RaY

Research at the University of York St John

Prisoners of War

Elodie Duché

In 1807, Charles Williams, who, under the pseudonym Ansell, was one of the leading caricaturists of his age, responded to the battle of Eylau with an unusual satire (Fig.1). The composition played on tropes of British caricature with, at its core, a belittled emperor trapped in the clutches of the Russian bear, desperate to save face through propagandist bulletins, yet hardly concealing his ambition to conquer the East. Unusually, his army's 'winter quarters' featured a space rarely represented in caricatures of the period: a prison. This depiction is revealing and raises questions about the significance of captivity during the conflict. Here, the prisoners are not subject to derision. Only the façade of a jail is to be seen. Inscribed 'Prisoners of War' and surmounted by a Russian Eagle, the building confines a mass of indistinct faces pressed against heavily barred windows. These are presumably the '7,000 Prisoners' from Napoleon's legions mentioned in the darkening cloud of news that Talleyrand is muffling with a dispatch trumpeting the emperor's victory to Paris. This carceral wall is symptomatic of the ways in which war prisons were imagined in Britain – as elusive and voiceless places of doom and disease, akin to 'state prisons', where the boundaries of the captives' selves somehow dissolved. As historians have shown, French soldiers conceived this space in similar terms, expressing fear in personal accounts that

conflated prisons with hospitals.[1] The risks of being captured or falling ill were, after all, ever-present in the minds of those who fought and travelled during these conflicts.

Fig.1: Ansell, 'Boney and his Army in Winter Quarters', 1807 (British Museum).

Yet, this façade does not capture the variety of experiences that prisoners of war encountered at the time. Captivity affected people of widely different rank, identity, age and sometimes gender, and they were often treated differently, too. Many were confined in camps, in fortresses, or on decommissioned warships, while a favoured few were allowed to remain at liberty and enjoy their freedom on parole. This diversity stemmed from the strains captivity placed on local and national infrastructures to accommodate, feed, clothe and care for ever-growing populations of prisoners taken on a global scale. Capture severed transnational and global networks and, in so doing, generated complex contact zones which left prisoners to grapple with the societies of their captors as well as with the challenges of

---

[1] Alan Forrest, *Napoleon's Men: The Soldiers of the Revolution and Empire* (London: Hambledon and London, 2002), 158.

their own coerced company. Far from being what contemporaries called 'spoils of war' – the passive victims of martial violence – inmates exercised agency in varied ways that shaped the conditions of their reclusion.

Considerable and Cosmopolitan Gatherings

The number of prisoners detained increased massively between 1803 and 1815. One in five soldiers fighting for Napoleon experienced captivity. Fed by mass conscription, the wars brought over 120,000 French prisoners to Britain, a number far higher than the 13,666 captives held in the country in 1795. The 'French' category used in the registers of the Transport Board – the Admiralty branch in charge of their surveillance – was, however, misleading, as Napoleon's armies gathered a kaleidoscope of identities that extended beyond the borders of France itself, including allied prisoners and West Indians. Arrivals followed the vicissitudes of war. Large numbers of young seafarers appear on the registers after the Trafalgar campaign, before the Peninsular War brought a steady stream of soldiers: 1,200 from Ciudad Rodrigo, 3,700 after Badajoz, 2,800 at Vitoria. This quickly reversed the ratio of sailors to soldiers in detention. Across the period, Britain faced a constant flow of thousands of French, Spanish, Italian, German, Dutch, Russian, Greek, Croatian, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, Polish and, after 1812, American prisoners, all, in the eyes of the Transport Board, capable of sedition if not of mass escapes, particularly when sequestered together.[2]

---

[2] Patricia Crimmin, 'Prisoners of War and British Port Communities, 1793-1815', *The Northern Mariner* 6:4 (1996), 17-27 ; Gavin Daly, 'Napoleon's Lost Legions: French Prisoners of War in Britain, 1803-1814', *History* 89 (2004), 362-363; Stéphane Calvet, 'Aux mains des Britanniques et des Espagnols: la captivité des soldats et des officiers français au Royaume-Uni et dans la Péninsule Ibérique', *Napoleonica. La Revue* 21:3 (2014), 17-34.

Changes in the carceral system illustrate the challenges posed by the sheer numbers involved. At first, Britain relied on traditional sites of seclusion, confining prisoners in port cities (Portsmouth, Chatham or Liverpool) to reduce the cost of transport. With hulks moored in their harbours, they offered flexible accommodation with proximity to garrisons and naval bases for surveillance. The government also made use of existing land-based facilities, including the purpose-built camp at Norman Cross, constructed in 1797 to house 7,000 prisoners from the previous war. But these soon proved insufficient. Up to 51 hulks, including ships capable of holding 1,200 men, were turned into floating prisons where poor hygiene prevailed; from being a temporary expedient, the hulks soon became a long-term solution to the problem of housing prisoners of war.[3] New prisons, generally referred to as 'depots' at the time, were also built to house the captives. Completed in 1809, HMS Prison Dartmoor first held 6,000 European inmates, who were later joined by American captives from the War of 1812. By then, 10,000 inmates were crammed into insalubrious rooms within its eighteen-foot granite walls, under the watchful eyes of 1,200 militiamen. Inner partitions were added to separate white prisoners from African-American captives, who were all contained in one block.[4] In 1812, Perth prison opened to hold another 7,000; whilst three new depots near Penicuik gathered up to 7,500 captives each. These new prisons were strategically located away from the coast to discourage escapes, while captive officers were dispersed to remote towns like Ashby-de-la-Zouch or Leek. There, 'gentlemen' gave their parole – their word of honour not to escape or bear arms – to the local magistrate, who arranged for them to be billeted in private houses or inns. Their movements were limited to a mile from the town, which townsfolk demarcated with the Honour Oak in Whitchurch or the

---

[3] Philippe Masson, *Les sépulcres flottants. Prisonniers français en Angleterre sous l'Empire* (Rennes: Ouest France Université, 1987), 86.

[4] Robin Fabel, 'Self-Help in Dartmoor: Black and White Prisoners in the War of 1812', *Journal of the Early Republic* 9:2 (1989), 165-90.

