

ALAN MOORHEAD TELLS ABOUT HIS ENCOUNTERS WITH THE SOVIET PEOPLE ON THE ROADS OF WW2

IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND IRAN - OF RUSSIA AND THE RUSSIANS



Alan Moorehead (1910 - 1983) was a renown Australian journalist and historian-writer. In particular, he wrote the now classic book 'Gallipoli'. During the WWII he was a war correspondent, mainly, - in the North Africa and Middle East. In 1944 he published one of the best books about the war in this region - 'African Trilogy'. In this book one can find interesting pieces dedicated to the attitudes of the British towards their unexpected ally - the Soviet Russia and about his encounters with the Soviet soldiers and officers in Iran occupied by the Soviet and British troops in the

autumn of 1941. They are here for your attention...

THE MIDDLE EAST - SUMMER 1941

The Middle East was almost an all-British sphere, full of all-British ways of thinking and some of them a little behind the times. The ritual of the salute and the hierarchy of the commissioned officer survived very strongly. That increasing left-wing movement among the soldiers and workers of England scarcely touched the Middle East. It is understandable that the political moves at the heart of the Empire do not penetrate its edges at once. Isolated in the desert and scattered outposts, the men craved reading matter more than anything else - and did not get it. This cut them off from the political and social trends at home.

In this self-contained and intensely unpolitical world the entrance of Russia on our side caught the serving officer off balance. The prime minister's prompt and lucid speech on the Nazi attack upon Russia did a good deal toward making our position clear. But after that there was an immense gap in our internal propaganda on the subject. It was not easy for men reared in the public-school-university-city-regular-army atmosphere to adjust themselves suddenly to the idea that they were fighting side by side with the Communists. It was embarrassing and painful to see them struggling against their old loyalties. Some made no attempt. Others avoided the whole issue. The majority in the end achieved the necessary mental transition, and as the Russian resistance went on from day to day they began to take pride in the Red soldier.

For the average soldier in the British ranks no such mental upheaval was necessary. The conditions of labor in England in the late 1930s and the conduct of our foreign policy up to Munich had not exactly made him a passionate admirer of the Conservative Party. He had already traveled some distance toward the left. He was at this point a long way ahead of his officers in his appreciation of the Russian question.

But the soldier's approach to the new political line-up was slow and cautious. He was starved of information. Where his officers lagged so far behind him politically he could not make much progress. All this may not have been important, but for the fact that still there came no pronouncement from London about the aims of this war. Through the previous winter in the Middle East it had been enough for the private soldier to know that his home in England was in danger and he was fighting for his life. But now that the crisis was past he could reasonably hope for the defeat of the enemy. To what end? Were we going to annihilate Germany? Were we going to rebuild the English cities and improve working conditions? Were we going to make a union with

the United States? In the desert and the Delta, at sea in the merchant ships and in the remote garrisons of Malta and Cyprus, Aden and Basra, the men debated these points endlessly. Inevitably every argument turned toward Russia, Red Russia the Mysterious, the place of Moscow Trials, Bolsheviks, whiskers and Volga boatmen dressed in smocks. The ignorance was pitiful.

Yet as each day went by, the seeds of admiration for the reds began to take root through the camps and barracks of the Middle East and there was a growing feeling, 'We must do something to'.

IRAN - AUTUMN 1941

We had been passing groups of Indian soldiers encamped beside the road, and now on the third morning we came on their farthest outpost, a company of Gurkhas.

Their officer told us the great meeting between the British and Red forces had taken place the previous day, and now the Russians had withdrawn to Kasvin, some seventy kilometers farther on. Well, that was another story we had missed. We were too weary to care much about it anyway. I was beginning to loathe the whole adventure. We went on doggedly and presently someone said, 'Good God, what's that?'

It was a truckload of troops who seemed at first to be Nazis. They sat four abreast in gabardine tunics and jackboots. They had German helmets on their heads, and each man, sitting bold upright, clasped a rifle with a fixed bayonet. Where had I seen this before? A newsreel showing the Nazi entrance into Vienna? We ran alongside. Looking up into their faces, we saw young men with fair hair and blue eyes and round brown cheeks. Hand grenades were strapped to their waists and on their superb shoulders were strapped cartridge belts. Every rifle was automatic.

They never turned to look at us. They looked straight ahead, sitting there stiffly on the hard wooden seats of their truck, and the truck was running on caterpillars. I looked keenly at the nearest boy and his pleasant, peasant's eyes were blank and rigid, and his great countryman's hand was corded tightly round the barrel of his rifle. He was as erect as a birch tree. He wore a red hammer and sickle badge. At that moment the great Red bluff was exploded for me forever. What about the poor anemic Russian infantryman who had no boots in Finland? And the dumb herds slaughtered by the Germans in the last war? And the peasant crushed by the OGPU?'



Soviets and British servicemen meet in Iran

It had been a fine bluff and it had been working steadily for more than two decades. Now at last the Soviets had been forced to show their cards. And their cards were these young men, athletes all of them, with their iron discipline, their brand new modern weapons, their wonderful shining health. They had that strange thing you see occasionally in young men's faces. It is a mixture of adolescent strength and spiritual resolve, and something else - pride, maybe. I had never seen troops like this before.

As we drove on into Kasvin, we came on one remarkable thing after another. There were multiple pom-poms mounted on tractors that were designed to meet low-flying aircraft. These traveled with the convoys lorried infantry and filled the role a destroyer takes at sea. They had field guns too far off for me to see clearly, but obviously of a recent design. They had armored cars with a two-pounder gun and two-inch armor on the turret. These cars had eight wheels, two of which in the front could be jacked up clear of the road and used as spares or lowered to help the car across bad ground. They had steel field kitchens and wireless vans. They had streamlined aircraft, faster than our latest *Spitfire* (though these we did not see until later). They had many tracked vehicles and small scout tanks. All these weapons were in a spotless condition.

