

# **WAR BEHIND BARBED WIRE**

REMINISCENCES OF BUCHENWALD  
EX-PRISONERS OF WAR

**FOREIGN LANGUAGES PUBLISHING HOUSE**  
**Moscow 1959**

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## FOREWORD

On June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany launched her perfidious attack against the Soviet Union. At the outset the war took an unfavourable turn for the Soviet Union: Soviet troops were forced to retreat, suffering heavy losses. Hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers, who had requited themselves with honour on the battlefields, were taken prisoner through no fault of their own. Many were captured by the enemy when wounded or shell-shocked.

On the eve of the attack on the Soviet Union, Hitler told his generals that since the Russians were not a party to the Hague Convention, treatment of Russian prisoners of war need not correspond to the decisions of the Hague Convention. This order was in effect an inhuman call to butcher Soviet people. Moreover, it was a flagrant lie: the Soviet Union had accepted the commitments imposed by the Hague Convention of 1907 concerning the treatment of prisoners of war and had always been faithful to them. The real reason behind the Führer's overpowering hatred for Soviet fighting men was that he knew only too well that the Soviet soldier was politically aware and was not only a military enemy, but an ideological foe of fascism as well.

In the course of the war Hitler's orders took the form of documents, notorious for their outspoken cyni-

cism; such was the order of the German High Command, dated January 14, 1942, which contained the following lines:

"A merciful or humane attitude towards a prisoner of war will be severely punished." The same spirit inspired the injunctions which Field Marshal-General Walter von Reichenau addressed to the Nazi troops engaged on the Eastern Front: "Supplying food to the population and prisoners of war is unduly humane."

The monstrous programme of the extermination of Soviet people was steadfastly implemented. Trampling all norms of International Law, the Nazis transformed their POW camps into "death factories." Thousands upon thousands of Soviet prisoners of war died a terrible death before firing squads and as a result of beatings, torture and hunger. It may be stated without exaggeration that the barbaric treatment of Soviet prisoners was probably the foulest of all Nazi crimes.

The heroism of Soviet people who fought on in the hell of Nazi POW camps was all the greater for this. It is not easy to be a hero at the front; it is more difficult still to be one in captivity. Many books and articles have been written about the horrors of Nazi POW camps. The horrible in these books has only too often eclipsed the heroic. We are now beginning to see these things in their proper perspective. The Soviet War Veterans' Committee has undertaken the task of collecting reminiscences and memoirs of former soldiers, partisans and prisoners of war. These contributions create a striking picture of mass heroism, saving the names of remarkable men from oblivion.

The present collection is composed of reminiscences by members of the underground organization of Soviet war prisoners in Buchenwald. Imprisoned in the camp were anti-fascists from 19 European countries with the greatest numbers from Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and France. Each country was represented by



its own underground organization with an international political centre co-ordinating their activities.

The authors of this collection deal with only one organization—their own, since the national organizations, for reasons of security, had no direct contact with one another in their everyday struggle against the Nazis. The authors hardly mention the camps they were at before they were sent to Buchenwald.

It would take another book, or, rather, many other books, to describe the other camps. Besides the notorious big extermination camps of Oświęcim, Dachau, Mauthausen, Buchenwald and Sachsenhausen, the Nazis set up hundreds of temporary and stationary camps known according to number. The cruelties perpetrated there by the Nazi butchers and the sufferings and heroism of the prisoners have hardly been touched upon in war memoirs and especially in fiction. This gap will undoubtedly be filled.

Preparation for the uprising in Buchenwald, which took place on April 11, 1945, was only one of the tasks confronting the Soviet underground organization. No less important was the constant battle to save the lives of as many POWs as possible, to direct sabotage at munitions plants where the POWs were forced to work and, finally, to conduct political work inside the camp itself. It should not be forgotten that besides physical torture the POWs were subjected to ruthless brain-washing. This made it imperative to combine the fight for life and freedom with a battle for the men's souls. The fires of Soviet patriotism had to be kept burning to defeat the anti-Soviet slander, the Nazi attempts to foment national hatred and draw the POW's into the ranks of General Vlasov's army of traitors.

Who liberated Buchenwald?

When the first American tanks lumbered up to the camp there was not a single SS man in sight. The prisoners had routed the guard, flung open the gates, torn down the



barbed wire, and were prepared to defend themselves in case the Nazis tried to retake the camp. It goes without saying that the success of the uprising as well as the approach of the American tanks was a direct result of the titanic struggle waged by the Soviet people and their army, a struggle which smashed the backbone of the Nazi horde.

Upon their liberation the prisoners of Buchenwald took an oath which stated in part: "We, united by Buchenwald, this symbol of the sufferings of the peoples, swear we shall fight in every way against those who would build the death camps and employ weapons of mass extermination. We swear to fight with all our strength against the return of the executioners—their masters, their leaders, their comrades-in-arms—in order to prevent the enslavement of the peoples."

