

Prisoners of War (Belgium and France)

By [Heather Jones](#)

Summary

During the First World War, France was faced with creating a system of mass captivity for German prisoners of war and German civilian internees, both at home and in its overseas Empire. It largely succeeded in retaining civilian government control over prisoner treatment policies although on the ground the French military had considerable leeway in how they treated captives. In contrast, in Germany, the military had complete control over how French prisoners of war and civilian internees were treated. Belgium, with most of its territory occupied by Germany, faced different challenges in how it managed prisoners of war, while some Flemish Belgian prisoners in Germany experienced favourable treatment compared to their Walloon counterparts due to Germany's desire to promote a pro-German version of Flemish nationalism.

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Introduction

To date, remarkably little historical research has been done on the fate of German [prisoners of war](#) held by [France](#) in the First World War; in contrast, there has recently been substantial work on French prisoners of war held by [Germany](#), by [Annette Becker](#) and others, and there has also been some historical research on Belgian prisoners and civilian internees in Germany, in particular by [Jens Thiel](#) and Karolien Cool. As the treatment of prisoners of war in Germany is dealt with in detail in the regional thematic article on "[Prisoners of War \(Germany\)](#)", this article will focus more on the experiences of German prisoners of war and

civilian internees in France, with some brief discussion of the Belgian case.

During the First World War, France captured between 327,373 and 392,425 German prisoners of war in total across the whole conflict.¹ At the start of the war these men were held in improvised accommodation – often hastily converted fortresses and barracks. Prisoners were held all across France, including in Corsica, and, in the first year of the war, large numbers of German prisoners of war were transferred to camps in [North Africa](#). The maximum estimate for the total number of German combatant prisoners of war who died in French captivity during the war is 25,229. [Heather Jones](#) has calculated that this gives a maximum estimated death rate of 6.42 percent.²

In contrast, there were between 446,300 and 600,000 French combatant prisoners captured by Germany during the First World War.³ The average French prisoner spent 2.6 years in German captivity.⁴ From the very start of the war Germany held more French prisoners than France held German – the fall of Maubeuge fortress saw over 30,000 French troops captured in September 1914. This disparity in prisoner numbers gave Germany a significant advantage over France diplomatically during the conflict since it created greater leverage on issues of prisoner treatment.

During the 1914 invasion of Northern France, Germany also deported thousands of French civilians – particularly those from socially or politically important positions – as hostages. During the first weeks of the war, these civilians of all ages were transported in chaotic conditions along with combatant prisoners of war and were often held in the same improvised German camps as combatant prisoners until a more developed camp system could be established months later. Death rates amongst these civilian deportees remain uncertain but anecdotal evidence reports deaths from exposure and exhaustion among vulnerable groups such as the elderly.

During the First World War, Germany captured 40,500 Belgian soldiers and 730 Belgian officer prisoners of war, approximately 2,000 of whom died in captivity.⁵ Germany also held large numbers of Belgian civilian internees during the conflict – a first wave was deported as hostages during the German invasion of [Belgium](#) in 1914; later deportations targeted Belgian civilian workers who were to be used as labour for the war effort on the German home front; around 60,000 met this fate. High profile deportees, taken as hostages, included the internationally famous Belgian historian [Henri Pirenne \(1862-1935\)](#), who was held at Holzminden camp. In total, the [International Committee of the Red Cross](#) estimated that 100,000 French and Belgian civilian prisoners were forcibly deported to Germany during the

war; this figure included all ages and both sexes.⁶

France's Treatment of German Combatant Prisoners of War

The treatment of enemy prisoners by France during the First World War was initially defined by a Ministerial Instruction of 21 March 1893 and the administration of prisoners of war was directed by the *Service Général des Prisonniers de Guerre*, a department established in the French Ministry of War in autumn 1914. In 1916, a new *Inspection Générale des Prisonniers de Guerre* was created to take over running the *Service Général*. As the war went on, France increasingly based its prisoner treatment policies upon reciprocity with how Germany was treating its French prisoners of war rather than upon the 1893 Ministerial Instruction which came to be seen as too limited and too liberal. Throughout the war, the overall direction of French prisoner treatment policy came from the civilian government and although the French military had considerable leeway on the ground, prisoner treatment was kept under the control of the civil state.

