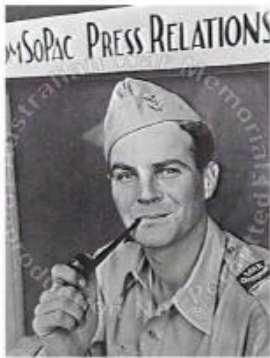


BY THE EYES OF A WAR CORRESPONDENT



Osmar White (1909-1991), an Australian war correspondent, witnessed action in New Guinea and Solomon Islands and wrote a book about it. From August to November 1944 and till the V-day White was in Europe in the ranks of the 3rd US Army led by famous General George Patton. White's paper articles and diaries, on the basis of which the book "Conqueror's Road" was compiled, are very interesting, especially the pages about the soldiers and officers of the Soviet Army and activities of the Soviet occupation administration. His impressions and comments are often quite critical and even offensive for a Russian reader, nevertheless, he is by no means a Russophob. In his notes there are many words of respect and warm feelings to the Russian soldier and Soviet administration in the occupied Berlin. One thing is obvious - he tried to write truth about the war and occupation of Germany. It also refers to many uncomplimentary

comments given by White to the behavior of the American soldiers in the defeated Germany.

THE AMERICANS

Long before Allied troops reached the big concentration camps in which death squads specialized in the extermination of Jews and Slavs, and the world learned the meaning of Hitler's promise to arrive at a "final solution", the fighting men who stormed into Germany were angry and in vengeful mood. They had learned in France and Belgium, at first hand, of Nazi atrocities; of the mass execution of hostages, senseless burning and beatings, sadistic interrogation of men and women suspected of supporting resistance cells. Few wavered in the conviction that the Germans they killed deserved their fate, or that the survivors had little right to human consideration. Thus, at first the treatment of German civilians was harsh. Eisenhower's broadcast proclamation – "WE COME AS CONQUERORS" - implied the right of military commanders to requisition whatever accommodation remained intact in half demolished towns. The aged, the sick, the very young, were often driven out into the ruins to fend for themselves.

"The only way to teach these *Krauts* war doesn't pay is to kick them about the way they kick other people about."

I heard that idea expressed time and again. Conquest tacitly implied the right to booty. The victorious troops appropriated whatever portable enemy property they fancied - liquor and cigars, cameras, binoculars, shotguns and sporting rifles, ceremonial swords and daggers, silver ornaments and plate, and fur garments. This sort of petty looting was known as "liberating" or "souveniring". Military police looked the other way until the more rapacious liberators, usually support and transport personnel, began to steal expensive motorcars, antique furniture, radio sets, machine tools and other industrial equipment, and devise ingenious means of smuggling the stolen property to the coast from which small craft could ferry it to England. Only after looting became an organized criminal racket when the fighting ceased, did the Military Government step what they wanted and often kicked Germans about in doing it. Yet I saw few cases of calculated or depraved brutality. The troops felt that they were only handing out rough justice, morally valid retribution, to a race whose armies had plundered Western Europe for nearly five years. One of a few times I saw American soldiers deliberately and soberly smash up a German house was at Erfurt.

After the fighting moved on to German soil there was a good deal of rape by combat troops and those immediately following them. The incidence varied between unit and unit according to the attitude of the commanding officer. In some cases offenders were identified, tried by court martial, and punished. The army legal branch was reticent, but admitted that for brutal or perverted sexual offences against German women, some soldiers had been shot - particularly if they happened to be Negroes. Yet I know for a fact that many women were raped by white Americans. No action was taken against the culprits. In one sector a report went round that a certain very distinguished army commander had made the wisecrack: "Copulation without conversation does not constitute fraternization." A divisional officer remarked dryly during a discussion of the non-fraternization edict: "This is surely the first in history a serious effort has been made to deny soldiers the use of women in a country they have conquered!"

Probably the most objective and credible account of the situation was given by an intelligent, middle-aged Austrian woman in Bad Homburg. "Yes, of course the soldiers take women," - she said. "After the occupation of this place we were troubled for many nights by soldiers coming to the doors and asking for Fraulein. Sometimes they forced their way into the houses with kicks and blows. Sometimes the women hid, or escaped."

