A Cross Section of America's World War II Prison Camps: The Lives of Axis Prisoners of War in Alabama, Their Memory, and Their Place on the Historical Landscape

by

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Abstract

The experience of nearly half a million Axis prisoners of war held by the United States on American soil, their impact on this nation, and their legacy has been largely forgotten and neglected. The state of Alabama held a significant number of these prisoners in four camps across the state. These camps provide a sample that frames and highlights the national prisoner of war program. Through this example, one can see the lasting legacy of the prisoner of war program and its role in transforming the United States and forever changing the lives of thousands of prisoners, guards, and local citizens. An analysis of the Alabama camps also reveals how memory is constructed and how one narrative can ultimately emerge as the dominant story. In addition, a survey of the landscape reveals the importance of place and its role in the process of remembering and forgetting.

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Chapter One

The Alabama Homefront and the Origins of the Prisoner of War Program

For many Americans, the story of World War II is well known. The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 woke "the sleeping giant" and drew it into both the Pacific and Atlantic theaters of warfare. The United States and other Allied countries would rally together culminating in the great Allied invasion of Normandy on June 6, 1944 that broke through Hitler's Atlantic Wall and allowed troops to pour into the heart of Nazi occupied Western Europe. At the same time, battles were being fought in the Pacific including Midway, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa. Ultimately, the Allies would prevail over the Third Reich and the Japanese Empire achieving complete victory on September 2, 1945. These events are ingrained in the minds of many Americans and those who served in the armed forces during this time are enshrined as national heroes. Indeed, the Americans who endured the Great Depression and who are often credited as having won World War II have been called the "greatest generation." Those who returned home from combat overseas receive the highest honor and praise and the most widespread recognition and memorialization. Certainly, these veterans are heroes and their story is worthy of recognition and commemoration, but what about other stories? Are there other stories or narratives that have been forgotten or relegated to the dustbin of history? One story forgotten by the American public is that of nearly half a million Axis

prisoners of war held by the United States on American soil and their impact on this nation.

The story of these Axis prisoners of war is unique. It differs from the narratives of other prisoners, such as Allied prisoners in the hands of Germany or German prisoners in the hands of the Soviet Union. Generally, when imagining the prisoner of war experience, connotations of starvation, hard labor, and the simple struggle to survive come to mind. However, for the Axis POWS destined for interment in the United States, an entirely different experience awaited them.

The state of Alabama held a significant number of these prisoners, over seventeen thousand in four camps across the state: Camp Aliceville, Camp Opelika, Fort McClellan, and Fort Rucker. This study focuses on Camp Aliceville and Camp Opelika, for reasons detailed in chapter two. Camps Aliceville and Opelika provide a sample that frames and highlights the national prisoner of war program. Through this example, one can see the lasting legacy of the prisoner of war program and its role in transforming the United States and forever changing the lives of thousands of prisoners, guards, and local citizens. An analysis of the Alabama camps also reveals how memory is constructed and how one narrative can ultimately emerge as the dominant story. In addition, a survey of the landscape reveals the importance of place and its role in the process of remembering and forgetting.

In order to frame the focus, purpose, and contributions of this thesis it is necessary to first explore the works of previous authors. Several problems can generally be found in the literature. One is that authors tend to be almost entirely narrative in nature, lacking detailed analysis or providing insight on key issues such as race and ideology. Another is

that analysis of issues connected to historical memory and the historical landscape is missing. The prisoner of war program reveals the formative process of memory construction as well as the importance of place in remembering and forgetting. In addition, it is imperative to make this connection to comprehend the legacy of the program and prisoners in the present day. Furthermore, any connection to the larger context of World War II and the homefront is generally lacking from current historiography. This homefront context is pivotal for understanding the impact the prisoners had on the country and for appreciating the currents of the nation that the prisoners were entering. All of these are issues this thesis will address to shed light on the intricacies and legacies of the program. Nevertheless, despite missed opportunities, other authors have made significant contributions to the field.

Studies of the prisoner of war program and the experience of these prisoners are relatively sparse compared to other areas of historical inquiry. The subject attracted attention in the 1970s as the population was beginning to reflect on and gain a better understanding of the events of the Second World War. Since then, several national studies along with a handful of state studies have expanded the literature. The first two authors to address the topic extensively in a national context were Judith Gansberg in *Stalag USA: The Remarkable Story of German POWs in America* and Arnold Krammer in *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* published in 1977 and 1979 respectively.[1] Both Gansberg and Krammer provide an in depth exploration of the prisoner of war program on the national level covering a broad range of topics. However, since their coverage is so vast, there is not a chance for a more intimate look at an individual camp that a

[1] Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, (New York: Stein and Day, 1979); Judith Gansberg, *Stalag USA: The Remarkable Story of German POWs in America*, (New York: Crowell, 1977).

narrower state study might provide. In addition, they do not analyze memory or landscape issues, a problem inherent in a majority of the literature. Nevertheless, these two authors certainly set the precedent for future national studies and are still the most prominent and comprehensive surveys available to historians. Interested readers can turn to these authors for additional details on topics that may only be briefly covered in this thesis. While Gansberg and Krammer might be the preeminent authors on this subject, they were not the first to publish on it.

In 1967, Stanley Hoole published, "Alabama's World War II Prisoner of War Camps" in the *Alabama Review*.[2] As one of the earliest publications on the World War II prisoner of war program, it is understandably limited in its focus and content. Hoole notes all major camps in Alabama as well as mentioning several of the branch camps in the state. He also discusses the major topics of prisoner of war study such as the labor program, education, and camp activities. However, details, context, and analysis are all limited, which may leave some readers feeling disappointed. On the other hand, Hoole's article acts as an excellent introductory piece for anyone first discovering the story of the Alabama POW– as many undoubtedly were at the time of its publication, and any lack of breadth and depth is certainly understandable considering its early publication. Later state studies on Alabama are considerably richer. Later studies that address the Alabama prisoner of war program include works by Allen Cronenberg, Chip Walker, Daniel Hutchinson, Joseph Robertson, and Randy Wall.

[2] Stanley Hoole, "Alabama's World War II Prisoner of War Camps," *Alabama Review* 20, no. 2 (April 1967): 83-114.

Allen Cronenberg's *Forth to the Mighty Conflict: Alabama and World War II* is quite extensive.[3] He covers the state in its entirety during World War II examining politics, economics, and society as well as providing a chapter on Alabama's Axis prisoners of war. In his discussion on the Axis POWs, he includes everything from initial capture to repatriation. However, its coverage leaves less room for specifics and the ability to truly explore one individual camp. However, this is understandable as his main focus is in documenting Alabama's role and contributions during World War II. Cronenberg discusses the increase of industry before the war, and the even larger increase during the war as defense spending skyrocketed. He also notes the rural to urban migration, a general migration of African Americans out of the South, and a decrease in farming, all themes discussed later in this chapter. He provides statistics and facts that address industrial output, number of troops in service, number and efforts of volunteers, civil defense service, and the overall supportive nature of Alabamians towards the war effort. This chronicle of facts and the focus on the individual stories that Cronenberg integrates into his narrative is where he excels. However, despite the large volume of information provided in *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*, much is missing.

What Cronenberg lacks is analysis and interpretation. He does not delve into the complexities of racial and gender conflict and inequality or the immense impact and consequences of industrialization and urbanization on Alabama. This is not necessarily a negative characteristic as some readers may prefer Cronenberg's style, but others expecting more will be disappointed. Nonetheless, it is definitely an opportunity missed. Other authors such as George Tindall, Morton Sosna, and Wayne Flynt have explored the

[3] Allen Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict: Alabama and World War II*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995).

transformative nature of World War II on not only Alabama but also the South as a whole. Major issues related to race, gender, politics, society, and economics set the stage for events to come in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is important to consider these themes when discussing the Second World War. While Cronenberg may have missed certain opportunities, the fact that he includes a chapter on prisoners of war in Alabama is certainly laudable, as many authors would simply dismiss or overlook the program. Other authors that do address the prisoner of war program in Alabama include Chip Walker, Daniel Hutchinson, Joseph Robertson, and Randy Wall, who all choose specific individual camps to analyze.

Chip Walker and Randy Wall both write concerning Camp Aliceville, while both Daniel Hutchinson and Joseph Robertson write on Fort McClellan. Randy Wall paints a broader picture in his article, "Inside the Wire: Aliceville and the Afrika Korps" than Chip Walker does in his article, "German Creative Activities in Camp Aliceville."[4] Wall explores numerous aspects of Camp Aliceville, including such common themes as camp activities, labor, and education. Wall's focus on the individual story leaves one feeling as if they truly understand the prisoner experience. However, analysis on topics such as Nazi fanaticism and the role the camp played in reeducation and its designation as a segregated camp for noncommissioned officers is missing.

Walker takes Camp Aliceville a step further and focuses only on the "creative activities" of the prisoners. He discusses music, art, theatre, and even landscaping. Walker offers high praise for the camp authorities and the prisoners as he covers the many talented skills and creations of the prisoners. He attributes the creation of so many

[4] Chip Walker, "German Creative Activities in Camp Aliceville, 1943–1946," *Alabama Review* 38, no. 1 (January 1985); Randy Wall, "Inside the Wire: Aliceville and the Afrika Korps," *Alabama Heritage* 7 (Winter 1988).

fine objects not simply to "good old" German discipline and ingenuity but also to the fact that Aliceville housed an extraordinary amount of noncommissioned officers who were not forced into labor programs, resulting in their having much more free time. This discussion of creative activities provides insight into the experience of prisoners of war and helps determine unique camp attributes, such as the general make up of noncommissioned officers at Aliceville. However, there are other ways of looking at creative activities that will be explored later in this thesis. Joseph Robertson's "Fort McClellan's POW Camp, 1943-1946" is intended to be a camp level study but fails to capture the unique aspects of Fort McClellan's prison camp and thus reads as any survey of any other camp would. [5] Such stories of the zookeeper, the large cemetery still maintained today, and murals created by prisoners are excellent ways to separate the camp from the national prison camp story. Robertson mentions these aspects but does not truly explore them. In addition, there are practically no individual accounts by prisoners or prisoner stories leaving the reader struggling to understand the prisoner experience at Fort McClellan.

Daniel Hutchinson's article "The Oasis: German POWs at Fort McClellan" is similar to Robertson's article.[6] Hutchinson covers the experience and day-to-day activities of prisoners at Fort McClellan. Where Robertson fails, however, Hutchinson excels. He fully integrates personal stories and individual accounts into the text. In addition, he also takes advantage of the unique elements present in Fort McClellan as mentioned above, including the cemetery, zookeeper, and murals. Unfortunately, all of

[5] Joseph Robertson, "Fort McClellan's POW Camp 1943-1946," *Alabama Review* 49 (October 1996).

[6] Daniel Hutchinson, "The Oasis: German POWs at Fort McClellan," *Alabama Heritage*, no. 8 (Summer 2008).

these studies generally lack any discussion or analysis of the program's place in public historical memory or any remaining traces on the historical landscape. However, it is understandable that these authors never intended to explore these issues. Two other authors, however, attempt to address the issue in some detail.

Robert Billinger in his work, *Hitler's Soldiers in the Sunshine State*, provides an epilogue chapter that analyzes graves, alumni, and memories.[7] He describes the deaths of seven POWs, their burial, and their remembrance in the present day. However, he focuses more on the circumstances of their deaths and who they were rather than their role in the remembrance of the prisoner of war program. This remains true for the other two categories. Billinger discusses several prisoners who made the trek back to the United States to visit the site of their former incarceration and the bonds often formed between prisoner, guard, and even civilian. However, again he merely describes the people involved rather than examining their impact on historical memory. Indeed, even in the section devoted to "Memories" he returns to descriptions of prisoners' memories of the camp rather than any insightful look into memory today. Perhaps one can say that Billinger never intended to do any of this. However, his statement that "the West German servicemen of 1989 were engaged, as most people have always been, in reconstructing the past in the image desired for the present" leads the reader to expect some analysis on the construction and importance of historical memory, how it is formed, and the role it plays in modern society.

[7] Robert Billinger, *Hitler's Soldiers in the Sunshine State: German POWs in Florida*, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2000).

Michael Waters' *Lone Star Stalag: German Prisoners of War at Camp Hearne* suffers from problems similar to Billinger's.[8] Waters provides three interesting and unique chapters; one on the archaeological uncovering of artifacts, one on fountains, statues, and buildings, and one simply entitled legacy. The excavation of Camp Hearne and the resulting artifacts found is an excellent way to provide evidence of life in the camp. The same can be said for the chapter on fountains, statues, and buildings. The chapter on "Legacy" leaves much to be desired, however. It details some experiences in post war Germany as prisoners sought to rebuild their country and their lives. However, it is very brief in what it covers. Instead of simply covering the years immediately after the war, there is room to analyze the legacy of the prisoners and the program to the present day, perhaps even with a connection to current government prisoner practices in the federal penitentiary and even the treatment of suspected terrorists at Guantanamo Bay. His other two chapters suffer from the same problem. He reverts to detailed descriptions of artifacts or fountains and statues uncovered that are interesting at first but quickly become monotonous. Surely, some will think these details are of great significance, but more analysis is necessary. Artifacts could be related to those souvenirs greatly desired by American guards and civilians alike for example. In addition, the place of statues, fountains, and buildings on the landscape of historical memory could have been explored in depth. Certainly, these are missed opportunities that are addressed in this thesis.

Before exploring the construction of memory and the importance of place however, it is necessary to provide background and context concerning the homefront during World War II with particular concentration on the South as this thesis focuses on

[8] Michael Waters, *Lone Star Stalag: German Prisoners of War at Camp Hearne*, (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2004).

camps in Alabama. This homefront context is pivotal for understanding the impact the prisoners had on the country and for appreciating the currents of the nation that the prisoners were entering. The events of World War II had a profound impact on the lives of individuals, the morals of society, the gears of economics, and the gavel of politics in not only the United States but also around the world. Indeed, this transformative era in history resonates in nearly all countries today. Considering this, some would say that nowhere is this truer than in the southern United States. Morton Sosna even suggests that World War II was more significant than the Civil War in his essay "World War II as a Watershed in Southern History."[9] Sosna offers several explanations on how World War II affected the South, most notably in terms of gender and racial equality. Another prominent author concerning World War II southern history is George Tindall, who in opposition to Sosna believes that, socially, the South took a major step backwards during World War II in both gender and racial equality. Despite disagreements, however, both Sosna and Tindall agree on the importance and primacy of one thing– economic change in the South.

Perhaps nowhere else is change more evident than in the economy of the South. Due to massive amounts of defense spending, the South slowly moved away from agriculture to become more industrial. The Great Depression hit the South hard, as it did the entire nation. President Franklin D. Roosevelt deemed the southern economy as the number one problem to fix.[10] Therefore, with the advent of World War II many defense contracts traveled southward to help solve the problem. In addition to defense contracts,

[9] Morton Sosna, "World War II as a Watershed in Southern History," in *Major Problems in the History of the American South Volume II: The New South*, ed. Paul Escott and David Goldfield, (Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1990).

