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# “Nazis Hoe Cotton”: Planters, POWs, and the Future of Farm Labor in the Deep South<sup>1</sup>

JASON MORGAN WARD

*During World War II, the POW labor program provided cotton planters in the lower Mississippi Valley with a temporary yet timely solution to an increasingly mobile local labor supply. While war prisoners worked in a variety of crops and non-agricultural industries, one of the greatest concentration of camps and captive workers devoted to a single crop occurred along the southern stretch of the Mississippi River. Cotton planters in Arkansas, Mississippi, and northern Louisiana secured over twelve thousand war prisoners from 1943 to 1946. German and Italian prisoners reinforced a labor system based on boundaries of color even as their presence in the fields revealed racial contradictions. Even as the inexperienced field hands undercut planter profits, exposed racial tensions, and undermined racialized notions of work, their presence helped to extend the life of an exploitative plantation economy. Despite the limited scope and dubious success rate of POW labor, cotton planters in the Deep South found a temporary workforce to hold a place on the plantation for African-American labor.*

ON A BLAZING SUMMER MORNING IN 1943, dozens of curious planters gazed across a field full of white men chopping cotton. These spectators had gathered at E. J. Mullens’s plantation near Clarksdale, Mississippi, to witness an unusual “experiment.” With the cooperation of military officials, local planters had secured sixty Italian prisoners-of-war from nearby Camp Como. When the POWs arrived by bus, Mullens put his “regular hoe crew” of black farmhands on one side of the railroad and the “Italian hoe hands” on the other. Noting that the workers “operated

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slowly and overworked the land,” Mullens nevertheless maintained that the “willing” Italians were “learning quickly.” A visiting reporter from Memphis predicted that POW labor “will be used extensively in the Mississippi Delta this Fall to gather the cotton crop.” Observers praised the cheerful disposition of the workers, who “regarded the trip to Clarksdale and the work here as a picnic and sang throughout the day.”<sup>2</sup>

During the summer of 1943, cotton planters across the South conducted similar experiments with POW farm labor. Allied advances in Europe and North Africa had spurred a massive influx of German and Italian POWs to the continental United States. Ultimately, the home front hosted nearly four hundred thousand Axis prisoners-of-war during World War II, and two-thirds of this predominantly German population spent time in southern camps. As the war effort lured millions of rural workers into military service and defense work, many anxious employers turned to enemy captives for relief from an increasingly elusive labor supply. While Axis prisoners worked in factories and lumber camps across the South, their strongest impact was in the fields. Prisoners-of-war picked everything from peaches to peanuts, and thousands toiled in cotton fields from southern California to the Chesapeake Bay. However, the greatest number of camps and captive workers devoted to a single crop occurred in the cotton counties along the southern stretch of the Mississippi River. Cotton planters in the Delta region of Arkansas, Mississippi, and northern Louisiana seized on this wartime window of opportunity and secured around 11,500 war prisoners.<sup>3</sup>

The thousands of Axis POWs shipped to the southern home front encountered a society in transition. As several historians have argued, World War II threatened the status quo in the Cotton Kingdom. The largely black workforce that drove the plantation economy of the Deep South seized on new opportunities stimulated by the wartime boom. African Americans left cotton plantations to join the military, take defense jobs, or opt for the relative freedom of daily wage labor. As local employers competed for the remaining day laborers, the abysmal wages for chopping and picking cotton began to rise. Historian Pete Daniel notes that rural employers, accustomed to a surplus of cheap labor, “became obsessed with labor supply and control.” With the cooperation of local officials, planters employed a variety of strategies to limit black

mobility and rising wages, but wartime changes threatened to radically alter southern society.<sup>4</sup>

The temporary yet timely solution of POW labor provided local planters with another way to sustain an increasingly outmoded agricultural system. Yet, as historian Morton Sosna points out, scholars of the wartime South have generally treated prisoners-of-war as "an interesting historical footnote." Those who have paid sustained attention to the topic focus on the camps largely in isolation from the broader context of wartime change. Some historians have noted the undeniable economic impact of POW labor, and a few have even explored the racial ramifications of this peculiar episode in southern history. Most, however, accept the planter complaints of labor shortages and their embrace of the POW workforce without addressing motivations beyond a basic desire for profit. If historian Nan Woodruff is correct in asserting that "POW labor represented the planters' response to the demands of farm workers for decent wages," then the existing historical treatment is insufficient. Administered in the midst of a war with momentous implications for the American civil rights movement, the POW labor program revealed hopes and fears for race and labor relations in the postwar South.<sup>5</sup>

During the latter half of the war, the POW labor program helped cotton planters weather wartime turmoil as they continued to modernize their agricultural practices. Consequently, they used their political clout within the federal agricultural bureaucracy to barter for thousands of prisoners from nearby camps. In practice, however, the POW labor program revealed wartime uncertainties that complicated the transition to a less labor-intensive model of cotton production. Even as inexperienced field hands undercut planter profits, exposed racial anxieties, and undermined racialized notions of work, their presence helped to extend some of the most exploitative practices of southern agriculture. Despite the limited scope and dubious success rate of POW labor, cotton planters in the Delta region utilized this temporary workforce to hold a place on the plantation for African Americans.

POW contract labor was neither the first nor the only counterstrategy employed by cotton planters to maintain low wages and preserve their control over local labor. Before the War Department authorized the POW work program in early 1943, cotton planters had already tried a

variety of tactics to maintain a ready supply of workers. Initially, they aimed to retain rather than replace their dwindling black workforce. The wartime boom gave many rural African Americans options for escaping the drudgery of the cotton fields. Many entered the military or migrated to the cities to take relatively lucrative jobs in defense industries. As African-American soldiers began to send their pay home to wives and relatives, women and children left the plantations and moved into town. With newfound mobility and independence, even those who remained on the farm could scout around for the best wages and hire themselves out for temporary work.