I asked her if she knew if the women were taken with violence. She thought for a while and replied: "No. I don't think it often happens like that. Except where soldiers are in a gang. You must remember that your German women these days have not the horror of being taken violently by a man that they had before the Nazis spread their beliefs. They are frightened - yes. But they are more frightened of getting beaten than they are of getting taken by force. You will see. If your soldiers are patient they will not find German women unobliging."

The *no-fraternization* rule, promulgated as soon as German territory was occupied, never worked. It was absurdly artificial and unforceable. Primarily it was aimed at discouraging the cohabitation of British and American soldiers with German women. But as soon as the fighting was over and troops could settle into semi-permanent billets, a considerable number of officers and other ranks, particularly Military Government personnel, established liaisons with German women; liaisons in every category from common prostitution to genuine and often star-crossed love affairs.

A Berlin washerwoman expressed an opinion: Hitler's girls will soon take your soldiers to bed and make them forget the orders. They don't think there's anything wrong in doing it. They'll have their fun and laugh and joke afterwards. F---ing doesn't mean anything any more. You'll see - before long they'll be letting Negroes and Jews f---ck them" there was probably some truth in it. Hitler's immaculate Aryan maiden may have subscribed to the master race teaching of the Nazi ideologies but their puritanical inhibitions did not long survive sexual deprivation.

After a few sordid and pointless courts martial of scapegoats, the no-fraternization rule was eased quietly into limbo. To my knowledge, soldiers who served in the American division which liberated Buchenwald in April were sleeping with German girls by the end of May. They boasted about it. When the camp itself was cleaned up and converted into a center for DPs, the row of huts in which hundreds of Eastern Europeans had died of disease and starvation was refurbished with looted furniture from Weimar, and used as a brothel. It flourished and supplied the camp with uncounted cases of canned food and cartons of cigarettes bought at the American PX in the town.

ON THE GERMAN ROADS

Procession of liberated slaves was commonplace on every country road in Germany. They came in knots and files through the spring rain, marching in the long grass or on the shoulders of the roads. In the early days one often saw their mutilated bodies where they had trodden on S mines at the approaches to culverts and bridges. But they did not delay. They were free, so they marched - marched anywhere as long as it was out. The firstcomers were the farm workers. They looked strong and well-enough fed. They wore the rags of all the uniforms of Europe. Some had boots, some clogs, some the gaping wrecks of shoes. Some went barefoot even in the frost, others wrapped their feet in blanket strips and sacking. They were marked by this kind of poverty but they were not in bad physical shape. As the armies went deeper into Germany the character of the marchers began to change. The processions no longer comprised vigorous - or comparatively vigorous - men. Some limped and were obviously ill and half starved. Women and children were among them. The older women had weather beaten faces and sullen eyes, but the girls gave their liberators gap-toothed smiles. Nearly everyone had a handcart or a baby carriage piled with loot.

Generally speaking, these first slave workers to be freed in the Rhineland displayed no particular personal bitterness against their masters. Even eastern Europeans seemed to have been treated humanely, or at least as valuable as farm animals. I recall vividly one old peasant woman who came out to the commander of a reconnaissance column near Besigheim and begged him to stop her Russian from running away. Her son and husband, she said, had been taken for the Wehrmacht, and without her Russian there would be nobody left to do heavy work about the farm. There would be nobody to plough and sow. In the winter they would all starve. We had a look at the Russian. He was a lumpy, silent youngster with an expression of subnormal good humor but he was quite determined to run away. He had his bundle of clothes. The old woman had apparently been following him along the road, remonstrating with him. The tank commander said something unprintable and signaled the column on. When I last saw the queer pair, the woman was sitting in the ditch with her head in her hands, and the Russian was striding purposefully away.

