

Prisoners of war and captivity in Europe nineteenth-twentieth century

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ABSTRACT

Relegated outside of the patriotic memories forged after 1945 in Europe, and kept in the shadows as the vanquished, prisoners of war were long absent from historiographies of wars and their aftermath. Yet from the French Revolution onward, both during and after conflicts captives were a major military, political, and cultural issue in the cultural mobilization of societies both during war as well as in its aftermath. With the coming of European conscript armies, soldiers fulfilled their duty to defend the homeland through combat. Prisoners subsequently emerged as a major figure in the nationalization of war by states, while captivity became a mass phenomenon that affected hundreds of thousands of individuals during the nineteenth century, and millions during the twentieth century. The management of these *citizen-soldiers* by state actors who are increasingly subject to humanitarian law provides an interpretation—from a perspective of inverted fronts—of the evolution of war across two centuries.



Heinrich Himmler's Reichsführer-SS inspecting a camp of Soviet war prisoners in the fall of 1941. Source : U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

In 1792, 200,000 French citizens took up arms to defend the homeland, which was under threat from armies of mercenaries that had made war their trade. By inventing the category of citizen-soldiers fulfilling their patriotic duty, the French Revolution also created that of the prisoner of war, to whom an increasing number of rights were granted. It opened the way for a nationalization of captivity, which was considerably mobilized with the democratization of the fighting experience during the ensuing centuries.

Prisoner of war, a protective legal status

While modern times did not invent the prisoner of war, they did transform his condition. By making the military a school of the nation and conscription a civic duty, European states rendered obsolete the practices inherited from mercenary armies, such as re-enrolment in the victorious army, which was henceforth seen as betrayal. In contrast, between 1798 and 1815, France and England did not proceed with any exchange of prisoners. This nationalization of the combatant was accompanied by a growing involvement of states in the development of international humanitarian law (IHL), which protects prisoners. Under the leadership of the International Committee of the Red Cross founded in Geneva in 1864, European states and the United States sought to define an international legal status for the captive soldier, one that would replace bilateral agreements. Signed in The Hague in 1899 and updated in 1907, the Convention Respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land defined prisoners of war as “legal and disarmed enemies [...] under the power of the government,” who had to be “treat[ed] with humanity.”

Through its extreme violence and the number of prisoners concerned, the First World War led to the ratification of the Geneva Convention of 1929, which defined norms for the treatment of captives (such as a ban on collective punishments), and introduced mechanisms of control. However, IHL was by definition lagging behind war: in reaction to partisan warfare, the new Geneva Convention of 1949 extended the status of prisoner to “members of organized resistance movements.” Following the conflicts of decolonization, the additional protocols of 1977 included combatants in wars of national liberation. In one century the military prisoner became “the most privileged victim of war,” but also subject to States’ compliance with the law.

Systems of captivity as a reflection of the totalization of war

In Europe this evolution was related to the totalization of war starting in the last third of the nineteenth century, in which belligerents mobilized a large part of their human, economic, technical, and cultural resources. The mobilization of conscript armies led to mass numbers of prisoners, including one eighth of soldiers mobilized between 1914 and 1918 (between 6.6 and 8.4 million), and one third of the 80 million combatants from the Second World War. Captivity became a reality for entire societies, for both the captive who fought and the detaining power, which subsequently had the obligation to keep an enemy on its soil until the end of the fighting and even beyond, as the last German prisoners left France in late 1948 and the USSR in 1956.

European captivities underwent a dual shift as a result. Management became institutionalized with the creation of camps. From the first prison-camp opened in 1796 by English authorities in Norman Cross to house French prisoners, to the camp system that the Nazis took from the first global conflict and perfected, the camp was where the soldier became a prisoner once the uncertain moment of capture passed. Barbed-wire symbolized this endless detention, in which hunger torments and idleness sometimes leads to depression (“barbed-wire disease”), notably for officers who could not be put to work, unlike soldiers.

The longer wars lasted the more captivity changed in nature, from military to economic. It was no longer just a question of reducing the enemy’s military power, but also using captive manpower for one’s own war effort and later reconstruction. In Germany during the Great War, the failure of a short war, the enlisting of over 80% of active men, and the “battle of supplies” led to the putting to work of massive numbers of prisoner, with 1.5 million of them working for the German war effort in 1918. Like other belligerents, the Second Reich would not have lasted as long without this considerable potential.

The conditions of captivity and mortality rates were therefore not necessarily due to the authorities’ lack of preparation, but could be connected to a policy on the part of the detaining state, as was the case with Germany during the two conflicts, Austria-Hungary and Turkey during the First World War, and the USSR during the Second World War. Two systems of captivity emerge: those in conformity with international law, with low mortality rates (in 1914-1918, 3% of German prisoners died in British captivity), and those reflecting extreme violence, with much higher rates (during the Second World War, 57% of Soviet prisoners detained by the Nazis died). This poor treatment promoted the mediatization of the prisoner to denounce the barbarity of the enemy—who mistreated the soldiers that fell into their hands—and to emphasize the good treatment reserved for detained prisoners. This act of speaking out tended to remobilize troops, contributing to what historians call the cultural mobilization of societies at war.

The figure of the prisoner in the aftermath and memory of war

When wars end, interest in prisoners wanes. For what role should be given in heroic national memories to those who spent the war as the vanquished?

Governments established organizations to oversee their return, such as the United Kingdom, where the *War Office* created twenty *Civil Resettlement Units*, each with military psychologists providing support for 450 former captives in their return to civilian life. However, once they were demobilized, prisoners disappeared from the honors of victory. In the Resistance France magnified by General de Gaulle after 1944, authorities only celebrated two figures among captives: those who escaped and those who rebelled, which is to say a minority of the 1.6 million prisoners in Germany. An epic of captivity and evasion was immortalized on the screen with *La Grande Illusion* (Renoir, 1937) for the First World War, and with *The Great Escape* (Sturges, 1963) for the Second World War. In law, recognizing the status of the combatant was long in coming; the combatant card was granted to French prisoners only in December 1949.

In the Germanies born of the defeat in 1945, the two million captives who returned from Soviet camps had to show their compatibility with the new social and political order built from 1949 onward. In the West, prisoners became victims of Nazism and later Stalinism. Survivors of totalitarianism and repatriates were seen as regenerated Germans, model citizens of a Christian, liberal, and democratic Republic. In the East, they had to show that staying in prisoner's camps in the USSR transformed former members of the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* (people's community) into good antifascist citizens. This example shows the importance that the return of these men played in the postwar society's successful handling of the aftermath of war on both the individual, national, and European scale.

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