'Frenchman's Mile' near Derby. In Scotland alone, 109 different communities held prisoners from the Borders to the Shetlands, an indication of how the captives were spread throughout the country.[5]

France held fewer detainees, in part because some were liberated for political reasons. Following Jena, Napoleon released all Saxon prisoners in an attempt to convince Dresden to end their alliance with Prussia. Similarly, 70,000 Austrians were freed in 1806, and after Tilsit, the Emperor returned Russian captives, freshly uniformed and equipped, in a well-staged diplomatic act to impress the Tsar.[6] The French government facilitated the voluntary enlistment of Prussian captives in bespoke units such as the Westphalian regiment. However, the majority were forced to labour on farms and public works. Most of the 80,000 Prussian prisoners had to work on canal and drainage schemes, particularly along the Rhône, until their release in 1808. An estimated 50,000 Spanish regulars were also put to work, chiefly around Lyon and Grenoble. These received varied treatment: officers enjoyed parole in Nancy whilst others were held in irons at night. The small contingent of British 'first-class' captives – an estimated 16,000 per annum – enjoyed greater comfort though they were placed under closer surveillance in North-East France. They had the same rations and the same pay as French soldiers, while the other prisoners received half of this allowance. The rank-and-file were held in the fortresses of Arras, Valenciennes and Givet, or in the vaults of Bitche if

[5] Ian MacDougall, *All Men are Brethren: French, Scandinavian, Italian, German, Dutch, Belgian, Spanish, Polish, West Indian, American, and Other Prisoners of War in Scotland, 1803-1814* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2008), xiv.

[6] Gunther E. Rothenberg, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Napoleon* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1980), 89-90; Léonce Bernard, *Les prisonniers de guerre du Premier Empire* (Paris: Christian, 2002); Jean Tulard, *Napoléon, Chef de guerre* (Paris: Tallandier, 2012), 175-180.

they were guilty of misconduct; whilst British officers and civilians enjoyed the largesse of parole in Verdun, where they lodged with local people and had only to report to the *gendarmes* twice a day. As Jean Tulard noted, the treatment received by these captives contrasted sharply with the fury of the sack of Jaffa, where Napoleon ordered the execution of 7,000 Ottoman troops who had surrendered to the French.[7] The reasons for this brutal act are yet to be fully established, but it shows how inconsistent French ideas of restraint in war could be when they strayed beyond the bounds of Europe.

Recent studies reveal that Russia captured over 110,000 prisoners during the disastrous campaign of the *Grande Armée* in 1812, excluding those who surrendered to partisans or were slain on the spot.[8] Two-thirds of them succumbed to the hardships of winter, sickness, malnutrition and the violence of their journey through Minsk, Smolensk and Vitebsk. There, prisoners were evacuated in haste and suffered abuse from local people as the French armies progressed eastwards. In February 1813, official reports suggest that while 3,500 of those who survived enlisted to fight Napoleon, another 39,645, mostly junior officers, remained confined in western parts of Russia and in the distant provinces of Vyatka, Orenburg and Pskov. These prisoners were as ethnically diverse as the Napoleonic armies themselves; yet, their treatment depended on Russian perceptions of their national character. Polish prisoners suffered harsher treatment, as they were regarded as rebels from the time of the Polish Partitions. The law condemned them to service in remote parts of the empire, and denied them the right to correspond. On the other hand, Russians had deep respect for French

---

[7] Tulard, *Napoléon,* 176.

[8] David Rouanet, 'Captivités en Russie, regards croisés', in Marie-Pierre Rey and Thierry Lentz (eds), *1812, La Campagne de Russie* (Paris: Perrin, 2012), 253-265; Alexander Mikaberidze, 'Napoleon's Lost Legions. The Grande Armée Prisoners of War in Russia', *Napoleonica. La Revue* 21:3 (2014), 35-44.

culture, allowing French officers to live among local people or even to apply for temporary citizenship. Because the authorities classified nationality by the origin of each unit, Dutch, German and Italian prisoners received similar favours and joined the Orel legions, whilst Spanish and Portuguese captives were protected by the Treaty of Velikie Luki.

Other captives never reached their intended prison, finding themselves stranded in transit. This was the result of logistical pressures and a refusal to carry out the terms of surrender in the Iberian Peninsula, where guerrilla warfare unsettled the codes of restrained combat. Few captives were taken by either side there, and those who did survive capture at the hands of *guerrilleros* shortly discovered that detention brought further hardships. In 1808, after the French defeat at Bailén, the *Junta* sent 9,000 conscripts to overcrowded, vermin-infested hulks off the coast of Cadiz before shipping them to the Balearic Islands. The governors of both Majorca and Menorca, then under British occupation, refused to house them for want of adequate facilities and for fear of contagion. This meant that the captives were stranded on Cabrera – the barren isle of goats – without shelter and left to fend for themselves. Rumours of cannibalism soon reached the Continent, contributing to Spain's fearsome reputation among Napoleon's troops. Overall, only a minority of officers and camp-followers were transported to Britain. Forty per cent of the captives died on Cabrera, and those who returned home in 1814 were emaciated and traumatised from the experience.[9]

Transfers of captives operated on a global scale, which made it necessary to turn colonial outposts into temporary prisons in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Until 1810, when Britain conquered the island, Mauritius was used by General Decaen to hold prizes from privateers, including the crew of Captain Matthew Flinders, arrested after circumnavigating Australia in 1803. Ships in Port Louis and the prison at Flacq were requisitioned to hold rank-and-file and

---

[9] Denis Smith, *Les soldats oubliés de Napoléon, 1809-1814: Prisonniers sur l'Île de Cabrera* (Paris: Autrement, 2005), 138-139.

merchant prisoners; while the Café Marengo and the leafy 'Garden Prison' of the Maison Despeaux were used for officers and civilian passengers, including women. Later agreements were reached which allowed them to lodge at Plaines Wilhems plantations.[10] Such arrangements were not dissimilar to the ways in which British forces landed Dutch captives at Semarang and Cirebon during the raids on Java in 1807 and 1811. Other sites, such as Chandannagar in India and Penang in Malaysia, were used to detain captured crews while their possessions were inspected before being taken to Britain.[11]

Cultures of Captivity and *Ad Hoc* Regulations

In various parts of this transient geography of captivity, the presence of civilians amongst combatants complicated the very definition of what it was to be a prisoner of war. This was a major problem in France. In 1803, following the rupture of the Peace of Amiens, Napoleon ordered the arrest of all British men on French soil aged between eighteen and sixty, on the grounds that they would be liable for service in the British Militia. Four hundred British non-combatants were made '*détenus*' – hostages – and sent to Verdun, specifically chosen to house 'civilians accompanied by their wives and children'. In this way the term *détenus* entered the English language, but Britain refused to acknowledge them as prisoners of war. Partly because of this, other women took risks to join their relatives in captivity, to smuggle letters or recreate a household dislocated by war and naval service. Up to 800 British civilians, including women, became *détenus*, a term that remained in use until 1805, when

---

[10] National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, FLI25, Mathew Flinders, Correspondence, 1800-1814.