The International Committee of the Red Cross was allowed to inspect all prisoner of war camps in France, including those in North Africa, with the exception of those camps and prisoner holding areas that were located in the "*Zone des Armées*", the military zone behind the front. During the First World War, a system of "protecting powers" existed, under which [neutral](#) states undertook to safeguard the interests of specific combatant prisoner nationalities for the duration of the conflict. The interests of German prisoners in France were supervised by the Swiss; those of French prisoners in Germany were safeguarded by the Spanish state, which undertook a series of remarkably comprehensive inspections of camps and working units for French prisoners of war in Germany in the latter half of the war.

As well as combatant prisoners of war captured on the battlefield, France [interned enemy aliens](#) in civilian internee camps:

The authorities detained not only German, Austrian, Hungarian, Turkish and Bulgarian civilians, but also Czechs, Poles, Armenians and refugees from Alsace-Lorraine in so far as they were suspected of harbouring pro-German, pro-Hapsburg or pro-Ottoman sympathies.

Around 60,000 people were interned at one time or another.⁷

The types of French internment camps varied: there were internment camps for German and Austrian enemy aliens of military age, and separate camps for "privileged" alien minorities – often Poles or Czechs. German civilian internees who turned out to be of [Alsace-Lorraine](#) origin, were also held in special camps. Additionally, there were special camps for "notables"

- those considered to be of particular significance because of their class or their social position; similar to Germany's policy of interning or deporting "notables" from [occupied France and Belgium](#), France saw these people as potential hostages to use against the German state. Overall, Ottoman civilians were the enemy alien category against whom internment policy was least stringently implemented and German and Austrian women, children and elderly men, although often rounded up, were usually deported from France afterwards, rather than interned for long periods. Internment policy was implemented haphazardly in the early years of the war but became more organised as the conflict continued. However, camps operated a range of regimes: some were relatively open, while others, especially those for German and Austrian military age enemy aliens, operated harsh disciplinary policies. Food rations also deteriorated as the war continued.⁸

The French state also used the war to implement a policy of social control, using camps to intern those seen as asocials. Some of the Roma or "gypsy" population in France were subject to internment, especially those from the part of Alsace-Lorraine taken by France at the start of the war who had German-sounding names, partly because they were believed to be suspect potential spies and partly out of prejudice and the aim to control groups perceived as "asocial"; other Roma in France were subject to restrictions on their movements. Many were held at Crest camp, near Valence - women and children included - where conditions were harsh.⁹ Women who worked as prostitutes in the *Zone Militaire* (Military Zone) - the area of war operations in Northern France - who did not abide by the regulations, particularly those concerning health and [venereal disease](#), and were often found to be carrying an STD, were also sometimes sent to internment camps located away from the Military Zone, as were vagrants from the area.¹⁰

Working Conditions for German Combatant Prisoners of War in France

As the war continued, other rank German combatant prisoners held by France were put to work; officer prisoners were held in better conditions and were exempt from working. From the start of the conflict, France employed combatant prisoners of war on "public works" schemes. Under the [Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907](#), other rank prisoners of war could be put to work by the captor state provided that the tasks on which they were employed had no connection with the captor state's war effort. France interpreted this prohibition loosely: it forbade prisoners to handle munitions directly. However, it did permit prisoners to be used to unload ships carrying war materiel at Channel ports; to quarry stone or carry out forestry work; to engage in road building tasks; and to work on railways, agriculture and in mines. In June and August 1915, France and Germany each claimed that the other was using prisoners

of war for war work: when Germany failed to respond promptly to the French protest note of 31 August 1915, France “leapt to its advantage.”¹¹ In October 1915, France declared that “it considers itself from now on released from all international obligations on this point”.¹² In 1916, France began to use German prisoners of war in permanent “prisoner of war labour companies” that worked for the French army directly in the front area and the military zone to the immediate rear of the front. By 26 January 1917, 22,915 German prisoners were working in prisoner of war labour companies. According to Isabel Hull, France may even have been using prisoner labourers unofficially in the army zone as early as July 1915.¹³ By July of 1916, 50 percent of all German prisoners held by France were working for the French army either in prisoner of war labour companies in the war zone or for the army on the home front.¹⁴ While manual labour on the French home front was demanding, prisoners of war were relatively well fed throughout the war.