Military government units moved into populated areas as soon as the fighting ceased and they were able, despite the flight of the people who had exerted civil authority, to establish a semblance of order and begin to restore essential services. But when the slave laborers and POWs started to clog the roads in uncounted numbers, looting their way from town to town and village to village, the situation became impossible to control. Only a small proportion of those who broke out of camps or left the districts to which they had been drafted with the intention of making their own way home succeeded in doing so. They ended up in hastily established refugee centers, barely surviving on starvation rations requisitioned from already inadequate civilian food stocks and living in conditions of indescribable squalor. Elements among the survivors the big concentration camps often banded together to reap a harvest of vengeance on German people who so strenuously denied all knowledge of Nazi atrocities. Sparsely populated areas, until then spared the horrors of war, often suffered grievously at the hands of these criminal gangs.

I remember vividly one miserable hamlet on the Fulda River where I was shown the battered and violated bodies of two children, aged seven and twelve, victims of liquor-maddened Russians who had slaved in the deep salt mines for three years.

IN BERLIN

In the last days of June word came down the line that, under pressure from Washington and London, the Russians had agreed to share the occupation of Berlin with the British and Americans. It was poor recompense for the humiliation of being kept waiting for six weeks, but some consolation that Churchill and Truman had at last shown the guts to put Stalin in his place. Crack regiment were chosen to put on a show of strength - enough strength to make arrogant Reds think again and give them a bloody nose if they tried to muscle in on more territory. Patton was rumored to be hopping mad and spoiling for a fight.

On 1 July a convoy of eighty jeeps carrying more than two hundred correspondents set out ahead of the troops and arrived in the capital by midmorning. The journey was enlivened by a completely unexpected encounter with the advance guard of the Red Army moving up to replace the Americans in Thuringia. The armoured vehicles and guns of the Western Allies, immaculate in coats of fresh paint, rumbled along at parade-ground intervals. Compared with these spruce columns converging on the city from the west and north-west, the outbound Russians were a rabble. Their padded cotton jackets were grease stained and threadbare, their transport a hodgepodge of antiquated trucks and horse drawn waggons piled with looted furniture, and more than half of them traveled on foot. They marched beside the autobahn, shepherded by NCOs on tyreless German bicycles. Even the famed Russian artillery pieces were practically invisible under layers of dried mud. A British correspondent travelling beside me said with near awe in his voice: "Good God, so these are the chappies who slogged all the way from Stalingrad, beating the blitzes out of the Jerries all the way!" These were, indeed, the men of the armies which had fought and beaten two-thirds of Germany's land forces on the Eastern Front while the magnificently equipped British and Americans had trouble enough dealing with the other third in Normandy, Italy and along the Siegfried Line. They were stocky, hard-faced peasants and herdsmen from the Steppes. They looked inured to hardship and utterly indifferent to the show of mechanised might put on to impress them. Perhaps, I thought, mere machines of war could never in the long run prevail against a peasant truly determined to resist foreign invaders of their homeland.

Two days later the Russians hung an enormous portrait of Stalin on the Brandenburg Tor and Red Army girls were directing the traffic on the Unter den Linden with flagged batons and robotic. Precision. A voice beside me: "Excuse me, sir, is that Stalin? It is? Ah, handsome, handsome is he not? Have you any spare cigarette butts, sir?"

At the end of my first day in Berlin I was convinced that the city was in its death throes. Human beings could not continue to live in this horrendous garbage heap. But by the end of my first week I was beginning to change my mind. Berliners were getting enough food and water to keep them standing up and, in some residential areas, electric power was available for short periods each day. The wraith of a public transport system had been conjured up to service ration depots and medical aid posts. More and more people were finding employment in public works supervised by the Russians. Thanks to Russian experience in dealing with the problems of their own devastated cities, epidemic diseases were controlled. All in all, I believe that the Soviets in those early days did more to keep Berlin alive than the Anglo-Americans could possibly have done. The Russian method of maintaining order and achieving results in the essentials was not inhibited by humanitarian niceties. They understood mass psychology. They realized that the sooner Berliners could be encouraged to help themselves, the better it would be for all concerned.

Within a few weeks of the surrender they encouraged the publication of newspapers. They restored broadcasting service, permitted the organisation of public entertainments, and announced that they would approve the formation of trade unions and democratic political parties. Some sort of rational, ongoing arrangement had to be made for the education of millions of children of school age, an education that must not perpetuate the corrupt philosophy of nazism. Typically, the theorists of Western democracy addressed the problem with more righteous zeal than horse sense. No tainted word or phrase should remain in the textbooks used by German schools they declared. The schools must stay closed pending a complete purge of educational literature. The Russians were far more realistic - at least in Berlin. Even before the Western allies took over their zones they encouraged the reopening of primary schools in the least mauled suburbs, employing teachers with no notable track record as Nazi activists. West of the Elbe the reopening of schools was delayed for months.

