THE CULTURE OF CAPTIVITY: GERMAN PRISONERS, BRITISH CAPTORS,
AND MANHOOD IN THE GREAT WAR, 1914-1920

Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

For German soldiers of the Great War (1914-1918), falling into enemy hands was an emasculating ordeal that called one’s courage and loyalty into question and physically separated men from the national struggle upon which their identity as soldiers in the service of a higher ideal rested. This dissertation examines the ways that the stigma of captivity affected how approximately 132,000 German military prisoners held in the United Kingdom from 1914-1920 experienced the Great War and life in enemy captivity. An analysis of the German prisoners’ lives in the United Kingdom stands to broaden our understanding of the Great War captivity experience and how idealized visions of appropriate male behavior impacted soldiers’ actions in the frontlines and shaped how they responded to the pressures of life in enemy hands.

The stigma of surrender predated the outbreak of war in 1914, but as German soldiers fell into enemy hands in increasing numbers after 1916, German authorities strengthened the correlation between surrender, cowardice, and disloyalty. Thus, this dissertation argues that the Great War failed to alter popular notions of what it meant to be a man at war and actually reinforced existing mores. By war’s end, more than 8 million soldiers had surrendered to their enemies, but despite the frequency with which soldiers made the transformation to prisoners, they struggled to come to terms with the implications of their surrender. Although the British treated German prisoners in the
United Kingdom exceptionally well, prisoners suffered from feelings of detachment, inadequacy and abandonment, and their letters from captivity indicate an urge to reestablish contact with the front and homefront in order to convince themselves that as prisoners they still had a place within the national community.

Prisoners in the United Kingdom accordingly devoted themselves to the establishment of vibrant cultural communities that accentuated their nationalism and commitment to the same higher ideal for which they had fought in the trenches or at sea. The prisoners’ activities ranged from academic endeavors to enthusiastic celebrations of the Kaiser’s birthday, but the events were always framed in a broader context that emphasized how the organized activities might benefit the fatherland. Reestablishing bonds with the homeland, after all, helped prisoners rebuild and maintain their sense of manhood. The homefront’s unsuccessful efforts to secure immediate prisoner repatriation following Germany’s defeat demonstrated that prisoners had not been forgotten, but the victorious powers’ decision to delay prisoner release intensified the prisoners’ isolation from their comrades.

In spite of the prisoners’ expressions of nationalism in captivity, they returned home to discover that many segments of German society considered former prisoners “second class soldiers.” In the interwar years, former prisoners attempted to change the public’s negative image of captivity by stressing the prisoners’ unique sense of nationalism and camaraderie, which had been evolved in opposition to a foreign captor. Ultimately, it was not until Adolf Hitler’s 1933 recognition of prisoners of war as honorable members of the “community of the front” that many former prisoners found the redemption they had desired for more than a decade.
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I began work on this project more than six years ago, and its completion would not have been possible without the support of numerous individuals and institutions. I am grateful for the opportunity to thank those whose advice, encouragement, and financial support has made this dissertation possible.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT

BEF: BRITISH EXPEDITIONARY FORCE
DPW: DIRECTORATE OF PRISONERS OF WAR
PWD: PRISONERS OF WAR DEPARTMENT
PWEC: PRISONERS OF WAR EMPLOYMENT COMMITTEE
PWIB: PRISONERS OF WAR INFORMATION BUREAU
RDC: ROYAL DEFENCE CORPS
ReK: REICHSVEREINIGUNG EHEMALIGER KRIEGSGEFANGENER
UK: UNITED KINGDOM
WO: WAR OFFICE

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN FOOTNOTES

APC: AUTHOR’S PERSONAL COLLECTION
BABL: BUNDESARCHIV, BERLIN-LICHTERFELDE
BAK: BUNDESARCHIV, KOBLENZ
BAMA: BUNDESARCHIV-MILITÄRARCHIV, FREIBURG IM BREISGAU
BHStA/IV: BAYERISCHES HAUPTSTAATSARCHIV, ABTEILUNG IV: KRIEGSARCHIV
BfZ: BIBLIOTHEK FÜR ZEITGESCHICHTE, STUTTGART
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INTRODUCTION

“The war had entered into us like wine. We had set out in a rain of flowers to seek the death of heroes. The war was our dream of greatness, power and glory. It was a man’s work, a duel on fields whose flowers would be stained with blood. There is no lovelier death in the world…”

Ernst Jünger’s recollections of the Great War’s commencement fail to capture the range of emotions that accompanied men to the front in August 1914 and throughout the Great War. For every soldier who welcomed the opportunity to face death and prove himself on the battlefield, another likely trembled at the prospect of not returning home. Nonetheless, Jünger’s comments reveal something significant about social expectations in the years before Europe descended into more than four years of conflict. War was indeed “a man’s work,” and even the most reluctant warrior understood what was expected when he encountered the enemy. Firmly entrenched stereotypes demanded that men exhibit honor, strength, courageousness, and self-control in all aspects of their lives. Soldiers, including citizen soldiers, realized that their peers expected that they would not only fight bravely, but also willingly give their lives in defense of the fatherland. Jünger’s search for a “lovely” demise was not exceptional; thousands of young men imagined the Great War in absolute terms of victory or death. But what of soldiers who found neither and fell into enemy hands?

Prisoners of the Great War found neither the triumph of victory nor the glory of martyrdom. Instead, soldiers who left the battlefield as prisoners faced accusations of cowardice, desertion, or treason, regardless of the circumstances leading to their capture.\(^2\)

As a result of what George Mosse referred to as the “militarization of masculinity,” German men of the early twentieth century based much of their masculine identity on the belief that they served a higher, collective purpose, which was often defined along national lines.\(^3\) Willingly sacrificing one’s life on the battlefield for the sake of the nation was the ultimate expression of heroic manhood. The act of surrender, however, simultaneously separated combatants from their comrades at the front and their loved ones in Germany. Falling into enemy hands did not merely physically remove soldiers from the battlefield; it severed the psychological bonds with the higher purpose upon which their sense of manhood depended. In what was frequently their first face-to-face encounter with the enemy, prisoners often suffered physical abuses and the humiliation of plunder at the hands of their captors, making that ordeal even more emasculating.

The millions of soldiers who raised their hands in defeat and chose enemy captivity from 1914-1918 entered the largest prisoner of war camp system of the twentieth century.\(^4\) Included in this global network of prisoner of war camps were approximately 500 facilities managed by the British War Office in the United Kingdom.


More than 325,000 German soldiers surrendered to the British during the Great War. Of that number, at least 132,000 spent their captivity in the military camps of the UK. This dissertation, the first comprehensive study of its kind, examines the experiences of the German prisoners held in the UK from 1914-1920. Their story is one of emasculation, shame, detachment, and redemption.

Although they spoke different dialects and maintained diverse regional customs, the German prisoners in the UK had all failed to meet social expectations and the ideal they aspired to as courageous warriors in the service of a higher purpose. The attempt to come to terms with the implications of surrender was a central feature of the prisoners’ lives behind barbed wire. Rather than focus on soldiers who embodied idealized notions of manhood, this study offers innovative perspectives on its social construction by analyzing the experiences of soldiers who fell short of prescribed standards and chose surrender over a hero’s death (Heldentod) on the battlefields of the Great War. It demonstrates not only that a soldier’s manhood depended upon his relationship with the nation, but also that his existence as a prisoner was defined by efforts to reestablish a place within the national community.

Michael C.C. Adams has observed that to take someone’s gun or flag at war was a way to “unman him.” Appreciating the emotions associated with having been unmanned by the enemy is essential to understanding how prisoners experienced surrender and captivity. Becoming a prisoner involved the separation from one’s comrades, and the

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moment of surrender inevitably brought about an identity crisis. The stigma of cowardice and weakness plagued virtually every prisoner. Popular expressions such as “victory or death” or “you’ll never take me alive” reveal our admiration for individuals who refuse to surrender when the odds are stacked against them. The phrase “Please don’t shoot, I am your prisoner,” evokes a different set of mental images. In an era when soldiers and civilians alike revered sacrificial death as the highest expression of national devotion, society often relegated prisoners of war to the commemorative emptiness between victory and death.

However, the same social mores that compelled soldiers to view surrender as shameful made it impossible for prisoners to accept their fate and submissively await repatriation. Despite the feelings of detachment and anxiety that characterized life in enemy hands, the German prisoners in the UK nurtured a camp culture of resistance and redemption. They believed that the manner in which they handled themselves as captives on enemy soil was a direct reflection of their national character. Their British captors may have stripped prisoners of the conventional weapons of war, but in the camps of the UK German captives waged a battle of redemption that emphasized camaraderie, nationalism, and a commitment to Germany’s future. The prisoners’ organized pursuits were intended to demonstrate that although surrender had separated them from the battlefield, they remained devoted to the same higher aim as soldiers still in the front lines. By examining how prisoners responded to captivity we stand to strengthen our understanding of the men who fought the Great War and the ways a soldier’s identity rested upon his connection to the front—and the nation he defended there.
NEGLECTED HISTORY: PRISONERS OF THE GREAT WAR

Of the more than 70 million soldiers mobilized from 1914-1918, approximately 8.5 million fell into enemy hands. Statistically speaking, between eleven and thirteen percent of the men who answered the call to arms shared the experience of life in enemy captivity. Yet their stories have been overshadowed by those of the estimated 9-10 million soldiers killed in action. Although the historiography of captivity during the Second World War is well established, historians of the Great War have overlooked its prisoners to the extent that one scholar recently referred to the subject as “forgotten history.” In view of recent publications on the Great War’s prisoners, it may be an overstatement to classify their history as altogether forgotten. Nonetheless, scholarly interest in captivity has not revealed the prisoner of war’s significance to the history of the Great War. Historians on both sides of the Atlantic have only begun to devote significant attention to prisoners of war. Even those who discuss the Great War in the context of “total war” often fail to address one of the factors that set it apart from its predecessors—captivity as a truly mass phenomenon. As Heather Jones recently pointed out, military captivity represents a “missing paradigm” for the study of the Great War. As such, analysis of military captivity may raise fresh questions about the events of

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9 Hinz, Gefangen im Großen Krieg, p. 9. Hinz uses the term “eine vergessene Geschichte.” Prisoners of war have likewise been largely excluded from studies of gender and masculinity during the war. See, for example, Karen Hagemann’s report on gendering modern German military history, which discusses research on martial masculinity but fails to consider what the study of surrender and captivity may reveal about the subject. Karen Hagemann, “Military, War and the Mainstreams: Gendering Modern German Military History,” in Hagemann and Jean H. Quataert, eds., Gendering Modern German History: Rewriting Historiography (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007), pp. 63-85.
1914-1918 while offering a new lens through which to view its legacies for the course of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{11}

This dissertation contributes to the development of this missing analytical paradigm in several important ways. First, it addresses a significant gap in the historiography of the 1914-1918 conflict. The Great War’s prisoners have generally received little attention, but perhaps no group has been overlooked to the extent of the German military prisoners captured by the British and held in the UK. With scholars beginning to recognize captivity as a viable field of historical inquiry, a wide range of geographically based studies has appeared in the past decade.\textsuperscript{12} The respective works of Annette Becker and Uta Hinz, for example, provide valuable insight into the complexities of the German camp system and the prisoners it held.\textsuperscript{13} Alon Rachamimov’s examination of Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war in Russia similarly offers new methodological approaches to the study of captivity and draws attention to the Great War’s forgotten front in the east.\textsuperscript{14} Until now, however, historians have failed to produce a single comprehensive study of the more than 132,000 German military prisoners held in the UK.

This is not to suggest that German military prisoners of the British have been entirely excluded from the historical narrative. Robert Jackson’s popular work \textit{The

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Prisoners 1914-1918 includes a discussion of German prisoners in England, but it makes little, if any, use of German sources and focuses on British prisoners in Germany. Panikos Panayi’s more scholarly approach provides valuable insight into the lives of German prisoners held across the English Channel, but like Jackson’s, his contribution fails to consider important German archival sources. Although Panayi addresses military captivity in some detail, prisoners of war are of secondary importance in his work, as he is ultimately interested in civilian internees. Rainer Pöppinghege’s examination of British, German, and French prisoner of war newspapers utilizes an impressive array of published and archival materials related to British captivity, but his project’s admirable breadth makes a comprehensive analysis of life behind the UK’s barbed wire impractical.

The following study builds upon but also departs from these previous studies of German prisoners held by the British during the Great War. By war’s end, the British sent only officers and severely wounded prisoners across the English Channel and employed a majority of their German prisoners in camps administered by the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) in France. This dissertation discusses the BEF’s handling of prisoners on the continent to provide the larger context of British prisoner management, but its scope is limited to the German military prisoners held in the UK from 1914-1920.

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17 Rainer Pöppinghege, Im Lager Unbesiegt: deutsche, englische, und französische Kriegsgefangenen-Zeitungen im Ersten Weltkrieg (Essen: Klartext, 2006).
Both Panayi and Pöppinghege examine Britain’s military and civilian prisoners alongside
one another, moving seamlessly from one classification of captives to the next. Their
methodological approach offers an effective framework for comparing and contrasting
the experiences of civilian internees with those of prisoners taken from the battlefield, but
distinctions between combatants and non-combatant internees did not disappear in
captivity.¹⁸

There was a high probability that civilian internees had lived in the UK for an
extended period prior to their arrest and confinement. They were far more likely to speak
English and have British friends and associates—or even a spouse—to assist them in
captivity.¹⁹ Many, if not a majority, of the military prisoners captured by the British had
never set foot in the UK, and depending on their level of education, had only a
rudimentary understanding of the English language. Overall, the landscape they
encountered upon arrival in England was altogether more alien to them, as many were
unfamiliar with British customs or cuisine. Aside from the sensation of geographic
dislocation, military prisoners carried the emotional baggage of their battlefield
surrender. Civilians interned before being able to report for military duty in Germany
may have felt emasculated by having been prohibited from participating in the war.
However, internees did not suffer the shame of having looked the enemy in the eye and
blinked at the moment of truth. Finally, physical weakness often complicated the
feelings of inadequacy experienced by military prisoners, as many soldiers who fell into
enemy hands were wounded when captured and continued to suffer from their injuries.

¹⁸ For a contrary view, see Jennifer Kewley Draskau, “Relocating the Heimat: Great War Internment
¹⁹ On German civilian internees in Britain, see Panikos Panayi, The Enemy in Our Midst: Germans in
Although this study’s scope is limited to the comparatively small population of German military prisoners in the UK, it is a comprehensive appraisal that begins by considering the prewar sensibilities that distinguished surrender as shameful and follows prisoners through repatriation and reintegration into postwar society. The Great War captivity experience did not begin when the first combatants entered enemy prison camps, or even with the August 1914 declarations of war. It began centuries earlier with the emergence of the correlation between surrender and cowardice. The feelings of emasculation that accompanied the moment of capitulation, when prisoners were often stripped of personal belongings and military decorations, intensified the emotional consequences of surrender. Whereas earlier studies all but ignore battlefield encounters between German prisoners and their British captors, this dissertation presumes that the moment of capture is critical to understanding the prisoners’ lives behind barbed wire. Furthermore, the captivity experience did not end with the armistice of November 1918. The general repatriation of prisoners from the UK commenced only in September 1919, and the emotional scars of captivity adversely affected the prisoners’ ability to reintegrate back home in Germany. The struggle for social acceptance was long and laborious, and it was not until 1933 that Adolf Hitler offered former prisoners the recognition they sought by welcoming them as honorable members of the community of the front.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this dissertation brings the stigma of surrender and captivity to the forefront of the discussion of the Great War’s military prisoners. Niall Ferguson has argued that surrender was the “key to the outcome of the First World War,” observing that it was not combat deaths that crippled the German Army in autumn 1918, but rather the waves of surrenders that occurred among its troops.
in the war’s final months. Ferguson concludes that the realistic fear of being killed following surrender kept soldiers from raising their hands in defeat. Had it been safer to give oneself up, he contends, more soldiers might have sought salvation in enemy captivity prior to summer and autumn 1918. The fear of dying an undignified death following surrender was legitimate, but the fear of losing one’s life was not the only force that kept men in the trenches during desperate situations. Many soldiers preferred to fight to the death rather than face the humiliation of asking their enemy for mercy, and their resistance to the idea of surrender was rooted in centuries of interaction between captors and their prisoners. Just as surrender is key to understanding the Great War’s outcome, an appreciation of the emasculation and dishonor of battlefield capitulation is essential to understanding the act of surrender and the captivity experience.

Prisoners of war have existed as long as armies have taken to the field, and falling into enemy hands has rarely been considered a dignified fate for a soldier. Beginning in the ancient world, victors typically killed their prisoners or paraded them through the streets as war trophies before enslaving them. The historical degradation of prisoners led to a corresponding understanding that no brave soldier would allow himself to be subjected to the humiliation of life in enemy captivity. Death was almost always preferable to surrender, particularly among men who considered themselves great warriors. Frederick the Great, for example, reportedly carried a vial of poison during the


Silesian Wars to ensure that the Prussian monarch would die by his own hand before being captured alive.\textsuperscript{22} This attitude proved especially prevalent in the decades prior to the Great War. Prewar standards demanded that men exhibit strength and bravery in all aspects of their lives, especially when they donned a military uniform and became soldiers. In an era when the military establishment proclaimed that “real men” fought to the death, soldiers who sought salvation in enemy captivity faced allegations of cowardice or desertion. Germans in many quarters viewed prisoners not as honorable warriors, but “second-class soldiers.”\textsuperscript{23} Historians have only recently started to acknowledge the central role that the emasculation and dishonor of surrender played in the history of captivity in the Great War. As Annette Becker points out, surrender represented a personal defeat, and prisoners often struggled with depression as a result of their separation from both the front and the homefront.\textsuperscript{24} Rainer Pöppinghege and Alon Rachamimov have likewise demonstrated that prisoners internalized a sense of shame at having fallen into enemy hands, and their respective works consider how this sensation affected prisoners’ lives in captivity.\textsuperscript{25}

The struggle to overcome the shame of captivity was unremitting. It began in the moments immediately following capture and continued long after prisoners returned to Germany. The psychological burdens of surrender were a prisoner’s constant companion

\textsuperscript{23} This phrase is borrowed from Rainer Pöppinghege, “Kriegsteilnehmer zweiter Klasse? Die Reichsvereinigung ehemaliger Kriegsgefangener 1919-1933,” \textit{Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift} 64 (2005).
\textsuperscript{24} Becker, \textit{14-18}, p. 83.
and functioned as the common thread that intertwined the segments of life in enemy hands. Accordingly, the stigma of surrender must take center stage in any attempt to determine what surrender meant for the soldiers who experienced it. The German prisoners of the British carried the disgrace of their battlefield surrender into the prison camps of the UK. It was there, in enemy captivity, that the same forces that led soldiers to consider surrender shameful drove them to embrace a redemptive vision of manhood and transform the prison camp into a new theater of war. Armed with their cultural sensibilities and a desire to reconnect with the front, they continued to resist their captors through simple disobedience, escape attempts, and the establishment of camp organizations that demonstrated their nationalism and devotion to the fatherland.

This study likewise contributes to our understanding of the complex relationship between nationalism and idealized visions of manhood. The understanding that proper men strove to serve a purpose higher than their individual interests heavily influenced early twentieth-century gender norms. National symbols, icons, and celebrations served as powerful reminders of the higher purpose German soldiers fought for during the Great War. Yet as Alon Confino argues, they likewise helped Germans to integrate their regional identities with that of the nation.²⁶ National rituals and symbols took on an even more important function for prisoners separated from the front lines, as ceremonies intended to foster a sense of belonging were doubly significant for men suffering from an acute sense of detachment.

Focusing on the emasculating stigma of surrender and the prisoners’ attempts to overcome it allows us to do more than deepen our knowledge of the German captivity experience in the UK. Approaching the subject from such an angle makes it possible to integrate the story of the German prisoners and their British captors into the war’s broader context and offer new insights into not merely what it meant to become a prisoner of war, but rather what it meant to be a man at war. Although this dissertation is not comparative, it represents a point of reference for future comparative studies of captivity. Finding common ground from which to begin discussions of how prisoners experienced wartime captivity in various environments will be essential as historians begin to examine more closely the Great War’s prisoners.

The consequences of surrender were enduring, and repatriated prisoners continued to battle the shame of their battlefield capitulation long after they returned home. Thus, the experiences of former prisoners support Omer Bartov’s observation that despite the industrial nature of the Great War, the romanticized ideas about appropriate behavior in battle that thrived in the prewar years survived the mechanical carnage of the 1914-1918 conflict intact. The postwar activities of the leading association for former prisoners of war and its gravitation towards National Socialism raises new questions about the extent to which former prisoners may have been more susceptible to the ideologies of extremist movements that offered the feeling of national unity, strength, and camaraderie former prisoners needed to restore all that had been lost at the moment of surrender.

The following work draws upon a wide range of materials located in German, British, and American archives, including unpublished memoirs, post-repatriation interviews, camp newspapers, and nearly 1,000 previously unused letters written by prisoners and their families. Relying on materials produced by those who experienced wartime captivity provides a look at the ordeal from the prisoners’ perspective and allows us to reconstruct, at least partially, the prisoners’ “everyday life.” Since many prisoners held in the UK after 1916 were officers, I have made a conscious effort to balance their accounts of captivity with those of their rank and file counterparts.

As with any source, there are unique dilemmas associated with relying heavily on prisoner letters. The British usually censored correspondence, so letters home that accused British soldiers of war crimes or complained of poor treatment were unlikely to arrive without significant alterations. Prisoners were also unlikely to discuss sensitive topics such as sexual frustration with their friends and family on the homefront. They rarely confessed that they felt as if their manhood had been taken at the moment of capture, so analyzing surrender’s impact on their masculinity requires a bit of reading between the lines. Although there are more than one thousand available letters written by German prisoners in the UK, correspondence written to prisoners is exceedingly rare. When prisoners departed for home in 1918, the British allowed them to transport limited materials across the English Channel. Years of letters from home, possibly numbering in the hundreds, were less likely to make the journey than items that would be immediately

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useful following repatriation. There exists, to my knowledge, no available example of extended correspondence between prisoners in the UK and their loved ones on the homefront. In this case, the rich, detailed narrative of Paul and Marie Pireaud’s wartime long distance relationship constructed by Martha Hanna in Your Death Would Be Mine remains out of reach.  

Nonetheless, one of a prisoner’s primary concerns was the fear that relatives and former comrades might abandon them, and letters from captivity reveal the prisoners’ insecurities and desire for a connection with the world beyond the barbed wire. Benjamin Ziemann’s recent work on the Great War and rural Bavaria demonstrates that despite the shortcomings of wartime correspondence, letters remain one of the most effective sources for determining how soldiers constructed their war experience.  

Prisoners used correspondence to inform acquaintances of camp activities and express their unconditional devotion to Germany’s collective struggle. Regardless of their limitations, wartime letters represent a valuable, and underused, media for assessing life in the prison camps of the UK.

The extensive use of prisoner correspondence by soldiers of various ranks and backgrounds is typical of scholarship that utilizes a “history from below” approach, but this study does not ignore the views of military officials and high-ranking government officials. Military authorities were largely responsible for nurturing the stigma of


surrender, and their perspective is essential to making sense of the captivity experience. British and German military and foreign office communications detailed the treatment of prisoners immediately following capture and in the prison camps of the UK. When paired with thousands of reports filed by neutral camp inspectors from the United States and Switzerland, these official communications provide a comprehensive view of the structure of the British camps. When read alone, correspondence can lack context, but inspection reports and official communications help fill in the voids left by censored writings from captivity. Finally, publications prepared by aid associations whose representatives worked closely with both prisoners and volunteers on the homefront offer an additional perspective on the challenges of life in enemy hands.

While this dissertation is organized somewhat chronologically, its framework may more appropriately be described as thematic. This organizational scheme allows for a progressive examination of the intensification of the stigma of surrender before turning to the prisoners’ responses to life behind barbed wire. Chapter One lays the foundation by discussing the dishonor of captivity against the backdrop of “normative” notions of manhood. To be labeled a coward was synonymous with social exile, and becoming a prisoner threatened a soldier’s identity as a member of a nation at war and therefore challenged his manhood. Even after the war’s initial engagements exposed the industrial face of modern warfare, authorities equated death with honor and overlooked the sacrifices of soldiers who fell into enemy hands. As large numbers of Germans entered British prisoner cages for the first time at the Battle of the Somme in July 1916, German officials began to reinforce the prisoner of war’s image as a coward, and possible deserter, in order to limit surrender losses. With the German front collapsing in 1918,
military officials further distorted the lines between deserters, traitors, and prisoners, ensuring that the stigma of captivity would endure even as German soldiers surrendered in unprecedented numbers. Although many scholars stress the Great War’s role in destroying traditional social customs and mores, Chapter One reveals a persistent link between surrender and shame, pointing to the continuity and reinforcement of prewar notions of appropriate battlefield behavior.

The second chapter examines the British treatment of German prisoners immediately following capture and in the camps of the UK. The battlefield encounter between British captors and German prisoners could be violent, if not deadly, and surrender was not uncommonly accompanied by the humiliation of plunder and abuse. Although the British handling of prisoners immediately following capture was often less than humanitarian, despite the tensions of the Anglo-German rivalry, prisoner abuse was largely a battlefield phenomenon. Prisoner treatment in the UK was commendable, and the British seemed legitimately interested in working with their enemies to improve standards for prisoner care. This assessment of the British treatment of German prisoners in the UK makes possible future comparisons between British prisoner handling and that of other belligerents, as well as British treatment of prisoners in other locations.

Arrival in the UK virtually guaranteed that prisoners who had not suffered serious wounds would live to see the end of the war, but most could not see the benefits of their status as prisoners for the shame it entailed. The German prisoners of the British struggled with the stigma of captivity and their separation from their nation’s war effort. Chapter Three examines the prisoners’ psychological struggles with life in captivity and argues that their correspondence reflected an acute desire to reestablish ties with former
units and friends beyond the barbed wire. Feelings of detachment and uselessness burdened prisoners who preferred duty on the Western Front to the consequences of being safely removed from it. Surrender brought a soldier’s loyalty and manhood into question, but there was a sure path to redemption. The Great War’s belligerents generally accepted that prisoners had a duty to attempt escape. Chapter Three likewise analyzes the value that prisoners placed on escape attempts and concludes that while escapes never threatened to turn the tide of the war, the resulting security increases aggravated a camp system low on manpower reserves. More importantly, escape attempts demonstrated the prisoners’ desire to resume an active role in Germany’s collective struggle and therefore helped to repair their damaged sense of manhood.

Few German military prisoners successfully fled the UK, leaving the vast majority in search of another road to redemption. With little hope of reaching the front and reuniting with their units, prisoners transformed the prison camps of the UK into an unconventional theatre of war. Chapter Four examines the prisoners’ organized activities in captivity, which ranged from the establishment of camp schools to competitive athletic associations, arguing that their pursuits displayed an unbroken desire to serve the higher cause and did not merely constitute a means for relieving the boredom of captivity. Prisoners strove to regain their sense of manhood and express their identity as German warriors through acts of defiance and the establishment of cultural communities that accentuated the merits of the “German spirit.” They decorated their quarters and social halls with images of prominent German personalities and celebrated the Kaiser’s birthday

enthusiastically. For men battling feelings of humiliation and inadequacy, organized events gave their lives meaning. By preparing themselves for the challenges of postwar life, prisoners felt that they continued to serve German interests.

Frontline soldiers demobilized and returned to Germany at war’s end, but prisoner repatriation did not begin until after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in June 1919. Chapter Five details the postwar captivity experience and contends that delayed repatriation intensified the prisoners’ emasculation by threatening their prospects for employment and underscoring the fact that surrender had severed their ties with the soldiers who returned home by December 1918. Prisoner correspondence from the postwar months reveals a growing sense of abandonment and frustration with what appeared to be a war without end. In Germany, relief associations organized efforts to persuade the Great War’s victors to commence repatriation, but the fragile German government was powerless to force the return of approximately 800,000 German prisoners that remained abroad around the globe. Prisoner advocates also spearheaded an unsuccessful movement to gain “back pay” (Nachzahlung) for time spent in captivity. Together, failed efforts to expedite repatriation and secure full compensation for prisoners signifies that despite good intentions, the German government’s approach to prisoner relief was hampered by the political and economic realities of the postwar era.

It was not until January 1920 that the last German prisoners of war left the UK. In the postwar era, the story of the German prisoners of the British merges with that of other prisoners returning from captivity around the globe. My final chapter explores the challenges faced by former prisoners as they attempted to gain financial compensation and recognition as honorable veterans in the Weimar Republic. The stigma of captivity
remained with prisoners in the years after repatriation and served as an obstacle to full reintegration. Many observers continued to associate the mass surrenders of summer and autumn 1918 with the German Army’s defeat and considered former prisoners of war to be “second class soldiers.” I examine the prisoners’ continued battle for respect following repatriation and consider the extent to which dissatisfaction with Weimar politicians’ inability to address their needs made some former prisoners susceptible to Nazi ideology. It was, after all, Hitler who eventually embraced former prisoners as honorable members of the “community of the front” and offered them a place of distinction within a movement that embraced idealized notions of sacrificial nationalism.

In accordance with German privacy laws, I have abbreviated the surnames of all prisoners quoted in this dissertation, with the exception of those mentioned in previously published works and newspaper articles. File numbers and other relevant indicators (dates, reference numbers, etc.) make unpublished materials easily accessible in their respective archives. With archival materials located in German, British, and American collections, I have cited all documents in the original language in order to maintain clarity and simplify matters related to translation and identification. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.

CHAPTER 1: BETWEEN VICTORY AND DEATH

More than 997,000 German soldiers fell into enemy hands from 1914-1918, approximately 325,000 of whom surrendered to the British. The act of surrender challenged the prisoners’ identities as men at war and called into question their commitment to Germany’s national struggle. In the early twentieth-century, the qualities of an honorable man and an honorable soldier were often equated. Social mores dictated that real men did not surrender. “Real” men demonstrated selflessness and served a “higher ideal,” valuing national prosperity over personal security. In times of war, a man’s identity was particularly bound to his status as a defender of the nation and the values it embraced. Surrender mentally and physically separated soldiers from the sense of belonging to something larger than themselves and threatened their place in the national community by opening them up to charges of cowardice or treason.

In the early twentieth century, there developed in Germany a harder image of military manhood that emphasized courageousness, endurance, and most importantly, a willingness to die in pursuit of a higher ideal. This chapter argues that as German losses to surrender increased during the Great War, military officials strengthened the prisoner of war’s shameful image and therefore intensified the stigma of falling into enemy hands. The fear of dying at the hands of potential captors prevented many soldiers from surrendering in hopeless situations, but the shame of appearing weak or disloyal likewise
kept men from asking the enemy for quarter. The intensification of surrender’s stigma throughout the war challenges the Great War’s reputation as a transformative event that ruptured traditional social customs by pointing to the persistence of prewar conceptions of appropriate battlefield behavior. Within the German Army, few military observers failed to recognize that it was not death tolls, but unprecedented waves of surrender that led to the army’s collapse in November 1918. In the postwar era, prisoners would be closely linked with Germany’s military defeat, regardless of the circumstances of their capture.

MANHOOD & THE ROAD TO THE GREAT WAR

What does it mean to be a man? Although this timeless question is likely to yield an infinite number of responses, this dissertation proceeds under the presumption that in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, most Europeans shared roughly similar ideas about appropriate male behavior. There was, in other words, a “normative” notion of what a man “ought to be.” This is not to suggest that there existed an unquestioned model of appropriate masculinity in nineteenth and early-twentieth century Germany. Competing masculinities challenged the hegemonic definitions of manliness, but they never threatened the ascendancy of the gender norms promoted by individuals dedicated to preserving male social primacy.¹ The middle-classes shaped the masculine ideal, but

¹ On both normative and hegemonic masculinities, as well as the problems associated with normative definitions of manhood, see R.W. Connell, Masculinities (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 70, 76-81. Additionally, John Tosh provides a valuable discussion of Connell’s work in “Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender,” in Dudink, Hagemann and Tosh, eds., Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History (New York: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 41-56.
the influence they exerted upon lower and upper class Europeans revealed the remarkable mobility of the model they constructed.²

The masculine ideal that solidified in the decades prior to the Great War portrayed the prototypical man as brave, steeled, and active, traits that do not come to mind when one imagines a prisoner of war being led away in defeat. Manly virtues were closely linked to the martial spirit and soldierly qualities such as physical strength, endurance, and dependability. As one scholar recently wrote, “manliness seeks and welcomes drama and prefers times of war, conflict, and risk.”³ Indeed, manhood was something that had to be proved; it was never granted to males simply by virtue of their birth. Men were expected to ascribe to socially constructed patterns of behavior and above all else, demonstrate honor and courage in their daily lives. Manhood, like honor, could be lost, and had to be defended when called into question.⁴ Both manhood and honor are difficult to define, but each is connected to the concept of respect and the ways in which the desire for public approval shapes behavioral patterns and provides individuals with a moral compass.⁵ Honor was essential to prewar normative definitions of manhood, as the loss of one almost always involved the loss of the other.

⁵ Alexander Welsh, for example, refers to honor as “the respect that motivates or constrains members of a peer group.” See Welsh, What is Honor: A Question of Moral Imperatives (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), p. xv.
Of all the ways one’s manhood could be contested, to be accused of cowardice was the most serious affront to one’s honor.\(^6\) To be labeled a coward was to be ostracized, and nowhere did the pressure to act in accordance with masculine standards weigh more heavily upon men’s shoulders than in the military. Civilian and military notions of proper male conduct were not mutually exclusive, but rather reinforced one another through the military’s influential role in civil society. Civilians in Imperial Germany looked to the military establishment to provide the masculine standard,\(^7\) and the military’s role in the national unification of 1870-71 made the institution exceedingly influential. Men of the middle classes commonly valued their reserve officer’s commission over any civilian accomplishment, financial or otherwise. Reserve officers vigorously defended the military and forged the primary bond between the armed forces and civil society.\(^8\) An officer’s commission was a valuable key to social acceptability, and men privileged enough to wear an officer’s uniform demanded, and received, respect.\(^9\)

The adoption of the Prussian model of universal conscription following German unification further strengthened the bonds between civilian and military life. The Prussian system theoretically conscripted young men regardless of social background or religious preference. As recruits, soldiers became students of the military “school of

\(^6\) Mosse, *The Image of Man*, p. 18.
manliness” whose rigors supposedly transformed boys into men. To limit the threat of infiltration by pacifist, unpatriotic recruits, the army conscripted only fifty-seven percent of Germany’s eligible males and ensured that urban centers, where men were more prone to socialist leanings, remained underrepresented.

By blocking the garrison doors to targeted groups, the German Army made a clear statement as to who it deemed worthy of bearing arms and reaping the social rewards of military service. Official propaganda questioned the worth of any individual who had not undergone military training, so in many ways the military accordingly defined popular conceptions of manhood. There were few scenarios under which one could simultaneously be a poor soldier and a good man, or vice versa. Few civilians challenged the social predominance of the military establishment and its customs, as most were eager to participate. Military service was a defining moment in a young man’s life, but for most Germans the peacetime experience in uniform was brief. About ninety-six percent of all recruits performed less than three years of uninterrupted service followed by reserve duty. Of lasting import was that once released back into civil-society, reservists were required to retain the attributes cultivated during training lest they be found inadequate if called to their regiments at a moment’s notice.

11 Hew Strachan, The First World War (New York: Penguin, 2003), 45-6. See also Kitchen, The German Officer Corps, pp. 143-186. Jews, in particular, were often depicted as the masculine “countertype” and found it nearly impossible to gain a reserve officer’s commission from 1885-1914, despite the fact that they were legally entitled to such distinctions under the German constitution. Campaigns by Jewish advocacy organizations to remedy this inequality proved largely unsuccessful. See Mosse, The Image of Man, pp. 56-76; Werner T. Angress, “Prussia’s Army and the Jewish Reserve Officer Controversy before World War I,” in James J. Sheehan, ed. Imperial Germany (New York; Franklin Watts, 1976), pp. 93-115.
12 Frevert, A Nation in Barracks, pp. 158, 170.
Visitors to prewar Germany were often amazed by the permeability of the lines separating civil and military society, particularly the degree to which military culture had deeply embedded itself in civilian life. Noticing the high-percentage of men in uniform during a 1901 visit to Germany, an American observer likened the national atmosphere to that of a “military camp” and noted that in essence, “every German [was] a soldier.” The uniform, he declared, made it unnecessary for Germans to judge their fellow citizens’ character, “for almost every other German wears his character on his back.” Attire alone could not make the man, but anyone who wore a military uniform was expected to possess certain qualities.

The character traits soldiers sought to exemplify became increasingly rigid during the decades leading to the Great War. The embourgeoisement of the military that accompanied universal conscription signaled the decline of the traditional officer class and corresponding shifts in the military cult of manliness. The ascendancy of bourgeois sexual norms forced the officer corps to reconsider the behavioral patterns it modeled for recruits. Although the most prestigious regiments continued to draw a majority of officers from the nobility, by 1913 seven of every ten Prussian officers came from the middle classes. Aristocratic military culture of the nineteenth century had emphasized respect for honor, duty and self-sacrifice. On the battlefield, sacrifice meant a calculated willingness to die so that those on the homefront would survive. Yet there

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14 Frevert, *A Nation in Barracks*, p. 158.
had also been a softer side to aristocratic military life that included all-male dance evenings and socialization with women in the barracks. In the decade immediately preceding the Great War, German officers migrated toward a “hardened masculinity” that stressed “toughness” and “endurance.” Officers continued to embrace older aristocratic notions of service and duty, and although the softer side of aristocratic manhood did not disappear completely, they purged all things “feminine” from their military existence.17

The entry of the middle classes into the upper ranks of the military forced aristocratic officers to conform to a revised set of masculine norms and legitimized a harder notion of manhood in the eyes of Germans who took social cues from men in uniform. In 1914, the Prussian officer corps consisted of approximately 22,000 active officers. Even when combined with the officers of the smaller German states, this cadre represented a minute segment of a population of more than 65 million. The influence it wielded, however, was totally out of proportion to its numerical strength.18 Military authorities used their influence to promote a rigid masculine ideal that depicted battlefield death as enviable. The belief that a “true man” must serve a larger purpose became a key component of the “militarization of masculinity.”19 Within this milieu, soldiers who surrendered to the enemy failed to meet military and social expectations and strained their connection to the larger purpose they had defended on the battlefield. In numerous

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19 Mosse, The Image of Man, p. 44.
cultures, going to war has been a rite of passage that males must bravely endure in order to be considered a man by their peers. Warriors who fail to conquer their fears have been historically shamed and humiliated to remind others of the consequences of exhibiting cowardice under fire. On the battlefield, it was not enough to simply serve; performance under fire was a reflection of a soldier’s character.

Officers understood that they were to lead by example by personally welcoming a soldier’s death. The veneration for death in the service of the nation had origins in the Wars of Liberation that drove Napoleon’s forces from central Europe from 1813-15, and the mystique that surrounded fallen soldiers reached unprecedented heights prior to the Great War. The Germans who took up arms in 1914 came of age surrounded by memorials to the wars of unification, and textbooks and youth organizations encouraged them to consider it an honor to die in defense of the fatherland. Heroes both served the nation and willingly fought to the death in its name.

A soldier’s education in the manly virtues of courageousness and sacrifice was directly related to the demands Germany expected to make of its soldiers in the event of a general European war. With improvements in Russo-French relations in the early 1890s, Germany faced the disadvantage of being surrounded by potential enemies. Before retiring from the General Staff in 1905, Alfred von Schlieffen addressed this strategic

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dilemma with a plan designed to ensure decisive victory and avoid a prolonged two-front campaign. His successor, Helmuth von Moltke the younger, embraced Schlieffen’s plan for aggressive warfare and shared his predecessor’s objection to defensive tactics. German strategists calculated that their homeland’s reliance on imports made it incapable of winning a protracted war. The Schlieffen Plan called for the destruction of the French Army in less than a month while limited German forces held the eastern frontier against a slowly mobilizing Russian Army.²⁴ Immediately following France’s surrender, the Kaiser’s victorious armies would move east with the full weight of the German military machine. The Schlieffen Plan’s limitations were well known. No one could be sure what role the British would play or how neutral Belgium might respond to a request for passage through its territory. What remained clear was that once the gears of the plan were set to motion, time was of the essence. Germany’s prospects for victory diminished with every month in the field. Some scholars of the Great War have described the Schlieffen Plan as nothing more than a “desperate gamble,”²⁵ but the officers who viewed it as Germany’s greatest chance for success rarely questioned its basic components.

Since serious delays would be disastrous, authorities asked a great deal of the officers responsible for the Schlieffen Plan’s execution. Iron resolve, a willingness to take extreme risks, and a resilient will to victory were required of men on the ground if the plan was to move according to schedule.²⁶ In the opinion of General Alexander von Kluck, commander of the German 1st Army in 1914, “innate bravery” was the “greatest

of all assets” in an effective soldier.\textsuperscript{27} German forces had little time to retreat and await better opportunities to engage the enemy, for the clock was an adversary. The German General Staff relied on its officers’ and soldiers’ character to overcome numerical inferiority and strategic disadvantages. In 1910, for example, Friedrich von Bernhardi wrote that Germany would have to compensate for its statistical shortcomings with the “mental and moral strength of the individual,” which remained the best weapon.\textsuperscript{28}

The German Army depended on the power of the \textit{Heldentod} myth to overcome its strategic disadvantages. German strategists, like their adversaries in France and England, touted the superiority of offensive warfare despite the obvious advantages granted to the defender.\textsuperscript{29} The viability of the offensive depended on the morale of soldiers willing to continue fighting as their comrades fell around them. Proponents of the prewar cult of the offensive understood that in the next war soldiers would die in large numbers, and planners accepted the prospect of heavy losses. Von Bernhardi predicted that the infantry could only serve as a potent weapon if it was determined “to shed streams of blood, and if it is possessed of the iron will to beat the enemy, cost what may.”\textsuperscript{30} Soldiers had to accept their expendability, which required them to construct an identity as warriors who fought as a part of a larger whole. An individual’s death was meaningful as long as the greater unit survived. Military culture not only promoted acts of courage, sacrificial

\textsuperscript{29} Snyder, \textit{The Ideology of the Offensive}, pp.15-16.
\textsuperscript{30} Quoted in Kramer, \textit{Dynamic of Destruction}, p. 78.
bravery, and other manly virtues, it demanded these qualities from soldiers in the field.\textsuperscript{31} A majority of the men who donned the German field gray uniform in 1914 had never seen combat, but they understood that the concept of surrender had no place in military culture. They had been indoctrinated from an early age to welcome \textit{Heldentod}, and their education in heroism had been deliberate.\textsuperscript{32}

\textbf{“AN INVITATION TO MANLINESS”}

War represented the ultimate test of manhood, and countless men longed for the conflict that would allow them to demonstrate their willingness to unselfishly serve the nation.\textsuperscript{33} Since unification, however, limited German troops had seen action during the Boxer Uprisings in China (1900-1901) or in German Southwest Africa (1904-1907), and the absence of a forum in which to realize dreams of glory left many would-be warriors frustrated. When the United States went to war with Spain in 1898, several enthusiastic German officers reportedly even stormed the American embassy in Berlin to volunteer for duty in Cuba.\textsuperscript{34} It was during the stretch of relative tranquility between 1871-1914 that von Bernhardi penned his famous treatise on the dangers of pacifism, \textit{Germany and}

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\item[\textsuperscript{32}] Karen Hagemann, “German Heroes,” p. 128.
\item[\textsuperscript{33}] René Schilling, \textit{Kriegshelden: Deutungsmuster heroischer Männlichkeit in Deutschland, 1813-1945} (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2002), pp. 15-16, 375.
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the Next War. He warned his readers “an intellectual and vigorous nation can experience no worse destiny than to be lulled into a Phaeacian existence by the undisputed enjoyment of peace.”35 For von Bernhardi, war was an intrinsic element of the natural world that allowed individuals to reach their highest potential through submission to a greater cause. His observations resonated with others who longed for the test of war.36 War was not merely the means to a political end. Conflict was valued for the experiences soldiers stood to gain in the heat of battle, but those anticipated moments did not encompass the experience of personal defeat and surrender.

When the conflict that von Bernhardi and his contemporaries yearned for appeared imminent in summer 1914, emotions ran high across Europe as crowds swarmed the streets of major cities to express their patriotism and await the latest news. For a moment, feelings of national sentiment spanned social divides. In Berlin, the Kaiser claimed to recognize only Germans and no political parties. His optimism appeared justified by the typically pacifist Social Democrats’ decision to fall in line with their political rivals in the Reichstag and approve war credits. But there were limits to war enthusiasm. Some Social Democrats organized protest marches that drew participants by the hundreds of thousands, and the working classes generally accepted the war and hoped for the best rather than passionately supporting German involvement. After the novelty of the war faded and its realities came to light, the realization that

36 Bernhardi, Germany and the Next War, pp. 25-28, 286. According to Kristin L. Hoganson, Americans likewise pursued war with Spain in 1898 due to a widespread belief that the American men lacked the soldierly virtues that would be necessary to propel the United States to a place of prominence in international affairs. War, jingoistic leaders argued, would provide them with the formative combat experiences they needed to become effective political leaders. See Hoganson, Fighting for American Manhood.
domestic tensions had only beaten a temporary retreat replaced expressions of national unity.\textsuperscript{37}

Nonetheless, even unenthusiastic volunteers feared the consequences of an enemy invasion of the homeland, and most Germans readily reported for duty when asked to do so.\textsuperscript{38} The soldiers who mobilized in 1914 were bound together by the social expectations they had internalized long before they reached the front. The Great War as an “invitation to manliness,”\textsuperscript{39} and despite the working classes’ reluctance, the volunteers who responded to its call came from diverse backgrounds. The droves of untried volunteers arriving at recruiting stations made such an impression on Reichstag Deputy Matthias Erzberger, Catholic Center Party politician and future war critic, that he estimated 1.3 million had registered for duty in only a few days. He pointed to the range of social classes represented as proof of the social unity the war had inspired:

The registrations came from all walks of life: sons of the nobility, students, young farmers, merchants, workers! No class wanted to stay behind. Every young man mourned if he was rejected. No region of the fatherland excluded itself, including the territories of Alsace and Lorraine; even there the rush was noticeably strong. If the lists had to be closed in certain cities, the rejected withdrew with tears in their eyes and the telegram inquiries went out from regiment to regiment searching for an open position.\textsuperscript{40}

Erzberger drastically overestimated volunteer turnout, but his observations bear witness to the enthusiasm that gripped Germany in the wake of war declarations. More

\textsuperscript{38} Alexander Watson, \textit{Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 56.
\textsuperscript{39} Mosse, \textit{Nationalism and Sexuality}, p. 114. Joshua S. Goldstein offers a broad analysis of the test of manhood as a motivation to fight in Goldstein, \textit{War and Gender}, pp. 251-301.
than 300,000 Germans volunteered for military service in 1914-15 alone.  

Students, businessmen and other professionals surpassed blue-collar workers in their eagerness to serve, and volunteers signed on for a number of reasons.  

The thread that ran through all of their motivations was the need to accept the test of manhood that had finally presented itself after decades of peace. The Great War offered a reprieve from the stagnation and bureaucracy of civilian life and an opportunity to participate in an event that would serve as the defining experience in soldiers’ lives.  

The “August Days” offered at least the illusion of true comradeship. Owing to the fact that the German Army never actually possessed the troop strength demanded by the Schlieffen Plan, middle-aged reservists accompanied young volunteers and enlisted men from the onset.  

As volunteers and reservists answered the nation’s call, many likely imagined victory parades or contemplated how their “beautiful death” might be commemorated, but few talked about the prospects of being taken prisoner. Military commanders prepare soldiers to efficiently kill the enemy or defend a position, but field service manuals offered little advice on how to properly capitulate. Even hesitant warriors had no desire to be considered weak or cowardly once they joined a regiment.  

Despite pockets of pacifism and reluctance, many in German society initially welcomed the outbreak of hostilities in August 1914. The intellectual community, disaffected by modern life and its apparent preference for financial profit over cultural enlightenment, saw the promise of rebirth in the coming conflict. Like their counterparts

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44 Strachan, The First World War, p. 45.
in England, France and Russia, German intellectuals praised combat’s virtues and, echoing Bernhardi, saw conflict as part of the natural world. From the ashes of war they hoped to retrieve the influence they had once enjoyed in German society.45 Death was ever present in their speeches and propaganda tracts. Academic giant Max Planck exploited the Heldentod legacy and observed that men absent from the front were envious at being denied the chance to die for “the highest of all earthly ideals.”46 Not to be outdone by his erudite professors, Kaiser Wilhelm II reminded soldiers of his expectations when he assured them in early August that “in each of you lives the burning, unconquerable will to victory.” Each of you knows, he continued, “if it must be, how to die like a hero.”

Sacrificial heroism, soldierly virtues, and manhood were so intertwined that the Kaiser might have achieved the same effect by reassuring his troops of his confidence that each of them knew how to die like a man. The soldiers’ vigor for war was both communal and personal. As individuals they embodied the normative values of a national community that prized honor, selflessness and courage, even if their virtues might only be recognized through the commemoration of their deaths. It was apparently possible to die “like” a man/hero, but was it also possible to surrender like a man? Although a significant distinction existed between soldiers who fought until the last possible moment before surrendering and those who capitulated at the first sign of

46 Quoted in Roland N. Stromberg, Redemption by War: The Intellectuals and 1914 (Lawrence, KS: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1982). p. 3.
47 Armee-Verordnungsblatt Nr. 1, 6 August 1914, Bundesarchiv Koblenz (Hereafter BAK), R 67/1519.
danger, in the eyes of military authorities, all prisoners were at least initially considered cowards.\textsuperscript{48}

Prisoners’ failings as combatants made them immediate outcasts, and the act of surrender was so traumatically emasculating that Alon Rachamimov has argued that some soldiers “experienced capture by the enemy as a metaphoric castration.”\textsuperscript{49} This “metaphoric castration” severed prisoners’ ties to the identity they had constructed as a soldier in the service of a higher cause, as well as the bonds of comradeship that had been formed during training and under fire. Soldiers of a given unit had sweat and bled together, comforted each other after the loss of a comrade, and relied on one another when facing the enemy. Additionally, they shared the expectation that each member of the group would fight to the end for the sake of the men beside him. In short, they depended on one another for mental and physical survival. Surrender not only meant failing as an individual warrior, it necessitated an exile from one’s comrades and the cause for which they fought.

Falling into enemy hands threatened to erase everything soldiers had accomplished by joining their units in the nation’s time of need. While many men went to battle to demonstrate their manhood and fulfill their civic duties, they also did so to avoid the shame of not participating and having their loyalty questioned. Shame, after all, was the “glue” that held the “man-making process together.”\textsuperscript{50} In order for men view war as attest of manhood, there had to be consequences for poor performance. Surrender implied that prisoners lacked the courage necessary to make the ultimate sacrifice or

\textsuperscript{49} Alon Rachamimov, “The Disruptive Comforts of Drag,” p. 5.
\textsuperscript{50} Goldstein, \textit{War and Gender}, p. 269.
valued their personal well being over that of the nation. Even worse, prisoners were often viewed as potential deserters or traitors. To die a battlefield death was to become a hero, to desert, an act of criminality. The relationship between appropriate male behavior at war and the bestowing of political rights was so entwined that falling short of social expectations endangered one’s existence as a legitimate member of the national community.

Even after the war’s early engagements exposed the industrial nature of modern warfare, military authorities nostalgically equated death with honor and ignored or belittled the sacrifices of those who fell into enemy hands. Many soldiers viewed the war as a large-scale duel in which they would defend personal and national honor. Honor was judged by one’s willingness to fearlessly accept any challenge, making courageousness one of the key characteristics of an honorable man. The realities of mechanized warfare buried expectations of valiant hand-to-hand combat under the debris wreaked by heavy artillery. Soldiers found the death they sought in abundance, but their opponents remained hidden miles away.

Yet the industrial, impersonal nature of the Great War did little to alter popular conceptions of what it meant to be a man on the battlefield. Society revered soldiers who fell in action, and according to one scholar of military culture, in Germany “heroic death became a philosophy of life.” As Germans celebrated their fallen soldiers, prisoners of

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war fell under a cloud of suspicion and struggled to come to terms with their capture. In an environment that valued bravery and sacrificial death above all else, there was little room for prisoners who ostensibly chose safety in enemy captivity over salvation as a national hero.

THE STIGMA OF SURRENDER: CONTINUITY & INTENSIFICATION

Surrender was an emasculating ordeal that robbed soldiers, at least on the surface, of the manly virtues that characterized an effective soldier. The pain of surrender and captivity may have been even more acute for German soldiers captured by the British. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a sometimes-bitter rivalry strained Anglo-German relations. Anglophobes argued that in order for Germany to fulfill its potential, conflict with Britain—the guardian of the standing order—was inevitable. When British troops arrived on the continent following the German Army’s violation of Belgian neutrality, ordinary Germans reacted with indignation, and a cloud of anti-British sentiment settled over Germany. The British alliance with the ‘racially inferior’ and ‘uncivilized’ Russians appalled the German press, which reported that British deception was to blame for the war. Hatred for the British quickly surpassed that felt for other belligerents, and cries of “Gott strafe England” (God punish England) echoed through the streets and taverns of the smallest German village. The British had allegedly entered a quarrel in which they had no business, and they had done so solely to prevent Germany from reaching its “place in the sun.” Perhaps Ernst Lissauer’s notorious song of hate best

54 See Mosse, Fallen Soldiers, pp. 70-75.
captured prevailing feelings of German animosity toward Britain: “we have but one and only hate, we love as one, we hate as one, we have one foe and one alone: England!”

