The Employment of Prisoners of War in Great Britain

Previous issues of the Review *have contained articles describing the general regulation of the employment of prisoners of war under the Geneva Convention of 1929*[1] *and reviewing the information available from German official sources on the employment of prisoners of war within the territory of the Reich in connection with the German war effort.*[2]

The following note supplements the information already published with a description, based upon information supplied by the British Government, of the conditions under which prisoners of war are employed in Great Britain. Although the scale and range of this employment is by no means comparable with the vast numbers of prisoners employed and the multitude of their occupations in Germany, and although no German prisoners are employed in Great Britain, the method by which the shortage of man-power in British agriculture is being partly relieved by Italian prisoner-of-war labour forms an interesting addition to previous information and shows the general lines upon which the question has been handled in Great Britain.

Italian prisoners of war have been employed in agriculture in various parts of Great Britain since 1941. They work mainly on land drainage and reclamation and other kinds of heavy work. In general, priority is given to jobs which will result in an early increase of the acreage of land producing food or in improving land which could produce better crops, but prisoner-of-war labour may also be diverted to urgent harvesting. Since 1942 they have also been employed in timber production, and during 1943 in metal mines and quarries as well.

Employment in Agriculture

Accommodation

The prisoners are for the most part accommodated in camps. It was impossible, however, to supply the labour to all the employers who needed it from these camps, and from an early date provision was therefore made for a certain number of prisoners to be billeted on farms. More recently, a third system has been

[1] *International Labour Review*, Vol. XLVII, No. 2, Feb. 1943, pp. 169-196: "The Conditions of Employment of Prisoners of War: the Geneva Convention of 1929 and its Application".

[2] *Idem*, Vol. XLVIII, No. 3, Sept. 1943, pp. 316-323: "The Employment of Prisoners of War in Germany".

adopted, namely, the construction of satellite hostels attached to the camps, with a maximum of three hostels to each camp.

The camps and hostels are under the direct control of the War Office. They generally consist of groups of huts, though in a few cases requisitioned buildings have been specially adapted as hostels. Tents may be temporarily used while the huts are being erected, but only between May and September.

Farmers with whom prisoners are placed are required to provide suitable lodging quarters on the farm. The prisoners may be housed with the employer or with an employee working on the same farm or they may be accommodated in suitable quarters in a farm building. The regulations require the employer to supply healthy, comfortable and warm premises, straw to fill palliasses, crockery, artificial light, and facilities for washing and baths. No change may be made in the accommodation without the approval of the camp commandant. Farmers must allow the responsible military authorities to visit the prisoners regularly, and to inspect the accommodation in which they are living. As a rule, farms must not be more than 25 miles from the nearest camp.

The camps normally accommodate 500 prisoners, and the hostels 50 to 70 prisoners. There is no fixed limit to the number of prisoners who may be billeted on a farm, but applications for more than three prisoners require special sanction. They remain with the same farmer for not less than three months. Prisoners living in hostels or billeted on farms consist, as far as possible, of men with agricultural experience.

Food and Clothing

Prisoners of war wear a distinguishing uniform supplied by the military authorities, who also provide underwear and footwear. Employers are expected to supply any special working kit, but prisoners working on wet land drainage are, whenever possible, provided with rubber boots.

The food in central camps is provided by the military authorities. Prisoners working from hostels are also provided with their normal rations, including a haversack lunch, by the military authorities, but farmers are expected to supply them with hot liquid refreshments (cocoa, coffee or soup) during the day and also, if necessary, with facilities for cooking a midday meal. For prisoners billeted on farms the camp commandant issues ration books to the farmers, who are required to provide three meals a day on the same scale as for an ordinary civilian farm labourer who lives in. Farmers can obtain the "agricultural" cheese ration (which is higher than the ordinary civilian cheese ration) for prisoners. The farmer receives an allowance in respect of board and lodging at the rate of 21 shillings a week.

