

# INTRODUCTION

Captivity is as old as war itself. It has existed for centuries and has profoundly affected the lives of millions of people, including some of the most influential figures in history. Politicians such as Winston Churchill and Charles de Gaulle, and writers such as Miguel de Cervantes and P. G. Wodehouse have all endured imprisonment in wartime. It might even be argued that captivity, which historically has affected entire populations, has been more universal than combat, which usually involves only the warriors of any society. W. Wynne Mason, a historian of New Zealand POWs, has estimated that one person in every thousand was interned at some point during World War II. Even in that global conflict, armed combat occurred in only a few regions. Internment, on the other hand, occurred in all nations, belligerent and neutral, and affected the lives of people thousands of miles from the firing lines.

Any discussion of captivity in wartime must account for the fact that, throughout history, there have been many kinds of prisoners, each of which experienced different treatment. Most notable (and certainly most glamorous in terms of modern culture) have been prisoners of war, called POWs, members of a recognized military body captured during wartime. *POW* is apparently a straightforward classification that should admit of little controversy, but even within this group, a number of subcategories have evolved. Guerrilla fighters and merchant mariners are, to varying degrees, combatants, but their status as POWs has been the subject of considerable debate. The status of camp followers, civilians who attach themselves to armies to provide services or for personal reasons, has also been unclear.

Even legitimate POWs have sometimes found their status called into question. The Allied powers in World War II created other categories to cope with the massive numbers of enemy soldiers captured. Some of them were classed as Disarmed Enemy Forces (DEF) or Surrendered Enemy Personnel (SEP), artificial distinctions that relieved the Allies of according them all the rights of official POWs. By the same token, Italian soldiers captured by the Allies were often classified not as POWs but as military internees, another dubious distinction that owed more to the demands of the moment than anything else. Finally, war captivity has also involved civilians who have been interned for a variety of reasons. While they are not prisoners of war in the strictest sense, they have certainly been prisoners in wartime.

Over the millennia, there have been many changes in captivity as it affected these various groups. Most striking are the improvements in international law, which have created a broad and complex network of largely nongovernmental organizations to monitor and improve the conditions of captivity during wartime. But these improvements make it easy to lose sight of a more sobering reality: that, despite the Enlightenment, notions of progress, and the evolution of a humanitarian spirit, there is far more continuity than change in the institution of war captivity.

For centuries, all people were vulnerable to enslavement or massacre. War was total war, waged by societies rather than armies; soldiers were captured, but so, too, were women, children, the elderly, and the infirm. The population of a vanquished city was essentially a kind of plunder, no different

from gold or oxen or implements, that belonged to the conquering armies. If the victorious commander had a use for his human trophies, either as slaves or to augment his own community's population, they would live. If not, or if they had offended him by resisting conquest, they would be quickly dispatched. Human history is full of accounts of entire populations being taken into slavery or put to the sword.

In the early modern era, and particularly with the great liberal revolutions in America and France, the situation began to change. Following trends that originated with international jurists, there evolved a distinction between combatant and noncombatant, and between combatant and commander. Wars were fought by people's armies, but no longer was it assumed that a subjugated population was one of the spoils of war. Civilians, provided they took no active part in hostilities, were deemed to be inviolate. Furthermore, it was recognized that the soldier was essentially an employee of his commander. Military considerations demanded that soldiers be removed from action if captured, but humanity demanded that they not be treated unduly harshly. After all, the opposing leader was the real enemy; the soldier was merely a worker.

Despite occasional lapses (Napoleon Bonaparte, for example, had no compunction about interning British civilians in France or slaughtering thousands of Arab prisoners at Jaffa in 1799), such notions persisted until the world wars of the twentieth century. During these global conflicts the distinction between combatant and noncombatant was broken down, a development that had been foreshadowed by events of the Philippine-American and Boer Wars. In World War I, civilians were once again vulnerable to internment, and World War II took the process to new lengths, with the imprisonment, enslavement, and massacre of millions of people, combatants and noncombatants alike. On the surface, this might seem to be a characteristic of an alarming

new trend in warfare, but in fact it was merely a throwback to centuries-old practices.

There is now one new element in the mix, however: ethnicity. When wars were primarily political or ideological struggles, it was relatively easy for captives to change sides. For centuries, prisoners were encouraged to join the armies of their captors. For the detaining power, this was a simple method of securing new soldiers after a costly campaign; for the captives, it was a way to save their own lives while continuing to receive a soldier's wage. In the modern world, this would be considered defection, but in reality it was simply an expedient that allowed countless prisoners to escape death.

