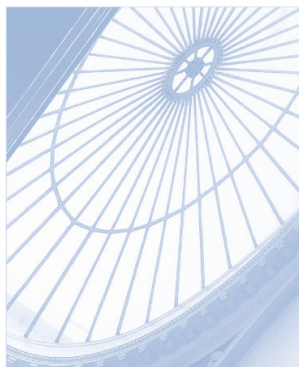


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YORAI LINENBERG, *Jewish Soldiers in Nazi Captivity: American and British Prisoners of War during the Second World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 288 pp. ISBN 978 0 198 89278 6. £83.00

Yorai Linenberg's book deals with an apparent paradox: between 1939 and 1945, around 4,700 Jewish soldiers serving in the British and US armies were captured by the Germans; however, contrary to what one might expect from the National Socialist regime and its persecution of Jews, most of them survived the Second World War. Unlike almost all other Jews in the territories controlled by Nazi Germany, they were not murdered. The same is true of the roughly 13,000 Jewish POWs from France,¹ as well as the 2,000 or so who came from other countries.² In total, around 20,000 Jewish men thus survived the war as POWs (not 60,000, as Linenberg claims).

By contrast, Jewish soldiers serving in the Red Army were separated from other Soviet prisoners immediately after being captured and were murdered at assembly points and in transit camps. The *Wehrmacht* and Gestapo also searched for Jews among Soviet internees after their arrival in camps within the German Reich. These Jewish POWs were then released from military detention, transferred to concentration camps, and murdered.³

Translated by Jozef van der Voort (GHIL).

¹ Linenberg assumes that there were 55,000 French Jewish POWs (p. 5), but I take my estimate from Delphine Richard, 'Prisonniers de guerre juifs de l'armée française 1940-1945' (unpublished PhD thesis, Université Lyon II, 2022), abstract at [<https://www.fondationshoah.org/recherche/prisonniers-de-guerre-juifs-de-larmee-francaise-1940-1945-delphine-richard>], accessed 27 Jan. 2025.

² Rank-and-file Jewish soldiers from Poland were generally released from detention and later murdered in the Shoah; however, 1,000 Polish Jewish officers and up to 650 Jewish officers from Yugoslavia survived the Second World War as prisoners of the *Wehrmacht*. The same is true of several hundred Jewish POWs from Belgium and the Netherlands. Linenberg also names Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand as countries of origin (p. 5).

³ Rolf Keller, *Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene im Deutschen Reich 1941/1942: Behandlung und Arbeitseinsatz zwischen Vernichtungspolitik und kriegswirtschaftlichen Zwängen*, 2 vols. (Göttingen, 2011), ii. 110-15.

While the fate of Jewish POWs from the Soviet Union is relatively well studied and documented, it is only over the last twenty years that historians have begun to pay closer attention to non-Soviet Jewish soldiers in German captivity.⁴ Some authors have studied non-Soviet Jewish POWs collectively in a bid to explain their extraordinary exclusion from the extermination of Europe's Jews,⁵ while others have focused on Jewish prisoners from a particular country, most notably France.⁶ The 1929 Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, whose terms were generally observed by the *Wehrmacht* in their dealings with non-Soviet POWs, is an important point of reference in all attempts to explain the phenomenon.⁷

Linenberg is deeply familiar with the current state of research on British and US Jews in German military captivity, and his extensive work in international archives has enabled him to assemble a superb source base. His introduction also offers an accurate and helpful overview of the German POW organization and how it changed between 1939 and 1945.

Linenberg divides the Jewish soldiers he studies into two major groups. The first of these is made up of 1,500 Palestinian Jewish

⁴ The first studies on the subject were published nearly fifty years ago: Shmuel Krakowski, 'The Fate of Jewish Prisoners of War in the September 1939 Campaign', *Yad Vashem Studies*, 12 (1977), 297–333; Josef Lador-Lederer, 'World War II: Jews as Prisoners of War', *Israel Yearbook on Human Rights*, 10 (1980), 70–89; Yoav Gelber, 'Palestinian POWs in German Captivity', *Yad Vashem Studies*, 14 (1981), 89–137.

⁵ Johanna Jacques, 'A "Most Astonishing" Circumstance: The Survival of Jewish POWs in German War Captivity during the Second World War', *Social and Legal Studies*, 30/3 (2021), 362–83; Rüdiger Overmans, 'Die Kriegsgefangenenpolitik des Deutschen Reiches 1939 bis 1945', in Jörg Echternkamp (ed.), *Die Deutsche Kriegsgesellschaft 1939 bis 1945*, vol. ii: *Ausbeutung, Deutungen, Ausgrenzung* (Munich, 2005), 729–875.

⁶ Janine Doerry, 'Schützlinge des Marschalls'? *Kriegsgefangene Juden aus Frankreich und ihre Familien während des Zweiten Weltkrieges* (Berlin, 2020); Richard, 'Prisonniers de guerre juifs'; Galit Haddad, '"Prisonniers de guerre français" ou "prisonniers de guerre juifs"? La captivité des combattants juifs et le rôle du régime de Vichy', 20 & 21: *Revue d'histoire*, 155 (2022), 103–16.

