

Erziehung vor Verdun

Education before Verdun

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Book One, Chapter One: Turning off a Tap

The earth is a disc, mottled with yellow-green blotches and steeped in blood. Like a mousetrap, a merciless blue sky is closed over it, preventing mankind from escaping the plagues unleashed by its bestial nature.

The battle had been stagnating since mid-May. Now, in mid-July, the artillery was still pounding the depression between the village of Fleury and the Souville Fort. Explosions steamrolled back and forth and the air was darkened by plumes of poisonous smoke, clouds of dust, pulverised earth, and flying chunks of stone and masonry. Legions of bullets whistled past and shards of steel punctured the air relentlessly. At night, the hinterland was ablaze and echoed with the impact of the bullets, while during the day, the blue sky was delirious with the rattle of machine-guns, the explosion of hand grenades, and the howls and whimpers of lost men. Again and again the summer wind scattered the dust raised by the assaults, dried the sweat of the attackers as they clambered out from their covers with glazed eyes and stiff jaws, and whisked away the sighs of the wounded and the last breath of the dying with a sneer. The Germans have been on the attack here since the end of February. The war that began in the south-east of the continent and has been raging for the last two years is a war between Europeans. Yet, it is France, her people, her country, and her army that have borne the brunt of the devastation. And while at this very moment there is bitter fighting in Bukovina, along the Rivers Etsch and Isonzo, the wildest battles are being fought between the two French rivers, the Somme and the Meuse. And the battle that spanned the Meuse was for the possession of the Fortress of Verdun.

Escorted by Bavarian infantry, a detachment of French prisoners-of-war is marching along the road that leads from what was once the village of Azannes to a surviving railway station at Moirey. It's a tough march between raised bayonets as the prisoner of an enemy whose invasion of Belgium and France has proven that it considers human life cheap, that of its own people and others. In Germany, the whole world knows that people are starving. In Germany, they treat prisoners like dirt, paying no heed to the laws of civilization, that's what the newspapers say. It's rotten luck that you had to fall into the hands of the Germans right now, just before the end, before they call it a day with this business, because the might of the Franco-English attack on the Somme has taken them unawares. Alright, you've escaped the fires of hell with your limbs intact, and if you behave yourself, you'll manage to stick out the few months in captivity. But it still makes you sick to be herded around like cattle. You've left the craters behind you, the former forests now flattened to a pulp, the Meuse hills, and the descent to Azannes. Here you're on safe ground, relatively speaking. There's a stream to your right below and you can already make out hills, those rounded green tips of the Lorraine countryside. If only they'd let us stop at the watering hole! Heat, dust, and sweat plague the band of forty or fifty soldiers marching four deep in their blue-grey uniforms, wearing helmets or double-peaked caps.

Just around the corner to the left of the street two large troughs beckon, a clear stream of water pouring into each of them. German soldiers are washing their mess kits there. As they approach, the Frenchmen raise their heads, square their shoulders, and quicken their pace. The Bavarian guards know what it is to be thirsty; they'll give them time to drink and fill their canisters. After all, the soldiers of both armies are only bitter enemies in battle, and besides, the Frenchmen have long figured out that these soldiers are unarmed younger and older members of the land reserves, harmless fellows.

Rising up from the dust of the street, an expansive barracks stands black against the blue sky with a flight of steps leading down from it. More and more German soldiers are hurrying towards it, drawn by the spectacle and their own thirst – it's lunch-time. Now then, the more hands, the quicker people will get watered. As we speak, a blue-grey cluster of thirsty men is laying siege to the trough. Swarthy, bearded faces strain upwards and dozens of arms stretch forward holding out mugs and pots. The same

faces are now plunged into the clear stream of water that falls quietly in playful spirals to the bottom of the trough. Oh, what good French water does you and how delicious it tastes when it's flowing through your parched throat for the last time in God knows how long! The Germans cop on quickly and line up obligingly alongside the Frenchmen with their filled plates. German aluminium and tin clatter companionably against the French mess kits and the dark tunics of the prisoners are surrounded by a swarm of white and light grey fatigues.

"Come on, then." calls the officer in charge, "Get a move on!" This wasn't an official stop, but he's not overly concerned. Nobody is in any hurry to go back to their unit, when it happens to be dug out by the Douaumont Fort. Now that they've had their fill, the Frenchmen slowly turn away from the well, drying their dripping beards, and reassemble in the middle of the street, their eyes shining brighter than before. In two years of war, Germans and Frenchmen have developed a certain respect, if not a downright sympathy for each other. It's only away from the front, behind the lines, that countless people on both sides are doing their utmost to sow hate and rage, anything to stem the war-weariness of the human material.

A private named Bertin, whose shiny black facial hair marks him out from the others, looks on in amusement as one of his officers, Karde, a bookseller from Leipzig, offers his Bavarian companion a cigarette and a light, quizzing him in his thick Saxon dialect. Bertin pushes through the crowd with a load of water, calling to his two comrades Pahl and Lebehde *en route*, and trots to the very top of the line, where soldiers are jostling in vain for a position at the front. Like a drove of brown animals, a herd of strange and yet familiar creatures, they crane their necks from open collars, cursing and imploring throatily. With grateful eyes they welcome the three men who have come to take charge of them.

