

PRISONERS OF WAR.

The treatment extended to prisoners of war by their captors has been made the subject of rules laid down under international law, and there is no reason to doubt that, in the present war, these conditions are being observed—except, perhaps, by some sections of the German army. No international machinery can, in any case, be devised which will protect prisoners from brutal or illegal treatment by men of an innately cruel or revengeful temperament having, for the time being, absolute power over their captives. It is one of the anomalies of war, however, that the average soldier on one side has no personal quarrel with those fighting against him, neither is the average man given to wanton cruelty or to ill-treatment of his fellows, so that in by far the greatest proportion of cases the rules referred to would be observed. The main object of taking prisoners is, of course, to prevent their further participation in the fighting and so weaken the enemy's force. Consistent with the attainment of this object, there is nothing to be lost by the humane treatment of prisoners of war. The rules provide, therefore, that they shall be so treated and that all personal property shall be retained by them. Everything of a military nature—arms, horses and so on—becomes the property of the captors. Imprisonment of captives is not admissible unless the circumstances of the case justify it. If prisoners are so placed that escape is very improbable, as in the centre of the enemy's country, or within a city from which egress can only be had under military supervision, their personal liberty should not be restricted; similarly with those taking their parole—that is, promising not to attempt escape. On the other hand, nearness to the enemy's lines, probability of escape or refusal to give their parole would justify the confinement of prisoners.

International custom also permits prisoners to be employed by their captors, though not, of course, in operations of a military character. If they are employed by private persons they are to be paid for their services at the rates usually paid to civilians; if by the State, at the rates paid to soldiers. Instances can be multiplied where prisoners of war have been employed at agricultural and other pursuits; well educated captives in a foreign country have frequently occupied themselves as teachers of their language.

Prisoners taken by British troops get scrupulously fair treatment. They receive the same food, clothing and quarters as the British soldier. Official information is supplied to them and they are allowed to communicate with their friends, and wherever it is possible their letters forwarded free of charge for postage. Even valuables lost on the battlefield are often returned to their owners. When relief societies for prisoners are formed on a legitimate basis and military exigencies permit, their work is expedited in every way. Prisoners are also given the opportunity of attending church and religious freedom is accorded to them. The lot of a captive soldier is, therefore, by no means hard; on the contrary, he may even make warm friendships and regret his departure when, at the close of the war or by exchange, the time comes for his return to his own country.