[11] Aditya Das, *Defending British India against Napoleon: The foreign policy of Governor-General Lord Minto, 1807-13* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2016), 185.

France stopped singling them out, at least on paper.[12] The British continued to hold different views, although some French civilians (1,557 men, and 152 women and children), mostly passengers taken at sea, were considered prisoners of war in Britain in 1812. Camp-followers and children also populated depots in Hungary, Romania and Russia. [13]

Historians have seen in the treatment of Napoleonic prisoners the sign of a radical turning point in the conduct of war, heralding a culture of modern, if not, 'total' war.[14] Some elements were indeed rather new. The logistic and the ideological threats posed by mass captivity were a spectacular novelty of post-1789 Europe. The arrest of British civilians in 1803 also signalled the dissolution of distinctions between combatants and citizens liable for service. But it is the length of incarceration, resulting from the breakdown of negotiations and the reduction in *ad hoc* exchanges (which ceased altogether in 1810), that is perceived as a defining moment. Long-term internment, which could last for as long as eleven years during

---

[12] Elodie Duché, 'The Missing Spouse: The Wives of British Prisoners of War in Napoleonic France, Their Lives and Writings', in Rebecca Probert (ed.), *Catherine Exley's Diary: The Life and Times of an Army Wife in the Peninsular War* (Kenilworth: Brandram, 2014), 111-28; Archives Départementales (hereafter AD) Meuse, 9R2, 'Règlement de Verdun', 1803.

[13] Daly, 'Lost Legions', 364 ; Mikaberidze, 'Lost Legions', 39; Edna Lemay, 'A propos des recherches faites sur le sort des prisonniers de guerre français pendant les guerres européennes (1792-1815)', *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française* 312 (1998), 234.

[14] Crimmin, 'Port Communities', 18; Catriona Kennedy, *Narratives of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars: Military and Civilian Experience in Britain and Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2013), 115-116; Sibylle Scheipers, 'Prisoners and Detainees in War', *European History Online* (2011). URL: www.ieg-ego.eu/scheiperss-2011-en [Accessed 17-09-2018].

the Napoleonic wars, refashioned conceptualisations of carceral spaces, which archaeologists have read into the proto-panoptic structures of Norman Cross and Dartmoor.[15]

Yet, not all of these changes were unprecedented. Recent studies have unearthed overlooked continuities, locating Napoleonic practices and notions of war captivity within longer trends across the eighteenth century.[16] Napoleonic treatment of prisoners of war had its roots in prior debates about what captors owed to captives, notions of reciprocity and just war, and the challenges of warfare on a global scale. These had underpinned the creation of the first purpose-built war prison not in Norman Cross, but in Stapleton in 1782 to hold captives of the American War of Independence. As Erica Charters argues, longer periods of internment emerged from unequal exchanges in the eighteenth century, a trend which, according to Ian MacDougall, contributes to explain the breakdown of all exchanges in 1810. The administration of war captivity also rested on standardized responsibilities developed before the Napoleonic conflicts, which placed captives under the care of military and naval forces. Many facets of the captives' lives were coloured by this: officers were segregated from the rank-and-file, victuals and clothing were allocated unequally, and all had to obey a curfew. The reliance on four main modes of detention – hulks, land-prisons, parole and

---

[15] Harold Mytum et al., 'Norman Cross: Designing and Operating an Eighteenth-Century British Prisoner of War Camp', in Harold Mytum and Gilly Carr (eds), *Prisoners of War Archaeology, Memory, and Heritage of 19th- and 20th-Century Mass Internment* (New York: Springer, 2013), pp. 75-91.

[16] MacDougall, *Bretheren*, xiii; Erica Charters, 'The Administration of War and French Prisoners of War in Britain, 1756–1763', in Erica Charters et al. (eds), *Civilians and War in Europe, 1618-1815* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 87-99; 'The Treatment of Prisoners of War', in Geoffrey Butler and Simon Maccoby (eds), *The Development of International Law* (London: Longman, 1928), 204-210.

forced labour – also suggests more continuity with *Ancien Régime* practices than is often admitted. On parole, for instance, Napoleon was merely resurrecting a practice briefly abandoned by revolutionary governments. This was the reinvention of a tradition, in the sense that the intention was less to follow chivalric codes of honour than to respond to the pressures of negotiation and secure reciprocity for French officers detained abroad.[17] The motives might have been different; yet the lives of Napoleonic parolees were not dissimilar to the experiences of those paroled during the Seven Years War.[18]

Captors did not entirely cease to abide by traditional conventions. Rather, different cultures of captivity, honour and humanitarianism were thrown into relief by the length and geographical spread of the Napoleonic Wars. Most of these were refashioned on an *ad hoc* basis and in response to one another. Russia adjusted existing legislation to cater for more Western captives.[19] Prior to this, the country had mostly waged war against Ottomans and Tatars in Crimea, and Poles and Swedes in the Baltic. This had generated a series of laws throughout the 1770s and 1790s, defining the individual worth of captives and their daily allowances – a practice derived from non-Christian ransoms. These were only refined in 1806 and 1812, when Russia passed amendments dealing with the practicalities of transporting and

---

[17] Alan Forrest, 'Prisonniers de guerre et récits de captivité dans les guerres napoléoniennes' in Nicolas Beaupré and Karine Rance (eds), *Arrachés et Déplacés. Réfugiés Politiques, Prisonniers de Guerre, Déportés, 1789-1918* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2016), 100. On Revolutionary legislation, see Hugues Marquis, 'La Convention et les prisonniers de guerre des armées étrangères', *Histoire, Economie & Société* 27:3 (2008), 65-81.