Organisation of Work

A camp labour officer is appointed in each camp by the county war agricultural executive committee concerned.[1] He is a member

[1] This note describes the arrangements in England and Wales. In Scotland the administrative organisation, which is under the Scottish Department of Agriculture, is slightly different.

of the staff of, and is paid by, the committee. He takes his instructions, however, from the Ministry of Agriculture, either direct or through the Ministry's Labour Advisory Officer.

The only authorities to whom prisoner-of-war labour allocated to agriculture can at present be supplied are county war agricultural executive committees and drainage authorities. Applications from other bodies or persons have to be sent to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Camp labour officers are responsible for arranging the day-to-day allocation to the various authorities of the labour of prisoners of war who are accommodated in the camps; for the general arrangements from the agricultural point of view for the work of the prisoners; and for acting as a liaison between the employing authorities and the camp commandants appointed by the War Office. When prisoners are accommodated in hostels, the camp labour officers act as a liaison between the camp commandant and the committee in whose area the hostel lies, but they are in no way responsible for the arrangements for the employment of these prisoners. When prisoners are billeted on farms, the camp labour officer's duties are to notify the committees concerned of the result of applications made by the farmers and to make periodical reports to the Ministry on the working of the scheme.

The applications from the farmers are made through the labour officer of the county war agricultural executive committee concerned to the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. Before any prisoners are allocated to a farmer, the committee makes certain that he does not propose to stand off any employees in their place. At the same time the committee points out to the farmers that prisoners of war are intended for employment on the heavier types of farm work and that they should not be used for work which is suitable for members of the Women's Land Army or other female labour.

The camps send out working parties of twelve or more prisoners (with an armed escort when the numbers exceed twelve) and the prisoners return to the camp every night. These camps are intended to serve a radius of twenty to twenty-five miles.

Prisoners accommodated in hostels are sent out to work on individual farms within a radius of ten miles. They return to the hostels every night. As a rule not more than three hostel prisoners are allocated to any one farm.

Transport

Prisoners working in gangs from central camps are transported to and from work if the work is more than about four miles from the camp. Prisoners sent to work on farms may be allowed to walk up to three miles in each direction. For greater distances, employers have to collect the prisoners allotted to them, in one of their vehicles, at their own expense. In special cases, prisoners selected by the military commandant may be allowed to cycle without a guard to and from their work up to distances of seven miles in each direction.

Hours of Work

The hours of work are in accordance with the Geneva Convention, which provides that the duration of the daily work of prisoners of war, including the time of the journey to and from work, shall not exceed that for civilian workers of the locality employed on the same work, and that each prisoner shall be allowed a rest of 24 consecutive hours each week, preferably on Sunday. During the winter months (October to February) the hours of work of prisoners working from a hostel are arranged on a sliding scale, beginning as soon as possible after the end of the blackout and ending before the beginning of the blackout in the evening. Special arrangements may however be made for a prisoner to leave the hostel in the morning before the end of the blackout if his employment—for instance, milking—makes it necessary. From March to September a usual working day for prisoners is from 8.30 a.m. to 6 p.m. or an equivalent period. In assessing the maximum permitted hours, time spent in travelling to and from work is treated as working time, but meal times and rest periods are excluded.

Where it is not possible for prisoners to put in such long hours as civilian agricultural workers from Monday to Friday, the work may be continued on Saturday afternoon, so that the full number of hours put in by ordinary workers during a week may be completed. For example, if the average hours worked by civilian agricultural workers (including overtime) are 54 and the prisoners leave the camp or hostel at 7.30 a.m. and return at 6 p.m., with one hour for meal times, on Monday to Friday, the hours on Saturday may be 7.30 a.m. to 3 p.m. For prisoners in individual employment, farmers are instructed that their hours should not exceed those of other agricultural workers on the farm.

Rates of Pay and Charges to Employers

Prisoners are paid by the military authorities at rates settled in accordance with the Geneva Convention. The rate for skilled work is 1½d. an hour and for unskilled work 3/4d. an hour, subject to a daily maximum of 1s. and 6d. respectively.

