

"A footnote to Yalta"

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In the National Archives in Washington there exists a short clip of film, which would appear to be the only one of its kind ever made. It is the unedited footage taken by an American army camera unit at a prisoner of war camp in southern Germany in February 1946. A card, headed "Return of Russian Prisoners to Russia," identifies the subject matter of the film and the location where it was taken.

For many years this unique piece of film was not available for public inspection. What it recorded was a small part of a vast operation that was one of the most sensitive of the Second World War, the handing over to Stalin of large numbers of Russians who in varying circumstances found themselves under German control by the war's end. Some of these Russians had been organized into military units to fight alongside German forces against the Red Army; in addition to them were well-known Cossack regiments who had left their homeland in the period 1917 - 1921 after the defeat of the White Russian armies by the Bolsheviks. In all, several hundred thousand Russians - a staggering number - took up arms against the Soviet Union in the years following the German invasion in June 1941.

The fate of these Russians was one of the best kept secrets of the war. As many as could surrendered to American and British forces, trusting that they would eventually be able to settle somewhere outside the Soviet Union. But in February 1945, at the Yalta conference, Roosevelt and Churchill agreed to Stalin's demand that they be handed over to him. The anti-Soviet Russians in the hands of the western allies would therefore be betrayed. To carry out the repatriation order, American and British servicemen often had to resort to deception and brute force. No one doubted what was in store for the Russians once they were in Soviet hands. Many were executed on the spot. In some instances, Allied guards responsible for turning over their prisoners could see their bodies hanging in the forests where the exchange took place. Some were transferred on the same boat that had brought the British delegation to Yalta a few months previously. They were shot behind warehouses on the quay side with low flying Soviet planes circling overhead to help drown the noise of the rifle fire. Many returned prisoners were tortured before being shot. The remainder disappeared into prison camps for long sentences, receiving the worst treatment of all the Gulag's inmates. Needless to say all were immediately stripped of the new winter clothing and personal equipment that had been generously issued to them by the British in response to the cynical demands of Soviet liaison officers. American and British officers were the appalled eyewitnesses to many desperate acts of suicide by Russian men and women who preferred their own death and that of their wives and children to falling into the hands of the Cheka/NKVD/GPU/KGB. The Cossack General, Pyotr Krasnov, had fought against the Bolsheviks back in 1918 and hoped that the British would sympathize with his situation, remembering their own intervention at that time on the side of the White Russians. Churchill, British Secretary for War in 1919, had then been the most ardent supporter of their cause; while the Allied Commander-in-Chief in Italy, Field Marshal Alexander, still wore a Russian Imperial order awarded to him for his services against the Bolsheviks in Courland. Krasnov in turn had then been decorated with the British Military Cross. He like other White Russians had never been a Soviet citizen. But his appeals were unavailing. Under the Yalta agreement, he too was sent back to the Soviet Union to certain death. He was for Stalin a prize captive. Another bonus

came Stalin's way when zealous administrators for good measure threw in individuals and groups from the Baltic republics and Yugoslavia who found themselves on the wrong side when hostilities ended and whose repatriation had never been part of the Yalta negotiations.

