

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

PRISONERS OF WAR IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

A Problematic at the Crossroads of Histories and Disciplines



Anne-Marie Pathé and Fabien Théofilakis

Good stories often start in old boxes, with the lid more or less firmly stuck down, full of papers turning yellow with age: as the German historian and theoretician Reinhart Koselleck reminds us, the researcher remains subject to the 'right of veto over sources', and the revival of the historiography of captivity that underlies this work is no exception. But we must go back to the sources . . .

On that gloomy November day in 2007 we were very far from imagining that we were embarking on an adventure, with the publication of this book as its ultimate conclusion and happy ending. In the course of that autumn afternoon, Jean Mongrédien,¹ the son of a French prisoner who had spent his five years of war in an Oflag,² was awaited in the library of the Institut d'histoire du temps présent, in Paris.³ He was carrying a little brown cardboard attaché case, a relic from another time – that of his father's captivity: Georges Mongrédien, an officer in the reserve, was in civilian life a senior administrator of public affairs in Paris (he was the co-director of secretariats for the City Council and for the General Council for the Seine department) – and also a well-known specialist in the history of literary life in the seventeenth century.⁴

Opening the little case was magical. It proved to be the casket for a real 'treasure trove' of archives that awaited us. Side by side, carefully arranged and scrupulously preserved, were some fifteen little notebooks full of careful handwriting, twenty bundles of personal reflections – 'family chats' – with photographs, a quantity of programmes from cultural events, menus from feast days, right down to a packet containing a literary prize. All

these documents with their fine calligraphy and illustrations lit up the dreary afternoon and shed new light on French captivity in German hands. From his mobilization, Captain Mongrédien had been very conscious of living through a dramatic event and, as a man of letters, felt that he must preserve the details of this 'strange defeat', which had tipped him into the unknown world of captivity. As he wrote in his diary:

27 August 1940⁵

. . . I am not hiding the fact that these notes, with minor material facts side by side with personal impressions and reflections, may be disorganized and incoherent. That does not worry me; I have three aims: 1, to make a chronological record, scrupulous and precise, of the material facts that make up our daily life; 2, if possible, to build up a complete documentation with a view to future publication, memoirs or souvenirs which will then require preparation in full; 3, finally, and above all, to enable me to reawaken my daily impressions later, and to bring understanding to those of my nearest and dearest who are interested.⁶

Sixty years after his repatriation, deposited in the archives of the IHTP (Institute for the history of modern times), the Mongrédien archive was born. Its impressive totality provided a view of the full diversity of captivity, as an experience that was individual but also collective; as a trauma that was military as well as political; as an ordeal that was simultaneously social and cultural. Two archivists and a historian set out to make this voice from OPG 2365⁷ resound in a publication, *Archives d'une captivité, 1939–1945. L'évasion littéraire du capitaine Mongrédien* (2010). As the exploration of these files advanced, re-echoing their own work,⁸ the idea to try to understand this state of captivity as it had been experienced – as a totality, as a transnational history – came to life.

This determination to set the state of captivity in the foreground in lectures and representations coincided with historical concerns that were moving the figure of the defeated individual from the rear of the battlefields to the forefront of research. Following an international conference at the Ecole Militaire in Paris, 17–18 November 2011, this work on war captivity in the twentieth century thus takes its place in a historiographical renewal that no longer forgets the prisoners. For more than a dozen years now, the history of captivity has benefited from a double dynamic: on one hand, the crisis in national narratives, little inclined to take into account those who were conquered, turning instead to international histories that look at side issues of the battlefields – and, on the other hand, the growing interest in the exits from war, which locate the prisoner-figure at the heart of the dynamics of demobilization – military and cultural, political and ideological, public and private.

This book aims to take up a thematic challenge, to attempt a 'total history' of war captivity not through exhaustivity but in taking care not to isolate 'captivity' as part of military history (which itself is not restricted to the battlefields: on the contrary it is considered through a range of approaches – thematic, methodological, historiographical, archival, etc.). This approach takes into account the specificity of the experience of captivity while exploring its capacity to reveal dynamics at work in twentieth-century European societies. It is an essential step, if only in concern for intelligibility over a phenomenon previously unknown on this scale: although the wars of the nineteenth century were still being defined – although to a diminishing extent – within a certain Napoleonic heritage, the First World War marked an initial quantitative leap. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871 – the war of reference up to 1914 – resulted in 380,000 French prisoners being held in Germany in January 1871 (Bendick 2003: 183), but the figure of between 7 and 8.5 million combatants captured by the enemy during the First World War represented one seventh of the total number of soldiers mobilized. The Second World War extended this incremental pattern with ten million prisoners during the war in Europe and nearly twelve million Germans captured in 1945 (7.7 million in the west, 3.3 million in the east).⁹ Although the wars of colonization show far lower prisoner numbers, they were on the other hand part of the same dynamic of totalization¹⁰ at work for the duration of captivity: 90 per cent of French prisoners returned to France by mid August 1871, after a year in captivity, while in the Second World War the average German soldier spent more time in captivity than on the battlefield (Overmans 1999: 20). The treatment of prisoners in the wars of decolonization would in fact strengthen a broader evolution. In Indochina and in Algeria the treatment of soldiers who fell into enemy hands seemed to render the protective framework – national as well as legal – inoperative in these asymmetric conflicts. The numerical growth is part of the expression, in defeat, of the transformation of the link between societies and warfare.