[10] Sosna, "World War II as a Watershed in Southern History," 456.

the increased development and establishment of military bases in the South spurred local economies and population booms. Examples of these two economic transformations are evident in Birmingham and Montgomery, Alabama, where Birmingham saw increased industrial growth, while Montgomery benefited from the nearby Maxwell military base.[11] There were practical reasons for building defense industries and military bases in the South. Land and labor were both cheap and a mild climate allowed buildings to be constructed cheaper by using less insulation. All of these reasons would also ultimately play a major role when it came time for the United States to select locations for prisoner of war camps. New industrial growth had an unexpected consequence in the south, however. Labor shortages and mass migrations would come to characterize much of the war years in the Deep South.

Increased industrial growth in the South along with the staffing and servicing of military bases, and traditional agricultural endeavors required labor. However, labor was in limited supply during World War II as the draft had taken a majority of the working population overseas. This problem would plague many throughout the war. People generally shunned from employment, including women and the handicapped, were called up to fill the shortage. Business leaders and government officials soon realized, however, that this was not enough to make up the difference. A unique solution presented itself and the most unlikely of candidates came to fill American factories and farms – prisoners of war. They partially filled the labor shortage, although there were strict restrictions placed by the Geneva Convention of 1929 to ensure safe working condition and the national labor unions to make sure all available civilian labor was utilized before prisoner labor.

[11] Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict: Alabama and World War II*; Wesley Newton, *Montgomery in the Good War: Portrait of a Southern City, 1939-1946*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000).

Indeed, jobs were of great significance and the higher paying industrial jobs in large cities fueled a massive migration that would change the South forever.

During the early twentieth century, many individuals concluded that farming was not as lucrative as it was in the past. Parents struggled to support their families and unregulated child labor became far too common. Therefore, when a new factory opened in a nearby city, people leapt at the opportunity for employment with high wages. This industrial boom resulting from defense spending led to widespread urbanization as rural residents moved into the cities to seek the lucrative employment opportunities offered by defense contractors and the supporting war industries. The Axis prisoners who would ultimately come to America would come to this sparsely populated countryside where interactions with civilians were limited as few now lived in and farmed rural areas. Those who had previously been farmers were not the only ones working in factories, however. As more and more men travelled overseas, women and African Americans increasingly began to fill the labor need.

Gender is a major issue when looking at the years of the Second World War. Women proved that they could work just as effectively as men could, filling factory positions and supporting military bases. With prisoners filling jobs not directly impacting the war effort, women were free to take up positions that largely influenced the United States' ability to wage war. However, by the time the war was over, the government, and society at large, moved them back into the home to yield their jobs to returning male soldiers.[12] It was said that it was their duty to return home and allow the brave servicemen the employment they deserved. It seems that women may have made some

[12] George Tindall, "Change and Resistance in the South During World War II," In *Major Problems in the History of the American South Volume II: The New South*, edited by Paul Escott and David Goldfield, 433-455, Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company, 1990.

strides during World War II but returned to the same status held in the pre-war years. A similar parallel can also be seen in the African American experience during World War II.

African Americans too made great strides in civil rights only to succumb to greater inequality and segregation at the end of the war. African Americans fought and died during the war and played an equally significant role as other soldiers but were forced to serve in their own segregated units. Many other soldiers, however, experienced new ideas and a new, deeper understanding of democracy while fighting abroad. As Southern soldiers traveled abroad and experienced new cultures, places, and people, they changed and returned home enlightened.[13] As they fought the racist Nazis, many came to realize the inherent conflict between the freedoms of democracy and Nazism and the struggle faced by the African Americans in the South. Even if they did not fight directly next to an African American, they acknowledged that both fought and died in service of their country and that social equality was deserved.

The deployment of military personnel on the homefront created a similar exchange of ideas. Northerners moved to military bases in the South and southerners moved to military bases in the North where each experienced different cultures and different lifestyles. Many northerners, after experiencing segregation first hand, realized that it was incompatible with the ideals of democracy.[14] In addition, many African American service men came home changed, as they also saw the conflict between democracy and racial discrimination. Their resolve hardened and they fought harder for

[13]Neil McMillen, ed., *Remaking Dixie: The Impact of World War II on the American South*, (University Press of Mississippi, 1997); Sosna, "World War II as a Watershed in Southern History," 462.

[14]Sosna, "World War II as a Watershed in Southern History," 461-462.

equality. Many also became educated thanks to the GI Bill and were able to fight more effectively through the legal system.

This unique situation in the South can also be seen in relation to the prisoner of war program. Prisoner interaction with local citizens, including African Americans, can provide great insight as to who the real enemy was in the South. Frequently, authorities gave these enemy prisoners more liberties and better treatment than African American citizens and soldiers received. The fact that Germans and Italians were seen as white before they were seen as the enemy is a major theme for exploration. Indeed, the prisoner of war program and the experience of prisoners reveals much about race relations that will be discussed in the following chapter. The story of the Axis prisoner of war in the United States begins far away from American soil, however, in the deserts of North Africa.

In November 1942, Allied forces gained an overwhelmingly decisive victory at the Battle of El Alamein and continued on to overall victory in North Africa. Allied forces under General Bernard Montgomery devastated Field Marshall Erwin Rommel's famous Afrika Korps, resulting in the surrender of nearly three hundred thousand Axis soldiers. Great Britain, having already fought the war for several years, had exhausted its means to confine any more POWs on British territory. Negotiations ensued and the United States agreed to provide assistance and begin transporting and interning prisoners on American soil. However, the United States was completely unprepared to deal with such a massive influx of prisoners. The government considered many factors such as, camp locations, security measures, how to interpret and adhere to the Geneva Convention, registration, interrogation, and the overall processing of prisoners.

The United States government and the War Department had a difficult task ahead of them with much planning to do concerning these prisoners and how to accommodate them. United States officials decided that the first issue, camp location, for security reasons, was to be at least 170 miles from any coastline, 150 miles from the Canadian or Mexican border, preferably in a secluded location, and close to a railroad.[15] The South and Southwest regions of the United States fit these requirements resulting in the majority of camp locations in these areas. Other benefits offered in these areas were cheaper land, labor, and cheaper overall construction costs. In addition, due to the mild winter climates of the South and Southwest regions, engineers did not have to take into consideration the difficulties that accompany frigid temperatures and the resulting insulation costs– the same reasons for the establishment and development of military bases in the South. Alabama was an ideal choice for these conditions and four major camps were built at Aliceville, Opelika, Fort Rucker, and Fort McClellan.

Wherever possible, the prisoner of war program used existing Civilian Conservation Corp Camps or unused property connected to existing military bases. This was the case with the camps at Fort Rucker, and Fort McClellan. However, at Aliceville and Opelika there were no previously existing camps; the United Stated government built these camps specifically for the purpose of housing prisoners. In the construction of these camps, the government adhered to rigorous specifications. A general layout of the camp consisted of:

[15]Arnold Krammer, "German Prisoners of War in the United States," *Military Affairs* 40, no. 2 (April 1976): 68; Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 27-28; Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict: Alabama and World War II*, 95; Martha Byrd, "Captured by the Americans," *American History Illustrated* 11, no. 10 (February 1977): 27. A similar policy can also be seen in light of the internment of Japanese civilians during World War II.

> One or more compounds surrounded by two wire fences . . . compounds are separated from each other by a single fence. Each compound houses four companies of prisoners, or approximately 1,000 men. The facilities consist of five barracks, a latrine, a mess hall, and an administration building for each company. In addition, each company is provided with a recreation building, an infirmary, a workshop, a canteen building . . . a chapel, and a station hospital.[16]

Of course, guard towers played a central role and were located at varying distances along the fence line. A typical scene at Camp Opelika in figure one shows prisoners and their barracks, while figure two displays a general scene at Camp Aliceville illustrating the construction and layout of the camp as well as the surrounding landscape. The layout and placement of these buildings that played such a large role in the daily life of prisoners is displayed in figures three and four. In the unfortunate instance that a prisoner succumbed to illness or political infighting resulting in death within the camp, cemeteries would also be incorporated into the layout of the camp.[17] However, in most cases, prisoner bodies would be returned to Germany at the end of the war, and the cemeteries would not remain on the American landscape.

[16] Krammer, "German Prisoners of War in the United States," 68-69.

[17] Some numbers on prisoner fatalities are provided in chapter two.

Figure 1. Scene in Camp Opelika exhibiting the general layout of the camp.[18]

Figure 2. Scene at Camp Aliceville exhibiting the general layout of the camp.[19]

[18] Photograph in Albert Killian, ed., *Prisoner of War Camp, Opelika, Ala. Camp Opelika, '42-'45* (Opelika: The Museum of East Alabama, 2007): [9]. This work is a primary source book that includes numerous letters, newspaper articles, photographs, and official reports and whenever cited is referring to primary source material. The scrapbook type nature of this work does not include page numbers. Therefore, the page numbers provided in footnotes are given by the author and notated by brackets.

[19] Aliceville Prisoner of War Camp photograph album and scrapbook, LPP7, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

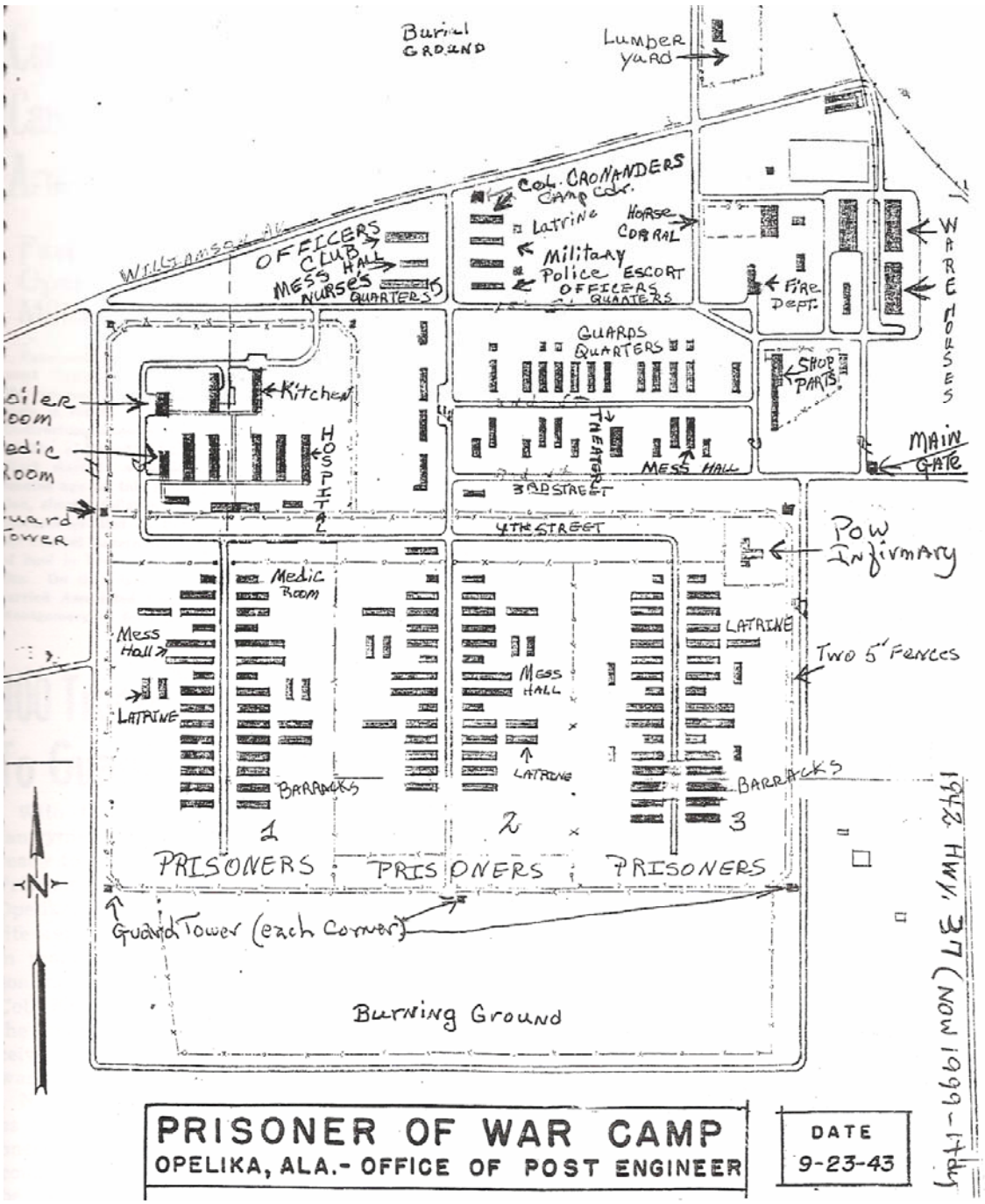

Figure 3. Layout of Camp Opelika exhibiting specifics of camp construction.[20]

[20] Map in Killian, *Prisoner of War Camp, Opelika, Ala.*, [4].

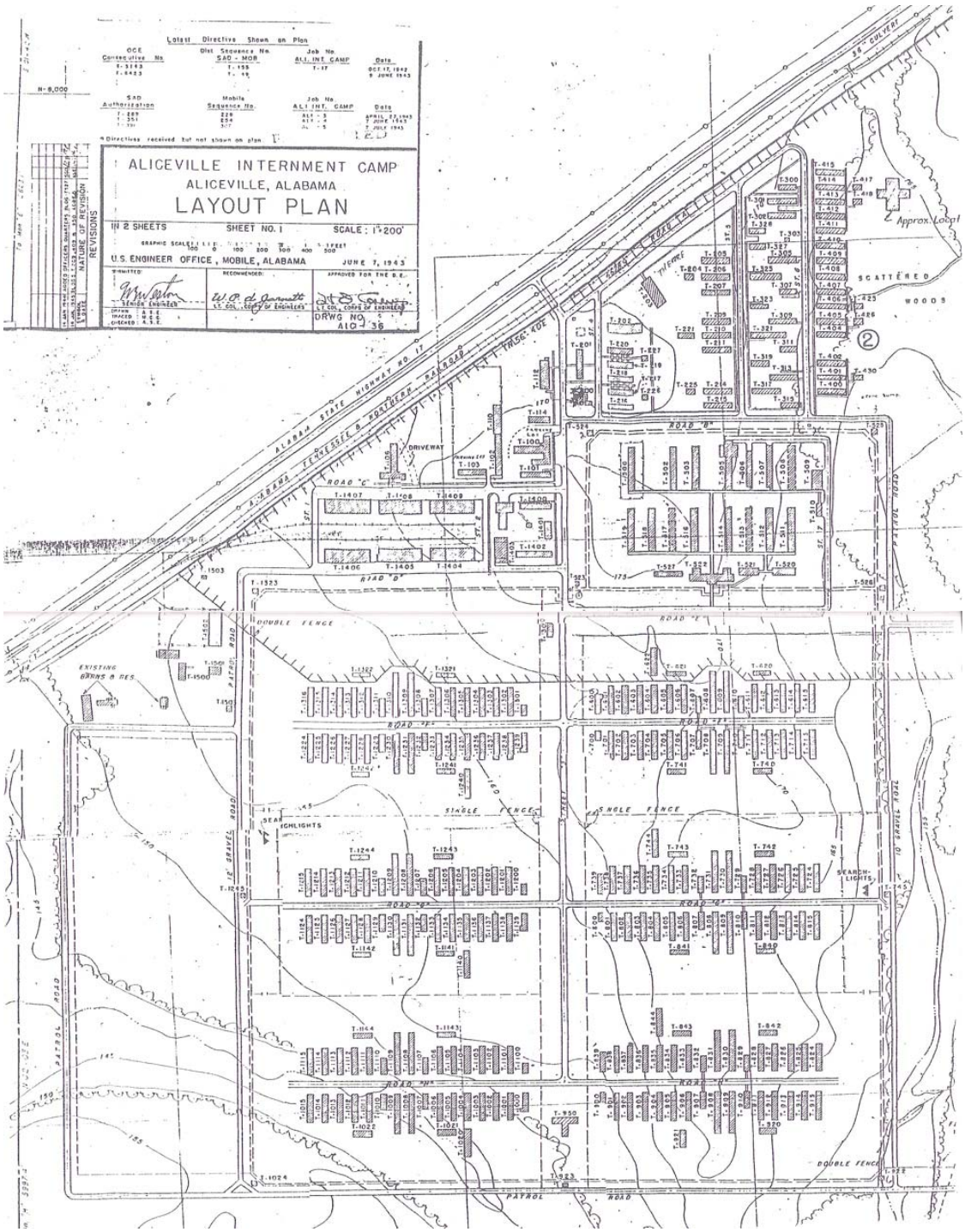

Figure 4. Layout of Camp Aliceville exhibiting specifics of camp construction.[21]

[21] E. B. Walker, *A Brief History of Prisoner of War Camp Aliceville*, (Birmingham: Taurus Enterprises, 1993).