Of all this, the public in the democracies knew nothing. For three decades the subject remained a closely guarded secret. Western eyewitnesses were obliged by official policy to keep silent. A few journalists knew that some handing over was taking place, but not its scale. But Alexander Solzhenitsyn had met some of the surviving Russians in Soviet prison camps and learned about their history. His account of their fate and that of their leader, General Vlasov, which appeared in the first volume of *The Gulag Archipelago*, published in 1973 - itself a sensation - was the first the general public in the west heard of the subject and the phenomenon, as Solzhenitsyn put it, of so many young Russians joining in a war against their own Fatherland. "Perhaps there is something to ponder here," he wrote. When Western archives were at last available to historians, two remarkable books quickly appeared: *The Last Secret*, 1974, by Nicholas Bethel, and *Victims of Yalta*, 1977, by Nikolai Tolstoy, both shocking in their detailed accounts of what had happened. The BBC joined in with a television documentary by a Hungarian film maker, Robert Vas, based on interviews with servicemen and civilians who had been involved in the tragedy or knew about it. Some of them confessed to still feeling traumatized by what they had been ordered to do. Solzhenitsyn had written harshly about the moral weakness of Western leaders in kowtowing to Stalin, about the duplicity and short-sightedness of their repatriation policy; and though others defended the decisions taken as a necessity of war, pointed questions continued to be raised over the reputation of prominent individuals who once had a hand in determining the policy. In 1989, a bitter libel action was fought in British courts between a senior establishment figure and his detractors who accused him of being one of the military officers responsible for repatriating Cossack and Yugoslav prisoners knowing what their fate would be. Tolstoy, the author of *Victims of Yalta*, was one of his accusers, arguing that senior British officers were in this matter just as guilty as German officers executed for war crimes.

The film in the National Archives is thus a unique visual document, an extraordinary witness to a dark episode in this century's history. To historians of documentary films it offers an absorbing text on the elusive correspondence between visual records and historical reality, between pictorial and literary descriptions of events, a subject that requires increasing attention in our image-conscious age. For me the discovery of this film clip came at the same time as I learned with a shock that none of the students I was lecturing to, and who were about to graduate from a leading mass communications institute, was aware of "the Gulag", or indeed had heard of the term. How can one explain the significance of visual records if there is no historical imagination to give them meaning?

Unedited footage constitutes the raw material of documentary film. It contains everything the cameraman shot, usable or not, and in the order in which he shot it. Thus it is a visual document in its primary state, providing the historian with evidence not only of the subject matter displayed in front of the camera lens but also of the attitudes and intentions of the cameraman. In the National Archive, as in most newsreel archives, cards identify the source and content of each item and provide a brief list of the scenes in it. The card in this case is no exception. It classifies it as Signal Corps material. In addition to its file number and title, it gives the sequence of shots in a professional, noncommittal manner, and ends: "Note: Most of the prisoners are former Russian soldiers captured by the Germans near Stalingrad. After, many of them joined the

German Army and fought against the Russians." The film itself lasts for about seven minutes and would seem to be all that the cameraman recorded during the time in which what is shown in the film took place. If the material had ever been cut together to make a story, it would have run for barely half that time. What we see is this:

Lines of men wrapped in heavy coats are moving across a muddy square in front of a row of single story huts. In the background, buildings reveal the outskirts of a small town with what might be a church steeple and a factory chimney providing the chief landmarks. Some of the men are carrying their packs, others are still loading them with their belongings. It's cold; men stamp their feet and rub their hands together. A quantity of discarded or unclaimed personal items are scattered about on the ground. American military police stand by, armed and carrying white night sticks, with which they briskly encourage the men to move along. On the hood of a jeep parked in the vicinity a loudspeaker is set up and a Russian officer with a handset can be presumed to be calling out names. (He's identified as such on the card - the film is silent.) Individuals come forward to have their names checked by a young American officer who is without a hat. The Russian prisoners make their way to a column of trucks. They check their names with another American officer against another list. The hull of an American tank can be seen behind them, a white star displayed prominently on its gun-turret. There are piles of kitbags, cases, personal belongings. The prisoners mount the trucks. A wintry sun casts pale shadows. The trucks move down a mud filled road with American guards sitting at the rear and pull into a railyard. The prisoners are searched again as they climb into freight cars in the railyard. Others wait their turn behind barbed wire, and the shadow of a truck passes across them. The guards are chewing gum. An ancient steam engine slowly pulls the freight cars away from the scene. From the conventional film-maker's point of view, the film is rather dull. It looks like routine coverage of routine military life. But the Archives' card identifies the scene as taking place in February 1946 at "Platting" - a spelling or typing mistake for Plattling. And what happened on February 24, 1946, at Plattling is described by both Bethel and Tolstoy. Some 1500 Russians from a unit commanded by a General Meandrov were due to be repatriated that day. As Tolstoy tells it, in the early hours American troops, equipped with riot clubs and rubber soled shoes, crept into the sleeping Russians' dormitory huts.

