

# EXHUMED CORPSES:

Prisoners of War Who Chose Betrayal Over Death  
in the American Civil War

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HIST522: Civil War - The Seminal Event in American History

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Random House's College Dictionary defines a traitor as "a person who betrays his country by violating his allegiance."<sup>1</sup> A soldier who changes sides in a war is assuredly "violating his allegiance" which is among the most egregious actions a soldier can do. A traitor is often not trusted by his new nation nor allowed to return to his old one, paying a high price for his defection. Yet, even in the passionate fight of brother against brother of the Civil War, many soldiers forsook their nation and became traitors. Their story, however, was not one of evil intent as presumed by the label. For most, the choice was one of survival due to the inhumane conditions these so-called traitors endured—often for more than a year—in prisoner of war camps in both the North and South.

While the people of the Union and Confederacy generally scorned soldiers who switched sides, historians have taken a more sympathetic view. The consensus among historians was that the prisons were awful. Camps on both sides had problems of "overcrowding, exposure, poor sanitation, inadequate medical care, and starvation."<sup>2</sup> Most historians attributed this problem to lack of resources, particularly in the South, and some to incompetence. James McPherson, as one example, explained "a deficiency of resources and the deterioration of the southern economy were mainly responsible for the sufferings of Union prisoners."<sup>3</sup> However, a few historians have argued that the deplorable conditions of the prison camps were by design. Charles W. Sanders Jr., chief among this camp, maintained that "Both of the belligerent powers deliberately and

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<sup>1</sup> *The Random House College Dictionary*, rev. ed., "Traitor."

<sup>2</sup> Charles W. Sanders, Jr., *While in the Hands of the Enemy: Military Prisons of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 5, Amazon Sample Preview, <https://www.amazon.com/While-Hands-Enemy-Conflicting-Dimensions/dp/0807130613/>.

<sup>3</sup> James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom : The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1988), 800, ProQuest Ebook Central. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/reader.action?docID=431834&ppg=840>.

systematically mistreated the captives they held..."<sup>4</sup> Prisoners on both sides, Sanders charged, were seen "not as men, but as mere pawns to be used and then callously discarded in pursuit of national objectives."<sup>5</sup>

Whether deliberate or not, most of the prison camps were horrible cesspools of disease, starvation, and death regardless on which side of the Mason-Dixon line they were located. Some soldiers calculated that the only way to survive was to become a traitor. "The soldiers' switch of allegiance offered a ticket out of grim prisoner of war camps, where many perished from malnutrition and disease..."<sup>6</sup> The decision these soldiers made was "not the result of 'moral degeneracy' but the product of measured reality."<sup>7</sup> Yet, very few historians have examined this specific group of Civil War prisoners. Most historians have focused on the prison conditions and the suffering of prisoners, but few have attempted to understand why the Union and Confederacy recruited these prisoners to turn against their country or why some prisoners accepted the offer.

When nations prepared for war, one of the last things they considered was what to do with enemy prisoners.<sup>8</sup> In virtually every war, some enemy soldiers would surrender rather than face certain death, so this was an inevitable complication of warfare. When capturing enemy soldiers, a nation wanted to either get something in return from the enemy—typically a return of its captured soldiers in an exchange—or wanted to hold the prisoners so that they did not return

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<sup>4</sup> Sanders, *While in the Hands of the Enemy*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Sanders, *While in the Hands of the Enemy*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Springer, "Galvanized Yankees' Served in Dakota Territory," *The Jamestown Sun*, April 20, 2015, <https://www.jamestownsun.com/news/galvanized-yankees-served-in-dakota-territory>.

<sup>7</sup> Brian D. McKnight, *We Fight for Peace: Twenty-Three American Soldiers, Prisoners of War, and Turncoats in the Korean War* (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press), 270, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/reader.action?docID=3121201>.