In general, prisoners "living in" on farms or working from hostels for individual farmers receive the skilled rates, while those employed in gangs receive the unskilled rate. In some cases the payment of piece rates may be authorised, provided there is not likely to be any appreciable increase in the total amount of wages payable to a group of prisoners as compared with the time rate for the same period. No payment or gratuity may be made by farmers or other persons direct to prisoners. Employers are however charged for the work performed for them. Committees have been instructed that where prisoners have been doing work for drainage authorities or private farmers, they should, wherever possible, charge a contract rate for the job, based on the estimated cost of employing reasonably skilled workers and approximating to the charges made by private firms of contractors for similar work. If there is any difficulty in fixing a contract rate for a particular job, the hourly rate for times actually worked is 1s. an hour up to eight hours in any one day and 1s. 3d. an hour for any hour in excess of eight.

For individually placed prisoners the charge is 40s. a week for the first three months of service and thereafter 48s. a week for the statutory hours in the county; for overtime, the charge is 1s. an hour initially and 1s. 3d. an hour after three months. These rates, which are subject to review, apply to time actually worked; no payment is required for travelling or meal times.

Medical Attention

If a prisoner individually employed requires medical assistance, the farmer calls in the local doctor, whose fees are paid by the war agricultural executive committee of the county concerned. In the case of an accident or illness likely to incapacitate the prisoner for more than a few days, the camp commandant is informed, so that he can arrange for the prisoner to be taken to a military hospital. Farmers are not required to take out any insurance policy in respect of prisoners or to pay National Health and Unemployment Insurance contributions.

Supervision and Restrictions

Where an escort is provided for parties of more than twelve prisoners, it is part of his duty to see that they do a full and fair day's work. But the civilian foreman supervising the gang is mainly responsible for the work, and also for discipline, if no escort is provided. He must see that the prisoners do not wander off from the gang, do not visit villages or towns, enter houses or shops, or fraternise with members of the public. In the case of prisoners individually employed, the farmer reports to the non-commissioned officer in charge of the hostel or to the military commandant, as the case may be, any misconduct, indiscipline or unsatisfactory work. Prisoners individually employed may not leave the land on which they work on weekdays, except to attend religious services, for which the military authorities make special arrangements. On Sundays they may go freely up to a mile or so from the farm, but they may not enter shops or houses other than the farm where they work or go to any villages or towns. They must be within doors throughout the hours of blackout, except in individual cases where farm duties, such as milking, make it necessary for the prisoner to go out before daylight. The instructions issued both to farmers and to foremen emphasise the importance of good supervision and proper treatment of prisoners.

Non-Agricultural Work

Timber production is the responsibility of the Ministry of Supply and is carried out partly by the Home Timber Production Department of the Ministry through its own labour force and partly by private firms known as timber merchants. Prisoners are employed both by the Department and by merchants.

The general arrangements are similar to those applicable to working in agriculture. There are no committees corresponding to the county war agricultural executive committees, but their duties are fulfilled by the Home Timber Production Department through

its own regional officers. The prisoners are available for any kind of timber production work, but for security reasons they may not be employed in a town.

The main difference between the timber scheme and the agricultural scheme concerns the rates charged to the employer. In timber production the rates are those applied to civilian labour as fixed by the Joint Industrial Council.

Results

At the beginning of 1942 the prisoners working in agriculture were stated to have earned a good reputation for work when employed in gangs. Since that date there has been a considerable extension of the system of satellite hostels and individual billeting on farms. As these systems were originally experimental, their extension may be regarded as an indication that they have proved satisfactory from the point of view of labour supply. The prisoners, from their standpoint, enjoy the protection of the Geneva Convention, under which they are entitled to draw the attention of the protecting Power to any complaints they may have to make. The most striking feature of the system in general is the degree of liberty which it is found possible to grant to prisoners in employment.