

The American LEGION

MONTHLY

AUGUST, 1934: p. 10

How the GERMAN VETERAN is Faring

by
Dorothy Giles



FOR some years after the Armistice the German war veteran was looked on by the folks back home as a reminder of a very disagreeable time; which, the sooner forgotten—and the veteran with it—the better. Everyone who read Remarque's *The Road Back* remembers his picture of a Germany whose self-respect was defeated more thoroughly than her army was. And everyone who heard or read the proposals and promises of Berlin's Big Business Boys in the post-inflation years knows how eager they were to have the world understand that they knew the war had been one terrible mistake which they were anxious to forget, and to have forgotten, as soon as might be.

All fair enough for international trade, and for saving face at Geneva and Locarno and the other holiday resorts where the big bankers and the debt planners got together. But, as Fritz put it up to Hans, what about the 80,000 wounded? What about the mothers and wives and orphans of the 2,000,000 dead? What about the 1,000,000 veterans, like themselves, *hein?* Could they get the war out of their systems as quickly and as easily as all that? As though those four years in the trenches around Verdun had been a dream, dreamed in the nap between dinner and the four o'clock glass of beer. A nice little nap that had been in the Argonne in the late summer of 1918! An American shell had put his own leg to sleep so soundly that it had never since waked up.

"Ja, ja," Hans agreed. And Karl, who had hitched his chair across the sanded floor to join in, reminded everybody present that the German soldiers who had been called "heroes" in 1914 when the first regiments moved across the Meuse, were called "strike breakers" when they came back to the Fatherland after the Armistice.

Gloomily Fritz and Hans and Jacob and Ernst agreed with him that it was *schade*. Or, in other words, tough luck. They hadn't won the war, but was there an army in the world that could go through three years fighting against the combined armies of three other nations, and then in the fourth year take on a couple of million fresh troops aus Amerika, and come out on top?

Now all that is changed. The *Kriegsopferversorgung*—yes, that's the dainty little mouthful by which the Germans call their national War Veterans Association—has stepped up into prominence in the Reich's political and social life. In the first years after the war a number of veterans' societies sprang up in Germany, all of them only more or less official or even national. With the coming into power of the National Socialists two years ago, and the emergence of the Reich as a fascist state, most of these organizations passed out of existence. The others were combined into one national association—strictly Nazi—to which Chancellor Adolf Hitler, one-time corporal, belongs and whose official badge he wears.

OldMagazineArticles.com

GERMAN VETERANS

Like Hitler, so do nearly a million other veterans of the Meuse and the Somme and the Marne. They wear their badges and their war ribbons with conscious pride. If they didn't win the war, at least they showed the color of their patriotism and their devotion to the Fatherland. And that, according to the *Kriegsopferversorgung*, is what counts.

As the motto painted on the wall of the Association's headquarters in Berlin declares, *Soldat Sein, Dauert über Krieg und Frieden*. (To be a soldier, lasts through war and peace.)

In the one-time imperial palace in Berlin, which every tourist can now stare his way through for fifty pfennigs, the first of all sights is the desk in the ex-kaiser's study, at which he sat to sign



the order for the mobilization of the German armies, and the declaration of what was to become the World War. A brass plate let into the desk at the spot where the signer's wrist probably rested as he wrote that fatal "Wilhelm II" tells the story for all time to come. The German sightseers who visit that room shuffle up to the desk in the felt-soled slippers that all visitors are required to wear over their shoes to save the ex-imperial parquet floors from being scratched, and stoop to read the inscription. Then their gaze rests solemnly on the blotter and on the pen laid beside it. They stand there a few minutes, silent, rather awkward. Then they shuffle away.

After all, there is nothing in that relic to make anyone of any nation feel proud. It is probably the most awful memento on view in any museum anywhere in the world.

There was a corresponding note of solemnity about the first mass meeting of the *Kriegsopferversorgung*, that was held in Cologne on July 30, 1933. For one thing the day marked the nineteenth anniversary of the beginning of the War. For another, it was the first official gathering of German war veterans Germany had ever seen. Two hundred and fifty thousand strong they marched through the banner-hung streets of the Rhineland capital. There was Adolf Hitler, one-time corporal and *kamerad*, now *reichschancellor*—*Der Führer* (The Chief) as he is popularly called—to review them. There were speeches and more speeches. There were memorial wreaths and salutes. There were bands and yet more bands. And after the first note of solemnity had been struck, while the bands played livelier and yet livelier airs, there was beer; there was coffee, which, queerly enough, seems to lots of German drinkers a more festal drink than the beer that made them famous. There were sausages—every special, highly spiced variety of wurst the Heinies know how to make. And is that some? There was dancing in the parks of Cologne to finish out the day.

