"The Greatest Morale Factor Next to the Red Army": Books and Libraries in American and British Prisoners of War Camps in Germany During World War II

David Shavit

The demand for books in American and British prisoners of war (POW) camps in Germany during World War II was insatiable. Libraries, both lending and reference, were established in almost all the camps. In addition, there was a considerable number of privately held books. This article details ways in which books were supplied to the camp libraries and to individuals POWs, the size and conditions of the libraries, and the books read by POWs. It emphasizes the importance of the library in the camps as a morale factor.

> Prisoners of war shall be allowed to receive shipments of books individually, which may be subject to censorship. Representatives of the protecting Powers and duly recognized and authorized aid societies may send books and collections of books to the libraries of prisoners' camps. The transmission of these shipments to libraries may not be delayed under the pretext of censorship difficulties.
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> Convention of July 27,1929, Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Article 39[1]

Prisoners of War

Some 95,000 American and 135,000 British and Commonwealth servicemen were incarcerated in prisoners of war (POW) camps in Germany during World War II. The prisoners were held in some fifty German POW camps, of several types. These included the Stalag (=*Stammlager,* permanent camps for noncommissioned officers and enlisted men), Stalag Luft (=*Luftwaffestammlager,* permanent camps for air force personnel), and *Oflag* (=*Offizierslager,* permanent officers' camps). American POWs were found in many of the POW camps, but the majority of camps contained only a few Americans. In some camps (Stalags II-B, III-B, IV-B, XVII-B, Luft I,

Libraries & Culture, Vol. 34, No. 2, Spring 1999

Luft III, and Luft IV), however, the number of American POWs ran into the thousands. Germany in general followed the 1929 Geneva Convention in the treatment of American and British servicemen in POW camps. POWs were not to be individually confined, and the food served them should have been equal to that served to German troops. The convention forbade work of any kind for officer prisoners and non-commissioned officer prisoners were only supposed to do supervisory work, but private soldiers could be made to work, provided the work was not connected with the war effort.[2]

The most urgent problems for POWs were obtaining sufficient food, warm clothing, minimum health care, and adequate shelter. While life for POWs who were interned in German camps was mainly composed of boredom, frustration, hunger, cold, and occasional bouts of real danger, their existence was not, remarked one ex-POW, "absurdly grim."[3]

> Although fictional portrayals of POWs have invariably focused on the excitement generated by attempted escapes, gloomy resignation and stifling boredom more typically characterized a prisoner's daily existence. Rather than undertaking unrealistic and potentially dangerous escapes, it was far more sensible for the prisoner to stay focused on his immediate environment and try to counter its negative effects. Keeping busy was all-important, either through recreational, cultural, or educational activities or by just communicating with one's friends.[4]

Agencies Supplying Books

In the beginning of the Second World War, the International Red Cross Committee (IRC) in Geneva became involved in providing books to prisoners of war and to civilian internees. While the number of POWs was small, the IRC had taken upon itself to send books to the German camps. In spring 1940, however, this was no longer practicable, and the IRC began to coordinate this type of relief through various religious and lay organizations which had already been active on their own. The IRC presided over an Advisory Committee on Reading Matter for Prisoners of War, which centralized the activities of six organizations and to which the appropriate requests for books from POW camps were forwarded. The organizations were the World Alliance of Young Men's Christian Associations (YMCA), the International Bureau of Education, the Ecumenical Commission for Assistance to Prisoners of War, the European Student Relief Fund, the International Federation of Library Associations, and the Swiss Catholic Mission for Prisoners of War.[5]

In the late autumn of 1940, the Indoor Recreations Section of the Prisoners of War Department of the British Red Cross Society and the Order of St. John of Jerusalem was established and accepted the responsibility for regular consignments of books. (The section was initially named the Fiction and Games Section, but was later renamed the Indoor Recreations, Books, Games and Music Section.) It began the task of providing books for the establishment of camp libraries and trying to satisfy all tastes.[6] By December 1941, the Indoor Recreations Section had sent over 71,000 volumes. Between October 1940, and March 1945, the Indoor Recreations section sent directly to POW camps or to the reserve at Geneva more than 239,500 volumes for POW libraries.[7]

The branch of the Indoor Recreations Section that dealt with educational books had been in operation since the early days of the war. It was later expanded into a separate section called the Educational Books Section. By the end of May 1942, 69,400 educational books had been sent to POW camps.[8]

To meet the needs of newly formed camps without undue delay, a stock of 50,000 reserved and unreserved books in the English language was built up in Geneva, and many volumes requested by POWs were supplied more quickly from this source. “Request” forms were sent to the camps, on which prisoners gave some indication of their previous academic backgrounds, subjects that they wished to study, and books that they required to do so. When requests were received by the Educational Books Section, the books were ordered, packed and sent on to the POWs, who were separately notified and required to return an acknowledgment card. When the prisoner finished with these books, they were placed in the central camp library by the prisoner concerned.[9]