Abruptly the stillness of the camp was broken by the shrieking blast of a whistle. Startled, Meandrov's men woke and looked about them. At once a ghastly cacophony of yells burst from all around. Without any warning, and with accompanying shrieks and curses, the Americans began to lash with the bludgeons at each recumbent figure. "Mak snell! Mak snell!" they shouted in pidgin German, driving the bewildered figures out of their beds, through the doorways and across to the camp gates. Anyone slow in scrambling from his bed was beaten ferociously until he too fled in his underclothes out into the night. At the gates stood a row of trucks, their engines humming, into which the prisoners were driven by their screaming guards. Off along darkened roads the speeding convoy clattered and swayed. There followed a hasty transfer to a train, and the journey was continued some hours later. The train rattled on towards the east, where already a pale cold light was failing in the darkening sky. Near the Czech frontier, beyond Zwiesel, the train halted in the dripping stillness of the Bavarian forest. Blue-capped troops were waiting; officers exchanged brief words through

an interpreter, and the bruised and terrified men of Meandrov's Division were shepherded down beside the railway track. Dazed, they stood in little groups amongst the puddles. The American guards, silent and awkward, jumped back into their carriages and prepared to make off. There was a brief hissing and clanking of pistons, and then the blank gaze of the Vlasov men watched swaying lights disappear back along the line.

The Americans returned to Plattling visibly shamefaced. Before their departure from the rendezvous in the forest, many had seen rows of bodies already hanging from the branches of nearby trees. On their return, even the SS men in a neighbouring compound lined the wire fence and railed at them for their behaviour. The Americans were too ashamed to reply.

The contrast between the scene portrayed in the film clip and the one described by Tolstoy is startling. One might well wonder if Tolstoy's incident took place on the same day as the filming. Apart from the personal items strewn on the ground in the film, there is nothing to suggest the violence, the noise, and the terror, or the speed with which, in Tolstoy's account, the operation was conducted. That the pictures were taken on the same day as the operation, however, is confirmed by one shot in the film, not yet mentioned. It appears toward the end of the roll, at a point where the cameraman was in the railyard filming the prisoners, who, having been brought to the train in trucks, are being searched before boarding the freight cars. The shot is rather puzzling: a man is brought up to the camera by American soldiers, accompanied by one or two officers. He opens his coat cheerfully to reveal a bare chest with what seem to be lines or scars drawn on it. The man and his guards appear to be smiling at each other. They are all glad to pose for the camera. This shot is described in the Archives' card as: "Russian soldier who slashed himself on chest with hope that he would not be returned to Russian [sic], poses with guards."

As it happened, an army stills photographer was also present at Plattling that day - perhaps the same man as took the film. A few days later, on March 6, a photograph was published in the American forces newspaper, *Stars and Stripes*, showing this same Russian. It's an identical pose to a frame in the film. The caption to the photograph reads:

"HURT: Russian repatriate Constantine Gustonon grimaces with pain after he slashed himself on the chest some 17 times in a suicide attempt to avoid being returned to Russia. He is held by Capt. Kenny Gardner, of the 66th Inf. Regt. Gustonon's was the first case of attempted suicide among the deportees from Plattling [sic] to Russia as PWs."

The photograph is reproduced in Bethel's book, described as "rare." It is rare indeed, carried in only one edition of *Stars and Stripes* and with no accompanying story, but it's enough to corroborate that the film clip was taken on the same occasion.