Many cotton planters resorted to deception, bribery, and intimidation to counter this increasing independence and mobility of black workers. On both sides of the Mississippi River, planters promised to secure draft exemptions for workers who signed lengthy contracts. When workers refused such offers, planters evicted them from the plantation. Planter abuses constituted “a new form of peonage,” warned an ally of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union (STFU). Formed in Arkansas during the Great Depression, the STFU was a biracial union of sharecroppers and farmworkers with locals throughout the Delta region. From STFU headquarters in Memphis, union co-founder Henry Mitchell kept up a steady barrage of protests against the tactics of area cotton planters.<sup>6</sup>

Increasing black mobility and outmigration forced cotton planters to look for alternate sources of labor. This strategy was by no means unprecedented. Previous generations of Delta planters had attempted to lessen their dependence on black labor by recruiting Chinese and Italian immigrants. While these labor experiments had petered out by the early twentieth century, the demand for Mexican migrant workers increased during the war years despite limited availability in the Delta region. But racial anxieties, heightened by wartime disruption, continued to complicate the hunt for nontraditional farmworkers. While northern and midwestern farmers successfully recruited migrant labor from the Caribbean, several island nations refused to send their citizens “south of the Mason-Dixon line” for fear of discrimination. Another potential source of nonnative labor appeared with the construction of two Japanese-American internment camps in the Arkansas Delta. However, Governor Homer Adkins adamantly opposed Japanese-American labor on explicitly racist grounds, and most whites in the region followed suit.

When cotton planters in the Mississippi Delta inquired about employing interned Japanese Americans, a prominent local banker warned that "instead of having one racial problem we will have two." In northern Louisiana, a prominent planter abandoned plans to recruit tenant farmers from the nearby internment camps when alarmed local citizens warned that the former California vegetable farmers would "take over the parish."<sup>7</sup>

In the midst of the scramble for farm labor, the War Department announced that Axis POWs could be used to ease shortages across the country. Following this, Delta planters began an aggressive campaign to secure as many prisoners as possible. When Clarksdale, Mississippi, cotton planter Paul F. Williams learned that Italian prisoners-of-war had arrived at nearby Camp Como, he devised a plan to gauge "the attitude of the prisoners toward doing such farm work." Williams presented his plan to the Delta Council, an organization of white planters, politicians, and professionals. With the approval of the Delta Council, Williams contacted the commanding officer at Camp Como to request several dozen prisoners to test the feasibility of POW farm labor. While Colonel H. L. Henkle claimed to be "very sympathetic" to the plight of the planters, he initially balked at the idea of sending the Italians nearly sixty miles away. Nevertheless, in late June 1943, Henkle sent sixty POWs to E. J. Mullens's plantation for the first of many days in the cotton fields.<sup>8</sup>

Delta planters and the local press enthusiastically heralded the "successful experiment" on the Mullens plantation. Despite public praise, the local farm labor committee privately admitted that POWs might be more expensive and less cooperative than local workers. Under the Geneva Convention, the prisoners could only work for an eight-hour day. Chairman Williams reported that when time was deducted for travel and lunch, the Italians on the Mullens plantation only worked five hours per day. Although the War Department required that the planters pay the POWs the "prevailing wages" of the area, Williams calculated that the actual cost of hoeing one acre of cotton was five dollars with Italian POWs as opposed to three dollars with local black workers.<sup>9</sup>

The cautionary report did little to dampen the enthusiasm of Delta planters. When the commanding officers from Camp Como and Camp McCain attended a farmers' association meeting a few weeks later, Mis-

Mississippi Delta planters requested thirty thousand prisoners for the upcoming cotton harvest. But even as cotton planters pressed hard for POWs, H. L. Mitchell of the STFU feared that a legion of captive workers would undermine the wartime gains of rural farm labor. When Mitchell learned of the labor experiment on the Mullens plantation, he inundated federal agencies with letters of protest. In a memo to the War Production Board, Mitchell blasted “the use of prisoners of war to break down wages and other standards of employment for farm workers.” He maintained that the STFU had no objection to the use of prisoners-of-war to harvest food crops as long as they did not displace domestic workers. He questioned, however, the rationale for assigning POWs to Mississippi Delta cotton plantations “when there is a surplus of American labor available for farm work in this area.” Mitchell dismissed the cotton planters’ pleas for relief from a crippling labor shortage. What planters lacked, he contended, was an excess of workers who could be mobilized for seasonal farmwork at minimum cost. “It is the custom of southern planters,” Mitchell explained, “to always have a huge surplus of workers available and to pick the cotton crop as rapidly as it opens.” Since cotton prices fell steadily throughout the harvest, this practice allowed planters to reap the largest profits in the shortest amount of time.<sup>10</sup>

Some federal officials shared the skepticism of the STFU. When Mitchell reported the POW experiment in Coahoma County, Mississippi, to the War Manpower Commission (WMC), agency chairman Paul McNutt called for an investigation by the War Food Administration. The head of the WMC Rural Industries Division admitted that “prisoners of war have been used in agricultural employment in various instances and perhaps at less than the prevailing wage of domestic labor for similar work.” Another top official acknowledged that “there is, as yet, no legal way in which these prisoners may be assigned to this or any other work.” He also noted that “some of the officers in charge of these camps are not too sympathetic with the efforts of groups like the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union.”<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, although cotton planters had found cooperative allies among local camp commanders, some struggled to convince federal agencies of the severity of their labor shortage. On August 10, 1943, the director of the Arkansas Agricultural and Industrial Commission in-

formed Governor Adkins that "all of the proposed sites for military prison camps in Eastern Arkansas have been turned down." Although the USDA had designated ten Arkansas counties as "critical from the farm labor standpoint," some of the top cotton counties in the Arkansas Delta had not made the list. While Arkansas planters dismissed the labor calculations as ludicrous, Mitchell argued that they were accurate. "These counties without exception have a sufficient labor supply to meet all normal requirements," declared Mitchell, "and it is my opinion that the only reason for application being made for the establishment of these camps in Arkansas is to hold down wages during the cotton-picking season this fall." The consequences of POW labor were not lost on farmworkers in eastern Arkansas. When STFU organizer Charles McCoy told a local farmhand about the plan to bring in POWs to chop cotton, the worker replied, "Americans can eat rabbits till cotton picking time."<sup>12</sup>

