

## [Vourkoutiotis on Bischof and Karner and Stelzl-Marx, 'Kriegsgefangene des Zweiten Weltkriegs: Gefangennahme--Lagerleben--Rückkehr'](#)

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**Guenter Bischof, Stefan Karner, Barbara Stelzl-Marx, eds.** *Kriegsgefangene des Zweiten Weltkriegs: Gefangennahme--Lagerleben--Rückkehr*. Vienna: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2005. 599 pp. EUR 29.80 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-486-57818-8.

**Reviewed by** Vasilis Vourkoutiotis (Department of History, University of Ottawa) **Published on** H-German (November, 2006)

### Updates on Research and Filling in Some Gaps

With such a weighty tome edited by three known specialists in the field, this volume would seem to offer the potential for an authoritative one-volume history on the history of prisoners of war during the Second World War. Following an introduction by the three editors, the book is broken into the following main sections: "Kriegsgefangenschaft als internationales Forschungsthema," "Kriegsgefangene in sowjetischem Gewahrsam," "Kriegsgefangene in westallierter Hand," "Westliche Kriegsgefangene im 'Dritten Reich'" and "Sowjetische und polnische Kriegsgefangene im 'Dritten Reich'." This material is followed with a section containing the bibliographic source material and index. The authors contributing individual articles are a mix of well-known names in the field including Rüdiger Overmans, Bob More, Pavel Polian and Klaus-Dieter Mueller, as well as lesser-known authors, not all of whom have completed doctorates, though from the quality of scholarship demonstrated this status is hardly a handicap. With such a wide-ranging thematic mandate, as well as just over two dozen articles, it is natural that such a collaborative book will have both strengths and weaknesses. Cumbersome as it may be, the only fair way to proceed with an assessment is to mention the contents of the sections individually.

Guenter Bischof's contribution in the first section demonstrates his belief in the relevance of prisoner of war history to the current political climate. His overall point, given the references to both international law and the question of its applicability to Taliban prisoners, is convincingly made. This thread was not, however, picked up in a discernable fashion by most of the other authors, who present their findings without direct reference to a more over-reaching collaborative goal. Overmans's overview of the First World War is a useful synthesis of the existing historiography and provides effective historical context for any general discussion of prisoners in the Second World War. Mueller rounds out the first section with an examination of the difficulties faced by researchers of the Soviet dimension, in the years since the war's end.

The second section, on prisoners in Soviet captivity, starts with two reports on the status of research. By Valerij Vartanov and Aleksandr Orlov, these comment on the current work of historical commissions and collaboration within the Russian Federation. Tamas Stark's contribution on Hungarian civilians in Soviet captivity is the first "microhistory" to appear and makes an interesting contribution on an apparently undeveloped topic. Felix Schneider's article provides a "bottom-up"

view of life in Soviet captivity, based on contemporary reports and sources. Igor Krjuckov then offers a brief article on Austrian prisoners in the Stavropol region, which is followed by Jörg Morre's very interesting research on antifascist organizations among German and Austrian prisoners of war. Judicial matters receive the attention of Harald Knoll and Vladimir Motrevich, who deal, respectively, with Austrian prisoners accused of war crimes from 1944 to 1953, and accused civilian and military prisoners in the Sverdlovsk region from 1949 to 1953. Specific issues concerning repatriation conclude the section. Andreas Hilger examines the overall issue of the repatriation of German prisoners in the context of Soviet economic and foreign policy, while Stefan Karner and Peter Ruggenthaler examine the case of the last repatriate, Franz Steeg.

With regard to prisoners of war in western captivity, the range and number of articles is smaller. Neville Wylie looks at the International Committee of the Red Cross and prisoners of war, Ravael Zagovec covers the use by the allies of prisoners of war for intelligence purposes and Bob More discusses the case of Italian prisoners of war in British and American captivity from 1941 to 1947, while Wolfgang Weber looks at the issue of Austrians in the German military who were held in British captivity.

The section on western prisoners in the Third Reich contains five articles. Huber Speckner examines the prisoner of war camps in the "Ostmark," Andreas Kuesternig looks at the specific case of French officer prisoners at Oflag XVII A Edelbach and Barbara Stelzl-Marx examines how prisoner of war history has been carried on in entertainment (from "Cardboard Playhouse" to "Stalag 17"). Edith Petschnigg addresses the "spirit of comradeship" among British prisoners in Steiermark from 1941-45, and Gabriele Hammermann examines the situation of Italian military internees from a social-historical perspective.

The fifth main thematic section, on Soviet and Polish prisoners in the Third Reich, begins with a report by Rolf Keller on a German-Soviet research project on Soviet prisoners of war from 1941 to 1945, before moving on to three articles on the Gestapo and Soviet prisoners by Reinhard Otto, Soviet Jews as prisoners by Pavel Polian and an overview of Polish prisoners of war in the Third Reich by Edmund Novak.

The book can not be considered a history of prisoners of war during the Second World War in the traditional sense. As is clear from this brief overview of the contents, the titles of the main sections provide convenient groupings for the sometimes specialized articles the authors have written, rather than an indication of an overview of the themes. The articles that provided information on the status of ongoing projects shed light on some problems of methodology encountered by those who have ventured into the Russian archival system. However, given how rapidly archival circumstances can change, their pragmatic utility for a monograph, as opposed to a conference presentation or journal article, may be open to question; still, it is useful to know what is generally going on there. The specific case-studies that appear in most sections serve the function of fleshing out lesser-known examples and can hardly be criticized on this basis. The absence of a greater framework beyond the title of their respective sections, however, mean that it is mostly up to the reader to extrapolate more general meanings from them. The pieces most accessible to readership will most likely be those that deal with slightly wider-ranging themes.

The clear priority in this volume is life in Soviet captivity. Building upon the traditional work by

Christian Streit, and then furthered by Osterlow and Mueller, this volume's contributions in this field stand as its strongest point. Here, as well, a good balance of specific case studies is included along with more thematic examinations. Outside of this section, the articles by Otto and Polian will likely strike readers as worthy additions to the historiography. With the exception of these selections, however, many of the other articles struck me as being too narrowly focused, without a greater sense of context or as constituting progress reports on the nature of research in the field. The remaining general articles (those by Overmans and More, for example) maintain the positions these authors have staked out in the past, but do not necessarily make a new contribution to previously published research. In the end, the volume serves to fill in a few thematic gaps, updates the status of research initiatives, but does not provide a more otherwise comprehensive commentary on the history of prisoners of war during the Second World War.

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