PRISONERS OF WAR

Europe: 1939–1956

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Contents

Maps

Map 1 Main Prisoner of War Camps in Greater Germany Mentioned in Text

Source: Adapted from M.R.D.Foot and J.M.Langley, *MI9: Escape and Evasion 1939–1945* (London: The Bodley Head, 1979), pp. 98–9; S. P. Mackenzie, *The Colditz Myth: British and Commonwealth Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) pp. xvi–xvii; Neville Wylie, Barbed Wire Diplomacy: Britain, Germany and the Politics of Prisoners of War (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. xiv–xv.

Map 2 Prisoner of War Camps in Italy 1940–1943

Source: Red Cross and St John War Organisation, British Prisoner of War Camps, September 1943

Map 3 Principal Prisoner of War Camps in Canada 1939–1946

Source: Derived from Yves Bernard and Caroline Bergeron, *Trop loin de Berlin: Des prisonniers allemands au Canada (1939–1946)* (Sillery, QC: Éditions du Septentrion, 1995) pp. 17–19; Chris M.V.Madsen and R.J.Henderson, *German Prisoners of War in Canada and their Artifacts* (Regina: Hignell Printing, 1993) pp. 98–101; Martin Auger, *Prisoners of the Home Front: German POWs and Enemy Aliens in Southern Quebec 1940–1946* (Vancouver: UBC, 2005), p. 153.

Map 4 German Prisoner of War Camps in the East

Source: NARB (The National Archives of the Republic of Belarus), F.370, op.1, d.7a, l. 207. Adapted by Hanna Abakunova.

1
Introduction

Prisoners of War and the Historians

The Second World War between the European Axis powers and the Allies saw more than twenty million soldiers taken as prisoners of war. While this total is inflated by the unconditional surrender of all German forces in Europe on 8 May 1945, it nonetheless highlights the fact that captivity was one of the most common experiences for all those in uniform—and even more common than front-line service. Despite this, and the huge literature on so many aspects of the war, prisoner of war histories have remained a separate and sometimes isolated element in the wider national chronicles of the conflict constructed in the post-war era. Put bluntly, their individual and collective narratives of defeat and captivity do not fit easily into either the military or social histories of the countries they served.

This can be seen on the Western Allied side where the concentration has been on the heroism of fighting forces in defeating the Axis in order to construct a narrative of victory. Almost by definition, those who had fought and been captured earlier in the conflict had no part to play in this process. This can be seen in Britain and its Dominions, where the evacuation from Dunkirk was portrayed as a heroic success but with little or no attention being paid to the fate of the many thousands left behind on the beaches who became long-term prisoners of the Germans. The same could be said of France, where the soldiers of 1940 had spent up to five years in captivity but reprising their history and experiences in German hands would have merely reinforced the image of defeat at a time when the country was developing its myth of a resistant nation as a means to promote political and social reconstruction. In the Soviet Union, this exclusion was even more apparent with the Stalinist demonization and punishment of Red Army soldiers who had been sullied by capture and who had thus played no role in victory during the Great Patriotic War. On the Axis side, the national memories of captivity have been equally selective and driven primarily by Cold War agendas, for example with the (West) German and Italian focus on their prisoners held by the Soviet Union.

Perhaps not surprisingly, each of the countries involved in the conflict has developed its own specific historiography and a popular perception of what it was to be a prisoner of war in the European theatre. For the British Commonwealth

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and the Americans, their servicemen in Axis hands were always 'objects of concern' as is evidenced by the lengths their respective governments were prepared to go to to protect them in captivity, and then to repatriate and reintegrate them as soon as possible once the war was over.[1] Their experiences were brought to public attention first by published memoirs and then bolstered by adaptations into feature films, most notably *The Wooden Horse* (1950), *Albert RN* (1953) *The Colditz Story* (1955) *Reach for the Sky* (1956) and perhaps most famously *The Great Escape* (1963). While based on fact, their admission into cinematographic popular culture has usually involved embellishments insisted upon by Pinewood or Hollywood.[2] While the films encompass stories of betrayal and failures, most involve officers planning and executing escapes from German captivity—creating the image that this was the norm among all Allied prisoners in Nazi hands.[3] Moreover, critics and commentators have also seen this as a recreation of an archetypally English public school trope.[4] This so-called 'Colditz Myth' has been comprehensively debunked by Paul Mackenzie in his ground-breaking book with the same title,[5] but his work was presaged by the works of David Rolf and David Foy, whose explorations of the interviews and papers left by both officers and other ranks provided the first academic studies of the topic and served to alter perceptions of wartime captivity and bring to the forefront the experiences of the majority of ordinary British and American prisoners who were put to work by their captors and who were less inclined to escape.[6] These first scholarly works have since been followed by others, most notably Neville Wylie and Arieh Kochavi discussing the detail of Allied–German prisoner of war diplomacy and Clare

[1] Prisoners of war are not discussed as a topic in the British Official History Series of the Second World War. There was a manuscript compiled by Colonel H. J. Phillimore, 'Prisoners of War' but even an extensively amended version was condemned as an apologia for the War Office Directorate for Prisoners of War written by someone with no knowledge of its formation. It was therefore never published but can be found in The National Archives (TNA) WO366/25 and WO366/26. See David Rolf, 'The British Government and POWs in Germany, 1939–1945', in Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich (eds), *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II* (Oxford: Berg, 1995), p. 65. There was also a limited edition publication by the Foreign Office, Sir Harold Satow and M. J. Sée, *The Work of the Prisoner of War Department during the Second World War* (London: Foreign Office, 1950).

[2] In this context, see Paul J. Springer, 'Prisoners of War on Film and in Memory', *Orbis*, Vol. 54, No. 4, pp. 669–86.

[3] Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich, 'Prisoners of War in the Second World War: An Overview', in Moore and Fedorowich, *Prisoners of War and their Captors*, p. 2.

[4] See in this context Dilys Powell, *Sunday Times*, 30 July 1950. Nicholas Cull, 'Great Escapes: "Englishness" and the POW Genre', *Film History*, Vol. 14, Nos 3–4 (2002). Gill Plain, 'Before the Colditz Myth: Telling POW Stories in Postwar British Cinema', *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2014), pp. 269–82. Martin Stollery, ' "The Hideous Difficulty of Recreating Nazism at War": Escaping from Europe in The Wooden Horse (1950) and the British Prisoner of War Film', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2017), pp. 539–58.

[5] S. Paul Mackenzie, *The Colditz Myth: The Real Story of POW Life in Nazi Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[6] David Foy, *For You the War is Over: American Prisoners in Nazi Germany* (New York: Stein and Day, 1984); David Rolf, *Prisoners of the Reich: Germany's Captives, 1939–1945* (London: Leo Cooper 1988); and, in the same tradition, Adrian Gilbert, *Allied Prisoners of War in Europe, 1939–1945* (London: John Murray, 2007).

Makepeace providing new insights on the social history of British captivity.[7] British Commonwealth prisoners have also been studied as national groups, most notably the discussion of the Canadians by Jonathan Vance, the Australians by Peter Monteath, and the New Zealanders by Mason Wynne.[8] At the same time, escape stories in general and the specifics of the mass breakout from Stalag Luft III mean that the myths created in the early post-war years continue to have credence, even in the second decade of the twenty-first century.[9]

In contrast, the experiences of the French 'Army of 1940' have been largely ignored and there was a dearth of publications before the appearance of Yves Durand's *La Captivité* in 1980 under the auspices of the prisoners of war veterans' organization.[10] While there has been a steady stream of memoirs, they are again weighted towards escape stories while subsequent scholarly studies of French captivity relate specifically to the French prisoners' role in the German war economy.[11] Only their repatriation in 1944–5 has been better served, both in the wider literature on 'return' but also as a specific topic in its own right, reflecting on the prisoners' exclusion from the national narrative of liberation and their problems of reintegration.[12] In common with the historians, post-war French cinema showed no inclination to highlight the experiences of its soldiers in German captivity and filmmakers eschewed the topic until Henri Verneuil directed *La Vache et le prisonnier* (1959), a comedic treatment of a French prisoner's travels

[7] Neville Wylie, *Barbed Wire Diplomacy: Britain, Germany and the Politics of Prisoners of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Paul Mackenzie, 'The Shackling Crisis: A Case-Study in the Dynamics of Prisoner-of-War Diplomacy in the Second World War', *International History Review*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (1995), pp. 78–98. Arieh Kochavi, *Confronting Captivity: Britain and the United States and their POWs in Nazi Germany* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Clare Makepeace, *Captives of War: British Prisoners of War in the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). See also Vasilis Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War and the German High Command: The British and American Experience* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003).

[8] Jonathan Vance, *Objects of Concern: Canadian Prisoners of War through the Twentieth Century* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1994). Peter Monteath, *POW: Australian Prisoners of War in Hitler's Reich* (Sydney: Macmillan, 2011). Mason W. Wynne, *Prisoners of War: Official History of New Zealand in the Second World War 1939–45* (Wellington: War History Branch, 1954).

[9] See, *inter alia*, Anton Gill, *The Great Escape* (London: Review, 2002). National Archives, *Escape from Germany: True Stories of POW Escapes in WWII* (London: National Archives, 2009). John Nichol and Tony Rennell, *The Last Escape: The Untold Story of Allied Prisoners of War in Germany* (London: Penguin, 2003). Arthur Durand, *Stalag Luft III* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988).

[10] Yves Durand, *La Captivité: histoire des prisonniers de guerre français 1939–1945* (Paris: Fédération Nationale des Combattants Prisonniers de Guerre et Combattants d'Algerie, Tunisie, Maroc, 1980) and the even earlier Pierre Gascar, *Histoire de la captivité des Français en Allemagne (1939–1945)* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1967).

[11] Helga Bories-Sawala, *Franzosen im 'Reichseinsatz': Deportation, Zwangsarbeit, Alltag: Erfahrungen und Erinnerungen von Kriegsgefangenen und Zivilarbeitern* Vols 1–3 (New York: Peter Lang, 1996). Christophe Woehrlé, *Prisonniers de guerre: dans l'industrie de guerre allemande, 1940–1945* (Beaumontois-en-Périgord: Éditions Secrets de Pays, 2019).

[12] See in this context the work of Christophe Lewin, *Retour des prisonniers de guerre français: naissance et développement de la F.N.P.G., 1944–1952* (Paris: Sorbonne, 1986), François Cochet, *Les Exclus de la victoire: histoire des prisonniers de guerre, déportés et S.T.O. (1945–1985)* (Paris: SPM, 1992), and Alain Navarro, *1945: le retour des absents* (Paris: Stock, 2015).

with a cow.[13] Three years later, Jean Renoir attempted to revisit the themes of his First World War classic *La Grande Illusion* with *Le Caporal épinglé* (1962), set in the more recent conflict but to mixed reviews. Far more pertinent, but largely unknown, is *Sous le manteau* a film made by French prisoners in Oflag XVII-A (Edelbach) using a clandestine camera which portrays everyday life in the camp but also chronicles attempts to escape.[14]

Deliberate ill-treatment of Western Allied prisoners by either the Germans or the Italians was the exception rather than the rule, but there were examples of localized poor treatment and neglect, especially in the first days and weeks after capture. Killings were also rare, although Allied investigations at the end of the war brought to light several individual examples such as the massacre at Le Paradis in May 1940 and the order to kill recaptured escapers from Stalag Luft III in 1944. However, this image of captivity regulated by defined rules and principles of reciprocity powers breaks down when the many non-white soldiers fighting in Allied uniforms are included. Almost entirely absent from the narrative are the African soldiers in the French Army who were generally treated much more harshly by their German counterparts, as were British colonial forces captured by the Axis in North Africa. Their stories have been all-but lost, but trail-blazing work by Rafael Scheck has served to bring back into focus the massacres carried out in 1940 and the racial prejudice suffered by surviving *tirailleurs sénégalai*s and North African soldiers at the hands of the Nazis.[15]

In complete contrast to the Anglo-French literature, the history and experiences of German prisoners of war have been much better served, both by government-appointed historians and by the historical profession more widely. Their continuing captivity was a major political issue in (West) Germany from 1945 onwards and in 1957, a year after the last prisoners had returned from the Soviet Union, the Federal Republic established a Scientific Commission for the History of German Prisoners of War (often referred to as the Maschke Kommission). Employing some of the country's leading historians, the Commission produced a total of twenty-two volumes over sixteen years covering an extensive number of topics. Its reception was slightly coloured by an original stipulation that texts had to be reviewed by the German Foreign Office before publication to prevent offending foreign powers and were to be available only in research libraries. While the former remained in place, the latter was abandoned, with all the volumes being made available at the end of the project in 1972, and

[13] The film starred Fernandel and was the highest grossing box office film in France in 1959. It told the story of a French prisoner who escape from a farm in Germany with a cow and used her as an excuse to travel homewards.

[14] Christian Fraser, 'How French secretly filmed prison camp life in WWII', <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-23423329> [7 February 2018].

