

Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>)

Prisoners of Britain: German Civilian and Combatant Internees During the First World War

Review Number:

1455

Publish date:

Thursday, 25 July, 2013

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ISBN:

9780719078347

Date of Publication:

2012

Price:

£65.00

Pages:

342pp.

Publisher:

Manchester University Press

Publisher url:

<http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9780719078347>

Place of Publication:

Manchester

Reviewer:

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'It is astonishing', states Panikos Panayi in the opening sentence of his monograph, 'that almost a century after the outbreak of the First World War, no academic study has yet appeared upon the experiences of German prisoners of war in Britain' (p. 1). Without question this book goes a considerable distance in plugging this rightly identified deficit in current First World War and POW historiography. To do so Panayi undertakes an ambitious canvass of the experiences of hundreds of thousands of German captives and detainees held in Britain during the conflict, their numbers having peaked at 115,950, comprising 24,522 civilian and 91,428 military internees, in November 1918 (p. 44). These men, for Panayi shows that mass internment was almost exclusively a male experience, are split into three categories: German civilians resident in Britain in 1914 who were subjected to increasing levels of control; German civilians seized by the British around the world, especially in the British Empire and on the high seas, who were transported for detention in Britain; and German combatant POWs, captured on the Western Front and transferred to the United Kingdom in increasing numbers (especially post-1917). Through inclusion of the last the book is an important development of Panayi's 1991 monograph, *The Enemy in Our Midst: Germans in Britain during the First World War* (1), which concentrated solely on German civilian internment experiences. By

categorising German internees, Panayi illuminates a picture of multiple captivity experiences as opposed to a homogenous captivity narrative. He chiefly considers differences between civilian and combatant internee experiences but he also flags the impact of class, age, level of education and religion on captive experiences. So, for example, we learn that the spatial confines of the camps weighed particularly heavily on 'older middle-class civilians used to their own space' while 'younger working-class Germans, especially those who had grown up in inner-city tenements' coped best with the circumstances of wired life (p. 123). German civilian and combatant internees clearly faced different conditions in different British camps at different periods during the war. Each prisoner also brought his unique pre-captive experiences. Accordingly each individual reacted and responded in different ways. Hence, when men engaged in social activities in the camps, partially as a response to the boredom and monotony of life within, their backgrounds determined the communities and activities in which they became involved (p. 169). There is still more to do in tracing the impact of inmate background on their First World War captivity experiences. For example, it would be worth investigating how individuals and groups were challenged differently within the same camp context and how they sought to respond. The evident weight of source material available on the camp at Knockaloe might make such an investigation possible in the case of German civilian internment experiences in Britain. Furthermore, comparing findings trans-nationally, exploring for example the situation of parallel groups in Britain and Germany, offers further understanding. Panayi, however, raises these considerations, stresses internment experiences in the multiple and sets an agenda for further POW scholarship.

The book follows a logical structure, beginning with an overview of material produced about First World War German captivity. The opening chapter introduces the German POW as an absent figure in the history of the war by outlining the phenomenon of POW amnesia, captivity narratives having been largely forgotten in both academic and popular narratives produced about the conflict. Explanations, including the impact of ongoing Germanophobia in post-war British society as well as the role of the Second World War in eclipsing earlier internment experiences, are offered for this phenomenon. In this regard the introduction points to a bigger story, indicating the marginalisation of POW experiences more generally in the histories of wars.⁽²⁾ It may therefore be possible to attribute further reasons for this blanket marginalisation. These could include a common disinclination amongst ex-POWs to talk about or publicise their experiences, based on internalised ideas of shame, dishonour or guilt. Conversely it may be that a lack of appetite for POW narratives exists amongst the public of former belligerent nations, unless they are exciting tales of escape which resonate with dominant constructions of heroic wartime exploits. Panayi, however, also shows that amnesia around German internment experiences was only partial, noting attempts made in both Britain and Germany to construct narratives about German captivity experiences. He offers insight as to why some POW narratives were heard, including how a POW voice was mobilized in post-war Germany via the creation of POW veterans' associations, this process pressurising the German state into giving captivity narratives some space for memorialisation (p. 20). That process is striking given that it was not universal. For example, a parallel national POW association did not form in Britain in the aftermath of war. The introduction ends with a succinct overview of existing scholarship on POWs and interned civilians. Panayi positions his approach alongside that of Alon Rachamimov's study of captivity on the Eastern Front during the Great War and Matthew Stibbe's exploration of British civilian internment in Ruhleben, 1914-18. These works have a common focus on the everyday lives of internees and are rooted in the tradition of 'history from below'. Panayi's book thus incorporates a wide range of what he terms 'official' and 'unofficial' sources, encompassing those available in German and English languages. Seeking 'individual stories' of internment 'through the eyes of those involved' (p. 297), he uses material produced by the internees, such as published and unpublished testimony, letters, diaries and other archival material. These, however, are combined with 'official' governmental reports, parliamentary debates, camp reports, material held by humanitarian groups and newspaper coverage.