Another pressing issue on the minds of prison officials and administrators was compliance with the Geneva Convention. The general provisions relevant to prisoner of war treatment were first adopted and ratified in 1929. These provisions generally stated that conditions for the POWs must be the same as the soldiers of the host country. This included quarters, meals, clothing, and medical attention. The Geneva Convention also strictly regulated prisoner labor programs. Provisions stringently forbade any labor deemed dangerous or in direct support of the war effort. Therefore, prisoners were not to work in the manufacturing of ammunition, combat vehicles, or in the logistical operations of warfare. However, one might easily see that any labor program at all in a way supported the war effort as it filled a need and freed up additional labor for those critical wartime industries. These are the most significant provisions the United States was concerned with. However, not all countries were equally concerned with the principles set forth in this convention.

While the United States worked strenuously to maintain compliance, other countries did not follow the guidelines so strictly. Indeed, one method of prisoner interrogation involved having a Soviet KGB agent present, or someone dressed like one. When the prisoner did not divulge desired information, the interrogating officer stamped papers of the prisoner with "NR." When the prisoner would ask what this meant officials informed him it meant "*Nach Russland*" or "to Russia," which was often more than enough to break the prisoner's silence.[22] Soviet adherence to the Geneva Convention was lackluster at best. With limited supplies, harsh winters, and generally more contempt towards German soldiers, Russian camps were a far cry from their American

[22] Lewis Carlson, *We Were Each Other's Prisoners: An Oral History of World War II American and German Prisoners of War*, (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 30; Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 18.

counterparts. However, other, more brutal methods of interrogation were rare and strictly regulated by the United States. The United States government hoped that good conditions would be reported back to Germany so that American prisoners would be treated better and that Germans would surrender more readily knowing that good treatment awaited them. Indeed, this line of reasoning motivated many United States guards and local citizens to provide the enemy prisoners the best treatment possible. Once the administration had solved these preliminary conditions though, action was taken to process the prisoners. The first experience of Axis prisoners in the hands of the Americans was registration, identification, and interrogation.

For the most part, registration took place in immense temporary holding camps in North Africa. Registration was often a confusing process for the prisoner, which consisted of being assigned a serial number, fingerprinted, photographed, given a medical examination, and interrogated.[23] In addition, during this process, souvenir-hungry guards subjected prisoners to numerous searches and would pocket anything from medals, pistols, and daggers to Nazi handbooks.[24] This often infuriated the German prisoners who submitted, begrudgingly, to the searches and seizures carried out by Allied personnel, as displayed in figure five.

The former POW Henry Kemp recalled these searches stating, "these acts of thievery were committed in full view of their American officers."[25] Another former prisoner, Reinhold Pabel, also recalled this humiliating act stating, "as soon as the

[23] Krammer, "German Prisoners of War in the United States," 68; Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 68.

[24] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 6.

[25] Ibid., 13.

stretcher had been placed on the floor, a bunch of souvenir hunters ripped some of my decorations off my blouse. After they had done so, they asked me if I had any objections. I kept my mouth shut."[26] Oskar Schmoling reported that many soldiers lost their watches to searches, even noting that one American proudly boasted seven or eight watched on his arm.[27] Others, like Karl-Heinz Hackbarth lost more personal items, such as a portrait of his father and mother standing next to each other.[28] Certainly, this was a degrading process for the prisoners, some of whom may have lost treasured keepsakes and reminders of home just as Hackbarth did. Criticisms such as these would become increasingly rare over the years as certain forces and factors would come to influence the prisoners. For now, however, prisoners would continue through the registration process.

Figure 5. Allied soldiers searching German prisoner.[29]

[26] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 6.

[27] Carlson, *We Were Each Other's Prisoners*, 35.

[28] Ibid., 19.

[29] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 8.

The registration process was also a time in which high-level German officers could slip through unidentified, as the Allies often lacked competent interpreters. These high-ranking officers would intentionally act as if they misunderstood communication and would even present wrong identification papers. Another failure on the part of the Allies was to take advantage of the initial confusion of the prisoners, singling out hardcore Nazi extremists, and separating them from the rest of the prisoners. This would later lead to problems in some camps.[30] However, after the lengthy and arduous process of registration was over, prisoners awaited transportation across the Atlantic and into what they believed would be the devastated and war-stricken interior of the United States.

The Allies transported their captured prisoners across the Atlantic on large vessels that were often overcrowded with prisoners. However, in some instances luxury liners were used, which resulted in extraordinarily good treatment for both prisoners and guards.[31] On these transatlantic voyages, Nazi officers and political extremists reinforced their discipline over the troops and established the military order that had existed before capture.[32] Later, once in the camps, this hallmark discipline of the German military would please many a camp commander who valued the smooth and orderly operation of the camp. Overall, it seems that the German prisoners were treated well, fed well, and endured much the same conditions, if not better, as American soldiers crossing the Atlantic. This was important, as it was the first step in complying with the Geneva Convention. Upon arriving in the United States, the prisoners experienced disbelief as

[30] Krammer, "German Prisoners of War in the United States," 68; Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 13.

[31] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 16.

[32] Ibid.

they saw the bustling metropolises and high-rise skylines. Many had believed the propaganda that German bombers had leveled American cities, and that sites like the Statue of Liberty lay in ruins.[33] This, their first glimpse of America, would continue as they boarded trains to be taken to their specific camp location.

The prisoners rode across the United States in comfortable passenger coach cars, as displayed in figure six. This was a stark contrast from military standards, as Reinhold Pabel described the trip, "Most of us had always been transported in boxcars during the military service. These modern upholstered coaches were a pleasant surprise to everybody. And when the colored porter came through with coffee and sandwiches and politely offered them to us as though we were human beings, most of us forgot . . . those anti-American feelings that we had accumulated."[34] This captures the general experience of the prisoners as they traveled the vast American countryside experiencing the country's immense, diverse, and beautiful landscapes. However, there were also criticisms from prisoners, and they voiced them at every opportunity to Swiss authorities who ensured proper treatment of prisoners.

The neutral Swiss emissaries visited various camps and interviewed prisoners during the war to ensure that the holding nations were maintaining compliance with the standards of the Geneva Conventions. In one instance of an interview with a Swiss agent, prisoner Hans Golhard expressed his dissatisfaction stating, "the journey lasted about one hundred hours. In that time, we were hardly allowed to move. The consequences were indigestion and blood pressure of the severest type. And then the watch! In each coach

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[33] Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*, 95; Newspaper article dated June 8, 1943 in Killian, *Prisoner of War Camp, Opelika, Ala.*, [9].; Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 16; Wall, "Inside the Wire: Aliceville and the Afrika Korps," 4.

[34] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 19.

were two men with automatic pistols and two men armed with clubs. They transported us like the lowest criminals about which they seem to have plenty of experience in this country."[35] Criticisms like these, as we will see in chapter three, were limited in number. Nevertheless, by the middle of 1943, the prisoners would ultimately reach the final destination of their camp, where they would spend the next several years of their lives.

Figure 6. Transportation of prisoners by train.[36]

The arrival of the prisoners to the small towns that were usually located near the camps was a big event for the locals. People came out in droves to see Hitler's famous army, and to get a glimpse of the hardened Nazi troops that they had been reading about in the papers throughout the war. For residents of Aliceville, Alabama, farmers, merchants, mothers, children, and many others watched the arrival of the first prisoners

[35] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 25.

[36] Ibid., 24.

by train as they looked upon the weary troops of Rommel's Afrika Korps.[37] Likewise, the sight of 15,000 Germans and Italians stepping off the trains astonished the small town of Crossville, Tennessee, a town with a population of only 2,000.[38] One observer described the prisoners as, "fliers, parachute men, artillerymen, panzer men . . . some of them wear the gaudy uniforms, faded and rumpled now, of high ranking officers. Many of them are still deeply burned from the African sun; some who cruised beneath the ocean until a depth bomb brought them up, are pale and blond."[39]

Figure 7. Aliceville residents view the arrival of prisoners.[40]

[37] Wall, "Inside the Wire," 6.

[38] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 44.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Aliceville Prisoner of War Camp photograph album and scrapbook, LPP7, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

Citizens were also surprised at how similar the Germans were to Americans as they noticed their ordinary human appearance when they were expecting to gaze upon cruel devils or ruthless militants. Ted Spears of Sylacauga, Alabama recalled this as he and his family drove down to Camp Opelika to see the prisoners.[41] People realized that the people they were seeing could be anybody– perhaps their next-door neighbor, their children, or even themselves. Indeed, seeing the faces of real Axis troops was a huge occasion in the small towns nearby the camps. The fatigued prisoners would now march to their camps where they would make the best of their situation for the next several years.

Indeed, the march to camp would mark a new beginning for the battle weary soldiers as they transitioned to a new lifestyle with new routines and orders with little to no freedom. These first prisoners had experienced a heavy uneasiness and even shame as they surrendered to the enemy who subjected them to the rigors of processing. Interrogation, searches, exams, and internment in immensely overcrowded temporary holding camps were all trials these prisoners of war endured. Upon arrival in America, however, they gazed upon great metropolises, rolling green countrysides, and vast forests all of which was a stark contrast to the bleak deserts of North Africa and the war torn battlefronts they were taken from. By entering America, they immediately became part of the fabric of change that was engulfing the nation. Politicians defended the decision to bring prisoners to the homeland, businesses benefited from prisoner labor, and many others wondered why these prisoners received more rights than African American citizens and even African American soldiers. Nevertheless, the prisoners entered their own individual camps to mark a new chapter in their journey where they would have to

[41] Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*, 94.

confront the monotony of an imprisoned life within the confines of the American prisoner of war program.

Chapter Two

Life in Aliceville and Opelika

It is easy to imagine the fear and anxiety that engulfed the Axis prisoners of war as they first stepped off the trains and onto the American soil that would soon become their prison. Certainly, thoughts of defeat and dishonor at home whirled about in their minds, as well as projections of torture, starvation, and the simple struggle to survive that could possibly compose their existence for the foreseeable future. Despite all of these fears, some of the most fervent Nazis would assuredly continue the fight with fierce resistance at every opportunity. However, others, including the many conscripts from Nazi occupied territories, were tired of fighting and undoubtedly relieved to be away from the dangers and troubles of the frontline. Despite differences between prisoners, they all shared a common uncertainty as they entered the confines behind the barbed wire. This uncertainty, fear, and anxiety would quickly dissipate though as prisoners settled into their new surroundings. Although their fate was in the hands of the adversary, prisoners would come to define and shape their own existence and experience within the camp as they participated in various daily activities including, labor and education programs as well as arts, crafts, and other leisure activities.

The experience of these prisoners of war through the lens of prison camps in Alabama frames the prisoner of war program as a whole and provides insight on the POW experience, which play a significant role in the legacy of not only the program but

also the prisoners themselves. The four major camps in Alabama were Camp Aliceville, Camp Opelika, Fort Rucker, and Fort McClellan, with numerous secondary branch camps attached to them. This study limits the exploration of the prisoner of war experience to two camps in Alabama, Camp Aliceville and Camp Opelika. Camp Aliceville and Camp Opelika were the two largest camps in Alabama and therefore arguably created a larger impact on the state and the most number of prisoners. Camp Aliceville was the largest of the camps with roughly six thousand prisoners of war at maximum capacity while Camp Opelika was the second largest holding roughly three thousand prisoners of war at maximum capacity. With such a large concentration of prisoners in these areas, lasting transformations occurred between community and prisoner as prisoners transformed communities while camp life in Alabama transformed prisoners. The physical size of these camps was also a factor. With such large camp construction, they significantly affected the community and forever changed the landscape. Furthermore, in some cases, the camps' presence on the landscape would later be embraced and help foster town identity, and in others, would ultimately be forgotten. Another major reason for focusing on these two camps is that while Camp Aliceville has seen some exposure in research and publication, Camp Opelika remains largely overlooked. By focusing on Camp Opelika, previously unseen sources and accounts can be revealed and shed new light on the literature. In addition to these, however, several other reasons influenced selection and methodology, specifically concerning the analysis of memory and each camp's place on the historical landscape.

A similarity both camps share is that they were not attached to a United States military base. This is important when considering the selection process for camp location,

as well as the changing nature of the land over time. Fort Rucker and Fort McClellan, the other two major prisoner of war camps in Alabama, were active military installations at the time and have remained so to this day. This is a marked contrast to the varying degrees of activity and inactivity at Camps Aliceville and Opelika. Gaining access to these active military bases also poses certain challenges in gathering sources as well as considering the physical remnants of the camps and artifacts of prisoner activity. In addition, preservation of static landscapes in contrast to an active one is an important consideration. Physical artifacts and the preservation of camp remains on the historical landscape play a major role in both this chapter and the next two. Object and artifact analysis lend compelling evidence on many aspects of prisoner of war life that provides insight on the prisoner of war experience in Camp Aliceville and Camp Opelika that undoubtedly shaped their memory and recollections of time spent in Alabama.