[15] Rafael Scheck, *French Colonial Soldiers in German Captivity during World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

these have become the bedrock on which all subsequent studies have been based.[16] They have been augmented by the work of other German scholars, most notably Rüdiger Overmans who has provided crucial insights into the fate of German prisoners as well as publishing extensively on German prisoner of war policy.[17] The Germans in captivity have also been well served by historians from other countries, beginning with Matthew Barry Sullivan on Britain and Arnold Krammer on the United States.[18] Their work has been followed by many books, articles, and, more recently, websites devoted to individual camps as well a stream of autobiographies and memoirs of captivity.[19] Within the topic, there have also been several controversies about the post-war treatment of German prisoners, all loosely linked to the idea of them as victims of the conflict. Specific accusations of deliberate American ill-treatment and killing of prisoners in occupied Germany emerged in the 1990s but were successfully rebutted both by reference to existing scholarship on the issue and by subsequent research.[20] There were also some questions raised about the French treatment of their prisoners which did have some traction and were backed up by the available mortality statistics but were never portrayed as a concerted policy on the part of a vengeful post-war French administration. More serious were the questions raised about prisoners supposedly in Soviet hands. With the four-power agreement to repatriate all prisoners by the end of 1948, and Moscow then declaring that it had sent back all its prisoners save those serving sentences for war crimes it soon became evident that the number of returnees from the USSR was nowhere near the totals assumed to be in Soviet hands. Not surprisingly, post-war German public perceptions of captivity have concentrated on the victims of Soviet captivity and the German

[16] Rolf Steininger, 'Some Reflections on the Maschke Commission', in Günther Bischof and Stephen Ambrose (eds), *Eisenhower and the German POWs: Facts against Falsehood* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), pp. 171–3.

[17] Rüdiger Overmans, *Soldaten hinter Stacheldraht: Deutsche Kriegsgefangene des Zweiten Weltkriegs* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2000). Rüdiger Overmans, 'Die Kriegsgefangenenpolitik des Deutschen Reiches 1939 bis 1945', in Jörg Echternkamp (ed.), *Die Deutsche Kriegsgesellschaft 1939–1945. Zweiter Halbband: Ausbeutung, Deutungen, Ausgrenzung. Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, Vol. 9 (Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, Munich, 2005), pp. 729–875. ISBN 3-421-06528-4. Rüdiger Overmans, 'Das Schicksal der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen des Zweiten Weltkriegs', in Rolf-Dieter Müller (ed.), *Der Zusammenbruch des Deutschen Reiches 1945. Zweiter Halbband: Die Folgen des Zweiten Weltkrieges. Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, Vol. 10/2 (Munich: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 2008).

[18] Matthew Barry Sullivan, *Thresholds of Peace: Four Hundred Thousand German Prisoners and the People of Britain* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979); Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979).

[19] See, for example, David J. Carter, *Behind Canadian Barbed Wire: Alien, Refugee and Prisoners of War Camps in Canada, 1914–1946* (Elkwater, AL: Eagle Butte Press, 1998); John Melady, *Escape from Canada: The Untold Story of German POWs in Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1981); and Martin Auger, *Prisoners of the Home Front: German POWs and 'Enemy Aliens' in Southern Quebec, 1940–1946* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005).

[20] See especially, Bischof and Ambrose, *Eisenhower and the German POWs.* S. Paul Mackenzie, 'Essay and Reflection: On the Other Losses Debate', *International History Review*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (1992). Arthur L. Smith, 'Der geplante Tod?', in Karl Dietrich Bracher et al. (eds), *Deutschland zwischen Krieg und Frieden* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1991).

cinematic treatment of the topic has reflected this with feature films being focused primarily on *Heimkehrer* from the Soviet Union.[21]

Captivity during the Second World War has also been a major political issue in post-war Italy not least because her servicemen became captives of all the major powers during the conflict. British military successes against Italian forces in the latter's colonies produced the first mass captures—which were soon followed by others during the campaign in North Africa. Prisoners were sent to many parts of the globe, with officers being sent to India while other ranks were dispersed to East Africa, South Africa, Australia, the United States, and the United Kingdom to be used as a welcome addition to the labour supply.[22] This diaspora across the globe was perceived as necessary because keeping the Italians in North Africa was regarded as a security risk and the ordinary soldiers were more useful if they could be employed. The movement of captives by sea had inherent risks and led to some tragic losses of life, for example when the RMS *Laconia* was torpedoed by U-156 off the West African coast on 12 September 1942 and 1,420 Italian prisoners held below decks were killed. While this prompted some Allied limitations on the numbers conveyed on a single ship it did not lead to a change in overall policy. A further complication for the Allies arose after the Italian surrender when the status of their prisoners came into question. The regime under Marshal Badoglio and its remaining forces were now fighting alongside their erstwhile enemies, but designated as co-belligerents rather than allies, a device that allowed the many prisoners taken before 8 September to stay in captivity.

Meanwhile, other elements of the Italian armed forces were caught up in the chaos surrounding their country's surrender, often with murderous consequences, for example when their erstwhile Axis partners turned on them—as in Kefalonia and the Peloponnese. Those that survived, alongside the huge numbers of Italian servicemen that ended up in German hands on the Italian mainland, were designated collectively as Italian Military Internees (IMI) rather than prisoners of war. Only those who threw in their lot with Mussolini's Salò Republic were allowed to remain under arms and the rest were demobilized and then shipped to Germany as forced labourers.[23] As prisoners of the Nazis, the fate of these men fitted better with the post-war image of the Italians as victims of the war and

[21] In this context, see Christiane Wienand, *Returning Memories: Former Prisoners of War in Divided and Reunited Germany* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2015), the films *Liebe 47* (Wolfgang Liebeneiner, 1948), *So weit die Füße tragen* (Hardy Martins, 2001), and the TV series *Am grünen Strand der Spree* (Fritz Umgelter, 1960), all of which were based on plays or novels.

[22] Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich, *The British Empire and its Italian Prisoners of War 1940–1947* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003). Louis E. Keefer, *Italian Prisoners of War in America, 1942–1946: Captives or Allies?* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992). Romain H. Rainero (ed.), *I prigionieri militari durante la seconda guerra mondiale: aspetti e problem storici* (Milan: Marzorati Editore, 1984).

[23] Gerhard Schreiber, *Die italienischer Militärinternierten im deutschen Machtbereich 1943 bis 1945 Verraten—Verachtet—Vergessen* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1990). Gabriele Hammermann, *Zwangarbeit für den 'Verbundeten': Die Arbeits- und Lebensbedingungen der italienischen Militärinternierten in Deutschland 1943–1945* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2002).

epitomized the country fighting for the Western cause in the later stages of the conflict. The same could be said of the last major group of Italian prisoners, namely those who were captured on the Eastern Front by the Soviet Union. Very much like their German counterparts, the uncertainty about the numbers in captivity persisted well after the war was over, with more than 60,000 supposedly unaccounted for. Only 19,000 returned from camps in the late 1940s to become another facet of Italy's contested memory of the Second World War. Their experiences were the subject of extensive political debate between the centre-right and communist parties in the decade after the war, but this dissipated once the last prisoners returned in the 1950s.[24] Nonetheless, their status as victims of Soviet Communism during the Cold War helped reinforce Italy's position as very much within the Western Alliance. Some returnees wrote memoirs, but more scholarly assessments of Italian captivity in the Soviet hands had to wait until the end of the USSR, when more information became available.[25]

As intimated earlier, the experiences of more than five million members of the Soviet armed forces captured by enemy powers has been the least well served by their nation's historians. Criminalized by their leaders for having been taken prisoner and ignored in the narrative of the Great Patriotic War, the survivors were then victimized and ostracized on their return—their sufferings and mortality forgotten.[26] Stalinist contempt for those who had died in enemy hands did not prevent them being included among the millions of dead that the USSR attributed to fascist war crimes, but returnees were forced to travel very different paths from their Allied counterparts. In the post-war Soviet Union, discussion of the prisoners was more or less a taboo subject as it involved discussion of the military disasters of 1941–2, the impact of Order No. 270, the 'treason' of some prisoners in having changed sides, and the fate of returning prisoners at the hands of the NKVD.[27] The Khruschev era saw some mention of the prisoners in official literature on the war, but even the amnesty of convicted prisoners of war in 1957 did not lead to full scale rehabilitation or change their social stigma as traitors and

[24] In this context, see, for example, Democrazia Cristiana, *Mandati in Russia dai Fascisti, trattenuti dai comunisti* (1948). Paolo Robotti, 'Perché non si è fatta luce sulla campagna di Russia: dove sono i soldati dell'ARMIR', *Supplemento all'Unità*, 13 Aug. 1948. Aldo Valori, *La campagna di Russia CSIR, ARMIR 1941–1943* (Rome, 1951). Valdo Zilli, 'Fascisti e anti-fascisti: il trattamento politico dei prigionieri di guerra nell'URSS', *Il ponte*, Vol. 6, No. 11 (November 1950). There was also a veteran's organization, Unione Nazionale Italiana Reduci di Russia.

[25] Maria Teresa Giusti, *I prigionieri italiani in Russia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003). Enrico Reginato, *Dodici anni di prigionia nell'URSS* (Milan: Garzanti, 1965). Nuto Revelli, *La strada del Davai* (Turin: Einaudi, 1966). Emilio Vio Sopranis, *ARMIR—La Tragica Avventura Dell'Armata Italiana in Russia* (Milan: Mursia, 2012).

[26] Thomas Earl Porter, 'Hitler's Rassenkampf in the East: The Forgotten Genocide of Soviet POWs', *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 37, No. 6 (2009), pp. 839–59.

[27] Jörg Osterloh, *Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene 1941–1945 in Spiegel nationaler und internationaler Untersuchungen* (Dresden: Hannah-Arendt-Institut für Totalitarismusforschung, 1995), pp. 38–9.

deserters.[28] This only began to alter in the Gorbachev era and the first mention of Stalin's infamous Order No. 270 appeared in 1988.[29] At the same time, there was a renewed interest in trying to ascertain the exact numbers of prisoners taken during the war and how many of them had died in captivity.[30]

Hitler's Kommissarbefehl that ordered the segregation and 'special treatment' of captured Red Army political commissars had been documented in the Nuremberg Trials immediately after the war, but the fate of ordinary Soviet soldiers in German hands had to wait until the late 1970s when Christian Streit published *Keine Kameraden*, a highly detailed study of Wehrmacht behaviour towards enemy prisoners of war on the Eastern Front. This was the first work to address the appalling levels of mortality suffered by those captured in the first six months of Operation Barbarossa and was soon followed by a second monograph and documentation by Alfred Streim.[31] Given the scope of these studies, it is highly surprising that they were never translated into English—even more so as the subject matter soon became embroiled in a much deeper political debate within the Federal Republic about the role of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front, and specifically its participation in the Holocaust. The exhibition mounted by the Hamburg Institute for Social Research in 1995 served to debunk the myth that German armed forces had fought a clean war against the Soviet Union, albeit that some of the evidence initially cited provided opponents with an opportunity to challenge the veracity of the claims made, and to open the door for attempts to relativize German war crimes with those committed against Germany (and other states) by the Soviet Union.

The specific debate on the fate of the Soviet prisoners of war and the reasons for the horrendous death rates they suffered was then addressed by several leading historians, most notably Rolf Keller, Christian Hartmann, and Rüdiger Overmans.[32] All three looked at how specific military polices, the attitudes of responsible agencies, and individuals as well as localized circumstances conspired

[28] Osterloh, *Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene*, p. 43. As an exception, he notes the work of E. A. Brodskij, 'Osvoboditelnaja borba sovetskichnljudej v fašizkoj Germanii (1943–1945 godov)', *Vosposy Istorii*, No. 3 (1957), pp. 85–99, that studied resistance by Soviet captives inside the German camp system.

[29] Osterloh, *Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene*, p. 67.

[30] V. P. Galitskii, 'Vernite den'gi', *Voenno-istoričeskij Žurnal*, No. 8 (1991), pp. 28–31. V. I. Kozlov, 'O Ljudskich Poterjach Sovetskogo Sojusa v Velikoj Otečestvennoj Vojne 1941–1945 godov', *Istorija SSSR*, No. 2 (1989), pp. 132–9. E. I. Rybkin, 'Mirovozzrenie i voennaja istorija', *Voenno-istoričeskij Žurnal*, No. 3 (1989), pp. 49–55.

[31] Christian Streit, *Keine Kameraden: Die Wehrmacht und die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen 1941–1945* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1978). Alfred Streim, *Die Behandlung sowjetischer Kriegsgefangener in 'Fall Barbarossa': Eine Dokumentation* (Heidelberg: C. F. Müller, 1981).

