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## **Intelligence and Counter-Intelligence in German Prisoner of War Camps in Canada During World War II**

During World War II, the Canadian Government held close to 40,000 German prisoners of war and civilian internees in Canada, on behalf of the British Government. From June 1940 to January 1947, these men were interned at twenty-five different sites across Canada.

One of the lesser known aspects of internment operations was the constant battle of wits being waged between Canadian and British intelligence officers and the German prisoners within the camps. Throughout the period of confinement, intelligence information gathered from German prisoners was sent to contacts in the Royal Canadian Navy and Royal Canadian Air Forces, and later passed on to the War Office in London, England, for transmission to the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force.

After the arrival of a large number of German prisoners in 1943 with the termination of German resistance in North Africa, it was decided to establish a Psychological Warfare Committee in Canada to initiate programs of segregation and re-education of prisoners. This decision had followed a riot, which had obviously been well organized internally, at the tented camp at Ozada, Alberta, on 22 July 1942, when the prisoners sought to show their displeasure with the unseasonably cold, damp weather that was being experienced. In analysing the disturbance, Captain F.C. Mason, the Camp Intelligence Officer, noted:

. . . there is no doubt that the present demonstration has been carefully organized . . . the prisoners of war who recently arrived from Egypt appeared to be well-contented with the camp conditions at first . . . (Also the technique employed is practically the same as that employed at a similar demonstration at Camp 21 (Espanola) some time ago.

The Canadian Internment authorities soon discovered the presence in each camp of a Gestapo element which attempted to make things as dif-

difficult as possible for the Camp Commandant and staff. Prisoners were instructed by fellow internees as to what to complain about, and told not to write anything about camp conditions. These directions were given to all new prisoners of war when arriving at internment camps.<sup>7</sup> Captain J.A. Milne, the British Intelligence Officer at Ozada, wrote:

... the Gestapo element within the enclosure is extremely active and it is known that it threatens with direct penalties—ostracism here etc., and a court martial with the death penalty in Germany after the war—to any prisoner of war who gives any information to the Camp Staff.

During 1943, Intelligence work in each camp was carried on by a Camp Interpreter, whose duty it was to read incoming and outgoing mail, gather facts through interviews with the prisoners, and find out what was going on behind the wire. In 1944, changes were made in the roles of Intelligence Officers. A section of Military Intelligence was created to take care of psychological warfare. Selected personnel from Camp Interpreter Staffs were to take an intensive short course in intelligence and security, so that each camp would have the services of a trained Intelligence Officer.<sup>4</sup> He was to study and report on the attitudes of prisoners to educational programs and the influence of the internal Nazi pressure groups in order to provide guidance for the anticipated segregation and educational policies contemplated by the Canadian authorities in cooperation with their appropriate British counterparts. Intelligence Officers were to assist also in the carrying out of educational programs and in the collection of the various types of materials for broadcast to German civilians and troops. Still another branch of Military Intelligence was to gather and sift through information pertaining to matters such as counterintelligence information on escapes and intended escapes; detection of codes and secret writing equipment; security and liaison with other security services. The search for secret codes included secret messages from Germany entering the camp via parcels and letters.

On 22-23 June 1944, a conference of Internment Camp Commandants was held in Ottawa to discuss future plans; and this was followed by a course for Interpreter Officers from the 26th to the 29th of June. In the view of the Allied Powers, the importance of the work of these men scarcely needed emphasis. The grave danger of returning some 200,000 young, physically fit and thoroughly indoctrinated Nazis to Germany after the war was quite obvious. The authorities decided to "open their minds" to ideas more in harmony with those of the

democracies, and thus make these returning soldiers potential supporters of political and social reform in postwar Germany.

The variety of challenges that the Interpreter Officers found in their work was quite interesting. A home-made air rifle was found at Medicine Hat, and short wave radio antennae made from bedsprings were discovered at another camp. A German air force officer at the Gravenhurst camp injected dental wax into his chin, and after this facial disfiguration made him unrecognizable to the staff, he attempted four unsuccessful escapes. Camp authorities were anxious to find members of the S.S. (*Schutzstaffeln*) within the ranks of ordinary prisoners, presumably to segregate them. These men were recognizable by the greenish-coloured tattoo marks under their left arms at the armpit. The main task of the Intelligence personnel was to prevent uncensored war news from reaching the prisoners. A home-made short wave radio was discovered at Medicine Hat, with the radio antenna threaded through the prisoners' clothes line. The main source of information seemed to be the German Red Cross, and messages were found concealed in loaves of bread, cigarette tins, books, nutshells, sausages, tin cans, cigars; and in some cases written in indelible pencil on wax paper. The German censor had allowed all this material to proceed to Canada. Later in the war, there was good psychological value in letting this previously confiscated information through to the German prisoners, as it confirmed to them the hopelessness of their cause. In addition, the Camp Gestapo was found to be tampering with the incoming mails, and this posed a problem for the camp authorities. The Assistant Director of Military Intelligence wrote:

This places two weapons in the hands of Gestapo control: a) double censorship on incoming mail making it possible to keep out news from Germany which would have an adverse effect (from the Party point of view) on the prisoners of war; b) as a punishment weapon. Holding back prisoner of war mail is probably even more effective than beatings as a means of making the prisoners of war a "loyal" Nazi . . . this control over incoming prisoners of war mail is a most serious threat to our Psychological Warfare operations.<sup>5</sup>

There was a great fear among Canadian authorities of the Gestapo element in the Canadian camps. They had made their presence quite well-known to the authorities with the murders of German prisoners of war at Medicine Hat on 22 July 1943, and 10 September 1944. The Military Court of Inquiry noted that in the murder of August Plaszek, in July, that

The guilty party or parties were not discovered, but a good many prisoners of war, strongly Nazi, who either assisted in, connived at, or approved of the hanging, were uncovered. Some of these, all strongly Nazi and some Gestapo, had been troublemakers at Lethbridge and Ozada and it is evident that they were anxious to get control of the camp from the slightly more moderate Nazi group previously in control.<sup>6</sup>

The scrapbook of a German prisoner of Medicine Hat offers some interesting insights into life in the camp:

I can . . . state positively that 70% of the prisoners of war had not fared so well at home as they did here (in Canada) under the Detaining Power Switzerland . . . . However, under the influence of the Gestapo element everyone was watched by everyone else. Were we not a German island in enemy land? . . . it is clear that one (could) not have an opinion of his own. To think was absolutely forbidden . . . . There had to be appointed hut leaders, section leaders, sport leaders, group leaders, leaders and even more leaders . . . . In July 1943, there came seven medical officers from the officers camp in Bowmanville who, allegedly, brought with them a communication from the most senior German officer in Canada, Lt.-Gen. Schmidt. All possible affairs of the camp whether good or bad, were then carried through as if ordered by General Schmidt. And now a little "Gestapo" had also come into existence which sternly saw to it that all the soldiers of the camp behaved as exemplary Nazis. Woe to him who dared to give free vent to his thoughts! Pitilessly, measures were taken against him. Some prisoners of war were tired of being duped any more by these uniformed tramps and got together to bring about an overthrow of these elements. But through treachery, the camp police got wind of this and a few of those revolutionists had to leave the camp. The enraged mob got hold of one of them, dragged him into the recreation hut and strung him up on one of the rafters here without any trial whatever, after he first had been stoned half to death. Thus did Gefr. Plaszek, having done his duty towards the Fatherland at the front, die the hero's death . . . . such a spy system started that no one could say a word anymore. Everyone walked around quietly and oppressed. Only a shrewd observer would notice that if two men were walking, one of them kept looking behind in order to detect immediately possible spies. A phrase was coined in the camp: "The German look". Everyone for himself. Nobody was anxious to stick their own necks out . . . . Beatings were daily occurrences . . . . each soldier by threat of having his bones broken was forbidden to remain outside the hut after 2000 hours. It was the privilege of the Gestapo to stroll through the camp at night and do their dirty work, as a result of which others were then beaten up. Individuals who didn't feel secure any longer in the camp sought the protection of the Camp Commandant.<sup>7</sup>

Intelligence Officers classified prisoners by degree of their pro and anti-Nazi fervour, in order to prepare for their final repatriation to Ger-

many. No prisoners were to be returned home until after the end of the military occupation, which was expected to be 1 1/2 years after the end of the war. In the classification procedure, the strong Nazis were called BLACKS; the anti-Nazis were called WHITES; and the men in-between were called GREYS. The program used to classify these prisoners was referred to as PHERUDA.<sup>8</sup> The information gathered for this compilation was a result of the accumulation of facts and details gleaned from documents, mail, behaviour towards camp personnel, and contacts with various camp guards and interpreter officers. The idea of the program was to try and teach the prisoners of war about democracy, its ideals and thoughts, and generally how it functioned. Arrangements were made with professors and teachers to visit the camps, and give talks to the prisoners of war. Special camps were set aside to segregate the BLACKS from the remaining German prisoners. The basic test of "whiteness" was the willingness to cooperate with the authorities in different ways.