As camp libraries became active, a continuous flow of requests reached the Education Book Section. It was not always easy to satisfy these requests. A considerable number of new publications came under censorship restrictions. There was also a general shortage of books in the United Kingdom, which made supplies difficult to maintain. Some well-known and popular titles were almost unprocurable; others were available only in insufficient quantities.[10]

In October 1939, the World’s Committee of the Young Men’s Christian Association, a neutral organization with headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, established the War Prisoners Aid, in order to satisfy the recreational, educational, and moral needs of war prisoners. The American War Prisoners Aid of the Young Men’s Christian Association became the major agency for acquiring books and sending them to POW camps in Germany. (The American National Red Cross decided to leave the field of educational, recreational, and spiritual welfare to the YMCA.)

In its preliminary summary report of its activities during the war, the War Prisoners Aid stated that it was no accident that the first shipment to a POW camp from the War Prisoners Aid in Geneva consisted of books. Books were the first and most important requirement in helping fight boredom, in occupying and often improving one's mind; they immediately came to the mind of anyone who wanted to help men in confinement. Following the first shipment, an ever increasing, yet ever inadequate, flow of books went to the camps.[11]

Neutral YMCA officials from Geneva also received permission to visit POW camps and talk with the prisoners in order to determine what more could be done. From these reports and from prisoners' letters, it was learned that there was a great need for books for the professional man, the student, and the artisan.

In spring 1942 the World's Committee of the YMCA founded the "Men of Science—Prisoners of War" Service. This special service was developed to provide books for prisoners who wished to study and those who wanted to begin or to continue projects of serious study and research. Hundreds of librarians, university professors, and certain business corporations in the United States and Canada helped to locate, and frequently to donate, books especially requested by such individuals. Authors, publishers, libraries and friends were generous in their donations of books as well as money to be used for book purchases.[12]

It is not easy to ascertain the exact number of books sent by the War Prisoners Aid to American prisoners of war. One record states that the YMCA sent 1,280,146 books to American POWs in Europe during World War II. Herbert G. Sisson, member of the Information Services of the War Prisoners Aid, reported that 98,962 popular books and textbooks were shipped to Geneva in 1943 by the War Prisoners Aid. In addition, 51,00 Bibles or parts of the Bible, supplied by the American Bible Society, were also shipped to Geneva.

In general reading alone, American prisoners in Germany received 41,030 books from Geneva in 1944 and 96,945 books in the first six months of 1945.[13] On 13 January 1945, *Publishers Weekly* reported that 522,345 books were sent to Allied prisoners of war in Germany through the War Prisoners Aid during 1943, and a million books were sent in 1944. About 900,000 copies of the Armed Services Editions were purchased by the U.S. Army and donated to the War Prisoners Aid.[14]

The Geneva office reported that during 1944, the last full year of operation, 108,682 books were shipped to American POW camps. It included 41,030 books termed "general reading," and 26,682 termed "circulating library," as well as 19,602 religious books, and 14,117 general education books.

A typical library of 1,050 volumes, prepared for a unit of 200 American prisoners in Germany, would contain 600 fiction and general reading books; 150 textbooks; 25 biographies; 50 books on history and travel; 100 on vocations, professions and trades; 50 on science and medicine; 50 on religion; and 25 on poetry and art.[15]

Thousands of books were purchased outright by the YMCA using funds donated by the American people, largely through the National War Fund. (Publishers were very generous with discounts). The Victory Book Campaign, sponsored by the American Library Association, American Red Cross, and U.S.O. set aside 45,051 new and clean books for prisoners of war. The *Infantry Journal* provided a large number of popular books, as well as a consignment of new reference books for POW camp libraries. Other books were donated by various individuals and agencies.[16]

Families and individuals could also send books to prisoners of war in Germany, but only new books. No used books could be sent. Book orders had to be placed with a book seller or publisher who had to mail the books. The purchaser was not allowed to wrap or mail the books.

The American Red Cross, in its *Prisoners of War Bulletin,* provided guidelines to prisoners' relatives and friends. It was possible to send, directly from a bookseller, sixty pounds of books a year, at the rate of five pounds a month. Only one parcel of books, weighing no more than five pounds, could be forwarded each thirty days, by the Censor's Office in New York, to any one prisoner of war.