After the collapse of Rommel's forces in North Africa, the War Department brought thousands of German captives into the United States. Only Texas and Oklahoma received more of these prisoners than Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana. As the War Department, WMC, and the War Food Administration ironed out the legal procedures for securing POW contract labor, cotton planters rushed to secure extra workers. Undaunted by their earlier setbacks, Arkansas Delta planters pressed Governor Adkins to intervene on their behalf. In a telegram to the regional POW commander, Adkins pleaded for a "minimum of three thousand prisoners" for two counties that had been left off the USDA labor shortage list. The governor warned of an impending agricultural disaster if the War Department refused to provide laborers for picking, ginning, and compress work. Across the river, thirty planters in Greenville, Mississippi, requested an allotment of one thousand German soldiers from Camp McCain. Engineers from the nearby air base hastily erected an experimental "branch camp" of two hundred tents surrounded by six guard towers and a barbed wire fence. In early October, eight hundred German prisoners headed out to the "fields of white gold" on twenty local plantations. Meanwhile, in Clarksdale, local planters erected a "tent city" for one thousand Italians from Camp Como. In late October, farm labor officials announced that Axis prisoners had picked two million pounds of cotton in two weeks. Like their counter-

parts in Mississippi, Arkansas cotton planters pooled their resources to build a few temporary work camps for the upcoming harvest season. By November 1943, four hundred fifty prisoners were working on the “largest cotton farm in Arkansas” near Wilson.<sup>13</sup>

The sporadic use of POWs in the cotton fields of the Deep South expanded as federal agencies and local planters negotiated the criteria for contract labor. While the federal guidelines required potential employers to request workers from the WMC, planters could apply indirectly through their local agent of the Agricultural Extension Service. In response to STFU protests, the WMC maintained that war prisoners could not work on farms unless an acute labor shortage existed. To counter the charge that POWs would drive down local wages, the WMC required that employers pay prevailing wages for their work. Such pronouncements did little to reassure Mitchell, who argued that powerful planters could easily manipulate federal guidelines to secure cheap captive labor. According to the monthly STFU bulletin, “the Farm Labor Committees in each county are either plantation owners or local officials dominated by the planters and these Farm Labor Committees determine the need and set the wage.”<sup>14</sup>

Some WMC officials quietly agreed that the labor projections coming out of the Delta merited a second look. The Washington office urged Regional Director Willis Sloan “to be careful in these determinations because low wages paid and possible availability of free labor in the Delta Area might come in for some close scrutiny.” Noting the steady stream of complaints emanating from that corner of the country, a Washington official questioned “the contemplated extensive use of prisoners of war.” Sloan, who oversaw the operations of the WMC across a swath of southern states, replied that he had already whittled the original request of seven thousand prisoners for the 1944 harvest down to three thousand “on a well-distributed basis.” Sloan stopped short of altering the wage rates suggested by local extension agents, but the Washington office maintained that “such wages should be scrutinized and investigated if out of line.”<sup>15</sup>

Cotton planters responded to a skeptical bureaucracy by increasing their demands for POW workers. With the 1944 cotton harvest quickly approaching, the POW labor program in the Mississippi Valley was booming. Whereas the harvest of 1943 involved the scattered use of

POWs, planters and military personnel spent the off-season expanding an extensive network of "branch camps." Local associations of planters pooled their resources to build these makeshift work camps in their towns and counties. "Any group of men in any one community may apply for a prisoner of war camp" announced the *Delta Farm Press*, "if they want to pay the costs of getting the material here and getting the camp constructed, guarantee 80 percent employment over a period of one year and pay prevailing local wage rates." The military, in turn, would provide administrators, guards, and prisoners.<sup>16</sup>

From the beginning, cotton interests dominated the contract labor program in the alluvial plains along the Mississippi River. Early in 1944 over one hundred members of the Mississippi County Farm Bureau met in Osceola, Arkansas, to plan a major expansion of POW labor operations. Eventually, local planters established six branch camps in this, the nation's top cotton county. In nearby Brinkley, a War Department official reported that "there were plenty of prisoners" and encouraged planters "to rush construction of the camps as fast as possible." When federal officials cut the requested allotment of ten thousand prisoners in half, irate representatives from twenty-nine farmers' associations elected three representatives to take their concerns to Washington. Within a matter of days, the delegates reported that they had successfully lobbied for three thousand extra POWs to help fill the cotton camps of the Arkansas Delta. Planters on the other side of the river failed to establish as many branch camps as their Arkansas neighbors, but the predominance of cotton interests was equally apparent. Following the example of the experimental branch camp in Greenville, Mississippi, planters quickly built six more branch camps in five of the top cotton counties in the state. Not to be left out, Louisiana cotton planters erected a handful of camps as well. Although sugar plantations consumed the majority of the POW manpower in the state, cotton planters in northern Louisiana eventually hosted two thousand war prisoners.<sup>17</sup>

As the branch camps fanned out across the alluvial plains, the STFU continued its lonely yet vigorous protest from Memphis. When German prisoners entered the cotton fields just across the river in the Arkansas Delta, the STFU claimed that there were as many as five thousand idle workers in Memphis. "With 1,000 prisoners now located in Crittenden County, Arkansas," warned the union's monthly, the *Memphis Farm*

