
Prisoners of War and Internees

in the Second World War –

a Survey of Some Recent

Publications

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- Günter Bischof and Rüdiger Overmans, eds., *Kriegsgefangenschaft im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Eine vergleichende Perspektive* (Ternitz: Verlag Gerhard Höller, 1999), 472pp., (hb), ISBN 3-85226-078-7.
- Karl Hüser, 'Unschuldig' in britischer Lagerhaft? *Das Internierungslager Nr. 5 Staumühle 1945–1948*, Paderborner Historische Forschungen 10 (Cologne: SHV, 1999), 128pp., DM 29.80, (hb), ISBN 3-89498-076-1.
- Reinhard Otto, *Wehrmacht, Gestapo und sowjetische Kriegsgefangene im deutschen Reichsgebiet 1941/42*, Schriftenreihe der Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte 77 (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1998), 287pp., €24.80 (pb), ISBN 3-486-64577-3.
- Aleksander A. Maslov, *Captured Soviet Generals. The Fate of Soviet Generals Captured by the Germans, 1941–1945*, trans. David M. Glantz and Harold S. Orenstein (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 329pp., £35.00 (hb), ISBN 0-7146-5124-9.
- Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich, eds., *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II* (Oxford and Washington, DC: Berg, 1996), 312pp., ISBN 1-85973-152-X.
- Michael Borchard, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen in der Sowjetunion. Zur politischen Bedeutung der Kriegsgefangenenfrage 1949–1955*, Forschungen und Quellen zur Zeitgeschichte 35 (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2000), 352pp., DM 56.00, €28.60 (hb), ISBN 3-7700-1883-4.
- Stephen Fox, *America's Invisible Gulag. A Biography of German–American Internment and Exclusion in World War II* (New York, Bern, Berlin and Brussels: Peter Lang, 2000), 379pp., €31.00, £22.00, \$34.95 (pb), ISBN 0-8204-4914-8.
- Arthur L. Smith Jr, *Die 'vermißte Million'. Zum Schicksal deutscher Kriegsgefangener nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*, trans. Hermann Graml, Schriftenreihe der Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte 64 (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1992), 141pp., €24.80 (pb), ISBN 3-486-64565-X.

During the Second World War, countless individuals were robbed of their freedom, particularly their freedom of movement, and put into some form of captivity while being deprived, to a greater or lesser extent, of their rights. The most dramatic example by far, the concentration camps, does not concern us here. I shall be dealing in the first place with the fate of prisoners of war during and immediately after the conflict. Numbered in millions, their destinies were very different depending on

when and where they were captured, and to which country and 'race' they belonged. But there was also another large group of people who lost their freedom, and most of their rights, during the Second World War: civilian internees. I shall be considering their fate here insofar as it is discussed in the works under review below. However, it should be noted here that internees, unlike prisoners of war, were not covered by international law; internment camps cannot be equated with prisoner of war camps.

I shall begin with a brief description of the collections edited by Bischof and Overmans and Moore and Fedorowich, after which I shall discuss the individual contributions.

One of the editors of *Kriegsgefangenschaft im Zweiten Weltkrieg* is German, the other Austrian, with the fortunate consequence that the book covers Austrian POWs and POW camps in Austria, as well as the leading belligerent nations (the German Reich, France, Britain, the Soviet Union and the United States). The approaches are very varied (for example: German POWs in France, French POWs in Germany, etc.). The volume opens with a historical overview of the POW question and ends with a bibliographical essay covering some 600 items. The collection will be of great interest to those seeking an overview of historiography on this subject, but unfortunately it contains an inordinate number of misprints (e.g. the caption to a picture of a POW camp on p. 233 gives the date 'Spring 1045') and syntactical errors. It includes chapters by Günter Bischof, François Cochet, Albert E. Cowdrey, Yves Durand, Klaus Eisterer, Sarah Fishman, Stefan Karner, Simon Paul MacKenzie, Bob Moore ('The Last Phase of the Gentlemen's War'), Rolf Dieter Müller, Rüdiger Overmans, Pavel Poljan, Gerhard Schreiber and Barbara Stelzl.

By contrast, *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II*, a British publication, considers some rather unfamiliar areas of the POW question on which relatively little research has hitherto been done. It includes chapters on Japan's attitude towards POWs and the progress of the war in the Far East. The book is not really suitable for beginners in the field, but offers some interesting accounts of lesser-known aspects. It begins with an introductory survey of the POW experience in the Second World War and ends with an afterword on postwar developments. Unfortunately, there is no exhaustive bibliography. The contributors are Joan Beaumont, Kent Fedorowich, Sibylla Jane Flower, Ikuhiko Hata, David Killingray, Bob Moore ('Axis Prisoners in Britain during the Second World War'), Charles G. Roland, David Rolf, Lucio Sponza, Martin Thomas and Jonathan F. Vance.

