

*The Case of the Unhappy People of Custrin*¹ (1759)

The Seven Year's War (1756–63) engulfed most of Europe, with Prussia joining Britain as allies against France, Russia, and much of the rest of the continent. In 1758 a Russian army roved through Brandenburg sacking several cities. On August 15 they laid siege to the town of Custrin (modern Kostrzyn) in Poland. The siege lasted for ten days, being lifted only when a Prussian army led by Frederick the Great engaged the Russians and defeated them in a very costly battle. Shortly after, in an effort to raise relief funds for the people of Custrin, a pamphlet describing their suffering was published in Britain, titled *The Case of the Unhappy People of Custrin* (London: H. Miller, 1759).

Charles Wesley was moved by the suffering of the people of Custrin and sought to offer support in raising relief funds. In this effort he cooperated with his regular London publisher, William Strahan, in publishing an abridgement of the original pamphlet.

[Charles Wesley.] *The Case of the Unhappy People of Custrin*. [London: Strahan, 1759.]

CW's abridgement shortens the original by omitting opening and closing sections. Then he appended a hymn on behalf of the people of Custrin.

The transcription which follows reproduces CW's form of the pamphlet (which was never reprinted). Page transitions in the original are noted (in **red** font).

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The Case of the Unhappy People of Custrin

Towards the latter end of June 1758, the Russians entered the New Mark, and seized upon the fortress of Driesen, and totally plundered the city of Friedberg, Selenow, etc. It would be endless to enumerate all the horrid scenes of villany and outrage committed by them. The case of poor Mr. Sch_____ may serve as a specimen of the rest. He was heretofore one of the most substantial inhabitants of Selenow. But after having been dangerously wounded in four different places of his body, was robbed of everything. His wife was forced to see her infant, of which she was delivered but seven days before, fall a victim to their fury, and she herself left to perish in a wood. In short, the whole province is laid waste and desolate, and a [p. 2] great many people formerly in affluence are now quite naked, and destitute of the necessaries of life, and constrained to beg. The nobility and gentry shared the same fate with others. Even the ladies of quality have not been spared; many of whom have miserably lost their lives. But nothing comes up to the inhuman treatment the clergy have met with in these places. Their wives and daughters have been shamefully abused; the ministers burnt in straw, shot with pistols, stabbed with pikes and swords; had their limbs cut off, and their bodies otherwise unmercifully torn and mangled.

The Cossacks and Calmucks, who serve as irregulars in the Russian army, have above all others done the greatest mischief. It is no fiction that the Calmucks live much upon human flesh, and are especially very greedy of little children's; what they cannot eat at once they carry along with them. Some time ago a Portmanteau was found in the road with half a child in it; and thus too many poor parents have lost their children. One of their own officers said, "It is a sign of God's wrath against the New Mark that he suffers these people to enter it."

The 14th and 15th of August the siege of Custrin began. A neighbouring gentleman describes it thus:

On Tuesday morning at eight o'clock a terrible cannonading commenced. An hour and a half after a prodigious fire was seen, and continued ascending as from a burning furnace for twenty-eight hours. At first it was the general opinion, that it was only the suburbs on this side, which the commandant himself had set fire [p. 3] to. But we soon discovered by some Russian officers that it was the city itself, and that the suburbs were still remaining. It was certainly a great fault of the general that he did not burn these suburbs before the enemy arrived, since behind them General Fermor could very conveniently erect his batteries, under the cover of the large houses, without opposition. A Russian lieutenant-colonel told us that the lamentable shrieks and cries of the distressed inhabitants had even raised compassion in his heart. It contributed very much to the heightening of their calamity that, contrary to the rules of war, the city was not summoned by a trumpet but in an instant set on fire; for which reason a great many people were so affrighted as to fly away naked. Not one dwelling-house is remaining. Everything is consumed by the flames, except a small chapel for the use of the garrison and the prison, which stand in a wood. At that time an immense quantity of very valuable things were treasured up in Custrin, being looked upon by everyone in the country to be the safest place in which to secure their effects. The Royal Exchequer—containing more than ten millions of rixdollars, the arsenal, the archives of the kingdom of Prussia, the most valuable effects of gold and silver, together with the church-plate which was conveyed thither from almost every town and village—were all destroyed by the raging flames. During the siege