Camps Aliceville and Opelika both received their first contingent of prisoners in early June 1943.[42] These first prisoners were members of Rommel's Afrika Korps, elite, hardened, and optimistic of German victory. However, later in 1944-1945 the camps would become home for "post D-Day" troops, often demoralized conscripts not supportive of the causes and ideologies of the Axis powers. At first, the U.S. Government paid little attention to how prisoners were organized. However, after revelations of political infighting and appeals by anti-Nazis and minority ethnic groups, policy changed and segregation camps were established. In late 1944, both Camps Aliceville and Opelika were designated segregation camps for noncommissioned officers. For the most part, prisoners in Aliceville and Opelika were mostly German. This was also the case for most

[42] Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*, 101; Hoole, "Alabama's World War II Prisoner of War Camps," 86, 91; Newspaper article in Killian, *Prisoner of war camp, Opelika, Ala.*, [7]; Wall, "Inside the Wire," 4.

camps across the nation; Germans were the bulk of prisoners as few Italians and even less Japanese were captured. Nationally, at their highest points, there were 425,871 captured Germans, 51,156 captured Italians, and 5,413 captured Japanese.[43] Certainly, the Italian military was smaller than Germany's and the Japanese cultural practice of avoiding capture attributed to the makeup of these numbers. With a steady arrival of prisoners to the camps though, the United States began to use this new resource in a new labor program.

Throughout a normal day at a POW camp, labor was the bulk of routine and provided an escape from the boredom of an imprisoned life. Commissioned and noncommissioned officers were not required to work, but enlisted men were required to participate in a U.S. labor program that was in accordance with the Geneva Convention. The Geneva Convention stipulated certain conditions where prisoner of war labor was not to be used, however. It restricted prisoners from doing any hazardous or dangerous work, as well as any work directly related to the war effort. While the United States could not use prisoners to make munitions, bombs, or tanks, military and government leaders easily recognized the benefits of cheap prisoner labor. Indeed, the government was familiar with forced and contract labor as convicts and immigrants were often used to fill shortages.[44] As detailed in the previous chapter, a widespread labor shortage existed during this time due to much of the population serving overseas, especially in the South where the

[43] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 271-272.

[44] Although the Axis prisoners of war were not criminals, Alabama has a history of using prison and convict labor. For further reading on this see: Alex Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South*, (Verso, 1996). Another labor program used to fill the shortage was the Bracero program that brought in Mexican immigrants to work the fields and work the railroad lines. For further reading on this see: Barbara Driscoll, *The Tracks North: The Railroad Bracero Program of World War II*, (Austin: University of Texas at Austin, 1999). Both of these programs dealt heavily in the agricultural area, a similarity shared with the prisoner of war labor program.

majority of the camps were located. Therefore, in addition to working in the compounds to improve their own conditions, prisoners were also contracted out to local private businesses to provide much needed labor. Contracting of prison labor was not without opponents, however. Local and national unions fought to ensure that local labor was not available before allowing prisoners to be used. For example, the Army Service Command in Atlanta was required to obtain approval from the War Manpower Commission stating that local labor was indeed not available.[45] Unions had many successes, such as prohibiting POW labor from working in the meatpacking industry or the railroad industry.[46] However, contractors were also able to skirt the regulations by not considering African Americans as part of the available labor force.

Ultimately, prisoners of war were contracted out with agriculture employing the largest number of prisoners. Prisoners in Alabama picked cotton and harvested peanuts, but also chopped and sawed lumber and even worked in a Tuscaloosa area hospital.[47] In fact, in October 1944, as the *Birmingham News* reported, 4,000 POWs helped save a $38 million peanut crop.[48] Many of these prisoners came from Camp Opelika as one news article headline reads, "Large Group German War Prisoners From Opelika Camp In South Georgia Helping Harvest The Peanut Crops."[49] The article estimates that half of

[45] Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*, 101; Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 85-86, 94-95.

[46] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 94-95.

[47] Camp Aliceville Collection, Aliceville POW Museum and Cultural Center; Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*, 101; Hoole, "Alabama's World War II Prisoner of War Camps," 93; Newspaper article in Killian, *Prisoner of war camp, Opelika, Ala.*, [73]; Wall, "Inside the Wire," 10.

[48] Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*, 101.

[49]Newspaper article in Killian, *Prisoner of war camp, Opelika, Ala*., [73].

the prisoners from the camp were out working in Georgia peanut fields.[50] Prisoners from Camp Aliceville often worked in the lumber industry, as figure seven displays. This photograph could easily be interpreted in a number of ways, but the armed guard is indicative of imprisoned life.

Figure 8. Aliceville prisoners working the sawmill.[51]

For their labor, prisoners were paid eighty cents a day for their contract work, in addition to the ten cents a day that the camp normally provided to them.[52] This was not a payment in American currency though, but rather in camp canteen coupons, as government officials believed giving prisoners hard currency would make it much easier for them if they tried to escape.[53] These coupons allowed the prisoners to purchase

[50] Newspaper article in Killian, *Prisoner of war camp, Opelika, Ala*., [73].

[51] Photograph, Camp Aliceville Collection, Aliceville POW Museum and Cultural Center.

[52] Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*, 101; Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 87.

[53] Wall, "Inside the Wire," 10.

improvements for the camp and equipment such as musical instruments or sports supplies. Indeed, this helped shape how prisoners spent their leisure time as they participated in music, arts, crafts, sports, and education activities. Camp Opelika and Camp Aliceville provided many prisoners to local businesses and farmers. Certainly, their presence in the community transformed businesses and left a lasting impression on many individuals including farmers who might have lost their crops, all the while becoming a part of the community and befriending their employers.

Close connections between local residents and POWs formed due to the time spent working with one another, and over time local U.S. citizens and the POWs began to trust each other. One prisoner from Camp Foley, Alabama, Alfred Klein, remembered his experience of being stopped for speeding after being entrusted with a farmer's car, stating, "I still remember the expressions on those two highway patrolmen when they finally caught up with us. They started to write out speeding tickets when they realized we were POWs. They were absolutely speechless! I still laugh about it today."[54] Another prisoner, John Schroer, at a Montgomery, Alabama branch camp loaded canned goods and other food rations onto rail cars remembers that "several times a week, we found ourselves loading beer– and the guards always encouraged us to break a case or two. Since we couldn't ship them, of course, we all sat down in the shade together and drank the beer."[55] Specifically in Camp Opelika, in 1992, former prisoner Herbert Sprung had his daughter write to the town of Opelika to reconnect with his old employer and friend,

[54] Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*, 103-104; Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 74.

[55] Ibid., 104; Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 74.

William Perry.[56] Likewise, many a heartfelt reunion between former prisoner and community member occurred during reunion celebrations held in Aliceville. These accounts show the trust and friendship that developed between the prisoners, community members, and even guards through the war years. Similar stories of employers reuniting and reconnecting with prisoners in the post war years abound and will be discussed in the next chapter. Nevertheless, being accepted as part of these communities was a major accomplishment for these enemy soldiers who were previously seen as some of Hitler's most vile and ruthless warriors– many of whom regarded themselves as members of the superior super race.

The acceptance and even befriending of these enemy soldiers is perhaps telling of southern society, where being white was particularly important. Despite being United States citizens, contributing to the war effort, and fighting and dying in the service of their country, African Americans in segregated Alabama remained less than equal. African American guards were forced to ride in different trains when transporting prisoners and also made to wait outside restrooms, restaurants, or other segregated spaces.[57] In one instance, at an El Paso, Texas train station, a restaurant provided service to roughly two dozen German prisoners while refusing to serve black soldiers. One of these African American soldiers recalled that "my morale dipped to zero. Nothing infuriated me more than seeing these German prisoners of war receiving the warm hospitality of Texas."[58] Indeed, as Morton Sosna eloquently puts it, "one did not have to

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[56] Letter, Sprung to Moore, 1992, in Killian, *Prisoner of war camp, Opelika, Ala*., [35-36].

[57] Matthew Schott, "Prisoners Like US: German POWs Encounter Louisiana's African Americans," *Louisiana History* 36 (1995): 285-286; Morton Sosna, "Stalag Dixie," *Stanford Humanities Review* 2, no. 1 (1991): 52-53.

[58] Sosna, "Stalag Dixie," 52.

be a committed proponent of the civil rights to realize that there was something fundamentally wrong when German prisoners of war, because they were white, could be seen receiving better treatment than black Americans wearing the uniform of their country."[59] This did not go unnoticed by prisoners as they slowly became aware of what they perceived as cruel Jim Crow era laws, black submissiveness, mass ignorance, and impoverishment.[60] In fact, one prisoner who spent time in Aliceville commented, "We discovered in Mississippi and Alabama that blacks were considered to be low. We occasionally went out on work details with them, and they were not treated any better than we were. They might just as well been surrounded by barbed wire."[61]

Prisoners were not only well received by local communities and their employers; they also received high praise for their workmanship. Despite overwhelming evidence that prisoners almost never reached their quota and were largely ineffective at the tasks given to them, they were still more desirable to employers than African American laborers who could easily outperform the POWs. It seems as if the prisoners took on a certain mystique as described by Matthew Schott who wrote, "seemingly all of the Germans were hardworking, handsome blue-eyed blondes. Though national enemies, POWs were viewed either as nice folks like American soldiers themselves, the innocent young victims of war and national propaganda; or, on the other hand, as unmistakably the enemy-Nazi types as would please Hitler, characterized by such words as fanatic,

[59] Sosna, "Stalag Dixie," 52.

[60] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 74.

[61] Carlson, *We Were Each Others Prisoners*, 173.

hardcore, and arrogant."[62] One might argue that although these prisoners were the enemy, they were seen as white and therefore granted higher status in society than African American citizens.[63]

In both Opelika and Aliceville, interactions with African Americans were perhaps more likely than in other camps across the nation. The 1940 United States Census shows that the Lee County population, where Camp Opelika was located, consisted of 15,840 whites or 43.3% and 20,615 African Americans or 56.5%. In contrast, the Pickens County population, where camp Aliceville was located, consisted of 14,565 whites or 52.6% and 13,105 African Americans or 47.4%. While direct interactions where prisoners and African Americans exchanged conversations may not have occurred often or at all due to the many noncommissioned officers refusing to work, certainly prisoners likely had many opportunities to observe African Americans, their conditions, and their lifestyle. Figure nine below shows a comparison between Lee and Pickens Counties depicting white and African American population percentages as well as showing how the prisoners of war at the camps, if at maximum capacity, would factor in population percentage.

[62] Schott, "Prisoners Like US: German POWs Encounter Louisiana's African Americans," 281.

[63] There is a broad literature available on the aspects and implications of whiteness. For further reading see: David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, (Verso, 1999); Matthew Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, (Harvard University Press, 1998).

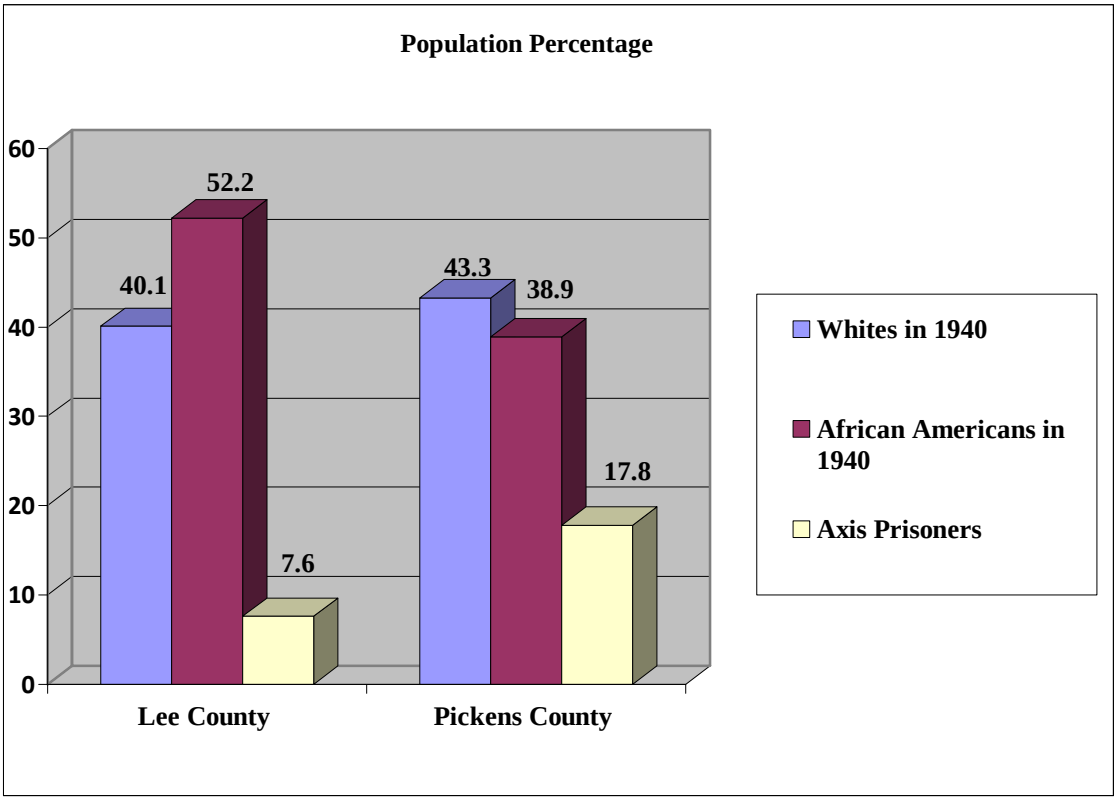

Figure 9. Chart displaying population percentages of Lee and Pickens County.[64]

In Aliceville and Opelika, interactions with the community were perhaps less after 1944, when they were designated segregation camps, where noncommissioned officers occupied the camps who, as mentioned earlier, were not required to participate in work details under the Geneva Convention. Although some noncommissioned officers volunteered for labor details, most remained inside the camp walls with hours and hours of unoccupied and monotony filled time on their hands. To fill this void they took part in a variety of recreational and educational activities.

Entertainment activities in the camps consisted of lively orchestras, bands, string quartets, choirs, and even drama plays all organized and operated by the prisoners.[65]

[64] This chart adds the maximum capacity of Camp Aliceville (6,000) and Camp Opelika (3,000) to the total population given by the 1940 census and appropriately distributes the percentages.

They were able to form these due to purchases made with their coupons, as well as from contributions from the Red Cross and YMCA, both of which valued the treatment of the prisoners, and attempted to create better living conditions for them, much in the same way that they cared for American prisoners of war.[66] Even if no instruments were available, the resourcefulness and skill of the prisoners meant that solutions were found. Prisoners would often make their own instruments including carefully carved violins, or perhaps a working violin made out of matchsticks.[67] Figure ten shows the Camp Opelika Orchestra in front of one of the camp barracks. One can easily see the diverse range of instruments, as well as the size of the one orchestra, whereas several usually existed within different compounds of the camp. Under other circumstances, one might imagine being a prisoner of war and treasuring something as small and simple as a harmonica.

Figure 10. The Camp Opelika Orchestra[68]

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[65] For specific examples of these activities see: Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*; Hutchinson, "The Oasis: German POWs at Fort McClellan,"45; Killian, *Prisoner of War Camp, Opelika, Ala*; Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*; Wall, "Inside the Wire."

[66] Camp Aliceville Collection; Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*, 98; Killian, *Prisoner of War Camp, Opelika, Ala;* Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 60.

[67] Camp Aliceville Collection; Wall, "Inside the Wire," 18.

[68] Photograph in Killian, *Prisoner of war camp, Opelika, Ala.*, [18].

