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War and Welfare: British Prisoner of War Families, 1939-45

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Barbara Hately-Broad?s purpose is to insert the neglected subject of British prisoner-of-war (POW) families into the history of army, navy and air force families during the Second World War, a subject that is itself rather thinly tackled by historians. She casts light on the part played by the families of POWs through lobbying, support mechanisms, and communications with the absent prisoners, alongside more familiar POW narratives of male bravery and suffering The hardships suffered by POW families, particularly wives, is also on her agenda. More widely, Hately-Broad links family conditions to the development of a welfare state that had difficulty internalising anything other than the ?classic? at-home family of the married couple with children. She shows how the armed services and the British state grew to recognise a duty of care for its fighting forces and their families during the 19th and 20th centuries, but finds the exercise of care to be dilatory, cumbersome, and inadequate. The war in which welfarist principles became irresistible (1939?45) is no exception in her view. She does not deny that modern and total war *does* bring welfare, as the general view holds, but severely questions the value and the extent of the welfare extended to service families.

Hately-Broad points out a virtual absence of interest in POW families in conventional narratives of the war, and shows that this is equally true in feminist revisionist histories of the war. She aims to fill the gap, and also to give voice to POW families themselves. This is no easy task, as POW families? informal and localised methods do not leave many traces in personal or official records. Despite her best efforts (and this

is an adapted PhD with close on a third of the book taken up with notes and bibliography), engaging with the history of POW families proves to be largely a top-down exercise, relying on governmental and administrative records. Some personal papers, memoirs, and memories of POW families are unearthed for use in the book, but in truth this is a thin source. Given how much ordinary people did commit to paper during the war, this lacuna is in itself testimony to the reticence with which society, including the families themselves, surrounded POWs. More discussion of this and of the frame of mind of the home front towards its unproductive captive men in Europe and in the Far East, would be welcome. Indeed, the subject would benefit from more reflection on the socially determined nature of individual and common memory.

Hately-Broad recognises that the wartime principles of equality and fairness on the home front could be used to deny decent treatment for particular groups, as much as to develop welfare provision ? as the social history of the home front has it. This is very clear in the government?s response to the Army Morale Reports that reported the concerns of men fighting abroad for many years in Africa or the East. Men were aware of the civilian ordeal, believed that the state stood in place of the absent husband, and so asked that their wives and families should be specially nurtured on the home front in Britain. However, the government?s commitment to equality among women and children on the home front was used to deny the development of special privileges for service families beyond an over-leisurely expansion of the allowances system that had already operated during the Second World War. If this was the case for the families of active servicemen in the field, it was equally applied to the families of more morally problematic prisoners-of-war, and there was no particular recognition of the specific anxieties and truncated communication that they suffered. It was much easier for the state to relegate the needs of servicemen and POWs to the voluntary sector in the shape of the Soldiers, Sailors and Air Force Families Association (SSAFA) or the Red Cross, and to regard the local committees for POW support as unofficial and less valid .

The first two chapters overview the development of state responsibility for service families from the Crimean War onwards. Charities were regarded as less demeaning to families in the Victorian period, but their provision was increasingly displaced by the growth of status-based benefits and of conscription in the 20th century. The availability and level of allowances to service families, whether the serviceman was a professional, a volunteer, or a conscript, grew greatly during the First World War, albeit hinged with assumptions about the nature of the family and the ?good behaviour? expected of wives. The second chapter describes and analyses the evolving allowance systems of the 20th century. Hately-Broad shows the levels of bureaucratic confusion and delay, the inadequacy of rates of allowances, and the public debates about allowances in the forces that largely took place in Parliament because servicemen were forbidden to lobby about their pay. In general, benefits to families were at a level where state responsibility could be demonstrated, where public concern would never get out of hand, and where taxpayers? money would not be ?squandered?.

Chapters three to six focus in on POWs and their families. Chapter three (?Dead, missing, or prisoner of war??*)* shows how the classification of men by the forces impacted on the status of dependants and on their types and levels of allowances. Once a man was known to be dead, his allowance was replaced by pension. This change was disadvantageous to widows, and some British soldiers left off their dog tags during combat so as to postpone identification if they should die. If a man was ?missing?, the time allowed before being assumed dead was varied from time to time during the war and from war theatre to theatre. Men?s fates at sea were particularly difficult to call in non-European waters. The British Army did not follow the Indian Army in adopting a status of ?missing assumed prisoner? that might have cut this Gordian knot. However, and here the administration was more sensible than Hately-Broad seems prepared to admit, the situation in the Far East and the Pacific as the Japanese swept through, led to a more open-ended admission that a man?s fate might be unknown for a long time, even for years, and that declaring a woman a widow too soon opened the door to bigamy. (Indeed, in 1945, husbands turned up at the door of wives who had remarried.) The Japanese were not bound by the Geneva Convention to a prompt declaration of who was a POW: they were not only callous in this matter, they also held a cultural assumption that it would be shaming for a family to learn their man had been taken prisoner.