The men were in grey-green uniforms and light half-length black knee boots. Woven badges on their arms showed who was an electrician, who a wireless expert, who a tank mechanic and so on. The officers' ranks were marked by little red enameled badges attached to their tunic lapels - four badges to a general. They all had heavy steel helmets.

Sentries twice sprang from ditches with hand grenades and stopped us. They carried Russian tommy-guns.

We came in the early afternoon to the hotel at Kasvin, the Russian army headquarters. There were red sentries and armored cars at the door, and the Persian servants, obviously frightened, were setting out a late luncheon on the dining-room table. One after another the Russian staff officers and commissars came in.

There must have been about twenty of them. They were rough, leathery, sweaty and cheerful. The senior political commissar, a round porcine little man, looked at me narrowly and said, 'We met in Valencia in the Spanish war'. I could not remember, but it seemed to reassure him greatly. I suppose he was doing one of those underground political jobs in Spain. The general, the last to arrive, was a soft spoken little man with deceptively gentle manners. A civilian interpreter had bobbed up from somewhere and explained that we were a party of British and American war correspondents on our way to Teheran.

'Ask them to lunch', said the general; we will discuss it later. The lunch continued until six in the evening. There was the stage where we ate cold chicken and chatted politely through the interpreter. The stage where we toasted Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill. The stage where we denounced the Germans and filmed one another with my miniature movie camera. The stage where we exchanged badges and sang folk-songs together. And, last scene of all, the stage where I drew off to my bedroom with a spitting head to type my dispatch.

Through all this toasting in fierce Persian vodka, the general was charming but adamant. Teheran, he said, was not yet occupied by the Allied troops. He, for his part, would be delighted to let us go through, but he had just made an agreement with the British general that no one should pass along the road. Let us produce a pass from the British general and he would countersign it at once and off we should go.

There was nothing for it but to drive back to British headquarters. Mundy and Patrick Crosse of Reuters, who had joined our party, volunteered to make the journey while the rest of us slept. They drove all night, were twice arrested by red sentries, and in the early morning got back with the pass. By ten o'clock we were on the road again.

IN TEHERAN

Governing everything was one dominating fear - fear, not of the British, but the Russians. In the last war the Russians had come into this country, they had seized Kasvin, the very town they now held again, and they had been ruthlessly severe. Every Persian I spoke to seemed mortally afraid of the Russians. The people of Teheran were spreading the most hair-raising stories of red rape, pillage and violence.

The German and Italian nationals also were petitioning that they should be handed over, not to the Russians, but to us. It was interesting to see that even after the bombing of England these remote little hangers-on of the Axis believed that there was still goodwill to be found for them among the British. And they had a proportionate fear of the Russians. I had seen the same thing at the fall of Addis Ababa. Even at the moment of their capture Italians and Germans will adopt a confident, almost insolent, manner because they have a conviction that they will be treated well by the British.

When we were waiting in Teheran for the departure of the Axis nationals and the dethronement of the Shah in favor of his son, we decided to visit the Caspian Sea where the Red Fleet was in occupation. We dropped at last below sea-level to the shores of the Caspian and drove into the flowering gardens of Chalus. Six Red sentries blocked the road.

Sam remembered a few Russian phrases and Clifford seems to be able to speak any language he likes after about ten minutes. Between them they made the introductions. Cluttered up with his tommy-gun and his hand-grenades, the Russian corporal bowed from the hips, an astonishing gesture, and told us to report to his officer a few kilometers east along the coast.

Now we were really enjoying ourselves. The Caspian was grey and limitless, a wonderful vision after the desert. From the green forests little mountain streams raced across the road into the black sand beaches. Two Russian destroyers lay at anchor, and again one felt that sudden uplift of excitement about the Red forces. From a distance these ships looked exactly like our latest destroyers, only a little more rakish and modern in outline. If fresh grey paint goes for anything, they were beautifully maintained. Two more sentries, tommy-guns braced evenly in their hands ready for action, blocked the way to the wharves. Strange uniforms only meant enemy to them, and we went forward keeping our hands elaborately away from our sides. Then the lieutenant came along in blue gabardine with a blue cap and an anchor badge on the band. He was absurdly handsome and his teeth were like an American toothpaste advertisement.

As soon as we approached, the two sentries saluted and jumped to attention; and at attention they stayed throughout the whole interview. When the officer called a marine along the beach the marine ran toward him, saluted, stood to attention while he got his orders, saluted again, and then ran back to his post.

These men were keyed to a discipline. I have yet to see in our army, or any other army. It may be that they are all comrades together, but the Red officer on the job gets the sort of skilled and immediate obedience we don't often see off the parade ground. At Kasvin a sentry had been posted outside my bedroom door. It had been almost unnerving the way he had swept up to attention and a full salute when I merely appeared in the distance. Here on the Caspian this was no rehearsed parade for the benefit of foreigners. We had arrived unexpectedly, their first visitors, and probably, apart from Persians, the first foreigners these men had ever seen.

The lieutenant wrote us out a safe conduct at once. He grinned and seemed to take the whole thing in his stride and I would much like to have talked at length to him. All the rest of the afternoon we drove along the southern littoral of the Caspian to Ramsar.

The head policeman of Ramsar, bulbous, sweating and surmounted by a Prussian helmet, had met us on the steps. It seemed that the Russians had not called here yet, and in a long lyrical

speech he offered us the surrender of the town. We took him inside and sat with him far into the night eating caviar and drinking vodka and lemonade. We were asked to go pig-sticking in the forest on the morrow, but declined. Each time the policeman spoke, he clipped his heels, bowed and raised his glass in a toast. He was very hot and very thirsty.