Responding to the question as to what books would interest a prisoner most, the *Bulletin* stated:

> Any book that is sufficiently well written, and that has enough body and content and purpose to hold the reader to the world the author is describing. A prisoner of war lives in monotonous and drab surroundings, but through books he can escape into another world. His intellect, his imagination, or his emotions are stimulated by what he reads. Even books that he read before may be enjoyable, not only for their content but for their reminders of the times and places where he has read them in his old, free days. If your prisoner is a voracious reader, the Pocket Library reprints are much lighter in weight, and you could therefore send many more books in a 5-pound package. They are also less expensive. These reprints have a wide choice, from Shakespeare and Homer through Mark Twain, Thornton Wilder, Jack London, Raphael Sabatini, John P. Marquand, and Daphne de Maurier, to mention only a few. Books published in these small, lightweight editions are apt to be good reading because they have already

> survived the test of a first publishing. They are also almost all prewar, and so avoid censorship problems.[17]

In Canada, families of POWs were given a list of government-authorized firms through which they could order books. They would send in the order, and the books would be sent by these firms directly to the POWs, so that the families had to rely on the integrity of the businessmen with whom they were dealing, since they would never see the books. Unfortunately, some booksellers took advantage of this situation. A Canadian flying officer in Stalag Luft III reported that his mother and father sent him a parcel of books, "and the books turned out to be things like *Nancy So-and-So and Her School Girlfriends at Something-or-Other Tech*. I mean crap that you wouldn't ever read. Took them just terrible."[18] Some of the books received from the YMCA were characteristic of the kind of books that people had probably cleaned out of their attics and given to the YMCA to pass along to POWs.

Censorship

"For many prisoners, the most exciting moment of the month was when they heard the casual remark: 'Oh, Smith, your name's on the list—book parcel.'" The contents of the weekly food parcel and the quarterly clothing parcel did not vary much. Books, therefore, became the great standby and a means of escape from the confinement of the barbed wire.[19]

Martin A. Smith, Prisoner in Stalag IV, recalled:

> January 3rd [1945] was a red letter day for me when my first package arrived from my parents back in New Jersey. Hurriedly ripping off the tattered wrappings, I found four books inside. Two were language texts, one German, the other Spanish. In addition, there was a volume of Shakespeare's plays and a biography, *Good Night, Sweet Prince*, the story of the life of the famous actor, John Barrymore. Any reading material sent to us was, of course, thoroughly inspected by German as well as American censors but these four books were surely non-controversial and had no doubt easily passed muster. They were a most welcome present that guaranteed me many hours of reading to help pass the time. Probably much better for me than cigarettes or edibles would have been—food for the mind rather than the body.[20]

Two sets of censors had to be satisfied. All books (new and used) were subject to rigid censorship control and had to conform to censorship

requirements. The United States Office of Censorship prohibited the sending of all magazines and newspapers regardless of date of publication. In addition, books containing the following material were also prohibited: navigational charts, plans, and wharf and dock maps or parts thereof; meteorological charts; charts of currents; navigational reference books, including sailing instructions; lists of lights; lists of wireless signals; tide tables; distance tables; nautical and air almanacs, directories and calendars, and supplements thereto; information of any nature relative to ports, harbors, anchorages, and inland waterways; military, naval, and air force subjects; chemistry; espionage; explosives; geography and map making; lithography; politics; weapons and armament; wireless and radio; enemy propaganda; any subject, which may be considered doubtful or of a technical or scientific nature, including patents, inventions, and discoveries.[21] Few scientific books published later than November 1941 passed by the American censors. All books had to have neither pencil or ink markings in them, nor labels or bookplates. In Great Britain, every volume had to pass through the Educational Books Section, where each mark and map was removed before the book was shipped to Germany.

The books also had to pass the restrictions imposed by the German censor. A whole set of regulations, some standard throughout the Reich and others varying from camp to camp, had to be observed. Parcels sent by relatives were stored in the camp and censored there. If the books were approved, they were then issued to the prisoner. The Germans did not permit books written by or including material by Jewish authors, émigrés from Germany or German-occupied countries and certain other authors to enter POW camps. A single poem by a Jew in an anthology was sufficient to prevent the book's arrival.

A librarian in a large camp for officers reported on the "large and annoying gaps where the British or German censors had intervened, but this was mainly confined to the history shelves." He found it interesting that H. L. A. Fisher's *History of Europe* was forbidden by the Germans not for the chapter on Nazi Germany, but because of the first sentence of the Introduction. ("We Europeans are the children of Hellas".) The banned list was extraordinarily thorough, but had some delightful omissions: John Buchan's war novels, such as *Greenmantle* and *Mr. Standfast* were forbidden, but the omnibus *Adventures of Richard Hannay* remained untouched; the American novelist Winston Churchill was of course banned in toto, but *My Early Life* by Winston Spencer Churchill was not attributed to the then Prime Minister and was let in. Other gems on the black list were the *Golden Treasury* (because the editor, Francis Turner Palgrave, was a Jew) and *Scouting for Boys* (because the Boy Scouts were, of course, part of the British Secret Service). Spinoza's *Ethics* was banned on racial, *Gil Blas* on patriotic, and *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* by James Hadley

Chase on moral grounds. However, there were usually ways of evading the censorship, but the only banned work that that librarian never succeeded in obtaining was the most curious of all, the English translation of *Mein Kampf*.[22]