Chapter four (?The fortunes of war?) examines the economic difficulties that POW families had. POW

officers? families had a particularly difficult time because the officer was expected to make arrangements with his bank about making funds available to his family before going abroad. If he had been negligent, the authorities were hesitant to intrude into his bank account and to infringe his independence. Makeshift arrangements were eventually made, but Hately-Broad estimates 100s of hard cases where substantial underpayment may have resulted in family hardship. The obsession with officers? kit, and its location and ownership, which was prevalent in the First World War, continued into the later war. (?Other ranks? had fewer possessions to fuss over.) General findings about the system emerge in this chapter. Administrators had a pathological fear of overpaying recipients of allowances, born of the Treasury ethos and of a residual poor law attitude towards claimants assumed to be on the make. The air force had more commonsense and humanity than the other services.

Chapter five ?Nobody would tell you anything? clarifies the many official and unofficial channels through which POW families could learn about their men and communicate with them. The author flays the British administration (especially the army) for over-complexity, complacency, and inefficiency with regard to POW administration. POW families were at the bottom of the feeding chain when it came to information and support from government agencies, whether military or civil. During periods of large captures of British forces such as Dunkirk and Singapore, it could take months before a man?s fate and location as a POW was known. Hately-Broad makes much of these sorry stories of administrative foot-dragging, errors, and misunderstandings with POW families that she finds in the government papers, speculating ? probably correctly ? on how the real scale of inefficiency and uncaringness may have been much wider. Families, however, were relatively uncomplaining. (I will come back to this point later.)

Chapter six ?By ourselves, for ourselves*?* examines POW families? self-help and their relations with the relevant charities. The home front was awash with charities, national and local, some dating back to the First World War such as the British Legion, others new to the Second World War, who concerned themselves with POWs, but less so with families. Voluntary bodies dealt with much of the nitty-gritty of communications in the shape of parcels and letters, (notably the British Red Cross), of support for families (such as SSAFA), and of information and self-support among POW families (POW Relatives Association, local branches of POWRA and of the Red Cross), and of any lobby of a political kind for POW interests. They tended to function in competition with each other, and could evade responsibility when complexities and irregularities occurred, sometimes literally passing the parcel. Official agencies could be cavalier in their treatment of the voluntary groups and bodies, underestimating the value of relatives? concerns and organisations, and showing a particular disdain for ?ladies? who were relatives of POWs. In general the Red Cross shouldered the burden of public responsibility, even if the culprits giving poor service were governmental, such as the Post Office, only occasionally bumping elbows with SSAFA. Hately-Broad provides a strong inclusive history of these organisations and their work in this chapter. Once again she is stronger with administrative sources than personal ones, which do seem rather scant, though there is no question that this historian has looked for them.

Chapter seven ?The rate for the job? looks at the public debates about pay, conditions, and allowances in the post-war forces, resuming the historical perspective shown in the introduction. It concludes with a discussion of the relative lack of support given by the state to returning POWs and their families. Their repatriation received a hesitant response from government and voluntary organisation, fearful of interfering in their independence and in the privacy of the restored family unit. Hately-Broad melds their issues with those of all returning servicemen, drawing on a growing recent historical concern with the millions of men who had to be reintegrated into a British society greatly changed by Home Front experiences of war. There is a rather unfinished air about this chapter. The remainder of this review comments on the book?s sources, and engages with the author?s analysis.

The author omits one memoir of a POW family that is relatively well known in Home Front literature ? Clara Milburn?s diaries.(1) Mrs Milburn shares with her diary the capture of her unmarried officer son during the Dunkirk retreat of 1940, her (polite) exasperation when the Red Cross read a list wrongly and misinform her of his location in Germany, her anxiety when it transpires that he had been wounded, and her account of the flow of resources to her son until his release in 1945. Typically the Milburns hear precise