*Worker*, “the planters can fix wage rates at starvation levels and thus force American citizens to accept the same pay.” As winter approached, the STFU anticipated a new threat to the local workforce. With the transition from seasonal tent cities to “winterized” branch camps, local planters looked for ways to utilize their prisoners beyond the harvest season. As hundreds of prisoners-of-war prepared to enter gins, warehouses, and compresses in November 1944, the STFU convened for its annual convention in Little Rock. Members voted unanimously to adopt a resolution calling for pickets of cotton facilities that employed prisoners. Undaunted, compress operators in the Arkansas Delta pledged “to work them picket or no picket.” By the end of the year, thirty compresses in the state employed nearly seven hundred prisoners-of-war. Mitchell contended that the use of POWs in these rural industries deprived unemployed farmhands of winter employment. In a letter to WMC Chairman Paul McNutt, Mitchell claimed that the Federal Compress and Warehouse Company in Lepanto, Arkansas, employed fifty POWs despite a local labor surplus. “In this town,” Mitchell argued, “there are not less than 200 unemployed workers who would welcome an opportunity to get a job at this plant.” Gin and compress owners faced the same labor challenges as the planters that fed their operations. In addition, their labor shortage was not simply a lack of any available workers, but often a drastically reduced local labor pool with more lucrative wartime employment options.<sup>18</sup>

As planters and politicians clamored for more POWs, thousands of Axis prisoners adjusted to life in the Cotton Belt. Although their employers agreed to pay prevailing wages, the captive soldiers only received eighty cents in canteen coupons for their daily labor. Back at the camp, war prisoners could redeem the currency for cigarettes, candy, and personal items. The balance of their wages went directly into federal coffers to help defer the cost of their imprisonment. As the STFU repeatedly pointed out, local farm agents wielded substantial latitude in determining the wage rate for agricultural labor. While the WMC declared publicly that war prisoners could not work for reduced wages or in the place of available local labor, such requirements were difficult to enforce. WMC officials quietly admitted that few states actually had a reliable method for determining wage rates or labor supply. In many

rural areas, county agents would simply poll planters to determine wage rates or to assess the local labor supply.<sup>19</sup>

Although planters used their influence to keep wages as low as possible, the initial performance of the inexperienced field hands was barely adequate. Edwin Pelz, a German POW incarcerated at a Memphis army depot, learned firsthand that picking cotton was miserably difficult work. On his first day in the fields of eastern Arkansas, the young soldier worked "like a fool without a break or interruption." Despite his best efforts, Pelz could not keep up with the backbreaking pace of cotton picking. "By noon my sack was full and so heavy I had difficulty pulling it between the rows of cotton plants," remembered Pelz. Although he was sure that he "had broken all cotton picking records," the German prisoner had only picked forty pounds. "There were aches and pains all across my back," he recalled, "I was half dead." Only with the help of his more experienced comrades could Pelz meet his daily picking quota of one hundred twenty pounds. He finished the last few rows of cotton under moonlight.<sup>20</sup>

War prisoners quickly discovered ways to meet the relatively modest quotas set by their employers. After his first day in the fields, Pelz discovered why he had so much trouble keeping up with his comrades. "They put dirt, stones, and anything else they could find into their sacks," to increase the weight, he discovered. Although the prisoners improved their performance as they gained experience, few had anything positive to say about tending and picking the despised "tree wool." Some expressed their misery and resentment through subtle acts of sabotage. One German POW in Lake Village, Arkansas, reasoned that dragging cotton sacks through mud puddles was "a continuation of the war on a lower level." Even in the fields, he explained, "we were still fighting back." Captive laborers failed to rival the output of experienced local workers and had little reason to make the effort. If they refused to work or failed to meet their picking quotas, they forfeited wages and other privileges. However, there were few motivations for the workers to exceed the rather modest expectations set by their supervisors. After German prisoners in Indianola, Mississippi, met their daily quota, they made a few extra cents by secretly selling their additional cotton to local black pickers who were paid by the pound.<sup>21</sup>

Many planters did not seem overly concerned with the efficiency and

output of their POW laborers. E. J. Mullens, the Coahoma County planter who had hosted the first POW farmhands, stated flatly that he had no desire to push these workers beyond their minimum quotas. "The government requires each of you to pick 150 pounds of cotton a day," Mullens announced to a newly arrived crew of German POWs. "I shall not watch you pick it," he continued, "I will give you credit for having been gentlemen before the war and I shall treat you as gentlemen." Of course, the regulations regarding the treatment of war prisoners ensured that German and Italian soldiers would escape the worst abuses of southern agricultural labor. The Geneva Convention shielded them from the harshest realities of the cotton fields. In a manual distributed to employers of POW laborers, the Army cautioned supervisors against harsh treatment. "You will find it unwise and at times impossible," warned the Army, "to use all of the supervisory techniques you may have used to advantage in supervising the work of free American labor." The fact that enemy laborers enjoyed legal advantages over southern farmhands underscored the harsh reality of life on the cotton plantation. But as Mullens's declaration to his POW workers suggests, the racial assumptions of many southern whites made military pronouncements against worker abuses largely irrelevant.<sup>22</sup>

Many cotton planters had no intention of subjecting POWs to the harshest conditions of plantation labor. The few who did violated local standards of white privilege. When a planter in Osceola, Arkansas, pushed his German workers too hard, a visiting minister took their complaints to federal officials. Reverend F. W. A. Eiermann reported that the prisoners were "being forced to work ten hours per day in the parching sun." Concerned that many of the men would "fall out and suffer from sun stroke," Eiermann argued that the prisoners should not be required to work the blistering schedule "fixed by the plantation owners who have heretofore employed Negro labor." In a society that had long rationalized the subjugation of African Americans through a racialized division of labor, subjecting fair-skinned men to grueling physical work was a sensitive issue. While many Delta planters regularly hired local white workers, many also continued to make explicitly racial distinctions in their expectations and management of labor. Thus the utilization of white POWs required either an adjustment of prevailing racial assumptions or an extension of special privileges to Axis prison-

ers. Of course, southern planters knew that no amount of leniency could render the cotton fields a suitable place for "gentlemen." Nevertheless, their refusal to implement "all the supervisory techniques" alluded to by military officials suggests that racial customs often undercut efficiency.<sup>23</sup>

