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## Review of "Life and Death in Captivity: The Abuse of Prisoners during War" by Geoffrey P.R. Wallace

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Geoffrey P.R. Wallace. *Life and Death in Captivity: The Abuse of Prisoners during War*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015. Pp. 296.

Geoffrey P.R. Wallace is a political scientist and assistant professor at the University of Washington in Seattle. In his recent book, *Life and Death in Captivity: The Abuse of Prisoners during War*, he examines the treatment of prisoners of war (POW) during twentieth-century armed conflicts. In particular, he is interested in abuse and harsh treatment perpetrated against captured or surrendered soldiers in wartime. This subject is not new considering the voluminous historiography on POWs in the last twenty years. However, according to Wallace, scholars are not entirely convincing in explaining why some POWs suffered abuse, while others received decent conditions of detention. To answer this question, Wallace proposes a new concept regarding the systematic violence committed against prisoners in war during conflicts from 1898 to 2003. Using primary and secondary sources as well as original data, he explores how and why the safety and well-being of prisoners were regularly compromised by states in modern warfare despite the presence of international legislation to protect these people. The central question Wallace seeks to answer is: what helps to explain the varied ways captors chose to treat prisoners during war?

In his book, Wallace challenges what he calls "a gentler and kinder vision of the treatment of captured enemy combatants" (p. 2), where humanitarian ideals, conceptualised in the just war theory and codified in the laws of war, offered protection for POWs. The soldiers who chose to surrender were supposed to be safeguarded against the violence of war. The reality of war captivity in different wars was, however, often far different from the philosophers' and lawyers' definition. Although abuse of enemy POWs has been prohibited by international law, Wallace asserts that cruel treatment of captives was frequently committed for different purposes by captor states even if they were signatories of the Geneva Convention. By observing the patterns of the perpetration of abuse, he examines the conduct of state actors in wartime. Moreover, he explains the use of violence by different regimes in its wartime context, the real impact of international law and the consequences of such treatment on the general course of a conflict.

Wallace's argument is structured along two axes. According to the political scientist, two categories of factors primarily drove the violence against POWs. First, he claims that democratic regimes, although far from innocent, were less likely to inflict an extreme level of violence on captives than nondemocratic governments. The reasons for this are that democracies are rooted in liberal norms, normally treat their own citizens humanely and the political authorities are usually accountable to their public, which makes them more sensitive to inhumane treatment. Also, these regimes were more concerned about retaliation and often adopted a more pragmatic strategy regarding the benefits of offering decent conditions to enemy soldiers (i.e. to encourage the enemy to surrender). However, as brilliantly described by Wallace, in many contexts democracies were far from blameless and their approaches to POWs could also differ little from their autocratic counterparts.

Secondly, Wallace argues that the violence perpetrated against captured combatants was related to the nature of the conflict itself. The violence of the fighting, in particular during wars of attrition or territorial conquests, shaped the policy and practices of states regarding enemy POWs. In addition, in a precarious wartime situation or for a particular military purpose, a belligerent could decide to use prisoner abuse as a strategy to weaken the enemy. The level of violence also depended on the political objectives of a state in the conflict. With these two points, Wallace clearly rejects the cultural arguments commonly advanced to explain belligerents' wartime decisions about prisoners of war. The patterns of violence against captives, despite the existence of international laws, were the result of domestic and external considerations directly related to the regime in charge and the nature of the conflict rather than a state's culture.