news of Alan in 1940 from fellow officers and their families, who operate a phone network while their sons are POWs in Germany, well before the War Office catches up with the situation. Alan Milburn broadly gets what the Geneva Convention promises to officers. He spends his time in study, gardening, amateur plays, camp sociability, and farm work. His family at home are a material and psychological resource rather than a financial drain on him. Mrs Milburn is rather unreflective, and yet her diary can provide a valuable discourse regarding men in captivity. ?Monday 17th January 1944. He has had very few letters lately. He has now heard about his exam. Gardening is occupying a lot of time and for serious reading he has studied The Beveridge Report ? Alan! Gosh! He has also been out for a walk, ?very pleasant to get away from one?s fellow-men?. They must get a bit sick of each other.? And ?Monday 14th February 1944. A letter for Jack today, dated 20.1.44 ? quite a quick journey for it. He wrote mostly of engineering matters, but at the end says he has begun to smoke a pipe! ?We rather hope it continues. A man is so much more companionable with a pipe.?

Alan Milburn returns home in 1945 in good shape, takes up his career as a draughtsman, and gets married. He is well nurtured by his family for whom his absence was more distressing than their experience of bombing and rationing in Warwickshire. Mrs Milburn?s diary also provides accounts of the POW relatives groups and meetings in the South Midlands. In general, Hately-Broad is keener to comment on the factual accuracy of information given in family sources rather than to analyse their attitudes and emotional flow. The Milburns adore Churchill, hate the Germans when the Ministry of Information bids them, and rarely complain about the War Office or the Red Cross. They do not easily fit the image of the POW family that Hately-Broad tends to privilege ? the husband a POW, the wife inarticulate and put-upon by home front life and by her status, the children deprived of a father, and the family economy dependent on a grudging state and thus rather shaky.

Another facet that Hately-Broad does not discuss is the issue of returning POWs having to render some months of further conscription. They also shared post-war reserve status with other ex-servicemen, and many were called up for the Korean war. We hear of just one case of hardship. POWs had the last bits of their armed service extracted from them at a stage in their life when they had had enough of authority and were deeply needful of time with their families. This is another situation where the language of equality could be used by the authorities (why should an ex-POW be treated more generously than the normal fighting man?) and could coincide with a feeling that some labour contribution needed to be extracted from men who had sat out the war in camps, whether dire or just plain Spartan.

More generally, Hately-Broad?s view that British POW families were disadvantaged sufferers from neglect by the British state is questionable. Playing devil?s advocate, one can point to the voluntary and unofficial organisations that kept POWs in the public mind, and the level of military and civil attention to the incomes and allowances of POW families. All this was not bad by the standards of the Second World War. Community-level creativity, and a rough-and-ready commitment to fairness (if not equality) was shown by wartime Britain in its dealings with POW issues. All services wives had a tough time during the war, with a very high proportion of wives, including those with young children, having to take up paid work to survive. The only alternative was to save expenditure by living with parents or in-laws. It is true that neither government nor armed forces saw reason to put discussion of POWs at the front of their concerns and policies and they could be dilatory in working out policies for POW groups in particular theatres of war that might have been planned for. However, families suffered little from public disdain. Their menfolk were not regarded as cowards or traitors: the warmth with which ?retreating? British soldiers were greeted on coming home from Dunkirk is instructive on this point. POWs remained as good a cause for philanthropy as they had been in the First World War. In the economy of sacrifice of 1939?45, it ill behoved POW families to whinge too much, and their unhappy voices remained private. Social relations and bonds could provide support of the type that the French in the Vichy state also directed at their POWs in German hands: Hately-Broad makes instructive comparisons with other countries throughout the book. POW wives could garner the same public approval for their Home Front efforts as other women.

British POWs were spared repatriation to defeated or divided homelands that Japanese and German POWs

experienced, in some cases as much as a decade after the end of the war.(2) It is true that returning POWs and their families were left to sort out adjustment very much on their own, and that they received no concessions from the state such as immunity from the men seeing out their period of conscription. They had more or less the same access to the evolving Welfare State as other citizens. However, the latter was the common condition in 1945 for demobilised men, and partly mitigated by the priority that the state gave to men above women in the labour market and to the ?traditional? family headed by a man. The feminist historians who Hately-Broad finds limited in their view of POWs have a significant general point to make here. However, she is right to link the POW families with the general issues of the status, conditions, and incomes of service families. She also shows the seesaw of public attitudes across two centuries. Soldiers, sailors and airmen received approbation and better conditions in time of war than they did once wars were over, and the same was true for their families.

Notes

1. *Mrs Milburn?s Diaries: An Englishwoman?s Day-to-Day Reflections 1939?45*, ed. Peter Donnelly (London, 1980).Back to (1)
2. Frank Biess Homecomings: *Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in Postwar Germany* (Princeton, NJ, 2006).Back to (2)

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