Radio newspapers, politics, concerts. The Russians had cleverly nurtured regrowth in a desert of misery. They had shown a measure of mercy to the followers of the beast dead in its lair under a mountain of shattered stone. But Berliners didn't see things that way. Everywhere there was the same whispered story: "Thank God you British and Americans have come. We cannot tell how glad we are to see you. Russians are animals - ravening animals. The Russians have taken everything I possess, even my change of clothes. They rape and steal and shoot." Anti-Russian hysteria was so strident, so many tales of Russian atrocities circulated, that the chief of the Anglo-American public relations bureau saw it fit to summon correspondents to issue a "guidance". "Remember, - he said, that there is a strong and concerted movement among the German people to sow seeds of distrust and discord between the Allies. Germans believe that they can gain much by dividing us. I wish to warn you against believing German stories about Russian atrocities without thoroughly checking them."

Anyway, Russophobia was nothing new. The troops had encountered it all the way from the Rhine as they met thousands of panic stricken civilians fleeing westward. The Russians were coming! Anything on God's earth to escape the Russians! Any heel was better than a Russian heel! When you singled out individuals from the stampeding mass and questioned them, it almost turned out they had no first hand knowledge of Russians at all. They had been told this. They had heard that - from a friend or a brother or a cousin who had served on the Eastern Front. Certainly Hitler had lied to them. His master-race theories were absurd, his claim that the British were decadent and all Jews subhuman the raving of a disordered mind - but about the Bolsheviks, the Fuhrer had been right! Goebbels's propaganda had scored at least one success which would survive the disillusion of defeat. It had instilled into the German people a psychotic fear of the "hordes from the East"/ When the Red Army advanced to the outskirts of Berlin a wave of suicide swept the city.

How much had Russian behavior, as distinct from and unreasoning fear of Bolsheviks, fueled this orgy of self destruction? I put the question to scores of Berliners of both sexes. Discounted for exaggeration, the picture that emerged was credible. The Red Army overran the city in the white heat of battle, fired by a thirst for vengeance. They destroyed, looted and raped in much the same way as the German Army - by the accounts of Polish refugees - had destroyed, looted and raped Poland and Western Russia four years previously.

The most objective account of Russian behavior came from a middle-aged woman. I took notes of the interview:

Q: You say the Russians behaved very brutally after the fighting. What do you mean by "brutally"?

A: They looted houses, shot anyone who resisted them, and attacked women. They lost all control.

Q: What happened when they looted a house? Can you tell me about a house you saw looted? Did they loot your house?

A: Yes, all these flats were looted. After the firing stopped up the street, ten or eleven soldiers came up the stairs and started kicking and beating on the doors. We were afraid to open, so, they broke the locks or kicked them down.

Q: Then what happened?

A: They looked everywhere to see if there were any arms or snipers. Then some of them started pulling open drawers and throwing things about, and others attacked the women.

Q: What do you mean by "attacked"? Did they rape the women?

A: Mostly, yes.

Q: All of them? Did all the Russian soldiers rape, or try to rape the women?

A: Not all - most of them. They were drunk. They had bottles of brandy and wine and they were excited - you understand how it would be.

Q: How many women were in this building?

A: There were eight of us, I think. Three were in my flat with me.

Q: Were you raped?

A: No. One of them came at me, but I speak a little Russian and I told him he was drunk and a disgrace to his country. I told him to tell the others to leave the women alone.

Q: Did that stop him?

A: Yes. He was only a boy. He seemed ashamed, but he took all my clothes out of the drawers and wardrobes. He said the Germans had taken all the Russian women's clothes in 1941, so he didn't see why he shouldn't have what he wanted. I didn't try to stop him.

Q: Didn't he try to stop the others?

A: they were all drunk. The Russians are terrible when they are drunk. You have no idea what they are like.