As time passed by, the Intelligence Officers became aware of German plots to commit mass murder and sabotage. One plot was a HARIKARI CLUB at Grande Lygne, Quebec. As noted in a letter to all Camp Intelligence Officers,

It is based on the old German "Twilight of the Gods" (Gotterdaemerung) philosophy-mythology, wherein the Gods kill off each other in a final orgy of violence. The HARIKARI plan will go into operation when it becomes obvious that the capitulation or destruction of the German Army is imminent and a negotiated peace is beyond hope. When the right moment is decided upon by the HARIKARI leaders, members will proceed to murder all fellow prisoners of war whom they consider to be cowards because of their anti-Nazi sentiments. The HARIKARI prisoners will then rush some or all of the guard towers, regardless of cost to themselves, and break out of the enclosure. Some will proceed to murder as many of the camp staff as possible. In this connection, the Camp Commandant, Camp Intelligence Officer, and Camp Senior Medical Officer have been singled out for special attention at Grande Lygne. Others will head for the nearest plants, industrial areas, airports, etc., to commit as much sabotage as possible. Their final aim is as much murder and destruction as possible before they themselves are killed. It must be realized that the prisoner of war officers involved in the HARIKARI CLUB are fully aware that a number of innocent people will be killed, and that most or all of them will be killed. Nevertheless, their Nazi minds are so transfixed by the "GOTTERDAEMERUNG" idea that their only thought is to go to their deaths in a final blaze of bloody glory, taking as many of the enemy, and as much property as possible with them to destruction.<sup>9</sup>

Another constant headache for the Camp Staff was the German usage of secret writing materials. At first, the Germans used liquid secret

writing inks to report to Germany the names of prisoners of war who appeared unfaithful to Naziism. The Allies countered with a new sensitized paper which prevented the use of any liquid secret writing inks, or other commonly known secret writing techniques in prisoner of war correspondence. A search at Medicine Hat in September 1944 turned up secret writing materials of the highest calibre, as well as complete directions from Germany as to how and for what purpose they were to be used. The ink was of the "solid" type used by the German Secret Service, and was designated as "AV Putty". It had formerly been reserved for only the highest ranks in the German Secret Service, and posed problems in attempting to censor incoming mail. Both the A.V. Putty and a second type of solid ink ("blue pencil") neutralized the Allied green sensitized prisoner of war paper which had been valuable in defeating liquid secret writing inks. The Allied censorship chemist, Dr. Flemons, ultimately developed a new coated paper that would combat both solid and liquid secret writing inks; but due to delay in the supply of chemicals, this stationery was not introduced until April 1945. In the interim, usage of the old paper continued in order not to abrogate Article 36 of the Geneva Convention, which noted the right of the prisoner to have a set amount of correspondence per month with his family.<sup>10</sup> The use of A.V. Putty in Canadian camps confirmed the fears of British Counter-Intelligence that a high-grade organization had been set up in Germany to make use of the prisoners of war.<sup>11</sup>

By the end of 1944, most of the prisoners had reconciled themselves to the fact that Germany had lost the war, and they blamed the Nazi Party for these problems. Newer prisoners were less inclined to bow to the Gestapo than the older prisoners, but this meant that the BLACKS would redouble their efforts to bring the newcomers into line. The April 1945 Intelligence Report at Farnham, Quebec, noted:

... the Nazi pressure group is making every effort to disrupt the unity of the camp. Threats are being directed by them against the anti-Nazi group. The anti-Nazi group, in spite of this, is growing steadily and were the Nazis to be removed, would come into the open, drawing into their following the onlookers. As a whole, the prisoners of war are very subdued, owing to the adverse war news.<sup>12</sup>

In view of the constant struggle between the two groups, the authorities decided to segregate the BLACKS from the other prisoners. Neys and Lethbridge, along with Gravenhurst and Grande Lygne were designated BLACK camps. Medicine Hat and Bowmanville were classified as GREY, and Seebe was a mixture.



In the New Year, the fight against secret writing materials continued. India drawing inks (for art lessons) of Western Hemisphere origin and in unopened bottles were the only inks allowed into the camps. All indelible pencils, paints, crayons and dyes from Germany were prohibited from entering the camps. All indelible pencils were confiscated lest the Germans simulate the name and number of such pencils, and substitute the inactive lead with an active one. Curry powder, caustic pencil and styptic pencil were also viewed with disfavour because they could be used in secret writing communications. Typewriter ribbons manufactured in Canada were the only ones to be used for official correspondence. It was also felt that marzipan (a composition of sweet stuff of powdered almonds) was being used as a means to smuggle in the toffee-like solid ink. They were identical in colour, and marzipan had the same elasticity as the solid ink. A.W. Faber pencils (from Germany) were not admitted into the compound, nor was bismuth, since the zinc could be extracted from it and used to make excellent secret ink. Glycerin permanganate, suppositories, and the white frosting of Christmas tree decorations designed to simulate snow were also found to be unsuitable for camp use.

