



POWs IN AMERICAN MILITARY HISTORY

By Lorien Foote, Daniel Krebs and Ron Granieri March 30, 2021
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Ron Granieri: Welcome to *A Better Peace*, the War Room podcast. I'm **Ron Granieri**, Professor of History at the Department of National Security and Strategy at the U.S. Army War College and Podcast Editor of the War Room. It's a pleasure to have you with us. As long as there has been war, there have been prisoners of war (POWs) held up as victims or political symbols or portrayed as heroic rebels in films and television. POWs have had a place in cultural representations of warfare. At the same time, however, historians of war and society have only just begun to integrate the study of POWs into their work. In their recent edited collection, *Useful Captives: The Role of POWs in American Military Conflicts*, from the University of Kansas Press, Professors **Daniel Krebs** and **Lorien Foote** have made a significant contribution to the integration of POWs into military history by bringing together a series of articles from the colonial era to the present. Discussing topics ranging from the personal experiences of American POWs and POWs in American custody to the development of policies regarding prisoners to the memorialization of POW camps. Throughout, the book seeks in the words of the introduction, "to demonstrate how the study of prisoners of war can provide answers to broad questions about war and the societies that fight them." And so, we are delighted to have with us today, both Daniel Krebs and Lorien Foote. Daniel Krebs is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Louisville and the current occupant of the Harold K. Johnson Chair in Military History at the U.S. Army War College. He is the author of *A Generous and Merciful Enemy: Life for German Prisoners of War during the American Revolution*. Lorien Foote is the Patricia & Bookman Peters Professor of History at Texas A&M University, and the author of *The Yankee Plague: Escaped Union Prisoners and the Collapse of the Confederacy*. It's wonderful to have you both with us today. Welcome to the War Room, Dr. Foote, and Dr. Krebs.

Daniel Krebs: I just wanted to thank you, Ron, for having us and this wonderful introduction. Also, thank you to the folks at War Room for the interest in this topic and for inviting me and Lorien here today.

RG: You bet. So how did this book come about?

Lorien Foote: Well, it came about when Daniel came to Texas A&M University to give a talk about his book and also to talk to our grad students about professional development. He gave a wonderful talk about that, and he and I went to dinner and talked about our mutual interest in prisoners of war and how we felt there was much more to learn about them than their experience in prison camps. Even though, of course, this is vitally important to understand the experience of prisoners, we felt that there were many aspects of prisoners of war as a topic that weren't being well explored in the broader literature on warfare. So, we decided that we wanted to host a conference at the Filson Historical Society in Louisville, bringing together people who are studying prisoners, but asking them specifically to consider what does studying prisoners of war tell us about war that we didn't know otherwise and how does this speak to big picture issues? So, we did a call for papers and we had a wonderful conference in 2017 dealing with this topic. People from all over the world came and presented, and we chose several of the papers to form part of an edited volume.

RG: And so Lorien when you invited Daniel to come to Texas A&M, obviously, you knew that he worked on POWs and you worked on POWs, but did you two know each other professionally before you met at this event?

LF: He was actually invited by our mutual friend, Adam Sipe.

RG: Also a former guest on this podcast.

LF: Yes, so I had never met Daniel before but because Adam had invited him, that was how we connected.

DK: Adam and I we met actually this might be interesting for you, Ron. I mean this is a side story that you guys can cut out, but Adam and I met years ago in D.C. at a study symposium at the German Historical institute.

RG: A lot of academic relationships begin on New Hampshire Avenue in Washington D.C. at the German Historical Institute. I mean, this is one of those interesting questions that people ask academics all the time- where do you get the ideas for your books, or how do these things happen? We of course would like to assume and about ourselves that everything is perfectly logical, but there is always that element of personal history that brings people together, right? The friend of a friend, the colleague who says you really need to meet this person because they're interested in what you're interested in. So, the idea that you brought everybody together for this conference, and when you were bringing the people together, what did you feel like you were trying to push against? Were there ideas about prisoners of war that you felt were inaccurate that needed to be fixed or were there particular things that you wanted to make sure that the

contributors to the conference, and then to the volume, would hit in this? I'm going to go to Daniel first on this.