Q: How do you know the other women were raped?

A: I saw a Russian rape my friend.

Q: Violently.

A: yes.

Q: But did you actually see what happened to the others?

A: No, but there was no doubt about it. They weren't lying. It really happened, I assure you.

Q: Wasn't this just another isolated instance?

A: No, it happened all over Berlin. I am not exaggerating. It really happened. At least half the young women in Berlin have been raped by Russians. The trouble went on for days after the fighting stopped.

Q: Did the Russian officers not try to control their troops?

A: Of course. Most of the officers were very nice. If you could only get to an officer you were usually all right. We heard that some of the soldiers had been caught in the act and shot. But it was no good complaining. If the officers didn't see it, they wouldn't believe.

Q: When did this sort of behavior stop?

A: It never did stop entirely. The trouble was the wine and brandy stocks. They should have been destroyed. The troops would get drunk at night and the trouble would start up all over again. They were only really bad when they were drunk. They were different when you got to know them. We were lucky in this district - we had one lot for ten days billeted in this house. We were sorry to see them go, because we were afraid of what would happen when a new lot came in. They were childish, really. Sometimes after trouble they would

come in the morning and apologize and ask you not to tell. They would give you some food, just to be friendly and make amends.

Q: You said people were shot. Did you actually see any cases of civilians being shot?

A: A woman I knew up the street was killed.

Q: Did you see her body?

A: yes. Her sister and I buried her in the garden.

Q: Why was she shot?

A: The Russians thought she had a revolver.

Q: had she a revolver?

A: No. She had no revolver.

Baffling people, these Russians! Rape and apology. Theft atoned by gifts of food. The savage sacking of a blasted city and, within days, attempts to rehabilitate it.

White also met Russians in the night clubs of Berlin.

I made a round of cabarets, starting with the notorious *Femina* near Potsdammerplatz and the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church. The church was so shot up its walls seemed to waver against the sky, but the building that housed the cabaret stood like an island in an ocean of fallen bricks. The evening was mild and damp. The sewer and corpse smell was in the air. The façade of the *Femina* was covered with futuristic nudes and tinsel announcements in four languages.

The dance floor and tables were crowded with Russian, British and American officers escorting (or hunting for) personable female companions. A bottle of bad wine cost twenty-five dollars, a horsemeat hamburger and potatoes ten dollars, a pack of American cigarettes a breathtaking twenty dollars. Berlin women had been without cosmetics for more than a year. But inside the Femina cheeks were as delicately tinted and lips as tacky-looking as if Hitler had won his war. A number of women wore sheer silk stockings. A mistress of ceremonies in a sequined dress introduced the floor show in German, Russian, English and French. This provoked a philosophic quip from a captain of Soviet field artillery at the table next to mine. He leaned over and remarked in tolerable English: "So soon from the national to the international! Are not the bombs of your RAF fine professors of foreign languages, no?"

The first turn was a child-dancer after that a troupe of "Russian" dancers came on. They were so energetic and so popular with the Red Army men that I felt sure they drew supplementary rations as heavy industrial workers - Russian officers made up a fair percentage of the Femina's male clientele, but a surprising number of able-bodied Germans were there, too. Some of them were industrial technicians, specialists upon whom the Soviet authorities smiled benignly. But who were the rest I did not try very diligently to find out. Pimps, black marketeers, spies. There were probably more ears trained to catch whispered asides in the Femina than in any other establishment of the sort east of Lisbon or north of the Bosphorus. Ears well-enough trained could command generous hire even in the country of a vanquished enemy. One must always beware of one's friends.

In the early days of the tripartite occupation of Berlin, correct, if by no means cordial, relations existed between the elements of military government. If one was to believe the official handouts, everybody loved everybody else and all parties were cooperating wholeheartedly in the task of keeping the four million inhabitants of the city fed and putting them to work on reconstruction. But the truth was otherwise and that soon became evident. The Russians had no intention of cooperating with anybody. They appeared to suffer from a malignant inferiority complex which made them increasingly touchy and aggressive when trivial differences of opinion arose over procedures and the allocation of responsibilities. They cheated blatantly in matters of larger concern. Serious friction occurred when they denied their Western partners permission to procure an equitable share of farm produce from the rural belt around the city. This land, they announced was within the Eastern occupation zone allotted to them at Yalta and any food it produced would be

distributed only to the population in the parts of the metropolis under Russian control. Since the British and Americans insisted on their right to share in the occupation of the capital, they could make their own arrangements to feed their own dependents from resources farther ahead.

