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## "Professors Into Propagandists": German Pows and the Failure of Reeducation

[William M. Tuttle, Jr.](#)

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**Ron Robin. *The Barbed-Wire College: Reeducating German POWs in the United States During World War II*.** Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995. xii + 217 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95.

During World War II, 380,000 captured German soldiers were shipped to the United States and incarcerated in prisoner-of-war camps. The U.S. Army ultimately established 511 such camps in rural areas and near small towns such as Crossville, Tennessee, Algona, Iowa, and Robinson, Arkansas. Most of the camps were located in states in the South and Southwest and on the Great Plains, although there were also camps in California, Michigan, and New York. People in these areas remember the POW camps. The Germans helped to harvest crops, clear forests, and build roads. In Louisiana in 1944, they harvested nearly 250,000 acres of sugar cane, and in Maine the next year, they picked five million bushels of potatoes. The POWs also worked in rock quarries and as plumbers, carpenters, and painters. Local citizens appreciated their contributions. A Texas farmer commended German POWs as "just the best bunch of boys you ever saw in your life." Employers described them as "cooperative," "well-mannered," and "good natured."<sup>1</sup> And in Peabody, Kansas, an Army officer cautioned farm wives against further incidents of baking cookies for the POWs and mending their clothes. Not all Americans, however, had such pleasant memories of the POWs. African Americans ruefully recall that the Germans, being white, were accorded privileges denied them.

Thanks to Judith Gansberg, Arnold Krammer, and others, we have several useful studies of the German POWs during the Second World War, including descriptions of Americans' reactions to the captured enemy in their midst.<sup>2</sup> One concern that the United States government had was that, without reeducation, Nazi prisoners returning to postwar Germany would subvert efforts at implanting democratic ideas and respect for peace. As a result, the Army's Office of the Provost Marshal General (OPMG), which had the responsibility for running the POW camps, in 1943 established the Special **[End Page 121]** Projects Division (SPD) to convert the Germans into "American-style democrats."

The story of the SPD has now been told by Ron Robin, a historian at the University of Haifa, in *The Barbed-Wire College: Reeducating German POWs in the United States During World War II*. Gansberg and Krammer had made reference to the SPD in their works, but their treatment was cursory and even misleading. Gansberg, in fact, claimed that the SPD was "one of the most remarkable and successful training programs ever

implemented under the auspices of the military." It "virtually deactivated National Socialism in the POW camps" and "remains today a unique experiment in political reprogramming." <sup>3</sup> Robin's conclusion is starkly different: the SPD was a dismal failure, in some ways even a joke, which "registered no meaningful change in the worldview of the vast majority of the internees" (p. 111).

Who is correct? Clearly, it is Robin, whose research took him to the OPMG papers at the National Archives as well as to pertinent collections at Yale's Beinecke Library, the University of California at both Berkeley and Davis, and the Hoover Institute. Since the SPD was an effort to convey the humanities American-style to the POWs, it naturally attracted to its ranks humanists and scholars, some of whom have left their papers to libraries. In addition, Robin has read the memoirs of some of the German POWs as well as of POW collaborators who went to work for the SPD. In short, he has uncovered a wealth of material.

The most interesting part of *The Barbed-Wire College* tells of the way in which the transformation of "Professors into Propagandists" illuminates "the intersection between scholarship and government policy in modern America" (p. 4). When it established the SPD, the OPMG opted not for social scientists to run the program, but for "humanists, poets, and professors of the Liberal Arts." With one exception, these "scholars in uniform" were "not on the cutting edge" in their disciplines, but they were firm believers in "rational persuasion," and in their ability to reconstruct "the milieu of their colleges" and, in that environment, to teach the POWs respect for democracy, peace, and "the American Way" (p. 5). The major problem, as Robin points out, was that "the student body"--consisting as it did of battle-hardened veterans and Nazis--was "quite unsuited" for highly intellectualized college courses.