Chapter two explores the first stage of the captivity journey, showing the development of internment policies and their immediate impact on those concerned. Focusing on the arrest, transportation and capture of the three types interned by the British, Panayi offers a cleverly structured insight into how each category found itself behind barbed wire. Chapters three to six, comprising the core of the book, see the author's wide consultation of sources pay dividends. Herein he explores the experiences of German civilian and combatant

internees in Britain by tracing central elements of captive life. Chapter three begins with a necessary if in places repetitive and formulaic outline of the creation, development and management of a captivity landscape in Britain. The camps, numbering over 600 by war's end (p. 83), and embracing early *ad hoc* establishments for non-combatants, the gargantuan Isle of Man camps, a variety of military installations, and working camps, are mapped. Chapter four explores the conditions experienced within, together with their impact on those interned. This involves consideration of the causes and prevalence of 'barbed wire disease', being the adverse mental affects attributable to life in captivity (pp. 123-8). Chapter five explores the camps as social entities, considering the religious, sporting, educational and leisure activities that were established and the accompanying social formation that evidently proved important in helping individuals to cope. The role of relief agencies, including the Markel Committee, The YMCA and The Red Cross, in facilitating these activities is further explored. Chapter six sketches the developing policies and practices regarding the employment of POWs in Britain, giving due consideration to the importance of captive labour for the British war economy and for the prisoners themselves. Chapter seven shifts tack, adding another layer to Panayi's analysis: he leaves the confines of the camps in order to consider the ways in which German internees were seen in both Britain and Germany during the war. The largely negative views constructed in medial and official discourses are balanced against positive manifestations of public opinion, including the charitable efforts to help internees that operated on an international, national (in Britain and Germany), regional, local and familial level. The juxtaposition of the negative discourses which generated hatred against softer, human interactions which resulted in kindness and intimacy between those categorised elsewhere as 'enemies' is striking. In chapter eight the book comes full circle with a consideration of escapes, releases and returns to show the various ways German internees' exited captivity. This rightly stresses that exit did not mark an end of the experience, the deportations suffered by many German civilians who had been long-time resident in Britain before war's outbreak revealing how First World War captivity could be a life changing experience. For most internees it was rarely as easy as leaving the camps and returning to one's pre-captive life.

In the conclusion the meaning of internment in Britain during the First World War is considered on a number of levels: the meaning of captivity for those who experienced it; the significance of incarceration as state policy; and the importance of the internment of Germans in Britain as part of a broader picture of the history of persecution during the First World War and beyond. This approach results in both specific and broad, bold conclusions. The First World War is represented as a turning point in the history of mass internment and in the persecution of minorities. Therein Britain is confronted with an uncomfortable view of its history. Panayi argues that the internment of Germans in Britain was central in the development of persecution in the 20th century, the British indulging in what he describes as a process of 'ethnic cleansing' which saw perceived enemies identified, discriminated against, attacked, incarcerated and eventually 'eliminated' through mass deportations at the war's end. In this view the processes of persecution that were established and legitimated by belligerents in the First World War pave the way for 'bloodier' events in the 20th century (p. 306). Moreover the history of internment and persecution is given a contemporary relevance, Panayi connecting his findings with recent instances of the detention of perceived dangerous peoples on grounds of 'security'. These conclusions are hard hitting and persuasive, although it must be said that they are drawn substantially from the experiences of German civilian internees rather than the experiences of captured combatants. Yet confronting the reader with what many might consider to be an uncomfortable and unpalatable truth promises to further our understanding of the First World War and its impact. Indeed, as Brian K. Feltman states in his exploration of atrocities committed by First World War British soldiers when taking Germans' prisoner, 'the time has come to explore more fully the true nature of the Great War, even if we may not like what we find'.⁽³⁾