[32] Rolf Keller, *Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene im Deutschen Reich 1941/42: Behandlung und Arbeitseinsatz zwischen Vernichtungspolitik und kriegswirtschaftlichen Zwägen* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2011). Christian Hartmann, *Wehrmacht in Ostkrieg: Front und militärisches Hinterland 1941/42* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2009). Rüdiger Overmans et al. (eds), *Rotarmisten in deutscher Hand: Dokumente zu Gefangenschaft, Repatriierung und Rehabilitierung sowjetischer Soldaten des Zweites Weltkrieges* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2012).

to bring about the deaths through cold, ill-treatment, or starvation of more than two million men in the early stages of the conflict. They also addressed, either directly or indirectly, the thesis proposed by Christian Gerlach that this was a policy of calculated murder.[33] Apart from these broader syntheses, there have been studies of individual camps in the occupied territories as part of assessments of German military policy in the 'war of annihilation',[34] and of the many camps inside the Reich that held Russian prisoners who were used as slave labourers, a category that included those who ended up in the concentration camp system.[35] Given their numbers in the German war economy, the Soviet prisoners are also integral to many of the histories of forced labour within the Reich as well as the wider debates on nature of warfare on the Eastern Front.

One further issue that became a feature of Western historiography in the 1970s was the fate of those Soviet citizens—many of them former prisoners of war—who had sided with the Germans and then surrendered to the Western Allies at the war's end. They included not only anti-Soviet minorities such as Cossacks, Tatars, and Ukrainians who attempted to further their national interests by siding with the Axis, but also ordinary Russians who put on German uniforms to avoid starvation in the camps.[36] Many hundreds of thousands were handed back to the Soviet authorities under the terms of the Yalta agreement but it was the Cossacks who became a cause célèbre with accusations that British officials deliberately handed them over to the Red Army knowing that they were likely to be killed. Like many of the other sensationalist claims made about prisoners of war, there was a kernel of truth and some questions to be answered about British actions, but the exaggerated and sometimes fallacious construction of the initial arguments was undermined in this instance by a high-profile libel case in the English courts.

[33] Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik Weißrussland 1941–1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999).

[34] In the occupied territories, see Frank Ellis, 'Dulag 205: The German Army's Death Camp for Soviet Prisoners at Stalingrad', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2006) and the chapter on Dulag 240 in Theo Schulte, *The German Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia* (Oxford: Berg, 1989).

[35] On individual camps studies, see among many, Uwe Mai, *Kriegsgefangen in Brandenburg: Stalag III-A in Luckenwalde 1939–1945* (Berlin: Metropol, 1999) and Jörg Osterloh, *Ein ganz normales Lager: Das Kriegsgefangenen-Mannschaftsstammlager Stalag 304 (IV H) Zeithain bei Riesa 1941 bis 1945* (Berlin: Kiepenheuer, 1997); and on Soviet prisoners in concentration camps Reinhard Otto, 'Die Zusammenarbeit von Wehrmacht und Stapo bei der "Aussonderung" sowjetischer Kriegsgefangener in Reich', in Rolf-Dieter Müller and Hans-Erich Volkmann (eds), *Die Wehrmacht: Mythos und Realität* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1999). Hans Coppi, 'Sowjetischer Kriegsgefangene im Konzentrationslager Sachsenhausen', *Jahrbuch für Forschungen zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung*, Vol. 1 (2003). Jerzy Brandhuber, 'Die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen im Konzentrationslager Auschwitz', *Hefte von Auschwitz*, Vol. 4 (1961).

[36] See Mark Elliot, *Pawns of Yalta: Soviet Refugees and America's Role in their Repatriation* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1982). Michael Parrish, 'Soviet Generals in German Captivity: A Biographical Inquiry', *Survey: A Journal of East and West Studies*, Vol. 30 (1989), pp. 66–86. Osterloh, *Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene*, pp. 30–1.

These, then, have been the most high-profile debates on the prisoners of the major belligerent powers, but it should be remembered that there were many other armed forces involved in the conflict and that their servicemen were also taken captive. The most numerous were the Poles, who became victims of both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. With Berlin and Moscow keen to expunge Poland from the map altogether and to engage in widespread ethnic cleansing in their zones of occupation, their Polish prisoners became victims of those policies—civilianized and then deployed as forced labourers. German treatment of prisoners was publicized by the Polish government-in-exile and by one or two post-war authors, but primarily to expose war crimes rather than to reflect on the experiences of men in captivity.[37] Survivors in the USSR were grudgingly handed back to Polish control after June 1941, but the absence of the many officers known to have been in Soviet hands exposed a scandal that was brought to light by the German discovery of mass graves in the Katyn forest in 1943. Ignored by the post-war communist regime in Poland, the fate of these officers dominated the literature in the West until Mikhail Gorbachev admitted Soviet guilt in April 1990.[38] Likewise, the soldiers taken prisoner by both sides in the Winter War and the so-called Continuation War between Finland and the USSR between 1939 and 1944 have also largely been forgotten. Substantial numbers of Soviets fell into Finnish hands in both conflicts, but there was a marked difference in their treatment with a relatively benign regime in the first war being replaced by something more punitive in the second, an apparent contradiction only recently addressed by Finnish historians.[39] In contrast to the soldiers of their Axis allies, the Finns taken prisoner by the Red Army seem to have fared better in Soviet captivity and were repatriated promptly at the end of the conflict.

The final element in the history of prisoners of war relates to the armies surrendered at the end of war. As we have seen, the fate of the Germans has received by far the greatest attention, but what of the officers and soldiers of the other powers involved such as the Hungarians and Romanians? To some extent, their experiences in Soviet hands were hidden by the communist governments of the Cold War era, with a very limited number of sources and histories save for the memoirs of those who subsequently escaped from the communist bloc. A further complication was the forced recruitment of soldiers by the Axis who were then

[37] Szymon Datner, *Crimes against POWs: Responsibility of the Wehrmacht* (Warsaw: Zachodnia Agencja Prasowa, 1964). Polish Ministry of Information, *The German New Order in Poland* (London: Hutchinson, 1942).

[38] See in this context, Claudia Weber, *Krieg der Täter: Die Mass erschießungen von Katyn* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2012).

[39] Lars Westerlund, 'The Mortality Rate of Prisoners of War in Finnish Custody between 1939 and 1944', in Lars Westerlund (ed.), *Prisoners of War Deaths and People Handed over to Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939–1955* (Helsinki: Finnish National Archives, 2008). W. P. and Z. K. Coates, *The Soviet–Finnish Campaign: Military and Political, 1939–1940* (London: Eldon, n.d.). Oula Silvennoinen, 'Limits of Intentionality: Soviet Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees in Finnish Custody', in Tiina Kinnunen and Ville Kivimaki (eds), *Finland in World War II* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

returned to their countries of origin and treated as collaborators. For example, the appreciable numbers of ethnic Germans in Hungary who were recruited in 1944 but ended up in Soviet hands before being released back to their homeland, where they were treated as pariahs and subjected to further periods of punitive forced labour. Among the millions of soldiers wearing German uniforms at the end of the war, there were forced enlistments from annexed territories, such as the so-called 'Malgré nous' from Alsace and Lorraine. However, there were also many non-German volunteers who had freely enlisted in the various foreign units of the Waffen-SS. Most of these men were ultimately returned to their countries of origin by their captors and suffered the consequences of their allegiance to the Axis cause. The main exceptions were those from the Baltic States and Eastern Poland who were held by the Western Powers and not returned to the USSR on the grounds that this would validate Soviet annexations that had taken place after 1 September 1939.

Prisoners of War: Europe 1939–1956

Prisoners of every nationality had their own narratives of military service and captivity. While it is impossible to do justice to their collective histories, let alone to the individual experiences of all twenty million prisoners in a single volume, the intention here is to use a series of case studies to highlight the key elements involved and to introduce, analyse, and refine some of the major debates that have arisen in the existing historiography. The book is divided into three broad parts: captivity in Eastern and Western Europe during the war itself, comparative studies of specific categories of prisoners, and the repatriation and reintegration of prisoners after the war.

The first section begins with the German and Soviet defeat of Poland, and the fate of more than one million Polish servicemen in the following five years. The Polish case contains many specific elements; captivity by two enemy powers, forced civilianization, the dissolution of the Polish state, the lack of outside protection, and the contrasting fates of prisoners in German and Soviet hands—most obviously in the case of the officer corps. However, it also provides some common themes including the development of what might be termed prisoner of war regimes—namely the administrative and practical management of large numbers of men in captivity as well as the need to balance security concerns with using prisoners as a source of labour in the domestic economy.

Following on from this is an analysis of the German treatment of prisoners from the occupied Western European states: Norway, Belgium, the Low Countries, and France. Each nationality was dealt with differently, from the rapid demobilization and release of the Scandinavians, Dutch, and Flemish elements to the long-term incarceration of the francophone Belgians and

French. The history of the latter also includes their role in the relationship between Berlin and France's Pétainist collaborationist government. From 1940 onwards, the Germans also had an appreciable number of British Commonwealth prisoners, mainly taken in the aftermath of Dunkirk. Their experiences, and later those of their American allies, were dictated by the powers' reciprocal adherence to the terms of the Geneva Convention that, while not without its crises, largely protected prisoners on both sides for the duration of the conflict. It is often forgotten that the history of Germans in British hands is, in fact, a history of North American captivity, at least until 1944. The wholesale transport across the Atlantic of Germans considered too dangerous to be kept in the United Kingdom or North Africa meant that their experiences were dictated by the prairies and forests of rural Canada. In the same way, the American military authorities shipped many of its prisoners to the continental United States where they were put to work across the country.

As already indicated, the story of Italians in captivity is complicated by the changing loyalties of their government—from Axis partner to Allied fellow traveller. Their dispersal across four continents can only be described as a diaspora, and the intention here is to show how different their experiences could be—depending on which front they fought on—from the punishing cold and hard labour of Soviet camps endured by those captured by the Red Army to the far more benign conditions in the United States where good weather, good accommodation, and plentiful food was the norm. In the same way, Italian prisoners of the British were spread across the globe and employed by both dominion and colonial governments under a variety of circumstances until the final repatriations took place in 1947.

The experiences of most Western European prisoners contrast with the extremes endured by the Red Army soldiers captured by the Germans during and after Operation Barbarossa. More than two million fell into Nazi hands in the first six months of the campaign and by the spring of 1942, most of them had either been murdered or had succumbed to hunger or disease. Remembered only as statistics of fascist war crimes by the Soviet government, explaining the huge number of deaths has fallen to the German military historians who have attempted to chronicle and analyse the nature of the 'war of annihilation' and who have also looked in detail at the specifics relating to the capture and treatment of enemy soldiers. Although the *Kommissarbefehl* and its impact on political officers in Soviet ranks is well known, it has served to mask the appalling treatment of ordinary soldiers who were either deliberately or accidentally left to starve by German military authorities that were either unwilling or unable to help them. Moreover, the loss of life did not end there and millions more were to fall into German hands before the tide of war turned against the Third Reich. By this stage, although the Hitler regime had fully recognized the value of Soviet prisoner labour in an economy rapidly running out of manpower, the Russians were still

considered as an expendable resource, with poor living and working conditions coupled with ill-treatment by state and private employers being the norm.

The last chapter in this part looks at the very specific circumstances that pertained in the Balkan conflict where the Serbs remained in Axis captivity while other nationalities were permitted to return home or, as in the case of the Croats, to form the basis for an independent satellite state. In the ongoing war in the region, the Germans and Italians were confronted with a mixture of regular and irregular forces. Here the warfare was sometimes akin to that on the Eastern Front, with no quarter being given to captured combatants on either side, but as more Axis forces were taken prisoner by Tito's Partisans, there was the beginning of some negotiation and a departure from the German norm of treating all partisans as *francs-tireurs*. This may have been a function of changing fortunes in the war itself but was replicated (albeit sometimes grudgingly) in other theatres to include the Polish Home Army, the Free French, and French Forces of the Interior (FFI).

Part II looks at three specific types of prisoners from a more overtly comparative perspective. Given the commitment of the Germans to a war of annihilation on the Eastern Front and the resultant horrors associated with captivity, it is hard to imagine that Jews could have fared any worse than their non-Jewish counterparts, but even in the appalling conditions suffered by Red Army soldiers in captivity, Jews were singled out for special treatment. Hitler's order to segregate and hand over Jewish-Bolshevik political officers to the Security Police rapidly escalated into a much wider purge of all Jews captured in Red Army uniforms. They were, as Aron Schneyer described them, the pariahs among the pariahs.[40] Survival in these circumstances was the exception and was achieved either through disguise, help from comrades and friends, specific circumstances, and/or huge slices of luck. In the earlier war against Poland, Jews had again been segregated out from the mass of prisoners, demobilized, and sent home, ensuring that they suffered the same fate as their families during the Holocaust. In complete contrast, Jewish soldiers of the Western Allies were almost invariably left untouched by their Nazi captors—ostensibly protected by their nationality.

Non-white prisoners captured by the Axis were not so well protected. As has already been noted, the many African soldiers deployed by the French suffered extensively at the hands of the Nazis—a discrimination driven partly by the racial precepts of the Nazi state and partly by the memory of the 'black shame' of the early 1920s.[41] For the most part, non-white prisoners were not imprisoned in Germany but held elsewhere—most notably in France. While their treatment was

[40] Aron Schneyer, *Pariah among Pariahs: Soviet-Jewish POWs in German Captivity, 1941–1945* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2016).

