Prisoners of War

What was the reality for prisoners of war in World War One? Dr Heather Jones looks beyond the propaganda to consider the facts around prisoner mistreatment, labour and death rates across Europe.

The image of prisoners behind barbed wire gazing at the camera taking their photograph is a striking one. Prisoners of war were central to the propaganda machine in the First World War, with belligerent states keen to circulate photographs that showed that they were treating their captives well. How a state treated its prisoners was taken as an indication of its level of cultural development and modernity – and all states accused their enemy of mistreating its prisoners.

Prisoner mistreatment

These accusations were not all propaganda stories. Although the majority of the estimated eight to nine million men taken prisoner during the First World War survived the conflict, during the war there were a number of serious episodes of prisoner mistreatment. In 1914, Germany captured far more prisoners of war than Britain or France. By 1915, Germany held over a million prisoners of war. Germany expected a short war and it was not prepared for these numerous soldiers captured on both Germany's Eastern and Western Fronts. In 1914, prisoners of war transported to Germany from the Front often had to sleep in fields, where they suffered from exposure, while they waited for their camps to be built. The prisoners were also used as labour to build the camps.

In Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia in 1915, prisoner of war camps were often unsanitary and that year a severe typhus epidemic broke out which cost the lives of thousands of prisoners. In Mauthausen camp in Austria-Hungary in January 1915, up to 186 prisoners a day died of typhus. Typhus also broke out in many camps in camps in the Russian empire: in winter 1915-16, typhus ravaged Totskoe camp where at least 10,000 men died out of 25,000. The typhus epidemic led to

the development of better hygiene conditions in prisoner of war camps in Germany, with modern latrines, disinfection vats to remove lice from clothing and shower or bath houses built for the prisoners.

Reprisals also resulted in prisoner mistreatment. In 1916, Germany sent newly captured British and French prisoners to carry out forced labour on the Eastern Front in a reprisal action for the French sending German prisoners of war to camps in North Africa and the British using German prisoners as workers for the British army in France. These Eastern Front reprisals were horrific and many prisoners died of cold and starvation. In 1917, Germany kept British and French prisoners of war on the Western Front in dangerous locations, carrying out forced labour. This was a reprisal for the British and French using forced German prisoner labour on the Western Front: the French had forced German prisoners to work under shellfire for months on the Verdun battlefield. These reprisals marked a significant escalation in prisoner of war

Labour

The image of prisoners of war behind barbed wire in the prisoner of war camp was one of the most widespread images of the war. However, it was also rather misleading as by 1915 states and armies had started to think differently about how best to house and treat prisoners. The large prisoner of war camp on a country's Home Front was only one place that prisoners were held. From 1915 on, Germany began to send prisoners to live and work in small working units in agriculture, forestry or mining – industries badly short of manpower due to the war effort. Russia and France also began to use prisoner labour on a massive scale: in Russia, working conditions varied very widely, with the worst occurring during the construction of the Murman railway during which an estimated 25,000 out of the 70,000 mainly Austro-Hungarian and German prisoner of war work force died. Britain, however, delayed using widespread prisoner labour on the home front until 1917 because of trade union opposition.

Prisoner labour was key to the war effort of many states. Overall by 1916, across Europe most non-officer prisoners of war, whom it was legal for the captor to put to work under international law, were working, some returning to the prisoner of war camp at night, others lodged under guard near to their place of work. For those housed outside the camp conditions could vary considerably. While prisoner of war camps were inspected during the war by the International Red Cross , working units outside the camp were rarely inspected. The worst camps, however, were those run by armies near the front line. By 1916, the British, French, German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian armies were all keeping permanent units of prisoners as forced labourers for the army at or near the front. These men had to work under shellfire and live in desolate, unhygienic conditions. In some armies, such as the German army in 1918, they were

Death rates

Death rates varied for different prisoner nationalities during the war: 100,000 of the 600,000 Italian prisoners captured by the Central Powers died. Romanian prisoners in German camps had a death rate of 29%. Serbs held by Austria-Hungary or British prisoners captured by the Ottoman Empire also had very high death rates. In contrast, German prisoners captured by Britain had death rates of 3%. While most prisoners survived the war, and camps in Western European countries were generally quite good, for certain nationalities captivity was more dangerous than serving at the front. The image of the well-run prisoner of war camp is thus not representative of the experience of all prisoners during the war.