DK: Yeah, thank you. The issue I think in the historiography when it comes to POWs that we were a little bit grappling with is that POWs were often studied in the past as a kind of separate topic. So, they were kind of separate from the history of warfare and military history that that focuses on conducting and planning warfare. What we felt is that this type of history is not doing justice to the issues that come to the fore when you're looking at POWs. What I often tell my students is that when I'm when I'm looking at POWs, what we're struggling with in the historiography is that military history has often a focus on heroes- you know, those that plan and win battles, that plan and win wars, that lead the grand armies to victory. That is often the history that we focus on when military history talks about warfare. POWs don't fit that kind of narrative. They're not these traditional heroes. As I often joke, I blame the 19th century for a lot of those feuds, and Lorien and might have her issues with that, but for me, originally as a colonial and revolutionary American historian, you know, the 19th century here is to blame for a historiography that does not see POWs as heroes. In the 19th century we have this invention of the nation and this invention of this idea of nationalism, and what we see is that if you are a soldier, you're supposed to give everything for your cause for your nation. POWs, by surrendering and entering captivity, obviously did not fulfill that kind of call to give everything to their cause to their nation. So, we see in the 19th and 20th century how these POWs then were written, if you will, out of the history of warfare, precisely because they had not given that full measure of devotion to their nation or their cause.

RG: Now this is good because this gets me back to you, Lorien. First of all, your book has perhaps the greatest title I've ever heard, the greatest before the colon title, right? The Yankee Plague, right? So, the idea of the problem for the Confederacy was bringing, you know, after you've taken people captive, and then you have to somehow keep them in your community but keep them separate from your community. But I am curious about the ideas of how different were things by the 19th century when we were talking about prisoners of war? In American history, in what ways is the Civil War an important inflection point for the POW question in American military history?

LF: I think the Civil War is this critical moment because both sides want to fight a civilized war by the time of the Civil War, and there are definite ideas that have been put into place based on the laws of war that have developed by the 18th century about how a civilized nation treats its prisoners. You're going to parole them. You're going to exchange them. You're going to treat officers as if they're honorable gentlemen. There's this code of conduct that, if you follow it, it shows you're part of the ranks of the civilized, and if you don't follow it, you're one of the barbaric or savage nations, and surrender is an inherent right that you have fighting civilized war. So, you have a set of expectations and then what happens during the Civil War is that when the

exchange breaks down and both sides are accusing each other of incredibly barbaric treatment of prisoners of war and how many prisoners are taken, going back to what date? Nobody expected that there would be hundreds of thousands of prisoners of war. Neither side is prepared for the magnitude of that, and in a moment, I'm going to kind of hit on how this kind of sets up some dysfunction that I think lasts for the rest of American military history. And so, then you have this situation where neither side was prepared. There are accusations of barbarity, and there are more people who are taken prisoner than who die on the battlefield. Because neither side is really prepared for this, during the war and after the war, how both sides treat prisoners becomes the single most divisive issue in inhibiting reconciliation after the war. Even the Confederacy's treatment of slaves is linked in the propaganda after the war to how they treat prisoners of war. So, I think what we see happen is because this was such a traumatic experience for both sides, the military wants to move on and ignore it. And what we see is the U.S. military from this point on does not prepare for prisoners of war, does not prepare for the propaganda effect because that's the big thing we see in the Civil War is the use of prisoners of war as propaganda to show that the other side is not civilized. You're the righteous one. The other side is unrighteous, and so it all becomes this debate about how POWs were treated, and that starts to dominate the literature. So, I want to tie this back to what Daniel said about the problems in historiography. The literature after the Civil War becomes focused on how did both sides treat prisoners and were they really barbaric? The historiography bogs down in prisoner treatment. That's important, but Daniel and I wanted to move the conversation beyond how are prisoners treated to questions about how capturing, taking, housing, and politically dealing with prisoners- what can that tell us about broader issues of warfare? And I'll get to some answers to that, but I'll pause in case you have another question or Daniel wants to jump in.

RG: Well, Daniel, I do want to get to this because since you are a Colonial era historian. During the Revolutionary War, you point out that George Washington wanted to show how civilized the colonials were, hoping that the British would reciprocate. But if I'm correct, the British did not treat Colonial soldiers as prisoners of war. They treated them as criminals and put them on prison ships. And at what point did that lead to or did it lead to any kind of retaliation on the American side?

