

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert D. Billinger, Jr. *Hitler's Soldiers in the Sunshine State: German POWs in Florida.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000. xi + 262 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-1740-2.



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Published on H-Florida (June, 2004)

During the Second World War, about two hundred thousand German prisoners of war were held in over five hundred camps all over the country. In this well-written and well-researched study, Robert D. Billinger chronicles the experiences of German POWs in Florida during the Second World War. This group has been frequently overlooked by historians, because Florida camps were not as large, or as subject to escape attempts or murder of prisoners by their comrades, as their counterparts elsewhere. The inmates of the camps were also more diverse where their political leanings were concerned. As Billinger puts it, the political views of the German prisoners "were, in fact, often inchoate, overlapping, and more complex than official American intelligence categories like 'Nazi' and 'anti-Nazi.'" The labor assignments were also diverse; prisoners worked not only in agricultural labor, but also in resort hotels in Miami. Political divisions and diversity of labor assignments notwithstanding, however, the Florida prison camps succeeded in their primary mission, which was to relieve wartime manpower shortages on military bases and agricultural labor.

Although the prisoners' labor was not limited to agricultural work, the diversity of labor assignments did not compensate for the tropical Florida climate, which was trying at times. Billinger points out that a camp in Clewiston had prisoners cutting cane in snake-infested

fields in temperatures hovering over 100 degrees. Small wonder that the Clewiston camp was often referred to as "the worst in all America" (p. 73). Despite the trying conditions, very few prisoners tried to escape. In fact, the Florida camps boasted the lowest rate of escape attempts in the country. Billinger explains that this may have been because "the Florida most German prisoners saw was not tourist Florida, but swamps and woods and old time country sheriffs and farmers with shotguns [and] dogs" (p. 78) that seemed like the end of the world for the German prisoners. Prisoners were nonetheless sometimes upset with the condescending attitude exhibited towards them by their captors. They also complained when reports that the prisoners were being "over-fed" resulted in a sharp decrease in prisoner rations.

Despite hardships imposed by tropical heat and shifting attitudes of the captors, the overall experience of the German POW in Florida appears to have been positive. Billinger pays particular attention to pictures from the Clewiston camp, which showed an egalitarian atmosphere between captors and prisoners: "the relaxed atmosphere, the heat-induced casual appearances, the mutual tobacco smoking, and the smiling faces of several of the prisoners express most vividly and quintessentially the relationships between Germans and Americans at most of the POW camps in Florida. Members of

both groups—captives and captors—came to the realization that, indeed, enemies are human” (p. 192). He concludes that, “for most of the alumni of the Florida camps, pleasant memories overshadowed distasteful ones” (p. 193).

In addition to interviews with surviving POWs, Billinger’s book is also based on an impressive array of primary sources—ranging from the Bundesarchiv in Germany to the National Archives in the United States. His work gives great insight into the experience and perspec-

tives of prisoners and captors alike. The only thing lacking in this fine book is a sense of the lessons learned by both Germans and Americans from the camp experience. Did the low rate of escape from Florida POW facilities give officials in Washington reason to consider creating future camps on the Florida model? Billinger also may have considered the question as to whether the positive camp experience in any way influenced relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and the United States in the postwar era.

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Citation: Patricia Kollander. Review of Billinger, Robert D., Jr., *Hitler’s Soldiers in the Sunshine State: German POWs in Florida*. H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. June, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9529>

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