It soon turned out that all the stories of red atrocities were untrue. True, the Cossacks had frightened the people badly by riding through the town at a gallop. True, they had seized certain stocks of sugar and other provisions they needed. True, their aircraft had bombed Pahlevi, the town along the coast.

But their fleet had not opened fire. What had happened at Pahlevi was that at the last moment the Persians had attempted to camouflage their warships by decorating them with branches of trees and shrubs, which they had brought down from the hills. But then a Russian cruiser appeared and the crews took to their heels. The Belgian consul had saved the day by rowing out to one of the Persian ships and hoisting the white flag before the Russians attacked.

A word here about the Russian commissars. They wore the same uniforms as the soldiers and held similar ranks. They were responsible directly to Moscow and not to the army command. In all matters apart from operations, they appeared to have control. They handled the administration of conquered territories, the financial and economic affairs of the army and propaganda. They were the liaison between the soldier and the state. They were the governors of the army. They watched morale and were the authorities of all normal civilian affairs. They exerted considerable power. Thus when one Red officer, an engineer, wanted to show me a medal he had in his pocket and a photograph of his wife and children, I noticed that he first glanced quickly over his shoulder at the nearest commissar - in this case my fat friend from Valencia. The commissar nodded and the engineer displayed his souvenirs.

Clearly the suspicions of the Russians were boundless. They trusted no foreigner unless they had to. Yet before I left Persia the British and Russian commanders had worked out an agreement and it seemed to be operating smoothly enough. Little by little, relations became closer in Persia. A great highroad for supplies to Russia was developed through the country. With the occupation of Persia a continuous front from Murmansk to the Western Desert of Egypt was secured. The Russians had gone into Persia with six divisions, we with two. Not ten per cent of those forces were needed in action.

The casualties were trifling - perhaps a few hundred in all. For the Persian themselves only good could flow from the occupation, for their new Shah, who was crowned in Persia in September, broke the royal monopolies, opened the political prisons, paid the army, reduced the taxes and took advice. Food was quickly brought in to feed his famished subjects. It began to appear that there was some reasonable future ahead of the country despite the war.

Alan Moorhead. African Trilogy. 1944

ECLIPSE OF THE NAZI GERMANY

Normandy

The German coastal troops, which had taken the first shock, included many Poles and recently conscripted Russians. These men became demoralized as soon as they lost their officers and NCOs. They either gave themselves up at once, or drifted aimlessly about the countryside waiting for a chance to surrender.

And so it was not hunger that made [French] detest the Germans. It was something else; a very ordinary sense of pride. We shall have to wait until we get to Paris to see the full effect of this but it was strongly apparent here in Normandy. The mere presence of the Germans in the role of overlords grated on these country people in a surprising way. It was not that the Germans

behaved very badly. It was simply that they had the power to behave badly or any other way they chose.

The French guerilla fighters, the maquis who sacrificed everything to their loyalty and enthusiasm, were loved in direct ratio to the hatred directed on the collaborationists. The maquis were a minority of Frenchmen, but everyone admired them and was willing to hide them and assist them. They were the expression of the best side of France, of France revived, France non-materialist. So long as the maquis existed and were ready to risk torture and death at the hands of the Germans, every Frenchman could say, 'France is not dead. She is still a country of heroes.' Not unnaturally then, when a collaborationist gave away a maquis to the German Gestapo he was hated with a passion which the incoming Allied soldiers were quite unable to understand. The doughboy and the tommy were disgusted at the way the French mistresses of German soldiers were dragged out into the village squares to have their heads shaved. It seemed indecent and vicious. Often they intervened. All this became much more intense when we got to Paris and Brussels.

There was one slight trend which one noticed at first in the French reception of the Allies, especially the British. They were afraid that we might be resentful of their country's collapse in 1940. They feared that our reaction might be something like that of the Germans towards Italy when Italy collapsed. In point of fact no such attitude was expressed, and whatever the troop id and felt among themselves I heard no British soldier flinging recriminations at the French in the whole march through France.

Meanwhile in the interior the maquis had risen in strength. At different times they cut all the railways leading into Paris. Enemy divisions crossing France were forced to proceed as though through hostile country, with armed reconnaissance units on either flank. Pitched battles involving ten thousand men were being fought in the south. All over France German ammunition dumps were being exploded, bridges blown up, telegraph lines cut and German convoys waylaid. It was no longer safe for German vehicles to travel through forests without escort. Hundreds < miles behind the front the enemy garrisons found they had to mount guard at night. Sabotage spread through the factories and the workshops like a disease. Within a few weeks the maquis were holding areas of France three or four times the size of our bridgehead in Normandy. France was in a state of open rebellion.

Before the end of 1940 they began to realize that there was something worse than war and that was humiliation and injury in the spirit in defeat. This was the soil of the resistance movement. It was first of all a revolt not so much against the Germans, but against the concept of defeat, against themselves as they were in 1940.

Caen-Cherbourg

The prisoners were most unusual. It was in a little village called Bricquebec that I finally got a chance to see them close at hand. A series of wooden sheds had been wired off as a prisoners' cage, and there were five separate compartments. German officers. German NCOs. German soldiers. A mixture of Russian, Polish and Czech conscripts. And then an indeterminate collection of Todt workers in civilian clothes, mostly Italian and Spanish. A French crowd stood outside looking through the wire.

In the midst of this babel each nationality behaved exactly as you would have expected. The German officers and NCOs sat in taut and rigid little groups. They looked across the heads of their guards and the other prisoners, saying nothing. They did not even speak to each other. What they wished to convey was perfectly clear: dignity, pride, contempt, indifference. Strength in defeat. On the whole they succeeded in this attitude. Or at least they succeeded in convincing themselves. The guards were bored with it, and the other prisoners indifferent.

