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no. 20

# UNITED STATES FOOD ADMINISTRATION

## The Prussian System

By

F. C. WALCOTT



WASHINGTON  
SEPTEMBER, 1917



# THE PRUSSIAN SYSTEM

Told by F. C. Walcott at Conference of Field Men, Sept. 12.

*This I have seen. I could not believe it unless I had seen it through and through. For several weeks I lived with it; I went all about it and back of it; inside and out of it was shown to me—until finally I came to realize that the incredible was true. It is monstrous, it is unthinkable, but it exists. It is the Prussian system.*

A year ago I went to Poland to learn its facts concerning the remnant of a people that had been decimated by war. The country had been twice devastated. First the Russian army swept through it and then the Germans. Along the roadside from Warsaw to Pinsk, the present firing line 230 miles, near half a million people had died of hunger and cold. The way was strewn with their bones picked clean by the crows. With their usual thrift, the Germans were collecting the larger bones to be milled into fertilizer, but finger and toe bones lay on the ground with the mud covered and rain soaked clothing.

Wicker baskets were scattered along the way—the basket in which the baby swings from the rafter in every peasant home. Every mile there were scores of them, each one telling a death. I started to count, but after a little I had to give it up, there were so many.

That is the desolation one saw along the great road from Warsaw to Pinsk, mile after mile, more than two hundred miles. They told me a million people were made homeless in six weeks of the German drive in August and September, 1916. They told me four hundred thousand died on the way. The rest, scarcely half alive,

got through with the Russian army. Many of these have been sent to Siberia; it is these people whom the Paderewski committee is trying to relieve.

In the refugee camps, 300,000 survivors of the flight were gathered by the Germans, members of broken families. They were lodged in jerry-built barracks, scarcely water-proof, unlighted, unwarmed in the dead of winter. Their clothes, where the buttons were lost, were sewed on. There were no conveniences, they had not even been able to wash for weeks. Filth and infection from vermin were spreading. They were famished, their daily ration a cup of soup and a piece of bread as big as my fist.

In Warsaw, which had not been destroyed, a city of one million inhabitants, one of the most prosperous cities of Europe before the war, the streets were lined with people in the pang of starvation. Famished and rain-soaked, they squatted there, with their elbows on their knees or leaning against the buildings, too feeble to lift a hand for a bit of money or a morsel of bread if one offered it, perishing of hunger and cold. Charity did what it could. The rich gave all that they had, the poor shared their last crust. Hundreds of thousands were perishing. Day and night the picture is before my eyes—a people starving, a nation dying.

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In that situation, the German commander issued a proclamation. Every able-bodied Pole was bidden to Germany to work. If any refused, let no other Pole give him to eat, not so much as a mouthful, under penalty of German military law.

This is the choice the German government gives to the conquered Pole, to the husband and father of a starving family: Leave your family to die or survive as the case may be. Leave your country which is destroyed, to work in Germany for its further destruction. If you are obstinate, we shall see that you surely starve.

Staying with his folk, he is doomed and they are not saved; the father and husband can do nothing for them, he only adds to their risk and suffering. Leaving them, he will be cut off from his family, they may never hear from him again nor he from them. Germany will set him to work that a German workman may be released to fight against his own land and people. He shall be lodged in barracks, behind barbed wire entanglements, under armed guard. He

shall sleep on the bare ground with a single thin blanket. He shall be scantily fed and his earnings shall be taken from him to pay for his food.

That is the choice which the German Government offers to a proud, sensitive, high strung people. Death or slavery.

When a Pole gave me that proclamation, I was boiling. But I had to restrain myself. I was practically the only foreign civilian in the country and I wanted to get food to the people. That was what I was there for and I must not for any cause jeopardize the undertaking. I asked Governor General Von Beseler "Can this be true?"

"Really, I cannot say," he replied, "I have signed so many proclamations; ask General Von Kries."

So I asked General Von Kries. "General, this is a civilized people. Can this be true?"

"Yes," he said, "it is true"—with an air of adding, Why not?

I dared not trust myself to speak; I turned to go. "Wait," he said. And he explained to me how Germany, official Germany, regards the state of subject peoples.

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Even now I find it hard to describe in comprehensible terms the mind of official Germany, which dominates and shapes all German thought and action. Yet it is as hard, as clear-cut, as real as any material thing. I saw it in Poland, I saw the same thing in Belgium, I hear of it in Serbia and Roumania. For weeks it was always before me, always the same. Officers talked freely, frankly, directly. All the staff officers have the same view.

