

for her book, and remarked that, 'the absence of German testimony or memoirs about British prisoner of war labour companies is remarkable and is matched by an absence of British archive documentation'. Confirmation of what Willi Jacob wrote in his letter appear, such as in 1916 companies contained 425 men, and they were 'reasonably well housed, well fed and clothed'. Parcel deliveries worked well until overwhelmed when huge numbers of prisoners were taken in late 1918. It was in the interest of both sides to provide food because of shortages at home. German prisoners were allowed to buy games, music, musical instruments and even gramophones using any profits made in the camp canteen. German NCOs were in charge of prisoners and were paid a bonus for this work. There was an agreement between the authorities in Germany, France and Britain in May 1917 that prisoners would not be sent to work less than 30 kilometres from the front lines. Once this news reached Germany, collective reprisals effectively ended against British POWs, although there was still mistreatment at an individual level, which escalated in 1918 after the failure of the Ludendorff Offensive and the gradual and then sudden defeat of the German Army. There is no doubt that the British treated German prisoners much better than they did our prisoners, upholding our sense of 'fair play'.

The paucity of testimony by German prisoners, makes it difficult to assess their experiences, and only official British sources have emerged for 1918. Therefore Willi Jacob's letter is a rare survival held in Britain, but is it propaganda, written by a British linguist on behalf of the authorities? Why was the letter not delivered to his parents in Bavaria? The final words 'I am not forced to write this' made me immediately suspicious. Perhaps, he was in a 'model camp', as he says and had a much better experience than most German POWs. At the time he wrote there does not appear to have been a surge of ill-treatment of our prisoners in areas occupied by the Germans, thus justifying a response, perhaps to neutral countries that made inspections of camps on behalf of the combatants.

Note

The images of the envelope and the letter reproduced below were digitally enhanced by V. Fenwick.