Books dealing with sensitive questions such as totalitarianism, freedom, democracy, and liberty were sometimes returned by the German authorities. Any criticism, open or implied, of Hitler or the Nazis, especially when the war was still young, caused the German censors to ban the particular book, sometimes even the whole consignment. For example, a book from a Penguin paperback series was found to be objectionable because it featured an advertisement on the back cover of a British Tommy with a fixed bayonet chasing a cartoon figure of Hitler. Not only that book, but the whole series was forbidden. This was especially unfortunate as this particular paperback series was a large mass printing in England and was suitable for sending to camps because of the light weight and the numerous varied subjects with which the books dealt.[23]

The selection and delivery of books were far from perfect. Prisoners were eagerly on hand in Stalag III-B when some fifteen cases of books arrived, only to discover upon opening the boxes that they were all filled with the same volume: A. J. Cronin's *The Keys of the Kingdom*, "a depressing story of tragedy, torture, famine, and plague."[24] In addition to books, the War Prisoners Aid shipped from Sweden wood for making bookcases, as well as repair and binding material.[25]

Camp Libraries

The World's Alliance of Young Men's Christian Association reported that the demand for books was insatiable and was never fully met. In some camps, libraries with as many as 25,000 to 40,000 volumes were organized, with card catalogues and penalties for the misuse of a book.[26]

In June 1944 the education director of War Prisoners Aid reported that in a typical British or American POW camp, one would discover a considerable number of privately owned books and, often, a lending and reference library. Although many of the enlisted men were scattered in work detachments where only a few books for evening reading were available, in some of the larger camps of Allied prisoners there were as many as 50,000 or even 100,000 volumes, counting both library and privately owned books.[27]

Stalag II-B, the largest ground force enlisted men's camp and the largest POW camp in Germany, was situated near the small town of Hammerstein, in Pomerania. On 30 December, 1944, it had 7,087 American POWs. A letter from Stalag II-B, dated 22 August 1943, reported

that they had a lot of library books and "a swell library," which contained 5,000 books.[28]

Stalag III-B, located in Fürstenburg on the Oder River, in Brandenburg, was another large camp for ground force enlisted men. On 30 December 1944, it contained 4,646 American POWs. A representative of the European Student Relief Fund who visited Stalag III-B reported that the camp library was a model of neatness and efficiency. The book-lending system guaranteed the most profitable use of the study material. The library increased from 200 books (donated by the commandant) to over 6,000 (many from the Swedish-led European Student Relief Fund).[29] A large and fairly good camp library was also located in Stalag VIII-B, in Lamsdorf, Upper Silesia.[30]

Stalag XVII-B in Gneixendorf, Austria, contained 4,175 American Air Corps noncommissioned personnel on 1 November 1944. A prisoner in this stalag wrote:

> The opening of our small library was a real shot in the arms for now we could slip away from this prison. It was only a mental escape but it still allowed us to break free from our internment.[31]

POWs felt fortunate to have a well organized library, with volunteers checking books in and out "as done in a regular library." The library became a very popular spot, and more than once all the novels were checked out. That meant waiting and double-checking everything to find if a book that one had not read had returned. In a letter dated 19 January 1944, the author wrote:

> Our library at present is in full operation. The fiction library is worked on check-out basis, occupies one-quarter of a barrack, and has a bookbinding project in conjunction with it. The technical library reserves its books for reference only.[32]

When the initial group of American ground force officers arrived in Oflag 64 (initially Oflag XXI-B) in June 1943, the preceding group of English officers had left a small library of some 250 well-worn English titles. The library was soon supplemented by American titles by the YMCA. A letter from the librarian of Oflag XXI-B, dated 30 June 1943, reported:

> At this camp we have established quite a library and I have been made librarian, a very pleasant job. I am learning to appreciate good books and most important how to take care of them. The British gave us all the books we have now, and we hope more will be

> sent. Our books, mostly fiction, number about 700 now and there are at least that many more to be censored.

The "white house" in Oflag 64 served as the German headquarters and as the quarters area for the senior allied officer and his staff. The library was in the attic of the white house, and the prisoners used the back stairs (the front staircase was for the German officers). Traffic up and down the steps must have intrigued German security because they suddenly began a systematic search for whatever clandestine activity was going on. The searches drew blanks and soon the prisoners were tramping up and down the steps again. In October 1944, the library had 6,000 volumes. By the war's end, there were 7,000 books in the Oflag 64 library, mostly used fiction. The librarian figured that, on the average, each POW took out and read one book every three days. The sought-after books had a "reserve list" glued inside their covers, and the officers' names were marked-off as they returned the books to the library.[33]