Let me try to tell it, as General Von Kries told me, in Poland, in the midst of a dying nation. Germany is destined to rule the world, or at least a great part of it. The German people are so much human material for building the German state, other people do not count. All is for the glory and might of the German state. The lives of human beings are to be conserved only if it makes for the state's advancement, their lives are to be sacrificed if it is to the state's advantage. The state is all, the people are nothing.

Conquered people signify little in the German account. Life, liberty, happiness, human sentiment, family ties, grace and generous impulse, these have no place beside the one concern, the greatness of the German state.

Starvation must excite no pity; sympathy must not be allowed, if it hampers the main design of promoting Germany's ends.

'Starvation is here,' said General Von Kries. 'Candidly, we would like to see it relieved; we fear our soldiers may be unfavorably affected by the things that they see. But since it is here, starvation must serve our purpose. So we set it to work for Germany. By starvation we can accomplish in two or three years in East Poland more than we have in West Poland, which is East Prussia, in the last hundred years. With that in view, we propose to turn this force to our advantage.'

'This country is meant for Germany,' continued the keeper of starving Poland. 'It is a rich alluvial country which Germany has needed for some generations. We propose to remove the able-bodied working Poles from this country. It leaves it open for the inflow of German working people as fast as we can spare them. They will occupy it and work it.'

Then with a cunning smile, 'Can't you see how it works out? By and by we shall give back freedom to Poland. When that happens Poland will appear automatically as a German province.'

In Belgium, General Von Bissing told me exactly the same thing. 'If the relief of Belgium breaks down we can force the industrial population into Germany through starvation and colonize other Belgians in Mesopotamia where we have planned large irrigation works; Germans will then overrun Belgium. Then when the war is over and freedom is given back to Belgium, it will be a German Belgium that is restored. Belgium will be a German province and we have Antwerp—which is what we are after.'

In Poland, the able-bodied men are being removed to relieve the German workman and make the land vacant for Germany. In Belgium, the men are deported that the country may be a German colony. In Serbia, where three-fourths of a million people out of three millions have perished miserably in the last three years, Germany hardens its heart, shuts its eyes to the suffering, thinks only of Germany's gain. In Armenia, six hundred thousand people were slain in cold blood by Kurds and Turks under the domination and leadership of German officers—Germany looking on, indifferent to the horror and woe, intent only on seizing the opportunity thus given. War, famine, pestilence—these bring to the Ger-

man mind no appeal for humane effort, only the resolution to profit from them to the utmost that the German state may be powerful and great.

That is not all. Removing the men, that the land may be vacant for German occupation, that German stock may replace Belgians, Poles, Servians, Armenians, and now Roumanians, Germany does more. Women left captive are enslaved. Germany makes all manner of lust its instrumentality.

The other day a friend of mine told me of a man just returned from Northern France. "I cannot tell you the details," he said, "man to man, I don't want to repeat what I heard." Some of the things he did tell—shocking mutilation and moral murder. He told of women, by the score, in occupied territory of Northern France, prisoned in underground dungeons, tethered for the use of their bodies by officers and men.

If this is not a piece of the Prussian system, it is the logical product of disregard of the rights of others.

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Such is the German mind as it was disclosed to me in several weeks' contact with officers of the staff. Treaties are scraps of paper, if they hinder German aims. Treachery is condoned and praised, if it falls in with German interest. Men, lands, countries are German prizes. Populations are to be destroyed or enslaved so Germany may gain. Women are Germany's prey, children are spoils of war. God gave Germany the Hohenzollern and together they are destined to rule Europe and, eventually, the world—thus reasons the Kaiser.

Coolly, deliberately, officers of the German staff, permeated by this monstrous philosophy, discuss the denationalization of peoples, the destruction of nations, the undoing of other civilizations, for Germany's account.

In all the world such a thing has never been. The human mind has never conceived the like. Even among barbarians, the thing would be incredible. The mind can scarcely grasp the fact that these things are proposed and done by a modern government professedly a Christian government in the family of civilized nations.



This system has got to be rooted out. If it takes everything in the world, if it takes every one of us, this abomination must be overthrown. It must be ended or the world is not worth living in. No matter how long it takes, no matter how much it costs, we must endure to the end with agonized France, with imperiled Britain, with shattered Belgium, with shaken Russia.

We must hope that Germany will have a new birth as Russia is being reborn. We must pray, as we fight against the evil that is in Germany, that the good which is in Germany may somehow prevail. We must trust that in the end a Germany really great with the strength of a wonderful race may find its place as one of the brotherhood of nations in the new world that is to be.

The responsibility of success or failure rests now upon our shoulders; the eyes of the world are anxiously watching us. Are we going to be able to rise to the emergency, throw off our inefficiency, and prove that Democracy is safe for the world?

September 13, 1917.