In the workshops located in the camps, prisoners also participated in sculpting, woodworking, pottery, painting, and other arts and crafts.[69] Some prisoners had previous training or natural talent, while classes were available for others. Pottery, woodcarvings, and paintings remain some of the most impressive creations by the prisoners. The prisoners in most camps also published their own newspapers reporting on camp activities. Camp Aliceville's paper was known as *Der Zangaust*, roughly translated as, "The Fenced Guest," while Camp Opelika's first paper was called *Der Breucke* or "The Bridge" with a later paper *Querschnitt*, roughly translated as "Cross Section." For the most part the prisoners wrote freely, but censoring by camp officials did take place to avoid any subversive political activity. Daily activities such as sports scores, upcoming concerts or plays, poems, and philosophical and literary discussions were published in the papers. Perhaps this suggests that censorship was more rigorous, limiting prisoners to report on only a handful of topics.[70] Later, as part of a reeducation project, the camp newspapers were used along with other readings to spread democratic philosophical ideas.[71]

Certainly, reading was an enjoyed pastime for the prisoners and many camps actually had libraries of both English and German books, magazines, and newspapers. Often times, the complaints from inspection reports in both Camp Aliceville and Camp

[69] For specific examples of these activities see: Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*; Killian, *Prisoner of war camp, Opelika, Ala*.; Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America.*

[70] These camp newspapers were published in German. While the author is not fluent in German others have examined camp newspapers and generally suggest that their informational value is limited.

[71] Gansberg, *Stalag USA: The Remarkable Story of German POWs in America*.

Opelika concerned the limited amount of reading material available.[72] However, despite the popularity of these activities, sports were perhaps the most popular draw. Prisoners participated in games of soccer, tennis, boxing, bowling, handball, and even American baseball.[73] Alfred Klein states that the soccer games were so popular and competitive that even the American guards became involved as he recalls that they "participated as cheerleaders from their towers and attended the games on weekends with their families shouting from the sidelines."[74] Figures eleven and twelve show a soccer game illustrating the large turnout of individuals to cheer on their favorite team. Indeed, it seems that camp life was not dull and monotonous for the NCOs or cruel slave labor for enlisted men, but active, lively, and even pleasant. However, one pursuit that many prisoners also participated in, which was very different from these playful activities, was that of self-enhancement and education.

[72]Inspection Reports, Camp Aliceville Collection; Inspection Reports in Killian, *Prisoner of war camp, Opelika, Ala*., [66-67].

[73] Byrd, "Captured by the Americans," 28; Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*, 99; Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 60; Wall, "Inside the Wire," 18.

[74] Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*, 99.

Figure 11. Prisoners of war play soccer at Camp Aliceville.[75]

Figure 12. Prisoners of war play soccer at Camp Aliceville.[76]

[75] Aliceville Prisoner of War Camp photograph album and scrapbook, LPP7, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama.

[76] Ibid.

The education programs in camps were professional, conducted by individuals with backgrounds in education or by those considered experts in a particular field. Courses taught included English, which was the most popular, other modern languages such as French and Russian, Latin, mathematics, the sciences, shorthand, and law.[77] In Alabama, professors from Alabama Polytechnic Institute at Auburn went to Camp Opelika and Camp Rucker to teach courses, while professors from the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa taught courses at Camp Aliceville and Fort McClellan.[78] Additionally, prisoners with education backgrounds also taught classes. The post-war German government viewed these classes and the level of instruction at such a high level that after the war they offered high school or college credit to prisoners completing these courses.[79] Many former prisoners who obtained increased education at POW camps went on to lead profitable and successful careers in the reconstruction of Germany after the war. Indeed, these educational opportunities did not simply fill prisoners' leisure time. By 1944, the reeducation program established and governed by the United States aimed to win the hearts and minds of its prisoners.

The reeducation program, called the Intellectual Diversion Program, initiated by the United States government was in part created after the United States realized the need to separate hardcore Nazis from so-called "anti-Nazis." Special Assistant Executive

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[77] Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*, 98; Hutchinson, "The Oasis," 46; Killian, *Prisoner of war camp, Opelika, Ala*; Wall, "Inside the Wire," 20.

[78] Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*, 98; Hoole, "Alabama's World War II Prisoner of War Camps," 97-98; No known university records exist documenting this exchange; it may be that this collaboration never occurred. In a footnote, Hoole states that, "There are no records remaining to prove that formal courses were offered; however, it is believed that some prisoners may have enrolled in correspondence courses or that a few professors may have taught the prisoners in unofficial non-credit courses. Certainly, none of the credits were earned toward a degree."

[79] Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*, 98; Killian, *Prisoner of war camp, Opelika, Ala*.

Officers were implanted at each camp to administer the program. These officers used books, films, newspapers, music, art, and all forms of communication to disseminate democratic values and its success and history in the United States.[80] The anti-Nazi prisoners with the right background, skills, and most fervent opposition to National Socialism were selected to take part in a more engaged program to ultimately rebuild Germany after the end of the war.[81] At Aliceville and Opelika, the Intellectual Diversion Program was in full force. Camp Assistant Executive Officers selected and censored books, music, movies, and influenced the camp in a variety of other ways creating an atmosphere conducive to accepting American values.[82]

The success of the reeducation program is difficult to gauge. One reason is the illusiveness of determining the prevalence of Nazi ideology in the camps and the indoctrination of prisoners. By 1944, the United States realized the need to separate hardcore Nazis from the average soldier and anti-Nazis. Also by this time, many prisoners coming into camps were post D-Day troops and were reluctant conscripts much less supportive of Nazi Germany and her ideals. Camps Aliceville and Opelika would seem unique though. With their high number of NCOs, one would imagine that Nazi ideology would be fairly widespread and commonplace among the captured troops.[83] As

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[80] Gansberg, *Stalag USA*, 82-83.

[81] Ibid., 65.

[82] Paul Neuland, "Memorandum for Director, Prisoner of War Special Projects Division," February 1, 1945, Camp Aliceville Collection, Aliceville POW Museum and Cultural Center; Paul Neuland, "Memorandum for Director, Prisoner of War Special Projects Division," April 9, 1945, in Killian, *Prisoner of war camp, Opelika, Ala*., [66-67, 72].

[83] Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-45, German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare*, (Palgrave, 2001). Bartov in his study of German troops on the Eastern front indicates that noncommissioned officers were generally more ideological than enlisted men, though commissioned officers were the most ideological.

mentioned previously, censorship of camp publications limited the prisoners in their voice. One method that offers insight, though, is the analysis of prisoner artifacts.

Due to the immense amount of recreational and creative activities at Aliceville and Opelika, a large number of artifacts of prisoner arts and crafts have survived. The creations of the prisoners and the subject matter provide a window into their minds, thoughts, and desires. From this one can look to see if any traces of Nazi ideology are present such as use of the swastika, superiority of the Aryan race, and portraits of Hitler or other party leaders. Two institutions, the Aliceville Museum and Cultural Center and the Museum of East Alabama, hold artifacts from Camp Aliceville and Camp Opelika. Their collections consist of woodcarvings, paintings, sketches, and pottery among other things. In these collections of artifacts created by the prisoners, no images associated with Nazi ideology can be found. Overwhelmingly, the art depicts scenes of countrysides, Bavarian Alps and cottages, and vast peaceful landscapes. Woodcarvings often feature intricate designs but no swastikas or even the more traditional German symbol of the iron cross. Therefore, one might deduce that Nazi ideology was not widespread or entrenched in the minds of German prisoners of war. They only truly wanted to be away from the war back at home in peace.

Of course, there are limitations with this methodology. While both the Aliceville Museum and the Museum of East Alabama hold various Nazi related artifacts such as daggers, flags, and even uniforms, none seem to represent the prisoner's heart and mind. Instead, they more mundanely represent standard equipment provided by the Third Reich. This does not mean that prisoners did not create art with Nazi themes, however. It does mean that for whatever reason it has not made its way into the collections of the

preserving institutions. Prisoners may have created this art to sell or give to guards or local community members, and they most likely realized or assumed that swastikas would not sell well. However, on the other hand, one might easily say that souvenir hungry guards would perhaps desire a portrait of Hitler or something displaying Nazism more than a peaceful Bavarian landscape. There was an unofficial black market trade network between prisoners, guards, and civilians.[84] Despite the efforts of the camp administrators and the camp canteens to prevent hard currency from coming into the hands of the prisoners, at times they did receive currency when trading illegally. However, most often they received other items for trade such as clothing, cigarettes, or alcohol, items that were not as easily acquired from the canteen. One can easily imagine, judging from the souvenir hunting of guards during the processing and interrogation of prisoners, that guards stationed on American soil desired souvenirs, war mementos, or battle trophies. In addition to considering desirability of creations on the trade market, censorship may have also played a role in what prisoners could and could not create.

[84] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 71.

Figure 13. Decorative Plates made by prisoners at Camp Opelika[85]

Figure 14. Landscape painting made by prisoner at Camp Opelika[86]

[85] Woodcarvings, Camp Opelika Collection, Museum of East Alabama, Opelika, Alabama.

[86] Painting, Camp Opelika Collection, Museum of East Alabama.

Figure 15-16. Wood Carving and a child's portrait sketch made by prisoners at Camp Aliceville[87]

Figure 17. Landscape painting made by prisoner at Camp Aliceville[88]

[87] Woodcarving and sketch, Camp Aliceville Collection, Aliceville POW Museum and Cultural Center.

[88] Painting, Camp Aliceville Collection, Aliceville POW Museum and Cultural Center.

At Camp Aliceville, there is one known instance of deliberate censoring of what prisoners could create. After sculpting a large bas-relief of what appears to be a prisoner marching, goose-stepping, or perhaps escaping, the camp commander upon seeing it ordered the sculpture destroyed.[89] However, the crafty prisoners made small replicas of the sculpture to distribute among themselves in a way to subvert camp authority. One of the replica tiles is displayed in figure eighteen below. The sculpture does not seem to display any National Socialist ideology, and in fact the text *heim mir reichts* translates to "home enough for me" seemingly indicating that the prisoners viewed the camp as a home. However, the ordering of its destruction suggests that camp officials did monitor what prisoners were creating and actively sought to prevent certain themes from being displayed. Indeed, it seems that by analyzing the art and crafts created by the prisoners, yields evidence supporting the notion that their hearts and minds were truly focused on home. However, there are others instances that might offer insight on prisoner ideology.

Figure 18. A replica tile of the bas-relief that was destroyed.[90]

[89] Exhibit, Camp Aliceville Collection, Aliceville POW Museum and Cultural Center.

[90] Ibid.

At Aliceville, there are several recorded instances of prisoners flying or distributing Nazi flags displaying the swastika. In one case, prisoners constructed a hot air balloon, attached a large homemade Nazi flag, and sent it flying across town.[91] However, in this case, as well as others, these instances seem to lean more towards pranks to aggravate U.S. guards and commanders rather than adamant and concrete displays of Nazi ideology. Another event that might shed some light on ideology recorded in Aliceville undoubtedly occurred throughout many prisoner camps across the nation.

The news of Field Marshal Erwin Rommel's death in October 1944 quickly spread throughout the Aliceville, Alabama camp. Many German prisoners "were shocked and in utter disbelief."[92] A commemorative service was quickly organized and held on October 25, 1944 and took place with the approval of the camp authorities.[93] Camp officials did not just allow the prisoners to hold the service, but also actively took part in it. A stage was constructed for prisoners and American officers to speak as well as a large portrait of Rommel in full uniform complete with war decorations painted by a prisoner and illuminated by the camp's large spotlights.[94] Indeed, the ceremony was a large affair with prisoners donning their Afrika Korps uniforms with shined boots and camp orchestras' playing appropriate funeral songs.[95]

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[91] "Klink's Heroes," in *Museum News* 9, no. 4 (November 2002): 5; "Schlegel Account of the Hot Air Balloon," in *Museum News* 10, no. 1 (February 2003): 2.

[92] "Tragic Death of Field Marshall Erwin Rommel," in *Museum News* 8, no. 2 (May 2001): 7.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Ibid.

Despite the overwhelming display Rommel's commemorative ceremony represents, there are problems with using it and the reported displays of flying swastikas as a gauge for Nazi ideology. The recorded instances of flying swastikas and the hot air balloon as discussed above can easily be attributed as simple pranks to get under the skin of the Americans rather than hardcore Nazi fanaticism. Likewise, admiration for Field Marshal Rommel is a difficult measure. In many ways, Rommel transcends Nazism as he formed personal relationships between his troops and ultimately gained great adoration from the German public. Of course, his participation in the attempted assassination plot against Hitler also leads individuals who may despise Nazism still able to hold a favorable or even idealized view of Rommel. Certainly, there are always complications or alternate views with every conclusion drawn, but perhaps examining what the prisoners created themselves is the best window into their soul.

The experiences of these Axis prisoners of war seem to be rather unique. The freedom to take part in creative activities and self-education is not what one normally considers a part of prison life. However, these prisoners reveled in leisure activities and lived a carefree life with ample food and supplies. Compared to Axis POWs in other Allied countries or Allied POWs in Axis countries there is a marked contrast. German prisoners in the Soviet Union undoubtedly suffered immense hardships struggling through brutal winters and Soviet contempt. Camps in Britain, while featuring better condition than Soviet camps, were not quite as comfortable as those in America. With limited supplies and the sheer chaos of warfare, Britain simply did not have the available resources to care for its prisoners as well as the United States. Germany too had limited resources but generally attempted to care for Allied troops in its possession as best as

possible and abide by Geneva Convention regulations, although those of Soviet, Jewish, or other "undesirable" origin suffered different fates.[96] Indeed, the Holocaust and German atrocities are well known. While conditions in Germany for Allied POWs were far from ideal, Japan represents the worst in prisoner treatment. Roughly one percent of American prisoners in German hands died of all causes, while over one-third of American prisoners captured by the Japanese succumbed to death.[97] This compares to the 477 German prisoners of war, or .001 percent who died, in the United States.[98] For the Axis prisoners of war, though, their time in American camps may have been over, but for many, they still had one last journey as a prisoner.

The end of the war in Europe on May 8, 1945, led to the need to repatriate the almost half a million prisoners that resided on American soil. Repatriation actually came to the Italians first as their process began after the liberation of Italy in late 1943. However, Germans and Japanese would not be repatriated until 1946 and some would have to wait until 1947. Officials decided that Germany was not prepared to deal with so many people coming back into the country, and the United States still needed the labor.[99] Nevertheless, repatriation took place with the ill first, the cooperative second, and the hostile last. Leaving the United States did not mean a one-way ticket to Germany though. France was in a state of devastation and many German prisoners found themselves laboring under grueling conditions rebuilding a nation with much more contempt and less

[96] Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-45, German Troops and the Barbarisation of Warfare*, 107. Of the estimated 5.7 million Soviet troops captured by the Germans, 3.3 million, or about 57% perished.

[97] Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*, 105.

[98] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 154. This number is the official government count; however, some have disputed this number.

