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OPINIONS TOWARDS GERMAN PRISONERS OF WAR HELD IN BRITAIN: 1939-48

Social and cultural histories of Britain during and after the Second World War have omitted the presence of German prisoners of war. We certainly know they were there. However, studies of German prisoners in Britain between 1939 and 1948 have focused on two themes: their experiences and the policies adopted towards them.[i] I seek to situate the German prisoner as a figure of British wartime and post-war culture. In the attempt to do so, I explore the phenomenon of captivity as a subject of debate in wider society, using it as a lens through which broader societal and cultural issues can be examined, refracting historical understanding. Amongst other sources, the content of newspapers and newsreels are read to examine two things: how the narrative of the captivity of German prisoners was communicated to the public; and, the opinions circulating society regarding them and their treatment. Both sources had a significant audience. Mid-twentieth-century Britain offered a competitive newspaper market, with three quarters of the population reading a paper every day.[ii] By the late 1930s, half the population regularly watched newsreels at cinemas and theatres.[iii] Prior to their digitisation the content of newspapers and newsreels was used to provide anecdotal colour to historical studies. Digitisation has enabled these sources to be the subject of rigorous study.[iv] In this paper, I wish to provide a general overview of the German prisoner in Britain, and elucidate some of the principal debates in British society regarding their captivity.

Studies of German prisoners held in Britain usually begin after the invasion of Normandy, when significant numbers were captured. However, this periodization of their captivity neglects the depictions and discussions of them between 1939 and 1944. Sporadic captures of *Luftwaffe* and *Kreigsmarine* totalled some 250 by December 1939.[v] Their arrival provoked a degree of curiosity, with groups of British people gathering at docks and train stations to view the spectacle of the captured enemy. Curiosity did not develop into hostility; no acts of

violence or protest towards the German prisoners were reported. Displaying the German prisoners like ethnological expositions, newsreels informed viewers of their presence and familiarised them with the aesthetic of military captivity, while reassuring them that they were not dangerous.[vi] In November 1939, pictures were published in the press depicting German officers held at Grizedale Hall. They were seen taking a stroll under casual guard, reading next to the fireplace, and singing around the piano. Considered more of a holiday resort than a prisoner camp, Grizedale—a baronial manor in the Lake District—was nicknamed the 'U-boat Hotel'.[vii] The media emphasised the contentedness of the German prisoners. They were well housed, well fed, and glad to be out of the fighting and safe in Britain. Their superior treatment was considered to reflect the chivalry of the British towards the captured enemy. However, this affable treatment provoked a negative reaction. Writing to newspaper editors, the British people expressed bewilderment and irritation at the luxurious conditions and excessively lenient treatment afforded German prisoners. Contrasting the images with their own experiences, ex-soldiers, having been prisoners in Germany during the Great War, stressed the brutal treatment they had suffered: starvation, forced labour, and beatings. In doing so, they derided those who sympathised with the German captives, arguing that the German people had a sadistic mentality geared towards power. Such feelings were exacerbated when it was revealed that British citizens were sending German prisoners festive gifts near Christmas 1939. The sentiment was considered misplaced, with articles and letters noting that these were the Germans that had sunk defenceless British ships, and slaughtering British soldiers and fishermen. A poll taken in the *Daily Mail* in January 1940 revealed that sympathy for German prisoners was a foremost grouch of their readership.[viii] Within weeks of their first arrival, German prisoners already provoked debate. In the wake of the German *Blitzkreig* which culminated in the Fall of France, and the threat of invasion, the British government decided to transport German POWs to the dominions, principally Canada. The tone of articles and items on German prisoners changed, and they were depicted as ardent Nazis. This was part of the government's attempt to stir up animosity towards the German people in the wake of the Dunkirk evacuation. As a result, there were few held in Britain, never more than 2000 between June 1940 and February 1944. Without going into extensive detail, there were two incidents which brought the German prisoner of war back into public debate. The first was a mooted exchange of prisoners in October 1941. The second was the Shackling Crisis of late 1942. In both these incidents, the media blamed the dishonest and barbaric Nazi leadership while exonerating the British for their honesty and virtue. During

these incidents, there was also debate as to whether the German people were 'good' or 'bad', misguided by Hitler or intrinsically bellicose. I will now move on to late wartime period and immediate post-war.