As Overmans notes in his introductory chapter, 'Kriegsgefangenschaft in der Geschichte', the law governing the treatment of POWs in 1939 had evolved from the American Lieber Code of 1863, through the Hague Land Warfare Conventions of 1899 and 1907 and the experience of the First World War to the Geneva Agreement of 27 July 1929 (the so-called 'Geneva Convention'). Overmans explains the characteristics of each agreement and also their weaknesses: for instance, the participation clause in the 1907 Hague Convention restricted its usefulness in the First World War. The offending article was amended in the Geneva Convention, which also tightened the rules on putting POWs to work (e.g. officers could not be made to work, and no prisoners could be made to work on the production or

transportation of munitions). But these improvements were not fully effective in the Second World War, as Overmans emphasises and as becomes evident from the other works reviewed in this article. The fact that some of the belligerents (such as the Soviet Union and Japan) had not ratified the Geneva Convention served as merely a pretext to disguise the ideological and racist motives behind their numerous grave infringements of international law.

Britain was less guilty than any other country of violating international law on the treatment of POWs. Bob Moore gives an excellent overview of the British situation in his chapter 'Axis Prisoners in Britain during the Second World War: A Comparative Survey', in which he points out that until the final stages of the war the number of German prisoners in Britain was quite small. Despite this the government, fearful of harbouring too many of such 'dangerous persons' in its own territory, sent as many POWs as possible overseas to Canada, India, South Africa or other parts of the Commonwealth. This in itself was a breach of the Geneva Convention, which stipulated that POWs could not be removed from the theatre of war in which they had been captured. The German prisoners thus removed were quickly replaced by Italians, who were considered to be less intrinsically bellicose and therefore less of a threat. They were put to work in the British economy, particularly in agriculture. The capitulation of Italy on 8 September 1943, after which the country changed sides, did not put an end to their captivity because they had become indispensable to the British war economy. From April 1944, however, they were offered a change of status: they could become 'co-operators' and be granted greater freedoms in return for services which were forbidden to POWs under the Geneva Convention. The Italian prisoners were suspicious of this offer, as Lucio Sponza points out in his study 'Italian Prisoners of War in Great Britain': in spring 1944 only just over half of the POWs agreed to assume this new status, and even by the end of the war only some 70 per cent of them were willing to 'co-operate'. Moore describes how a few hundred hand-picked German POWs were put to work in Britain from January 1944 onwards. Only after the Allied landings in Normandy was there any significant increase in the number of German POWs in Britain, and in their importance to the British war economy. Both Moore and Sponza point out that the labour shortage in the British economy, even after 1945, was so serious that the POWs were not immediately repatriated after the war. The first of the Italians were not allowed to return home until the end of 1945. Their place in the labour market was taken first by German POWs and soon afterwards by Italian guest workers.

The differing perceptions of the German and Italian 'national character' in British politics are also reflected in Kent Fedorowich's essay 'Propaganda and Political Warfare: The Foreign Office, Italian POWs and the Free Italy Movement 1940–1943'. He describes British attempts to segregate Italian POWs according to their political convictions and to bring those with anti-Fascist views into the Allied camp. The attempt met with little success, partly because of opposition within Britain but mainly because this attempt to sort the wheat from the chaff produced some unexpected results. It is interesting that such an attempt should have been made at all, especially with regard to Italians, who were assumed to have weaker

political convictions than, for example, Germans and so to be easier to influence. One remarkable aspect of the history of the Italian POWs is the fact that they were not released after Italy changed sides on 8 September 1943. As Moore and Sponza point out, this was because they constituted an indispensable workforce. But these POWs were really the lucky ones. The fate of serving Italian soldiers after the capitulation of their country was far worse, as Gerhard Schreiber shows in 'Die italienischen Militärinternierten – politische, humane und rassenideologische Gesichtspunkte einer besonderen Kriegsgefangenschaft' (Italian military internees: politics, humanity and racist ideology in an exceptional captivity). He explains that the designation as military internees was not originally chosen in order to remove these soldiers from the protection of the Geneva Convention, which does not recognise any such status. The idea was rather to use this vague terminology to reflect on the internal politics of the Republic of Salò. As Schreiber points out, no attempt would have been adequate to find 'any fig-leaves, whether terminological or legalistic' (p. 395) to cover the crimes committed against captured Italian soldiers by the Wehrmacht: some 12,000–13,000 of the disarmed soldiers were shot, while others received exceptionally harsh treatment in internment camps or carried out forced labour in the German economy; some 45,000 perished. Schreiber attributes this German attitude towards its former ally to historical, political and propaganda factors, with Nazi Germany's racist ideology playing the most decisive role.

