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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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Geneva Convention Vindicated

What Lord Byron called the brain-splattering, throat-cutting art of war received a modest but measurable setback with the ratification of the Geneva Convention of 1929, and its provisions for the protection of prisoners of war. Vasilis Vourkoutiotis believes that the OKW (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, or Armed Forces High Command) and the German Army adhered to the Geneva Convention of 1929 in the case of American, British and Canadian prisoners of war during World War II, but argues that the execution of Allied escapees, the Commando Order and the use of some Allied airmen as human shields, notably in Frankfurt am Main, were clear violations engineered and implemented by Hitler, Göring and the SS.

The work is solidly based on the archival records, and it shuns works of reminiscence, autobiography and memoirs. The facts have been diligently researched in the German archives, most notably those of the Bundesarchiv-Militaerarchiv in Freiburg, to verify the German part of the author's case. Vourkoutiotis has also consulted the records of the Public Record Office (PRO) in London, the National Archives and Record Administration (NARA) in Washington, D.C. and the National Archives of Canada (NAC), Ottawa, to document the provisions of the German prisoner of war guidelines and to gain indirect access to the inspection reports of the International Committee of the Red Cross. (The International Committee files copies with the nations concerned.) The result is a specialized monograph which gives an indispensable overview of the operation of a prisoner of war camp that adheres to the Geneva Convention.

The number of prisoners captured reflected the fortunes and vagaries of the war. The Germans won the early battles and British prisoners outnumbered those of their German counterparts by a factor of ten to one. In November 1940, the Germans held 39,956 British prisoners while the total number of Germans in British captivity was a mere 3,594 prisoners. In July 1941, the Germans held 50,717 British prisoners but only 5,010 Germans were prisoners in British camps. In December 1942, the Germans held 2,480,974 prisoners of

all nationalities but rough parity was achieved on a more narrow sector in July 1944 when the British and Americans held 186,375 Germans and the Germans held 176,688 British and Americans in camps from Germany to occupied Poland.

To deal with these prisoners, the Germans were obliged to house them in appropriate structures. Section 9 of the Convention stipulated that prisoners could be "interned in any town, fortress or other place with fixed limits" (p. 48). They were not to be exposed to the fire zones or located in areas subject to bombardment or used as hostages or human shields to prevent bombardment. However, Dr. Alfons Waltzog, in his 1942 update of German policies concerning Allied prisoners of war, wrote that "areas prone to enemy air-raids, but not actual zones of fighting by enemy armies, were legitimate sites" for the location of POW camps (quoted on p. 49). What this gloss or directive meant in practical terms at the time is unclear. It would seem to indicate that Waltzog's intention was to flout the Geneva Convention, but the author does not pursue the practical or criminal repercussions of Waltzog's ruling in detail. In any case, Vourkoutiotis does make it perfectly clear that the German High Command did not intend to leave its prisoners at the mercy of the annihilating thunderbolts, or torrents of friendly fire, from the sky. In October 1942 the OKW ordered air-raid shelters to be made available to prisoners and further stipulated that these shelters were to match those offered to German civilians wherever possible.

The Germans, who moved their prisoners by rail, often put them up in castles, forts, or former schools close to a railway line. What was called a *Dulag* (*Durchgangslager* or transit camp) normally consisted of six thousand men but a *Stalag* (*Stammlager* or POW camp for soldiers excluding officers) included up to ten thousand with a ratio of one German guard or staff member for every seven/ten prisoners. As a precaution, "the permanent camps [for British and American airmen] were generally located in the eastern districts.to make escape difficult for pilots" (p. 34). When, later on in the war, these unfortunates had to be evacuated due to the advance of the Soviet Army, they endured daily marches of between 20 and 25 kilometers (12.42 and 15.53 miles) per day. At one point in this evacuation late in the war, Hitler directly intervened. "On February 14, 1945, in response to an inquiry concerning British and American prisoners of war who were too ill to march with others being evacuated from the camps at Sagan and Lamsdorf, Hitler personally decided, contrary to both the Geneva Convention and previous official German policy, that they were ***not*** to be left behind. They were to be brought back with the first available train returning after delivering supplies to the Front" (emphasis supplied, p. 73).