[41] Iris Wigger, *The 'Black Horror on the Rhine': Intersections of Race, Nation, Gender and Class in 1920s Germany* (London: Palgrave, 2017).

generally much poorer than that of their white counterparts, there were some exceptions, as for example when Berlin began to court Arab opinion and engaged in a short-term charm offensive towards its Muslim prisoners. The ideology of race within Italian Fascism also underwent a degree of radicalization, as evidenced by the everyday and sometimes vicious racism of Mussolini's soldiers towards both French and British Commonwealth captives which rivalled that of their Axis counterparts.[42] In this context, it should be remembered that it was not just the Axis that encountered non-white combatants. In their successful campaigns in Eritrea and Abyssinia, the British captured many thousands of Italian colonial soldiers who were, for the most part, released almost immediately as being of negligible military value.

Female prisoners of war are almost invariably overlooked in both the military and social histories of the Second World War, but this conflict saw a huge increase in the numbers of women who volunteered or were conscripted into the armed forces. While the Western powers did not deploy women in front line roles, the USSR had large numbers in military units who suffered much the same fate as their male counterparts, especially in the first years of the war. Axis forces were particularly unforgiving when they encountered female combatants, whether in Red Army uniforms or as partisans. Summary executions and sexual violence were commonplace occurrences, but survivors were deployed as slave labourers until the end of the war and then subjected to further discrimination by their Soviet liberators when the war was over. Equally invisible are the women mobilized by Nazi Germany to substitute for missing manpower in the latter stages of the conflict. While the Hitler regime espoused an ideology where German women were restricted to the domestic sphere, even in 1939 the armed forces already had female secretarial and communications staff and by 1944–5 this had grown to the point where upwards of 500,000 *Wehrmachtshelferinnen* were deployed in all manner of functions including the operation of anti-aircraft gun batteries. When Germany was overrun, many of these women in uniform managed to disappear back into civilian life without being detected, but others were captured and interned by Allied forces, as were substantial numbers of German Red Cross sisters and nurses. As with so many of their male counterparts, their subsequent fates were determined primarily by the circumstances and location of their capture, and the attitudes of their captors.

Part III charts the liberation, repatriation, and reintegration of prisoners taken during the conflict. Often ignored by historians because narratives of captivity were deemed to end with liberation, the consequences for returning prisoners could be profound. Here again, the relatively seamless experiences of British and American servicemen and their homecoming is contrasted first with the guarded

[42] See Robert C. Gordon, 'Race', in Richard Bosworth (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Handbook of Fascism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 309.

welcome afforded by the French state and society to the returning 'Army of 1940' and then with the suspicion and victimization suffered by the Soviet prisoners liberated by the Red Army or handed back to them by the Western powers. The history of the Soviets is by far the most harrowing and charts Moscow's attempts to screen all its servicemen through filtration camps to weed out those who might have collaborated with the fascists or were just tainted by some contact with the West. Accurate figures are difficult to establish, but tens of thousands fell victim to immediate NKVD retribution while many others were placed in punishment battalions within the army or sent to forced labour camps. For the remainder, there was a gradual reintegration into civilian life, but with a stigma attached to their record that remained after the end of Stalinism and was even still evident beyond the demise of the USSR.

The final chapters deal with the Axis soldiers already in Allied captivity or who surrendered at the war's end. The history of the Germans has all manner of anomalies. For example, the fact that soldiers, sailors, and airmen captured by the Western Powers before the cessation of hostilities remained in captivity while those handed over by their commanders on 8 May 1945 were rapidly recategorized, screened, and then released. While this was done for pragmatic reasons by Allied forces overwhelmed by the task of reorganizing and administering a shattered Germany, it was undoubtedly inequitable—and made more so by the subsequent reallocation of the remaining prisoners as a labour force in the United Kingdom and increasingly as reparations labour for formerly occupied countries to the point where France held more German prisoners than any other Western state. Although there were controversies surrounding the treatment of Germans in Western captivity, they were increasingly overlooked as the many Germans supposedly in the USSR became an issue within the politics of the Cold War. The agreement reached by the Four Powers' foreign ministers that all prisoners of war should be returned home was largely respected by all sides but left unresolved the fate of upwards of a million men unaccounted for but still assumed to be in Soviet hands. Moscow admitted to retaining around 20,000 who were deemed to have been war criminals and were thus serving sentences for their crimes, but there was no accounting for any others. What had happened to them became a domestic issue in both the Federal and the Democratic Republic that transcended the return of the last prisoners from the Soviet Union in 1956, with persistent rumours that prisoners were still being held in labour camps.

This concentration on German captives should not be allowed to mask the fate of other nationalities also in Soviet hands. A similar mismatch between the numbers assumed to be prisoners and final tally of returnees occurred in the Italian case, but there were other Axis forces of whom much less is known, most notably the Romanians taken before the country changed sides on 23 August 1944 or the Hungarians captured on the Eastern Front and when their country was overrun in the last months of the war. Their numbers, mortality rates,

repatriation, and post-war histories were largely cloaked by the communist takeovers in those countries, leaving many questions unanswered. Moreover, those that did finally return were considered suspect and suffered further persecution and stigmatization by their countrymen.

Prelude: Protections for Prisoners of War before 1939

Before examining how prisoners of war fared during the Second World War, it is important to place the whole issue in context. Prisoner-taking had existed even in antiquity, its purpose being either for later ceremonial slaughter, ransom, or for the victims' use as slaves.[43] In general, defeated armies could expect to be slaughtered or enslaved by the victors, and in the medieval period this remained the fate of most ordinary soldiers even after noble officers were increasingly seen as having value for their captors and ransoms became more common. The sixteenth century saw the beginnings of bilateral agreements between belligerents on the treatment of sick, wounded, and prisoners of war and Ernst Gurlt counted no less than 291 between 1581 and the Geneva Convention of 1864.[44] Above all else this shows that concern for those on the battlefield was not an invention of the mid-nineteenth century but developed over time, albeit in a piecemeal fashion. Indeed, some of these bilateral arrangements, for example the Treaty of Amity and Commerce between Prussia and the United States in 1795 had provisions for prisoners of war that went well beyond those established by international treaties more than a hundred years later.[45] By the late eighteenth century, exchanges were becoming more the norm although with monetary adjustments if the numbers involved were unequal, but there were also occasions where specific prisoners were retained, for example the seamen captured during the various phases of the Napoleonic Wars. Deemed to have specific expertise and scarcity value, both sides were loath to hand them back to the enemy, and by 1814, the total number of French prisoners in British hands was around 80,000. The French Revolutionary Wars have therefore been portrayed as a watershed, marking the beginning of an era when prisoners of war were retained for long periods—and focused attention on the treatment of those prisoners by their captors.[46]

[43] Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War*, pp. 11–13.

[44] Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War*, p. 16, cites Ernst Gurlt, *Zur Geschichte der internationalen und freiwilligen Krankenpflege im Krieg* (Leipzig: Vogel, 1873).

[45] Vourkoutiotis, *Prisoners of War*, pp. 18–19, cites American National Red Cross, 'Historical Background of International Agreements Relating to Prisoners of War' (Washington DC, 15 February 1942).

[46] Stephen C. Neff, 'Prisoners of War in International Law: The Nineteenth Century', in Sybille Scheipers (ed.), *Prisoners in War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 57. Neff also highlights the decline in the use of parole—with its last large-scale occurrence during the American Civil War, see p. 61.

The gradual shift towards greater concern for the sick and wounded became the basis for the first multilateral treaty, the (First) Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field, and the parallel creation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in 1864. While the latter owed much to the vision of its creator, Henri Dunant, after his experience of the battle of Solferino in 1859 that left more than 30,000 casualties on the battlefield, there was also a more general desire among states to ensure more 'civilized' and 'humane' warfare in an era when armies were larger and military technology more deadly than ever before.[47] This trend towards codification was also evident during the American Civil War when Professor Franz (Francis) Lieber had been asked by the Commander-in-Chief of Union forces to update the 1806 Articles of War and produced what became first modern codification of the laws of war, covering martial law, military jurisdiction, the treatment of spies, deserters, and prisoners of war. Issued by President Lincoln in April 1863, in part to highlight the Confederacy's refusal to treat black soldiers as prisoners, this remained a unilateral document and did nothing to improve the lot of Union captives in the South, including the infamous conditions at Andersonville camp in 1864–5.[48] That said, its impact was to be profound and it acted as the basis for two later international conventions that framed the laws of war in the twentieth century.

The first was initiated by the International Executive Committee for the Amelioration of Conditions of Prisoners of War under the guiding hand of the indefatigable Henri Dunant. Prompted primarily by the events of the Franco-Prussian War, this meeting of experts took place in Paris in early 1874 and produced a code of 146 articles that was ultimately amalgamated with a similar treatise produced independently by the Russians at the behest of Tsar Alexander II. The Russian ruler had been clear in his own motivation, seeing dangers in the developments of new military techniques and armaments and advocating the measures to attenuate the effects and cruelties of warfare but he was also aware of the potential for internal disturbances in his own country.[49] A subsequent conference in the Belgian capital took place between 27 July and 27 August but included only diplomatic representatives and excluded other interested parties, most notably Dunant's International Executive Committee.[50] Both documents

[47] Caroline Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream: War History and the History of the Red Cross* (London: HarperCollins, 1998), p. 19.

[48] See Rick Beard, 'The Lieber Codes', *The New York Times*, 24 April 2013. Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field, General Order No. 100, 23 April 1863.

[49] Yvonne de Pourtalès and Roger-H. Durand, 'Henry Dunant, Promoter of the 1874 Brussels Conference, Pioneer of Diplomatic Protection for Prisoners of War', *International Review of the Red Cross Archive*, Vol. 15, No. 167 (February 1975), p. 72. Danièle Bujard, 'The Geneva Convention of 1864 and the Brussels Conference of 1874', *International Review of the Red Cross Archive*, Vol. 14, No. 163 (October 1974), pp. 528–9.

[50] De Pourtalès and Durand, 'Henry Dunant', p. 78.

had been heavily influenced by the Lieber Code and the resulting Brussels Declaration contained fifty-six articles and was signed by a total of fifteen states albeit not ratified by any of them.[51] It nevertheless indicated a continuing international desire to codify international law in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War where elements of both 'old' and 'new' warfare had created additional problems—in the latter case the military authority over the territory of the enemy state, siege and bombardment and who should be considered as a belligerent where there was a prevalence of irregular forces and so-called *francs-tireurs*.[52] Thus while much of its content related to the differentiation between soldiers and civilians and their treatment in new types of warfare, the Declaration also set out some clear guidelines on who was entitled to be a prisoner of war and how they should be treated. For example, it codified the pre-existing notions that sovereign states were responsible for the upkeep and humane treatment of prisoners and not individual captors.[53] It also asserted the rights of captors to compel prisoners to work, to punish those who attempted to escape, and to carry out reprisals against captives for acts committed against their soldiers in captivity. While the unratified Declaration was not binding on any of its signatories, it is notable that the Russian government stated that it would uphold its provisions during the war with the Ottoman Empire some three years later.

It was not until the end of the century that the topic was revisited, and then as part of a much wider international gathering with a much larger agenda. The Hague Conference of 1899 was convened by the Russian Foreign Minister, Count Mikhail Nikolayevich Muravyov, at the behest of Tsar Nicholas II to discuss three specific topics: limitations on the expansion of armed forces and a reduction in the deployment of new armaments, the application of the principles of the Geneva Convention of 1864 to naval warfare, and a revision of the Brussels Declaration regarding the laws and customs of land warfare. Representatives of twenty-six nations met in The Hague between 18 May and 29 July and while they failed to agree on the Russians' primary objective—that of arms limitation—they did reach agreement on other aspects, including the refinement of the Brussels Declaration.

[51] Eyal Benvenisti and Doreen Lustig, 'Monopolizing War: Codifying the Laws of War to Reassert Governmental Authority, 1856–1874', *The European Journal of International Law*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2020), p. 153. Tracey Leigh Dowdeswell, 'The Brussels Peace Conference of 1874 and the Modern Laws of Belligerent Qualification', *Osgoode Hall Law Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (2017), p. 806. Its full title was 'Projet d'une Declaration Internationale concernant les Lois et Coutumes de la Guerre (Texte Modifié par la Conférence)', *Supplement to the London Gazette* (24 October 1874). De Pourtalès and Durand, 'Henry Dunant', p. 74.

[52] D.B., 'The Brussels International Declaration of 1874 Concerning the Laws and Customs of War', *International Review of the Red Cross Archive*, Vol. 14, No. 164 (November 1974), p. 617. Dowdeswell, 'The Brussels Peace Conference', pp. 808–9, 812–13. While the humanitarian impulse was clear, it has also been argued that this was an attempt by the powers to outlaw civilian involvement in warfare and insurrections as had happened during the Paris Commune. Benvenisti and Lustig, 'Monopolizing War', pp. 168–9.

[53] Heather Jones, 'Revising the Laws of War on Prisoners of War in the Twentieth Century: Introduction', *War in History*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (2016), p. 409. Neff, 'Prisoners of War', pp. 62–4.