The racist practices of the rural South left an indelible impression on many plantation POWs. One of the stated goals of the labor program was to expose citizens of the Axis powers to the American way of life. "Labor Presents America to the Prisoner of War," announced an Army manual for supervisors of war prisoners. "The prisoner of war labor program gives the prisoners a chance to closely observe the average American citizen, the way he lives, the opportunities afforded him in the United States, and his relationships with his government and with his fellow citizens." The military warned that "careless talk about . . . our racial problems" could undermine "the opinions the prisoners hold with regard to American life and ideas." But, while the War Department hoped that the labor program would serve as a showcase for American democracy, POWs on southern plantations often learned different lessons. Hein Severloh, a German corporal, was astonished by the plight of the African Americans who picked cotton in the Mississippi Delta. "They required us to gather 100 lbs. of cotton a day," he remembered, "but of the Blacks, they demanded two or three times more." A self-described "agriculturalist," Severloh wondered how anyone could endure such wretched conditions. "For them it was worse than for us," he noted, describing their homes as "very ugly, very primitive." Seeing that blacks in the cotton fields were "oppressed and truly in misery," Severloh and other prisoners "tried to explain to them what National Socialism was."<sup>24</sup>

Although some POWs remembered similar encounters, others observed that their white supervisors preferred to isolate prisoners from local black workers. "Some Germans," notes historian Morton Sosna, "sensed their employers' uneasiness when local blacks saw so many white men working in the fields." Alfred Andersch, a German deserter and future fiction author, noticed similar practices working in the cotton fields of northeastern Louisiana. In one of his short stories, Andersch alluded to the strict segregation of the plantation workforce. Describing a fictional crew of German cotton pickers, Andersch noted that "even in

the distance they saw no Negroes working in the fields; it wasn't thought fitting that Negroes should see white men picking cotton."<sup>25</sup>

The sight of Aryan "supermen" stooped over in the cotton fields of the Deep South challenged some of the bedrock assumptions of southern society. On plantations that had previously relied on black labor, the spectacle of white field hands served as an unnerving reminder that the wartime upheaval threatened to turn the social structure on its head. At a time when any deviation from the segregated status quo encountered vigorous resistance, the disruption of traditional labor mores harbored explosive potential. Wartime changes forced southern planters into some uneasy compromises. The POW labor program helped many cotton planters to continue labor-intensive, low-wage practices in the face of increasing mechanization and outmigration. Yet, at the same time, southern racial customs often ensured that war prisoners enjoyed lighter workloads and better treatment than black workers.

The relatively lenient treatment and extra privileges enjoyed by war prisoners laid bare the contradictions of American war aims. In the cotton counties of the Mississippi Valley, African Americans resented the privileges afforded enemy prisoners. Delta native and World War II veteran Nathan Harris recalled that "if you was a black boy here in Mississippi, when they brought those Germans over here as prisoners they got more privilege than you did as a citizen." Stories circulated of German work crews eating in Jim Crow cafes while their black guards waited outside. Even as white Arkansans barred black citizens and interned Japanese Americans from their segregated universities, a large number of German and Italian POWs enrolled in correspondence courses.<sup>26</sup>

Although white elites preferred to focus on the positive aspects of POW labor, a building chorus of criticism undercut their rosy assessment. From the outset, the STFU had highlighted the shortcomings of POW labor. "War Prisoners Can't Pick Cotton," announced the *Memphis Farm Worker*. "Surveys on the use of war prisoners now employed on farms show that they are very poor workers," continued the union monthly. "Plantation owners who sought to use enemy labor as a means of holding down wages of Americans . . . are not pleased." An increasing rumble of planter discontent lent credence to this claim. After the 1944 harvest, cotton planters in Mississippi County, Arkansas, complained

that many of their 2,500 war prisoners had engaged in "petty acts of sabotage" such as dragging cotton sacks through the mud, adding clods of dirt and rocks to their sacks, and pulling whole stalks. "Offenses are enough to worry a farmer to death," reported one supervisor. A county agent in Sunflower County, Mississippi, reported that "the picking and pulling of cotton by German prisoners of war in this area as a rule has been very, very unsatisfactorily [sic]." Local planters complained that the "trashy" cotton was so full of stalks and mud that it could not be ginned. While frustrated planters admitted that POW workers were "better than no help at all," many agreed that they were "so much worse than any labor they ever used that there can be no comparison." One alarmed local criticized the lenient treatment of German prisoners, sending the *Delta Farm Press* a photograph of POWs "playing on the levee" with only a "negro truck driver" to supervise them. In response, the editor urged supervisors to get tough with their captive labor crews. "The prisoners of war should be made to work," he declared, "or else."<sup>27</sup>

Due to the seasonal nature of cotton cultivation, planters struggled to provide consistent daily work for the prisoners. Traditionally, plantation owners relied on a system of partial employment, flooding the fields with farmhands during peak periods of the cotton season. These practices, however, conflicted with the military requirements for maximum employment of war prisoners. In many areas of the country, POWs rotated from farm to farm and crop to crop in order to meet the demand for labor. In Louisiana, for example, planters shuttled war prisoners between cotton, rice, and sugar operations. However, in a region primarily devoted to cotton cultivation, planters often failed to provide alternative employment options for their POW workers. In early 1945 a labor report showed that Arkansas Delta planters only utilized their war prisoners for "37 to 38 per cent" of their maximum work hours. Consequently, government officials threatened to transfer the workers to pulpwood plants. In Mississippi, congressman and Delta planter Will Whittington urged area planters to keep their prisoners busy even as he pressed the WMC for more captive workers. "It is essential for those now stationed in the Delta to be utilized whenever it is practicable to work on the plantations," warned Whittington, "or we are likely to lose what we have."<sup>28</sup>