French Mistreatment of German Combatant Prisoners of War

One of the earliest mistreatment scandals concerning France during the war was when Germany accused it of abuse of German prisoners who had been transported to camps in its North African territories. Some of the German accusations were well-founded. Large numbers of the German prisoners of war held in camps in North Africa caught malaria. They were also subject to a harsh disciplinary regime, including punishments that were permitted for use against French [colonial troops](#) in North Africa, such as the “tambour”, when a prisoner, placed in a stress position, had certain body parts deliberately exposed to the sun. The climate was also difficult for many prisoners. In some cases, prisoners were also guarded by French colonial troops which caused resentment as German prisoners, in the racially hierarchical culture of the time, perceived this as a humiliation. In the case of Morocco, in particular, the French governor, [Louis Hubert Gonzalve Lyautey \(1854-1934\)](#), saw the presence of German prisoners of war as an opportunity to convey to the Moroccan people the weakness of Germany, in retaliation for Germany’s pre-war meddling in the country in the two [Moroccan crises](#) when it had posed as the defender of the Sultan. German prisoners in Morocco were thus put to work on very visible manual labour tasks such as road building. Meanwhile France concentrated German civilians, captured in the overrun German colonies in Africa, in a camp complex at Dahomey which became the subject of virulent rumours about the abuse of captives there.

In response to rumours of poor treatment of German prisoners of war in Africa, Germany launched a series of reprisals including sending French combatant prisoners of war and civilian internees from intellectual professions to work on harsh manual labour draining and

reclaiming marshlands. It also sent 30,000 French combatant prisoners of war to camps in Courland (modern day Latvia) to work in particularly harsh conditions. The prisoners were encouraged to write home from Courland to tell their families and people of influence in France about their conditions and the fact that they were being ill-treated in reprisal for the poor treatment of German captives in North Africa. The [French government](#) responded by negotiating with Germany in August 1916, through Spanish mediation, and the following month agreed a deal to evacuate all German prisoners from camps in North Africa to home front camps in metropolitan France, in exchange for Germany removing all French reprisal prisoners from Courland to camps in the German home front.

In 1916, the French army used German prisoners in labour companies on the [battlefield at Verdun](#), including under shellfire. Prisoner workers were used right at the front line, including at Fort Douaumont. Conditions for these captives were poor. In December 1916, a dysentery epidemic broke out among German prisoners being held at a holding camp at Souilly from where they were allocated to prisoner of war labour companies.¹⁵ Prisoners at Souilly were working an eleven-hour day.

In response to this poor treatment of German captives, the German army leadership – the third [Oberste Heeresleitung](#) (OHL) – decided to warn France on 5 January 1917 that it would launch reprisals if France did not withdraw its German captives to a distance of thirty kilometres behind the front line. On 21 January, when France did not comply, Germany ordered reprisals against all newly captured, unwounded other rank French prisoners. They were to be kept near the front line, with no protection from the weather, with meagre rations and no hygienic care; and they were put to work on harsh manual labour without any restrictions, including transporting munitions and fortification work under enemy fire. The reprisal prisoners were encouraged to write home to make the French public aware of their plight. Initially the French government planned to hold firm – it was misinformed by the Commander-in-Chief of the French army [Georges Robert Nivelle \(1856-1924\)](#), who told his government that German prisoners were not being used by France to labour under shellfire. [Britain](#) also rejected conceding to the German thirty-kilometre demand. However, by April, faced with letters from desperate reprisals prisoners, the French government had capitulated. “Owing to the pressure of public opinion”, on 27 March, Nivelle was informed that the French cabinet had decided that all German prisoner of war workers should be withdrawn to a distance of thirty kilometres from the front line.¹⁶ In response, Germany evacuated the French reprisal prisoners from its front line; all were removed by June 1917. For the remainder of the war France did not use German prisoners of war within thirty kilometres of the front line.

