

TOMMY TAYLOR IN THE COUNTRY OF BOLSHEVIKS

After a long search the author of the site managed to find a rare book, published in 1932 - memoirs of an Australian soldier Thomas Taylor (1894-not earlier than 1977) - the only British subject in history who escaped home for the German captivity through the revolutionary Russia. Reading of this book left mix emotions - there are really interesting revelations of a man of unusual fate and, simultaneously - open Russophobia the author of this site came across nearly for the first time in his life. Yes, mixing with the Russians instilled in Taylor's mind a consistent enmity, if not more, towards the Russian people. Apparently, captivity and civil war are not the best circumstances for conclusions about a people's national character. No doubt, that Taylor wrote his memoirs during times when Russophobia, mixed with anticommunism, were typical for the Australian society.

I was hesitant whether to place this page in my web site or not... Some of my acquaintances - nice Russian people - answered this question positively. After some pondering, I decided to add my comments, based on my long experience in living amongst Australians, to this page. Anyway, read and make your own judgement...



An Australian infantry soldier Tommy Taylor was wounded and imprisoned on 11 April 1917 near Bullecourt. He had to undergo all "luxuries" of POW's life near front line - starvation, cold, hard and dirty work - the Germans used POWs in burying of their dead. Apart from a pathetic ration there was no chance to find any other food - it came to the point when the German guards knocked food from hands of French women and kids, who were trying to give it to exhausted POWs.

Soon emaciated Taylor found himself in a hospital with a purulent wound on his hand. He hardly managed to talk a German doctor out of amputation and the latter operated him without anesthetic. Taylor was simply bound to the table during the operation...

A CONVALESCENT HOSPITAL

After spending about a month in that German hospital, I was transferred to a hospital for prisoners of war, and there the effects of the bad food and black bread were very evident. Dysentery was carrying off the invalids in scores, especially the Russians, who seemed to be accorded worse treatment than other Allied prisoners. I counted as many as 15 deaths in the Russian quarter in one week. The way in which their remains were treated showed us that they were evidently treated contemptuously as a people by the Hun. Their ward was in an upper floor of the building and each each unfortunate as he died, was taken by the legs or an arm and dragged down the stairs and thrown into huge one common grave. Even now I can hear the dull thuds and humps of those lifeless bodies. Several English Tommies died t the same hospital while I was there, but they were treated with more respect and were carried out decently and buried in separate graves.

All this should have contributed to development of animosity amongst the Russian POWs towards the British (VK).

I have mentioned that the hospital life was a variation from the workaday existence, but at times it was full of incident, even excitement, caused mostly by the contemptible disposition and entire lack of principle displayed by the majority of the Russians. Some of them were detailed at various times to assist in the hospital duties, and for that were rewarded with an extra ration of bread. When they had to parade for their allowance, a number, who were not entitled to it would also "line up", in the hope of getting an extra bite or two to eat. Sometimes the "oracle" worked all right, but very often one of the imposters would be detected, and when challenged and "bowled out", he would immediately point out to the guard all the others who were attempting the imposition. Meanness, jealousy, and suspicion I found to be the outstanding characteristics of the majority of Russians, and owing to them many little privileges we enjoyed at times were curtailed or stopped altogether.

When one is starving he doesn't care about principles. That's why there is no point to come to conclusions based on behavior of 2-3 men (VK).

There were two French ladies working voluntarily in the cook-house at that hospital and two Russian prisoners to assist them: the latter a bit better disposed towards us than the rest of their countrymen. Through the two ladies we received a small but regular supply of bread, issued, evidently secretly, by a French committee. This bread ration, together with a supply of milk, was smuggled to our ward by the two Russian assistants. We happened to be in the act of dividing it out on one occasion, when a Russian entered the ward for a purpose of taking our temperatures, and of course, saw our extra supply of bread. When he had finished with his errand he left, but returned almost immediately with one of the German guard, who confiscated our much prized bread much to the undisguised satisfaction of the Russ.

Here we go again! Two Russian smuggled extra-bread for the British, but another one gave them away. Out of it the same conclusion comes - all Russians are bad! (VK).