As a rule, a bindery was attached to the library and several POWs performed bookbinding and book repair. Because all the books, old and new, had been machine-bound, and were never intended for the unusual nonstop reading and handling, the glue and stitching deteriorated, causing sections of the books to fall apart and the cover to come off. Even the new and extremely popular American books began to fall apart after ten to twenty readings, and had to be rebound.[34]

Stalag Luft I was an American Air Corps Officer POW camp, near the village of Barth in Pomerania. On 12 December 1944, it had 4,780 American POWs. It held an initial library of over 1,500 books, thanks to the British POWs who were transferred out to other camps and left the books behind. A report from October 1944 stated that the library was fairly large and contained varied types of literature.[35]

Stalag Luft III was located near the small town of Sagan in Silesia. By 27 January 1945, it had 6,844 American POWs and was made up of several compounds. Each compound had at least two libraries, one for reference material and one that served as a general lending library for works of fiction and nonfiction. The libraries were a necessary component of the education program, but their overall importance was even greater. The fiction library especially was "probably the greatest morale factor in the camp next to the Red Army." From the very beginning, the POWs of Center Compound had reading material to keep them informed and occupied. The British gave the American POWs several hundred of their old novels and a reference library of about 200 volumes. The library was a clean place capable of seating about 80 men. A standard library procedure for shelving, lending, and cataloging the books was established. All the help, about two dozen or so men, were volunteers. The card index

was made of nondescript cardboard. The reading was done on homemade tables illuminated by two 60-watt bulbs where there should have been a dozen. The fiction library eventually contained about 2,000 books. These circulated completely every ten days. The most highly demanded books by order of importance were: (1), well-worn popular novels; (2), detective fiction; (3), western fiction; (4), travel; and (5) biography. In addition to the regular lending library there were about 5,000 or 6,000 privately owned books, which were used as much as those in the library. The reference and technical library had about 400 to 500 volumes that were in great demand. These books were not allowed out of the reading room and were treated with great care.

> It was a wonderful place for the high-strung and the studious *Kriegie* alike to spend many quiet hours in peace and concentration. Right after morning roll call there would be a mad rush for the best seats and the best books.[36]

American magazines were also available in the reference library and were eagerly read and reread. The issues most frequently received in the American compounds included *National Geographic, McCall's, Yale Review, Harper's, Atlantic Monthly, Saturday Evening Post,* and *The New Yorker.* Some Swiss movie magazines, and several German pictorial reviews were also received. They fell apart quickly. The Swiss movie magazines were extremely popular since they carried pictures of familiar American bathing beauties and movie queens. German pictorial magazines were also sent into the camp. The magazines were usually paid for out of communal funds. The prisoners also received the German papers printed in English for the POWs, and were said to be grateful to get them, because they supplemented meager rations of toilet paper and "only in such a role were they acceptable."[37]

Library book titles and the quantities of books in Stalag Luft III varied from time to time, but the holdings were impressive by prison camp standards. Within the first year after the camp opened, prisoners in the East and Center compounds alone had access to 8,500 volumes, about two-thirds of which were literary works and one-third scientific works. Not included in these figures are some 20,000 volumes that the prisoners had received in personal parcels and circulated among themselves. Many of the books which arrived in personal parcels were willingly passed around or donated to the libraries after the recipient had read them. A breakdown by category indicates that the lending library of the Center Compound once held a total of 1,944 volumes: 1,128 works of general fiction, 75 westerns, 342 detective novels, 28 biographies, and 371 miscellaneous books. The reference libraries contained fewer books, averaging

about 500 volumes in each compound. In addition, many of the books in the American compounds' reference libraries were British and of lesser value to the Americans. The reference libraries, however, were used extensively. Students had to share many textbooks for their course work, and the rooms were usually larger than those that housed the lending libraries and therefore provided one of the few places where the prisoners could study and keep warm in the winter. The reference library in Center Compound was generally full from ten o'clock in the morning until ten at night. Unfortunately, the libraries, like the rest of the camp, lacked sufficient lighting. The conditions of the books worsened because of frequent use and the absence of repair materials. It was noted in Center Compound that the more popular novels began to show signs of wear after about thirty or forty readings, and from that point onward deteriorated rapidly. This was a serious problem. Records kept by the libraries in Center Compound indicated that books changed hands about every ten days.[38]

While the libraries consisted of two rooms, the only entry to the inner room was through the outer. At certain times, when both rooms were full of readers, the inner room was vacated to make room for a meeting of the escape committee.

