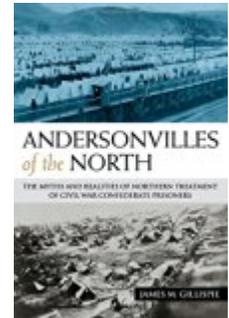


James M. Gillispie. *Andersonvilles of the North: The Myths and Realities of Northern Treatment of Civil War Confederate Prisoners.* Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2008. Illustrations. vii + 278 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57441-255-0.



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Commissioned by Martin P. Johnson (Miami University Hamilton)

In *Andersonvilles of the North*, James M. Gillispie examines the controversial and still emotional subject of Union treatment of Confederate prisoners (POWs) during the Civil War. It is Gillispie's contention that the vast majority of existing studies regarding this topic have unfairly portrayed Union officials as intentionally "cruel, vindictive, and negligent in their prisoner of war policies" (p. 2). Such scholars as Charles Sanders and James I. Robertson have even gone so far as to contend that Union officials deliberately made conditions within Federal POW camps as atrocious as possible to punish Confederate soldiers for the South's maltreatment of Union POWs. By reexamining the sources used to form these conclusions, Gillispie hopes to correct the existing historiography and at least partially vindicate Union POW policy.

While it is Gillispie's intention to challenge what he perceives as a mostly unfair historiography, he expressly does not contend that Union POW camps were places of leisure and luxury. Unmistakably, he concedes that conditions at most, if

not all, Union POW camps were "difficult and dangerous" and that mortality rates were far too high; however, he also contends that "difficult living conditions do not by themselves constitute proof of systematic negligence and cruelty" (p. 5). Northern POW camps may have been horrible places, argues Gillispie, but this was principally due to Union inexperience, improper planning, and plain incompetence rather than Yankee vindictiveness.

Gillispie divides his book into two main sections, the first of which presents his generally convincing argument regarding prejudiced sources. He believes that the vast majority of postbellum POW narratives, both North and South, are hopelessly biased and should be excluded as legitimate primary sources. Gillispie contends that the American political climate of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Northerners were constantly "waving the bloody shirt" and Confederate sympathizers were crafting the Lost Cause mythos, led to both sides' soldiers embellishing and exaggerating their wartime POW ex-

periences, making them sound far worse than they actually were. Not coincidentally, it is these questionable primary sources that such scholars as Sanders, Robertson, and others largely rely on to form their conclusions of Union malevolence. If one sets aside these problematic sources, Gillispie argues, a different set of conclusions regarding Union POW policy emerges.

The sources that Gillispie does focus on to build his revisionist argument are the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion*, the *Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion*, and a sprinkling of wartime Southern diaries and letters. Gillispie confesses that these records are far from perfect but more importantly “they also were not intended for popular consumption or created to make sure Union officials came off looking better to historians after the war” (p. 3). The policy directives, camp records, inspection reports, and correspondence between Union officials contained in the *Official Records* clearly testify to the many problems within the POW camp system, but they also describe the constant efforts by Federal officials, including the much maligned head of POW policy General William Hoffman, to improve conditions within the camps and to root out incompetence and corruption within the system. Nowhere does Gillispie find a premeditated or structured policy of neglect or abuse, only an imperfect system struggling mightily to improve itself.

The second part of *Andersonvilles of the North* contains Gillispie’s reexamination of the major Union POW camps employing the above referenced pre-1865 sources. This half of the book is a very thorough, if a bit repetitive, examination of the food, clothing, housing, and medical care provided by Union officials at nine of the major prisons in the Federal POW system. By painstakingly reviewing both the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion* and the *Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion*, Gillispie finds that overall, Union officials provided adequate

food, clothing, and shelter and were constantly attempting to remedy the many deficiencies, shortages, and other difficulties that plagued the Federal camp system. Problems certainly existed, he argues, but there is scant evidence of the systematic abuse or neglect proffered by other authors.

Perhaps the most provocative argument against an intentional Union policy to punish Confederate soldiers is Gillispie’s examination of the medical care provided in the camps. He finds that recovery and overall survival rates recorded in the *Medical and Surgical History of the War of the Rebellion* from such diseases as smallpox, dysentery, and pneumonia, and other common communicable diseases at Union POW camp hospitals were generally comparable to, and often better than, those of Chimborazo Hospital in Richmond. Had there been a deliberate Federal policy to starve prisoners and deny them proper medical care, Gillispie reasons, surely rates of infection and death in Union POW camps would be consistently higher than those of the Confederacy’s largest hospital. This was simply not the case.

Perhaps Gillispie’s most emphatic contention in this book aims to dispel the misconception that Union officials intentionally suspended the prisoner exchange program in 1863 for purely military reasons. This decision, which created a glut of POWs that neither side was properly prepared to care for, “has been held up for generations as the ultimate proof of Yankee callousness and calculation,” Gillispie writes (p. 244). After reviewing the *Official Records* it is clear to Gillispie that had the Confederacy agreed to include black Union soldiers in the exchange program it would have been quickly resumed. The Davis administration’s official policy of enslaving black Union POWs and executing their white officers could not be tolerated by Abraham Lincoln or the Union army and was the true reason for the exchange policy’s termination. It is not the fault of the Union, Gillispie argues, that Confederate racial policy created a

political environment in which the exchange regime could not be resumed.

In conclusion, Gillispie freely concedes that Union POW camps were generally dirty, overcrowded, and by and large unhealthy places to be; however, his final judgment is that: "Confederate suffering and death in Union prisons were truly tragic aspects of America's Civil War, but the wartime evidence strongly points to the conclusion that they were far more attributable to the misfortunes of war than to systematic Yankee cruelty or neglect" (p. 246). While this reviewer would have liked a more thorough examination of the actual physical treatment of the prisoners by camp personnel, such as punishments and work requirements, as well as further evidence of discussion and debates among Union officials regarding the treatment of prisoners, this is still an excellent study. Overall, this book is a well-argued, convincing corrective to the existing historiography and should prove to be an important and enduring work on the topic of Civil War POWs.

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