The invasion of Normandy and subsequent breakout into the French hedgerows resulted in significant captures of German servicemen. The arrival of batches shipped across the Channel was publicised in newsreels and newspapers by the correspondents who had flocked to south-coast ports to report on the invasion. By the end of the year there were some 140,000 in Britain. There were a number of controversies regarding their treatment: the distribution of sweets and cigarettes to wounded German prisoners; treating them in the same hospital wards as British soldiers and civilians; and, the luxurious train accommodation they were afforded. Like 1939-40, opinions towards the enemy prisoner were intertwined with debates on British and German characteristics. The tension at that time was encapsulated when a vicar who had appealed for material aid for German prisoners received a tin of rat poison from a fellow clergyman.[ix] On the one hand, it was argued that the respectful treatment of enemy prisoners epitomised Britishness. On the other, it was considered 'soft', especially given the brutality of the Nazi conduct of the war. The revelations of the Belsen concentration camp stimulated anti-German feeling near the end of the war, fuelling the desire for reprisals.[x] This emotion was intensified by the press. Comparisons were made between the pictures of emaciated British prisoners, recently returned from Germany, and the disclosure that German prisoners in Britain received double the ration of civilians.[xi] As a result of a press campaign, the rations provided German prisoners were cut. With increasing labour demands, particularly in agriculture, and problems with camp accommodation in France, the government reluctantly agreed to ship further numbers of German prisoners to Britain and maximise their employment. As a result, they became a far more visible figure towards the final stages of the war, and the immediate post-war: by May 1945 there were some 200,000 held in camps across Britain. As several historians have demonstrated, Italian and German prisoner were a useful source of labour for the British government. In society, however, views varied on the productivity of German prisoners. In general it was believed they were better workers than Italian prisoners, and farmers were quoted in the press praising their work ethic. Setting German prisoners to work was considered a justifiable form of post-war reparations, which had been agreed at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences. The Trade Union movement, however, was anxious. Reports from local branches noted that German prisoners, considered a cheap and hardworking labour pool, were displacing British workers and preventing the

demobilisation of the Armed Forces. Servicemen returning from duty were especially outraged that they could not find employment, while German prisoners were engaged in their former professions. While debate on the employment of German prisoners continued, as the distance of the war increased with time new questions were raised regarding their treatment.
As they were increasingly employed, the figure of the German prisoners became more established in the local landscape of Britain. Throughout 1946, questions were raised in press and parliament regarding the restrictions governing their freedoms. Throughout the war, the British authorities sought to prevent contact between the British public and German prisoners. The government maintained that there was no intention of relaxing the current regulations prohibiting fraternisation. After continued pressure from religious organisations and MPs, it was suddenly announced in December 1946 that the prisoner regime would be modified. Prisoners were allowed to take unescorted walks within a five mile radius of their camp or billet, talk to the British public, and accept invitations to private houses.[xii] The regional press reported how hundreds of families had taken the opportunity to invite German prisoners into their homes to celebrate Christmas. This period of experimental fraternisation was considered successful by the government. In turn, German prisoners were granted further freedoms in March and July 1947. The relaxations, allowed prisoners to step out in Britain, being permitted to attend football matches and cinemas. The prospect of rubbing shoulders with the ex-enemy, however, provoked sharp debate. Surveys in regional press suggest that the majority of British people were in favour of lifting the restrictions. However, noting local animosity, some Cinemas and football grounds banned prisoners.[xiii] Attributing the suffering of the war to German prisoners, they argued that it was offensive to British patrons to have to occupy the same space as Germans. A far more morally charged question was fraternisation between British women and German prisoners. Many illicit relationships were uncovered by the authorities. In the press, these women were often considered foolish at best, and anti-citizens at worst, for consorting with the enemy. In early 1947 the question of marriage between German POWs and British women was raised. Those petitioning to lift the ban pointed out the gender inequality of allowing British soldiers in Germany to marry German women while forbidding British women from marrying German prisoners. The 12 month sentence given to Werner Vetter for fraternisation was the catalyst for change, his and Olive Reynolds story being widely publicised. Considered an excessively harsh sentence, the government was pressured into remitting Vetter's sentence and lifted the marriage ban in July 1947. By this time, antagonism had declined toward the German people and German

prisoners of war. Most British people approved of the lifting of the marriage ban, and around three quarters considered that German prisoners of war should be repatriated.[xiv] Indeed, it was the question of repatriation while galvanised public debate regarding German prisoners.

No plans were drawn up for the repatriation of German prisoners; instead further numbers were brought to Britain: by September 1946 there were some 400,000. The indefinite captivity of German prisoners clearly upset the consciences of British people. Newsreels broadcast special items on the subject noting it as an important matter for the British people to consider. In parliament and the press, the government was lambasted, the contradiction between charging the defendants at the Nuremberg Trials with forcible detention and slavery while Britain perpetuated it by indefinitely retaining prisoners being noted.[xv] Anxiety, bewilderment and indignation were expressed in letters to the editor. From a humanitarian viewpoint, the suffering of the prisoners was emphasised, particularly the separation of families. The hypocrisy of preaching the virtues of democracy to the prisoners while forcing them to work was criticised. It was feared that such a treatment undermined British values and might push disillusioned prisoners towards communism. The employment of subjugated people was a fascist characteristic, something that was expected of a victorious Nazi Germany.[xvi] On the other hand, the employment of prisoners was also seen as a legitimate form of reparations after such a devastating conflict which the Germans had caused.[xvii] The government was petitioned by several religious and youth organisations who attached political and cultural significance to the issue of repatriation. It was, however, the memorial sent to Prime Minster Attlee by Victor Gollancz, chairman of Save Europe Now, which had an immediate impact in September 1946. Singed by 875 influential figures, it demanded the repatriation of German prisoners in the name of British liberal-Christian values. The government acknowledged public demand for a definite policy, and quickly announced a progressive scheme of repatriation, whereby 15,000 prisoners were sent home per month. However, no completion date for the scheme was announced. Criticism disparaging the government increased. Attlee's administration, it was believed, was more interested in exploiting the labour of German prisoners than aiding their re-education and the reconstruction of Anglo-German understanding; as some point out in their letters, this was surely antithetical to the socialism that the Labour party was supposed to champion. The announcement of a repatriation scheme, it was argued, was merely a concession to the uneasiness of a public disturbed by the sight of slave labour in a land of freedom.[xviii] In August 1947, Save Europe Now expressed these concerns in another memorial to the Prime