Despite the shortcomings of POW labor, many cotton planters were

generous in their praise. Planters frequently emphasized the demeanor and discipline of the POWs rather than their productivity. When German POWs in Coahoma County struggled to pick fifty pounds a day during their first week in the fields, planters nevertheless noted that the workers were “interested and conscientious.” Military officials reported that many planters were satisfied with the POWs “although the prisoners did not pick as much cotton” as local workers. War prisoners, planters contended, were “thorough to a fault.” Other supervisors admired the intelligence, pride, and vigor of the young German soldiers. According to one study of POWs in Louisiana, some whites “expressed their racial preferences by admiring the physical appearance of the fair complexioned Aryans.” Many planters and agricultural officials credited the POWs with rescuing the cotton crop from ruin. After the 1944 harvest, the extension agent in Coahoma County, declared that the POWs had “done an excellent job” picking nearly two million pounds “that otherwise might have rotted in the fields.” Across the river, Arkansas Delta planters declared that “the prisoners have saved the cotton crop.”<sup>29</sup>

Even as planters described their POWs in heroic terms, they openly questioned the patriotism, morality, and intelligence of their black neighbors. As an increasing number of African Americans abandoned debt peonage for wage labor, cotton planters stepped up their criticism. Contributors to the *Delta Farm Press* regularly berated local blacks for their refusal to remain on the plantation. One columnist scolded them for being “lazy and wasteful” and claimed that they were proving themselves “unworthy to have good wages.” The author of this advice column warned Delta blacks that “even Mrs. Roosevelt is getting out of patience with you.” The paper even introduced a section targeted at African-American workers entitled “The Colored People’s Messenger.” Under this banner, white columnists argued that local blacks were “helping Hitler and Tojo” by leaving the plantation. “You are not patriotic,” declared the editor, “You are not a loyal citizen.” The diatribe continued. “If your husband or son is in the army and he comes home with one leg or one arm,” the “Messenger” warned, “it may have been your fault.”<sup>30</sup>

Despite such threats, local white elites fully realized the importance of black labor to their continued predominance in the postwar world. “The Negro must not be allowed to leave the Mississippi Delta,” de-

clared John Lynch from Greenville. According to Lynch, the "Delta economy has always been based upon the Negro and not cotton." Others agreed that southern planters had to finesse the transition to mechanized farming in order to retain black laborers for the times they needed them. Warning that "mechanized farming is on the verge of depopulating the Delta," Lynch argued that planters and regional leaders had to "coordinate the inflow of industry with the rate of displacement." Modernization of agriculture, he advised, should only take place when other industries could absorb a displaced and unskilled black labor surplus. The *Delta Farm Press* assured its readers that such a scheme would not undermine white supremacy. "While such a plan may work directly toward economic equality between races," noted the editor, "it has nothing to do with social equality." The sluggish modernization of southern agriculture had allowed the Delta to retain poor black workers, but wartime opportunity threatened to scatter them across the country. Cotton planters, determined to continue their operations in the face of wartime disruptions, continued to experiment with new labor sources. Nevertheless, visions of a pliable and predominantly black postwar workforce persisted.<sup>31</sup>

Emboldened by their ability to manipulate federal agricultural policies during the war, cotton planters campaigned successfully for a federal ceiling on cotton-picking wages for the 1945 harvest. Planters justified a wage ceiling using the same rationale that had delivered over ten thousand war prisoners. They claimed that a severe shortage of workers, aggravated by labor recruiters and rising black mobility, was the source of their labor woes. They also maintained the need to modernize their operations gradually. "Without a ceiling," warned National Cotton Council president and Mississippi planter Oscar Johnston, "we will have to rush into mechanization." Lamenting the trend towards wage work, Johnston declared that "we must protect ourselves against the loss of the tenant system altogether." Although thousands of POWs would remain for months after the German surrender, planters realized that their captive work force was picking on borrowed time. Cotton barons hoped to counter the increasing assertiveness of STFU members who were demanding as much as \$3.50 per hundred pounds of cotton. During the summer of 1945, Delta planters successfully petitioned the USDA to appoint state wage boards that would oversee hearings and elections in

each county regarding the proposed pay cap. In the late summer, the cotton counties of Mississippi and Arkansas established wage ceilings through a series of planter-dominated hearings and referendums.<sup>32</sup>

Having devised their plan for a postwar plantation economy, cotton planters looked to their remaining war prisoners to ease the transition. As the war in Europe ground to a halt, a POW camp inspector in the Deep South reported that “the replacement of Prisoners of War in agriculture . . . will constitute a real problem.” He warned that the “migration of workers now employed in war plants in the larger cities, back to farm work . . . will be very slow” due to “harder work, longer hours, and less pay.” Months after the German surrender, Arkansas Congressman Ezekiel Chandler Gathings declared that his Delta constituents were “absolutely dependent upon the relief that can be obtained from prisoner-of-war labor.” In Mississippi, local agricultural officials lamented the challenge of matching desperate cotton planters with a limited supply of war prisoners. “We have about as many applications for prisoners to pick cotton as we have prisoners,” declared an exasperated county agent. “Numbers and numbers of farmers come to the office every day and others call us over the phone insisting that they need the prisoners more than anybody they know.” While the demand for POW labor remained high, the war prisoner population dwindled in the postwar months.<sup>33</sup>

By the end of 1946, the last of the war prisoners had returned home. The brief experiment with POW labor was over. Furthermore, planter attempts to regain control over their workforce through a wage ceiling did not survive the postwar transition. In 1947 President Truman lifted all wartime wage controls. But the fleeting nature of this episode in southern history should not obscure its relevance to the wider struggle to sustain white supremacy in the postwar world. During World War II white elites in the Delta region employed a variety of strategies to ensure their continued control over a largely African-American workforce. Even as planters adapted to changing circumstances in an attempt to sustain profits and predominance, the POW labor program challenged southern notions of race and place. This labor replacement scheme reinforced the southern racial hierarchy even as it blurred the color line. German workers were not the perfect placeholders for rural

blacks, but their presence helped planters to retain a semblance of an increasingly embattled and outmoded plantation system.

