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Representing Prisoner of War Experience: An
Interdisciplinary Conference at the University
of Warwick, 9th November 2013

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Abstract

On 9 November 2013 the Prisoner of War Network, in conjunction with the War and Representation Network (WAR-Net), brought together forty academics and researchers at the University of Warwick to discuss 'Representations of Prisoner of War Experience'. In response to Paul Gready's claim that 'to be a prisoner is to be variously written', scholars from across Europe and North America and a wide range of disciplines (including history, film, politics, literature, history of art and archaeology) discussed the fascinating work being done in the emergent field of prisoner of war studies, as well as the possible future directions and challenges for such research. Eighteen speakers approached the question of the representation of prisoner of war experience, both by the historical actors who underwent forced dislocation (captors and captives alike) and by researchers themselves.

Keywords: War; prisoner; history; politics; film; art; archaeology

In 1993, international human rights specialist Paul Gready stated that 'to be a prisoner is to be variously written' (Gready 1993: 493). Whether it was in the text of political trials or through interrogations—such as in his case study of apartheid South Africa—Gready argued that the prisoner's own voice was often bypassed, and that the authorities 'wrote' the prisoner's experiences instead. Gready's statement prompted Elodie Duché and me to consider the ways in which the prisoner of war—the captive figure in both of our PhD projects—was represented and by whom. Gready's assertion was particularly pertinent to the studies of prisoner of war life-writing that each of us were undertaking. My study

concerns British prisoners of war in the Korean War (1950-1953), and Elodie's focuses on British prisoners in Verdun during the Napoleonic Wars.

Heather Jones (London School of Economics), a leading figure in the new sub-field of prisoner of war studies, noted that the prisoner of war has until recently been a 'missing paradigm' within historical research (Jones 2008: 20). Elodie and I were therefore keen to understand how prisoner of war experience had been represented by the *historical actors* who underwent forced dislocation as well as by *researchers* in this new sub-discipline. In order to understand these questions in more detail, we founded the Prisoner of War Network at the University of Warwick in January 2013. We held our first conference, entitled 'Representing Prisoner of War Experience', on 9th November 2013. In conjunction with the well-established War and Representation Network (WAR-Net), we brought together forty academics and researchers to discuss their work.

The growth of prisoner of war studies in the last ten years owes much to the development of two strands of historiography: 'new military history' and the social history of the military (Bourke 2006: 258-280). These two approaches, which incorporate historical, psychological and literary research, have prompted mainstream military history to take far greater heed of the cultural and social context of war, as well as the experiences of the people who lived through it. The prisoner of war was previously somewhat excluded from conventional military and social history. As Bob Moore (University of Sheffield), the first keynote speaker at our conference, remarked 'military historians did not like losers and social historians did not like anything in uniforms.' The conference at Warwick was, therefore, the first major gathering of a new generation of scholars examining the prisoner of war. In this one-day conference, we asked eighteen speakers to consider the challenges in 'representing' the prisoner of war through their particular source material, and to reflect upon their own contribution to the emergent historiography on the subject.

The two keynote lectures at our conference tackled the issue of representation by historical actors and historians in differing, yet complementary, ways. Each keynote speaker based their comments on developments in their respective fields: history and archaeology. Bob Moore, offered a historiographical overview of the sub-discipline in the last twenty years, tracing its roots as what he described as a 'Cinderella subject' to its

current expansion and popularity—a development demonstrated by the conference itself. Moore stressed the historical—indeed, even political—need to study conflicts beyond the world wars, and the evolving meaning of the prisoner of war in modern conflict. Moore questioned, for example, the location of Saddam Hussein’s Republican Guard after the Iraq War. Moore’s call for scholars to widen their focus was met later in the day by a broad range of papers on captive contexts other than the world wars. These included a paper by author Sean McGlynn on captivity in the ‘Age of Chivalry’, using the case study of the Battle of Agincourt (1415). In addition, Canadian scholar James Clark reflected upon Canadian narratives of internment in the post-9/11 era.

In his keynote talk, Moore also highlighted important conceptual challenges for prisoner of war researchers. For example, the challenge of identifying moments of surrender and capture, understanding the unique experiences of prisoners of colonial armies, and deciphering the uncertain position of the prisoner of war within international law. This latter point was particularly pertinent to my own research on the Korean War. In the case of the Korean War, the Geneva Convention was frequently used, but to different ends, by both the United States and the People’s Republic of China in peace negotiations.

