
E U R O P E s p e a k s

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Germany

The War in the East

The following letter was written by a German soldier to his mother on July 26th, 1942. One of his friends copied it and brought it safely abroad.

Different from the O.K.W. Reports

"Actually I am badly in need of a good long leave. It would be quite possible as I have nothing to do at present. The air force radio station where I have been working up till now no longer exists. Perhaps I will really get my leave soon; though it looks very much as if I shall be sent into the front line after all, as several of the new troops recently sent to the front have already been killed and our signal unit has also had some new casualties.

Even before we reached X the real steppe land had begun. Not a village to be seen: not so much as a little stream. Each of us has now to carry a water-bottle. It is rather unpleasant not only because there is so little cover but also because of the terrific heat.

During air attacks the lack of cover becomes unpleasantly obvious as you can imagine. In places the grass is burnt for miles as a result of those damned new incendiaries used by the Russian aeroplanes. Skilfully making use of the undulations of the land they approach our columns at a height of 20 to 30 meters and spray us with their flame-throwers, the flames of which are 10 to 20 meters long.

We advanced very quickly as far as X and met no special difficulties. But on the other side of X the enemy had dug themselves in and occupied excellently fortified positions. We had to fight our way forward. After a few kilometers we reached their main line of defence and the mines in front of it were like the sands of the seashore. They cost us a lot of casualties.

Sometimes we had to resort to hand to hand fighting to get the Russians out of their trenches. I shall never forget standing on the edge of a gun pit, revolver in hand, calling on a Russian to surrender. I had seen him jump into the pit only a few minutes before and he was now lying there on his stomach pretending to be dead. He did not move and I fired several times into the sand beside him. At last he took courage, slowly turned over and put his hands up. The Commander had

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witnessed the whole scene from the distance and sent a messenger to ask whether we did not know that he had given orders that no prisoners should be taken. I did know it, but nevertheless I had already disarmed two Russians and sent them to the rear. And

even now I could not bring myself to shoot the Russian especially after he had trusted me and surrendered. So I left it to the driver whilst I shot the horse which was badly wounded. I can still hear the dreadful cry of the Russian when he realised that he had been fooled. Such an experience gets right under your skin and leaves its mark on you for the rest of your life."

Such letters give an idea of the terrible momentum of the German War "Machine", the name of which is more appropriate than most people think.

Everybody tries to shift the responsibility for the atrocities to someone else: everybody tries to get somebody else to become the actual perpetrator of the butchery. Such an attitude cannot and should not be excused; and yet letters and reports like this show that it would be equally wrong simply to describe all Germans or even all German soldiers without distinction as "butcherbirds" by inclination or by nature. ...

The letter continues:

"Thousands of the Russians stood to their guns and things looked very black for us as we were unable to force them out of all their positions and had to drive on through a withering fire. We were harassed by 'Stalin organs', which are a special type of mortar, and by armoured units. The surface was a nightmare, for nearly all the time we were driving across open country and suddenly we broke an axle. We could go no further and everything else whizzed past us. In half an hour's time we were alone in the countryside. At last at midnight one of our heavy armoured cars with three inch guns arrived. The next morning we drove back to our unit with our kit.

Behind the hills a Russian ambulance column was driving peacefully along when it was shot up by German Stukas. ... Suddenly two Russians, armed to the teeth, came blundering towards us. They were only 50 yards away when they became aware of our presence and at our challenge they threw themselves on the ground. We opened fire and at last they stood up, still retaining their weapons however. Only after we had fired a second time did they reluctantly ground their arms. My first thought was to offer them cigarettes, whereupon one of them threw his arms around my neck because we had not shot them. We sent them back towards our main body of troops."

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Italy

Down with the War!

We have received some delayed reports on the effects of the manifesto entitled "Down with war, Down with fascism!", which was written and distributed by the Italian Socialist Party. The following is a summary of the general situation after the distribution of the manifesto:

"The campaign calling for an end of the war and of fascism did not of course succeed in completely changing the whole political position. But our Party, the Socialist Party of Italy, which initiated the whole action, got an opportunity of testing the political situation and the mood of the population. We feel that there is no need to give the actual number of men, women and young people, workers, middle class people and peasants who were beaten up and arrested during and after the campaign. Even secondary school boys were arrested for circulating the manifesto amongst their school mates. Several of our older comrades who, for many years now, have been taking no

part in political activity, were arrested merely on suspicion of having read the manifesto. Several of our comrades were arrested and are still under police supervision. The suburbs, especially those parts of the town where the manifestos and inscriptions on the wall were most plentiful, were searched not only by police patrols, but also by fascist militia and even the military. The patrols ransacked all public buildings and stopped every passerby who looked like a worker. If they thought fit they snapped the handcuffs on them straight away.