Much of the Brussels document was adopted wholesale into the subsequent Hague Convention of 1899 to the extent that its authors inserted a reference to the Declaration in the preamble.[54] Nevertheless, there were some important additions such as the stipulations that prisoners were to receive the same rations and treatment as the soldiers of the captor power, that officers were to be paid at the same rates as their equivalent rank in the captor's armed forces and that prisoners were afforded freedom of religion and the opportunity to make wills.[55] In addition, captor powers were required to establish inquiry offices to respond to requests for information, (private) relief societies were given access to prisoners, and any gifts or relief supplies were to be admitted free of all duties.[56] These were all substantive changes to earlier codes and unlike these previous documents, the first Hague Convention with respect to the Laws and Customs of War on Land (1899) was adopted and ratified by most major European powers within a year. Its successor Convention of 1907 did little more than reiterate its provisions with regards to prisoners of war but did extend the definition of a combatant to include militias and volunteer corps if they conformed to certain norms—such as bearing insignia, being under an obvious chain of command, carrying arms openly, and themselves abiding by the laws and customs of war.[57] This was designed to address the vexed question of the status of irregular forces and how they might be treated. Yet despite this far more systematic codification of the laws and customs of war, the Conventions left open the question of how the maintenance of their provisions was to be monitored and how infractions might be punished. In terms of monitoring, one obvious element was the involvement of the neutral ICRC, whose representatives had played an important ameliorating and mediating role during the Franco-Prussian War and whose existence had spawned national Red Cross societies in Europe and elsewhere.[58] How breaches of the Conventions were to be dealt with remained unspecified.

The first major test of the signatories' commitment to this new form of international law came during the Great War where, ostensibly, many of the provisions made by the Hague Conventions were followed by the major belligerent powers, and steps were also taken bilaterally to deal with matters that had not been considered previously, for example on the exchange of the seriously wounded or mentally ill, on the limits of what constituted prohibited war work,

[54] Jean De Bruecker, 'La Déclaration de Bruxelles de 1874 concernant les lois et coutumes de la guerre', *Chronique de politique étrangère*, Institut Royal des Relations Internationales, Brussels, January 1974, p. 86.

[55] Neff, 'Prisoners of War', p. 65.

[56] Neff, 'Prisoners of War', p. 68.

[57] The Hague Laws and Customs of War on Land (IV) October 18, Annex to the Convention: Regulations Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land, Section 1 On Belligerents, Chapter 1 The Qualifications of Belligerents, Article 1.

[58] Neff, 'Prisoners of War', p. 69.

and minimum standards of nutrition and accommodation.[59] Yet while the nominal implementation of the Conventions was widespread, it hid inconsistencies and anomalies that were detrimental and sometimes fatal to men in captivity. While officers were well protected by their rank and status, ordinary soldiers were forced to work—firstly to impose discipline and latterly because the war economy necessitated it. Conditions could be harsh in the extreme, yet no worse than those experienced by civilians. For example, food supplies in the central powers deteriorated over time and rations were cut to the point where prisoners working in industry without access to parcels from home could become seriously malnourished. Not surprisingly, those employed in agriculture fared appreciably better. Working conditions were also affected by existing norms, for example in Germany and Austria-Hungary where officers and NCOs were permitted to starve or beat their men whereas this was prohibited in most other military codes. These cultures also permeated into the civil sphere, with employers increasingly adopting the same tactics as conditions in the economy worsened towards the end of the war—leading to the German government almost completely abandoning the Hague principles.[60] Despite this, the mortality figures for British and French prisoners in German hands was only about 3 per cent but Romanian and especially Russian prisoners fared appreciably worse than their Western European counterparts.

Adherence to the terms of the Hague Conventions was better in Britain and in France, although the latter reportedly discriminated against captives from Alsace-Lorraine, Schleswig-Holstein, and Prussian Poland who maintained their German nationality. In segregated camps they were given the harshest conditions and often beaten. Individual labour battalions also gained a reputation for ill-treating their men and at least 10,000 Germans were sent to work in North Africa and placed under African supervision—a racial insult that did not go unnoticed in Berlin where there was already outrage about the French deploying coloured troops on the Western Front in a 'white man's war'.[61] Reprisals involving 30,000 French prisoners being sent to Courland prompted Spanish mediation and the return of prisoners on both sides. Elsewhere in Europe, conditions could be much worse. There were major outbreaks of typhus in Russian camps in 1915–16 before pressure from neutral states prompted major policy changes but the mortality of Austro-Hungarian prisoners (18%) and Germans (15%) was still much higher than the 3 per cent suffered by the British and French in German hands. The Italians captured by Habsburg forces also suffered disproportionately with nearly 20 per cent dying in captivity. Part of this can be attributed to the systematic looting of prisoners and their Red Cross food parcels by the Austrians even before

[59] Alan R. Kramer, 'Prisoners in the First World War', in Scheipers, *Prisoners in War*, p. 77.
[60] Kramer, 'Prisoners in the First World War', pp. 78–9.
[61] Dick van Galen Last with Ralf Futselaar, *Black Shame: African Soldiers in Europe, 1914–1922* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 162. Kramer, 'Prisoners in the First World War', p. 80.

the transport system collapsed in the winter of 1917–18 but was also the result of the Italian government's refusal to send collective food deliveries as it regarded its captured forces as cowards and traitors for having fallen into enemy hands.[62]

In all of these cases, the efficiency of national prisoner of war regimes could have a marked bearing on the fate of captives in their hands, but, as the Italian case indicates, state concern (or its absence) for its men could also make a fundamental difference to their chances of survival. One other issue unaddressed by the Hague Conventions was the grey area between the moment of surrender/capture and the point when the individual was formally a prisoner and thus protected by international law. In this period which might last from a few hours to many days, prisoners could be subject to ill-treatment or even summary execution by the forces capturing them. While there are some documented cases of wounded prisoners being killed on the battlefield, the suggestions that this was endemic has not been substantiated.[63] As the war descended into a stalemate and increasing numbers of conscripts were called to the colours, all the states involved had to adjust to new circumstances including the new responsibilities engendered by public concern for their men in captivity. This could involve negotiating with the enemy on the precise workings of the Hague Conventions, trying to ensure exchanges of the sick and wounded, and organizing aid for those in enemy camps.

Other features of the conflict were the diplomatic interventions carried out by nominated protecting powers. This type of engagement by neutral states had begun during the Franco-Prussian War but was widely used throughout the Great War. Initially, the United States fulfilled this role for Britain, France, Germany, and Austria-Hungary until she entered the war and the mandates were transferred, mainly to Spain, the Netherlands, or Switzerland.[64] Apart from maintaining channels of communication between the belligerents, the diplomats were also charged with oversight of prisoners and civilians in enemy hands. As such, their role overlapped with that of the ICRC in monitoring and reporting on conditions in prisoner of war camps, organizing relief supplies, and addressing specific complaints in individual camps. Beyond this, international charities also became actively involved in prisoner relief, most notably the YMCA and the Quakers, while national Red Cross societies and many other private charitable bodies could be found funding aid to men in captivity.[65] In Britain, this appears to

[62] Kramer, 'Prisoners in the First World War', pp. 83–4.

[63] Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (London: Granta, 1999). Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (London: Penguin 1998) and Niall Ferguson, 'Prisoner-Taking and Prisoner-Killing in the Age of Total War: Towards a Political Economy of Military Defeat', *War in History*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2004), pp. 148–92. Kramer, 'Prisoners in the First World War', pp. 84–5.

[64] See Richard B. Speed III, *Prisoners, Diplomats, and the Great War: A Study in the Diplomacy of Captivity* (New York: Greenwood, 1990), pp. 20, 32–3.

[65] See, for example, Kenneth Steuer, *Pursuit of an 'unparalleled opportunity': American YMCA and Prisoner of War Diplomacy among the Central Power Nations during World War I, 1914–1923* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

have been organized both locally, such as the Barnsley Prisoner of War Committee, or by individual regiments.[66]

There were other features that only became apparent in the aftermath of war, for example the fates of prisoners forced to fend for themselves when captor states collapsed—as happened in 1918—or trapped by other conflicts, such as the Russians in Central Europe and the Germans and Austrians in Siberia who were unable to return home because of the Russian Civil War.[67] Concerns over the ill-treatment of prisoners also manifested themselves in the Treaty of Versailles where articles 228–30 specifically allowed for the prosecution of those deemed guilty of war crimes. However, although 14 per cent of the 1,059 charges against individual Germans related to crimes against prisoners, the courts established in Leipzig proved unwilling to impose more than the lightest sentences. So aggravated were the French and Belgians by what they regarded as a farce that they conducted *in absentia* trials of their own—something that merely 'prolonged and exacerbated the resentment and bitterness felt by all sides'.[68]

In the aftermath of the 'war to end all wars', there was a sense that the Hague Conventions had done much to ameliorate and to regulate the conditions of prisoners of war but that more needed to be done. Although the enthusiasm for multilateral treaties, the so-called 'pactomania' of the 1920s, reached its apogee in the 1928 Kellogg–Briand Pact designed to 'eliminate war as an instrument of national policy', the treatment of prisoners of war was the only issue in the existing laws on war to be updated in the inter-war period.[69] Other conventions, such as those banning the use of chemical warfare, related to aspects of warfare previously unknown. The 1929 Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War was initiated by the ICRC and has traditionally been portrayed as little more than a refinement and extension of the Hague Conventions. Indeed, this was one major element of the process as it involved incorporating many of the issues dealt with either bilaterally or multilaterally during the Great War, but there were innovations, for example the outright prohibition of reprisals against prisoners contained in article 2 of the Convention. While all sides were keen to prevent the escalations seen in the previous conflict, there had been strong pressure for this to continue to be dealt with on a bilateral basis—not least because the threat of retaliation was seen by states as a major protection for their men in captivity.[70] Nevertheless, the measure was agreed by all parties, as was the clear mandate given to both the ICRC and

[66] Barbara Hately-Broad, *War and Welfare: British Prisoner of War Families 1939–45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 9.

[67] Neville Wylie, 'The 1929 Prisoner of War Convention and the Building of the Inter-war Prisoner of War Regime', in Scheipers, *Prisoners in War*, p. 92.

[68] Wylie, 'The 1929 Prisoner of War Convention', pp. 93, 102.

[69] Timothy L. Schroer, 'The Emergence and Early Demise of Codified Racial Segregation of Prisoners of War under the Geneva Conventions of 1929 and 1949', *Journal of the History of International Law*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2013), p. 56.

[70] Wylie, 'The 1929 Prisoner of War Convention', p. 98.

protecting powers to oversee the workings of the Convention and to resolve disputes where possible. Less clear cut was the support given to related measures, such as the right to inspect prisoners wherever they were held and to speak to representatives in private—both measures designed to prevent breaches of the Convention being hidden.[71]

While the terms of the 1929 Convention undoubtedly rectified some of the perceived faults of its predecessors, it still left a great many unanswered questions. Mechanisms for monitoring were only as good as the captor powers allowed them to be and the whole edifice continued to rely on reciprocity between contracting parties, but there was no provision for conflicts where only one side had ratified the Convention. With Japan not ratifying and the Soviet Union being absent from the process, two major powers remained outside the fold, although at the time there were expectations that both could be persuaded to agree in the longer term. The Convention was also essentially predicated on wars between 'civilized' nations and made no provision for colonial wars or wars with 'non-white' peoples.[72] This implied that only some soldiers were worthy of protection and that individual states could decide for themselves and in what circumstances its adversaries were to be afforded the benefits of the Geneva principles.[73] More specific was article 9 of the Convention which was adopted almost without discussion. It specifically stated that 'belligerents shall, so far as possible, avoid assembling in a single camp, prisoners of different races or nationalities'.

All these precedents; the treaties, the military traditions, and working practices of the major powers established or modified by the Great War, were of major importance in understanding how prisoners fared in the wars of 1939–45. When confronted with the reality of a new conflict, every belligerent nation looked to its earlier experiences. For the countries involved in the Great War, it was a case of revisiting what had been done before and sometimes even employing the same personnel who had served previously. For other belligerents and for states declaring their neutrality it involved governments and military establishments examining what their roles and responsibilities were as the Continent was embroiled in conflict for the second time in little more than twenty years.

[71] Wylie, 'The 1929 Prisoner of War Convention', p. 101.
[72] Schroer, 'The Emergence', p. 54.
[73] Wylie, 'The 1929 Prisoner of War Convention', p. 104.

PART I

CAPTIVITY IN EASTERN AND WESTERN EUROPE

2

The Polish Campaign and the Winter War 1939–1940

Portents for the Future

The Polish Armed Forces in German Captivity

For many decades after the Second World War, discussion of Polish soldiers taken prisoner by Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia was dominated by the debate over the responsibility for the deaths of some 15,000 Polish officers at Katyn and other locations inside the Soviet Union.[1] Discovered in mass graves by the Germans in 1943, their murder at the hands of the NKVD became a cause célèbre for Polish exiles in the West while Poland was under communist rule and was only resolved by President Gorbachev's handing over of documents in April 1990 and by a subsequent admission of Soviet guilt by the Russian Parliament in 2010.[2] This focus on the fate of one section of the officer corps, however extreme, overshadowed almost entirely any discussion of what happened to the hundreds of thousands of other Polish soldiers who found themselves in either German or Soviet captivity after the war of 1939. Their treatment was governed by the ideological, security, and economic concerns of the capturing powers that led directly to brutality and countless deaths. In both Germans and Soviet hands, they were included in the schemes for mass deportation and economic slavery that also saw millions of Polish civilians deported from their homes to work in the fields and factories of the victorious powers, often in the most extreme of conditions and from which many failed to survive.

