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Under the Enemy Flag: Prisoner of War Experiences: An Interview with Angela Zombek and Michael Gray

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Abstract

Over the course of this year, we'll be interviewing some of the speakers from the upcoming [2018 CWI conference](#) about their talks. Today we are speaking with Angie Zombek, Assistant Professor of History at St. Petersburg College. Dr. Zombek is the author of numerous articles and essays, including "Paternalism and Imprisonment at Castle Thunder: Reinforcing Gender Norms in the Confederate Capital," which appeared in the scholarly journal, *Civil War History* in September of 2017; "Citizenship – Compulsory or Convenient: Federal Officials, Confederate Prisoners, and the Oath of Allegiance," in Paul J. Quigley's edited volume, *The American Civil War and the Transformation of Citizenship*, (LSU Press, forthcoming, Summer 2018); and "Catholics in Captivity: Priests, Prisoners, and the Living Faith in Civil War Military Prisons," in Michael P. Gray's edited volume, *Civil War Prisons II*, (forthcoming from Kent State University Press). Her first book, *Penitentiaries, Punishment, and Military Prisons: Familiar Responses to an Extraordinary Crisis during the American Civil War*, is forthcoming from Kent State University Press in June, 2018. Dr. Zombek's current research focuses on the Civil War's impact on the Florida Gulf Coast and Key West. She has presented some of her research on Unionism in Civil War Era Tampa Bay, and is currently researching prisoners of war at Fort Taylor (Key West), and Key West under martial law. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Andersonville, CWI Summer Conference, Libby Prison, Prisoners of War

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Under the Enemy Flag: Prisoner of War Experiences: An Interview with Angela Zombek and Michael Gray

By [Ashley Whitehead Luskey](#)

Over the course of this year, we'll be interviewing some of the speakers from the upcoming [2018 CWI conference](#) about their talks. Today we are speaking with Angie Zombek, Assistant Professor of History at St. Petersburg College. Dr. Zombek is the author of numerous articles and essays, including "Paternalism and Imprisonment at Castle Thunder: Reinforcing Gender Norms in the Confederate Capital," which appeared in the scholarly journal, Civil War History in September of 2017; "Citizenship – Compulsory or Convenient: Federal Officials, Confederate Prisoners, and the Oath of Allegiance," in Paul J. Quigley's edited volume, The American Civil War and the Transformation of Citizenship. (LSU Press, forthcoming, Summer 2018); and "Catholics in Captivity: Priests, Prisoners, and the Living Faith in Civil War Military Prisons," in Michael P. Gray's edited volume, Civil War Prisons II, (forthcoming from Kent State University Press). Her first book, Penitentiaries, Punishment, and Military Prisons: Familiar Responses to an Extraordinary Crisis during the American Civil War, is forthcoming from Kent State University Press in June, 2018. Dr. Zombek's current research focuses on the Civil War's impact on the Florida Gulf Coast and Key West. She has presented some of her research on Unionism in Civil War Era Tampa Bay, and is currently researching prisoners of war at Fort Taylor (Key West), and Key West under martial law.



Angie Zombek. Image courtesy of Angie Zombek

We are also speaking with Michael P. Gray, Professor of History at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania where he teaches courses on U.S. History to 1877, the Civil War, Interpreting Civil War Sites & Memory, U.S. Military History, and War and Society. He is currently developing a “special topics” course on Civil War prisons and the Home Front. His first book, The Business of Captivity: Elmira and its Civil War Prison (Kent State University Press, 2001), was a finalist for the Seaborg Award, and a chapter of that work, first published in Civil War History, earned “Honorable Mention” for the Eastern National Award. In addition to penning the new introduction to Ovid L. Futch’s classic History of Andersonville Prison in 2011, Gray is the author of “Captivating Captives: An Excursion to Johnson’s Island Prison,” an essay published in Ginette Aley and Joseph Anderson’s edited collection, Union Heartland: The Midwestern Home Front During the Civil War (Southern Illinois University Press, 2013). He is currently finishing an edited volume entitled Crossing the Deadline: Civil War Prisons Reconsidered and is progressing on a full-length treatment on the Johnson’s Island Prison. Gray currently serves as the series editor for the University of Tennessee Press’s Voices of the Civil War, which has produced more than 50 primary source volumes related to the conflict. Publicly recognized as a noted historian of Civil War prisons, Gray has discussed his scholarship on CNN and was recently featured on an episode of The Learning Channel’s nationally acclaimed series, “Who Do You Think You Are” with actress Jessica Biel, in which he assisted in uncovering the history of Biel’s lost ancestor who was incarcerated at a Civil War prison. Gray is the recipient of several internal and external grants relating to Civil War prisons, including the 2011 “Civil War Prison Archeology: Team Teaching Public History on Johnson’s Island” grant, as well as the 2014 “National Prisoner of War Grant,” for Andersonville, Georgia. He has also received multiple awards from ESU faculty and students for excellence in teaching.



