

Work, Play, and Identity: Understanding Masculinity in German POWs through Labor and Sports Programs

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Abstract

This project examines the relationship between notions of masculinity and the treatment of German prisoners of war (POW) in America during the Second World War. During World War II, approximately 400,000 German prisoners of war (POWs) were interned in 700 camps across the United States. Their treatment was largely guided by the Geneva Convention, which established international standards for their safeguarding. However, cultural perceptions also played a significant role in shaping their experiences. Historian Matthias Reiss demonstrates in his scholarship that shared notions of race and martial masculinity contributed to relatively favorable treatment of German POWs and fostered unexpected connections between captors and captives despite their ideological differences.

Building on Reiss' findings, this study examines the performance of masculinity through labor and sports. Both activities, sanctioned by international law, enabled POWs to express their masculinity while in captivity. These familiar expressions of masculinity resonated with the local populace and American guards' own notions of masculinity and enabled them to see German POWs as relatable. In addition, this outlet for masculinity allowed POWs to preserve their honor and physicality after surrendering to an enemy force, at a time when they could no longer fulfill their traditional roles as combatants. Overall, this study argues that viewing the German POW experience through the lens of masculinity reveals how parallel visions of masculinity led to improved treatment of German prisoners during World War II.

Methods

Cultural Turn

- This study draws on the cultural turn in historiography that began in the 1970s and uses gender as an analytic lens to interpret primary sources. The study examines masculinity as a culturally constructed category that was expressed and experienced by American soldiers and German prisoners of war. The study examines how these two cultural perceptions of masculinity collided during World War II.

Textual Analysis

- Textual analysis was the primary method of analysis used throughout the study. Since masculinity was often not expressed overtly in archival and primary source material, the study relied on examining the language used by German POWs and American POWs to express their notions of masculinity.

Oral Histories

- This study also utilized oral histories of German POWs. Although these interviews occurred several years after captivity, they provide insight into the enduring perception of their treatment in America during the Second World War.

Symbols and Rituals

- This study also examines the "meanings" tied between cultural rituals such as labor and sports during the twentieth century enabling scholars to understand expressions of masculinity that do not appear overtly in the text.