Although much attention has been paid to Hitler's 'war of annihilation' against the Soviet Union as marking the break with the norms of warfare associated with the Geneva Convention, there is evidence that elements of the 'criminal' behaviour associated with that war had developed incrementally during and after the Polish

[1] Edmund Nowak, 'The Vicissitudes of the Polish Prisoners of War in the Two Totalitarian Systems on the Years 1939–1945: Similarities and Differences', in Marianne Neerland Soleim (ed.), *Prisoners of War and Forced Labourers: Histories of War and Occupation* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), pp. 108–9, 122–4.

[2] See Claudia Weber, *Krieg der Täter: Die Mass erschießungen von Katyn* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2012). Esther B. Fein, 'Upheaval in the East: Gorbachev hands over Katyn Papers', *New York Times*, 14 April 1990. Tom Parfitt, 'Russian Parliament admits guilt over Polish massacres', *The Guardian*, 26 November 2010.

Prisoners of War: Europe: 1939–1956. Bob Moore, Oxford University Press.
DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198840398.003.0002

campaign of 1939.[3] Both Germany and Poland had ratified the Geneva Convention and it might have been expected that its terms would be upheld. However, from the very beginning, the nature of the warfare was framed by rules dictated from Berlin and reinforced by the Nazi regime's ideology and propaganda as well as the predispositions of the Reich's soldiers. Any Polish expectations that German behaviour would follow the relatively benign patterns of 1914 were soon cruelly dispelled; unprotected towns were bombed, civilians strafed on the streets, and buildings were indiscriminately destroyed.[4]

The German pincer attack on Poland was completed in just over two weeks, leaving most of the Polish land army surrounded. Within days, around 400,000 men were taken prisoner, including approximately 16,000 officers.[5] With the Soviet attack from the east beginning on 17 September, the Polish Commander-in-Chief, Inspector-General Edward Śmigly-Rydz, felt he had little option but to order his remaining forces to retreat into neutral territory in Lithuania, Hungary, or Romania.[6] The last Polish units on home soil surrendered on 6 October 1939, by which time the whole country was under either German or Soviet control. After the capitulation, contemporary estimates suggested that 694,000 Polish servicemen had been taken captive by the Germans, with 140,000 subsequently released, and 300,000 taken by the Russians.[7] However, these initial figures were

[3] Albert Seaton, *The German Army 1933–1945* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982), p. 119 notes that the national and moral degeneration of the German army began in Poland and that 'the time was not far off when the German Army itself was, on Hitler's order, to carry out the mass shootings of prisoners'.

[4] Tomasz Szarota, 'Poland under German Occupation, 1939–1941: A Comparative Survey', in Bernd Wegner (ed.), *From Peace to War: Germany, Soviet Russia and the World, 1939–1941* (Providence, RI:/ Oxford: Berghahn, 1997), p. 53.

[5] Nowak, 'The Vicissitudes', p. 110 gives an estimate of 440,000, made up of 420,000 other ranks, 17,000 officers including 33 generals and one rear-admiral, and around 3,500 officer cadets.

[6] Overmans, 'Die Kriegsgefangenenpolitik', p. 743.

[7] These figures are far from reliable. The Polish Ministry of Information, *The German New Order in Poland* (London: Hutchinson, 1942), p. 117 gives the figure of 30,000 officers and 664,000 other ranks—or a total of 694,000—citing a statement by Hitler as evidence. This total is repeated by i.a. Alexander B. Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland: Blitzkrieg, Ideology and Atrocity* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003), p. 179. Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, *Nazism 1919–1945*, Vol. 3: *Foreign Policy, War and Racial Extermination* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1988), p. 758, cites Klaus A. Maier et al., *Das Deutsche Reich und der Weltkrieg*, Vol. 2.: *Die Errichtung der Hegemonie auf dem europäischen Kontinent* (Stuttgart, 1979), p. 133. See also Klaus A. Maier et al., *Germany and the Second World War*, Vol. 2: *Germany's Initial Conquests in Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), p. 124. Conversely Overmans, 'Die Kriegsgefangenenpolitik', p. 743 gives a total of 400,000 'taken prisoner' but points out that the Germans also arrested 200,000 'suspicious elements' who were probably better categorized as civilians. Edmund Nowak, 'Les Prisonniers de guerre polonais en captivité allemande et soviétique dans la Seconde Guerre mondiale: points communs et différences', in Jean-Claude Catherine, *La Captivité des prisonniers de guerre: histoire, art et mémoire, 1939–1945. Pour une approche européenne* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008), p. 42 cites Danuta Kisielewicz, *Oficerowie polscy w niewoli niemieckiej w czasie II Wojny Swiatowej* (Opole: Uniwersytet Opolski, 1998), who gives Polish figures of 420,000 soldiers and around 17,000 officers. Andrzej Toczewski, 'Cooperation between the Soviet Union and the Third Reich in Exchanges of Polish Populations and Prisoners of War in the Years 1939–1941', *Polish Review*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (1992), p. 212 gives a much lower figure of 130,242 Polish officers and other ranks in Soviet captivity.

complicated by a lack of detailed information and the fact that around 100,000 Polish soldiers had managed to escape to neutral territory or join Allied forces elsewhere in Europe.[8]

During the five weeks of conflict, there were numerous accounts of atrocities committed by German soldiers against their Polish counterparts. SS units, most notably the *Totenkopfverbände* 'Oberbayern' and 'Thuringen', were widely thought to have been responsible for the murder of military prisoners. However, such crimes were by no means restricted to the SS. For example, a German motorized infantry unit having been under sniper fire and having suffered casualties, subsequently took some 300 uniformed Poles prisoner at Ciepielow.[9] The commanding officer, Colonel Wessel, then asserted that he was dealing with partisans. One of the German soldiers recounted what happened next.

> He forced them to take off their coats. Well, now they looked more like partisans. Their braces too, were cut off, presumably to prevent them escaping. Then he ordered the prisoners to march along the edge of the road in a line. The question was where were they being led? Back to the transports, who would shortly hand them over to the assembly point?
>
> Five minutes later I hear the clatter of a dozen German machine pistols. I hurried towards them and saw, 100 metres to the rear, 300 shot Polish prisoners lying in the ditch by the road.[10]

This was reputedly not an isolated case, suggesting that some elements in the German Army had already abandoned any pretence at adherence to the conventions on the treatment of prisoners, although it is instructive that the commanding officer found it necessary to designate his victims as 'partisans' rather than regular soldiers—and therefore not protected by the laws of war—before having them killed. Evidence of the army being out of control can also be found in the order issued by the Chief of Army Group V, General (later Field Marshal) Wilhelm List on 18 September 1939 prohibiting looting, raping of women, burning of synagogues, and the shooting of Jews. In part this may have been the High Command trying to distance itself and its men from the wholesale crimes being committed by the SS in the occupied territories, but it also provides evidence that regular troops

[8] Nowak, 'The Vicissitudes', p. 116 gives a figure of 230,000 to 250,000.

[9] Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, pp. 183–4. Charles W. Sydnor Jr, *Soldiers of Destruction: The SS Death's Head Division, 1933–1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 41.

[10] Datner, *Crimes Against POWs*, pp. 24–5. An alternative translation can be found in Bernd Boll, Hannes Heer, and Walter Manoschek, 'Prelude to a Crime: The German Army in the National Socialist State, 1933–1939', in Hamburg Institute for Social Research (ed.), *The German Army and Genocide: Crimes against War Prisoners, Jews and Other Civilians, 1939–1944* (New York: New Press, 1999), p. 25.

were already engaging in these activities.[11] This perception can be seen in a contemporary report from a German lieutenant colonel:

> . . . the first days of the war have already shown that the troops and that part of the officers inexperienced in war were either not taught at all, or insufficiently trained in peacetime. The instinctive nervousness and corresponding uninhibited shootings and incendiarism shames the discipline and reputation of the army . . .[12]

Szymon Datner, in his extensive investigation of Wehrmacht crimes against prisoners of war, recorded at least sixty-four separate instances of Polish prisoners being shot in captivity and argues that although the treatment of Polish POWs was more or less in accordance with 'the civilized customs of war', there were nonetheless many examples of unpunished violations.[13] The Polish government-in-exile also published details of a number of atrocities, For example, the Germans captured a detachment from the 12th Infantry Regiment near Rybnik in Silesia and instead of taking them into captivity, ordering them to lie down on the ground and then ran tanks over them.[14] Likewise, several hundred survivors from the defence of the Modlin fortress near Warsaw were shot by their German captors.[15] As the campaign progressed, the crimes continued. There were many examples of prisoners being shot long after capture, for example at Serock (Świecie District) where Poles quartered in a field overnight on 5 September were machine-gunned by their captors, and around 100 soldiers of the 4th Regiment of Podhale Fusiliers were herded into a barn at Urycze that was then set alight with petrol and hand grenades.[16] Even aid stations and Red Cross facilities were not always respected, thus at a barn near Szwarocin, German tanks deliberately shelled the building and then drove over or machine-gunned any who had managed to escape.[17]

Datner also lists other cases of prisoners being shot by the Germans where there had been some supposed provocation, for example when a captive attempted to use a concealed weapon. However, the number of unprovoked murders of defenceless Polish servicemen, and the number of different German units cited as responsible, suggests that at the very least the Wehrmacht had little regard for the niceties of the Geneva Convention if it did not suit them, and responsibility lay with the context in which the campaign took place, and the role of the

[11] Seaton, *The German Army*, p. 119.
[12] Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, p. 181 cites the War Diary entry for 3 September 1939 by Lieutenant-Colonel Hartwig Pohlmann.
[13] Datner, *Crimes against POWs*, pp. 20–1.
[14] Polish Ministry of Information, *The German New Order in Poland* (London: Purnell, 1942), p. 115.
[15] Polish Ministry of Information, *The German New Order*, pp. 115–16. Datner, *Crimes against POWs*, p. 31.
[16] Datner, *Crimes against POWs*. p. 28. [17] Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, pp. 181–2.

commanding officers in controlling their men. It seems evident that the background culture of regarding Poles as inferior coupled with Hitler's extreme statements in the summer of 1939 set the tone for the German field officers' attitudes. A diet of stories about Polish oppression of German minorities in western Poland had been served up for months before September 1939, and the war itself was portrayed as a defensive action to protect German interests. Moreover, the initial stages of the conflict saw atrocities committed by civilians on both sides. The German minority in Bromberg (Bydgoszcz) was set upon by their Polish neighbours and this pattern was repeated elsewhere. At the same time, a hurriedly organized *Volksdeutcher Selbstschutz* of ethnic Germans under SS control began a brutal terror campaign against ethnic Poles in West Prussia. While Berlin explained the latter's actions as retaliation for the atrocities committed by the Poles, Kershaw is adamant that 'they did not remotely compare with, let alone provide any justification for, the calculated savagery of the treatment meted out by the German masters, directed at wiping out anything other than a slave existence for the Polish people'.[18]

The very nature of Germany's war against Poland with its targeting of civilians and ideological commitment to ethnic cleansing, including the deployment of the SS *Totenkopfverbände*, make it difficult to disaggregate the military elements from the overall picture. A German soldier wrote home about his experiences in the early days of the war.

> Anything more vile than Polish soldiers has never been seen in a war. They've taken hardly any prisoners. Those falling into their hands have been butchered in a horrible fashion, and the Polacks have been treated in such brotherly fashion by us.[19]

This ordinary German soldier undoubtedly thought he and his comrades were the victims of unwarranted Polish savagery rather than the instigators of a campaign of ethnic cleansing, and there is no means of knowing if some German actions were in response to finding evidence of Polish reprisals against prisoners or ethnic Germans. Datner notes in particular the behaviour of troops attached to General von Reichenau's Tenth Army and cites the commander's fanaticism and notoriety for issuing orders to liquidate all Polish *francs-tireurs*, but also indicates that Wehrmacht units in all army groups were responsible for some atrocities.[20] Whether the commanders encouraged such actions or just chose to turn a blind eye has never been fully established. While the actions of the German Army and SS have been subject to much detailed scrutiny, we know much less about the behaviour of Polish troops towards prisoners in the campaign. Nonetheless, the

[18] Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936–1945: Nemesis* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 242.
[19] Kershaw, *Hitler 1936–1945*, p. 240. [20] Datner, *Crimes against POWs*, pp. 32–3.

overriding image is of warfare that rapidly escalated up to and beyond the boundaries set out by international laws and conventions. The available evidence suggests this had always been the German intention and perhaps the question one should ask is not why the Geneva Convention was not upheld in its entirety by the German military authorities, but why it was adhered to at all. Certainly, this behaviour cannot be attributed to brutalization caused by long-term exposure to close-quarter combat as many of the incidents took place within days, and sometimes hours, of hostilities beginning.