Michael Gray. Image courtesy of East Stroudsburg University

CWI: How are Civil War prisons usually perceived or represented in historical memory? What popular conceptions of Civil War prisons are accurate, and which conceptions are perhaps misleading?

GRAY: Civil War prisons are often associated with the dire suffering of captured soldiers that many times led to death. This was certainly true at some prisons, especially during the latter part of the war, but the general public assumes this was the case at every confine. In reality, a much wider array of prison experiences existed. Instead of immediately thinking of Andersonville, a deeper macro perspective into other Civil War prisons, or even a look at the inmate socio-economic variances within the stockade walls provides a much fuller and more accurate picture. Suffering is indeed a vital piece to the prison narrative, but historians must do their best in wading through biased testimony and corroborating previous claims with unpublished primary sources. There are far too many generalizations that all Civil War prisons were like the notorious Andersonville or even the Union prison at Elmira; in fact, there were more than 150 confines, each with a unique history and set of circumstances. There were also different “classifications” of prisons, including former training depots converted into prisons, open stockades, coastal fortifications prisons, warehouse prisons, and confines that were used as jails. Additionally, there were different classifications of captives, from enlisted men, to officers, to political prisoners (which included women), among others.

Since prisons were extremely diverse places, and even though there may have been suffering, one's carceral experience depended on class standing, social networking and who a prisoner might befriend while in prison (including guards and fellow captives), and the opportunities available for improving one's lifestyle with funds procured through paid work within the prison. Moreover, Civil War prisoner experiences also varied according to the aforementioned physical structures in which prisoners were incarcerated. For example, a political prisoner in Boston's Fort Warren would have had a very different, and most likely more positive, experience compared to that of an enlisted captive on Belle Isle. Some prisons also had the distinction of being considered officers' prisons, such as the Confederacy's Libby Prison or the Union's Johnson's Island Prison, while others housed enlisted men. Although the general public might consider all prisons terrible places, it should come as no surprise that Johnson's Island had a death rate of less than 2% while the enlisted men's Elmira Prison in the North reached about 24.4%. Variances in the apportioning of food, shelter, medicine, and other amenities, as well as differences in punishment and the amount of individual liberties granted to inmates are just some of the reasons for the disparity in death rates.



Andersonville POW camp, GA, August, 1864. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

CWI: How did the Union's prison system differ from the Confederacy's? Were there shared conceptions about "proper" treatment of prisoners in both the North and the South? How did each side perceive and represent the POW experience of its own men, as well as of enemy POWs?

GRAY: At first, the Union's prison system was more centralized and included a plan for housing prisoners. The Union was committed to having one person (Prison Commissary General William Hoffman) in charge of overseeing a prison system, which

was more efficient than the Confederacy's POW plan. Eventually, the Confederacy caught up. Unfortunately for prisoners, both sides were still shortsighted from the onset, from their expectations of the war's length, to the number of soldiers they captured, to their administration of the prisons themselves. Administrative woes only increased with the abrupt end to the prisoner exchange system and the big battles of 1863 that led to the proliferation of prisons and captives.