However, the German proved to be not a bad sort of a chap (we did meet a few decent ones), and later on he brought every bit of it back, with the explanation that he had been in duty bound to remove it, as we were not supposed to be getting it, in case the informer went to one of his superiors about. Well, after that, it became common knowledge in the Russian quarters, that we were receiving more food than they were, so they waited in a body and waylaid their two countrymen of the cook-house on their way with it from the kitchen. There was a bit of a melee, and they "collared" the milk, but didn't manage to get the bread. After that we had to make stealthy visitations to the cook-house and have our ration doled out to us there. We wore a hospital uniform consisting of a loose pair of trousers, over which was worn a long gown, and down the legs of the trousers we stuffed the bread, trying to walk back to our quarters as unconcernedly and naturally as we could. Those Russians were still suspicious, however, and when another chap and I were visiting the cook-house for our supply, we were watched, and when we emerged, each with two loaves of bread, we were immediately attacked. We made a bolt for it, and I just managed to get through the doorway to safety. My mate was not so fortunate. They coursed him around and around that quadrangle several times, and finally caught him, when they relieved him of his bread and severely knocked him about: not, however, before he had "bowled" a few of them over. The rumpus created brought the rest of our comrades on the scene, and then there was a general "mix-up", in which some very severe knocks were given and taken. The fracas was brought to an abrupt termination by the appearance of the German guard with fixed bayonets. Thus ended the "four o'clock bread riot", as we afterwards spoke of it. It was as much jealousy as hunger that prompted those Russians to deprive us of that which they could not get otherwise.

I think, the Russians reacted absolutely adequately on the double standards of French clandestine activists who were feeding the British only ignoring the Russians. Of course, it caused natural exasperation and will to restore justice among starving people (VK).

The little bit of black bread which the Germans issued to us was one of our most prized possessions, and yet I have seen Russians sell it ad lib on "soup" for the sake of the money it brought them, and many of them afterwards actually died from the effect of starvation.

AUTUMN 1917

Soon Taylor was sent to work on a German farm, where he found himself in a company of two Russians. The farm owner who had her husband and two sons on the front took care about the Australian and began to feed him up better. She didn't bother about the Russians. The Australian and his workmates often worked together with German women and children, which were driven to the farms in scores. The POWs found from them about the terrible famine in German cities.

The "flu" was raging throughout Germany at that time. There was not much that I missed, and, of course, I didn't miss getting the flu. For two weeks I lay very near to the "borderland". I think, with no medical attention whatever. No one came near to help me, save my companions, and they were only there after working hours. One of them in particular (a Russian) did more to help me than all the others, and to him, in a great measure, I owed my recovery.

And again we see that many West Europeans have double standards: a German woman fed up the Australian, "forgetting" about the Russians! Taylor didn't think that Russians were not too pleased about it. Thanks God, he didn't forget that a Russian had saved him from death (VK.).

THE ESCAPE

After the recovery Taylor began to think about an escape. It was obvious that there was no opportunity to cross the Western Front and get to the Allied lines. He decided to discuss chances for escape with his Russian mates.

For some considerable time some of us had been thinking seriously of making a bid for freedom. One Russian prisoner had secured a compass, whilst another had a map, and together we studied and discussed that map. From information we got from time to time from Russian prisoners who had escaped and had been recaptured, we decided that our best course was to make for Minsk, which was situated on the border of Poland and Russia. Once over the border we thought we would be safe. Of course we knew nothing whatever at that time of the state of affairs in Russia. Our German guards had at times told us contradictory tales of affairs in the outer world, and had even told us that the Russians had deserted their Allies, and that the country was in a state of chaos, but we did not believe anything...

At about 7 o'clock in the evening I and three Russians started off to the Polish border, which was about eight miles east of us...

