Prisoners of War Camps in Rochester - Were they humane?

Ryan McKelvie
St. John Fisher College, rmckelvie_no@sjfc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/ur

Part of the American Studies Commons, and the Regional Sociology Commons

How has open access to Fisher Digital Publications benefited you?

Recommended Citation

This document is posted at https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/ur/vol12/iss1/7 and is brought to you for free and open access by Fisher Digital Publications at St. John Fisher College. For more information, please contact fisherpub@sjfc.edu.
Prisoners of War Camps in Rochester - Were they humane?

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the first paragraph of the paper.

After the American involvement in the Second World War, labor issues became more prevalent because so many workers from Rochester either enlisted or were drafted into the ranks of the US Army. Also, many farmers realized they could make more money off of high wage paying industrial jobs in the cities. In order to provide a sufficient amount of produce and other harvested good, prisoners of war were used for the first time as laborers to help the war effort. It was a bitter irony, being a captured soldier and forced to help the enemy win the war by supplying them with enough food to be well fed. The captured soldiers staying in Rochester Prisoner of War camps were some of the first to be used as innovative laborers and were treated more humanely and therefore, better than American Prisoners of War were treated. Also, Rochester treated their Prisoners of War much better than most of America did.
Prisoners of War in Camps in Rochester—Were they humane?
Ryan McKelvie

After the American involvement in the Second World War, labor issues became more prevalent because so many workers from Rochester either enlisted or were drafted into the ranks of the US Army. Also, many farmers realized they could make more money off of high wage paying industrial jobs in the cities. In order to provide a sufficient force the POWs to do labor that would help the war effort at home, the most logical solution seemed to be to make exchanges for their own captured subjects. After looking at the economy of a country in a time of warfare, larger amounts of POWs were used for the first time as laborers to help the war effort. It was a bitter irony, being a captured soldier and forced to help the enemy win the war by supplying them with enough food to be well fed. The captured soldiers staying in Rochester Prisoner of War camps were some of the first to be used as innovative laborers and were treated more humanely and therefore, better than American Prisoners of War were treated. Also, Rochester treated their Prisoners of War much better than most of America did.

The idea of using Prisoners of War as laborers was a relatively new idea at the time of the Second World War. In the ancient times, war captives were often traded into slavery or “exchanged under specific conditions” (Nachtigal 165). In the following era, the early modern times, kings and princes ruled the land. With the war captives they received, they would try their hardest to make exchanges for their own captured subjects. If this could not be done, often times the captured soldiers would be enlisted into the ranks of the enemy’s army. During the emergence of modern warfare, larger amounts of POWs were used for labor. The Germans were the first to institute this during World War I. Their motives were not to capitalize on the labor being done, rather they wanted to distract the “Entente prisoners from the negative psychological effects of internment camps” (Nachtigal 166). It wasn’t until the beginning of World War II that prisoners of war become laborers designed to benefit the economy. Large amounts of POWs were put into labor camps in order to help the war effort at home.

While millions of prisoners of war were rotting away in internment camps, questions surfaced concerning what to do with the captives. After looking at the economy of a country in a time of war, the most logical solution seemed to be to force the POWs to do labor that would help the economy and benefit the war effort. Due to the intensity of World War II, many countries lacked workers since many of them were enlisted. In Rochester, “to compensate for the shortage of farm labor, housewives were recruited, school children were released from classes” (Lehr 4). The labor left by the soldiers was taken over by the women and children of the area; while they did a good job at the tasks they could perform, it was just not enough to make a substantial difference in the war effort. Lehr asserts that “larger harvests were needed to maintain a well-nourished army, to sustain the civilian population, and to supplement the production of combatants in Europe” (Lehr 4). Prisoners of war provided the monumental increase in manpower a country at war needed. Often, work for the Rochester war prisoners included working on local farms or in neighboring factories. Jobs ranging from harvesting tomatoes to canning peas were assigned to the captives in their work details. “Although seven food processing plants and an indeterminate number of related businesses on the east side of Rochester eventually used the services of prisoners of war, they never united into a consortium” (Lehr 5). Through the instantiation of captured soldiers, Rochester was able to provide substantial support to the war effort and the diminishing economy at the time. Not only was the implementation of POWs as laborers an innovative idea, it was also extremely practical because the captives did not receive full pay for the work they did. Therefore, not only did Rochester get the manpower it needed to help the rest of the country, it got the manpower at a much lower rate than it would normally cost.

