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Hist 133B
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3/19/19

A Long Way Home: The Wartime Experiences of Gunther Plüschow

Plüschow, Gunther. *My Escape from Donington Hall*. Translated by Pauline De Chary. London: John Lane, The Bodley Head Ltd., 1922.

Original German text:

Plüschow, Gunther. *Die Abenteuer des Fliegers von Tsingtau, meine Erlebnisse in drei Erdteilen*. Berlin: Ullstein & Co., 1916.

[https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b579994;view=1up;seq=5](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b579994;view=1up;seq=5)

In 1916, Kapitänleutnant Gunther Plüschow of the German Air Service wrote an autobiographical account of his remarkable experiences and escapes during the First World War in China, Japan, America, Gibraltar, England, and Holland, before getting back to the Fatherland. The original title translates in English to “The Adventures of the Airman of Tsingtau, My Experiences in Three Parts of the World.”¹ The publisher, Ullstein Verlag, was the biggest publishing company in Europe at the time; a son of the family-owned publishing business was a Jewish German officer in the war, and the company specialized in newspapers and non-fiction history books—like Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*—shortly after the war’s conclusion.² The English translation, which is my “original” document for this assignment, was published in 1922 in London by John Lane of the Bodley Head Ltd under the much more boring English title of *My Escape from Donington Hall*.³ Bodley Head specialized in texts for small audiences,⁴ which suited well for Plüschow’s book, since little interest could be initially expected in England over an enemy officer’s story.

¹ Full text available online through UCSB Library. See [https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b579994](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b579994).

² “Karl H. Ullstein, Publisher, Dead,” *New York Times*, January 8, 1964, <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:9443/hnpnewyorktimes/docview/115543213/A23E5F9569FE47E0PQ/1?accountid=14522>; “Ullstein Verlag,” History, Wikipedia, last modified January 9, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ullstein_Verlag.

³ Hardcover 1922 edition held at the UCSB Library. Also, full text available online through UCSB Library. See <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101073207027;view=1up;seq=18>.

⁴ “John Lane (publisher),” Wikipedia, last modified December 22, 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Lane_\(publisher\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Lane_(publisher)).

At the start of the First World War in August 1914, Plüschow was stationed in German-controlled Tsingtau, China as an airman. Soon after the outbreak of war, the Allied Powers, mostly led by Japan, besieged the German territory at “Kiao-Chow” Bay (as Plüschow spells it). After a few dogfights and aerial observations, Plüschow was ordered to evacuate the colony and bring final secret documents to the governor. In November, flying the only German *Taube* airplane, he crashed in a rice field and spared the engine before setting fire to his machine. Through the help of the local Chinese population, he eventually reached Nanking, despite the constant pursuit of Japanese forces. By jumping in a rickshaw and bribing guards, he reached Shanghai by train, where he received documents as a Swiss national and a ship ticket to San Francisco (the United States was neutral in late 1914). After an anxiety-filled stop in Nagasaki, then Honolulu, he arrived in San Francisco before New Year’s Day 1915. Shortly after, he travelled across the United States to New York City. After a “friend” gave an interview to a journalist of the *New York Times* about the details of his situation,⁵ he became worried of his uncovering, and quickly, again, acquired documents and a ship ticket to Italy (which did not enter the war until May 1915). On February 8th, 1915, bad weather forced the ship to dock in British-controlled Gibraltar, where he was arrested and recognized as the famous German aviator of Tsingtau. He was sent to Donington Hall, a German officer POW camp in Leicestershire, in May 1915.

Despite his decent treatment, Plüschow grew homesick; he and his friend, Oberleutnant Trefftz, escaped from the camp during a stormy night on July 4th, climbing the barbed-wire fence. After they went their separate ways, Plüschow reached London, where he saw a notice from Scotland Yard which wrote of Trefftz’s capture yet Plüschow’s still being at large, although the police were on his track. Plüschow then altered his appearance to look like a regular dock worker, and even had himself photographed, showing his exuberant confidence. After getting yet another ship ticket to neutral Holland, he then reached Germany by train, partially by the laziness of a Dutch “Secret Service” member. Arriving in Germany on July 13th, he did not initially receive a hero’s welcome—the Germans first believed him to be a spy who they were after. Quickly, the Germans realized their mistake, and Plüschow was reinstated into the military, given the Iron Cross, and promoted, concluding the last 3 years of the war proud and victorious