[18] Renaud Morieux, 'French Prisoners of War, Conflicts of Honour, and Social Inversions in England, 1744-1783', *Historical Journal* 56 (2013), 55-88.

[19] Mikaberidze, 'Lost Legions', 37-38.

providing medical care for Western troops who were not to be ransomed. Still keen to employ captives, Russia also asked Western Europeans to pledge national allegiance, rather than convert to Orthodox Christianity, to obtain work. These were reactive rather than proactive measures. So was the French edict in 1810 to reclassify enlisted British, Irish and Hanoverian troops as prisoners of war, in retaliation for the decision of the *Junta* to maroon their captives in Cabrera.[20] Even more established transnational cultures of captivity, such as the one that bonded France and Britain – and which Vattel held up as an example for other European powers – were affected by *ad hoc* negotiations over what was fair and right for certain categories of prisoner. Between 1803 and 1813, commandants of French depots repeatedly re-classified British midshipmen and masters of merchant vessels for parole, depending on tonnage or patronage, as officers already in captivity petitioned for them to join them in Verdun. Commandants were caught in webs of pressure exerted by prisoners, the Transport Board whom the latter petitioned, and the Ministry, which meant that the treatment of these captives was constantly being renegotiated. The movements of personnel that followed shows the extent of the problem: in 1805, 1808 and 1809, three mass transfers meant that 500 captives had to march hundreds of miles to see their parole status successively denied and granted within a couple of months. Servants suffered a similar fate, being first removed from Verdun to Metz in 1805, before parolees successfully petitioned for their return in 1806. The rules of Verdun were re-fashioned accordingly.[21] These examples show how pliable the boundaries of captivity could be, and demonstrate the role that the captives themselves could have in negotiating the terms of their own seclusion.

Money Matters

---

[20] Tulard, *Napoléon*, 179.

[21] AD Meuse, 9R2, Ordre de police, Verdun, 1 April 1809; Ernest d'Hauterive (ed.), *La Police secrète du Premier Empire* (Paris: Perrin, 1913), vol.2, 58, 347, 445.

Who should pay for the prisoners' keep? The question caused diplomatic dispute, mainly because France's position, which became entrenched under Napoleon, was to force rival nations to bear the full cost of detention.[22] Instead of placing the onus on the captives' countries of origin to send agents and monies for the basic care of their nationals, France increasingly pressured their opponents to pay, in full, for the upkeep of French prisoners abroad. In 1803, France issued a 'comparative table' for the reciprocal care of prisoners held in France and Britain.[23] This made the keep of captives the responsibility of captors, and, in the process, conveniently discharged the French state from financing the care of a fast-growing cohort of French captives in Britain. In this way France used prisoners as a means of economic pressure that could weaken the resources of the enemy. Captivity was costly. Between 1803 and 1815, France spent 1,852,108 francs to treat wounded and infected British prisoners; whilst in Britain, the cost of the French captives alone amounted to £6 million. Expenses included not only allowances for the bare necessities of life (accommodation, food, clothing and medical care) but also transport costs and what the French termed '*frais de geôlage*'. Such expenses were calibrated according to rank, and mapped on to expenditures for troop movements, but they could also seriously burden localities, as was the case in Russia.[24]

Still, state provisions barely covered the essentials of life. In 1808, the Danish government intervened and sent allowances to captured nationals in Britain. Local parishes and

---

[22] Crimmin, 'Port Communities', 18; Charters, 'Administration', 92.

[23] Service Historique de la Défense, YJ 28, Tableau comparatif, 1803; Bordereau de la dépense occasionnée pour le traitement des prisonniers anglais, 1815.

[24] Crimmin, 'Port Communities', p. 18; Mikaberidze, 'Lost Legions', p. 41.

communities also collected money, food and clothes to relieve prisoners' needs.[25] Some prisoners took the matter in their own hands. In France, Verdun parolees set up a Committee for the Relief of British Prisoners, which organised subscriptions throughout Britain with the help of insurance brokers, bankers and the Lloyd's Patriotic Fund, and distributed monies to eleven depots. The sums amassed were considerable: £27,000 in 1804, £16,700 in 1809, which the committee used to create schools, churches and hospitals for prisoners. The first captive-led dispensary cared for 786 patients between 1804 and 1806; by October 1808, there were hospitals in every depot in France except Sarrelibre. Local people could also receive medical treatment there, including vaccination and cataract surgery. Of approximately 16,000 British captives, 13,125 received funds from Verdun in 1812, which indicates the efficacy of their network.[26]

Detention was, in some cases, a source of profit for localities. Parolees were welcome for the money they brought. In Wincanton, where the weaving trade had collapsed, they took lodgings in empty houses and revived trade in the Shambles. Their concerts and fencing classes also gave a new lease of life to small market towns in decline, such as Ashburton and Kelso.[27] In Verdun, landlords quickly realised the profit to be made by letting rooms to parolees, who saw their rent rise tenfold within months of their arrival. Magistrates expressed concern about the inflation this caused in the region: 'Verdun will not profit from all the

---

[25] Clive Lloyd, *A History of Napoleonic and American Prisoners of War 1756-1816* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 2007), I, 147.

[26] Elodie Duché, 'Charitable Connections: Transnational Financial Networks and Relief for British Prisoners of War in Napoleonic France, 1803-1814', *Napoleonica. La Revue*, 21:3 (2014), 74-117.

[27] Jenny Uglow, *In These Times: Living in Britain through Napoleon's Wars, 1793-1815* (London: Faber, 2014), 541-542.

benefits that the stay of English people seems to promise', noted Varaigne-Perrin.[28] The matter was brought to the attention of the Minister of War, before Napoleon intervened, threatening to move parolees elsewhere. Schemes to profit from captives could be hazardous. When, in 1811, the Stapleton prison tried to boost the Cornish fishery by establishing two fish days in the prisoners' diet, the plan failed miserably: the captives refused to eat herrings and 63,000 pounds of fish had to be sold elsewhere. Providing credit for parolees could also prove a costly gamble. In Peebles, the Chambers were left bankrupt after French officers left the town; whilst in Verdun, the inhabitants demanded repayment of 3,500,000 francs of debt contracted by the British in 1814.