When we reached the vicinity of Sawalki we had no cover whatever, and traveled for a considerable distance over ploughed fields. We wanted to go well beyond that district before dawn, and as it was heavy going, we decided to make for a near-by metalled road, thinking it easy enough to make off the road for safety if we heard anything approaching. That went on very well for a good few miles, but the heavy going and continuous plodding had made us all very tired, and we rested for a while on the roadside. Of course, we all meant to keep very much awake and have our wits about us, but we had scarcely sat down, it seemed, than we had all fallen asleep. How long we slept I don't know, but we were rudely awakened by the sound of approaching horses, which were so near that we had no time to make ourselves scarce. We did not know what to do, so did the most natural thing under the circumstances - nothing. And it was well we did (or didn't, for the slightest movement would have been our undoing). They were a party of Uhlans patrolling the road: we could just distinguish their peaked caps in the dawning light. One of them remarked as they were opposite to where we were lying that "those black objects looked like men", and we strained our ears for the reply. As we were lying amongst some very large stones, the other mistook us for stones, and, to our unbounded relief, they took that for granted and passed on. We managed to reach a small wood beyond a village shortly after daybreak, quite exhausted, and there we slept well into the evening.

The escapees chanced to find a boat so that to cross the Niemen River.

We had become... a little bit excited at the prospect of at last getting across the river after all our patient searching, and, for the time, had unconsciously relaxed our vigilance. We were abruptly brought to a realization of our position by the close proximity of a party of horsemen riding along the road. We did not know whether or not they were Germans, but were taking chances. One Russian and myself dropped flat behind a slight embankment at the side of the road, but the other two, taken by surprise, became panic-stricken, and raced up the road before the horsemen. Harsh calls from the latter on the fugitives to halt settled the doubt of their nationality; but the more they cried the harder the Russians ran, and after a while the noise of the chase died down, and we were left ignorant of their fate. We waited for a considerable time, but it was too cold to remain very long inactive, so we decided we would make a search for our missing comrades before attempting our voyage. We called them by name, cautiously at first, but our calls brought no response, and our searching seemed vain. We were forced to the conclusion that they had been recaptured. There was nothing for it but to make the attempt to cross the river without them, and this we had to do before another day dawned...

We... reached the opposite bank. I wanted to send the boat adrift, in the hope that it might reach the opposite bank again, and perhaps serve some other fugitives as it had served us, but my companion prevailed upon me not to do so. As it soon afterward turned out, it was as well he did, for we were just about to set out again on our journey eastward, when we heard our names called from across the river. Our first thought was that the German patrol had returned to search for us and was trying to decoy us back, but to our great relief we discovered it was our two missing comrades, who had managed to elude their pursuers in the darkness. Much as we feared it, there was nothing else for it but to commence our hazardous voyage all over again. However, we accomplished it without accident, and at last were safely landed and happily reunited...

IN RUSSIA

Well, at the first stopping place, a small village, we were able to buy a little bread. I was at disadvantage in the dealing in Russia; they drove some hard bargains, and as I could not speak or understand the language, I often came out on the wrong side of a deal. I decided to entrust my comrade with what little cash I had, and let him do the bargaining. It was an unlucky move for me. Two of the Russians had, by the way, left us and gone in another direction when we entered Russia, but the one who continued on with me had been a workmate in Germany. We had been companions in distress, and I had often shared some of the contents of my parcels with him. He seemed very much attached to me, so I had not slightest misgiving when I handed over my money. The following morning, however, he had completely vanished. Ingratitude and treachery are characteristics of the race; I believe most Russians would rob their own parents.

Well, I was "up against it" properly that time - unable to speak or understand the language, no money whatever, no friends; a stranger in a strange land. It was well for my peace of mind that I did not at that time know the real state of affairs in Russia. As it was, the outlook fairly appalled me. No doubt, had I been a woman I'd have had a good cry over it, and felt relieved - I felt like giving way to it, but the old saying "no good crying over spilt milk" occurred to me, so I had just to grind my teeth and "stick it".

Well, again one Russian, possibly, had been tempted by his money, and Taylor made a conclusion that all Russians are villains (VK).