⁵ “Fled in Aeroplane in Tsing-Tao Siege,” *New York Times*, January 16, 1915, <https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:9443/docview/97807309?accountid=14522>.

at Libau Naval Flying Station on the eastern Front in present-day Latvia.⁶ All of this is detailed in Plüschow's autobiography. He is the only successful escapee from either World War of a British POW camp to make it back to his home country.⁷

Capitalizing off of his “hero of Tsingtau” fame, Plüschow completed his book a year after his return to Germany in the summer of 1915. His heroic, cunning tales of escaping from the clutches of Germany's enemies across the world, published in the middle of the war, made an instant hit within Germany, selling 700,000 copies.⁸ From a historical lens, his account details a little-known epoch in Germany history of their colonies in East Asia, as well as early-Great War German battles in East Asia and early German aviators, in general. These themes encompass the greater, yet still relatively unknown, East Asian theatre of the Great War and the first real use of aircraft in war. His own unique experiences, escapes, and vernacular only increase the book's historical importance and readers' amusement through its various rarities.

After the war, in the late 1920s, Plüschow sailed to South America, where he became a renowned explorer of much of Patagonia. He was the first person to fly over many Patagonian landmarks and later published books on his explorations—*Segelfahrt ins Wunderland* (“Voyage to Wonderland”) and *Silberkondor über Feuerland* (“Silver Condor over Tierra del Fuego”). On another exploration in January 1931, he died in a plane crash near Lake Argentino, 10 days shy of his 45th birthday. He was survived by his wife and son.⁹

*See Ngram on the following page.

Note: An obvious spike for “Donington Hall” occurs in the late 1910s, due to Donington Hall's use as a POW camp for German officers during the war. Furthermore, a spike occurs in the 1930s, likely due to the park's use for motor racing.¹⁰ A general rise for “Gunther Plüschow”

⁶ Gunther Plüschow, *My Escape from Donington Hall*, trans. Pauline De Chary (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head Ltd., 1922); “Gunther Plüschow,” World War I—Return to Germany, Wikipedia, last modified January 20, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gunther_Plüschow.

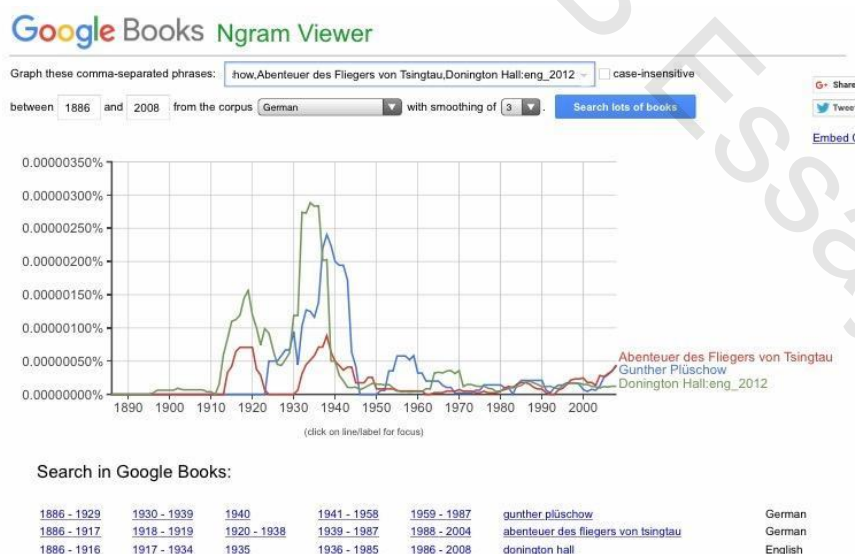
⁷ “Donington Hall,” History, Wikipedia, last modified February 20, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Donington_Hall.

⁸ K. Eckhard Kuhn-Osius, “Germany's Lessons From the Lost “Great War”: Pacifist Andreas Latzko and Bellicist Walter Flex,” *Peace Research* 42, no. 1/2 (2010): 23-51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23607875>; Wikipedia, “Gunther Plüschow.”

⁹ Wikipedia, “Gunther Plüschow.”