⁷ Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War (adopted 27 July 1929, entered into force 19 June 1931), 118 LNTS 343, at [<https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gc-pow-1929>], accessed 27 Jan. 2025.

volunteers in the service of the British Mandate who were captured by the *Wehrmacht* in Greece in April 1941, promptly separated from other POWs, and held in Stalag VIII-B Lamsdorf and its associated *Arbeitskommandos* (work camps) from the end of July 1941 until its evacuation in February 1945. The fact that this group was able to assert itself, with the support of delegates from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the protecting power, was a product of necessity in the face of discrimination. Yet even though they were treated worse at times, Linenberg takes an overall positive view of their isolation from other British POWs, as he notes that they were the only cohort of Jewish soldiers in German detention to be recognized as a specific national and ethnic group.

The Palestinian Jews, who were detained together until their release, can be contrasted with the 700 British and 2,500 US Jews serving in every wing of the armed forces who were taken prisoner by German forces. Although they entered captivity alongside their non-Jewish comrades, during registration in the Oflags (officers' camps) and Stalags (where enlisted POWs and non-commissioned officers were held), all prisoners were asked what religion they belonged to. At that moment, if not before, the British and American Jews had to decide whether to hide or reveal their religious background, which was in any case listed on their ID discs. They were aware of National Socialist antisemitism, and more and more information was emerging during the war about the persecution and murder of Jews. Linenberg impressively describes the dilemma faced by these soldiers. What awaited them in German captivity? Would they be treated worse than their comrades? Were they going to their deaths?

Some Jewish soldiers stated their religious affiliation upon registration, others did not. In a few cases, the *Wehrmacht* applied psychological pressure, used physical violence, or turned to informers in a bid to uncover British and American captives who were hiding their Jewish identity. However, in both the early and closing phases of the war, it remained rare for Jewish POWs from the British and US armed forces who were successfully identified in this way to be separated from their non-Jewish comrades. In cases where the authorities tried to do so, non-Jewish detainees sometimes came together to protest against and ultimately prevent any such moves.

However, not only the *Wehrmacht*, but also the ICRC and the protecting powers believed that segregating prisoners in this way was compatible with the Geneva Convention. This opinion was based on Article 9 of the Convention, which specified that POWs 'of different races or nationalities' should be kept separate. However, in cases where prisoners were segregated, they were supposed to be treated equally; under Article 4, distinctions could only be made based on 'the military rank, the state of physical or mental health, the professional abilities, or the sex' of POWs. Complaints that prisoners were being treated unequally became a source of conflict between the German camp staff and the representatives elected by the detainees. The latter were backed by delegates from the ICRC and the protecting power during their occasional visits to the camps.

Thanks to his extensive source base and his comprehensive study of the lower levels of the POW organization – the point at which *Wehrmacht* personnel and Jewish prisoners directly interacted with each other – Linenberg is able to trace in detail and interpret day-to-day life in the camps, as well as the prisoners' negotiations with administrators, guards, and German civilians.

Linenberg devotes an entire chapter of his book to the question of what it meant to be a Jewish soldier in National Socialist detention, and the associated emergence of a collective Jewish identity. His study addresses the experience of being taken prisoner – including, at times, that of segregation – along with the increased importance in captivity of religion and culture, deaths and funerals, and encounters with Jewish civilians who were entirely vulnerable to persecution and murder. Linenberg's account reveals the full spectrum of Jewishness and how it changed during captivity. At times, however, he tends to lionize his subjects, and his text would have benefited from a more critical stance towards his sources.

In order to explain the survival of British, Palestinian, and American soldiers in German captivity, Linenberg develops a complex line of argument. He begins by addressing standard explanatory approaches that he considers inadequate, including the theory that POWs in German camps were generally treated according to their nationality and its position in a hierarchy of nations – a hierarchy informed by either national conservative or racist ideas, depending

on which interpretation one adopts. At the top of this hierarchy were the UK and the USA, with Russia, or the Soviet Union, at the bottom, and this ranking was also applied to Jewish prisoners.

Scholars have also based their arguments on the principle of reciprocity: if one side mistreats its POWs, the other can commit reprisals against the enemy soldiers it holds in custody. Reciprocity can have a deterrent effect, but can also result in an escalation spiral. Article 2 of the Geneva Convention expressly forbids reprisal measures. Linenberg highlights fears that German soldiers held captive by the Allies might be subjected to reprisals, and suggests that this played an important role in encouraging the *Wehrmacht* to adhere to the Geneva Convention. As a result, he suspects that this has led many historians to overestimate the importance of reciprocity.

Another explanatory approach addressed by Linenberg—one espoused above all by Rüdiger Overmans and Johanna Jacques—is based on the national conservative values of the personnel working in the *Wehrmacht*'s POW organization. Linenberg points out that these values have not been clearly defined, and for the purposes of his argument, he restricts the definition to “chivalric warfare” between honourable foes’ (p. 21). According to many scholars, this was an attitude adopted towards all non-Soviet enemies of the German Reich, including Jewish POWs.

