

Captives in Gray: The Civil War Prisons of the North.

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Review

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Pickenpaugh, Roger *Captives in Gray: The Civil War Prisons of the North..*
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Southern Prisoners in Northern Prisons

Over the last fifteen years more writing has been done about Civil War prisons than during the previous fifty. There has been a conspicuous void here for too long that is only beginning to be filled. Roger Pickenpaugh is no newcomer to this topic, having already written a study of the Union prison at Camp Chase, Ohio. *Captives in Gray* goes beyond a single prison study to examine Union POW policies and life inside Federal prison camps during the Civil War.

Captives in Gray has much to recommend it and belongs on the bookshelf of every serious student of the war. Pickenpaugh very clearly and objectively explains Union policy towards and treatment of Confederate prisoners, relying almost exclusively on wartime records and prisoners' diaries—the most reliable sources available for this volatile subject. More so than in any previous book, *Captives in Gray* provides the reader with a good understanding of what life was like inside a Union prison from multiple perspectives. Pickenpaugh vividly describes the process of becoming a prisoner, the trip from the battlefield to prison, and how prisoners dealt with the boredom and difficult conditions they found in Yankee pens. The book has an excellent chapter on escape attempts as well as one about life in Union prisons from the guards' perspective, something no other book has done in such detail.

Pickenpaugh breaks with the well-established tradition that Southern prisoners were systematically abused and neglected by vindictive, callous Yankees. When the 1862 exchange cartel broke down in mid-1863 conditions in Union prisons got more desperate but Federal officials generally tried to provide adequate food, clothing, and shelter and prisoners' diaries indicate that as a

general rule these things were available. However, Pickenpaugh concludes that in the early summer of 1864, the U.S. government adopted a strict policy of retaliation for perceived mistreatment of Union prisoners in the South. The most destructive manifestation of this policy was disallowing food via sutlers and mail packages. Pickenpaugh's suggestion that Confederates faced severe malnutrition from these restrictions is questionable, however, since prisoners' diaries and other records indicate that they were lifted by the beginning of the fall.

The only assertion made in the book that is open to rather serious question is that the twelve percent prisoner mortality rate was inexcusably high thanks in large part to what Pickenpaugh calls the "lethargy" of Union medical personnel in the prisons. The first problem with such an assertion is that there is no argument made to demonstrate what that rate should have been. Related to that problem is that stationary military camps routinely hit that same figure; why should military prisons have been any healthier or less lethal? Records also indicate that five of the North's nine major prisons posted recovery rates of at least ninety-two percent and three more had recovery rates in the mid-eighties. Such rates were quite good for that period, especially under those conditions. Furthermore, James McPherson has demonstrated that a Confederate soldier was twenty-nine percent less likely to die in a Union prison than in his own army. Prison doctors were far from perfect and some were complete incompetents, but their overall success rates suggest that Pickenpaugh has perhaps been overly critical.

Captives in Gray is an outstanding addition to the literature on Civil War prisons. Pickenpaugh's balanced approach is as welcome as it is rare and his lucid prose makes reading it as pleasurable as it is enlightening. For those wishing to understand Union prison policies, especially during the war's first year, and to gain a clearer view of what life was like as a Confederate prisoner, this book is a good place to begin.

James Gillispie currently teaches history at Sampson Community College in Clinton, North Carolina. He is the author of Andersonvilles of the North (University of North Texas Press, 2008) and is currently researching Eastern North Carolina in the Civil War. His regimental history of the 18th North Carolina is under contract with McFarland Publishers.