Money caused some fracas in and around prisons. In 1812, a riot broke out in Tavistock, where local people had witnessed the 'daily passages of waggons full of corn' to feed the 11,000 prisoners at Dartmoor. The Victualling Office in Plymouth supplied 500 sacks of flour per week to the prison, at a time when food prices soared and the local community struggled to get supplies. Rioters demanded that captives should be sent home or fed with foreign grain. The trades brought by the prisoners – such as craft manufacture or, more subversively, the commerce of escape, gambling or prostitution – also provoked disquiet and threatened economic competition. In 1806, the British government introduced a tax on straw and banned plaiting in prison, as village hatmakers complained that the transactions captives made with local dealers undercut their wages. Yet, this only drove the trade underground. Years later, in Liverpool and Bristol, artisans complained that the prisoners were conducting an illicit straw-plaiting trade with the guards, who smuggled in straw and sold the finished product outside prison, undercutting local tradesmen. The militia's response was ambivalent: at Norman Cross, militiamen raided farms in search of contraband, whilst in Bristol some ignored local grievances, arguing that manufacturing kept the prisoners occupied and that the

---

[28] AD Meuse, 9R2, Varaigne-Perrin to the *sous-préfet*, Verdun, 18 December 1803.

preparation of the straw gave employment to British children. It was only when complaints turned to the trade of erotic toys that prisoners were reprimanded, mostly because Wilberforce intervened to restore 'morality' in the prisons.[29]

Contact Zones

It is difficult to ascertain how prisoners interacted with their hosts. Any communication would involve more than one language, and if communication did take place, little evidence remains. A percentage of those held prisoner were illiterate, and not all who had received a rudimentary education left any written record of their experience. Besides, the boredom and inactivity induced by seclusion means that most of the sources we do have speak of the *extra-ordinary*, of actions, events and disquiet that broke its monotony. To remedy the dearth of archival sources, most historians have used retrospective memoirs, combined with police and military documents and other pieces of life-writing from the time. These tend to suggest that war captivity generated what post-colonial scholars term contact zones. Prisoners' relations with local people were framed within asymmetrical power structures, which meant that captivity was less a prism through which we can observe distinct societies of captives and captors than a transformative experience that affected them both.

The first contacts prisoners made with local populations often took place as they were marched to the prisons. The sight elicited widely varying feelings amongst the country folk. In 1810, the magistrate of Autun related that the inhabitants felt saddened by the passage of thousands of Spanish prisoners, who arrived in the town in poor health and barely clad, with nuns giving them soup and tending their wounds. British prisoners on route to the Randers depot received similar sympathies from the Danes, who, despite the recent siege of Copenhagen, donated both clothing and food. Prisoners were heavily dependent on the

---

[29] Crimmin, 'Port Communities', pp. 23-24; Uglow, *These Times*, p. 543.

conduct and character of their agent, for it was he who interpreted government regulations with greater or lesser stringency. Elsewhere, captives complained that guards made them 'parade', as trophies of war, 'for the people of the town to gloat over and mock at'.[30] In Russia, after reports suggested that prisoners had suffered great hardships at the hands of peasants, the government passed a statute to prevent further abuse in 1812.[31] Hostility sometimes stemmed from ignorance and racial prejudice. In 1814, market women harangued American captives in Devon, telling them they should be hanged. Because they were white and spoke English 'almost as good as we do', they were adamant that only one of them was a 'Yankee', pointing at a West Indian captive. Captivity enforced encounters with distant Others, and these first contacts highlight how different populations tried to make sense of their appearance, identities and customs. Some prisoners were proactive in learning more about their captors, buying dictionaries during their march through France and Russia, an essential tool which, no doubt, could also facilitate escape.[32]

Some saw themselves – and their *Self* – transformed or strengthened by the experience of capture and interrogation. Two Scandinavian prisoners, Neilsen and Federspeil, expressed concerns about wearing the sulphur-coloured work clothes, inscribed with the letters 'T. O.', imposed by their British captors. The black letters on their jackets worried them. Neilsen feared that these might refer to 'condemned' ships, whilst Federspiel interpreted them as an acronym for 'taken out [of action]', when these were simply the initials of the Transport Office. Some Russian provinces dressed prisoners in local attire, including sheepskin coats, fur hats, and peasant bast shoes, immersing them in regional cultures that could affect their

---

[30] Edward Fraser, *Napoleon the Gaoler* (London: Methuen, 1914), 26.

[31] AD Saône-et-Loire, 9R1-6; Archives Municipales, Mâcon, 4H2; Lloyd, *A History* I, 159; Mikaberidze, 'Lost Legions', 38.

[32] Crimmin, 'Port Communities', 23.

sense of belonging. Interrogations also influenced how captives expressed their identities, particularly when they refused to divulge personal or professional information. Feelings of pride, honour or patriotism were expressed even in small acts of defiance. In 1803, Maria Cope found her sense of being 'an Englishwoman and not afraid' reasserted when she faced *gendarmes*, responding to their 'un-British' interrogation by 'saying John Bull like, what is it to them, who my Grandfather was, I won't tell'.[33]

Markets offered a prime space for contacts during detention. In Valenciennes, British sailors accessed regular markets in the city, while others in Britain could make and spend money in bespoke trading zones.[34] In Dartmoor, Norman Cross, Edinburgh and Penicuik, 'outer markets' open to the public, just outside the first wall of the prison, offered some prisoners the chance to sell objects of their own making. Guards allowed prisoners to be 'at full liberty to exercise their industry within the prisons'. They could manufacture objects insofar as these were not regarded as 'obscene', not in direct economic competition with local craftsmen, and not sold at the expense of the British government. Trading in forged notes, alcohol, tobacco and soldiers' necessaries was therefore prohibited. To craft objects, captives mostly used large bones from their meals which they secured from the kitchen staff. Because prisoners of war were not considered criminals or debtors, they could keep pocket knives which they used to produce carvings or elaborate lathes to turn such items as mini-guillotines, spinning jennies, model ships and domino sets. It is important to remember that many of these captives were sailors who had taken up a craft, often ivory carving, to while away long days at sea and to make gifts for their families. They were used to 'dwelling-in-travelling', to use James Clifford's words, and found in crafting and teaching their skills to others a source

---

[33] Quoted in Kennedy, *Narratives*, 119; Lloyd, *A History*, I, 151.