¹⁰ “I Donington Park Trophy,” kolumbus.fi, last modified April 4, 2013, <http://www.kolumbus.fi/leif.snellman/gp3317.htm>, quoted in Wikipedia, “Donington Hall.”

occurs in the early 1920s, probably as his story became more popular after war's end. Perhaps Germans were looking for something positive to reminisce on after their defeat and the Treaty of Versailles. Also, Plüschow was stationed on the eastern Front from 1915-1918, where the Germans essentially won the war against the Russians. The spike reaches its peak in the mid-late 1930s, likely as a result of his death in 1931. However, it is unknown if this posthumous rise in prevalence came as a result of his World War I achievements or of his explorations in South America. Finally, relating to his book, *Die Abenteuer des Fliegers von Tsingtau*, spikes occur in the mid-1910s, shortly after publishing, and the 1930s. According to WorldCat, other German-language editions were printed in 1917, 1927, 1933, 1934, 1936, 1940, 2012, and 2013, and other English-language editions were printed in 2010, 2013, 2015, and 2016. The 4 German editions published from 1933-1940 may account for this spike; however, his death in 1931, again, may have also increased interest in his autobiography. (An obvious gap in English editions lies between 1922-2010. My explanation for this is that a majority of the sources I found about Plüschow post-2000 emphasize his time in captivity. It seems that just in the past 15 years or so, studies and interest in prisoners of war in Britain have been revitalized, the reasoning of which I do not know. Regardless, this may account for the 88-year gap between English editions, yet 4 new English editions in the past 10 years; however, it is just my speculation. Also, the 2015 and 2016 editions coincide with the 100-year anniversaries of Plüschow's escape from Donington Hall and original edition of *Die Abenteuer des Fliegers von Tsingtau*, respectively.)



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Annotated Bibliography in Chronological Order

“Fled in Aeroplane in Tsing-Tao Siege.” *New York Times*, January 16, 1915.

In this *New York Times* article, a “friend who was acquainted with the details of [Plüschow’s] escape” tells the unnamed journalist many of the details of Plüschow’s situation up until that point. The article starts off with his experiences in China, where he used makeshift bombs out of tin cans, dynamite, and iron nails. He escaped in the nick of time, as a shell burst under his plane right after takeoff. It goes on to describe his informal capture by Chinese forces but quick escape after bribing a guard and then sailing on a neutral liner across the Pacific to San Francisco, passing by the Japanese guards by claiming he is a Scotchman. The article concludes by saying that Plüschow would not tell where he was going, but that he was leaving New York the next day by train. Ultimately, he would not leave New York for another 2 weeks, by ship on January 30th. Plüschow was reportedly unnerved by the article and subsequently feared capture; at the least, he realized that he could not stay in New York much longer after the article was printed. The article was written before his capture and internment at Donington Hall in the coming months.

“Hunt for Escaped German.” *Daily Chronicle* (London), July 6, 1915, quoted in Plüschow, Gunther. *My Escape from Donington Hall*. Translated by Pauline De Chary. London: John Lane, The Bodley Head Ltd., 1922.

In an “Extra Late War Edition,” the London newspaper printed an article describing Plüschow’s physical characteristics as well as the fate of his friend, “Treppitz.” The article references the notice issued by Scotland Yard, warning readers to look out for a man with a Chinese dragon tattoo on his left arm. It goes on about Trefftz’s capture at the Millwall Docks before mentioning Plüschow’s high-pitched voice, dapper appearance, and very good teeth. The *Daily Chronicle* also notes his intelligence and cunning; it describes him as “very English in manner” and writes of his ability to speak French and English fluidly and accurately.

“Two Escapes from Donington Hall.” *The Times* (London), July 6, 1915.

This brief article warns the public of the escapes of two German naval officers “yesterday morning” at Donington Hall—this is actually incorrect, as Trefftz and Plüschow escaped

on the night of the 4th. However, the article notes that it is not known what time they made their escape and that they could have escaped on Sunday during the thunderstorm (which they did). The newspaper article writes that “Treppitz” was recaptured at Millwall Docks, yet Plüschow is still at large. Like the *Daily Chronicle* article, it gives Plüschow’s height, notes his physical features and clean shave, and claims he speaks English very well.

“Plüschow Still Free.” *The Press* (York), July 11, 1915, quoted in Plüschow, Gunther. *My Escape from Donington Hall*. Translated by Pauline De Chary. London: John Lane, The Bodley Head Ltd., 1922.