<sup>8</sup> Lonnie R. Speer, *Portals to Hell: Military Prisons of the Civil War* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997), xvii, Google Books. [https://books.google.com/books/about/Portals\\_to\\_Hell.html?id=kCSQpPYnSFQC](https://books.google.com/books/about/Portals_to_Hell.html?id=kCSQpPYnSFQC).

to the battlefield against it. In either case, the nation housed, fed, and guarded the prisoners for a period of time, typically far from the battlefield so that the enemy could not recapture them.

Rarely had these prisoners been treated well, even after international rules were established for the treatment of prisoners of war at the Geneva Convention in 1949.

Prisoners of war have always presented significant logistical problem. First, the nation had to find somewhere to hold the prisoners. Second, the nation had to have sufficient numbers of its own soldiers to guard the prisoners—soldiers it could not use against the enemy to achieve its objectives. Third, the nation had to feed and clothe the enemy when often it was struggling to feed and clothe its own soldiers and, sometimes, its own citizens. Considering that prisoners of war were the enemy have further made it difficult for the nation holding them to have the requisite compassion to humanely care for them.

The Civil War was no different than most other significant wars in human history in the belligerents' lack of preparation for prisoners of war and challenges in housing, feeding, and guarding them.<sup>9</sup> Neither side had established camps or planned on any way to house, clothe, and feed prisoners, much less considered what to do with them as prisoners. In total, 408,608 soldiers were captured—about one in every seven fighters—and 56,194 died in prison.<sup>10</sup> This represented a 13-percent fatality rate, more than double the 5-percent from the battlefield.<sup>11</sup> For most of the war, neither side could consistently care for the prisoners they housed with some of the worst prisons—Andersonville in the South and Point Lookout in the North—considered war crimes as

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<sup>9</sup> Sanders, *While in the Hands of the Enemy*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> General F.C. Ainsworth, Chief of the Record and Pension Office, to James Ford Rhodes, June 29, 1903, in James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States: From the Compromise of 1850 to the Final Restoration of Home Rule at the South in 1877*, vol. V (New York: MacMillan Company, 1909), 507-508, Hathitrust, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.49015002148006>.

<sup>11</sup> Speer, *Portals to Hell*, xiv.

they are defined today. Captured Confederate Henry Morton Stanley vividly described the overcrowded prison conditions he faced in 1862 at Camp Douglas in Chicago:

"Exhumed corpses could not have presented anything more hideous than dozens of these dead-and-alive men, who oblivious to the weather, hung over the latrines, or lay extended along the open sewer, with only a few gasps intervening between them and death."<sup>12</sup>

By 1862, when it was clear the war was going to be an extended struggle, the North and South began to negotiate an exchange policy for prisoners. As Lonnie R. Speer examined in his book on Civil War prisoner of war camps, "The whole purpose of taking prisoners of war is to allow them to live while depriving the opposing force of their service."<sup>13</sup> However, the armies were taking in more prisoners than they could reasonably accommodate. Eventually a deal was hashed out and the Dix-Hill Cartel was signed on July 22, 1862, creating rules for exchanging prisoners of war. Quickly, the overburdened prisons were relieved and there was hope that, if both sides followed their agreed upon rules, they could each manage their prisoner of war camps humanely.

Complications arose almost immediately after signing the Dix-Hill Cartel. President Abraham Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation in September of 1862, and with it, a call for "colored soldiers" to join the Union Army. When it went into affect the following year, the Confederacy predictably retaliated with a policy of sending all captured black soldiers to slavery. This was a condition Lincoln could not accept. Soon the prisoner exchanges ended and prisons filled up on both sides with horrific consequences. "As these new, harsher attitudes took

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<sup>12</sup> Henry Morton Stanley, *Autobiography* (London: Sampson, Low, Marston and Co., 1913), 208-210 in Dee Brown, *Dee Brown on the Civil War: Grierson's Raid, The Bold Cavaliers, and The Galvanized Yankees* (Newburyport: Open Road Media, 2017), 668, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/reader.action?docID=5124638&ppg=617>.