During the Second World War, the Rochester area was selected as a place for work camps for prisoners of war. Three encampments were constructed at Cobbs Hill between the fall of 1943 and the winter of 1945. “When Allied forces captured thousands of Italian and German prisoners in the Tunisian campaign, the Food Production Administration began to consider that source” (Lehr 4). This campaign was one of the primary causes for the construction of the labor camps at Cobbs Hill, overall, the verdict to reinforce the food production through the use of captive labor was an ingenious idea that “seemed not only logical and practical, but also tailor-made to the situation” (Lehr 5). Although the POW camps are in a civilian park, they did not interfere with everyday life of the citizens. The first prisoners of war to arrive in Rochester to be held at Cobbs Hill were the Italian captives.
Two weeks after the resurrection of the work camps in Rochester, more than a thousand Italian war prisoners from another camp were transported to Cobbs Hill. When the prisoners arrived “they found that their new accommodations contained long rows of iron bunk beds, and each prisoner was assigned an unfinished stand to hold his few personal belongings. Large stoves provided heat for every building” (Lehr 6). The Italian prisoners were not treated like dogs like POWs were in distant countries. Things such as meals were under the regulations of the Geneva Convention; because of this, prisoners ate as well as American soldiers. The published menus illustrated the treatment of the prisoners since several items which appeared on the menu, also appeared on civilian ration lists. Things like Christmas packages were assembled by the Red Cross and the facilities in which the prisoners lived offered religious services, classes in English, and sports competitions. In an attempt to give advice to Rochesterians in the areas around Cobbs Hill, Col. John M. McDowell gave a speech addressing the citizens. “His advice to Rochesterians was to treat the war prisoners ‘with respect and not as jail prisoners.'” (Lehr 7). His advice went far in the minds of the residents of Rochester. Instead of seeing the Italians as prisoners, they thought highly of the POWs. Although the Italian POWs were favored by the citizens, the same did not go for the German prisoners of war. When Italy declared war on Germany in October 1943, Italian prisoners no longer were required to stay at the camps. To take the Italians' place, German prisoners of war were transported into Cobbs Hill. The new German captives in the camps were not thought of as fondly as the Italians. When the Germans were moved in Col. McDowell stated that “stronger precautions would need to be taken to guard against attempted German prisoner escapes” (Lehr 9). By this time, Rochesterians had learned that German prisoners were notorious for attempted escapes in other work camps around the country. While the Italian prisoners occupied the camps, they received news coverage in the local newspapers. Stories “included descriptions of their religious devotions, of their enthusiastic reactions to the Allied invasion of their homeland, and of their industriousness in the war effort” (Lehr 9). However, the news coverage of the German prisoners was not as favorable. National news coverage regarding German war prisoners focused in on repeated escape attempts, in addition—many stories covered the German rebellious work stoppages and “on the fierce loyalty to the fatherland which led groups of prisoners to inflict mental and physical anguish on compatriots who cooperate with their captors” (Lehr 9). These stories elicited feelings of discomfort and hatred towards the German captives. Due to propaganda of the government, the German POWs were characterized as remaining hostile against Americans even while in captivity and “posing a constant threat to vital war industries, to security, and even to citizens” (Lehr 9). This stereotyping against German war prisoners was harmful to their credibility and provoked feelings of hatred towards them by the citizens.

