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Raffael Scheck. *French Colonial Soldiers in German Captivity during World War II.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. xvi + 307 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-107-05681-7.

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Popular perceptions of German prisoner-of-war (POW) camps in World War II involve guard towers and barbed wire in desolate stretches of Eastern Europe. This monograph, however, illuminates a neglected stage: the prison camps that housed French colonial troops in occupied France itself. Raffael Scheck, Katz Distinguished Teaching Professor of Modern European History at Colby College, received a PhD in comparative European history from Brandeis University, has published mainly in modern German history, and has recently specialized in French POWs and black French soldiers in World War II. To the burgeoning field of POW studies, Scheck has contributed a work that is as convincing in its conclusions as it is sensitive to the nuance of human experience.

In recent decades, POW studies have turned away from narratives emphasizing prisoners' heroic escapes or stoic suffering, toward the social and cultural analyses of the new military history, including prisoner identity and memory; relations between prisoners, guards, and civilians; and prisoners' families and sexuality. A major precedent for Scheck's work is S. Paul Mackenzie's *The Colditz Myth: British and Commonwealth Prisoners of War in Nazi Germany* (2006), which exhaustively documents the day-to-day struggles of ordinary British POWs. Essential studies of French POWs include Yves Durand's *La vie quotidienne des prisonniers de guerre dans les Stalags, les Oflags et les Kommandos, 1939-1945* (1987) and Sarah Fishman's *We Will Wait: Wives of French Prisoners of War, 1940-1945* (1991). However, French colonial POWs have long remained obscured in scholarship as well as in French national memory. This may be in no small part due to the *blanchiment* (whitening) of the Free

French Forces that Charles de Gaulle ordered in 1944 and later efforts to foster a national self-image based on the legend of the internal Resistance, which tended to minimize the memory of the colonial troops that did the bulk of the fighting for Free France until 1944. In the past decade, both Martin Thomas and Armelle Mabon have pioneered the study of nonwhite or indigenous prisoners from the French Empire; however, neither of them has used documents from German or American archives, and neither has put the experiences of French colonial POWs in a comparative context.[1]

Seeking to avoid both these lacunae, Scheck's book mines French, German, and American sources to uncover the experiences of French colonial POWs and to compare them with the case of other western POWs held by Germany. Deciding that the term colonial prisoners is not quite precise but is less ambiguous and pejorative than the nomenclature of the era, Scheck includes all captured soldiers from French overseas territories in his analysis and emphasizes that distinctions of French citizenship mattered little, through the lens of German racial laws and propaganda. He estimates that the summer after the Battle of France, the Germans held between ninety thousand and one hundred thousand colonial POWs, although this number decreased steadily due to escapes and medical releases (p. 17). The specificity of the French colonial POW experience largely derives from the fact that almost all of them were held in France from early 1941 to September 1944, rather than in Germany (p. 11).

This work opens and closes with the story of Léopold Sédar Senghor, the poet of gratitude and

future Senegalese statesman, whose trajectory through German POW camps both contains some features relevant for all French colonial prisoners and highlights the complex tapestry of experiences of French colonial prisoners of war (p. 7). The narrative proceeds chronologically, but the main organization is thematic: chapters successively examine the early days of captivity after the Battle of France, diplomatic wrangling between Vichy France and Germany over the status and treatment of colonial POWs, German guards' treatment of their prisoners, the transfer to French guards, anti-French propaganda efforts targeted at Muslim prisoners, the working conditions of colonial POWs, their physical and mental experiences, their relationships with civilians, and then the logistically difficult and often botched repatriation of colonial POWs from 1944 to 1946. These organizational choices follow from Scheck's deep focus on the lived experience of the prisoners and his desire to present the same history through many angles so as not to lose any of its richness or complexity.

The ambitious study presents four main arguments. Scheck's most surprising finding is the dramatic shift in German behavior toward the colonial POWs; Nazi propaganda about black Africans mutilating German soldiers fueled massacres initially, but through the course of the war, French colonial POWs in fact did not experience an escalation of brutality under the control of Nazi Germany, as did other groups, such as Jews and the Roma (p. 9). Second, Scheck emphasizes the diplomatic context of the POW experience and highlights the Vichy government's vigorous efforts to defend the rights of French POWs, including colonial prisoners, and even those without French citizenship (p. 10). Third, the book's comparative framework demonstrates that the experiences of French colonial prisoners in France were somewhat different, but not necessarily worse, than those of Western POWs in Germany (p. 10). Lastly, and perhaps least surprisingly, Scheck emphasizes that the contrast between the experience of fighting together with white Frenchmen and the forced return to a racialized colonial regime after the war nourished claims for equality ... and a growing resentment against the French authorities, which led to disorder and rebellions during repatriation (p. 11).

This book combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to produce a very sensitive reading of challenging sources. With the exception of a small and vocal mi-

nority, most French colonial POWs were illiterate, and Scheck had to rely on such sources as collective grievance letters written by the few literate prisoners and oral histories of veterans to find the voices of his subjects (pp. 22-23). Similarly, the German prison guards themselves scarcely left any testimony, feeling that their experiences were not interesting enough to warrant publishing. Relying primarily on French, German, and American diplomatic and military archives, Scheck was able to determine from the weight of evidence how changes in policy affected the daily lives of French colonial POWs—such as, for instance, how the Vichy negotiators' decision not to press Germany to observe every article of the Geneva Convention meant that colonial prisoners routinely had to perform dangerous (and, technically, illegal) war-related labor in the last years of the occupation.

The principal strength of this work lies in the richness of its sources and of the resulting narrative. With his training in comparative history and his interest in diplomatic history, Scheck has achieved what a scholar working within the frame of German history or French history alone could not do: he provides a comprehensive picture and convincing explanations of French colonial prisoners' experience in German captivity. At the same time, he takes care not to obscure the great diversity of experience resulting from different stages of diplomatic negotiations, different kinds of camps and labor, civilians' differing attitudes, and cultural and ethnic divisions, and he consistently points out counterexamples to his narrative. An occasional limitation is the repetition of evidence and anecdotes, but this is a consequence of the holistic thematic analyses of the prisoners' experience that Scheck performs so well. Clearly and confidently written, this book will prove edifying to scholars of World War II and diplomatic historians, as well as historians of France or Germany who could not have achieved full understanding of this complex subject by relying on the scholarship or archives of either country alone.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Martin Thomas, *Le Gouvernement de Vichy et les prisonniers de guerre coloniaux français (1940-1944)*, in *L'empire colonial sous Vichy*, ed. Jacques Cantier and Eric Jennings (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 2004), 305-330; and Armelle Mabon, *Prisonniers de guerre indigènes: Visages oubliés de la France occupée* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010).

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