## NOTES

1. The author wishes to thank Glenda Gilmore for her help in revising this manuscript and J. Edwin Hendricks for his encouragement of this project. The article is dedicated to the memory of Samuel Lee Morgan. "Nazis Hoe Cotton," is the title of an article profiling the POW farm labor program in the South. See, "Nazis Hoe Cotton," *Business Week*, June 19, 1943, 18.

2. P. F. Williams and Harris Barnes to L. I. Jones, Aug. 4, 1943, Southern Tenant Farmers' Union Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (hereafter STFU Papers). "Cotton May be Picked by Italian Prisoners [sic]," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, June 25, 1943, 7-A.

3. Morton Sosna, "Stalag Dixie," *Stanford Humanities Review* 2:1 (1991): 38. The estimate of 11,500 war prisoners in the cotton fields of the Ark-La-Miss Delta region is compiled from several sources. In their study of POWs in Arkansas, Merrill Pritchett and William Shea estimate that seven thousand men lived in the branch camps of the Arkansas Delta. See, Merrill Pritchett and William Shea, "The Afrika Korps in Arkansas, 1943–1946," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 37 (Spring 1978): 14. The estimate of three thousand cotton workers in Mississippi is a conservative estimate that comes from the correspondence of the WMC. See, Report of Telephone Conversation Between Mr. Kvam and Mr. Gray in Washington and Mr. Willis Sloan, Region VII, Atlanta, Georgia, June 21, 1944, Box 1, Records of the WMC, Entry 175, RG 211, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Md. (hereafter NARA). The tally of 1,500 cotton workers in northern Louisiana comes from data compiled by Matthew J. Schott and Rosalind Foley, *Bayou Stalags: German Prisoners of War in Louisiana* (Lafayette: University of Southwest Louisiana Press, 1981), 5.

4. Pete Daniel, "Going Among Strangers: Southern Reactions to World War II," *Journal of American History* 77 (Dec. 1990): 889. Daniel argues that in this "transitional stage into mechanization," farmers experimented with a variety of labor arrangements that blended elements of the labor-intensive plantation system with more modern agricultural practices. The POW labor program, he notes, was a strategy used to "ease the perceived shortage of rural labor" and hold down wages. "The obsession for control," Daniel argues, "created a wide spectrum of labor arrangements that in some cases blurred the line between slavery and freedom."

5. Sosna, "Stalag Dixie," 60; Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, "Pick or Fight: The Emergency Farm Labor Program in the Arkansas and Mississippi Deltas During World War II," *Agricultural History* 64 (Spring 1990): 74–85. Scholars of the POW experience in the Deep South during World War II acknowledge the protests of organized labor yet they accept the rationale that a wartime shortage of workers was the sole impetus for the POW farm labor program. See, Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979) and the articles by Merrill Pritchett and William Shea on POWs in Arkansas and Mississippi, the aforementioned "The Afrika Korps in Arkansas," as well as "The Enemy in Mississippi (1943–1946)," *Journal of Mississippi History* 41 (Nov. 1979):

351–72. While dealing briefly with the POW labor program, some historians of the region contextualize the question of a labor shortage. Jeannie Wayne argues that the war prisoners in the Arkansas Delta helped cotton planters weather a severe labor shortage, but notes that “by its very existence in a labor-scarce economy, the POW labor program depressed farm wage rates and may have encouraged some landless farmers to move to employment in war industries.” Jeannie M. Wayne, *A New Plantation South: Land, Labor, and Federal Favor in Twentieth-Century Arkansas* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 223. See, also, James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 199.

6. Frank McCallister to Victor Rotnem, Aug. 12, 1943, STFU Papers (microfilm edition). For information on the origins of the STFU, see, Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971); H. L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening in This Land: The Life and Times of H. L. Mitchell, Cofounder of the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union* (Montclair, NJ: Allanheld, Osmun, 1979).

7. In the late nineteenth century, Delta planters recruited hundreds of Chinese immigrants as agricultural laborers. Most of those who remained in the region, however, did not stay in agricultural work. See, James Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971). For more on the short-lived experiment with Italian immigrant labor at the Sunnyside Plantation, see, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “Leroy Percy and Sunnyside: Planter Mentality and Italian Peonage in the Mississippi Delta,” in *Shadows Over Sunnyside: An Arkansas Plantation in Transition, 1830–1945*, ed. Jeannie M. Wayne (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), 77–94. Early in 1944 the *Delta Farm Press* noted that, while Mexican laborers had been brought in to the area in past years, “No Mexican labor is available now.” See, *Clarksdale (Miss.) Delta Farm Press*, Mar. 9, 1944. Nan Woodruff notes that as many as ten thousand Mexicans worked in Mississippi during the war. Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 207; “100,000 Needed to Bring in Bumper Crop” and “Caddo Citizens Express Views on Jap Farmers,” *Shreveport Times*, Aug. 1, 1943, 11, 24. For a brief description of the introduction of bracero labor into the Arkansas Delta in the immediate postwar period, see, Wayne, *A New Plantation South*, 223–24; Cindy Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty, 1870–1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 177.

8. P. F. Williams and Harris Barnes to L. I. Jones, Aug. 4, 1943, STFU Papers.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Inspection Report: Camp McCain, Mississippi, July 20–21, 1943, Box 2666, Records of the Provost Marshal General’s Office, Prisoner of War Division, 1941–1946, Entry 461, RG 389, NARA, p. 5; Mitchell to C. B. Baldwin, June 29, 1943; to Marvin Jones, June 29, 1943; to Clinton S. Golden, July 30, 1943, STFU Papers.

