Introduction

The First World War unleashed a paroxysm of violence, both within Europe and overseas. Marking a major radicalisation of warfare, the extent of this violence and its effect on societies has long attracted the attention of scholars. In the interwar period, accounting for how violence was collectively represented and sanctioned through cultural practices was an underlying theme of the work of Marc Bloch, Sigmund Freud and Jean Norton Cru, among others.¹ Later military historians analysed the brutal nature of trench combat on the western front in enormous detail.² More recently, there has been a new wave of historical analysis, exploring the cultural context of combatant violence, both on the battlefield and against civilian populations; this has been accompanied by an ongoing debate as to how the war contributed to a violent European post-war political climate.³ Yet despite this wealth of scholarship, one


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crucial aspect of wartime violence has been largely overlooked. Violence against the estimated 7 to 9 million prisoners of war taken in the conflict has not been addressed in the existing historiography, with the exception of the battlefield practice of prisoner killing; however, even this subject has largely only been briefly discussed as part of broader debates on the nature of trench warfare. The scale of violence against captives remains unknown.4

This book sets out to investigate this forgotten issue – violence against combatant prisoners of war – through an analysis of the captivity experiences of British, French and German military prisoners captured on the western front. More specifically, it aims to explore the wide range of different kinds of enemy violence that prisoners endured on the battlefield, in transit, in labour companies and in the prison camp, as well as the ways that governments and the public at large influenced the use of violence against captives; a particular focus here is the public’s role in

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defining acceptable violent practices through shifting social, political and legal understandings of what constituted transgressive ‘atrocities’ or acceptable ‘reprisals’. The violent act is thus not considered in isolation: while relating the reality of brutal treatment, with its painful, often traumatic, impact upon individual captives, this book also seeks to contextualise how forms of collective violent practices against prisoners developed in three countries and how these reflected changing societal values, as the idea of what constituted violence against prisoners evolved throughout the conflict.

Enemy violence against captives merits being singled out for this kind of study because it was a very distinct wartime phenomenon: unlike violence between combatants, the prisoner was unable to defend himself, nor could he flee. He was thus part of a very particular, unequal captivity power dynamic, which was inherently coercive: the prison camp system was based upon the long-term submission of the prisoner to his captor’s superior ability to use violent force, a submission which began at the moment of capture. In this regard, all Great War captivity, even the most comfortable, to some extent functioned through the threat of violence; indeed, in accordance with international law, all combatant prisoners of war were subject to the military law of their captor army during captivity, which meant they lived with the threat of corporal punishment for certain misdemeanours and often lost certain rights, for example, the right to refuse to work.5 To become a prisoner was therefore to come under the exclusive control of omnipresent systems of power, ultimately based on violent physical force.

The kind of violence which forms the subject of this book can thus be defined as the use or threat of physical force, both discriminate and indiscriminate, against a prisoner of war, by an enemy subject. It is a deliberately broad definition, as the aim here is to investigate the full range of those acts which contemporaries at the time considered constituted enemy violence against prisoners of war, which was described in public debate using multiple different terms, the euphemisms ‘mistreatment’ or ‘reprisal’ being particularly popular. Such public interpretations mattered during the conflict: violations of a prisoner’s right to bodily and mental integrity became part of a broader symbolic framework of violence that defined captivity. Shooting prisoners out of hand was one of the most dramatic types of violence, but it was far from the only one, nor was it always the most notorious: making captives work under shellfire, beatings, corporal punishment, mistreating the sick, starvation rations and even

5 On military law and prisoners in Germany, see Uta Hinz, Gefangen im Großen Krieg. Kriegsgefangenschaft in Deutschland, 1914–1921 (Essen, 2006), pp. 141–68.
threats of violence were all equally prominent in the debates on violent treatment during the war and thus feature in this study. The one kind of violence not covered here is sexual violence; due to the complete absence of any mention of this topic in the source material, it was not possible to include it.

There are three key reasons for focusing upon violence against prisoners. First, the kinds of violence against captives that emerged during the First World War offer a fundamental insight into the radicalisation processes at the heart of the conflict: as Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker have argued, ‘the specific violence of war is a prism, which refracts many things that are otherwise invisible’. Violence against prisoners, both on and off the battlefield, was not a set of static practices; it evolved as the conflict continued. It can thus show us how wartime extremisms developed. What constituted legitimate forms of violence against captives was a key question that preoccupied European wartime elites and the general public alike throughout the war; it was one which was constantly renegotiated within societies and also at a transnational level in close reciprocal relationship to what allied or enemy states were doing to their captives. This legitimacy debate operated at several different levels: what was actually practised as prisoner treatment; what was known about those practices by the population at large; and finally what was publicly endorsed. By encouraging hostility towards the enemy, violence against prisoners of war thus played a highly significant role in mobilising home front populations. In sum, studying violence against prisoners of war provides valuable insights into the escalation of wartime brutalisation, as well as the cultural limits placed upon this process, through changing understandings of acceptable ‘norms’, what was considered permissible, and ‘extremes’, the outer limits of what could be publicly condoned. The assumption here, building upon Walter Benjamin’s differentiation in his ‘Critique of Violence’, is that wartime violence is not a natural constant – rather it is a ‘product of history’ that is socially and culturally conditioned, emerging in different ways at certain historical junctures; in part, this study also reflects Wolfgang Sofsky’s work, with its suggestion that we need to explore the relationship between violence and culture in more detail, although it rejects his idea that because violence is innate in human nature, cultural structures ultimately always serve to facilitate it.