Compared to these atrocities, the relationship between British and Germans seems comparatively innocuous, as Bob Moore shows in his essay 'Die letzte Phase des Gentlemen-Krieges' (The last phase of the gentlemen's war). Overwork, disorganisation and incompetence, for example, led to some mistreatment of German POWs being shipped from Port Suez to Durban by the British in May 1942 – they were robbed and confined below decks – which led to angry diplomatic exchanges between Britain and the German Reich. The situation worsened significantly when German soldiers captured during the attacks on Dieppe and Sark in 1942 were shackled, allegedly to prevent them from destroying documents. The Germans reacted by putting handcuffs on captured British officers; the British retaliated in kind. This 'shackling crisis' came to an end largely because both sides realised that to pursue it would only lead to escalation and so to corresponding mistreatment of their own nationals. Simon Paul MacKenzie's essay, 'The Shackling Crisis: Krieger in Ketten. Eine Fallstudie über die Dynamik der Kriegsgefangenenpolitik 1939–45' (Warriors in chains. A case study of the dynamics of POW policy 1939–45), convincingly shows that both sides were happy to seize the opportunity to withdraw, step by step and without loss of face, from this vicious circle of measure and counter-measures.

David Rolf's "'Blind Bureaucracy": The British Government and POWs in German Captivity 1939–45' takes a critical look at the British government's efforts to ensure the safety and welfare of its soldiers in German hands, showing how squabbles between the newly established Department of Prisoners of War and the Directorate of POWs in the Ministry of War made things unnecessarily difficult for POWs and their families. Rolf also blames British agencies for the fact that Germany was often able to evade the exchange of wounded prisoners. Finally, he addresses the 'shackling

crisis', attributing its escalation to the confused allocation of responsibilities on the British side.

Canada's contribution to the peculiar practice of POW exchange is examined by Jonathan F. Vance in 'The Trouble with Allies: Canada and the Negotiation of Prisoner of War Exchanges'. In 1942 Canada withdrew from any further involvement in joint Commonwealth initiatives for the exchange of wounded and sick POWs and instead backed corresponding efforts by the United States, which seemed to accord better with Canada's own interests. But this withdrawal gave Germany a pretext for abandoning the negotiations on the grounds that they had to be with a united Commonwealth bloc. Rolf's conclusion is that Canada's policy was selfish – not only morally indefensible, since there were few Canadians among the Allied POWs, but also, in the last analysis, unsuccessful.

Yves Durand turns his attention to the fate of French POWs in German hands ('Das Schicksal der französischen Kriegsgefangenen in deutschem Gewahrsam, 1939–1945'). He shows that the Germans were at first overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of French prisoners captured in 1940. Of the 1,850,000 taken prisoner in the rapid German advance, some 1,600,000 were sent to Germany, and about a million remained there until the end of the war. On the whole, says Durand, their treatment was in accordance with the Geneva Convention, but with some important exceptions to this generalisation, such as the use of POWs to clear mines along the Maginot Line, the attempts to force NCOs to work and the use of French POWs in the armaments industry. International law was also respected in that the Jews among the French POWs were not fed into the extermination machinery of the Holocaust but were put in German POW camps, which often gave them a better chance of survival than their families in occupied France. This attitude on the part of the Wehrmacht contrasts sharply with its treatment of Soviet Jewish POWs (see below). Life for French POWs was complicated by the fact that the Vichy regime assumed the status of protecting power – in defiance of the Geneva Convention, which demands that a neutral power fulfils this role. Vichy naturally did not defend the rights of French POWs, endeavouring rather to support the Reich's demands for labour by allowing the use of POWs, but also by sending forced labourers to Germany.

The consequences of France's division into occupied and collaborating zones are examined by Martin Thomas in 'Captives of their Countrymen: Free French and Vichy POWs in Africa and the Middle East 1940–1943'. Thomas shows how French prisoners were held by French colonial authorities: an interesting aspect, since some colonies supported the Vichy regime whereas others sympathised with De Gaulle's Free French movement. Connected with this is an interesting question of status, which was not settled in international law until 1977: should 'freedom fighters' be treated in the same way as regular combatants, that is, as POWs under international law? Thomas concludes that captivity in a French POW camp in Africa was surely an easier fate than captivity in any other theatre of war, especially as in most cases imprisonment only lasted until 1943. The conclusion is unspectacular, as is the number of men involved – only a few hundred – but Thomas' research is a useful foray into the history of a hitherto forgotten group.

Sarah Fishman's essay, 'Das lange Warten auf die gefangenen Söhne Frankreichs: Ehefrauen der Kriegsgefangenen 1940–1945' (The long wait for France's captive sons: POW wives from 1940 to 1945), also addresses an unusual topic. Her study of the effects of husbands' captivity on their wives at home leads her to the conclusion that this experience of greater independence and responsibility did not lead to any lasting improvement in women's status. Any such change was forestalled principally by the policies and propaganda of the Vichy regime, with its forceful promotion of patriarchy. Wives were continually urged to respect the likely wishes of their absent husbands and never to assume the role of the responsible head of the family; this message, along with acute financial problems, made life very difficult for women bringing up children alone.