Howard Mumford Jones, a professor of English and teacher of American Civilization at Harvard, was the only scholar of note who joined the reeducation effort. Jones, who was appointed the senior civilian on the SPD staff, had argued in 1938 that the secret of Fascism's success lay in "the efficient creation by the dictators of a glamorous mythology." "We used to have Glamour in this country," Jones added, but it had been destroyed by "'progressive' educators, the debunking biographer, and social historians." **[End Page 122]** (Sound familiar?) Americans should learn from Fascism's success, and should mobilize the liberal arts to create both democratic myths and a heroic history of America's past. The "only way to conquer an alien mythology," Jones concluded, "is to have a better mythology of your own." <sup>4</sup>

Edward Davison, a professor, poet, and friend of Jones, became the director of the SPD. The curriculum, Davis and his staff agreed, should consist of courses in Western Civilization and American Civilization, with a smattering of intellectual history and literary criticism thrown in. To "re-create the intellectual climate of the liberal arts college behind bars," the SPD recruited collaborators from the POW camps, including "alienated German intellectuals, disillusioned Communists, writers, and journalists," who were engaged in translating program materials and publishing a newspaper *Der Ruf*--"The Call" (p. 60). (The other prisoners called them "Traitors" and "Cowards.") The "Idea Factory," where they worked, was located at a fort in Rhode Island. Sadly for the program's future, the "underlying tone" in the "Idea Factory" was one of "alienation from, and distrust of, the German masses," not to mention "contempt" for the other POWs (p. 62).

The first issue of *Der Ruf* appeared in March 1945. Robin describes its contents as "agonizingly short on substance," "convoluted," and "densely written." Since it offered only

"snippets . . . on a wide range of irrelevant issues," *Der Ruf* was "virtually ignored" by the POWs (p. 77). To try to wean the POWs from Nazism, the newspaper provided "liberal portions of native German intellectual antidotes," such as the writings of Schiller and Goethe, "for the numbing effects of mass culture" (p. 79). But *Der Ruf's* "contents," Robin writes, "puzzled the majority of POWs" (p. 77).

It is not clear how tightly the SPD controlled *Der Ruf's* German editors or the other cultural producers in the "Idea Factory," but in discussing *Der Ruf*, Robin alludes to the editors' "American masters" and "American overseers" and to "presumably American-dictated articles" (p. 85). Whatever the relationship, failure seemed to mark all the SPD's efforts. For example, the SPD adopted a literary program for the purpose of destroying "the mass deception of National Socialism" and replacing it "with an alternative, and thoroughly American cultural agenda" (p. 91). The approved list of books for POW reading, however, had "a distinctly elitist slant," and the subject matter "soared way above the comprehension capabilities of the average inmate" (p. 106).

Robin's discussion of "the battle of the books" is troubling in one regard. He writes that in selecting books for the program's German section, "a disproportionate number of Jews [was] included in the series" (p. 104). In fact, of the nine "contemporary German-language authors" whose books were chosen, three were Jews: Franz Werfel, Leonhard Frank, and Arnold Zweig. In **[End Page 123]** what way is this "disproportionate?" I found the use of this word troubling, as I did a later reference to the reading "program's bias toward a distinct intellectual minority" (p. 106).

The SPD, which naturally distrusted popular culture, also had a film program. One "Idea Factory" worker, author-inmate Werner Richter, argued that "movies cretinized the masses," and that "the sensuous stimuli typical of American movies stifled the intellect and encouraged bursts of brutal animal-like emotions" (p. 109). Needless to say, this program, too, was a failure. But some local Service Commands deviated from the approved list and, at the request of the POWs, permitted the screening of thriller and gangster movies, including *Seven Miles from Alcatraz*, *Boy Slaves*, *Too Many Blondes*, and *Legions of the Lawless*, which were very popular.

The SPD also established an experimental reeducation college for a target group of "the noncommitted and 'moderate' anti-Nazis [no Communists allowed]"; the purpose was to "expose them to a crash course in American democracy, inform them of American objectives in occupied Germany," and send them back to Germany first before the other POWs (p. 128). The school--whose director was Howard Mumford Jones--taught courses in American Civilization and the great books. And like any good "college," it offered teaching assistants, discussion sections, and "hour examinations." The students were taught that what made the United States great was that it had no ideology, but instead relied upon common sense, pragmatism, and compromise. But the experimental college, as well as the later "democracy seminars," failed to eradicate the narrow nationalism of the students.

