



PROJECT MUSE®

The POWs and the Great War: Captivity on the Eastern Front
(review)

Robert C. Doyle

The Journal of Military History, Volume 67, Number 1, January 2003, pp.
259-260 (Review)

Published by Society for Military History

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jmh.2003.0027>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/40453>

emblematic image of children with severed hands, based on such a legend, became a touchstone in popular imagination. Allied propaganda concerning these incidents, the authors argue, was no better than the German propaganda of denials. Given the facts, the Allies simply had an easier case to make. Peace in 1918 also did not bring closure. Rather, the Versailles Treaty demanded war crimes trials, which were frustrated by the Weimar government, which continued to obscure the reality of the events, thus contributing to the poisoning of the international atmosphere. Today, as the world still seeks restraints on violence against civilians, the events of 1914 deserve the reexamination given them in this compelling study.

Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius

University of Tennessee
Knoxville, Tennessee

The POWs and the Great War: Captivity on the Eastern Front. By Alon Rachamimov. New York: Berg, 2002. Distributed by NYU Press. ISBN 1-85973-578-9. Photographs. Tables. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xii, 259. \$22.50.

Although clearly a doctoral dissertation in need of professional editing for a more general readership, this book, one in a series of recent works, examines a part of World War I history rarely addressed in the west. That large numbers of German and Austro-Hungarian prisoners were taken on the Eastern Front between 1914 and 1918 has all but faded from memory, in part because of their victory over the Russians and subsequent peace negotiations with the Bolsheviks. That Alon Rachamimov addresses the issue, one that demands skill in German, Hungarian, and various Slavic languages, results undoubtedly in a distinct contribution to the field of historical POW studies.

The author poses several fascinating questions early in the text: did the large Russian POW camps preview the Soviet Gulag system and the Nazi Death Camp system later in the century? Rachamimov examines this thesis and concludes that the evidence shows pretty clearly that correlations remain historically circumstantial and do not prove causation. Second, did Czarist Russian Pan-Slavism usurp the POW provisions of the 1899 Hague Convention? Perhaps it did, in that the Czarist High Command ordered Alsatian and Slavic prisoners to be given better treatment in European Russia than Germans, Austrians, or Hungarians in Siberia. In the end, however, favoritism played a minimal role; over 90 per cent of all captured soldiers from all sides returned home after hostilities ended in 1918.

Even more important in the author's view were the stark differences in treatment accorded captured officers under the Hague Convention. Based on Joan Beaumont's concerns for hierarchal inequalities and lack of egalitarianism in military affairs, Rachamimov asks his readers to sympathize more with the plight of the lower rank and file—the "view from the bottom"—than

with the officers. The reason for this is the contemporary problem with the nineteenth-century understanding of officers as a social class, i.e., what Jean Renoir called the “Grande Illusion” in his 1937 film. Social problems aside, the author addresses the core difficulties of captivity in the East during World War I: the POW as loyalty risk, and the complexities of a civil war caused by the Bolshevik Revolution in the middle of a world war.

Essentially, the author shows us that the Cold War really started in 1918–20 as Austro-Hungarian POWs returned home under great suspicions that Russian Bolsheviks had infected them with notions of anti-Hapsburg, anarchic radical socialism. Rather than expressing the thanks of a grateful nation, the Austro-Hungarians engaged their returnees in long interrogations and subsequent military/political reeducation programs. The real complaints from the POWs had little to do with radical politics and much more to do with the low levels of concern for their physical welfare behind the wire.

Robert C. Doyle

Franciscan University
Steubenville, Ohio

Eisenhower Between the Wars: The Making of a General and a Statesman. By Matthew Holland. Westport, Conn: Praeger, 2001. ISBN 0-275-96340-3. Index. Bibliography. Endnotes. Pp. ix, 248. \$64.95.

Matthew Holland's *Eisenhower Between the Wars* is a solid piece of revisionist work on an area of Eisenhower's life that has received too little attention: the interwar years. It was during these twenty years that Ike became the officer worthy of the meteoric rise to high command that he experienced. The early myth that Holland refutes, that Eisenhower was an obscure but likeable and competent officer who just happened to be in the right place at the right time, was nearly palpably false from the beginning, but his early biographers seemed to enjoy that story, as did the American people. Later, Stephen Ambrose in his biography of Eisenhower suggested there was more to Ike's interwar preparation at times, but in assessing the whole, wrote, “During the war [First World War] he at least had important responsibilities; in the 1920's and 1930's, save as a football coach, he had none.” Geoffrey Perret's more recent treatment of Eisenhower is better in regard to these years; Ike meets important people and makes substantial contributions to the development of the U.S. Army, while receiving an education as to how the Army and the federal government work. But Perret is brief and does not approach the understanding of Eisenhower and these times that Holland possesses. This book, then, fills a long-term need in Eisenhower scholarship.

Holland brings a military background as well as graduate academic credentials to this task. He plainly states his own philosophical base and personal views concerning his subject. For Holland, history is shaped not only by impersonal forces but also by men, indeed by great men, and Eisenhower