While the public opinion of German POWs was very low, their actions at Cobbs Hill and in Hamlin gave the public no reason to think any different about them then they had thought about the Italians. Security had been increased when the German captives were transported in and remained at their respective locations, but it was not needed. The first four months the German prisoners took over the jobs and work routines that their Italian counterparts had been assigned to. And after four months, “no sit-down strike, attempted escape, or act of sabotage occurred during that time” (Lehr 11). Even though the German prisoners showed no signs of trying to harm American logistics, public opinion only worsened. Complaints were filed, claiming that the prisoner of war camps were too close to the community’s principal reservoir and they did not feel safe. Although the Germans were often referred to as Nazis which caused society to despise them, they were treated the same as the Italian prisoners by the guards in the camps.

Generally, the prisoners were transported to the fields or factories, where they would work that day, in Army trucks. Among the prisoners road enough carbine-bearing guards to sustain the ratio of two guards to every five prisoners. Every day at noon, the POWs would reboard the trucks that brought them to their destination to eat an isolated lunch that had been prepared that morning at the barracks. National regulations prohibited the prisoners of war to fraternize with the American workers which is why they had to eat isolated lunches on hot trucks. “Their workday could last as long as 10 hours, and the normal workweek was six days” (Lehr 6). While this work week sounds appalling, it falls in direct accordance with the Geneva Convention agreements between enemy countries. The prisoners did not work for free because they would become classified as slaves. Each war prisoner was paid 80-cents per day and
was allowed to spend it in the barracks at their own convenience store. Personal items such as shampoo, soap, and cigarettes were readily available to be sold to the POWs in the barracks store. The prisoners staying in Rochester were some of the finest treated war captives in America; places on the West coast where the Japanese prison camps erupted, they would be lucky to receive the treatment the prisoners received at Cobbs Hill and in Hamlin.

After the swift sneak attack on Pearl Harbor and the later declaration of war between Japan and the United States, Japanese Americans were seen as a threat to American society, logistics, and security. Hundreds of thousands of Japanese-Americans were taken prisoner and put in “relocation centers.” A life of freedom and happiness was stripped from those who were put in the relocation centers; a life full of hatred and fear soon replaced it. The god given rights of American citizens were torn from them. Within minutes, many Japanese-Americans went from being a fellow American brother, to a sworn American enemy. The people in these new internment camps were completely helpless against their dominant overbearing leaders. They had no say on where they got relocated to; while families were allowed to stay together, often times they got transported far from home.

Due to presidential orders regarding Japanese-Americans, no Japanese Americans were allowed to live on the Pacific coast. Military advisors thought the Japanese on the West coast to be a danger to defense establishments along the coast. When selecting locations for the Japanese internment camps, many areas were reluctant to accept requests to have them live in their area. One governor shouted: “If these people are dangerous on the Pacific coast they will be dangerous here! We have important defense establishments, too, you know” (Daniels 57). This shows the resentment and dissatisfaction select locations had toward the government and the internment camps trying to be established around them. Another governor from Wyoming was quoted by a reporter saying, “If you bring Japanese into my state, I promise you they will be hanging from every tree” (Daniels 57). Feelings of hatred brewed and boiled about Japanese living in America. After the sneak attack from the imperial power, Japan, resentment erupted towards Japanese by Americans and the government saw Japanese Americans as a threat, which in turn, made American citizens fear the Japanese and see them as a threat as well. The irony of the situation was that the Japanese in these camps had done nothing wrong, except be from Japanese dissent. These people weren’t prisoners of war, they were American civilians, and through comparison, it is clearly evident that the POWs in Cobbs Hill were treated better than the American citizens in the Japanese internment camps. Alongside American oppression, there was also oppression and fights between the Japanese Americans themselves. The only way Japanese Americans found they could resist oppression and confinement, was to conduct violence “against fellow Japanese Americans who, it was believed, were collaborating with the oppressive government” (Daniels 63). After the Japanese Americans were put on busses, as they traveled down long, desolate roads with nothing in sight, they had not the slightest idea where they would be going or what was in store for them when they arrived.