Defection was also encouraged in ideological wars; to convert or "turn" a prisoner to one's side was a propaganda victory that proved not only the appeal of one's own ideology, but also the bankruptcy of the enemy's ideology. Germany, the Soviet Union, and Japan all went to great lengths to convert prisoners to their own ideologies during World War II. In practical terms, their efforts largely failed; tens of thousands of POWs were turned, but they tended to make poor soldiers in the service of their erstwhile enemies and were rarely an asset on the battlefield. In propaganda terms, however, the numerical results were thought to justify the effort, for each convert was proof of the superiority of National Socialism, Communism, or the Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.

Generally speaking, changing sides is no longer an option in the increasingly ethnic and racial conflicts of the post-1945 era. One cannot simply change one's ethnicity in the event of capture; indeed, it is the very fact of ethnicity that distinguishes friend from foe. Furthermore, it is increasingly clear that there is no such thing as a noncombatant in ethnic wars. The genocides in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia reveal the degree to which all people, regardless of age, gender, and combatant status, are vulnerable to imprisonment, abuse, and execution. But

here again, even though race is a modern notion, there is a strong sense of continuity. If there is one striking feature of these genocides, it is the degree to which they are reminiscent of the attitudes toward captives in the ancient world.

As the international community has had to come to terms with racial or ethnic aspects of captivity, it has also had to come to terms with cultural factors. Simply put, not all societies share the Western belief in the sanctity of a prisoner's life. This reality has historically been troublesome to Western armies that encountered other societies, whether it be in the Americas, Africa, or Asia. Does one adopt the enemy's often brutal practices in dealing with prisoners, or does one attempt to instill in the enemy a respect for captives' lives? Typically, Western armies adopted the former course, maintaining that natives expected to be treated brutally and took anything else as a sign of weakness. But developments in international law have tended to advance the latter course and to force other societies to accept Western notions of acceptable conduct. The conundrum here is obvious. It is all well and good to lament the fact that Japan did not abide by the Geneva Convention in its treatment of prisoners during World War II, but scholars have pointed out that the treatment was an outgrowth of Japanese cultural and military traditions dating back hundreds of years. In this sense, international law, while attempting to protect POWs, has incidentally attempted to legislate away centuries-old cultural practices. Some observers have seen this as progress, while to others it smacks of cultural imperialism.

There is another cultural dimension to captivity that bears mention. The fact that captivity has been such a universal experience has made it a ubiquitous presence in popular culture, where the images are instantly recognizable to millions. Steve McQueen attempting to leap into neutral Switzerland on his motorcycle after escaping from Stalag Luft 3 (*The Great Escape*), Alec

Guinness destroying the bridge that he and his fellow POWs had labored so hard to build (*The Bridge on the River Kwai*), even Sergeant Schultz insisting, "I know nothing, nothing!" (*Hogan's Heroes*)—these are all part of the lexicon of modern culture. That some of them bear only the faintest resemblance to reality has been largely irrelevant to the viewers.

But even this is not a new trend in popular culture. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European settlers in North America used the captivity narrative as an object lesson; such narratives were published by the hundreds, almost always with the same basic elements. After the U.S. Civil War, the treatment of POWs by the Confederacy was transformed into a bloody shirt to be waved at every conceivable opportunity. After World War I, the British turned the escape story into a minor literary genre not unlike the colonial captivity narrative. The escape story, too, was in effect a simple morality play that pitted British pluck and ingenuity against German or Turkish perfidy and oafishness. All of these trends foreshadowed the dominance of captivity in popular culture after 1945.

The emergence of television, however, has added a new ingredient into the mix. Images of captivity—from the bruised faces of captured United Nations airmen during the Persian Gulf War to scenes from Bosnian detention camps to images of Western hostages held in Iraq—now come directly into our homes in a way that they could not in earlier times. These images, in all their harsh realism, have served to temper our often distorted views of prisoners. What impact this will have on captivity over the long term remains to be seen. Even the most violent regimes of the twentieth century have been aware of the importance of good public relations. The Japanese in World War II had no qualms about brutalizing prisoners, but they were very keen to ensure that the brutalization was hidden from the prying eyes of neutral observers; the same was true of Nazi Germany. But it is also true that pris-

oners can be used as trophies, as they often were in ancient history. Putting them on display on the television or the Internet is a way for captors to demonstrate their ability to strike at will or, in effect, to thumb their noses at their enemies. The technology is new, but the reality behind it is not: The prisoner is always the most powerless of pawns.

The fact remains that, even with the improvements in international law and the

increasing difficulty of committing crimes in secret, prisoners remain at the mercy of their captors just as they were thousands of years ago. A government that is benevolent toward POWs will be benevolent with or without legislation or inspection; a regime that is determined to mistreat prisoners will do so regardless of any strictures or sanctions. This fact does not make the attempt to protect prisoners any less worthy, but it does put it into the proper perspective.