To account for this diversity and complexity, this work is divided into five parts. After an introduction (John Horne) setting out the field of research that wartime captivity has become, it opens with the framework in which this captivity was set and managed. The first part considers the links between camp systems, international law and humanitarian action; how administrative organization and the logics of surveillance were applied to the management of mass captivity, the definition and relevance of military and judicial norms, and the definition of regimes of captivity and violence. Although wars make manifest the backwardness of judicial norms on combatant practices, once peace has returned do war experiences not contribute to the development of international human rights?

Heather Jones's contribution underlines that the treatment of prisoners of war (POWs) in Western Europe in the First World War was based upon a tense dynamic between humanitarianism and international law on the one side and military necessity on the other. From 1914–1918, indeed, this tension ultimately led to significant protection for captives in Western Europe. Yet this success story regarding humanitarian mobilization was accompanied by the widespread development of forced labour and the increased use of violence against captives. The text explores next the tensions between the cultural drive to 'civilize' prisoner treatment during the 1914–1918 conflict and the growing use of forced labour and violence against prisoners of war that the war also provoked. We are shown how the balance of forces between these two processes ultimately determined the kinds of captivity to which the Great War gave rise in Western Europe. International law played a major role in the treatment of POWs during the Second World War too, especially in the fate of the Non-Soviet Jewish POWs, which – as Rüdiger Overmans reminds us – is not often mentioned, although their number is also estimated to have been as high as 100,000. This group consisted mainly of French, Yugoslav and British soldiers, but there were also smaller groups from other nationalities, like the Poles. The German policy towards the Non-Soviet POWs stood in stark contrast to the treatment of Soviet Jewish POWs. Generally they were not murdered, and survived the Holocaust in the POW camps. Rüdiger Overmans explores the reasons behind such a difference in treatment, and gives an explanation for this apparently surprising German policy, since there was no general order concerning the treatment of Jews in German captivity. Delphine Debons's contribution explores another key factor of conditions in captivity in which international law played a major role: the regulation of religious life in POW camps between 1939 and 1945. During the Second World War, alleviating the physical sufferings of the majority of French, British, American and British Dominion prisoners of war in German hands was one of the challenges for humanitarian actors. However, another challenge was to alleviate the moral torments to which captivity gave rise. In this light, the right to practise religion was endorsed. Debons's contribution considers the interaction between international law and the domestic regulations put in place by captor states to legislate for prison camps. If international law was a key factor in the fate of POWs during the war, it did not disappear once the guns had fallen silent, as Patrizia Dogliani shows with the case of the Rimini Enclave along the Adriatic coast. It was the most important camp in Italy, set up after the German capitulation, on 2 May 1945. Lying along the Adriatic coast between Cervia and Riccione, the Rimini Enclave consisted of a complex system of no more than 10 camps with a set of supporting infrastructures to satisfy the principal needs of

those interned. Between 1945 and 1947 an extremely diverse group of male and female prisoners was interned and guarded by an equally heterogeneous army. The contribution focuses on this pivotal period between the end of the Second World War and the immediate beginnings of a new division and 'cold' war. Prisoners and guards were touched by these events, living in close confinement on an everyday level, in contact with the local population, which had to face the reconstruction of its territory and homes, and political parties.