Overall the work results in a thorough and hitherto unavailable canvass of German captivity experiences in Britain during the First World War. Its broadness results in both strengths and constraints. Without doubt each chapter is impressive in its range. Hence in Chapter four a great deal about life in the camps is covered including: the mental and physical health of inmates; camp rules, regulations and routines; housing conditions; diet; postal systems; the absence of women; and internal crime. Chapter five similarly details a plethora of activities, embracing everything from camp libraries to theatre shows, schooling to sports, religion to high culture as manifested in paintings, sculpture, music and literature produced by inmates.

Little known but fascinating elements also emerge. As examples it is revealed that a small number of German women resident in Britain were targeted, tried and imprisoned as suspected spies and saboteurs during the war (pp. 94-5) while specialist employment camps were established, such as the one at Cornwallis Road, Islington, where POWs helped in the production of prosthetic limbs (p. 209). The broad canvass also allows one to appreciate the length as well as the breadth of captivity experiences endured by Germans in Britain, the first exchanges of German captives being mooted as early as October 1914, the final German POWs not leaving British custody until 1920 (p. 276).

The trade-off for covering so much ground is that the analysis of each element is sometimes necessarily limited. Many understudied facets of captivity are included but in the space available not all are subjected to the level of deep critical analysis that they deserve. Readers will crave more. As a scholar who has focused on British military experiences of captivity in Germany, I would have liked more consideration of the specific effects of captivity on German servicemen. Combatants, whether they were Regulars, volunteers or conscripts, underwent deep psychological anguish because of their capture. This included an acute psychological 'displacement of self?', capture marking men off from their pre-capture civilian roles and, importantly, their male 'warrior' roles as defined by the war. The result, at least for some, were feelings of emasculation, failure, dishonour, shame, guilt, impotence and fear. Further anguish was experienced due to the trials of life in captivity, not least the problems associated with having to work for the enemy, as was common for all military POWs except officers. The effects of these elements also impacted on the ways servicemen sought to cope. Hence some attempted to reassert combatant roles through escape or sabotage, while others made various attempts to re-connect with and re-negotiate their military identities behind the wire. The German military experiences outlined in Panayi's book warrant further attention in these regards, some of the author's claims perhaps being too sweeping. An example is the suggestion that the vast majority of German military POWs were complicit in surrender because they had no real desire to continue fighting (p. 60) and, moreover, that many of those servicemen subsequently employed in picturesque settings enjoyed their work, embracing the relief of being away from the danger of the battlefields (p. 213). I do not dispute these claims yet they do imply nuances worthy of further analysis. Complicity might generate feelings of disempowerment and loss of control. POW labour could be equally challenging and disturbing, not least because of the implication that one was acting unpatriotically by working for the enemy, betraying one's own nation at a time of crisis. Even the relief at being out of harm's way, which was not the case when men were employed near the front line in France and Belgium, doubtlessly brought some pangs of guilt, feeling of impotency and sense of dishonour. However, in saying this it must be remembered that with limited prior scholarship on the topic and with constraints regarding word limits, Panayi needed to give the reader a general overview, exploring all the main elements, and therein provide as much analysis of each component as possible. He does, therefore, provide some fruitful analysis and successfully raise important questions about captivity experiences. Scholars reading this work, and perhaps Panayi himself, may now be prompted to explore specific aspects further, allowing deeper analysis and further nuance to be injected.