On the other side of the fence were the German POWs in French hands. In 'Zwei Meinungen zu einem Sachverhalt: die französische Behandlung deutscher Kriegsgefangener 1945–1948' (Two opinions on one question: the treatment of German prisoners of war in French hands 1945–1948), François Cochet shows that captured German soldiers lived under very harsh conditions. In 1945 – the most catastrophic year of all from this point of view – this maltreatment led to a perceptible deterioration of relations with the Americans, the original captors of most POWs now held by the French. The French population, on the other hand, were convinced that German POWs were living quite comfortably – or at least comfortably enough considering their conduct during the war. Not until the second half of 1945 did a press campaign, initiated by certain responsible individuals, produce a shift in public opinion, with the result that the treatment of the POWs – especially in the provision of food – improved and the death rate went down. Cochet uses figures from the research department of the French army to show that 3 per cent of German POWs in French hands died, which is almost identical with the figure for Frenchmen who died in German captivity. France released its German POWs in 1945–48, the last of the Western Allies to do so.

Among the Wehrmacht POWs in France were about 60,000 Austrians, the subject of an essay by Klaus Eisterer, 'Die österreichischen Kriegsgefangenen in französischer Hand, 1943–1947/48' (Austrian prisoners of war in French hands 1943–1947/48). They were treated better than the Germans because Austria, at least after 1944, was seen as the first victim of the German Reich. Because the Allies wanted to set up an independent Austrian state as soon as possible, the repatriation of Austrian POWs was also quicker than that of their German comrades. By the end of November 1946 all Austrian prisoners had left France for home, save those suspected of war crimes.

David Killingray's 'Africans and African-Americans in Enemy Hands' shows how strongly the treatment of POWs was influenced by considerations of origin and ethnicity – or, to put it bluntly, racial prejudice. Black soldiers fought in the Second World War as British and French colonial troops and in US army units. Killingray draws on first-hand accounts of the experiences of black POWs in German hands to show that their treatment depended more closely than that of their white comrades on the goodwill and state of mind of their 'warders', and that the Geneva Convention was seen as even less binding as far as they were concerned. They were put in separate

camps, where they suffered not only from miserable living conditions but also from the unaccustomed climate. Killingray estimates that about half of them died in captivity – a huge death rate compared with the 3 per cent of Frenchmen who died in German captivity. It can also be assumed that prisoners of African origin would have received even worse treatment if the Axis powers had not feared retaliatory measures by the Allies against German and Italian prisoners.

The influence of racist ideology on the treatment of POWs is also discussed by Barbara Stelzl in her essay on a multinational POW camp in Austria (*‘Im Gewahrsam des “Dritten Reiches”’: Aspekte der Kriegsgefangenschaft, dargestellt am Beispiel des Stalag XVII B Krems–Gneixendorf*). This camp provided most of lower Austria with labour, especially in agriculture and in the construction and armaments industries. The treatment of the prisoners differed sharply according to nationality. At the very bottom of the scale were the Soviet soldiers, who were put in a separate area, the ‘eastern camp’, where the Geneva Convention was entirely disregarded. At first they were seen as useless mouths, not even worth preserving as a labour force. Only the increasing labour shortage in the Third Reich from 1942 onwards created any interest in them as labourers, but even then they were guarded more strongly and treated more harshly than other nationals. The death rate among them was correspondingly higher. At the other end of the Krems–Gneixendorf scale were the Americans, who, along with the British, received the protection of the Geneva Convention in that neither officers nor NCOs were forced to work; indeed, prisoners of other nationalities were assigned to them as ‘orderlies’, whereas NCOs from the other nations represented in the camp – Belgians, Frenchmen, Serbs and Italians – were pressured into working. The Americans and British also received the best medical treatment. A considerable number of them reported sick in poor hygiene conditions, but none died of malnutrition or disease. This is confirmed by Albert E. Cowdrey, who writes of the medical care of US POWs in the Second World War in *‘Die medizinische Versorgung von amerikanischen Kriegsgefangenen im Zweiten Weltkrieg’*. He puts the death rate among US POWs in Europe and north Africa at less than 1 per cent. Things were very different in the ‘eastern camp’ at Krems–Gneixendorf, where prisoners were dying like flies according to Stelzl, who draws on personal records in the central archive of the Defence Ministry in Moscow. Even in death the nations were not equal: while Soviet corpses were buried in mass graves, individuals of other nations had graves of their own.

