

# Psychology of the Prisoner-of-War

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## Abstract

Prisoners of war undergo hard times in collective camps, where life conditions are harsh and the mood is depressing. To cope with such circumstances is difficult and the term served is frustrating. Based on available evidence; it is sheer solidarity and *esprit de corps* which enables a captive to maintain his mental hygiene. Preserving the hierarchy among themselves made the situation of the Turkish prisoners in Korean War (1950-1953) emerge as a really admirable phenomenon.

**Keywords:** Prisoner (of war); Morale; Discipline; Comrade; Fraternity.

## Introduction

—*We don't kill you so that you can serve this ship.*

*Row your oars and survive! (The briefing of an Ancient*

*Roman admiral, from the movie Ben-Hur, 1959)—*

Being enslaved means waging a war of nerves. The biggest weapon of a prisoner of war (*Gefangene*) is his Patience (a) along with his high morale and flourishing hope. He should be committed to the unwavering belief that someday, salvation is bound to come. There are slaves who had achieved this process and attained freedom.

Famous Ottoman mariner Dragut got busted in the island of Corsica while taking some respite with his tiny navy. He got enslaved. He worked as a *galérien* / rower in enemy ships for three long years. In 1543 [chief Ottoman admiral] Hayreddin Barbarossa besieged Genoa and saved his good friend Gövsa [1].

The famous Ottoman sailor mentions in his memoirs about his encounter with the knight named *la Valette*, who had been a slave in Ottoman war ships for a time, until his ransom had got paid by his associates. Dragut thinks: "He, indeed, was an instructed man. Next to his mother tongue French; he used to speak Greek, Spanish and Italian (b) and I now infer that he had captured Turkish and Arabic during slavery". He addresses the knight from his seat: Well, it seems that slavery added to your immense treasure of languages. Now, we might as well engage in a repartee of

swearing and insulting each other in the languages of the great Islamic poets!

The Knight replies: In whatever language you wish! I would be delighted, *maestro!* —looking at his chains— but in your present situation, it may not fall very appropriate.

Dragut: What can I say? A joke of the fate!

(*Extrait du journal de Dragut Raïs, aux archives navales de sérail de Topkapi; transmitted by Ball [2]. High morale comes above all in days of captivity. An American captain Coffee [3] returning from Vietnam after years of imprisonment relates in his memoirs that upon arrival in Florida, at the church ceremony organized in his honour, he emphasized his strong faith. He said that he survived thanks to his creed; he never forgot his acquaintances and compatriots; fortunately, he had some trustworthy friends; he never lost his belief in himself, his duty and country and of course in God-Almighty.*

## Findings of some Scholars

*Camp Blues or the prisoner psychosis or the barbed wire syndrome was mentioned as early as 1916 among the terms of La Haye Treaty between England and Germany Reiwald [4].*

*Lack of affective and impulsive ties among the inmates and the obligation of living in promiscuous conditions in mobs are the main grounds for developing such psychological disorders (ibid).*

Here, the adjective "impulsive" indicates "a spontaneous life drive orienting the individual towards survival" Akarsu [5].

Reiwald [4] considers it worthwhile to narrate some lines from the diary of a French soldier, who spent time in a prison camp in Germany in 1916: "Waking up in an environment which has nothing to do with the concept of nobility; hearing the same

banale swearing words all around; the same stuffy, smoky air all give a sense of strong nausea. The insipid stink of the crowd was infiltrating onto the depths of my soul from the 'herd' of human beings! A sheer male company (c) devoid of women! This was another kind of loneliness, a scene from the hell!"

Reiwald [4] also notes that *during World War Two; Swiss refugee camps were relatively more orderly, free and cleaner than all the other counterparts; but still the feeling of being abandoned persisted even in those places. He asserts that the solidarity among the British inmates used to constitute a certain exception. He also underlines the internal severe hierarchy of Nazi prisoners, who even did not refrain from arranging some executions in case of "need".*

### Turkish Prisoners in Korea

*"On the mountains of Korea*

*Abandoned I, my cigarette-case;*

*And in prison-wards*

*Left I, my freedom!*

*Tell me, darling of mine:*

*Is it not enough, yet?*

*All mortification I've endured?"*

*Late left-wing poet Enver Gökçe*

*(trans. by the Author)*

If Reiwald had witnessed the Turkish War Prisoners in Korea; obviously he would have been more impressed! There, Turks displayed a fantastic cohesion! A program broadcasted in the Turkish official television in 1990 compared the Turkish prisoners with other nationalities:

*With times discipline deteriorated in all groups and physically fit ones began persecuting the weaker ones. Incidents were breaking out often. The chaotic situation was being enjoyed by the Chinese "hosts". One exception prevailed. Among Turks the superior-subordinate relations were still observed. Food was shared equally and fairly. The secret simply lay in strong traditions. Ranks had internalized values. Among plain soldiers, the better educated ones were naturally respected by the others. Eventually the jealous jailers came and asked the secret formula openly. They got their answers, right away. If levels of education were equal the more elderly one had his say. The secret of the admired situation was summarized in those terms.*

Here at this point, it should be pointed out that Turks were used to live in small communities (Gemeinschaft) rather than city environments (Gesellschaft). Privacy (d) was not such a desired virtue. The worst sanction was getting "ostracized" from one's community.

A more interesting aspect of the issue is the genuine fraternity of the officers with the rank-and-file, despite the

hierarchy! This paradox is best explained by a British journalist during the Balkan Wars in late Ottoman era. James [6] mentions about the brotherly *attitude of officers towards the plain soldiers. He bases it on Mohammedan [Islamic] faith about the equality of all human beings in the eyes of Allah. He asserts that those used to the European way of forced discipline can never properly understand this topic.*

*Turkish soldiers fighting in Korea disregarded Poet-Nazim's letter inviting them to surrender. In 1953 armistice got signed in Korea. Exchange of prisoners started. Released prisoners were questioned in American Headquarters in Tokyo and meanwhile Colonel Perry obtained important knowledge and came up with inferences of his own. It is based on data provided by him that Eugene Francis Kinkhead wrote his book about the "enemy collaborators" Çiloğlu [7].*

*The Chinese told them that ranks are not valid any more. An American soldier once patted the nape of his officer and asked: Joe, where the hell have you been?" A Chinese authority watching the scene smiled delightedly. But the Turkish-Johnny was still loyal to his culture, history, homeland soil and superiors. He had always obeyed his father, his government, his army-superiors. He would not take a bath all-naked. When Talk was heard about venereal diseases he would blush. He would eat the uncleanly dog meat under the circumstances without complaint and also gulp all greenery he could lay his fingers on. Americans began emulating them in eating grass. Out of 6443 Americans 2643 died. All 229 Turks returned (ibid).*

*The link connecting fellow conscripts in the army is so strong that in difficult circumstances it mostly overweighs kinship. It is convenient to the character of the Anatolian boy and is further reinforced by the indoctrination provided by the officers, who are well-raised educators Alpugan [8].*

### Other Facts from Recent Wars

One can see that in the Korean War ideology came into play often. The zeal of the fresh *Chinese revolution did not subside yet: Chinese communists brainwashed American prisoners, thereby diminishing their resistance and also helping the process by dismissing primary (e). Groups. They succeeded in obtaining a certain degree of cooperation, in this manner Secord & Backman [10].*

*As Meyers & Bradbury [11] inform us that; in the Geoje camp, Chinese prisoners did not display animosity against their American jailers, as civilians would do so. The difficulties they caused were far from being emotional. On the contrary; they were disciplined, planned, purposeful activities. Moreover; the communist leaders were easily organizing discontent into rebellion.*

*Bradbury & Kirkpatrick [12] notify us that during the Korean War; among nationalist Chinese soldiers one could talk about [naturally growing] feelings of amity and loyalty. Leaders of Red China; on the other hand; were trying to build up a morale upon*

political convictions. They were condemning all individual acts (like concealing the booty, personal bargains or fraternity, and all menace aiming the party's superiority). This constant criticism and vigilance would in actuality contribute to loss of trust in the general ambiance.

### Further Experimentation

Morali-Daninos [13] notes that in most battles the number of ranks and files who escape or surrender is bigger than those who got killed or wounded. One can deduce, he reasons, that the basic phenomenon is the loss of unity and solidarity, right there at the crucial moment.

Now; how can those defeated ones get along with one another in the prisoner camps, then? There are interesting psycho-drama studies regarding this topic. In a simulatory experiment by Zimbardo in 1973 at Stanford University; those playing the inmates displayed deindividuation and weakness and getting dependant on the strong ones. Another desired by-product of showing low profile was getting unnoticed (f) and thereby avoiding drudgery and heavy penalties more easily Raven & Rubin [14].

According to Reiwald [4], eventually the war-prisoner resembles a child who had lost his parents. He undergoes a regression –one of the defense mechanisms or orientations or coping mechanisms in distress– and recognizes the same behavior patterns in other fellow-prisoners. Only an overpowerful and effective leader can get them together and realize some extraordinary achievement, he affirms.