On V-E Day, the prisoners were informed that active hostilities between Canada and Germany had terminated. Commandants of BLACK camps were warned to take extra precautions in view of the HARIKARI CLUB, and Interpreter Officers were asked to note the reaction of the prisoners. No statement was to be made to the prisoners regarding their status or repatriation. The representative of the Swiss Government, which was responsible for the protection of German interests, was to continue to act until contrary instructions were received by him from his government. The International Red Cross was to continue to work with the prisoners, as were the humanitarian agencies, including the Y.M.C.A. However, if the Swiss relinquished their protection of German interests before the repatriation of German prisoners from Canada, the International Committee of the Red Cross might be asked to take over responsibility for receiving complaints from the prisoners, and to carry on some of the functions of the Protecting Power. BLACK prisoners were to be the last to be repatriated.

By the end of September 1945, the PHERUDA teams had classified some 9,172 prisoners of war, leaving some 24,872 to be analyzed.<sup>13</sup> Every possible measure was taken in all the camps to suppress Nazi censorship. At Farnham, a tinge of democracy had appeared, with meetings of the "Representative Assembly" open to all prisoners, and well attended.<sup>14</sup> All prisoner camp officials who were classified as

BLACKS and DARK GREYS were to be removed from office and be replaced by WHITES or LIGHT GREYS, elected by a secret ballot arranged by and under the supervision of the Camp Commandant. Severe disciplinary action was to be taken against any prisoner who committed acts that would discourage WHITE or GREY activity. All Nazi literature was to be removed from the camp enclosure; while Canadian, British and American media were permitted in the compound. Radio sets were allowed in the WHITE and GREY camps, but no radios were given to BLACK personnel.

In February 1946, the first prisoners of war were repatriated to Germany. In March, there were several more shipments of prisoners, and by the end of July, there were only 4,400 prisoners of war left in Canada. Some 6,000 Germans had made written application to stay in Canada, but the Geneva Convention, which governed the treatment of prisoners of war, stated that all prisoners were to be repatriated. In November 1946, arrangements were made to evacuate the remaining prisoners, and all save some sixty prisoners were gone by the first week in January 1947. The remainder were confined to hospital, or serving time in jail for crimes committed; and some six cases were under investigation by the Department of External Affairs. Twenty months after the termination of hostilities, internment operations in Canada finally ceased, and intelligence efforts were no longer necessary.

Could these efforts be classified as successful? To the extent that the Intelligence Officers were able to gather information regarding conditions in Germany, conditions behind the wire, and the names of people in neutral countries who were sympathetic to the German cause, one can interpret it as successful. If analyzed from the point of view of the PHERUDA program, it was far less successful. The program was initiated too late in the war, and by the war's end, too few of the prisoners had been classified. When the program reached peak efficiency, hostilities had terminated, and the majority of prisoners were interested only in returning to Germany, and their families. They had no real interest in "democracy", and viewed the lectures and seminars as "indoctrination" and "propaganda" put forth by people they felt were still their enemies. They were ready to agree to anything in order to facilitate their return to Germany. In some cases, however, the messages were apparently successful, as evidenced by the 6,000 Germans who made written application to stay in Canada; and by the following letter written by a former German prisoner of war to Canadian internment authorities:

I should like to let you know . . . how very much I shall always appreciate the ever so correct and considerate attitude of the Government of Canada



and the Military Authorities towards prisoners of war . . . your country has done a lot to show Germans in Canadian Custody the value of democratic life. The results of this attitude, I hope, will prove to be of stimulating value in rebuilding our own country.<sup>15</sup>

