

About 371,000 German soldiers were held in American prisons until 1946. That they, above all in the southern states, were treated better than black workers, gave the growing civil rights movement a powerful weapon.

All in all, our life here is very orderly. We sleep in beds which have white covers and we eat with knives and forks. Up till now, we were treated excellently... When I was taken prisoner, I visualized a life of horror but it is quite different." So wrote Private Heinz Fricke, a POW in Camp Ogden, Utah, to his family in Germany in September 1944.

Eventually, more than 371,000 soldiers in German uniform would come to be interned in the United States during World War II. The first large contingent arrived after the surrender of the Army Group Africa in Tunisia in May 1943. The 135,000 "Africans" were joined by those captured in Italy or at sea and about 182,000 German soldiers who were captured after D-Day.

The Germans were brought to the United States to work and also to relieve the Allied troops in Africa and Europe from their care. Most of them arrived in the hulls of returning WWII cargo ships, although a few lucky ones crossed the Atlantic on converted passenger liners. Very few had been to the United States before or had any extended knowledge of it. U.S. Army sources recorded disapprovingly that "contempt of America as a country without its own 'culture,' without a 'soul,' a country which is only interested in making money, is widespread among all classes of Germans."

Although the former POW Reinhold Pabel admits that they were all "somewhat prejudiced," he also stressed that nearly all POWs were "quite curious to find out for themselves what the United States was really like." One prisoner noted in his diary when he arrived in July 1943:

"Indescribable are the thoughts that move us at this moment. The uncertain, new, unknown lies before us, we are in the process of entering into it, getting to know it: the United States of America."

For the duration of the war, the United States closely observed the 1929 Geneva Convention in order to prevent retaliation against its soldiers in enemy hands. The POWs were overwhelmed by the excellent conditions in the camps and the abundance of food and other articles. One German reported with ill-concealed amazement in a letter in November 1943: "I am really in a golden cage."

The work program offered many POWs the opportunity to leave their golden cage during the day. An "escape-sabotage phobia" and shortage of guards initially prevented the efficient use of POW labor. This changed with the introduction of the 'calculated risk' policy in February 1944. From then on, maximum employment of prisoners was more important than the prevention of escapes, and security was quickly reduced to a symbolic minimum.

Starting in April 1944, POWs were allowed to work without permanent guards on military installations where the majority of them were employed. A significant number of POWs were also hired out to civilian employers. In theory, they still had to be accompanied by soldiers but this rule was frequently ignored. Farmers and other employers often picked the POWs up in the morning and returned them to the camps in the evening. If soldiers went along, they often showed little enthusiasm for their work. The report of a Texan sheriff that "the guards come to the field very woozy in the head and sleepy and as soon as they arrive would go hunt a warm dry place and go to sleep" was quite typical.

Commanding officers constantly complained about the low caliber of the personnel they received. An investigation by the War Department confirmed in March 1945 that "there exists considerable laxity on the part of enlisted personnel used to guard prisoners of war, due mainly to the fact that many of such enlisted personnel are physically, mentally or through lack of training, ill-suited for this type of duty."

In contrast, American soldiers and civilians often described the German POWs as "magnificent physical specimens," "physically supreme, muscular types" or "fine specimens of physical manhood." The prisoners from



Africa especially attracted attention and admiration. For a man from Texas, the Germans were "just the best bunch of boys you ever saw," while a reporter who visited Camp Gruber, Oklahoma, confessed that he found them "uniformly neat, excessively polite, splendidly disciplined, these young men are – frankly – hard to dislike."

Americans who employed POWs often shared this feeling. Most Germans worked in agriculture, canning, logging and lumber where the war had created a shortage of reliable

unskilled labor. Many of these jobs had been traditionally performed by black Americans who were no longer available in sufficient numbers, despite substantial efforts to restrict their mobility or defer their induction. The German POWs filled this gap and grateful employers often showed their appreciation in various forms. Some even invited them to restaurants or into their own homes. The Inspector General's Department was not pleased and wrote in a March 1945 report: "The average employer and his foremen, learning that the German prisoner of war, except for ideological concepts, is in general little different from the rank and file of our own soldiers, are apt to become overly friendly and solicitous of the prisoner of war's welfare."

The vast majority of POWs were interned in the South or border States where they often worked next to black Americans in the fields and factories. The availability of POW labor kept the wages for blacks at a low level and also had "rather a good effect on some of our sorry Negro labor by tending to keep them on the job better," as one employer from Alabama put it.

Nevertheless, the German POWs reported almost uniformly that the African Americans treated them friendly and regarded them as "prisoners like us."

"We were their fellow-sufferers," one former POW recalled. "Bad time, prisoner time." For the moment, the joint "underdog" status was more important than the racial divide. POWs and black Americans shared stories, songs, food and drink, and many Germans came to regard the blacks as the anti-thesis of white, soulless, capitalist America – the "land without a heart."

While black Americans frequently clashed with Italian prisoners of war who enjoyed

greater freedom than their former German allies, there is little evidence of direct tension between Germans and black Americans. However, black American soldiers frequently contrasted the treatment of German POWs with their own treatment and reported in countless letters that "there are German prisoners here and they live better than we do."

Although not all of these reports were accurate, German POWs often did enjoy better treatment and more rights, such as access to "whites only" facilities. The fact that "Nazi prisoners" were given access to restaurants or railway compartments off-limits to black American soldiers provided the growing civil rights movement in the United States with a powerful weapon.

Racial discrimination also limited the effectiveness of the reeducation program for the German POWs. The program, which started in 1944, tried to turn the prisoners into democrats "by presenting to them in so far as is possible under the circumstances the best aspects of American life and institutions." Some POWs responded by contrasting American values with the treatment of black Americans. However, the majority of them were more concerned with when they would be allowed to return home.

The Americans created the impression that participation in the reeducation program would lead to quicker repatriation but this was not true. The first to return to Germany were "useless" prisoners and "troublemakers," i.e. unrepentant Nazis. The last regular shipment of German POWs left the United States on July 22, 1946 of which around 178,000 of the POWs were handed over to Great Britain and France as workers. For the prisoners, this was a "modern slave trade on the grandest scale." Some of them had to endure over two more years of captivity and forced labor.

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Arrive, learn, work: German POWs in Maine (above), in Georgia (below) and working in a garage (left).