> Those forced to leave the inner room were streaming through the connecting door, muttering discontentedly and clutching their books and papers as they looked hopelessly around for somewhere to sit. There was a great noise of shuffling boots and dropped books, and the readers already established in the outer room looked up and clicked disapproval with their tongues. A man leaning against the wall with a copy of *The Golden Bough* in his hand, screwed up his eyebrows in disgust. 'These bloody escapers,' he said loudly.[39]

Stalag Luft IV was located near the small village of Kiefheider in Pomerania. On 31 December 1944, it had 8,652 American POWs. For a long time there were no books in the camp. Once they began to arrive, a limited library was set up in the compound in part of Barracks Number 1. Both nonfiction and fiction books became available. The fiction books were usually paperbound Armed Forces Editions, published by the Council on Books in Wartime. While reading was a favorite pastime for the POWs, reading material was scarce and lighting at night poor. The only illumination was one 25 or 40 watt bulb on a cord, dropped from the ceiling in the center of each room. The light was barely sufficient for reading even for the perfect eyes of airmen. Some of the POWs supplemented the light with homemade lamps. They took small wicks cut from

a GI belt and inserted them into cans of margarine for lamps. The shortage of books made it necessary for the prisoners to sign up on a long waiting list. Each prisoner had to wait his turn. If he missed his turn for some reason or other, he had to sign up again and go to the end of the line.[40]

Even in small work detachments, library books were often available. Special efforts were made to reach the labor detachments through a system of portable book boxes. Many small work detachments were served by *Wanderbüchereien* ("Wandering Books"), library boxes containing about 50 books each, which were circulated among the detachments. They were kept in each detachment for a three-week period. A POW was in charge of the library. It was his responsibility to see that all detachments that belonged under his main camp were served as well as possible.[41]

Libraries, as would be expected, were always the busiest center of any POW camp. "It must be understood that our entire library changes hands every ten days, due to the enormous interest in reading," a letter from an American airmen's camp in Germany stated. One prison camp librarian reported that he was issuing 876 volumes per day. Another one reported that, of 800 books in his library, almost every one was read each week.[42]

When books were scarce, as they were at one point in Stag Luft IV-B, some prisoners held onto the books that they checked out of the library and failed to return them. The problem became so bad that on 21 November 1944, the library was closed and all books were recalled. The library was kept closed for several days, long enough to locate all the books and to force their return.[43] A Canadian flight officer in Stalag Luft III recalled: "I remember when *Lady Chatterley's Lover* came into our room, it came in units of ten pages, and you'd read ten and pass them along."[44]

Books and Readers

> To my mind the most important morale factor in camp was the library. There was an abundance of classics—Shakespeare, Thackeray, Bronte, Swift, Dickens, Twain and Conrad—and an assortment of mysteries as well as countless dull and unreadable autobiographies, mostly about English Peers of the nineteenth century. Books about philosophy and theology were much in demand and there was a small selection. Each officer was allowed to take one book a week from the library, but by interchanging with roommates and friends it was possible to read as many as ten books a week. During my stay I read 212 books.[45]

"It will hardly surprise you when I say that one of the first lessons of captivity is the value of books, and a new realization of how dependent most of us have become on their ministrations," wrote the Reverend David Read soon after returning from Germany.[46] He continued,

> To try to estimate the part played by books in the ordinary run of settled prison-life is not altogether easy, for naturally it varied with the camp. But it was remarkable that solid reading could be done, and it would be fair to say that a great many officers acquired the taste of serious reading for the first time in their lives.[47]

The establishment of satisfactory libraries meant the return to more normal conditions. The old division appeared between those for whom books were an essential and those for whom they were just a pleasant occasional relaxation. As the years went by, the demand for fiction dropped. At first, the bulk of the consignments sent by the British Red Cross to the POWs was made up of the escapist genre, but it soon became clear from the prisoners' own requests that this form of literature did not suffice. The British Red Cross reported that prisoners whose interest had at first been confined to detective novels, progressed by way of English classics, biographies, belles lettres, and travel, to abstruse works on psychology, writings on comparative religion, and philosophy. There were soon many POWs who never read a novel, unless it was one of the classics. History and biography were in constant demand.[48] Many people did not read much, but as books became more plentiful in the camps, there was a great deal of serious study by men who previously had only read for amusement.[49]

Robert Kee, a British POW in Stalag Luft III, wrote later:

> As clearly as any incident of those years I remember the books which I read.We could not have lived without books. They were the only sure support, the one true comfort. When food was short, clothing scarce, blocks overcrowded and underheated, and news bad, there were always books. In reading one had a pleasure of which, like sleep, one could never be deprived. I remember the books which I read in that time with great love.
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> This personal quality of books was their greatest worth. Every prisoner suffered from cycles of depression, more frequent but almost as regular as the changing seasons. With some people the effect was just numbing: the man would lie on his bed all day like a piece of dead wood. With others it brought a violent distress of spirit often visible in faces for days on end.

