



**SUPPLY
LINE**

Artifact Backgrounder

Prisoner of War Documents



DEFINITION

A prisoner of war is any person, whether combatant or non-combatant, captured or interned by a participant country during war. Approximately 10 million people (8 million soldiers and 2 million civilians) became prisoners of war during the First World War, including 3,842 Canadians.

DID YOU KNOW?

The camps in Munster, Germany, featured English, French and Russian theatre groups. They delivered regular performances to boost prisoner morale.

All the sources used in the composite scrapbook were produced in the Rennbahn prisoner of war camp near Münster, Germany.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The treatment surrendering soldiers received from their captors varied. In some cases they were treated with respect and empathy, in other cases they were subjected to acts of brutality.

Once captured, a soldier would be examined for injuries and placed in a temporary holding cage. Intelligence officers would question the prisoner before transporting him to a prisoner of war camp further behind the lines.



Both sides divided their camps between those for officers and other ranks. Officers generally received better lodgings and food compared to common soldiers.

Life in prisoner of war camps was difficult. Cut off from the wider world and with little control over their daily lives, prisoners endured tedious daily routines. In an attempt to stave off boredom, as well as to instil a sense of normalcy, prisoners commonly played organised sports, formed theatre companies and orchestras, visited camp libraries, and occupied themselves with a variety of other hobbies.

Prisoners of war were able to exchange letters with friends and loved ones at home. They also received care packages which could contain food, clothing, tobacco products, books, and photographs. Letters were censored and packages could be inspected by captors.

The International Committee of the Red Cross also supplied prisoners with items including food, clothing, medical supplies, tobacco, personal hygiene items, books, paints and brushes, and athletic equipment. The packages improved prisoner morale and added to their available rations.

DID YOU KNOW?

Private Lawrence Hewitson (Service Number 1245) was born in Toronto, Ontario on 23 November 1884. He was captured during the Second Battle of Ypres in April 1915, and held in the Rennbahn prisoner of war camp until his release in December 1918. After his death his family donated his mementos of his time in prisoner of war camp to the Canadian War Museum.

EVOLUTION/DEVELOPMENT

As both the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary) and the Allies (Great Britain, France and Russia) had expected a short war in August 1914, neither side was prepared for the massive number of prisoners they would have to house. The first prisoner of war camps were makeshift facilities that were over-crowded and lacked sanitation, housing, adequate provisions, and supplies. As a result, prisoners suffered from disease, exposure, and hunger. As the war continued, camps did become better organised. However, many prisoners still suffered less than adequate living conditions.

The International Committee of the Red Cross and representatives of neutral countries inspected prisoner of war camps during the war. They ensured prisons abided by the rules of the Hague Convention of 1907 on the humane treatment of prisoners.

The Hague Convention had established certain legal rights for prisoners including the right to be given adequate board, lodging, and clothing by their captors, the right to be paid for any work they were required to do, and the right to keep their personal belongings.

Rennbahn Camp was located in Münster, Germany. It was one of four prisoner of war camps – known as Münster I, II, III, and IV – in and around the city. Built in late 1914 on the site of a pre-war racetrack, Münster II became known as Rennbahn (German for race track) Camp. The first prisoners of war (French soldiers) moved into the camp in 1915. At its peak the Münster camps held between 15,000 and 20,000 individuals.

VOCABULARY LIST

Other ranks:

A term that refers to soldiers who were not commissioned as officers. An officer's commission was conferred by the British monarch, King George V. Commissioned officers, such as lieutenants, captains or majors possessed the legal authority to issue commands. 'Other ranks' comprised ordinary private soldiers, as well as various grades of *non-commissioned* officers (corporals and sergeants for example) who may have filled leadership or supervisory roles, but did not hold a commission, and were therefore not officially authorized to exercise command.