

## Review of "Prisoners of War and Local Women in Europe and the United States, 1914–1956. Consorting with the Enemy" edited by Matthias Reiss and Brian K. Feltman

Jean-Michel Turcotte

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Matthias Reiss and Brian K. Feltman, eds. *Prisoners of War and Local Women in Europe and the United States, 1914–1956. Consorting with the Enemy*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. Pp. 310.

As noted by several historians, the history of war captivity during the two world wars is well covered, considering the numerous books and academic articles published over the last three decades.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have given great attention to national as well as international policies, the treatment of various categories of prisoners of war (POW), the daily life in camps, the disparities of conditions among different places of detention and the contrasting individual experiences of captivity. Considering that between six and eight million servicemen have suffered from internment during the First World War and around thirty-five million during Second World War, captivity could be seen as the most “common” wartime experience. The scholarship, however, largely focuses on the experience of POWs within barbed wire and between prisoners and camp personnel, neglecting the fact that many prisoners were used as labour force outside of camps and, thus, had contact with enemy civilians, which favoured various forms of fraternisation. More precisely, fraternisation was an occasion for POWs, who were for the most part men, to enter into exchange with local women and develop unauthorised private proximity and familiarity. The nature of these complex phenomena of wartime interactions between POWs and women, their impact and consequences, are the subject of a recent collective study edited by Matthias Reiss and Brian K. Feltman: *Prisoners of War and Local Women in Europe and the United States, 1914–1956. Consorting with the Enemy*.

Reiss (University of Exeter) and Feltman (Georgia Southern University) are leading scholars in the field.<sup>2</sup> In addition to their own works on German POWs in Britain during the First World War and in the United States between 1942 and 1946, the book offers a

<sup>1</sup> For a recent historiography review, see Bob Moore, *Prisoners of War: Europe: 1939–1956* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Brian K. Feltman, *The Stigma of Surrender German Prisoners, British Captors, and Manhood in the Great War and Beyond* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2015); and Matthias Reiss, *Controlling Sex in Captivity: POWs and Sexual Desire in the United States during the Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

great collection of experts, who make use of the conceptual approach of fraternisation during wartime captivity. The chapters covered a wide temporal and spatial scale. Various cases of interaction between POWs and female civilians in Britain, Germany, France, Austria-Hungary, Soviet Union and the United States between 1914 and 1956 are examined. This approach, which combines the two conflicts as well as many localities, has the merit of highlighting the blurred boundaries between the two world wars. Scholars have shown that many connections, transfers and continuities exist between 1914 and 1945. Also, by comparing “common themes as well as differences in the interactions between both groups [of POWs and women] in different places and times” (p. 7), the book offers a transnational perspective on fraternisation. For instance, the multiple efforts made by authorities in all the countries dealing with POWs to prevent and punish fraternisation is particularly prominent.

The contributions of this book are numerous. First, as stated by the two editors, the book reminds us that wartime captivity “often did not end with armistices, peace treaties, or unconditional surrenders” (p. 3). The last prisoners of the First World War were repatriated only in 1926 and 1955 in the case of the Second World War. Often used as labour, many POWs not only contributed to the enemy war effort, but also the postwar economy and the construction of peace. As such, the book highlights the limits of international codification in place for the protection of POWs, which were based on the idea of reducing “suffering.” The Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, as well as the Geneva Convention 1929, were not always fully respected. In addition, many cases of sexual and emotional relationships that developed among POWs with local enemy civilians transcended both the legal status of prisoners of war and the image of the enemy as portrayed by wartime propaganda, blurring here the idea of boundaries between homefront and battlefield. Preconceived negative ideas and national stereotypes of the enemy, which often shaped official policy, did not stop the fraternisation between civilians and prisoners. According to Reiss and Feltman, “war captivity was also a site of cross-cultural encounters” (p. 8). Throughout the book, historians explore the impact of POWs on gender relations and contextualised issues and concepts such as sexual treason, infections, cohabitation, resistance, honour and dishonour. Those aspects highlight the entanglement of war, sexuality and captivity in the context of global conflicts. Finally, the chapters examine the impact of captivity on the masculinity of

POWs and the complexity of experience of soldiers falling into enemy hands—both for prisoners and the societies that detained them.

The book contains nine chapters that present various case studies. Matthias Reiss starts with a reflection on the pre-1914 history on captive labour and fraternisation. Though examples can be found in the warfare of ancient times, it became more frequent in the modern period. But it is definitely in the context of global wars that this phenomenon reached its highest scale. The three subsequent parts focus on the First World War. The chapters explore cases of German prisoners in Britain (Brian K. Feltman), prisoners from various nationalities, such as Russia, France, Belgium, Great Britain, Serbia and Poland in Germany (Lisa M. Todd) and prisoners in the Habsburg Empire (Julia Walleczek-Fritz). The next chapters explore the Second World War. On the Western front, Bob Moore and Barbara Hatley look at Italian prisoners in Britain, while Matthias Reiss focuses on German soldiers detained in the US and Raffael Scheck on prisoners in Germany. The last two chapters move beyond the war and explore POWs-local women interactions in immediate postwar societies. Fabien Théofilakis with the case of German prisoners in France from 1944 to 1948 and Andreas Hilger and Oskars Gruziņš with the study of prisoners on the Eastern Front until the 1950s show that the issue was not limited to the wartime period, but also had an important impact on the reconstruction.

The concluding remarks by Matthias Reiss are particularly interesting. The co-editor argues that postwar conflicts and warfare made the phenomenon of fraternisation between POWs and civilian women less present, especially after the Korean War. Reiss also argues that the lessons of the two world wars still need to be explored considering the important number of POWs used as labour and the numerous contacts with local civilians. In addition, both editors note that many questions raised in the book remain only partly answered, requiring further research, such as “whether close contacts in captivity also influenced or even altered national stereotypes in the medium or long run” (p. 8). Also, they question the “long-term impact of captivity on gender relations” (p. 9). Finally, they mention that “the fate of the children who were born from intimate relationships between POWs and local women still constitutes a gap in the scholarship” (p. 9). On this topic, additional case studies exploring POWs captured across various fronts in Asia and the Middle East as well as other categories of prisoners detained

in non-western localities, such as in the Ottoman Empire and Japan, would be particularly pertinent. Moreover, a discussion of various forms of same-sex fraternisation would be a fascinating contribution. Of course, language skills and access to archival documents remain challenges for writing such histories.

Despite the fact that some questions remain open, the contribution of this book is a welcome addition for anyone interested in the history of war captivity. This book would be particularly useful as a teaching tool. More precisely, the appendix contains twenty-three fascinating primary sources used by the authors to understand the fraternisation of POWs with civilian women, such as memorandums and orders by officials, trial testimonies, police and military reports, personal letters, newspaper articles and memoirs. Some of these documents, originally in French and German, are published and translated for the first time in English. This material is not only useful for a better understanding of the chapters, but also for undergraduate students exploring methodological approaches and interpretation of archival documents. Finally, these documents would help students and historians to better grasp the transnational and comparative perspectives on POWs, which remain essential for understanding the phenomenon of war captivity. The enormous effort made by the contributors is a most welcomed achievement.

JEAN-MICHEL TURCOTTE, *LEIBNIZ INSTITUTE OF EUROPEAN HISTORY, MAINZ*