[34] National Army Museum, London, NAM 1997-09-123-1, Balancing monkey made by Walter White in Valenciennes, 1811.

of distraction and revenue that could supplement their diet. This led to interesting cultural transfers, as the French exchanged skills with Danish carvers and American prisoners joined in their commercial ventures. Elected prisoners could trade these items for provisions brought by dealers who also had shops at the market. There civilians, including families and young children,' came into direct contact with prisoners, who could adjust their production to meet demand. Buying from them allowed British civilians to acquire ornaments at a cheaper price, but purchasing from the prisoners was also understood as a form of charity and tourism. The guards not only permitted visits from sightseers, who bought objects as souvenirs, but they also organised prison tours and let pedlars board hulks to facilitate such trades.[35]

Prison theatricals contributed to this traffic. In Spain, prisoners put on shows on the Cadiz hulks and in an old cistern of Cabrera, which some officers took to England when they were transferred to Portchester Castle. Records suggest that Portchester's commander gave 'a very large quantity of wood' to a troupe of sixty captives, led by a former stage technician in Paris, to build a theatre that could hold 200 spectators in the keep of the fortress.[36] Napoleon's conscripts gathered men of all walks of life: for sailors, acting was anchored in previous practices afloat; others had expertise in carpentry or wig-making, which equally benefited the company. Local people attended and appreciated the shows. In 1811, the *Hampshire Telegraph and Chronicle* wrote: 'It is no exaggeration of their merit to say that the Pantomimes which they have brought forward, are not excelled by those performed in London.' The surviving staging instructions of *Le Philanthrope Révolutionnaire ou l'Hécatombe à Haïti* put on by common sailors on the *Crown* suggest that the prisoners were

---

[35] Paul Chamberlain, *Hell Upon Water: Prisoners of War in Britain, 1793-1815* (Ann Arbor MI: Spellmount, 2008), 140; Lloyd, *A History*, II, 35.

[36] Victoria and Albert Museum Archives, GB71THM/ 415, French prisoners' theatricals at Portchester Castle, 1810-1812.

ingenious in evading censorship. The text was politically charged, yet they used what Mary Isbell termed 'differing visual and auditory symbols' to allow for two separate experiences of the play: Anglophone spectators would focus on the visual drama of the slave rebellion, whilst the Francophone audience would hear expressions of indignation against their British gaolers. Less subversive in nature, British theatricals in France allowed for collaboration with local troops in Metz and Nancy, where the latter changed their opening hours to suit British dinner times and contribute to prison shows.[37]

Elite captives on parole found brethren in masonic lodges and local libraries. Most European countries had traditions of travelling lodges attached to the military, and it is not surprising to see that these continued to function during years of detention. What is perhaps more intriguing is that captives joined foreign lodges: the *Franche Amitié* admitted over 100 British captives, whilst German and Swiss prisoners were reported to 'enliven' the Scottish border lodges of St John's and St Luke's.[38] Captives also set up their own lodges and occasionally opened those to local members, including guards in Wincanton, Abergavenny and Launceston. Here and there, rumours surfaced that fraternisation facilitated escapes, and interrogation reports suggest that the bond was so strong that some brothers openly helped absconders. However, fraternisation was not always forthcoming. In Malta, farmers declined an invitation to a banquet organised by masonic prisoners, accusing them of 'witchcraft'.[39] The exchange of books could also create lasting bonds. In Oufa, wealthy Russians opened

---

[37] Mary Isbell, 'The Handwritten Playbill as Cultural Artefact: A French Amateur Theatrical Aboard the British Prison Ship *Crown*', *Inquire: Journal of Comparative Literature* 1:2 (2011). URL: http://inquire.streetmag.org/articles/40%3E [Accessed 17-09-2018].

[38] Lloyd, *A History*, II, 235.

[39] Archives Nationales, F7 6541-1835, Wirion au Ministre de la Police, Verdun, 9 July 1808 ; Lloyd, *A History*, II, 252.

their libraries to captives at tea time; whilst in Mauritius, planters' clubs shared their collections with British parolees. At the Selkirk library, French officers consulted books that profoundly shaped their perception of the conflict and facilitated good relations with the local population. Some endeavours transcended apparent religious divides, as was the case in Verdun, where British prisoners supported Benedictine monks in creating the city's first municipal library. [40]

Internal Panopticons

Captives inhabited hierarchical communities that helped to form inner circles of discipline within prisons. In Russia, a decree introduced collective responsibility amongst Napoleonic prisoners in 1806. A similar system known as *cautionnement par corps* in France meant that prisoners actively tried to prevent escapes and denounced absconders to avoid being held to account. To preserve themselves from collective punishment, some prisoners developed their own judiciary. In France, prisoners were left to organise their own duels to solve matters of honour between themselves. In Dartmoor, prisoners were not confined to cells and so were able to organize their own governance. American inmates formed elective committees to punish troublemakers. Most punishments were for actions that threatened the health and safety of other prisoners. Some, following ideas of justice imposed at sea, advocated the use of corporal punishment; others, at the demand of white prisoners, were racially segregated, with white and black courts meeting independently. This meant that black prisoners established their own court at Dartmoor, presided over by Richard 'King Dick' Crafus, who

---

[40] Mark Towsey, 'Imprisoned Reading: French Prisoners of War at the Selkirk Subscription Library, 1811-1814', in Charters et al. (eds), *Civilians and War*, 241-261; Bibliothèque d'Etude de Verdun, MSS 1810, Catalogue, 1804-1814.

ruled Barrack Four with a rod of iron, often quite literally. Captivity offered a stage where race relations, masculinity and honour could be played out in different ways.[41]

Officers were keen to restore distinctions and modes of control that had been unsettled by their capture. This partly explains why British officers, surgeons and vicars set up a charitable committee in Verdun that could maintain distinctions between the beneficiaries of charity and those who could afford to be benevolent. The churches and schools they created aimed to channel young sailors' energies to self-improvement, but they also provoked discontent as recipients questioned the privileges of the paroled 'nobbs' or 'dons' who 'know little of captivity'.[42] French sailors created their own transnational language of difference to refer to the classes formed by captivity. They spoke of '*les Lords*', '*les Capitalists*', '*les Kaiserlics*', '*les Romains*', etc. Stigmatised for being promiscuous with other men, these last were restricted, on the demand of white French and American prisoners, to Barrack Four at Dartmoor, where their activities could 'contaminate' only Black captives.[43] Monitoring the homosocial setting of captivity was, here again, modulated on controls of sexualities in the military.