The German privates were sleeping in rows, striking no attitudes, simply resting. When a new truck-load of prisoners arrived, they were ordered to make room for them, the Germans rose in a body. They moved three paces to the right. Then they lay down again in rows. Quite possibly they would all have gone to sleep simultaneously if someone had given the order.

Then the Russians and the Poles. They stood like cattle, dumb, slow and heavy. One man sang a lament. The rest simply stood and waited. They were given biscuits and meat, and they showed no reaction except to reach out and take the food. Had they been led out and shot one by one they would probably have shown no surprise. In every way the situation was entirely beyond their comprehension.

Then the Italians. They came clamouring at the wire, ten of them talking together. 'You speak Italian? Ah, Merciful God, he speaks Italian. Excuse. Excuse. A great service! The very greatest service! Will you explain to the American soldiers that we did not fight? We did not fight at all. We were prisoners of the Germans. They made us work. We are nothing whatever to do with the Germans. We wish to fight the Germans. We wish to be free and go home. Jose and Giuseppe here must return to Cherbourg to collect our things. We had no time to collect our clothes. They will be gone only a short time. Have you any cigarettes, any chocolate?'

Outside the cage the French had been shaving the heads of two village girls who had slept with the Germans. And now in the dusk they had come up to the gates to jeer and spit at the Germans inside. They began thinking up new lines of invective and the noise was considerable.

The American private on the gate was a good head and shoulders above the crowd. 'Aw. Get the hell out of it,' he said at last, waving his gun.

That was the outward scene in the prisoners' cage, and it made no sense at all. A dozen different nationalities. All of them reacting in different ways, pulling in different directions, speaking different languages. And yet an hour or two since they had all been fighting with a suicidal ferocity. Pillboxes were being held long after their eventual destruction was a certainty. The Russians had been firing right up to the last few yards before they threw up their hands. And now here in the prisoners' cage there was complete disintegration, an evident hatred of the Germans. As one group had marched in, a German officer had stooped to pick up a fallen cigarette. Before his hand could reach it a Pole ran forward and ground the butt into the mud. Then he turned and laughed in the German's face.

I found an American soldier who spoke Polish, and we began to talk to the prisoners, especially one man who was more intelligent than the others. 'Why did I fight for the Germans? Like to see my back? It's got scars across it from the neck down to the arse. They hit me there with a sword. Either you obeyed orders or you got no food. Certainly I went on firing from the trench. There was a German NCO standing behind me with a revolver. It wasn't enough just to shoot. You had to shoot straight. If you didn't you got a bullet in the back. Don't believe me. Ask the others. Like the Germans? I'd like to tear their guts out.'

June 28th: The commander of the *Wolga* Tartar Battalion, a foreign unit, reported to the German army headquarters that he (the commander) had been shot at by his own men and one hundred of them had deserted. The battalion was withdrawn from the line.

Little by little the story came out. The Turkestan carpenter, the clerk from Lvov. The mechanic from Barcelona and the farmer's boy who was born in Gorizia. These were the children of occupied Europe, and it suddenly became apparent that to ascribe to them the name of 'enemy,' or indeed the name of anything, was a ridiculous over-simplification. The word 'conscript' came nearest to their condition. But conscription in what circumstances. Nothing had been seen like it in Europe since the Napoleonic wars. Even that parallel was not complete enough. One began to have a vision of the dark ages in Europe, of a period infinitely less moral than the time of the Roman Empire. This was less than a mercenary army. It was an impressed army. The soldier

fought not out of the voluntary desire for money, but out of fear of what the Germans would do to him if he did not fight. He avoided the certainty of immediate punishment from the Germans by accepting the chance of being hit by the Allies on the battlefield.



POWs from the Eastern battalions. Normandy

One began to follow the stages of Nazi conscription. They, the Germans, the master race, the men with all the modern engines of war, had over-run the villages of Europe. France, Belgium, Holland, Norway, Denmark, the Baltic States, Poland, White Russia, the Ukraine, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary. Austria, Rumania and the rest. They came into the villages in uniform, riding in armoured cars. They were the overlords, the new feudal masters. They made a great show in front of the unpolitical village boy. They said: 'This is the new epoch. This is the era of the new god Adolph Hitler. A new uniform and a gun for everyone who wants to follow.' It was easy enough to dazzle the villager, Instead of milking the cows every night he could swing along behind a military band. He got a new rifle all to himself. There were sports and competitions. Adolph Hitler wanted to build young healthy bodies. Up at dawn. Exercises. Plenty of good fresh food. Solemn and stirring parades. The boy was one of a team now, an heroic team, a crusader against Bolshevism. And off he went to the front.

Quite a few Letts and Croats and White Russians had been gathered in this way. All volunteers. Germany was on the way to victory, and they were marching with her. But as the war went on more men were needed. It became necessary to visit the villages again. There were a certain number of able-bodied men in every place. Now they were told: 'You must play your part in the great revolution. We want workers and fighters. We will pay good wages.' And then, when the volunteers did not come forward, the threats. The unpolitical boy did not have much choice. Either go with the Nazis or run away and hide. It needed courage to do the latter. Food was becoming more and more difficult to get in the village. Life was getting duller and more constricted. Reluctantly many went off to the labour gangs and the new regiments. Still it was not enough. More men were needed. This time they were taken by force. You got a ticket saying you must report for duty. There was no alternative. From one end of Europe to the other the conscripts were forced into the machine. And finally you arrived at the ludicrous anomaly of the Russian peasant firing at the American doughboy in Normandy - a Russian peasant who knew nothing of Stalinism or Hitlerism, who knew only that somehow he had been led into a pillbox and told to fire.