Germany’s most hated foe arrived on the continent to face an army on the offensive, and the British Expeditionary Force deployed in the war’s first months consisted of only five divisions totaling roughly 100,000 soldiers. Limited troops and early difficulties in the field produced a scenario in which the British took few prisoners in 1914, a year considered by many to be a “shattering defeat” for the BEF. In the first five months of combat, just over 100 German officers and 6,266 soldiers surrendered to the British on French soil. In comparison, more than 8,000 British troops fell into German hands in August alone, making up more than half of the BEF’s casualties for the war’s first month. One year after the onset of war, in excess of one million prisoners taken from all Germany’s enemies populated the country’s prison camps. In contrast, the British continued to have little success with prisoner taking. On the eve of the Battle of the Somme in July 1916, the BEF had captured little more than 13,600 soldiers and 229 officers in France.

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57 Strachan, The First World War, p. 51.
61 Hinz, Gefangen im Großen Krieg, p. 92.
For the comparatively small number of Germans who entered British captivity in 1914, the combination of exposure to industrialized warfare and falling into enemy hands was sometimes difficult to bear. When British soldier Percival Charles Cobb encountered a batch of German prisoners in September 1914, he observed in his diary that many seemed relieved to be out of the war on account of the privations they had suffered in battle. One prisoner, however, went mad following capture and had to be confined to a holding cell in a straightjacket. The following morning, guards discovered that he had managed to remove his jacket and hang himself with a muffler.63

The Germans who surrendered early in the war often did so only after being cut off from any chance for reinforcements. The German Army’s rapid advance created gaps in its lines and made it difficult to supply troops with munitions. As a result, soldiers were sometimes abandoned and unable to defend themselves.64 In September 1914, Reserve Lieutenant Eduard R., a teacher from Berlin, was cut off from reinforcements around the Marne as the British advanced on his company. Pushed to the point of exhaustion and out of supplies and ammunition, he was forced to choose between fighting to certain death or appealing to the enemy for mercy. He concluded that further resistance would have led to a “useless slaughter of all the men” and surrendered his company rather than fight to a useless death.65 Lieutenant R.’s situation was difficult. Although he claimed that his situation was hopeless, his decision to enter enemy

65 Testimony of Reserve Lieutenant Eduard R., Halberstadt, 18 February 1918, Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (hereafter BABL), R 901/86438, Nr. 25, pp. 2-3.
custody suggested a reluctance to make the final sacrifice and cast a shadow of doubt upon his bravery.

As early prisoners endured the emasculation of surrender to a hated foe, the German Higher Command scrambled to transform an army schooled in the virtues of the offensive into a defensive force while soldiers on both sides dug into entrenched positions. This process involved applying the dogma of the “cult of the offensive” to defensive warfare and maintaining faith that the moral qualities that had once motivated soldiers to advance under heavy fire would now enable them to defend positions to the last man. Trench lines were to be held at all costs and in the event of an enemy breakthrough, retaken without delay. General Erich von Falkenhayn, who replaced von Moltke as head of the German Supreme Army Command (Oberheeresleitung) after defeat at the Battle of the Marne, recalled in his memoirs that requiring soldiers to stubbornly hold ground rather than retreating to a tenable line of defense was often counterproductive. According to Falkenhayn, demanding that soldiers fight to the last breath led to heavy losses of the “gravest sort,” namely voluntary surrenders. Soldiers who had lost hope of being reinforced but feared retreat, he surmised, generally grasped for the prospect of survival offered by voluntary surrender to the enemy. “Premature retirement,” Falkenhayn concluded, may have saved the lives of individuals, but was “ruinous for the whole front.”66 Indeed, in 1918 it would be mass surrenders that crippled the German Army rather than deaths.

Notwithstanding Falkenhayn’s postwar recognition of the risks associated with ordering troops to fight to the death, as chief of staff he demanded that his men hold their

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ground against overwhelming displays of force. In 1915, he assured an American
journalist that if Germany “shall go under in this war…then we shall do so with honor, by
relinquishing not a foot of territory and fighting to the last man.”\textsuperscript{67} Apparently, fighting
with honor entailed refusing to surrender when faced with defeat, and in the great battles
of the following year, Allied armies tested the resolve of Falkenhayn’s troops as never
before. On the morning of 1 July 1916, more than 500,000 British and commonwealth
soldiers supported by 200,000 French troops attacked a German force of 300,000 on the
Somme after a prolonged bombardment intended to destroy the German defenses.\textsuperscript{68}
German machine-gunners emerged from deep bunkers to inflict heavy casualties on
Allied troops crossing no man’s land, but suffered grave losses in the process.

The Battle of the Somme not only stands as a benchmark in the history of modern
warfare, it represents a turning point in the story of the German prisoners in British
captivity. The slow trickle of prisoners passing into British hands prior to the Somme
swelled into a stream 6,000 men strong in the battle’s first five days.\textsuperscript{69} By 17 July, the
Somme offensive had resulted in the capture of 179 German officers and almost 11,000
soldiers.\textsuperscript{70} The taking of numerous prisoners indicated that despite the legendary losses
suffered by the BEF on the Somme’s opening day, British forces experienced a degree of
success in July 1916.

Falkenhayn realized that the “premature retirement” of thousands of men
jeopardized the stability of the entire front. In an attempt to stem the flow of prisoner

\textsuperscript{67} Quoted in Hull, \textit{Absolute Destruction}, pp. 317-18.
\textsuperscript{68} Gerhard Hirschfield, “Der Somme-Schlacht von 1916,” in Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich and Irena
Renz, eds. \textit{Die Deutschen an der Somme 1914-1918} (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2006), p. 79.
\textsuperscript{69} Summary of Official Communiqués, 5 July, 1916, TNA, WO 157/11.
losses at the Somme, German authorities reminded officers of their duty to hold the lines at all costs and simultaneously reinforced the stigma of surrender. In an official communication captured by the British in July 1916, General Fritz von Below of the Second Army responded to the increase in surrenders by informing his subordinates “Every Commanding Officer will be held responsible if the units under his command do not fight to the last man in the sector allotted to them. Any infraction of this order will immediately render the officer concerned liable to Court-Martial.”

American journalist Frederick Palmer accompanied the BEF at the Somme. From conversations with German prisoners, he learned that German authorities warned soldiers that the failure to hold out would result in the leveling of their hometowns by British and French guns. Other officers played on the soldiers’ sense of national pride and hatred for the British. Prussian officers reportedly asked their men if Prussians should be defeated by men of the British “New Army.” “No! Die first!” was the unequivocal answer the officers provided.

According to Palmer’s account of the Somme, the best soldiers fought harder as they gained experience under fire. He claimed that members of the German machine gun corps took an “oath never to surrender.” Consequently, they were sometimes found strapped to their machine guns, “probably by their own request,” to make it impossible for them to desert their posts. Other “natural fighters” refused to abandon trenches or

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72 Frederick Palmer, My Second Year of the War (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1917), pp. 217-18. The British New Armies, or Kitchener Armies, resulted from the expansion of the British Army that began in August 1914 as a result of recruiting drives and the establishment of “Pals” battalions made up of men from the same geographical area or social background. After the British abandoned voluntary recruiting in May 1916, the New Armies consisted largely of conscripts. See Peter Simkins, Kitchener’s Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914-16 (New York: Manchester University Press, 1998).
faced certain death for the opportunity to inflict damage before falling in action. Even after spending more than a year at the front and witnessing the horrors of the Somme, Palmer clearly held the greatest respect for soldiers who refused to accept defeat rather than those who broke under the strain of heavy bombardments and life in the trenches.\textsuperscript{73} British correspondent Philip Gibbs reported that the soldiers he interviewed at the Somme likewise had the highest admiration for the Germans who chose death over surrender. According to one Northumberland Fusilier, the Germans at Fricourt “stayed on when all the other men had been killed or wounded, and would neither surrender or escape.” In his opinion, they were “wonderful men,” and it would not have been sporting of him to deny it.\textsuperscript{74}

Despite the universal admiration for soldiers who refused to give in and the German command’s best efforts to minimize surrenders, the British captured 832 officers and 39,375 men in France in the six-months following the first engagements on the Somme—an average of more than 6,700 men per month. The battles of the ensuing six-month period resulted in similar losses. Even though prisoners passed into British captivity in ebbs and flows until the final collapse, the battles of 1916 symbolized a distinct shift in prisoner losses.\textsuperscript{75} The stigma of surrender, however, only intensified as captivity developed into a mass phenomenon.

This was potentially related to the fact that desertion increased at alarming rates during approximately the same period that Germans began to surrender in high numbers for the first time. Between 1916-1917, desertion rates nearly tripled in the Bavarian

\textsuperscript{73} Palmer,\textit{ My Second Year of the War}, pp. 219-20.
\textsuperscript{74} Philip Gibbs,\textit{ The Battles of the Somme} (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1917), p. 41.
\textsuperscript{75} War Office,\textit{ Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire}, p. 632.
Army, and if these figures are representative of the German Army as a whole, some soldiers had apparently begun to question whether military victory had slipped out of reach. Casualty reports often listed prisoner losses under the general category “missing or captured.” A soldier labeled as missing could have surrendered, fallen in combat, or deserted to the enemy, and as the war entered its later years, military authorities would attempt to further strengthen the implicit connection between prisoners and deserters. Offering oneself to the enemy as prisoner of war was unquestionably the most dangerous means of deserting, as prospective deserters had no guarantee that the enemy would accept their surrender after a risky journey across no man’s land. Only several thousand of the 90,000—100,000 German soldiers who deserted prior to July 1918 sought shelter in enemy captivity. It was much more common for deserters to flee to neutral territory or simply hide out behind the front. Nonetheless, deserters who sought relief from the front in enemy hands damaged the prisoners’ collective image.

Desertion and surrender increases indicate that war weariness intensified in 1916-1917. Yet even after the horrors of the Somme, a majority of German soldiers were still prepared to hold out and die for the sake of victory. In an October 1916 letter, Karl Gorzel revealed that as the British bombarded his position at the Somme, among his German comrades there was only “one thought in every mind: ‘They shan’t take us alive!’” Another Somme veteran, Hugo Frick, consoled his mother from the front in February 1917 by assuring her “If I fall, I’ll die a beautiful hero’s death for the

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76 Jahr, Gewöhnliche Soldaten, p. 150.
77 Ziemann, War Experiences in Rural Germany, pp. 102-03.
fatherland!”79 If these examples reflect the attitude of the average German soldier, the carnage of the Somme had failed to upend the Heldentod ideal. In fact, surrenders comprised only a fraction of the more than 200,000 losses suffered by the Germans at the Somme in July and August 1916.80 The persistence of an idealized notion of manhood and the veneration of sacrificial death helped sustain the prisoner of war’s image as a broken and helpless individual who had allowed the enemy to “take him alive.”

As captivity developed into a mass phenomenon shared by millions of soldiers, the stigma of surrender endured. Recalling his capture by the British at the Somme, Bavarian soldier Georg S. expressed the sentiments internalized by most prisoners when he confessed “It was without a doubt a very unpleasant and humiliating feeling that we had to raise our hands and, so to say, beg for our lives. Anyone who has gone into war captivity will confirm that.”81 Neutral observers also described prisoners in less than heroic terms. Just days before Georg S.’s capture on the Somme, a representative of the International Red Cross wrote:

In the course of this war, the vast number of combatants has produced a class of unfortunates of an almost novel type, for, if that class existed before, it never attained its present proportions. We refer to prisoners of war. These, too, are powerless, incapable of resistance, delivered to the tender mercies of the enemy who has compelled them to lay down their arms and plead for their lives.82

Men did not plead for their lives, they fought for them, and the popular perception of the prisoner as defeated and powerless undeniably influenced soldiers’ decision to

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80 Herwig, The First World War, p. 204.
fight on in moments of doubt. Holding the lines at all costs and avoiding entry into the “class of unfortunates” remained a point of pride with many soldiers. In a letter from early 1918, Walther P. proudly informed his father that as long as his unit had been in its position not even one of their number had fallen into British hands: “That is an enormous achievement that you in Germany could not appreciate enough,” he wrote, and concluded “our men hold out magnificently.”

While the Red Cross’ representative was correct to draw attention the unprecedented number of prisoners in enemy custody, prisoner losses had not yet become a critical factor in the German Army’s capacity to wage war. Even in the face of rising desertions throughout the final months of 1917, there was no lack of confidence in the trenches as the spring offensive of 1918, code-named Michael, approached.

Under Falkenhayn’s successors, Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg, the spring offensive began with impressive German gains and corresponding manpower and artillery losses for the enemy. For a fleeting moment, it looked as if the army’s goal of knocking the British out of the war was within reach. In time, the Allies regained their composure and mounted counterattacks that exposed the German Army’s exhaustion and stalled Michael before it achieved its objectives. German soldiers had been optimistic about the offensive’s chances for success, but many considered it a final attempt at victory. Sensing the enemy’s despair, Allied planes showered German trenches with

pamphlets inviting soldiers to cross the lines.\(^{86}\) Although the illusive victory German soldiers had anticipated did not transpire, neither did the waves of deserters the Allies hoped for. The BEF netted less than 10,000 prisoners between 19 March and 1 July 1918. In the interwar years General Hermann Joseph von Kuhl, former Chief of Staff of Army Group Crown Prince Rupprecht, pointed out that in the battles of March-July 1918, the numbers of German dead and wounded exceeded those of the missing and prisoners, implying the soldiers’ willingness to bleed and die for the fatherland had not waned.\(^{87}\)

German authorities nonetheless considered prisoner losses a serious threat. In May 1918, the Kriegsministerium (War Ministry) issued an order in the Kaiser’s name that required former prisoners to submit an explanation of capture to determine whether disciplinary measures were in order. Although the requirement was supposedly not intended to gauge loyalty, the Kriegsministerium considered the reports a top priority. Apparently, the “honor of the entire army and the individual demand[ed] a statement of the nature of the capture.”\(^{88}\) If determined innocent of any cowardly or treasonous acts, former prisoners would receive a certificate attesting that they had entered captivity under honorable circumstances. The Kriegsministerium hoped to soften the order’s accusatory nature by claiming that it was often the most courageous soldiers who found themselves in enemy captivity—on account of their refusal to retreat. Officials reasoned that capture reports might be beneficial to repatriated prisoners since they would allow them to defend

\(^{86}\) Herwig, *The First World War*, p. 408.


themselves against “unfounded suspicions and slander.” The army’s platitudes failed to conceal its distrust of soldiers who surrendered, and the explanatory reports it demanded revealed an unwillingness to assume that prisoners had entered captivity as honorable men. Long after surrender became a common occurrence on the Western Front, allowing oneself to be taken alive cast doubt upon a soldier’s integrity. Prisoners were suspected of cowardice, and thus sacrificing their manhood, until proven innocent.

As the German lines showed signs of breaking in summer 1918, officials finally acknowledged the need to train soldiers for the possibility that their battlefield experience might end with their hands raised in surrender. However, they did so in a manner that solidified the correlation between surrender and desertion. In summer 1918, a copy of a German conduct code for soldiers captured by the enemy found its way into British hands. It reminded soldiers “for a man to allow himself to be taken prisoner by the enemy without having defended himself to the utmost is a dishonourable act equivalent to treachery.” The code conceded that it was possible for a brave soldier to be captured “without it being his fault,” but most soldiers probably understood that defending oneself to the “utmost” meant fighting to the death in the eyes of the military. In the event that soldiers chose surrender over death, the code stressed that prisoners were obligated to observe the oath of loyalty taken to their country and comrades. Once captured, this meant refusing to provide the enemy with details of troop strength, orders of battle, or conditions on the homefront.

The report’s authors alleged that prisoners had previously provided the enemy with accurate intelligence at the expense of soldiers at the front. German authorities insisted that in the final stages of the war, prisoners must “feel more than ever the shame and infamy of such unprincipled conduct.” Captors held little admiration for cooperative prisoners, the code declared, but an honorable soldier’s refusal to betray his homeland would earn the enemy’s respect. Here again, the authorities’ handling of the surrender problem demonstrates an inherent distrust of prisoners. It should have been a given that a man of honor would know how to behave appropriately in captivity, but the code of conduct’s drafters obviously assumed that anyone who allowed themselves to be taken might need instructions, as their personal code of conduct had already been proven insufficient by their capture.

Understanding that capture was almost always followed by interrogation, German authorities instructed prisoners to reply that they had recently joined their units or returned from sick leave and possessed no useful intelligence. The order reminded soldiers that it was not difficult to trace the source of damaging intelligence and warned that prisoners who neglected “duty and honour” would face criminal proceedings following their release. Additionally, relatives of talkative prisoners would suffer for their association to a suspected traitor and be haunted by their shameful relationship indefinitely. As a final warning, military authorities ensured soldiers that treason was unforgivable, and as far as the army was concerned, traitors’ names “were branded, their homes and property lost forever!”

surrenders demonstrated that officials were well aware of the devastating effects of prisoner losses. Efforts to make surrender and desertion synonymous were almost certainly intended to discourage soldiers from choosing premature surrender as a means to an end in a conflict in which victory seemed out of reach. At the front, soldiers were embodiments of sacrificial nationalism and manly virtues of courage and honor, but the army’s scare tactics suggested that they could be transformed from valiant defenders to potential criminals with the simple act of raising their hands.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

On 8 August 1918, a day General Ludendorff would later refer to as the “black day” of the German Army, the British cracked the German lines and achieved gains from which the German Army would never recover. Some historians argue that Germany’s defeat had been assured already in spring 1918. In terms of morale and prisoner losses, however, the weeks following the “black day” signified a point of no return in the soldiers’ inability or unwillingness of to continue. During the week of August 6, British forces in France captured 19,533 German soldiers and 612 officers. The following week saw a sharp decline in German surrenders, but total captures for the period 6 August—2 September surpassed 1,700 officers and 63,000 enlisted men. Commanders unable to comprehend the looming defeat struggled to explain massive prisoner losses.

93 Herwig, The First World War, p. 419.
94 According to Alexander Watson, the morale of the German Army was in a state of “unstoppable decline” by mid-1918, which was closely related to heavy losses of junior officers who had filled key leadership roles. See Watson, Enduring the Great War, pp. 186-87.
95 War Office, Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire, p. 632; For a slightly lower estimate see “Summary of Intelligence received on 1st and Morning of 2nd September, 1918,” TNA, WO 157/35.
Some found scapegoats in pacifists and socialists, and German leaders’ reflections on the events unfolding around them in summer and fall 1918 blurred the lines between defectors, deserters, Bolsheviks, and prisoners. The Kaiser’s son, Crown Prince Wilhelm, lamented that the reinforcements he received in 1918 were infected with revolutionary ideology and determined “to hold up their hands at the very first opportunity.”

According to the heir apparent, the resulting effect on morale was disastrous. Soldiers who had no desire to continue the fight labeled brave veterans “war protractors” and “blacklegs.” One rumor that circulated among the officer corps alleged that when twenty Germans surrendered to just two British soldiers, an observing German officer fired on the captors. In response his soldiers verbally abused him, as they were determined to give themselves up. German commanders feared that the ideology of the Russian revolution might spread westward, and they were aware that the waves of desertion inspired by the revolution of 1917 made it impossible for the Russian Army to wage war.

The army’s habit of punishing strike leaders from the homefront by sending them to the trenches bolstered their fears. Following the widespread munitions strikes of January 1918, there was no shortage of embittered former labor activists on the Western Front. It was relatively easy for officials to convince themselves that Bolsheviks had infiltrated the army and were now instigating surrender en masse in order to end the war.

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98 Von Kuhl, Die Kriegslage in Herbst 1918, p. 27.
99 On fears of Bolshevism within the German army, see Ludendorff, Kriegserinnerungen, pp. 407-411.
Ernst Jünger counted among the soldiers unwilling to yield even as his comrades surrendered by the thousands. In the war’s final months Jünger realized that Germany could not prevail, yet he remained resolute in his conviction that the “enemy should know that he fought against men of honour.”\textsuperscript{101} For Jünger, maintaining his identity as a man of honor meant fighting to the bitter end and demonstrating courageousness in a desperate situation. As British soldiers surrounded his regiment in August 1918, he urged his comrades to “fight it out to the death” rather than concede defeat. When ordered to lay down his weapon, Jünger recalled, “there was left only the choice of being taken or being shot. And now the moment had come to show whether all that I had often said to the men when on rest about the fighting spirit was more than empty phrases.”\textsuperscript{102} He clearly associated surrender with hypocrisy and believed that even when encircled, soldiers were left with the choice between dying with honor and capitulating in disgrace. Jünger opted to fight on and evaded capture and killed a British soldier who attempted to block his escape. Soldiers like Jünger, who did not consider surrender an option, set a high standard for their comrades and cast a heavy shadow upon soldiers who, for whatever reason, failed to follow their example.

Behind the lines at command headquarters, segments of the German High Command, seemed more than willing to risk the complete destruction of the German Army rather than negotiating with the enemy. The concept of “Endkampf” that developed in the last months of the war proposed that Germany continue fighting through any means necessary and accept total defeat rather than surrender. Isabel Hull has argued

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\textsuperscript{101} Jünger, \textit{Storm of Steel}, p. 304.
\textsuperscript{102} Jünger, \textit{Storm of Steel}, pp. 310-11.
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that *Endkampf* required that an individual’s readiness to perish be extended to the corps and army as a whole.\textsuperscript{103} By her estimation, the army’s hesitation to negotiate was a product of a German military culture that included deeply embedded conceptions of honor and encouraged radicalization in difficult situations.\textsuperscript{104} The military’s attitude toward surrender seems to support this characterization of German military culture. At times, members of the German Supreme Command envisioned a terminal battle that would require not only soldiers, but also civilians, to fight to the last man for the sake of German honor.\textsuperscript{105} Even as the German Army fell to pieces and remaining prospects of victory vanished, high commanders expected soldiers to fight on. In his postwar memoirs, Paul von Hindenburg recalled that in the war’s last days, the orders passed on to frontline troops often consisted of little more than instructions to hold out to the last man. In hopes of inspiring his men to continue on, the military icon claimed to have consciously fulfilled his duty by remaining at his post until the end.\textsuperscript{106} The extent to which *Endkampf* exemplifies the continuity or exceptionality of German military ideology remains debatable, but certain high-ranking officers believed it to be a viable option in autumn 1918. Despite orders to hold out at all costs, the men in the trenches, however, did not.

Approximately 420,000 German soldiers were killed or wounded between mid July and November 1918, but it was not these statistics that revealed Germany had reached its breaking point. An estimated 750,000 to one million soldiers ‘shirked’

\textsuperscript{103} Hull, *Absolute Destruction*, p. 318.
military duty in the last months of the war. The loss of an additional 340,000 surrendered and missing soldiers testifies to the general collapse that occurred in the war’s final days. With October coming to a close, the British could boast at having taken more than 180,000 prisoners on the Western Front in 1918. These losses, not death statistics, indicated that the German Army was at its end. Already on 14 September, the Third Army’s General Karl von Einem lamented that he had lost 13,000 soldiers to surrender and predicted that if the trend continued, the German Army would die from exhaustion.

The surrenders perplexed von Einem, and he correctly deduced that the war could not be won with soldiers who “give themselves up as prisoners.”

In the war’s last three months, the British lost more than 4,225 officers and 59,311 soldiers, compared to substantially lower figures of 1,540 and 26,688 for their German adversaries. In terms of combat deaths, the German Army continued to kill more soldiers than they lost when facing the British. It was the battle to prevent soldiers from surrendering that the Germans lost decisively. Commanders could only watch in dismay as entire units surrendered to the enemy and sealed the army’s fate. In the end, von Einem’s proved to be a irrefutable. Wars cannot be won with soldiers who give themselves up as prisoners.

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107 Deist, “The Military Collapse of the German Empire,” pp. 206-7. One of the difficulties associated with determining prisoner losses is the fact that prisoners and the missing are often grouped together. For a year by year table of prisoner and missing losses, see Die Krankenbewegung bei dem Deutschen Feld-und Besatzungsheer im Weltkriege 1914/1918 (Berlin Mittler & Sohn, 1934), Table 151.

108 “Summary of Intelligence Received on 6th and Morning of 7th Novr. 1918,” TNA, WO 157/37.

109 Ferguson, The Pity of War, p. 368.


111 Ferguson, The Pity of War, p. 368.
The homefront had not stabbed the army in the back; soldiers at the front had simply lost the will to die for a cause in which victory was unattainable. Perhaps when it became clear that their deaths could not save their Germany from collapse, the power of the Heldentod myth finally, albeit temporarily, lost its influence. Massive surrenders continued to weaken the German Army as the war neared its conclusion. In October, Crown Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria confided to his father that he had only unpleasant news to report regarding to the spirit of the men at the front. He noted, “repeatedly major divisions and also officers have voluntarily given themselves up.”

Ludendorff, too, realized by late September that his “troops [could] no longer be relied on.” In the end, a sense of despair set in even among the officer corps. Junior commanders frequently offered their men a chance for survival by relieving them from the moral dilemma of surrender and leading them into enemy hands. As the British Major-General Sir F. Maurice recalled, by the signing of the armistice, the German Army had been routed and “the morale of the troops was gone.”

Ernst Jünger proved to be the exception rather than the rule. One might expect that as Germans gave themselves up by the hundreds of thousands, the stigma of surrender would correspondingly diminish. Yet commanders’ comments on the surrender phenomenon promoted and reinforced the image of the prisoner as dishonorable or even treasonous. In his postwar musings on the stab-in-the-back myth, General von Kuhl suggested that among the prisoners and missing of late 1918 were

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113 Quoted in Deist, “The Military Collapse of the German Empire,” p. 205.
115 Major-General Sir F. Maurice, The Last Four Months of the War: How the War was Won (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1919), p. 221.
included “numerous shirkers, deserters, and defectors.” Ludendorff argued that shirking, desertion, and large prisoner losses greatly compromised the army’s effectiveness in autumn 1918. After painting prisoners and deserters with the same brush, the former chief of staff went on to remark that not all soldiers who fell into enemy hands counted among the corrupt, as it was “very often it was the best” who fell into enemy hands. The worst soldiers apparently fled to the rear while their brave comrades held out to be eventually overrun by the enemy. Suffering defeat in the Great War was emasculating for Germany as a nation, and discussing prisoners alongside deserters and traitors, commanders ensured that prisoners would shoulder a significant share of the blame for the army’s collapse.

On top of associating prisoners with cowardice and desertion, many commanders spoke in terms that tied prisoners to communist leanings. Crown Prince Wilhelm insisted that many of his troops had been taken prisoner only after “contaminated elements,” internationalists and pacifists, allowed the German flank to be turned. Postwar analysis of this nature made it difficult to distinguish between prisoners who had been overwhelmed by the enemy after intense fighting and “corrupt” soldiers who capitulated with little resistance. Prisoners remained open to accusations of desertion or bolshevism despite the fact that a majority of the German prisoners taken by the Allies in the closing months were combat veterans who may have withstood years in the trenches before finally surrendering. Surrenders were a critical factor in the German Army’s disintegration, but the prisoners taken late in the war were not, as the crown prince

suggested, new recruits determined to throw up their hands at the first opportunity.\textsuperscript{119}

Commentary that depicted prisoners as revolutionaries fresh from the homefront belied the reality of the situation. Nonetheless, the image of the prisoner of war as a cowardly and disloyal soldier persisted.

Historians of the Great War often stress its transformative qualities and the destruction of traditional social customs the war engendered. However, the perseverance and intensification of surrender’s stigma points to the continuity, and even reinforcement, of prewar perceptions of appropriate battlefield behavior.\textsuperscript{120} Military authorities not only identified prisoners as having played a key role in the army’s defeat, but by hinting that captives taken at the end of the war may have been socialists or communists, authorities also tied prisoners to the stab in the back myth embraced by many disgruntled Germans in the interwar years. Jünger’s refusal to surrender may have been the exception to the rule, but he would be celebrated in the postwar era. Prisoners, on the other hand, continued to serve as symbols of defeat and carried the stigma of “second-class soldiers” for not having not demonstrated the soldierly/manly virtues expected of men in uniform.\textsuperscript{121}

**CONCLUSIONS**

During the Great War, soldiers confronted with the enemy were expected to perform with bravery and courageousness, and if needed, willingly make the ultimate

\textsuperscript{119} Watson, *Enduring the Great War*, p. 215.

\textsuperscript{120} On the Great War and continuity, see Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

\textsuperscript{121} Pöppinghege, “Kriegsteilnehmer zweiter Klasse?”, pp. 408-9.
sacrifice. German authorities nurtured the *Heldentod* myth largely because they realized that they could not successfully wage a major European war without soldiers who accepted their expendability. Soldiers whose battlefield experience ended in surrender faced accusations of cowardice and treason, two actions that defied prevailing conceptions of appropriate manhood. Thus, the shame of surrender served as an important source of combat motivation, as few soldiers wanted to be seen as weak or unmanly.

The terror associated with the great battles of 1916 and beyond proved incapable of destroying the *Heldentod* myth, and even as Germans surrendered to the British in large numbers for the first time, many veterans of the trenches remained determined to not be taken alive. German commanders attempted to further strengthen their soldiers’ resolve by blurring the lines between prisoners, deserters, traitors, and ultimately Bolsheviks. If it been safer to surrender to the enemy in 1917-18, more soldiers would have done so, bringing the war to an earlier conclusion. Surrender was the key to the outcome of the Great War.\(^\text{122}\) As this chapter has demonstrated, we must consider the possibility that soldiers remained in the trenches not only for fear that a bid for surrender might end in death, but also because the stigma of surrender motivated men to remain in their positions and fight on.

The conditions that led to Germany’s defeat hold an interesting paradox. The German Army collapsed when surrenders made it impossible to continue, and in the last months of the war, neither the shame of surrender nor the fear of death prohibited Germans from giving themselves up in large numbers. Apparently, when it became clear

\(^{122}\) Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, p. 367.
that the German Army was hopelessly outmatched, the humiliation of raising one’s hands in defeat was not enough to keep men in the firing line. If a soldier’s personal refusal to retreat could no longer affect the outcome of the war or Germany’s survival, then the Heldentod ideal lost much of its influence. Nonetheless, commanders’ observations on surrender would inextricably link prisoners to military defeat and bolster the image of the prisoner of war as a traitorous coward. In this regard, the story of surrender during the Great War seems to be one of continuity and intensification. Despite the collapse of the Kaiser’s Germany, the battles of the Great War did little to destroy prewar idealized notions of what it meant to be a man at war.
CHAPTER 2—IN BRITISH HANDS: ANGLO-GERMAN ENCOUNTERS
AT THE FRONT AND IN THE CAMPS OF THE UK

Surrender represented only the initial stage of the captivity experience. For German soldiers who gave themselves up throughout the war, their decision was the beginning of a humbling relationship with the enemy. The following chapter examines the British treatment of German prisoners at the front and in the camps of the UK. By drawing attention to the crimes committed against prisoners following surrender, it challenges the view that the Great War was a gentlemanly affair fought in accordance with the laws of war. Additionally, it offers insight into recent debates over the nature of combat violence by demonstrating that although British treatment of prisoners behind the lines could be less than ideal, the handling of prisoners inside the camps of the UK was rather admirable. Removed from the adrenaline and pressures of life at the front, prisoner abuses were almost unheard of in the UK. Although the Anglo-German antagonism may have contributed to prisoner mistreatment in the heat of battle, it had no perceivable effect on their handling across the English Channel.

BEHIND THE LINES: INITIAL ENCOUNTERS WITH THE ENEMY

Few soldiers seriously considered that their frontline service might end with the enemy leading them into captivity. Recounting his capture at the Somme, a Bavarian
reserve captain recalled that until it actually happened, the possibility of falling into
enemy hands had never crossed his mind, not for even an instant. As he came to realize,
soldiers often faced the “desperate choice to either be entirely uselessly shot down or give
up.” Although military authorities and social expectations conditioned men to welcome
a soldier’s death, survival instincts frequently led men to capitulate rather than fight to
the end. The mental anguish of life in enemy hands began to creep into the psyche before
prisoners could even fully comprehend the consequences of their actions. After seeing a
group of German prisoners taken at the Somme, American correspondent Frederick
Palmer remarked that although they had perhaps fought with iron discipline and ferocity
minutes earlier, “Now they were simply helpless, disheveled human beings, their short
boots and green uniforms whitened by chalk dust.” Palmer’s commentary suggests that
the transformation from soldier to prisoner was unnerving, and most of the men had
never experienced a more sudden fall from grace.

The moments immediately following capture further stripped away one’s previous
identity as a courageous warrior, protector, father, son, or husband. Both The Hague
Convention of 1907 and the British Field Service Regulations of 1909 prohibited captors
from seizing prisoners’ personal property. Nonetheless, British soldiers regularly
plundered prisoners behind the lines, adding insult to injury for soldiers whose sense of

1 Capture Report by Hauptmann d.R. R. to his Bataillonskommandeur, 15 October 1918, Bayreuth,
BHStA/IV MKr 2244, p. 4.
2 Palmer, My Second Year of the War, p. 96.
3 According to article IV of The Hague Convention of 1907, prisoners’ personal property was to remain in
their possession following capture, and article XXIII forbade the destruction or seizure of enemy property
“unless such destruction or seizure be imperatively demanded by the necessities of war,” James Brown
116-117. On British regulations, see Great Britain, General Staff, War Office, Field Service Regulations,
Part II. Organization and Administration, 1909 (London: His Majesty’s Stationary Office, Reprinted with
Amendments, 1913), p. 149.
manhood had just been shaken by surrender. By taking souvenirs from the defeated, British captors collected tangible proof that they had seen action at the front and proven themselves worthy of the test of war.\footnote{See Joanna Bourke, \textit{An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare} (New York: Basic Books, 1999), p. 27.} At the same time, they bolstered their own sense of manhood by forcing the enemy to hand over his most intimate links with his former life. As soldiers ripped military decorations from the breasts of the captured, they simultaneously robbed the former owners of the pride and respect associated with those distinctions. The sense of accomplishment once conveyed by the recipient was instantly transferred to the plunderer, who could boast at having broken an acknowledged hero.

For pillaged prisoners, the message sent by plunder was clear and emasculating—behind the lines, prisoners were at the mercy of their conquerors. It would be impossible to determine how prevalent souvenir hunts became among British troops in the first years of the war, but German records suggest that the practice was common early on. A May 1916 report on more than 100 prisoners captured in 1914-15 claimed that while the British treated German officers well, “almost all” of the enlisted men taken by the BEF complained of having been robbed of money, watches, rings, pen knives, pay books, caps, photographs, and uniform buttons.\footnote{Bericht über die Vernehmung der am 25.5.16 aus England zurückgekehrten Austauschgefangenen, BAK, R 67/1563, p. 3.} American camp inspector John B. Jackson, on the other hand, reported that in the thirteen camps and nine internment ships he visited in February 1915, the captive officers informed him that they “had always been treated like officers and honorable men by the English soldiers.”\footnote{John B. Jackson, Special Attaché to the American Embassy in Berlin, to James W. Gerard, American Ambassador in Berlin, 27 February 1915, BABL, R 901/83825, p. 5.}
Whereas conflicting reports make it difficult to establish the pervasiveness of souvenir hunts in the war’s initial engagements, incidences of pillaging seemed to rise steadily throughout the war. On both sides of the trenches, efforts to dehumanize the enemy intensified during almost two years of stagnant but brutal trench warfare. News of atrocities in Belgium and northern France seemed to justify the depiction of the Germans as barbaric Huns, and rumors of the murder and mutilation of prisoners by German troops encouraged the British to believe they could expect no mercy if captured. German soldiers likewise remained particularly wary of falling into British hands. Before surrendering to the French just north of the Somme in July 1916, a wounded Lieutenant Carl Kersting had the opportunity to surrender to the British. While he believed the French to be chivalrous, he had always heard “Gott strafe England” and assumed he would receive better treatment in France. Influenced by propaganda, he decided not to give himself up to Germany’s most hated enemy. With vilification of the enemy came an increased reluctance to treat prisoners with dignity, and souvenir hunts reached unprecedented heights as the British encountered masses of German prisoners for the first time in July 1916.

The Battle of the Somme represented a spike in the upward trajectory in the occurrence of crimes at the front. Reservist Friedrich K., who surrendered on the opening day of the Somme offensive, reported that his British captors had plundered him, “like all other German prisoners of war,” as commanding officers looked on. As souvenir hunts behind the lines increased, they also became progressively violent.

8 Statement by Friedrich K. (Copy), Nr. 11, 29 May 1918, Wolfhezen, Holland, BABL, R 901/54416, p. 9.
Deputy Officer Otto S. surrendered to the British on 21 October 1916 in Miraumont. He alleged that his comrades held their hands high following surrender, the British systematically collected “booty” under the threat of violence:

One held out a bayonet, the other took watches, money and other valuables, which they then divided among themselves with great laughter. They put the things in a gray bag they had previously hanged. I myself was kept to the side and had to watch the plunder of my men with raised hands. During this time an Englishman stood before me with uplifted hand grenades. While my plundered men were led away, the Englishman still wanted to slay me with the hand grenades and was only prevented from doing so by another Englishman. The wounded I had in the trenches were also plundered in this manner and I was robbed of my watch, two rings, and 56 marks from my neck pouch. Above all, I did not want to suffer my wedding ring being ripped off, but the Englishman punched me in the face with his fist and also violently snatched my wedding ring from me. From the punch I had a swollen face and bruises for weeks.  

Otto S. maintained that the British conducted themselves not “like soldiers, but like a horde of savages.” He concluded “after everything I have seen and heard, I had the impression that the British soldier was only interested in the plunder of German prisoners; everything else was irrelevant to him.”

Every button, watch, photograph or wedding ring taken from a prisoner represented a sliver of his identity, and a prisoner’s inability to prevent their theft surely left them feeling powerless. In the course of several hours, Otto S.’s identity shifted from that of a brave defender of the front lines to a suspicious prisoner unable to stop the humiliation and plunder of his men by an amused enemy that offered not even the pretense of chivalry. His captors were little interested in earning his respect, as his worth had been reduced to the sum of his valuables.

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10 Statement by Otto S. (Copy), Nr. 1, 29 May 1918, Wolfhezen, BABL, R 901/54416, p. 2.
Even though the British routinely denied allegations of theft and abuse, high-ranking officials were aware of the regularity of souvenir hunts among British troops. An internal report issued by the War Office’s prisoner of war branch, the Directorate of Prisoners of War (DPW), acknowledged that despite strict orders to thwart pillaging, there was “little doubt that prisoners were not infrequently stripped of personal effects on capture, decorations and badges of rank were removed and they were subjected to indignities which are forbidden and are contrary to the usage of civilized warfare.” The report insisted that General Headquarters in France carefully investigated complaints lodged by the German government but conceded that the British “treatment of prisoners in this respect compared unfavourably with the Germans. In both armies strict orders had been issued on the subject, but we do not seem to have been so successful in their enforcement as they were.” Looting behind the lines was emasculating for the men who experienced it, but watching one’s comrades be murdered following surrender served as an even more acute reminder of the disempowerment associated with the transition from soldier to prisoner.

Surrendering on the Western Front was a risky endeavor that carried no guarantee of survival. Article XXIII of the Hague Convention declared it illegal to issue an order of “take no prisoners” and forbade the killing of any soldier attempting to surrender.

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Nonetheless, soldiers in the field had to balance the laws of war with practical considerations. Before accepting an enemy’s surrender, combatants had to be certain of a potential prisoner’s intentions to actually give up. On numerous occasions, soldiers approached a surrendering enemy only to be gunned down by the very men to whom they intended to grant clemency. These instances led to a general distrust of potential prisoners, and a belief in enemy atrocities against one’s own countrymen allowed captors to rationalize showing the enemy no mercy. Prisoner killing was, as Alan Kramer argues, the exception rather than the rule. After all, the British captured more than 325,000 Germans throughout the course of the war, and there is little evidence to suggest that any army preferred to kill potential prisoners systematically rather than accept their surrenders. Nonetheless, evidence suggests prisoner killing during the Great War was more common than has traditionally been accepted.

Historians have largely presumed that the Great War’s prisoners were handled in accordance with international laws and rarely treated inhumanely. The inclination to overlook crimes against prisoners is symptomatic of a larger trend in the historiography of the Great War. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker are correct to argue that historians have “sanitized” combat violence to the point of blurring the public’s understanding of the conflict. The atrocities committed during the Great War pale in comparison to those of the Second World War, and prisoner killings were committed by only a fringe element among soldiers who took to the field from 1914-1918. Both the number of prisoners murdered following capture and the official tolerance of the practice,

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15 Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, 14-18, p. 37.
however, suggest that the Great War was either not as “curiously civilized” as some historians would have us believe, or that random acts of battlefield violence against prisoners were an accepted part of civilized warfare.\textsuperscript{16} It is easy to forget that soldiers are trained to dispose of their enemies, and perhaps even easier to ignore instances when soldiers went beyond the sanctioned killings authorized by the laws of war and mistreated or murdered defenseless prisoners.\textsuperscript{17}

Incidences of prisoner killing took place in virtually all of the armies that participated in the Great War, and allegations that British troops murdered German prisoners following surrender date back to the war’s opening months.\textsuperscript{18} With relatively few Germans in British hands, however, early atrocity reports were rare when compared with the number of killings alleged to have taken place later in the war, particularly after the battles of 1916. The surge in prisoner seizures at the Somme resulted in corresponding increases in prisoner killings. Sergeant Daniel K. witnessed British troops murder five of his fellow soldiers in Fricourt on 1 July 1916. Pointing to the fact that one of his English-speaking comrades notified the British of the company’s intent to surrender, he insisted that the shootings were intentional:

\begin{quote}
The Englishmen understood and ordered us to come out without weapons. With raised hands and without weapons we wanted to come out of the dugout. The first five to go out, however, although they held their hands high and called “pardon!” were wantonly mowed down by the English. Then the English threw hand grenades and firebombs in the dugout,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{16} When comparing the Great War to the Second World War, the British historian John Keegan concludes that the Great War was “curiously civilized” after claiming that between 1914-1918 there was “no systematic displacement of populations, no deliberate starvation, no expropriation, little massacre or atrocity.” See John Keegan, \textit{The First World War} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), p. 8.

\textsuperscript{17} Bourke, \textit{An Intimate History of Killing}, p. xiv.

\textsuperscript{18} For an example of an early allegation, see the Testimony of Max S., Enclosure 3, 19 December 1917, Augsburg, BAMA, PH 2/26, pp. 1-2. Other examples from 1914-15 are located in Kriegsministerium Militäruntersuchungsstelle, “Kriegsrechtsverstöße englischer Truppen”, BAMA, PH 2/26.
whereby nine men among us were wounded, one man had a leg ripped off. We were all plundered; my pocket watch was also ripped away from me.\(^{19}\)

Sergeant Josef K. was also stationed in Fricourt on the opening day of the Somme offensive. When his unit surrendered and exited the trenches, three British machine-guns quickly “mowed down” more than thirty prospective prisoners. Josef K. survived the attack by hiding in a bomb crater until the violence had come to an end. He, too, was sure that the shootings he witnessed were deliberate: “the British knew well that we were prisoners because other groups of prisoners had already gone across and British sentries accompanied us. The distance was also so short that the machinegun operators had to recognize us as prisoners.”\(^{20}\) Apart from the horror of watching his defenseless comrades be shot down, Josef K.’s experience served as a reminder that as a prisoner he was helpless to defend himself or his fellow soldiers. As his comrades fell, he could only hope that he would not share their fate.

Josef K. and Daniel K. were two of many prisoners to report widespread prisoner killing at the Somme, and British recollections of the battle substantiate German allegations of atrocity. Thirty years after the Great War’s conclusion, British General Sir Charles Noel Frank Broad confided in fellow officer and military historian B.H. Liddell Hart that the British 34\(^{\text{th}}\) Division sent back so few German prisoners on July 1 that prisoners taken by other corps had to be “borrowed” so that the division’s interrogators could be given something to do. Broad, who was on the staff of the III Corps, confessed that the shortage of prisoners at interrogation stations was not necessarily a sign that few Germans had attempted to surrender. When it was discovered that the 34\(^{\text{th}}\) had not

\(^{19}\) Statement by Daniel K., (Copy) Nr. 2, 29 May 1918, Wolfhezen, Holland, BABL, R 901/54416, pp. 2-3.
\(^{20}\) Statement by Josef K., (Copy) Nr. 12, 29 May 1918, Wolfhezen, BABL, R 901/54416, p. 10.
completed an order to fill in a reserve line of trenches, the British soldiers who went to examine the position “found it had been filled with the bodies of German prisoners—who had been taken there and killed in cold blood.”

In September 1916 Brigadier-General Frank Maxwell, commander of the 12th Battalion Middlesex Regiment, wrote a letter to his wife that revealed an unwillingness to take prisoners among his troops. Recounting a recent battle, Maxwell noted that the Germans fought admirably, but implied that even worthy opponents were not guaranteed mercy in defeat:

The ground was, of course, the limit itself, and progress over it like nothing imaginable, the enemy quite determined to keep us out, as they had so many before. And I must say that they fought most stubbornly and bravely, and probably not more than 300 to 500 put their hands up. They took it out of us badly, but we did ditto; and I have no shame in saying so, as every German should, in my opinion, be exterminated, I don’t know that we took one. I have not seen a man or officer yet who did anyway.

Maxwell’s writings imply that along with his acquaintances at the front, he was guilty of war crimes. Although the British higher command’s complicity in prisoner killing remains controversial, violence against prisoners seems to at least been tolerated by many higher commanders. Officers like Maxwell were clearly not ashamed of their actions, and his willingness to reveal the details of his exploits suggests that he had no fear of being punished. Prisoner killing may not have been systematic, but for the Germans who surrendered to the BEF, the shame of surrender was sometimes compounded by the

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emasculating violent plunder and the feelings of helplessness associated with watching one’s comrades be murdered.

Soldiers who believed they might be plundered or murdered following capture might have been more inclined to fight to the end rather than surrender. Thus, German authorities probably did little to quell rumors of prisoner abuse that found their way into the trenches. In fact, the British believed that German soldiers were told “frightful tales” about the fate of prisoners captured by the British, which the accused claimed were almost always false, to prevent them from surrendering too readily.24 It is impossible to statistically determine the percentage of German prisoners who suffered pillage or violence at the hands of their British captors. Many German prisoners reported that they were treated well by their captors, and in some cases British troops reportedly protected prisoners from angry civilians in Belgium and France. Nonetheless, even if only a fraction of British soldiers participated in abuses, allegations and admissions of war crimes were numerous enough to suggest that prisoner mistreatment was not uncommon in the moments immediately following capture. Perhaps the Great War was not as civilized as some have imagined.

Those prisoners fortunate enough to make it through the moment of capture without loss of life or limb faced a humiliating journey from the battlefield to staging areas away from the front. After clearing captured soldiers from the trenches, the BEF herded prisoners into divisional holding pens before transferring them to enclosures, often consisting of barbed wire, further to the rear. American frontiersmen developed

barbed wire to enclose fields and maintain cattle, and being confined to cages of any sort had a dehumanizing effect. As one scholar has argued, “The simple act of placing men behind barbed wire produces superimposed images of men and beasts.”

Falling into enemy hands not only threatened a soldier’s sense of manhood, it endangered their very sense of humanity. In an August 1916 conversation with a British officer, a newly captured German officer offered some insight into how quickly a soldier’s sense of self could shift following capture: Yesterday I was a gentlemen, to-day I am a monkey behind iron bars.

As prisoners destined for the UK moved away from the war zone, they left behind the identities they developed there as defenders of the front lines. Physical separation from the battlefield led to psychological detachment from everything the front represented: camaraderie, duty, service, and manhood. They carried their feelings of shame and emasculation across the English Channel, but upon arrival prisoners discovered that the worst of their ordeal was over, at least in terms of physical abuses or hardships. Although the British plan for dealing with prisoners may have been piecemeal, the camp system in the UK effectively evolved throughout the war and typically surpassed international standards for prisoner maintenance. Ultimately, the British treatment of German prisoners in the British Isles provided a stark contrast to the less than civilized treatment German prisoners sometimes received immediately following capture.

ACROSS THE CHANNEL: EARLY CAMPS AND ADMINISTRATION

If not for intervention from John French, the army’s commander-in-chief in 1914, the BEF’s early prisoners may have never left continental Europe. The initial British plan for dealing with prisoners from the Western Front entailed simply handing them over to French authorities. General French recognized that this arrangement violated The Hague Convention and would have likely prompted the transfer of British prisoners in Germany to Austria or Turkey in retribution. Furthermore, General French considered the transfer of German prisoners to be a tactical error. He believed German soldiers were more likely to surrender to the BEF than their French counterparts, and would therefore be more inclined to fight on if they expected to be handed over following capture.27 The French Army was willing to take responsibility for the BEF’s prisoners, but after considering General French’s objections, British officials abandoned the previous arrangement and opted to hold on to the army’s captives.28

With the decision made to look after its own prisoners, the War Office needed a plan for their maintenance. In England, officials were ill prepared to deal with even the small numbers of prisoners taken prior to the Battle of the Somme. This is not to say that the military had not previously considered how prisoners might be handled in the event of a major European war. In 1906, an interdepartmental committee on the custody, maintenance, and treatment of prisoners of war drafted a confidential blueprint for prisoner management. It considered the suitability of various ports for landing prisoners

27 Sir John French, Commanding in Chief, British Army in the Field, to the Secretary of the War Office, London, 19 September 1914, TNA, WO 32/5365.
on British soil and attempted to delegate responsibility for prisoner transport and care among various branches of the armed forces. With an eye towards maintaining discipline, it also established standing orders for prisoners interned in the UK. Although the committee’s guidelines predated the Hague Convention of 1907, its work bore remarkable similarities to the rules of war established the following year.29

![Fig. 1: Postcard image of prisoners departing France for the UK](image)

During the first two years of the war, the BEF shipped all prisoners captured on the Western Front to holding facilities in the UK where they joined naval prisoners taken at sea. After being moved to the rear, undergoing interrogation, and receiving medical attention, the first German prisoners captured on the Western Front departed from port cities like St. Nazaire and Le Havre. They usually arrived in southern England at

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Southampton after less than two days at sea. In France and Germany, civilians often greeted German prisoners of war with frenzied excitement that sometimes erupted into violence. Similar incidents surely occurred in Britain, but civilians there seem to have been rather indifferent to the German prisoners’ arrival.

When Lieut. Eduard R. landed in England in September 1914, the public “took absolutely no notice” of his party and left them in peace. Belgian civilians derided, spat upon, and threw horse feces at Paul L. of the 22nd Reserve Pioneer Battalion as his prisoner convoy passed through Belgium. However, the civilians he encountered in England reportedly treated him with respect and left him unmolested. Occasionally, German prisoners received an unexpectedly warm welcome to the UK. WPB Spencer was a cadet at the Royal Military College in Camberley when approximately 2,200 German soldiers and civilians arrived at an unnamed camp in Surrey. Not content to politely leave the prisoners to themselves, Spencer spent a day with the captives and enjoyed himself so thoroughly that he promised “to go over to Berlin after the war and drink a bottle of lager with them.” Although he noticed that the prisoners were unkempt after making the journey from the battlefield to England, Spencer concluded that the prisoners were “a gentlemanly lot on the whole.”