Captivity provided a space for accelerated community-building, a process in which religion played a crucial yet ambivalent part. Very quickly, prisoners built their own sites of worship: Catholic churches in Dartmoor and Penicuik, Anglican chapels in Arras and Verdun, and Danish Lutheran schools orchestrated with the help of British vicars in Plymouth. Yet, matters of religion could also prove divisive, and affected prisoners' relations

---

[41] Elizabeth Jones-Minsinger, '"Our Rights Are Getting More & More Infringed Upon": American Nationalism, Identity, and Sailors' Justice in British Prisons during the War of 1812', *Journal of the Early Republic* 37:3 (2017), 471-505.

[42] Quoted in Kennedy, *Narratives*, 127.

[43] *The Diary of Benjamin Palmer* (New Haven: Acorn Club, 1914), 176.

with local people. In Russia, Orthodox priests brutalised and shamed French prisoners for their atheism as they passed on their way to prison. Some of these captives expressed equal revulsion at local beliefs. Near Kazan, Beulay deemed Tartar 'Mohammedans' to be 'savages'. Others fiercely disagreed. Fuzellier, a captive doctor who had more contacts with Tartars, found them 'more industrious than the Russians' and more educated as 'they read the Koran morning, noon and night'. French captives experienced more striking divisions in Hungary, where Austrians would usually guard them. There, some prisoners refused the help of *émigrés* priests, preferring the counsel of Hungarian preachers, despite the language barrier. But above all, what was contentious was whether captivity, and the idleness it induced, placed captives under the watchful eye of God, and of *which God*. This exacerbated denominational fault lines particularly where, as in Longwy, prisoners set up competing missions to convert fellow captives.[44]

Captivity Writings

Prisoners often narrated captivity as a gap in their lives and careers. Midshipman Edward Boys lamented, for instance, that his capture deprived him of an imminent promotion.[45] However, the very acts of writing and remembering captivity, to articulate this loss, were part of the experience. As such, they need to be relocated in the lifecycles that continued within the walls of prisons. Prisoners pursued their professional activity, sometimes through writing. British midshipmen kept ship's logs as they marched to prison and gathered court-martial evidence for the Admiralty that would exonerate the crew from any wrongdoings in their capture. This would, in return, further their chances of regaining employment after release.

---

[44] Lloyd, *A History* I, 157-149; Lemay, 'Recherches', 234; Farrell Mulvey, S*ketches of the Character, Conduct and Treatment of the Prisoners of War* (London: Longman, 1818), 24-25.

[45] Quoted in Kennedy, *Narratives*, 119.

Equally, Spanish engineers like José María Román were trained to take notes, mostly on territorial recognition and military strategy, which they continued to do after they had moved on from the battlefield. The captive surgeons who volunteered to practise medicine in prisons noted observations that they would translate into publications in later life.[46]

Writing in other forms, including graffiti (which can still be seen on the doors of castles in Edinburgh and La Aljaferia), helped to combat boredom and compensate for a lack of news, as prisoners desperately sought indicators of a possible peace. New arrivals in prisons led to speculation and fed into the letters some were able to exchange with their families, forming what could be termed communities of knowledge. If letters chronicled the vexations of displacement, they also served to maintain the captives' roles in distant communities. The incantatory rhythm of the letters Catherine Lelean sent to her husband, for example, carried the voice of a Cornish Methodist congregation to a French prison, where the letters would be read aloud.[47] Despite clandestine networks, letters took time to arrive, ranging from two months to almost a year. This, coupled with the materiality of the letter itself, often delivered unsealed by guards who had reviewed its content, was a tangible reminder of the distance that separated prisoners from home.

Vicars among the detainees recorded births, marriages and deaths, which meant that other rituals endured. Research into such records reveals that death rates varied greatly both between and within prisons. Thus, whereas 80 per cent of General Dupont's troops succumbed in Spanish prisons in 1808, only 2 per cent of Danish prisoners died in custody

[46] Elodie Duché, '"A Sea of Stories": Maritime Imagery and Imagination in Napoleonic Narratives of War Captivity', in Charlotte Mathieson (ed.), *Sea Narratives: Cultural Responses to the Sea, 1600–Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2016), 47-79; María Zozaya, 'Prisioneros Españoles en la Francia Napoleónica', *Trocadero*, 26 (2014), 75-106.

[47] Royal Cornwall Museum, Wesleyans of Mevagissey Papers.

each year in British hulks, and the mortality rate among prisoners across Britain did not exceed 10 per cent. Drawing on associative cultures from their own countries, some prisoners organised friendly societies to cover the cost of burying their dead, and negotiated for them to rest in local graveyards in defiance of differences in denomination. Inter-faith marriages and births also occurred, particularly in parole towns where prisoners had built strong ties with the local population to the point where some decided to stay on after 1815. In Verdun alone, 61 marriages were recorded between prisoners-of-war and local women, along with the births of 122 'natural children' to Franco-British parents, which doubled the number of such births in the city.[48]

Release took place at different times, as the war drew to a close and alliances dissolved. Although some administrations prepared for a general discharge by listing and segregating prisoners by nationality as early as 1812, repatriation was seldom orderly. To accelerate the evacuation of depots in 1814, British agents allowed captives to make their own way home. This was particularly difficult for someone like Jean Eustache, a fisherman from Saint-Domingue detained at Norman Cross, who, after being conveyed across the Channel, would have to find his own passage to the West Indies, had he wished to go home. It is unlikely that the French authorities would have facilitated a trip back to the island, given the recent upheaval in Haiti. The records of the depot give us little information about the final destinations of such captives.[49] In Valleyfield, the agent reported that prisoners had no

---

[48] Society of Genealogists, London, FRA/R6/73007, Register of English Prisoners at Verdun; AD Meuse, 2E558 (50-60), État civil de Verdun, 1803-1814; Patrick Le Carvèse, 'Les prisonniers français en Grande-Bretagne de 1803 à 1814', *Napoleonica. La Revue* 9:3 (2010), 118-152.