Belgian Combatant Prisoners of War in Germany

Overall, most Belgian combatant prisoners in prisoner of war camps within Germany were treated the same as French prisoners during the war; indeed, on prisoner of war matters, France often negotiated on behalf of both French and Belgian captives as a single group. [Spain](#) acted as the protecting power for Belgian combatant prisoner interests in Germany, although it was not granted access to camps for Belgian prisoners of war within occupied Belgium itself. Francophone theatre, music and newspaper cultural activities flourished in some German home front camps with the support of combatant prisoners of war from both France and Belgium. The [Belgian government](#) organised a system of food parcel aid to Belgian combatant prisoners held in Germany, through the neutral [Netherlands](#), allowing them to crucially supplement their camp rations.

While the majority of Belgian combatant prisoners of war were not segregated and were held in camps and working units alongside prisoners of other nationalities held by Germany, this was not the case for some Flemish-speaking captives. Germany sought to promote its support for a [Flemish nationalist movement](#) that would form a support base for its future control of Belgium through its prisoner of war policies, placing pro-Flemish Belgian captives in a camp at Göttingen where, from 1916, they were subject to pro-Flemish nationalist [propaganda](#). A second such propaganda camp for Belgian prisoners also appears to have operated at Giessen.¹⁷ From March 1915 to November 1918, the Flemish prisoners in Göttingen published a propaganda paper *Onze Taal*, copies of which were circulated to other prisoners and to Belgium with German approval. Flemish activists such as [August Borms \(1878-1946\)](#) and [Cyriel Rousseu \(1882-1968\)](#) visited the camp and the German professor of Theology Carl Strange was charged with organizing pro-German lectures and propaganda to the inmates.¹⁸ In July 1918, Germany offered the most convinced Flemish activist prisoners the option of liberation either to return to occupied Belgium or to live as free workers in Germany. Prisoners who became pro-Flemish activists were deprived of food parcels by the Belgian state. This promotion of Flemish [nationalism](#) - *Flamenpolitik* - by Germany saw only limited success among Belgian prisoners; it was hampered by a lack of coordination between Flemish activists and the German authorities, and by loyalty to the Belgian state or Germanophobia among Flemish captives.¹⁹

While there has been historical research on the fate of Belgian combatant prisoners of war in Germany - particularly by Karolien Cool - the war experience of the small number of German combatant prisoners captured by the Belgian army during the war remains virtually unresearched. At the start of the war, the Belgian army planned to hold German military prisoners of war and enemy civilian aliens at Hoogstraten and Bruges, however, due to the

German advance, the holding centre at Hoogstraten was rapidly evacuated to Bruges.²⁰ Other captives were held briefly at Antwerp prison and on a steamer – the *Ganelon*. Ultimately, the German conquest of most of Belgium resulted in an agreement between Belgium and France to transfer all prisoners of war captured by Belgium to the care of the French government and to camps in France. Belgium, however, reserved the right to exchange these prisoners for Belgian prisoners of war held by the Germans. By 20 November 1917, France held fifty-one German officers and 2,225 soldiers, who had been captured by the Belgian army.²¹ In March 1918, Belgium renegotiated its agreement with France as it now wished to retain future Belgian captures of German prisoners of war as a source of labour. Throughout the war, Belgium remained responsible under the Hague Convention for registering the names of those prisoners its army captured, and of notifying their identity to Germany. After the Armistice, Belgium retained its German prisoners of war until 25 September 1919 when it began repatriation.