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32 Testimony of Eduard R., Halberstadt, 18 February 1918, BABL, R 901/86438, Nr. 25, pp. 5-6.
33 Testimony of Paul L., Döbeln, 11 January 1918, BABL, R 901/86438, Nr. 19, p. 2.
34 Lieut. WBP Spencer, Camberley, to his Mother, undated, The Papers of WBP Spencer, IWM, 87/56/1. Although Spencer’s letter is undated, his visit likely took place early in the war since he mentions that civilians and military prisoners were held in the same facility.
curiosity in prisoners is especially interesting when one considers that by August 1914, isolated attacks on German property had broken out in several English towns and cities.\textsuperscript{35}

The task of officially documenting the prisoners’ arrival in the UK fell to the Prisoners of War Information Bureau (PWIB). Article XIV of The Hague Convention required belligerents to establish a bureau for processing inquiries regarding enemy prisoners. The British set up the PWIB in August 1914 under the direction of Sir Paul Harvey, chief auditor of the National Insurance Department. Harvey’s staff initially consisted of less than fifteen employees, most of whom he borrowed from existing government agencies.\textsuperscript{36} The PWIB maintained lists of combatants held in the British Empire and documented the condition of wounded prisoners. The agency was also responsible for documenting enemy dead found behind the lines and overseeing the return of property collected from the battlefield. Its most important functions were responding to inquiries from individuals and aid associations and forwarding parcels and correspondence to prisoners whose exact location was unknown.\textsuperscript{37} This could be a time consuming task. Even in the early days of the war, the PWIB processed as many as 400 inquiries per day.\textsuperscript{38}

The War Office’s prisoner affairs branch, the Directorate of Prisoners of War (DPW) was also founded in the war’s opening months. Under Lieutenant-General H.E. Belfield, the DPW maintained and controlled all military prisoners in British custody, regardless of their geographic location. It operated a separate division that attended to

\textsuperscript{35} Panayi, \textit{The Enemy in our Midst}, pp. 223-28.
\textsuperscript{36} Report on the Prisoners of War Information Bureau, TNA, WO 162/341, p. 1. On employee borrowing, see Sir Paul Harvey to the Secretary of the Treasury, Whitehall, 18 August 1915, TNA, T1/11739.
\textsuperscript{37} Report on the Prisoners of War Information Bureau, TNA, WO 162/341, Section III.
the needs of British prisoners in enemy hands. Initially, the DPW determined which
civilian aliens required internment, but by May 1915, the Home Office had taken up
oversight of all matters pertaining to enemy civilians. The War Office, then, dealt
primarily with military prisoners and issued all orders pertaining to their treatment in the
British Empire. Accordingly, War Office officials set up, staffed, and managed the
facilities that would serve as the temporary homes of the German prisoners in the UK.39

Like other belligerents, the British had no existing mechanism for managing
prisoners when the war broke out in August 1914. The Hague Convention charged
governments with the maintenance of prisoners in their possession and mandated that

captors treat prisoners humanely. Belligerents were to intern their prisoners in a “town, fortress, camp, or other place” but the laws of war provided few further specifics.\(^4^0\) The guidelines developed by the Interdepartmental Committee in 1906, which do not appear to have been closely consulted, were equally vague. Since the BEF and Royal Navy took relatively few prisoners in the first year of the war, it was easier to accommodate the military prisoners that arrived after early confrontations at sea and on the Western Front. In the absence of a concrete plan, the British divided prisoners by rank and nationality, and with few exceptions kept military and naval prisoners in the same camps. Whereas combatant prisoners and civilian internees were eventually held in separate locations, enlisted men and civilians often occupied the same spaces early on, including empty military barracks, large factories, and passenger ships.\(^4^1\)

The laws of war permitted captors to draft prisoners, excluding officers, into the work force under the condition that laborers were safely removed from the front and not employed in armaments production. British officials opted not to take advantage of this stipulation until 1916. In the first years of the war, prisoners resided in larger facilities and generally had no specific responsibilities outside the camp.\(^4^2\) The War Office’s reluctance to employ prisoners of war in the UK was a direct result of the labor unions’ defiant opposition to the use of prisoner labor.\(^4^3\) Camps were always under the command

\(^{4^1}\) Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War, TNA, WO 106/1451, p. 16. The Great War was not the first conflict during which the British held enemy prisoners in the UK. During the Napoleonic Wars, the British held as many as 56,000 French prisoners in barracks, castles, and salvaged ships off the coasts of England and elsewhere. See Erich Pelzer, “Il Ne Sera Fait Aucon Prisonnier Anglas Ou Hanovrien: Zur Problematik der Kriegsgefangenen während der Revolutions- und Empirekriege (1792-1815),” in Overmans, *In der Hand des Feindes*, pp. 206-10.
of a commandant, and while a facility’s needs depended largely on its size, the staff usually consisted of an interpreter, medical officer, quartermaster, an adjunct, and a cadre of civilian employees.\textsuperscript{44} Despite the War Office’s early efforts to coordinate a system for prisoner management and the restraint displayed by British civilians, German allegations of prisoner mistreatment in Britain were numerous. The American ambassador in Berlin, James W. Gerard, consequently arranged for one of his representatives to inspect the camps of the UK. He chose John B. Jackson, a former American minister in the Balkan States and secretary in the Berlin embassy, for the task.\textsuperscript{45} By early 1915, Jackson and other American representatives routinely visited and reported on conditions in prisoner of war camps in both the UK and Germany.\textsuperscript{46}

The first permanent quarters for enlisted men materialized in an army camp in Dorchester capable of housing 2,500 civilian and combatant prisoners.\textsuperscript{47} Jackson visited Dorchester in early 1915 to discover that the camp had been cleared of civilians and held approximately 900 soldiers.\textsuperscript{48} A converted army installation, Dorchester was a logical site for a prisoner of war camp. Another early camp at Leigh in Lancashire, however, demonstrated the improvisational nature of other preliminary facilities. At Leigh, more than 1,700 military prisoners lived in an unused factory divided into six sleeping quarters. Prisoners slept in open rooms on straw mattresses with three blankets. Up to 500

\textsuperscript{44} The standards for camp staffs were not finalized until 1917. For the official scale of staff see the Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War, TNA, WO 106/1451, p. 134.
\textsuperscript{45} James W. Gerard, My Four Years in Germany (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1917), pp. 158-59.
\textsuperscript{47} Jackson, The Prisoners, p. 135.
prisoners shared access to clean toilets and showers with hot and cold water. Electric lighting illuminated the facility and more than twenty cooks prepared meals for prisoners in the camp kitchen. As early as January 1915, Leigh’s prisoners worked in recreational garden plots and studied in a library of 2,000 German and English volumes. In addition, prisoners participated in choral ensembles and a variety of academic and technical courses organized and taught by members of the camp population.49

Among other locations, the War Office established similar camps at Handforth in Cheshire, Frith Hill in Frimley, Frongoch in North Wales, Shrewsbury in Abbey Wood, and Stobs in Hawick, Scotland in 1914-15. The War Office also interned civilian and military prisoners on passenger ships beginning in December 1914, but halted the practice due to sanitation concerns and the costs associated with confining men on vessels needed elsewhere. Regional circumstances gave each camp a unique atmosphere, but as a general rule, prisoners found similar accommodations and restrictions regardless of their place of internment. The British divided larger camps for enlisted men into compounds of approximately 1,200 prisoners and allowed German non-commissioned officers to maintain discipline among the men. Local military authorities supplied camp guards, yet the War Office provided no specific regulations for prisoner oversight. The War Office therefore left commandants with some latitude in the administration of their facilities.50

Although prisoners enjoyed some independence in camp governance, two standard six-feet high rows of barbed wire separated by ten feet of coiled or loose wire

made it difficult to forget that they were in enemy hands. From a psychological standpoint, the barbed wire had a profound effect on the prisoners’ mental health, as will be discussed in chapter three. Guard posts, an additional wire fence, and lamps marked the boundaries of the camp, beyond which no prisoner was allowed to pass without explicit permission. Inside the camps, authorities expected captives to obey standing orders designed to prevent disturbances and escapes. Since common soldiers received no pay and initially had no opportunity to work in the UK, they depended on their captors for food and clothing. In accordance with The Hague Convention, the British offered early prisoners a “liberal scale of rations” and issued clothing and toiletries to prisoners in need of assistance. Large camps included hospitals capable of handling routine and emergency cases, and the number of beds at a given time equaled approximately two percent of the camp population. Prisoners often had access to athletic facilities, educational opportunities, and a variety of other cultural activities.

As was the case in camps run by most of the Great War’s belligerents, enlisted soldiers had little contact with officers who shared their fate as prisoners. The British reputation for relying on class as an organizational principle is legendary. In this instance, however, the separation of officers and enlisted men corresponded with the stipulations of the Hague Convention, which demanded that captors provide lodgings equal to those maintained for men of the same rank in their own armies. Upon arrival

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54 On class on Britain, see David Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).
in Southampton, officers underwent processing at Bevois Mount while enlisted soldiers registered at Shirley Rink, a large wooden-floored skating facility. With common soldiers in larger camps, the War Office housed officer prisoners in “country houses or houses supplemented by huts or tents” and provided orderlies taken from the ranks of the enlisted prisoners. When not granted private quarters, senior men of rank shared accommodations with a small contingent of fellow officers. Article XVII of The Hague Convention ensured that officers continued to receive a salary equal to that of officers in the army by which they had been captured. Unsure of Germany’s willingness to pay captive British officers, the War Office paid German officers half the rate earned by their British equals until it became clear that the Germans would observe Article XVII as well.

Fig 3. Postcard of the Frith Hill prisoner of war camp with clear view of standard barbed wire enclosures.

In addition to recognizing officer privileges, the British reached an agreement with the German government that separated many ensigns and non-commissioned
officers from enlisted prisoners and accorded them the rights afforded to other officers. This measure was designed to keep future officers or men of special status clear of any situation that might “lower them in the eyes of those who [would] subsequently be their subordinates.”\(^{55}\) The agreement protected cadets from transfer to “uncivilized countries” as well as involvement in activities unbefitting men of their status.\(^{56}\) Officials at the DPW likewise considered establishing a second class of combatant prisoners who, while not officers, were capable of paying for higher quality food and accommodations.\(^{57}\) These higher quality camps for military prisoners never materialized, but when considered alongside the special treatment of prospective officers, it becomes clear that social standing could significantly impact a prisoner’s captivity experience in the UK.

The War Office founded one of the earliest officers’ camps at Dyffryn Aled in Wales in September 1914.\(^{58}\) When the camp began operations, its guests were unimpressed with their lodgings. A year after the camp’s opening, the senior German officer at the facility complained to the American embassy that the structure had been in a state of total disrepair upon his arrival. An old country home, Dyffryn Aled had to be fitted with closets, a water supply, and gas lines with the first prisoners already in residence. The camp’s staff saw to the most urgent repairs within several months, but problems stemming from a leaky roof, rotting floorboards, and serious draughts plagued

\(^{55}\) Note Verbale from the German Foreign Office to the American Embassy, Berlin, 28 February 1915, in James W. Gerard to Walter Hines Page, 2 March 1915, TNA, FO 383/32.

\(^{56}\) Note Verbale from the German Foreign Office to the American Embassy, Berlin, 28 February 1915, in James W. Gerard to Walter Hines Page, 2 March 1915, TNA, FO 383/32; Also see the Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War, TNA, WO 106/1451, p. 15.

\(^{57}\) H.E. Belfield, “Outline of Arrangements Made for Prisoners of War in our Hands,” BABL, R 901/83825.

\(^{58}\) Macpherson, Horrocks and Beveridge, eds., Medical Services, II: p. 133.
the camp throughout its first year. Nonetheless, in June 1915 a cast of twenty-nine servants looked after only sixty-nine officers at the country home turned prisoner of war camp. Since officers continued to receive salaries, the British required them to purchase their own food and supplies. As was usually the case, officers at Dyffryn Aled oversaw the preparation of menus of their choosing.

When John B. Jackson visited the site as part of a thirteen-camp inspection tour in February 1915, he found little cause for concern and concluded that as a general rule, the British were treating their prisoners “as good as could be expected under the present circumstances.” On the same tour, Jackson inspected the most famous of the British camps for German officers, Donington Hall in Derby. Opened in February 1915, the castle at Donington Hall held only twenty officers and a few civilians during Jackson’s inaugural visit. By the time a second American representative, William H. Buckler, inspected the camp in August of the same year, its population had expanded to 118 officers and forty orderlies. An ancestral castle with a “magnificent view,” Donington Hall was considered one of the best camps in the UK, and it held a number of high profile officers.

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59 Captain Wallis, Dyffryn Aled, to The American Embassy in London, 14 September 1915 (Translation), in the American Ambassador in London to the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 4 October 1915, TNA, FO 383/34, pp. 1-3.
prisoners, including the infamous spy Franz von Rintelen. The estate had been uninhabited for years, and the War Office spent thousands of pounds on furnishings, drainage repairs, and the installation of an additional boiler to provide officers with hot water. Situated on 1000 acres of parkland, Donington Hall offered ample opportunities for tennis, soccer, and hockey. Although German newspapers and war-related materials were forbidden, officer prisoners also spent their time reading British periodicals and books donated by charitable organizations.

Prisoners at Donington Hall sometimes secured private quarters. Others shared rooms measuring 35x24 feet with up to thirteen other officers. The War Office supplied a wardrobe and washstand for every two prisoners, and officers had access to a hospital, large kitchen, canteen, exercise yards, and arts and crafts. In short, officers at Donington Hall enjoyed many of the luxuries they were accustomed to in Germany. Aside from three daily meals, prisoners chose from a wide selection of items at the camp canteen. Buckler’s August 1915 inspection report revealed that the canteen stocked numerous brands of tobacco and cigarettes and sold toiletries, including vanity items like as cologne, lanolin lotion, pumice stones, and manicure tools. Finally, officers supplemented their meals with condiments, cheeses, and eight varieties of chocolate.

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65 Von Rintelen allegedly worked to sabotage American ships carrying supplies to the Entente prior to the United States’ entry into the war. He was captured by the British aboard a Dutch vessel while trying to return to Germany and interned as a prisoner of war. Eventually, he was sent back to the United States to face charges of espionage. See Franz von Rintelen, The Dark Invader: Wartime Reminiscences of a German Naval Intelligence Officer (New York: Macmillan, 1933).
66 “How the Money has been Spent,” The Times (London), 9 March 1915, p. 12.
67 Bericht des Oberleutnants z. See Plüschow über englische Gefängnlager (Copy), Berlin, 19 August 1915, BAMA, RM 3/6865, pp. 11-12.
Not all Britons appreciated the effort, or money, that went into transforming Donington Hall into a respectable officers’ camp. Many believed the accommodations at the estate to be extravagant and complained that the War Office coddled German officers while their British counterparts made due with far less in Germany. Public anger over the amenities at Donington Hall even spawned a satirical Tom Wootwell skit on spoiled prisoners and a Leslie Elliott tune entitled “Dear Old Donington Hall.” During a parliamentary discussion on camp expenditures, Representative M. Hogge asked how many more country estates the War Office planned to “rebuild for the comfort of the German prisoners.” His colleague, Representative W. Thorne, was greeted with a chorus of laughter when he sarcastically asked if as a consequence of the extraordinary treatment extended to the German officers, “any of those gentlemen will ever want to go back to Germany again?”

Fig. 4. Postcard image of the officers’ camp at Donington Hall in Derby.

70 “German Prisoners at Donington Hall,” *The Times*, 2 March 1915, p. 9.
Allegations that the War Office coddled the prisoners at Donington Hall were almost certainly overstated. One of the castle’s Austrian prisoners, Konstantin Maglic, remembered that the landscape surrounding the estate was magnificent, but the junior officers’ quarters were so poorly heated that water in washbasins froze solid on cold winter nights.71 Lieutenant Karl Spindler was captured at sea while attempting to supply the Irishman Roger Casement with weapons for the Easter rebellion of 1916. Following his release, Spindler wrote that Donington Hall “deserved the name ‘Castle’ only when regarded from a distance.” The interior, he recalled, was more like a “tenement.”72 Furthermore, even though the canteen was well stocked, purchasing luxury items required funds that officers did not always have at their disposal. In rare cases, German officers were even forced to appeal to British acquaintances for financial support.

On numerous occasions, Officer Otto V. of the 7th Field Artillery regiment asked a British family, the Wardles, to lend financial assistance.73 Otto V.’s father owned a German dye works and had befriended the Wardle family through prewar business ventures with Joshua Wardle & Sons dye works in Leek. Wardle felt obligated to help the son of a family friend, but he understood the need for caution. When he sent the requested funds to Donington Hall, Wardle assured the commandant of his “hope that we

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73 See Prisoners of Information Bureau memo I.B./6(a), 30 March 1915; Otto V., Donington Hall, to Wardle, Leek, 22 August 1915; Wardle, Leek, to the Officer Commanding the Prisoners of War 5th Southern General Hospital, Southsea, 31 March 1915, Author’s Private Collection (hereafter APC).
are not doing anything against your wishes.” Wardle seemed more concerned with maintaining his image as a patriotic Briton than securing repayment. Following the fulfillment of a request for funds, Wardle explained his financial generosity to Donington Hall’s commandant with the following: “Although I’m British to the backbone & condemn the actions Germany [sic] at War. I cannot forget the kindness I have received from his father. I of course wish to do nothing which in your eyes is disloyal to my country.” The commandant did not question Wardle’s loyalty, but he informed him that Otto V. spent more money than “almost any other prisoner” at Donington Hall. Therefore, the commandant did not think it would be necessary to send further remittance for the time being.

Otto V.’s relationship with the Wardle family offers insight into the complexities of the Anglo-German rivalry. Wardle was careful not to aid the prisoner in any way that might be considered disloyal or treasonous, but he remained willing to assist a German friend despite the antagonism between England and Germany. Even with British troops dying at the front, the pervasive anti-German sentiments that gripped wartime Britain could not sway Wardle’s loyalty to an old friend. Although many Britons may have questioned Wardle’s willingness to aid a captured enemy, average citizens showed restraint, and while generally curious, treated arriving German prisoners with indifference.

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74 Joshua Wardle & Sons, Leek, to the Commandant at Donington Hall, Derby, 14 February 1916, APC.
75 Otto V., Donington Hall, to Wardle, 5 March 1916, APC.
76 G.C. Wardle, Leek, to the Commandant at Donington Hall, Derby, 12 April 1916, (Copy), APC.
77 F.S. Picot, Commandant at Donington Hall, to Wardle, Leek, 15 April 1916, APC.
or quiet respect. In the first years of the conflict, the War Office likewise demonstrated a commitment to looking beyond resentment for its German enemy and providing prisoners with a standard of care that usually exceeded international standards. Anglo-German hostility was not imagined, but it seems to have had little negative impact on the treatment of the UK’s early German prisoners.

Perhaps nothing better demonstrates this point than the British treatment of captured submariners. In February 1915, the Germans declared the waters off the British Isles to be military zones, and by September of the same month, German submarines had sunk nearly 800,000 tons of shipping. Although the shipping losses never threatened to knock Britain out of the war, Britons viewed submariners with particular anger and disdain due to the civilian casualties that accompanied the sinking of merchant vessels.

In March 1915, British destroyers sank two German submarines, the U-8 and U-12, in separate engagements and rescued approximately thirty-nine crewmembers from the floundering vessels. Rather than sending the submariners to join the more than 1,000 naval prisoners in the UK, Winston Churchill’s Admiralty detained the crews at the Chatham and Devonport detention barracks. The Admiralty justified the special detentions by declaring submariners unfit to “mingle with other prisoners of war” owing to the dishonorable crimes they had allegedly committed against merchantmen and civilians at sea. It planned to prosecute the submariners at war’s end and maintained that

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78 In addition to the examples of the reaction to arriving German prisoners already provided, see Leslie Smith, *The German Prisoner of War Camp at Leigh* (Manchester: Neil Richardson, 1986), pp. 13-26.
80 W. Graham Greene, Secretary to the Admiralty, to the British Foreign Office, No. 1, 29 March 1915, in Prisoners and Aliens Confidential, Section 1, No. 1, TNA, FO 383/32.
they would be held under special restrictions until legal proceedings commenced.\footnote{Press Bureau. Serial No. B. 625., 8 March 1915, TNA, ADM 116/1418.} However, while they awaited trial, the submariners—who were commonly viewed as murderers, war criminals, and pirates—were granted suitable lodgings and supplies similar to those found in other British camps.

At Chatham, the British lodged the submariners in 8x13 ft. rooms with ample ventilation, and recreation facilities and a modern gymnasium were located on site. Edward G. Lowry of the American Embassy in London inspected the barracks in May 1915. He considered the quarters, which had originally been constructed to hold British sailors guilty of disciplinary infractions, to be well equipped. Lowry noted that although the prisoners had few complaints about their lodgings, they resented the fact that their quarters were designed to house criminals.\footnote{Report on the Naval Detention Barracks at Chatham by Edward G. Lowry, to Walter Hines Page, London, 3 May 1915 (Abschrift zu A IV 10138, zu No. 1022/5.15.Z2.), BAMA, RM 3/5374.} The Admiralty did indeed consider the submariners to be war criminals, but the prisoners were confused by their treatment. The U-8’s commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander Alfred S., insisted that his men had fought in “honourable battle up to the end in accordance with the orders of His Majesty, the German Kaiser.” He complained that his crew’s lodgings were an insult to the honor of servicemen who had simply followed orders and had not been provided even a preliminary trial.\footnote{Lieut. Commander Alfred S. to Commander P.V. Oliver, Chatham Detention Quarters, 9 March 1915, TNA, ADM 116/1418, p. 1.}

Germany fully supported its submariners and threatened to imprison one British officer for every submariner detained in detention barracks.\footnote{Walter Hines Page to Sir Edward Grey, London, 20 March 1915, in Prisoners and Aliens Confidential, Section 2, No. 1, TNA, FO 383/32.} The British responded by
declaring that German reprisals would result in British vessels being ordered to no longer rescue submarine crews. As promised, the Admiralty’s failure to transfer the submarine crews to prisoner of war camps prompted German officials to place a number of British prisoners under “officers arrest.” When the British imprisoned the crew of an additional vessel, the U-14, the number of men under special arrest in Germany climbed correspondingly higher. In the end, German reprisals achieved the desired effect. In June 1915 the British Foreign Office announced that the Admiralty would henceforth hold submariners under the same conditions as other prisoners and quickly scattered the crews among several camps for officers and enlisted men. The transfers were not likely the result of any new respect for the battle tactics the submariners employed, but rather the realization that holding the men as criminals was not justifiable if innocent British officers suffered as a result.

Although submariners viewed imprisonment as an insult to their honor as fighting men, their handling provides further evidence of the British ability to treat their most hated enemies with humanity. The crews of the U-8 and U-12 complained bitterly of the injuries to their pride and honor, but they made no accusations of abuse or neglect. The quality of care provided to the most detested men in British hands, materially speaking, exceeded international standards of the day. In view of the favorable conditions in the camps of the UK, a postwar German report concluded that notwithstanding the restriction of individual freedoms and the mental pressures of life in captivity, the experience was at

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85 W. Graham Greene, to the British Foreign Office, 29 March 1915, in Prisoners and Aliens, Section 1, No. 1, TNA, FO 383/32.
86 Sir Edward Grey to Walter Hines Page, 19 April 1915, in Prisoners and Aliens, Section 1, No. 1, TNA, FO 383/32.
87 James W. Gerard to Gottlieb von Jagow, German Imperial Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Berlin, 14 June 1915, BABL, R 901/84691.
least bearable for the German prisoners of the British during the war’s first two years.\(^88\) Initial plans for accommodating prisoners in the UK were far from perfect, but British authorities made the most of available resources and managed to provide prisoners with a comfortable standard of living. As the war progressed, labor concerns and a growing prisoner population posed new challenges that would alter the structure of the camp system for prisoners who found themselves in the UK after spring 1916.

**CAPTIVITY RECONSIDERED: 1916 AND BEYOND**

In early 1916, the British began preparations to fell timber and quarry stone in France in order to limit shipments of materials across the English Channel. As a result, the War Office reevaluated its position on prisoner labor and decided to employ German prisoners at work sites on the continent. General Douglas Haig, who replaced General French as the BEF’s commander in chief in December 1915, had reservations about using prisoners as a labor source.\(^89\) Although the German Army began employing prisoners on the Western Front in 1915, it relied exclusively on Russian prisoners of war and enlisted no British captives in its labor companies until spring 1917.\(^90\) The British use of German labor, then, could potentially lead to the employment of British prisoners behind the lines. Additionally, Haig held the opinion that prisoners had little incentive to perform their tasks efficiently and more likely to escape work sites than proper camps. As the British

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labor shortage deepened, however, Secretary of State for War Kitchener persuaded him to make use of prisoners in France on an experimental basis.\footnote{Scott, “Captive Labour,” pp. 319-321.}

The first German prisoners to work for the BEF left the UK for France in April 1916. At the same time, the British sent additional prisoners to the continent to work under French supervision in the northern ports of Le Havre and Rouen.\footnote{Scott, “Captive Labour,” pp. 320-321.} Prisoners found this arrangement confusing and reasoned that having been captured by the BEF, they should only answer to British authorities.\footnote{“Report of Military Depot Rouen,” 12 June 1916, BABL, R 901/83097, p. 7.} The prospect of having prisoners of the British work under French supervision seemed little better than earlier schemes for handing prisoners over to the French outright. Consequently, the British soon assumed direct control of their working prisoners in France.

The experimental labor groups sent to France in April 1916 proved invaluable to the British war effort, and German prisoners accounted for more than forty percent of the BEF’s labor supply by the war’s conclusion.\footnote{Scott, “Captive Labour,” p. 319.} As thousands of German soldiers surrendered to the BEF during the Battle of the Somme, the British abandoned the practice of transporting all prisoners to the UK and began holding a majority of their prisoners in working camps in France. Prisoners generally transitioned into the work force swiftly. In one case, a British officer recalled that a group of German prisoners was busy with roadwork only three days after their capture.\footnote{G.S.O., \textit{G.H.Q (Montreuil-Sur-Mer)} (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1920), p. 165.} Officers, who were prohibited
from working by The Hague Convention, and the seriously wounded comprised the better part of the prisoners sent to the UK after summer 1916.96

The use of prisoner labor on the Western Front was not the only experimental measure tested in 1916. In the spring, the War Office began assembling prisoners “who although captured as enemies, belonged to the races whose national aspirations could be fulfilled only by the victory of the Allies.”97 At a special “friendly” camp at Feltham in Middlesex, Alsatians, Schleswig-Holsteiners, Czechs, and Poles expressed their political aspirations in their native languages without fear of reprisal. Of the UK camps founded after the war’s first year, Feltham was the only facility where civilian prisoners consistently lived alongside combatants.98 Many “friendly” prisoners feared that their relatives in Germany might suffer as a result of their treasonous transfer to Feltham, and the British made a concerted effort to keep the camp’s nationalistic climate a secret. American Attaché Boylston A. Beal inspected Feltham only six weeks after the camp’s opening, and his report suggests that he had no knowledge of its special status. Beal’s write up, which the Americans forwarded to the German Foreign Office, made no mention of Feltham’s purpose and revealed only that a majority of the camp’s inhabitants were Roman Catholic.99

98 Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War, TNA, WO 106/1451, p. 43. The British establishment of a separate camp for ethnic minorities living inside Germany was by no means exceptional. The Russians attempted to take advantage of “national discontents” among their prisoners and even formed a Czechoslovak Legion composed of prisoners willing to take up arms against Austria-Hungary. Likewise, the Germans offered special privileges to Irish prisoners prepared to fight against the British, although there do not seem to have been many willing to do so. See Rachamimov, POWs and the Great War, pp. 115-22; Matthew Stibbe, British Civilian Internees in Germany: The Ruhleben Camp, 1914-18 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), pp. 122-26.
99 Report on Feltham by Boylston A. Beal, 29 May 1916, Enclosure No. 13 in United Kingdom, Parliament, Reports of Visits of Inspection made by Officials of the United States Embassy to Various
The Feltham experiment was largely successful. Only months after the camp’s opening, the War Office went a step further and began to transfer Alsatians and Lorrainers, at their request, to France. Eventually, the British handed over German prisoners from Alsace and Lorraine without so much as documenting the prisoners’ capture. The French likewise sought the transfer from the UK of “prisoners of true Polish national sentiment” to contribute to the formation of a Polish brigade to fight on the Western Front under French command.\(^{100}\) The War Office initially declined to provide Polish prisoners for the scheme, but late in the war, the British agreed to assemble prospects for enlistment at Feltham. In exchange for their willingness to join the Polish brigade or a similar unit, prisoners regained their freedom.\(^{101}\)

The War Office was sometimes overzealous in its efforts to recruit prisoners into the friendly population. Some prisoners vigorously protested their transfer to Feltham, insisting that they were nothing but German and did not relate to the camp’s sentiments. Prisoner Johann P. implored the Swiss Legation to halt his transfer on the grounds that he had “not the slightest sympathies with Polish ideas” and had been born in Germany to German parents.\(^{102}\) His resistance to a proposed move to Feltham was not unique, and it revealed that the camp’s disposition was not as confidential as its inhabitants, nor the British authorities, may have liked. German military officials ultimately became aware

\(^{101}\) G.R. Warner, Secretary of the Interdepartmental Committee of Prisoners of War, Revised Minutes of the Meeting of the Interdepartmental Committee on Prisoners of War on the 16\(^{th}\), August, 1918, TNA, FO 383/433, p. 4.
\(^{102}\) Johann P., Stobs in Scotland, to the Swiss Legation in London, 1 February 1918 (Copy), in The Swiss Minister to the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, London, 20 February 1918, TNA, FO 383/433.
of the subversive activities at Feltham, making a prisoner’s association with the camp a liability for his family in Germany. ¹⁰³

Notwithstanding Feltham’s sympathies with the Allied cause, the British subjected the prisoners there to the same regulations as other prisoners in the UK. ¹⁰⁴ Following the successful use of prisoner labor on the continent, those regulations increasingly included compulsory employment. Preliminary requests for prisoner labor in the UK surpassed the number of men available for work, but the British hesitated to make use of prisoners on a large scale away from the front. By September 1916, the War Office had assembled an advisory committee to discuss how prisoners might be used in the UK. Months later, officials decided to integrate prisoners into the national economy, resulting in the December 1916 establishment of a Prisoners of War Employment Committee (PWEC) to review requests for prisoner labor. ¹⁰⁵ The PWEC consisted of representatives from the War Office, Home Office, Ministry of National Service, Ministry of Munitions, and Board of Agriculture and Fisheries. Even after the PWEC’s foundation, the British employed German prisoners quite sparingly; using them only after other labor sources had been depleted. ¹⁰⁶

In March 1917, there were no more than 7,000 military prisoners at work in the UK, but a multitude of British agencies eventually made use of more than 65,000 military prisoners in land reclamation, quarrying, construction, forestry, agriculture, and more

¹⁰³ On the recognition of Feltham’s “friendly” status, see “Kapitänleutnant S., beauftragt mit der Befragung aus England ausgetauschter Militärgefangenen, 1. Bericht” (Copy), BAMA, RM 5/4681.
¹⁰⁶ Notes on the Conditions Regarding the Employment of Prisoners of War, TNA, NATS 1/567, p.1.
specialized tasks.\textsuperscript{107} Laborers came from the lower ranks of the German armed forces, as even non-commissioned officers could not be put to work unless they volunteered. Working prisoners earned wages and worked the same number of hours as British laborers employed in similar tasks. They received one day of rest per week to recuperate, and a new scale adopted in February 1917 offered increased rations to offset the additional calories they expended as laborers.\textsuperscript{108}

A growing prisoner work force required the British to restructure the camp system to accommodate labor parties who could not return to one of the larger, established camps on a regular basis. The War Office set up numerous working camps that often held less than 200 prisoners, and later employed migratory gangs of ten prisoners to assist farmers with the harvest. To a lesser extent, private employers took on the responsibility of maintaining groups of fewer than three prisoners. Working camps and migratory gangs were generally affiliated with one of the larger permanent facilities known as “parent” camps.\textsuperscript{109} Roughly ten parent camps (Handforth, Blandford, Dorchester, Leigh, Frongoch, Pattishall, Brocton, Catterick, Shrewsbury, and Stobs) indirectly managed hundreds of working camps scattered across the UK.\textsuperscript{110} This arrangement could strain the resources available to parent camps, which were responsible for processing mail and parcels intended for men in affiliated work camps. At times, a single parent camp oversaw more than 160 work camps and thousands of prisoners. Dorchester, for

\textsuperscript{110} List of All Prisoners of War Camps in England and Wales and Scotland with Postal and Telegraphic Addresses, May 1918, TNA, HO 45/10883/345466.
example, carried as many as 42,000 prisoners on paper although the facility was only capable of accommodating 3,800 men.  

Even so, the War Office maintained a working environment in parent camps and satellites that exceeded expectations. In September 1916, the parent camp at Leigh actually held fewer prisoners than it had the previous year, but the camp’s staff supervised an additional 475 working prisoners outside its boundaries. Despite housing fewer men, Leigh offered separate living quarters to non-commissioned officers and had expanded to include seven dormitories that included bathing and laundry facilities and accommodated several barbers. American inspectors found the camp’s accommodations to be clean and well kept, noting that prisoners bathed and did laundry at least once a week. Physicians looked after prisoners at a hospital located on the grounds and British and German dentists were available if needed. As part of the British labor scheme, prisoners at Leigh worked as bookbinders, bricklayers, carpenters, butchers and tailors. With funds earned or received from relatives on the homefront, prisoners could purchase “practically anything except alcoholic beverages” from the canteen at the same rates offered to British soldiers.  

The first of the British camps, Dorchester underwent significant changes as the war progressed. By June 1916, Dorchester’s population had nearly doubled, and a majority of its prisoners busied themselves making mailbags, digging drains, and constructing roads or huts. Private firms employed other prisoners at sawmills, sewerage

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farms, gas works, and coal weighing stations. Inspectors acknowledged the camp’s healthy atmosphere and suggested that its prisoners benefited greatly from the work they performed. If prisoners sought more physical activity, Dorchester included nine acres of recreational fields and a small gymnasium. Just as at Leigh, prisoners could purchase goods from a camp canteen, and they received a standard ration that included eight ounces of meat and a selection of vegetables, coffee, condensed milk, and bread.  

The work sites associated with parent camps like Leigh and Dorchester generally lacked expansive facilities such as hospitals, but satellite camps operated according to the same high standards as larger camps. In the absence of on-site medical services, local physicians cared for the prisoners employed in their region. With prisoners earning wages for their labor, working camps with suitably large populations operated canteens as well. One of Leigh’s dependents, Harperly, was typical of many satellite camps. Harperly consisted of well-insulated heated dormitories with wooden floors, asbestos lined walls, and tarred felt roofs. Prisoners shared sleeping quarters with twenty-seven other men, each being issued a straw mattress and four blankets to protect them from the winter cold. Harperly’s prisoners worked principally in stone quarrying and received extra rations for their labor. Cooks prepared meals in the kitchen’s two roasting ovens and the camp included spaces for recreation and regular religious services.

114 Macpherson, Horrocks and Beveridge, eds., Medical Services, II: p. 140.
At another work camp, Henbury near Bristol, 400 prisoners occupied ten dormitories similar to those at Harperley. The latrines, drying rooms, and showers at Henbury were reportedly “all very well-built and arranged,” and inspectors approved of the camp’s adequate water supply and drainage. In the absence of a proper dining hall, prisoners took meals in their dormitories. When the United States severed diplomatic relations with Germany in February 1917, representatives of the Swiss Legation in London assumed responsibility for neutral camp inspections. The Swiss inspector who visited Henbury in May 1917 concluded that the camp, “as far as situation, drainage, water supply, housing, etc. are concerned, is all that could be wished.”  

Prisoners in both parent and satellite work camps, nonetheless, faced increased hardship when shipping losses to German submarines prompted a reconfiguration of the ration scale. The modified scale guaranteed working prisoners only what was “absolutely necessary” and required that unemployed prisoners live at a level of “bare subsistence.” By March 1918, British authorities regularly substituted beef with horseflesh, “Chinese bacon,” or pickled herring, but prisoners generally suffered no worse than the average British citizen. Even under these circumstances, prisoners in the UK were better nourished than millions of German civilians who felt the impact of the British naval blockade only months after the war began and survived on a diet of 700-900 calories per day during the winter of 1916-17.  

As a general rule, neutral inspectors agreed that the British treated prisoners in parent camps and their satellites well. Still, there were occasional allegations of abuse, and certain commandants were known for demanding strict discipline of their prisoners.

The most notorious commandant in the UK was Lieut. Colonel Sir Arthur Grant of camp Brocton in Staffordshire. Several prisoners accused Grant of slapping, punching, and verbally abusing the men in his charge, and he does not appear to have held his prisoners in the highest esteem. When asked to compile a short history of Brocton, Grant felt compelled to include some generalizations of the prisoners who passed through the camp:

The German has a liking for lewd photographs which when found have been destroyed. I have found him a good and hard worker but without much sense of shame or honor. He will pilfer from his comrades with the thoroughness of an English soldier playing football. He will always lie if he thinks he can gain anything by it. He will give away his comrades even to the British authorities, for a few cigarettes or a loaf of bread. On the other hand, in the mass, he is well conducted and obliging, giving very
little trouble, realising as he does that every care has been taken to treat him reasonably and humanely.\textsuperscript{120}

Rumors of Grant’s abuses prompted the British to investigate his disciplinary techniques, but rather than confirming the commandant’s guilt, the resulting report cited prisoner insubordination as the basis for his harsh tactics and cleared him of any wrongdoing.\textsuperscript{121} Swiss representatives visited Brocton in August 1918 and acknowledged that Grant was a “strict disciplinarian.” However, they maintained that Brocton was among the best prisoner of war camps and concluded that its staff treated prisoners favorably.\textsuperscript{122}

British and Swiss investigations into Grant’s alleged abuses indicated that the charges against the commandant were exaggerated, but his comments on the men in his custody suggest that he viewed Brocton’s prisoners with disdain. As far as many prisoners were concerned, Grant represented the worst of what the British camp system had to offer. Nevertheless, according to both his own assessment and that of neutral inspectors, Grant and his staff treated their prisoners well. Although there has been no in-depth study of working conditions or violence against working prisoners in France, former German members of British labor companies in France sometimes complained of the harsh treatment they experienced there.\textsuperscript{123} The Irish historian Heather Jones has likewise shown that prisoners in German labor companies near the front were often

\textsuperscript{120} History of the Prisoner of War Camp at Brocton labeled “Prisoners of War Camp. Brocton. Staffs,” 10 January 1919, IWM, Papers of Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Arthur Grant, 78/31/1, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{121} Lt. Col. H.B. Thornhill, Report on the Brocton Camp Complaints, 14 April 1918, IWM, Papers of Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Arthur Grant, 78/31/1. For further allegations against Grant and other British camp personnel, see BABL, R 901/86438, Schwarze Liste derjenigen Engländer, die sich während des Kriegs gegenüber deutschen Heeresangehörigen völkerrechtswidrigen Verhaltens schuldig gemacht haben.
\textsuperscript{122} Report on Brocton by A. de Sturler to Gaston Carlin, London, 8 August 1918, in Schweizerische Gesandschaft in Berlin (Vertretung deutscher Interessen) to the Auswärtiges Amt des Deutschen Reiches, 2 September 1918, BABL, R 901/83041a, pp. 2-3.
exposed to dangerous working conditions and violently mistreated by their guards.\textsuperscript{124} If Grant’s strict, sometimes callous, discipline represented the worst of what the UK’s camps had to offer, then it is safe to assume that the English Channel acted as a barrier to the violent atmosphere of the front and made work conditions and treatment in the UK preferable to those on the continent.

The distinction between working camps at the front and in the UK was of little consequence to German officers who were protected by international law from being drafted into the work force. Life inside the officer camps of the UK was not significantly affected by the utilization of prisoner labor. Yet much like common prisoners, officers suffered as a result of British shipping losses to German submarines. Whereas enlisted prisoners relied primarily on their captors for rations, officers prepared menus based on supplies from canteens managed by private contractors. As food and indulgences like tobacco became scarce in 1917, the British placed increasingly tighter restrictions on the variety of items available to officers.\textsuperscript{125}

Nonetheless, for prisoners in transit from the Western Front to the UK, tobacco shortages were only the beginning of the problems posed by unrestricted submarine warfare. Days after surrendering at Arras in April 1917, Reserve Lieutenant W. M. of the 25\textsuperscript{th} Bavarian Infantry Regiment boarded the hospital ship HMS Lanfranc in Le Havre. As the Lanfranc headed for Southampton carrying wounded British soldiers and 167 prisoners, a German torpedo struck the engine room and sank the vessel. W.M. survived

\textsuperscript{124} Jones, “The Final Logic of Sacrifice?”
\textsuperscript{125} Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War, TNA, WO 106/1451, p. 41.
his experience with friendly fire, but not all of the prisoners aboard the Lanfranc, many of whom were already severely wounded, fared as well.\textsuperscript{126}

It was not unheard of for officers who made it safely across the English Channel after July 1916 to encounter camps filled to near capacity. Donington Hall, for example, held around twenty German officers in February 1915. In October of the following year, more than 385 men crowded the same facility.\textsuperscript{127} With prisoner numbers multiplying, the War Office supplemented estates like Donington Hall with ordinary huts similar to those used for accommodating enlisted soldiers.\textsuperscript{128} Overcrowding was the chief complaint issued by Donington Hall’s prisoners in summer 1917, and a Swiss inspector that visited the castle on several occasions agreed that its living quarters were “somewhat too small for so many.”\textsuperscript{129} Even as captives, officers at Donington Hall and elsewhere considered it beneath their dignity to share accommodations with numerous men or sleep in wooden huts no better than those offered to common soldiers.\textsuperscript{130} Quarters were almost certainly cramped at Donington Hall, but British estimates placed the camp’s capacity at more than 400 officers and 121 servants, so the officers’ complaints likely stemmed from their

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\textsuperscript{130} Report on Skipton by A. de Sturler, Special Attaché to the Swiss Legation in London, to Gaston Carlin, 27 June 1918, in Verbalnote, Schweizerische Gesandschaft in Berlin (Vertretung deutscher Interessen) to the Auswartiges Amt des Deutschen Reiches, 23 Juli 1918, BABL, R 901/83146, pp. 1-2.
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belief that the scarcity of personal space was an affront to their status.\textsuperscript{131} Apparently, the British were not the only ones obsessed with the preservation of class privileges.

Although many officers were frustrated by the close quarters they were forced to share, by spring 1916 the British had already negotiated an agreement that had the potential to reduce the number of prisoners held in the UK. Using an existing Franco-German agreement as a template and working through American representatives, the British Foreign Office expressed interest in the mutual transfer of wounded and invalided prisoners to neutral Switzerland.\textsuperscript{132} Britain and Germany had negotiated a treaty in January 1915 for the direct repatriation of prisoners whose injuries made further military or administrative service impossible, but the requirements for release were exceedingly stringent.\textsuperscript{133} Following months of negotiations, German and British representatives agreed in March 1916 to relocate prisoners suffering from an extensive list of maladies, including deafness, syphilis, limb loss, and afflictions of the nervous system, to Switzerland.\textsuperscript{134} Although the agreement applied to German prisoners of the British held in both France and the UK, those selected for transfer came almost exclusively from the latter location. As a consequence of the British practice of removing wounded captives from the continent, few eligible prisoners remained behind the front lines in France.

\textsuperscript{131} Macpherson, Horrocks and Beveridge, eds., \textit{Medical Services}, II: p. 133.
\textsuperscript{133} Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War, TNA, WO 106/1451, pp. 66, 68.
\textsuperscript{134} Foreign Office, \textit{Correspondence with the United States Ambassador Respecting the Transfer to Switzerland of British and German Wounded and Sick Combatant Prisoners}, pp. 4-6.
In order to secure transfer, German prisoners went before a traveling review board of Swiss physicians and British medical officers. Prisoners selected for consideration underwent an additional inspection by a control board that held final authority to approve or reject candidates. The Swiss interned selected prisoners in the name of captor nations and could only release individuals with the permission of those powers. Since German prisoners in Switzerland were considered invalids, the Swiss Medical Service governed their lives there.\textsuperscript{135} Invalided Germans found accommodation in Switzerland’s Vierwaldstättersee region, and German prisoners with lung ailments recovered at Davos im Bündnerland. The prisoners’ home governments took care of the expenses associated with their maintenance and lodgings, which usually took the form of hotel rooms or pensions.\textsuperscript{136} Prisoners interned in Switzerland enjoyed significantly more freedom than the War Office allowed in the UK. The Swiss employed no guard details and usually allowed prisoners to receive visitors and travel outside of the areas designated for their internment. Be that as it may, prisoners were subject to Swiss military law and forbidden to attempt escape. If a prisoner were to successfully flee, British and German officials promised to promptly return escapees to Switzerland.\textsuperscript{137}

The transfer of prisoners into Swiss custody was a successful undertaking that provided a higher quality of life to a number of wounded men. In all, approximately 21,500 German prisoners of the British and French recovered in Switzerland.\textsuperscript{138} Nonetheless, the departure of invalids for neutral internment could not offset the number

\textsuperscript{138} Ruchti, \textit{Geschichte der Schweiz}, p. 411.
of prisoners entering British camps. As the prisoner population of the UK expanded, so too did the bureaucracy responsible for its management. The PWIB established under Sir Paul Harvey with a handful of borrowed employees in 1914 eventually swelled to include 475 staff members under Harvey’s successor, Sir J.D. Rees.\(^{139}\) Although the PWIB was a well-organized and efficiently run unit, the inability of the other departments of state to communicate effectively with one another proved problematic. Upon the outbreak of hostilities, British authorities neglected to delegate responsibilities among relevant departments or establish a hierarchy of authority. Increasing numbers of prisoners in the UK only complicated this matter. It was generally recognized that the War Office had the largest investment in prisoner affairs, but when departments of state could not reach consensus, there was no apparatus for resolving procedural differences of opinion.

In order to settle disputes, the British War Committee founded the Prisoners of War Department (PWD) in October 1916. Under the control of Thomas Wodehouse Legh, the 2\(^{nd}\) Lord Newton, the PWD oversaw the organization of an Inter-Departmental Committee of representatives to sort out disagreements and take irresolvable issues before the War Committee. As head of the PWD, Lord Newton answered all questions related to prisoner affairs in the House of Lords. The PWD effectively replaced the Foreign Office’s Prisoners and Aliens Department and communicated with foreign governments in the name of the secretary of state for foreign affairs in matters regarding prisoners of war.\(^{140}\) Lord Newton’s agency provided a forum for the expression of dissenting views, but the events leading to the department’s formal establishment

revealed the primacy of the War Office and Admiralty in policy development and implementation.\textsuperscript{141} The PWD streamlined the bureaucracy of captivity in the UK and alleviated much interdepartmental friction, but Lord Newton lacked the authority to make executive decisions and was forced to place issues of particular contention in the hands of the War Committee.\textsuperscript{142}

Despite its shortcomings, the PWD played a significant role at the June 1917 Anglo-German conference at The Hague, where a British delegation headed by H.E. Belfield of the Directorate of Prisoners of War and Lord Newton met with its German counterpart to discuss prisoner treatment. Major General Friedrich, director of the \textit{Unterkunftsdepartment} (Department of Prisoner Accommodations) of the Prussian \textit{Kriegsministerium} from its inception in 1914 until his September 1918 death, led the German delegation. Friedrich was directly responsible for a majority of the prisoners in German hands and thus the country’s leading voice in prisoner affairs.\textsuperscript{143} During negotiations, representatives agreed to a more extensive catalog of disabilities to qualify prisoners for Swiss internment. The most notable feature of the new list was the inclusion of “barbed wire disease,” a depression stemming from the mental strains of life in captivity. Modifications to earlier agreements also made commissioned and noncommissioned officers with no mental or physical disabilities eligible for neutral internment after eighteen months in captivity.\textsuperscript{144}

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\textsuperscript{141} Revised Minutes of Meeting of Inter-Departmental Committee, October 30\textsuperscript{th}, 1916, TNA, WO 32/5373. \\
\textsuperscript{142} Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War, TNA, WO 106/1451, p. 7. \\
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At the same conference, delegates forged an agreement for the internment of 16,000 prisoners in the Netherlands. In many ways, the blueprint for internment in the Netherlands followed the precedents already established in Switzerland, where prisoners continued to be interned. The arrangement was unique in that Dutch authorities agreed to accommodate British and German prisoners but did not reach similar agreements with France or any other belligerent. Additionally, the treaty covered both civilian and combatant prisoners. Of the 16,000 available slots in the Netherlands, 7,500 went to invalid combatants, 6,500 to officers and noncommissioned officers, and the final 2,000 to invalid civilians. Prisoners were transferred to the Netherlands based on their time in captivity without consideration of nationality.\textsuperscript{145}

As in Switzerland, prisoners in the Netherlands lodged in private accommodations, hotels, or special barracks, with most Germans situated in Rotterdam, Dieren, Wolfheze, Hattem, Arnhem, and Noordwijk. The number of prisoners interned in the Netherlands fell short of the proposed population of 16,000 due to the difficulty of transporting prisoners, and supplies for their upkeep, across waters teeming with German submarines. The Dutch population saw prisoners as a drain on already scarce resources and Dutch officials feared that supply shortages would make it impossible to maintain the standard of care demanded by international law. In the end, the Dutch accepted 4,500 German and 6,000 British internees, a population that officials felt they could adequately maintain.\textsuperscript{146} The Hague meeting on prisoner affairs was an unusual undertaking, as it was not typical for representatives of warring nations to meet in person to discuss

anything other than peace negotiations. Upon Lord Newton’s return from The Hague, he
discovered that most of his colleagues, as well as the king, were more concerned with
whether he had shaken hands with the Germans than the terms of the treaty. In fact, he
recalled in his memoirs, the delegations parted ways with formal bows.147

At a second Anglo-German conference in summer 1918, Newton and Belfield met
with a Friedrich led delegation at the Hague to refine many of the imprecise provisions of
the Hague Convention of 1907. The resulting agreement required captors to transfer
prisoners thirty kilometers behind the front immediately following surrender and
prohibited the establishment of prison camps within the same distance. Perhaps most
importantly for prisoners in the UK, it created accommodation standards for officers and
enlisted men. Barracks were recognized as standard housing for common soldiers, with
each man receiving a minimum of three-square meters. The agreement required captors
to provide officers with quarters befitting their rank, and lieutenants and captains were
ensured six square meters of personal space. Delegates also agreed to reserve between
eight and ten square meters for majors and colonels, and private rooms measuring at least
twelve square meters for higher-ranking officers.148

The second Anglo-German agreement was a comprehensive document that
reflected the experience of the men responsible for its drafting. Delegates overlooked
few details and established standards in camp construction, prisoner clothing, heating,
lighting, recreational facilities, punishment, nutrition and sanitation. Without question,
the agreement could have served as a touchstone for the future governance of prisoners of

147 Lord Newton, Retrospection (London: John Murray, 1941), pp. 240-42.
war. For the officers at Donington Hall who complained of overcrowding and unsuitable living arrangements, the changes it promised were surely welcomed. As Richard B. Speed has observed, the Anglo-German accords represented a legitimate effort by its signatories to alleviate the suffering of life in captivity. Unfortunately, the agreements failed to realize their potential. Upon the signing of the armistice in November 1918, all existing Anglo-German treaties on prisoners of war became null and void, and the victorious Allies determined that the repatriation of German prisoners was a matter to be addressed at formal peace proceedings.149

Had the British attempted to honor the second Anglo-German agreement in the months following the armistice, it would have been difficult to conform to the document’s provisions. Between its signing on 14 July 1918 and the armistice, British forces captured more than 188,270 prisoners in France, including approximately 4,770 officers. German soldiers and officers made up an overwhelming majority of these numbers, as less than 11,000 Austrians surrendered to the British on the Western Front through more than four years of fighting.150 The BEF assigned most of the Germans captured during this period to labor battalions in France, but officers and severely wounded soldiers traveled to the UK to await repatriation.

The British could not have known that Germany’s collapse would result in a doubling of the prisoner population inside the British camps in France and the UK, and the sudden influx of prisoners must have been overwhelming. The BEF’s success in the months after the second Anglo-German conference required the British to provide the

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throng of officers arriving in the UK with a minimum of 28,620 square meters of additional living space conforming to the standards set out by the agreement. To make matters worse, construction in Britain dropped sharply during the war. By the armistice there was a shortage of more than 60,000 houses, making lodgings of any sort a valuable commodity.\footnote{J.M. Winter, \textit{The Great War and the British People} (London: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 242-43.} The armistice mandated that Germany release all Allied prisoners immediately, and with little fear of reprisals, the War Office had no incentive to continue with improvements to the camp system.

**CONCLUSIONS**

In his comparative study of captivity in the Great War, Richard B. Speed argued that the British camps, along with those of the Americans, came closer to attaining the “prerwar ideal of captivity than did those of any other European belligerent.”\footnote{Speed, \textit{Prisoners, Diplomats, and the Great War}, p. 105. Panikos Panayi has likewise concluded that the German Prisoners in the UK were treated well and managed to live “relatively comfortable” lives there. See Panayi, “Normalität hinter Stacheldraht,” p. 146.} By examining British prisoner treatment both at the front and in the camps of the UK, this chapter has complicated his assessment. German prisoners were sometimes plundered, abused, or even murdered by their British captors. Although these incidents were exceptions to the rule, their occurrence challenges the notion that the Great War was somehow “curiously civilized” while demonstrating how the violent atmosphere of the front could affect the prisoner/captor encounter. As Speed suggests, however, the British managed to look beyond the Anglo-German antagonism and treat their prisoners in the UK with a standard of care that generally exceeded international standards.
American and Swiss representatives filed hundreds, if not thousands, of inspection reports detailing their visits to the camps of the UK. Only rarely did reports indicate serious concerns about the British handling of the men in their custody. Jay Winter has suggested that during the Great War, British national identity was shaped by a belief that ‘Englishness’ and “masculine ‘decency,’ moral rectitude, and martial virtues” were one and the same. Englishness and “Germanness” stood on opposite ends of a cultural spectrum in which German barbarism contrasted with British morality.\(^{153}\) This perception seems to have carried over into the British treatment of German prisoners in the UK. The British believed that German authorities mistreated the British soldiers who fell into their hands, and in response, the War Office provided Germans in its custody with commendable care.

Physically speaking, prisoners in the UK probably maintained a higher standard of living in captivity than many civilians on the German homefront. Prisoners in the UK rarely faced serious threats of starvation or exposure to the elements, if at all. These favorable conditions resulted in a high survival rate for prisoners who lived through their battlefield encounter and entered British captivity. Although available statistics vary, the death rate for German prisoners of the British appears to have been less than four percent. Death rates among German prisoners in France, by contrast, approached six percent, and more than nine percent of the Germans who fell into Russian hands died in captivity. Consequently, a German soldier had a better chance of survival in a British camp than those in the custody of other Entente powers. Somewhat surprisingly, death rates in

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German camps remained below five percent, and among British prisoners the number dropped to three percent.\textsuperscript{154} However, death figures would have surely been higher if not for the food parcels that the Western powers regularly shipped to their prisoners.\textsuperscript{155}

One of the greatest contributing factors to the admirable management of the British camp system was the somewhat small number of prisoners it held.\textsuperscript{156} Even after the BEF captured in excess of 185,000 prisoners in the last months of the war, pushing the number of Germans captured to over 325,000, British prisoner totals paled in comparison to those of other belligerents. At least 2.5 million prisoners passed through the German camp system and more than 2.3 million soldiers spent time in Russian captivity. Even Britain’s closest ally, France, held approximately half a million prisoners. In other words, the small size of the UK’s prisoner population made its administration notably less complicated. The limited number of prisoners in the UK attributed to the War Office’s ability to clothe and feed captives sufficiently, but the size of the prisoner population does not account for the absence of any significant maltreatment by camp personnel. Because it was not uncommon for British soldiers to abuse prisoners on the Western Front, one might have expected that mistreatment likewise occurred in the camps of the UK. Yet there is little evidence to suggest that intentional mistreatment was commonplace.\textsuperscript{157}

If the naval detention barracks temporarily occupied by German submariners and Arthur Grant’s camp at Brocton represented the worst aspects of captivity in the UK, then

\textsuperscript{155} Hinz, \textit{Gefangen im Großen Krieg}, p. 246; Speed, \textit{Prisoners, Diplomats, and the Great War}, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{156} Speed, \textit{Prisoners, Diplomats, and the Great War}, p. 185.
\textsuperscript{157} Panayi, “Normalität hinter Stacheldraht,” p. 146.
British success in the management of German prisoners is undeniable. Away from the violence and nervous tension of the Western Front, the British rarely mistreated the prisoners in their custody. This not only suggests that British prisoner abuse, when it occurred, was largely a battlefield phenomenon, it demonstrates that the British rarely allowed hatred for the enemy to compromise their commitment to the moral rectitude and decency that were essential to the wartime national identity they had constructed for themselves. Still, even in the relative comfort and safety of the UK, prisoners faced a constant struggle for emotional survival. While the British saw to the prisoners’ physical needs, camp authorities could do little to help men cope with the feelings of desertion, failure, and isolation that compounded the sense of emasculation and shame associated with their capture and assaulted their senses on a daily basis.
The moment of capture shook to its core the identity soldiers had constructed as honorable warriors in the service of a higher purpose. As prisoners, they were subject to perception as cowards, deserters, or traitors, the latter two designations making them no better than criminals. Captives lived in a state of emotional and physical limbo that the French historian Annette Becker has described as “neither at the front nor at home, but ‘elsewhere.’”¹ In the camps of the UK, prisoners had ample time to contemplate how their battlefield experience might have ended differently. Fears of abandonment and powerlessness compounded the feelings of shame and detachment associated with surrender, and prisoners fought to come to terms with the emasculating implications of their capture. The exceptional treatment prisoners received in the UK proved incapable of counteracting the sensations of humiliation and isolation that characterized life in captivity. Regardless of the conditions under which prisoners lived, the English Channel separated them from the struggle upon which their identity rested.