[49] The National Archives, PRO ADM103/260, General Entry Book of French Prisoners of War at Norman Cross 1811-14.

decent shoes to march from Scotland to France. In these conditions, it is hardly surprising that captives expressed mixed feelings about returning 'home'. For French prisoners this also meant being repatriated to a Bourbon regime some had originally fought against. Others had learnt to appreciate the constricting but secure routine of prison life: its consistent food rations and healthcare, and found it difficult to adjust to life outside prison. Between 1814 and 1816, the French monarchy published articles in Russian newspapers asking for former prisoners to return to France, but few did. Besides, once they reached home, some prisoners were shunned as the vectors of diseases; those who had been on Cabrera found themselves quarantined for this reason. The physical traumas of displacement could also turn into social stigmas. The relatives of Jens Krog commented on the 'stoop' he had developed from spending years on a hulk, where the lower deck made it difficult to walk upright. Others shocked their families by their appearance, as they returned in tatters, tanned, emaciated, and penniless.[50]

These conflicting feelings were seldom expressed in narratives of captivity, however, a genre that boomed after Waterloo. Publishers could, in some cases, determine the format of the published account: Macdonald's memoir was turned into an epistolary account of Denmark, though he never addressed letters from captivity. Others included diagrams of prison-ships, inspired by abolitionist publications, to emphasize the harshness of the author's plight. There was a market for texts that looked back on detention, carefully figured to follow an 'event-scenario' that placed it in a tripartite cycle of capture, wait/escape, and release – and producing a happy ending. Some silences were, however, more telling: Spanish parolees were shamed for the 'positive' experience they had enjoyed while their king, Ferdinand VII,

---

[50] Paul Chamberlain,'The Release of Prisoners of War from Britain in 1813 and 1814', *Napoleonica. La Revue*, 21:3 (2014), 118-129; Régis Baty, 'Les prisonniers oubliés de la campagne de Russie', *Revue Historique des Armées* 267 (2012), 51-59.

was held in Valençay. Other forms of memorialisation articulated the paradoxical bond captives had forged with local people. In 1830, the inhabitants of Penicuik raised funds to erect a monument to the 300 French prisoners who had died in the town. Similar initiatives emerged in Norman Cross, Liverpool, Leek, Dartmoor, and Mauritius.[51]

Overall, Napoleonic experiences of war captivity varied greatly from prison to prison and from individual to individual. They were shaped by status, rank and nationality, but also by the state of the war, the pressures placed on infrastructures, and the agency of their guards in interpreting normative texts. And, often overlooked, the captives' actions themselves affected their wellbeing, as they corresponded with home, channelled funds, interacted with local people, narrated their experiences and negotiated the terms of their own detention. War captivity did not occur in a vacuum.

---

[51] Lloyd, *A History* I, 151, 165; Zozaya, 'Prisioneros', 62; Service Historique de la Marine, FF2-8-d2.

Prisoners of War

Bibliographical Essay

Prisoner-of-war studies are no longer a 'missing paradigm' of historical research, to use the words of Heather Jones. Historians have produced a variety of regional and national histories of captivity during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic conflicts. Most of them tend to focus on prisoners in Britain. Excellent overviews include Gavin Daly, 'Napoleon's Lost Legions: French Prisoners of War in Britain, 1803-1814', *History* 89 (2004), 361-80; Patricia Crimmin, 'Prisoners of War and British Port Communities, 1793-1815', *The Northern Mariner/Le Marin du Nord* 6:4 (1996), 17-27; and Philippe Masson, *Les sépulcres flottants. Prisonniers français en Angleterre sous l'Empire* (Rennes: Ouest France Université, 1987). Such studies stress how imprisonment fostered identities and agencies, and locate detention within broader changes in the conduct of war, its administration and notions of honour. Others have offered valuable transnational perspectives, including Ian MacDougall's work on captivity in Scotland in *All Men Are Brethren* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 2008); Renaud Morieux's cross-Channel examination of 'humanitarian patriotism' in custody in Laurent Bourquin et al.(eds), *La politique par les armes. Conflits internationaux et politisation, XVe–XIXe siècles* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014), pp. 301-16; and Robin Fabel's work on race and contacts between Napoleonic captives and prisoners of the War of 1812 in 'Self-Help in Dartmoor: Black and White Prisoners in the War of 1812', *Journal of the Early Republic* 9:2 (1989), pp. 165-90.

Studies of captivity elsewhere on the Continent remain somewhat sparse. Recent attempts at synthesis include the special issue of *Napolonica. La Revue* 3:21 (2014) edited by François Houdecek and Alexander Mikaberidze, gathering articles on detention in Russia and Spain, politics of repatriation, and transnational charity networks for prisoners. A useful summary of Hungarian studies and archives can be found in Edna Lemay, 'À propos des recherches faites sur le sort des prisonniers de guerre français pendant les guerres européennes (1792-1815)', *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française* 312 (1998), 229-44. Jean René Aymes focuses on Spanish captives in *La*

Déportation sous le Premier Empire: les Espagnols en France, 1808-1814 (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 1983). Increasingly, scholars are looking beyond Europe to explore prisoners' colonial and global trajectories: see Linda Colley, *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600-1850* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002); and Elodie Duché, 'Captives in Plantations: British Prisoners of War and Visions of Slavery in Napoleonic France and Mauritius', *French History and Civilization* 7 (2017), 108-124.

Social, cultural and archaeological approaches have refined understandings of creativity, life-writing and reading in captivity. The most incisive studies include Catriona Kennedy's chapter on prisoners of war in *Narratives of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars: Military and Civilian Experience in Britain and Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013); Alan Forrest, 'Prisonniers de guerre et récits de captivité dans les guerres napoléoniennes', in Nicolas Beaupré and Karine Rance (eds), *Arrachés et déplacés. Réfugiés politiques, prisonniers de guerre, déportés, 1789-1918* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2016), 99-115; and Marie-Pierre Rey, 'La Russie et les Russes dans les écrits des prisonniers de la Grande Armée : une approche comparée', *Annales historiques de la Révolution Française* 369 (2012), 61-80.