When thousands of Japanese Americans arrived at WRA relocation centers, people had no idea where they would be taken. Almost every of the camp was in a remote desolate location with nothing around it except dirt. The camps were located at desolate, distant sites where no one had lived before and where no one has lived since the release of the Japanese. “All around the camps was dust, which became mud when it rained, and there was barbed wire, floodlights, and armed soldiers” (Daniels 65). Structures such as highways or railroad lines were considered “strategic sites” by the American army. They insisted that the camps all be located at a safe distance from these strategic sites. Through comparison, it is clearly evident that locations of the POW camps in Rochester were much better than those on the West coast which housed the Japanese.

After the Japanese Americans arrived at the camps, many issues became evident, primarily the sanitation of the internment camps. “Most, if not all, of the sites were overcrowded and not really prepared for human habitation. Toilet and bathing facilities were minimal” (Daniels 65). Almost every Japanese internment camp was an old factory or a storage facility, not meant to house and support people. From one of the internment camps in Merced, CA, for example, a woman prisoner wrote:

“The lavatories [are] not very sanitary... The toilets are one big row of seats, that is, one straight board with holes out about a foot apart with no partitions at all and all the toilets flush together... about every five minutes. The younger girls couldn’t go to them at first until they couldn’t stand it any
longer, which is really bad for them" (Daniels 65).

Not only were the bathrooms unsanitary and not fit for humanity, sanitation issues ran rampant throughout the “kitchens.” Many prisoners felt like dogs due to the way they were treated and the kind of conditions they had to live in. Mass outbreaks of diarrhea became a prominent problem in the internment camps due to improper sanitation in the makeshift kitchens that were created out of what they had. The camps at Cobbs Hill provided sanitary living conditions for the prisoners who stayed there. They were treated like civil people, not like dogs, and it seemed like the guards even considered the prisoners American after they were in the camp long enough. The mess hall at Cobbs Hill was up to every sanitation standard and the prisoners ate as well as the American soldiers did. On the other hand, the Japanese internment camps were cesspools for germs and bacteria. The sanitation was so horrendous that “the army’s own experts reported that the kitchens were ‘not up to Army standards of cleanliness’, that ‘bread and milk’ were the only foods provided for small children” and “that dishwashing was not effective, due to an insufficiency of hot water” (Daniels 66). Along with all the sanitation issues, there were no cribs available for children and infants in the improvised makeshift hospital at each location. Infection and sickness were a direct result of the poor sanitation that thrived in the internment camps. While the Japanese internment camps on the Pacific coast were notorious for their horrid sanitation issues, it was nothing compared to the physical labor and malnutrition experienced by American prisoners of war in Germany.

Through the examination of memoirs written by captured Americans forced to live in German work camps, it is clearly evident that they received very poor treatment, especially in comparison to the POWs in Rochester. One camp in Germany, Güstrow, stood out to be a horrendous place to live and was destructive to its captives’ health. Not only was sanitation an issue in this work camp, but hard physical labor and malnutrition broke down spirits, morals, and health of the prisoners. The security of this camp was maintained loosely, the barracks were surrounded by a tall fence and many coils of barbed wire but besides that there was never a guard on duty at night. The guards at Güstrow were the outcasts of the German army. They had seemed to be rejected by the army due to physical conditions, injuries, or mental problems. For this reason, many of the guards had built up anger and were short tempered. A few guards had a psychosis “for their tempers could not be anticipated” and often threatened the prisoners very severely during a low point in their mood swings (McCullen 100). Along with problems with the prison guards, sanitation issues became prevalent and impossible to ignore by anyone other than the guards themselves.