Both sides relied on incarceration standards from previous wars, especially the War of 1812. They parlayed with an exchange system that dated from that war, but when the system collapsed due to various reasons, including the controversy over the exchange of African-American prisoners, it did not bode well for Civil War captives. Standards of treatment versus actual practices were incongruent from the start. To better standardize prison conditions, the Union enlisted Francis Lieber to more clearly define the manner in which to treat its prisoners. Lieber's Code, which was based off General Order 100, attempted to set standards for *both* sides to follow regarding treatment of captives. However, my latest research shows that much of Lieber's hard work was ignored. For instance, I have found that more than a few Civil War prisons regressed into becoming "Dark Tourist destinations" for home-front civilians to frequent: Civilians literally paid an admission price to view the prisoners from high observation towers, or civilians took steamship excursions that anchored near stockade walls so prisoners might be viewed. Such practices directly violated the Lieber Code, which called for prisoners not to be "humiliated" or "disgraced" inhumanely. Finally, perceptions of captivity only made the situation worse, especially toward the end of the war. Charges of negligence and cruelty against Confederates and their purported improper treatment of Yankee prisoners set a quid pro quo that was instituted in the North, including a reduction in prisoners' rations. Ultimately, each side did not trust the other. The dismal prison conditions were exacerbated by the prioritization of soldiers and resources for the battlefield over home-front POWs, and by the stripping of administrative prison personnel to other jobs and departments that were considered more important to the prosecution of the war.



Elmira Confederate POW camp, NY. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

CWI: How much did prisons and POW camps vary with regard to size, condition, prisoner treatment, etc. within each region? In what ways did prison life and the treatment of POWs evolve over the course of the war, and why? How does the story of Civil War prisons and POWs tie into other aspects of the Civil War, such as military policy, the politics of waging war, and moral debates about “just warfare?”

ZOMBEK: Union and Confederate officials had to figure out how to handle the wartime prisoner crisis as the war progressed and the number of captives increased, since the United States was largely immune from military crises throughout the 19th century, with the exceptions of the War of 1812 and the Mexican War. In each instance, military officials improvised and used existing structures, such as hulks, existing jails, and penitentiaries, to address the POW crisis. Union and Confederate officials behaved similarly during the Civil War, and also constructed open-air stockades/barracks or commandeered existing structures, like warehouses and factories, to house prisoners. The size and capacity of the military prisons varied, and the total number of prisoners held ranged. Lonnie Speer recorded 117 total Confederate and 106 Union military prisons. Of the known population totals, Speer listed one Confederate and eight Union prisons holding under 100 inmates; twenty-two Confederate and twenty-five Union prisons holding from 100 to 999 prisoners; six Confederate and five Union prisons holding 1,000-1,999 inmates; one Confederate and three Union prisons holding from 2,000-2,999 captives; three Confederate and three Union prisons holding from 3,000-3,999 prisoners; and three Confederate and one Union prison(s) holding from 4,000-4,999 inmates. The number of military prisons holding over 5,000 prisoners was nominal, and extremely large prisons that held over 10,000 were few.

They include Camp Douglas (Chicago) at 12,082, Fort Delaware (Delaware) at 12,600, Point Lookout (Maryland) at 22,000, Belle Isle (Richmond) at 10,000, Salisbury (North Carolina) at 10,321 and Andersonville (Georgia) at 32,899.¹¹

Given the establishment of long-term imprisonment as punishment with the penitentiary program in the antebellum period, which emphasized just punishment and Christian treatment of inmates, and in light of the Lieber Code's dictate (Article 76) that prisoners of war be treated with humanity, both Northern and Southern civilians expected that prisoners of war be afforded decent treatment and suffer no intentional maltreatment, cruelty, mutilation, or death (Art. 56). But the Lieber code also stated that all POWs were liable to the infliction of retaliatory measures (Art. 59) and could be made to work for the benefit of the captor's government (Art. 76). Instances of prisoners of war working for their captors either in prison or on the public works, both as punishment and in order to cut costs, occurred at Camp Chase, Johnson's Island, Salisbury, Andersonville, Old Capitol Prison, and Castle Thunder, among other prisons.

The breakdown of prisoner exchanges under the Dix-Hill Cartel in the summer of 1863 is often attributed to General Ulysses S. Grant and his alleged desire to capitalize on the North's numerical superiority, but this interpretation is inaccurate. The Cartel, authorized in July 1862, called for equal exchanges of captured soldiers, with the remaining men to be paroled under pledge not to take up arms against the enemy until formally exchanged. Once the Lieber Code was issued in April 1863, the US government demanded that black soldiers be treated equally. This demand was in response to the Confederate government's formal statement in May 1863 that neither black soldiers nor their white officers would be exchanged. President Lincoln consequently suspended the Dix-Hill Cartel on July 30, 1863 (General Order 252), only to be resumed if the Confederates agreed to afford white and black soldiers equal treatment, which they refused. Exchanges were effectively ended in August 1863, prior to Lincoln's appointment of Grant to overall command. From that point forward, prisoner populations climbed and exchanges were never resumed despite the Confederacy's conceding to demands regarding the treatment of black prisoners over a year after the Cartel was stopped.