[99] Cronenberg, *Forth to the Mighty Conflict*, 103.

resources to freely give to prisoners than the United States. This disenchanted many prisoners who may have received democratic reeducation in America and would ultimately affect their lives in Germany as they returned home to rebuild their own country. Thus, after such a long time away from home, the prisoners would now be able to reflect on their time spent in America, constructing their memories through reminiscing and nostalgia, reliving the past and creating their legacy.

Chapter Three

The Construction of Memory

What is a memory? For many this might be a simple question to answer, as one might believe that their memories come directly from factual experiences in the past. However, this is not always entirely the case. How do one's experiences translate into what is later remembered? Are there other factors that influence memory construction in addition to seemingly factual experience and do memories evolve over time? These are fundamental questions that can be difficult to answer. Indeed, perhaps the answers to these types of questions can never truly be found or completely understood. The chemical and electrical impulses that form connections deep within the mind are still foreign to science. However, in the recent past there has been an interdisciplinary avalanche of studies that seek to understand memory, its construction, and its many implications and definitions. A brief overview helps explore the topic as it applies to the Axis prisoners of war.[100]

Some influential musings on memory include those by Sigmund Freud, Maurice Halbwachs, and Pierre Nora.[101] These authors, among others, address memory at its deepest philosophical and theoretical level discussing individual versus collective

[100] Throughout this chapter, I draw on certain ideas and concepts from the broader literature on memory studies. A brief overview on how I address memory is included in the text, but in general, throughout this chapter, footnotes will provide reference for works addressing specific ideas or concepts.

[101] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, (University of Chicago Press, 1991); Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7-24.

memory. Definitions for these two distinct ideas on memory vary with considerable complexity. Individual memories may include explicit and implicit, or perceptual and autobiographical where collective memory may include cultural, official, or vernacular concepts. For the purpose of this paper, it is sufficient to say that individual memories are regarded as events experienced or facts learned, while collective memory may be defined as a group of individuals sharing a common recollection or memory of the past. Furthermore, official memory is that embraced as an authoritative narrative accepted as fact, often at a national level. Just how are these memories formed, though?

In the field of memory studies, it was once understood that the act of remembering was to objectively reproduce the event or fact from a central repository analogous to a computer hard drive. However, it is increasingly recognized that this is not the case. With advances in modern science, psychologists and biologists now believe that memories are formed through associations, as electrical impulses form connections throughout the brain, which is to say that each recollection is a new construction.[102] As David Thelen effectively states, "memory [is] an active and new construction made from many tiny associations, not a passive process of storing and retrieving full-blown objective representations of past experiences."[103] In addition to chemical or biological ways memories are constructed inside the brain, there are also ways memory is shaped, formed, or constructed due to social, cultural, or even institutional pressures. For the axis prisoners of war, available evidence would seem to indicate that their experiences in the prison camps were overwhelmingly positive. Evidence certainly supports this

[102] David Thelen, "Memory and American History," *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 4 (March 1989): 1119-1121.

[103] Ibid., 1121.

interpretation, but there are also reasons why it is remembered this way– by the prisoners themselves, by historians, and by the broader public as a variety of factors coalesce to form both individual and collective memory.

After returning to Germany to continue to live their lives, the prisoners never forgot their experiences and life in the camps in the United States. They continued to reflect on their past experiences as they reintegrated into European life. Europe, Germany in particular, had been ravaged by war. Widespread devastation, deprivation, and chaos plagued the continent. Former prisoners of war returned home to find that their homes were nothing more than piles of rubble, or that no food, clothing, or other vital supplies were available. While many were grateful to be "home" alongside family and loved ones, they could not help but recall the time of plentiful abundance and carefree existence they had in America. For example, Gerhard Stroh wrote to Aliceville mayor Gerald Stabler in 1947, expressing the hardships he and his family faced in Germany while remembering his time in America:

> I often think on the days I spent in Alabama as a prisoner of war. In this time I never was hungry… But today in Germany I am always hungry. There is little bread, we have no potatoes, no flour and no sugar. We have also very little fat and dripping. There are days, my mother does not know what to cook for the family. But we hope it will be better in autumn, when the harvest is brought in. But I think till this time, there will be very bitter days. When I am hungry, I often wish to be a prisoner in the U.S.A. That's very sad. That's the same with the clothes. When [I became] a soldier I was a young man and so all my clothes are so small. I am very glad that there is now summer. But what will happen in winter?[104]

Johannes Peter's letter to Stabler in September 1947 displays a similar sentiment:

> For a long time I was PW in the camp [at Aliceville]. Often I have gone through your town. I am sorry that I was not able to speak often with the American people, but I can say, that I have been treated there very well. Now I am discharged. When I came to Germany, [I discovered] that I have lost all and often I must think of the good li[f]e,

[104] Stroh to Stabler, June 8, 1947 in "Stroh-Stabler Post-War Correspondence," *Museum News* 11, no. 2 (May 2004): 7.

> we have had in your country. Although I was a PW at that time, I have not to take care for [clothing] and food. Both are very scanty here.[105]

These reflections, made not long after the end of the war, are important when considered in relation to the destruction and devastation of Germany in the aftermath of the Second World War. This experience undoubtedly shaped the memory of the former prisoners, casting their time as prisoner in a much better light than their current situation. Perhaps if conditions in postwar Europe had been better than life in the Alabama prison camps, they would have remembered things differently. One can easily imagine living in conditions where such basic necessities were unavailable, looking back with a somewhat romanticized view of the good life in America. In addition to the condition and defeat of Germany, the revelation of the transgressions, war crimes, and sheer brutality of the Third Reich, specifically the Holocaust, perhaps held equal sway over how the former prisoners remembered their imprisonment.

After learning about the atrocities committed by the Nazi state and seeing the shocking and morbid footage of Allies liberating concentration camps, prisoners in the United States and in Alabama were left speechless and with a deep sense of shame. Footage of the piles of rotting corpses and the survivors who looked like corpses, the gas chambers, and the mass burials enraged, disheartened, confused, and most of all shamed many of the German prisoners. Some took up collections for victims and families of victims or donated the profits of the camp canteens to organizations such as the Red Cross.[106] Despite prisoner action demonstrating feelings of compassion and embarrassment, some evidence exists of a decline in the treatment received by the Axis

[105] Peter to Stabler, September 15, 1974 in Wall, "Inside the Wire," 29.

[106] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 70, 210-211; Gansberg, *Stalag USA*, 103.

prisoners at the hands of their American captors. For example, many reports indicate a sharp decline in the amount and quality of food available for the prisoners.[107] This short term impact on the prisoners pales in comparison, however, when one considers the powerful force of shame on the construction of memory. Shame has led many communities and individuals over time to forget and even obliterate places or memories.[108] In the case of the German prisoners of war, how could they criticize their experience in the hands of the Allies after seeing such raw and brutal disregard for human life and treatment of prisoners in the hands of the Germans? Indeed, in the words of Horst Blumenberg, a former prisoner:

> Yet, the only thing I objected to– it's very tough if the war ends on the fifth of May, and you get released in September of '47. But in general, I don't have any hard feelings, and– after those Holocaust films, and stuff like that– it's really hard to judge, even if it wasn't fair, and wasn't legal, but it's very hard to judge what you should say about it, you know?[109]

From this account, one can see that criticisms of treatment may have been held back due to the emotional strain and shame imparted by the Holocaust. In this instance, it is clear that Blumenberg was critical of not being repatriated until 1947. Some prisoners expressed dissatisfaction with late repatriation or with a decline in the quality and quantity of food following the revelation of the atrocities committed by Germany, but it is rarely discussed by historians or, more importantly, in prisoner's own accounts. Indeed, it seems prisoners have tempered their memories to forgive or forget any ill feelings, criticisms, or notions of mistreatments. As prisoners kept the shame of living a

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[107] Gansberg, *Stalag USA*, 40.

[108] Kenneth Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy*, (University of Texas Press, 2003).

[109] Horst Blumenberg, *American Stalag: The Story of German Prisoners of War Held in the U.S. During World War II*, DVD, Directed by John Aldrich, (Gainesville, Florida: AM Production, 2000).

fairly well cared for existence in the United States in their minds, they continued to recall a positive experience later in life.[110]

Not dissimilar to other prisoner of war camps, Camp Opelika during the 1990s experienced a revival of interest, most significantly from the former prisoners of war. In 1992, the city of Opelika received a letter from Ingeborg Janssen-Sprung, writing on behalf of her father, former prisoner Herbert Sprung. Mr. Sprung was interested in the place where he had spent several years of his life. He wished to know if large cotton plantations remained in Opelika and if William Perry, the man Mr. Sprung had worked for, was still living.[111] Unfortunately, Mr. Perry had died just two years earlier. His children, very young during World War II, remembered the German prisoners of war who worked for their father, but not Mr. Sprung in particular. Mike Moore, Opelika's revenue officer at the time, wrote back to the Sprung family. Ingeborg wrote back stating that they read Moore's letter with "much beating of the heart" and that her father was "very shaken and touch[ed]." Truly, this was a stimulating and riveting reunion of minds and memories past. Mr. Sprung after so many years still remembered and longed to revisit a portion of his past that had made a tremendous impact on his life.

In 1996, Opelika again heard from one of its past residents. Instead of sending a letter to Opelika officials, former prisoner Karl-Heinz Bösche actually returned to the site

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[110] There is a larger literature available concerning German war guilt, conscience, and reconciliation following World War II and the revelation of the Holocaust and other atrocities. Some works include: Andrew Bonnell, Gregory Munro, and Martin Travers, eds., Power *Conscience, and Opposition: Essays in German History in Honor of John A. Moses*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1996); Barbara Heimannsberg and Christoph Schmidt, eds., *The Collective Silence: German Identity and the Legacy of Shame*, (Jossey-Bass, 1993); Claudia Koonz, *The Nazi Conscience*, (Belknap Press, 2003); Michael Wolffsohn, *Eternal Guilt?: Forty Years of German-Jewish-Israeli Relations*, (Columbia University Press, 1993); Rudy Koshar, *Germany's Transient Pasts: Preservation and National Memory in the Twentieth Century*, (University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Wulf Kansteiner, *In Pursuit of German Memory: History, Television, and Politics after Auschwitz*, (Ohio University Press, 2006).

[111] Sprung to Moore, April 7, 1992 in Killian, *Prisoner of war camp, Opelika, Ala*., [35-36].

of his incarceration.[112] He walked through the sites of the prisoner camp, now long gone, and viewed the empty railroad tracks, seemingly leading to nowhere now, where he first stepped foot onto Alabama soil. To him, it was important to return to the site, breathe the air, and feel the earth. However, the memories flowed most abundantly when Bösche was reunited with a former prison guard, George Marlett, inside the Museum of East Alabama. Although Bösche did not speak English and Marlett did not speak German, the two men had formed an instant connection that transcended all language barriers. They shared memories of past experiences as Mr. Bösche stated, "I'm just so proud to get the chance to come back here and be reunited with an American veteran . . . This has been a life-long dream for me to come back to this place where I was a prisoner. I had to come back."[113] Likewise, Mr. Marlett stated, "I got along real well with all of the prisoners, there was no animosity. They were prisoners, but I treated them the way I would have wanted to be treated . . . I knew he was fighting for his country and I was fighting for mine. I didn't feel hatred towards him just because he was German."[114] These men forged a bond of fellowship that they will certainly never forget nor forsake. While these scenes of reunion are striking, at Aliceville, the level and amount of commemoration celebrating the camp history exists on a much larger scale.

Beginning in 1989, the residents of Aliceville, former guards, and former prisoners gathered together for a camp reunion. Many former prisoners from Germany attended this reunion to experience Alabama once again. The Aliceville Museum and

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[112] "Former WWII Prisoner Meets Former Opelika Guard," *Opelika-Auburn News*, June 21, 1998 in Killian, *Prisoner of war camp, Opelika, Ala*., [29-30]; "Recollections: Coming Home," in Killian, *Prisoner of war camp, Opelika, Ala*., [39-40].

[113] Ibid.

[114] Ibid.

Cultural Center holds a reunion every other year with much larger celebrations at important milestones, such as the fiftieth anniversary of the camp opening in 1993. Five to ten prisoners usually attended off year meetings, but at larger celebrations such as the first reunion in 1989, or the fiftieth anniversary anywhere from twenty to thirty prisoners attended. These reunions were held with great fanfare. Ceremonies, displays, feasts, and even reenactments took place to commemorate Camp Aliceville and the former prisoners of war, effectively disseminating, and giving credence to, a particular view of history, one that had perhaps given way to certain influences.

Figure 19. Reenactors dressed as Afrika Korps soldiers present a flag at the 1993 Camp Aliceville Reunion.[115]

These meetings, reunions, and various correspondences between prisoners and community members might easily be attributed to pure nostalgia or simply a desire to reminisce for the sake of the good old times now past. Certainly, one must consider this

[115] Aliceville Reunion Photograph Album, Camp Aliceville Collection.

aspect as influencing one's memory. By the 1990s, when many of these reconnections and gatherings took place, the former prisoners had generally lived successful lives. In retirement, they desired to revisit a significant part of their youth. Sharing their experience with children and grandchildren also played a role, as prisoners wanted to show their family this important part of their life. Considering those former prisoners that did return is an important factor in the memory making process.

Why any prisoners at all would desire to return to a site of incarceration for celebratory commemorative events is testament to United States policy towards prisoners of war and prisoner of war treatment. It is remarkable that so many prisoners did physically come back or write. However, one must consider that while nearly thirty prisoners returned to Aliceville to participate in commemorative reunions, Camp Aliceville interned nearly six thousand prisoners. On a national level, informal calculations estimate that 5,000 prisoners immigrated to the United States, a small percentage of the nearly 500,000 original prisoners of war.[116] Those prisoners who did return have been rewarded with helping construct the World War II prisoner of war narrative. The stories of prisoners who could not afford to return or simply chose not to, perhaps due to negative experiences, have been neglected. Through the actions of the prisoners who returned and the inaction of those who did not, collective memory was slowly constructed and a dominant narrative began to be accepted as fact. The reunions, artifacts donated by former prisoners, and especially their memories and recollections

[116] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 266.

have provided a frame for historians to build upon, thus further legitimizing the narrative.[117]

Over the years, as historians have looked at the national prisoner of war program or have conducted various state studies, the sources consulted and methods used have led to generally the same conclusions– that the United States treated its World War II POWs exceptionally well and that its prisoners were happy and content. As we have seen, the evidence, including prisoner accounts, supports this conclusion. However, the fact that no attempt exists that actively seeks to refute this narrative is important. When this happens, the field stagnates and what is written contributes to what ultimately becomes the prevailing narrative and collective memory. One must imagine that somewhere some prisoners had negative experiences or critical memories. Perhaps this story simply does not exist or cannot be found due to factors shaping the memories and accounts of former prisoners. As explored above, shame and nostalgia are powerful shaping factors in determining what is remembered or how memories are constructed. On the other hand, the documentary record available to historians through archives and museums is immensely influential. Certainly the pen wielded by authors and historians holds great power, and contributes much to forming collective memory, but the role of collecting institutions such as the museum and archive, also play a significant role in determining what is remembered and what is forgotten.