DK: Well, that is one of those questions during the American Revolution. What we see, as you rightfully point out, at the beginning of that war we have the revolutionaries on one side and we have the British on the other side, and both sides suddenly take prisoners. And just like Lorian pointed out, they were sort of surprised by that. Suddenly in 1775, both sides had guys from the other side in their hands, and questions come up like what do we do with these people now? Traditionally in the past, actually prisoners were not kept for a long time. Prisoners were usually released fairly quickly because neither side had enough resources, funding, housing to actually keep them. And this fails in the American Revolution. Suddenly we have in the American Revolution, prisoners who stay for years in each other's captivity. On the revolutionary side, they

tried to make these prisoners into an effort to force the British to accept the revolutionaries as legitimate belligerents, not as rebels to be treated and hanged summarily, but rather as a nation against which they fight a regular war and now their regular treatment of POWs was demanded. The British don't do that, and that is one of the main sources of contention throughout the war, and both sides repeatedly threaten retaliation. The numbers then, however, often don't work out to the favor of one or the other side. So, when the Americans want to retaliate, the British have a lot of Americans in their captivity. That is, of course, then a problem for the revolutionaries, or the other way around. If the British want to retaliate, but the Americans have many British soldiers in their hands, that worked to the detriment of these kinds of ideas. Plus, that is something that we have to understand that the American Revolution. It was as much a war of American revolutionaries against British soldiers as it was actually a civil war, and in that civil war, similar to what Lorien just said, the issue of POWs in the treatment of how do I treat fellow Americans that are loyal to the Crown versus fellow Americans that are revolutionaries becomes one of those issues. And frequently, actually, the mistreatment happens. There are many cases during the American Revolution where captured soldiers are executed or surrendering soldiers are shot because in that escalating violence that a civil war brings with it, these kinds of issues are or not being resolved in a civilized way, similar to what Lorien just stated for the Civil War.

RG: So, here's a question that I keep thinking of. I can't count the number of discussions of military history that I've heard where people say that when they fought War X the people who organized it were surprised by fill in blank here with things that they should not have been surprised by, right? They were surprised that the people didn't stop fighting after the Army surrendered, right? They were surprised that, you know, they were surprised that people got killed. How can you be surprised that people are taken prisoner? And yet, when reading these essays, right? Is it sounds like every time it's like 'Well, golly gee, what are we going to do with these people who are taken prisoner'? What do you think it says? This is actually asking for a little bit of philosophy, or what do you think it says that military planners seem to want to believe that the enemy will somehow dissipate into thin air after a conflict is over? Is it just because planning for POWs is so inglorious and boring that nobody wants to be responsible for it? Does it say something about how people plan wars that they seem to be repeatedly surprised by the fact that they just took a lot of prisoners? Lorien, do you want to go first on that?

LF: I think there are two things involved. I think one is that it's actually difficult to think in advance about what you want to do with these people. At the same time, they take for granted that it's going to be easy. Because I think that, you know, we will take prisoners, will take them off the front line, and we'll put them somewhere, and then we hold them. And, you know, that's what we'll do. But so many issues arise as part of that seemingly simple process of removing prisoners from the front that they don't plan for and don't think about. Most of the time, prisoners become a logistical issue. They become a propaganda nightmare. And I want to go back, and I

hope you ask me a little bit about the logistical issue because I want to tell you a story that kind of relates to that, but I want to give Daniel a chance to answer.

RG: Okay, I do want to come back to that because just the very idea about how you walk the prisoners all the way to wherever or get them wherever you're going to put them, right? Because I have a friend who has written a book about German prisoners of war in Nebraska during the Second World War. And so, the idea that you're going to put prisoners and you're going to take them a whole long way and put them someplace, but we'll come back to the logistics question. But Daniel, what about this not only in your research, but in the essays in the book? Is it fair to say that the POW question is systematically underprepared for in the conflicts that you've studied?

DK: I would argue as a as a typical historian about the yes or no.

RG: Outstanding.

