

Fabien, Théofilakis: *Les prisonniers de guerre allemands. France, 1944–1949*. Paris: Fayard 2014. ISBN: 978-2-213-66304-3; 762 S.

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This book is a comprehensive and detailed history of the captivity of German soldiers in France from 1944 to the last prisoner releases in 1948. The author draws from a very rich document base drawn predominantly from French, German, American, and Swiss archives, which he complemented with some interviews of former prisoners. All aspects of captivity receive attention, but it is important to note that the book provides more than a history of the German prisoners in French hands. It also sheds light on diplomatic and economic dimensions and evaluates the role of the German Prisoners of War (POWs) as a symbol in France and Germany. While focusing on the German prisoners, the book demonstrates powerfully that the transition from war to peace in Europe was highly complex and took a long time.

France detained 700.000–800.000 German prisoners in the months immediately following the end of the war, but, considering fluctuations, a total of nearly one million German soldiers at one time experienced French captivity in the last months of the war and in the years following the German capitulation. The vast majority had been captured by the American army, but the Americans transferred many of the German prisoners they captured in 1944–1945 to French custody, largely because they felt not prepared to organize the upkeep of such a large group of prisoners in Europe and had no interest in transporting them to the United States. For the French provisional government installed in 1944, the predominant notion was that the German prisoners had to pay for the damage and suffering the Nazi occupation of France 1940–1944 had caused. The French government therefore expected that the American army would continuously transfer German prisoners to France. Keeping large numbers of German prisoners in France and making them work in de-mining and in the French economy could be considered as a form of repara-

tion Germany had to pay. The German prisoners indeed became a central element of French economic reconstruction. The French government and people saw the work of the POWs as a possibility for the Germans to gradually redeem themselves through hard labor and to thereby help support a future recovery of their own country – albeit in insecure form. That many of the Germans in French camps had been mobilized very late in the war and were hardly personally responsible for the hardships of the German occupation of France did not matter.

For a variety of reasons, the beginning of captivity brought much suffering for the prisoners. The French treatment was initially rather harsh and sometimes abusive, especially in the cases where the German prisoners were captured or guarded by French resistance units, who themselves were considered criminals and not recognized as POWs by Nazi Germany. But generally, the dire circumstances in France at the end of the war were more responsible for the hardship of the German prisoners than willful abuses. Regardless, the bad humanitarian conditions in many French camps, the extremely dangerous de-mining work, and other practices contrary to the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War (1929) soon triggered an international outcry spearheaded by the agency charged with camp inspections, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). Soon, the American government detected a contradiction between its political imperatives for reconstructing Germany and the fact that the French authorities were widely blamed for not taking good care of German prisoners, most of whom had been in American hands at first. Officials began to call for a stop of American prisoner transfers to French supervision and even for a recall of German prisoners previously handed over to France by the American army. The French government retorted by saying that the Americans had left a disproportionate number of sick and wounded prisoners to French custody and that the conditions for the German prisoners were so bad because of the extensive destructions caused by the German army in France. It insisted on being allowed to use more healthy German prisoners for its economic recovery. Mean-

while, in the German occupation zones a newly forming public opinion became highly concerned about the fate of the German prisoners in France, whose conditions were considered only mildly better than the conditions of captivity in the Soviet Union. Théofilakis shows very well how the German churches and the emerging political parties used the POW theme in their efforts to establish themselves as platforms of public opinion. By late 1946, the French government thus faced a major international public relations problem, especially at a time when the Americans and British began releasing large numbers of their own German prisoners.

The French government could not ignore this problem, not least because it had to take into consideration public opinion in its own occupation zone in Southwestern Germany. French authorities therefore worked busily toward improving the conditions of captivity while beginning to release some prisoners, especially the sick and handicapped. Repatriation was initially poorly organized, however. Trainloads of dismissed prisoners were just dropped off at some train stations in Germany without papers, money, or food. Many of these prisoners were disabled or severely ill. In an occupied, war-ravaged country with curfews and extremely restricted mobility (especially for people without papers), many of these ex-prisoners clustered around the train stations in overcrowded towns that were usually unable to provide shelter and supplies for them.

In France itself, Théofilakis shows that the German prisoner was popularly seen as somebody who through his hard labor could gradually redeem his home country. Initially, public hostility was too strong to envision a more decentralized deployment of the German prisoners, but after some delays they were sent to individual farms and small businesses. The prisoners and their French employers began to foster friendlier relations. The French government even instituted a program that allowed German POWs to become voluntary civilian workers (inspired by programs negotiated by the Nazi and Vichy governments for French prisoners in Germany during the war). While some German POWs were happy to seize this opportunity, especially given the dis-

ruptions in their home region and with many of them having lost their home in eastern Germany, the number of volunteers always lagged far behind French expectations. Still, conditions for German prisoners continued to improve as more of them were sent to individual employers, especially farmers. By the time of the last releases in early 1948, captivity in France definitively had become very bearable. The last prisoners seem to have returned in a spirit of reconciliation.

This is an important book based on very extensive and thorough research. The author left no stone unturned. The book urges us to reconsider periodization by paying more attention to the period of what French historians call the „sortie de guerre“ (exit from the war), the cumbersome and slow transition from war to peace. The book explains comprehensively the administrative, diplomatic, and economic details concerning the prisoners of war, and it occasionally uses their testimonies as support or illustration. If I could articulate a wish, I would ask for a bit more emphasis on the experiences of the prisoners and perhaps also of the guards, as far as documents exist for them. But this does not detract from the value of a very well researched and multi-dimensional book that is a treasure trove for anybody interested in postwar reconstruction, POW history, and Franco-German relations.

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