# A

## **ABU GHRAIB PRISON (BAGHDAD CORRECTIONAL FACILITY)**

Abu Ghraib is a city in Iraq approximately 30 kilometers west of Baghdad where the government of Iraq built a 280-acre prison facility in the 1960s. Under Saddam Hussein, Abu Ghraib became a symbol of the ruling Ba'ath party's tyranny. Saddam's security services dispatched countless thousands of real and suspected enemies of the state there during his 24-year reign. In 2004, the prison became the focal point of an enormous scandal involving American abuse of prisoners following the U.S.-led invasion that liberated Iraq from Saddam's regime.

For decades, Abu Ghraib figured prominently in human rights reports from Iraq. In the 1980s, Amnesty International catalogued thousands of reported cases of abuse, brutal interrogation, forced starvation, and torture, as well as innumerable "disappearances" and extrajudicial executions occurring inside Abu Ghraib. Conditions did not improve after Iraq's defeat in the 1991 Gulf War; if anything, the regime's survival emboldened it to take even more repressive measures against dissent. In the 1990s, thousands of alleged enemies of the state (including large numbers of Sh'ia Muslims and Kurds who had risen against Saddam following his army's expulsion from Kuwait in March 1991) were sent to Abu Ghraib, and reports of torture and execution continued. In 1998, Amnesty International reported that several hundred inmates, many of them political prisoners of the regime nearing the end of their sentences, had been suddenly executed there the previous November. As late as 2001, approximately 15,000 inmates

were held in the prison, many for political reasons. However, with war against the United States imminent, Saddam Hussein announced a general amnesty, and in October 2002 most prisoners throughout Iraq were released. Abu Ghraib was largely abandoned, and files pertaining to past prisoners were hurriedly burned by prison officials and staff. Hence, it is probable that the fate of many who "disappeared" inside Abu Ghraib will never be known.

In March 2003 an American-led military coalition invaded Iraq, quickly brushing aside Iraqi military opposition and seizing Baghdad. Saddam's government disintegrated within three weeks, although Saddam himself was not apprehended until December. Subsequently, Abu Ghraib, renamed with typical bureaucratic loquaciousness the "Baghdad Central Confinement Facility," was reactivated by the Americans to serve as a detention center for Iraqi prisoners of war, insurgents, and suspected terrorists. By year's end, more than 5,000 Iraqis were held in the facility.

In January 2004 the U.S. Army commenced an investigation into reports of abuse and torture being committed by American military personnel at Abu Ghraib after receiving testimony and a compact disc of photographic evidence from a member of the military police. In late April, the American television program *60 Minutes II* and the journalist Seymour Hersh, writing in the online edition of *The New Yorker*, exposed to the public the abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners by American military personnel. Thus began a series of revelations that engulfed the U.S. armed forces, the Department of Defense, and the Presidency itself in scandal. Published photographs of U.S. service

personnel intimidating, sexually humiliating, and in some cases beating prisoners or threatening them with dogs shocked many Americans accustomed to regarding their armed forces as defenders of human rights. In addition, the revelation of these crimes did incalculable damage to the moral credibility of the American cause. Henceforth, the claim that the United States had invaded Iraq to liberate its citizens from tyranny would, throughout much of the world, be dismissed as self-serving hypocrisy.

In some cases the instances of abuse and torture occurred during interrogations to extract “actionable intelligence” from prisoners, but in others it appears to have had no motive apart from abject sadism. While decrying the incidents, U.S. President George W. Bush and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld stressed that only a handful of poorly trained and ill-supervised individuals were directly responsible for the abuse (neither Bush nor Rumsfeld would deign to use the word “torture”). Subsequent accusations regarding similar incidents in American detention facilities in Iraq, Afghanistan, Cuba, and, indeed, at various “secret” facilities utilized in the War on Terror, have led many to suspect that the Abu Ghraib incidents may have been more systemic.

In all, 17 soldiers were relieved of duty and seven charged under military law. The prison’s commanding officer, Brigadier General Janice Karpinsky, was demoted to colonel, while as of December 2005 two soldiers, Specialist Charles Garner and Private Lynndie England, have received jail terms of 10 and three years, respectively.

For opponents of the war, Abu Ghraib has become a symbol for everything morally and pragmatically wrong with U.S. policy in Iraq. The irony, however, is that American treatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, appalling though it was, actually constituted an improvement over the former regime’s, but few opponents of the Iraq War had ever heard of the facility before April 2003.