The liberated prisoners of fascism who took this solemn oath could have hardly foreseen that in a few years' time life would remind them of their oath. The Wehrmacht is being revived in West Germany with the same Nazi generals in command. General Speidel has been appointed to a prominent post in the aggressive North Atlantic bloc. Former SS men, murderers in uniform, have been holding regular rallies. Martin Sommer, a sadist who with his own hands murdered 187 prisoners when he was chief of the punishment cell at Buchenwald, is prospering in West Germany where he receives a comfortable pension from the Bonn Government. The transatlantic bidders for world domination have declared their intention of arming the West-German army with atomic weapons. It is not difficult to imagine the perils that will threaten mankind when the Martin Sommers lay their hands on these weapons of mass extermination.

Mankind, however, yearns for peace. An army of peace-loving peoples, many millions strong, prevents the war-makers from carrying out their dark schemes. Those who

survived the horrors of Nazi concentration camps form a shock troop in this army. They help set up museums on the sites of former death camps and publish their memoirs. These stirring monuments, both material and literary, call the peoples to greater vigilance, to fight ceaselessly for the peace that has been won at such a terrible price.

N. P. POLYAKOV,  
*Member of the Presidium  
of the Soviet War Veterans'  
Committee*





Yury Sapunov

**TRUE TO THEIR  
COUNTRY**

**Shot by the Nazis**

**S** pots appeared on his arm. Sickly yellow spots. The dead soldier's arm hung before my eyes. It had been hanging there for two hours. Big and calloused with work and sun-tanned. Helpless now and dead. There were eight of us in the small trench. Seven of the eight were dead.

It was hot. The sun blazed overhead. My bullet wound burned fiercely. Hours would pass before the merciful night would fall and allow me to crawl out of the trench. I shut my eyes to blot out the vision of the dead hand which almost touched my forehead. I let my thoughts wander to the events of the last few days.

It was August of 1941. We were surrounded in the village of Podvysokoye (Kirovograd Region) which we had tried to hold. German artillery, aircraft and sub-machine-gunners set to work on the village. We decided to make a dash for the woods along a deep ravine overgrown with bushes. Indian file, we forced our way through.

Then we sighted a bridge across the ravine. It was in the enemy's hands. We turned back. In the morning, when the Nazis began to comb the ravine—they were confident there would be no resistance and wanted only to corral us—we met them with a burst of fire. The firing did not last long—the odds were too great. The Nazis jumped us from behind, threw us to the ground and tied our hands behind our backs. There were only nine of us and no less than forty German motorcyclists. They all wore black coveralls with the sleeves rolled up above the elbows. Our last desperate show of resistance had enraged them. They ordered us to take off our belts and boots. They pulled the red stars off our caps and flung them into the bushes. Then they herded us into a trench that was only chest-deep and raised their submachine-guns. As luck would have it, I stood at the extreme left and they began mowing us down from the other end. I ducked instinctively and crouched in the trench. Without troubling to make sure that all were killed, the motorcyclists rode away.

The minutes dragged by. The dead man by my side grew heavier and heavier. It was the longest day in my life. I was sure I would not live to see the sun go down. My wound—I had no way of knowing it was not dangerous—hurt more and more. I moved, trying to wriggle from under the corpse above me and heard a scream. Peeping out, I saw two peasant women running away from the trench as fast as they could. I did not know what to do—to climb out or remain in the trench until dark.

Eons passed and then someone shook me by the shoulder.

*"Kamerad! Kamerad!"*

Two middle-aged Germans—fiftyish they looked—dragged me out of the trench. They were transport drivers, Germans of another generation who had retained their own ideas about war in spite of Nazi indoctrination. They

led me out onto a road where I saw a string of mules hitched to covered waggon. They gave me something to eat and drink. One pulled a Soviet leaflet from his pocket and asked whether it was really a safe conduct pass to the Red Army as claimed. The question surprised me, for Hitler was winning at the time. He had trampled all of Europe and the easy victories had gone to the heads of the Nazi soldiers. But apparently some had remained sane.

The two Germans, though they treated me well, turned me over to a POW assembly point.

We sat on the ground surrounded by guards and listened to the rat-tat-tat of a machine-gun in a burning village near by. A comrade of ours was shooting it out to the end. Someone said it was a tank man who had barricaded himself in a hut with a machine-gun he had taken off his tank. There would be a short burst of fire and then silence. Was it the end? No, a new burst of machine-gun fire. . . . Then we heard the explosions of hand grenades and bursts from submachine-guns. Surely this was the end! But after a few minutes of silence our machine-gunner again came to life. We at once recognized his "voice." The unknown hero kept the Nazis at bay for twelve long hours while we listened, sick at heart because we were helpless.