Archives, museums, and related repositories are institutions of great power where official memory is created, maintained, and promoted. The collections they hold

[117] For further reading on collective memory see: John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*, (Princeton University Press, 1992); Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*, (Vintage: 1993).

represent evidence legitimizing memory that is concrete– it can be seen, touched, and its existence verified by individuals who see it. Not only do historians draw sources from these collections, but ordinary people look to these holdings as a source to validate their place in history. However, archives do not always represent an all-encompassing history of all people. Gaps or holes exist where information is not available either because it never existed or because it has been hidden or perhaps destroyed.

Collecting institutions can make deliberate decisions to collect certain areas while actively ignoring others, essentially creating silences in the records. Certain social pressures influence archives resulting in this discrimination. It might be said that "those who control the present control the past," and indeed archives tend to focus on groups in power while neglecting minority groups.[118] For example at the Alabama Department of Archives and History, established in 1901, there was essentially no material collected on African Americans until the latter half of the twentieth century despite the fact that its institutional mission was to document the lives of Alabamians. Today, while archivists are working to correct minority representation, one will be hard pressed to find collections on what many might consider ideas of the crazed. For instance, documentation of unidentified flying object sightings (UFOs) is missing from the record.[119] Certainly, many might say that this is for good reason, but if one day in the future the UFO theorists are proven correct, they will essentially have no documentary history.[120] Those in the minority are denied the opportunity to promote and engage in

[118] George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, (Plume, 2003), 35-36.

[119] "History of Archives," (seminar, Auburn University, Auburn, AL, October 28, 2009).

[120]Certainly, there may be some organizations that collect information relating to UFOs but none particularly mainstream or officially sanctioned. Those that do collect such information may also be subject to questions and concerns of accuracy or legitimacy of information.

creating official memory. How archives and museums collect documents and records, and the silences or holes this process can create, can also be seen in relation to the Axis prisoners of war.[121]

After World War II, the remaining Nazis and Nazi supporters were certainly in the minority. Not only were they the minority, but the Nazi party, ideology, and all aspects of National Socialism had become vilified. Anybody seeking to defend or support the party was met with hostility. Therefore, it stands to reason that most who sympathized with the Third Reich kept their opinions and attitudes silent while collecting institutions became wary of what entered their holdings. Former prisoners returning to Germany denouncing democracy and declaring the supremacy of the Aryan race would not have been received kindly. Thus, social pressures have contributed to public silences and omissions in archival and museum collections.

No officially sanctioned or mainstream museums in Germany exist to glorify the Nazi state. Indeed, Kenneth Foote tells us that significant Nazi buildings such as the Gestapo Headquarters have either been left vacant since the end of the war or in some cases completely destroyed and obliterated from the landscape.[122] It may be that no horrors or atrocities were committed in the prison camps in Alabama, but if there had been any mistreatment, the stigmatism towards anyone viewed as a Nazi sympathizer would have suppressed or silenced the story, not to find its way into the archive. Any

[121] For further reading on archives and museums as institutions of memory see: Eric Ketelaar, "Archives as Spaces of Memory," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 29, no. 1 (April 2008): 9-27; Kenneth Foote, "To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture," *American Archivist* 53 (Summer 1990): 378-392; Jeannette Bastian, "Whispers in the Archives: Finding the Voices of the Colonized in the Records of the Colonizer," in *Political Pressure and the Archival Record*, Margaret Procter, Michael Cook, and Caroline William, eds., (Society of American Archivists, 2006); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: The Power and the Production of History*, (Beacon Press, 1995).

[122]Foote, "To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture," 386-387.

hardcore Nazis such as *Schutzstaffel* (SS) members or high-ranking officers who perhaps held negative memories of imprisonment in America would not have easily revealed this. As explored above, those with positive memories who made the pilgrimage back to the camps or made the effort to contact local community members were rewarded with telling their story and helping to construct an official narrative. Many artifacts were donated by these individuals. In fact, the Aliceville Museum and Cultural Center was founded in 1995, after former prisoners and community members gathered collections together to display at the reunions and realized they needed a place to preserve and exhibit their story.[123] Undoubtedly, these collections and what ultimately made its way into the archives and museums received a spot in the treasured vaults or atop sacred pedestals.

It is odd, but whenever an object is placed in an exhibit case behind glass or on top of a pedestal, it takes on a new life, one with authority. Americans place a high level of trust in what are believed to be unbiased institutions with highly trained professionals and experts interpreting history for others to digest. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen in their landmark survey of how people imagine the past found that individuals have the highest level of trust in museums with a rating of 8.4 on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being very trustworthy.[124] This compares to college history professors at 7.3, high school history teachers at 6.6, nonfiction books at 6.4, and movies or television programs at

[123] The Aliceville POW Museum and Cultural Center, "The Aliceville Museum History," Aliceville POW Museum and Cultural Center, http://www.cityofaliceville.com/POWHistory.htm (accessed June 5, 2011).

[124] Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, (Columbia University Press, 1998).

5.0.[125] However, exhibit design and development is a heavily involved process where controversy and varying interpretations can clash. Consider the highly controversial proposed exhibition of the Enola Gay, the B29 Superfortress bomber that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, at the National Air and Space Museum. How does one tell the story of the Enola Gay? Does it involve the depiction of thousands of Japanese along with the destruction and devastation it caused? Or is it a story of American victory featuring jubilant celebrations and parades at home?[126] Visitors rarely perceive the level of interpretation and behind the scenes work in museums that go into collections. They willingly accept the displays and labels for facts. Thus, museums effectively legitimize memory with displays and collections intentionally chosen to tangibly represent the narrative that has been selected and interpreted by the museum staff.

At museums in Aliceville and Opelika, exhibits focus on the creative activities of prisoners, displaying arts and crafts created by the prisoners. By focusing specifically on this aspect of camp life, ideology, boredom, or just general criticisms are often neglected in the larger interpretation of the camps. Undoubtedly, the hot Alabama climate and fierce mosquitoes plagued the prisoners, as seen in the following poem:

> Aliceville in Alabama, where the sun is like a curse
> And each long day is followed by another slightly worse,
> Where the brick-red dust blows thicker than the shifting desert sand
> And a white man dreams and wishes for a greater, fairer land.
>
> Aliceville in Alabama, where a woman's never seen
> Where the sky is never cloudy and the grass is never green;

[125] Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*.

[126] Roger Launius, "American Memory, Culture Wars, and the Challenge of Presenting Science and Technology in a National Museum," *Public Historian* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 13-30; Edward Linenthal, "Struggling with History and Memory," *Journal of American History* 82, no. 3(December 1995): 1094-1101; Robert C. Post, "A Narrative for Our Time: The Enola Gay 'and after that, period'," *Technology and Culture* 45 (April 2004): 373-395; David Thelen, "History After the Enola Gay Controversy," *Journal of American History* 82, no. 3 (December 1995): 1029-1035.

Where the mill's howling whistle robs the man of blessed sleep,
And there isn't any whisky and the beer is never cheap.

Aliceville in Alabama, where the nights were made for love,
Where the moon is like a searchlight and the Southern Cross above
Sparkles like a diamond necklace in a balmy tropic night,
It's shameful waste of beauty, when there is no girl in sight.

Aliceville in Alabama, where the mail is always late,
And a Christmas card in April is always up to date,
Where we never have a payday and we never have a cent,
But we never miss the money, 'cause we'd never get it spent.

Aliceville in Alabama, where the ants and chiggers play,
And a hundred fresh mosquitoes replace each one you splay,
So take me back to Berlin, where everything is swell,
For this godforsaken outpost is a Substitute for Hell.[127]

With so much focus on creative activities, it seems odd that a poem as striking as this one has not received more attention. "For this godforsaken outpost is a Substitute for Hell" seems to go directly against the prevailing narrative of the happy and content prisoner. It is easy to understand why though. Documents and artifacts such as this one are tucked away, as museums and archives focus on the positive story of the well cared for prisoner and peace and unity in the present through reunion. A few examples of the displays at the Museum of East Alabama and the Aliceville Museum and Cultural Center are illustrated below.

[127] Walker, *A Brief History of Prisoner of War Camp Aliceville*. Walker adds the note that this lament is by an unknown author.

Figure 20. The Camp Opelika display featuring artifacts created by the prisoners.[128]

[128] Camp Opelika Collection, Museum of East Alabama.

Figure 21. Display at the Aliceville Museum and Cultural Center[129]

These displays, as seen in chapter two, focus on the creative activities of prisoners, prominently displaying arts and crafts. Intricate wood carvings, detailed paintings, or photographs of musical or theatrical performances all essentially tell the same story. This story of the carefree prisoner who indulges in pleasures and leisurely activities is then imparted on the visitor who, not knowing any other narrative, accepts it as *the* narrative. The reunions and other forms of commemoration, specifically at Aliceville serve to further reinforce this idea. The reunions at Aliceville promoted friendship, peace, and unity. Indeed, in 1995, a group of former POWs donated and dedicated a ginkgo tree, planted in front of the new Aliceville Museum. It was chosen to represent peace and unity as former prisoner Wilhelm Schlegel stated, "This tree now we plant at this place: let it be a symbol of hope for a peaceful future."[130]

[129] Camp Aliceville Collection, Aliceville POW Museum and Cultural Center.

[130] "Story of the Gingko Tree," in *Museum News* 5, no. 4 (November 1999): 4.

Figure 22. Former prisoners stand in front of the gingko tree at the Aliceville Museum and Cultural Center.[131]

At the Aliceville Museum and Cultural Center, the exhibits clearly depict dominant themes to tell a certain story. However, in Opelika, it is not quite as clear. At the Museum of East Alabama, staff has compiled a large collection of artifacts, photographs, documents, and letters concerning the prison camp. However, in contrast to Aliceville with its clear textual labels and interpretations, they are simply displayed as a "cabinet of curiosity." There is no overall theme, message, or context to provide the visitor with an interpretation of the story of Camp Opelika. One simply gazes at the artifacts, ponders their importance, and leaves with no true sense of the importance or role Camp Opelika played in history or the broader story of World War II prison camps.

[131] Photograph album, Camp Aliceville Collection.

Visitors must draw conclusions for themselves, dig deeper into the sources, or chat with museum staff to gain a better understanding of the story. Admittedly, the museum, like many museums and archives, is a small institution that perhaps lacks adequate funding and staffing to properly care for this collection. This reveals the role of museums and archives in not only constructing memory through collection building and exhibitions, but also in disseminating and promoting memory through interpretation, education, outreach, and preservation.

The story of the World War II Axis prisoners of war is a forgotten memory in the public's mind. The narratives and memories discussed here prevail collectively, but only for those limited number of individuals who remember or engage in the history. The vast majority of the public have seemingly forgotten the experiences of these prisoners or that there were ever even any here to begin with. Perhaps there are reasons why this is a forgotten history, but at the same time, there are many opportunities for museums to engage in educational and outreach programs.

Museums and other similar institutions are evolving in the twenty-first century to play a more active role in people's lives by fostering civic dialogue, engaging the public, and increasingly reaching out to their communities.[132] Many opportunities exist for the Museum of East Alabama to disseminate knowledge of Camp Opelika. Walking tours could easily be conducted through the site of the original location giving visitors a sense of the size of the camp, the original railways leading into it, and the importance of historical preservation. Kits for teachers could be developed to introduce subject matter into the classrooms of elementary and high schools. Most importantly, and perhaps an

[132] Robert Archibald, The New Town Square: Museums and Communities in Transition, (AltaMira Press, 2004); "Sites of Conscience," Special Issue, *Public Historian* 30, no. 1 (February 2008): 9-79; See also: International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, http://www.sitesofconscience.org.

opportunity already missed, oral histories could have been made with the camp's original guards, local members of the community, and even former prisoners. Admittedly, however, the Museum of East Alabama is a small institution with limited staff and funding. These types of projects involve considerable dedication both in staff time as well as in monetary costs. At Aliceville too, facing similar budget and staff constraints, many of the same opportunities could be pursued to increase awareness of the existence of prisoner history.

Considering the detrimental state of memory and preservation of the prisoner of war story, not only in Opelika and Aliceville, but throughout the entire nation, perhaps more responsibility should be placed on other institutions such as neighboring Auburn University and the University of Alabama, or even the federal government. However, it does not seem that there is much interest in the subject. While there certainly have been some efforts at collaboration between the two universities and museums, it has been limited. At the nation's premier site for prisoner of war commemoration, Andersonville National Historic Site, operated by the National Park Service, there is barely a mention of the nearly half a million prisoners of war held in the United States. A small display of roughly three to four panels is placed in a location away from the main exhibit walkway, easily overlooked or ignored by visitors. However, this is understandable, as it does not directly relate to the mission of presenting the story of American prisoners of war. However, there is an indirect correlation as better treatment of German prisoners of war in the United States influenced the treatment of American prisoners in Germany. This connection can easily be made to tell the story of two separate groups.

National park sites, such as the one at Andersonville, occupy an important place on the landscape, so to do the museums at Aliceville and Opelika. The simple fact that these institutions exist on the landscape is important. In efforts to disseminate memory, museum efforts for preservation and designation of sites on the landscape contribute immensely to public memory. However, remains of the original camps are limited. Perhaps the physical landscape of the sites also contributes to what is remembered, or what potentially can be remembered.

Chapter Four

Remnants on the Landscape

Over the years, just as people's memories are formed and shaped over time, the power of time can also shape and transform the physical landscape. Mountains rise and fall, rivers change their course, and even whole continents slowly drift apart or grind into each other. Similarly, over time humans transform the environment as we build and abandon buildings, clear forests, or dam up rivers and streams. Just as many have forgotten the story of the World War II Axis prisoners of war, it also seems that the sands of time have eroded the remnants of the camps from the physical landscape. This is the case for both Opelika and Aliceville, as one would be hard pressed to find evidence of either camp's existence.

The original site of the two prison camps today looks drastically different from what existed during World War II. These properties have changed hands quite a few times. After the war, all original materials were sold off as surplus, with the barracks for a short time after the war serving as temporary housing for returning veterans– an ironic twist of fate for the returning American heroes. Since housing prisoners of war was no longer necessary, the government sold the land and industrial parks were established at both sites. Kenneth Foote might call this repurposing of the sites, rectification.[133] Rectification as Foote defines it is "the process through which [a site] is put right and

[133] Foote, *Shadowed Ground*.

used again."[134] At Opelika and Aliceville, society deemed the original purpose of the site no longer needed, and since it was not a site of extraordinary significance, transforming the site to serve the current needs of the community made sense. With the dismantling of the camps and the rectification of the original sites, remains of the prison camps were wiped from the landscape. Businesses created a new active landscape of continual use, essentially creating an absence in history.

Without the preservation of the original site, the history of these camps was left to be told by others, such as those who experienced it first hand, museums, archives, and historians. These sources all exhibit some level of bias and are subject to certain forces that shape the construction of memory. However, structures and artifacts have less to hide. Through analysis of structures, artifacts, and locations of artifacts on the landscape archaeologists can recreate history with much more accuracy and with less infiltrating influences. Perhaps the story told through a pristine camp preserved from the 1940s would tell a different story than what is currently being told. In addition, archaeological digs might reveal new information previously forgotten or hidden. Fortunately, there might still be opportunities for this as not all remnants of the site have disappeared; a few last reminders of the camps' presence still exist.