Although arrival in the UK virtually guaranteed that a soldier would survive the war, most prisoners could not see beyond the shame of their situation. The following chapter examines the mental struggles of life in the camps of the UK, as well as the prisoners’ efforts to redeem themselves by escaping their captors and returning to the

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¹ Annette Becker, “Art, Material Life and Disaster: Civilian and Military Prisoners of War,” p. 28.
front. The expectation that soldiers die a hero’s death may have been idealistic propaganda, but the sensations of isolation and uselessness experienced by those who failed to live up to those standards were very real.

**AN UNCERTAIN EXISTENCE**

The moment of capture was traumatic, but it was inside the confines of enemy camps that prisoners began to fully comprehend the consequences of their surrender. Although still technically soldiers, their military service at the front had ended, and the barbed wire that once protected them in the trenches separated prisoners from the only two places that mattered in times of war—the front and the homefront. Soldiers are accustomed to strict routines and orders from superior officers, but following orders from the enemy is a different matter. The standing orders codified by the War Office in 1917 required prisoners to obey camp personnel and salute British officers. Without a commandant’s permission, communication between prisoners and anyone employed in a camp was expressly forbidden. Along with more practical restrictions, the British also prohibited prisoners from using derogatory language towards the king or leaders of any Allied nation.² Camp authorities determined when prisoners woke, assembled for roll call, took meals, and turned in for the night.³ The scheduled certainties of these camp routines resembled regimented military life, but it was the uncertainties of the camp existence that weighed most heavily on their minds.

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³ For a typical day’s schedule at the officers’ camp at Dyffryn Aled, see Major E. Landwehr, “Mein Aufenthalt in Dyffryn Aled,” BAMA, MSG, 1/598, p. 35.
One of the hallmarks of manhood was controlling one’s destiny, but prisoners had no way of knowing when their captivity might come to an end. In earlier conflicts, belligerents customarily released prisoners on their word of honor, or parole, not to take up arms again. The practice began to disappear during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, and even though the Hague Convention of 1907 provided for prisoner parole, captives were not obligated to accept the offer. European powers generally frowned on parole because it relieved captors from the responsibility of guarding and providing for their prisoners, rendering parolees militarily useless. As one prewar observer noted, although accepting parole allowed prisoners to return to their families, it also necessitated that they “stay home with women, children, and old men” while their comrades marched against the enemy. In short, accepting release on parole destroyed any remnants of a prisoner’s worth as a soldier. Neutral internment provided an opportunity to escape British captivity, but supply shortages limited slots available in the Netherlands and injured prisoners could not count on being selected by Swiss review boards. With direct exchanges between Germany and Britain reserved for the severely wounded, the length of a prisoner’s time in the UK was directly related to the war’s conclusion, which could come in days, weeks, months, or years.

The unknown length of confinement contributed to a sense of powerlessness and stagnation among prisoners. Following his famous escape from Donington Hall, Gunther Plüschow reported that the mood in the camps of the UK was dismal. Inactivity and a sense of uselessness, he contended, bore down upon men who had ample time to

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4 Overmans, “In der Hand des Feindes,” p. 4.
ruminate over their situation. With no set release date and little control over their surroundings, prisoners found it difficult to define progress in the camp environment. According to one prisoner, camps were “treadmills” where hours, days and weeks bled together and men lost the ability to distinguish one day from the next. The one thing prisoners could count on was that each day in captivity began with “sorrow and worry” and ended in the same fashion.

The endless cycle of sorrow and worry all too often resulted in the onset of “barbed wire disease.” As a Swiss camp inspector, the physician A.L. Vischer toured the camps of the UK and Western Europe speaking with prisoners about their anxieties and discontent. He contended there was no connection between prisoners’ mental state and the treatment they received at the hands of their captors. Thus, barbed wire disease was as likely to affect prisoners in the UK as their counterparts interned under significantly harsher conditions in Russia or Germany. Prisoners afflicted with the condition suffered from a lack of privacy, worried about their prospects for the future, reported being sexually frustrated, and fought the constant urge to rail against the wire that surrounded them.

Barbed wire is intended to draw distinctions between “inside and outside” and maintain separation. In prison camps, wire separated prisoners from the community to which they wanted to belong while simultaneously forcing them into a community of

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10 Razac, Barbed Wire, p. 75.
exiles. In order to mentally escape their surroundings, prisoners sought contact with the world beyond the barbed wire. The stigma of captivity weighed heavily upon prisoners whose confidence and sense of manhood was challenged by their surrender. The idleness and monotony of camp life deepened their feelings of futility, and prisoners were unsure how acquaintances on the homefront would react to the news that they had fallen into enemy hands. Would old friends and comrades understand the nature of modern war, or would they be ashamed that a friend or relative had chosen surrender over Heldentod?

Prisoners feared that their separation from the war and life on the homefront would make it easy for the outside world to forget them. Accordingly, they reached out to friends and relatives in hopes of confirming that they were loved and respected, grasping for evidence that they still had a life outside the confines of their camp. The standard correspondence sheet given to prisoners in the UK contained approximately twenty-three lines.\(^{11}\) Since these cards were the only steady channels of communication with the homefront, many prisoners valued them, and the responses they generated, above all else. Correspondence cards were a lifeline to the time and place where their manhood, honor, and nationalism had been secure, a world where they were sure of themselves. As prisoners in exile, soldiers needed to be convinced that they still had a place in that world. In Lieutenant Iwan Crompton’s published recollections of British captivity, for example, the submariner stressed the importance of contact with the homefront and reminded his postwar readers:

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\(^{11}\) Graham Mark’s recent work on the camps of the UK suggests that this standardized sheet was introduced in 1916. It was glazed in order to prevent prisoners from sending hidden messages to Germany through the use of secret inks. See Graham Mark, *Prisoners of War in British Hands during WWI: A Study of their History, the Camps and their Mails* (Exeter: The Postal History Society Press, 2007), p. 15.
Every reader that has an acquaintance, relative or a friend that must suffer the hardest fortune for a soldier, captivity, I beg you: Show him that you remember him, send him a postcard, a letter or a book, and even if it is only a few lines, only a pamphlet, the prisoner is for everything so grateful! Never have you seen more joyful, or unfortunately often also bitterly disappointed, faces as at ten o’clock in the morning, the hour of the day when the mail is distributed! 

Another captive officer observed that it was easy for prisoners to become jaded and unresponsive to everything around them. But the mail, he wrote, was “the star in our darkness” with the power to resurrect the weariest and most battered prisoner’s mind. 

It would be difficult to underestimate the significance of communication with the outside world. Postal restrictions and the censor’s all seeing eye limited freedom of expression, but letters from captivity remain one of the most poignant records of the prisoners’ struggles with life in the camps—as well as their fears of being abandoned there. The War Office prohibited prisoners from receiving or sending telegrams, but allowed them to write two letters per week and receive unlimited mail and packages. As regulated by the Hague Convention, items addressed to or sent by prisoners carried no postage. Censors examined all correspondence before clearing it for delivery, and the war Office required prisoners to use Latin characters when possible, avoid the use of coded language, and write only on the lines provided.

The Prisoner of War Branch of the Postal Censorship Department returned letters that contained complaints about nutrition or poor treatment to camp commandants, and letters including serious

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complaints were forwarded to higher authorities. Furthermore, commandants were not above revoking correspondence rights as a disciplinary measure.

Nonetheless, British authorities allowed even submariners detained in detention barracks to correspond with the homefront. Several weeks after the March 1915 sinking of the U-8, Lieutenant Commander Alfred S. explained in a letter home that as his boat disappeared into the depths, “All that remained for me was the choice between the eternal captivity of death or captivity through the enemy. I chose, thinking of my men, the latter: a decision that has become very difficult for me.” His reference to death as “eternal captivity” suggests that he did not equate death in the service of the nation as a cathartic release, yet he was clearly troubled by his decision to surrender. He regretted that Germany’s struggle continued without his men, but he took solace in the fact that they “did [their] duty to the end.” Alfred S.’s need for a connection with the homefront is revealed when he assures his family that when “the morning sun briefly casts its rays in my room, then I know that these rays also illuminate all those who think of me and my brave men.” Through his correspondence, he formed a bond with others who shared the sun’s light and linked himself to the world outside his detention cell. By speaking of his crew’s bravery and insisting that they fought to the end, Alfred S. addressed suspicions of cowardice and asserted that he and his men had entered captivity with honor.

Letters like those written by Alfred S. served a vital function, but they were ultimately intended to elicit a response. Whereas correspondence could verify that a prisoner had not been abandoned, unanswered mail caused great distress. Prisoners

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15 Mark, Prisoners of War in British Hands during WWI, pp. 24-5.
rarely concealed their desire that letters be answered in a timely manner. Following his 1917 surrender, Ludwig G. contacted his sister from a hospital in Belmont, Surrey to explain that regulations permitted him to write two letters per week. He assured her that his wounds were healing nicely and informed his sister “It would give me great pleasure if you would also send me a letter or even a package in the near future. It takes 4 to 8 weeks to receive a letter from the homeland, and 10 to 20 days for a package, given that, you can imagine how pleased one is to once again receive mail. Please send current news.” When weeks passed without any response from his family, Ludwig G. grew uneasy. From his new camp at Blandford, he reminded them that he waited “every day with yearning for mail and packages.” He repeated his concerns the following month and explained “now I wait every day with longing for news and packages from you, but unfortunately all my waiting is in vain. It has already been a quarter of a year that I have been in captivity.”

More than five months after his capture, Ludwig G. finally announced “I can joyfully share with you that on the 17th of the month I received your first letter dated 26 November. I thank you in the best sense. It pleased me exquisitely when I once again received news from the dear homeland after such a long time.” Ludwig G.’s early writings from captivity revealed his insecurities and separation anxieties. The tone of his correspondence changed dramatically when he established contact with relatives, as the letters he received proved that they would not turn their back on him as a result of his

17 Ludwig G., Belmont, Surrey, to Faný G., Munich, 22 October 1917, author’s personal collection (hereafter APC).
18 Ludwig G., Blandford, Dorsetshire, to His Family, Rain am Lech, 23 November 1917, APC.
19 Ludwig G., Blandford, Dorsetshire, to His Family, Rain am Lech, 20 December 1917, APC.
20 Ludwig G., Blandford, Dorsetshire, to His Family, Rain am Lech, 18 January 1918, APC.
surrender. Upon receiving a reply from his sister, he exclaimed “You can imagine the joy I had when I received such a joyful message from you after such a long time and such a far distance from you.” Hoping to receive letters more often, he closed by reminding her “you are permitted to write and send to me as much a you want, the more often, the better.”

Unfortunately, letters began to arrive less frequently, and in June 1918 Ludwig G. asked his parents to explain the communication gap. Their response served as a sobering reminder that in spite of his psychological dependence on a connection with the greater entity he had once fought for, life in Germany moved on without him. During the break in correspondence with his sister, she was married and expected the birth of her first child. While he languished in captivity, Ludwig G.’s acquaintances continued to attend weddings, build relationships, and carry on with their lives. They were the focal point of his world, but as a prisoner abroad, he inhabited the outer edge of theirs.

It was difficult to come to terms with this realization, and prisoners grew angry with relatives and friends who had seemingly forsaken them in their time of need. A 1918 letter from an officer in the UK expressed disappointment with Germany’s apparent negligence towards its enlisted prisoners abroad:

The State of things in a camp for enlisted men is sad enough. And that a man must also feel that the German homeland, on which he hangs with every fiber, does nothing, absolutely nothing, that is unjustifiable. Especially since these should be the people to assist in repairing and relieving the losses of the war. How can they do that when now they hear nothing more from their homeland? I have thoroughly considered whether I should write this, but after I heard the same from many gentlemen in other camps, I now hold it to be my duty to share this with you so that you can at least do something to remedy these grievances. I call on the

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21 Ludwig G., Blandford, Dorsetshire, to Faný G., Munich, 29 January 1918, APC.
22 Ludwig G., Working Camp at Chiseldon, to his Family, Rain am Lech, 25 June 1918, APC.
23 Ludwig G., Working Camp at Chiseldon, to Faný K., Munich, 3 September 1918, APC; Ludwig G., Working Camp at Chiseldon, to Faný K., Rain am Lech, 31 October 1918, APC.
homeland: Do something—do as much as you can for your imprisoned soldiers who have to suffer severely, but who must also despair when they are neglected!\textsuperscript{24}

The officer’s call to action illustrates the correlation between prisoner well being and interaction with the homefront, yet the officer’s accusations contradict the true nature of German prisoner relief. Despite the sense of isolation and detachment from the higher ideal that most prisoners wrestled with, individuals and homefront organizations reached out to their exiled warriors soon after the first battles of the Great War. The Mecklenburgischer Hilfsverein für deutsche Kriegsgefangene und Vermisste, a prisoner relief association in the province of Mecklenburg, noted in its annual report of 1917 that prisoners suffered more as a result of irregular contact with their homeland than physical hardships or poor treatment by the enemy.\textsuperscript{25} Organizations like the Hilfsverein understood that the prisoners’ sufferings were not exclusively physical. For that reason, aid associations worked diligently to facilitate contact with the homefront and reassure prisoners that the homefront remembered them.

Beginning in 1914, Germany’s regional Red Cross associations began to coordinate plans for prisoner relief. In January 1915 the Prussian Kriegsministerium approved the establishment of the Zentralkomitee der Deutschen Vereine vom Roten Kreuz (Central Committee of the German Associations of the Red Cross). Although regional Red Cross agencies maintained their independence, the wartime organizational scheme allowed volunteers to coordinate relief projects geographically. The Hamburg Red Cross’s Committee for German Prisoners of War (Ausschüß für deutsche

\textsuperscript{24} “Aussage aus den Briefen eines in England Gefangenen Offiziers,” in Dr. A.W. S. to the Auswärtiges Amt, Berlin, 9 August 1918, BABL, R 901/84680, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{25} Mecklenburgischer Hilfsverein für deutsche Kriegsgefangene und Vermisste, Arbeits-Bericht 1917 (Rostock: Carl Boldt’schen Hof-Buchdruckerei, 1918), p. 7.
Kriegsgefangene des Hamburgischen Landesverein vom Roten Kreuz) oversaw relief efforts in Northern Germany; the Frankfurt Red Cross’s Committee for German Prisoners of War (Verein vom Roten Kreuz in Frankfurt a. M., Ausschuß für deutsche Kriegsgefangene) supervised regional associations in the south.\textsuperscript{26}

The Red Cross inquired into the fates of men listed as prisoners or missing, collected the addresses of soldiers in captivity, and prepared care packages for prisoners abroad. Early assistance from influential figures like Prince Max von Baden, who lent his services to the Red Cross after illness forced him from his post with the XIV Army Corps, was essential to the success of relief proposals. Welfare agreements with enemy powers depended upon reciprocity, and Prince Max provided an invaluable link with Kriegsministerium officials whose authorization made relief work for Allied prisoners in Germany possible.\textsuperscript{27} Additionally, the support of a well-known and respected figure like Prince Max lent relief efforts some legitimacy with the public and validated the experiences of the prisoners held abroad.

Initially, the Hamburg Red Cross worked primarily with prisoners in Russia and the Frankfurt committee administered relief in Western Europe. As the number of Germans in enemy hands increased, volunteers in Stuttgart processed parcels headed for


France and the Cologne Red Cross assumed responsibility for prisoners of the British.\textsuperscript{28} Local agencies continued to support their prisoners in the UK, but as of December 1916, Cologne handled all monetary donations for prisoners held by the British. In that capacity, the Cologne office provided instructions for ensuring that letters and packets bound for the UK and British colonies reached their destinations.\textsuperscript{29} Based in London, Dr. K.E. Markel’s Prisoner of War Relief Agency handled the transfer of funds from the German Red Cross and distributed clothing, musical instruments, and gift parcels \textit{(Liebesgaben)} after the items arrived in the UK via the Netherlands.\textsuperscript{30} Typical parcels included sausage, toothpaste, soap, coffee, underwear, and tobacco and generally cost relief agencies between 4.50 and 12.50 German Marks to assemble, depending on the contents.\textsuperscript{31}

The Red Cross also cooperated with \textit{Vaterländische Frauenvereine}, patriotic women’s associations, to organize national fund drives. The most notable effort, the \textit{Volksspende für die deutschen Kriegs-und-Zivil Gefangenen} of 1916, raised prisoner awareness by distributing approximately 370,000 posters designed by graphic artist Ludwig Hohlwein and an additional ten million postcards. The project resulted in the collection of approximately twelve million Marks. From the funds donated to the \textit{Volksspende}, the Cologne Red Cross prepared more than 40,000 holiday care packages

\textsuperscript{29} Cölner Rundschreiben Nr. 1 (Copy), BAK, R 67/1265; “Bestimmungen über den Verkehr mit den in England und den englischen Kolonien befindlichen Zivil-und Kriegsgefangenen,” BAK, R 67/299.
\textsuperscript{31} Mecklenburgischer Hilfsverein, \textit{Arbeits-Bericht 1917}, p. 10.
for prisoners in the UK that contained fir tree branches that could be combined to construct improvised Christmas trees.  

Relief organizations served as one of the prisoners’ most important contacts on the homefront, but for men already battling the stigma of surrender, accepting charity threatened to strengthen the interpretation of prisoners as helpless and weak. Whereas military authorities often wrote prisoners off as deserters or cowards, civilian relief agencies commemorated prisoners’ sufferings. They did so, however, in a manner that drew attention to the prisoners’ vulnerabilities. Both during and after the war, relief workers sometimes referred to prisoners in less than flattering terms. A representative of the American Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), one of the first organizations to provide aid to Germans in the UK, painted a picture of prisoners as the walking dead:

32 “Bericht über das Ergebnis der Volkspende für die deutsche Kriegs- und Zivil-Gefangenen,” BABL, R 901/83845; Vereinigte Vereine vom Roten Kreuz Köln, “Rundschrifen Nr. 12”, 24 November 1916, BAK, R 67/1265; Kriegsministerium, Berlin to sämtliche stellvertretenden Generalkommandos, 22 June 1916, Kriegsministerium No. 16279/16 U5/4, BHSTA/IV, MKr 13761. Ludwig Hohlwein was perhaps the most successful German graphic designer of the twentieth century.
The prisoner of war is a strangely pathetic figure—a youth, conscious of no crime, yet deprived, in the full vigor of his manhood, of nearly all the ordinary outlets of human activity; a soldier, without the stimulus of active service or the sustaining consciousness of achievement; an exile, living in an atmosphere of constant hostility, owing his very life to the sufferance of his captors; a man without rights. Since he is no longer an effective unit in the business of war, his own military organization counts him as non-existent. Though living, he is dead, and dead with little glory. To his captors he is simply an additional embarrassment, another mouth to be fed, another body to be clothed. To his guards, he is the cause of the most monotonous and hated of all duties; and to the civilian population, he is the enemy in their power and without means of retaliation.33

Few prisoners appreciated being described as militarily useless or dead with little glory, particularly when their masculine identity had been based in large part upon their military effectiveness. Still, even if charitable donations further emasculated recipients by bolstering the notion that prisoners were incapable of caring for themselves, relief associations served as an indispensable link with the outside world. The desire to feel appreciated superseded the shame of accepting charity, and recipients had only kind words for the organizations that supported them.

One such local organization was the Liebesgaben-Ausschuss of the East Prussian city of Rastenburg. As a garrison town, Rastenburg served as a second home to numerous soldiers whose battle experience ended in British captivity. The letters of appreciation from those who benefited from the town’s charity reveal that prisoners did not expect the same generosity offered to active soldiers in the field. When Willi S. received a care package at Stobs in Scotland, he thanked the Liebesgaben-Ausschuss for its kindness and wrote “it greatly pleased us all, who have had the misfortune to enter

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captivity, that you also graciously thought of us at this time.” Alfred M., a prisoner at the Larkhill working camp, claimed that he would “never forget what the good city of Rastenburg did for [him] and his comrades from the regiment,” and he was gracious that it had also thought of soldiers in captivity. At Handforth near Manchester, Sergeant Kurt Emil H. considered it “a joyful surprise that the L.A. also commemorated the infantrymen who had the misfortune to fall into captivity.” One of his fellow prisoners at Handforth, Max H., informed the Ausschuss that upon picking up his parcel he “rejoiced that you have also not forgotten me here in captivity.” Sergeant Paul P. responded to the arrival of his care package at Pattishall in Northampton with similar sentiments, exclaiming “It especially pleased me that you, the citizens of my beloved garrison town, have also adopted and so generously commemorate the Germans who have entered war captivity through no fault of their own (unverschuldet).”

Paul P. made a point of clarifying that he was no deserter, but like his fellow prisoners, his use of the term also demonstrates that he had internalized the stigma of surrender. The Liebesgaben-Ausschuss received hundreds of letters from prisoners in the UK, and they regularly thanked the organization for also remembering them. Prisoners realized that their surrender had jeopardized their identities as men and warriors by separating them from the action of the front lines. While they assumed that the homefront would honor frontline soldiers with gifts of appreciation, prisoners were

34 Willi S., Stobs, Scotland, to the Liebesgaben-Ausschuss der Stadt Rastenburg, 28 January 1918, BAMA, MSg 201/72.
35 Alfred M., Larkhill, to Pastor Buscholz, Rastenburg, 19 August 1918, BAMA, MSg 201/72.
36 Kurt Emil H., Handforth near Manchester, to the Liebesgaben-Ausschuss des Gren. Regt. 4, Rastenburg, undated, BAMA MSg 201/72.
37 M. Hoffmann, Handforth near Manchester, to the Liebesgaben-Ausschuss des Gren. Regts. No. 4, Rastenburg, 26 January 1918, BAMA, MSg 201/72.
38 Paul P., Pattishall in Northamptonshire to E. Alsl, Rastenburg, 18 January 1918, BAMA, MSg 201/72.
genuinely surprised that Germans were still concerned with the welfare of those in enemy hands. Prisoner relief organizations verified that someone in Germany considered prisoners valuable members of society and provided hope that the shame of surrender would not define former prisoners in the postwar era.

When relief agencies failed to meet captives’ needs, prisoners occasionally petitioned higher authorities for assistance. The prisoner Adolf F. participated in the German march through northern France before being wounded and captured by the BEF near the Marne in September 1914. After recovering, he spent time on several prisoner of war vessels before transferring to Dorchester.39 Since the British did not utilize prisoner labor until spring 1916, Adolf F. and his fellow enlisted prisoners had no opportunity to earn extra income and depended upon their captors for sustenance. Apparently dissatisfied with the supplies allotted to him, in January 1916 Adolf F. sent an original poem to Wilhelm II in celebration of the Kaiser’s birthday. Along with the poem, Adolf F. included a request for a donation of 200 Marks to benefit the prisoners in his camp.

The British transferred Adolf F. to Rouen, France in 1916, and as months passed he likely gave up hope of receiving a reply from the Kaiser. Then, in June 1916 the American Embassy in Berlin notified the prisoner that the German Foreign Office had transferred 210 Francs, the equivalent of 200 Marks, into his name. When he asked where the funds had come from, embassy officials informed him that the money was a donation from His Majesty the Emperor Wilhelm II. Adolf F. asked American officials

to deliver a letter of thanks to the Kaiser in which he assured the emperor that he was “deeply moved” by the donation and accepted it with his warmest gratitude. Adolf F.’s appeal to the Kaiser was a long shot, but Wilhelm II’s gift confirmed that Adolf F. was worthy of assistance from the highest levels of German society and validated his sacrifices in captivity. The Kaiser was not only the German Emperor; he was also Adolf F.’s supreme military commander. Although it was important for prisoners to establish contact with relatives and relief organizations, it was this sort of recognition from the military establishment to which prisoners attached the most importance.

RECONNECTING WITH THE FRONT

In captivity, prisoners made the transition from frontline warriors to spectators with an obstructed view, all while realizing that the war continued without them across the English Channel. Their manhood had been closely linked to participation in the war, and as prisoners they longed for contact with figures from their lives as combatants. Soldiers form tight bonds with their units during training and depend on one another for survival at the front. Although combat participation in the war zone ended when prisoners entered captivity, their units remained in the trenches or at sea. Separation from one’s comrades was distressing. Prisoners feared that just as the YMCA’s representative suggested, their comrades might consider them ineffective and therefore non-existent. Camaraderie among fighting men is a decisive factor in combat motivation, and prisoners often carried a sense of guilt over their surrender, feeling as if they had betrayed the

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41 Taft, Service with Fighting Men, p. 217.
group’s esprit de corps and let down the men with whom they shared a sense of mutual reliance.\textsuperscript{42} These were, after all, the men they had celebrated, bled, and mourned with, the comrades who had seen them at their strongest and most vulnerable moments. Correspondence with the homefront played a critical role in rebuilding a prisoner’s confidence, but it was affirmation from fellow soldiers that prisoners coveted.

While British regulations make no mention of communication between prisoners and frontline units, authorities surely restricted this sort of contact as a security measure. Within the German Army, direct correspondence between prisoners and soldiers in the field seems to have been forbidden, so prisoners could only ask relatives and friends to share kind words with their former units.\textsuperscript{43} In February 1918, Friedrich L., for example, asked the Rastenburg Liebesgaben-Ausschuss to pass on a greeting to his lieutenant at the front and lamented “I cannot personally write to him.”\textsuperscript{44} German officials realized that materials sent to the UK passed though the hands of British censors. It is unlikely that they would have would have risked inadvertently providing the enemy with information on impending offensives or morale. Correspondence guidelines advised German civilians not to discuss information of a military, political, or economic nature and specifically warned against mentioning war conditions or inflation on the homefront.\textsuperscript{45}

German authorities were wise to suspect that British censors gave correspondence


\textsuperscript{43} See Württemberg Regiment Nr. 126 to Der General-Adjutant der Kgl. Hoheit des Großherzogs von Baden, Karlsruhe, 11 November 1917, Generallandesarchiv Karlsruhe (hereafter GLA) 59/1199, in which a major from the regiment states that correspondence between units in the field and prisoners of war is not allowed.

\textsuperscript{44} Friedrich L., Towcester, to the Liebesgaben-Ausschuss der Stadt Rastenburg, 25 February 1918, BAMA, MSg 201/72.

entering and leaving the UK more than a passing glance. The War Office routinely
photographed letters of interest and compiled intelligence reports based on information
gleaned from the contents. 46

Regulations prohibiting contact between troops and prisoners, although a
necessary precaution, intensified the prisoners’ sense of separation from the war.
Surrender not only physically removed prisoners from the front and the identity they
developed there; it denied them the privilege of receiving information related to the cause
for which they had sacrificed their freedom. Correspondence restrictions produced
separation anxiety among prisoners who wondered if their comrades had survived and, if
so, how they might have interpreted their decision to surrender. In spite of the obvious
threats posed by interaction between captives and the front, many prisoners cited the
absence of an effective means of corresponding with former units as one of the most
distressing problems facing prisoners in the UK.

A February 1918 report on former prisoners of the British interned in the
Netherlands asserted that those taken in the early years of the war were depressed as a
result of their belief that the homeland looked down upon and had “abandoned and
forgotten” them in captivity. The report called special attention to the significance of
prisoner contact with military acquaintances and offered suggestions for alleviating the
prisoners’ sense of detachment and failure:

Gift parcels from the Red Cross and donations from the homeland do not
help against this. The men yearn to hear something from their units.
Letters from regiments or companies with a few friendly words and

46 Major Ducrot’s Weekly Report for the Week Ending the 5th of June, 1915, TNA, FO 383/65. For photos
of German correspondence, see TNA, ADM 137/3855.
greetings, for example, “to the brave fighters of the Marne,” to the “heroes from the battles of fall 1914,” to the “courageous fighters of Loos 1915,” to the “brave defenders from the struggles at the Somme,” are necessary to refresh the courage to face life and confidence of these seriously suffering people.47

The report’s recommended use of the adjectives “brave” and “courageous” was not accidental. Prisoners needed to hear these words in order to convince themselves that soldiers at the front did not equate their surrender with desertion or cowardice.

In the months following his transfer to the Netherlands, Lieutenant-Captain Alfred S. of the submarine U-8 likewise underscored the value of communication with the front. While discussing British efforts to offer special status to prisoners of Danish and Polish descent, as well as those from Alsace and Lorraine, he warned that in order to prevent prisoners in England from losing their enthusiasm for the war:

…as much as possible must be done to improve their contact with the homeland. Everyone knows that not much can be done. But they also know whether they have been altogether forgotten or not. A German prisoner who once received a card from his company leader with entirely general comments often carried it with him through the entire time of his ordeal. Loyal German non-commissioned officers and troops who are already recognized at the front as hard fellows must remain in contact with their units or higher authorities.48

It was apparently possible for soldiers at the front to send greetings to prisoners in captivity, perhaps via a third party, and Alfred S. and his fellow prisoners in the Netherlands believed that correspondence with military figures was essential to preserving a prisoner’s dignity and helping to sustain a positive attitude toward the war.

To circumvent limited contact opportunities with active soldiers, prisoners took advantage of transfers to Switzerland and the Netherlands to smuggle uncensored letters to the front. Uncensored communications allowed prisoners to express themselves freely and explain the events that led to their capture. In these candid letters, prisoners sought to demonstrate their continued identification with their former units, simultaneously revealing their need to be acknowledged by their comrades. In what appears to be a smuggled letter from 1917, Lieutenant Hermann B., a North Sea Pilot, articulated his longing to once again serve with his flight unit. He informed his commanding officer “I would be indebted to the Captain if I could later come again to the II.S.F.A [II Seefliegerabteilung] and be able to stay there. I am in every respect capable of flight duty.” Of course, what Lieutenant B. sought in response was an acknowledgement that he was not a deserter and would always have a place with the II.S.F.A.

In another letter smuggled to the front from Donington Hall, Hans K. stressed the difficulties of being separated from his men with little knowledge of the war’s progress. He thanked a fellow officer for an earlier greeting and confessed, “it did me some good (ordentlich gut) that one has not yet forgotten me entirely.” Hans K. recounted his capture and gave a detailed description of his injuries, and like many other prisoners, claimed to have been captured while unconscious. Eager to be of military use, he informed his comrade of ammunition depots and supplies he had spotted in Le Havre prior to his departure for the UK. Hans K. regretted that British newspapers, whose war news he considered unreliable, were his only source of information. Expecting victory,

49 Hermann B., Holyport near Maidenhead, to Captain B., Wilhelmshaven, undated, in Der Chef des Admiralstabs der Marine to the Staatssekretär des Auswärtigen Amtes, Berlin, 7 November 1917, BABL, R 901/84690.
he commented that it “would be a shame if our troops suddenly stood in Calais and we knew nothing about it.”\textsuperscript{51} In case he had not sufficiently expressed his solidarity with the frontline troops, Hans K. closed his letter with the assurance that “Even long, hard captivity cannot shake our faith in Hindenburg and Ludendorff. You could hardly imagine how greatly we yearn for the front and our beloved comrades, and already gentlemen, among them myself, have attempted to escape this country.”\textsuperscript{52} Although his attempt to physically escape failed, his words indicated that he preferred the perils of life in active service to the safety of Donington Hall.

Other prisoners attempted to associate themselves with the front with material symbols of military achievement. Sergeant Schindler L. of the 126\textsuperscript{th} Infantry Regiment mobilized in August 1914 and fell into British hands approximately one year later. Before his capture, Sergeant L.’s superiors nominated him for a Silver Merit Medal of Baden, but his award failed to arrive before his surrender and transfer to the prisoner of war camp at Pattishall. In September 1917, he wrote military authorities in Karlsruhe and explained that he would be grateful to receive his award. He strengthened his request by mentioning that he had been wounded in battle and was a recipient of the Iron Cross, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Class, which suggested that he was indeed worthy of the commendation he sought.\textsuperscript{53} Schindler L. recognized that his courageousness was open to debate, and his attempt to secure a military decoration was likely a coping mechanism to convince himself that his service record was respectful.

\textsuperscript{52} Hans K., Donington Hall, to H. Mathis, Regt. 29, 6. Battr., 9 May 1918, HStAS, M 1/3, Bü 527, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{53} Schindler L., Pattishall, to the Großherzoglische badische Ordenskanzlei, Karlsruhe, 4 September 1917, GLA, 59/1199.
Schindler L. was not the only prisoner to appeal to higher authorities for commendations earned prior to capture. In fact, requests that medals be awarded in captivity were so numerous that the Kaiser addressed the issue as early as 1915. Military authorities initially declared that prisoners would not be eligible to receive awards until after their release.\textsuperscript{54} Officials later modified this policy to enable the awarding of Iron Crosses for service prior to capture if prisoners were interned by neutral powers. At the same time, the Germans instituted a plan for documenting the battlefield performance of prisoners whose pre-surrender accomplishments merited recognition. Owing to the war’s exceptional length and high turnover rates among officers at the front, officials feared that worthy soldiers might be overlooked and never receive their decorations. Under the new documentation system, distinguished prisoners would be able to claim awards without delay following repatriation or transfer, provided that the conditions of their capture did not make them undeserving of such recognition.\textsuperscript{55}

Prisoner advocates applauded these measures as an effective means of ensuring prisoners that the homeland had not forgotten them, or their battlefield achievements.\textsuperscript{56} Even though the Kaiser’s representatives recognized the sacrifices of soldiers in enemy hands, German authorities insisted that prisoners receive commendations only after their internment by a neutral power or repatriation. It was as if the awarding of an Iron Cross

\textsuperscript{54} Moritz von Lyncker, Der Chef des Militärkabinett, Großes Hauptquartier, to sämtl. mobile und immobile Immediatstellen der Armee, 4 September 1915, Kr. II 548/8.15., GLA 59/1199.
\textsuperscript{55} Der Chef des Militärkabinetts, Gr. Hauptquartier, 8 February 1917, to sämtliche mobile Immediatstellen der Armee einsch. selbständig Divisionen, Kr. II 50/2.17., GLA 59/1199.
\textsuperscript{56} See Großherzogliches Badisches Ministerium des Innern to the Generaladjutanter Seiner Königlichen Hoheit des Großherzogs, Karlsruhe, 25 October 1918, No. 63093, GLA 59/1199.
in captivity might somehow tarnish one of Germany’s highest military honors. The willingness to acknowledge a prisoner’s past accomplishments implied that it was possible for brave men to fall into enemy hands, but lingering concerns with the circumstances of capture suggested that surrender could negate earlier heroism. In the end, Schindler L. and the other prisoners who petitioned for commendations achieved their aim. Although prisoners would not receive their awards on enemy soil, their correspondence made it impossible for officials to forget the nation’s captive soldiers.

Letters to prisoners in the UK are exceedingly rare, so it is difficult to discern how family members in Germany or soldiers at the front responded to the prisoners’ cries for acknowledgement. Prisoners’ letters reveal that the knowledge that they would likely survive the war provided little relief from the shame and guilt that burdened men who would have rather faced the horrors of the Western Front than confront the sense of dislocation that accompanied removal from it. Surrender brought a soldier’s loyalty and manhood into question, but there was a way to escape the obscurity of the prisoner of war camp and redeem oneself in the eyes of the military establishment. The surest path to redemption led through, over, or under the barbed wire, and back to active service.

PHYSICAL RECONNECTION—ESCAPE

The Great War’s participants widely accepted that prisoners were honor bound to attempt escape and reconnect with their units if at all possible. As one group of

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57 Ironically, the German Supreme Military Command (OHL) did much to diminish the status of the Iron Cross by handing out 5.2 million awards, I & II Class, during the war. As Holger Herwig has pointed out, staff officers often joked that soldiers could only avoid being awarded the distinction by committing suicide. See Herwig, The First World War, p. 192.

German prisoners explained to their British commandant upon the discovery of an escape tunnel, “Every prisoner of war has the duty to attempt escape from captivity, with us the same as with you.” The Hague Convention granted the right to punish escape attempts. Yet neither disciplinary action nor the Red Cross’ suggestion that prisoners accept their fate so that guards might treat them as non-belligerents deterred prisoners who equated escape with the renewal of one’s honor. Escape from the UK was extremely rare, but prisoners continued to attempt the feat even after they realized that their efforts would almost certainly end with punishment. The success or failure of a bid for escape was of little consequence. A prisoner’s desire to flee the relative safety of captivity for the dangers of the front signaled that his spirit remained unbroken and his willingness to serve resolute.

Escape was, quite simply, the manly thing to do for prisoners in enemy captivity. Flight represented a refusal to allow captors to dictate the terms of the prisoner/captor relationship. Additionally, it demonstrated the prisoners’ desire to reclaim their soldierly virtues. Escapers prepared for the journey beyond the barbed wire in secret, often sharing their plans with only their most trusted fellow prisoners. When the escape took place, however, it became a public spectacle that required prisoners to assemble for roll call, guards to scour the area surrounding the camp, and camp officials to notify authorities and press agencies of the breach in the camp’s security. The message escapers hoped to convey was that although surrender had removed them from the front, they sought to rejoin the fight taking place across the channel. Furthermore, escapers were attempting

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59 Crompton, Englands Verbrechen an U41, p. 178.
60 Scott, The Hague Conventions and Declarations of 1899 and 1907, p. 110; Becker and Audoin-Rouzeau, 14-18, p. 141.
to prove something to themselves. Corralled within barbed wire enclosures, prisoners often felt less than human, like animals. Flight offered prisoners the opportunity to escape their cages and reclaim not only their humanity, but also their manhood.

Although military authorities might have considered captives functionally non-existent, prisoners maintained a degree of usefulness in captivity. By constantly working to escape, prisoners forced captors to employ guard staffs capable of keeping them within the barbed wire and away from civilians. The War Office left the formation of guard staffs up to local military authorities. Members of the National Reserve, who were usually too old for service in the trenches but capable of sentry duties, often made up the early guard. Financial considerations required most camps to rely on a light guard detail. The Jersey camp in the Channel Islands, for instance, held 1,500 enlisted prisoners in July 1915, but the strength of the guard stood at 130, a ratio that made each sentry responsible for 11.5 prisoners. Camp Brocton, a substantially larger facility, was capable of holding approximately 6,800 prisoners. The camp relied upon only two companies of guardsmen from the Royal Defence Corps (RDC) totaling 834 men, 200 of whom served as escorts for migratory labor gangs.

The RDC, which assumed guard duties in many UK camps after its April 1916 establishment, was an outgrowth of the National Reserve and trained soldiers for a

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variety of homeland duties.\textsuperscript{64} There was no age limit for enlistment in the RDC, and the corps, including Protection Companies that guarded “vulnerable points” and prisoner of war camps, consisted entirely of men too old for military service or younger men of “low medical category.”\textsuperscript{65} Aside from relying on soldiers unfit for frontline service, the British guarded prisoners “very lightly, if at all” while the men labored outside the camp.\textsuperscript{66} Nonetheless, every man employed as a sentry was prevented from working at another war-related task, and provisions to prevent escapes kept scarce materials such as barbed wire, concrete, lighting equipment, and timber away from the front.

The War Office understood the prisoners’ motivations to escape and endeavored to install formidable barriers to their success. Camp officials frequently examined barbed wire enclosures and kept prisoners on their toes with surprise roll calls and night inspections. Tunneling was a preferred method of escape, and commandants regularly checked camp yards for digs in progress. Proportionately speaking, German officers in the UK attempted escape more frequently than men of other ranks.\textsuperscript{67} To counteract the officers’ proclivity for escape, staff members at officers’ camps remained on high alert and employed additional measures to prevent breakouts. Each camp replaced coins with distinctive metal tokens that were easily identifiable and useless outside the camp. All German officers wore proper uniforms and dressed in other clothing only when participating in sporting events. Finally, camp personnel stored knap sacks and other

\textsuperscript{64} Jackson, \textit{The Prisoners}, p. 147.
bags in a secure location and only allowed officers to use large trunks that were too cumbersome to transport easily.⁶⁸

In spite of these preventive measures, prisoners had little trouble securing civilian clothing and British currency, outmaneuvering guards, and making their way into the countryside. Guard duty was a tedious and monotonous task, and many sentries failed to approach their jobs with the enthusiasm their superiors expected. In a postwar evaluation of Brocton, the camp’s commandant commented that “in general the guard troops have needed and [sic] good deal of supervision, being too leniently inclined towards the P/W.”⁶⁹ Following an escape from the officers’ camp at Sutton Bonington in Nottingham, the chief constable reached a similar conclusion: “English officers make very bad gaolers. It is not their work and their previous training is all against it.”⁷⁰

Fortunately for the British, nature provided an additional deterrent to flight that only the most ingenious prisoners proved capable of overcoming—the English Channel.

Hundreds of military prisoners escaped their camps’ enclosures, but only two officers and four men of other ranks managed to evade recapture.⁷¹ Even after it became clear that escaping the UK was all but impossible, prisoners diligently worked to defy the boundaries set by their captors. Perhaps prisoners continued to attempt an improbable return to Germany because the benefits of escaping far outweighed the risks. Prisoners faced disciplinary confinement if caught in the act of escape, and while it rarely occurred,

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⁶⁹ History of the Prisoner of War Camp at Brocton labeled “Prisoners of War Camp. Brocton. Staffs,” 10 January 1919, IWM, 78/31/1, p. 3.
regulations authorized sentries to shoot escapees after firing a warning shot. But if escapees successfully reached Germany, the military and homefront alike greeted them as heroes who had defied the odds to rejoin the nation’s struggle, whether a successful escape meant a return to the trenches or duty at sea.

No one epitomized the romanticism that surrounded escapees better than Gunther Plüschow, unquestionably the most famous German to flee the UK. A naval pilot, Plüschow was stationed at the German colonial base in Tsingtau, China in August 1914. When Japanese forces besieged the base months later, he narrowly escaped with a collection of confidential papers before landing in a Chinese rice field and destroying his plane.\(^{72}\) Plüschow then purchased a ticket aboard a passenger ship bound for San Francisco. On board, he met an American who encouraged him to remain in the United States, which was still neutral, rather than returning to Germany. Plüschow idealistically proclaimed that he was a German officer and wanted to fight for his fatherland. He could not have possibly imagined how difficult that would be.\(^{73}\)

Plüschow’s quest to reach the front literally took him around the world. He left San Francisco shortly after his arrival in the United States and reached New York via train several days later. In New York, Plüschow had his passport altered and boarded an Italian steamer as Ernst Suse of Switzerland. He succeeded in crossing the Atlantic, but in Gibraltar, Plüschow’s luck ran out. British soldiers questioned the aviator’s identity during a ship inspection and sent him to the UK with several other suspicious passengers. Upon his arrival in Plymouth, the British imprisoned Plüschow and then transferred him


to the prisoner of war camp at Dorchester. As a German officer, he was entitled to be held with other men of rank, and following a brief stay at the officers’ camp at Holyport, he transferred to Donington Hall. Like many other prisoners, Plüschow found it difficult to live without any sense of how Germany was faring at the front and began to suffer from barbed wire disease. Along with another officer fluent in English and familiar with the UK, he quickly made preparations to flee Donington Hall and end his misery.  

Escaping Donington Hall proved to be simple enough. The officers feigned illness in order to explain their absence from roll call and arranged for two fellow officers to slip into their beds before camp personnel came to confirm their sickness. With camp officials none the wiser, Plüschow and his accomplice cleared the fence surrounding the estate and headed into the town of Derby. From Derby, the officers took separate trains to London, where they were to reunite on the steps of St. Paul’s Cathedral. Plüschow’s companion never made it to St. Paul’s, and although he would be more difficult to track down in London, Plüschow was a wanted man. Owing to Plüschow’s distinctive dragon tattoo, the British felt confident he would be easy to identify. He realized that time was of the essence and worked out a plan for stowing away aboard a steamer destined for the Netherlands. Equipped with a sailor’s sweater given to him by a servant at Donington Hall, he dirtied himself with a mixture of coal dust and petroleum jelly and posed as a dockworker. While waiting for an opportunity to board a ship, Plüschow joined a socialist dockworker’s union and was recruited for Kitchener’s Army. After several

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74 Plüschow, Die Abenteuer des Fliegers von Tsingtau, pp. 103-143.
tense days on the docks, he climbed aboard a vessel and succeeded in reaching the port of Vlissingen in the Netherlands before crossing the border into Germany.\footnote{Plüschow, \textit{Die Abenteuer des Fliegers von Tsingtau}, pp. 139-189.}

Once Plüschow convinced officials that he was an officer of the German Navy rather than a British spy, the Kaiser awarded him the Iron Cross, first class, for his exploits. Plüschow appreciated the recognition he received for his efforts, but as far as he was concerned, the real reward was the privilege of resuming active duty: "I became a flyer again, was permitted to go to the front to my fighting comrades, was allowed to be of assistance, to fight for the fatherland, and become the commander of a large marine flight base on the Eastern Front!"\footnote{Plüschow, \textit{Die Abenteuer des Fliegers von Tsingtau}, p. 189.} In 1915 Plüschow assumed control of a flight station in Libau. While there, he traveled to Kovno to share his story with Generals von Hindenburg and Ludendorff at a dinner held in the escaper’s honor. As two generals engaged in a war of attrition, Hindenburg and Ludendorff probably saw in Plüschow a characteristic worthy of acknowledgement—an unwillingness to accept defeat.

From Libau, Plüschow wrote his memoirs, \textit{Die Abenteuer des Fliegers von Tsingtau: Meine Erlebnisse in drei Erdteilen} (\textit{The Adventures of the Flyer of Tsingtau: My Experiences on Three Continents}).\footnote{Isot Plüschow, \textit{Gunther Plüschow, deutscher Seemann und Flieger: Das Bild seines Lebens} (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag, 1933), pp. 195-96.} His exploits made him a household name in wartime Germany. He published the first edition of his memoir in 1916, and its original printing sold 600,000 copies before war’s end. Subsequent editions in 1927 and 1933 pushed sales to 643,000, distinguishing Plüschow’s as one of the most successful
German-language accounts of the Great War. After the memoir’s completion, Plüschow could not help taunting his former captors. He sent a complimentary copy to H.E. Belfield, the director of the DPW.

The homefront’s reception of Plüschow illustrated the redemptive nature of a successful escape. Since he returned to Germany before the British held large numbers of prisoners, most of the men who eventually filled the UK’s camps knew the details of his adventure and could hold out hope that although escaping England was nearly impossible, it could be done. Writing several years after Plüschow’s death, his wife suggested that for troops in the front lines, her husband’s story provided an inspirational model for manliness (Mannestum) and glory. One thing was for certain; for prisoners who worried that they might be forgotten, Plüschow’s ordeal proved that escape offered recognition and acclaim as a hero.

ESCAPE: DUTY OR CRIME?

Around the time that Germany was hailing Plüschow as a hero, the coordinated escape attempt of three other German officers prompted quite a different response in the UK. In August 1915, German naval officers von Helldorf, von Henning, and Tholens escaped from Dyffryn Aled in Wales by filing an iron bar from the window of their room.

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80 Isot Plüschow, Gunther Plüschow, deutscher Seemann und Flieger, p. 195.
while another prisoner held the sentry’s attention. Once outside the camp, the three officers headed for the coast. Prior to their departure, Tholens succeeded in sending a message to the commander-in-chief of the German submarine forces through an exchanged prisoner.\footnote{Hermann Tholens, “Rendezvous with a Submarine,” in J.R. Ackerly, ed. Escapers All: Being the Personal Narratives of Fifteen Escapers from War-Time Prison Camps 1914-1918 (London: John Lane at The Bodley Head, 1932) pp. 281-82.} Von Henning likewise passed secret codes to naval officials in letters home that suggested it would be relatively simple to escape Dyffryn Aled and reach the sea. Through coded messages from family members, the commander-in-chief agreed to deploy a submarine to pick up the officers just off the coast of Wales. Max Valentiner, a friend of von Henning and commander of the U-38, volunteered for the operation.\footnote{Max Valentiner, Der Schrecken der Meere: Meine U-Boot-Abenteuer (Leipzig: Amalthea Verlag, 1931), pp. 79-80. Tholens recalled that he escaped from Dyffryn Aled on 13 August 1915 and was scheduled to be picked up on the night of 14 or 15 August. Valentiner claimed that von Henning’s letters specified 22 and 23 August as the pick-up dates. Valentiner seems to have recalled the incorrect date here, as British documents support Tholens’ recollections. Also, the British Q ship “Baralong” sank the U-27 and killed all survivors on 19 August 1915 in one of the Great War’s most infamous cases of atrocity at sea. See Strachan, The First World War, p. 225.}

Valentiner’s crew, along with an additional submarine, the U-27, headed for a scheduled pick-up at the Ormes-Head in Wales, but the U-27 departed for another mission before attempting to make contact. Valentiner’s U-38 ventured precariously close to shore after failing to locate the officers during the first night and even scoured the shore with searchlights. The three officers had reached their rendezvous point, but coastal rocks made it impossible for the U-38 to detect their torch signals during their second night on the beach. When weather conditions worsened, the officers gave up
hope of finding the vessel and parted ways. Tholens purchased a rail ticket to London before a policeman confronted him at the station and ended his run as an escaper.\textsuperscript{83}

Police eventually apprehended all three prisoners, but recapture was only the beginning of the officers’ ordeal. When the commandant at Dyffryn Aled sent for his prisoners, he ordered that they be handcuffed for the return journey to camp, even after they offered their word of honor not to attempt escape. Upon reaching the camp, the commandant required the prisoners to stand handcuffed before a crowd of soldiers and civilians for approximately fifteen minutes. The German officers, who believed that attempting escape was their duty, were appalled by the commandant’s decision not to accept their word of honor and quickly lodged complaints with the American Embassy. The events that followed demonstrated the officers’ unwillingness to allow their captors to debase a prisoner’s surest path to redemption by treating them as criminals.

In early September 1915, Lieutenant von Helldorff informed the American Embassy’s German Division that he regarded his treatment “as beneath the dignity of an officer” and considered it “a personal chicanery and insult” on the part of the commandant.\textsuperscript{84} Von Henning not only asserted that his treatment was meant to be insulting, he questioned the commandant’s understanding of the concept of honor:

\begin{quote}
I humbly wish to point out that in all civilized states handcuffs are only put on in the case of the lowest criminals, and consequently I also firmly believe that the handcuffing of officers who are prisoners of war and who
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{83} Tholens, “Rendezvous with a Submarine,” pp. 283-88; Valentiner, Der Schrecken der Meere, pp. 82-86.
\textsuperscript{84} Von Helldorff, Chester, to the American Embassy in London (Translation), 1 September 1915, in The American Ambassador in London to the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 1 October 1915, TNA, FO 383/65, p. 1.
simply wished to perform their duty to their Fatherland is not compatible with the standpoint of honour of the English army.\textsuperscript{85}

News of the handcuffing sent shockwaves through the officer community at Dyffryn Aled. Before any of the prisoners had an opportunity to protest, the senior officer at the camp wrote American representatives to object to the commandant’s disciplinary techniques. He notified embassy officials that every German officer held the belief that “it was not only his right, but his duty, to avail himself of any opportunity of escape which presented itself.”\textsuperscript{86} In a later communication, the camp senior reiterated von Henning’s contention. Handcuffs, he agreed, were intended for criminals, and he claimed that the dishonorable treatment was so painful to the officers at Dyffryn Aled that “as companions of those who were subjected to it, we feel bound to comment upon it.”\textsuperscript{87}

The publicity generated by the incident made matters worse. Several British officers who witnessed the escapees’ arrest disapproved of the commandant’s actions, and the War Office seemed to recognize that the episode might lead to reprisals against British prisoners in Germany. British officials saw little utility in sharing information about the incident with the German government.\textsuperscript{88} Also problematic was the fact that this was not the first time that Dyffryn Aled’s commandant had handcuffed officers after

\textsuperscript{85} Von Henning, Chester, to the American Embassy in London (Translation), 1 September 1915, in The American Ambassador in London to the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 1 October 1915, TNA, FO 383/65, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{86} Captain Wallis, Dyffryn Aled, to the American Embassy in London (Translation), 18 August 1915, in The American Ambassador in London to the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 1 September 1915, TNA, FO 383/65, pp. 1-2.
\textsuperscript{87} Captain Wallis, Dyffryn Aled, to the American Embassy in London (Translation), 14 September 1915, in The American Ambassador in London to the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 4 October 1915, TNA, FO 383/65, p. 16.
failed escapes. Lieutenants von Sandersleben and Ambler fled the camp in April 1915 and remained at large for almost a week before being recaptured. In the days after their arrest, a military tribunal sentenced the officers to twenty-eight days confinement, but the episode otherwise passed with little fanfare.

