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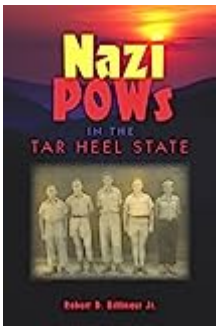

Robert D. Billinger Jr. *Nazi POWs in the Tar Heel State.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008. 246 pp. $27.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-3224-5.

Reviewed by Uwe Luebken

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Commissioned by Alexander Freund (The University of Winnipeg)

German POWs in North Carolina

During the later stages of World War II, with Allied POW facilities in war-ravaged Europe stretched to the limit, 378,000 captured German soldiers were brought to the United States and interned in several hundred prisoner-of-war camps. Although the general history of the German POWs in the United States has been researched quite intensively by Arnold Krammer, Matthias Reiss, Robert D. Billinger Jr. himself, and others, we still know very little about the local and regional aspects of the camps and their inmates.[1] Billinger, a leading expert in the field, tries to fill this gap with his âpopular and anecdotal history of the German POW experience in North Carolinaâ (p. xiv).

North Carolina, as Billinger points out, was the first state to receive German POWs when in the spring of 1942 survivors of the torpedoed submarine *U-352* were interned in a temporary camp at Fort Bragg. This facility, however, was shut down again in early 1943; the first permanent German POW camp in North Carolina was established only in May 1944, when 500 German prisoners were transferred from Tennessee and Alabama to the Tar Heel State. By the time the camp system had been fully developed, about 10,000 German POWs were interned in 18 facilities–two base camps, at Fort Bragg and Camp Butner respectively, and 16 branch camps–throughout the state. The base camps were not only the largest POW facilities in North Carolina but also administrative centers for their respective satellite camps. By the end of the war, Camp Butner was responsible for more than 5,000 German POWs. âAllied POWs,â i.e., men who had been forced to join the German army, were housed separately at Camp Butner at their own request. In June 1945, the âUnited Nations Compoundâ sheltered 332 Czechs, 150 Poles, 147 Dutch, 117 French, 34 Austrians, 11 Luxembourgers, and 1 Lithuanian.

As in other POW camps, the German prisoners in North Carolina were amazed at the relatively high level of comfort that they were provided with by their American âhosts.â Billinger points out that the German POWs âwent from train travel by cattle car to train travel by passenger car, from meatless weeks to meat three times a dayâ (p. 1). Some barracks even had central heating and

running hot water day and night. At Camp Sutton, the prisoners could watch movies once a week, play soccer, handball, or ping-pong, and participate in a small orchestra. The Swannanoa branch camp offered several English courses and a discussion group. Thus it is hardly surprising that after the end of the war, some former POWs looked back at their experience in the United States with positive feelings. Arturo Morasut, for example, wrote to an American friend from the Russian sector of Berlin that âlife was better in [camp] Williamston than here. I will never forget the beautiful time I stay [*sic*] with you and your friendsâ (p. 189). Tellingly, out of a total of approximately 10,000 German POWs in North Carolina, only 29 tried to escape. âObviously, as in the United States as a whole, German POWs in the North Carolina camps had little inducement or occasion to undertake fruitless escapes from camps that were generally safe and relatively comfortableâ (p. 140).

Despite these fond memories, there were problems galore in the camps. Tensions erupted between the German POWs on the one hand, and Jewish American guards, âAlliedâ POWs, and, of course, the camp authorities on the other. At Camp Butner, for example, 200 German POWs refused to work in February 1945 after they allegedly had not been paid on schedule. The strike, however, was quickly broken up by court-martialing the two leaders and by waking up the remainder in their compounds with tear gas grenades. There were also problems between different factions amongst the German POWs. One particular group of prisoners was the soldiers of the Afrika Korps, who had been captured relatively early in the war and who âtended to be younger, more fit, and more self-confident than later captives, who, whether they were older or younger than the Afrika Korps veterans, had seen more German defeats than the âAfrikanersââ (p. 5). Afrika Korps men were seen as loyal to the Nazi regime by both their fellow inmates and by U.S. authorities. Although the latter tried as much as they could to isolate and suppress âfanatical Nazis,â their influence remained strong in some camps. German POWs who were seen as too cooperative with the Americans ran the risk of being beaten up or even killed.

One of the strengths of Billingerâs book is his account of the integration of the camp system into the regional economy. Initially, most of the German POWs were imprisoned far away from coastal areas in the central portions of the country where they could do less damage in the case of escapes or uprisings. However, with the number of German soldiers shipped to the United States steadily rising and a growing need for labor on the home front, the idea of concentrating of German POWs in the interior of the country was abandoned. The camp system was thus expanded, encompassing 705 camps in 46 states by the end of the war. In North Carolina, German prisoners of war were a welcome source of labor both at American military installations and in the private economic sector. Thus, German POWs in the Tar Heel State could be seen shaking and stacking peanuts or cutting pulpwood; they were employed in a basket factory, a fertilizer plant, a local slaughterhouse, and in lumber mills. German POWs were a substantial element of the wartime economy of the Tar Heel State. Altogether, they performed almost two million man-days of labor in agriculture and rural industries in North Carolina. By 1945, German POWs were cutting one-third of all pulpwood in the South and in Appalachia. Labor shortages in the agricultural and forestry industries were so huge that the repatriation of many German POWS was delayed into late spring of 1946.

Billingerâs book has a couple of minor flaws. Methodogically, his appraisal of the (lack of) penetration of the German POW camps by National Socialist ideology in chapter 1 relies too much on personal interviews and thus on the prisonersâ memories more than half a century after the war (a problem which, however, Billinger himself acknowledges). Also, the book is repetitive at times. Lengthy quotes from a note by POW Helmut Haeberlein, who escaped from Camp Wilmington and was later found dead in the Hudson River, for example, appear twice (pp. 126, 130). Finally, the bookâs title remains somewhat of a mystery (if one disregards marketing purposes), since âNazi POWs in the Tar Heel Stateâ is hardly reconcilable with Billingerâs intention of showing âthat German prisoners of war in America were indeed not all Nazisâ (p. xvii). In sum, though, Billingerâs book is a well-researched and detailed analysis of the origins, the everyday life, and the aftermath of the German POW experience in North Carolina.

Note

[1]. An exception is Robert D. Billinger Jr., *Hitlerâs Soldiers in the Sunshine State: German POWs in Florida* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000). See also Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America (*New York: Stein and Day,1979); and Matthias Reiss, â*Die Schwarzen waren unsere Freundeâ: Deutsche Kriegsgefangene in der amerikanischen Gesellschaft* (Paderborn: Schoeningh, 2002).

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