Similar to the *Daily Chronicle* article, this newspaper article notes Plüschow’s dragon tattoo, claiming that it should “betray his identity.” The article briefly mentions Trefftz and his capture at the Millwall Docks within twenty-four hours of his escape. It concludes with details on how the two escaped: other prisoners answered for their names during roll call, while Plüschow and Trefftz were hiding outside the first wire entanglement at Donington Hall. They eventually used a wooden plank to climb up the second line of barbed wire.

“Escapes from Donington Hall.” *The Times* (London), September 20, 1915.

This *Times* article, although unrelated to Plüschow, tells a strikingly similar escape story. Two German officers—one a flight-lieutenant, like Plüschow—escape from Donington Hall two and a half months after Plüschow. Also, Scotland Yard issues official descriptions of each of the two escapees, like they did for Plüschow. However, this time, a 100-pound reward is offered to anyone who gives information leading to their arrest; perhaps escapes were becoming a problem in British POW camps, so the War Office tried to entice the public for help. The two would be recaptured the following day.

“Catch Germans Trying to Escape.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, February 27, 1916.

The *San Francisco Chronicle*’s reporter in London writes a detailed story of the two German officers who escaped in the September 20th *Times* article. After their capture, they were caught digging a tunnel in the floor in the bathroom, of which they had already dug eighty yards. They were then removed to a small hut, where they were caught trying to saw the floor under the bed, while the other playing a “mouth organ” (harmonica) to

cover up the noise. The article closes interestingly, claiming, “Advertisements of men who have escaped from the detention camps are becoming common in the newspapers.” This proves that the problem of POW escapees was increasing. Relating to Plüschow, he may have been one of the pioneers of escaping, leading others to believe they could do the same. He escaped before these escape attempts became common, and further, he was the only one to make it back to Germany.

“Disguised for Escape.” *The Times* (London), June 22, 1922.

When Plüschow altered his appearance to look like a regular dock worker, he had himself photographed. This photograph was posted in the *Times* in the same year that the first English edition of *My Escape from Donington Hall* was published, perhaps as an advertisement-of-sorts for the book. The photograph is also included as an illustration in the book itself.

“Donington Hall.” *The Times* (London), June 22, 1922.

This newspaper article, coinciding with the 1922 English translation of Plüschow’s autobiography, has an obvious anti-German, pro-English slant to it. Essentially, the article summarizes Plüschow’s escape. Yet, it plays his feat down to “colossal luck.” The writer claims that he is much worse of an escaper than that of the famous English escapees. The article writes that he left with no plan to get out of the country or support himself in it, and only changed his appearance after seeing the Scotland Yard notice about his escape. He notes a situation when Plüschow accidentally spoke to a cloakroom attendant in German. He describes Plüschow as an “ignorant officer” who is not as smart as the average German, noting that in his autobiography, Plüschow writes that the siege of Kiao-Chow happened in 1915, when in reality it was November of 1914. The writer concludes with Plüschow’s quote about the English being “extraordinarily tolerant” and “[behaving] in the most exemplary fashion.”

Remarque, Erich Maria. “Literature and the War.” In *Im Westen Nichts Neues*, edited by Brian Murdoch, 8-11. Routledge, 1984. Google Scholar.

In the introduction of the 1984 e-book reprint of *Im Westen Nichts Neues—All Quiet on the Western Front*—Murdoch discusses how many German World War I books emphasize the “adventure” of the “heroic soldier.” He naturally interprets Plüschow’s

autobiography to fall under this realm of literature. Moreover, Panayi's journal article in 2012 describes the same sort of writing-style craze that surrounded the First World War. The word *Abenteuer* in the German title of Plüschow's book is significant to Murdoch, and he argues that many of the British World War I pieces of literature portray a similar level of romanticism for the "adventure" of the war.

Panayi, Panikos. "Prisoners of Britain: German Civilian, Military and Naval Internees during the First World War." In *"Totally Un-English"? Britain's Internment of "Enemy Aliens" in Two World Wars*, edited by Richard Dove, 29-44. New York: Rodopi, 2005.

Panayi writes about three points he finds noteworthy in Plüschow's story in this edited book about enemy aliens in Britain. He begins by briefly mentioning Plüschow's capture in Gibraltar. The second mention of Plüschow is his interpretation of the prisoner's food at Donington Hall: the food was "very good [but] English, so that many did not like it." Lastly, Panayi discusses the general concept of the barbed wire psychosis that many prisoners felt. He describes it as a consciousness that becomes more severe over time; perhaps this led Plüschow to escape from Donington Hall despite his decent treatment. In each of the three references to Plüschow, Panayi cites the 1922 English translation of *My Escape from Donington Hall*.