Paris

For a full week before we had arrived, this street fighting had been going on. Already three-quarters of Paris had fallen to the Resistance movement. The whole city had been secretly divided into resistance zones, little underground cells that might be in garage or a back-street hotel.

I was looking round for someone to guide me down towards the left bank of the river when one of the boys with an FFI arm->and stopped me. 'Come on,' he said. 'I'll take you to our headquarters.'

'You speak English?'

'I'm in the RAF.'

'But how...?'

It was the sort of story that is impossible to absorb. Shot down over the Channel, the rescue and the escape, three years wandering round Europe, the fight in the Warsaw ghetto and then Paris. 'I'm Australian,' he said. 'In our group we have Spanish, Dutch, Poles and Portuguese as well as the French.' They lived in a rambling garage-cum-workshop. At the gate the young Spaniard was piling half a dozen wooden-handled German grenades into his car. 'I can't make out how you work them,' he said. 'Do you pull this or this or what do you do?'

They had about twenty prisoners, men and women, locked in a back room. All of them stood up when we entered the room, and it was fairly clear that they expected to die. More than half were French snipers. The attitude of the FFI youths towards them was that of a workman in a butchery, who will presently take such animals as he is directed to take, and kill them. Within the hour they had received an order that all prisoners must be handed over to the incoming Allied authorities. It neither pleased nor displeased them. To kill or not to kill. It was all the same so long as these pieces were taken off the chessboard of Paris. The prisoners were without identity any more. To the FFI youths who had captured them they were merely abstract evil; so many capsules of poison which were pleasant to display as the measure of their success in the fighting.

The Dutchman said in English: 'We have been conducting our courts martial in the next room. Last night we had a dentist who used to give his patients away to the Gestapo. We took evidence on his behalf before we shot him.'

Brussels

Mad with excitement the million people of Brussels rushed out into the open, screaming and shouting and waving flags. The joy of Paris was a pallid thing compared to this extravaganza.

As Moorehead witnessed the population of Brussels and other Belgian cities, as well as in France if not more brutally, avenged themselves on POWs and women which marred their reputations by sleeping with the occupiers. Whilst the Belgians had suffered less than French of the occupation and war their hatred towards the Germans was limitless and reached pathological proportions. However, the Belgians reserved hostile feelings towards the Soviet Russia too.

Here, as in France and Italy, there was a powerful and wholly ignorant fear of Russia. I dined at many a little bourgeois home where they shook their heads apprehensively over the advances of the Red Army. *Ces gens-là*; they were bad for business. Bad for the Church too, if it came to that. It was the one part of Goebbels's propaganda that had sunk home. The little doctor had an instant success whenever he broadcast, as he did so well, a line like this 'You will not listen. We know you will not listen, you Christian peoples of Europe. But one day you will have to listen. You say you are opposed to Nazi Germany. Very well. What is the alternative? The Bolsheviks. Don't believe the Americans and the British will come and save you. The Red wave is breaking towards you from the east. One man and one man alone stands against it: the German grenadier at Kiev

(or Warsaw or Odessa according to the news). If he fails then everything goes. You can take your choice, you Christians.'

It sounded pretty good stuff to a lot of people at home in America and England as well.

The truth was of course that what the people feared was not so much Russia but the rise of their own Communists. In Belgium as in France and Italy the swing to the left was very marked. Since the war had placed the emphasis less on money and more on human energy the labour organisations had grown greatly in power. There was no unemployment in Europe during the occupation. The demand for man-power grew stronger and stronger. And with it the strength of the left. Presumably as soon as the war was over good old peace-time unemployment would start again and the influence of the left diminish. But the little Belgian and French capitalist by no means felt sure of this happy issue of affairs. He feared that in some way the local worker would join hands with the terrible Bolsheviks who were, as the good doctor said, surging on from the east. And then where were you? What happened to business then? A minor stockbroker cried hotly to me over the black-market oysters one night: 'These strikers in the Belgian mines. I would put a machine-gun at the pithead and force them to go down.'

The main trouble probably was that none of these people had received one iota of reliable information about Russia for more than five years. When one told them that Russia was now probably one of the most nationalistic and conservative countries in the world, that class distinctions were being rapidly revived under Stalin and private ownership was well on its way back, they regarded this as a joke.

In Germany

That was the first thing we learned inside a week of living with the Germans; they expected to be ill-treated. They had an immense sense, not of guilt, but of defeat. If a man's shop was entered and looted by Allied soldiers he never dreamed of protesting. He expected it. And the reason for this was that he was afraid. Mortally and utterly afraid. And so the German made the ordinary normal reaction of a man overcome by fear; he ran to obey. He was obsequious. And the women turned away their heads. They walked past with wooden despairing expressions on their faces, a though they were being pursued by someone. One saw few tears. For the Germans the catastrophe had gone far beyond that point. Tears were a useless protest in front of the enormity of the shelling and the bombing. And so one was always surrounded by these set wooden faces.

Sometimes our car got stuck in the mud. At a word the Germans ran to push it out. Once a German came up to my drive and said: 'The Russian prisoners of war are looting my shop. Will the English soldiers please come and see they do it in an orderly manner?' It never occurred to him to contest the right of the Russians to loot. He was simply anxious to avoid the needles smashing of his windows as well.

Moorehead accidentally found himself amidst a debate between a German pastor and an American officer who was trying to find in a bomb shelter occupied by German civilians some space for refugees. The pastor agreed to help and show vacant premises.

