

Andersonvilles of the North: The Myths and Realities of Northern Treatment of Civil War Confederate Prisoners

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Review

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Prisoners of War

In this important study of northern prisoner of war camps and policies governing them, James M. Gillispie counters many earlier treatments of the subject. Gillispie makes a compelling case that southern Lost Causers trying to counter condemnation of the South for the horrific conditions at southern camps such as Andersonville colored early accounts of northern prison policy and studies of prisoner of war camps. They argued that the North intentionally meted out treatment every bit as harsh without the Confederacy's mitigating excuse of lacking resources. Gillispie concedes that other historians have covered some of this ground, but their work has focused on individual camps. Gillispie instead examines all major camps to discern how commanders implemented Commissary General of Prisons William Hoffman's policies and to scrutinize Union policy on prisoners of war.

Gillispie begins with an overview of post-war Union accounts of southern camps with a particular emphasis on Andersonville. Gillispie's survey of modern scholarship on northern prison camps would perhaps be more suited for an introduction, but it nonetheless provides an interesting starting point for the heart of his book, which is a thorough examination of Union prisoner of war policy and its relationship to conditions in each camp.

While abuses certainly occurred in southern camps, Gillispie believes that many post-war narratives were fashioned to confirm the South's moral depravity rather than present a true picture. For example, these accounts often contrasted the treatment of prisoners in the South with the relatively humane handling of Southerners in northern camps. Northern accounts of southern barbarism also

helped veterans lobbying for benefits and fueled Republican attacks on northern Democrats. Southerners, however, bristled over these narratives and responded with their own stories about Northern prisons to counter what they viewed as unfair assaults.

The Lost Cause school of southern history followed close on the heels of this initial southern response. In addition to creating a pantheon of southern heroes, Lost Cause writers aggressively defended southern treatment of Union prisoners. Aside from claiming that disease was rampant in the camps because Northerners preferred to live in filth, the Lost Cause version described southern prisons as benign in intent but unavoidably harsh in practice because of Northern war policy. They blamed the northern blockade of Southern coasts for shortages in the camps and the Union's curtailment of the prisoner exchange cartel in 1863 for overcrowding. These writers' principal aim, though, was to prove that conditions in northern camps were every bit as bad as those in southern camps and resulted from the intentional neglect the United States government and deliberate cruelty of northern officers. According to Gillispie, many twentieth century writers drew on these early accounts to shape their interpretations about those camps, and the result has been a distortion that persists to the present day.

Gillispie, on the other hand, clearly demonstrates that the North was far better organized and efficient in establishing prisoner of war camps, and early conditions in them were consequently far superior to those in southern camps. He also persuasively argues that the North suspended the prisoner exchange cartel in 1863 because the Confederate government declared that it would not treat African American prisoners and their officers as legitimate prisoners of war, not—as others have claimed—that the Confederate pronouncement merely gave the Union an excuse to end a program that benefited the South.

Nevertheless, the end of the cartel led to overcrowding in both Union and Confederate prisons, bloating numbers in camps designed for much smaller populations and creating horrendous problems in waste disposal and the procurement of fresh food. Disease became rampant and lethal. However, the efficient Union inspection system implemented by Hoffman generally brought about changes that improved most northern camps. While discounting accusations that the brief Union retaliation policy in 1864 led to excessive suffering, Gillispie admits that Hoffman's reputation as parsimonious was well deserved; yet he also provides ample evidence that Hoffman's thrift never resulted in undue distress among his prison populations. In fact, throughout most

of the war, Hoffman insisted that prison rations match those of Union armies in the field, daily allowances that exceeded 4,000 calories per man. Nineteenth-century nutrition standards equated abundant calories with a superior diet, no matter its substance. Rations lacked sufficient vegetables and were almost totally devoid of fruit, causing malnutrition and greater susceptibility to disease, but that was hardly a calculated plan to wreck the health of southern prisoners.

Gillispie insists that because it is impossible to determine how many Confederate soldiers became prisoners with pre-existing medical conditions, it is also impossible to know if they became ill after they arrived in prison camps. He is less convincing when he compares death rates in northern prisoner of war camp hospitals to the death rate at the Richmond, Virginia, Chimborazo Hospital. Because this facility was used to treat Confederate soldiers and in some cases had a higher death rate for certain diseases than many Northern prisoner of war camps, Gillispie argues that Confederate prisoners often fared better in Union camps than in the care of their own government. The argument ignores the extreme shortages of medical supplies that Chimborazo suffered throughout the war.

Gillispie does not completely absolve northern commanders and doctors of responsibility for the large numbers of ill and ultimately dead prisoners in some northern camps. Some commanders were clearly incompetent, overwhelmed, or alcoholics, and sometimes were all of the above. In addition, medical arts sometimes employed practices likely to worsen the plight of the sick rather than heal them. Some doctors neglected their prison patients for more lucrative private practice and did not insist that camp hospitals maintain even minimal levels of cleanliness. Gillispie argues, however, that these were local problems, not government policy. When inspectors noted neglect, Hoffman replaced incompetent commanders and corrected abuses.

Gillispie provides a welcome addition to Civil War scholarship. His understanding of how and why the myths surrounding northern policies came into being amounts to a convincing revision of existing interpretations that will be a standard source for years to come.

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