Some suggestions about the state of mind of German POWs in the United States are made by Günter Bischof in *‘Einige Thesen zu einer Mentalitätsgeschichte deutscher Kriegsgefangenschaft in amerikanischem Gewahrsam’*, which draws heavily on eye-witness accounts. German troops captured by the Americans in north Africa in 1943 were shipped across the Atlantic to POW camps in the United States, where living conditions were good. Indeed, Bischof’s conclusion is that ‘a German soldier captured by the Allies in World War II could hope for no better fate than to end up in a POW camp in the USA’ (p. 179). He could expect clean accommodation, good food, hot showers, and sports, entertainment and educational facilities. At the end of the war there were about 380,000 Germans in US camps, mostly in the south,

where they worked on the land. However, it is striking that soldiers transported from the African campaign into the isolation of US captivity clung to their Nazi ideology and their belief in an eventual German victory right up to the end of the war. This made them very different from the Wehrmacht soldiers captured by the Americans in 1944/45, who had experienced the military defeat of the German Reich.

During the Second World War civilians as well as soldiers found themselves in camps, as internees. Although the United States was not the only country where this happened (see Bob Moore's 'Axis Prisoners' for British policy on enemy aliens, which envisaged, among other things, deporting them to Canada), we now have a very worthwhile monograph on the American experience in Stephen Fox's book. Its real importance is that it deals with a subject that has not yet found its way into the American public consciousness – unlike the resettlement and internment of Japanese ethnic communities. For all its merits, however, the comparison with the Soviet gulags, suggested by the book's title, is misleading. Fox begins with an account of the political and legal measures introduced under Franklin D. Roosevelt to enable the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to gather information about 'suspicious' citizens or ethnic groups. The FBI prepared a scheme whereby persons who were considered suspicious by reason of their origins, relationships or friendships could be classified according to their degree of 'dangerousness' – a proceeding which leads Fox in his epilogue to argue against all attempts to pigeonhole human beings. Drawing on oral testimony as well as archival sources, Fox traces the fate of about thirty individuals of German origin, describing their lives before and during the war and, where possible, after it. The book is all the better for the way in which each individual's story is divided according to the stages in the persecution (arrest, interrogation, arrival in the camp, camp life, release), with a chapter devoted to each stage. Each chapter begins with an explanatory note by the author; each extract of the individual biography ends with references that enable the reader to pursue that particular individual's story from chapter to chapter. We are introduced to a world of spying and snooping, where the mere fact of belonging to a particular society or subscribing to a German-language newspaper could lead to disaster. They were all grist to the FBI mill. There was little distinction between people who really did sympathise with Nazi ideology and those quite inoffensive individuals who retained a certain patriotic devotion to their country of origin. It is noteworthy that US citizenship afforded no protection against suspicion and internment. Moreover, according to Fox the efforts of the US government to purge the entire western hemisphere of enemy influence resulted in Germans being abducted from Latin American countries and brought into US camps. A few hundred of these internees eventually opted for repatriation to Germany, which did not take place – via Switzerland – until the end of 1944 and early 1945, when the returnees found themselves in a country that lay in ruins.

At the end of the war, in Germany, there were about three and a half million German soldiers in US hands, but the nationality of their captors was all they had in common with their comrades in the United States. Bischof refers briefly to the attitudes of German POWs in the huge, notorious Rhine camps, built on the left bank of the river in 1945 to receive the enormous numbers surrendering from the

Wehrmacht. Rüdiger Overmans devotes an entire article to them under the title ‘Ein untergeordneter Eintrag im Leidensbuch der Jüngerer Geschichte?’ (A minor entry in the book of the sufferings of recent history?). At the beginning of 1945, in the strictest secrecy, the American authorities decided to deny German captives POW status, with all its accompanying privileges, and to treat them as ‘disarmed enemy forces’, that is, captured ex-soldiers of a state that had ceased to exist. However, Overmans argues convincingly that it was not this measure that created the conditions in the Rhine camps, but the sheer numbers involved: at the beginning of the year the Americans were holding 300,000 prisoners, but within six months there were 3.4 million. A great many Wehrmacht soldiers had handed themselves over in any way they could, some by deserting their own units, because US aircraft had dropped propaganda leaflets promising that any German soldiers who surrendered would be treated in accordance with international law. Subsequent disappointment contributed to the prisoners’ dismay at the way they were now being treated; often they were stripped of all their possessions, including their paybooks, and herded into fenced compounds, some reminiscent of ‘cages’, without shelter or even sanitation. Such breaches of international law were an excuse for the sufferers to see themselves as victims – of the Americans, the war, and finally of Nazism. It was a way of evading the need to face up to their own responsibility for what had happened.