Huge trophies had fallen to the Germans in this area, and they set us prisoners to collecting Soviet army property. We put everything we could out of commission: we smashed storage batteries, disassembled the locks of field guns and tossed them into the bushes, and threw maps into bonfires for burning litter. German ordnance officers thought they would melt lead from cartridges picked up on the battlefield. They forced us to fill a cauldron with cartridges and set it over a fire. We speedily put an end to this insane project by throwing a shell into the cauldron. It exploded, considerably depleting the German trophies.



Novo-Arkhangelskoye, Uman, Dniepropetrovsk, Novo-Moskovsk—it is impossible to recall all the Ukrainian towns and villages we were marched through by our guards. Our hearts bled at the sight of our native land being trampled by Nazi boots and at the thought that we soldiers, the hope and defenders of our country, were powerless to help it in its hour of peril. Ukrainian women, young and old, who watched us passing through, were thinking of their husbands, sons, and brothers. Where were their loved ones? Fighting at the front, or lying in common graves hastily filled over with loose soil? Or, perhaps, wielding picks in POW gangs, starved and ragged, under the eyes of their merciless guards? Local people seized every opportunity to pass us a chunk of bread, a piece of bacon, or a pouch of home-grown tobacco through the barbed wire. In Novo-Arkhangelskoye two schoolteachers, both of them women, secretly kept us abreast of the Soviet Information Bureau's news bulletins.

### **SS Selection**

The battle of Stalingrad marked the turning-point in the war. The Soviet Army took up the offensive, but the hour of our liberation was still very distant.

On February 12, 1943, the Nazis herded us westwards from Dniepropetrovsk to Kirovograd. Our guards were in a hurry: they had received orders to dispatch us prisoners to Germany. They thought it unnecessary to give us food on the journey, and no one will ever know how many corpses we left behind. The survivors owed their lives to the peasants who managed to pass on some food to us.

We were cooped up in the goods waggons for five days and only once were we each given a ladle of gruel. On the sixth day, more dead than alive, dizzy with hunger and supporting one another, we stumbled out of our waggons. It was a bright sunny day but the picture that presented itself to our gaze was not a cheerful one.



Before us was a barbed wire fence, behind which were rows of drab barracks. We had arrived at *Stalag* 326, a large sorting camp.

"This is where your fate is settled," we were told by camp veterans. "Some will be put to work, others will stay here; and still others will be sent on to a better world than this."

This is how the SS men sorted out the prisoners. The 150 of us who had just arrived were taken to a clearing before a long low barrack. We were told to sit cross-legged with our backs to the wall. All movement was forbidden. When an SS man hit you on the shoulder with a stick it meant you had to jump up and run for the open door of the barrack. Three of our comrades had already been hit and had vanished. Time stood still. Where were they? What was being done to them? Our imaginations supplied the most horrible answers. At last they reappeared. They stumbled out of the door and sank down on the ground again. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed they were flushed and breathless; their faces were covered with red blotches from blows.

When would my turn come? The long shadow of an SS man fell across the patch of grass at my feet. I saw the shadow of the stick go up. And down across my back. There was nothing symbolic about that blow. I jumped up and dashed to the door. Inside I found myself in a small corridor with three other doors. Which was the one? A guard shoved me into the middle door with his stick. Inside an SS officer was standing before a desk. There was nothing there but that desk, a chair, and a radio-set on a small table near the window. The only ones in the room were the officer, an interpreter, and myself. The interpreter proceeded to interrogate me. Here are his questions and my answers as I remember them.

"Are you a captain?"

"A private."

"You lie!"

"No."

"In what troops did you serve?"

"Signal corps."

"Komsomol member?"

"No."

"What defence badges did you have?"

"All of them except the Voroshilov Marksman."

"You lie!"

"I'm near-sighted."

"Where were you born?"

"In Kalinin."

"Engineer?"

"No, I finished seven classes."

"Where did you work?"

"At a carriage-building works."

"Komsomol member?"

"No."

"How many times did you collect Komsomol dues?"

"Never."

"Trade-union member?"

"Yes."

"What social work did you do?"

"I used to be chairman of a chess club."

Here the interpreter turned to the SS officer and spoke in German. I understood nothing except the word *Aktiv-ist*, which is the same in both languages. That I was a Soviet citizen active in public life did not at all follow from my replies, but still he had guessed right. I *was* a Komsomol member. I could not admit it, for it would have meant death. The SS officer, who had not said a word during the interrogation, stepped up to me and as calmly as though he were playing football kicked me in the groin. As I doubled up, he punched me hard in the face. I stumbled back across the room and slumped down in a corner. There was more to come. The Nazi turned on the radio full blast, picked up the bamboo chair and hurled it at my head. Then he called an SS man who