Jones, Heather: *Violence against Prisoners of War in the First World War. Britain, France and Germany, 1914-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2011. ISBN: 9780521117586; 451 S.

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At least six million soldiers fell into enemy hands from 1914-1918, yet historians have only recently begun to examine seriously the First World War captivity experience. The book by Heather Jones aims to establish wartime captivity as more than a 'marginalised sideshow' and make it a focal point of the conflict (p. 371). By focusing on violence against prisoners held by Britain, France and Germany, this comparative study chronicles the progressive brutalization of the First World War and the extent to which reports of atrocity altered perceptions of acceptable violence against enemy captives.

Jones contends that 'non-fatal' violence was important to the brutalization process, and the first of the book's three parts examines civilian violence against prisoners. When civilians encountered captives in 1914, prisoners often suffered physical and verbal abuse at the hands of crowds that gathered to catch a glimpse of the enemy. Violence against prisoners took place in each of the three countries discussed, but British civilians suppressed their rage more effectively than their French and German counterparts. Although the British were slow to lash out at prisoners, French civilians considered prisoners 'legitimate targets for popular anger' (p. 50). German civilians likewise mistreated enemy captives, and prisoners were appalled by the reception they received from German women. Prisoner mistreatment quickly made headlines, with each belligerent publicizing abuses as proof of the enemy's barbarism. The deeper significance of the civilian mistreatment of prisoners, Jones stresses, was the signal it sent to military authorities—violence against prisoners was now acceptable in the court of public opinion.

Several recent studies have drawn attention to the frequency of prisoner killings during the First World War.[1] Jones argues that news of these killings encouraged soldiers to view captured enemies as perpetrators of war crimes and thus logical targets of vengeance. Furthermore, she goes beyond the battlefield to demonstrate that violence, both lethal and non-lethal, was common in many prisoner of war camps. German authorities, for example, supplied prisoners with insufficient rations, enforced discipline with beatings, and failed to appropriately care for prisoners during the 1915 typhus epidemic. The French held German prisoners under dangerous conditions in North Africa, where almost all of the men caught malaria. As a result of the 1914-15 abuses, prisoners came to be almost universally depicted as either victims or perpetrators of atrocity.

The book's second part examines one of the innovations of the First World War—the prisoner of war labor company. Jones explains that rather than transporting all captives to prison camps, captors sometimes required prisoners to work near the front lines in retaliation for mistreatment of their own soldiers in enemy hands. The German army was particularly conspicuous in this regard. When the French employed German prisoners under harsh conditions in 1917, the German army retaliated by providing French prisoners with minimal rations and forcing them to labor under shellfire. Many German officials considered these reprisals necessary, and the measures eventually prompted British and French authorities to withdraw German prisoners from the front. Germany's methods, however, may have significantly damaged its international reputation. In the end, Jones contends, the permanent use of prisoner labor near and in the front lines 'marked the major wartime shift in the existing paradigms of captivity' (p. 165).

Conditions in German labor companies deteriorated severely in 1918 as the German army distinguished itself from its enemies by allowing prisoner mistreatment to reach extreme levels. The German army continued to employ prisoners close to the front, in violation of agreements reached in 1917, where parcels from home reached prisoners

[1] Tim Cook, The Politics of Surrender. Canadian Soldiers and the Killing of Prisoners in the Great War, The Journal of Military History 70 (July 2006), pp. 637-665.

irregularly and malnutrition became a serious concern. Starvation eventually led to increased violence when guards used beatings as a means of forcing famished prisoners to work. Jones persuasively argues that German authorities valued a prisoner's labor over his personal safety. Standards of treatment deteriorated slightly for German prisoners in British and French labor companies as well, but prisoners of the Allies did not experience the starvation and violence that characterized life in German labor companies. Jones attributes this contrast to civilian oversight of the British and French militaries, which was largely absent in Germany.

The books final section analyzes repatriation and representations of violence against prisoners in the interwar period. Following the armistice, the Allies continued to publicize, and attempted to prosecute, Germany's mistreatment of prisoners. The victorious powers also delayed repatriation of their German prisoners until after the conclusion of formal peace proceedings. The French went on to employ German prisoners in dangerous battlefield clean-up operations and, as Jones points out, it was in this manner that France „would exact her revenge" (p. 297) for Germany's abuses against prisoners. Whereas the Allies eagerly publicized Germany's crimes, Jones maintains that the failure of German officials to acknowledge their army's mistreatment of prisoners made it difficult for German civilians to comprehend the Allied decision to delay repatriation. The Allied desire to publicize prisoner mistreatment diminished with time, and by the mid-1920s Europeans suffered from 'historical amnesia' regarding violence against prisoners (p. 316). Jones describes this development as a complex process that varied by country, but she explains that the need to rebuild the international community was a significant factor.

Jones's evaluation of prisoner reintegration raises questions about cultural attitudes towards surrender. She claims that the state did not stigmatize captivity in interwar Britain, but one wonders whether average Britons suspected former prisoners of cowardice or disloyalty, as was often the case in France? Furthermore, her assertion that former prisoners enjoyed „positive recognition" (p. 338) and encountered little stigmatization in interwar Germany simplifies a complicated issue. Former prisoners faced no official discrimination upon their return to Germany, but one of the paramount goals of Germany's largest association of former prisoners was rehabilitating the negative image of soldiers who fell into enemy hands.[2] Jones acknowledges the former prisoners' insecurities, but she overlooks the degree to which their belief that the public viewed them as 'second-class soldiers' hampered their efforts to reintegrate socially. Jones is clearly focused on violence, but more consideration of the emotional, emasculating consequences of surrender would have complemented to this already impressive study.

Jones is to be commended for her balanced comparative approach. When evaluating German and Allied prisoner treatment, she considers the unique circumstances facing each captor nation, such as the size and composition of its prisoner population. Jones' examination reveals that the German army was more willing than its enemies in Britain and France to employ brutal tactics in pursuit of victory. In doing so, she provides evidence in support of Isabel Hull's argument that the German army's tendency to embrace extreme, violent solutions during the Kaiserreich was facilitated by a lack of civilian control of the armed forces.[3] This meticulously researched study will require historians to reconsider mass captivity's importance to the First World War and the conflict's role in the evolution of forced labor. Jones accomplishes her goal of establishing the centrality of captivity to the war and demonstrates that prisoners could be open to acts of violence throughout their captivity. This book is sure to establish Jones' reputation as one of the leading scholars of wartime captivity.

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[2] Brian K. Feltman, The Culture of Captivity. German Prisoners, British Captors, and Manhood in the Great War, 1914-1920, Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University, 2010, pp. 260-290.

[3] Isabel V. Hull, Absolute Destruction. Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany, Ithaca 2005.

Germany, 1914-1920. Cambridge 2011, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 11.01.2012.