"Hey lads, let me through!" Bertin shouts on his way back from the trough, balancing a pot in one hand and a lid in the other. Danger has presented itself. Up on the hill by the barracks some officers have suddenly appeared and are watching the proceedings below. The corpulent Colonel Stein, his stomach protruding over his oxbow legs, eagerly raises a monocle to his eye. He is flanked to his right by Lieutenant Benndorf and, to his left, by Quartermaster-Sergeant Grassnick. Standing

at a respectful distance from this group, Acting Sergeant Glinsky looks with contempt at the goings-on below. The Colonel points his riding stick indignantly at the wet faces that have just been refreshed at the trough. How long does the whole scene last? Three or four minutes? It's impossible to convey in words all that is happening at the one time.

"What a mess," the Colonel growls, "who in God's name let them drink there? Let them go and wet their snouts somewhere else." And holding one hand to his mouth, he shouts down to the Officer to get going.

Colonel Stein is the Commandant of the Steinbergquell Ammunition Park that extends up the hill, Lieutenant Benndorf is his adjutant, and Grassnick is merely the Sergeant in charge of the labour company attached to the Park. All three gentlemen marched into battle in 1914, all were wounded back then (Benndorf still limps around on a stick), and now they make the rules around here. So the Colonel can well expect to be obeyed.

But in the open air and in the absence of a propitious gust of wind, the human voice does not seem to carry very far. So at first there is no reaction to the Colonel's order, although this would appear to defy natural laws. But then Glinsky begins to wiggle his behind, rushes forward to the railing, and, leaning over it with his entire body, roars "Stop that at once, get into line and move off!"

Glinsky hits the right tone. Without thinking, the Bavarian NCO reaches for the butt of his bayonet. If it weren't for those glistening epaulettes up there, he'd treat that lousy Prussian to a few Bavarian pleasantries. But instead he addresses his detachment curtly, ordering them to line up and form a column.

The prisoners do well to understand something of what is being said in the foreign tongue, and some of their escorts have a smattering of French. Slowly the head of the column begins to move forward. With even greater urgency, the Germans now weave through the French soldiers, trying to ensure that every last one of them gets a drink as the column silently takes shape.

Colonel Stein's face turns a deep shade of red. The people down there are defying him. Below, at the Moirey station the carriages that will take the prisoners away are rolling into line like a model railway; the same carriages must return as soon as possible with gas munitions. There'll be enough time for them to have their fill down there. "Put an end to this nonsense!" he orders "Officer, turn off the water!" Everybody in the Ammunition Park knows about the two brass taps beside the fodder bin that cut off the water supply to the pipes. Glinsky springs immediately into action.

The German soldiers who happen to be standing within earshot react to this order with anger, indifference, or a mere grin. But one man is touched to the core: under his black beard, Bertin turns white. It doesn't occur to him that there's a tap at the Moirey Station. Although he's just in front of the well, he himself will now have to do without water. He's just filled his pots and pans. By rights he should now pour the contents away like some of his comrades, such as Otto Reinhold, that docile fellow, and the typesetter Pahl. But Bertin knows that there are still a few thirsty men in the very back rows. With three Bavarians behind them, they're just passing the trough, going at a snail's pace. Now nobody will be able to fill their cupped hands and empty mugs.

"No can do. The water's been cut off" the publican Lebehde explains, pointing to the two taps that are just about to run dry. "Bloody hell!" cries the disgusted gas worker Halezinsky, "And you call that humane?" With a shrug of his shoulders, he shows his empty field pot to the last of the Frenchmen.

Bertin's pot is made of aluminium, dented and blackened with soot on the outside, lily-white on the inside, and now brim full of precious water. Moving stealthily along the edge of the column, he doles out its contents, easily recognizable with his beard. He offers the filled lid to one gunner with a tormented expression and outstretched palms and brings the pot to the lips of another, who at Bertin's words, "Prends camarade", grabs the pot and drinks his fill on the hoof. All being well, Bertin, the aspiring lawyer, has every chance of reaching old age. But he'll never forget how this Frenchman looks at him now, staring out from brown eyes ringed with exhaustion and framed by yellowish skin dusted with soot from the cannon fire. "Es-tu Alsacien?" the Frenchman enquires. Bertin smiles back. So you have to be from Alsace to show

some decency to a French prisoner. "Not at all," he answers in French "I'm from Prussia." Then he bids him farewell "The war is over for you lot." Before turning back into line the prisoner replies, "Merci, bonne chance."

As the rest of the German soldiers slowly sidle off up the steps, Bertin remains standing with a warm feeling in his heart and watches contentedly as the blue-grey tunics move into the distance. Now if these people are sent to work on farms in Pomerania or Westphalia they'll know that they won't be eaten alive. He can and will stand by what he's just done. What's the worst that can happen to him? All he needs to do is to skive off to the barracks for a quarter of an hour or wait until the beginning of the next shift. With his head full of pleasant thoughts, Bertin climbs the wooden steps, the pots from which the Frenchmen have just drunk dangling from his clasped fingers. Lost in thought and oblivious to the look of sheer amazement on the typesetter's face, he strolls past Pahl.

Yet Pahl lets him pass because he doesn't want to be around this comrade today. In the past, he's often assumed he was a spy, hanging around with the workers of the company to eavesdrop and inform on them. But this fellow is no spy. He's the very opposite in fact, the epitome of recklessness. And as sure as Wilhelm Pahl knows those Prussians, he senses that this lad is in for an interesting time – but the young man himself doesn't seem too interested in what lies ahead of him. Pahl, by contrast, is most interested. And so he stands in the sun, an oversized gnome with big shoulders, impossibly long arms, a short neck, and small pale-grey eyes riveted on this fellow who has just followed his heart – and a Prussian at that.

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