It was the biggest day the Rhineland has had since the Stars and Stripes came down from Ehrenbreitstein. And the greatest gala occasion Cologne has seen since the day some

Not until last summer did the German veterans of the World War form a national organization. Now, on its first anniversary and the twentieth of the start of the war the kriegsopferversorgung has nearly a million members. Above, and on the opposite page, the war veterans and their families enjoy a Kameradschaftsabend, with coffee cups easily outnumbering beer steins.



GERMAN VETERANS



7 hundred years back, when Frederick Barbarossa, old Emperor Redbeard, came back to it from the Crusades bringing the bodies of the Three Wise Men. At any rate he brought three bodies, and he said they were the bodies of the three Kings of the Christmas story, who visited the stable in Bethlehem. And Frederick was one red headed veteran whose

war stories nobody cared about doubting. At least what "Oh yeahing!" was done wasn't within hearing of Frederick's royal ears, or within reach of his mailed fist.

The Cologne meeting and all the publicity the press throughout Germany gave to it brought the Kriegsoferversorgung into prominence, as the national officers of the association intended it should. Enrolment in the local posts has grown steadily and local interest is very much alive. The Versorgung has a well defined national program which calls for financial aid to the crippled and permanently disabled veterans, pensions for widows and support for war orphans that will enable them to get the best educational advantages. But not less important is its social and recreational program for the members. This includes athletics, which are coming to be more and more a feature in the new Germany. Witness the fine new stadium recently erected in Nuremberg, and others now being built by the "Unemployed Army" in several cities along the Rhine. The Germans have never played ball in the way Americans and the English have; but the young generation in Germany is pretty generally "football conscious," and there's a very vigorous interest in running and jumping and gymnastics. All of which is having its effect on the German figure, male and female. The old beer barrel formation bristling with mustaches cut after the fashion made famous by Kaiser Wilhelm, that the cartoonists used to draw to represent Germany, went out with the goose-step. The years of monetary inflation deflated the beer barrels; the barbers took a look at Hitler and began to carve Germany's upper lips to resemble Charlie Chaplin's, and veterans of the field gray and the goose-step put on khaki breeches, got out on the roads and hiked, and learned the Nazi salute.

The real life of the local posts is in the Kameradschaftabends. They aren't for men only, those "Get-Together Evenings." Mrs. Fritz and Mrs. Hans and the children come along mit. It's one big family party of the sort the Germans are so crazy about, held at a beer garden or a coffee house, with plenty of beer and plenty of coffee. Plenty of smokes for the men. None for the women, however. Since Germany went Nazi, cigarettes and lip-sticks and votes for women have been "out." For something to do there's music furnished by the post members, and dancing. No poker, no bridge. Checkers and dominoes and chess for the few—and they are very few—who don't dance. And as the evening gets under way, and everybody gets warmed up, singing.

And do they sing? Boy, you should hear

OldMagazineArticles.com

GERMAN VETERANS

them! None of the German versions of that ballad concerning a young miss from Armentières; not trench songs, except the old popular favorites that went to the front in 1914 and stayed there until the Retreat in November '18, and which are the same songs the grandfathers of these veterans sang when they fought the French in 1870. Probably they were sung by the Hessians who came over and fought us in 1776. Maybe Frederick Barbarossa sang them in his time. Yes, all the sentimental old ones about the green, green hemlock tree, and the red, red rose on the heath; about the King of the Elves and the pretty little girl under the linden who isn't stingy with her kisses. And at the end of the evening, inevitably, *Die Wacht am Rhein*.

No Kameradschaftabend is complete without that one. It's the song that brings back to the German war veteran the days when he was encamped on the Meuse, or along the Moselle back in '14 and '15, when the trenches were cut zig-zag through the vineyards, and if a singer had a thirst, he could quench it without having to pay for the privilege. They sing it and then they begin to reminisce. Not all sordid, grim, blood-stained reminiscences, by any means. Not any more so than are the "Say, do you remember—" stories that one hears at Legion conventions. One of these stories, told me by an ex-navy man, established at least as far as he has been able to discover, what and when and where was the first actual engagement between Germany and the Allies.

My informant was at that time serving his seaman's apprenticeship on board a sailing ship bound for Caleta Buena, Chile, to load nitrates. Lying in the same port and taking on the same sort of cargo were two English vessels, a French ship, and a Belgian windjammer. All through the days of that last week of July '14, the crews of the five vessels stored the sacks of high explosive in the holds. And day by day the telegraph brought news of momentous events piling up in Europe that were going to make those cargoes mighty important. On Tuesday, July 28th, Austria declared war on Serbia. On Wednesday, all the world including the nitrate loaders in Caleta Buena, debated what effect this would have on the already jittery peace of Europe. On Thursday it became known that Russia was mobilizing.

