Prisoners of War on the Eastern Front during World War I

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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The virtually simultaneous publication of these books on prisoners of war on the Eastern Front during World War I put me in mind of the old jest that Londoners wait an hour for a bus only to find that three arrive at once.¹ In this instance there is no cause for complaint, merely a sense of surprise that many aspects relating to the imprisonment of combatants, particularly during World War I, have hitherto been ill served by historians.² It is not clear why this should be so. Does the neglect imply that imprisonment has been regarded as a calamitous exception rather than the rule? This explanation is not convincing, because so many millions were taken captive during the Great War, particularly on the Eastern Front. Is it because of a shortage of source material? Hardly: these books demonstrate that there is a rich archival and memoir literature at the historian’s disposal (Leidinge and Moritz, 88–108). Is it, perhaps, because the subject draws attention to a human condition that appears to be the shameful antithesis of heroic military endeavor?³ The relatively large literature on the Czech Legion seems to be the exception that proves the rule. That is, where POWs demonstrated traditional military qualities of collective fighting spirit, their behavior could safely be incorporated into the narrative of state-building in the interwar years.⁴ By contrast, it seemed best to draw a veil over more troubling examples of incarceration. Witness the furor that surrounded the appearance of La Grande Illusion (1937), with its evocation of the unexpected human bonds that could be forged in captivity between men of the same class.⁵ Alon Rachamimov suggests, in addition, that those POW memoirs that dwelled on routine existence rather than escape attempts held only limited appeal among the postwar reading public in Central and Western Europe, which was fed a diet of riveting battle narratives (226). It was much less interesting to read about people for whom time stood still. A much broader consideration is that prisoners of war, like other displaced persons, are difficult to locate within the established categories of social history.⁶ [End Page 558]

Whatever the explanation, incarceration offers the possibility of reflecting on hidden aspects of combatants’ experiences, such as solidarity, personal and group identity, and the psychological consequences of confinement. Important issues of this kind, as well as problems relating to humanitarian intervention, repatriation, and reintegration into civilian society, are only just beginning to receive the attention they deserve. The history of World War I offers an opportunity to reflect on wartime experiences of incarceration, on the process of repatriation and on the politicization of POWs, themes that are explicitly brought together in the work of Leidinge and Moritz.⁷

To be sure, historians have paid some attention to...
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¹ Nachtigal, Leidinger, and Moritz have all previously published several articles on this subject, most of them available only in German. See Reinhard Nachtigal, “Kriegsgefangene der Habsburgermonarchie in Russland,” Österreichische Geschichts- und Literatur 40, 4–5a (1996): 248–62; “Suchen unter militärischer Aufsicht in Russland: Das Lager Tockoe als Beispiel für

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