H-France Review Vol. 15 (April 2015), No. 56

Fabien Theofilakis, *Les prisonniers de guerre allemands: France 1944-1949.* Paris: Librarie Arthème Fayard, 2014. 762 pp. Notes, appendices, illustrations, maps, tables, bibliography and index. 32.00€. (pb). ISBN: 978-2-213-66304-3.

Review by Julia S. Torrie, St. Thomas University.

In the course of the Second World War, some 700,000 Germans became French prisoners of war. The number rises to one million if one counts those captured in North Africa, and yet, as Fabien Theofilakis points out, "le nombre des travaux sur cette captivité semple inversement proportionnel à la dimension du phénomène" (p. 11). Among scholars of German history, captivity in Russia plays a much larger role, and the fact that former Wehrmacht soldiers remained prisoners in France until 1948, some staying on longer after their status was transformed into so-called *travailleurs civils libres* (free civilian workers) remains a little-known fact. Theofilakis's comprehensive volume, which analyses this phenomenon in detail, is likely to take a well-deserved place as the standard work for a long time to come. Beyond analysing the history of German POWS in France carefully and in detail, the book's greatest strength lies in the way that the author skilfully embeds this narrower story into the broad history of war's aftermath, and French and German reconstruction in an incipient Cold War context.

After an introductory overview, the book begins by examining the experience of capture. This was a critical moment during which tensions on both sides could easily lead to extreme violence and even death, particularly if a soldier found himself isolated, or if his capture was preceded by especially harsh combat. Brought together in rudimentary encampments behind the Allied lines, prisoners were shocked and demoralized when they encountered thousands of their peers. Capture meant the end of combat and the beginning of an often delicate process of transition from combatant to captive, from military discipline by one's own officers to camp discipline by the enemy, and the start of a sometimes rapid, sometimes slower disillusionment and turn away from Nazism.

Especially before the end of the war, prisoners who were held by units of the French resistance, rather than the regular army, were subject to greater violence. Prisoners tended to be treated better as they were assembled into camps and their status became regularized, though some camps were severely overcrowded, and in a context where the French themselves were suffering from serious material shortages and war damage, conditions varied. Still, Theofilakis suggests that the existing evidence disagrees with the German soldiers' own perception that they were treated better by the Western Allied forces than by the French. At the same time, conditions seem to have been at least nominally better for prisoners taken by regular French army units (some 117,000 men), than for the roughly 20,000 captured by the Forces françaises de l'intérieur (FFI). While the former were officially documented, subject to military discipline and the terms of the Geneva Convention, a "*manque de transparence*" (p. 57) in the FFI's treatment of prisoners gave rise to rumours of ill-treatment, the Nazis having prepared the ground for such rumours through their persistently negative propaganda about French partisans. Moreover, Theofilakis points out, this propaganda was "partiellement reprise par les Anglo-Américains à l'entroit de l'ensemble des autorités françaises" (p. 56).

It is clear that control over, and treatment of, German prisoners of war were deeply political issues and, within France itself, former resisters saw their interaction with prisoners as an extension of the conflict they had fought against Nazism. Struggles over control of the prisoners between the new government of de Gaulle and members of the resistance also reflected two possible visions of how to reconstruct France--on the one hand, de Gaulle's centralized republic characterized by representative democracy; on the other, the FFI's more radical vision of locally-based, direct democracy, born in and legitimized by combat against the occupier.

In the absence of a sovereign German state, the International Committee of the Red Cross was given an extensive role in supervising and monitoring the treatment of German prisoners of war in France. However, the wide dispersion of prisoners throughout French territory and the many demands on the Red Cross at war's end meant that prisoners were not always particularly satisfied with the level of Red Cross engagement they saw. Larger camps were easier to oversee and visit than the more dispersed "kommandos," smaller detachments of prisoners housed in civilian settings. Though inspection visits to kommandos made up two-thirds of the visits for which Red Cross representatives filed reports between 1944 and 1948, and camp visits only 30 percent, (the remaining visits were made to hospitals), larger camps were often visited several times, whereas this was rarely the case with kommandos. Conditions for prisoners varied significantly, though they were generally worse early on, and they varied more significantly from kommando to kommando than from camp to camp.