As evidence, then, for what actually took place at Plattling on February 24, 1946, the visual document is clearly of dubious value. To tell the story of the repatriation of the Russians, Bethel and Tolstoy needed written documents and eyewitnesses, just as Solzhenitsyn drew on what he heard from survivors he met in Soviet camps and his own documentary research. These written and oral sources have provided the primary evidence of what happened as a result of the secret Yalta accords. No doubt Tolstoy was highlighting the extraordinary nature of the operation in the

extract given above; Bethel quoted "a Russian witness" who said that "Many of us had to stand in six degrees of frost from 6 am until four o'clock that evening," which implies that the clearing of the camp went on for most of the day.

Even so, the disparity between the pictorial and the verbal depictions of this event is striking. At this level of historical reality, the level that concerns primary evidence for what actually happened, the visual record preserved in seven minutes of Signal Corps film is ambiguous, to say the least.

At another level of reality, however, the very existence of the film must claim attention. What is its meaning? We can't exactly disbelieve what we see in its frames, but can we rely on what we see? It depends, of course, on what we bring to our viewing of it, what an art historian has called the beholder's share. Here the cameraman's laconic written report is an important aid to interpretation, though not in the sense that he may have intended. His words like his pictures give no hint of the drama that had taken place earlier that day or of the fate that lay ahead for these men at the end of the train journey they are shown taking. In this respect, the card's reference to the "Russian soldier who slashed himself on chest with hope that he would not be returned to Russia" is also ambiguous. If we did not know of the many other actual and attempted suicides that accompanied the policy of forcible repatriation, we might understand from this scene that the Russian was a malingerer, a type known to sergeant majors in armies all over the world. Five men did in fact succeed in killing themselves in the railroad freight cars on their journey from Plattling. There's no way we can tell from the card or the film of the plight of these Russians captured near Stalingrad - if this was where they were taken prisoner. The card is deadpan in informing us that many of them joined the German Army to fight against the Russians, but it provides no indication of why they did so.

At this second level of reality, then, the Signal Corps film illustrates that visual records are rarely as transparent as they seem; they are not windows giving access to reality, but mirrors reflecting the mental landscape of the persons who made them. What they document is an intention, a moral reality that lies behind the camera, rather than a physical reality that happens to be in front of it. Looking again more closely at the film, one picks up clues to this other reality. Take Captain Kenny Gardner, the officer who holds poor Constantine Gustonon's arm as he bares his chest to show us his self-inflicted wounds. Captain Gardner wears dark glasses on this cold, February day. He carries an officer's forage cap on his head. His down topcoat is warmly buttoned, the hood pulled back, which in its turn pulls back part of the front collar.

The inside of the captain's collar is of a lighter texture than the rest and this makes it possible to identify him in other shots even if we don't see his face clearly in close up. We now realize that he has played an indeterminate, but official role in the film making. In one scene, as the trucks carrying prisoners move down the muddy road toward the rail yard, a jeep drives up on the edge of the frame and an officer gets out of the passenger seat just as the cameraman stops the camera. But there's enough on the film to recognize Captain Gardner's collar, although we don't yet know this as we haven't seen the shot of Gardner holding Gustonon's arm. Gardner has stopped his jeep to talk to the cameraman. To tell him he has a good story? That he has a Russian prisoner who slashed his chest and wouldn't that make a good picture? We can't tell, of course, but very soon after this appears the shot of Gardner with Gustonon. He's the one who holds Gustonon's arm to

show that he's in charge (there's another officer in this picture, but he stands behind Gustonon and he's not named.) After patching up his chest, they're putting him on the train anyway, and Gardner makes sure that he, Gardner, is the one closest to the camera.

And Captain Gardner appears a last time before the train pulls out with the Russians. The cameraman has already shown us a scene of Russians being searched at the entrance to the freight cars. He then gives us a shot (a "cutaway") of another group waiting with their bags behind a wire fence, the one with the shadow of a truck passing across it. The next scene logically for the cameraman to shoot would be the train pulling out of the siding. But no, we go back for another two shots of Russians being searched prior to entering the freight cars. And who is doing the searching this time? Captain Kenny Gardner. He certainly wanted to be in the picture, and as far as *Stars and Stripes* was concerned he succeeded.