Franco-German Wartime Agreements Regarding Prisoner Policies

During the war France and Germany continued to negotiate, through the aid of neutral states, with regard to prisoner of war issues. In March 1915, limited exchanges began when the two countries swapped a small number of badly wounded prisoners who would be incapable of ever fighting again, via [Switzerland](#). In 1916, both states agreed to suspend the implementation of all official military sentences passed against individual prisoners of war for misdemeanours in accordance with internal military law, until after the end of the war. Following the Armistice, France retained German prisoners who still had sentences to serve, leading to campaigns in Germany for them to be freed. In contrast, under the terms of the Armistice, Germany had to release all Allied prisoners of war immediately and without reciprocity.

On 15 March 1918, France and Germany agreed what became known as the Berne Agreement which allowed for the repatriation home of other rank and NCO prisoners over forty-eight years of age if they had been in captivity for over eighteen months; officers meeting the same conditions could be interned in Switzerland. The agreement also stipulated that prisoners should be removed after capture to camps at least thirty kilometres behind the firing line; that they should not be put to work on war-related tasks; and that they should not be mistreated.²² A second Franco-German Berne agreement was agreed on 26 April 1918 which extended the repatriation and exchange eligibility criteria, and also set out reciprocally agreed ration amounts for captives, as well as minimum standards for camp accommodation and sanitation. According to [Alan Kramer](#), the second Berne Agreement

also laid down that men and NCOs had to receive rations to the value of 2,000 calories, plus extra food for those engaged in physical labour; in addition, the German government allowed each prisoner to receive up to two kilograms of bread per week from home. If applied, this must have represented a major improvement for French prisoners, providing perhaps twice as much food as for German civilians.²³

Repatriation

After the war, France retained its German combatant prisoners of war until spring 1920. Following the Armistice, it moved other rank prisoners from camps in the French interior to the devastated former northern battlefields where the prisoners were put to work clearing the former front; the decision was issued the day after the Armistice to move 100,000 German prisoners to the devastated zone; by spring 1919, 270,000 were located there.²⁴ The work was heavy manual labour and frequently dangerous – there were several incidences of prisoners being killed during work in clearing munitions from the land. Living conditions were also very poor – prisoners effectively camped in small working units in the devastated landscape. The retention of these men was used as a way to force Germany to accept the [Treaty of Versailles](#) in 1919 and later was seen by the French Prime Minister, [Georges Benjamin Clemenceau \(1841-1929\)](#) as a form of reparations by Germany. There were high rates of depression – and several incidents of suicide – among the German prisoners retained in France. During 1919 there was a high-profile, and widely supported, campaign in Germany for the return of German prisoners of war, including public demonstrations in most major German cities, some of which were attended by thousands of people: protests held in the fifty-five largest towns in Wurttemberg on 16 November 1919 attracted over 50,000 people, according to German estimates.²⁵

Conclusions

The First World War saw the widespread transnational development of camp systems which were used to hold combatant prisoners of war captured on the battlefield as well as suspect or undesirable civilians – enemy aliens, deportees from occupied territories or asocials. This was a deeply reciprocal process as the French and Belgian cases reveal – how their civilians and military prisoners were treated in Germany strongly influenced these states' attitudes to captivity. Belgium, which at the start of the conflict had to relinquish its prisoners to France, by 1918 was asserting itself as a captor power and retaining its own prisoners of war. However, throughout the conflict, Belgium and France worked closely together in dealing with Germany on issues of German mistreatment of their prisoners. France's treatment of prisoners of war was at times ruthless during the conflict – it was prepared to use reprisals in

reciprocity if Germany did. However, its combatant prisoner of war camp systems remained under civilian state surveillance and did not become military fiefdoms as occurred in Germany. Moreover, general living conditions in French camps never deteriorated to the degree that they did for French captives in Germany due to the impact of food shortages and the blockade upon the German wartime economy. Yet, if wartime totalisation processes are more visible in the German case, they were also present in milder forms in the French camp system, particularly with regard to civilian internees who found themselves interned without civic rights or redress. Here, the First World War would set dangerous precedents for the French Third Republic and its attitude to incarceration.

