

A PRISON CAMP IS NOT A GARDEN CITY

This is the fourth of a series of articles written for "The Listener" by JAMES BERTRAM

"THE prisoner," Stephen Spender says somewhere, "ought never to pardon his cell." He isn't likely to: anyone who has been in solitary confinement anywhere—and this applies equally to the conscientious objector as to the political revolutionary—has entered a new dimension of experience. He has tasted the final bitterness of "man's inhumanity to man."

For there is nothing worse than this. Beatings or torture are easier to bear, because these are signs of a kind of interest, however perverted, on the part of one's captors. And I shall return again to a curious but now familiar rule of prison behaviour: that *morale*—a clumsy word, but we all know what's meant by it—automatically goes up when the bashing begins. The same thing happens to cities under bombing.

It is not an original comment, but I sometimes feel—watching the neighbour's car drive off to the beach on Sunday, with Dad in his shirt-sleeves and Auntie May watching the children and Yvonne taking a crack at the Government because there are still no imported dress-patterns—that it's a pity we didn't have at least one serious air-raid in New Zealand. But we did have prison-camps; and there are still people locked up because of the war.

These are random observations, and it isn't particularly my business to follow up their implications. All I want to suggest here, by a somewhat devious approach to the whole subject of Japanese prison-camps, is that I hope New Zealanders come to it with a vivid sense of reality; and with a reasonably clear conscience.

O Horror, Horror!

But it still isn't easy. "Does the public want to hear about atrocities?" is the sort of question a News Taster might put to his colleagues, fingering a sheaf of films and documents. And it's the wrong question. The public *should* hear of them; but it should hear of them the right way. For this is a very dangerous blend of sensation and social dynamite, and though I have been a journalist, off and on, for ten years, I'm still positive the right way isn't through scare headlines and obscene photographs.

These things happened all right: Belsen and Buchenwald and Auschwitz and the rest. We ought to realise them with every protesting nerve, let them burn in deep upon our consciousness. But there was Oranienburg before Belsen, and an English poet wrote in 1938:

*"Ideas can be true although men die,
And we can watch a thousand faces
Made active by one lie:
And maps can really point to places
Where life is evil now:
Nanking; Dachau."*

If people are only interested in horrors as horrors, they had much better go to a Boris Karloff film. The point about atrocities and persecution and prison-camp records is not that men can behave like sub-men; we all know that

now. It is that these are the symptoms and by-products of a whole social system and mental environment that lives on terror and breeds monsters like Kramer and Tokata just as dung breeds flies. And the whole thing isn't washed out when a few of the leading butchers have been shot or hanged. (Krupp is indicted as a war criminal; but Duponts are still the guardians of the atomic bomb.)

It is important for us—especially in New Zealand—to realise just what happened in Japanese POW camps. It is far more important for us to realise *why* it happened, and what the military-fascist set-up in Japan did to unspoilt young Japanese peasants and fishermen as well as to the victims whom war threw in their way. For if this lesson is learnt thoroughly, it may yet be possible to help build up a decent Japan, and incidentally do something about Hong Kong and China, too.

That is why I want first to make some general statements about the Japanese

Army. Back in New Zealand in 1940 I wrote: "I do not think anybody has done justice to the fighting quality of the Japanese Army."

This was based on my own observations in China over some years of war, declared and undeclared. And the brief combat-experience we had in Hong Kong certainly confirmed it. We had been outnumbered, of course; but we had also been out-generalled and out-fought. And by and large the Nips fought fair.

I don't think anyone who was at Hong Kong would deny this. The Japanese bombed military objectives with as much precision as they were capable of; their artillery was excellent and extremely well-directed. The conduct of their troops during the fighting and the occupation, if not exemplary, was generally good. With the exception of some inexcusable bayoneting of wounded prisoners, the few instances of "atrocities" were not without provocation; they were promptly investigated and the offenders punished by the Japanese Command. After the surrender, British troops as a whole were not insulted or injured until they were rounded up and brought behind the wire.

All this was an agreeable surprise to most of us. I had seen a great deal of the China fighting, and I knew that there the Japanese did not take prisoners. Sometimes, if they wanted a road built or some heavy military work done they would keep a few thousand captives alive—battle-derelicts working in chain-gangs—for just long enough to finish the job. More often what prisoners they

took, or what villagers they rounded up in "partisan" areas, were tied together in long lines and used as dummies for bayonet practice to break in raw troops.

If anyone is moved to call this inhuman, I would suggest that *in wartime* it is merely logical (and I would recommend that he or she abstain from acquiring first-hand details of our own commando training; or of the savagery on both sides of the later fighting in the Pacific Islands). But the point I really wish to establish here is that the things we are only too glad to put out of our minds now that the war is over, were routine in peace or war to the soldiers of the Emperor. That is why Japanese civilians hated the Army—because of what it did to their young men.

The System Made Them

And if this was true of the Japanese Army—which as a fighting service had its points, as I have tried to indicate—how much more was it true of the Gendarmerie, the Japanese *kempeis* or Military Police who bore to the Army much the same relationship as Himmler's SS to the Wehrmacht. This is where we move into the habitual realms of shadow, the gangster-land of a post-Inquisition whose symbols, less familiar than the steel whip and the rubber truncheon, are the knotted cord and the water-torture. Religious zealots are at least honest zealots, and materially disinterested. Of the Japanese Gendarmerie it might be said that this was the dirtiest racket on the whole sordid fringe of Japanese imperialism. One would need an 18th century vocabulary to do justice to either its personalities or its methods.

And I am sure it will be found, when all the thousands of reports are added up, that it is the *kempeis* who are responsible for the abominable crimes. I do not suggest, of course, that the Japanese Army was incapable of atrocities: the evidence is there, of Bataan and Borneo and Thailand. But brutality, not torture, was their accustomed weapon; and accident and callousness played a larger part in their misbehaviour, I believe, than calculation. That is why I personally regret the fact that the first Japanese war criminal on public trial should be General Yamashita in the Philippines. For after all Yamashita was a fighting soldier and a commander who made our own generals look pretty silly at times. Homma, of China ill-fame, or the aloof and aristocratic Count Terauchi, would perhaps be fairer game to start on, if the Army is to be the first in the box. Or Tojo, the prime mover in Japanese eyes.

But the men the Japanese people, as well as all Allied prisoners whose comrades disappeared in their net, most want to see tried and convicted are the heads of the Gendarmerie—the slimiest and most cold-blooded vampires who ever sucked their profits from the carcass of war.

All this is a long preamble. But there have not been enough political distinctions of this kind made in Europe, and there have certainly not been enough made in the Far East, since VE and VJ days. At the risk of reopening an ancient controversy, I cannot too strongly insist that it is not a nation but a system that is under indictment in Tokyo today.

The Spoils of War

Back in Hong Kong, then, in the last days of 1941.

A military surrender is an unforgettable experience. I suppose there is

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"Villagers rounded up in 'partisan' areas." Japanese police searching Chinese civilians