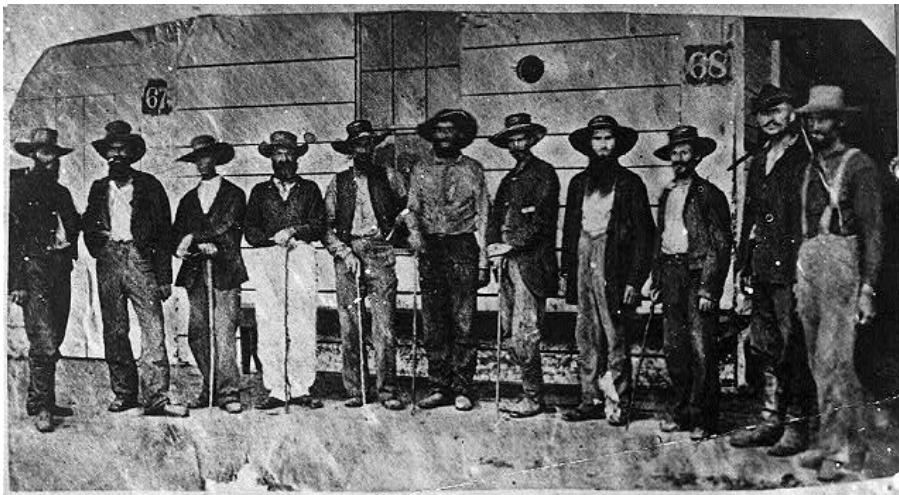


Libby Prison, Union POW camp, Richmond, VA. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

CWI: How was the POW experience of African-American soldiers different from that of white soldiers? In what ways were prisons for spies, traitors, deserters, and dissidents similar to or different from traditional soldiers' prisons?

ZOMBEK: African-Americans appear in prison records in a few instances. I've found that Confederate soldiers held at Camp Chase, for a time, were allowed to keep their slaves in prison. Columbus's civilians got word of this and complained to the federal government, and eventually the practice stopped. At Andersonville, Confederate authorities often demanded that black inmates participate in work details outside of the stockade, which incensed some white POWs since the laborers got reprieve from the prison's horrid conditions. They perhaps, however, failed to realize that this labor relegated black inmates to a position that was akin to slavery.

Despite Union and Confederate officials' attempts to classify inmates, spies, traitors, and deserters often wound up incarcerated with prisoners of war. One distinction was that, prior to incarceration, deserters faced court martials which, given the stigma of imprisonment, often stripped soldiers of their title and/or rank prior to incarcerating them, a punishment most commonly reserved for criminals. Many Union deserters found themselves sentenced to the D.C. Penitentiary prior to its closure in September 1862. Some prisons, like those in St. Louis, primarily held Union deserters, Southern sympathizers, and political prisoners but, according to the Lieber Code, prisoners of war were defined broadly and included public enemies, soldiers, and citizens ranging from sutlers, to editors, to journalists, and contractors (Art. 49 & 50). Union and Confederate authorities often tried to segregate prisoners according to their offenses within each individual prison and, if they could, recorded prisoners' offenses upon intake, but the classification scheme was difficult to uphold given the magnitude of the wartime crisis of incarceration and given the Lieber Code's broad definition of prisoners of war.



