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## Prisoners of War on the Eastern Front during World War I

Peter Gatrell

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**Prisoners of War on the Eastern Front during World War I**

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Hannes Leidinger and Verena Moritz, *Gefangenschaft, Revolution, Heimkehr: Die Bedeutung der Kriegsgefangenenproblematik für die Geschichte des Kommunismus in Mittel- und Osteuropa 1917–1920* [Captive, Revolution, Return: The Significance of the POW Issue for the History of Communism in Central and Eastern Europe, 1917–1920]. 754 pp., illus. Vienna: Böhlau, 2003. ISBN 3205770684. €85.00.

Reinhard Nachtigal, *Die Murmanbahn: Die Verkehrsanbindung eines kriegswichtigen Hafens und das Arbeitspotential der Kriegsgefangenen* [The Murmansk Railroad: A Strategic Port's Integration into the Transportation Network and the Labor Potential of POWs]. 159 pp., illus. Grunbach: Verlag Bernhard Albert Greiner, 2001. ISBN 3935383053. €13.00.

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Alon Rachamimov, *POWs and the Great War: Captivity on the Eastern Front*. 259 pp., illus. New York: Berg, 2002. ISBN 1859735789. \$84.95.

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.<sup>1</sup> In this **[End Page 557]** 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 (Leidinger 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?<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> **[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 Leidinger and Moritz.<sup>7</sup>

To be sure, historians have paid some attention to...

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<sup>1</sup> 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," *Österreich in Geschichte und Literatur* 40, 4–5a (1996): 248–62; "Seuchen unter militärischer Aufsicht in Russland: Das Lager Tockoe als Beispiel für

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