Images of German Prisoners of War

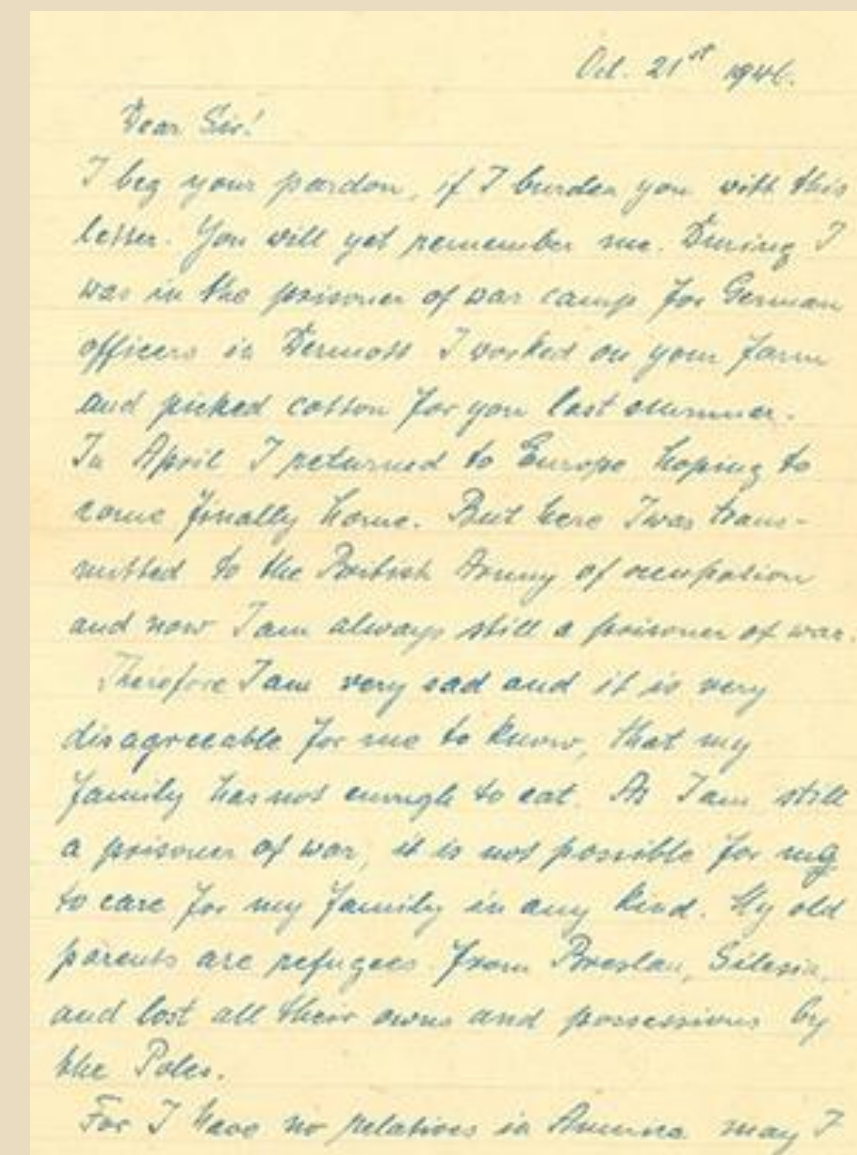


Figure 1: Letter from Edward Grego, a U.S. POW during World War II, written on March 10th 1944, sent from a German POW camp



Figure 2: German prisoners standing outside in front of a building. In the center of the image, two individuals are engaged in a recreational wrestling match



Figure 3: German POWs standing and kneeling in front of a stack of wooden crates labeled "COLOMA FRUIT EXCHANGE COLOMA, MICH." The POWs are in an outdoor setting, which captures their group activity of work, specifically fruit harvesting or packing.

Figure 5: Handwritten Letter by a repatriated German POW after World War II

Dear Mr. Gregory!
I am anxious you will scarcely remember me. It was in 1945 when I worked as P. O. W. at your farm. I hope you will always have been satisfied with me and because I am now in a terrible want. I ask whether you can help me a little.
The position in Germany you will certainly know. There is really great need. Above all I have got much sorrow for my two little children. They are in the very age growing up and therefore their health is in great danger. In the second hand my wife is ill with heart and cannot get any refreshment.



Figure 4: A scene shown that captures a moment of exchange between the soldiers during a work assignment



Figure 6: German prisoners participating in a soccer match in Stakagg IIB

Work: The POW Labor Program

Labor as a Means of Expression and Connection

- Working in various labor activities surprisingly served as a way to relieve stress.
- Created opportunities for POWs to build relationships with American citizens.

Relationships Between POWs and Americans

- Many American soldiers and citizens formed unexpected bonds with German POWs.
- This was surprising given the wartime tensions between America and Germany.

Overall Finding

- The primary research analysis indicates that German POWs generally received positive treatment, which allowed for them to build connection with their employers
- Their experiences in athletics, labor, and social interactions contributed to this perspective.

Play: The Sports Program

Sports as a Pivotal role in POW camps

- Provided an emotional outlet for expression and stress relief.
- Helped with social organization and bonding among prisoners.
- Sports enabled relations between American Guards and German POWs

Types of Sports Played

- Cricket, baseball, and boxing were commonly played.
- Allowed POWs to feel a sense of control over their lives despite captivity.

Connection to Masculinity

- Sports participation demonstrated physical strength, endurance, and competitiveness.
- Reinforced traditional masculine ideals within the camp environment.

Conclusion

Psychological & Sociological Impact of Sports and Labor in POW camps

Sports Beyond Tradition

- Functioned outside traditional roles, especially in wartime captivity
- Means of resilience and cultural preservation

Psychological survival

- Preserved cultural and gender roles in restricted environments

Historical Significance

- Sports symbolized perseverance and survival

Therapeutic Role

- Tool for coping with confinement and psychological distress

Labor & Relationships:

- Respectful relationships with American Farm Managers and Workers
- Alignment with Western Ideas of Masculinity

Limitations

- Language Barriers
- Reliance on digitized source material
- Limited perspectives

Future Research

- Examine actors outside an Anglo-American context
- Longitudinal study on relationships after the war
- Intersectionality of social categorization in German POW experiences

Resources



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