'I was in England before the war,' the pastor said. 'I had many friends there. This is the room for the air raid sirens. We were very much relieved when the bombers came and then passed on to some other place.' He was making a big effort to speak English slowly and carefully. 'Here is the first-aid. Here the ventilator room.' In each room the attendants jumped up when we entered and stood to attention. 'I must apologize for the lavatories,' the pastor said. 'Since the Russian prisoners went there has been no one to keep them clean.' I asked why the Germans themselves could not clean their own lavatories, but he apparently did not understand and went on with some other subject. After half an hour I for one could stand no more, and we moved through the lower decks of the shelter towards the entrance.

East of Rhine

For a few weeks before it was stopped altogether - the looting was widespread and heavy. German cars by the hundred were dragged out of garages and hiding-places under the straw in the barns, painted khaki and driven away. Cameras and watches and revolvers were taken automatically from prisoners and frequently from civilians. Wine was fair booty for everybody. In nearly every town the shops were broached, the distilleries emptied. Even pictures were stripped from their frames. This was quite different from the German manner. The Germans had looted systematically and officially. They had seized not odd bottles of wine but a whole year's crop. They seized the products of entire factories. They seized rolling stock from the railways, gold from the banks, iron from the mines; and in the end they stole the conquered people themselves.

As soon as we crossed the Rhine we were confronted by a problem almost as big as Germany herself; the millions upon millions of semi-slave workers. With every mile we went into Germany they grew more numerous on the roads: little groups of Frenchmen, then Dutch, then Belgians and Czechs and Poles and Italians, and finally, in overwhelming majority, the Russians in their bright green uniforms with 'SU' - Soviet Union - painted in white on their backs. Half the nationalities of Europe were on the march, all moving blindly westward along the roads, feeling their way by some common instinct towards the British and American lines in the hope of finding food and shelter and transportation there. These millions lived a vagabond existence. At every bend of the road you came on another group, bundles on their shoulders, trudging along the ditches in order to avoid the passing military traffic. The Germans were terrified of the Russians. Again and again women ran out to us to cry: 'Can't you leave a guard with us? The Russians have taken everything. The next lot will smash up the place if they find nothing.' More than that the German women feared for themselves. Cases of rape increased. The looting increased. And still that vast moving human frieze kept pouring down the roads, constantly augmenting its numbers with every new town that was captured.

One began to get a new picture of Nazi Germany. What we were seeing was something from the dark ages, the breaking up of a medieval slave state. All the Nazi flags and parades and conquests in the end were based on this one thing - slave labour. There was something monstrous about the wired-in worker's compounds and sentry boxes round each factory, something that was in defiance of all accepted ideas of civilization. As yet, in early April, we had only begun to glimpse the extent and depth of the Nazi terror system, but already one sensed the utter disregard of the value of human life in Germany. And now the Reich was collapsing at its roots because the slaves were melting away.

One saw mostly women in the country towns and in the farms as we passed on; nearly all the German men were either at the front or prisoners or dead. And the slaves were on the road. There was no longer anyone to sow the crop, no one to reap the harvest later on. Here and there a foreigner chose to remain with his German master. Indeed, on the whole the country labourers got sufficient food and they looked healthy enough. But nothing on earth would have kept the industrial workers in the factories and the mines once the Germans had gone. First they rushed out into the streets to loot. Then they took the road to the west until they drifted into hastily made British and American camps where some attempt was made to sort them out and send them home.

Liquor at the moment of liberation caused as much uproar as anything else. The Poles and Russians especially in their first wild moments of freedom would run roaring on the hated factory machines and smash them with crowbars. When they found a distillery or one of the many dumps of wine stolen from France there were scenes to break the heart of the connoisseur.

In Belsen concentration camp

We saw the women guards first. A British sergeant threw open the cell doors and some twenty women wearing dirty grey skirts and tunics were sitting and lying on the floor. 'Get up,' the

sergeant roared in English. They got up and stood to attention in a semi-circle round the room and we looked at them. Thin ones, fat ones, scraggy ones and muscular ones; all of them ugly and one or two of them distinctly cretinous. I pointed out one, a big woman with bright golden hair and a bright pink complexion.

'She was Kramer's (*camp commandant* - VK) girlfriend,' the sergeant growled. 'Nice lot, aren't they?'

There was another woman in a second room with almost delicate features, but she had the same set staring look in her eyes. The atmosphere of the reformatory school and the prison was inescapable.

Outside in the passageway there was a large blackboard ruled off in squares with white lines. Down the left-hand side of the board was a list of nationalities - Poles, Dutch, Russians,' and so on. Spaced along the top of the board was a list of religions and political faiths - 'Communist, Jew, Atheist.' From the board one might have seen at a glance just how many prisoners were in the camp from each nation and how they were subdivided politically and religiously. However, most of the numbers appeared to have been rubbed off, and it was difficult to make out the totals exactly. Germans seemed to make up the majority of the prisoners. After them Russians and Poles. A great many were Jews. As far as one could decipher there had been half a dozen British there, one or two Americans. There had been something like fifty thousand prisoners altogether.

The crowds of men and women thickened as we went farther into the camp. The litter of paper and rags and human offal grew thicker, the smell less and less bearable. At the entrance soldiers were unloading trucks filled with wooden latrines, but these had not yet been placed about the camp, so many hundreds of half-naked men and women were squatting together in the open, a scene such as you sometimes see in India - except that here it was not always possible to distinguish men from women, or indeed to determine whether they were human at all.

We drove through the filth in cars and, presently emerging on to an open space of yellow clayey soil, we came on a group of German guards flinging bodies into a pit about a hundred feet square. They brought the bodies up in hand-carts, and as they were flung into the grave a British soldier kept a tally of the numbers. When the total reached five hundred a bulldozer driven by another soldier came up and started nudging the earth into the grave. There was a curious pearly colour about the piled-up bodies, and they were small like the bodies of children. The withered skin was sagging over the bones, and all the normal features by which you know a human being had practically disappeared. Having no stomach for this sort of thing I was only able to look for a second or two, but the SS guards and even the British soldiers there appeared to have grown used to the presence of death and to be able to work in it without being sick.