6 Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, 14–18. Retrouver la Guerre, p. 25.
In this way, this book provides a new perspective on some of the existing interpretations of the war. Isabel Hull has argued that there was a cultural predilection for extremes of violence in the German army, a ‘dynamic of destruction’ which caused it to always opt by default for the most ruthless method to achieve its aims; building on Hull’s analysis, Alan Kramer’s recent work has suggested that this dynamic existed in other armies too and that ‘for all sides in the war, enemy civilians and other non-combatants came to be regarded to a greater or lesser degree as targets of war policy, even as legitimate objects of violence’.8 By following the evolution of violence against prisoners of war, in three countries, this book is able to show that there was a drive towards extremes in the German army, as Hull has argued; however, this German ruthlessness was only the farthest and most extreme end of a developmental spectrum, whereby mass captivity, as well as new forms of forced labour, unleashed a dynamic of radicalisation of violence against prisoners which affected all three states and their armies. The idea of brutalisation, first posited by George Mosse, is thus presented here as a process which was already occurring within polities during the conflict.9 The key conclusion that emerges, however, is that in the British and French cases this radicalisation dynamic was ultimately impeded due to political structures and cultural norms in these two countries that differed from the German case; these acted as impediments that offset the drive towards radicalisation.

Second, through studying violence against prisoners this book aims to show the real extent of prisoner mistreatment during the conflict and the policies that facilitated this development. Violence against prisoners is taken here as a crucial indicator for broader mistreatment patterns. In particular, this book argues that the key overlooked innovation of the First World War was the forced labour company. As the war continued, a significant percentage of non-officer prisoners of war were retained at the western front to work for their captor army in labour companies – an innovation adopted by all three national armies studied here. This was a breach of international law: while the 1907 Hague Convention allowed other-rank prisoners to work for the captor state, it stipulated that they should not be put to work directly for their captor’s war effort.10 These
men endured a much harsher captivity which contrasted greatly to that of their peers who were evacuated to home front camps, effectively creating two contrasting captivity systems. The advent of this ‘dual’ system, of home front camps and labour companies at the front, radicalised prisoner of war treatment; prisoners in labour companies were often exposed to frequent violence, particularly in the German army. This book reveals the extent of the labour company system for the first time and emphasises the importance of reintegrating this early, significant development into the longer-term historical trajectory of the evolution of forced labour and the prison camp in the first half of the twentieth century, which would go on to be marked by the widespread use of mass imprisonment and forced labour, from the gulags of Russia to Franco’s Spain and the horrors of the Nazi concentration camp system.

Thus this book provides a new perspective upon an ongoing debate in the existing historiography on First World War prisoners of war as to whether captives were generally humanely or badly treated. Until fifteen years ago, the overall history of captivity during the Great War was largely forgotten, under-researched due to the popular and historical focus upon the horrors of the camps of the Second World War, as well as the severe destruction of archive sources in Germany and Britain in aerial bombardments in 1939–45. However, recently there has been a series of new publications on Great War captivity, most of which focus on prisoner living conditions. These can be broadly divided into two interpretations. The first, presented in the work of Odon Abbal, Richard Speed, Rémy Cazals, Kai Rawe, Rainer Pöppinghege and Alon Rachamimov, broadly views the war as the last phase of a nineteenth-century humanitarian culture, which protected prisoners from the extremes of mistreatment seen in later twentieth-century conflicts; Rachamimov concludes in his study of prisoners of war in Russia that ‘when we want World War I to be the worst cautionary example of war’ then captivity at best ‘has a marginal place’. More nuanced, Uta Hinz’s impressive recent study of prisoners of war in Germany accepts that significant deterioration in prisoner living

11 Second World War bombing destroyed the archives of the German army at Potsdam and damaged First World War British Red Cross prisoner of war records.
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conditions occurred but argues that this was due to ‘the structural economic changes caused by the war’, rather than any violent radicalisation of wartime attitudes to prisoners; for Hinz, the boundaries set in international law to protect prisoners were largely kept: ‘in this regard the First World War was not a total war’. The second interpretation, presented in the work of Annette Becker, Giovanna Procacci and Mark Spoerer, emphasises poor Great War captivity conditions; Procacci and Spoerer point to the high death rates among Italian and British prisoners respectively, with Procacci citing the deaths of 100,000 of the 600,000 Italian captives held by Germany and Austria-Hungary. For these historians, the war was marked by particularly ruthless prisoner treatment; indeed, Becker goes on to argue that it established patterns which later surfaced in the 1939–45 conflict. At issue in these two diverging historiographical interpretations, which are both represented in the contributions to Jochen Oltmer’s recent edited book of essays on Great War captivity, is whether the First World War marked the key watershed moment in Europe’s twentieth century treatment of prisoners of war: indeed, one historian, a proponent of the benevolent captivity interpretation of the Great War, François Cochet, contended that it was only after the Second World War that a process of deregularisation set in, as international law protecting prisoner rights in war was sidelined.