The second part of the book examines the phraseology of captivity, those traces on bodies and minds from being behind the barbed wire that took the form of artistic and intellectual productions during and after captivity, and the questioning of social and gendered norms. How to characterize the society of captives within the camp and through their links with home fronts? As Iris Rachamimov stresses in the case study on internees during the First World War, this population was cut off from their previous civilian or military existence. These men therefore strove during their years in captivity to create meaningful social and cultural practices and preserve a feeling of self-worth. POW officers and civilian internees in particular developed elaborate practices that attempted to uphold their sense of privileged male authority. However some of these practices in fact challenged even undermined gender boundaries and sexual norms. By examining the social and cultural life of English- and German-speaking inmates, this contribution focuses on two mainstays of internment: theatrical productions (and especially drag performances) and camp domesticity (i.e., the attempts to create a 'home from home'). Relating to the Second World War, gender is a heuristic, analytical category for the examination of the captivity experience in American conflicts, as Matthias Reiss demonstrates with the experience of more than 371,000 German prisoners of war who were interned in the United States. He argues that the perception of these prisoners as hyper-masculine soldiers influenced the way they were treated on American soil, particularly the members of the Army Group Africa, who went into captivity in Tunisia in May 1943. Prisoners' continuous performance of a soldierly masculine identity allowed them to build bridges with the Americans even before the end of the war and therefore may have contributed to paving the way for the rapid reintegration of the Federal Republic of Germany into the Western world.

On an individual level, and also in the intellectual sphere, captivity in wartime could induce specific kinds of intellectual production. The text of Peter Schöttler devoted to Fernand Braudel as a prisoner at Mainz and Lübeck from 1940 to 1945 illustrates this convincingly. During these long years he famously edited a preliminary version of his book *The Mediterranean*. A close examination of a wide range of Braudel's work

as well as his behaviour reveals that Braudel, a historian with first-hand experience of war and of imprisonment, actually thought as much about contemporary history as he did about the sixteenth century. Music, another intellectual field, could also be used to express the experience behind barbed wire. By May 1940 the war had taken a critical turn, and the British government decided to intern, en masse, German and Austrian resident 'enemy aliens'. These included numerous artists, scholars and musicians, amongst them a highly successful Austrian-born classical composer, Hans Gál, who is studied by Suzanne Snizek. While interned, Gál wrote a work for three instrumentalists in the camp and managed to craft a first-rate piece of chamber music that he called the 'Huyton Suite'. Suzanne Snizek's chapter explores the genesis of this musical work; the process by which it was first rehearsed and performed in the camp, the thematic connections between internment and its portrayal in the music and, finally, its reception.

The third part of the book considers relations between captives and the cultures – in times of war or afterwards – that guarded them, employed them and lived alongside them. How do friend-enemy representations evolve in daily contact with the defeated? How does each one of the actors – from public authorities to local populations – respond to the tension between economic interests in employing this captive labour force and the ideological need to retain the enemy image? How do the experiences of imprisonment differ between military prisoners and civilian internees?

Bob Moore provides elements of a response with his comparative study. During the Second World War, the British Isles played host to both German and Italian prisoners of war. While the former were treated as dangerous enemies and Nazis, to be confined and removed elsewhere until they ceased to be a threat, the latter were assumed to be both harmless and uncommitted to the fascist cause. The 150,000 Italians were rapidly integrated into the agricultural economy, often working unguarded and being billeted on individual farms. By contrast, Germans were only brought to Britain in 1944, primarily in the aftermath of Operation Overlord. Over time, their numbers grew and they were gradually seen as a useful supplementary labour force, increasingly replacing the Italians, who were sent home 1946–1947. Bob Moore's contribution examines both state and public perceptions of these POWs and questions whether they were determined by pre-existing cultural stereotypes or by practical encounters with an enemy 'other'. Georg Kreis deals with similar issues even if they involve another geographical and cultural context, considering a specific group that between 1942 and 1945 experienced a 'voluntary' forced stay in Switzerland for what was more or less a lengthy period. This group were

Soviet nationals who had escaped from German captivity. The authorities endeavoured to reduce to the minimum the contact between these prisoners of war and the native population. Unlike the stereotype of the Russians, continuously drunk and violent, the internees were considered by the native populations as likeable and amiable. The last chapter of part three offers a chronological counterpoint as Fabien Théofilakis focuses on German captivity in French hands after 1944–1945. This mass captivity constituted a challenge to foreign policy as well as to the military administration once the enemy had been defeated on the battlefields. The economic use of captive labour and the decisions made regarding its management turned it into one of the issues of the French *'sortie de guerre'*: the whole of French society was concerned, even challenged, by their presence. This contribution goes back to look at the first cohabitation during peacetime between French and German people on a large scale. It tries to understand to what extent this second post-war period led to a true Franco-German rapprochement, unlike the first one of 1918–1921.

Captivity is revealing, at both intra-state and interstate levels, as illustrated with acuity by the colonial question considered in part four. In the light of the French case, we can see patterns of domination both in the home country – in the consideration of 'indigenous' prisoners in the prism of Franco-German relations in the Second World War – or in Algeria, from colonial conquest in the nineteenth century to the War of Independence a century later. If the European twentieth century is the century of excesses, what can the treatment of captives reveal? It is equally that of the constitution of a judicial corpus – international humanitarian law – that develops in the wake of war.