*See also* Hussein; Saddam Iran-Iraq War; Gulf War; Iraq War; Torture; War on Terror

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—Graham Broad

## ACCOMMODATION

Detaining powers face many challenges when handling prisoners of war and civilian internees, not the least of which is the need to provide accommodation, or living quarters for captives. In some conflicts, belligerents are able to make advance preparations, but more often, arrangements must be made much more hastily. As a result, prisoners have usually been housed in structures that have been hurriedly converted to prisons rather than in camps specially designed for internment.

For centuries, belligerent nations have agreed on a number of practices for the release of prisoners, all of which have been intended, in part, to solve the problem of having to provide accommodation. Until the twentieth century, there was widespread use of parole, whereby, upon giving a pledge not to fight again, prisoners would be released, either to their home country or to arrange their own lodging in the enemy state. Many prisoner exchanges, often on the basis of numerical equality, also allowed prisoners to return to their homes. At the other end of the spectrum, it was not uncommon for prisoners to be massacred. This, like exchange and parole, was a way to



*A typical hut that accommodated Allied POWs on the Burma-Thailand Railway in World War II (Australian War Memorial 157878)*

relieve a belligerent state of the burden of housing prisoners.

However, if exchange or parole could not be agreed upon and if execution offended the sensibilities of the state, it had no choice but to provide accommodation for prisoners. In the worst-case scenario, when an enemy collapsed suddenly or an offensive was more successful than predicted, a belligerent government would suddenly be faced with masses of prisoners to house. This was the case at certain points during the U.S. Civil War, during the German spring offensive in the summer of 1918, after the fall of France in 1940, and after the fall of Germany in 1945. In each instance, prisoners bore the brunt of the lack of preparations. They endured long and exhausting treks, only to discover there were no buildings to shelter them. When the first Union prisoners reached Andersonville, Georgia, in February 1864, there were no barracks; POWs slept in the open air, dug holes in the ground, or

cobbled together rude shelters from scraps of lumber they found. The situation was the same for the hundreds of thousands of German soldiers who surrendered when the Nazi state collapsed in 1945; there were simply not enough buildings available to house them, so many spent weeks living in open fields without shelter. Prisoners of the Japanese in World War II, sent to Thailand to work on the Death Railway, found that they had to build their own camps. Their captors provided the tools, but they had to clear the jungle and erect the barracks themselves.

Wherever possible, detaining powers have adapted other structures to serve as prisons. Of course, there is nothing inherently wrong with this practice: Provided there is sufficient time to complete the arrangements, a converted camp can be quite adequate. Indeed, millions of prisoners have been incarcerated in camps that had once been something else. Perhaps the most common practice has been to convert a military estab-

ishment into a prison camp. During World War I, the German government did this at a former cavalry school at Bischofswerda and at a former training school for noncommissioned officers at Friedberg. Disused industrial buildings were also used frequently, although they were not particularly well suited to the task. They were large and could easily accommodate many prisoners, but considerable effort was generally required to make them habitable, and the detaining power was often not willing to expend that effort. In the U.S. Civil War, the prison at Cahaba, Alabama, had once been a cotton warehouse. British POWs confined in Halle in World War I were dismayed to discover that their camp had once been an iron foundry; there were no proper sanitary facilities, and the room that served as a mess hall had a dirt floor. Castles have also been natural choices: Portchester Castle in England held French POWs during the Napoleonic Wars, and during World War II, the German military made prison camps out of many castles, including Colditz, Königstein, Spangenberg, and Laufen. But there were also many strange conversions. In World War I, the British government converted London's Alexandra Palace, a huge, glass-roofed exhibition hall, into a prison for 5,000 civilian internees. Oflag 21B at Schubin in eastern Germany was a former girls' school that held Allied POWs during World War II. Cu Loc prison in southwest Hanoi (known to its American inmates as "the Zoo") had been a film studio before it was converted to hold American POWs captured in the Vietnam War.

Conditions in POW camps have obviously varied, but this variation is largely related to issues unconnected with the nature of the camps themselves; virtually any converted structure can be made comfortable, provided that the detaining power is inclined to do so. The only type of prison camp that is by its nature less than inhabitable is, oddly enough, the converted military fortress. British prisoners captured during the Napoleonic Wars lived in a number of French fortifications, like Verdun citadel and

the fortresses at Bitche, Valenciennes, Arras, Besançon, and Auxonne. Fortresses in eastern Germany, like Thorn (Torun), Zinna, Posen (Poznan), and Graudenz (Grudziadz), held Allied prisoners during both world wars. In such places, cold, damp, and dank conditions were undeniably inimical to prisoners' health.