Our second keynote speaker, Gilly Carr (University of Cambridge), used her archaeological fieldwork to provide a different perspective on the representation of prisoner of war experience. In exploring the wealth of material culture produced by civilian internees from the German-occupied Channel Islands during the Second World War, Carr demonstrated the importance of non-written sources to prisoner of war studies. She showed a range of objects crafted by prisoners of war, including kettles made from tins sent in Red Cross Parcels, and an astounding range of objects fashioned from Players’ Navy Cut cigarette packets. Carr also referred to a collection she recently edited with fellow archaeologist Harold Mytum, *Creativity Behind Barbed Wire*. This collection showed the range of items constructed by prisoners of war, including an artificial spleen in a Japanese camp during the Second World War, and elaborates theatre productions during the First World War (Carr and Mytum 2012). Carr’s paper prompted a wider discussion about the meaning and ‘biography’ of objects, both during and after captivity, and the relationship between written and non-written texts in prisoner of war studies. Carr’s approach is potentially significant for investigating captive situations in which there was a large artistic output—as in Elodie’s research on

British prisoners of war in Verdun—or where paper was scarce and prisoners could only ‘represent’ their experiences through non-textual forms.

The conference raised several other important points for researchers of military captivity. Scholars discussed the spatial representation of internment, through maps or artistic renderings of camps or internment areas, as well as other source material including oral history and life-writing. Delegates also explored how we should define the prisoner of war and the relative position of civilians, non-uniformed fighters and children being held captive in times of war. This in turn led to discussion of the moral expectations of captive and captor. For example, Erica Charters (University of Oxford) explored contemporary debates about what constituted the ‘humane’ treatment of prisoners of war in the mid- to late-eighteenth century through an analysis of French, British and American prisoner of war accounts. In addition, delegates discussed the societal expectation—particularly within post-1945 British literature and film—that all prisoners of war should have attempted to *escape*. Over the course of the conference it became evident that the notion that prisoners constantly hatched cunning escape plans, as represented by television programmes such as the BBC’s *Colditz* (1972-4), clashed with more common stories of everyday survival, resistance, privation and even boredom. Prisoner of war scholars must therefore understand the popular preconceptions of their subject matter today, particularly when communicating their research to a broader audience.

The centrality of escape to the prisoner’s narrative also led to questions about the limits set on representation by post-war societies. Gill Plain (University of St. Andrews and WAR-Net co-founder) explored the changing images of masculinity in post-1945 British prisoner of war films, including *The Captive Heart* (1947), *The Wooden Horse* (1950) and *The Colditz Story* (1955). Similarly, Clare Makepeace (Birkbeck College, University of London) reflected on the often strained relations within British ex-prisoner of war organisations. The legitimacy and authenticity of prisoner of war experience was therefore under continual debate, even after captivity had ended.

Throughout the conference, it was evident that prisoner of war studies has given rise to exciting research topics and varying approaches. Among the other thought-provoking topics explored during the conference, researchers from different disciplinary

backgrounds offered reflections on violence and economic exploitation, the importance of ‘reciprocity’ in early modern and modern contexts, the prevalence of trauma and mental illness among prisoners and the concept of ‘creativity behind barbed wire.’ The conference was therefore an important step in theorising the prisoner of war and in exploring the notion of ‘representation’ by prisoners of war themselves and scholars today. We hope that, as a result of events like ours, the ‘Cinderella subject’ of prisoner of war studies will no longer be excluded from mainstream military and social historical research.

The ‘Representing Prisoner of War Experience’ conference was generously sponsored by the Department of History at Warwick, the Humanities Research Centre, the Royal Historical Society, the Centre for the History of Medicine at Warwick and the Warwick Oral History Network. It was the first event of the Prisoner of War Network, founded by Elodie Duché and Grace Huxford. This interdisciplinary, bilingual network has over sixty members from Europe, Africa and North America. It distributes regular newsletters, and it plans to host future events to further encourage collaboration on prisoner of war studies across disciplines and institutions. For further information visit <http://powstudiesnetwork.wordpress.com/>.

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