Sylvie Thénault's chapter offers an enlightening framework on the internment issue in Algeria in the long term. Despite the chronological distance separating them, the colonial war to conquer Algeria (1830–1847) and the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) share at least one common characteristic: during both conflicts the treatment of Algerians taken prisoner by the French was described as 'internment'. In the twentieth century the term 'internment' only referred to detention within a camp; the treatment of Algerians at the time, however, did not diverge from the usual treatment of prisoners of war. In contrast, as the French authorities officially refused to apply the Geneva Conventions in the Algerian War of Independence, the ALN (National Liberation Army) prisoners were described as 'internees' to whom the status of prisoners of war did not apply. Comparing these two conflicts thus aims to underline the differences that separate them and to call into question the idea of any simplistic long-term continuity in colonialism over time, despite the use of the same term 'internment' in both wars. Sarah Frank opens the

perspective to the colonial issue in France, with a case study on French colonial prisoners through the lens of the philanthropic organizations after France's defeat in June 1940. Amongst the 1.8 million French soldiers captured in the debacle of June 1940, there were tens of thousands of colonial prisoners of war (CPOWs). While white prisoners from the Frontstalags were released by 1941, the colonial soldiers remained in captivity. Conditions in the Frontstalags were a major concern for CPOWs. Various national and international aid groups sprang up to help French and colonial prisoners by providing them with food, clothing and distractions, enabling closer interactions between CPOWs and local populations. Considering who was helping the CPOWs and why, Sarah Frank's contribution answers the question of how CPOWs interacted with the local and international charities and leads to reflection on whether helping CPOWs filled a political need to maintain sovereignty over a vulnerable population or was based on purely humanitarian needs. Focused on the same period, Raffael Scheck's contribution addresses another sensitive issue: the French colonial prisoners guarded by French officers. In January 1943, the German commander-in-chief in France requested that the Vichy government provide French officers and NCOs (non-commissioned officers) as guards for 'indigenous' prisoners of war. Vichy agreed, and the replacement of German guards by French cadres began two months later. The origin and execution of this agreement were riddled with misunderstandings and conflicts between German and French officials. This chapter examines the economic, social and diplomatic aspects of this agreement, arguing that it does not simply constitute a case of high treason but is rather a typical example of collaboration – mixing elements of opposition and compliance in the face of manipulative but poorly coordinated (German) initiatives. In this framework, the Algerian war appears once more as a war that is not being named as such. Between 1954 and 1962 the French colonial presence in Algeria was challenged by an enemy that used non-conventional tactics, including guerrilla warfare and terrorism, alongside diplomatic actions by the FLN (National Liberation Front). France responded to this attempt to challenge its power in Algeria by sending massive numbers of troops to Algeria while refusing to recognize the situation as a state of war. It is in light of this tense dynamic that Raphaëlle Branche's chapter discusses the question of French soldiers who were taken prisoner in Algeria.

Yet – as discussed in part five, which takes the form of an interdisciplinary discussion between a historian (Hervé Drévilion), a philosopher (Christophe Bouton), a former officer (Michel Goya) and a historian (Daniel Palmieri) working with the International Committee of the Red Cross – it is precisely this dynamic that creates new wars, numerous since the

end of the Cold War as asymmetry challenges the norms of warfare and opens the debate on captivity in modern times. This scientific revival can be applied equally to a vigorous social demand that finds expression in the deposit of archives – in museums, on Internet sites or in local libraries. The conclusion of the book (Henry Rousso) poses the challenge: 'Tell me how you treat your prisoner, and I will tell you what kind of war you are pursuing'.

These are the areas of current research that the book sets out to explore, inviting a new generation of international historians to pursue these new paths and in doing so to propose a different history of Europe and Europeans centred on Western Europe.¹¹ The present work thus plays on the geographical and academic diversity of the contributors, enhancing echoes between the chapters in which the reflection of one war can be read in another; from one enemy to another, from one front line to another.

