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Between 1914 and 1918, enemy civilians were interned on an unprecedented scale, with a global network of camps holding men, women, and children by the hundreds of thousands. Included in this number were approximately 5,500 Britons interned by the German military at the Ruhleben racecourse on the outskirts of Berlin. Matthew Stibbe's well-researched analysis of their experiences manages to place the Ruhleben internees within the broader context of the First World War captivity phenomenon without losing sight of the characteristics that set Ruhleben apart from other camps for civilian internees.

Stibbe's first chapter examines the German decision to intern British civilians, which was both a response to the alleged mistreatment of Germans in the United Kingdom and the belief that Britons in Germany might be used as bargaining chips in future negotiations over enemy civilians. The number of Britons in Germany was small compared to the German population in England, and although agreements were concluded for the exchange of women, children, and men disqualified from military service, the British had no intention of sending potential soldiers home to Germany. Germany's internment policies were strongly influenced by the actions of its enemies, and the arrest of military-aged Britons ensued only after the British refused to release Germans interned in England. Of Germany's more than 175 prison camps, Ruhleben was the only facility earmarked exclusively for civilians, and its proximity to Berlin kept it "in the public eye" (p. 24). The inmates of Ruhleben came from diverse backgrounds. Their numbers included merchant sailors, Hamburg bankers and traders, and numerous entertainers, journalists, and service workers who were arrested alongside unfortunate tourists stranded in Germany when war was declared. Perhaps those most surprised to be interned were internees who were only technically British and had never set foot in England.

Ruhleben's diverse population was housed in barracks, originally consisting of renovated horse stables, and eventually received access to a restaurant and YMCA hut for cultural activities.
Neutral inspectors regularly visited the camp, and in the book's second chapter, Stibbe argues that despite racial tensions, overcrowding, and a few antisemitic guards who harassed Jewish internees, the camp's inhabitants realized that treatment at Ruhleben compared favorably with living conditions at other German camps. For the most part, the Germans allowed internees to govern themselves, and British hairdressers, tailors, and other entrepreneurs began offering their services shortly after the camp opened. In wartime Germany, food supply and quality were issues of constant concern, and Stibbe points out that only food parcels from home kept many prisoners from being underfed.

In chapter 3, Stibbe aims to establish Ruhleben's credentials as an "imagined community" based on shared traditions, participation in camp athletic and cultural societies, and the circulation of a camp newspaper. It should not be assumed that Ruhleben's internees would have formed a united front naturally. The camp held a significant number of residents with pro-German sympathies, and fault lines developed among the population as parcels from home provided prisoners of means with higher-quality food and supplies than those available to internees of lower-class backgrounds. Gambling, alcohol consumption, and violence produced additional strains, and Ruhleben's black and Arab prisoners were generally isolated from other internees. Internment was also a gendered experience, and Stibbe effectively demonstrates how the absence of women led to further tensions over behaviors believed to be "self-destructive," like masturbation and homosexuality (p. 100). Despite these divisive issues, internees came together to compete in or view sporting events, enroll in academic courses, or produce musical, choral, and theatrical shows. They placed a great deal of importance on organized camp activities and drew a collective sense of purpose from them.

Stibbe's articulate discussion of Ruhleben's cultural scene provides valuable insight into how the First World War's internees responded to life in captivity and worked to shape their environment. However, he does not address with as much rigor the question of how the internees' separation from the war might have influenced their organized activities. Ruhleben was indeed a "community at war;" yet, it was also a community decidedly not at war. Stibbe agrees with Alon Rachamimov's observation that captivity led to "an acute sense of masculine disempowerment" (p. 101), but his otherwise sharp analysis left me with little sense of whether the guilt of being prevented from serving at the front significantly affected internees' approaches to camp cultural pursuits.[1] After all, by 1916, British men were being asked to make the transformation from citizen to soldier in increasing numbers, and had Ruhleben's internees not been detained, they likely would have spent time in some form of military service.

Another source of disempowerment was the internees' reliance upon aid from England. Stibbe's chapter "Relief, Punishments and Reprisals" shows that although the relief efforts of government and private aid organizations in England greatly improved material conditions inside Ruhleben, relief parcels also served as sources of anxiety. Acceptance of relief indebted internees to the home front, and the conditions under which aid was sometimes offered made it clear that internees' sacrifices in captivity were not equal to those of soldiers in the field. Whereas the British continued to offer full service pay to combatant prisoners, for example, the government demanded that internees repay relief funds at the end of the war.

As the war dragged on, Ruhleben's population declined due to internment opportunities in neutral countries and health-related releases. Attempts to negotiate a general exchange of internees were unsuccessful, but Britons forced to
remain at Ruhleben continued to receive support from home and within Germany. In fact, Stibbe's examination of Ruhleben in the war's later years demonstrates that conditions at the camp remained quite good even as Germany struggled to feed its population. Nonetheless, escape attempts increased as morale sank. Stibbe claims that some prisoners felt as if they had a duty to escape, while others attempted to flee in order to spend a few hours outside the camp. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker have argued that escape represented a military prisoner's sole opportunity to restore his honor. Two Although Stibbe touches on the relationship between duty and escape, one wonders to what extent civilians saw flight as a means of reaching the front and performing their military duties.

Following the armistice of November 1918, repatriation of Ruhleben's prisoners took place quickly and with few difficulties. Back in England, many former internees seemed eager to put Ruhleben behind them, while others sought to commemorate the internment experience. In January 1919, for example, former Ruhleben prisoners held a well-attended exhibit that showcased camp artwork and cultural productions. Still, Stibbe's final chapter shows that the sacrifices made by Ruhleben's internees were always overshadowed by the memory of British soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice. As a result, he contends, internees never received the sort of commemoration they deserved—a common experience for former military prisoners as well. Stibbe's work complements the efforts of scholars like Jonathan F. Vance, who has argued that former Canadian prisoners of war felt marginalized by their government in the interwar years, and brings us closer to an understanding of the challenges faced by former prisoners following repatriation.

One of the greatest strengths of Stibbe's contribution is the variety of archival and published sources he draws upon. He has conducted exhaustive research in five countries and incorporated dozens of memoirs into his narrative. The use of a greater number of letters from internees to their families would have been a welcome addition to Stibbe's source base. However, these letters often remained in private hands, and considering Ruhleben's relatively small population, it is quite possible that few such collections have survived.

Stibbe accomplishes his goal of drawing attention to the Ruhleben internees' forgotten struggles in a manner that offers significant insight into the nature of the First World War. His awareness of German Anglophobia during the war years serves him well in this regard. He skillfully makes the case that the nationality of the inmates protected them from reprisals and abuses, in spite of strong anti-British sentiments in Germany. With so many German civilians in England, authorities in Germany recognized the counter-productivity of reprisals. In this case, the emotions of the Anglo-German rivalry were held in check by diplomatic realities. Stibbe's appraisal of Germany's treatment of British civilians likewise supports Uta Hinz's contention that historians should resist the temptation to draw direct lines of continuity between Germany's handling of prisoners in the First World War and the horrors experienced by civilian and military prisoners of the Germans between 1939 and 1945. After decades of largely overlooking its prisoners, historians have recently begun to rediscover one of the factors that set the First World War apart from previous conflicts—captorship as a mass phenomenon. Stibbe's recent work is a major contribution to this emerging field of scholarship.

Notes


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