Rippon, Anton. *Gunther Plüschow: Airman, Escaper, Explorer*. South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword, 2009.

Rippon writes a biography of Plüschow, naturally incorporating his wartime experiences but also his postwar life and attitudes. Rippon mentions Plüschow's family life and his struggles in the early 1920s due to the political turmoil in Germany (he was very proud of his Fatherland during the war), inflation, and longing for flying prior to his South American explorations. Furthermore, an in-depth description of Donington Hall—that is difficult to find elsewhere—preludes Rippon's account of Plüschow's escape. Overall, Rippon's book is much more descriptive and detailed than many other sources that often just briefly summarize Plüschow's wartime experiences, leaving out his postwar explorations and unfortunate death. This is the best third-person biography of Plüschow that I have found.

Kuhn-Osius, K. Eckhard. "Germany's Lessons From the Lost "Great War": Pacifist Andreas Latzko and Bellicist Walter Flex." *Peace Research* 42, no. 1/2 (2010): 23-51.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23607875>.

This journal article notices that early war literature often took the form of officers' memoirs. Moreover, these memoirs usually come from navy captains or aviators that had more freedom than the average soldier and embody national heroism through this use of freedom. Plüschow's *Die Abenteuer des Fliegers von Tsingtau* is cited as one of these particular sources, giving a short, general summary of his war experiences and, naturally, the book.

de Bruxelles, Simon. "The only one that got away: PoW's great escape from Britain." *The Times* (London), February 11, 2011.

In this modern newspaper article, de Bruxelles writes a positive article (unlike the 1922 article) on Plüschow with almost a century's worth of information and writings of Plüschow at his disposal. He essentially writes a biography of Plüschow, mostly incorporating his escapes in China and England, but also noting his marriage, explorations in South America in the late 1920s, and his death in 1931. The photograph from "Disguised for Escape" is printed, as well as another portrait of him in a suit and his *Taube* airplane in China. The article celebrates Plüschow's escape as "daring" and takes quotes from Anton Rippon—the 2009 biographer of Plüschow—and Terry Charman of the Imperial War Museum.

Panayi, Panikos. "Forgotten Prisoners of the Great War." *History Today* 62, no. 11 (2012): 34-35.

<http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy.library.ucsb.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=83883090&site=ehost-live>.

This article notes the stream of books and pamphlets printed in the 1930s emphasizing the experiences of captured Germans in Britain during the Great War. Adventure stories were a large part of these books and pamphlets, of which the author claims Plüschow's original 1916 version of *Die Abenteuer des Fliegers von Tsingtau* was the most famous. (Perhaps this accounts for the spike in "*Abenteuer des Fliegers von Tsingtau*" during the 1930s in the Ngram on page 4.) He also claims that Plüschow was one of three German

prisoners during the Great War to escape from Britain and make it back home; this contrasts from various other sources that claim Plüschow was the only German to escape from Britain and return home. I could not find other sources or information to agree with Panayi's claims and he does not cite any sources (or, perhaps, I just could not view his sources as UCSB Library may not have received access to his notes—there are no in-text citations either), so I cannot trace his evidence of either claim.

Johnson, Wray R. "Advance to Maturity, 1919-1935." In *Biplanes at War: US Marine Corps Aviation in the Small Wars Era, 1915-1934*, 131-192. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2019. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvbd8m0m.7>.

This book chapter contains a few paragraphs on Plüschow's flying experiences in China at the start of World War I, revealing more specifics about his escape in China than any article or publication (besides his autobiography) from the 1910s or 1920s. His plane was one of two *Taube* airplanes in China in the summer of 1914, but the other one crashed the day before war broke out. During attacks by Japanese aircraft, Plüschow moved his aircraft to a camouflaged location and deployed decoys, resulting in limited damage to his plane. In September, he discovered a Japanese infantry column and reported it to his superiors, who quickly realized the importance of aerial observation. He even managed to shoot down a Japanese airplane with his handgun. After further observation missions, he was ordered to steer clear of Japanese forces, as his airplane was extremely valuable for reconnaissance on top of being the only German aircraft in China. It concludes with his escape down the coast and him unfortunately having to burn his aircraft after German evacuation. The chapter calls Plüschow's story "barely known, [but] stands as a remarkable achievement in the annals of combat aviation history."