DK: I would argue that the problems of actually keeping and handling POWs is what repeatedly surprised people, just like Lorient pointed out. But I would argue that beginning with the American Revolution and the French Revolutionary Wars, if we're staying in that Western realm of warfare, I think it was actually a goal to make prisoners. We see that with the American Revolutionaries, for example, when the British Army, or British German Army I should say, at Saratoga surrendered. By traditional means, these guys would have been pardoned and essentially sent back to Europe to take up Garrison duty, removed from the war and removed from the battlefield, but not in any way, you know, kept as POWs. Instead, what happens? The Revolutionaries do not let that surrendering British Army leave the country. They keep them in the country for the remainder of the war, and we see that then also with the captives that they take at Trenton. They are kept as prisoners because what the Revolutionary realizes is that these captives weaken the British war effort because the British now have to replace these soldiers, have to send up new armies, etc. So, I would argue that with these revolutionary wars at the end of the 18th century. There was a change that people want to take prisoners because these prisoners weaken the other side's war effort. However, what they struggle with is once I have thousands or hundreds, later tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of POWs, that is when we then all of a sudden, in and around like Lorient said, where now I have to feed, house, and deal with these people, and that is what I'm not prepared for.

RG: Especially when you consider, at least into the 19th century. And now I'll go back to you, Lorient, on logistics as I promised. Certainly, when I think about the history of the American Civil War, I think that both armies in the beginning had trouble feeding, clothing, caring for, lodging, keeping from dying of dread diseases of their active duty soldiers. And so, how much effort are you really going to put into protecting other folks? So, what is the logistical problem?

Say, especially if you're the Confederates , and you're retreating, or I don't know, where are you putting these prisoners, and how are you getting them to where you're putting them?

LF: So, I want to address this by saying something about the moment that I had when I was researching and writing *The Yankee Plague* because I was not someone who had studied prisoners of war before. I had written several books about other topics before that, and I'm reading and finding all these things in the primary sources about thousands of Union prisoners escaping at the end of the Civil War. I'm thinking I've never heard of this, what is going on? And it caused me to begin kind of looking at the historiography on the American Civil War. And as I am seeing prisoners being moved all over the Confederacy from Andersonville to Charleston, South Carolina. From Virginia to Georgia to South Carolina. As I'm seeing the incredible movement that POWs go through and I start thinking about it. Not only do you have to march them off the battlefield under guard, then you have to put them in holding places near the battlefield, then you have to march them to a train station, then you've got to get them on a train and take them somewhere. You've got to guard the trains. You've got to guard where you take them. How much manpower is this taking? Using the trains to do this, is this meaning that the trains aren't being able to be used to bring men to the front? You know, I mean things that I know military people think about all the time that I hadn't thought of. So, as I was trying to find answers to this, I was looking at famous Civil War books on campaigns and battles, and I would go to the index to look up prisoners of war, and I would discover that prisoners of war weren't even in the index. That people were writing campaign histories where 50,000 men are taken prisoner, and they're not even talking about it. I thought, well, are they not talking about it because it's not important? Or are they not talking about it because they just don't even think you need to integrate prisoners into the history of their writing? So, I started researching the issue, and what I'm realizing I okay, I'm continually finding commanders saying things like 'Well, we have to put off the offensive for two weeks because we have to process all these prisoners. We can't march forward.' One of my graduate students wrote his dissertation about Grant's processing of prisoners, and what he found is after Grant captures Henry and Donaldson, his offensive is delayed for many days because of the need to send all of the prisoners up to Illinois. And so, it's amazing to me that Civil War historians have not integrated prisoners into the operational history of the war. That was just one example, when I am now convinced that there's multiple occasions. That processing prisoners and moving them off the battlefield drastically affects the timing of operations, what commanders are able to do, and how they are able to feed their own men. In my book, I found that in the Union capture of Wilmington, the Confederacy, is not able to evacuate all of the stores that they're trying to evacuate from Wilmington because the railroads are caught up trying to transfer prisoners around. And so, the Union captures a lot of ammunition and equipment that they wouldn't have otherwise if the Confederacy wasn't dealing with a logistical nightmare because it wasn't prepared for its prisoners.

RG: That is fascinating, and yet, when you say it as with so many things historians do, after you say it, everybody says 'Well, of course that's obvious.' And it's like 'But it wasn't obvious before I researched it, thank you very much,' right? But I think that is an interesting thing to think about, right? We're talking about finite resources, which often then means the soldiers or the resources that are placed that are given the responsibility for dealing with the prisoners are stretched very thin. So, the commander of Andersonville, who, am I correct that the Confederate commander of Andersonville was executed for his treatment of prisoners?

LF: Yes.