Linenberg then uses this definition as the basis for his analysis of the collection of POW organization orders issued by the *Oberkommando*, or High Command, of the *Wehrmacht*, of which very few expressly refer to Jewish prisoners. As a result, an order issued on 15 December 1944 enjoys a particularly prominent role. It primarily specified that all non-Soviet Jews in German captivity should be separated from other members of their own armed forces.⁸ Apart from that, however, Jewish POWs had to be treated in essentially the same way as their non-Jewish comrades—including a stipulation that they should not be marked out in any way, for example with a yellow star.⁹

⁸ Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, RW 6/270, Befehlssammlung 48, order 876, 15 Dec. 1944; reproduced in Doerry, *Schützlinge*, 277.

⁹ Due to a translation error, Linenberg assumes that Jewish POWs *were* to be marked out. The order states: ‘Von einer besonderen Kennzeichnung der Juden ist abzusehen’; in English: ‘Jews are not to be specially marked’.

Linenberg stresses that the order of 15 December 1944 must be seen in the context of the increasing radicalization of general POW policies within the German Reich. He cites several other orders issued at Hitler's behest that applied to non-Soviet Allied POWs and that were carried out even though they clearly breached the Geneva Convention. He asserts that this radicalization began on the Western Front with the *Kommandobefehl* (Commando Order) of 18 October 1942, which mandated that captured commandos should immediately be handed over to the *Sicherheitsdienst* (Security Service). In this way, they were denied POW status and thus left unprotected by the Geneva Convention.

In contrast to orders of this kind, Linenberg argues, there were no top-level orders—namely from Hitler—specifying how non-Soviet Jewish prisoners were to be treated. This can be inferred not just from the fact that no such orders have been preserved in the archives, but also from the tendency of POW organization personnel to follow orders issued by the *Wehrmacht* leadership, even when this involved breaking the law. Nonetheless, Linenberg sees a crucial difference between the POW organization and almost every other institution of the National Socialist state, in that its personnel did not 'work towards the Führer';¹⁰ in other words, they did not show any initiative in anticipating Hitler's will and implementing it independently. Linenberg ascribes this particularity to the national conservative values that dominated the organization.

Linenberg offers some additional reflections on the final phase of the war. He points out that although Himmler gradually brought the POW organization under his control between July and October 1944, the order of 15 December 1944 nonetheless confirmed that non-Soviet Jewish prisoners were to remain in the custody of the *Wehrmacht* and—apart from being segregated—should be treated the same as their non-Jewish comrades. By way of explanation, Linenberg suggests that the new head of the POW organization (the high-ranking SS General Gottlob Berger) and other senior officials were searching for ways to escape punishment in the event of

However, Linenberg translates this as: 'Special labelling of Jews is to be foreseen' (pp. 144, 207).

¹⁰ Ian Kershaw, "'Working towards the Führer': Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship', *Contemporary European History*, 2/2 (1993), 103–18.

an Allied victory, or to receive only a mild penalty. He argues that they strategically adapted their behaviour based on the foreseeable scenario of a German defeat, ensuring the continued protection of non-Soviet Jewish POWs.

Linenberg underscores his claim that the POW organization did not 'work towards the Führer' by suggesting that the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* (Reich Security Main Office) and the Nazi Party exerted continuous pressure for POW status to be removed from Jewish soldiers. This seems plausible, but unfortunately, Linenberg's evidence is problematic: he refers to statements made after the war by Adolf Westhoff and Theodor Krafft, two high-ranking *Wehrmacht* officers who may have testified to this pressure retrospectively in order to cast themselves in a more positive light in the face of ongoing investigations and the threat of prosecution.

The book also includes a contradictory case study: in February 1945, 350 US prisoners were transferred from Stalag IX-B Bad Orb to an SS forced labour camp in Berga an der Elster, in accordance with an order received by the Stalag commandant. It remains unclear why these 350 prisoners included 280 Jews. Was the Stalag commandant following SS instructions, or acting on his own initiative? Seventy of the transferred soldiers died from the appalling conditions in the forced labour camp and during its later evacuation. To explain why this is the only recorded case of its kind, Linenberg points once again to the aforementioned fear among officials at all levels of the POW organization that they would be held personally to account in the event of a German defeat. From this, he concludes that a values-based, chivalric attitude ultimately prevailed in the organization.

However, the national conservative values cited by Linenberg did not result in the principle of 'chivalric warfare' being applied to Soviet soldiers – or to Italian military internees, who were seen as traitors. Linenberg's study thus confirms that a moral double standard was in force in the POW organization just as much as in the *Wehrmacht* more widely. We thus cannot speak of a 'clean' POW organization, analogous to the myth of the 'clean *Wehrmacht*'.¹¹

¹¹ Ulrike Jureit and Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung (eds.), *Verbrechen der Wehrmacht: Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941–1944. Ausstellungskatalog* (Hamburg, 2002), 14.

Linenberg's book is cohesively constructed, highly readable, and offers important building blocks for better understanding the paradoxical survival of Jewish prisoners of war. He may be guilty of over-generalizing when he takes what is true of British and American Jews in German captivity and applies it to all other non-Soviet Jewish POWs; however, the sharpness of his arguments results in many different points of connection for future scholarly research.

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