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As stated in much scholarship, the history of wartime captivity has considerably developed in the last two decades. The detention of civilians and militaries during armed conflict is an old and complex phenomenon which goes well beyond the proper context of wartime and rather continues “after the guns of the battlefield fall silent” (p. 68). In the first part of the twentieth century alone, the scale of war captivity expanded drastically in reaction to the high number of people involved in wars, but also to the globalization of warfare that tends to minimize the distinction between combatants and noncombatants. The “century of camps” as claimed by sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (quoted, p. 8) also saw the development of numerous states and nonstate actors working in different ways on national, international, and transnational levels for the “protection” of prisoners of war (POWs) and interned civilians. Many of these actors had legal diplomatic roles as stated by international humanitarian law (i.e., the Geneva Conventions). The most famous example is the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), founded in Geneva in 1864, which worked actively for POWs on various fronts during the two world wars. However, the increasing diplomatic involvement and influence of transnational organizations and individual actors on the treatment of war captives during the twentieth century is still little known. The recent collection edited by Marcel Berni and Tamara Cubito proposes to fill this gap by providing a better understanding of these important components of war captivity.

Based on a conference organized in Bern in 2018, Captivity in War during the Twentieth Century opens a discussion on the “forgotten” role played by transnational actors on POW and internment diplomacy. The book contains seven essays examining various experiences of wartime captivity in different spaces in the Caribbean, Europe, South America, the Pacific, Asia, and Africa, during a sixty-year time frame from the
First World War to the US war in Vietnam. Through chapters the concepts of transnational actors and POWs are widely defined. The first term involves multiple nonstate actors such as the ICRC, but also state representatives working as intermediaries for war prisoners—as a protecting power—or a neutral state representing the interests of the country of origin of POWs and negotiating with the state in charge of their detention (the detaining power) in a designated area. For instance, the United States accepted multiple mandates between 1914 and 1917 including the protection of Germans detained in Western hands, and British and French prisoners in Germany. Switzerland had similar mandates for Western captives in Europe as well as German POWs in the United States, Britain, and Canada during the Second World War. As the book shows, the role of protecting power was politically and diplomatically complex. The second concept central in the book—war captivity—refers to various types of prisoners including military combatants, merchant seamen, enemy aliens, and other civilians. Those categories of captives are generally examined separately in scholarship.

According to the two editors, such broad understanding of the concepts of POW and transnational actor allows historians to connect different cases of unknown diplomatic players “across a geographically and chronologically diverse spectrum ... who were active in big and small wars” (p. 5). The multiplicity of spaces, actors, and wars is important in the framework of the book. According to Berni and Cubito, even in small armed conflicts, captivity quickly assumed transnational relevance. This idea of transnational diplomatic action aims to overcome traditional national approaches well represented in the historiography of wartime captivity. In contrast, the essays look at the interplays and dynamics between transnational actors, belligerents, and captives, and illustrates how the role of transnational actors and practices evolved during the twentieth century. In other words, the collection examines the practice of mass captivity, which was “coupled with often strong, existing transnational organizations and means of communications” (p. 11) even in less-studied conflicts. The essays show that transnational actors had different impacts on the treatment of POWs. Sometimes they succeeded in influencing the conditions of prisoners, while in other circumstances they failed or offered only very limited protection. The diplomatic involvement of intermediaries between captors and captives remained complex and changed significantly according to political, cultural, military, and ideological context.

Following an introduction by the two editors explaining the conceptual framework and objectives of the book, Tamara Cubito explores the role played by the United States as a protecting power for German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman nationals in British colonies in the Caribbean, Hong Kong, Malta, and Ceylon between 1914 and 1917. She suggests that in contrast to captivity in Europe, the conditions in remote British colonies were far less formal and institutionalized. Despite a limited influence over captor authorities in those regions, American diplomatic agents were the only external contacts for many internees. Pursuing the discussion over the First World War period, Brian Feltman examines the postwar campaign for the repatriation of German POWs. The latter was mostly led by individual women and organized women’s groups in Germany. Feltman convincingly argues that German women had a critical role in drawing international attention to the “captive husbands, fathers and sons awaiting a reunion with their families” in 1918 and 1919 (p. 69).

Moving from the world war to the less-known Chaco War between Bolivia and Paraguay (1932–35), Robert Niebuhr highlights the transformative impact of international activities created by war captivity in this region on societies. International intervention notably involved the League of Nations, the Nansen Commission, the United States,
the Catholic Church, the Rotary Club, and the ICRC as well as national Red Cross societies. He argues that those organizations helped to accelerate political change, the construction of national identity, and connection with global norms in both countries. Another fascinating case explored is the internment of Japanese civilians in the French territory of the New Caledonia and those transferred to Australia by December 1941. Rowena Ward states that Japanese enemy aliens received limited protection. Not only were civilians not included in the 1929 Geneva Convention, but also the political situation of Free-France, which was not fully recognized by all belligerents, complicated the status of internees. Although the ICRC and Switzerland, the designated protecting power for Japan, succeeded in reaching Japanese civilians, their influence over their conditions of detention was minimal.