After several days I reached a place called Smolensk, and there, utterly exhausted by want and feeling on the verge of a collapse, I decided to make an appeal to the military authorities there. I sought out the commandant and reported to him. My reception was contrary to what I expected. Much to my relief, there happened to be a clerk at the military station who could speak German, so I had no trouble in making my predicament understood. He took me to his own home and fed me, and his wife insisted on me accepting a parcel of food to satisfy my wants on the rest of the journey. I was then escorted to another office, where were congregated quite a crowd of men and women. They had formed up like a double queue on each side of a narrow passageway leading to the office, and were evidently there for the same purpose as myself - to secure railway passport to other parts. Through the waiting queue I was taken, and it was evident they somehow sensed I was British or a foreigner, and it angered them considerably to see me taken in ahead of them. I was carrying a small case, which I had to place upon my head to get through with it, the passageway was so narrow, and on that case the Russians pounded with their fists and hurled at me vile threats and imprecations. I had seen enough of the Russian in Germany, however, to know, to know that is generally a coward, and I did not fear any violence from them. Arrived at the office, *(As far as I know, Taylor lived through the WW2 time and must have heard something about Stalingrad, Kursk, storming of Berlin. I hope, that the ageing veteran changed his opinion after that. - VK.)* I met there a Russian on the same quest as myself, who seemed to be more of a gentleman than the average, and, entering into conversation with him, I learned he was a Russian doctor, who had also been a prisoner in Germany. He had been well treated by a number of British prisoners with whom he had been interned, and doubtless actuated by feelings of gratitude towards Britishers generally, and being bound for Moscow, whither I intended to go, he took me under his care, and I was mighty thankful for it.

We arrived at Moscow about 10 o'clock the following morning and as my friend the doctor was going further on, I was somewhat apprehensive of my task of battling for myself again. But the doctor was evidently well acquainted with Moscow, for he took me straight away to an office connected with the railway station, where there were three ladies working. One spoke German and another French, and with my smattering of each language to help me along, I felt somewhat at ease for the time being. They were very kind and sociable, and I remained with them until they finished their duties in the evening, when one of them took me to a house not very far distant. Arrived at the place, we were met by a gentleman who had a short conversation with my guide, and then turned to me and spoke in perfect English. The gentleman was the Rev. Mr. North, an Anglican clergyman, and he and his wife invited me in, and made their guest for the night. For the first time for many and many a day I enjoyed the luxury of a good bath...

Let's remember now, how many kind Russian people unselfishly helped Taylor: a Russian POW who took care of him when Taylor was ill, a clerk in Smolensk, ex-POW the doctor, women from the railway station office... But no generalization was done by Taylor upon these examples! (VK).

Yet on the next day Taylor got a feeling, that it would be hard to find way home: the Civil War was raging in Russia, and there was no British Embassy in Moscow. The interests of British subjects in Russia were represented by the Danish embassy. That was where Taylor settled in. He lived in one room with two English seamen, who had once jumped their ship in Murmansk and then had been arrested by the Bolsheviks as suspects in espionage. They even had had to serve some time in jail. For some time the trio had been making some money by storage and sales of firewood, but soon the Englishmen disappeared,

having stolen Taylor's clothes and linen, he had spent all his money on. Due to it Taylor survived the Moscow winter with no warm clothes and had to sleep on a bare bed under a mattress ... Later on he found out that the thievish fugitives had joined the Red Army.

For some reason this case had not inspired Taylor to come to a conclusion about the overall meanness and stealthy of the British. Well, they were his sons of a bitch... (VK).

The soldier was practically a law unto himself, and was a very conspicuous personage in his uniform, armed with a rifle, revolver, and a sword which reached to his heels. The hue and cry of a chase and promiscuous shooting could be heard intermittently about the streets day and night. If a soldier came across a case of alleged law-breaking, he was judge, jury and executioner, and if he thought a case warranted him shooting he immediately gave effect to his finding. Many a time I have seen a man running for his life through the streets, with perhaps one or half dozen soldiers in hot pursuit, blazing away with their revolvers, regardless of what innocent might stop the flying lead. It invariably caused a general scatter, people flying in all directions for shelter. I often had to squeeze myself into a doorway or some other corner... bullets "whizzed" uncomfortably near. On one occasion I received a deuce of scare. I was wending my way home in the early hours of the morning, when I was stopped by a posse of soldiers, who demanded to see my passport, orders having been issued to them to examine all foreigners. I had none, and pretended I had misunderstood them, offering them cigarettes. When that failed I pleaded ignorance of their meaning, replying to their demands, "Angliski plauer", meaning English prisoner. It got me out of the corner anyhow, and saved me, perhaps, a night or two in the cells.