<sup>13</sup> Speer, *Portals to Hell*, xix.

hold," Sanders revealed, "the quantity and the quality of food, clothing, blankets, and medical care provided to prisoners in Union and Confederate camps was slashed dramatically; with the onset of winter [in 1863], conditions in the prisons of both nations plummeted."<sup>14</sup>

There were attempts to negotiate prisoner exchanges, to little success, until General Ulysses S. Grant became General-in-Chief of all Union armies in March of 1864 and brought an end to it for good. Grant recognized the greatest advantage the Union had was its superior number of men available to fight. The manpower gap with the Confederacy would expand faster if Grant held his prisoners rather than exchange them. This, Grant believed, would bring the war to a quicker end with the least amount of bloodshed. Refusing to exchange Confederates for Union prisoners, unfortunately meant that throughout the duration of the war, Union soldiers would remain imprisoned, suffer, and many would die. Sanders lamented that it was "ghastly arithmetic."<sup>15</sup>

The recruitment of prisoners of war to enlist with the enemy occurred throughout the war, but did not become officially sanctioned until 1864. Prior to that, most prisoners who were allowed to change sides were foreign-born soldiers because they seemed to have a less vested interest in the cause they were fighting. Spies and provocateurs were constant worries for both sides, however. Many were understandably suspicious of prisoners who claimed to have a change of heart. If the practice had been widely known, remarked Dee Brown, "No doubt

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<sup>14</sup> Sanders, *While in the Hands of the Enemy*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Sanders, *While in the Hands of the Enemy*, 4.

Congress eventually would have launched an investigation and become engaged in a series of debates on the difficult subject of oaths and allegiances.”<sup>16</sup>

As the war neared its fourth year, those concerns became less of a problem compared to the desperate need for manpower. The draft in the North struggled to fill quotas and Confederate deserters thinned already emaciated ranks. Prisoners of war were idle in overcrowded camps neither side could properly accommodate. Turning these prisoners into something useful at this perilous juncture of the war overcame concerns for these prisoners’ loyalty to the new oath they took. Unwittingly, both the Union and Confederacy created conditions whereby some of these prisoners were so demoralized that they accepted the offer to turn against their country so as long as it proved a better chance at survival.

The misery prisoners of war faced was magnified by camp commanders who refused to treat them with humanity. The North used allegations of mistreated Union POWs to justify retaliation against the Confederate POWs they held by cutting their rations and preventing them from receiving any vegetables to stave off scurvy. Confederate Commissary General of Subsistence Lucius B. Northrop, responsible for providing food and supplies to Union prisoners, "repeatedly demonstrated his opposition to supplying food to prisoners at the rate required by Confederate army regulations."<sup>17</sup> Further aggravating conditions for Union prisoners were General William T. Sherman's and General Phil Sheridan's destruction of the Southern food supply. This meant that, "The more the Union army destroyed, the more the prisoners suffered."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Dee Brown, *Dee Brown on the Civil War: Grierson's Raid, The Bold Cavaliers, and The Galvanized Yankees* (Newburyport: Open Road Media, 2017), 680, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/reader.action?docID=5124638&ppg=617>.

<sup>17</sup> Sanders, *While in the Hands of the Enemy*, 3-4.

<sup>18</sup> Speer, *Portals to Hell*, xix.