As a thematic and archival work, the book also responds to a conceptual take on captivity, since it proposes that captivity offers excellent ground for an exchange between disciplines. In addition, the book anticipates considerable benefit from its growing openness: at the end of each chapter it invites a specialist other than a historian to take an 'alternative' look at captivity. Each one – a specialist in international law; an ethnologist whose work concentrates on the memories of three generations of Spanish refugees interned in France; a hospital doctor who takes an interest in humanitarian matters; and a sociologist working on the diaspora – in his or her own way, and according to individual practice, offers a 'counter-voice' and a way to escape from institutional logics. Captivity, understood as a phenomenon that exceeds the battlefield and detention camps, encompassing whole societies both at war and emerging from war, thus represents a crossroads in the labyrinth. The outcome is propitious for an interdisciplinary reading capable of grasping the interwoven and long-neglected dynamics of captivity, as summed up by Captain Mongrédién:

This is why all these lectures and talks, this intellectual life . . . had a much greater range than our immediate diversion . . . but behind this picturesque vision was a very fine and strongly emotional symbol: the irresistible attraction of the mind over the unfortunate prisoners, who refused to believe in the failure of spiritual values, who stood fast in a praiseworthy effort to escape from intellectual collapse. It was the unconquered spirit which stood firm against the material forces which had attempted to eliminate it. This was, unrecognized among many, an act of faith of the intellect.¹²

In return, captivity regains an actuality in the research that is laid out as evidence in these chapters.

Notes

1. Jean Mongrédien (b. 1932) is Professor Emeritus of Musicology at the Université de Paris IV – Sorbonne.
2. A camp for officer prisoners of war during the Third Reich. Captured on 17 June 1940 in the Aube, Captain Mongrédien was interned in Mailly-le-Camp (22 June–11 August 1940) before being taken to Germany where he was held, successively, in the Oflags XIA (Osterode am Harz, Hanover, 15 June 1940–5 July 1941), IV D (Elsterhorst bei Hoyerswerda, Silesia, 6 July 1941–16 February 1945) and IV C (Colditz, Leipzig, now in Saxony, 17 February–6 April 1945). Liberated on 22 April, he returned to France on 1 June 1945 after 1,769 days in captivity.
3. The Institut d'histoire du temps présent (IHTP) is a laboratory within the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS). Set up in 1980, it took over from the Comité d'histoire de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, founded in 1951. The IHTP is both a laboratory working on the most up-to-date history and a documentation centre where publications, periodicals and private archives are conserved. For a detailed presentation, see its website: www.ihtp.cnrs.fr
4. He has published some forty works on this subject, as well as around a thousand articles.
5. After six weeks of fighting, France signed an armistice with Hitler's Germany on 20 June 1940. Of the approximately 1.8 million soldiers who were captured, nearly 1.5 million were taken by the Third Reich as prisoners of war.
6. IHTP, ARC 132, Journal, cahier 4, 27 August 1940, p. 106.
7. OPG: 'officier prisonnier de guerre', officer prisoner of war.
8. In particular Théofilakis (2014).
9. Around one third of all soldiers engaged in the war – between 85 and 110 million men – were taken prisoner.
10. On this concept, see John Horne's introduction in Horne (2010).
11. Preparing this book for English-speaking readers has required an adaptation of the initial manuscript. For this reason the methodical presentation of European archival institutions has been withdrawn from the present publication as being less relevant from an international perspective. We direct the reader on this point to the French edition, which presents the archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva, the archives of the Musée royal de l'Armée et de l'Histoire militaire in Brussels, the Archives nationales at Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, the Etablissement de communication et de production audiovisuelle de la Défense (photographie and film collections of the Ministère de la Défense) at the Fort d'Ivry, the Bureau des archives des victimes des conflits contemporains at Caen, and the Bibliothèque de documentation internationale contemporaine in Paris.
12. IHTP, ARC 132, extract from the chapter 'L'université d'Osterode' in 'Causeries familiares'.

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Auroy, Jours de guerre. Ma vie sous l'Occupation (with Dominique Veillon, éditions Bayard, 2008) and *Archives d'une captivité, 1939–1945. L'évasion littéraire du capitaine Mongrédién* (with Yann Potin and Fabien Théofilakis, éditions Textuel, 2010).

Fabien Théofilakis is currently DAD visiting Professor (DAAD for the German academic exchange service) at the University of Montreal (Canadian Center for German and European Studies). In 2010 he presented a thesis on the German prisoners of war in French hands and their repatriation to Germany (1944–1949), undertaken jointly at the universities of Paris Ovest Nanterre La Défense and of Augsburg; rewarded in particular by prizes from the Université franco-allemande and the Chancellery of the Universities of Paris, it was published by éditions Fayard in 2014. He has published several articles on the subject and co-directed the proceedings of a Franco-German conference on the camp at Dachau (2005). He worked on the exhibition 'The Eichmann case, Jerusalem, 1961', organized at the memorial to the Shoah (Paris 2001) and has continued since then with research on the notes taken by the Nazi criminal during his prosecution.