> And undoubtedly the most satisfactory reading of all was poetry. Always the most directly relevant to a charged state of mind, even though it wasn't always modern, it was thus the most comforting and the most healing. If anthologies ever needed any justification they received it for me at least during those years. Under such conditions one could not afford to despise what was well known. One needed it too much for its own sake.[50]

And Kee continued:

> I remember the books which I read in that time with a great love. I think of novels: all Hardy, *Adam Bede, Tristram Shandy, The Newcomers, Henry Esmond, The Old Wives' Tale, Sentimental Education* and many others, but every sort of reading was happiness. As supply was limited, and controlled by censorship, reading was conventional, but one soon discovered that it would be possible to spend a life-time reading books which were not obscure and still not exhaust everything that was worthwhile.
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> I even remember books I disliked with affection. During the worst period for external conditions of the whole three years the only book I could get hold of (and then only putting my name down on a wishing list) was Somerset Maugham's enormous *Of Human Bondage*. I read it, literally hungrily, for four days, stopping only for the daily half pint of soup and four slices of bread, and sleep. I did not think it a good book, but I shall always be grateful to it.
>
> There were many copies of plays in the camps. Among those which gave me the greatest pleasure I remember the whole of Shakespeare, Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion,* and Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*.[51]

Another prisoner in Stalag Luft III wrote in his diary:

> *August 1, 1944.* No, the trick is to keep yourself busy. Keep doing anything to have an object to be accomplished, even if that object is only the construction of a tin plate. There are other things too, this is the first chance many of us have had in years (me included) to do any serious reading, catch up on ourselves mentally. And, thanks to the Red Cross and the YMCA, we have a pretty fair library here, containing some 2000 volumes of all kinds.
> *September 11, 1944.* Our reference library contains some 1200 volumes. Most heavily read being books on Math, Business, History, in that order.

October 30, 1944. Writing this in the camp library, which has been made out of an end of one of our two cookhouses, the only really warm spot I've been able to find. Weather has turned cold in the last four days, bitterly cold under the dull gray of these unfriendly skies, and it seems impossible to deal up or heat up our barracks.

So I, and as many others as can crowd in—have taken to spending a good part of the day in the library. It's salutary, too. In the period of the past year, with the cooperation of the YMCA and the omnipresent Red Cross, we have built up a considerable list of reference works, including some volumes on journalism. So I keep warm, and try to learn a few things about my professions, hereto matter of practical experience to me, rather than theory. Only thing that bothers me greatly is the strain on my eyes, I find I'm reading constantly in bad light, for lack of anything else to do.

December 10, 1944. Continuing my program of self–education, however haphazard it may seem, I've been reading biographies. Currently, Van Doren's *Benjamin Franklin*. Will do some reading on Rousseau next, prompted by a recent reference to his teachings (in print) which made it immediately apparent that I know almost nothing about him.

December 23, 1944. My reading program progresses. I've almost finished the Old Testament; have finished *Franklin, Jeb Stuart, Paul Revere,* and a biography of Jacob Riis, and am now well into Arthur Train's *From the District Attorney's Office*. A pretty catholic collection, but interesting.

January 13, 1945. Add to my list of books read: Lytton Strachey's *Elizabeth and Essex,* Fast's *Citizen Tom Paine,* H. B. Baker's *Juarez*; a growing and most catholic collection.[52]

A prisoner in Stalag XVII-B recorded that reading became a passion for him and many of the other POWs. He was reading everything he could get his hands on, including mysteries and westerns. He had never read western stories before, but he could not get enough of these novels. Even law books became interesting since he was taking a business law course. Everything he read was fascinating and each book catapulted him away from his surroundings.[53]

Kenneth W. Simmons, who was also a prisoner in Stalag Luft III, remembered:

During the second and third weeks of November, full scale winter reached Sagan, and packed the snow a foot and a half deep. We were confined more and more to the barracks, and daytime winter

> activities continued to grow. Most of the members of my combine spent their time reading. There were many *Kriegies* who would read a new book every day.
>
> There were some books that could not be checked out of the library, and I spent as much time in the library as I did in the combine. I devoted many hours each day to reading books of all types. The more I read the greater the desire I had to read. I spent several days studying the works of Shakespeare, Byron, Keats, Shelley, and Samuel Johnson. I became so interested in Johnson's works that I read Boswell's *Life of Johnson* from cover to cover. I also read biographies of Henry Clay, Lincoln, Napoleon, and Henry the VIII, and I read *Mein Kampf*. I read, too, several popular novels and, believe it or not, a history called *Economic Life in Europe*.[54]