11. F. W. Hunter to H. L. Mitchell, Aug. 27, 1943, STFU Papers; Nelson Cruikshank to Clinton S. Golden, July 20, 1943, Box 3, Records of the WMC, Entry 11, RG 211, NARA.

12. H. K. Thatcher to Homer M. Adkins, Aug. 10, 1943, Folder 91, Homer M. Adkins Papers, Arkansas History Commission, Little Rock (hereafter Adkins Papers); Mitchell to Clinton S. Golden, July 30, 1943; Charles McCoy to Mitchell, July 3, 1943, STFU Papers.

13. Sosna, "Stalag Dixie," 41, 61; Homer M. Adkins to Major General Richard Donovan, Aug. 20, 1943, Folder 91, Adkins Papers; *Greenville Delta Democrat-Times*, Oct. 8, 1943 quoted in Pritchett and Shea, "The Enemy in Mississippi," 368–69; *Clarksdale Daily Register*, Oct. 1, 29, 1943; "War Prisoners Can't Pick Cotton," *Memphis Farm Worker* 3 (Nov. 1943): 1.

14. "War Prisoners Can't Pick Cotton," 1.

15. Report of Telephone Conversation Between Mr. Kvam and Mr. Gray in Washington and Mr. Willis Sloan, Region VII, Atlanta, Georgia, June 21, 1944.

16. *Delta Farm Press*, Apr. 6, 1944.

17. "War Prisoners for Farm Labor," *Osceola (Ark.) Times*, Feb. 18, 1944, 1; "Farmers Need More War Prisoner Labor," *Osceola Times*, June 2, 1944, 1; "Three Thousand Prisoners Expected," *Osceola Times*, June 16, 1944, 1; Pritchett and Shea, "The Enemy in Mississippi," 368; Schott and Foley, *Bayou Stalags*, 4; Jerry Purvis Sanson, *Louisiana During World War II: Politics and Society, 1939–1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 196–201; Rafael Alexander Zagovec, "German Prisoners of War and the Homefront in Louisiana, 1943–46: A Cultural Interpretation" (master's thesis, Louisiana State University, 1995), 47.

18. "War Prisoners in Cotton Fields," *Memphis Farm Worker* 4 (July 1944): 2; *McGehee (Ark.) Times*, Nov. 12, 1944; "War-Prisoner Labor Fought," *New York Times*, Nov. 16, 1944, 8; H. L. Mitchell to Paul V. McNutt, Jan. 4, 1945, Box 1, Records of the WMC, Entry 175, RG 211, NARA.

19. Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor*, 178.

20. William L. Shea, ed., "A German Prisoner of War in the South: The Memoir of Edwin Pelz," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 44 (Spring 1985): 53.

21. *Ibid.*, 53; *Blytheville (Ark.) Courier-News*, June 28, 1944 and Mar. 31, 1945 quoted in Pritchett and Shea, "Afrika Korps in Arkansas," 16; David T. Zabecki, "From the Med to Mississippi: Odyssey of a Landser," *World War II* 18 (Sept. 2003): 59.

22. *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, Aug. 22, 1948; United States Army Services Forces, *Handbook for Work Supervisors of Prisoner of War Labor* (Washington, DC: Army Service Forces Manual M-811, 1945), 3.

23. C. Calvin Smith, "The Response of Arkansans to Prisoners of War and Japanese Americans in Arkansas, 1942–45," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 53 (Autumn 1994): 354; *Handbook for Work Supervisors of Prisoner of War Labor*, 3.

24. *Handbook for Work Supervisors of Prisoner of War Labor*, 1; Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 92–93; Daniel Costelle, *380,000 Soldats de Hitler aux USA* (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), 113–16.

25. Sosna, "Stalag Dixie," 50; Alfred Andersch, *My Disappearance in Providence and Other Stories* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), 40.

26. Neil R. McMillen, "Fighting for What We Didn't Have: How Mississippi's Black Veterans Remember World War II," in *Remaking Dixie: The Impact of World War II on the American South*, ed. Neil R. McMillen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 102; Pritchett and Shea, "Afrika Korps in Arkansas," 10.

27. "War Prisoners Can't Pick Cotton," 1; *Blytheville Courier-News*, Jan. 31, 1945; *Delta Farm Press*, Jan. 25, 1945; Feb. 1, 1945.

28. Zagovec, "German Prisoners of War and the Homefront in Louisiana, 1943–46," 43; *Blytheville Courier-News*, Feb. 6, 1945; *Delta Farm Press*, Mar. 8, 1945.

29. *Delta Farm Press*, Sept. 7, 1944; "Reference Manual on Prisoner of War Administration," Box 37, Records of the Provost Marshal General's Office, Prisoner of War Division, 1941–1946, Entry 439A, RG 389, NARA, p. 149; Schott and Foley, *Bayou Stalags*, 4; Pritchett and Shea, "The Enemy in Mississippi," 370; Pritchett and Shea, "Afrika Korps in Arkansas," 17.

30. For a discussion of the wartime racial rhetoric of Mississippi Delta planters, see, Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, "Mississippi Delta Planters and Debates over Mechanization, Labor, and Civil Rights in the 1940s," *Journal of Southern History* 60 (May 1994): 263–64. *Delta Farm Press*, Mar. 23, 16, 1944; Sept. 21, 1944.

31. *Delta Farm Press*, Dec. 6, 1945.

32. David S. Burgess, "A Preview of American Fascism," Aug. 29, 1945, STFU Papers, p. 2; Woodruff, "Pick or Fight," 74–85.

33. Zagovec, "German Prisoners of War and the Homefront in Louisiana, 1943–46," 42; Pritchett and Shea, "Afrika Korps in Arkansas," 21; *Delta Farm Press*, Oct. 11, 1945.