Food for the prisoners was always one of the major bedeviling issues, and the author makes it clear that the provision of food was a problem in both world wars. "The British Manual of Military Law and the German *Kriegsbrauch* [i.e., *Kriegsbrauch im Landkriege* (*Manual for War on Land*)] ... took the requirements of the [1907] Hague Convention to mean that the prisoners of war were entitled to the same rations as the Detaining Power's peacetime troops, but neither country actually gave their prisoners of war these rations. The British came close to the required rations before cutting them, along with the civilian population's rations, in January 1916 and again in June 1918. The German rations for the prisoners of war were significantly worse, leading in some cases to near-starvation and disease among the British prisoners; almost mirroring the case a quarter of a century later, parcels arriving through the intermediary offices of the International Committee of the Red Cross made a significant difference for the British prisoners, as by 1918, because of the complete British blockade of all items, Germany no longer had the resources to meet the needs of its own armed forces, let alone the prisoners of war" (p. 23). For this reason, the Germans decided to

supplement their own rations with donations from the International Committee of the Red Cross. In December 1941, the food rations of the POWs were reduced by one third; the shortfall was to be made good by food parcels distributed by the International Committee of the Red Cross. The author writes that on October 10, 1942, the bread ration was set at 800 grams (or 28.21 ounces) per day while sick prisoners were entitled to 225 grams (or 7.9 ounces) of sugar per week and the magnificent beer ration stood at 3 to 5 liters (or 3.17 and 5.28 quarts) per month. Furthermore, to assure the prisoners that they were receiving an adequate food supply "it was standard practice to publish a complete menu indicating the calories and rations, thus allowing the Men of Confidence [*Vertrauensmaenner*, or Camp Representatives] and the Protecting Power delegates to compare the prisoners' menu to the official German rations. Most importantly as regards discipline, all collective disciplinary measures affecting food were prohibited by the Geneva Convention" (p. 55). It was a central and immensely important stipulation. It meant that the detaining power could not impose its will or compel obedience by starvation.

Although Vourkoutiotis does not raise the subject of the normal death rate in the prisoner of war camps--it was probably in the range of four deaths per thousand per year, as even relatively young men are mortal--he does cover a number of serious violations of the Geneva Convention in dispassionate fashion. They include the shackling of prisoners after capture; the Commando Order of 1942; the execution of recaptured Allied escapees by firing squad; official conniving at the lynching or killing of prisoners by enraged civilians; and the attempted use of prisoners as human shields against air attacks.

The shackling of prisoners (Germans, British and Canadian) evidently began with the discovery, after the failure of the 1942 Dieppe Raid, of German prisoners with "arms bound in such a way that they would eventually, and did, strangle themselves" (p. 187). The number of German dead is not given, and the Allied unit responsible is not, of course, identified. The Germans, however, exacted a collective punishment by shackling their Canadian and British prisoners. The reprisal apparently did not lead to Allied deaths, and to judge by reports of the International Committee of the Red Cross on the condition of the 381 manacled prisoners in the officers' camp of Oflag VII B Eichstaedt, the ordered reprisal in this camp was implemented in such a way that "it was an inconvenience as it was applied, rather than a serious problem" (p. 180).

The one besetting problem with the Geneva Convention is that there is no effective means to protect captured troops on the battlefield as opposed to the rear areas, and that brings us directly to the Commando Order. The author's discussion of Hitler's Commando Order is very brief, and his failure to give a copy of the order in the original German along with a translation is an inexplicable omission. He writes, "the Commando Order of October 18, 1942, was issued by Hitler in conjunction with the shackling order for Canadian and other British prisoners of war. After the raid at Dieppe, by mostly Canadian soldiers and British commandos, had been repulsed, members of both the German armed forces and the Todt organization had been found with their arms bound in such a way that they would eventually, and did, strangle themselves. Further, a British close-quarters combat manual was purportedly found which instructed commandos to keep prisoners alive only insofar as it was expedient.... Henceforth, regardless of whether they fought in uniform or as spies or *franc-tireurs*, Allied commandos caught fighting outside major military beachheads or war zones were to be killed rather than taken prisoner [and the order's implementation] ... represented an obvious breach of international law committed by the OKW (not just the Nazi military structures), and was easily proven to be a war crime at Nuremberg" (p. 187). It is, of course,

possible to argue with the judgment that this breach was one committed by the OKW and the German Army; the order, after all, originated with Hitler and not the officer corps, and it is my belief that high and low-ranking officers of the OKW who disagreed with the policy in private were bullied and coerced into giving their assent against their will and better judgment. It should also be added that the killing of prisoners in World War II was by no means a German monopoly. In the research for his book ***Overlord: D-Day and the Battle of Normandy***, Max Hastings discovered that "among scores of Allied witnesses interviewed for this narrative, almost every one had direct knowledge or even experience of the shooting of German prisoners during the campaign. In the heat of battle, in the wake of seeing comrades die, many men found it intolerable to send prisoners to the rear knowing that they would thus survive the war, while they themselves seemed to have little prospect of doing so. Many British and American units shot SS prisoners routinely, which explained, as much as the fanatical resistance that the [Waffen-] SS so often offered, why so few appeared in POW cages."[1] It would also be very revealing to read any reports by the International Committee on the condition of American, British and Canadian prisoner of war cages and camps for German soldiers and their European allies in France during the course of hostilities in 1944-45.