As Speer noted grimly, "For many in the Civil War's prisons, though, to have been killed on the battlefield might have been more humane."<sup>19</sup>

Considering these conditions, some prisoners were willing to turn against their country. Studying American POW turncoats in the Korean War, Brian D. McKnight observed, "Each had to decide whether he would remain loyal to the principles of his military duty or save his own life."<sup>20</sup> Slaves survived their captivity in a similar way, McKnight explained.<sup>21</sup> Cooperation with one's captor was abhorrent but necessary in order to see the next sunrise. Slavery spoke "to the realities of the powerlessness of individuals in captivity...."<sup>22</sup> One's foundational beliefs, whether slave and prisoner of war, became insignificant compared to the basic human need of survival according to McKnight's study. When recruiters in Civil War prison camps began offering prisoners freedom in exchange for fighting against their country, some chose betrayal over death. The seemingly never-ending suffering and near daily starvation meant "for many the odds of survival seemed better carrying a rifle than overcoming prison camp conditions."<sup>23</sup>

Union General Benjamin Butler, commander of "the largest of all prison camps, Point Lookout, a Maryland sandpit thrusting into Chesapeake Bay," was the first to recruit a regiment of prisoners.<sup>24</sup> Lincoln quietly authorized Butler to form the First United States Volunteer

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<sup>19</sup> Speer, *Portals to Hell*, xix.

<sup>20</sup> McKnight, *We Fight for Peace*, 49.

<sup>21</sup> McKnight, *We Fight for Peace*, 269.

<sup>22</sup> McKnight, *We Fight for Peace*, 269.

<sup>23</sup> Michael K. Brantley, *Galvanized: The Odyssey of a Reluctant Carolina Confederate* (Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2020), 94, ProQuest Ebook Central. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/reader.action?docID=6130633&ppg=15>.

<sup>24</sup> Dee Brown, *Dee Brown on the Civil War* 676.



Infantry on March 28, 1864 to serve for three years or the duration of the war.<sup>25</sup> These Confederate prisoners had a myriad of motivations to turn against their country. Some planned to desert at the earliest opportunity while others had a change of heart or were determined to survive by any means.<sup>26</sup>

The First U.S. Volunteer Infantry was first sent to Norfolk, Virginia for police duty in the city but, upon learning the regiment was filled with former Confederate prisoners, Grant decided it would not be wise to have them face their former comrades. Grant wrote on August 9 that the First United States "is a first-class regiment, but it is not right to expose them where, to be taken prisoner, they must surely suffer as deserters," and ordered them to the Department of the Northwest to fight Indians.<sup>27</sup> However, Dee Brown suggested that Grant's real reason for sending these former Confederates west was that he did not trust them to be the fiercely loyal troops he needed to finish the war.<sup>28</sup> Whatever his reason, Grant's decision set in motion a successful use of these former prisoners for the waning months of the war—protecting the West. By 1865, nearly 6,000 Confederate prisoners enlisted in the Union army to fight Indians.

Meanwhile, the Confederacy was running out of men to continue to fight the Union much less guard the tens of thousands of prisoners it held. Informally, some Confederate prisons recruited Union prisoners to work in the prison camps as hospital stewards or cooks if they

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<sup>25</sup> Brown, *Dee Brown on the Civil War*, 676-677.

<sup>26</sup> Brown, *Dee Brown on the Civil War*, 617.

<sup>27</sup> Ulysses S. Grant to Henry W. Halleck, August 9, 1864, City Point, Virginia, in United States War Records Office, *The War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1893), Ser. I, vol. 41, pt. 2, 619, HathiTrust, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/cool.ark:/13960/t9280x69v>.

<sup>28</sup> Brown, *Dee Brown on the Civil War*, 679.

pledged a loyalty oath to the Confederacy.<sup>29</sup> A few prisoners accepted these offers as a better alternative than starving to death. As conditions worsened and deaths mounted throughout 1864, camp commanders reported prisoners requesting to join the Rebel cause to escape their plight. Partially this was due to anger by Union prisoners directed at the North for shutting down the exchange program thereby abandoning them "to the pain and suffering of the captivity experience."<sup>30</sup> "Not until late in 1864," however, recounted Dee Brown, "did the Confederate War Department make any serious effort toward recruiting soldiers from prison camps."<sup>31</sup> Much like in the North, foreign-born POWs were targeted by recruiters to join to the Confederacy presuming they were less likely to be strong supporters of the Union. It is unknown how many took the offer to exchange their freedom for service to the Confederacy but there was no doubt as to the sickening choice before them—"assimilation with the enemy or a hopeless, agony-filled captivity."<sup>32</sup>