From the beginning it was apparent that Soviet policy aimed to force the Western powers out of Berlin and concede another propaganda victory. Muttering about "kicking the shit out of the Commies" subsided but, there was no fraternization between off-duty Tommies, GIs and Ivans. Although a certain brittle camaraderie existed between officers patronizing the nightclubs, among other ranks the atmosphere was strained. The Soviet garrison troops were sullenly unfriendly. A high proportion of them were illiterate Asiatic, and the Tommies and I decided they were only a bunch of unwashed savages who used bathtubs for latrines.

In bringing order to their zone the Russians thought and acted in terms of the mass. They did not worry about precise justice for the individual. They were chiefly concerned with making every community as near self-supporting as possible in the shortest possible time. Their first thought was to provide productive occupation to everyone capable of working. Neither the expulsion of Germans from areas destined for cession to Poland or Czechoslovakia, nor in relocation of populations when a workable balance between district and district had been upset by influx of war refugees, nor in destruction of industrial plants, were the Soviets constrained by what the British and Americans - or even the French - would call mercy. They rearranged the human herds of Soviet-occupied Germany very much as a rancher would shift herds of cattle or sheep on some draught-stricken tract of pasture - expecting and regretting loss in move from starvation, disease, exhaustion and exposure, but hoping to achieve a minimum overall wastage.

Once active fascists had been rounded up and liquidated in the Russian zone, Stalin's men were not pernickety enough to waste time and energy on the small fry. They put them to work at the job they were best capable of doing, and in the main rewarded them according to their merits. If later evidence disclosed that some of the people working under the new regime had been enthusiastic Nazis, then they were liquidated without fuss or bother - but not until less suspect workmen became available. The Russians took trouble to preserve for public trial at Nuremberg or elsewhere only war criminals whose punishment would have propaganda value. They dealt with the small-town bullies, low-caliber sadists and cranks, quietly and immediately, not caring too much about possible miscarriages of justice. They were consistent in preferring the proletariat. Rank, wealth or class could gain no privileges for a German under Russian military rule. The only German who could expect preferment was a technician, an expert in some pure or applied science.

It seemed to me that the Russians were the only victors who did not attempt to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. From what I could see and hear, they were unconcerned with problems of "humanitarianism" as it was defined by the British or the Americans. Nor were they concerned with vengeance for the sake of vengeance. They were sublime egoists, the uncompromising realists. An English-speaking ordinance officer in the *Kabarett der Kommiker*, the candor of wine in him, told me: "We are pledged to destroy Fascism. German fascism is no worse than any other Fascism. The only country in the world which recognises and destroys Fascism in any disguise is Russia - but it is not a matter of nationality, you know. Nationality is not important to us. We did not hate Germans - or Italians or Chinese or Negroes. Oh no. We do not think Russians are better than other people, except perhaps that Russians have a system which seeks to destroy Fascism. We will make Russia strong and secure - not to impose our will on other peoples but to defend men against Fascism wherever it shows itself. Russia must first be made strong and secure. That is a good sense. That is logic. We have nothing against capitalist democracy, except perhaps that it turns Fascist so easily when something goes wrong with the machinery.

IN PRAGUE

There is no reign of terror in Prague or any part of Bohemia. Russians are stern realists with the collaborator and the fascist element, but a man whose conscience can go without fear.

The discipline of the Red Army is good. There is no more looting, rape or bullying that in any zone of occupation. Wild stories of brutality arise from magnification and distortion of individual instances, given verisimilitude by the Czechs' nervousness of the Russian soldiers' exuberant manners and their liking for vodka. One woman who told me the most hair-raising tales of Russian brutality in Prague was forced in the end to admit that the only evidence she had seen with her own eyes was drunken Russian officers firing pistols into the air or shooting at bottles.