Two other aspects of this work are further noteworthy. The first is Panayi's success in contextualising German POW experiences. So, for example, in chapter two he places the development of internment policies regarding German POWs within the context of growing state power, tighter classifications of insider/outsider groups, a corresponding fanaticism for 'security' manifest in pre-war British fears about German 'spying?' and 'treachery?', all set within the increasing brutalization of 'total war?' (p. 41). It is this background that enhances our understanding of why German captives, especially those German civilians resident in British territories in 1914, were treated in the ways they were. Similarly the development of the prison camps and their management are placed alongside the development of other state bureaucracies, not least those which were established to move, house, clothe and feed millions of soldiers (p. 79). I have similarly been struck by the rarely explored parallels existing between prisoners' and soldiers' experiences in terms of their movement, control and administration. Suicide rates, death rates, crime and diets evidenced inside the wire are also set against these elements experienced in the British population and on the Western Front (pp. 130-2). Context puts captivity in perspective, here allowing judgement as to whether captives were more adversely affected by their experiences. Panayi is therefore able to point to the 'generally sound mental and physical condition among the prisoners?' (p. 128). Meanwhile, assessment of public opinion

reveals how events during the war, such as the sinking of the *Lusitania* (p. 236) or Kitchener's death (p. 237), co-related with peaks in Germanophobia and informed how German internees were seen in Britain. By placing German captivity experiences within the bigger picture, the author shatters the illusion that a POW can be seen and studied as a 'separate and discrete subject' in wars.⁽⁴⁾ His approach further contextualises captivity by mapping broad developments, such as state policies and public discourses, onto the individual experiences of the internees who were affected.

This implies the second noteworthy point about the work which is the superb method employed. Panayi explains his approach in terms of 'history from below', or what is known in the German tradition as *Alltagsgeschichte*, focusing on 'life stories' (p. 28). Yet he places these stories in the context of the attitudes and actions of government, public opinion and humanitarian groups in both Britain and Germany. This allows a revealing and appealing combination of macro developments with micro histories, the former giving a broad sketch of policies and practices, the latter bringing real lives and colour to the history offered. Panayi expertly balances the two. Thus, in the same chapter, he gives a broad sketch of the complicated tangle of ministries and quangos governing the lives of German internees in Britain and provides engaging individual testimonies as to how specific prisoners experienced the system. There is much to commend this kind of approach to studying captivity. We need to be aware of the political wrangling, diplomatic efforts and media discourses informing policies, practices and opinions about POWs. But these cannot, and should not, be divorced from the people who were experiencing captivity first hand. Hence Panayi sketches the ongoing Anglo-German negotiations that took place throughout the war on prisoner releases and exchanges, tying the success and failures of these diplomatic missions with the hopes and despairs of Germans anxiously waiting in the camps (p. 273). Ultimately, as Matthew Stibbe has also argued, the greatest challenge facing the historiography of this field is to facilitate understanding of how individuals, families and communities directly affected by captivity were able to make sense of, and influence, what was happening to them.⁽⁵⁾ Panayi has added to such understanding, his work providing essential reading for POW and First World War scholars. His subject and approach provides an engaging overview, raising myriad themes and questions that invite further scholarship in this still under-researched subject area. What is more, not least because of the range and vibrancy of the internment experiences that it reveals, this book will also be enjoyed by that real but elusive animal in academic scholarship; the general reader.

Thus, almost 100 years after the outbreak of the First World War, with a century's worth of scholarship produced about the conflict, covering every conceivable topic, Panayi has achieved what many would think impossible. He has provided something new; he has illuminated an under-researched First World War topic, and, thereby, he has contributed to the liberation of hundreds of thousands of captives by adding them to the historical record.

Notes

I am happy with this excellent review and do not wish to comment further.

1. Panikos Panayi, *The Enemy in Our Midst: Germans in Britain during the First World War* (Oxford, 1991).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Joan Beaumont, 'Rank, privilege and prisoners of war?', *War and Society*, 1 (1983), 67; Alon Rachamimov, *POWs and The Great War. Captivity on the Eastern Front* (Oxford, 2002), p. 227; Matthew Stibbe, *British Civilian Internees in Germany. The Ruhleben Camp, 1914-1918* (Manchester, 2008), pp. 163-83.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Brian K. Feltman, 'Tolerance as a crime? The British treatment of German prisoners of war on the Western Front, 1914-1918?', *War in History*, 17 (2010), 458.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich, 'Prisoners of war in the Second World War: an overview?', in *Prisoners of War and their Captors in World War II*, ed. Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich (Oxford, 1996), p. 2.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Matthew Stibbe, 'Introduction: captivity, forced labour and forced migration during the First World War?', *Immigrants and Minorities*, 26 (2008), 14.[Back to \(5\)](#)

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