A similar conclusion is reached by Karl Hüser in his “‘Unschuldig’ in britischer Lagerhaft?” (‘Guiltyless’ in a British internment camp?), a study of the Staumühle camp in Hövelhof, Westphalia, in which functionaries of the Third Reich were held after the end of the war, having been subjected to ‘automatic arrest’ under Allied rules. Hüser shows that few of these internees were innocent, although many of them had been no more than small cogs in the machinery of the Third Reich. The harsh living conditions in the camp, especially in 1945, together with palpable injustices in the de-nazification process and the length of their internment, led them to believe that they were first and foremost victims. Here again, internment had no reforming effect. Hüser’s article, which draws on both eye-witness reports and British archives, has an appendix with a selection of printed sources.

The awful conditions in the Rhine camps naturally raise the question of how many prisoners actually died in them, and here I must briefly take issue with the Canadian James Bacque, who in his book *Other Losses* (1989)¹ claims that about a million German soldiers were deliberately starved to death and were disguised in the statistics under the item ‘Other losses’. Overmans argues persuasively against this claim, but the best-supported refutation of Bacque is surely to be found in Arthur L. Smith’s 1992 book *Die ‘vermißte Million’* (The ‘Missing Million’). Smith points out that no attempt was made to register the soldiers on their entry into the camps; owing to this negligence, and to other inaccuracies (e.g. prisoners for exchanges might be counted more than once, and POWs could be transferred), all statistical data from the US side must be treated with the greatest caution. Smith therefore turns to German sources (not consulted by Bacque), and argues on the basis of documents from the

¹ Toronto: Stoddart.

Wehrmacht information office and post-war German investigations that over 80 per cent of the missing soldiers were last heard of alive on the eastern front. This is supported by information in the archives of towns and parishes close to the Rhine camps, by a count of graves in cemeteries and by the fact that the vast majority of soldiers who died in the camps can be identified by name. Smith does not deny that between 10,000 and 40,000 German soldiers perished from indifference and neglect in the Rhine camps and that the US government has never acknowledged responsibility for this. But he also points out that the Americans were very quick to release their POWs; by spring 1947 only 18,000 remained in captivity. By June 1945 the camps themselves had passed to British or French control – after which conditions in the French-controlled camps immediately deteriorated still further. The inevitable conclusion, as Smith convincingly demonstrates, is that the ‘missing million’ German combatants must be sought on the eastern front.

Stefan Karner introduces us to the world of the Soviet POW camps in ‘Lagergruppe Stalingrad/Volgograd’ (the Stalingrad/Volgograd group of camps), which uses Russian sources. The largest single group interned in these camps consisted of some 93,000 German soldiers who had survived the Battle of Stalingrad. The conditions were so terrible that two-thirds of the prisoners succumbed; in the Beketovka section 40,000 of the 50–60,000 inmates died. Most of the deaths were put down to dystrophy or dropsy – both symptoms of extreme malnutrition. Able-bodied prisoners were put to work in industry and road-building, but their capacity to work was so low that in 1945 the camp commandants tried to stabilise the prisoners’ condition by increasing their rations, meeting with only limited success. The situation changed when sick prisoners, and those unable to work, began to be repatriated, and there was a steep rise in criminal convictions. Most of these convictions, which generally carried a sentence of 25 years’ forced labour, were for membership of a particular Wehrmacht unit or of the Waffen-SS. Strangely enough, the mere hopelessness engendered by such a sentence goaded the prisoners into protests and demands for better living and working conditions since they had nothing more to lose. Not until 1955 were the Stalingrad/Volgograd camps closed and the last German prisoners released. The political and diplomatic efforts which procured the return home of the last German POWs in Soviet hands are the subject of Michael Borchard’s chapter, ‘Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen in der Sowjetunion’ (German prisoners of war in the Soviet Union). Borchard approaches this difficult theme with commendable objectivity, based on extensive research in archives in both the Federal Republic and the former East Germany, together with US, British and French collections. Regrettably, there is no evaluation of the Russian sources which have been available since 1991.

Borchard explains that the Moscow Declaration of 30 October 1943 allowed war criminals to be put on trial in the countries in which their crimes had been committed. This gave the Soviets a pretext for subjecting captured Wehrmacht soldiers to Soviet criminal law and, flouting all the principles of international law, to find them guilty of ‘counter-revolutionary activity’ or ‘damage to national property’. Borchard does not deny that some of the victims of this were war criminals. Unique