Polish soldiers who did make it from the battlefield alive were frequently subjected to continued brutal treatment. There were reports of prisoners being force marched or held in the open for up to eleven days with little food or water. Temporary camps were often insanitary and conditions dreadful, with the result that many died. For example, 4,000 Polish prisoners were kept in a fenced in area in a park at Rawa Mazowiecka. They were poorly fed only once every two or three days and there was little or no medical attention. At Łańcut, Zyrardow, and other camps in southern Poland, similar stories emerged, of prisoners being held in the open and without food for days on end.

> Dressed in rags, ill and verminous, they had no other aid than that given by the local inhabitants. They were taken away in trucks and, incredible as it would appear, as many as seventy persons were jammed into one wagon. Some of the wagons had just been used to haul manure and had not been cleaned. They were pervaded by a horrible smell which caused the more squeamish to faint.[21]

While some of the conditions could be ascribed to the speed of the German victory and the lack of adequate preparation, there is no doubt that ill-treatment was also deliberately inflicted. Non-commissioned officers were reported to have been the worst offenders, particularly those who had been part of the German minority inside Poland before the war. They regularly stole the food from the prisoners and were also reported to have incarcerated them in churches 'often for several days without food or being allowed outside to relieve themselves, in order that the churches should suffer desecration'.[22] Violence by camp guards was often arbitrary or inflicted for the slightest infringement. Thus, getting up to walk around 'invited a German bullet' while conversely being unable to get up to work would sometimes receive a similar sanction.[23]

[21] Polish Ministry of Information, *The German New Order*, p. 117. For similar stories about Zyrardow see Sibylle Höschele, 'Polnische Kriegsgafangene im Stammlager (Stalag) VI-A in Hemer', *Die Märker: Landeskundliche Zeitschrift für den Bereich der ehem. Grafschaft Mark und den Märkischen Kreis*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (1995), p. 114.

[22] Polish Ministry of Information, *The German New Order*, p. 116.

[23] Rossino, *Hitler Strikes Poland*, pp. 181–2.

Those who made it as far as properly established prisoner of war camps fared no better. A Polish report submitted by the Russian prosecutors at the Nuremberg trials gave a clear picture of conditions in these camps.

> The camp in Koumas was an open space surrounded by barbed wire, with large tents each holding 180–200 persons. In spite of very cold weather (the temperature was below –25°C) there was, in December 1939, no heating appliance whatsoever in the camp. Consequently, some of the internees suffered from frozen hands, feet, and ears. Since the prisoners had no blankets and since their uniforms were too worn out to protect them from the cold, disease broke out, while malnutrition resulted in extreme debility. Moreover, the guards constantly ill-treated the prisoners. They were beaten on the slightest pretext. Two men were especially noted for their brutality, Lieutenant Schinke and Sergeant-Major Grau. They hit prisoners in the face and beat them, broke their ribs and arms and gouged out their eyes. Such inhuman treatment resulted in several cases of suicide and insanity among the soldiers.[24]

Until December 1939, Polish prisoners were habitually billeted in tents, sheds, or in the open. Even when more adequately housed, their treatment was reportedly much worse than those afforded to the small numbers of French and British prisoners.[25] Prisoners' parcels were looted and spoiled by their captors and even officers were subjected to humiliations and beatings. While much of this testimony comes from contemporary Polish sources eager to expose the barbarities of the Germans, independent corroboration suggests that little of this was exaggerated. Measuring the conduct of the Germans against the yardsticks of the Geneva and Hague Conventions, the Poles could clearly point to numerous infractions of these supposedly operational agreements as well as to many acts that infringed other aspects of international law.

Overall, it has been suggested that some 10,000 Polish servicemen who should have been considered as prisoners of war died at the hands of their captors during and immediately after the five weeks of war. However, focusing on these examples of German atrocities against Polish prisoners, both on the battlefield and in captivity, should not be allowed to mask the fact that most survived this initial period. By the end of September there were 208,000 prisoners formally distributed between twenty-one Stalags involving a mixture of tents and huts. Only two Stalags and eight Oflags, the latter housing 9,800 officers, were described as comprising permanent structures. Although there was a sufficiency of barbed

[24] USSR-93 Report of the Polish Government, *International Military Tribunal*, Vol. 7 (Nuremberg: International Military Tribunal, 1947–9), pp. 428–9.

[25] Polish Ministry of Information, *The German New Order*, p. 118 cites an article published in the Swedish daily *Dagens Nyheter* in January 1941 which explicitly claimed that the British were better treated than the rest because the Germans were mindful of their soldiers in British hands.

wire to enclose the prisoners, building materials were in short supply and the result was that many captives spent the entire winter under canvas. If this was purely the result of under-preparation for the sheer scale of the German victory, other issues were more contentious; for example the German insistence that food rations would be defined by those of reserve troops rather than those of the depot troops decreed by article 11 of the Geneva Convention. This meant much lower rations in practice; something that was commented upon in Red Cross reports as requiring improvement but considered as acceptable because of the provisional nature of the accommodation.[26]

There was also the question of providing religious services for the Catholic majority in camps. This was conceded by the OKW but there was to be no question of confessions being heard as this might become a means of spreading news from one camp to another, or even for getting information abroad. This had to be prevented on security grounds, but also indicated that the regime was undoubtedly worried about spies in priestly garb.[27] In the meantime, the Polish captives were put to work, although it was reported that health checks, delousing, registration, and racial screening were inhibiting the process. The latter was carried out by the Rassenpolitisches Amt of the NSDAP which was charged with segregating out ethnic Poles from those who were racially and ideologically unobjectionable and who could be kept as labour inside the Reich. Although some releases did take place to reduce the numbers held in the camps, the planned attack on Western Europe made it imperative that camps were cleared of Poles to make way for a new influx of prisoners. The programme of segregation and civilianization of prisoners who were prepared to sign an undertaking to work in Germany began in February 1940 and continued for several months. Various incentives were offered such as better pay and conditions and the chance to write home, and while many ordinary Polish soldiers were persuaded to change their status, large numbers of officers and NCOs remained deeply sceptical about giving up their rights.[28]

However, there were also categories of men who were not to be released; those who refused to sign up for work, those who were unfit for work, those suspect for other reasons, Jews, officers, White Russians, and Ukrainians from Polish territories and Poles from areas under Soviet occupation.[29] Of these around 140,000 were 'repatriated' to the General Government or handed over to the Russians as their birthplace or residence lay in Soviet-controlled territory. In many cases these transports took place in the depths of winter. Many of the Poles taken prisoner and held in camps inside the Reich were returned to the General Government in

[26] Overmans, 'Die Kriegsgefangenenpolitik', p. 744.
[27] Ernst Reuß, *Gefangen! Das schicksal sowjetischer Kriegsgefangener im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Munich: Olzog, 2005), pp. 123–4.
[28] Höschele, 'Polnische Kriegsgafangene', p. 116.
[29] Overmans, 'Die Kriegsgefangenenpolitik', pp. 746–7.

early 1940. A Red Cross delegate gave a harrowing account of one particular transport.

> During the first half of the month of January 1940, a convoy of Polish prisoners of war liberated from the camps in East Prussia on account of their extreme exhaustion arrived at Warsaw. Of the 2,000 men in the convoy two hundred and eleven died of cold on the way. When the doors were unsealed, and the cars opened the prisoners who stumbled out seemed to have lost their reason. The journey had lasted eleven days, and the soldiers had been packed fifty to seventy into an unheated car.
>
> When the men arrived at Warsaw they were not in a condition to take nourishment. They had to be fed for the first few days with liquid only.[30]

Those returning from Soviet-held territory were no better treated. Soldiers in the first two transports were sent without warm clothing in unheated trucks by the Soviets. Many had frozen to death by the time they arrived at their destinations.[31]

> The platform was heaped with frozen corpses. The prisoners remained in the trucks, feeble and apathetic, in the midst of a deathly silence. In answer to an inquiry whether they would prefer milk or tea, a voice answered with difficulty, after a long pause: 'If you have any pity for us, give us poison.'[32]

Both the Germans and Soviets had effective systems of prisoner registration to identify those whose domicile lay within the regions occupied by their allies and allow for their transfer. The general question of population exchanges had been agreed between the two powers on 28 September through a secret protocol to the Nazi–Soviet Non-Aggression Treaty.[33] This was followed by discussions begun in March 1940 in Cracow and Zakopane between the Gestapo and NKVD that dealt with the exchanges of Polish civilians identified as Ukrainians and Byelorussians in German hands with Poles claiming to be *Volksdeutsche* in the USSR.[34] The same basic principles were applied to prisoners of war. Almost as soon as hostilities were over, exchanges began and a total of 43,054 Polish soldiers in Soviet hands were transferred to the Germans, while 13,757 went in the opposite

[30] Republic of Poland, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *German Occupation,* Appendix 162, p. 226. Polish Ministry of Information, *The German New Order,* p. 120.

[31] Jan T. Gross, 'Polish POW Camps in the Soviet-Occupied Western Ukraine', in Keith Sword (ed.), *The Soviet Takeover of the Polish Eastern Provinces, 1939–1941* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 48.

[32] Polish Ministry of Information, *The German New Order*, p. 121.

[33] Anna M. Cienciala, Natalia Ledebedeva, and Wojciech Materski (eds), *Katyn: A Crime without Punishment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 19, 70 cites Beria to Molotov, No. 4584/B, 11 October 1939.

[34] Toczewski, 'Cooperation', pp. 210–11. He estimates that 15,000 Poles and 67,000 *Volksdeutsche* were sent from the USSR in exchange for around 35,000 Byelorussians.

direction, almost exclusively via the border at Brześć (Brest) or Jagodzin. Most of these transfers took place in late 1939 and early 1940 as by March 1940, the Soviets had refused to take any further Polish soldiers from the Third Reich despite German enthusiasm for them to accept a further 50,000 Byelorussians and Ukrainians.[35] Attempts by the German Ambassador in Moscow, Friedrich von Schulenberg, to revive the exchanges also ended in failure. This change of policy more-or-less coincided with the first Soviet mass deportations of Polish civilians to the interior of the USSR. Three phases in February, April, and June 1940 saw the removal of approximately 780,000 people who were deemed suspect either because their relatives were already in Soviet custody, or who were reputedly committed to the Polish cause, or who were regarded as foreign nationals, or who had relatives abroad.[36]

The exception to this catalogue of misery was the German treatment of captured Polish officers. Unlike the ordinary soldiers who were treated with scant respect by their captors, the officers remained in military captivity throughout the war and suffered losses that were only marginally higher than their Western European counterparts.[37] They were held in various camps inside the Reich such as Oflags VI-B (Dössel), VII-A (Murnau), II-E (Neubrandenburg), II-C (Woldenburg) II-D (Gross Born), and VI-G (Oberlangen) and remained under Wehrmacht control throughout the war in spite of attempts by Himmler to have them civilianized and used as labour.[38] At the end of 1944, there were still around 20,500 officers, including 46 generals, held in four separate locations.[39] In defending the interests of its Polish officer prisoners, the Wehrmacht used the argument that any ill-treatment might prompt retaliation on Germans held by the Western Allies and this seems to have been sufficient to persuade the Nazi leadership that the officers should be kept idle in captivity and not suffer the same fate as their men.[40] That said, conditions were ostensibly worse than those inflicted on Western officer prisoners by the Germans. Oflag II-C (Woldenburg) was described as follows:

> The barracks had bricked floors, lacked ceilings, [were] poorly illuminated, damp and insufficiently heated in winter. The barracks were overcrowded with three-tiered bunk beds, unchanged straw mattresses and the omnipresent bugs. There

[35] Toczewski, 'Cooperation', p. 213.

[36] Z. S. Siemaszko, 'The Mass Deportations of the Polish Population to the USSR, 1940–1941', in Sword (ed.), *The Soviet Takeover*, pp. 217–25.

[37] Szarota, 'Poland under German Occupation', p. 58. Overmans, 'Die Kriegsgefangenenpolitik', p. 755.

[38] Martin Broszat, 'Behandlung von Kriegsgefangenen polnischen Offizieren', *Gutachten der Institut für Zeitgeschichte* (Munich, 1958), Vol. 1, pp. 389–91. Nowak, 'The Vicissitudes', p. 113.

[39] Nowak, 'Les Prisonniers' p. 44.