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Notes

1. Based on the most reliable estimates. The lower figure is from Cahen-Salvador, Georges: *Les Prisonniers de guerre (1914-1919)*, Paris 1929; the British War Office publication: *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War 1914-1920*, London 1922; and the Service Historique 16 N 525 estimate of 392.425. See Jones, Heather: *Violence Against Prisoners of War in the First World War. Britain, France and Germany, 1914-1920*, Cambridge 2011, p. 22. ↑
2. Jones, *Violence Against Prisoners of War* 2011, p. 23. ↑
3. Based on estimates in *ibid.*, pp. 20-21. One Red Cross Bulletin estimate did put the maximum number of French prisoners in Germany higher, at 844,000, but this is unsubstantiated by any other sources. The most likely range is between 500,000 and 600,000. ↑
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8. On French internment camps, see Farcy, Jean-Claude: *Les Camps de Concentration Français de la Première Guerre Mondiale, 1914-1920*, Paris 1995. See also the review of Farcy by Témime, Emile: *Les Camps de Concentration*, in: *Vingtième Siècle. Revue*

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 16. Ibid., p. 351. ↑
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 19. Pöppinghege, Rainer: Das Kriegsgefangenenlager Ebertal als Zentrum flämischer Propaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg, in: Göttinger Jahrbuch 51 (2003), pp. 49-60. ↑
 20. Office Central Belge pour les Prisonniers de Guerre, Quatrième et Dernier Rapport, septembre 1917 - mars 1924 (Bruxelles, 1924), pp. 517-518. I am very grateful to Professor Sophie de Schaepdrijver for her help in locating this report. ↑
 21. Ibid. ↑
 22. Scheidl, Franz: Die Kriegsgefangenschaft von den ältesten Zeiten bis zur Gegenwart. Eine völkerrechtliche Monographie, Berlin 1943, pp. 63-64 and pp. 68-69. ↑
 23. Kramer, Alan: Prisoners in the First World War, Unpublished paper, pp. 5-6. ↑
 24. Jones, Violence Against Prisoners of War 2011, pp. 296-297. ↑
 25. Ibid., p. 304. ↑

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External Links

- [1914-1918, Prisoners of the First World War, the ICRC archives \(International Committee of the Red Cross\) \(Database\)](#)
- [Backhaus, Alexander: Die Ernährung der Kriegsgefangenen im Deutschen Reiche, Berlin 1915 \(Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin\) \(Book\)](#)
- [Erinnerungen an die Kriegsgefangenschaft von Heinrich Meisloh \(Europeana 1914-1918\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Hinsberger, P. J.: Gefangen! aus den Erlebnissen des Verfassers in zweijähriger französischer Kriegsgefangenschaft \(Europeana 1914-1918\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [History of the ICRC \(International Committee of the Red Cross\) \(Article\)](#)
- [ICRC in WWI: overview of activities, 2005 \(International Committee of the Red Cross\) \(Article\)](#)
- [Le régime des prisonniers de guerre en France et en Allemagne au regard des conventions internationales 1914-1916, Paris 1916 \(Gallica\) \(Book\)](#)
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GND Subject Headings

[Frankreich ; Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\] ; Deutscher Kriegsgefangener](#)

LC Subject Headings

[World War, 1914-1918--Prisoners and prisons, French ; Prisoners of war--Germany](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[Guerre mondiale \(1914-1918\) ; Prisonniers et prisons des Français ; Prisonniers de guerre allemands](#)

Key Person(s)

[Rousseu, Cyriel](#); [Clemenceau, Georges](#); [Lyautey, Louis Hubert Gonzalve](#); [Nivelle, Robert Georges](#); [Borms, August](#); [Pirenne, Henri](#)

Key Location(s)

[Fort Douaumont](#); [Antwerp](#); [Valence](#); [Giessen](#); [Göttingen](#); [Hoogstraten](#); [Holzminden](#); [Souilly](#); [Verdun](#); [Bruges](#)

Title

Prisoners of War (Belgium and France)

Author(s)

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Classification Group

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