

German Evacuation of Allied Prisoners from POW Camps [Oflag 64 at Schubin, Poland]

During 1945, the Soviet Army overran, in two sequences, German camps that held US POWs. The experiences of the prisoners released by the Soviets was considerably different depending on whether they were liberated during late-January to early-February in Poland and East Prussia, or during April and May in central and northern Germany. **Most of the US prisoners in the early sequence came from Oflag 64 at Schubin, Poland, Stalag III-C near Kustrin, Poland, with a few from Stalag II-B, Hammerstein, Germany.** The Soviets evacuated these men to the east and most of them eventually came out through Odessa. They comprise a relatively small portion, about ten percent, of all American prisoners that were in Soviet hands; contemporary accounts have 2,858 evacuated by way of Odessa. But because of the smaller numbers, the more direct involvement of the US Military Mission to Moscow, and the somewhat more routine evacuation procedures, the Odessa evacuation is better documented and more frequently written about than the liberation of POWs which took place later in central Germany.

As the Russians moved into western Poland and East Prussia during January and February 1945, the Germans began evacuating the POW camps in that area and moved the prisoner populations into camps further west. These movements had a significant, negative impact on the POWs and on the orderly recovery of liberated prisoners by the western Allies. Some of the POWs who were marched west came out of the Soviet zone without ever really having been in Red Army custody, that is being controlled administratively and physically by the Soviets. By far most of the US POWs liberated by the Soviets came from about a half dozen camps in central and northern Germany, which by late-April and early-May 1945 were overcrowded with large numbers of men previously evacuated from the camps further east. This group of US POWs, totaling about 25,000, returned to military control across the front-lines from the Soviet to the SHAEF sectors.

The Allied POWs whom the Germans marched west suffered from extreme weather conditions, including subfreezing cold and blizzards, shortages of food and shelter, and from the sheer exertion required in the movement, most of which was by foot. **[Day-by-Day]** The movements of US and British prisoners from Stalag Luft III (Sagan), Stalag Luft VIII (Bankau), and Stalag III-B (Furstenburg) to Stalag III-A (Luckenwalde) during late-January and early-February 1945 created special hardships. Because of concern for the prisoners being evacuated, SHAEF authorities attempted to keep track of the movements, as well as tried to adjust estimates on the changing prisoner populations in individual German camps. Reports from the International Red Cross and the protecting powers (the neutral Swedes and Swiss) were important sources for this information. But even as the moves concluded in April 1945, SHAEF admitted that it had inadequate, incomplete information as to the numbers and purpose of the evacuations: "It is impossible to assess what is the purpose of this attempt to retain PW to the last." Speculation included use as hostages in the Alpenstellung (the suspected, but not real Alpine redoubt), or even that the Germans planned to massacre them in the end.

Allied authorities foresaw another consequence of the evacuations: "In view of conditions of evacuation, large numbers of stragglers must be anticipated." The number of actual stragglers, of course, affected the accuracy of contemporary estimates on the numbers of POWs evacuated who actually reached another camp. The consequences of the German movements included not only hardships during the marches, but significant overcrowding at the camps to which the POWs were moved. At Luckenwalde, Albert Kadler, a Swiss observer, noted: "There is excessive overcrowding in all compounds.... The floor space... is supposed to accommodate 200 men, while at present 400 men are living in each room." The overcrowding negatively affected nearly all aspects of camp life, causing in particular health and safety problems. In order to alleviate the suffering caused by the evacuation marches, in mid-February 1945 Major General Ray Barker, the SHAEF Assistant Chief of Staff for Personnel and the officer responsible for recovery of Allied POWs, recommended that the US and British governments approach the German government, through the Swiss or Swedish governments, to urge ending the evacuations; as German forces withdrew, POWs would simply 'stay put' in the camps to be liberated by the advancing armies, whether Soviet in the east or the other allies in the west.

Eventually the Germans adopted this 'stay put' policy. But because it did not take effect until 21 April 1945, the migration of the POW population continued for some time. During those intervening weeks, the Germans moved more than a 100,000 POWs of various nationalities westward away from the Red Army. At least a few thousand perished in the process. Others suffered serious health problems as a consequence. SHAEF never determined the exact numbers variously affected and had only estimated the actual numbers moved. But the evacuations did put many western Allied prisoners in camps more likely to be liberated by American and British forces than had they 'stayed put' in Poland and East Prussia.