

Florian Kern, Kriegsgefangenschaft im Zeitalter Napoleons. Über Leben und Sterben im Krieg, Berlin (Peter Lang) 2018, 352 S. (Konsulat und Kaiserreich. Studien und Quellen zum napoleonischen Zeitalter, 5), ISBN 978-3-631-76193-9, EUR 64,95.

rezensiert von | compte rendu rédigé par
Michael Rowe, London

The Napoleonic Wars are the subject of numerous publications, ranging from narrowly-focused histories to »big-picture« studies. Prisoners-of-war (POWs) remain under-represented within this mass, and even less exists on the whole logistical side of moving, holding and repatriating them. Against this deficit, Florian Kern's study is a welcome addition. Necessarily, it considers the French Revolutionary context. The revolutionaries' hopes that they had ushered in a new pacific era were dashed in 1792. However, fears that then surfaced that warfare would enter a »no-holds-barred« phase where prisoners would simply be massacred did not come to pass either. Instead, the humanitarian impulses within the Revolution found expression in legislation that placed POWs under the protection of the nation. They could now enjoy a degree of legal certainty, at least in theory, rather than become the subject of private arrangements that in the past had favoured the privileged.

All this looks quite modern, but as was so often the case in this period, difficulties overwhelmed the capacity of essentially pre-modern states to translate ambitions into reality. Kern demonstrates this in the greater part of his book, showing in particular how France and its enemies struggled to organise the logistics of handling masses of POWs. Austria is especially prominent in this account: as the French's most persistent Continental opponent, it had ample opportunity to make prisoners of them. Many of these it marched off to Hungary, an ideal receptacle given its remoteness and adequate food supplies. However, moving thousands of POWs hundreds of miles was as challenging as moving an army, but with the need for additional security arrangements.

The most obvious danger was escape; another was that French POWs might contaminate the civilian population with radical ideas. This form of potential infection diminished as the Revolutionary Wars gave way to the Napoleonic, but the danger of actual disease transmission remained. Those who succumbed then presented yet another bureaucratic challenge, in the form of masses of bodies, the safe disposal of which proved something of a nightmare. Austrian officialdom responded with meticulous bureaucratic activity, detaching itself by dealing with statistical objects; but one has the impression that this was a displacement activity in the midst of chaos as much as an effective response.

There is much in Kern's volume on the experience of POWs. This varied, with several factors influencing their treatment. As ever, officers could expect more consideration than ordinary soldiers,



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

thereby providing an element of continuity with earlier conflicts. Notions of honour and chivalry amongst the professional officer class remained an important ingredient on all sides. Even French officers, whom one might have supposed to be more egalitarian, remained ever conscious of their rank. Equally helpful in mitigating the experience of »elite« prisoners were masonic lodges, which together with other networks, functioned as a kind of transnational relief system. As is generally the case, prisoners' treatment varied also according to how far the areas they found themselves in had suffered the rigours of war. For French POWs, for example, Hungary was a more benign environment than Prussia: the former largely escaped French invasions, whilst in Prussia Napoleon's armies had brought misery. Other variables determining treatment included the skills that POWs might possess. Those who could make themselves useful whilst in captivity earned extra money, and might strike up harmonious relations with the host population. These extended sometimes to sexual relationships, though marriages between POWs and local women appear to have been a rarity.

Kern's book is part of the series »Konsulat und Kaiserreich. Studien und Quellen zum napoleonischen Zeitalter«, edited by Erich Pelzer. It betrays some of the typical features of a German scholarly dissertation: it includes an excellent literature review, and thorough theoretical and methodological reflections. Less welcome are the overly-long footnotes, whilst the addition of an index, even if extending only to names, would have been useful. In terms of content, and despite its title, this study is focused mainly on Central Europe. This means that the study neglects theatres where bigger cultural differences were a factor, like the Americas, the Middle East, and along the periphery of the Russian Empire.

Despite these drawbacks, Kern's book is a valuable addition in a number of key areas. It gives particular prominence to the Habsburg Monarchy, and within this composite, to Hungary, areas whose Napoleonic-era experiences are neglected in the literature. Kern also demonstrates the vital importance of the military hinterland in supporting the kind of »front line« actions that have always captured the most attention. The impression of these wars one leaves with after reading this book is decidedly less glamorous or spectacular than conveyed in much of the literature, but it is also no doubt more accurate.



Herausgegeben vom Deutschen
Historischen Institut Paris |
publiée par l'Institut historique
allemand



Publiziert unter | publiée sous
[CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)