Many books and even more demotic films concentrate on the sensational theme of escape to the exclusion of all other issues. Vourkoutiotis does not. He remarks that the German use of dogs to guard prisoners was modified in 1940, when "the previous practice of allowing guard dogs to run freely between perimeter fences was prohibited; from then on, all guard dogs had to be kept on a leash" (p. 50). Later, he gives some really startling statistics on the overall number of escapes from German custody. From January to September 1942, it appears that "1,175 Officers (of whom 678 were Russians) and 77,628 noncommissioned officers and men (of whom 35,208 were Russians) had escaped their captivity. Dealing with this problem cost 620,000 lost work hours for the German economy, in addition to the increased threat to the internal security of Germany" (p. 102). The reasons for this very high total of escapes by prisoners of war are not explored in more detail. Whether Hitler knew the details of what he would undoubtedly have considered a scandalous state of affairs is unclear. In any case, he decided to act in 1944 and personally gave the order to execute the recaptured escapees from Stalag Luft III Sagan. (The copy of this order is also not part of this book.) "The shooting of the 47 recaptured prisoners of the 'Great Escape' from Stalag Luft III Sagan constituted perhaps the single greatest crime against British or American prisoners of war during the war.... As was made clear at the Nuremberg Trials, the actual murders of the prisoners were not carried out by Wehrmacht troops, but by the SS, and were conducted further at the personal behest of Hitler" (p. 181). It might be added that if the execution of these escapees was intended to serve as a deterrent, it seems to have failed in accomplishing its purpose, and it was therefore both criminal and pointless. The fact is that the problem of escaping prisoners continued to plague the Germans even after this mass execution in 1944. As late as March 1945, General Alfred Jodl sent a jovial memo to military district XIII (most probably Wehrkreis XIII in Nuremberg), to let camp commandants know that even a single escape would cost them their heads. It is, all in all, a strange and baffling state of affairs, and the underlying reasons why so many Allied prisoners were at large in Germany during the war years are never made totally clear in the narrative.

In the same vein, the author explores the violation of the Geneva Convention by German civilians who, enraged or made mad by grief and despair, either killed or connived in the killing of some of the unfortunate downed members of the Allied air crew who were shot down over Germany. The total number of these victims, whose fate could not materially alter the course of the

air war in the slightest degree, was thirty-nine men; and, while Vourkoutiotis tried to get more accurate figures, he failed to come up with a more definitive total. One of his more interesting explorations concerns what he calls Göring's attempt to use the prisoners as human shields, and he suggests that Frankfurt was the site selected for this experiment, but the presentation of the sketchy facts of the case does not make for a convincing argument. While Frankfurt was blasted and bombed as we know full well, we are not told how many of the airmen located in the Frankfurt transit camp were killed in the raid or raids.[2]

Vourkoutiotis does not mention it, but it is highly probable that the greatest cause of excess mortality among Allied POWs was the villainy called friendly fire. It consisted of high explosives, incendiaries and machine-gun belts of ammunition delivered by Lancaster bombers, B-17 Flying Fortresses, and Mustang fighter bombers, against little or negligible opposition. The Germans, as previously noted, were not at liberty to expose their prisoners to this bombardment, and they issued rules and regulations about it. The aim was to provide air raid shelters equivalent to those provided to German civilians. Given that an estimated 600,000 civilians died in these attacks, the proviso is apt to pall. Other rules applied. The prisoners were to remain in housing or shelters during air raids or risk the death penalty for looting. The guards escorting prisoners during train journeys were asked to prepare contingency plans if the train was attacked. Generally, guards and prisoners of war were to take the same evasive action as the rest of the train, and the guards were to keep the prisoners within their line of sight during this action, a stipulation that I suspect was the source of much mirthless laughter among their ranks. "In mid-September 1944, the OKW ordered that they be notified by telex of prisoners of war killed during an air-raid only if there were more than seven killed" (p. 161). This order surely suggests that the OKW kept an overall record of the total number of Allied prisoners killed during these air attacks, but the book does not anywhere give this total.

The Allied bombing offensive affected the prisoners indirectly as well as directly. Red Cross inspectors who visited Stalag X B Sandbostel in March and April 1945 noted catastrophic conditions when many of the 2,143 prisoners were transferred west from camps in the east, and found that "the recent bombings of Bremen (from where the camp used to receive its bread supplies) meant that there was no more bread available, and the prisoners were given more potatoes instead" (p. 176). This report does not sound like the depths of deprivation, but we have to imagine a group of 2,000 weary and ravenous young men much emaciated by their trek, perhaps by forced marches of between 20 and 25 kilometers (12.42 and 15.53 miles) per day. One other proof of the danger posed by the bombing campaign is that the Red Cross inspections, which had averaged around one hundred visits per quarter during the war, were reduced to nine camp visits during the spring of 1945, when the bomber offensive was arguably at its most bitterly destructive phase. The 1945 inspections revealed, as we would expect, a decline in overall conditions: some three of the camps were satisfactory, three were poor and another three dangerously inadequate. What is clear is that by 1945, the visits were few and far between. It had plainly become too dangerous for the Red Cross inspectors to check for dangerous camp conditions.