One extraordinarily encouraging experience during this campaign was the use made of our propaganda material: copies of our manifesto and little placards for sticking on the wall multiplied like the fish of St. Peter [1]. Workers, black-coated employees, women and even young lads reproduced copies on their own initiative. The day after the first distribution, in Turin, Genoa, Milan, Bologna, Trieste, Spezia, Leghorn, Rome and Naples, the city guards and the crossing sweepers were mobilised, as well as the police, to paint over the inscriptions on the walls with white lead or tar. In Milan this work went on continuously, for at nightfall the inscriptions re-appeared more thickly than ever.

In another industrial centre the campaign aroused great interest amongst the soldiers. The propaganda material circulated particularly in the barracks and depots. In a hotel in this town where German officers were quartered, the walls were literally plastered with inscriptions against the war and the Axis. In yet another town our campaign coincided with demonstrations against the inadequate bread ration. The fascist paper 'Il Telegrafo' [2] of Leghorn [3] commented on this week's campaign, though naturally without openly making reference to it: 'Since the enemies of the nation want to isolate the fascists even in our own country, it is necessary to reply with a better combination, with a bloc of all Italians around Mussolini.' "

Opposition

We have received the following report on the various political groups which form part of the Italian opposition and on their mutual relations:

"The most important groups are: 'Justice and Freedom', the 'Republican Union', the 'Catholic Action Groups' and the 'Antifascist Nationalist Union'. The essential things these groups have in common is their opposition to dependence on Germany

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and their past memories and grievances. To some degree they harbour the illusion that it will be possible to restore the conditions which existed before the fascist revolution and they fear that this is threatened by the radicalism of the Italian fascist which has developed under Nazi influence.

The Italian socialists and the communists are the groups who actually have the widest influence. There are also a number of small groups of left wingers. The socialist party gets support from all categories of Italian workers, from industrial workers, and peasants and also from office workers, artisans, small tradesmen, professional people, intellectuals and students. The communists rely almost exclusively on the proletariat. Relations between these two main left wing groups are very strained. The communists pursue a sectarian policy denying the right of any other organisation to exist. They are dishonest in their dealings with the socialists and anti-fascists. In all anti-fascist political activity in the past, they have carried on their own activity at the expense of every non-communist political group. To-day the socialist party and other socialists find the "theory

and programme" of the communists more unacceptable than ever. Even now the communists continue to make use of socialist groups who do not yet belong to the party organisation, and if things turn out badly or produce unexpected results they do not shrink from making lying accusations. The real reason for their 'flirtation' with the socialist groups and their constant attempts to capture the whole party, especially during the past two years is their declining influence on the working masses. The activity of the socialist party and other socialist groups is on the other hand continuously growing in extent and arouses a wide response amongst all sections of the working population.

One of the basic tasks which the socialist party set itself was the building up of a vast network of socialist cells. The result has been to create a broader organisational framework which provides a basis for the development of the party's struggle against war and fascism. This realisation of the necessity of extending the organisational network by creating cells of activity is also the key to the development of a broad and popular opposition movement capable of uniting the Italian people in the fight against fascism and war. On the basis of bitter experience, the socialist party to-day refuses all cooperation with communists as well as with other anti-fascist groups."

In contrast to this mistrust which, as is shown in the above report, prevails among the organised groups, it is interesting to note the increasing readiness of the ordinary individuals to discuss current events more openly and in greater detail than was the case until quite recently. Thus we get the following report about life in a factory:

"There are many political discussions. Quite a number of workers of all grades realise that fascism symbolises war, misery, hunger and the destruction of any kind of civilisation. At their benches, the workers discuss their working conditions, their special class problems, and questions of a general political nature. Naturally those who take part in such discussions are not always of the same opinion but they talk things over in a calm and friendly atmosphere of mutual confidence such as did not exist in former times. This change of atmosphere makes it possible for the Socialist Party of Italy to develop extensive and by no means superficial political activity."

Editorische Anmerkungen

1 - *St Peter = Simon Petrus (wahrscheinlich gestorben 64), Fischer, einer der zwölf Jünger Jesu.*

2 - *„Il Telegrafo“, italienische faschistische Zeitung, herausgegeben in Livorno.*

3 - *„Leghorn“, englische Bezeichnung der italienischen Stadt Livorno.*