Minister, signed by two thousands influential figures.[xix] It demanded that repatriation should be completed by the middle of 1948, whatever the policies of other states holding prisoners. Their continued detention betrayed the democratic ideals and British values for which the recent war had been fought and so much sacrificed. Although sympathetic to the human considerations, Attlee dismissed the memorial as impractical.[xx] Despite the unsuccessful second Memorial, repatriation was increased in December 1947 from 15,000 to 20,000 per month,[xxi] and, on 12 July 1948, the repatriation of German prisoners was completed.[xxii] In 1947 German POWs were offered the chance to stay in Britain: they had to work in agriculture for a minimum of two years as a form of indentured labour. Some 25,000 opted to stay.

The captivity of German prisoners of war in Britain between 1939 and 1948 not only an experience of the prisoners themselves or a problem to be tackled by authorities, it was a controversial subject, one that can be used as lens to examine British society and culture during and after the Second World War. Through newsreels and newspapers, this subject was brought into the everyday lives of the British public. These sources can be read to understand the deabtes and opinions circulating British society regarding their captivity. During the years of war, debates were intertwined with broader opinions regarding British and German characteristics. On the one hand, the superior treatment of enemy prisoners was considered to reflect British values of chivalry and fair-play. On the other, sympathy for the captives was derided; the prisoners were enemies, ardent Nazis killing British soldiers and civilians. The post-war period saw a number of debates regarding these captives: their employment, fraternisation with them, and their repatriation. There were various opinions regarding the employment of German prisoners. By and large, they were considered to be productive workers. However, Trade Unions expressed anxiety over the displacement of British workers. Their presence in British society and contact with the British people, particularly women, was a subject of debate, but, over time, hostile attitudes towards the German people, and the prisoners, thawed. The most controversial debate was their continued detention in Britain. Indeed, their labour was useful, but the retention of German prisoners was considered to undermine the values for which the war had been fought.

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[ii] Adrian Bingham, 'Reading Newspapers: Cultural Histories of the Popular Press in Modern Britain', *History Compass*, 10: 2 (2012), 140-50, 141.

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[v] CAB 67/3 WP (G) (39) 157, German Prisoners of War in Great Britain, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs , 18 December 1939

[vi] *Pathe News*, *Pathe*, German Prisoners of War in Camp, 39/88, 7/7, 9 November 1939.

[vii] 'U-Boat Hotel: "Home From Home" For German Prisoners', *Daily Mail*, 15 November 1939, p.

[viii] '"Daily Mail" readers tell their grouches', *Daily Mail*, 13 January 1940, p. 6.

[ix] 'Vicar's "Vulgar Joke": Bishop's Sharp Rebuke', *Manchester Guardian*, 1 November 1944, p. 8.

[x] MOA, FR 2565, Attitudes to the German People, 23 February 1948, p. 6.

[xi] 'Britain's Anger', *Daily Mail*, 23 April 1945, p. 2.

[xii] HC Deb 10 December 1946, vol. 431, cols. 967-8.

[xiii] 'P.O.W. Barred From Cinemas', *Manchester Guardian*, 23 July 1947, p. 5.

[xiv] MO FR, 2585, Attitudes to the German People, 23 February 1948, p. 8.

[xv] HC Deb 27 March 1946, vol. 421 cols. 531-40.

[xvi] Prisoners of War: Germans in Britain', *The Times* 21 August 1946, p. 5.

[xvii] 'What about our German prisoners?' *Glasgow Sunday Post*, 25 August 1946, p. 6.

[xviii] 'Friends or Enemies?', *Spectator*, 20 December 1946, p. 7.

[xix] Victor Gollancz, Memorial to the Prime Minister, July 1947, University of Warwick, Modern Records Centre, MSS.292/881.423/8.

[xx] 'Prisoners-of-war: Review promised by Prime Minister', *The Times*, 9 September 1947, p. 2.

[xxi] HC Deb 27 October 1947, vol. 443 cols. 494-5.

[xxii] HC Deb 13 July 1948, vol. 453 cols. 996-7.