of this unhappy town the enemy have shown a most abominable delight at its destruction: when the fires seemed to be abated and the flames [p. 4] to be quenched a little, they immediately threw bombs and fire-balls into it again, till it began to burn with greater violence. And such discharges having done the desired execution, great rejoicings, attended with music, were heard in the enemy's camp. Thus the capital of the New Mark was laid level with the ground. This city, before its deplorable fate, contained large new and stately buildings, three stories high, the royal palace, the session house for the regency of the New Mark, the exchequer, etc. and was a flourishing trading town, having two navigable rivers, the Oder and the Warta. But here the misfortune did not end. The terrible catastrophe of Custrin was followed by many bad consequences to the neighbouring places. The whole country now being laid open, the nearest villages, churches and all, were directly plundered and reduced likewise to ashes. In one of these villages three of the inhabitants were killed. In another above half of the people burnt alive. Old and young, little children not excepted, have been drove with pikes and spears into the midst of the flames.

The 24th of August, at noon, the siege of Custrin was raised, the reason of which was the unexpected and providential arrival of the King of Prussia with 20,000 men.

The 25th that every memorable and glorious victory at Zorndorf happened, which the King of Prussia obtained over the Russian forces, which, according to all probability, consisted of more than 80,000 men. [p. 5]

During and after the action, the Russians set fire to seven of the finest and most opulent villages in the whole country. And to increase the calamity, the Cossacks and Calmucks, during the conflagration, ranged about committing the most unheard of cruelties.

Besides what has been already mentioned, the following horrid facts are not to be omitted. The scattered inhabitants of Wilkersdorf that were still alive, thinking to save themselves by taking refuge in the churches, locked themselves up in them, but the Cossacks forced themselves in and shot, stabbed, and cut to pieces both old and young. Few escaped by the swiftness of their heels. At Quartshen seven murdered people lay on the ground—among whom were found the body of a young gentleman's tutor, entirely mangled; two clerks of the bailiff of that riding; a mother who had been shot, and her daughter, eight years old, lying near her, cut to pieces; likewise a woman big with child, run through with a pike. A father from Camin had his son of but two years of age stabbed in his arms. The minister of Begersdorf, passing over the Oder, was laid hold on by the Cossacks. They fastened a rope round his body, then jumped with their horses in the water and dragged the unhappy gentleman through the water along with them. The prisoners they take from us must suffer want very often, and they even show them mercy if they give them the crusts of their course bread or the paring of turnips.

At Wilkersdorf, where they destroyed half of the inhabitants by fire and sword, they chained [p. 6] above forty-five people together, and thus compelled them to run along with them by the side of their horses. Among these unhappy ones there were several mothers with their sucklings. Whenever theses poor wretches begged for bread, etc., they took them by the hair of their heads, and so pulling them on the grass, commanded them to eat it.

Sometimes they were constrained to kneel down and say their prayers, then they sharpened their knives before their eyes, which cruel preparations seemed to indicate their immediate dispatch; when at last horses were killed, and their flesh divided among them, without bread or salt, which they were forced to live upon during the time of three weeks. And being

afterwards released, a great many of them have since died.

And in this manner many thousands more have perished. The rest that escaped with their lives are reduced from a decent and reputable condition to a state of want and beggary.

It would melt any heart to see the trees, gardens, and houses, in some places for twenty miles round, entirely ruined and destroyed, and the people, for want of utensils, cattle, and men, unable to cultivate their land.

This is but a short and imperfect sketch of the present miserable situation of the New Mark. But perhaps enough has been said to raise the compassion of all true Protestants and Christians. [p. 7]

An Hymn

1. God of boundless pity spare
Those that now thine anger bear;
Far from them the scourge remove,
Whom we in thy bowels love.
2. Why should they be stricken more?
Give thy controversy o'er;
Do not let their foes come nigher,
Cease to plead with sword and fire.
3. Listening to thy people's cries,
Rescue them from Rome's allies;
Stop the ministers of death,
Save the children from their teeth.
4. Comforter of all that mourn,
Heal whom human fiends have torn,
Sanctify their loss and pain,
Take them to thine arms again.
5. Jesus, is there not in thee
Balm for every misery?
Let thy love their anguish ease,
Bless them with thy perfect peace.
6. Now the gospel-grace impart,
Enter every broken heart,
Seal the mourners' sins forgiven,
Lift them on thy cross to heaven.