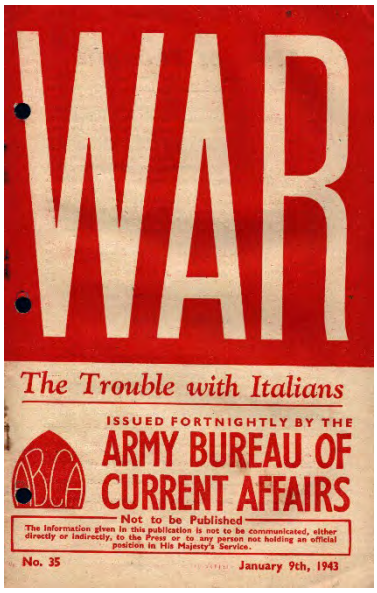
The First Time they Saw Paris



I extracted this article from a publication called WAR, issued fortnightly by the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, this edition dated January 9th, 1943. I have altered it slightly to make it more understandable as clearly the information is no longer "current."

On June 14th, 1940, early in the morning, an endless grey stream moved down the Outer Boulevard in Paris. This was the German army, at the height of its good fortunes. Paris taken, and the world more or less at its feet. They were young men, well disciplined. They were definitely surprised at having reached their goal so quickly and with such ease. After the many stories put out about their "cardboard" tanks and bad equipment it was surprising to the onlookers too how well equipped they were. In a very short while they were all over Paris.

Too Old at Thirty-One

The troops that occupied Paris were crack troops, young and fanatical. It was always the same story. The regular Army, the Spanish Civil War, the march into Austria and Czechoslovakia, Norway, Holland, Belgium and now France. They were trained for years and had their first innings in Spain. One driver in a Panzer battalion said that because he was 31, he was considered too old for active service: he drove a staff car. The morale of these men from the 6th Army was excellent, but they belonged to the elite of the present-day Germany, and were professionals too. The fact that within two years they would almost all be dead, killed in Russia, did not occur to them, why would it?



They were conceited and flushed with victory, but they respected the 'Tommies.' On the day of occupation, a soldier climbing from a signal's car commented: "We didn't take many British prisoners. They were usually dead or wounded." The man had come straight from the Battle of Calais. Later the large mass of the conscript army lumbered into Paris. Many of their officers had taken part in the last war, and they were perhaps more surprised at their easy victory than the youthful spearhead that had come before them. But the large majority of officers were young.

There had been deserters. One soldier had deserted because the life in France appealed to him more than German army life. He was 24. Another deserted because having hit a sergeant he was put into a punishment battalion. In that battalion discipline was so harsh that he couldn't stand more than four weeks of it. So, he escaped into Vichy France and preferred the hell of a French prison to the soldiering he left behind. He was just 20 years old.

The Privates and the General

Discipline was indeed harsh. But after duties there was very little of it. Officers and men mingled freely in cafes and restaurants. Officers had special instructions to eat with their men in the Paris restaurants. None the less, each kept his distance, but officers never behaved like wet blankets and they were often seen helping drunken soldiers out of bars.

In a small bar two privates were seen sitting down at a general's table. At first, they clicked their heels and issued the usual "Heil Hitler," then sat down and ordered drinks. The general said a few words to them, then the soldiers drank and talked as though they weren't at the same table with the general.



When France fell, Hitler promised that every German soldier of the battles of Flanders and France would see Paris. It seems that that was the only promise Hitler ever kept. From all parts of France, they came with their officers to partake of one day's tourist feast in Paris. Usually, after finishing their sight-seeing programme, the soldiers rushed into the bars and bistros and turned up at their rendezvous afterwards at least an hour late. The officers waited patiently and when at last their men appeared there was hardly a word of complaint. "You must have had a very good time," they mostly said. Rather surprising, most had heard about Prussian discipline. A lieutenant-colonel explained. He said "I served the King of Prussia, the Weimar Republic and now Adolf Hitler. It is best to serve under him." He said that the trouble in the last war was the collapse of the soldier's morale. In this war the General Staff wished to avoid the mistakes of the last war. So, they concentrated on the relationship between officers and men and had reached the conclusion that it was far better to treat the men well and make them trust their officers as children trust their parents.

While on active service discipline is the most important factor in a soldier's life, but even so there were several opportunities to make the men feel happy. With German thoroughness they worked out a scheme, and German officers had definite instructions how to make the men feel happy in performing their duties. Heavy jokes at the right moment; expressing interest in their families; asking after their wives and children. This worked well and after duties complete freedom.

They found a compromise. At bars and even in nightclubs the men saluted their officers, but on the other hand, they could go up to them, talk to them, joke with them, and of course, when they left, again they saluted them. After duties the officers had to treat their men as equals.

It Worked Remarkably Well

The lieutenant-colonel went on to say that the fundamental principle of the Prussian military state had not changed. The Prussian Army's mainstay in the past was the landowner officer (Junker) and his tenants. A certain patriarchal system always existed in the Prussian (German) Army. Now it reached its modern conclusions. The officers were still drawn from the same class, only they had to treat their men in harmony with the new idea. Very few men rose from the ranks.

More than One Officer Led Away



In some matters they were very strict. Take leave passes for instance. After the first weeks of occupation the bulk of the German Army left Paris. The chief reason was that, having too good a time did discipline and morale a lot of harm. They were only allowed into Paris with special passes. That applied to officers and men. The German Military Police, (*left*), did the round of cafes and bars and asked for passes. They would stand to attention in front of officers, but inexorably ask for passes. More than one officer was led away by the military police.

The next move by officers and men was to buy civilian suits and try like that to evade the military police. There were notices on the walls of Paris that it was verboten to sell civilian suits to members of the Wehrmacht. But there were always way and means. The next move of the military police was to rope off in the evenings whole districts, post sentries everywhere and then methodically stop everybody in the district and examine the identity papers of all and sundry. As it wasn't difficult to recognise a German, their task was not difficult.