RG: That he was not the greatest officer in the Confederate Army? He was completely overwhelmed. He did not get the support that he needed. He may have been guilty of terrible things, but I think about this because, as we already approach the end of this brief conversation, the stories of Abu Ghraib and the whole problem of having soldiers who are themselves undertrained, overburdened, and under supervised. It creates then that the treatment of prisoners of war becomes a huge, you talked about propaganda, becomes a huge danger zone for the United States. If you're not handling prisoners properly, then it can cast terrible aspersions on your entire war effort. And yet, these are the kinds of things that people only recognize in retrospect. That 'Oh yeah, we probably should have paid more attention to that.'

DK: And Ron, just because you mentioned that following also what Lorien said.

RG: Go ahead Daniel, please.

DK: What recent research, and we have actually a chapter in in our book on that by Paul Springer if I may, you know, plug his name.

RG: Please.

DK: He is at the Air War College, and he actually argues that we have entered now a phase in American history in which during those wars against nonstate actors, so the War on Terror, etc. over the last two decades the United States actually does not consider it worth anymore the costs. And costs of just what you just mentioned from recruiting future terrorists to the propaganda to potential embarrassments. A nightmare such as Abu Ghraib. These costs are too much, and, as a result, in these kinds of conflicts, the U.S., he argues, is simply conducting wars without taking POWs. That if there is anybody who has been taken captive there, just let go. There might be, you know, we might take the identity, we might try to, you know, take the biometrics, etc., but beyond that, there's not much that the U.S. military does because taking POWs is a problem these days. So, unlike the 19th century when we see this, and the 20th century, when we see these efforts to weaken the other side by taking as many POWs as possible.

RG: Interesting. There's something to be said there about the deterritorialization of warfare, right? If you're no longer worried about the size of the enemy force or about holding particular territory?

DK: Yeah, absolutely. Paul goes even further and then argues that not only is the U.S. trying to avoid taking POWs, but they're also trying to move war toward robotics. So that any questions, even of casualties, do not appear anymore, especially in the U.S. side, of course. And this is the focus of his research.

RG: Interesting. So, we're just about out of time, but I wanted to ask both of you where your research is going next. Are you continuing in this field of studies of prisoners of war, or are you moving into something else? Lorien, I see you smiling as I ask this question, so I am curious. What are you working on next or now?

LF: I have a book coming out in August called *Rights of Retaliation: Civilization, Soldiers and Campaigns*, and it's about how the Union and the Confederacy use prisoners of war in retaliation episodes to negotiate what civilized war is supposed to look like in practice. So, I use prisoners of war to show cultural ideas of warfare and how prisoners were a part of this process, and then I'm also working on a project about dogs in 19th century warfare.

RG: Oh man, okay well good. Daniel, what are you working on next?

DK: At least during my time here at the War College, I actually just started working on an essay about escalation, a topic that we discuss quite often in our courses here, during the American War of Independence. Essentially trying to do a case study on how the American Revolutionaries were able to escalate horizontally and vertically to put the British government, the Loyalists, their army, and navy, increasingly into these disadvantageous positions. If you will, the revolutionaries here were able to establish escalation dominance. That, at least, is an argument that I want to make in that essay while I'm here at the War College.

RG: Great, well, all interesting topics, and I assure you that when those works come out, we will be happy to invite you back to talk about them. There's obviously a lot to go into on this topic of prisoners of war. We're about out of time for today, but I want to encourage listeners who have been intrigued by what we've talked about to make sure that they find themselves a copy of *Useful Captives: The Role of POWs in American Military Conflicts* Copyright 2020 from the University of Kansas Press. Please go out and get a copy, and please let us know what you think about it. But for today, I want to thank Professor Lorien Foote and Professor Daniel Krebs for joining us on *A Better Peace*. Thanks so much.

DK: Thank you for having us and thank you for this opportunity.

RG: You bet. And thanks to all of you for tuning in and listening to us. Please send us your comments on this program and all the programs and send your suggestions for future programs. Please subscribe to *A Better Peace*, and after you have subscribed to *A Better Peace* because of course you would want to subscribe, please rate and review this podcast on your pod-catcher of choice so that other people can find us too. We're always interested in growing this community so that we can have more people tuning in for conversations like this. This conversation is over, but there will be others and we look forward to welcoming you. Until next time, from the War Room, I'm Ron Granieri.