to the Soviet Union, however, was the importance of such prisoners as pawns in the political game with postwar Germany. Political developments, such as the founding of the German Federal Republic, had a very direct impact on these prisoners' fate, as the wave of condemnations in 1949/50 clearly shows. Borchard demonstrates how a fundamentally humanitarian problem turned into a political one that could be solved only by political means. He also highlights the very different ways in which it was tackled in the two Germanies. A turning point was the announcement by the Soviet news agency Tass, on 4 May 1950, that only about 13,000 'war criminals' still remained in Soviet camps. While the true number of German POWs in the Soviet Union had never been definitely established, this could only mean that the fate of up to one and a half million German soldiers was unexplained and would doubtless always remain so. Between Tass's declaration and the death of Stalin in 1953, the subject of POWs was never mentioned in public in East Germany or raised in its exchanges with the Soviet Union. In the West, on the other hand, efforts to secure the prisoners' release began in earnest. It became obvious that Chancellor Konrad Adenauer was right to maintain that the question could only be solved at governmental level and after certain basic political conditions had been met. This last was achieved after the Paris treaties of 1954, which strengthened the sovereignty of the Federal Republic and integrated it more thoroughly with the Western bloc. As the Soviet Union became more eager to consolidate the status quo in Europe and to establish diplomatic relations with the Federal Republic, the value of POWs as political pawns began to diminish. Adenauer could claim the credit for understanding this situation and exploiting it skilfully in his negotiations in Moscow in September 1955.

While the treatment of German prisoners by the Soviet authorities was a gross violation of international law, the suffering and mass deaths of Russian POWs in German camps undeniably constituted a war crime. Whereas after 1943 the German soldiers were prisoners in a country in a state of economic collapse, where the native population was also near starvation, the Russian POWs in the Reich in 1942/42 were seen as useless mouths, not (at first) worth keeping even as labourers, their lives not worth preserving. Barbara Stelzl's essay on Stalag XVII B Krems-Gneixendorf, already mentioned, gives some account of this. Particularly useful on this subject, however, is Reinhard Otto's book. Otto's extensive research in German and Russian archives – especially his discovery and evaluation of the card indexes belonging to the Wehrmacht's information office, now in the archives of the Russian Defence Ministry – provides proof of something that has long been disputed by historians (including Rolf-Dieter Müller in his otherwise very worthwhile essay): that all Soviet POWs in Germany were individually registered and therefore their individual destinies can be established with certainty. The Supreme Command of the German Army began this registration on 2 July 1941, after the Soviet government announced that it would report the names of German prisoners to the Red Cross so long as the favour was reciprocated. Otto shows that from the beginning of the war the intention was to subject Soviet prisoners to 'special treatment'. Camps were prepared for them even before the attack on the Soviet Union – camps which were far below the

standard of other POW camps. However, in the first phase of 'Operation Barbarossa' this strict discrimination proved impracticable, if only because of the sheer numbers of prisoners taken. Initially, also, it was decided on ideological grounds that Russian prisoners should not be put to work because the risks of contact with the German population were too great. Their treatment was to be based on Orders No. 8 and 9 issued by Reinhard Heydrich, chief of the security police and the SD, a special branch of the SS, on 17 and 21 July 1941; all Soviet prisoners were to be examined and those considered ideologically dangerous to be liquidated immediately. All Jews belonged, naturally, in the latter group. The selection process was handled by *Einsatzkommandos* who visited each camp where Russian soldiers were being held and set up the machinery of extermination. The prisoners were interrogated – often under torture – and the 'dangerous' ones transferred to a concentration camp, where most were killed immediately. Otto describes this process meticulously, using the example of Stalag 308 (VIII E) Neuhammer in Lower Silesia. But the strict prohibition on using Soviet captives as labour did not last long: on 31 October 1941 this was formally approved. The Germans never officially renounced the principle that Soviet POWs had to be examined and approved before being put to work, but as their importance to the German war economy grew the selection as practised by the *Einsatzkommandos* was abandoned; from mid-1942 almost all the POWs were used as labour. Otto estimates that by then some 38,000 of them had succumbed. The Soviet prisoners were subject to special vigilance until the end of the war, and countless numbers of them were sent to concentration camps to be 'exterminated through labour'. Otto's excellent study lays special emphasis on the unholy alliance between the Gestapo and the Wehrmacht; the latter flouted every aspect of the military code of honour and collaborated with the former, as also happened in the extermination campaign against the civil population on the eastern front.

More chilling statistics are to be found in Rolf-Dieter Müller's essay 'Die Behandlung sowjetischer Kriegsgefangener durch das Deutsche Reich 1941–1945' (The treatment of Soviet prisoners of war by the German Reich 1941–1945). Drawing on Russian publications, though unfortunately not on the Soviet archives, Müller concludes that there were 5.7 million Soviet prisoners in Germany, of whom 3.3 million (58 per cent) died. Müller rejects, as unreliable, the much lower figures sometimes reported on the Russian side – for example that 1.8 million Russians failed to return from captivity.

Müller also investigates the repatriation of Russian captives. On 16 August 1941 Stalin declared that any Soviet soldiers who surrendered to the enemy were to be treated as deserters. Consequently the vast majority of returning prisoners vanished straight into the Gulag, where they were interrogated, interned, punished, and even after being released – if they ever were – remained marked men for life. In terror of such a fate, many Soviet prisoners tried to avoid being sent home and were eventually repatriated by force – one of the most horrifying aspects of the POW experience in the Second World War, but one of the least known. An informative survey of how this repatriation was organised is Pavel Poljan's 'Die Repatriierung der Sowjetbürger in die UdSSR' (the Repatriation of Soviet Citizens to the USSR).