A researcher named Bettelheim studied the reactions of inmates to stressful circumstances in Nazi concentration camps in 1943. He concluded that some of them were assuming the airs of their very oppressors, following the violence and persecution they had undergone (abridged from Worchel & Cooper 1979).

As Bettelheim puts it; Nazi jailors inflicted demeaning physical and psychological torture to render their slaves infantile in mentality. They themselves appeared as figures of stern parents. Eventually the prisoners stooped to flattery for the sake of privileges. They started imitating (g) the attire and speech style of their oppressors. They started warning one another to comply with the rules paraphrased from Schein [15] (Figures 1 & 2).



Figure 1: A Nazi Prisoner Camp (Imagination and Illustration by the Author).



Figure 2: Universal Military Ethics stipulates that prisoners to be treated humanly (Illustration by the Author).

### Impressions from a Museum Visit in Guise of Conclusion

On the other hand; efforts to improve the existing conditions or attempts or at least hopes to evade can lead to very productive activities. Similar preoccupations (h) are bound to be extremely health-provoking. As a matter of fact; is not occupation by itself a psychiatric cure and rehabilitation method, after all?

Years ago, I was lucky to visit the Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio. In a section products realized by the inmates of prison camps were displayed behind glass panes. It was amazing to see their multitude and versatility: A compass made of a half-razor-blade mounted on a cork-bedding; a pistol carved out of wood and dyed black by shoe polish to render a realistic appearance; bellows made of leather boot legs in order to blow air into a prospective tunnel; a heating stove made by adding together the lateral faces of tin cans got embedded in my memory.

Utilitarianism can make people produce wonders especially in life and death situations. There is an anecdote: They asked a literary figure which book he would like to read in a deserted island. The scholar said: "The art of building a bateau!"

In his great novel, Grapes of Wrath, Steinbeck in one episode mentions the new face of Tom, who has just got out of jail. This is a face "trained not to Show his emotions" [to the powerful guards]. After all; one can see that the author is quite aware of the fact that serving a sentence in prison tends to change one's mimics.

North African Arab Muslim historiographer Ibn Khaldun asserted way back in the fourteenth century that; the defeated tend to emulate the attire, the weapons and the horse of the victorious.

### Notes

- (a) Patience is especially useful in tunneling, which proceeds very slowly. Wooden Horse is a novel based on a true story of tunnel digging. It was written by Eric Williams. The Author
- (b) Dragut Raïs himself is known to be fluent in Italian.
- (c) Years ago I was working for a state-owned pulp-and-paper plant in Anatolia. At one time a German specialist-engineer was fetched to remove certain technical problems.

Herr Schreiber once made a grimace as we entered the company social facilities for dinner. He said "I hate this male company!". He then decided to drive to a hotel's restaurant within the nearby city, to get the same-quality meals at an enormously higher price, just for the sake of ambiance. I later narrated the incident to a Pharmacology professor while in Çukurova University. The faculty member reacted with the words: "He must have had a lot of money!" The Author

(d) Years ago a Swiss student who had been through Turkey, pointed out that Turkish people were always in groups and never let alone, when it came to act socially.

A warden in an interview once said:

– "I visited German jails and got surprised to see that a new-comer was ignored by the inmate lying in the upper bunk. The fellow pretended to be asleep. Here in our country, the new-comer is cordially received by the senior inmates". The Author

(e) Indeed; face-to-face primary groups are of outermost importance for high morale. Based on the telling of German soldiers returning from Soviet camps; Russians established the food distribution on individual merit, thereby destroying comradeship. In such conditions physical proximity cannot provide even the minimum requirements of fraternity. One can stay indifferent to the starvation of the nearby fellow (abridged from Gray 1970: 41) [9].

(f) In his great novel, *Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck in one episode mentions the new face of Tom, who has just got out of jail. This is a face "trained not to Show his emotions" [to the powerful guards]. After all; one can see that the author is quite aware of the fact that serving a sentence in prison tends to change one's mimics. The Author

(g) North African Arab Muslim historiographer Ibn Khaldun asserted way back in the fourteenth century that; the defeated tend to emulate the attire, the weapons and the horse of the victorious. The Author

(h) It is known that in prisoner camps opened for German captives in America during World War II, educative activities were prominent. As Wikipedia notes with reference to G. Sytko; "the systematically taught courses [at some of those camps] were so successful that in May 1944 the German Ministry of Education and the OKW / Oberkommando der

Wehrmacht ("Supreme Command of the Armed Forces") sent through the Red Cross detailed procedures for students to receive credit at German high schools and universities".

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