Also focusing on Japan, Frank Jacob analyzes the complexity of the postwar Japanese society regarding the repatriation of POWs remaining in the Soviet Union. As Japan came fully under the control of Douglas MacArthur and his staff, it turned out that the US general had a crucial role in the protection of the former Japanese militaries. In the context of the early Cold War, anticommunism was a major aspect of the US occupation of Japan, which influenced the reintegration of the limited number of repatriated POWs in the postwar society. In the end, both repatriated prisoners and those remaining in the Soviet Union “became pawns in the great chess game of international relations” (p. 134). Marcel Berni pursues the discussion on the Cold War dynamic by examining the work of the ICRC with Communist captives during the Vietnam War (1965-75). The treatment of prisoners and the role of intermediaries were particularly complex because of the interpretation of the 1949 Geneva Convention and the blurred categorization of individuals as captives, POWs, and civil detainees depending on the ideological and political interests of the South Vietnamese regime. The main problem was that the South Vietnamese authorities saw captives suspiciously as spies, saboteurs, traitors, criminals, and terrorists, and therefore refused to recognize them as POWs. In the Cold War context in Asia, the ICRC was not of much help in protecting captives, influencing Saigon to uphold the Geneva Convention, or reporting accusations of torture and thus, working as a protecting power.

The book closes with an examination by Oluchukwu Ignatus Onianwa of oilmen taken hostage during the Biafra War. The capture of fourteen Italian, three German, and one Lebanese Eni employee by Biafran military forces rapidly assumed an international dimension and caused public uproar, especially in western Europe. Onianwa shows that the Biafran authorities were put under pressure by numerous diplomatic actors, including many from nations not directly affected, such as the Vatican, and the Portuguese government as well as the presidents of Gabon and Ivory Coast to release the captured oilmen. This fascinating episode shows how negotiations led by various transnational actors working together can lead successfully to the release of captives in the context of civil war.

The contribution of this book to the field of war captivity studies is much welcomed. Not only do the chapters discuss the well-known cases of the two world wars, but they also include other armed conflicts that are rarely explored by captivity historians. The book has the great merit of showing that captivity and internment policies during the twentieth century were deployed in different areas around the world and were hardly limited to western Europe and America. In terms of transnational diplomatic interventions concerning POWs, the contributions highlight that a variety of actors were involved in this process—showing that captivity remains a global phenomenon even in wars limited to a particular area. This argument could be extended to that every war and armed conflict has international components. By making use of broad definitions of transnational
actors and POWs, the editors open the reflection to multiple perspectives, spaces, and players involved in diplomacy, which help to understanding the globality of war captivity.

The conceptual framework of this book, although bringing new light to the subject, also raises questions related to a certain lack of clarity. By adopting a conceptual approach englobing a large group of captives, captors, and intermediaries, the object and the central argument of the book remains unclear. The term “transnational actors,” for instance, is never defined in detail. It broadly includes NGOs such as the ICRC but also some protecting powers that were state actors. In the end, readers may be confused as to who were considered transnational actors and why. Protecting powers were not a monolithic group of diplomatic actors, and not all protecting powers acted on a transnational level. On the same point, various POWs and internees are included in the definition of captives. But such a large group of captives experienced very different conditions and reality depending on the context of the war, which influenced the work of protecting powers. For instance, the US representatives’ views on civilians detained in the British colonies differed from those of the ICRC toward German, French, and British combatants on the western front at the same time. Once again, it was not a monolith group of individuals. A more detailed historiographical discussion on the terms “protecting power” and “transnational actor” as well as a conclusion to wrap up the arguments would have been particularly useful to really grasp their role as diplomatic actors and the dynamic in which they operated, their evolution during the twentieth century, and how the latter changed depending on the nature of warfare and the ideological and political conditions.

Although the contribution of this book may seem modest, the editors remain honest in the limits of their approach and suggest interesting avenues for future research. This effort would certainly be appreciated by scholars. As noted by Berni and Cubito, the global connections between multiple less-known diplomatic players and the “disentanglement of the global political dimensions behind the negotiations surrounding captives in war” could, in further research, “shed light on many of the hidden (diplomatic) interests, intentions and agendas of transnational intermediaries” (p. 16). To add to this discussion, one potential avenue of research mentioned in the book is the impact of concepts of class, race, empire, and gender on the work of transnational diplomatic actors. As many scholars have recently argued, humanitarian actors often supported and enforced structures of imperialism and class, racial and gender inequalities, and then extended state power and policies already in place.[1] These elements also influenced the framing of international law for the protection of wartime captives and the role of protecting powers. Such perspectives are important to take into account to nuance and complexify our understanding of diplomatic actors beyond the “protection of POWs” narrative and connect this subject to larger debates. Let us see how historians will pursue the research, hopefully in the near future.

Note

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