Things were also, naturally, very difficult for Soviet generals returning from captivity, as shown in *Captured Soviet Generals* by Aleksander A. Maslov. This is an important book because it is the first to gather and analyse information that was previously off limits for Russian historians. Maslov briefly recounts the fate of more than seventy Red Army generals who were captured by the Germans. Twenty-six of them died in captivity, five escaped, twenty eight were put on trial on their return, pardoned and returned to active service (though not usually in positions of responsibility). The rest were accused of treason and executed.

Even greater contempt attended prisoners of war in Japan. Ikuhiko Hata, in 'From Consideration to Contempt: The Changing Nature of Japanese Military and Popular Perceptions of Prisoners of War Through the Ages', argues that this pejorative attitude was the result of developments in the 1920s and 30s. In the Russo-Japanese War of 1904/5 and the First World War, Japan had gained a reputation for treating its prisoners correctly in accordance with the Hague Land Warfare Conventions. But Japan did not ratify the 1929 Geneva Convention. Hata explains that in the interim, public opinion had swung in favour of the idea that the status of POW was a dishonourable one. He gives the example of a Japanese ex-POW, Major Kuga, who was released in 1932, returned to the location in Shanghai where he had been captured and there committed suicide, an act which turned him into a national hero. In 1941 this attitude was enshrined in the army's Field Service Code: 'You shall not undergo the shame of being taken alive' (quoted on p. 255). As a result, few Japanese prisoners fell into Allied hands, many preferring to fight to the death rather than surrender. Many of those captured by the American or British forces (who treated them quite correctly) assumed false names so that their own would not be besmirched by the shame of captivity. Hata believes that many of them probably planned to commit suicide after the war, or live outside Japan, but the vagaries of history enabled them to return to a Japan that had become a very different country.

This Japanese contempt for prisoners of war had a direct impact on their treatment of Allied soldiers. They suffered from insufficient food and medical attention, ill-treatment and forced labour. Charles G. Roland's 'Human Vivisection: The Intoxication of Limitless Power in Wartime' is a horrifying description of how a number of Japanese doctors, spurning all the dictates of conscience, subjected POWs to a series of abominable and meaningless pseudo-medical experiments. It must be borne in mind, however, that the sources for this aspect of POW research are very limited, since none of these Japanese cases received any criminal investigation analogous to the Nuremberg trials. The vast majority of the victims (and Roland is talking about some 30,000 people) were Chinese or Manchurian; the number of criminal doctors was small and the experimenting was not nearly so systematic as that done on prisoners in German concentration camps. It must also be pointed out by way of explanation (though not of excuse) that very few victims of this 'vivisection' actually died; most of those who did succumb were subjected to experiments with bacteriological weapons.

One example of the forced labour performed by Allied POWs for the Japanese, often in the most inhuman conditions, is examined by Sibylla Jane Flower in 'Captors

and Captives on the Burma–Thailand Railway’ – the line which entered popular culture through *The Bridge over the River Kwai*.² About 64,000 POWs, more than half of them British, worked on this railway line, which was intended to transport supplies to the Japanese army in Burma. Flower shows that their treatment could be very different depending on what camp they were in; her picture diverges somewhat from the description in the novel and in the film. The personalities of the commanders on both sides – the Japanese commandants and the Allied (mostly British) officers, many of whom had been captured along with their men – had a decisive impact on the survival and welfare of the prisoners.

What can we learn from the works reviewed here? First, surely, that by 1939 there were adequate legal principles in existence to guarantee the correct treatment of prisoners of war. Joan Beaumont comes to the same conclusion in ‘Protecting Prisoners of War 1939–1995’: the Geneva Agreement of 1949 and the protocols added in 1977 merely clarified a few points – important though some of them were – because the basic protection of POWs had already been provided for in the 1907 and 1929 conventions. If prisoners were ill-treated in the Second World War – and sadly, ill-treatment was more common than proper treatment – the motives were ideological, and primarily racist: prisoners were not always treated as human beings. Such prejudices seem to have been widespread, but it is obvious that German minds, in particular, harboured a disgraceful hierarchy of the value of different nations, with Americans and British at the top and Russians, blacks and Italian ‘military internees’ at the bottom. Two things worked more powerfully to protect prisoners than any legal stipulations: the need to preserve their labour so as to integrate them into the war economy, and the fear of reprisals against the soldiers of the captor’s own nation.

² Pierre Boulle, *The Bridge Over the River Kwai*, trans. Xan Fielding (New York: Gramercy, 2000 [1954]).