There's another shot that gives one cause for reflection. It occurs in the first portion of the film in which we are shown columns of men moving across the muddy expanse in front of their barracks. The activity seems confusing at first. One line is moving in one direction, another in the opposite direction, and a large group in the middle are not moving at all. Near them are what appear to be two trestle tables, their centers covered with white cloths. Could these possibly be makeshift altars, erected for a final service for men who expect the worst to happen to them before the end of this day? And could the figures standing motionless at these tables be praying? Perhaps this is overdramatizing the scene. If they are altars in the shot, no doubt they have been erected for a regular church parade. But that would mean this day was Sunday and surely the Americans would not have planned their drastic operation for a Sunday? It seems it was so, however, for February 24, 1946 was indeed a Sunday.

Thus the images in the Plattling film offer us their own kind of evidence after all, while the film's existence in the Signal Corps archive itself raises interesting questions about the use of the film medium by the American army in war. Why was this particularly episode filmed? And filmed like this? Who authorized the filming? On whose orders? If the order to return all Russian prisoners to the Soviet Union - forcibly if need be - was so secret, why have a camera there that day? Tolstoy, who was denied sight of the film, speculated that it was intended as a guide for future operations. But the sequences hardly support this. It might of course have been a mistake; a snarl up in duties by Signal Corps operatives. But if this were so, why was the *Stars and Stripes* photographer also present?

The more we think about these seven minutes of official film the more disturbing the questions become. Five weeks earlier, Russians interned at Dachau, site of the notorious Nazi concentration camp and not far from Plattling, had resisted their repatriation with a ferocity that stunned American military police, resulting in at least ten suicides. Did someone have the idea of using a film clip to quell rumors about the difficulties the American army encountered in the forcible repatriation program? Did they think they might show the clip in other camps whose inmates were also scheduled for deportation? The film material strongly suggests that it was intended to give the impression that the repatriation policy was being conducted without incident. Further research would no doubt teach us more about the use of visual images for propaganda purposes by all the participants in World War Two, use that on one reading of this film could be compared with the Nazi film, *The Führer Gives A City To The Jews*, made at the bogus

Theresienstadt concentration camp to fool the Red Cross and neutrals. In the Nazi film, Jews are seen living in reasonable, if cramped, conditions, enjoying their own cultural activities and limited opportunities for work. They smile in some shots, tend their own gardens, watch their own games of soccer, and they even have the luxury of hot water showers (to quell rumors that signs to the showers led to gas chambers?) All who participated, including the cameraman, were sent on to Auschwitz. For the Signal Corps cameraman at Plattling, the assignment, it appears, was undemanding. He has distanced himself from his subjects and displays little sympathy for them.

There remains a third level of interest in this film, however; its value as an aesthetic object, not something we would normally associate with an officially sponsored film. Yet this is often what gives newsreel material its permanent appeal, especially black and white footage. It testifies not to historical facts, but to the fact of history. It reminds us of our own mortality.

Aesthetic considerations were certainly far from the minds of those who ordered the film to be taken and the results in this case do not show any special filmic quality. But once we know more about the context in which the filming took place, and once it dawns on us what the material really signifies, the images are transformed and the whole piece acquires an emotional charge unrelated to formal aspects of the recording medium. They have the power to move us in the same way that graffiti in Christian catacombs do. Yes, that probably was a church service the camera caught a glimpse of as it came to an end. We can imagine the heart-wrenching melodies of the Russian Orthodox liturgy in that desolate setting. Was it by chance or design that the camera caught the shadow of a truck passing across the wire behind which prisoners wait their turn to board the railcars? Details that are included in documentaries as "filler" material or "cutaways" ("B-Roll" in modern video terms), always with a deadening effect, now come to life. They affect us through their artlessness, their truth to life. The packs and belongings abandoned on the ground bear witness to an earlier scene not recorded on camera, the one, no doubt, described by Tolstoy. We suddenly become alert to the mud, the cold, the awful process of selection by those with power over those without it. One man slowly limps across the frame, as if dragging out his remaining hours on earth; another comes trotting up when his name is called, and then trots on into the truck that is going to take him back to Stalin, a response that suggests a man who has survived many other camps. Will he also survive this journey? The young American without a hat present at the first roll call does not seem part of the military. But he appears to speak Russian. He catches a prisoner who is trying to slip quickly by when his turn comes, holding him by his coat as he checks on his list. Then he puts away the paper that he's been holding in his hand. What, one wonders, was his role in the events of that day? And what became of him?