The Oflag 64 Item, the newspaper of Oflag 64, often reported on library activities. On 1 December 1943, one of the headlines read: "*Kriegies* Are Bookworms, Survey Says." The article stated that more than 100 books daily were being digested, or about one per man every three days. Historical novels of Early America were the most popular reading, led by Walter Edmunds' *Drums Along the Mohawk,* while James Truslow Adams's *Epic of America* topped the non-fiction list. Perry Mason, Philo Vance, and Ellery Queen were the fictional "dicks" with the largest followings. In March 1944, Lloyd C. Douglas's *The Robe* headed Oflag's best-seller list. Douglas was "head and shoulders" above all others as the most popular author in camp, according to the librarian. It was the most read book in camp; five copies were in continuous circulation and yet it had the longest waiting list. Authors from Shakespeare to Sherwood were represented in the drama section. There were 50 collections of poems from Dante to Carl Sandburg, 200 biographies, 150 travel books, several histories of art, and more than 1,900 fiction novels. On 1 August 1944, the librarian reported that the books most in demand were fiction with themes that Will Hays did not read. Will Hays was the first "czar" of the motion picture industry (from 1922 until 1945) who directed the motion picture censoring operation. The two novels that topped the most popular list for the longest time were *Kitty Foyle* and *Random Harvest*. However, *The Robe* and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* were the most read, and *The Americanization of Edward Bok* was the most popular autobiography. Travel books and stories of canoe and sailboat trips were also extremely popular.

By 1 January 1945, the library had 7,000 volumes and catered to the varied reading tastes of the prisoners. More than 250 books were withdrawn each day. The most popular section was fiction, with well-patronized sections of travel, essays, biography, verse, drama, psychology, art, religion, sciences, history, and languages. The most popular works

were on a "reserve" list, such as Kenneth Roberts's *Arundel*, Samuel Hopkins Adams's *Canal Town*, and Douglas Freeman's *Lee's Lieutenants*.[55]

David Westheimer, another prisoner in Stalag Luft III, recalled that he read *Nicholas Nickleby, The Old Curiosity Shop, Return of the Native, Henry Esmond*, Joinville's *Chronicles of the Crusades, A Mind That Found Itself*, and G. U. Ellis's *There Goes the Queen*, a novel for some reason particularly appealing to POWs. When not improving his mind with serious works, he read every detective novel he could get his hands on.[56]

> Books were the best escape. You vanished into whatever world was theirs and hours fled by. On the South Compound library shelves, I found some of the old Literary Guild selections I'd read in my big brother's easy chair when I was a boy. The library was divided into two sections, one for reference, the other for lending. The lending library was the smaller of the two, an eight-man room lined with shelves full of fiction, nonfiction and poetry . . . The reference library filled two adjoining eight-man rooms, one of them fitted with packing-case armchairs and settees. There was a fairly good selection of textbooks and technical works on history, banking, law, chemistry, math, foreign languages, and literature but nothing on map making, radio, navigation, or any other subject that might prove useful in escape and evasion.
>
> I read to kill time and for entertainment, mysteries and other light novels, but I also read books I thought I might never turn to outside the bag [slang for being in POW camp]. Some of those I found hard going but others brought unexpected pleasure. I'd already developed a crush on Dickens with *Dombey and Son* and now I had *David Copperfield* and *The Pickwick Papers*. I discovered Thackeray, too. *Vanity Fair, Pendennis, Yellowplush Papers, The Great Hogarty Diamond* and *Canterbury Tales* and Boswell's *Life of Johnson, The Compleat Angler, Tom Jones, Roderick Random, Moby Dick, Lord Jim, Pride and Prejudice, Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, The Mill on the Floss, A Passage to India, The Vicar of Wakefield, Madame Bovary, Crime and Punishment, Penguin Island, Growth of the Soil*. The only novel I started and didn't finish was George Meredith's *The Egoist.* Too mannered for a lowbrow no matter how bored.[57]

It is impossible to overestimate the psychological value of the entertainment facilities. They made life bearable for many lonesome POWs. If it had not been for the unstinted aid and generosity of the Red Cross, prisoners felt that their lives would have been much more difficult. As it was, it made their confinement tolerable.[58]

Three observations would best summarize the importance of libraries, books, and reading to prisoners of war. At the conclusion of the war, the U.S. War Department's Military Intelligence Service reported that reading was the greatest activity of prisoners of war. The report stated: "Of all the recreations, reading seemed to take the first place. Many officers availed themselves of numerous text books to improve their knowledge on various subjects." Arthur A. Durand, in his secret history of Stalag Luft III, wrote: "The effect of serious reading that well-selected camp libraries made possible, though neither obvious nor measurable, cannot otherwise than ultimately be of great benefit to many individual ex-prisoners, and indirectly to the communities in which they live." And Major General Delmar T. Spivey, who was a prisoner in Stalag Luft III, wrote similarly:

> Many people do not read much, but if they were deprived of all reading material they would suffer greatly. I am sure that thousands of books in our library were responsible for providing constructive, mind-saving diversion from the mental fortunes of POW life.[59]

American and British prisoners' worst enemy was usually boredom. One of the most important activities which overcame this enemy was reading. The American and British peoples, through the various agencies which undertook the task of providing POWs with books, made it possible for prisoners to obtain books which were so necessary and useful. It helped the prisoners to occupy their time and keep their mental capacity. When the American and British POWs left the prisoners of war camps, approximately 1 million books were left behind.

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