'The doctors are doing a wonderful job,' the captain said. 'They are in the huts all day sorting out the living bodies from the dead, and it's not easy sometimes to tell the difference. Of course there are many who are just hopeless and they are simply left. But they are saving a lot now. We have got in all the food we want - two meals a day, at ten and six. Come on and have a look at one of the huts. We will go to the women first.'

It was a single-storey, rectangular wooden building, I suppose about a hundred feet long. Wooden bunks ran in tiers up to the ceiling, and there was a narrow passage just wide enough to allow you to pass through. Since the majority of the women there were too weak to move and had no attention whatever the stench was nauseating. Hurrying through, handkerchief to nose, one saw nothing but livid straining faces and emaciated arms and legs under the filthy bed-clothes on either side. Many were using their last strength to moan feebly for help. These enforced animals were piled one on top of the other to the ceiling, sometimes two to a bunk.

An old hag somewhat stronger than the others was standing at the farther door. 'I'm twenty-one,' she whispered. 'No, I don't know why they put me in here. My husband is a doctor at the front. I'm

German but not Jewish. I said that I did not want to enlist in the women's organization and they put me in here. That was eighteen months ago.'

'I've had enough of this,' I said to the captain.

'Come on,' he said. 'You've got to go through one of the men's huts yet. That's what you're here for.'

It was if anything more rancid than the one I had seen, but this time I was too sick with the stench to notice much except the sound of the voices: 'Doctor, doctor.'

As we returned towards the entrance the people round us were noticeably better in health than those at the pits and the huts. As they were able to walk some instinct drew the people away from the charnel houses and up and out towards the entrance and the ordinary sane normal world outside. It was all like a journey down to some Dantesque pit, unreal, leprous and frightening. And now as one emerged into the light again one's first coherent reactions were not of disgust or anger or even, I think, of pity. Something else filled the mind, a frantic desire to ask: 'Why? Why? Why? Why had it happened?' With all one's soul one felt: 'This is not war. Nor is it anything to do with here and now, with this one place at this one moment. This is timeless and the whole world and all mankind is involved in it. This touches me and I am responsible. Why has it happened? How did we let it happen?'



Bergen-Belsen. The German ex-guards unload dead bodies and carry them to mass graves under supervision of British soldiers...

We stood there in a group, a major from the commandos, a padre, three or four correspondents, having at first nothing to say, and then gradually and quietly asking one another the unspoken question. Was it sadism? No, on the whole not. Or if it was sadism, then it was sadism of a very indirect and unusual kind. Relatively little torture was carried out at this camp. The sadist presumably likes to make some direct immediate act which inflicts pain on other people. He could not obtain much satisfaction from the slow, long process of seeing people starve. Then again the Germans were an efficient people. They needed man-power. Can one imagine anything more inefficient than letting all this valuable labour go to rot? The prisoners in Belsen were not even obliged to work. They were simply dumped in here and left to make what shift they could with a twice-daily diet of turnip stew. Incidentally this lack of work probably led to the break-up of the prisoners' morale as much as anything.

The Germans too had a normal fear of disease spreading among themselves. And yet they let these thousands of bodies lie on the ground. It's true there was not a great deal of typhus in the camp, but it had already broken out when the German commanders approached the British and offered to cede the camp under the terms of a truce.

It was not torture which had killed the prisoners. It was neglect. The sheer indifference of the Nazis. One began to see that the most terrible thing on earth is not positive destruction nor the perverse desire to hurt and destroy. The worst thing that can happen to you is for the master to say: 'I do not care about you any more. I am indifferent.' Whether you washed or ate or laughed or died - none of this was of any consequence any more, because you as a person had no value. You were a slug on the ground, to be crushed or not to be crushed, it made no difference.

And having become attuned and accustomed to this indifference the guards were increasingly less affected by the suffering of the people around them. It was accepted that they should die. They were Russians. Russians die. Jews die. They were not even enemies. They were disease. Could you mourn or sympathize with the death throes of a germ?

Now here is where the evidence of Kramer, the camp commandant, comes in. To consider Kramer calmly I think we have first got to rid ourselves temporarily of our memory of that published picture of him shuffling across the yard in shackles. And we have to forget for the moment the tide he was given through the world: 'The Monster of Belsen.' A friend of mine, a trained intelligence officer and interrogator in the British army, went into the whole question very carefully with Kramer, and this was Kramer's statement:

'I was swamped. The camp was not really inefficient before you crossed the Rhine. There was running water, regular meals of a kind. I had to accept what food I was given for the camp, and distributed it the best way I could. But then they suddenly began to send me train-loads of new prisoners from all over Germany. It was impossible to cope with them. I appealed for more staff, more food. I was told this was impossible; I had to carry on with what I had. Then as a last straw the Allies bombed the electric plant which pumped our water. Cart-loads of food were unable to reach the camp because of the Allied fighters. Then things got really out of hand. In the last six weeks I have been helpless. I did not even have sufficient staff to bury the dead, let alone segregate the sick.'

'But how did you come to accept a job like this?' he was asked. The reply: 'There was no question of my accepting it. I was ordered. I am an officer in the SS and I obey orders. These people were criminals and I was serving my Fuhrer in a crisis by commanding this camp. I tried to get medicines and food for the prisoners and I failed. I was swamped. I may have been hated, but I was doing my duty.'