Less significant numerically but equally important in historical terms were camps built specifically as prisons. These have a longer lineage than might be imagined, and as a consequence, it is not unknown for prison camps to be used in more than one war. Mill Prison in Devon, in southern England, had first served as a POW camp during the War of the League of Augsburg (1688–1697). Later, permanent buildings were erected there to house prisoners during the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–1748), and those same buildings housed American prisoners during the American Revolution. Lamsdorf, in eastern Germany, served as a prison camp in both World War I and II, and conditions were equally bad in both wars. One unlucky British prisoner even had the misfortune to be imprisoned in Lamsdorf in both wars.

However, most camps built as prisons were never intended to be permanent. Dozens of camps in Nazi Germany, for example, were built according to a standard plan and consisted of the same basic elements: long wooden barracks divided into small sleeping and common rooms; high barbed-wire fences, often with a low warning wire running around the inside of the fence to create a danger zone close to the wire; guard towers around the perimeter; a lavatory block; common buildings to be used for recreation or study; and adjacent compounds for the punishment block and the camp staff offices. Camps of roughly the same design were constructed in Britain, Canada, the United States, and Australia, so that it is almost possible to speak of a common style of prison-camp architecture for this period. Most of these camps were dismantled soon after the war, although some have been retained (either whole or in part) as museums.



*The kitchens at the Alexandra Palace in London, which held German POWs during World War I (from German Prisoners in Great Britain [London, n.d.] )*

hungry. As a consequence, POWs suffered severely, for it was unlikely that any detaining power would ensure that enemy prisoners ate better than its own civilians. British officers imprisoned in Rastatt in 1918 lived on coffee and a small chunk of bread for breakfast, a bowl of thin soup for lunch, and more soup for dinner, with perhaps a beet or a couple of baked potatoes. By 1945, Allied POWs in Japanese camps were existing on as little as 600 calories a day, less than half what captives in Germany received, and one-fifth of what POWs in Allied camps were receiving. It was not uncommon for prisoners in the Far East to lose 100 pounds in body weight over the duration of their captivity.

To some degree, international law has recognized that a detaining power will not always have limitless food supplies at its disposal. The Lieber Code of 1863, which regulated captivity during the U.S. Civil War, stipulated that prisoners should receive

“plain and wholesome food” but added “whenever practicable” as a caveat. This effectively admitted that there would be occasions when the detaining power simply lacked the resources to feed prisoners adequately. Union POWs in the camp in Macon, Georgia, for example, were issued cornmeal with corn husks, rancid and maggoty bacon, salt, vinegar, and watery soup—an unappetizing fare to be sure, but no different from the rations their guards received. The 1907 Hague Convention held that POWs should receive the same rations as the troops that captured them, while other agreements reached in World War I attempted to lay down minimum calorie levels: 2,000 calories per day for nonworking prisoners, 2,500 for working prisoners, and 2,850 for prisoners doing hard labor. The 1929 Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War altered this practice slightly by stating that prisoners should be fed on

This time-line includes most of the entries contained in this encyclopedia, with the exception of some of the thematic entries, such as "Labor," "Slavery," "War Crimes," and "Women," that have been a feature of captivity through the ages. Entries that are relevant to more than one conflict are listed more than once; Dartmoor, for example, was used as a prison during the Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812, and so appears under both headings. Biographical entries appear according to the individual's involvement with captivity, rather than their birth or death date: the entry for "Winston Churchill," then, appears with the Boer War, when he was a civilian internee in South Africa. Because of the number of entries covering World War II, that section of the time-line has been arranged thematically as well as chronologically, to make it as functional as possible to the reader.

ANCIENT & CLASSICAL  
WORLD

Greece - Bronze Age to the Hellenistic Period .....	3500 B.C.E.-300 B.C.E.
Sphacteria, Battle of.....	425 B.C.E.
Peloponnesian Wars....	431-404 B.C.E.
Ancient Egypt .....	3200 B.C.E.-350 B.C.E.
Hittites .....	1800-1175 B.C.E.
Greece - Hellenistic Period.....	300 B.C.E.
Punic Wars.....	264-146 B.C.E.
Roman World.....	100 B.C.E.-500 C.E.
Attila the Hun .....	453

DARK & MIDDLE  
AGES

Karbala .....	629
Imma .....	679
Vikings .....	8th - 12th centuries
Basil II Bulgaroctonus .....	958-1025
Crusades .....	11th - 13th centuries
Ransom .....	11th - 17th centuries
Tower of London.....	1078-1945
Plains Indian Warfare .....	1100-1890

# NAZI CONCENTRATION CAMPS

1938 - 1945

MAP 1