We can't exactly blame Stalin for wanting to get his hands on these men. The Cossacks were implacable enemies of the Soviet state, and most of the others who had joined Russian divisions under German control had no reason to feel loyalty toward the Stalinist system. Nor can we blame ordinary Russians who had suffered terribly defending their country if they felt outraged at fellow countrymen who donned German uniforms. In the Soviet Union, wrote Solzhenitsyn, to call someone a Vlasovite, a follower of General Vlasov, was a term of abuse comparable with calling him "sewage". In Britain, the word "Quisling", the name of the Norwegian Nazi, had a similar connotation for traitors of all kinds. And whatever we may think of their leaders in

acquiescing in the policy of repatriation, surely most American and British soldiers who had seen German concentration camps must have felt that any Russian who allied himself with the Nazis deserved all that was coming to him.

Nearly half a century has passed since these events took place. In those extraordinary months before they lost control of the center of power, Soviet officials were themselves driven to admit to the crimes of the Stalin era, internal and external, including the Nazi-Soviet pact and the atrocity of Katyn committed against the Poles during the existence of the pact. Since then we have seen a Romanov brought back to what is now again called St Petersburg to be buried with a traditional Orthodox mass in a Cathedral that until recently had been treated as a museum, and we have heard questions openly raised about the future of Lenin's mausoleum in Moscow. The Soviet Union is no more, the names have all changed, and the archives have been opened. In this topsy-turvy Russian world, it would not be surprising if the fate of the Cossacks and even of the Vlasovites came to be seen in a new light, just as terrorists in the old colonial regimes were reborn as freedom fighters when independence came to their countries. It was, after all, these anti-Soviet Russians who saved Prague from destruction by SS units in the last days of the war. Who knows what else lies hidden in the Soviet archives? Some Russians who did survive the repatriation policy lie buried in a graveyard in the Hudson Valley, not far out of New York City, where prayers are said regularly for their souls and for their country. Memorials proudly display their battle honors - 1917-1921; 1941-1945. Is it beyond belief that a similar memorial will one day be erected inside Russia?

Meanwhile, the seven minutes of unedited Signal Corps film rests in the archives in Washington, a reminder that a shadow still lies over actions committed by the victors in this war. Now that Russians are facing up to their own past, some gesture of reconciliation from the west on behalf of these forgotten men would not be inappropriate. The gray human figures that have been captured on celluloid are like the shards of an archeological dig, to be handled with the utmost tenderness as we reconstruct their world, relive their experiences. With the exception of Constantine Gustonon, the man who stabbed himself in the chest, we know no one's name; but here are individual human beings whose images have been saved from the turmoil of a terrible century. A few lined and weary faces are recognizable, they speak for all of humanity, and who cannot single out among them a son, a brother, a husband?

July 1992

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A Postscript

When this article was published in *The New Criterion* I received several emails from people who had a personal interest in the subject. One was from an American officer who had been present at the event I described. He was, he wrote, one of three American officers who took part in the hand-over, Kenny Gardner being one of the others:

"I had two ambulances waiting when the trucks from the camp arrived and transported the injured to the hospital. They fell on their knees in the ambulance and begged me to shoot them; it was very difficult to keep them under control.

They were absolutely petrified when we reached the Russian unloading site, and they discovered that Mongolian troops of the Russian army would now take control."

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