Of those who did walk out of Union prison camps in a gray uniform, most deserted at the first opportunity they faced battle with their former comrades. One well-documented story occurred at Egypt Station, Mississippi on December 27, 1864. Cavalry Brigadier General Benjamin Grierson, after the Battle of Nashville, was ordered to raid Confederate supplies throughout Mississippi. Preparing to attack Rebel positions in the morning, Grierson's men were surprised by three Confederate soldiers who had found their way to his lines to surrender. They

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<sup>29</sup> Glenn M. Robins, "Race, Repatriation, and Galvanized Rebels: Union Prisoners and the Exchange Question in Deep South Prison Camps," *Civil War History* 53, no. 2 (June, 2007): 135, ProQuest, <http://ezproxy.apus.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Frace-repatriation-galvanized-rebels-union%2Fdocview%2F208266374%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D8289>.

<sup>30</sup> Robins, "Race, Repatriation, and Galvanized Rebels," 135.

<sup>31</sup> Brown, *Dee Brown on the Civil War*, 817.

<sup>32</sup> Robins, "Race, Repatriation, and Galvanized Rebels," 140.

claimed to be former prisoners at Andersonville who "enlisted in the Confederate Army to save themselves from death by starvation and disease, and that they had taken an oath they no longer remembered, with the design and determination to join the Union Army at the first opportunity."<sup>33</sup> They explained to Grierson that about 300 hundred other former Union prisoners were with the Tenth Tennessee opposing him and would lay down their weapons when attacked. As Grierson's raiders attacked later that morning, the former Union prisoners fired one volley then immediately surrendered.

Interestingly, this was not the end of military service for these former Union prisoners. Grierson had them sent to Alton prison camp in Illinois. Normally, these soldiers would be viewed as traitors. However, the horrors of Andersonville the former Union prisoners told him, induced Grierson to plead for leniency.<sup>34</sup> This was granted and these soldiers were offered an opportunity at redemption by re-enlisting in the Union army as members of a regiment of Confederate prisoners, the Fifth US Volunteer Infantry, headed west. As far as is known, these were the only soldiers who switched sides twice.

While their service was controversial and nearly completely forgotten, the prisoners of war who chose to switch sides in the Civil War impacted the outcome of the war at great cost to themselves. Confederate prisoners who joined the Union army protected communication and commerce in the West so that when the war was over, the United States did not have to engage in another potential war with Indians. Union soldiers who joined the Confederacy deserted at their first opportunity, depriving the Rebels with the manpower they needed to continue the conflict.

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<sup>33</sup> Brown, *Dee Brown on the Civil War*, 820.

<sup>34</sup> Brown, *Dee Brown on the Civil War*, 730.

For most of these prisoners, the decision to betray their country—often as an alternative to death—was unacceptable to those back home. "[T]hose who switched sides," Michael K. Brantley mournfully related, were considered "to be dishonorable deserters, a legacy that followed them home and lasted in some cases for many generations."<sup>35</sup>

The "concept of loyalty," McKnight wrote in his study on American POWs in the Korean War, is fluid and "can be shaped and even compromised by those whom we consider to be the least powerful of constituents."<sup>36</sup> Prisoners on both sides of the Civil War endured unimaginable suffering with disease, lack of shelter, starvation, and, particularly from 1864 until the end of the war when prisoner exchanges were terminated, a loss of hope. Faced with a choice that could allow them to survive, some prisoners chose to betray their oath and serve the other side. Viewing their decision as a choice between life and death, rather weakness or evil intent, offers a new perspective from which to examine the trauma experienced by prisoners of war in the American Civil War.

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<sup>35</sup> Brantley, *Galvanized*, 96.

<sup>36</sup> McKnight, *We Fight for Peace*, 11.

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