attention from their misery.

Apart from these urgent personal worries, some Germans are beginning to be aware of the wider consequences of the war and the havoc Nazism left behind in GERMANY. They are worried about the future of German youth, about the difficulty of getting good schools going again and of providing something to fill the gap that used to be filled with the activities of the Hitler Youth, the League of German Girls and other Nazi organisations. They are afraid that their young people who have grown up with no other religion but Nazism and militarism will, now that these are utterly discredited everywhere, become lost souls. The Germans are aware, however, that Allied authorities are also keenly interested in the problem of German youth, and the Commander-in-Chief's personal interest in the matter has

given them hope. German Churchmen of all denominations are endeavouring to recapture the minds of the young, confident that they will be given every assistance by the British authorities.

### **Interchange of Ideas**

One of the greatest difficulties which faced the British authorities in the early weeks of the occupation was the circulation of news in a country where communications of every kind had virtually broken down. Newspapers were quickly started under Allied control, but owing to the shortage of paper and transport difficulties, these could have only a local circulation. The intense interest in purely local items of news meant, moreover, that the papers could devote only the minimum of space to world events like the decisions of the POTSDAM conference. Broadcasting has to some extent helped to solve the problem, but the number of receiving sets are limited and reception on the smaller receivers is not always satisfactory. The result was that GERMANY became the perfect breeding ground for alarmist rumours which spread with great rapidity in all zones of occupation. Most of the stories are started by idle gossip and are made up of half truths or misrepresentations of minor happenings. There are, however, indications that not all these rumours are innocently inspired, and there is every reason to believe that there are still many Germans who will take every opportunity of stirring up trouble between the Allies. It is clear that this dangerous tendency can only be effectively combated by taking every step to ensure the widest possible distribution of reliable up-to-date news, and by avoiding any action or expression of opinion which might foster such rumours.

### **Family Life**

Another factor which deeply influences the minds of the Germans at the moment is the dispersion of families—a problem which is causing great anxiety not only in GERMANY but all over CENTRAL EUROPE. Although postal facilities are now available in GERMANY there are thousands of Germans who have had no news of their nearest relatives since before the surrender. Officers and men of the German armed forces have been awaiting demobilisation in great anxiety over the fate of their fathers and mothers, their wives and their children. Men and women directed during the war to Western German industrial centres are still without news of their families in EASTERN GERMANY. In the present shattered and dispirited state of

the nation the restoration of family life is vital to the reconstruction of an ordered society. Until families can be re-united and can work together for the future, the Germans are likely to have little heart for the great tasks that lie ahead, or to feel any enthusiasm for the enormous work of making their country a place fit to live in.

## Conclusion

What are the difficulties which we shall have to face in our attempt to reform the German character? The German has been brought up to be slavishly obedient to authority, to have an unquestioning faith in the "Vaterland", to devote all his energy and productive ability to the advancement of Germany and to believe in the almost sacred mission of his country. Imbued with this doctrine, the German was prepared to accept any means as justified in attaining the desired end. That is why he finds it so difficult to understand the full meaning of the NUREMBERG trial. That suffering and misery are the inevitable reward of defeat and failure he can understand. But that there was something enormously immoral in the actions of the Nazi leaders is beyond the comprehension of the majority of the German nation.

Now that the shining vision of a victorious Germany has been eclipsed and the future of the "Vaterland" has no more meaning, the inspiration of a whole nation has vanished.

And so we are left with a people whose faith has been destroyed. Now is the time when the future outlook of that people will be determined. Either we can give them a new faith and a new set of values or we can have them in a state of empty and embittered disillusionment. There are the two alternatives. There can be little doubt which is the right one. To give the German nation a new set of values is one of the biggest tasks of Military Government and it is one in which all the British Occupying Forces have a large part to play, both in the example that they set of good conduct and integrity and in the many other ways in which they represent the British way of life. On the manner in which that task is carried out may well depend the future of mankind and the survival of our civilisation.