Abstract

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"Doing it for Phil": An Examination of the Influencers Behind America’s Prototypical Prisoner of War Treatment During World War II

My thesis analyzes the key determinants responsible for the exemplary treatment afforded both German and Japanese prisoners of war housed on U.S. soil during World War II. Between 1941 and 1946, the United States transported some 425,000 prisoners of war from both the European and Pacific theaters to America. Due to the sheer size of the prisoner population, the United States was forced to craft a comprehensive POW program, the first of its kind. In this thesis, I argue that four factors influenced the War Department’s official prisoner of war policy; the Geneva Convention, reciprocity, military strategic advantages, and American public opinion. The War Department scrupulously applied the Geneva Convention to defend America’s reputation among the comity of nations. Such strict adherence simultaneously enabled the U.S. government to expose POWs to democratic ideals. In addition, the War Department pursued exemplary POW treatment to promote reciprocity for American GIs held captive overseas and to extract strategic advantages from POWs. Advantages included increasing the propensity of Axis soldiers to surrender in battle and promoting a willingness to divulge vital intelligence during interrogation. All the while, the War Department strove to temper American public opinion regarding the benevolent handling of prisoners of war. While prisoner nationality and race played a marginal role in determining official War Department policy, I also argue that racial sentiment within camp commands and within the public heavily influenced the implementation of a number of policies on the ground level. Through it all though, the United States far exceeded any other nation in its preparedness and its execution of prisoner of war treatment during World War II.

Sources Include:
RG 389 Records of the Office of the Provost Marshal General, National Archives II