Poor nutrition and sanitation is enough to break any man’s spirit and make him feel like a dog. The barracks at Güstrow contained a few rooms. One being the sleep hall; this was a small room with ten bunk beds lined up so they could all fit. The bunks were wooden with a poorly made straw mattress and a single flannel blanket was issued to each prisoner. There was a single pot-bellied stove in a corner which provided the only source of heat in this subzero climate. Along with this “there were no toilet facilities except for a water faucet in a room connecting our sleeping quarters with another large room” (McCullen 97). It was not until months later that an outside “johnny was built leading to a gaping hole in the ground for a urinal,” this was to be used during the day time only, leaving the prisoners to use the sink at night (McCullen 98). No POW was ever clean and had good hygiene at Güstrow because there were no bathing facilities whatsoever. Another large room was considered the mess hall. It became a makeshift kitchen at best, with very limited appliances and food to prepare. The prisoners at Güstrow selected one of the men among them to be the cook because he had been shot in the leg during his capture and was unable to work. “He was also no cook, but that did not matter, since there was nothing to cook. Whatever the Germans gave us was thrown in the pot for so-called soup. After a day of grueling work in the bitter cold, coming “home” to Güstrow did not sound so bad come nightfall.

The labor at Güstrow was much worse than the labor that was conducted by the war prisoners staying in Rochester POW camps. While both sets of workers usually worked hard, the POWs in Güstrow were forced to work from sunup to sunset six days a week. There was little work to be done at the actual camp at Güstrow. Work consisted of various menial chores here and there. Work outside of the camp detailed unloading wood from a train car or trucks in subzero weather. Not only was it cold out, but the workers had to walk to and from camp carrying these large loads of wood in their arms. “The weather was subfreezing and it sleeted and snowed
most of the time" (McCullen 100). McCullen, an American prisoner held at Güstrow, explains the pain he experienced working for the Germans in their prisoner of war camps. He asserts the pain was so bad and unbearable he decided he would walk off the job. "I was going to quit regardless of the circumstances. I ran the risk of being shot. I was hurting so that I decided to make the move regardless of the circumstances, and I just took off and did not look back" (McCullen 103). While this brave, yet dumb soul received no repercussions after he was found down the road by a German officer, threats were made to the prisoners after the incident. The guards claimed they would not hesitate pulling the trigger on the chest or back of a running war prisoner trying to escape the camp. After everything was said and done, the soldier explains the lessons he learned from being a prisoner of war, and how feels he was given grace by being captured.

"For forty-odd years, I have not lived a day without reflecting back on what life was once like. Not a meal is eaten that I do not reflect back on a time when there was nothing to eat. Not a day passes that I do not recall the time I could not have lived off the table scraps from the mother’s table. Not a night passes that I do not awaken to change positions to relieve some of the pain or cramp in my back or leg and remember how life once was. How grand it all is compared to what it once was, and this is why I feel so richly blessed by what occurred . . . I can enjoy and appreciate so much that is taken for granted by so many. It is hard for me to understand why the Lord has been so good to me. I just have to thank Him for it every day in my own silent way. I hope that in some manner my loved ones have been able to sense this" (McCullen 99-100).

Not only does this quote illustrate the optimism of this selected soldier/prisoner, but it also sheds light on how terrible the camps actually were in comparison to life back home. After liberation from the camps, American soldiers were in a rush to get home. On the contrary, after the surrender of Italy and the prisoners were set free, many stayed in America to further pursue the work they had been doing in the camps and to experience things in America. Many Italians settled in the United States and started a new life there.

Through the evidence provided, it can easily be stated that the prisoners of war held in Rochester were better treated than the American camps on the West coast and camps held in Germany. Not only did the prisoners in Rochester receive pay for their daily work, they ate high grade food which was equivalent to the food being served to the American army. Camps on the West coast were subjects of malnutrition and were exposed to highly unsanitary situations. Furthermore, the labor that was asked of the captives in Rochester was much easier and less taxing on the body than the physical labor demanded by the German prison guards.

Works Cited


