

Vasilis Vourkoutiotis. *Prisoners of War and the German High Command: The British and American Experience.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. xi + 266 pp. \$69.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4039-1169-8.



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The Geneva Convention and the Wehrmacht High Command

During the Second World War, Germany captured an estimated quarter of a million British and American prisoners of war. British prisoners (i.e., soldiers captured while fighting for Britain regardless of their land of origin) accounted for about two-thirds of this number, many being captured during the initial phase of the war. Although substantial in itself, the number of British and American POWs was dwarfed in comparison to the number of prisoners on the Eastern Front. Prevalent estimates place the number of soviet POWs caught by the Wehrmacht at 5.7 million and the number of Axis soldiers in Soviet hands at 5 million. Like the First World War, the main story of war captivity during the Second World War lay in Eastern Europe.

Still, as Vasilis Vourkoutiotis argues in this very structured study, the case of British and American POWs was unlike that of other POWs held by Nazi Germany and deserves to be examined in its own terms. The combination of three basic facts made it unique: Great Britain and the

United States were never occupied by the Wehrmacht, the claim of British and American POWs to be protected by the 1929 Geneva Convention was never disputed by Germany (in contrast to the claim of captured Polish and Soviet soldiers), and there were numerous German POWs held by British and American forces (about three hundred thousand by the end of the war). Thus, whereas Soviet POWs captured by Germany were either murdered outright or held in atrocious conditions (resulting in mortality rates of around 60 percent), British and American POWs experienced treatment, "at a 'satisfactory' level or above," through most of the war (p. 195). Yet, as Vourkoutiotis correctly points out, this "did not necessarily mean that the requirements of the Geneva Convention were being met" (p. 195).

Therefore, the aim of *Prisoners of War and the German High Command* is straightforward: to examine to what degree the policies of the German High Command (Oberkommando der Wehrmacht or OKW) vis--vis British and American POWs consistently conformed to the stipulations of the Geneva Convention, and to investigate

whether the *de facto* treatment followed OKW policies. Differently put, was it OKW policy that facilitated "satisfactory" material conditions in most of the camps, and was it the very same policy that resulted in a number of flagrant violations of the Geneva Convention. Thus, although the issue of OKW culpability in war crimes never receives more than a passing mention, it is implicitly present throughout the book.

The structure of *Prisoners of War and the German High Command* is rigid by design: Vourkoutiotis begins by describing in chapter 2 the various provisions of the Geneva Convention; proceeds in chapters 3 through 5 to catalogue the orders and guidelines issued by the OKW, in what he acknowledges is a "lengthy if occasionally tedious" procedure (p. 122); and concludes by presenting the findings of neutral inspectors regarding both material conditions in POW camps and violations of the Geneva Convention. Thus, by moving from accepted international definitions of "proper treatment," to the manner in which these definitions were perceived and interpreted by the OKW, and finally to actual living conditions of British and American POWs in Germany, Vourkoutiotis is able to reduce and simplify the moral equation of OKW culpability.

This methodology allows Vourkoutiotis to show, for example, that the OKW ordered the reduction of food rations to British and American POWs as early as December 1941, relying on Red Cross parcels to supplement the diet of POWs. Consequently, the High Command consciously decided not to abide by article 11 of the Geneva Convention which mandated that food rations be equivalent "to what the Detaining Power would provide for its own depot soldiers." The "satisfactory" calorie intake of British and American prisoners of war was mainly the outcome of assistance sent by their home countries via Switzerland. During the last six months of the war, when the amount of parcels dwindled, American and

British POWs suffered from malnutrition and at times even hunger.

>From 1941 onwards the OKW issued increasingly stringent orders regarding the productivity of POW labor. Arguing that prisoners did not work hard enough, the German High Command instructed guards in June 1942 to discipline "slackers" and "strongly punish any prisoners of war who continued not to give their full effort" (p. 115). This was followed two months later by allowing Nazi Party functionaries and Gestapo agents to oversee the implementation of orders regarding POW productivity. Thus, concludes Vourkoutiotis, the OKW may have been responsible for the increase of physical abuse of POWs reported by neutral inspectors.

Although stressing that the German High Command did not initiate the three most appalling cases of war crimes committed against British and American POWs, Vourkoutiotis nonetheless points to OKW responsibility. These involved the shooting of allied commandos captured by the Wehrmacht (as ordered by Hitler in October 1942); the lynching of downed airmen by German civilians, orchestrated and encouraged by leaders of the Nazi party; and the execution of forty-seven recaptured prisoners of the "Great Escape" from Stalag Luft III in Sagan on April 17, 1944. Vourkoutiotis suggests that the latter action was "perhaps the single greatest crime against British and American prisoners of war during the war" (p. 181), although in all likelihood the number of commandos and downed airmen executed was many times higher.

The rigid conceptualization of this study results in a few fundamental weaknesses. More than half of the book is devoted to presenting the various orders issued by the German High Command. The focus is clearly on description rather than on analysis, and the reader is left often perplexed as to why certain measures were adopted and in what historical context. Thus, for example, we learn that the OKW issued numerous orders

aimed at preventing sexual relations between POWs and German women. The penalties for these offenses stiffened during the war to the point that in November 1944 the OKW ordered "that all prisoners of war be informed of the case of the Serbian prisoner, named Pantalija Kabanica, who was charged with having relations with a German woman, and sentenced to death and executed" (p. 93). One can assume that racist considerations played an important role in drafting policy, since the OKW prohibited all POWs from donating blood to Germans "to prevent contamination by Jewish hybrid blood" (p. 62), and that "'colored' POWs were to be considered for more lenient sentences than white POWs because of their inherent racial weakness and inferiority" (p. 89). Yet, the issue is not developed, and Vourkoutiotis does not link this study to wider questions regarding the role of the OKW in pursuing the racist aims of the National Socialist regime.

Finally, the OKW was not the only initiator of policy decisions vis--vis British and American prisoners of war. During the second half of the war major policy decisions were being taken by Hitler, Martin Bormann, and Heinrich Himmler. In fact the appointment of Himmler in September 1944 as head of the Reserve Army meant that he was in direct control of all POW camps. It is not entirely clear whether the German High Command called the shots anymore, or whether decisions were taken at the Reich Security Main Office. The failure of Vourkoutiotis to integrate this present study into the vast historiography about National Socialist Germany is probably its greatest shortcoming.

Prisoners of War and the German High Command is not a page turner. However, scholars of the history of captivity would certainly find its factual richness instructive. Other students of military history would probably benefit from reading the first two chapters and the concluding section.

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