Probably the greatest problem facing prisoners was lack of food. Although Theofilakis insists that "jamais la situation, même alimentaire, des prisonniers ne fut catastrophique à l'échelle nationale" (p. 79), some prisoners were clearly better off than others. In September 1945, the Red Cross reported that the food situation was "excessivement alarmante" (p. 88), particularly for the 350,000 prisoners in camps. In October, Dr. Roussel of the Red Cross suggested that over the previous ten weeks, while the theoretical POW ration had been a paltry 1,170 calories, only 1,050 had actually been distributed. Drawing on information from a former French deportee to Buchenwald, Professor Richet, who had determined that rations in that German concentration camp between January 1944 and January 1945 had amounted to 1,750 calories, Roussel ended his report with the comment that, "Malgré l'extrême repugnance que nous ayons à risquer ce parallèle, [...]nous sommes obligés de conclure que cette confrontation est en faveur de Buchenwald" (p. 88). And yet, despite conditions that superficially appeared to warrant Roussel's shocking comparison with Buchenwald, the expected deaths of starvation among German POWs in France did not occur. According to Theofilakis, reasons included the fact that the period of lowest rations was relatively short-lived, and that heat, light and sanitation were all relatively good in POW camps in France. Moreover, canteens in the camps enabled prisoners to purchase toiletries, beverages, and perhaps the occasional bit of food. The smaller size and dispersed nature of the kommandos, for their part, gave prisoners other opportunities to improve their food supply locally. A gradual normalization of their situation, and the emergence of France from the immediate aftermath of war, as well as a transition toward seeing prisoners of war as resources for French reconstruction rather than burdens, meant that, with time, rations improved.

Indeed, it soon became apparent that although maintaining them was costly, prisoners might also contribute as workers to the important project of French reconstruction. In some cases, their labour was exploited in highly controversial ways, particularly when they served in de-mining units. This dangerous work, which was also undertaken by French civilian workers, was seen as justified not only because the Germans had made French prisoners undertake it following the armistice in 1940, but also because making German prisoners purge France of mines that German troops had laid appeared to be a just punishment. Beyond this, prisoners became valuable workers in more conventional areas, from mining (where conditions were poorest), to industry and agriculture. In the face of growing pressure from their fellow Western Allies to liberate these men, the French sought to retain control over them because they viewed their labour as a form of reparation for war damages caused by Germany. Rather than send employable prisoners back to Germany, the French argued for their transition to free worker status, a possibility that they were able to realize in 1947. As Valentin Schneider notes in his fine,

though less comprehensive, study of German POWs in France, some 20 percent of German POWs who were still in France as workers in 1948 decided to stay.[1]

In the course of his analysis, Theofilakis examines not only the place of the German POWs in France, but also the ways that defeated Germany responded to their on-going captivity. For the Germans, the prisoners of war bore a double-sided symbolic value, "aussi bien [comme] victim de la guerre que héraut de la reconstruction" (p. 566). Their experience became a kind of purgatory, a necessary part of the transition from Nazism through denazification to reconstruction. Theofilakis devotes a chapter to the camp chaplains whose role was both to help prisoners move away from Nazi ideology and to rebuild a new, Christian Germany as a bulwark against Communism. As they ministered to the prisoners (even to the point of establishing seminaries inside certain POW camps), these men also served as liaisons between German prisoners and French civilians, and as conduits for Church-based assistance to the captives.

Throughout this work, Theofilakis argues that at a very human level, the POW experience became a foundation of postwar German-French reconciliation. Whether because of the close interactions between the French population and working prisoners during their time in captivity, or as a result of the ongoing connections some former prisoners maintained once they returned home to the French communities where they had lived, the POW experience helped break down barriers between the two neighbours.

To make his arguments about the experience of captivity as well as its conditions, Theofilakis bases his account not only on record sources such as the inspection reports of the Red Cross, but also on diaries, newspapers and an extensive series of interviews undertaken with former prisoners of war. The work is liberally supplied with maps and images, as well as a collection of selected primary source documents. While the author is perhaps somewhat dismissive of earlier, more local or limited attempts to uncover the history of German prisoners in France, it is clear that this work goes well beyond any study yet undertaken. It contains an impressive level of detail, yet the author does not lose sight of larger issues. Indeed, what makes this account particularly valuable is its consideration of broader contexts, whether of the "déprise de guerre"(p. 10) and start of reconstruction in France, or the question of denazification in Germany, or the incipient Cold War and European reconciliation over the longer term. Scholars not only of French history, but also German history, and the intertwined relations of the two states, have much to learn from Theofilakis' work.

NOTE

[1] Valentin Schneider, *Un million de prisonniers allemands en France: 1944-1948*, Paris: Editions Vendémiaire, 2011, p. 131.

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ISSN 1553-9172