Sandersleben later secured transfer to Holyport. In December 1915 he asked the American Embassy to inform the German government that the he, too, had been handcuffed following a failed escape from Dyffryn Aled, even though a contingent of guards with fixed bayonets surrounded him. Furthermore, Sandersleben claimed that the commandant forced him to pay £3 for his transport back to the camp. Already indignant at having been handcuffed, Sandersleben was shocked to discover that prison officials in Brixton expected him to share an exercise yard with “black and coloured men and other English criminals.” Like von Henning, Tholens, and von Helldorff, Sandersleben believed the treatment he received was spiteful and insulting. As soldiers of a nation at war, the officers were confident that in attempting to flee, they were simply performing their duty. The trouble was that their duties as prisoners conflicted with those of their commandant. The officers’ success at evading camp sentries suggested that the staff at Dyffryn Aled had neglected their responsibility to ensure that the camp’s prisoners remained behind barbed wire.

Regarding escaped officers as criminals invited the Germans to handle British officers in the same manner. Since the War Office expected British soldiers to attempt escape from enemy captivity, defending the Dyffryn Aled commandant’s actions would

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have been counterproductive. In late November 1915, even before von Sandersleben issued his complaint, the British Foreign Office asked the American ambassador to assure the German government that steps had been taken to make certain that handcuffs would no longer be used following recapture. This guarantee was as close as the British would come to an apology, but their willingness to accept responsibility for the incidents showed that they respected a prisoner’s obligation to rejoin his comrades at the front.

The officers who suffered the indignity of handcuffing based their complaints on the contention that they had been treated as criminals rather than men of honor. Any officer would consider being placed in shackles after giving one’s word of honor disgraceful, regardless of the circumstances, but being treated like a criminal was especially damaging to officers in captivity. The commandant’s decision not to take the men at their word could only mean that he did not perceive them to be honorable soldiers. Desertion and treason were criminal acts under military law, and captives were well aware that in some circles, prisoners could be suspected of either crime. Thus, being treated as a criminal had a deeper significance for prisoners who were painfully aware of the stigma of surrender and seemed unable to escape its implications, even when demonstrating an unquestionable devotion to duty.

The commandant’s extreme response to the Dyffryn Aled escapes proved that even though the prisoners failed to reach Germany, they were creating problems for British authorities. When prisoners slipped out of their camps, sentries and local police units had no choice but to devote their attention to recapturing them. Subsequent military

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91 The postwar report on the DPW stated “It is universally recognized that it is the duty of a prisoner of war to escape if opportunity offers.” Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War, TNA, WO 106/1451, p. 18.  
tribunals and dealings with neutral embassies that transmitted complaints to the prisoners’ home governments tied down civilian and military authorities for hours or days. And it was not only officers who proved to be a headache for their commandants. When five enlisted prisoners escaped from camp Dorchester in a span of two months, the camp commandant was reportedly forced to resign his post.⁹³

![Image of two German prisoners and local police force]

Fig. 7: Meirionnydd Archives, Gwynedd Archives Service, Wales, ZS/48/51. Two German prisoners, almost certainly von Sandersleben and Ambler, with members of the local police force at Blaenau Ffestinog, Wales on 11 April 1915 following their recapture after a failed escape from Dyffryn Aled. Notice that the men are attempting to hide their handcuffs by placing their hands in their pockets.

The War Office expected prisoners caught in the act of escape to be punished for the difficulties they created, and penalties for flight convinced many prisoners that their captors continued to view escape as a crime. Although the Hague Convention allowed captors to punish escapers, it provided no standard for disciplinary action. The German Army operated under the assumption that “attempts on the part of individuals who have not pledged their word on honor might be regarded as the expression of a natural impulse for liberty, and not as a crime.”

British military law permitted tribunals to punish escapers with any penalty “exclusive of death,” and sentences in the UK were customarily much harsher than those handed down in Germany. Tholens, von Henning, and von Helldorff, for example, received 84 days confinement for their escape, a sentence the Kriegsministerium believed violated the spirit of Article VIII of the Hague Convention and belittled the officers involved. Prisoners in Germany tended to find British punishments severe as well. Following his escape from a German camp, British Lieutenant S.E. Buckley claimed that the handing down of harsh sentences in the UK only made life more difficult for prisoners trying to escape Germany. Buckley reminded British officials that German prisoners had “little or no chance” of escaping England, and he attributed progressively harsher punishments in Germany to the British practice of sentencing German officers to long terms of imprisonment.

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96 Emil Friedrich, Kriegsministerium, to the Reichs-Marineamt (Copy), Nr. 585.15.U5, 30 October 1915, BAMA, RM 3/5379.
97 Report by Lieutenant S.E. Buckley, in Government Committee on the Treatment by the Enemy of British Prisoners of War to the Secretary of the Prisoners of War Department, London, 3 July 1917, TNA, FO 383/285.
The German government vigorously protested the British treatment of escapers, and prisoner punishment was a subject of much contention at conferences with German and Turkish officials in Switzerland and the Netherlands in summer 1917. Negotiations at these meetings led to the adoption in the UK of a code limiting the punishment of simple escapes to fourteen days confinement and two months for flight attempts that included violations of other regulations.\textsuperscript{98} The new standards, codified as Army Council Instruction 1209 of 1917, still reprimanded escapees, but brought British practices closer to the standards observed by other belligerent nations.\textsuperscript{99}

**NEW APPROACHES TO PRISONER RECAPTURE**

As the prisoner population in the UK increased, German captives provided military tribunals with ample opportunities to apply the new sentencing guidelines. During the same month that the War Office released Army Council Instruction 1209, *The Times* reported that there were thirteen German prisoners, both officers and enlisted men, at large in the UK.\textsuperscript{100} The British eventually recaptured the escapers, but the following month a coordinated breakout from an officers’ camp in Nottingham left more than twenty additional prisoners unaccounted for. On the night of 25 September 1917, twenty-two German officers escaped from Sutton Bonington by tunneling under the camp’s barbed wire perimeter. Operations of this magnitude required months of planning and cooperation among the prisoners involved. Excavation of the tunnel reportedly took the prisoners three months to complete, and the officers constructed maps and compasses

\textsuperscript{99} See Army Council Instruction 1209 of 1917, 2 August 1917, TNA, FO 383/285.
\textsuperscript{100} “13 Prisoners at Large. Two of Zeppelin Crew,” *The Times*, 25 August 1917, p. 3.
and stockpiled food before making a dash for liberty. British authorities captured most of the men within three days, but four officers remained on the run until 30 September.101

A number of the officers who fled Sutton Bonington had previous escape attempts to their credit, an accomplishment that earned them a reputation as “probably the toughest lot of prisoners to deal with in England” according to the chief constable of Nottingham.102 Almost all of the officers involved in the escape received 56-60 days military confinement for their efforts. In order to award sentences exceeding the fourteen-day standard for simple escape, military tribunals convicted the prisoners of possessing civilian clothing or altering their uniforms. The officers considered disguising themselves a necessary part of the escape attempt and challenged the legality of the verdicts.103 Although they protested the harsh sentences, the officers could serve their time knowing that they had caused tremendous difficulties for their captors.

The mass escape from Sutton Bonington prompted local officials to question Britain’s approach to camp administration and call for closer cooperation between military and local police agencies. The threat of the German officers from Sutton Bonington roaming the Nottingham countryside forced the chief constable of the district to employ special constables in a thorough operation that included roadblocks, night searches, and motorcycle and bicycle patrols. The search lasted for five days and

101 Chief Constable of Nottingham to the Under Secretary of State of the Home Office, London, 1 October 1917, TNA, HO 45/10883/345466, pp. 1-2; “Escape of 23 War Prisoners. Three Months’ Tunneling Work in Camp,” The Times, 26 September 1917, p. 3. The camp referred to as Sutton Bonington by the Chief Constable of Nottingham also went by the name Kegworth in War Office and American Embassy reports. Since it is called Sutton Bonington in newspaper reports and police documents pertaining to the escape, I have chosen to refer to the camp as such.
102 Chief Constable of Nottingham to the Under Secretary of State of the Home Office, London, 1 October 1917, TNA, HO 45/10883/345466, p. 3.
103 Fregattan-Kapitan von M., Chelmsford, to the Swiss Legation in London, 21 November 1917, in Verbalnote, Schweizerische Gesellschaft (Vdl) to the Auswärtigen Amt des Deutschen Reiches, Berlin, 12 April, 1918, BABL, R 901/85163.
exhausted the chief constable’s resources. In his report on the recapture efforts, he noted that the investigation required him to drive his constables “unmercifully hard.” On account of the shortage of regular police officers in the county, he feared that an undertaking of the same magnitude could not be carried out again for some time. The chief constable assured the Home Office that if numerous officers were to escape again, “the same amount of success would not be attained in their apprehension.”

He maintained that the camp’s commandant and adjunct captain were excellent officers, but concluded that it was impossible for them to effectively run the camp with the limited support staff at their disposal. In other words, the staff at Sutton Bonington could not expect to control the German officers in their care without reconsidering their methods.

Other observers called for more drastic measures. In a letter to the editors of The Times, a concerned citizen regarded the breakout at Sutton Bonington as a reflection of the camp’s administration:

That a tunnel could have been excavated under the fence into the adjoining field without discovery, if it were not a very unpleasant fact, would be incredible, as it is discreditable to the officers in charge of the camp. Just imagine the time it would take and the quantity of soil to be removed. It is manifest that there has been great laxity, and it is imperative that drastic measures should be taken at once. The officers in command should be removed and placed upon their defence before a Court-martial. There are, as may be expected, all sorts of rumors in the district, which a public inquiry may perhaps show to have no foundation. One wonders whether these camps are under any sort of official inspection.

The ease with which the German officers fled the camp disturbed the residents of the surrounding area. The suggestion that the commanding officers at Sutton Bonington

105 Chief Constable of Nottingham to the Under Secretary of State of the Home Office, London, 1 October 1917, TNA, HO 45/10883/345466, p. 3.
106 “German Officers’ Escape,” The Times, 29 September 1917, p. 5.
stand before a court martial left little doubt that residents were concerned and angry over the prospect of German officers living near them with such lax supervision.

Perhaps the residents of Nottingham were correct to suspect that British authorities were not granting German prisoners the respect they deserved as flight risks. Camps for officers supposedly remained on a state of high alert, but as authorities gained confidence in the English Channels’ ability to contain prisoners, British officials found it more economical to reward citizens for assisting in recapture than to employ large contingents of guards.\(^{107}\) Only weeks before the escape at Sutton Bonington, the head of military intelligence (M.I.5.), Colonel Vernon Kell, authorized constables to offer rewards of £1-£5 for information leading to the immediate arrest of an escaped prisoner. If they chose, constables could pay informants on the spot and apply for reimbursement. Naturally, camp guards were not eligible for rewards.\(^{108}\) With little hope of prisoners making it across the channel, British authorities were content to simply round up prisoners after their escape efforts ran out of steam.

As a result of the breakout, the commandant at Sutton Bonington doubled the guard staff, but a deficiency of sentries was not the only problem with the British method of dealing with escapes.\(^{109}\) Despite the fact that prison camps relied on local policemen to assist in prisoner recapture, poor communication between camp authorities and local officials hampered searches and wasted valuable resources. The chief constable of Nottingham called for closer cooperation with camp officials in the wake of the breakout.

\(^{109}\) “Escape of 23 War Prisoners,” The Times, 26 September 1917, p. 3.
at Sutton Bonington and recommended that a protocol be established for contacting relevant agencies in the event that a prisoner breached a camp’s perimeter. His colleagues in other districts shared his desire for reform. In November 1917, the Home Office called a meeting of representatives from eight agencies, including New Scotland Yard, the Constabulary, M.I.5., and the War Office. Representatives acknowledged that the chief procedural difficulties of recapturing prisoners were insufficient warnings that an escape had taken place and inadequate notification of recaptures. The latter problem was especially disturbing. In many cases, special constables had continued their searches long after prisoners had been taken into custody.¹¹⁰

The Home Office meeting resulted in a protocol that required camp commandants to quickly inform constables of breakouts and supply descriptions of wanted men. Each camp maintained a card index of prisoners’ descriptions in order to hasten the transmission of information. Owing to the higher quality telephone lines installed at police stations, chief constables passed information to local authorities while commandants telegraphed the Home Office, New Scotland Yard, and Command Headquarters. Command Headquarters continued the chain by informing military authorities of the escape. British officials understood that neutral steamers offered prisoners the best chance of crossing the channel, so the Home Office warned port authorities, customs officers, and port police to anticipate a prisoner’s arrival. Since prisoners sometimes remained at large for several days, New Scotland Yard publicized escapes in the Police Gazette, which was circulated among all police forces in England.

¹¹⁰ “Procedure to be Followed on the Escape and Recapture of Prisoners of War, Both Combatant and Civilian,” 8 November 1917, TNA, HO 45/10883/345466, p. 1.
and Wales twice weekly. The Press Association and Central News also received notification of escapes. Authorities used the same communication chains to ensure that prisoner searches concluded as soon as a prisoner had been apprehended.\textsuperscript{111} The protocols reached police stations throughout the UK in January 1918,\textsuperscript{112} and while they streamlined the process of recapturing escaped prisoners, the new practices did little to check the prisoners’ aspirations for flight.

Heinz H.E. Justus, for instance, fell into British hands on 31 July 1917 and began attempting escape almost as soon as set foot on British soil. Following his arrival at the officers’ camp at Colsterdale, Justus repeatedly attempted to break through the camp’s barbed wire enclosure or tunnel underneath it. On the way to building a reputation as a master of disguise, Justus succeeded in simply walking out Colsterdale’s gates while impersonating the camp’s canteen manager. Once outside the camp, he used items smuggled in parcels from his mother, who was seemingly aware of their intended use, to disguise himself as a female. When sentries finally caught up with him, they encountered a man dressed in a skirt, white fur hat, and veil. His exploits earned him a court martial and transfer to Holyport, where he once again attempted to escape through the barbed wire and participated in several failed tunneling operations. Justus’ reputation as a difficult prisoner resulted in his transfer to a third camp at Lofthouse Park, but the prolific escaper decided to take a detour before reaching his final destination.\textsuperscript{113}

En route to Lofthouse Park, Justus leapt out the window of his train while other officers shielded him from their escorts’ view. He hid the high collar of his officer’s

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  \item \textsuperscript{111} “Procedure to be Followed on the Escape and Recapture of Prisoners of War, Both Combatant and Civilian,” 8 November 1917, TNA, HO 45/10883/345466, pp. 2-3.
  \item \textsuperscript{112} E. Blackwell, Home Office, to all Chief Constables, 7 January 1918, TNA, HO 45/10883/345466.
  \item \textsuperscript{113} Heinz H.E. Justus, “An Unconducted Tour of England,” in Ackerly, ed. \textit{Escapers All}, pp. 201-05.
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uniform with a handkerchief and made his way to London. Only hours after his escape, he took in a theatrical show and was delighted to discover that the English staff officer sitting to his right was oblivious to the fact that he was in the presence of a wanted man. Justus found lodging in a hotel by posing as a Frenchman and enjoyed a good rest during his first night on the run. Recognizing that his beloved officer’s tunic was a liability, he considered throwing it into the river, but refrained because it was new and he thought he might like to have it if he was recaptured. Justus’ solution to the problem was both practical and arrogant—he mailed the tunic to his old commandant at Holyport! Doing so ensured that he would be able to retrieve the garment if his escape proved unsuccessful and allowed him to thumb his nose at an old adversary.114

Newspaper coverage of his escape confirmed that the commandant received the tunic and revealed that authorities presumed Justus to be once again posing as a woman.115 He left London for Cardiff and remained at large for more than a week, but his plans for hopping a neutral steamer were foiled when he came down with the flu. Justus’ condition declined so rapidly that he had no choice but to report to the police and turn himself in. After recovering from his bout with the flu, he was court martialed and sent to Chelmsford prison. While serving his sentence there he received his tunic from the commandant at Holyport, who was surely pleased to have gotten the last laugh.116

Like other escapers, Justus probably felt that his bid for freedom had been worth the effort. Military honor codes demanded that prisoners attempt to return to battle, but prisoners also derived a great deal of satisfaction and pleasure from trying to outsmart

115 “Disguised as a Woman. German Officer’s Escape,” The Times, 26 October 1918, p. 3.
their captors. Hatching an escape scheme provided prisoners with a long-term goal and gave meaning to their lives. Planning an escape signified that prisoners had not accepted their fate and sought a return to active service in Germany’s struggle. Men in captivity undoubtedly believed that their escape efforts tied down British resources, and they were eager to share news of their exploits with the homefront whenever possible. In a smuggled letter from Stobs in Scotland, a submariner informed his wife that he had already acquired civilian clothing for an escape and needed only to obtain the necessary funds to put his plan into action. He neglected to provide the specifics of his plan, but the submariner surely knew that his chances at success were minimal. Nonetheless, it was important that his wife know he was making plans to formally rejoin the war and not simply wasting away.\textsuperscript{117} In another smuggled letter to a fellow officer, Hans K. lamented that getting off “the island” was almost impossible, but he proudly claimed that at Donington Hall an average of twenty sentries guarded every ten officers.\textsuperscript{118}

Did the British really find their German captives as problematic as the prisoners liked to imagine, or were the prisoners’ feelings of accomplishment misguided? The answer to this question is complicated. The British consistently sought to guard the UK’s prisoners with the fewest number of sentries possible. As a matter of policy, authorities preferred to offer rewards for tips leading to the prisoners’ apprehension rather than strengthen the guard, even after large breakouts. What prisoners could not have known was that the War Office’s quest for efficiency was a sign that its resources were stretched thin. German labor was essential to British agriculture, but the number of sentries

\textsuperscript{117} Letter from an unnamed German submariner (copy), Stobs, Scotland, to his wife, 2 December 1917, BAMA, RM 5/4681, Nr. 107-109.
required for scattered work groups far exceeded the amount that had been needed when prisoners were clustered exclusively in larger parent camps. The growth of the work camp system and increases in German surrenders led to significant shortages in the number of RDC men available for guard duty by 1918.\textsuperscript{119} At times, manpower shortages became so acute that officials feared the RDC would not be able supply guards in the event of unexpected growth in the prisoner population.\textsuperscript{120}

In view of these shortages, commandants relied heavily on the English Channel’s ability to turn back escapees, and had the channel not been there, it is safe to say that many of the men who fled their camps would have reached a neutral country and rejoined their units. Effecting escape from a British working camp in France, for example, was a much easier undertaking, and numerous prisoners succeeded in evading recapture. However, the War Office was not terribly concerned with the ones who got away. In its postwar report, the Department of Prisoners of War (DPW) claimed that it was “no wonder” that many prisoners had escaped from various theaters of war outside the UK, but considered the prisoners’ triumphs a “comparatively minor consideration as compared with the grave disadvantages of employing an excessive number of guarding troops who were required for duties of much greater importance.”\textsuperscript{121}

The War Office attached limited importance to ensuring that captives remained behind barbed wire, but the DPW’s attitude to escapes belies the prisoners’ success at drawing their captor’s attention from other war-related matters. Escapes never threatened

\textsuperscript{119} Representative of the Field Marshal of the Home Forces, London, to the Secretary of the War Office, 20 April 1918, H.F.C.R. 17609 (RDC/A), TNA, HO 144/1450/309852.
\textsuperscript{120} See Colonel G.S., Inspector Vulnerable Points, Minute Sheet labeled “Royal Defence Corps: Requirements now affecting the Corps, and possibilities of complying with them in view of existing strength,” Register No. 17609 (RDC/A), TNA, HO 144/1450/309852.
\textsuperscript{121} Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War, TNA, WO 106/1451, p. 47.
to turn the tide of the war, and a soldier in the trenches or manning a submarine was always more useful than the most problematic prisoner of war. Yet every search for a prisoner on the run required that military and local police authorities divert their attention away from other affairs. As the escape at Sutton Bonington made clear, the efforts required to recapture prisoners sometimes stretched resources to the breaking point. The Home Office’s decision to call a national meeting on prisoner recapture suggests that the difficulties experienced in Nottingham were not exceptional. Despite the desire to keep guard staffs at a minimum, escapes prompted commandants to increase security measures and strengthen sentry numbers, a difficult and complicated task with a limited pool of guardsmen to pull from. The Great War was a war of attrition where manpower reserves played a crucial role, and at the very least, escape attempts further aggravated an already stressed prison camp system.

CONCLUSIONS

Becoming a prisoner of war was a traumatic experience for the German soldiers and sailors who surrendered to the British during the Great War. However, it was inside the camps, after the fog of battle had lifted, that prisoners were forced to come to terms with the realities of their decision to surrender. Surrounded by dehumanizing barbed wire, they were physically cut off from the higher purpose for which they had once fought. Prisoners suffered immensely from sensations of abandonment and detachment that compounded the feelings of shame that had accompanied their capture. The German

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122 For examples of guard increase, see Tholens, “Rendezvous with a Submarine,” p. 282, and “Escape of 23 War Prisoners,” The Times, 26 September 1917, p. 3.
prisoners in the UK longed for affirmation from military acquaintances and relatives in Germany, and many internalized the stigma of captivity so thoroughly that they found it difficult to believe that German relief agencies still cared for their well being. As their letters make clear, prisoners became obsessed with maintaining contact with the outside world and took every opportunity to assure their correspondence partners that they remained loyal soldiers despite their inauspicious fate. A captor’s willingness to accept his enemy’s surrender offered survival, but continued existence carried a high emotional price.

Escape proved to be the most effective means of reconnecting with the war effort and therefore regaining one’s sense of manhood and honor, but for the overwhelming majority of prisoners, flight attempts proved unsuccessful. The frequency with which soldiers meticulously planned and attempted escapes, despite their almost certain failure, demonstrated that fleeing a prisoner of war camp did more than free escapers from the physical confines of the camp. It offered release from the nagging thoughts of inadequacy that occupied the prisoner’s mind. Escaping back to the front was the ultimate expression of solidarity with one’s fighting comrades and most effective means of shaking the stigma of surrender, but there were also ways of demonstrating continued devotion to the national cause without leaving the confines of a camp. In the trenches and at sea, prisoners had been armed with typical weapons of war, but in the struggle waged inside the camps of the UK, cultural sensibilities governed efforts at continued resistance.
The English Channel prevented all but a few German prisoners from escaping the UK and returning to the front, but they rarely accepted that their separation from the battlefield excluded them from contributing to the war effort. Their pre-capture sense of manhood rested upon the assumption that they served a higher collective purpose and would willingly sacrifice themselves for the good of the nation and the values it upheld. In enemy hands, they felt isolated and detached from that greater purpose and their roles as citizens of a nation at war. Surrender inevitably set off an identity crisis that forced prisoners to confront the stigma of captivity. This included proving that despite the opinions held by many observers, prisoners were neither cowards nor traitors, and certainly not “dead with little glory.”¹ With little hope of reaching the battlefield, prisoners worked to overcome the emasculation and shame of captivity by once again devoting themselves to a higher cause. The activities they organized behind barbed wire stressed their camaraderie, unbroken nationalism, eagerness to continue the fight, and commitment to playing a useful role in postwar German society.

The German prisoners of the British believed that their response to enemy captivity said something significant about their national character, and more importantly, their identity as men at war. The culture of captivity became a culture of resistance and

redemption. Prisoners chose agency over passive acceptance of their fate, and their camp activities gave their lives meaning. Ranging from acts of simple disobedience to the production of first class cultural events, the prisoners’ camp pursuits were intended show that their removal from the battlefield was not indicative of an unwillingness to serve. Prisoners drew upon German traditions of resistance dating to the Napoleonic occupation of the German lands to rebuild their masculine identity. As soldiers on enemy soil, prisoners needed to believe that they were still connected to a higher purpose, and the importance of camp activities went well beyond relieving the boredom of captivity.

**DISOBEDIENCE AS RESISTANCE**

German prisoners were subject to British military law and likely to be punished for any transgressions committed as “guests” in the UK. Whereas captors anticipated that prisoners would attempt escape, and largely honored their right to do so, acts of disobedience directed at camp authorities generally met with swift retribution.\(^2\) On the whole, there were relatively few instances of outright indiscipline, but it was not unheard of for prisoners to express their dissatisfaction with life in captivity by refusing to observe their captors’ regulations.\(^3\) Swiss representative A. de Sturler visited the military detention barracks at Stafford in August 1918 to find its cells filled with men accused of various disciplinary infractions. The first prisoners of war began serving sentences at Stafford in July 1917, and by the time of de Sturler’s inspection more than 217 German

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\(^2\) For general guidelines on prisoner punishment, see “Army Council Instruction. No. 1209 of 1917,” 2 August 1917, TNA, FO 383/285.

\(^3\) On the overall conduct of the Germans in the UK, see “Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War, TNA, WO 106/1451, p. 44.
military prisoners had done time in the facility. The British most commonly imprisoned prisoners for disobedience, insubordination, and breaking into camp stores, but the prison also held men sentenced for laziness or refusal to work, stealing, using threatening language, and threatening a non-commissioned officer.4

The British took disrespect towards or threats against their officers seriously. When a British non-commissioned officer instructed Hugo B. to put out a fire the prisoner had started, the German allegedly responded with “highly insubordinate and disgusting language.” Although Hugo B. claimed that his unfamiliarity with the English language made it impossible for him to comprehend the severity of his statements, a court handed him a seemingly harsh sentence of six months imprisonment with correspondence restrictions.5 In another case of defiance, several prisoners at Brocton displayed an “insubordinate attitude” during roll call. The ensuing confrontation ended with the commandant knocking a prisoner to the ground and placing him in a detention cell. The German camp senior challenged the commandant’s actions only to receive the same treatment as the comrade he had defended. This was one of several instances of unruliness at Brocton. The British officer assigned to investigate the incidents concluded that the insubordinate acts were not isolated, but part of a “continued series of determined attempts” by a small number of prisoners to break down discipline. By the investigator’s

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4 Report on the Military Detention Barracks at Strafford to Gaston Carlin, 8 August 1918, in Schweizerische Gesandtschaft in Berlin to the Auswärtige Amt des Deutschen Reiches, 2 September 1918, BABL, R 901/83073.
5 British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to the United States Ambassador, 5 January 1916, No. 229/P, in Note Verbale, The Embassy of the United States of America, Berlin, to the Imperial Foreign Office, 14 January 1916, BABL, R 901/85159.
estimation, the prisoners’ complaints to the German government on the matter were aimed at “getting the better of the Commandant.”

Prisoners employed another form of resistance as laborers inside their camps and in the countryside by working slowly or not at all. In the last years of the war, German prisoners became an indispensable component of the British labor force, but the quality of the Germans’ work disappointed many employers. The freedom that accompanied agricultural work encouraged prisoners in the farming sector to execute tasks reasonably well for fear of being replaced by a more industrious comrade, and skilled laborers likewise performed a higher quality of work. Nonetheless, Board of Trade estimates suggested that prisoner output approached only 55 to 65 percent of the numbers achieved by the prewar English labor force. British authorities attributed much of this discrepancy to ration reductions and the prisoners’ inexperience with their occupations. While that may have been the case, deliberate indolence also played a significant role in impeding efficiency.

Subordinate groups often employ this sort of “foot dragging” as a safe form of everyday resistance, and although public acts of defiance generally occur less frequently due to their consequences, we have already seen that they took place. In June 1918, members of the Dunmow Farmers’ Club reportedly complained of the minimal effort put forth by German prisoners and declared that they would no longer employ prisoners of war because of the trouble they caused. One employer asserted that prisoners on his farm

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destroyed his flower garden and “pelted the workhouse master with rag balls.” While the victim of the assault was probably appalled by the prisoners’ insolence, another employer experienced far worse from a German working his land. After the farmer and his wife turned in for the night, the prisoner broke into his employer’s home and murdered the man and his wife with a billhook. Of course, cold-blooded murder by prisoners was exceptionally rare, and the billhook yielding prisoner’s crime was the product of deranged mind rather than any desire to resist his captors.

Labor protests among prisoners were usually non-violent, but they were often carried out in public. On numerous occasions, prisoners expressed their dissatisfaction with working conditions or pay scales by going on strike. In one case, approximately thirty prisoners called a sympathy strike when authorities punished three of their comrades with a twenty-eight day pay stoppage for walking off the job. Another strike occurred when British officials transferred prisoners employed in drainage work to agricultural sites during harvest time. Disappointed at being left behind to complete the less desirable drainage operation, the remaining prisoners from the group organized a two-day strike that ended only after officials withheld mail privileges and replaced standard rations with bread and water. Prisoners utilized the power of the strike in hopes of gaining favorable work assignments. Yet work stoppages were also a weapon of choice in power struggles between prisoners and commandants. Strikes occurred at

11 “Hun Prisoners on Strike: Mutinous Squad Refuses to Work” Daily Express, 24 June 1918, article clipping in BABL, R 901/54401.
12 “German Prisoners Strike: Prompt Disciplinary Measures,” The Times, 12 September 1918, p. 3.
Brocton on at least two occasions, the first of which broke out when the commandant revoked the privilege of hauling fallen wood into the compound. Once again, a British investigator concluded that the strike was an attempt to “best the Commandant” and believed both strikes to be examples of “deliberate resistance to authority by the prisoners of war concerned.”

Disobedience, whether expressed as a vulgar insult or a coordinated strike, represented deliberate resistance to authority. When prisoners participated in public acts of defiance, they understood that they would be punished. By causing trouble for guards and other camp staffers, prisoners kept their captors on edge and boosted their own egos by cultivating an image as soldiers dedicated to resisting the enemy. Power struggles are common between any prison population and its warden/commandant, but acts of defiance allowed prisoners of war to imagine that they were contributing to the military effort by requiring commandants to employ larger guard staffs. German officer Walter P. and his fellow prisoners at Wakefield engaged their commandant in a protracted test of wills late in the war. When the commandant harassed prisoners by locking the gate between the camp’s two sections while they attended a theatrical production in the neighboring compound, the officers attempted to force the barrier open and later opened an “offensive” of harassment against him. The morning following the incident, three prisoners failed to appear for roll call, and the camp’s officers began lodging daily complaints against the Wakefield commandant with the British War Office. In a smuggled letter, Walter P. revealed the deeper significance of the prisoners’ activities by

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assuring his father that their defiance had led to a doubling of the camp guard. “You see,” he continued, “we tie down as much power here as we can.”

**REESTABLISHING CONNECTIONS**

While maintaining their physical and mental health and exhibiting a commitment to bettering postwar Germany, prisoners placed their camp activities within a broader framework by focusing on how their individual actions might help them better serve the nation. This involved regaining a sense of power in the camp environment by shaping the space the British had assigned them and forcing observers to recognize the camp’s viability as a battleground of a different sort. Adopting an insubordinate stance and attempting to “best” camp personnel signaled the prisoners’ refusal to quietly accept their fate, and their insolence surely troubled commandants and kept guards on their toes. However, prisoners who employed extreme tactics risked implying that when faced with adversity, German soldiers resorted to criminality and dishonorable conduct. Insubordination could also result in jail sentences or emotionally distressing punishments, particularly correspondence restrictions. Accordingly, most prisoners chose a subtler path of resistance that simultaneously stressed their identification with the war effort and rebuilt their sense of manhood.

In his work on resistance techniques commonly utilized by subordinate groups, James C. Scott has observed that between overt acts of resistance and private backroom diatribes of defiance that take place beyond the power holders’ gaze, there exists another

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plane of resistance. These acts of resistance take place in public, but they are subtler than strikes or physical confrontations and usually carry a double or secret meaning. Songs, humor, and rituals tend to fall into this category. While the meaning of the prisoners’ camp activities was often quite clear to participants and British officials, their non-threatening, yet nationalistic, tone situates them somewhere on this middle plane of resistance.¹⁵

Members of a given national community form relationships with only a fraction of their fellow citizens, but we feel bound to one another by shared traditions, symbols, and experiences.¹⁶ Regional factors heavily influenced the German prisoners’ identities. Yet when faced with a common enemy, they managed to reconcile their regional and national identities, symbols, and expressions of German culture to set themselves apart from their captors and convert an environment of shame into a community of resistance and solidarity.¹⁷ Following the outbreak of the Great War, the British attempted to sever cultural ties with their most threatening enemy and denounced German culture as barbaric. As Jay Winter points out, “Englishness” and “Germanness” were believed to be incompatible, and recognizing oneself as decidedly not German was essential to British national identity.¹⁸ By expressing and celebrating their Germanness, prisoners challenged the hegemonic culture of their captors and reaffirmed their commitment to a nation at war.

¹⁵ See James C. Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, pp. 18-21.
¹⁷ On the relationship between local and national memory in Imperial Germany, see Confino, The Nation as Local Metaphor.
Prisoners had little control over the quarters in which they were housed in the UK. The War Office determined the physical construction, furnishings, and geographical location of barracks. In the civilian realm, families decorate their homes with images of individuals they admire and respect, and prisoners routinely adorned their walls with photos and sketches of prominent German military and political figures. When American inspector Edward G. Lowry visited Holyport in May 1915, he observed that the officers had recently celebrated the “Bismarck anniversary,” and a large picture of the founding statesman overlooked one of the camp’s recreation rooms.19 Francis E. Brantingham toured the facility the following year and found that “among the photographs and prints decorating the rooms were frequent portraits of the German emperor and the Field Marshall von Hindenburg.”20

The portraits were signs of admiration for the military establishment. The iconic images identified those who hung them as loyal Germans in much the same way that a depiction of the Virgin Mary or the crucifixion of Jesus identified someone as a devout Catholic. Outside the barracks, prisoners sometimes attempted to lay claim to a camp’s paths and streets by naming them after famous German personalities. Stobs in Scotland, for instance, included unofficial street names like Zeppelinallee and Hindenburgstraße, and prisoners held weekly concerts on Blücherplatz.21 At other camps, prisoners

attempted to associate themselves with the front by hanging improvised war maps. A map may not be the territory, but these visual representations helped captives psychologically link themselves to life in the front lines and shorten the distance between the camps of the UK and the battlefield.

In their efforts to create a German enclave on enemy soil, prisoners were confronted with the challenges that face any group that seeks to foster a sense of community. Larger camps held thousands of men, and it would have been difficult for individuals to familiarize themselves with more than a small percentage of their fellow prisoners or keep up with a camp’s numerous organized activities. The development of camp newspapers strengthened prisoners’ sense of community by keeping them informed of upcoming events and chronicling camp life. Newspapers connected prisoners “through print” in a way that verbal communication could not. The first camp newspapers appeared in the UK in 1914, and before war’s end prisoners had founded more than fifteen publications in military camps. Prisoners organized and produced camp newspapers themselves and generally printed the publications on primitive block presses or sent away for professional printing. Newspapers were subject to War Office censorship and usually funded through subscriptions. As Rainer Pöppinghege argues, newspapers added structure to the camp environment by providing prisoners with a means for marking time. They also served as a sort of therapy against the dangers of barbed wire disease. Aside from uniting prison camp populations, newspapers formed an

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22 For postcard photos of soldiers with pictures of military leaders and war maps, see BAMA, MSg 200/1247 and German Prisoners in Great Britain (Bolton and London: Tillotson & Son, Ltd., 1916?), p. 42.
23 See Anderson, Imagined Communities, pp. 7, 44.
24 Pöppinghege, Im Lager Unbesiegt, p. 145. For a listing of publications in civilian and military camps in the UK, see Pöppinghege’s table on pp. 319-20.
additional bridge to the outside world. Prisoners sent copies of camp publications to Germany, the United States, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Japan. More than 2,500 issues of each printing of Stobsiade, the official paper of Stobs in Scotland, for example, made their way to the German homefront.25

In the pages of publications like Stobsiade, readers found reason to believe that prisoners had not accepted captivity lying down. Instead, the prisoners had rebounded from the initial shock of surrender to commit themselves to the war effort and the exaltation of German character. Stobsiade’s first military edition stressed the importance of staying engaged and encouraged prisoners to think about the ways in which they might to contribute to the paper’s success.26 In the follow-up edition, Stobsiade’s editors reminded readers that a prisoner of war’s primary duty was to stay active and work towards the future rather than sinking into a hopeless state of despondency.27 The staff of camp Dorchester’s Deutsche Blätter used its inaugural issue to inform readers that the “highest purpose of the existing camp associations, to pay homage in enemy territory to the spirit and character of the fatherland through gymnastic and athletic activities or the fostering of German art, German music, German songs or the German language, will also be served by our paper.” Deutsche Blätter’s editors considered it a duty to serve German interests and reasoned that their work might help them overcome the feelings of

25 Pöppinghege, Im Lager unbesiegt, p., 226, 200.
26 “Ziele und Wege,” Stobsiade, Nr. 1, 15 October 1916, pp. 1-2. Like other camps, Stobs in Scotland originally contained both civilian and military prisoners. The first version of Stobsiade, first published on 5 September 1915, was produced by the camp’s civilian internees. In July 1916, the camp’s civilians were transferred to the Isle of Man, where Stobsiade’s original editors created the Knockaloe Lager Zeitung. By October 1916, Stobsiade was once again being published at Stobs in Scotland under an editorial board consisting of military prisoners. For the details of this transition, see the first military edition of Stobsiade, 15 October 1916, Nr. 1; Kewley Draskau, “Relocating the Heimat,” pp. 83-90.
invalidity and nothingness that accompanied captivity by giving their lives a sense of direction.\textsuperscript{28}

By drawing Dorchester’s organized activities under the same umbrella, \textit{Deutsche Blätter}’s commentary suggested that although methods might differ, prisoners could organize their lives in captivity around common goals. Indeed, the organizational aspect of the prisoners’ pursuits gave meaning to their lives and allowed them once again feel as if they belonged to something larger than themselves. J. Davidson Ketchum spent the Great War as a civilian internee at the Ruhleben camp in Berlin before earning a doctorate in psychology. In his posthumously published study of Ruhleben, he argued that organization was essential to prisoners’ ability to build a world of purpose behind the barbed wire. As individuals, humans are generally disinclined to continue on towards the attainment of a goal, but Ketchum observed that people behave differently when placed in groups. When part of a formal, coordinated unit, individuals become goal oriented.\textsuperscript{29}

One of the prisoners’ primary goals in the UK was to reestablish the bond with the fatherland that had been severed when they left the battlefield. Long before unification in 1871, Germans used festive celebrations to cultivate a sense of national unity. The process of culturally uniting the German lands following political unification was challenging, and regional peculiarities endured as the young nation went to war in 1914. Although Bismarck and earlier Kaisers had resisted the creation and celebration of national holidays, Kaiser Wilhelm II recognized the value of national commemorations.

and supported them enthusiastically. For German prisoners in the UK, celebrating the Kaiser’s birth was a means of demonstrating loyalty to their commander in chief. Observations of the Kaiser’s birthday carried spiritual undertones, with loyal worshippers singing hymns in honor of an emperor who personified the religion of nationalism. The persistence of cultural divides made the celebration of national holidays like the Kaiser’s birthday essential to maintaining a united front on enemy soil. At one such celebration at Dyffryn Aled, festivities included a military march, the singing of the German national anthem—presumably *Heil dir im Siegerkranz* or *Das Deutschlandlied*—and patriotic songs like *Ich bin ein Deutscher* (I am a German). The evening also featured humorous soldiers’ songs and a duet entitled *Berlin bei Nacht* (Evening in Berlin). During the “Fatherland Evening” held at Brocton in 1918, the Kaiser’s birthday celebration featured the *Deutscher Schutztruppen Marsch* (March of the German Protection Troops), *The Germans to the Front*, and the *Schwarz-Weiβ-Rot! Marsch* (Black-White-Red March).

The musical selections’ military tone highlighted the prisoners’ unbroken patriotism and helped to identify them as strong and courageous disciples rather than passive and cowardly nonbelievers. Celebrations of nationalism represented more than an evening of amusement. They afforded prisoners the opportunity to shape their surroundings and musically express what they longed to demonstrate physically. The diary writings of Ernst Ewald H., a Saxon reserve lieutenant, illustrate this point well. A prisoner at Holyport, Lieutenant H. wrote in January 1917 that he had just celebrated the

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31 See the program in Major E.L., “Mein Aufenthalt in Dyffryn Aled vom Sept. 1914,” BAMA, MSg 1/598.
32 Program for “Vaterländische Abend aus Anlaß des Geburtstages S.M. des Kaisers, Sonnabend, den 26 u Sonntag, den 27.1.18 in Deutschen Theater,” Brocton Camp, BAMA, MSg 201/555. Black, white and red were the colors of the Imperial German flag.
Kaiser’s birthday for the third time since the commencement of hostilities. Observing his commander-in-chief’s birthday in enemy captivity may not have been ideal, but as Lieutenant H. noted, “one can no longer demonstrate through acts what one expresses through song and word on a day such as this.”

Prisoners drew a sense of solidarity from celebrations of the Kaiser’s birthday and clearly saw the ritual as a means of continuing the fight. Following a commemoration of the event at Stobs in Scotland, a facility for enlisted men, an editor from the camp newspaper reported that the prisoners’ sport and music associations had all given their best efforts for the festivities. Recognizing the sense of camaraderie brought on by the commemoration, he noted that for many prisoners, the ceremonies would remain one of

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33 Ernst Ewald H., “Kriegstagebuch 1914-1917,” entry for 28 January 1917, BfZ.
the few memories when the ugliness and trivial matters of life in captivity disappeared.  

Even better, honoring national holidays did not require prisoners to abandon their regional identities. As Celia Applegate’s classic study of *Heimat* and German identity suggests, it was possible for regional and national identities to coexist, even thrive, in Imperial Germany. In January 1918, Stobs’ prisoners commemorated the births of Kaiser Wilhelm II and King Ludwig III of Bavaria within weeks of each other. While the Kaiser’s celebration featured theatrical and musical selections, prisoners observed King Ludwig’s birthday with an evening of traditional Bavarian dance and song, in the Bavarian dialect, of course.

Musical expressions of nationalism and solidarity were not restricted to holidays or special occasions. Although prisoners ultimately sought contact with the outside world, they drew strength from each other as well. Lieutenant Erich G. recalled that he spent hours gathered around his barrack’s furnace singing with fellow prisoners. Of all the songs they sang, the “old, beautiful folksongs” that reminded them of home were their favorites. During Gunther Plüschow’s brief stay at Dorchester, prisoners often loudly sang nationalistic favorites like “The Watch on the Rhine” as they passed British civilians on supervised walks. In early 1915, the *Leigh Chronicle* reported that prisoners in the town’s camp could be heard singing “For Fatherland and Gott,” “For Kaiser and Gott,”

34 “Kaisers Geburtstag,” *Stobsiade*, 17 February, Nr. 6, p. 3.
37 Erich G., “Mit dem Tod auf Du und Du!” BAMA, MSg 201/610, p. 51.
38 Plüschow, *Die Abenteuer des Fliegers von Tsingtau*, p. 130.
and “For Victory and Christ” from outside the camp.\textsuperscript{39} At more formal events, choirs performed folk songs and military marches for enthusiastic audiences throughout the year. Prisoners at camp Jersey in the Channel Islands organized a brass band, choir, guitar band, and a music committee, and similar musical groups thrived at other camps for both officers and enlisted men.\textsuperscript{40} Most of the participants in musical and choral ensembles were amateurs, but they approached their performances with professionalism and purpose, with posters, flyers, and newspaper ads advertising upcoming events.

Prisoners who joined musical associations were continuing an established tradition of melodically expressing nationalist sentiments. Germans had long considered themselves the “people of music” and believed their perceived musical greatness to be a defining national trait.\textsuperscript{41} Nurturing a German musical tradition was an important part of the nationalist movement that swept the German lands following the humiliation of defeat at the hands of Napoleon’s armies.\textsuperscript{42} Later, choral societies claimed more than 100,000 members by 1847, and participants generally adhered to a nationalist agenda that promoted fraternity and national solidarity.\textsuperscript{43} After 1871, amateur singing associations committed to “strengthening German identity” flourished throughout the new nation.\textsuperscript{44} Choral ensembles were not simply a way to pass time or make captivity more bearable.

Participants were taking part in an art that they, perhaps inaccurately, believed to be

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\textsuperscript{39} Smith, \textit{The German Prisoner of War Camp at Leigh}, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{40} Report on Jersey by Boylston A. Beal to Walter Hines Page, 27 April 1916, in the American Embassy in Berlin to the German Foreign Office, 6 May 1916, BABL, R 901/83081, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{44} Applegate and Potter, “Germans as the “People of Music”: Genealogy of an Identity,” pp. 17-18.
distinctly German. In the camps of the UK, it was their voices that echoed devotion to the nation rather than the report of their rifles.

Many of the camps’ musical activities were made possible by relief associations that acquired instruments and secured venues for performances. American YMCA representatives arrived in England in May 1915 and worked closely with Dr. K.E. Markel’s Prisoner of War Relief Agency to improve the prisoners’ spiritual and physical welfare. Markel’s agency provided musical instruments, clothing, and various tools while the YMCA oversaw the construction of social halls and huts inside the camps. In some cases, commandants allowed prisoners to use portions of existing structures as social and instructional centers. New arrivals could necessitate the use of the space for other purposes, and prisoners rarely felt as if donated facilities truly belonged to them. For these reasons, YMCA officials preferred to construct permanent social centers designated for community functions. Prisoners erected social huts and halls themselves, and the YMCA acquired building materials and financed operating costs such as heating and lighting once the centers were operational.45

Limited equipment availability restricted the prisoners’ musical repertoire, but most camps assembled an impressive array of instruments. Musicians at Handforth, for example, had access to violins, a cello, a string bass, an oboe, guitars, and a bassoon. The pianists among the prisoners were also able to rent playing time at a piano in the vicinity.46 Among the more popular events held at YMCA social clubs and other venues were Richard Wagner evenings that featured the composer’s classics. Other productions,

45 Taft, *Service with Fighting Men*, pp. 244-51.
such as the one held at Donington Hall in July 1916, included renditions of Mozart’s works and a variety of folk songs and military marches.\textsuperscript{47} In order to make participation in musical festivities easier, the British YMCA distributed prisoner songbooks filled with religious hymns and traditional German folksongs.\textsuperscript{48}

Camp choirs and ensembles consisted of both talented musicians and amateurs, but their performances reflected the values and ambitions of their members. Participants strove to demonstrate that their efforts had a deeper meaning than simply entertaining fellow prisoners. In an advertisement for a choral evening at the officers’ camp at Holyport in March 1918, organizers erased any doubts concerning their motivations by including a comment alongside the evening’s proposed musical lineup: “\textit{Wie einst im Kampf, so nun im Sang, der Heimat treu, das Leben lang}” (As once in battle, now in song, true to the homeland all life long).\textsuperscript{49} For both performers and spectators, musical events helped prisoners shed feelings of isolation and shame and build communities based on nationalism and camaraderie. It mattered little how long a given prisoner had been in a particular camp. The sensation of singing in unison can be binding, and with song and verse prisoners recognized each other as countrymen.

Physical expressions of camaraderie and strength were also popular in the camps of the UK, and once again, prisoners drew inspiration from German traditions of resistance. In the months following Napoleon’s crushing victory over the Prussian Army,

\textsuperscript{47} Program for “Konzert zu Donington Hall Sonntag, den 16 Juli 1916,” in Oberleutnant S., “Tagebuch begonnen im Juli 1916 zu Donington Hall [England-Derby], BAMA, MSg 1/602.
\textsuperscript{49} Holyport, March-June 1918, BAMA, MSg 200/681, p. 10. On choral activities at Holyport, see Ferdinand Friedensburg, \textit{Lebensinnerungen} (Frankfurt am Main & Bonn: Athenäum Verlag, 1969), pp. 87-89.
Friedrich Ludwig Jahn diligently worked to persuade his fellow Germans that the key to recovering their lost pride and morale was physical development. French dominance of the German lands, he asserted, was only possible because Germans had become “soft and effeminate.” In order to repel their conquerors, Germans would have to harden their bodies and regain the strength they had allowed to slip away. In other words, German men would have to recapture their manhood if Germany were to recover its losses. Thus, Jahn’s nationalism was intimately linked to an idealized notion of strong manhood, and the gymnastics movement he founded was seen as a forum for providing young men with preliminary military training, physical development, and an education in nationalism. An

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50 Snyder, *Roots of German Nationalism*, p. 61.
estimated 300 German gymnastics associations with 800,000-900,000 members thrived throughout the German lands by 1847, but only around 100 survived the reactionary era that followed the failed revolutions of the subsequent year. The movement experienced resurgence in the early 1860s, and in 1864 more than 167,900 men counted themselves as members of a gymnastics association.\(^5^1\)

Many gymnasts believed that they represented a barrier to weakness and passivity and sought to showcase their ability to defend the fatherland. The gymnastics movement grew remarkably in the decades after German unification, and by 1895 it had ballooned to more than half a million politically active athletes hoping to prop up their masculine image.\(^5^2\) From its inception, Jahn had conceptualized the gymnastics movement as a “training in manliness” that would create fearless soldiers ready to answer the call to arms on any occasion.\(^5^3\) Just over a century later, the movement’s emphasis on strength and nationalism was especially attractive to prisoners of war whose ability, or willingness, to defend the nation had been called into question with their surrender.

American YMCA representatives supplied even the smaller British camps with gymnastic equipment, and prisoners were eager to put it to use.\(^5^4\) A postwar chronicler of life at Handforth remembered that the camp’s equipment was equal to that of a good association in Germany, complete with a vaulting horse, springboards, horizontal bars, rings, and a trapeze. The physical quality of the gymnasts entering Handforth apparently diminished in the war’s later years as a result of food shortages and hardships of war, but

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\(^5^3\) Mosse, *The Image of Man*, pp. 44-5.
even these less impressive participants probably did not fail to recognize the symbolism of their activities.\textsuperscript{55} Photographs of gymnasts in several UK camps reveal that prisoners trained and performed in matching uniforms and attempted routines that demanded tremendous strength and agility. Complex maneuvers required prisoners to place incredible trust in their fellow gymnasts, which must have encouraged camaraderie among the athletes.\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Stobsiade} reported that the gymnastics association at Stobs was a testament to the maxim of the German gymnastics movement: “Fresh, Pious, Joyous, Free (\textit{frisch, fromm, fröhlich, frei}).” Discussing a recent gymnastics evening, editors claimed that the camp’s gymnasts performed with enthusiasm while training their minds and bodies and developing self-discipline and personal courage.\textsuperscript{57}

Although participants drew inspiration from the movement’s nationalist past, gymnasts emphasized their confidence that training would make them more productive citizens in postwar German society. In 1916 the Dorchester gymnastics association placed a telling advertisement in the camp newspaper under the heading “He who rests—rusts!” The ad reminded prisoners of their duty to sustain physical and spiritual strength in anticipation of the challenges that awaited them following repatriation.\textsuperscript{58} Even in captivity, prisoners realized that they might again be called on to serve the nation militarily. As a gymnast at Stobs recognized in April 1918, remaining fit for duty required prisoners to keep their bodies capable of resistance (\textit{wiederstandsfähig}) until their return to Germany.\textsuperscript{59}

\textsuperscript{56} See photos of gymnastic maneuvers in BAMA, MSg 201/1293.
\textsuperscript{57} “Turnen,” \textit{Stobsiade}, December 1916, Nr. 4, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{58} “Wer rastet—rostet,” \textit{Deutsche Blätter}, No. 3, 24 December 1916, MSg 201/467, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{59} “Vereine im Lager Stobs,” \textit{Stobsiade}, April 1918, No. 20, p. 4.
Fig. 10. Gymnasts in front of the YMCA hut at Leigh in Lancashire, BAMA, MSg 201/1293.

Fig. 11. Gymnastics Association, Stobs in Scotland, BAMA, MSg 201/1293.
Imprisoned gymnasts drew upon a specific tradition to display their nationalism and mend their shattered masculine image, but participants in other, less politicized, camp athletics shared similar goals. In a 1917 article on the content of letters taken from German prisoners following capture, a British correspondent warned readers against “attaching too great importance to the wailings of men, who, after all, may only be the weaklings of their units.”\(^{60}\) Courage and physical endurance were inextricably linked. It was often assumed that prisoners of war were among the worst physical specimens their armies had to offer. For men hoping to repair their sense of manhood, organized sports of all varieties offered a venue to flaunt strength and athletic prowess while reminding captors that the men they guarded were able bodied flight risks. Athletic training presented a forum for prisoners to counter their negative image, at least from a physical standpoint, while also preparing themselves to serve the homeland upon their return.

In the decades prior to the Great War, German society “rediscovered” the human body and physical beauty. The prewar youth movement combined physical education with the desire to experience unspoiled nature and the benefits of exposure to the sun’s light. A healthy figure was not only aesthetically pleasing; many contemporaries believed that the body was a reflection of the spirit.\(^{61}\) A well-built body spoke to the courageousness and character of the man who had sculpted and maintained it, and the relationship between physical exertion and the development of an admirable physique

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was well recognized. Sport remains, after all, a principal “definer of manhood in mass culture.”

Prisoners of all ranks accordingly placed high priority upon securing venues for physical activities. One of the simplest methods for staying in shape was taking extended marches outside of the camp’s confines. The War Office was initially cautious about allowing prisoners to stray beyond the barbed wire, even when accompanied by an escort. In September 1915, officers at Dyffryn Aled complained that their exercise grounds were inadequate. They proposed that they be allowed to hike outside the camp under the condition that they give their parole, or word of honor, not to attempt escape. Fears that locals might assault prisoners on parole prompted the commandant to deny the request.

The commandant’s concern for his prisoners’ safety was not the only obstacle facing captive officers. Military authorities expected prisoners to attempt escape if the opportunity presented itself, and prisoners who gave their parole relieved their captors of the responsibility of guarding them closely.