These two contrasting interpretations are fully contextualised for the first time through the analysis of violence against prisoners presented here, which reveals the existence of what were, in practice, effectively...
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‘dual’ captivity systems in Britain, France and Germany; although there was some bureaucratic overlap in their administration, the prisoner of war labour system in each country functioned largely autonomously from the home front camps. What emerges is that the benevolent captivity interpretation is one which is overly dependent upon sources from home front camps; the darker interpretation of widespread mistreatment stems mainly from the prisoner of war labour company system. This is not to claim that home front camps were always benign sites of incarceration – far from it. However, it is to argue that by tracing levels of violence in both home front camps and front labour companies from 1914 until 1920, when the last German prisoners were repatriated from France, the different patterns of mistreatment in the two systems emerge more clearly; the divergent forms and levels of violence to be found in different parts of these incarceratory systems, and the fluctuating scale of violence during different phases of the war, help to explain the contrasting historical impressions of Great War captivity and to present a more accurate picture of the scale and location of prisoner abuses. Indebted to the work of Hinz and Becker in particular, this book ultimately contends that the prisoner labour company system marked a watershed in western European ideas regarding forced labour.

Third, this book is intended as a contribution to the development of the comparative history of the First World War, a burgeoning scholarly field, albeit one which has until now largely focused upon two-way national comparisons. By deliberately studying three countries, the different patterns of violence against prisoners across three European states become visible for the first time; moreover, a central premise of this study is that comparing states on both sides of the conflict reduces the risk of partisan interpretations or of drawing overly simplistic national oppositions between victims and perpetrators of violence. Methodologically, this book draws upon two key approaches to historical comparison set out by Marc Bloch and Michel Espagne. As a clearly

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legally defined category found within all three states, where they generated very similar source materials, such as interviews with escapers and memoirs, prisoners of war represent an ideal subject for a synchronic comparative study of the kind advocated by Marc Bloch. However, this book additionally goes beyond the straightforward synchronic juxtaposition of the three countries as three separate units of comparison, to also look at these units as wholly interactive with each other; this is the transnational dimension to this history. The transnational sphere includes multiple levels of interaction such as bilateral and multilateral relations between the three states, as well as with other countries, national responses to enemy policies and constructed popular rumours about enemy practices; it also encompasses engagement with the international public sphere, with its discourses and debates about prisoner treatment. All affected how ideas about violence against prisoners of war were formed and practices condoned or rejected. This book attempts to deal with the complexity of this transnational sphere by building upon the work of Michel Espagne, which calls for historians to consider historical ‘transfer’, how ideas travel from one society to another and are changed into hybrid forms through the very process of exchange; thus this book treats violence as both a physical behaviour pattern within each country and a concept partly constructed through transnational interactions. Both Bloch’s and Espagne’s different approaches to historical comparison are constantly used throughout this book, although at certain points it has proved appropriate that the narrative focus in detail upon a particular national experience.

The work of Bénédicte Zimmermann and Michael Werner has recently highlighted the pitfalls of comparison, contending that selecting one historical theme to compare across multiple linguistic zones is an arbitrary, artificial process whereby the historian creates a framework out of linguistic categories which do not always directly conceptually translate

between different cultures; indeed, particular concepts may exist in one culture that are not even present in another. As far as is possible, this problem is circumvented here by comparing a subject which enjoyed a common legal definition in international law at the outset of the war in all three countries studied: what constituted unacceptable prisoner treatment was set out in the 1864 and 1906 Geneva Conventions, which provided protection for enemy wounded, and the 1907 Hague Convention on Land Warfare, with its stipulation that prisoners of war be treated ‘humanely’. Thus while acknowledging that, to some extent, the term violence in English does not mean exactly the same thing as its counterparts violence in French or Gewalt in German, this study takes as its comparative starting point the argument that there was considerable overlap in how contemporaries in all three countries conceptualised violence against captives in 1914; this facilitates historical comparison, even if, as the war continued, these shared understandings began to break down along national lines.

Ultimately, comparison is also a highly suitable approach given that prisoners of war experienced the war in a conceptually hybrid, transnational way, located in a liminal cultural space between home state and captor nation. The aid effort which developed to assist them clearly illustrates this: British, French and German prisoners provoked similar humanitarian mobilisations in their home countries as charitable organisations used the European postal system, which continued to function during the war, to send prisoners aid parcels; regimental care associations, départemental care committees, religious charities, national Red Cross organisations, and individual families, sustained a mammoth humanitarian aid effort which helped to alleviate prisoner hardship. And from 1916, the French government organised the delivery of bread and biscuits to French prisoners in German camps. All these efforts involved transnational exchanges and a reciprocal learning curve between cultures.

21 Werner and Zimmermann, ‘Beyond Comparison’.
24 Abbal, Soldats oubliés, pp. 88–9.