What would Germany do? What would France do? What, in the event of a continental war, would England do? On Friday the German emperor forwarded ultimatums to Russia and to France. The telegraph in Caleta Buena ticked off news of this, and each ship's commander smelling trouble in his whiskers like a cat, decided for himself not to pay off that night, but to keep his crew at work over Saturday in the hope of clearing his ship before all hell broke loose. On Saturday, August first,

GERMAN VETERANS

at five P.M. Germany ordered the mobilization of the entire army and navy. This automatically included the officers and crew of the nitrate ships. It was early noon in Caleta Buena when the news arrived; by the clock, six hours before the order was signed in Berlin. Before four o'clock all the men on all the ships had been paid, and all but those on watch had gone ashore. Caleta Buena doesn't offer much amusement.

As the German naval veteran remembered the town, it had two saloons. One of these was promptly taken over by the crew of the German ship; the other was crowded with the French seamen, the Belgians, and the English, who quite unofficially threw in their lot with the "allies." Things began to get going. Over in the German saloon a sailor discovered an accordion and began to play *Die Wacht am Rhein*. From across the street a chorus, not too well harmonized, answered with the *Marseillaise*. Whether it was the German's musical or national sense that suffered the more acutely, my friend didn't know. He only remembered that the Germans issued forth from the (Continued on page 48) saloon led by the accordion player, and marched Caleta Buena's one street in as good parade formation as sailors who have just drunk a week's pay could manage. The door of the other cafe burst open and the newly organized Allies rushed out and fell upon the Germans.

The war had begun. Begun in Caleta Buena, Chile, at the moment that Germany was mobilizing and at least four hours before German troops crossed the French frontier. Begun two days before Belgium was invaded, and while England was still debating what stand to take. And, begun, the German veteran reminded me gravely, though I caught a twinkle in the eyes behind the thick glasses, not by the Germans, who after all, were having nothing but a happy little Kameradschaftabend with music, but by the French, who, everyone knows, have no musical taste; by the Belgians who have always carried a chip on the shoulder; and by the English, who had long been jealous of Germany's sea strength.

That, anyway, was his story.

THE Berlin headquarters of the *Ver-sorgung* is Albert Leo Schlageter Haus, newly opened and dedicated a year ago on Hitler's birthday, and named in honor of the German war veteran who was shot by French command at Düsseldorf in May, 1923. Schlageter is on the way to becoming a national hero. A play has been written around him which is played to packed, enthusiastic houses in all parts of Germany. He has been chosen by the veterans' association as typical of the spirit the association desires to commemorate and encourage. He served at the front through the four years of the war, during the November revolution after the Armistice he

GERMAN VETERANS

kept command of his battery; later he was active in the fighting in Upper Silesia and Danzig, and finally he resisted the French occupation of the Ruhr, where he met his death.

From a stand before the house, I, as a guest of the editor of the *Versorgung Monthly* and the representative of *The American Legion Monthly*, was privileged to review detachments from the Berlin posts who paraded in honor of fifty Austrian war orphans, wards of the *Versorgung*. The children had been on vacation at a summer camp on the shore of the Baltic maintained by the war veterans. They were returning, by bus, to the orphanage near Salzburg, Austria. As part of their holiday they were taking in Berlin en route. The day's program included a sight-seeing ride, a visit to Albert Leo Schlageter Haus, a reception by the Berlin posts, and later a visit to the national War memorial on Unter den Linden.

The children looked happy and healthy. They looked quite properly impressed by the impressiveness of Berlin, and a little bored by the speeches. But they woke up when the band began to play and joined in the singing of patriotic songs, and replied with the straight out from the shoulder Nazi salute as the massed colors of the posts went by the stand, followed by squads of war veterans, and twenty or more wounded in self propelled wheel chairs.

I thought of Memorial Day and Armistice Day parades back home; of men who leave their jobs to put on old, worn uniforms and march to the war memorial or to the cemetery; of the local post's bugler, who never was very good and who is getting worse for lack of wind and a touch of gas, but who manages to sound Taps on those two occasions each year, and then hurries back to his plumber's shop, where trade isn't any too good these days. These German veterans under their brown shirts were pretty much the same sort of fellows. They'd left their stores and offices for an hour and a half that morning. Why? Just to impress fifty small children? I didn't think so. What they were showing those children, and incidentally, me who had once been "the enemy," was the simple feeling that is shared by all human beings, that a man owes a loyalty to the land of his birth and his citizenship which it should be his pride to fulfill when that country calls on him.

That there is in this loyalty, even when it costs as heavily as it had cost the fathers of the children, something nobler than money getting or worldly success, that it is good for the world, now and again, to stop its work and acknowledge this, and, above all, that a comradeship forged by such service is permanent and inclusive, and truly democratic. It may even extend to those who were once "the enemy."