IMPRESSIONS FROM MOSCOW

Moscow is well named the City of Churches, for unlike London, which is said to have a hotel on every corner, Moscow has a church on almost every corner. They both serve the same purpose, however, in my opinion - to keep people poor. Those churches are not the unpretentious little buildings we see so many of, but are magnificent and imposing structures, surmounted by great brass domes. They are open all day long, and there is a constant stream of devotees going in and out. In some parts of the city, throughout the streets there are small structures something like sentry-boxes, in which there are hundreds of candles burning, and they are also used for worship. Every time a Russian passes a place of worship it is his duty to cross himself, and as there is one every few yards practically you can guess he is kept fairly busy. Moscow is a beautiful city, with many fine, imposing buildings and wide thoroughfares, whilst the business parts have many splendid shop frontages. Instead of the tempting array of merchandise one would expect them to display, however, they were all shuttered up. Business was stagnant, and practically all that was transacted was confined to the market square.

WAY HOME

Taylor now could speak Russian quite well. He set up a task to make enough money to leave Russia. Market sales were the best way to do it. The Australian opened his own stand on a city market and began to buy and sell different goods. Later he found out that somewhere there was a man, who was producing the most precious goodie then - soap. Taylor found him far beyond the city suburbs. He appeared to be a former manager of a paint factory closed by the Bolsheviks. He had been making soap from drying oil remained in his disposal and relatively good soap was coming out of it. Taylor offered his services in sales and the Russian businessman driven into the corner by the military communism, agreed.

Taylor's business went along well, although his saving grew up not as quickly as he wanted to. To accelerate it, Taylor played cards on nights, and did it rather successfully.

I looked around the city and made a few cautious inquiries for a doctor who would give me a certificate of ill-health. I tried a good many without any success, but I eventually dropped across one who had more of the "key" in him than the rest. I went to him one evening without stating my purpose, and asked him to examine me. He put me through the usual form of examination... and told me that was in perfect health... I at once pitched him a tale of woe, but it did not seem to move him in the least. When I produced money, though, and began to tempt him... he gave me the necessary certificate, for which I gave him 100 roubles of the Czar's regime (10 pounds). The certificate was worded as follows: "This man is an English prisoner escaped from Germany to Moscow. Is in very bad health, and ought not to have been passed for a soldier at all. He is suffering from paralysis of the heart, and must be sent home at once."

Taylor received his passport and transit to the seaboard in the Danish Embassy. He reached Finland by train and from there, finally arrived in England on 11 April 1919. Being realistic Taylor did not expect too a warm reception from the British authorities, but he did not expect that they would interrogate him for three weeks in the military intelligence about what he had seen in the Bolshevik Russia. Sixty years after Taylor was still remembering it, saying not without resentment that "it was not fair, but this is the army..."

On my return to England, I was asked by British officers if I thought Bolshevism would last any time, and I replied that I thought it would. I had seen a good deal of the Bolshevik army; in fact, I had stayed in the same house with two of their officers. Almost every able-bodied man in the country had flocked to the army, in which they were well fed and clothed; in fact, it was the only place in Russia, so far as I could see, where there was any abundance of food, and the condition of the country drove them to it and kept them there. I also witnessed a procession of their artillery, and horses, guns and men looked splendid. Their armies seemed to lack neither reinforcements nor equipment. Boys over a certain age had all been called up for military training, and there was every evidence amongst the soldiers of loyalty to the army, possibly from selfish motives though. My opinion was given little credence at that time, but later events have shown that I gauged the situation fairly correctly.

During the Great Depression Taylor wrote a book about his peregrinations in the country of Bolsheviks and tried to sell it himself, but with no success. He remained the only British subject in history who had managed to make such a trip from the German captivity through the revolutionary Russia.

Private T. E. Taylor (Gippsland, Late of 14th Battalion, AIF). Peregrinations of an Australian Prisoner of War. The Experiences of an Australian Soldier in Germany and Bolshevik Russia. 1932