[40] Overmans, 'Die Kriegsgefangenenpolitik', p. 748.

was a constant lack of water, clothes were very rarely changed, medicines and medical equipment were scarce, and the prisoners were left to starve.[41]

It was also the case that the Germans were much less tolerant of escapees. Thus, when Polish officers were brought to Oflag VI-B (Dössel) and 47 of them escaped on 30 September 1943 using a tunnel started by their British predecessors, the 37 who were recaptured were summarily executed, either at KZ Buchenwald or by the Gestapo in Dortmund. Despite this bleak picture, the camp which had an average population of over 6,000 managed to generate most of the activities associated with Oflags, including scientific groups, educational courses, theatrical productions, orchestras, choirs, and even an 'Olympic Games'.[42] The officers seem to have been increasingly isolated from the outside world and from the war itself. Ideologically and politically divided, as well as trying to define the appropriate officer conduct for being in captivity, they were reduced to taking their personal animosities to (illegal) courts of honour.[43]

Fear of retaliation may have helped frame German policies towards other Polish servicemen who fell into their hands. This encompassed a broad range of circumstances. In defeat, elements of the Polish Army had escaped to other parts of Europe. Those who found refuge and were interned in the Baltic States, such as the 12,000 in Lithuania, fell victim to the Soviet invasion in June 1940 and suffered much the same fate as their counterparts captured in 1939.[44] The appreciable numbers who had fled to Hungary and Romania were likewise interned, but some at least were able to escape to the West to continue fighting. Of those who remained, the Poles in Romania were brought to Germany as labourers in February 1941, but those in Hungary were not removed until after the German invasion of that country in 1944.[45]

There were also two divisions of Polish troops, numbering some 85,000 men, that had been involved in the defence of France in May 1940. As resistance to the German onslaught crumbled, the Polish contingents not captured by the enemy either escaped to neutral Switzerland or were evacuated to a belligerent United Kingdom. Later in the war, some of these Poles fell into German hands while fighting for the Allied cause in North Africa or Italy. In all these cases, the OKW deemed that their treatment would be dictated by the uniform they were wearing

[41] J. Olesik, *Obóz jeniecki oflag II C Woldenburg* (Dobigniew: Urzą Miejski w Dobigniewie), p. 6 cited in Adam Czabański and David Lester, 'Suicide among Polish Officers during World War II in Oflag II-C Woldenburg', *Psychological Reports*, Vol. 112, No. 3, (2013), pp. 727–31, here p. 728.

[42] Czabański and Lester, 'Suicide', p. 730.

[43] Łukasz Kielban, 'Honoring and Masculinity in the Polish Officer Corps during World War II in Captivity: Escapes and Courts of Honor. The Case of Oflag VII-A Murnau', in Maren Röger and Ruth Lieserowitz, *Women and Men at War: A Gendered Perspective on World War II and its Aftermath in Central and Eastern Europe* (Osnabrück: Fibre, 2012), pp. 97–115.

[44] G. C. Malcher, *Blank Pages: Soviet Genocide against the Polish People* (Woking: Pyrford Press, 1993), p. 9.

[45] Overmans, 'Die Kriegsgefangenenpolitik', p. 750.

rather than by any assessment of their nationality. This was very much a pragmatic decision based upon the increasing German use of non-Germans in their units, such as Poles, Hungarians, and Romanians. If they were to be captured by the Allies who had recognized a government-in exile, they might be treated as traitors and thus a reciprocal recognition of uniforms by the Germans might militate against any such eventuality. The one exception was for Poles who had served in Wehrmacht units who had subsequently been captured and then mobilized for the Allied cause. If they were to fall into German hands, they were to be put on trial as deserters.[46]

The Economic Exploitation of Polish Prisoners of War

Aside from the racial assumptions of the Nazi state and its soldiers, the treatment of Polish prisoners was governed primarily by the economic necessities of the regime. Labour shortages inside the Reich were already reaching crisis levels by 1939, exacerbated by reductions in the civilian labour force as more men were conscripted into the armed forces or called in from the reserve.[47] The breakdown in diplomatic relations with Poland during the spring and summer of 1939 had meant that 90,000 Polish seasonal agricultural workers had failed to materialize to help with the harvest and the Reich Ministry of Labour had to engage in a rapid civilian recruitment campaign in Italy and Bohemia-Moravia, although high levels of local unemployment meant that Polish workers continued to cross the border illegally to work on German soil.[48] The subsequent invasion and occupation of Poland effectively solved the immediate labour crisis with 110,000 Polish civilians and nearly 300,000 prisoners of war being used to gather the harvest both in the annexed areas of Poland and in East Prussia.[49] This had been anticipated well in advance by the German authorities, with plans for barracks' construction and the guarding of prisoners being agreed as early as January 1939.[50] The fact that the Labour Ministry issued circulars on the employment of Polish prisoners on 26 September, followed by the Food Ministry on 4 and 5 October, is testimony to the urgency involved. Agriculture was the first priority, but the circulars also permitted their use in mining, railway maintenance, cable-laying, and road

[46] Overmans, 'Die Kriegsgefangenenpolitik', p. 752. Although Hitler initially forbade Poles from being formed into military units, over the course of war there were some ethnic Poles who had been enlisted into German units and on 24 October 1944 Hitler agreed that they could be officially deployed as *Hilfswillige*.

[47] Edward L. Homze, *Foreign Labor in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 16–20.

[48] Ulrich Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers: Enforced Foreign Labor in Germany under the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 61. Homze, *Foreign Labor*, pp. 16–17.

[49] Overmans, 'Die Kriegsgefangenenpolitik', p. 745.

[50] Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers*, p. 59. This planning was based on the experiences of harnessing large quantities of POW labour during the First World War.

construction.[51] Deployed in *Kommandos* of fifty men, a number that was later reduced to twenty, they were guarded by Wehrmacht soldiers or *Hilfspolizei* but attempts to get the farmers to pay the salaries of guards failed as it made prisoner labour far too expensive.[52] Employers paid the army 60 per cent of German wages for hourly work and 80 per cent for piece work, less deductions for room and board. Estimates on the total number of Polish prisoners of war actively employed in the German economy by the summer of 1940 vary between 344,000 and 480,000.[53]

Polish agricultural and industrial labourers were generally underfed and overworked; they were given 200 grams of bread and ersatz coffee each day, with a ration of watery soup at noon.[54] Reports issued by the Polish government-in-exile noted that any attempts by local populations to alleviate their condition were severely punished. A German convicted of playing cards with Poles and giving them cigarettes and alcohol was reportedly sentenced to four years hard labour, and others elsewhere in Germany were given lower sentences for less serious infractions such as supplying food. Even talking to Poles was prohibited and women were severely dealt with for entering into 'relationships'. For example an SD *Lageberichte* in January 1940 had reported the first prosecutions of women for having sexual relations with Poles, with one Grete Kask being given a six-year sentence.[55] On 8 March 1940, a detailed police circular from Himmler laid out the precise policies to be adopted in dealing with the Poles, including 'special handling' for anyone engaging in 'undesirable' sexual behaviour.[56] All instances of Polish men having sexual relations with German women were reported to Himmler personally, who invariably insisted on a death sentence.[57]

Continuing labour shortages in the Reich and problems with the recruitment of civilians from occupied areas prompted further changes in the status of Polish prisoners of war. A 'Führer decision' in February 1940 decreed that all Polish prisoners were to be released and given civilian status, an order enacted by Major-General Hermann Reinecke as head of the Allgemeines Wehrmachtsamt on 22 May 1940. The men were to report to their local police and labour offices on

[51] Polish Ministry of Information, *The German New Order*, pp. 117–18.

[52] Jürgen Bohmbach, 'Jan Rurarz, ein polnischer Zwangsarbeiter', in Jürgen Bohmbach and Hans-Hinrich Kahrs (eds), *Zwangsarbeiter und Kriegsgefangene in der NS-Zeit an der Niederelbe* (Stade: Landschaftsverband der ehemaligen Herzogentümer Bremen und Verden, 2009), p. 28.

[53] Homze, *Foreign Labor*, pp. 23–5. Polish Ministry of Information, *The German New Order*, pp. 117–18 cites a lower figure of 236,000 for August 1940.

[54] Polish Ministry of Information, *The German New Order*, pp. 117–18.

[55] *Meldungen aus dem Reich* No. 44, 24 January 1940.

[56] Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers*, p. 75. R. Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy 1933–1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 223, 233. Eric A. Johnson, *Nazi Terror: The Gestapo, Jews and Ordinary Germans* (New York: Basic, 1999), p. 59 notes a statement from a former Düsseldorf Gestapo officer in 1959 that special handling meant 'execution by hanging without a legal process of any sort'.

[57] Jill Stephenson, *Hitler's Home Front: Württemberg under the Nazis* (London: Hambledon, 2006), pp. 271–2, 279.

their return home. Prisoners already working in the Reich were to be converted to civilian status and forced to sign labour contracts.[58] This civilianization had important benefits for the German authorities as the men could now be assessed on the basis of their skills and be used to carry out war work untrammelled by any adherence to the terms of the Geneva Convention. It also removed them from army control and placed them in the hands of the civil authorities and the Security Police where they became subject to increasingly draconian restrictions imposed by Heinrich Himmler on this so-called *Arbeitervolk*.[59] German figures indicate how this step rapidly changed the deployment of Polish prisoners. In January 1940, 95 per cent were employed in agriculture and only 5 per cent in industry. A year later the respective figures were 52 per cent and 48 per cent[60]

This demobilization effectively meant the German Army command abrogating its responsibilities to its captured enemies and rendered the Poles subject to the civilian authorities within the Reich, or to the power of Governor-General Hans Frank in the General Government. Homze sees this as a victory for the elements within the Nazi movement that insisted on a hard line being taken against the Polish *untermenschen* for the benefit of the German economy.[61] The timing of the decree is also interesting; coming some two weeks after the campaign in the West had begun. In this way, the transfer of Polish prisoners to civilian status and their shift away from agriculture to industry was more than compensated for by the huge numbers of French servicemen taken prisoner in the subsequent two months. By then only 80,000 Poles remained as prisoners of war, in categories which had been specifically excluded from release by Reinecke, namely those in operational areas, of use to the Wehrmacht, officers, NCOs, members of the intelligentsia, those from minority groups, Jews, and 'a-socials'.[62]

Polish Prisoners under Soviet Occupation

The Soviet attack on Poland began in the early hours of 17 September, having been postponed at least twice after the initial mobilization some ten days earlier.[63] There was no formal declaration of war, but the Soviet note to the Poles used the excuse that the Polish state had ceased to exist and that this represented a threat to the USSR. Both the Polish government and its military high command were in danger of being cut off by the Soviet advance and crossed into Romania. Although

[58] Homze, *Foreign Labor*, p. 36. cites OKW Order 'Freilassung polnischer Kriegsgefangener', 22 May 1940.
[59] See, for example, the so-called *Polenerlasse* of 8 March 1940. Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers*, p. 71.
[60] Homze, *Foreign Labor*, p. 37, cites *Reichsarbeitsblatt*, 1941 Part V, p. 257.
[61] Homze, *Foreign Labor*, p. 38.
[62] Homze, *Foreign Labor*, pp. 36, 46.
[63] Cienciala et al., *Katyn*, p. 17.

initially interned by the regime in Bucharest, General Sikorski and his troops were ultimately allowed to leave via Yugoslavia and Italy for France to regroup with their Western allies. Forces that had fled to Hungary were given similar options and in total around 35,000 men in Polish uniforms were thereby evacuated from these neutral states.[64] As the bulk of the Polish armed forces had been deployed to confront the invading German armies, those in the eastern half of the country included a high proportion of reservists and also several thousand men of the Korpus Ochrony Pogranicza (KOP), the Polish frontier protection corps.[65] They had also been ordered by Śmygły-Rydz not to oppose the Russians unless they were attacked, and this created some confusion, with some units fighting and others surrendering without firing a shot. During the brief campaign there were some examples of NKVD murders of both military and civilian prisoners. The most high profile was the killing of the Grodno district commander, General Józef Olszyna-Wilczyński, but there were other stories of mass executions, for example the eighteen senior KOP officers found in a mass grave near Melnyky.[66] Further reports spoke of individuals being dragged along behind tanks or horses until they were torn to pieces and there were many accounts of widespread killing, for example in Rohatyn.

> The Soviet troops entered the town around four o'clock in the afternoon, and they immediately started a cruel slaughter and ill-treatment of the victims. It lasted until the evening. Not only policemen and soldiers, but also civilian 'bourgeois' were murdered, including women and children.[67]

One surviving KOP soldier described his capture by the Soviets:

> After being captured we were ordered to hold up our hands and then to run for two kilometres. During the search we were completely stripped and robbed of everything we had. Afterwards we were lined up in fours and then an interrogation followed in which our personal particulars were taken to the accompaniment of much abuse. They then drove us on for a further thirty kilometres without respite or water. Those who were too weak to continue the pace were struck with rifle butts so violently that they fell to the ground. If they could not get up they were stabbed with bayonets.[68]

[64] Cienciala et al., *Katyn*, p. 19.
[65] Cienciala et al., *Katyn*, p. 26. On February 1940, the Soviets enumerated 8,442 officers in their special camps, of whom 5,456 were reservists, 650 retired, and only 2,336 were regular officers.
[66] Cienciala et al., *Katyn*, pp. 19, 21.
[67] Polish Cultural Foundation, *The Crime of Katyn: Facts and Documents* (London: Polish Cultural Foundation, 1965), p. 11.
[68] Polish Cultural Foundation, *The Crime of Katyn*, p. 11.