The book includes minor errors and omissions. The ***Bundesarchiv-Militaerarchiv*** is said to be located in Freiburg im Bresgau, not Breisgau (p. 256). The OKH on one occasion appears as the "***Oberkommando der Heer***" rather than "***Oberkommando des Heeres***" (p. viii), a minor error that nevertheless makes a German reader flinch. These are exceptions, not the rule. Hundreds of OKW memo titles are meticulously and correctly transcribed in the notes. Gottlob Berger's title of ***Chef des Kriegsgefangenenwesen*** is

never translated into English as Director of Prisoner of War Department in the text as opposed to the notes. The German *Vertrauensmann* (a man who merits or deserves one's trust) is here translated literally as "Man of Confidence." This translation is too literal and is not good idiomatic English; it connotes the villainous "confidence man," the total opposite of the trustworthy "Man of Confidence." For these reasons, it would probably be better if Vourkoutiotis and others translated *Vertrauensmann* as "Camp Representative" and have done with it. The men who filled the position were responsible men with difficult assignments. Furthermore, some of the officials on the German side are not properly identified. They include Dr. Waltzog, evidently a German lawyer who provided legal glosses and interpretations of selected sections of the Geneva Convention, as well as Berger, the Chief of the Prisoner of War Department for a number of years. Brief biographical sketches of both men would have been helpful. Then again, is it really true that the Allied prisoners received 28 ounces of bread as part of their diet when the staple of the German diet, from east to west and north to south, was undoubtedly that nutritious carbohydrate, the common potato? And finally, a thick and impenetrable tangle of text appears on pages 31-34. It turns out to be a long list of German POW camps, the sort of thing only an author or archive rat could love. It should have been unceremoniously stuffed into an appendix.

The book also raises some curious questions of substance and procedure. Why should we assume that all these OKW rules and regulations were actually followed by harried German camp commandants on the ground? The fundamental and most convincing answer to this question is surely that Switzerland was the Protecting Power during most of the war, and Swiss roving inspectors made sure that the provisions of the Geneva Convention were followed. But it is never quite made clear by what means the OKW conferred with the Swiss legal representatives when it issued some of its more controversial rulings or regulations. Specifically, when Waltzog ruled in 1942 that "areas prone to enemy air-raids, but not actual zones of fighting by enemy armies, were legitimate sites" for the location of POW camps, did he discuss this ruling with his Swiss counterparts? And did they concur with his interpretation? And if so, on what grounds? These are not academic questions, but matters of life and death. We have it on the authority of R. H. S. Crossman, the cabinet minister in Harold Wilson's government and Member of Parliament for Coventry (Coventry and Dresden are "twinned" cities and Crossman had many occasions to visit the German city), that some 25,000 Allied prisoners of war were quartered in and around Dresden in February 1945. This fact was known in London and Washington before the raid, but the order to attack was given nevertheless.[3] Another source tells us that the Dresden attack killed at least seventy-one Allied prisoners of war.[4]

Vourkoutiotis, in the one instance where he directly confronts the question of OKW credibility, observes in passing that the secondary literature of biography, reminiscences and memoirs supports his conclusions. This observation is largely true, but it would have made for a better book if he had included some of the major statements from the reputable secondary sources. David Wild, British Army chaplain, who spent five years as a prisoner of war in Germany, many of them in and around Torun, Poland, attests to the truth of the matter in his admirable memoir: "An impression may be given in these pages that life was not all that hard in German captivity. It is true that we were fortunate to be prisoners of the German army. With that strange attachment to what is "*korrekt*," they frequently protected us from being subjected to the brutality and ruthlessness of the Gestapo and the SS, and made a show of conforming most of the time to the requirements of the Geneva Convention."[5] They made, as Wild's book and this book show all too well, more than a show of conforming to the Convention.

Notes

[1]. Max Hastings, ***Overlord; D-Day and the Battle for Normandy*** (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), pp. 211-212.

[2]. When he visited the city in 1945, John Dos Passos wrote "Frankfurt resembles a city as much as a pile of bones and a smashed skull on the prairies resembles a prize Hereford steer." ***Tour of Duty*** (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946), p. 244.

[3]. R. H. S. Crossman, "Apocalypse at Dresden," ***Esquire***, 60, no. 5 (November 1963), p. 152.

[4]. Dick Sheehy, "Dresden Plus 93 Days," ***History Today***, 45, no. 5 (May 1995), p. 6.

[5]. David Wild, ***Prisoner of Hope*** (Lewes, Sussex: Book Guild, 1992), pp. 11-12.

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