Robin is at his best in describing the reeducation college's course content, which anticipated significant intellectual currents of the later 1940s and 1950s. Not only did these courses emphasize the "end of ideology" in America, they also stressed American "exceptionalism" and spoke glowingly of America's national character and civil religion. Red-hunting in the SPD also anticipated "McCarthyism" in higher education. Staff members denounced the "leftist leanings" of colleagues and questioned their patriotism and loyalty. Robin concludes that the "tribulations of the accused SPD faculty members presaged a much larger loyalty controversy that would affect American society in general,

and institutes of higher education in particular" (p. 142). Finally, Robin persuasively suggests that social scientists might have done a better job than humanists in reeducating the POWs, if such a thing were possible at all. It is evident from their published studies, for example, that Paul Grabbe, Morris Janowitz, Kurt Lewin, Donald McGranahan, and Edward Shils had a much better sense of who the POW population was, and were much more realistic about what the potential for reeducation was. <sup>5</sup>

*The Barbed-Wire College* is a footnote to the history of American education [End Page 124] and World War II. Robin missed opportunities to broaden his purpose and deepen his analysis. Most of all, the reader learns precious little about the German POWs. Robin says they represented a cross section of the German nation, but this is obviously false, since all were men and most were young. Moreover, he portrays the POWs as, first, men who were so traumatized and mortified by captivity that they became "nonentities." Extrapolating from Erving Goffman's model of military and prison life as "Total Institutions," he describes the German POWs as "faceless captives" who "had lost all familiar points of bearing" (p. 31). This section reads like Stanley Elkins's *Slavery*, only this time the POW is "Sambo." Then, miraculously, the trauma vanished, and the Nazis--especially the *Unteroffiziere*, the NCOs--reinstated military discipline. To illuminate this and other issues, oral history, which has already been used in some studies of POW camps, could have been profitably employed in this book. In assessing the SPD record, interviews with POWs would not only have added rich texture, but could have yielded audience response to *Der Ruf* and the SPD's books, films, and seminars.

It would have been helpful, too, to have had an appreciation of the positive role that education played in prison camps. For example, the German POWs established schools of their own. At a camp near Concordia, Kansas, the POWs had their choice of courses organized and taught by other POWs, some of whom held doctorates. Thanks to a colleague in American Studies, Dennis Domer, I have a copy of the timetable of courses offered at the Concordia camp in 1945. These range from high school courses, both vocational and college preparatory, to college courses in English (eight courses ranging from Business English to Shakespeare), Romance languages, history (Roman, German, and Eastern European as well as a "Survey of American Civilization"), the natural sciences, mathematics, engineering, architecture, and theology. Other wartime internees also established schools. For a study reported in 1996, the historian Maxine S. Seller interviewed German and Austrian Jewish refugees who were interned by the British as "enemy" nationals in 1940. What she learned was that education played a "central role" in their lives, and that "the internees made extensive and deliberate use of education as a survival strategy, first in escaping from their homelands, then in coping with internment, and finally, in preparing for entry into British life." <sup>6</sup>

Robin's purpose, he explains, is not "to devote an entire book to damning American reeducation officials for being presumptuous or misleading," but instead to attempt "to understand why they would claim success for this manifestly ineffectual project" (p. ix). This is, I believe, a rather limited objective for a book; and for this reason, I am afraid, *The Barbed-Wire College* is a more limited accomplishment than it might have been.

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## Notes

1. Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (1979), p. 92.
2. Judith M. Gansberg, *Stalag: U.S.A.: The Remarkable Story of German POWs in America* (1977); Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners*.
3. Gansberg, *Stalag: U.S.A.*, p. 6.
4. Howard Mumford Jones, "Patriotism--But How?" *Atlantic Monthly* 162 (1938): 585-92.
5. See Kurt Lewin and Paul Grabbe, "Conduct, Knowledge, and Acceptance of New Values," *Journal of Social Issues* 1 (1945): 53-64; Donald V. McGranahan and Morris Janowitz, "Studies of German Youth," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 41 (1946): 3-14; Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12 (1948): 280-315.
6. Maxine S. Seller, "'Slowly We Made a Life': Education as a Survival Strategy Among Jewish Refugees Interned in Great Britain During World War II" (paper delivered at the History of Education Society, Toronto, 1996).

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