In Opelika and Aliceville, the physical existence of the prison camps has long been absent. Few identifiable remainders or active acts of designation exist to remind individuals of what once existed or to tell the story of the camps. At Aliceville, the level of commemoration and appreciation for the history of the camp might be quite high, but the remains of the camp have suffered the affects of time. All that is left of the camp is a large stone chimney standing as if mocking modern society. Its presence serves as a

[134] Foote, *Shadowed Ground*, 23.

silent reminder lacking any designation describing its history or significance, baffling those who do not know its origin. The chimney can be seen in figure twenty-three below along with the landscape of the campsite displaying what has become a generally vacant area with a few remaining businesses in the industrial park. There is a historic marker presenting basic facts about the camp, but it lacks any interpretation that might give readers a better understanding of the camp. Unfortunately, the historical marker and even the large stone chimney are easily overlooked or ignored. After all, one must consider how many individuals take the time to actively find and read historical markers. This lack of physical remains of the camp and minimal attempt at designation is similar to what exists at Opelika.

Figure 23. A lonely chimney remains at the original site of Camp Aliceville.[135]

At Opelika, the last trace of what was once Camp Opelika is one rapidly aging barrack. It stands forlornly among large warehouses and business, but it is quickly

[135] Photograph taken by the author.

deteriorating in its current state. The barrack is not designated in any way, and one would easily miss it hidden in its current setting. Figure twenty-four shows this last building and the surrounding area of the former campsite that today houses modern warehouses and businesses. There is one attempt at designation though. A historical marker, similar to the one at Aliceville, is located near the original site, dedicated in 2003. However, it lacks interpretation and only briefly states basic facts such as the opening and closing dates and the number of prisoners imprisoned there. While the landscapes of Opelika and Aliceville are similar, Aliceville does offer one special act of commemoration that designates the landscape in ways Opelika does not.

Figure 24. The last remaining barrack of Camp Opelika.[136]

At Aliceville, one area has received special attention. In 1993, the Sue Stabler Park commemorating the site of Camp Aliceville was established in recognition of the town's history and the service of Sue Stabler, wife of former Aliceville mayor, Gerald Stabler. At one point in time, it seems as if the park grounds and pavilion were used

[136] Photograph taken by the author.

regularly, particularly for camp reunions. Figure twenty-five shows the celebrations around one of the reunions and the focus on the park commemoration. However, with former prisoners, guards, and those who lived at the time of Camp Aliceville passing on, the park grounds seem neglected and forgotten. The industrial park seems to be past its prime too. This is also the case for the Opelika industrial park. Only a few businesses still operate in the industrial parks, leaving the areas with a vacant, almost derelict feel, certainly not appealing to visitors. Indeed, perhaps these industrial parks themselves limit or deter those interested in walking along the original site. Indeed, sites, places, and landscapes can emit a powerful aura beckoning visitors to partake and relive history.

Figure 25. The Sue Stabler Aliceville Prisoner of War Camp Park.[137]

Landscape, place, and environment can be a powerful force in remembrance. To many, it is important to breathe the air, feel the earth, and see the sights with their own eyes. Visiting or returning to the landscape adds a certain level of reliving or imagining

[137] Photograph album, Camp Aliceville Collection.

the past where one might feel connected to those who walked the land in the past. One example is Andersonville, also a former prisoner of war site, where one can truly feel as if they are transported back in time to understand what it was like for those who lived there. Great care has been taken to preserve and present the site to achieve this. Admittedly, as a site of tragedy and violence where some 13,000 prisoners succumbed to death, Andersonville occupies hallowed ground, which results in different circumstances than at Opelika and Aliceville. Nevertheless, for the former prisoners who returned to Opelika and Aliceville, it was important to return to the original site. Simply being in America in another part of the country would not have been the same. The location of the camps was a powerful factor for these prisoners, and so to it can be for others. Just as at Andersonville, where the site plays an integral role in interpretation, education, and ultimately memory, the sites at Opelika and Aliceville have the same potential.

As the industrial parks age and become increasingly abandoned with businesses closing or relocating, an opportunity exists for a new rectification. Archaeological digs and excavations could be performed to reveal hidden secrets buried in the earth. This would potentially add greatly to the understanding of what happened at the camps. There is actually precedent for this. In *Lone Star Stalag: German Prisoners of War at Camp Hearne,* Michael Waters discusses the excavation of Camp Hearne and describes in detail what archaeologists recovered. Numerous pieces of textile, buttons, belt buckles, utensils, and other items show how the prisoners lived and where certain activities took place.[138] This could easily be done at both Opelika and Aliceville where structures already in decay could be torn down to allow archaeologists access to the land. Particularly at Aliceville where a large green space and park exist around the chimney, excavations

[138] Waters, *Lone Star Stalag*.

could be started immediately. In addition to excavations though, another opportunity exists to repurpose the site.

One way to better tell the story of the prison camps is to remake the land to depict the environment that the prisoners would have entered in 1943. A national or state historic site could easily be established at either Aliceville or Opelika preserving the landscape and the last remnants of the camps. Some reconstructed elements could help tell the story of the camp and highlight what life behind the barbed wire was like. Guard towers, barbed wire fencing, and barracks would give visitors a clear sense of how the prisoners and guards lived. Rebuilding of other features such as an orchestra stand, camp library, and labor side camps could show other aspects of camp life and tell a broader story of recreation, labor, and even reeducation and ideology. As seen at Andersonville, and other national or state historic sites, incorporating the landscape into the visitor experience can be a powerful element.

At Andersonville, officials took great care when considering how to approach the landscape. The surrounding scenery, reconstructions, and visitor service experience were all taken into consideration. To truly gain an understanding of how the site existed during the Civil War, the National Park Service purchased extra property around the site to act as a buffer, preventing businesses or buildings from corrupting the forests and general surroundings of the site. Officials wanted to preserve the landscape as it existed during the Civil War rather than modern development. Only limited reconstructions or buildings exist at the actual site, as officials opted for a minimal approach recognizing the problems associated with reconstructions. With reconstructions, while they may offer excellent interpretive opportunities, there are always concerns of accuracy and the

problem with visitors assuming that they are original structures. Furthermore, unfortunately, there is also a potential for tourism or a theme park approach to overtake that of historical accuracy. Indeed, this can also be seen at Andersonville.

Economic development and tourist dollars usually trail historic sites. When the government considered Andersonville for National Park status, the Middle Flynt Planning and Development Commission ordered a development study of Andersonville and contracted the University of Georgia to complete it. The development study outlines many possibilities for Andersonville. First, it acknowledges that the overall theme for Andersonville must be something more than the Civil War era story to attract the most number of visitors. The study concluded, "If emphasis were placed only upon a presentation of the prison camp story, it would tend to have a depressing effect upon visitors and attendance might be limited to those with somewhat morbid appetites or with a particular interest in the camp."[139] One may never know if this would be true for the 1970s, but today the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum effectively dispels this belief. It is clear that the development study is concerned with offering a broader story simply to appeal a wider range of visitors.[140] Other economic ventures offered by the study include a museum gift shop, restaurant, and even grocery store to cater to a proposed recreational vehicle site. A blockbuster style audio-visual display is also given great importance as education takes a back seat with the priority of "above all, it must be a good show."[141]

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[139] Robert Hill and William Keeling, *Preliminary Development Study Andersonville Historical Complex*, (Athens: University of Georgia, 1965): 4.

[140] Ibid., 5.

[141] Hill and Keeling, *Preliminary Development Study Andersonville Historical Complex*, 7.

Ultimately, however, Andersonville did not fall into the trap of heritage tourism. When Mr. L. H. McKenzie, chair of the Middle Flynt Planning and Development Commission, brought the report before the congressional hearing on H.R. 140, legislation establishing the site as a National Park Site, he received harsh words from Representative John Kyl. Mr. Kyl told McKenzie that language concerning tourism and development was dangerous and that it cannot interfere with preservation.[142] Furthermore, he admonished McKenzie stating that the congressional committee did not consider Andersonville a tourist attraction, rather a site for preservation and that the committee was not in the business of economic development. Certainly, economic development and tourist interests would be challenges Aliceville and Opelika would have to confront. In addition to these, however, issues of interpretation and how to use the land also come to mind.

The landscape and the power of place can play a pivotal role in interpretation, fostering dialogue, and engaging community. Andersonville National Historic Site does not take advantage of the landscape to confront difficult issues or to connect the past with the present. However, an excellent example exists in the Sites of Conscience. The Sites of Conscience are a coalition of seventeen museums, sites, and memorials, often located at sites dealing with issues of violence and tragedy. These sites offer much more to its community than simply displaying a collection of artifacts. They seek to use the past to better understand the present and to deal with complicated issues. This connection to the present results in many institutions taking an active role in key issues, such as human and civil rights at Monte Sole or the Martin Luther King Jr. Home, immigration reform at the

[142] Transcript of House Hearings on H.R. 140, June 2, 1970, Administrative History, Andersonville National Historic Site Library.

Lower East Side Tenement Museum, or genocide at the Terezín Memorial. Connecting the past to the present is something all historians and museum professionals should attempt to do, yet a site of conscience does much more than making connections between past and present.[143]

The Sites of Conscience help communities confront the difficult issues of the past and, by doing so, gain a deeper insight into their own identity. To do this, a site of conscience allows individuals to contribute their own experiences and memories. The District Six Museum in South Africa allows its visitors to add details and comments to a large map of District Six, while also allowing visitors to create a "memory cloth" where they can record their experiences and memories. This "healing" aspect is of utmost importance due to the violent and tragic nature that sites of conscience address.

Perhaps the most prominent mission of sites of conscience is to promote civic engagement and civic dialogue. By providing a physical space for this, a site can both promote particular democratic and humanitarian values while also allowing its community to confront its past and its legacy in the future. One could even go as far as holding government meetings within its spaces as the District Six Museum did with the hosting of official land restitution hearings. Indeed, actively engaging individuals on current issues, especially those that might involve painful memories, is a difficult but admirable goal and something all museums and related institutions should consider.

Where American society has forgotten its history of the interment of nearly 500,000 prisoners of war there is now a time offering opportunities for change. Aliceville and Opelika have an important story to tell, one not only that played a significant role in

[143] "Sites of Conscience," 9-79; See also: International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, http://www.sitesofconscience.org.

the local community, but also one of national importance during one of the largest and fiercest wars in history. Aliceville and Opelika, as well as prisoner of war sites across the country can take many cues from the Sites of Conscience to connect the past with the present and engage in civic dialogue. Issues of economics in labor shortages, societal change and the unique view of race from the prisoners' perspective, and even politics concerning prisoner of war treatment policy can all be addressed at these sites. Certainly, there are numerous worthy educational opportunities that exist in telling the prisoner of war story, and many ways to incorporate the landscape into this process.

Epilogue

Lessons and Legacy

For many, one question that stands above the rest is, why study history? Similarly, one might ask, who cares or why is it important? Certainly many individuals, and humanity as a whole, desires to know their past and origins– the story of those who came before, giving credence to simple story telling. However, there is also an opportunity to connect the past with the present to analyze legacies and provide lessons for the future, so that "history does not repeat itself." For the United States World War II prisoner of war program, these lessons and legacies can influence and shape the present and the future.

The overwhelming policy of the United States on treatment of prisoners of war formed during the Second World War closely followed the Geneva Convention of 1929 as the government strenuously made accommodations for prisoners and their treatment. While there were POW camps during the Civil War, this was the first time the United States had to deal with interning prisoners of war from another country on U.S. soil and in a larger capacity than during the Civil War. One would image that policy set forth during this time would set precedence for future wars and conflicts. However, the substantive policy set by the United States during World War II attempting to win prisoners' hearts and minds has been forgotten.

Today, much controversy surrounds the treatment of internees in the now infamous facilities of Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib where accusations of torture and

atrocities abound. This stands in sharp contrast to World War II prisoner of war policy. One cannot help but to imagine how things may be different if the story of Axis POW treatment was not a forgotten story. Perhaps policy would be different from the beginning, or perhaps public opinion would sway government officials. Admittedly, the circumstances are somewhat different, and ongoing debates and varying interpretations on who is considered a prisoner of war and protected by the Geneva Convention have muddied the political waters.

Spies, guerilla warriors, and terrorists all complicate the standard definition of a prisoner of war as a uniformed soldier fighting under a standing nation state's direction. In the twenty-first century, United States combat missions have increasingly been against these types of fighters whose non-affiliation with a nation state and lack of standard uniformed combat protocol has lead to their designation as unlawful combatants, rather than prisoners of war and therefore not subject to the Geneva Convention. Nevertheless, World War II POW policy, rather than remaining forgotten, has the potential to serve as a lesson for the country going forward on how it should treats its prisoners. In addition to the United States, U.S. policy can also serve as an example and lesson around the world.

Discussions on human rights and international law are excellent topics that can use the example of the World War II prisoner of war program. Community members could easily engage in discussion, but so could nations or international organizations such as the United Nations or the International Red Cross. In addition, the affects of good treatment and the successes or failures of the subversive reeducation program serve as examples others can look back on as a type of social experiment or as a basis for future policy. All of these leave a lasting legacy providing many examples and lessons for the

present and the future. However, the legacy for those involved in the program is much more intimate, but perhaps with greater consequences.

For many involved in the program, it was a life-changing experience. Some prisoners learned the history of America and how it embraces the values of freedom and democracy. Others returned home to rebuild their country. Many formed lasting relationships with American citizens helping to cement an era of friendship, peace, and unity. These were formative years for the prisoners, so much so that many immigrated or returned to visit the site of their previous incarceration. Those who came back inadvertently began a process of building their own legacy and constructing what would become the official narrative.

Often former prisoners brought their children and grandchildren along as a way to teach other generations about their experience. However, their influence would reach much further than they expected. Their voice created what is now remembered as the World War II Axis prisoner of war experience. It is their artifacts, accounts, and memories that historians and other scholars draw upon to tell the story. Indeed, this and other elements shed light on the process of remembering and forgetting. This process is complicated, but with digging and analysis, one can reveal its constructive elements. For many, the story of World War II revolves around the American serviceman, typically remembered as a hero in many respects. However, the actual history or narrative of World War II is much broader. The stories of the American serviceman or the Axis prisoner of war are just two of them. There are many more of these cases throughout history that have been hidden or buried. However, democratizing the history-making process can help correct the problem.

Moving forward into the future, engaged citizens and the broader public can be engaged in the history making process to ensure that all people have their history recorded and told. There must be spaces for collaboration between museums, archives, universities, and their communities to come together and participate in this process. Historians and other academic professionals must descend from the proverbial ivory tower to participate in this shared authority with the public. It is essential that this occurs so that humanity has the best possible chance to build on its past to create a better future where society learns from its mistakes. Indeed, in Carl Becker's seminal address to the American Historical Association, he shows us that the public is quite capable of participation, as every person is their own historian, recording history as the "memory of things said and done."[144]

[144] Carl, Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *The American Historical Review* 37, no. 2 (January 1932): 223.

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