In April 1915, the Bavarian Kriegsministerium in Munich declared it dishonorable for a prisoner to give his word of honor not to escape or take up arms against the enemy, as no prisoner was permitted to behave in a manner that made him incapable of acting in the interest of Germany or its allies. Eventually, the British and German governments reached an agreement authorizing prisoners of rank to offer temporary parole in order to

62 Connell, Masculinities, p. 54.
63 Captain W., Dyffryn Aled, to The American Embassy in London, 14 September 1915 (Translation), in the American Ambassador in London to the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 4 October 1915, TNA, FO 383/34, pp. 8-10.
65 Kriegsministerium Communication Nr. 30573, 7 April 1915 (Betreff: Ehrenwortgabe kriegsgefangener Offiziere usw.), BHStA/IV, MilBev Berlin/35.
exercise outside the camp. A British officer accompanied prisoners on marches, but was unarmed and served only to prevent contact with local Britons. Before allowing prisoners to exit a camp’s gates, the British required officers to sign the following declaration:

I hereby promise and undertake that during the period I am permitted to leave this place of internment for the purpose of taking exercise I will make no attempt to escape, will make no preparation for a future attempt to escape, and will commit no act prejudicial to the British Empire or her Allies.66

This arrangement was beneficial to both prisoners and their captors. It afforded prisoners a much-needed change of scenery, and the British found the threat of suspending the privilege to be an effective means of maintaining discipline.

Inside the confines of a camp, sporting events took place on designated athletic fields, and prisoners took full advantage of the opportunity to compete. According to the editors of Deutsche Blätter, athletic associations “shot from the earth like mushrooms” at the Dorchester camp.67 Enlisted prisoners at Leigh similarly organized soccer matches, played a type of volleyball know as “fistball,” and swam in an on-site tank during the summer.68 At Shrewsbury in Shropshire, prisoners trained with dumbbells, boxed, and partook in “Sandow developers,” a series of exercises conceived by renowned bodybuilder and fitness celebrity Eugen Sandow (born Friedrich Wilhelm Müller) to attain muscular perfection.69 Officers at Donington Hall enjoyed access to 21,780 square

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67 “Sport und Bewegung,” Deutsche Blätter, No. 3, 24 December 1916, MSg 201/467, p. 3.
69 Report on Shrewsbury by Boylston A. Beal to Walter Hines Page, 29 May 1916, Enclosure No. 3 in United Kingdom, Parliament, Reports of Visits of Inspection, p. 6. On Eugen Sandow and the early history
yards of recreational grounds that featured multiple tennis courts. When not perfecting
their backhand, prisoners could also work out on rowing machines.  

Although most camps could not provide prisoners with the square yardage
available at Donington Hall, athletic events were popular throughout the UK. In most
camps, sport committees organized competitions and worked with aid associations to
secure athletic equipment. Red Cross and YMCA representatives furnished many of the
necessary supplies, but prisoners occasionally arranged fund drives inside the camps or
asked relatives to mail materials from Germany. In one of his early letters home, for
example, Lieutenant Ernst Ewald H. asked his parents to send soccer cleats, two pairs of
white shorts, his good sports shirt, and elastic stockings.  

For the most part, prisoners devoted significant time and effort to the organization
of athletic events. At Kegworth in Sutton Bonington, the camp recreational committee
drafted sports bylaws and served as an intermediary body between athletic clubs and
other recreational groups. One of the committee’s primary functions was to govern the
use of recreational fields by assigning time slots for practice. In many camps, this sort
of organizational scheme was necessary to accommodate the large number of sports
represented and the quantity of prisoners who wished to participate. Soccer was one of
the most popular activities available to prisoners. In 1917, more than 7,960 athletes at

of bodybuilding, see David L. Chapman, Sandow the Magnificent: Eugen Sandow and the Beginnings of
Bodybuilding (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).
70 Report on Donington Hall by Boylston A. Beal to Walter Hines Page, 27 March 1916, in the American
Embassy in Berlin to the German Foreign Office, 31 March 1916, BABL, R 901/83052, p. 2.
71 Taft, Service with Fighting Men, p. 253; Bogenstätter and Zimmermann, Die Welt hinter Stacheldraht, p.
192.
Handforth competed in 364 matches, but soccer players had to share field time with athletes from the rounders and field hockey clubs.\textsuperscript{74}

Whether prisoners competed as gymasts, weight lifters, or in soccer matches, they hoped their activities would make it possible for them to look after their minds and bodies so that they might contribute to German prosperity at war’s end.\textsuperscript{75} Several years after the war, a former Handforth prisoner argued that the leaders and sponsors of the camp’s athletic associations did a true service to the health of the nation by strengthening the prisoners and promoting “good German sense” and comradeship. He called attention to the more than 25,000 athletes who participated in soccer matches and over 33,000 gymnasts who performed on at least 500 separate occasions at Handforth and concluded, “with the physical and spiritual collapse of the German people, every healthy and capable young person is valuable.”\textsuperscript{76} Sports not only promoted health and stamina, they likewise improved morale. Endorphins released during physical activity promoted a heightened sense of contentment, which could help prevent the onset of “barbed wire disease.”\textsuperscript{77} In much the same way that Friedrich Ludwig Jahn had advised Germans to embrace physical development as a means of overcoming military humiliation in the early nineteenth-century, prisoners believed that they could not recover their manhood and sense of pride without rebuilding and maintaining their physical strength and endurance.

The reformers of Jahn’s generation placed great emphasis on physical strength, but they also realized that a well-built body was of little use if the mind was not equally

\textsuperscript{74} Bogenstätter and Zimmermann, \textit{Die Welt hinter Stacheldraht}, p. 194-96.
\textsuperscript{75} “Sport,” \textit{Stobsiade}, 5 November 1916, Nr. 2, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{76} Bogenstätter and Zimmermann, \textit{Die Welt hinter Stacheldraht}, pp. 202-03.
sound. The German education system was geared towards producing students who would become loyal and efficient servants of the state. This was especially true of the imperial period’s universities, where professors commonly delivered lectures that reinforced popular ideas about the correlation between manhood and sacrificial nationalism. As the Great War approached, German universities experienced a spike in enrollment as students from previously underrepresented backgrounds joined the academic community in increasing numbers. However, universities suffered serious enrollment declines when students volunteered for frontline service or auxiliary roles in war related fields after 1914. Although some students attempted to promote academic pursuits in the trenches by founding makeshift schools behind the frontlines, former students’ preoccupation with survival left little room for scholarship.

Despite the decline in the student population on the homefront and limited educational opportunities at the front, schools inside prisoner of war camps thrived. Prisoners considered scholarly endeavors to be a top priority, and they made a point of stressing how their studies stood to make them not only better individuals, but better Germans. In camps across the UK, prisoners organized classes in language study, military sciences, history, woodworking, and countless other subjects. Aside from giving prisoners a sense of accomplishment, completing courses could lead to new opportunities for wage earning and a sense of independence following repatriation. Upon Lieutenant Erich G.’s return to Germany from Scotland, for instance, he was able to forego his

80 For an evaluation of the war’s impact on German higher education, see Jarausch, Students, Society, and Politics in Imperial Germany, pp. 394-99.
apprenticeship and begin work immediately thanks to the training he received as a prisoner in the UK.\textsuperscript{81}

In civilian camps, a wealth of instructors and materials led to educational schemes that rivaled many university curricula.\textsuperscript{82} Fewer potential instructors limited the number of equally intensive programs in military camps, but military prisoners proved eager to take advantage of course offerings. Prisoners at Frongoch in Wales studied English, French, Spanish and Italian and also took classes in engineering, mathematics, drawing, and “instruction for railway men.”\textsuperscript{83} At Kegworth in Sutton Bonington, officers busied themselves with courses on “languages, political economy, engineering, and military science.” As a Swiss inspector noted, students of the military sciences had to be particularly creative due to the prohibition of military textbooks.\textsuperscript{84} Instructional materials available to camp schools came primarily from the British and American YMCAs and Dr. Markel’s Prisoners of War Relief Agency, but prisoners also received donations from the German homefront.\textsuperscript{85} Among the many organizations and individuals that contributed educational materials was the Deutscher Studentendienst 1914, which reached out to university students in captivity by attempting to supply them with “intellectual nourishment” in the form of scholarly literature.\textsuperscript{86}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[81]{Erich G., “Mit dem Tod auf Du und Du!” BAMA, MSg 201/610, p. 62.}
\footnotetext[82]{Taft, \textit{Service with Fighting Men}, pp. 253-4.}
\footnotetext[83]{Report on Frongoch by Boylston A. Beal to Walter Hines Page, 6 April 1916, in the American Embassy in Berlin to the German Foreign Office, 14 April, 1916, BABL, R 901/83067, p. 3.}
\footnotetext[84]{Report on Kegworth by F. Schwyzer and A.L. Vischer to Gaston Carlin, 24 March 1917, in Schweizerische Gesandschaft in Berlin to the Auswärtige Amt des Deutschen Reiches, 25 April 1917, BABL, R 901/83095, p. 6.}
\footnotetext[85]{Taft, \textit{Service with Fighting Men}, pp. 253-54; Bogenstätter and Zimmermann, \textit{Die Welt hinter Stacheldraht}, pp. 154-56; “An Unsere Leser in Deutschland,” \textit{Stobsiade}, Nr. 2, 19 September 1915, BAMA, MSg 201/821, p. 3.}
\footnotetext[86]{Jarausch, \textit{Students, Society, and Politics in Imperial Germany}, p. 398.}
\end{footnotes}
Two of the most successful camp schools were located at Stobs and Handforth, both of which were larger camps with sizeable populations to draw upon. Prisoners began taking classes at Stobs in June 1915, and the following year approximately 1,200 prisoners enrolled in the camp’s courses. German instructors at Stobs offered a diverse curriculum, including foreign language training, bookkeeping, history, geography, statistics, and zoology. By January 1917, a staff of sixty-seven instructors oversaw the educational pursuits of more than 3,600 prisoners in the camp’s compounds. At Handforth, students studied German history, social studies, art history, stenography, foreign languages, mathematics, and agricultural sciences such as animal husbandry and agricultural chemistry. Handforth’s first course offerings in winter 1915-16 drew 1,300 students from a prisoner population of 2,500. Enrollments peaked in summer 1918, when 2,355 students registered for places in forty-nine courses. At the time, the facility held approximately 2,600 prisoners, meaning that more than ninety percent of Handforth’s population was enrolled at the camp school.

Camp courses were a serious affair, and some of the more advanced students from across the UK had the opportunity to work with British professors in a university extension scheme organized by the YMCA and Cambridge University. Beginning in late 1916, seventy-five professors advised around 150 German students. For extension program students and camp school participants alike, preparing for the future allowed prisoners to look past the despondency of their situation and envision new lives as part of postwar German society. They realized that regardless of victory or defeat, the homeland

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88 Bogenstätter and Zimmermann, Die Welt hinter Stacheldraht, pp. 162-64.
89 Taft, Service with Fighting Men, p. 252.
they returned to would be irrevocably altered by the experience of war. The editors of 
Stobsiade considered their camp school the fulfillment of a duty to live for the fatherland 
that so many comrades had bled and died to defend. They believed postwar Germany 
would need courageous men with “honest hearts and clear eyes” and reasoned that 
educational pursuits strengthened their bond with the nation. 
After all, the editors 
continued, prisoners could only fulfill their mission if they possessed at least a general 
understanding of the workings of the German state and national economy. The 
outbreak of war had led to a surge in patriotic instruction in German universities. Camp 
schools were equally interested in cultivating a sense of nationalism among the 
students. At Stobs, for instance, school organizers openly professed their hope that the 
instruction prisoners received in captivity could mold them into “conscious carriers” of 
German nationalism.

Prisoners were eager to share news of their scholarship with loved ones in 
Germany. Doing so dispelled the notion that prisoners waited in comfortable idleness 
while soldiers at the front continued to suffer and die. In 1915, a prisoner at Donington 
Hall explained to his wife that he had little to report concerning camp life except that he 
was “very busy learning Spanish and English.” He went on inform her that the camp 
population had a “tremendous zeal” for languages and contained “perfect experts” in 
English, French, Turkish, Russian, Danish, Spanish, and Japanese. After describing the 
castle’s artistic life, he closed his letter with the assurance “we understand how to make 

90 “Die Lagerschule,” Stobsiade, Nr. 5, January 1917, BAMA, MSg 201/821, p. 1.  
91 “Die Lagerschule,” Stobsiade, Nr. 5, January 1917, BAMA, MSg 201/821, p. 2.  
92 Jarausch, Students, Society, and Politics in Imperial Germany, p. 397.  
93 “Die Lagerschule,” Stobsiade, Nr. 5, January 1917, p. 3.  

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use of our time as well as we can.”94 Another prisoner, Friedrich S., frequently wrote of the agricultural manuals and educational offerings available to him, free of charge, at Stobs in Scotland. The manner in which he discussed his agricultural studies suggested that he had not had similar opportunities in Germany, and he planned to take full advantage of the camp’s resources. For Friedrich S., course work was more than a means of passing the time, as he assured his family that he hoped to put his “mental work” (Kopfarbeit) to good use at a later date.95

Skills acquired in camp schools could also be used in attempts to effect escape. Following his flight from a transport train bound for Holyport, Heinz H.E. Justus planned to return to Germany aboard a Spanish steamer since he had studied Spanish in a camp school.96 Whether using the education received as a prisoner to attempt escape or prepare for the future, by attentively working to acquire new talents, prisoners showed British authorities that their spirits had not been broken. They likewise hoped to make a statement to the homefront about their intentions of returning to Germany as productive citizens. As the editors of Stobsiade wrote, educational pursuits were designed with an eye towards helping the homefront recognize that schools were not simply a “useful pastime, but honest German work, work for the future (Zukunftsarbeit) in the best sense of the word.”97

95 Friedrich S., Stobs, to Wilhelm S., Dissen am Teutoburgerwald, 14 August 1917, Special Collections Research Center, Morris Library, Southern Illinois University Carbondale (hereafter SCRC), Friedrich S. Collection (hereafter FSC), 219/1/1. For further discussion’s of Friedrich S.’s agricultural studies and plans for the future, see Friedrich S., Stobs, to Heinrich S., Hannover, 10 August 1917, and Friedrich S., Stobs, to Heinrich S., Hannover, 20 July 1917, SCRC, FSC, 219/1/1.
97 “Zukunfts-Arbeit,” Stobsiade, 5 November 1916, Nr. 2, p. 3.
Camp schools were not the only venues for prisoners to sharpen their minds. Barbed wire disease was a serious threat to the emotional health of any man who had been in captivity for an extended period, and thwarting depression was one of the primary reasons that prisoners participated in and attended camp theatrical productions. In his study of prisoner of war theater in Russia, Alon Rachamimov argues that camp theaters combated physical and mental decay among both performers and their audiences. Additionally, theaters allowed officers to recreate a “prewar sense of comfort, power, and self worth.”\(^98\) As the foremost postwar chronicler of prisoner theater, Hermann Pörzgen, wrote in 1933, camp theater promoted communal experiences and spawned new interests, topics of conversation, and memories.\(^99\) Theaters, it seems, permitted prisoners to reconnect with the comforts of their prewar identities. German prisoners of the British discussed their theatrical activities in letters and diaries less frequently than their counterparts behind the eastern front, but prisoner of war stages in the UK appear to have served a similar purpose.

Much like concerts and sporting activities, theatrical productions were extremely popular events where prisoners could socialize and exhibit a degree of cultural refinement in captivity. Between 1914-19, enlisted prisoners in the UK founded at least twenty-seven theatres, and officers oversaw the activities of nine additional stage companies.\(^100\) Theatres appeared in British camps early on, but participants faced significant obstacles keeping their stages operational. At officers’ camps, where prisoners had a disposable income, viewers often kept theaters afloat by paying admission or a monthly membership


\(^{100}\) Pörzgen, \textit{Theater ohne Frau}, pp. 166-87.
fee. Enlisted prisoners relied more heavily on equipment donations from the YMCA or Dr. Markel’s aid association. Working prisoners likewise received salaries for their labor, but much of their earnings went towards purchasing supplemental food items. In order to accommodate prospective viewers of various means, the Handforth theater opened its doors to all prisoners but charged a fee for the best seats in the house.\(^\text{101}\) With the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare, shortages in leather, paper, and other materials needed for costumes and scenery created additional challenges for theatrical troops attempting to achieve high-quality performances with limited resources.\(^\text{102}\)

Despite these difficulties, captive thespians delivered thousands of memorable performances that positively affected the prisoners’ reality by offering the temporary diversion of a fictional world. Participants busied themselves with the production and rehearsal of shows, as well as the preparation of programmes and advertisements for events. In some camps, theater was so popular that prisoners founded multiple theater companies. The theater was an important staple of German cultural and social life, and across the UK, camp companies presented an assortment of original works and German classics, including *Johannisfeuer* (Midsummer’s Eve), *Wallensteins Lager* (Wallenstein’s Camp), *Rosenmontag* (Rose Monday), *Alt Heidelberg* (Old Heidelberg), *Die Spanische Fliege*, (Spanish Fly) and scenes from Goethe’s *Faust*. Actors and production staff attached great meaning to their work. Costumes, which British authorities allowed only

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\(^\text{101}\) Pörzgen, *Theater ohne Frau*, p. 28-32.

after actors gave their word of honor not to use the disguises in escape attempts, reflected the participants’ dedication to suspending the audience’s sense of reality.103

Viewing or performing in theatrical productions offered an escape from the realities of camp life and gave prisoners reason to smile. Taking part in a camp production not only allowed prisoners to recall the comforts of their prewar lives, it also offered the opportunity to assume a new identity, or a fictional persona whose existence had not been shaken by the experiences of surrender and captivity. Preparing for a performance was a group effort, and performers took great enjoyment in helping each other into costume and makeup prior to the show. A photograph taken during pre-show preparations at Stobs captures prisoners in top hats, suit vests and drag applying cosmetics and styling hair as a crowd of fellow performers looks on with delight. The photograph gives no indication that the performers were prisoners who were quite possibly battling depression and struggling with feelings of inadequacy. Their expressions reveal not even a hint of their psychological baggage, and if not for the photo’s label it would be impossible to discern that the performers were prisoners.104

The ability to help prisoners forget the perils of their situation was perhaps the greatest advantage of camp theatres, and viewers benefited from performances immensely. A winter storm prevented William Whiting, a visitor to Frongoch, from attending a concert and play, “for which the best talents of the camp were commandeered” during the 1915 holiday season. Much to his disappointment, Whiting arrived on the scene as the play came to an end, but despite the rain and driving wind

103 Pörzgen, Theater ohne Frau, p.27. For lists of popular productions in the UK, see Pörzgen’s appendices, pp. 166-87.
104 Photo labeled “Stobs beim Schminken und Frisieren,” BAMA, MSg 201/1319.
outside, he noted that in the play’s aftermath “it was easy to detect that the atmosphere was one of cheerfulness and hilarity.”105

In an environment often entirely lacking women, theatrical performances affected the camp atmosphere in another significant way. Prisoners, who would have ranged in age from approximately 17-45, often suffered tremendously from the deficiency of female company. This was a problem in most of the Great War’s prison camps. Although prisoners in some camps managed to smuggle local women into their compounds or arrange meetings outside the barbed wire, contact with females was limited.106 In his investigation of “barbed wire disease,” Dr. Vischer argued that prisoners attempted to overcome their sexual difficulties by decorating their surroundings

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with “suggestive pictures” and frequently discussing sexual topics. To be sure, suggestive artwork sometimes appeared in camp publications. At Holyport, a postwar camp publication commemorating *Fasching* contained a rendering of a prisoner bowing before an alluring woman in carnival attire, as well as a separate piece depicting three naked women, one straddling a chair, one climbing a pole, and another sitting atop a slab of meat with legs spread wide.

Vischer maintained that prisoners found another outlet for their sexual frustrations in the theater. The appearance of female impersonators on stage offered prisoners at least the illusion of a womanly presence in the camp, and impersonators seemed to understand the function they served for their audience. Impersonators served as the only representation of feminine comfort available to many prisoners for the duration of their captivity. It was essential that impersonators maintain the illusion of femininity by perfecting their costumes and softening their voices so that viewers might allow themselves to believe that a woman, with all her charms, stood before them on stage. The vision of a female presence could make it possible for prisoners to psychologically escape their camps. A former prisoner from Oswestry in Shropshire recalled that the camp’s theater featured all varieties of femininity, from teenagers to angry mother in

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108 *Faschingszeitung Holyport* 1919, March 1919, BAMA, MSg 200/681, pp. 3-5.


laws. The results of hours of make-up and costume preparation, he contended, made it possible for viewers to forget that they were in a prison camp theater.\textsuperscript{111}

Prisoners at Brocton likewise enjoyed the illusions of femininity presented on the camp stage and paid homage to the accessory that made it all possible—the corset. A publication commemorating the camp theater’s second anniversary included a short song praising the corset’s ability to make the “ladies” of the stage attractive by giving bulky men a figure as slim as a stiletto. A corset, the song continued, could bring to light a man’s inner Venus and complete the likeness of a proper damsel. An accompanying illustration revealed three prisoners working in unison to tighten the corset laces of a fellow prisoner with voluminous lips and still larger simulated breasts.\textsuperscript{112} Even if prisoners wrote the corset song in jest, its publication reveals that female impersonators and their associates went to great lengths to maintain the impression of a female presence on stage.

For other prisoners, female fantasies were less important. It would be absurd to presume that there were no homosexual relationships in a population as large as that of the German prisoners in the UK, but in an era when society ruthlessly persecuted gay men for their lifestyle, prisoners rarely spoke of “abnormal” sexual practices in their diaries or letters home. Vischer claimed that among prisoners of war “homosexual practices [were] not as frequent as might be imagined” and suggested that “mutual self-abuse” probably


\textsuperscript{112} “Das Lied vom Korsett,” in Festschrift des Deutschen Theaters Broctonlager, BAMA, M$\text{g}$ 201/555, pp. 16-17. Moreover,
took place more often. Still, he conceded that some of the camps he visited had experienced “homosexual epidemics,” particularly during the earlier phases of the war.\footnote{Vischer, \textit{Barbed Wire Disease}, p. 42.}

![Fig. 13. “Actresses” at Brocton, BAMA, MSg 201/1319](image)

Officers imprisoned in Russia reportedly believed that by perfecting their skills as female impersonators, performers could effectively check the outbreak of these “epidemics” by preserving the “image of woman.” Drag performances could be seen as a challenge to social norms regarding appropriate male behavior, but many former prisoners preferred to overlook this detail and portray theater as a barrier to the onset of homosexual activity.\footnote{Rachamimov, “The Disruptive Comforts of Drag,” pp. 379-82.} After all, Europeans had historically accepted the stage as a “safe” space where actors were permitted to violate class and gender norms for the sake of their art without fear of reproach.\footnote{Marjorie Garber, \textit{Vested Interests: Cross Dressing & Cultural Anxiety} (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 32-7.} Drag performances took place among, and for, the highest circles of German society. In 1908 the head of the military cabinet, Dietrich
von Hülsen, reportedly dropped dead of a heart attack as he danced for the Kaiser—while wearing a tutu and feather hat. German prisoners who spent time in the UK left fewer indicators of their views on the role of drag performers in camp life than their Russian counterparts, but there was no shortage of men willing to slip into costume and assume the persona of a female character.

Nor do they appear to have accepted their roles reluctantly or with any degree of embarrassment. The number of female impersonators active on the stages of the UK and their willingness to be photographed in drag suggests that at the very least, the practice was an accepted part of the camp environment. This is not surprising when one considers that transvestite theater is common in many cultures, even more so in situations where women are unavailable to fill female roles. Theaters have existed in prisoner of war camps since at least the eighteenth century. Since women are generally absent from camps, the practice of male prisoners taking on female roles has existed for just as long. Cross-dressing for theatrical roles was common in virtually all of the Great War’s prison camps, including those for civilians. Moreover, camp impersonators were not participating in any activity that was not also taking place among soldiers in makeshift theaters along the battlefront. Theatrical productions were extremely fashionable on all segments of the Western Front, with German soldiers organizing stages

in at least 520 locations. On both sides of the lines, soldiers assumed female personas, and although authorities were not always entirely comfortable with the practice, cross-dressing was a necessary and accepted component of frontline theater. More research is needed to determine whether prisoners in the UK viewed drag performers as deterrents to the development of “abnormal” relationships, but the impersonators’ devotion to the craft suggests that they were important personalities in the prisoners’ world.

That world, as we have seen, was a world in which prisoners sought to redeem themselves by framing their activities in the larger context of national service. Theater attendance, athletics, and military history courses were not an instant cure for the guilt and shame of captivity, and there was no watershed moment when the prisoners of the UK collectively decided to confront their insecurities head on. With prisoners leaving for neutral internment and new captives taking their place, the composition of the UK’s prisoner population was constantly changing. Since the process of coming to terms with one’s surrender and captivity differed for every prisoner, a given camp simultaneously held men consciously working toward the future and others unable to see past the shame of their capture.

H.M. Hall visited several early prison ships anchored off England’s Southend as a correspondent for the *New York World*. He reported that while not all of the prisoners he encountered had proper uniforms; each had managed to hold on to something that denoted his status as a soldier. As Hall toured the prison ships, the captives on deck

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snapped to attention “with hatred frozen in their faces” and preformed drills that “would have made the finest company that West Point ever turned out go green with envy.”

Evidently, these prisoners were eager to convey that they remained proud soldiers despite their capture, but other prisoners Hall came across seemed less sure of themselves. When he conducted interviews below decks, he found “in most instances they (the prisoners) turned their eyes away as if horribly ashamed of having been taken prisoner.”

Camp veterans understood that having a meaningful life in captivity required an adjustment period. In July 1917, the appearance of new prisoners prompted the editors of Stobsiade to remind readers that new arrivals faced long, hazy days of no substance. If they wanted to overcome the despondency of their situation, however, they would have to realize that working for the future through organized camp activities was the only hope of salvation. British authorities were likewise aware of the significance of camp activities, and commandants used the threat of revoking privileges as a disciplinary tool. Unruliness could lead to the cancellation of planned events and hikes outside the compound. Moreover, commandants did not hesitate to punish prisoners for the mistreatment of British soldiers in Germany with harsh restrictions on camp recreational life. When the War Office took exception to the poor treatment of British prisoners in the 10th Army Corps district in Germany, it ordered commandants in the Northern Command to restrict prisoner access to newspapers, confiscate all musical instruments, forbid

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121 Forwarded copy of an article to be published in New York World by H.M. Hall, in James W. Gerard to von Jagow, Imperial Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 1 March 1915, BABL, R 901/83825, p. 8.
122 “Lagerchronik,” Stobsiade, July 1917, Nr. 12, p. 3.
outdoor games, and seize “all national flags, maps, pictures of German and Allied Sovereigns, Commanders and Notabilities,” among other restrictions.\(^{123}\)

Retributions of this nature hit prisoners where it hurt the most. Their identity as representatives of German character and soldiers dedicated to the homeland’s future depended on the expressive outlets offered by camp organizations and the ability to surround themselves with national symbols. The prisoners intended for their endeavors to send a message to the homefront and their captors. Although the British surely took notice of these undertakings, camp officials were usually content to grant the prisoners significant freedom as long as the men did not violate censorship restrictions or become too boisterous. After all, allowing captives to celebrate holidays and occupy themselves with sports and scholarship suggested that the British treated their prisoners with dignity and were tolerant of the enemy’s patriotic impulses. British authorities recognized that a contented prisoner population was easier to administer than an angry one, and harsh restrictions appear to have been infrequent and brief.

CONCLUSIONS: A QUESTION OF MEANING

In many ways, the activities organized inside the camps of the UK differed little from those that the soldiers had participated in while on duty in reserve lines at the front. Frontline soldiers published trench newspapers, staged plays, held choral evenings, and took part in scores of athletic events. These pursuits helped soldiers cope with the pressures of life in the trenches and passed the time in what could be a monotonous

environment when major attacks were not underway. One could argue that camp pastimes served the same function for prisoners of war. Relieving boredom was certainly a catalyst for the organization of camp activities. Yet as Victor Turner observed, “all human activity is impregnated with meaning,” and it was the meaning the prisoners attached to their camp pursuits that set them apart.\(^\text{124}\)

J. Davidson Ketchum, who had experienced wartime internment as a civilian, made the case that “ritual and ceremony, though technically superfluous, are of deep psychological importance; by dramatizing man’s petty activities they rescue them from insignificance and endow them with dignity and value.”\(^\text{125}\) In the case of the German prisoners in the UK, Ketchum’s analysis could not have been more accurate. Surrender forced prisoners to reevaluate how they might serve their country, and their deployment to a new theater of war required that they ascribe new meaning to familiar activities. For many prisoners, organized camp pursuits became the core of their identity. Without celebrations of the Kaiser’s birthday or choral evenings, prisoners were simply vanquished warriors in enemy custody. By carrying out familiar rituals from home and the front, prisoners made a clear statement about their nationalism and loyalty to the war effort, which helped rebuild their sense of manhood and made it difficult for critics to charge that prisoners were little better than deserters. Camp pursuits enabled prisoners to resurrect their masculine identity, and, as Ketchum suggested, restore a sense of dignity to their daily lives. Moreover, prisoners saw camp organizations as a means of ensuring

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\(^{125}\) Ketchum, *Ruhleben*, p. 229.
that they would return home mentally and physically sound, confident that they had represented themselves, and their country, well on enemy soil.

When separated from the battlefield and homefront, prisoners attempted to reconstruct their identities as soldiers in the service of a greater cause with expressions of German nationalism, strength, and a concern for Germany’s future. Although “real” men supposedly did not surrender, the prisoners of the UK showed that the ideas about service, duty and appropriate male behavior that had influenced their lives prior to capture also shaped their response to life in captivity. They may have surrendered, but with few exceptions, they had not betrayed their comrades or nation at arms. On the contrary, prisoners had dedicated their lives in captivity to reestablishing their strained bonds with the national community. When news of the German Army’s collapse in November 1918 reached the prison camps of the UK, prisoners likely mourned defeat but welcomed the opportunity to demonstrate their dedication to rebuilding a strong Germany. Wartime captivity had been filled with uncertainties, but prisoners had always been sure that whether the war ended in victory or defeat, peace would bring their release. What they soon realized was that although the conflict that had shaken their self-image and stolen their freedom had ended, their ordeal was far from over. As the German government disintegrated and revolution spread throughout the country, prisoners in the UK remained isolated from their families and defeated nation, with no indication of when they might finally be reunited with the homeland.
CHAPTER 5—PRISONERS OF PEACE: THE POSTWAR CAPTIVITY EXPERIENCE

In early November 1918, revolution spread from the northern port city of Kiel to the German interior, carrying with it feelings of discontent that would eventually destroy the Kaiserreich. On 9 November Prince Max von Baden, the last chancellor of Imperial Germany, announced Kaiser Wilhelm II’s abdication and officially recognized the government of Friedrich Ebert’s Social Democrats. Two days later, with the Kaiser in Dutch exile, a German delegation acknowledged Germany’s military defeat with the signing of the armistice at Compiègne. For millions of German soldiers on the Western Front, the armistice brought about the commencement of demobilization. Yet for the prisoners in British custody, the end of hostilities brought no such hope for a prompt homecoming. Regardless of when prisoners had fallen into enemy hands, they likely expected the war’s end to be followed by a timely release from captivity. Much to the prisoners’ dismay, the Allies determined that general repatriation was a matter to be addressed during formal peace negotiations and opted to delay prisoner release until after the proceedings had been concluded.

This chapter examines the prisoners’ responses to postwar captivity and the German homefront’s efforts, and ultimate failure, to expedite the prisoners’ release. In

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the postwar era, prisoners initially focused on keeping their minds and bodies sound for life after repatriation. As months passed without any indication of when the British might begin repatriation, prisoners became restless over the uncertainty of their future. Would there be a position for them in the army, navy, or with their former employers when they returned home? How had the revolution affected their families? How would the homefront and fellow soldiers view prisoners who had chosen surrender over fighting to the death? These were only a few of the questions that occupied prisoners’ thoughts and revived old insecurities. While they designed camp activities to reestablish a connection to the homeland and strengthen their masculine image, the uncertainty surrounding their repatriation or postwar future made the prisoners’ sense of detachment and helplessness increasingly acute.

Nonetheless, prisoners once again channeled their energies and launched a campaign to expose the impracticality of delaying repatriation. In Germany, the prisoners’ friends and families likewise demanded the immediate return of all prisoners of war from the victorious powers. Although the Ebert government legitimately wanted to hasten the prisoners’ release, officials faced with financial crisis and military impotence were powerless to force their former enemies to hand over captives until they were prepared to do so. Thus, for the Germans in the UK, the war continued in a very real sense. Prisoners remained separated from their families in economically and politically uncertain times and could only speculate as to when they might escape the barbed wire and stigma of captivity.
WAR WITHOUT END: THE UNWANTED ENCORE

Between 6 August and 11 November 1918, more than 185,000 prisoners surrendered to the British in France.² The BEF employed a majority of these prisoners on the continent, but officers and the severely wounded made their way to the camps and hospitals of the UK to await repatriation. Already in late July, approximately 62,880 prisoners inhabited at least 495 camps in the British Isles. The influx of prisoners taken during the German Army’s collapse meant that as the war concluded, more German soldiers than ever populated the British camps.³ According to The Times, by 12 March 1919, the War Office held approximately 99,684 German military prisoners in England.⁴

Prisoners reacted to news of the armistice with a combination of relief and despair. The silencing of the Western Front meant prisoners could look forward to an inevitable homecoming, but thoughts of returning home had to be balanced against recognition that the war had been lost. After more than two years of captivity at Dorchester, Karl K., an enlisted man, wrote to his parents that the German people had finally taken the steps necessary to end the nation’s suffering. He saw no shame in defeat and argued that even the enemy recognized the hardships that the German homefront and

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³ “Royal Defence Corps Memorandum re. Reductions in strength during the last 6 months and Duties performed and hours of work,” 27 July 1918, TNA, HO 144/1450/309852, p. 2. It is difficult to calculate exactly how many of the prisoners captured in August-November 1918 wound up in the UK, but British records indicate that at least 4,000 officers were taken in France during that period, all of whom would have been sent across the English channel. See War Office, Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire, p. 632.
⁴ “German War Prisoners: Over 113, 000 in England on March 12,” The Times, 15 March 1919, pg. 7. Other prisoners, of course, had already been exchanged on medical grounds, interned in the Netherlands or Switzerland, or transferred to France for employment in prisoner labor battalions.
military had endured for more than four years. At the officers’ camp at Skipton in North Yorkshire, cheers of jubilation among the guard staff provided the first indications that the war had ground to a halt. When it became clear that Germany had been defeated, prisoners “cried like children” in response to what was unfolding around them. Hearing news of the military defeat, however, was only the beginning of their disappointment.

The Hague Convention vaguely stipulated that at the conclusion of peace, “the repatriation of prisoners shall be carried out as quickly as possible.” As determined by the conditions of the armistice, German authorities began repatriating Allied prisoners almost immediately. By 15 January 1919 Secretary of State Matthias Erzberger announced that with the exception of the ill and wounded, the Allied prisoners of war had departed German soil. The armistice nullified wartime treaties regarding prisoner exchange and internment, which left the Allies under no obligation to release prisoners promptly. With large numbers of prisoners employed in the UK and on the continent, the British and French opted to delay repatriation primarily out of economic considerations.

The armistice likewise precipitated the series of events that would lead to the arrival of the last prisoners to be held in the UK. The victorious powers divided the German submarine fleet only weeks after the Western Front fell silent, and the armistice dictated that the German surface fleet be interned in a neutral or Allied port until its fate could be decided at Versailles. The fleet left Wilhelmshaven under the leadership of Admiral Ludwig von Reuter on 19 November, and just over a week later, more than

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6 Sachsse and Cossmann, Kriegsgefangen in Skipton, p. 123.
8 Hinz, Gefangen im Großen Krieg, p. 332.
9 Speed, Prisoners, Diplomats, and the Great War, pp. 174-75.
seventy German ships were interned in the northern British port of Scapa Flow. The skeleton crews of approximately 4,800 sailors and officers who stayed in Scapa Flow to maintain the vessels were not technically prisoners of war, but as will be seen, they would end their time in the UK with that distinction.\textsuperscript{10}

Although the decision to retain captives was not malicious, the prisoners’ inability to demobilize with their frontline comrades served as another reminder that surrender had severed their relationship to other soldiers and the homeland. In the weeks following the armistice, prisoners learned of the Allies’ intention to postpone repatriation, and they understood that they would not be reunited with their families for months to come. In late November, prisoner Ludwig G. drafted a letter from the working camp at Woodford to inform his parents that he would be spending another Christmas and New Year in England. He assumed the camp would celebrate in much the same way it had the previous year, a painful prospect for a prisoner who had expected only weeks earlier that he would be at home with his family for the holidays.\textsuperscript{11} Delayed repatriation not only postponed family reunions, it made it difficult for some prisoners to physically recover from their experiences at war. Lieutenant Hans K. was wounded in June 1917 and spent months in recovery before being transferred to Kegworth in Sutton Bonnington. In a January 1919 letter to relatives in the United States, he explained that he needed further surgery on his back and hoped that the Allies would release the “poor prisoners of war” soon. He appears to have already lost faith in his government’s ability to speed the repatriation process. It was President Woodrow Wilson, with the support of the


\textsuperscript{11} Ludwig G., Working Camp at Woodford (Parent Camp Dorchester), to his Family, Rain am Lech, 29 November 1918, APC.
Democratic Party, who he felt confident would at least secure the release of sick and wounded prisoners “as soon as possible.”

The general sense of shock over Germany’s loss and uncertainty over the prisoners’ fate brought organized activities to a temporary halt in many camps. At Skipton, prisoners cancelled regularly scheduled hikes outside the camp because they could not tolerate the stares from locals beaming with pride in their national victory. In time, prisoners realized that Germany’s defeat was largely inconsequential for much of what they had hoped to accomplish through their camp pursuits. The war was lost, but prisoners could still make a statement by expressing their solidarity with the homefront and continuing to improve themselves mentally and physically for life in the “new” Germany. With thousands of prisoners arriving from the Western Front throughout November, organized activities and celebrations resumed in the months following the armistice, although many facilities experienced decreased participation in certain activities. This trend only worsened after peace had been officially concluded.

A great deal of informal discussion of events on the homefront took place in the camps of the UK. Prisoners often debated whether Germany should be a monarchy or republic. Among the enlisted men, there were doubtlessly those who welcomed the fall of the old order and the opportunities that might be available under a new democratic government. There was more mourning of the Kaiser’s abdication among the ranks of the captive officers who shared a special relationship with their commander in chief and

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12 Hans K., Kegworth, to Harry K., New York, 31 January 1919, APC.
held a place of privilege in Wilhelm II’s Germany.\textsuperscript{15} The Kaiser’s birthday had always been an occasion for prisoners to celebrate national pride and honor their commander. On the Kaiser’s first postwar birthday, the senior officer at Skipton took the opportunity to remind his men that although the Kaiser no longer held power, Wilhelm II was to still be honored as a shining example of true patriotism.

In his address, the camp senior conceded that many characteristics of the Germany his fellow officers remembered were relics of the past. Yet he was determined that his men not lose sight of their loyalties, insisting that they vigorously defend the exiled Kaiser against the “shameless attacks of the triumphant enemy.” Even after the end of hostilities, the camp senior saw his captors as foes, and he considered it a “sacred duty” to hold the Kaiser’s name “pure and unstained” before the entire world. As far as the officer was concerned, his men could best honor the Kaiser through continued work for the welfare and success of the German people. Military defeat had not blunted the senior’s nationalist sentiments, and he concluded his message by encouraging each of his men to remember “you are a German.” The Kaiser’s exile seemed to strengthen the prisoners’ bond with their fallen leader. The camp senior called attention to the fact that the Kaiser would be celebrating his 60\textsuperscript{th} birthday “alone and abandoned, far from the homeland.”\textsuperscript{16} As a prisoner, it was not difficult for the officer to put himself in the Kaiser’s place, and the parallels between his description of Wilhelm II’s birthday in exile and his own emotional state are difficult to overlook.

\textsuperscript{15} See, for example, the religious services commemorating the Kaiser’s 1919 birthday at the officers’ camp at Wakefield. Hans Schmidt, \textit{Aus der Gefangenschaft: Predigten gehalten im Offiziers-Gefangenenlager Lofthousepark bei Wakefield in England} (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1919), pp. 117-22.
For many prisoners, remembering that they were German meant continuing to improve themselves through organized camp activities. Scholastic endeavors remained popular throughout the war, and most camps maintained active schools after the conflict’s conclusion. The school at Handforth offered fifty courses in winter 1918-19, and while attendance dropped off from the previous semester, more than 1,900 students enrolled in classes. Instruction likewise continued at Skipton, where several officers who had been pulled away from their studies during the war worked towards diplomas. Other prisoners attended lectures on a host of subjects, including “Germany’s Financial Situation after the War” and “The Peace Treaty and the German Army.” As one of the camps founded late in the war, Oswestry did not develop a proper curriculum until February 1919. When courses began the following month, approximately 2,400 prisoners enrolled, which overwhelmed the school’s directors and prompted the addition of several new courses to accommodate eager students. The Oswestry school embraced the timeless motto “knowledge is power,” and students saw their studies as a means of maintaining mental strength. The prisoners’ devotion to education impressed outside observers. In an article published weeks after the armistice, a Swedish visitor to a British camp discovered that prisoners had used every available room for the learning of new subjects. He was struck by their industriousness and proclaimed “the diligence of these German prisoners of war, their pursuit to expand their knowledge, and their utilization of time made a deep impression on me. It is highly characteristic of the German spirit.”

17 Bogenstätter and Zimmermann, Die Welt hinter Stacheldraht, p. 164.
18 Sachsse and Cossmann, Kriegsgefangen in Skipton, pp. 169-78.
19 Das Kriegsgefangenenlager Oswestry-Westlager, pp. 51-53.
20 “Disziplin der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen in England,” Reichsbote, 27 November 1918, Clipping located in BABL, R 901/54430.
The sustained success of camp activities also impressed other official visitors who noticed that organized pursuits’ protection against “barbed wire disease” became even more important in the postwar months. After a visit to Dorchester in March 1919, Swiss inspectors reported that theatrical productions were still in full swing and noted “one may indeed wonder how it is possible after 4 ½ years of captivity for prisoners of war to rejoice and arrange theatrical performances, but it shows a will to live which is just as well.” In reality, camp schools and theatrical performances showed more than a will to live, they demonstrated the prisoners’ desire to retain their capacity to be productive citizens. When A.L. Vischer released his 1919 study of captivity, *Barbed Wire Disease*, he predicted that many prisoners of war would return home with a “damaged mentality” and therefore threaten Europe’s collective psychological health. Prisoners believed that coursework and camp theater were important to the prevention of mental illness. Their continued pursuits in these fields revealed a determination to hold on to their ability to care for themselves, a central component of a healthy sense of manhood.

Athletic competitions continued to find devoted participants and spectators after the armistice as well. The Holyport sport commission sponsored a weeklong festival that featured track and field events, hockey, a pentathlon, gymnastics, and a separate competition for the camp’s orderlies. Prisoners at Ripon in North Yorkshire preferred hand-to-hand competition and organized an extended athletic festival in which officers competed in pugilism and wrestling. Perhaps eager to hone the skills they learned in the trenches, Ripon’s officers also participated in a grenade-throwing contest—for distance.

21 Report on Dorchester by A. de Sturler and R. de Sturler, 7 April 1919, BABL, R 901/83055, p. 3.
23 See the program for the event at Holyport between 26 May and 8 June 1919, in BAMA, MSg 201/654.
Gymnastics participation fell off at Handforth after November 1918, but the camp’s soccer program expanded considerably in the postwar era. In the ten months that the camp remained operational in 1919, more than 9,500 prisoners took part in 369 matches, with figures for both participants and games played exceeding all previous totals. In spring of that year, players from the camp at Leigh traveled to Handforth for a series of matches that drew almost 2000 spectators. Months later, prisoners challenged Handforth’s guard staff to a soccer match. Despite a Scottish officer’s efforts to organize the meeting, it never took place. 

During the war, prisoners realized that they might have to rely on physical strength and abilities to support themselves when they returned home. The economic and political upheaval that followed Germany’s defeat made this even more apparent. Still, not all prisoners took advantage of the opportunities available for physical development. From the camp at Oswestry, a health conscious newspaper columnist lamented that some of his fellow prisoners spent their time sitting idly and playing cards. He warned his comrades against allowing one of their greatest assets, their bodies, to waste away. By his estimation, the prisoners’ health was paramount, and he believed that back in Germany, the “entire future would revolve around a healthy body.”

Despite the prisoners’ physical and psychological commitment to ensuring that they would be assets to the new Germany, numerous factors that influenced their postwar lives remained completely beyond the prisoners’ control. Extended captivity not only

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24 Program titled “Sportfest der Kriegsgef. Deutschen Offiziere in Ripon/Engl. Mittwoch, d. 4 Sonntag, d. 8 VI 1919,” BAMA, MSg 201/162. The grenade throwing contest appears to have been allowed only after the armistice, as I have seen no evidence of any similar contests during the war.
25 Bogenstätter and Zimmermann, Die Welt hinter Stacheldraht, p. 194.
kept prisoners separated from their families; it often left their dependants without a primary wage earner, and the prisoners’ distance from Germany put them at a distinct economic disadvantage. Consequently, the prisoners’ inability to provide for their families complicated existing feelings of inadequacy. Trapped in the UK, prisoners could only guess if they would be compensated for their time in captivity or return to Germany as penniless burdens to their relatives, a rather emasculating prospect. The Hague Convention explicitly stated that captives became the responsibility of their captors upon surrender; hence the German government was under no obligation to remunerate soldiers who fell into enemy hands. In spite of this internationally recognized law of war, many German prisoners felt that they deserved back pay (*Nachzahlung*) for their time behind barbed wire. The Allies’ insistence on holding prisoners after the armistice only strengthened the captives’ claims to compensation.

In March 1919, Handforth’s senior prisoner contacted German officials in Berlin to inquire whether he and his fellow captives could expect back pay beginning with the date of their capture. He was especially interested in how the government planned to compensate prisoners, whose families relied upon them, for the time between the armistice and repatriation. As the camp senior, he wondered what would be done to help his fellow prisoners compete on the job market with demobilized soldiers who had been home for months.\(^\text{27}\) The fear of being overlooked for employment opportunities was common in the camps of the UK, and prisoners sometimes used correspondence privileges to express interest in positions. After reading that Gustav Noske had been

\(^{27}\) Offizier Stellvertreter R., Handforth, to the Deutsche Regierung, Berlin, 7 March 1919 (Abschrift zu IIb 5881), BABL, R 901/86416.
appointed Minister of National Defense, Machinist Alfred B. of the U-48 informed Noske that the warrant officers interned at Pattishall were desperate to secure positions in the provisional fleet. The submariners were anxious over their inability to represent themselves in Germany, and Alfred B. encouraged Noske to recognize the disadvantages of their status: “We hope that we are to be regarded having had a great loss on account of our captivity and many of us having a wife and children to provide for.”

Apprehension over the economic future was symptomatic of a collective sense of uncertainty and frustration that surged as months passed with no announcement of a repatriation schedule. In a March 1919 letter from Stobs, Georg F. told his girlfriend Sophie of his growing depression and lamented that no one had any idea when his homecoming might take place. Plans to marry Sophie upon his return had kept him going through years of captivity, but delayed release made it difficult to look past all that he had lost as a prisoner. Stobs, he declared, was the “murderer of [his] youth.” Sophie seemed to understand his plight and assured him that repatriation would come soon, as she was sure that the German people would settle for nothing less. Until then, though, she could only encourage him to think of their future and “hold [his] head high.”

This was sound advice, but many prisoners lacked Sophie’s optimism about the chances for a timely release. Prisoners in both officers’ camps and facilities for enlisted men grew increasingly difficult to manage throughout 1919. As days passed, their anxieties and anger over their special status in what seemed to be an endless war

28 Machinist Alfred B., Pattishall, to The German Minister of National Defense Noske, Berlin, 4 April 1919, (Original in English), BAMA, RM 20/501.
29 Georg F., Stobs, to Sophie W., Ritterhude bei Bremen, 3 March 1919, SCRC, Georg F. Collection (hereafter GFC), 225/2/2. Georg F. speaks of his plans to marry Sophie throughout his extended correspondence with her.
30 Sophie W., Ritterhude bei Bremen, to Georg F., Stobs, 6 March 1919, SCRC, GFC, 225/2/2.
amplified. Only months after the armistice, a Swiss inspector reported that prisoners at Leigh had “only one desire which is to be sent home and one grudge which is that nothing is being done with respect to their repatriation.”31 In the absence of a plan for release, some prisoners attempted to arrange their own homecoming through escape. Already in December 1918, officers at Holyport refused to give their parole, and flight attempts across the UK rose as prisoners grew tired of waiting for a peace treaty to be signed.32

The consequences of an escape attempt could be deadly. The Swiss Legation’s Corragioni d’Orelli visited Brocton in March 1919 to investigate the shooting of a prisoner who had apparently tried to flee. The inspector was troubled by his findings and argued that the death could have been avoided. The sentry responsible for the shooting had reportedly been a prisoner in Germany, and the body of the victim was found inside the compound rather than outside the barbed wire. D’Orelli concluded that while he did not question the sentry’s intentions, the guard could have perhaps fired a non-lethal shot and spared the prisoner.33 Another German lost his life when a guard at Dorchester presumed the prisoner to be attempting escape and opened fire. The incident was judged to be a case of justifiable homicide.34 These shootings demonstrate that despite the armistice, tensions remained between prisoners and guards. While much of Europe may

32 For examples of continued escape attempts, see the report on the camp at Redmires by Corragioni d’Orelli, Counselor of Legation in Charge of the Swiss Legation in London, to Carlin, 30 August 1919, BABL, R 901/83144; “German Officers’ Escape: Flight in a Snowstorm, The Times, 24 March 1919, p. 9.
33 Corragioni d’Orelli, Swiss Legation in London, to Sir Arthur Grant, Brocton, 10 April, 1919, IWM, Papers of Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Arthur Grant, 78/31/1.
have been focused on peace, the war dragged on for the men behind barbed wire, as well as the guards charged with overseeing them.

Postwar escapes were often acts of desperation, but as had been the case prior to the armistice, flight attempts were also a means of defying one’s captors. Continued resistance took other forms as well. Whether refusing to give parole, showing up late to roll call, or goading sentries, many prisoners remained insubordinate. As two Swiss inspectors recalled after a visit to Frongoch during which prisoners were particularly agitated over food shortages, “It all comes from being cooped up and idle, one loses all sense of proportion. Grudges grow as large as giants and small matters fasten on one’s nerves like a tick on a dog’s ear and sometimes the only fun one has is to be aggravating.” At times, guards failed to appreciate the prisoners’ antics, and on one occasion a sentry at Holyport fired on two officers whom he believed had provoked him. The incident prompted a great deal of excitement, but no one appears to have been injured and the camp calmed down in the weeks following the episode.

Other acts of defiance, however, had more serious implications. Admiral von Reuter, the commander of the German fleet at Scapa Flow, was determined that the Allies would not receive German surface vessels as part of a reparations scheme. He had no intention of allowing the navy to suffer the humiliation of surrendering its fleet and began planning for the possibility of scuttling the ships when peace terms were announced in May 1919. With the Reichstag having voted to accept terms that included the loss of the

interned ships, von Reuter experienced his own battlefield moment of truth at Scapa Flow. As the enemy figuratively advanced, he was forced to decide between surrender and captivity for the proud German fleet, or death with honor. On the morning of the 21 June 1919, the admiral prepared his full-dress uniform with Iron Cross. He understood the gravity of what he was about to do, and it was only fitting that he dress for the occasion. At approximately 10:30 AM, von Reuter chose Heldentod for the German Navy and ordered the scuttling of all vessels under his command. According to some reports, several destroyers raised a red flag with the letter “Z,” internationally recognized as the code to advance on the enemy, before they sent their ships into the depths. The sinking caught the British by surprise and guards were slow to respond. When they realized what was taking place, Royal Marines fired on the vessels, killing nine German sailors and wounding sixteen more.\footnote{Van der Vat, \textit{The Grand Scuttle}, pp. 164-75.}

Von Reuter’s orders resulted in the largest scuttling in history, and it was a clear act of defiance intended to preserve the honor of the German Navy. One German officer recalled that the crew of one of the sinking ships had been reminded that they “were doing this for [their] fatherland,” at which point the sailors responded with “three rousing cheers for Germany.”\footnote{Friedrich Ruge, \textit{Scapa Flow 1919: The End of the German Fleet}, ed. A.J. Watts, trans. Derek Masters (London: Ian Allan, 1973), p. 113.} The British considered the scuttling an act of treachery, and von Reuter and his men became official prisoners of war only hours after the sailors carried his orders out. On 24 June, von Reuter’s crew reached the prisoner of war camp in Oswestry, and within a week the admiral, now the highest-ranking prisoner in British custody, arrived at Donington Hall. Since prisoners had access to British newspapers,
they were familiar with the details of the scuttling. The officers at Donington Hall allayed any doubts von Reuter may have had about his comrades’ attitude towards his decision by greeting him with a chorus of cheers as he entered the castle.39 Von Reuter had struck a blow against his enemies and demonstrated that defeat had not altered his conception of honorable behavior. His fellow prisoners, who had struggled endlessly with their decision to surrender, could certainly appreciate his motivations.

