ABSTRACT

This study analyses the situation of German soldiers who became British Prisoners of War during World War II. It aims to look at two sides, the British policies towards POWs and their effects on the German soldiers.

During the war the British policy regarding POWs changed. In the early stages of the so-called „phony war” the British government expected a short war and a distinction was made between the Nazis and the German people in general. At this time there were just a handful of German POWs living in two camps and the British public did not pay any attention to them.

The attitude towards the Germans, especially those who lived as enemy aliens in the country, changed during the spring of 1940 when England feared a German landing.

Winston Churchill’s newly formed government therefore decided to evacuate all camps and transport German enemy aliens as well as POWs to the Dominions. Although the Foreign Office warned that such action might be regarded as a breach of the Geneva Convention, hundreds of German soldiers were sent to Canada, South Africa, Australia and the US. These transportations can, to some extent, be seen as a panic measure that illustrates the British fear of possible fifth columnists. At the same time Italian prisoners were brought into the country to work in agriculture. This difference in treatment indicates that Germans were considered as the real enemies, whereas Italians were seen as harmless and naive workers.

Later in the war German POWs were used as hostages in a circle of reprisals and counter reprisals which lasted over a year and made an exchange of prisoners with the Third Reich impossible. Both sides used POWs to demonstrate their strength.

The last phase of British POW policy began with the decision to re-educate German prisoners and use their labour. In the autumn of 1944 plans for the post-war period were considered. After Germany’s unconditional surrender there would be a demand for reliable Germans to assist the British occupation army. These Germans should be convinced of the benefits of democracy and it was therefore necessary to re-educate them. There had already been a secret project at Camp Ascot during the war, where with the help of German emigrants German POWs worked for the BBC. After the war a large-scale re-education programme was started, its focal point being the famous Wilton Park training centre.

As time went by POWs’ interest in the programme slackened and from 1946 onwards the question of repatriation became the most pressing issue. As POW labour was needed in post-war Britain the government was very reluctant to send all prisoners home and was therefore criticised for using slave labour. In 1948 the last German POW finally left the country.
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