The book consists of five chapters. The first part of the book explains the theoretical framework used by the author. Using a political science approach, Wallace carefully defines what he means by prisoner abuse: "a military strategy enacted by political and military authorities that involves the intentional killing or harming, either directly or indirectly, of enemy combatants who have laid down their arms and surrendered" (p. 16). Following this definition, he describes the variety of violence perpetrated against POWs in conflicts during the twentieth century and his method of classifying abuse between low, medium and high levels. Thereafter, he identifies several factors

considered by political regimes in the shaping of their policy regarding surrendered enemy troops. The second part of the book (Chapters Three to Five) is more a practical and empirical analysis. Wallace begins by explaining his quantitative and qualitative approach, which results in a statistical analysis, and how his political science methodology structures his argument. The last two chapters are case studies used to demonstrate his results. With the examples of British and American policies toward POWs in the Second World War, the author shows that institutional mechanisms were more important than normative aspects in determining captivity policy among the democratic regimes and their "more humane," but not blameless, treatment of POWs. Lastly, he emphasises the well-known Katyn Massacre by Soviet forces in 1940 as an example of how the context of territorial conquest explains the harsh treatment of Polish POWs. These cases prove that cultural differences and international laws did not represent significant factors in understanding violence against prisoners.

Unfortunately, from a historian's perspective, the contribution of this book to our understanding of wartime captivity is debateable. Despite the interesting assertions posed by Wallace, this study does not effectively engage with the existing literature which seeks to explain the treatment of POWs. The argument proposed by Wallace is also debatable. On several occasions, the author compares cases from different periods and geographical areas to support a general statement, but does not fully consider the historical context of each example which leads to several generalisations. Here, the use of the Second World War and the Katyn Massacre to explain the treatment of prisoners throughout the twentieth century does not take into account the specificities of captivity in that global conflict. Furthermore, these examples appear insufficient to understand captivity during other conflicts, such as the Great War or the Korean War. The different political regimes mentioned in the text were not isolated from each other, but were interconnected by several international and transnational political, economic and social aspects. The study overlooks causal relations between conflicts and states and thus the evolution of war captivity during the twentieth century.

Considering that this book is likely addressed to graduate students and practitioners of international security and less for a general public or historians, this work missed the opportunity to add to the arguments of S.P. Mackenzie and Niall Fergusson published

in 1994 and 2004.<sup>1</sup> Finally, archives and material used by Wallace seem limited to the English language and consequently, important studies and relevant concepts in other languages are absent.<sup>2</sup> Notably, prominent historians such as Annette Becker, John Horne and Alan Kramer have demonstrated that concepts of *Culture de guerre* and national identity during the two world wars also explain the complex treatment of prisoners of war by states.<sup>3</sup>

The present review must, however, be qualified. Firstly, this book proposes a political science discussion on POWs and never pretends to offer a historical analysis. Secondly, the attempt to produce a broader understanding of the dynamics of violence against captured soldiers for more than a century of warfare presents a difficult but relevant challenge. Scholars, especially historians, often neglect this perspective by focusing on specific cases of war captivity. Finally, the statistical data presented by the author and his quantitative and qualitative method are certainly relevant in the field of social sciences. Considering these elements, Geoffrey Wallace suggests a new theoretical framework to examine wartime conduct and political violence in armed conflicts.

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<sup>1</sup> S.P. MacKenzie, "The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II," *The Journal of Modern History* 66, no. 3 (1994): 487-520; and Niall Ferguson, "Prisoner Taking and Prisoner Killing in the Age of Total War: Towards a Political Economy of Military Defeat," *War in History* 11, no. 2 (2004): 148-192. We can also add Neville Wylie, "Prisoners of War in the Era of Total War," *War in History* 13, no. 2 (2006): 217-233.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Marie Pathé and Fabien Théofilakis, *La captivité de guerre au XXe siècle: des archives, des histoires, des mémoires* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012); and Günter Bischof, Stefan Karner and Barbara Stelzl-Marx, eds., *Kriegsgefangene des II. Weltkrieges. Gefangennahme - Lagerleben - Rückkehr* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2005). There is also no mention of recent works on humanitarianism and POWs: Sybille Scheipers, ed., *Prisoners in war* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Annette Becker, *Oubliés de la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Fayard, 2012); Annette Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *14-18, Retrouver la Guerre* (Paris: Folio, 2003); and John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).