The sinking of the German fleet may have complicated the proceedings taking place at Versailles, but it did not prevent the treaty’s formal signing on 28 June. By that point, the prisoners in the UK had spent more than seven months in postwar captivity, most thinking that peace negotiations presented the only obstacle to their freedom. Ludwig G., for example, assured his mother in early June that he believed every letter he wrote was to be his last from captivity, and he felt sure that the conclusion of peace proceedings would come in the near future.40 As he predicted, the treaty was signed only weeks later, but it would be months before Ludwig G. and his comrades would see their homeland. The Treaty of Versailles stipulated that prisoners were to be released “with the greatest rapidity,” but only once the treaty came into effect, which meant that repatriation could not proceed until the Allies ratified the treaty.41

For the second time in less than a year, the prisoners’ expectations that physical reconnection with the homeland would follow a particular event were dashed. They had looked forward to the end of peace negotiations as a sign that their ordeal would finally reach its conclusion. After all, how could the British continue to detain prisoners when

40 Ludwig G., Working Camp at Woodford, to his parents, Rain am Lech, 6 June 1919, APC.
the war had officially ended? From the prisoners’ perspective, it mattered little that the peace treaty was not official until ratified. All they knew was that it had resulted in no concrete date for their release. This state of uncertainty dominated the prisoners’ lives to the extent that they found it difficult to focus on anything else. From Oswestry, Reserve Lieutenant Hans J. pleaded with German politicians to give prisoners an indication of when they might be released. In his letter to a member of the German National Assembly in Weimar, the lieutenant stressed the severity of the prisoners’ desire for information and recalled an incident that occurred when a friend with a seriously ill wife asked for the latest repatriation news:

When I shared with him some news from letters and newspapers, a circle of old prisoners from 14 and 15 immediately gathered around us and examined news from the letters and discussed news items from German, English, French, Swiss and Spanish newspapers. Every piece of news about repatriation is greedily devoured, discussed and passed along in a manner that you cannot understand if you are not a prisoner of war.42

The lieutenant’s was a familiar story. During the war, prisoners had longed for a connection with the world outside the barbed wire, looking for confirmation that they had not been abandoned. With the front silent and peace concluded, the threat of abandonment seemed all too real for men who had been away from their homes for years. This made an acknowledgement that they would, in fact, be allowed to rejoin the national community more important than ever.

Feelings of disappointment often manifested themselves in expressions of anger. The Morning Post reported in July that the prisoners at an unnamed camp had been “unruly” since peace was signed, which required the War Office to call in reinforcements

42 Lieutenant Hans J. (153 Infantry Regiment), Oswestry, to Dr. Vershofen (Deutsche demokratische Partei), Weimar, 18 July 1919 (Abschrift zu IIIb 13401), BABL, R 901/86458.
from the RDC to maintain order. In the most severe case of unrest, a sentry shot and killed a prisoner after the German attacked him with a brick.\^43 Prisoners blamed a great deal of their extended suffering on their British captors, but many questioned the new German government’s handling of the repatriation question. By July 1919, enlisted prisoner Karl K. confided to his parents that the lack of regular correspondence with the homefront was threatening his mental stability. He assured them that many of his fellow prisoners blamed the German government for their despair since officials had built up false hopes in press releases.\^44 The following month, he warned his parents against putting too much faith in deceptive press reports and cynically alleged, “in any case, up to this point still no decisive steps towards our release have been attempted or undertaken.” Believe what your son tells you, he concluded, and not the nonsense from the newspapers (\textit{Zeitungsquatsch}).\^45

Parents who chose to believe their captive sons had reason to worry that the ambiguity surrounding repatriation had pushed prisoners to their breaking point. More than a month after the signing at Versailles, Ludwig G. complained that he had no idea what to do with his time and spent the entire day struggling with his thoughts, losing heart with each day. He reminded his parents that three quarters of a year had passed since the armistice, but “the poor prisoners must still remain sitting in the same place

\^43 “German Prisoner Shot Dead: Mutineers at a Camp,” \textit{Morning Post}, 14 July 1919, clipping accessed in BABL, R 901/54388.
\^44 Karl K., Working Camp at Little Fernhill, to his Parents, 4 July 1919, BfZ, Bestand 112.
\^45 Karl K. Little Fernhill, to his Parents, 9 August 1919, BfZ, Letters of Karl K., Bestand 10. For other published letters expressing discontent with the government’s efforts to ensure timely repatriation, see the clipping “Kriegsgefangenen-Briefe: Die Wut auf Erzberger ist grenzlos,” \textit{Die Post}, 20 August 1919, BABL, R 901/54490.
while the others were home long ago.” The “others” Ludwig G. referred to were the frontline soldiers who remained in action at war’s end and retuned home shortly thereafter. His reference illustrates that he remained keenly aware of the ways in which surrender had separated him from his frontline comrades, and it is not difficult to imagine that prisoners were resentful of soldiers who had already begun their postwar lives.

Following his internment at Donington Hall, Admiral von Reuter became a vocal advocate for the immediate repatriation of prisoners who had been in captivity for an extended period of time. After several months in the camp, it was apparent to the admiral that many prisoners were at the end of their rope. In August, he wrote the British prime minister that the “prisoners of war and interned have reached the utmost limits of their endurance.” Himself a prisoner, von Reuter understood his comrades’ anxieties about the future. He notified the prime minister that “almost every officer will be compelled to enter a new profession, which for the senior officers with families is especially a heavy care as they are mostly without means. Every day in captivity lowers their vitality and lessens their opportunity in life.” With this observation, von Reuter drew attention to the prisoners’ greatest concern. They had attempted to look to the future and better themselves for their postwar lives. Delayed repatriation made it impossible to compete for desirable employment and threatened their fragile mental stability and ability to provide for their families, which was vital to their sense of manhood. Thus, prisoners justifiably feared that when they finally returned to Germany, the consequences of their past lives in captivity would jeopardize their prospects for success and reintegration.

46 L. Gebert, Working Camp at Woodford, 4 August 1919, to his parents, Rain am Lech, APC.
47 Rear Admiral von Reuter, Donington Hall, to the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (Translation), 7 August 1919, TNA, FO 383/502.
It was especially frustrating that although prisoners were unable to pursue employment in Germany, many continued to work to the benefit of their enemies. The number of prisoners employed in the UK declined in the months following the armistice as the War Office transferred able bodied enlisted men to the continent, but more than 31,000 reportedly remained at work in the UK at the end of July 1919.\footnote{“German Prisoners to be Sent Home,” *The Times*, 30 August 1919, p. 10.} This was a small force compared to the army of more than 180,000 German prisoners of the British at work in France. By April 1919, most of the prisoners in France were employed clearing battlefields of debris, scrap and salvage.\footnote{Scott, “Captive Labour,” pp. 328-29.} In addition to those who entered labor companies shortly after capture, the British relocated a number of prisoners from the UK to assist in clean up duties in France. When prisoners at Oswestry discovered that they were to be transferred across the English Channel, many complained that they “had been sold by the English to the French to work as slaves in the devastated areas of Northern France.” Even though the men claimed to be content once they arrived in the former war zone, their work was undeniably dangerous. Salvage operations included collecting and disarming ammunition. British officials often assigned this work to Germans since the prisoners were more familiar with German armaments and suffered fewer casualties than Allied soldiers employed in the same tasks.\footnote{“REPORT NO. “8,”” A. de Sturler to Monsieur J.L. Isler, Charge de’ Affires, Swiss Legation in London, BABL, R 901/84688, pp. 7-8.}

Back in the UK, the prisoners’ greatest concern was repatriation. With summer at an end, officers took their appeals for freedom directly to the British public. As one prisoner at Lofthouse Park put it, “the homeland cannot help us, so we will help
ourselves.”  Although prisoners had limited contact with British civilians, the inhabitants of several camps found an ingenious way to spread their message. Prisoners at Oswestry constructed a large banner from bed sheets that read “Let Us Home [sic]” and unfurled it when civilians made their way past the camp.  At other camps, prisoners inscribed illustrated pleas for help on razor thin sheets of tissue paper and attached them to paper balloons. They then sent the balloons into the countryside with requests that civilians deliver the notes to the local press.  The flyers appealed to the citizens’ desire for the demobilization of British troops. One such message sent from Lofthouse Park claimed that 50,000 British soldiers were required to guard the Germans in the UK and argued that sentries could return home if prisoners were allowed to leave.  Other messages asked readers to consider how English mothers would feel if their sons remained in captivity after peace negotiations or reminded readers that while prisoners awaited repatriation, their wives and children made due without providers.

The balloon campaign was more than slightly annoying for camp commandants. During a visit to the officers’ camp at Redmires in Yorkshire, a Swiss inspector asked the German camp senior to stop his fellow officers from sending out balloon messages, at the special request of the commandant.  The commandant surely realized that there were British citizens who sympathized with the prisoners’ cause on both humanitarian and

51 Haupt, *Die Deutsche Insel*, p. 87.
52 *Das Kriegsgefangenenlager Oswestry-Westlager*, p. 81.
55 Sachsse and Cossmann, *Kriegsgefangen in Skipton*, p. 303. For additional examples of flyers sent out in late 1919, see BAMA, MSG 201/126.
practical grounds. In an August 1919 editorial in *The Times*, for example, it was suggested that the government grant clemency to the German prisoners who had to be “guarded, fed, and warmed” at public expense.\(^{57}\) Ultimately, commandants benefited little from the prisoners’ extended stay and had no control over repatriation. They, like prisoners, simply awaited instructions from the War Office regarding plans for prisoner release.

News of the balloon campaign of 1919 made its way to Germany, and it demonstrated to those on the homefront that prisoners were still dedicated to working towards the future and looked forward to reuniting with their homeland.\(^{58}\) However, it also revealed that with each passing week, prisoners lost faith in the German government’s willingness or ability to expedite their release. As correspondence with the homefront demonstrated, the government’s apparent lack of action was frustrating and a source of constant disappointment that reopened old, emasculating psychological wounds. Yet the prisoners’ prolonged suffering was not the byproduct of an uncaring or indifferent homefront, but rather a sign of Germany’s powerlessness to challenge the policies of its victorious enemies.

**ON THE HOMEFRONT: THE REALITIES OF PRISONER POLITICS**

In the months following the armistice, the history of the UK’s prisoners merges with that of other German prisoners awaiting repatriation in camps around the globe. As

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\(^{57}\) “German Prisoners,” *The Times*, 30 August 1919, pg. 11.

\(^{58}\) Herr Waldewitz discusses the balloon campaign in a letter to his son at Pattishall. See Waldewitz, Hamburg, to his son, Paul Waldewitz, Pattishall, 22 August 1919, APC.

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frontline soldiers demobilized in November 1918, more than 800,000 German prisoners remained in enemy hands. Additionally, a significant number of former prisoners were already home in Germany by the signing of the armistice. Belligerents exchanged severely wounded prisoners throughout the war, and German prisoners had begun returning from behind the Eastern Front after Russia’s defeat in 1917. Although both Germany and Russia were reluctant to release prisoners, the Treaty of Brest Litovsk included provisions for repatriation. Former prisoners of war fortunate enough to be home at war’s end were surely thankful to be free. However, the government’s apparent lack of concern for repatriated prisoners and efforts to gain the release of those still in captivity troubled them.

In response, a cohort of former prisoners founded the Reichsbund zum Schutze der deutschen Kriegs-und Zivilgefangenen (Reich League for the Defense of the German Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees) on 20 December 1918. The Reichsbund hoped to consolidate existing prisoner aid associations in order to present itself as a formidable organization dedicated to the prompt release of German prisoners of war and civil internees. Under the leadership of Baron Wilhelm von Lersner, Gerhard Rose and Captain Peddinghaus, among others, the Reichsbund brought together prisoner advocates

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59 Although some estimates suggested that more than one million German prisoners remained abroad after the armistice, 800,000 is the number most frequently used in German documents. See also, Bessel, Germany after the First World War, p. 161.
60 Speed, Prisoners, Diplomats, and the Great War, 169-70.
61 “Satzungen des Reichsbund zum Schutze der deutschen Kriegs- und Zivilgefangenen,” 24 December 1918, BAMA, MSg 201/748.
from across the political spectrum and quickly gained followers in more than eighty local associations (Ortsgruppen).\textsuperscript{62}

The Ebert government was well aware of the general dissatisfaction surrounding the issue of repatriation, and it recognized the need for a centralized agency to handle prisoner affairs. As one government official argued, the creation of such an agency appeared to have few disadvantages. It would garner the sympathy of the entire nation and show prisoners of war “that although they feel betrayed and sold out,” the German people had not abandoned them.\textsuperscript{63} In early organizational meetings, officials determined that the new agency would cooperate with existing aid associations, and authorities were aware of the difficulties they faced. Financing prisoner aid schemes was a topic of particular concern. By war’s end, the monies collected through Red Cross charity drives and the Volkspende were practically exhausted, and the number of needy prisoners had risen in the war’s final months. If the government were to set aside ten marks per prisoner each month, for example, it would result in a monthly expenditure of 7-8 million marks.\textsuperscript{64} Nonetheless, government officials could not overlook the need for action. On the first Christmas Eve of the postwar era, thirteen government officials released an open letter assuring prisoners that the fight for repatriation would continue until the last of them had returned home.\textsuperscript{65} On 2 January 1919, Ebert and his chancellor, Philipp


\textsuperscript{63} See the letter from Schlesinger, Beauftragter des Zentralrats im Kriegsministerium Unterkunftsdépartement, which appears to be to Friedrich Ebert, dated 27 November 1918, BABL, R 43/2512, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{64} “Verhandlungsbericht zur Sitzung am 7.12.1918,” BABL, R 901/86451.

Scheidemann, went a step further and publicly announced the establishment of a
government agency, the Reichszentralstelle für Kriegs-und Zivilgefangenen (Reich
Central Office for Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees) to oversee prisoner affairs.66

The German government selected Social Democratic Deputy Daniel Stücklen to
head the Reichszentralstelle. By early January, the agency directed regular meetings
between aid workers and government officials in order to discuss repatriation and
prisoner welfare.67 Initially, the Reichsbund seemed eager to cooperate with Stücklen’s
agency, but it was only a matter of months before differences of opinion began to strain
their working relationship. The Reichsbund saw repatriation as the most important matter
facing postwar Germany, and it believed itself to be the public voice of the prisoners and
their families. In order to stress its apolitical nature, the Reichsbund changed its name to
the Volksbund zum Schutze der deutschen Kriegs-und Zivilgefangenen (People’s League
for the Defense of the German Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees) in early 1919 and
began to actively recruit a membership base capable of exerting significant pressure on
the government.68 Political differences could not be allowed to interfere with the ultimate
goal of securing the prisoners’ release, and the Volksbund was prepared to work with
anyone, regardless of political affiliation, who was willing to be of assistance.69

The Reichszentralstelle, on the other hand, was tied to Ebert’s socialist
government, and thus more sensitive to the complications of ongoing peace negotiations

66 “Bekanntmachung betreffend die Errichtung einer Reichszentralstelle für Kriegs-und Zivilgefangene.
Vom 2 Januar 1919,” Nr. 6615, BABL, R 901/86451.
67 On Stückeln’s appointment, see Nachrichtenblatt der Reichszentralstelle für Kriegs-und Zivilgefangene,
Nr. 1, January 1919, BABL, R 901/86452, p. 1.
68 Rose, Krieg nach dem Kriege, pp. 50-51.
69 “Bericht über Vorstandsbesprechung des Volksbundes zum Schutze der Deutschen Kriegs-und
Zivilgefangenen (hereafter Volksbund), Besprechung am 30 Januar 11 Uhr vormittags,” BAMA, MSg
201/749, pp. 3-4.
and the difficulties facing postwar Germany. Stücklen hoped to secure the prisoners’ release as quickly as possible and argued that in negotiations with the victors, repatriation should be addressed independently of other issues. Nonetheless, he recognized that Germany’s hands were tied, and he conceded that only the victors held the power to free their captives. The Volksbund was critical of government claims of helplessness, and although still working with the Reichszentralstelle, launched its own newsletter to publicize the fight to bring prisoners home. Adopting the slogan “Heraus mit unserer Gefangenen” (out with our prisoners), Volksbund activists organized nation-wide protests and even traveled to Spa, Belgium to persuade the Allies to release prisoners on humanitarian grounds. The discussions were unsuccessful, yet the Volksbund continued to pressure its own government to make repatriation a priority. After all, by 15 January 1919, virtually no prisoners taken from the western allies remained on German soil.

The Volksbund’s actual size is impossible to determine, but in February 1919 its leaders claimed to speak for more than 10 million members. The tone of the Volksbund’s calls for protest was uncompromising. The letters its members drafted to government officials demanded that no preliminary peace agreement be signed until the Allies began transporting prisoners home. In one letter, a member wrote that the liberation of prisoners was a matter of life or death for the German people, and he pressured the government to demand the immediate release of any Germans still in enemy hands.

70 “Verhandlungsbericht über die am 3 Januar 1919 stattgehabte Sitzung der Reichszentralstelle für Kriegs- und Zivilgefangenen im Hotel Prinz Albrecht,” BABL, R 901/86451, pp. 1-3.
71 Mitteilungen des Volksbundes zum Schutze der deutschen Kriegs- und Zivilgefangenen, Nr. 4, 1 February 1919, BABL, R 901-86419; Rose, Krieg nach dem Kriege, pp. 83-84.
72 Quoted in Hinz, Gefangen im Großen Krieg, p. 332.
73 Volksbund, Ortsgruppe Kaltennordheim, to the deutsche Reichsregierung in Berlin, 20 February 1919, BABL, R 901/86456.
From Berlin, members of the *Volksbund*’s executive board similarly insisted that the government sign no preliminary treaty that did not include arrangements for immediate repatriation. In correspondence with the Foreign Office, the *Volksbund* warned that “the patience of the German people had run out,” and argued that the enemy must know that Germany would not stand for further humiliation.  

Oldenburg’s *Volksbund* division challenged the government’s very identity when it informed President Ebert that the socialist revolution only had meaning if it was serious about the concept of “brotherly love.” Like other members of the *Volksbund*, the Oldenburg group warned against signing any document that failed to provide for prisoner release. Quoting Goethe’s *Faust*, Oldenburg affiliates called for action by reminding Ebert “in the beginning was the deed.”

The *Reichszentralstelle* understood that one of the largest obstacles to prisoner release was the need for labor in the devastated areas of France. The agency recognized that in the absence of a labor solution that satisfied French authorities, it would remain impossible to speed the prisoners’ return. Prisoners’ families were particularly troubled by news that their relatives might be used to clear the former war zone of debris. In March 1919, the women of Sonneberg, a city near Germany’s eastern frontier, circulated a petition expressing disbelief that prisoners who had already spent years of their lives in “dishonor and misery” would now be utilized for clean up duty. As an alternative, the petitioners suggested that the government send the thousands of unemployed German

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74 *Volksbund*, Berlin, to the Auswärtiges Amt in Berlin, 17 March 1919, BABL, R 901/86455.
75 *Volksbund*, Landesgruppe Oldenburg, to Reichspräsident Ebert, Berlin, 17 April 1919, BABL, R 901/86457.
workers who collected weekly payments without “lifting a finger” to do the work designated for prisoners. The Volksbund shared the women’s contempt for the thought of prisoners clearing battlefields. The group’s Magdeburg branch considered the use of prisoners in the former war zone to be little better than slavery. In a letter to Phillip Scheidemann, its leaders made clear their preference for suffering the consequences of breaking off peace negotiations over abandoning prisoners to the “vindictiveness of the enemy.”

The Volksbund and other prisoner advocates effectively expressed their dissatisfaction in correspondence, and the association’s growing membership emboldened representatives to take an aggressive stance in discussions with government officials. At a meeting in April 1919, Privy Councilor von Keller of the Foreign Office acknowledged the strength of the Heraus mit unsern Gefangenen movement and maintained that it was the government’s duty to bring the prisoners home. Still, von Keller contended that technical considerations, including the lack of adequate transport vessels, complicated an already delicate issue. Speaking on behalf of the Volksbund, Wilhelm von Lersner identified himself as the voice of a true people’s movement (Volksbewegung) that consisted of more than 2,000 local branches. As such, he demanded that the German government set a deadline for the commencement of repatriation. Establishing a deadline would not only benefit the government, von Lersner argued, but the prisoners as well:

77 “Protest der Frauen gegen unsere armen Kriegsgefangenen in Feindeshand,” delivered to Herr Landrath in Sonneberg, 19 March 1919, BABL, R 901/86456.
78 Volksbund, Provinzialgruppe Magdeburg, to Reichspräsident Scheidemann, Weimar, 18 March 1919, BABL, R 901/86455.
The prisoners of war find themselves in dreadful animosity and have the feeling that the government does nothing for them. If they now also see that nothing is settled for certain, then one must fear that following their return they will become adversaries of the government that did not speak up for them. However, if the government demands defined deadlines, these people, who are fulfilled by a deep love of the homeland, will be backers and supporters of this government.79

The scenario von Lersner presented was an obvious attempt at employing scare tactics to persuade a fragile government to take a stand on repatriation. His Volksbund colleague, Professor Böhmer, later stressed that the paramount question remained whether the victors were prepared to hand the prisoners over. Furthermore, if the answer was no, would the government go ahead with peace negotiations? Although Böhmer probably did not like the answer he received, it offered a revealing perspective on the government’s dilemma. Von Keller replied that the release of the prisoners was one of the government’s fundamental concerns, but that it was necessary to view repatriation in the proper context—as only one consideration of a much larger peace process.80

As von Keller suggested, the German government did not seem willing to let prisoner release jeopardize the successful conclusion of peace proceedings. Ebert and his fellow socialists benefited little from the prisoners’ delayed homecoming. With an estimated 2 million German soldiers having failed to return home from the battlefield, healthy men were highly valuable. The problem was that the government was in no position to make demands. It was a symbolic gesture of solidarity for Volksbund members to advocate terminating peace negotiations in the absence of repatriation deadlines, but the realities of a crumbling economy, a defeated military, and a war-weary

79 “Niederschrift einer Besprechung über Gefangenenfragen am Donnerstag, den 10 April 1919, vormittags 11 Uhr in den Geschäftsstelle für die Friedensverhandlungen,” BABL, R 901/86443, p. 11.
80 “Niederschrift einer Besprechung über Gefangenenfragen am Donnerstag, den 10 April 1919, BABL, R 901/86443, p. 47.
population weighed upon German representatives at Versailles. This did not mean that
deleagtes were unwilling to push repatriation; it simply required that they do so with
humility rather than the bravado that characterized earlier German diplomacy.

In a 7 May 1919 speech delivered at Versailles, Count Brockdorff-Rantzau, the
leader of the German delegation, assured the Allies that he and his colleagues held “no
ilusions as to the extent of our defeat—the degree of our impotence.”

The French Prime Minister, Georges Clemenceau, urged his allies to use prisoner labor as long as
possible, and rebuilding efforts in northern France proved to be a significant barrier to
prisoner release. On the German side, Brockdorff-Rantzau conceded that Germany was
responsible for the reconstruction of areas devastated by intense fighting, but when
discussing the best methods for reconstruction, he warned against the continued use of
prisoner labor:

The worst possible method would be to continue to have the work done by
German prisoners of war. Such labour is certainly cheap. It would,
however, cost the world dear, if hate and despair were aroused in the
German people at the thought of their captive sons, brothers and fathers
continuing to languish in their former bondage after the Peace
Preliminaries. We can attain no enduring peace without the immediate
settlement of this question which has dragged on far too long already.

Several days later, Brockdorff-Rantzau again raised the issue of prisoner release in a
letter to Clemenceau. Due to the technical and logistical difficulties of transporting
prisoners, the German delegate suggested that the “greatest importance should be
attached to finding a solution of all preliminary questions” before the repatriation process

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81 "Translation of a speech delivered by Count Brockdorff-Rantzau, First German Plenipotentiary at the
Peace Congress at the meeting held at Versailles on May 7th, 1919," TNA, FO 608/167, p. 1.
82 "Translation of a speech delivered by Count Brockdorff-Rantzau, First German Plenipotentiary at the
Peace Congress at the meeting held at Versailles on May 7th, 1919," TNA, FO 608/167, p. 4.
actually began. Accordingly, he recommended that deliberations on the matter should proceed immediately, and “separately from all other questions.”

The German delegation at Versailles recognized the importance of expediting prisoner release and hoped that planning for the captives’ return could begin prior to the conclusion of peace negotiations. Clemenceau, however, responded that although the Allies and associated powers would be willing to set up repatriation commissions, they would not do so until Germany announced its intention to sign the peace treaty and officially bring the war to an end. The decision to initiate repatriation was the victors’ alone, and they had no intention of seriously addressing the matter until the ink had dried on formal peace documents. Even so, the campaign waged by the _Volksbund_ on the homefront and by German representatives at Versailles reveals that while prisoners believed their homeland had forsaken them, their delayed homecoming was due to circumstances beyond the government’s control. Moreover, the publicity campaign organized by millions of _Volksbund_ members, as well as other prisoner advocates, demonstrated that the prisoners were by no means forgotten.

Dissatisfaction with prisoner retention only grew following the signing of the Versailles Peace Treaty, but repatriation was not the German government’s only prisoner-related concern. The German government had set up the _Reichszentralstelle_ to show prisoners that they had not been abandoned. As early as January 1919, however, the Reich Treasury reported that funds available for prisoner care would be substantially less than expected. Even in its infancy, the reality that any resources reserved for prisoners

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would have to be supplemented with donations from private charity organizations
hindered the Reichszentralstelle.\textsuperscript{85} Although the Volksbund was critical of the
Reichszentralstelle’s approach to negotiating release, the two agencies agreed on the
importance of continuing to assist prisoners with care packages until they returned home.

In spring 1919, the Reichszentralstelle began collecting funds for prisoner welfare
under the name Deutsches Hilfswerk für die Kriegs-und Zivilgefangenen (German Relief
Association for the Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees). Along with the Volksbund
and Red Cross, the Hilfswerk garnered the support of numerous veterans’ and relief
associations. It further bolstered its reputation by recruiting political figures like Ebert,
Scheidemann, Noske, and Brockdorff-Rantzau as honorary board members. Throughout
March and April 1919, the Hilfswerk solicited monetary donations and encouraged
Germans to provide special assistance during the final phase of the prisoners’ difficult
ordeal.\textsuperscript{86} The Volksbund published a special edition of its newsletter to explain its
relationship with the Hilfswerk and assured members that prisoners would benefit greatly
from the program. Of course, it challenged each member to personally contribute.\textsuperscript{87} The
Hilfswerk made no attempt to conceal the government’s inability to handle prisoner aid
without public support. In May 1919 it organized a special Opferwoche (Week of

\textsuperscript{85}“Protokoll der Sitzung am 23. Januar 1919 in Sitzung der Reichszentralstelle für Kriegs-und
\textsuperscript{86}Nachrichtenblatt der Reichszentralstelle für Kriegs-und Zivilgefangene, Nr. 4, March 1919, BABL, R
901/86452, p. 1. On the appointment of honorary board members, see Reichszentralstelle to Seine
Exzellenz Graf Brockdorff-Rantzau, Berlin, 17 April 1919, Nr. 3639/19, and the unaddressed letter on
Hilfswerk letterhead, both in BABL, R 901/86451.
\textsuperscript{87}Sondernummer der Mitteilungen des Volksbundes zum Schutze der deutschen Kriegs-und
Zivilgefangenen, Nr. 15, 24 April 1919, BABL, R 901/86419, pp. 1-3.
Sacrifice) that featured an intensified advertising campaign and door-to-door street collections.88

As the Hilfswerk was opening its Opferwoche, Brockdorff-Rantzau was at Versailles appealing to the Allies for additional assistance. The German government apparently harbored concerns that prisoners might return home as broken men. Brockdorff-Rantzau stressed the importance of prisoners returning to Germany in “as normal a condition as possible” so that they might be quickly reintegrated into the workforce. This would only be possible if efforts were made to improve their mental and physical health, and Brockdorff-Rantzau lamented that Germany did not possess the needed resources. He requested that the Allies consider providing prisoners with appropriate clothing, footwear and provisions prior to their departure for Germany. Brockdorff-Rantzau hinted at Germany’s willingness to pay for any expenses associated with the additional support, presumably by having the costs added to reparations payments.89 Predictably, the Allies replied that they would probably not be able to assist the German prisoners with supplies since many of their territories had only recently been “liberated from the German yoke.”90 The victors’ inability or unwillingness to help with prisoner welfare made efforts on the homefront all the more important.

The Hilfswerk forced Germans to confront the reality that the war had not ended for prisoners abroad. Its methods, however, may have unintentionally reinforced the

88 Nachrichtenblatt der Reichszentralstelle für Kriegs-und Zivilgefangene, Nr. 6, April 1919, BABL, R 901/86452, p. 1.
prisoners’ negative image. The *Hilfswerk* relied on compelling poster, stamp, and postcard illustrations to gain sympathy for its cause and convince Germans to make contributions. More often than not, the illustrations portrayed prisoners as physically weak, emaciated zombies who were sometimes quite literally begging for help from the homeland. As an advertising strategy, the approach made sense. The organization clearly wanted to draw attention to the prisoners’ anguish and elicit an emotional response from potential contributors. The *Hilfswerk’s* campaign depicted prisoners as emasculated charity cases who were incapable of helping themselves. In reality, the German prisoners in the UK were happy to receive care packages from the homefront, but they had worked diligently to remain physically and mentally strong to avoid returning home as dejected men. The images the *Hilfswerk* utilized could have ultimately been detrimental to the prisoners’ goal of legitimizing the captivity experience. In this sense, the campaign was counterproductive. It is surprising that the *Volksbund*, an organization founded by former prisoners, apparently failed to challenge the *Hilfswerk’s* illustrations. At times, the organization even used the images in its own publications. The *Volksbund* was determined that prisoners of war be granted the same respect given to other veterans of the Great War. Despite its cooperation with the *Hilfswerk*, the organization was hesitant to refer to prisoner aid as charity or participate in programs that might reinforce the perception of the prisoner as a second-class soldier. As far as the *Volksbund* was concerned, the prisoners had earned any aid they received.

This stance was nowhere more apparent than in the organization’s attempts to secure financial compensation for time spent in enemy hands. The Hague Convention of 1907 stipulated that upon surrender, a prisoner became the responsibility of his captors.
Enlisted men received provisions equal to those granted to soldiers of corresponding rank in the army by which they had been captured, and officers received salaries according to the same terms. In spite of this internationally recognized law of war, many German prisoners, like those at Handforth, demanded back pay for the duration of their captivity. The *Volksbund* eagerly supported the prisoners’ financial claims, but as a government agency, the *Reichszentralstelle*’s desire to help the prisoners with back pay, or any other aid, was curbed by Germany’s desperate financial situation. The prospect of compensating prisoners for time in captivity was problematic from the start, as the money was never available.

![Stamps](https://example.com/stamps.png)

Fig. 14. Stamps used as part of the *Hilfswerk*’s fund raising efforts. APC.

However, this fundamental problem never deterred prisoners, or their advocates, from requesting that wages be paid to prisoners or their dependants. In February 1919, the president of the *Bayerischer Kriegerbund* (Bavarian Warriors’ League) suggested to the German National Assembly in Weimar that prisoners’ partial or full wages might be given to their relatives as a means of supporting them in the prisoners’ absence. Many
prisoners had been the primary wage earners for their families, and the *Kriegerbund* reasoned that knowing their loved ones had been provided for would surely lessen the strain of captivity. Obviously familiar with the stigma of surrender, he assured officials that they need not worry about whether such payments were deserved, as in a majority of cases, prisoners had only surrendered after “heroic resistance” in the front lines.\(^91\)

Nonetheless, German officials continued to deny access to wages for men in enemy hands. When submariner Paul W.’s funds ran low at Pattishall, he instructed his father to contact commanders in Germany to see whether his wages might be transferred and used for his upkeep in captivity.\(^92\) Paul W.’s father did as he was asked, but authorities in Kiel informed him that they would not pay wages to sailors in captivity.\(^93\)

From a financial standpoint, the circumstances of a prisoner’s capture were irrelevant. The *Reichszentralstelle* was of the opinion that demands for payments would be impossible to fulfill, and it suggested that the government revise earlier estimates on available funding in light of the postwar economic crisis.\(^94\) This stance brought the agency into direct conflict with the *Volksbund*. During a March 1919 meeting, *Reichszentralstelle* representative Schlesinger insisted that the *Volksbund* refrain from encouraging prisoners to make demands that the government was incapable of satisfying. In the *Volksbund’s* defense, Professor Böhmer claimed that anyone familiar with the mood among the prisoners understood that the question of compensation was a daily topic of discussion. The prisoners felt that they had a right to reimbursement and rejected

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\(^91\) I. Winneberger, Präsidium des Bayerischen Kriegerbundes in Munich, to the deutsche Nationalversammlung, Weimar, 14 February 1919, No. 573, BHStA/IV, MKr 6051.

\(^92\) Torpedo. Masch. Paul W., Pattishall, to his Father, Herr G.W., Hamburg, 18 August 1919, APC.

\(^93\) G.W., Hamburg, to Paul W., Pattishall, 20 September 1919, APC.

the idea that payments should be need based rather than standardized. At the heart of the
issue, Böhmer contended, was the prisoners’ desire to be viewed as honorable soldiers
worthy of compensation: “They do not want a gift, but rights. They do not want their
captivity to impress upon them a dishonorable character and mark them as second-class
soldiers.”95

Prisoners believed they had suffered enough, and they did not want captivity to
place them at an economic disadvantage upon their return or be viewed as inadequate
men and soldiers. In any case, civil servants had continued to receive salaries in
captivity, and according to Böhmer, the British, French, and Austrians planned to
compensate their prisoners. Thus, he argued:

Only the German prisoner of war will have to panhandle as exceptions to
this graciousness to which he believes he has a well-founded right. If the
Reich persists with its dismissive standpoint regarding the question of
payment, it will most certainly turn the returning prisoners of war into an
army of 800,000 unsatisfied and embittered soldiers that carry the
substance of the most extreme left, yes of Bolshevism, in their arms.96

Böhmer’s reference to Bolshevism likely made more than a few of his colleagues
uncomfortable. Yet even with the threat of a Bolshevik army marching home to
Germany, the government could not pay returning prisoners from an empty treasury. The
Reichszentralstelle insisted that the unwillingness to pay was not the result of ill will
towards prisoners, but rather a consequence of the harsh economic constraints it faced. In
view of that immutable fact, its representative suggested the time had come to resign

95 “Sitzung des Arbeitsausschusses der Reichszentralstelle für Kriegs-und Zivilgefangene am 19 März 1919
im Hotel Prinz Albrecht, Berlin, Prinz Albrechtstr.9,” BABL, R 901/86451, pp. 8-9.
96 “Sitzung des Arbeitsausschusses der Reichszentralstelle für Kriegs-und Zivilgefangene am 19 März
1919 im Hotel Prinz Albrecht,” p. 9.
oneself to the current situation and not “raise and propagate false hopes whose non-
fulfillment could only bring about agitation.”  

The Reich Finance Minister fell in line with the Reichszentralstelle’s stance. He
maintained that since awarding back pay contradicted international law, any payments to
prisoners would have the appearance of donations rather than earned wages. In other
words, prisoners had no legal right to compensation. His position struck a blow to
advocates who hoped that securing reimbursement might legitimize the prisoners’
experiences by implying that although behind barbed wire, they continued to serve their
nation. Echoing the attitude of the Reichszentralstelle, the finance minister concluded
that making impossible demands of the government threatened to exacerbate existing
dissatisfaction among the prisoners and should therefore be stopped.  

Nonetheless, German officials appreciated the sensitive nature of the
compensation question. In June 1919 the Reichszentralstelle and Kriegsministerium
jointly offered a scheme for reimbursing enlisted men and non-commissioned officers
who had not received payment from their captors. The sums offered by the plan were
small. Yet when combined with its contention that a “majority of the prisoners entered
into enemy captivity against their will,” it showed the authorities’ understanding that
prisoners were not inevitably deserters and therefore undeserving of payments. The
same month, the new minister of finance, Matthias Erzberger, weighed in on the subject.
He declared that the prisoners had doubtlessly suffered tremendously in captivity and

97 “Sitzung des Arbeitsausschusses der Reichszentralstelle für Kriegs-und Zivilgefangene am 19 März
1919 im Hotel Prinz Albrecht,” p. 10.
98 Reichsminister der Finanzen Maeder, to the Reichszentralstelle für Kriegs-und Zivilgefangene in Berlin,
15 April 1919, BHStA/IV, MKr 6051.
99 Reichszentralstelle für Kriegs-und Zivilgefangene & Kriegsministerium, to the Reichsministerpräsident,
would likely continue to find life difficult at home. In view of their service, Erzberger saw it as a “social duty” to assist the prisoners, and he requested that 150 million marks be allocated from government funds to assist them.\textsuperscript{100} Officials in the chancellery agreed and approved the request in early July.\textsuperscript{101}

The funding the government was able to set aside for prisoners represented a fraction of what would have been necessary to meet the Volksbund’s demands for partial of full payment of wages. Nevertheless, securing payment was a step towards the recognition prisoners desired. Unfortunately, the process of securing compensation aggravated the rift between the government and prisoner advocates. Even though the Reichszentralstelle and Volksbund continued to work together on projects like the Hilfswerk, each party questioned the other’s motives. In July 1919, Stücklen warned the national assembly in Weimar that the Volksbund continued to make demands that the government could not meet and apparently wanted to “mobilize the prisoners of war and civilian internees against the government.”\textsuperscript{102} According to a Volksbund representative, the Reichszentralstelle was quick to label his group “reactionary,” which made collaboration and more efficiently coordinated campaigns impractical. In the end, it was the prisoners who suffered as a result of the animosity, as mistrust weakened the organizations’ potential to expedite repatriation.\textsuperscript{103}

\textsuperscript{100} Matthias Erzberger, Reichsminister der Finanzen, to the Reichsministerium, Berlin, 27 June 1919, BABL, R 43, I/233.
\textsuperscript{101} The Unterstaatssekretär in der Reichskanzlei, Weimar, to the Kriegsminister, 2 July 1919, BABL, R 43, I/233.
\textsuperscript{102} Stücklen to the Verfassungsgegebende Deutsche Nationalversammlung, Weimar, 22 July 1919, BABL, R 43, I/233.
\textsuperscript{103} Rose, Krieg nach dem Kriege, pp. 53, 251.
In the months immediately following the German Army’s collapse, the Allies seemed to have little empathy for German requests for prisoner release. In February 1919, the *Daily Express* had responded to calls for repatriation by charging that the Germans still held Poles in Germany and were in no position to demand that the Allies do something they had failed to do themselves. The paper demanded that Polish prisoners be allowed to leave and reminded British readers that while both powers still held prisoners, there was a vital difference in the countries’ respective situations: “We have won the war and Germany has lost it—a trifling fact of which we are not too sensible and which Germany has yet to learn the importance.” In conclusion, the article suggested that Germans should be told that the British “shall retain or return German prisoners exactly as and when it suits our convenience.”

Most Britons probably held similar opinions at the time. As months passed with no sign of repatriation, German prisoners began to look like little more than expensive war trophies. Unlike the spiked helmets and iron crosses British soldiers had taken in the moments following capture, prisoners had to be fed and clothed. Labor organizations resented the use of prisoner labor on tasks that could have been completed by British workers. With demobilized troops returning home, the government faced allegations that German prisoners were keeping British men out of work. Even more problematic were the financial considerations of providing food and shelter for hundreds of thousands of men, many of whom could not be made to work due to their status as officers. By the summer of 1919, the British were spending an estimated thirteen million dollars per

month to guard and care for their prisoners in France and the UK. When American and British representatives spoke to the French about the burdens of prisoner maintenance, Clemenceau expressed his desire to keep the more than 350,000 prisoners working in France in place as long as possible. One potential solution, he suggested, was for the British and Americans to hand their prisoners over to the French. Since international law prohibited the practice, neither power saw this as a viable option.\textsuperscript{106}

Given financial considerations and disgruntlement among British workers, it became clear that the \textit{Daily Express}' moment of “convenience” had come and gone. Anglo-American representatives continued to push the repatriation issue with the French, and in late August, Clemenceau agreed to allow his allies to release prisoners prior to the ratification of the peace treaty. On 30 August, the British began the process of returning prisoners in France to their homes.\textsuperscript{107} The following month, the UK’s prisoners finally began making their way across the English Channel, but months would pass before the last German prisoners would experience life beyond the barbed wire and reconnect with the homeland.

\section*{GOING HOME}

Between the armistice and August 1919, British authorities lowered standards for invalidism in order to repatriate thousands of German civilians, wounded prisoners, and medical personnel. This allowed the British to make room in hospitals and freed them

from the burden of maintaining prisoners who were largely unable to work. Additionally, the War Office transferred around 3,500 “friendly” prisoners to French, Danish, Polish, and Czecho-Slovak authorities prior to the general repatriation of prisoners captured while serving with German forces. For the rest of the prisoners held in the UK, repatriation officially began on 24 September 1919.108

In preparation for the planned evacuation, the War Office systematically shut down satellites and funneled prisoners into parent camps where they would await their day of departure. The mood in the camps was a mixture of excitement and anxiety. The War Office generally informed prisoners of their impending exodus, but rarely provided specifics. Instead, it vaguely announced that they would be released in a few days.109

Once the British had announced their intention to commence repatriation, prisoners lost interest in the organized activities that had been a cornerstone of camp life. When Swiss inspectors visited Handforth in late October 1919, they reported that the “camp industries so flourishing at one time are slowly dying out, tools and materials are being collected and returned and the same applies to musical instruments, games and books lent by the different Charitable Societies. These are, however, no longer of interest to the prisoners who have only one thought to “pack up and go.”110 The time had come to stop preparing for a new life in postwar Germany and begin living it.

Depending on their rank and place of internment, prisoners took one of several routes out of the UK and back to Germany. Officers traveled exclusively on German vessels running primarily between the German North Sea and the British port cities of

109 Sachsse and Cossmann, Kriegsgefangen in Skipton, pp. 311-14.
Newcastle and Hull. German steamers likewise collected prisoners on the Thames or in Southampton and Harwich. Once prisoners were settled on board, German authorities provided the British with a receipt for their cargo, at which point the prisoners ceased to be their captors’ responsibility. Although British ships did not enter enemy ports, an arrangement with the Netherlands provided for the transfer of approximately 10,000 prisoners from Harwich to Rotterdam aboard British vessels. In the Netherlands, British officials handed over prisoners to a German representative who prepared them for the trip into Germany. Finally, the British transferred more than 30,000 prisoners to France, where they were repatriated via rail car.\(^{111}\)

Once the machinery of repatriation was set into motion, the system worked with surprising effectiveness. In an October 1919 telegram to the German Red Cross in Frankfurt, the PWIB reported that more than 75,000 military prisoners remained in the UK.\(^{112}\) With a few notable exceptions, the War Office had cleared the UK of German prisoners by 20 November, just over a month after the PWIB’s telegram. Despite the efficiency of the repatriation program, years of uncertainty and persistent fears of abandonment kept many prisoners skeptical until they set foot on the ship that would carry them across the English Channel. When Otto M.’s departure was delayed due to a strike among German seamen, the doubts he had struggled with for years quickly resurfaced:

> When are we finally going home? Are we really still going home? Is there any truth to what we did not want to believe, what the English newspapers reported: that the German homeland did not want us back?

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\(^{112}\) Telegram from the PWIB, London, to the Verein vom Roten Kreuz in Frankfurt a/M., Ausschuss für deutsche Kriegsgefangene, 18 October 1919 (G.46/290), BAK, R 67/1664.
For God’s sake, we would go insane if we had to remain here any longer! German brothers and Sisters, where is your loyalty? Have you really forgotten us?  

Otto M.’s ship arrived later than expected, but his setback was nothing compared to the delay experienced by several thousand prisoners withheld even after the prisoner repatriation program had come to an end.

To ensure that the German government complied with the terms of the armistice, the British held back approximately 1,400 officers and orderlies, essentially as hostages. Additionally, the more than 1,700 prisoners taken at Scapa Flow remained in British hands while the Allies determined how to punish Germany for von Reuter’s scuttling. Of course, the admiral resented that the British denied his men the freedom granted to other prisoners, and he regularly demanded to know when final repatriation was to commence. Von Reuter also complained about his lodgings, supplies, and the unwelcome nightly visits he received from a British officer whose job was to ensure that he did not attempt escape. The War Office saw little validity in most of von Reuter’s complaints, and Swiss inspectors concluded that the staff at Donington Hall did everything within reason to make the prisoners’ stay as comfortable as possible.

Confident that Germany was willing to comply with the terms of the peace treaty, the War Office released the prisoners taken at Scapa Flow in late December 1919. Following the German government’s agreement to penalties imposed for von Reuter’s last stand at Scapa Flow,
he and his men returned to Germany towards the end of January 1920. At the time of his departure, more than five years had passed since the first German military prisoners of war landed in the UK.

CONCLUSIONS

The Great War did not end with the armistice of 11 November 1918, or even the signing of the peace treaty that “officially” brought the war to a close the following June. Like other prisoners of war around the world, German prisoners of the British continued to live in an active war zone where their daily lives were governed by regulations laid down by their captors. As their comrades from the frontlines evacuated the trenches and left the battlefield, prisoners of war continued to view the world through the barbed wire that separated them from their families and made it impossible to recreate themselves in the new Germany.

It could be argued that the Allied decision to withhold prisoners until the conclusion of peace proceedings was a cruel twist of fate. The war’s end failed to bring the immediate repatriation prisoners expected and deepened familiar feelings of helplessness, emasculation, and uncertainty. Old fears of inadequacy were now complicated by worries that separation from Germany might result in lost employment opportunities and the inability to provide for one’s family. Ultimately, delayed repatriation threatened to hamper the prisoners’ chances for postwar success, and thus reinforced the stigma of captivity and lost manhood. However, prisoners rarely passively

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accepted their lot, as evidenced by their correspondence, organized activities, and their campaigns for expedited release.

As months passed without a concrete date for release, prisoners lost faith in their government’s willingness or ability to help them, and their sense of abandonment intensified. In reality, the homefront had not forgotten its prisoners in the UK, or elsewhere. Organizations like the Volksbund campaigned vigorously for the prisoners’ release. Although government efforts were limited by political and military realities, postwar officials sincerely wanted to secure the prisoners’ release and continued to assist them in captivity as best they could. As the Reichszentralstelle stressed, the government harbored no resentment for the prisoners, it was merely at the mercy of the Allies and largely incapable of influencing decisions on repatriation. The German delegation at Versailles had limited diplomatic clout. Negotiations regarding prisoners of war demonstrate that the resumption of hostilities was never a viable option after the commencement of peace proceedings. A nation that feared it might be unable to provide its returning prisoners with clothing and supplies was hardly in a position to equip an army of millions at the front.

The German government was equally unable to meet the prisoners’ demands for back pay, which led to further feelings of disgruntlement among those who believed the government was attempting to withhold funds that had been rightfully earned. Ebert’s fledgling socialist government needed all the support it could muster. Had funds been available, it is safe to say that Ebert’s government would have willingly paid lost wages to returning prisoners. Delayed repatriation and the debate over lost wages dealt a blow to the prisoners’ already fragile egos, leading many to wonder how badly the homefront
wanted them back. It also gave the impression that prisoners were not entitled to the wage reimbursement they requested. In truth, the prisoners’ prolonged suffering was a consequence of the German government’s weak footing at home and abroad. It had little to do with any animosity towards soldiers who had chosen life in enemy hands over death on the field of battle. Nonetheless, the prisoners’ sense of abandonment and betrayal was very real, and they would find that the battle for respect and redemption continued even after they said goodbye to the camps of the UK.
CHAPTER 6—WORKING TOWARDS THE FÜHRER: THE STRUGGLE FOR ACCEPTANCE IN INTERWAR GERMANY

Less than a month after the armistice, Friedrich Ebert welcomed German soldiers home as warriors returning from the battlefield undefeated. His comments provided significant fodder for postwar observers who insisted that Germany’s men at arms had not been conquered, but sabotaged by traitorous elements on the homefront. Germans greeted demobilizing soldiers as undefeated heroes rather than a vanquished army. It remained to be seen how the homeland would welcome former prisoner of war. It was impossible for sympathetic politicians to insinuate that prisoners had not been conquered, as their delayed homecoming marked them as soldiers who had experienced a personal battlefield defeat of the most humbling nature.

This chapter analyzes former prisoners’ experiences in postwar Germany. It argues that despite the celebrations and expressions of gratitude that accompanied their return to German soil, former prisoners of war struggled to overcome their image as “second-class” soldiers who had failed to live up to the expectation that they fight to the death. Prisoners returned home to find that they had been inextricably linked to the German Army’s collapse and often felt as if fellow Germans considered them unworthy of the recognition enjoyed by other veterans. Ultimately, the Great War was incapable of

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1 The term “working towards the Führer” comes from a 1934 speech made by Werner Willikens, State Secretary in the Prussian Agriculture Ministry. It has been most prominently used by Ian Kershaw. See, for example, Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1889-1936: Hubris* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), pp. 529-31.
destroying prewar notions of proper battlefield behavior. More than a decade would pass before a most unlikely figure granted former prisoners the acknowledgement they desired as honorable members of the community of the front. Even then, their acceptance as respectable warriors was conditional, as government leaders preparing for war had little use for commemorations of battlefield failure and life in enemy hands.

**COMING HOME: LONG AWAITED REUNIONS**

An unknowing observer might have mistakenly assumed that the demobilized soldiers that clogged German streets in November and December 1918 had left the battlefield as victors. Military officials worked closely with government representatives to create a festive atmosphere as the nation’s men at arms returned home, despite their defeat. Flags, victory arches, garlands, welcome banners, and music filled the streets around train stations where soldiers reunited with friends and family. As a result of the labor shortage that occurred immediately following the war, employers were happy to offer veterans their jobs back. Many demobilized soldiers went back to work soon after reentering civilian life. When veterans returned to the workplace, employers often greeted them with gifts of cash and cigars to thank them for their service and sacrifice. In most cases, veterans found it possible to return to a “normal” existence fairly quickly after demobilization was complete.²

Former prisoners returned to Germany months later as the army was trimmed to 100,000 soldiers to comply with the military restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles and

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² Bessel, *Germany after the First World War*, pp. 84-85, 160-64.
unemployment soared.\textsuperscript{3} The reduction of the armed forces meant that thousands of career officers would find themselves without employment when they returned home from captivity. Aside from these financial concerns, returning prisoners served as reminders that Germany had not fought to the last man, but accepted military defeat. Even so, Germans seemed initially eager to welcome prisoners home despite the lingering suspicion that many had fallen into enemy hands as a result of failed courage or compromised loyalty. Veterans’ organizations often supported prisoners’ claims for compensation. They accordingly cautioned members against judging returning prisoners for their apparent failings or the circumstances under which they entered captivity.\textsuperscript{4}

Letters from captivity left little doubt that prisoners were dissatisfied with the government’s handling of repatriation, and the \textit{Volksbund}’s campaign demonstrated that returning prisoners enjoyed a broad support base in Germany. With that in mind, the German government realized that homecomings would be a significant factor in the development of former prisoners’ attitude towards the “new” Germany. In an April 1919 memo to its regional offices, the Central Committee of the Red Cross underscored the importance of making a good first impression with returning prisoners:

\begin{quote}
It cannot be stressed enough that the affectionate reception of our prisoners is one of the most pressing duties presently at hand, and of the greatest political importance. The previously repatriated officers and enlisted men unanimously stress that the first impression upon reentry to German soil—the embodiment of the moment upon which they have concentrated all of their hopes and desires through years of suffering—carries a great psychological value. The sentiments of returning prisoners who are graciously and festively welcomed by the homeland and met with well-prepared arrangements can greatly contribute to evoking their
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{3} Bessel, \textit{Germany after the First World War}, p. 161.
\textsuperscript{4} See passage from the \textit{Bayerischer Krieger Zeitung} quoted in Ziemann, \textit{War Experiences in Rural Germany}, p. 250.
patriotism and willingness to work for civil society and prevent the disastrous consequences of the influx of hundreds of thousands into a politically and economically languishing land.\footnote{Zentralkomitee der Deutschen Vereine vom Roten Kreuz, Berlin, to Vorstände der Landes-und preußischen Provinzialvereine vom Roten Kreuz, 10 April 1919, BAK, R 67/529, p. 4.}

The Red Cross’ worries were not limited to concerns that disgruntled prisoners might not whole-heartedly support the new government. The organization feared that dissatisfaction could lead prisoners to embrace Bolshevism. This likely stemmed from knowledge that the Russians subjected German prisoners of war to Bolshevik propaganda. Many prisoners who returned home prior to November 1918 had played significant roles in the Kiel mutiny and uprisings in other major German cities.\footnote{Arnold Krammer, “Soviet Propaganda among German and Austro-Hungarian Prisoners of War in Russia, 1917-1921,” in Samuel R. Williamson, Jr. and Peter Pastor, ed., \textit{Essays on World War I: Origins and Prisoners of War} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), pp. 254-56. Prisoners of war returning from Russia also led communist uprisings in Hungary and Austria. See F.L. Carsten, \textit{Revolution in Central Europe, 1918-1919} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 224, 239.}

Feelings of distrust were mutual, and many prisoners feared that the homeland might not want them back. In August 1919, submariner Paul P. explained to his father that it was “generally agreed” among prisoners at Pattishall that the German government did not want them to return due to fears that repatriation might lead to further disturbances.\footnote{Paul W., Pattishall, to His Father, G.W., Hamburg, 18 August 1919, APC.}

To put these concerns to rest and foster goodwill among returning prisoners, receptions similar to those planned for demobilizing troops in 1918 were later organized for veterans returning home from captivity.

The sight of gathering crowds was encouraging. When former prisoner Otto M.’s transport from the UK arrived in Wilhelmshaven in October 1919, he found the wreaths, waving handkerchiefs, flags, German music, and “mountains of gift parcels” difficult to
A prisoner repatriated from Oswestry was likewise taken aback by the outpouring of song and the sight of waving handkerchiefs and flags, recalling that he not seen such a display of national appreciation since 1914. If these homecoming ceremonies were intended to convince prisoners of the homeland’s gratitude, they were generally successful. When later describing his arrival, Otto M. asked his countrymen to forgive prisoners for ever believing that the homeland could have forgotten them, concluding, “It is not true, we see that now.” Officers repatriated from Skipton the same month arrived to similar fanfare. After reentering Germany, the former prisoners enjoyed refreshments in a great hall filled with tables ceremoniously covered with white linens. Surrounded by their countrymen, the officers sang folk songs and relished the opportunity to converse with other Germans as free men for the first time in months or years.