There was some truth in this last. Not only were the prisoners fond of hurling missiles at Kramer since we had arrived but his own guards turned on him as well. Kramer asked the British authorities that he should be segregated. He was told that in this event he would have to be shackled and to this he agreed.

Who then was responsible for Belsen, and for that matter all the other camps? The SS guards? They say they were ordered. They hated the work, but disobedience to Kramer meant death. Kramer says he was in precisely the same position. And so presumably do all the other Kramers above him, until you reach Himmler. What does Himmler say? Himmler says he is serving his Fuhrer. The Fuhrer of course was innocent and knew nothing about the vulgar details. (Quite a number of Germans assured us of that.) But we can imagine Himmler saying it was vital to protect the Fuhrer from his declared enemies inside the Reich - the Jewish Bolsheviks who would have cheerfully murdered him. At this dire crisis for Germany and the Party one could not be too nice about the details - possibly some people were treated a little too harshly, but one could not afford to take chances. The Nazis were perfectly prepared to treat these prisoners with humanity, but the enemies of Germany made this impossible. They destroyed communications, they blocked the food supply. Naturally the camps suffered.

But the people of Germany? Why had they allowed this thing to be? Why had they not protested? The average German answers: In the first place we did not know these camps existed. Secondly how could we have protested? What possibly could we have done? The Nazis were too strong.

Very well then, why did you not protest when the Nazis were rising to power?

They answer: How could we foretell that the Nazis would end with this horror? When they first came to power they embarked on a programme that was excellent for Germany: new roads, modern buildings and machines. It seemed rational and good at the beginning. When we realized that Hitler was turning to war it was already too late. By then the Nazis had claimed our children. They were Nazified in the schools. A parent would be denounced by his own child if he spoke against the Nazis. Little by little we were overwhelmed and in the end it was too late. There was no point at which we could have effectively protested. Why did not foreign countries which had the power check the Nazis soon enough? If only you had attacked us before the Nazis became strong.

And so the thing is thrown back upon the world. No one anywhere is willing to take responsibility. Not the guard or the torturer. Not Kramer. Not Herr Woolf. They were all ordered. Not Himmler or Hitler (the end justified the means: they were fighting to rid the world of the terrible menace of Jewish Bolshevism - they were ordered by their high sense of duty). Not the German people. They too had to obey. And finally, not the world. Is England Germany's keeper?

That is the line of argument which we have heard as observers. of this final eclipse of Germany.

The Eclipse

The surrender of Germany came not with a bang but a whimper, following no precedent in other wars. Indeed the act of surrender or rather the several acts of surrender did not do much more than underline a fait accompli and give the semblance of authority to a situation that was frankly chaotic.

The Germany in which we found ourselves travelling at the end of April presented a scene that was almost beyond human comprehension. Her capital lost and almost razed, and nothing to give that ash-heap significance beyond a name, a history and the presence of a lunatic who was about to make his last gesture to a colossal vanity his death. Around us fifty great cities lay in ruins, or at least in partial ruins. Many of them had no electric light or power or gas or running water, and no coherent system of government. Like ants in an ant-heap the people scurried over the ruins, diving furtively into cellars and doorways in search of loot. Like ants you would see women

scuttling down a side-track with their bundles only to be blocked by debris and then turn irresolutely back, shoving and bumping against one another. Everyone was on the move, and there was a frantic ant-like quality about their activity. Life was sordid, aimless, leading nowhere. Every house in every unbombed village was stacked to the roof with city refugees living on soup and potatoes. From the Ruhr across Germany an occasional factory chimney smoked, but ninety per cent of the country's industry was at a standstill. No trains ran. Every family was bereaved or broken up. The housing situation was impossible and likely to get worse. A very large part of the population was simply wandering on the roads with the millions of foreigners. And to these was now added the German army itself. A mass flight from the Russians towards the Elbe and the Anglo-American lines began. Officers stripped off their uniforms and begged or stole civilian clothes from the nearby houses. Mass fear had gripped them so greatly that when aircraft appeared in the sky the shout went up: 'The Russians! The Russians!' and the mob would break out in panic across the countryside.

The ports were at a standstill, and such shipping as put out into the Baltic sailed aimlessly for a day or two and then came back to the shore for the inevitable surrender. This time the German navy was so disorganized it had not even the will to scuttle. And unlike the last war the naval morale was the highest of the three services. The Luftwaffe had long since been beaten down, much of its personnel drafted haphazardly into the army, where the rot had gone far beyond recall.

The collapse of the Nazi Party was leaving a vacuum; there was no movement, either religious or political or military or dynastic, able to assume control at the last moment. Nowhere in the world was there any sanctuary for a German, and so the average German made a poor man's choice: he decided to surrender to the Anglo-Americans if he could. One had to be in Germany at this moment to appreciate the blind and universal fear of the Russians. In every soldier's mind there was a fixed certainty that if he were taken by the Reds he would be starved, beaten, sent to Siberia and there worked to an early death. In every civilian's mind there was an equal certainty that his women would be seized and raped, his goods impounded or destroyed and himself condemned to some unthinkable inhuman end. Dr. Goebbels had achieved his last success. He had so planted the idea of the terror of the Bolshevik hordes that when the hordes actually appeared every German lost hope and the frantic panic to the west began.

As Moorehead witnessed the German generals did their best to surrender to the Allies not to the Soviet Army. In one case Montgomery himself refused such a proposal. He said: 'Those armies are fighting the Russians, so they must surrender to the Russians. I am not going to have any dealings.' It went to the point when the German generals gave themselves up having found from the Allies that their units had already been overrun by the Soviets! Up to the last moment the Nazis tried to make a separate deal with the Allies.

Moorehead never had any doubts that it was the Soviet Army which had borne the brunt of fighting against the Nazi Germany.

Alan Moorhead. Eclipse. 1945