## Notes

1. Public Archives of Canada, Director of Internment Operations, RG 6, L. Vol. 24, File 9-1-3, Captain F.C. Mason to Colonel H.N. Streight, 28 July 1942.
2. *Ibid.*, Colonel H.N. Streight to Special Section, Prisoners of War, Department of External Affairs, 23 December 1942.
3. *Ibid.*, Captain J.A. Milne to Commandant, 26 December 1942.
4. Public Archives of Canada, Department of National Defence, RG 24, A, Vol. 2296, File H.Q.S. 31 Vol. 1. Memo to District Intelligence Officers, Military Districts 1,2,3,4,7,10,13, 31 May 1944.
5. *Ibid.*, Assistant Director of Military Intelligence to the Deputy Chief of the General Staff, 1 August 1944.
6. D.P.O.W., File H.Q.S. 7236, Case of hanging by his fellow prisoners of war Sgt. PLASZEK, August. The best information on the murders at Medicine Hat can be found in Douglas Sagi's article "My Fuehrer, I Follow Thee", *The Canadian Magazine*, 4 January 1975.
7. Intelligence Report, File 26-H-44, 14 November 1944.
8. PHERUDA referred to the first capital letter in each of the areas in which the prisoners of war were interrogated. These were in regards to their POLITICAL leanings (five categories from Democrat to Rabid Nazi); ATTITUDE TOWARDS HITLER (five categories from Anti-Hitler to Fanatically pro-Hitler); EDUCATION (five categories from University to Minimum); RELIGION (five categories from devout Protestant or Catholic to neo-pagan or Gottgläubig); USEFULNESS for purposes of labour (five categories from willing and skilled to refuse to work); DEPENDABILITY (five categories from known dependable to undependable); ATTITUDE TOWARDS HITLER (nine categories from pro-Allied to anti-Allied). The interrogation report that accompanied PHERUDA included five sets of questions covering PERSONAL DETAILS of his life: GENERAL BACKGROUND (education, work, home life, appraisal of individual); PRISONER OF WAR HISTORY (which camps, attitudes, work record); POLITICAL HISTORY (how politically oriented he was while in Germany); MILITARY HISTORY (which units, which fronts, attitudes); CAMP INFORMATION; EXAMINER'S REMARKS (personality, truthfulness, reliability). The combination of PHERUDA and the Interrogation Report were comprehensive enough to classify the prisoner under one of the BLACK, WHITE, or GREY categories.
9. Memo to G.S.O.II, Intelligence, Military Districts 2 & 4; G.S.O. III, Intelligence, Military Districts 1, 3, 7, 10, 13; Camp Security Officer, Petawawa; all Camp Intelligence Officers, 14 November 1944. In a letter to the author, dated 2 September 1975, Colonel E.D.B. Kippen, O.B.E., Commandant at Grande Lygne at the time of the HARIKARI CLUB noted: "However in my opinion, there were relatively few of the German officers that went along with this sort of philosophy, but there were some fanatical Nazis. Anyway, the authorities were so concerned that they moved a great many of them to different camps and thus broke up the organization. I know that they had me down as a victim and it was rather a strange feeling when carrying out an inspection in the enclosure to have this thought. However it didn't worry me too much because I thought they wouldn't when it came to the crunch do such a stupid thing. They would only bring disgrace on their officer corps and I am sure the majority felt that way."
10. Public Archives of Canada, Department of National Defence, RG 24, A, Vol. 2296, HQS Vol. 1, Memorandum to Director of Military Intelligence, 22 February 1945.
11. See Directorate of History, Department of National Defence, File 72/ 222, Attempted Rescue By German Submarine U-536 of Prisoners of War in the Baie des Chaleurs, September 1943. The officers camp at Bowmanville had a short wave radio and was constantly in touch with the

German High Command. This file tells how three Germans (including their top submarine ace, Otto Kretschmer) were to escape and be picked up by a submarine in the Baie des Chaleurs. However, only one of the Germans managed to effect an escape, and he was recaptured at the Baie. On the way home, the submarine was sunk. After this ineffective escape, Admiral Donitz told Kretschmer to stay in the camp, for he was passing valuable information back to Germany concerning the Canadian and American war efforts, via the short wave radio in the camp. After the war, the Allies found in Donitz' headquarters, a large map illustrating the industries and resources of eastern Canada and the United States. Had the war lasted longer, and the trans-Atlantic bomber being tested by the Germans gone into production, the information gathered by Kretschmer and his colleagues at Bowmanville would have proven quite useful in mounting a strategic bomber offensive against the Western Hemisphere.

12. Public Archives of Canada, Department of National Defence, RG 24, A, Vol. 2296, HQS 31 Vol. 1, Extract from Monthly Intelligence Report Camp 40, 17 April 1945.
13. Public Archives of Canada, Department of Secretary of State, RG 6, A 13, Vol. 6, File 2422, Department of National Defence, Directorate of Prisoners of War Information Bulletin, September 1945.
14. *Ibid.*, Directorate of Military Intelligence Monthly Bulletin, October 1945.
15. Letter to Colonel E.D.B. Kippen, O.B.E., 26 March 1947. Kindly loaned to author for use.