In some towns, local branches of the Volksbund went a step further and formally presented returning prisoners with certificates that acknowledged their sacrifices. The small color prints depicted a woman and flag-waving child greeting a group of military prisoners as they passed below a window spilling flowers onto the street. The certificates included a patriotic poem entitled “Welcome” and were signed by the leaders of the local Volksbund office. The prints, which appear to have been intended for display, resembled certificates of achievement and suggested that former prisoners had done something worthy of recognition, something that they should be proud of. For men

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8 Otto M.’s untitled repatriation account, BAMA, MSg 201/1003.
9 *Das Kriegsgefangenenlager Oswestry-Westlager*, pp. 107-09.
10 Otto M.’s untitled repatriation account, BAMA, MSg 201/1003.
12 Welcome Certificate issued to Heinrich F. by the Volksbund Ortsgruppe Barmen, APC.
unsure of how the homefront would view their surrender, this simple gesture was important, as it encouraged prisoners to hold their heads high rather than bow them in shame. Along with the nationalistic crowds that greeted prisoners as they returned, the certificates helped to reestablish the prisoners’ place in the national community and signified, in writing, that someone on the homefront appreciated the prisoners’ sacrifices.

![Fig. 15. Certificate issued to returning prisoners by the Barmen Volksbund branch, APC.](image)

Government-issued flyers and pamphlets also assured former prisoners of the homeland’s gratitude, but government officials could not allow prisoners to return to their homes before first requiring them to spend several days in one of the many transit camps
(Durchgangslager) set up to assist prisoners as they began reintegrating into German society.\textsuperscript{13} Although former prisoners were likely irritated at being asked to reenter camps after months or years of confinement, the measure was a practical one. It offered officials the opportunity to process prisoners in an orderly fashion and ensured that those carrying contagious diseases did not contaminate the general population. In many ways, the transit camp experience was similar to demobilization protocols for frontline troops. Prisoners routinely underwent a medical exam and delousing, and authorities took great care to ensure that prisoners would have access to ample supplies of soap and shaving crème to help rid themselves of any unwanted infestations picked up abroad.\textsuperscript{14}

In transit camps, former prisoners also received a pamphlet prepared by the Kriegsministerium and Reichszentralstelle that outlined release requirements and the support prisoners would receive from government and private welfare agencies as they adjusted to civilian life. Those in need of long-term medical care could find information on how to pursue treatment, including psychological care, once they had reached their final destinations. Like veterans who demobilized earlier, prisoners received a new suit of clothing to ease their transition into civil society. Prior to their releasing them from the transit camp, officials also gave former prisoners a coupon for free passage to their

\textsuperscript{13} See the flyer titled “An unsere aus der Gefangenschaft zurückkehrenden Soldaten,” BHStA/IV, MKr/1707a.

\textsuperscript{14} Kriegsministerium (Unterkunfts-Department) and the Reichszentralstelle für Kriegs-und Zivilgefangene, eds., \textit{Merkblatt für heimkehrende Kriegsgefangene, August 1919}, pp. 7-20; On the hygienic importance of soap and shaving crème, see Wuertt. Kriegsministerium Verwaltungs-Abteilung (No. 90791 .B.4.), Stuttgart, to the Intendantur XIII .A.K., 30 July 1919, HStAS, M17/1 813.
home towns via second or third class railcar, as well as a portion of bread for their journey.\textsuperscript{15}

Government officials and citizens alike sought to prevent prisoners from feeling alienated in a postwar society whose foundational moments, after all, had taken place while prisoners remained captives of a war waged by the “old” Germany. Since prisoners had missed the revolution that toppled the Kaiser, government officials stressed their hope that returning prisoners would recognize their opportunity to play a role in transforming Germany into a land of freedom, justice, and peace.\textsuperscript{16} The Reichszentralstelle sought to bring prisoners up to speed on the history of the new government and solicit their support by providing its own published account of the revolutionary events of 1918. In Was ist in Deutschland geschehen? (What took place in Germany?), the Reichszentralstelle acknowledged the prisoners’ suffering and sacrifices. At the same time, it reminded them that the war had led to the establishment of a new fatherland characterized by freedom and chances for new prosperity. As long as the prisoners recognized this, the pamphlet concluded, their suffering had not been in vain.\textsuperscript{17}

The prisoners’ suffering may not have been in vain, but it would not be fully remunerated either. Although they would depart for their hometowns with some financial compensation and a suit of clothes, prisoners learned in the transit camps that

\textsuperscript{15} Merkblatt für heimkehrende Kriegsgefangene, August 1919, pp. 7-20. On the items (clothing, discharge money, etc.) offered to demobilized soldiers in November and December 1918, see Bessel, Germany after the First World War, p. 82-83.

\textsuperscript{16} “Telegramm des Württ. Landtags an die heimkehrenden Kriegsgefangenen,” (undated), HStAS, E 130 B 3830.

\textsuperscript{17} Reichszentralstelle für Kriegs-und Zivilgefangene, Was ist in Deutschland geschehen? Eine Übersicht über die Revolutions-Ereignisse, 1919, pp. 14-16.
they would not receive wages for the duration of their time in captivity. Despite this disappointment, the well-planned receptions and comprehensive reintegration scheme prisoners encountered when they returned probably exceeded their expectations. Germans did initially, as Reinhard Nachtigal has argued, welcome returning prisoners “by and large, with open arms and minds.” The pageantry and displays of affection, however, did not mean that German society would allow prisoners to avoid the question of the circumstances surrounding their capture. Germans may have been willing to accept that it was possible for soldiers to enter captivity with honor, but in many cases, it would have to be proven.

Old stigmas died hard in the “new” Germany, and officials demanded accounts of the events that led to a prisoner’s surrender. In the Bavarian Army, officers were advised to submit a report of their surrender within three weeks of their release from the transit camp. After initially questioning the usefulness of capture reports, Bavarian officials determined that the accounts would be of general interest to the officer class and could reveal details about the enemies’ treatment of prisoners, while also contributing to unit histories. Nonetheless, military officials remained interested in determining former prisoners’ innocence or guilt, particularly that of officers. Men asked to explain the circumstances of their capture surely realized that in the eyes of some of their countrymen, former prisoners’ loyalty, manhood, and bravery remained uncertain.

18 Merkblatt für heimkehrende Kriegsgefangene, pp. 15, 26-29.
21 See the report labeled Zu Nr. 100 443 P, M.M., (Betreff: Rückkehr aus Kriegsgefangenschaft), Munich, 25 July 1919, to Durchgangslager Lechfeld and Hammelburg, the Landesverband e.V. des Deutschen Offiziersbund and sämtliche Abteilungen des Ministerium f. mil. Angel., BHSta/IV, MKr/2245.
Questions of bravery and loyalty were important and would eventually have to be dealt with, but newly repatriated prisoners had more immediately practical matters to consider. Prisoners had often been their family’s primary wage earner prior to military service or captivity. Securing employment and regaining their financial footing was a principal concern. To facilitate this process, the Reichszentralstelle worked with private welfare agencies to establish Kriegsgefangenenheimkehr (Prisoner of War Homecoming) offices across Germany. The offices’ primary function was assisting prisoners with their reintegration into civil society. At these local offices, prisoners could seek advice on finding employment and secure financial assistance during their period of readjustment. 22

Many prisoners sought additional government assistance in the form of compensation for items stolen by captors at the moment of surrender. Alfred S. of the Bavarian 9th Infantry Regiment claimed that following his capture at Bapaume in August 1918, British soldiers stole his watch, wallet, change purse, and knife. He requested 78 marks for his losses. 23 Another former prisoner, Alfred R., applied for 34 marks for a watch, billfold, and pocketknife lost to British souvenir hunters. 24 These prisoners’ claims for restitution were representative of numerous others filed by former prisoners of the British. While authorities rarely paid out the totals requested, they often compensated prisoners for their losses with smaller sums.

24 Entschädigungs-Anspruch des aus englischer Kriegsgefangenschaft Zurückgekehrten Alfred R., Journ. No. 4724, Bezirkskommando Kissingen, 11 October 1919 an das Gen, kdo. II A.K. Würzburg, BHStA/IV, MKr/12695. For examples of damages paid to former prisoners by military authorities, see numerous examples in BHStA/IV, MKr/12695.
The financial stability of returning prisoners was an issue of considerable concern for average Germans as well. In spite of the desire to bring prisoners home, many Germans worried that the postwar economy could not stand the strain of 800,000 returning prisoners in search of employment. In a published pamphlet, Pastor Joseph Schmidt claimed that German industry was not capable of employing all of the men who would seek jobs in the nation’s factories. He encouraged farmers to offer agricultural work to men unable to find jobs in industry and argued that farmers would not only personally benefit from taking on an unemployed prisoner, they would also perform a great service for the betterment of the fatherland. Helping former prisoners find employment, the pastor argued, would make it more difficult for communist propaganda to take hold among their ranks. The possibility that former prisoners might embrace Bolshevism had long been a concern in Germany, particularly since prisoners felt that their extended captivity had placed them at a distinct economic disadvantage.

The influx of former prisoners streaming back into Germany temporarily strained the economy, but employers largely felt obligated to offer veterans their jobs back. In situations when this was not the case, the government passed legislation that defended the prisoners’ right to reclaim positions left behind to join the war. Most employers willingly complied with the legislation to avoid further state intervention in the workings of the labor market. Just as with general demobilization in 1918, employers believed that male workers had the right to reclaim positions filled by women out of necessity. The combination of government legislation and popular attitudes about a man’s “right” to

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26 On fears of Bolshevism, see Vorsitzender des Vertrauensausschusses der antibolsh.Organisationen Deutschlands, Berlin, to the Reichsregierung, Berlin, 7 October 1919, BABL, R 43 I/234.
replace female workers made it possible for former prisoners to find work rather swiftly. Throughout 1920, an inflationary surge in the economy erased labor shortages and pushed Germany toward full employment.\textsuperscript{27} Although this trend was temporary, the years immediately following repatriation from the UK provided at least an illusion of financial stability that helped smooth their transition from prisoners to civilians.

From the elaborate appreciation ceremonies that welcomed former prisoners to the willingness of employers and government officials to assist them in their search for employment, Germany’s reception of its returning prisoners signaled a desire to help them reintegrate into society. Much of the homeland’s generosity may have been based on the fear that 800,000 former prisoners might embrace extreme political philosophies if they felt unappreciated. Still, few prisoners could complain that they had been abandoned or left to their own devices following their return to Germany. Yet as they would soon discover, the homeland’s eagerness to welcome prisoners and help them regain their footing was not indicative of a universal willingness to forget that they had left the battlefield in enemy hands. For many prisoners, life in the “new” Germany was characterized by a continued struggle with the supposed transgressions of their past.

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\textbf{FORGING A NEW IDENTITY: THE REICHSVEREINIGUNG EHEMALIGER KRIEGSGEFANGENER & THE BATTLE FOR PRISONER RECOGNITION}
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By 1920, the British were busy dismantling the elaborate prison camp system developed from 1914-1919. At public auctions, the Ministry of Munitions sold the beds,\textsuperscript{27} Bessel, \textit{Germany after the First World War}, pp. 161-63.
washstands, linens, and cutlery that once filled Donington Hall. Even the camp’s sentry boxes, iron gates, hospital equipment, and barbed wire went on the auction block. As former captors, the British could remove any trace that the German prisoners had ever set foot in the UK by simply disassembling their camps and selling the remnants to the highest bidder. For German prisoners, the captivity experience left scars that transcended physical structures. Long after camps like Donington Hall had been put to new uses or taken apart, the facilities continued to exist in the prisoners’ psyche. Despite the relative ease with which many prisoners reentered the workforce and reclaimed the sense of manhood that accompanies the ability to support one’s family, they continued to shoulder the stigma of surrender in the postwar years.

In a sermon on the plight of soldiers who fell into enemy hands during the Great War, a German pastor from the province of Mecklenburg observed that captivity was a difficult fate for any brave soldier to endure. He noted that many prisoners would have preferred to die on the field of battle than surrender to the enemy. For it was better, he argued, “to fall into the hands of god than those of men.” As the pastor suggested, postwar Germany memorialized fallen soldiers while those who fell into enemy hands continued to struggle with the shame and emasculation of their surrender. In spite of Germany’s defeat, the prewar ideal of manliness became even more hardened and uncompromising, and soldierly values and manhood remained deeply intertwined. Paramilitary movements such as the Freikorps, whose members epitomized a brutal vision of military masculinity, found volunteers by the hundreds of thousands as they

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29 P. Schulz, Bülow bei Vollrathsruhe in Mecklb., undated pamphlet titled “Gefangen,” BAK, R 67/139.
30 See Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, pp. 159-81.
mobilized to fight on Germany’s eastern frontier.\footnote{Robert G.L. Waite estimates that between 200,000 and 400,000 men actively participated in the \textit{Freikorps}. Robert G.L. Waite, \textit{Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923} (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1952), p. 40. For a theoretical look at the relationship between the men of the \textit{Freikorps}, as well as other “soldier males,” see Klaus Theweleit, \textit{Male Fantasies, Volume 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History} (Minneapolis: University of University Press, 1987).} For Germans unwilling to accept that their army had been defeated, former prisoners of war were convenient scapegoats. Even after the war’s conclusion, the lines between prisoners, deserters, traitors and Bolsheviks, became increasingly blurred. This encouraged the public to be suspicious of any soldier whose service at the front had ended in surrender. Although the term manhood seems to have been rarely used in these discussions, it was impossible to be a coward or traitor and still be considered a “real” man. To question a prisoner’s battlefield performance was to simultaneously cast doubt on his manhood.

One of the most prominent forums for analyzing Germany’s military defeat was the numerous memoirs that flooded the global market in the early 1920s to satisfy public demand for inside knowledge from the war’s leading personalities. In their attempts to identify the cause of the collapse, many observers, including Generals Ludendorff, Hermann Joseph von Kuhl, and Crown Prince Wilhelm, pointed to the devastating losses that resulted from desertion and surrenders, particularly among revolutionary elements that supposedly gave up with little or no resistance. Von Kuhl, for example, argued that the columns of prisoners who surrendered in the war’s final months included “numerous shirkers, deserters, and defectors,” and the Crown Prince called attention to the revolutionary ideology of soldiers prepared to surrender at the first opportunity.\footnote{Von Kuhl, \textit{Die Kriegslage im Herbst 1918}, p. 9; Crown Prince William, \textit{Memoirs of the Crown Prince of Germany}, p. 246.}
The generals’ tendency to associate prisoners with less patriotic characters was perhaps unintentional. Ludendorff made it clear that not all prisoners were deserters, as many had fallen into enemy hands after fighting up to the last moment.\textsuperscript{33} Still, discussing prisoners alongside Bolshevik deserters made it difficult to separate prisoners who fought bravely from those who welcomed the opportunity to raise their hands in defeat. Prisoner losses were indeed a critical factor in the German Army’s disintegration, but while there were certainly revolutionary elements among the soldiers who surrendered in autumn 1918, the majority were battle-hardened veterans who had lived through difficult months, or even years, in the trenches.\textsuperscript{34} Observations like those of the Crown Prince, which implied that prisoners often came from the ranks of revolutionary recruits fresh from the homefront, belied the reality of the situation. The prisoner of war’s image as a coward and “second class soldier” persisted, and attempting to repair their collective image became a paramount concern for former prisoners during the interwar period.\textsuperscript{35}

The \textit{Volksbund} was the most important advocacy group working to gain prisoner recognition and ease the transition into civilian life, but its primary objective had always been to expedite the prisoners’ return to Germany. With a majority home by late 1920, the \textit{Volksbund}’s involvement in prisoners’ lives diminished until the association finally dissolved.\textsuperscript{36} However, much of the \textit{Volksbund}’s work continued under Freiherr Wilhelm von Lersner, a former prisoner of the French, and the \textit{Reichsvereinigung ehemaliger Kriegsgefangener} (Reich Association of Former Prisoners of War, ReK), which had been

\textsuperscript{33} Ludendorff, \textit{Kriegführung und Politik}, pp. 153-54
\textsuperscript{34} Watson, \textit{Enduring the Great War}, p. 215.
\textsuperscript{35} See Pöppinghege, “Kriegsteilnehmer zweiter Klasse?”
\textsuperscript{36} Although the United States, Britain, and Japan returned released their prisoners in summer and fall 1919, the French held on to many prisoners until spring 1920. See Nachtigal, “The Repatriation and Reception of Returning Prisoners of War,” p. 175.
associated with the Volksbund since March 1919.\textsuperscript{37} At the time of its establishment, the ReK was primarily concerned with securing financial compensation for former prisoners.\textsuperscript{38} After taking the reigns from the Volksbund, its members continued to petition government officials to pay wages for time in captivity. In time, the organization shifted its priorities to rehabilitating the public’s perception of former prisoners and establishing captivity as a respectable war experience. This meant transforming the prisoners’ image from quivering cowards or traitorous deserters into brave soldiers whose surrender was a consequence of their refusal to retreat in the face of enemy superiority. The ReK, which viewed itself as the former prisoners’ legitimate voice, stressed that aside from being captives, all military prisoners had been frontline soldiers as well. This distinction was often lost in the rhetoric of treason and cowardice, and the ReK’s obsession with the theme reveals the extent to which former prisoners felt alienated from other veterans.\textsuperscript{39}

Although the ReK could never rely on the membership base that supported the Volksbund, by 1921 it consisted of 400,000 members, or approximately one third of all former German prisoners of war. The financial crisis that followed the immediate postwar years’ false impression of stability in made it difficult for the ReK to maintain

\textsuperscript{37} Freiherr von Lersner, “Der inneren Motive des Zusammenschlusses der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen,” BAMA, MSg 200/341, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{38} Rose, Krieg nach dem Kriege, p. 159.
\textsuperscript{39} Pöppinghege, “Kriegsteilnehmer zweiter Klasse?,” pp. 408-09. For an example of early ReK demands, see Reichsvereinigung ehemaliger Kriegsgefangener, Berlin, to the Reichskanzler, Berlin, 12 February 1920, BABL, R 43 I/235. Prior to the decline of the Volksbund and the ReK’s ascent as the premier prisoner of war organization, members of the two organizations came into conflict with other veterans’ groups, including agencies like the Reichsbund der Kriegsbeschädigten, which represented wounded veterans, over how to best serve former prisoners. This was especially problematic because many former prisoners had also been wounded and counted among the disabled. See “Bericht über die Besprechung des Volksbundes, der Reichsvereinigung ehemaliger Kriegs- und Zivilgefangener und der Reichsbundes der Kriegsbeschädigten, ehemaliger Kriegsgefangener und der Kriegshinterbliebenen am 13. Juni 1919, 10 \frac{1}{2} Uhr,” BAMA, MSg 201/749.
paying members, and financial difficulties forced the head office in Berlin to close its doors on at least one occasion. Gaps in the records indicate that the ReK was relatively inactive through the mid 1920s, but the organization struggled on, primarily under von Lersner’s leadership. The ReK’s membership numbers continued to decline throughout the 1920s, but its losses corresponded with a larger trend in German society, as other veterans’ associations experienced similar declines in participation during the same time span.40

In the face of what appeared to be decreasing interest in the activities of all veterans’ associations, Germany’s interest in the events of the Great War, especially identifying the origins of the collapse on the Western Front, persisted. In 1919, the German National Assembly began investigating the factors responsible for the military defeat, and Reichstag committees continued to carry out investigations through 1928. Earlier commentary that clouded the distinctions between prisoners, Bolsheviks, and deserters made its way into these later reports as well. A report on the deterioration of the army, for example, argued that desertion en masse and the “surrender to the enemy of entire battalions and divisions” proved that revolutionary propaganda had taken hold within the army. Another section of the report alleged that German prisoners of war had assisted their French captors’ efforts to stir revolutionary agitation on the homefront by translating inflammatory newspapers into German. As was the case in the years directly

40 Pöppinghege, “Kriegsteilnehmer zweiter Klasse?,” pp. 400-06.
after the armistice, officials continued to discuss desertion and prisoner losses side by side.\textsuperscript{41}

Outside of war memoirs and official investigations, it becomes more difficult to gauge whether the general public suspected former prisoners of cowardice or desertion. It is equally difficult to determine if average Germans associated former prisoners with the deterioration of the army that led to the armistice of November 1918. It is clear, however, that more than a decade after the Great War’s conclusion, the stigma of surrender troubled many former prisoners who sensed that the public viewed soldiers who chose surrender over \textit{Heldentod} with some degree of contempt. For soldiers who had lived behind the physical and mental barriers barbed wire created in the camps, surrender’s legacy was one of isolation and continued feelings of separation from the larger public. The link that prisoners had attempted to reestablish in captivity through expressions of nationalism remained broken. The ReK’s membership had plummeted in the decade since the war’s end, but with the community it represented feeling misunderstood, the organization reemerged to petition for the rights of former prisoners and reenter the struggle to defend their image.

The ReK believed that the most effective means of improving the negative perception of former prisoners was to educate the public. In the late 1920s, its members sponsored a variety of public events geared towards highlighting the prisoners’ sufferings in captivity, which they had stoically endured for the fatherland. What was ultimately important was not the prisoners’ misery or hardships, but the fact that they had overcome

them. In 1929, the ReK initiated plans for an archive and museum dedicated to the study of captivity and asked former prisoners to submit letters, photos, artwork, handcrafts, and other materials from prisoner of war camps around the world.\textsuperscript{42} Camp activities had provided an outlet for prisoners to demonstrate their nationalism during the war. The ReK apparently believed that showcasing the prisoners’ camp pursuits might encourage the public to reevaluate their ideas about life in captivity. At the association’s 1929 national convention in Meißen, nearly 3,000 visitors toured the ReK’s first temporary exhibit, and the success of subsequent showings encouraged organizers to begin planning for a larger exhibition.\textsuperscript{43}

Taking advantage of the latest technologies, the ReK sponsored film screenings where representatives stressed that former prisoners carried both the experience of the trenches and the sense of nationalism and camaraderie that comes from close contact with a foreign captor. At a screening of the film \textit{Kriegsgefangene Deutsche in aller Welt}, an ReK spokesperson emphasized that in captivity, prisoners had overcome their political differences to present a united front against their captors. One of the ReK’s primary goals, therefore, was to share their experience with the homeland so that Germans might also rise above the differences of opinion that made it impossible to work cooperatively toward progress. The film highlighted the prisoners’ athletic and scholarly pursuits to demonstrate that although separated from the front, they had worked diligently to keep

\textsuperscript{42} Von Lersner, “Der inneren Motive des Zusammenschlusses der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen,” BAMA, MSc 200/341, p. 3.
their minds and bodies sound for the duties that awaited them in postwar Germany.\textsuperscript{44} In other words, they had never stopped contributing to the higher aim embraced by soldiers at the front.

As a whole, the ReK designed its activities to persuade Germans that former prisoners were not cowards, but brave frontline soldiers who served their country admirably and deserved a place of honor alongside the Great War’s other veterans. The film’s narrator accordingly reminded the audience that the decision between surrender and death was painful for any soldier, and prisoners often capitulated only after intense fighting or sustaining severe wounds. The ReK spokesperson admonished the prisoners’ critics by arguing “if there are still people in Germany who are frivolous in their use of the term deserter, then they demonstrate with their actions only that they have seen little of war.”\textsuperscript{45} With these comments, the spokesperson turned the tables on those who would liken surrender to desertion by insinuating that critics had obviously not spent time in the trenches. At the same time, the sharp comments reveal that more than a decade after the war’s end, prisoners remained sensitive to suggestions of disloyalty or cowardice.

The ReK’s activities apparently impressed the international community. According to von Lersner, the ReK was the only prisoner advocacy association invited to send representatives to negotiations for the Geneva Convention of 1929. The 1929 convention improved upon The Hague Convention’s generalities and addressed the sensitive issues of prisoner labor, punishment, and repatriation.\textsuperscript{46} Its shortcomings would later be exposed by the horrendous treatment of prisoners during the Second World War.

\textsuperscript{44} “Kriegsgefangene Deutsche aller Welt: Ein Wort zur Einleitung,” (undated), BAMA, MSg 201/1017, pp. 1-2.
\textsuperscript{45} “Kriegsgefangene Deutsche in aller Welt,” p. 8.
\textsuperscript{46} “Der inneren Motive des Zusammenschlusses der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen,” pp. 3-4.
but when it was signed, the 1929 Geneva Convention was a significant step towards improving captivity standards.\textsuperscript{47} While it was consulting on the principles of international law, the ReK resumed its battle for prisoner rights in Germany by once again confronting the government with captivity-related financial claims. Reparations claims from the Great War remained a sore spot as the Great Depression approached. The Young Plan of 1929 aimed to restructure Germany’s war debt by establishing a schedule of annual payments stretched out over a span of decades. The Young Plan offered final resolution of the reparations issue, but the plan’s overseers recommended that unresolved financial matters stemming from the Great War be resolved as quickly as possible so that the plan might be effectively implemented.\textsuperscript{48}

Under the Young Plan, Germany would settle its reparations debts by 1987-88, and politicians on the far right denounced the plan as a slave contract that would place three generations of Germans in servitude.\textsuperscript{49} The ReK opposed the Young Plan as well, but its hostility was related to the settlement’s impact on financial claims put forth by former prisoners. It reacted with indignation to news that German officials planned to relinquish former prisoners’ unsettled damage claims against captors in order to smooth the transition into the new reparations scheme. According to the ReK, millions of marks in claims against England, Belgium, and France were at stake, including wages demanded for work done in the devastated areas of Belgium and Northern France, where German prisoners of the French had remained until at least spring 1920. The Centre

Party’s Heinrich Brüning ascended to the German chancellorship in March 1930. The ReK quickly informed him that since the German government planned to release its past enemies from the obligation of paying damages to former prisoners, the organization held his government responsible for pending claims. Brüning considered ending the Versailles reparations scheme a top priority, even if it led to increased domestic hardship. It is therefore unlikely that he responded to the ReK’s threats with more than a routine acknowledgement of its concerns.

Nonetheless, by the late 1920s the ReK was actively working to protect the social and financial interests of former prisoners and reform their negative image. The organization’s role, even if trivial, in the drafting of the Geneva Convention of 1929 suggested that it recognized the importance of working with the international community to improve standards for prisoner treatment. Domestically, however, the ReK’s opposition to the Young Plan allied it with many of the scheme’s most outspoken critics on the conservative end of the political spectrum, as well as Adolf Hitler’s National Socialist German Workers’ Party. German officials had long worried that dissatisfied prisoners might seek comfort in communist ideology, perhaps never realizing that the real danger waited in a decidedly different direction.

THE DEVIL’S WARM EMBRACE: THE ReK IN HITLER’S GERMANY

As the Volksbund’s successor the ReK had apolitical roots. Representatives had always insisted that they would accept assistance from anyone willing to help the

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organization achieve its mission. Von Lersner and his colleagues had demanded an audience with many of the Weimar Republic’s numerous chancellors, but they never found the willing partners they sought in their quest to rehabilitate the prisoners’ collective image. With Hitler’s appointment to the chancellorship in January 1933, von Lersner sensed a change. Hitler and the Nazis referred to the Great War’s victims as the “primary citizens of the state,” and in their recognition of veterans they eclipsed the efforts of any previous postwar government. In Nazi Germany, veterans and other war victims were typically allowed to move to the front of lines at markets and theatres, and opening ceremonies for veterans’ homes featured parades, banners and public fanfare.\footnote{Robert Weldon Whalen, \textit{Bitter Wounds: German Victims of the Great War, 1914-1939} (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 176-77.} In short, the Great War had been the decisive event in Hitler’s life, and his movement poured considerable energy into drawing attention to the men who had experienced life at the front.

Perhaps inspired by Hitler’s often repeated assertion that national solidarity and the creation of a true \textit{Volksgemeinschaft} were the key to ending the humiliation of the lost war, in an April 1933 letter von Lersner called on the new chancellor to recognize the former prisoners’ unique value to the German people.\footnote{On Nazism and national solidarity, see Peter Fritzsche, \textit{Germans into Nazis} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 195.} Identifying himself as the leader of approximately 25,000 ReK members, von Lersner expressed disappointment that none of the previous governments had understood the value of the captivity experience. Behind barbed wire, he argued, prisoners developed a distinct sense of nationalism and camaraderie, and previous Weimar politicians had failed to grasp how the lessons of such an ordeal might be utilized for the benefit of the German people. He concluded his letter...
by assuring the new chancellor of his confidence that as the “leader of the national
revolution,” Hitler would not make the same mistake.\textsuperscript{54} By the time von Lersner opened
correspondence with Hitler in 1933, the ReK’s membership had dwindled to a mere
25,000, but Hitler surely realized the political value of a vocal group that spoke to the
concerns of thousands of former prisoners who were not official members of the
organization.

This was not Hitler’s first experience with former prisoners of war. In fact,
returning prisoners had played a crucial role in his political career. Following Hitler’s
demobilization at the conclusion of the Great War, he remained with the Bavarian Army
as an informant for its Information Department. In this capacity, he received training in
June 1919 in anti-Bolshevik instruction at the University of Munich. Several months
later, Hitler’s superiors selected him for an instructional team slated to offer a short
course at the Bavarian military camp at Lechfeld. The camp held a large number of
former prisoners waiting to be discharged, many of whom were allegedly contaminated
with Bolshevik ideology. The task of Hitler’s team, under the leadership of Rudolf
Beyschlag, was to reawaken the former prisoners’ sense of national pride through
patriotic lectures.\textsuperscript{55}

Hitler reportedly took on a leading role in the instructional courses and personally
delivered lectures on “Peace Conditions and Reconstruction,” “Emigration,” and “Social
and Economic Political Slogans.” He made a favorable impression on many of the

\textsuperscript{54} Wilhelm von Lersner, Berlin, to Reichskanzler Adolf Hitler, 3 April 1933, BABL, R 43 I/238, p. 1.
\textsuperscript{55} Kershaw, \textit{Hitler}, pp. 122-23. Available sources do not mention the power from which the former
prisoners had been released, but it is likely that they had returned from Russia. In August 1919, when the
lectures took place, the British had scarcely begun releasing prisoners from France, and general repatriation
from the UK had not commenced. It is unlikely, then, that any former prisoners from the UK attended
Hitler’s lectures.
soldiers who attended his lectures, with several describing him as a natural and captivating speaker. At Lechfeld, Hitler found his voice, and he had fond memories of the time he spent there among former prisoners.\textsuperscript{56} Years later, he wrote in \textit{Mein Kampf} that through his service as an educational instructor he “led many hundreds, indeed thousands, of comrades back to their people and fatherland. I ‘nationalized’ the troops and was thus able to help strengthen the general discipline.”\textsuperscript{57} Modris Eksteins points out that there was “never any question of Hitler being a shirker or a coward” during the Great War.\textsuperscript{58} He served at the front with documented courageousness, and his uncompromising nature and exhaltation of stereotypically masculine attributes made him an unlikely ally in the prisoners’ quest for social acceptance. Nevertheless, Nazism claimed to be a movement of national solidarity and resurrection. Perhaps Hitler would welcome the opportunity to once again “lead” former prisoners back to the fatherland.

In the months following Hitler’s appointment, the ReK continued to rehabilitate the prisoners’ image as the Nazis tightened their grip on Germany. By July 1933, the organization had collected sufficient prisoner memorabilia to commemorate the ReK national convention in Hamburg with an impressive exhibit at the Hotel Graf Moltke. The exhibit, arranged by Dr. Joachim Givens, focused on the prisoners’ camaraderie and unconquerable spirit.\textsuperscript{59} Although it represented the successful culmination of years of organizational work, the exhibit was not the highlight of the gathering. From the national convention in Hamburg, the ReK sent Hitler a telegram pledging to assist the Nazi

\textsuperscript{58} Eksteins, \textit{Rites of Spring}, p. 307.
\textsuperscript{59} Beier, \textit{Kriegsgefangen}, p. 13.
chancellor in the building of a new Germany. Furthermore, the ReK offered its members for inclusion in the *Kyffhäuserbund*, the national veterans’ association, as a “first step toward the collection of all combatants and soldiers.”

This was a decisive moment for the ReK. Despite its apolitical history, the association now openly embraced a movement that had already demonstrated a willingness to use whatever means necessary to achieve its aims.

In many ways, the ReK’s relationship with Nazism may have been a survival technique. Veterans’ groups that opposed National Socialism had a short life span in Hitler’s Germany, and the ReK was not the only veterans’ association that moved to form an alliance with the Nazis after their seizure of power. It must also be remembered that the ReK represented but a fraction of Germany’s repatriated prisoners by 1933, and equal numbers of former prisoners may have been actively involved in Social Democratic organizations like the *Reichsbanner* throughout the interwar years. Ferdinand Friedensburg, for example, spent time at the officers’ camp at Holyport after being apprehended at sea. In the interwar years, he opposed the Nazi movement and eventually became one of the founding fathers of the Christian Democratic Union. There does not appear, however, to have been any other association of former prisoners capable of, or interested in, challenging the ReK’s claim to represent the concerns of former prisoners.

While we must view the ReK’s movement towards Nazism in this broader context, the organization’s desire to cooperate with Hitler says much about former prisoners’ continued quest for respect. In July 1933 the ReK’s battle for recognition as

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60 Telegram from the Reichsvereinigung ehemaliger Kriegsgefangener, Hamburg, to Reichskanzler Adolf Hitler, Berlin, 22 July 1933, BABL, R 43 I /238.
62 See Friedensburg, *Lebenserinnerungen*. 
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equals among other veterans finally bore fruit. In response to the association’s telegram, Hitler replied with a greeting that welcomed former prisoners as honorable members of the “community of the front (Frontsoldatentum)” and called for their cooperation in his new Germany. In Hitler’s salutation, the ReK found what it had sought for more than a decade—a sense of belonging. Attempts to gain compensation had practical motives, but even financial claims were driven by the prisoners’ desire to repair their image and have the captivity experience legitimized.

Nazism was a cult of masculinity that demanded strength and assertiveness. Many former prisoners whose nationalism and manhood had been called into question were likely attracted to the Nazi’s hyper-masculine posturing. In his classic study of 581 early Nazis, Peter H. Merkl found that National Socialism attracted many veterans who felt disaffected in postwar society. Of the former prisoners and war invalids represented in Merkl’s sample group, he noted that many could be considered “superpatriots.” Additionally, a noteworthy number of the early local Nazi leaders (Ortsgruppenleiter) in his sample were war also invalids or former prisoners of war. These local leaders tended to devote themselves completely to their party offices, or as Merkl put it, were “married to the Nazi movement, so to speak.” It is certainly possible that the super patriotism and devotion of the former prisoners in Merkl’s study was the outgrowth of a continued need to address suspicions of disloyalty and earn a place of prominence in a movement that never tired of flaunting its collective manliness. By the time the ReK officially allied

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with Hitler in July 1933, it was following a path that had already been taken by a notable number of individual former prisoners who likely shared the ReK’s frustrations.

Like Benito Mussolini in Italy, who led a campaign to socially integrate all veterans of the Great War, including former prisoners, Hitler recognized the prisoners’ need to belong after years of physical and emotional separation from the homeland. He was not the only German politician to show interest in former prisoners. In late 1933, the ReK earned yet another significant acknowledgement when von Lersner and his colleagues were invited to speak with German President and war hero Paul von Hindenburg. The aging icon assured his audience of former prisoners that they need not be ashamed of their captivity. He recalled that he had once heard the Kaiser explain to a group of repatriated officers that it was not the most cowardly who fell into enemy hands, but the bravest and most courageous who held out at the front and refused to retreat.

Hitler’s acceptance of former prisoners was part of the larger consolidation of existing veterans groups that took place in summer 1933. After the association became officially affiliated with the Kyffhäuserbund, the ReK used its new clout to expand its membership and publicize its programs. As self-described disciples of Hitler’s revolutionary plan, the ReK spent the early years of Nazi rule attempting to solidify the prisoners’ place of honor among other frontline veterans. It advertised itself as a veterans’ organization actively working with Hitler and the Nazi movement, and the establishment of a permanent archive and museum of captivity remained one of the

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67 See the newspaper clipping from a Magdeburg newspaper that describes the meeting in BAMA, MSg 200/106.

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ReK’s paramount concerns. The association and its members seemed to be moving in two directions at once. On one hand, the ReK sought to commemorate the virtues of the captivity experience and struggles of its organizational past. At the same time, however, it pledged to assist in the construction of a new Germany under Hitler’s leadership—a Germany where perhaps the stigma of captivity would fade into the shadows of the promise of a “true” national community.

Membership in the ReK increased slightly following its gravitation towards Nazism, but its success proved to be bittersweet. Plans for a permanent prisoner of war museum never came to fruition. Despite the ReK’s intention to focus on nationalism and solidarity in the face of the enemy, a Nazi movement preparing for inevitable military conflict saw little value in drawing attention to the hardships of war. During the Second World War, Hitler and the Wehrmacht demanded that soldiers fight to the last breath, and praising the virtues of life in captivity could hardly be seen as an effective means of motivating soldiers to choose death over surrender. Like so many others, von Lersner and the ReK’s membership failed to recognize that for all the talk of building a new Germany, Hitler and the Nazis were far more interested in destruction. Yet if equality was what the ReK’s members truly wanted, the Nazis were more than willing to comply. Like so many other German organizations, the ReK was effectively liquidated during the process of National Socialist Gleichschaltung and absorbed by the Nazi war victims’ umbrella organization, the Nationalsozialistische Kriegsopfersversorgung.

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69 Flyer labeled “Ehemaliger Kriegsgefangener! Deine Kameraden rufen Dich!, BAMA, MSg 201/1051.
70 Beier, Kriegsgefangen, p. 13.
The German prisoners of the British returned home in autumn 1919 to appreciative crowds that were eager to express their gratitude for the prisoners’ contributions to the war effort. As had been the case with the demobilized soldiers who returned from the front a year earlier, the homefront welcomed former prisoners as if they were returning from the front in victory. Because government officials sensed that prisoners were dissatisfied with the pace and circumstances of their repatriation, the homefront desperately sought to influence the prisoners’ opinion of the new Germany and prevent a slide towards the specter of Bolshevism. Despite concerns that their captivity had placed them at an economic disadvantage, most former prisoners returned to work fairly quickly, and as was the case with other veterans, were able to resume a “normal” life. When the cheers of gratitude from homecoming ceremonies faded and the welcome banners came down, many repatriated prisoners sensed that their fellow Germans continued to view them with suspicion. In the camps of the UK and elsewhere, prisoners prided themselves on rebuilding their connections with the fatherland by exalting German culture, resisting their enemies, and preparing for lives as productive citizens in postwar Germany. Nonetheless, soccer matches, celebrations of the Kaiser’s birthday, and classes in foreign languages did little to destroy the stigma of surrender; it had survived the war.

At home in Germany, the ReK waged a public educational campaign intended to shed light on the prisoners’ camp activities and secure for them an honorable place among the Great War’s other veterans. The organization’s correspondence and public
activities demonstrated a sense of alienation from other veterans. More precisely, the ReK held the belief that other veterans, as well as the public at large, considered former prisoners “second-class soldiers.” Oddly enough, the same veterans that former prisoners felt estranged from struggled with a collective sense of detachment from the general public. Disabled veterans in particular resented the lack of public recognition for their sacrifices, which often took the physical form of a missing limb or mutilated profile. Like former prisoners, disabled veterans sought admiration for their service, and they found it difficult to not harbor animosity towards a society unwilling to grant them proper respect. The pensions paid to German disabled veterans were among the most generous in Europe, but their resentment toward an apparently unappreciative public often soured their opinions of the Weimar Republic.\footnote{Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 62-91.}

When viewed in this broader context, the former prisoners’ struggle serves as a firm reminder that prisoners of war, like disabled veterans, challenged what Robert Whalen referred to as the “heroic metaphor.”\footnote{Whalen, *Bitter Wounds*, pp. 23-30.} Heroes sacrificed their lives for the fatherland. They did not surrender in order to spend the remainder of the war in enemy hands, nor did they survive treacherous wounds to wander the streets as broken beggars in the postwar years. The war may have destroyed the Kaiser’s army, but the social mores at its foundation remained in place despite the cracks that formed in autumn 1918.

In his classic work on the paramilitary Freikorps movements that found success in interwar Germany, Robert G.L. Waite suggested that both the Freikorps and National Socialism “answered the pressing psychological need of the confused and insecure. It
gave them a chance to forget their own inefficacy by identifying themselves with a movement which promised everything they lacked as individuals: the opportunity for dramatic power and action.” Former prisoners and disabled veterans fit this mold perfectly. They felt misunderstood and frustrated, and they desperately wanted their fellow Germans to appreciate their service rather than view them as potential traitors or burdens to the state.

The Nazi movement offered the ReK and the former prisoners who filled its ranks the respect they desired. Whereas von Lersner and his colleagues felt slighted by previous Weimar politicians who viewed them as a threat, Hitler embraced the men of the ReK and welcomed them not only as members of the community of the front, but as honorable men and comrades. The financial compensation the ReK had once doggedly demanded mattered little as long as its members felt respected. Like other dissatisfied veterans of the Great War, former prisoners found in Hitler a sense of belonging and respect. When ReK members paraded at memorial ceremonies, their banners carried both the organization’s logo and the swastika of National Socialism. Behind the barbed wire, prisoners had struggled with isolation and fears that they had been abandoned. There are always consequences for making deals with the devil, but the warmth of Hitler’s embrace made the ReK’s members feel as if they belonged to something greater than themselves, an experience of which they had been stripped at the moment of their capture.

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73 Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism*, p. 43.
This dissertation has attempted to demonstrate how the stigma of surrender and captivity affected the course of the 1914-18 conflict and the lives of the German soldiers who fell into British hands. By examining soldiers’ responses to separation from the national struggle that had defined them as men at war, it has aimed to contribute to a deeper understanding of the Great War and the cultural forces that motivated its combatants. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker have argued that “being ‘deprived’ of the war was being deprived of the whole meaning of life between 1914 and 1918.”¹ Indeed, removal from the front challenged a soldier’s identity as a warrior and called his manhood and loyalty into question. In spite of the commendable treatment prisoners received in the British Isles, they were burdened by feelings of inadequacy and shame that stemmed from the emotional strains of their situation. After overcoming the initial shock of capture and confinement, German prisoners dedicated themselves to giving their lives new meaning by rebuilding the psychological links to the homeland that were severed when they fell into British hands. Although prisoners were separated from the front and the “meaning of life,” thousands looked for personal redemption by attempting to transform their camp into a new, nontraditional, theatre of war.

The culture of captivity became one of redemption, but German prisoners of the British returned home in 1919 to discover that the stigma of surrender was difficult to

¹ Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, 14-18, p. 80.
leave behind. The Great War did not destroy traditional notions of manhood at war; it complicated and reinforced them. Despite the homeland’s efforts to welcome prisoners as citizens of the new Germany, they continued to battle their image as “second class soldiers” who challenged notions of acceptable battlefield behavior. For many former prisoners, Hitler’s decision to formally welcome them to the community of the front represented the culmination of their battle for redemption and acknowledgement. Redemption was possible in Hitler’s Germany, and former prisoners of the British and other belligerents played key political and military roles in the Third Reich. Admiral Karl Dönitz, Hitler’s successor who oversaw Germany’s surrender in 1945, ended the Great War in enemy hands after the British sank his submarine in the Mediterranean.\(^2\)

Robert Ley, a Great War fighter pilot and leader of the German Labor Front from 1933-45, was shot down by a British pilot in 1917 and entered French captivity after his plane crashed behind French lines.\(^3\) In addition, four of the six Great War veterans who attended the Wannsee Conference of 1942, where Reinhard Heydrich and other Nazi officials initiated at the escalation of the “Final Solution,” had been prisoners of war between 1914-1919.\(^4\) Apparently, even the inner sanctum of the Nazi movement was open to former prisoners.

The ascendance of a significant number of former prisoners into local positions of power and the upper echelons of the Third Reich raises interesting questions about the relationship between captivity and Nazism. Were former prisoners whose manhood and nationalism had been challenged by surrender more likely than the average German to be


attracted to overtly masculine, militaristic movements like Nazism? Or was there simply a high statistical probability that some of the nearly 1 million Germans taken prisoner during the Great War would become high-level functionaries in Hitler’s Germany by 1933? These questions require further research, but it is evident that despite the upward mobility available to former prisoners in the Third Reich, Hitler abhorred surrender and expected soldiers to fight to the death or take their own lives before falling into enemy hands. His acceptance of former prisoners had been a political move rather than a display of understanding for the prisoners’ difficult decision to enter captivity.

The veneration and commemoration of sacrificial death was a hallmark of a Nazi propaganda machine that called on soldiers to willingly sacrifice their lives in the name of German prosperity. Soldiers who died for Germany were viewed as martyrs who had entered the realm of eternal heroes, and the philosophical foundations of Nazism rejected retreat or surrender when faced with the enemy. The relationship between manhood and a willingness to fight bravely in the face of death was even clearer to Germans during the Third Reich than had been the case before and during the Great War. As the widow of a World War II German flying ace observed after her husband’s death, “women will hate war and love the warrior, precisely because the best warrior is also the best man.”

Hitler’s military advisors were well aware that breakdowns in discipline and widespread surrender had hastened the collapse of the front in 1918. To prevent similar breakdowns in the Second World War, Wehrmacht officers maintained strict discipline in the field, and the German Army executed between 13,000 and 15,000 German troops for breaching military regulations during the Second World War. Among the most

5 Quoted in Baird, To Die for Germany, p. 228.
unacceptable violations of military law was cowardice, and German soldiers understood that failing to stand one’s ground on the battlefield would likely lead to a court martial and death sentence.\textsuperscript{6} Hitler revealed his personal belief in the dishonor of retreat or surrender when he refused to allow the German Sixth Army, cut off from food and supplies, to retreat from the battle of Stalingrad. Instead, he insisted that his soldiers hold out to the last man. When he promoted the Sixth Army’s commander, Friedrich von Paulus, to the rank of field marshal in the battle’s final hours, Hitler anticipated that the newly appointed field marshal would commit suicide before allowing himself to fall into enemy hands. Instead, von Paulus surrendered to the Red Army and led more than 90,000 of his troops into Soviet captivity. Hitler had expected his soldiers at Stalingrad to welcome the hero’s death that awaited them, and when they failed to live up to his expectations, he could only angrily proclaim that they had “fallen short at the threshold of immortality.”\textsuperscript{7} In Hitler’s mind, von Paulus had the opportunity to ascend into eternity and national immortality by refusing to surrender and committing suicide. Instead, Hitler lamented, the field marshal preferred “to go to Moscow.”\textsuperscript{8}

For Hitler and many of his fellow national socialists, a soldier’s death, even by one’s own hand, was preferable to the humiliation of surviving as a prisoner of war. He applied his personal philosophy to the German people as well. Long after Hitler knew that the war was lost, he remained unwilling to negotiate for peace, preferring to “fight to

the last breath” rather than surrender.\textsuperscript{9} As Berlin crumbled around him in May 1945, Hitler was resolute in his conviction to not surrender and took his own life before Soviet troops reached his bunker. He was not alone in his preference for suicide over surrender and captivity. In the bunker, Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels and his wife ended their own lives, and those of their children, shortly after Hitler. A significant number of other high-ranking military and political officials followed their example in the war’s closing days, including fifty-three army generals, eleven admirals, fourteen air force generals, and eight regional Nazi party leaders. Fears that the enemy might reciprocate the harsh treatment that the Germans had offered prisoners of war and enemy civilians drove many of these officials to take their own lives out of fear. Yet they were also motivated by the opportunity to control the circumstances of their final moments by embracing a soldier’s death. According to Christian Goeschel, they identified suicide as a “distinctly masculine way of dying” that would remove all possibilities that they might suffer the shame of captivity.\textsuperscript{10}

Historians have long debated the degree to which elements of continuity in German history may have set the country on a special path (\textit{Sonderweg}) that led to the horrors of two world wars and the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{11} Isabel Hull recently argued that during the Great War, the German Army tended to embrace violent extremes when confronted with strategic or tactical obstacles. When the army faced defeat in autumn 1918, its


\textsuperscript{11} For the most recent work on this subject, which includes an introduction to the \textit{Sonderweg} debate, see Helmut Walser Smith, \textit{The Continuities of German History: Nation, Religion, and Race across the Long Nineteenth Century} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
tendency to gravitate toward extremes revealed itself as a preference among many officers to risk the total destruction of the German Army to avoid the humiliation of surrender. Requests for peace negotiations would have likewise reflected weakness and were to be avoided. The behavioral patterns promoted by Germany’s military culture of violence and destructiveness, she contends, left an “unintentional legacy” to National Socialism.\textsuperscript{12}

As this dissertation has shown, part of that legacy was the nurturing of the \emph{Heldentod} myth and a corresponding disdain for soldiers who surrendered rather than fighting to the death. From 1914-1918, the German Army built upon the preexisting stigma of surrender by blurring the distinctions between deserters, traitors, and prisoners. Officials did so in hopes of encouraging soldiers to hold their ground and view surrender as an act of cowardice. Soldiers who chose capture over death or inadvertently landed in enemy captivity after receiving severe wounds accordingly carried an emotional burden that weighed upon them long after they returned home.\textsuperscript{13} The Nazis relied upon this tradition of fanatical reverence for sacrificial death and contempt for cowardice and surrender that escalated during the Great War. In this regard, an undeniable link exists between the Imperial German attitude toward surrender and the Nazis’ well-known belief that a soldier’s death was infinitely preferable to an emasculating existence in captivity.

However, it is important to note that there was nothing exceptional about the German disdain for surrender or the feelings or emasculation and inadequacy the nation’s soldiers struggled with after falling into enemy hands. British benchmarks of manhood

\textsuperscript{12} Hull, \textit{Absolute Destruction}, pp. 309-19, 333.

\textsuperscript{13} On the post-World War II experiences of German prisoners of war, see Frank Biess, \textit{Homecomings: Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
during the Great War resembled those embraced by their German enemies. Just as in the Kaiser’s Germany, the British praised soldiers who exhibited courage under fire and endurance while publicly commemorating fallen soldiers as the embodiment of sacrificial bravery. British soldiers who failed to live up to the masculine ideal for soldiers at war likewise struggled with the emotions brought on by capture. When a young British infantryman fell into enemy hands in April 1918, he expressed his disappointment by exclaiming, “It was the most horrible thing I’d ever imagined could happen to me. It made me feel as if I was a coward. I was letting my county down, I was letting my unit down, I was letting my family down…I felt utterly bewildered…Being taken prisoner, oh what a disgrace.”

Canadian soldiers likewise found little solace in the fact that capture improved their chances of surviving the war. Jonathan F. Vance has shown that Canadian servicemen often expressed feelings of shame and depression when discussing their capture. As one former prisoner recalled, a fellow soldier captured at Ypres could simply not believe the hand fate had dealt him, repeating, “This is the thing my father told me to never let happen.”

Even the highest ranks of the European military forces felt the pressure to live up to idealized images of soldierly masculinity. When the Belgian General Gérard Leman was captured in the Liège Fortress after vowing to hold the

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position to the end, he asked his German captor to “bear witness” that he had been unconscious when captured and thus unable to fight to the death.\textsuperscript{17}

Repatriated prisoners returning to Germany were similarly not the only Great War veterans who struggled with the stigma of captivity in the postwar years. Although British officers returning from captivity were not criticized as a matter of official policy, many were asked to explain the events that led to their capture.\textsuperscript{18} Former prisoners returning to Canada often experienced difficulties reintegrating into society and felt “marginalized” by governmental policies that failed to address the specifics of their war experience.\textsuperscript{19} In France, former prisoners found it difficult to persuade government officials to acknowledge their sacrifices and struggled to overcome the implications of cowardice and desertion that accompanied having surrendered to the enemy.\textsuperscript{20} There was nothing exceptional about the Imperial German attitude toward raising one’s hands in defeat, only the remarkable extent to which the Nazis managed to build upon existing sentiments and nurture a culture of no retreat, no surrender, in the Third Reich.

\textsuperscript{17} Keegan, \textit{The First World War}, pp. 81-87.
\textsuperscript{18} Heyman, \textit{Daily Life during World War I}, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{19} Vance, \textit{Objects of Concern}, pp. 80-98.
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**THESES AND DISSERTATIONS**


### APPENDIX A: MAJOR PRISONER OF WAR CAMPS IN THE UK, 1914-1919¹

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Camps For Officers</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colsterdale</td>
<td>Masham, Yorks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donington Hall</td>
<td>Derby, Leicestershire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyffryn Aled</td>
<td>Llansannan, Denbigshire (Wales)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holypoort</td>
<td>Holypoort, Maidenhead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kegworth/Sutton Bonington</td>
<td>Kegworth, Derby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipton</td>
<td>Skipton, Yorks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southampton</td>
<td>Bevois Mount, Southampton</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Camps for Enlisted Men</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blandford</td>
<td>Blandford, Dorsetshire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brocton</td>
<td>Brocton, Stafford</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catterick</td>
<td>Catterick, Yorks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorchester</td>
<td>Dorchester, Dorsetshire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frith Hill</td>
<td>Deepcut, Surrey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frongoch</td>
<td>Bela, Merionetshire (Wales)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handforth</td>
<td>Handforth, Cheshire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jersey</td>
<td>Jersey, Channel Islands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leigh</td>
<td>Leigh, Lancashire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pattishall</td>
<td>Pattishall, Towcester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oswestry</td>
<td>Oswestry, Shropshire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shrewsbury</td>
<td>Abbey Wood, Shrewsbury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southampton</td>
<td>Shirley Rink, Southampton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stobs</td>
<td>Hawick, Scotland</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Special Camps</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feltham</td>
<td>Feltham, Middlesex</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ The above list includes parent camps and major camps for officer prisoners of war. Since there were hundreds of working camps, none have been listed above. For an incomplete but nonetheless expansive list of camps in the UK, see List of All Prisoners of War Camps in England and Wales and Scotland with Postal and Telegraphic Addresses, May 1918, TNA, HO 45/10883/345466.