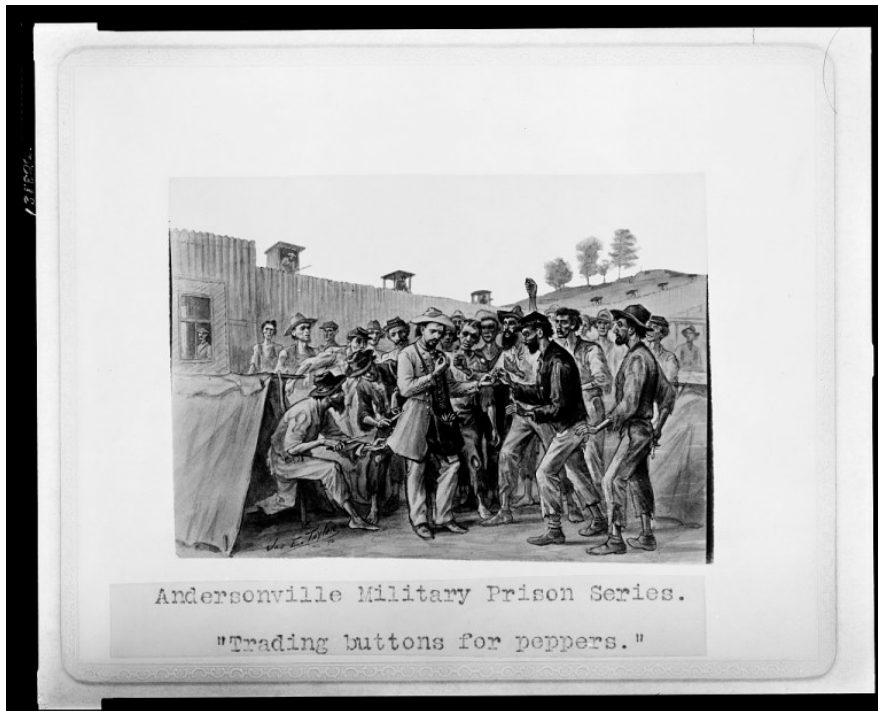
Commissioned officers of the 19th Iowa Infantry after their exchange as prisoners of war, New Orleans. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

CWI: We often tend to focus on the horrors surrounding soldiers who died in Civil War prisons. But, how did so many soldiers, North and South, *survive* Civil War prison life, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually? What new sources—and resources—are being used to uncover, document, and interpret the experiences of Civil War POWs and prison workers?

ZOMBEK: The first survival method that POWs used was to hope against hope. Examples of this are common in prisoners' diaries, which reveal that many men maintained hope up until their death. While their time on earth may have ended in prison, prisoners' clinging to hope prepared them for freedom in heaven, which can be considered a form of survival. On the other hand, prisoners who fell into despair often, in a way, predicted and sometimes seemed to even hasten their own death.

Prisoners also clung to relationships with their loved ones at home to survive. Through written correspondence, prisoners either were satisfied with hearing from home and the normal daily routines, or urged family members to use social or political connections to attempt to hasten their release from captivity. Some succeeded, but others, by continuously directing family members regarding who to contact and how to plea for release, kept their minds and their idle time occupied, which aided survival regardless of the outcome.

The most common way that POWs withstood captivity was to place their hope in God and seek out religious instruction. Prisoners clung to and read (and re-read) their Bibles. They also often shared scriptural passages that were filled with hope with their family members in letters. Other prisoners held their own religious services in the absence of chaplains, took time to observe the Sabbath and meditated on how the day was playing out at home, or sought religious instruction, penance, Sunday services, and religious counsel from visiting clergymen and women. Many prisoners believed that imprisonment was a temporary trial that God had willed for them, but believed that with His help, they could eventually make it back to their families.



Photograph of drawing by James E. Taylor showing prisoners at Andersonville Prison surrounding a Confederate officer and exchanging a button for a pepper as other prisoners behind the officer cut buttons from his uniform. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

GRAY: Prisoners' survival depended on the background and the creativity of the individual inmate. Some found jobs with prison administrators and served as hospital stewards, clerks, or public works employees. The more entrepreneurial inmates worked inside their respective camps, becoming a part of the prison marketplace and selling their services or wares to comrades. Writing home was also a survival mechanism, as having a network of family and friends who could mail extra provisions to the prisoners certainly improved the inmates' living situation. Emotionally, having contact with home, as well as friendships created inside prison walls boosted prisoners' spirits and could facilitate the sharing of resources. Various primary sources, including letters, diaries, prison rolls, and quartermaster payrolls indicate such social networks.

Moreover, contracts and prison sutlers' records indicate that prison work resulted in payment, and in turn the opportunity to supplement an inmate's lifestyle. The archaeological record has also helped to enrich our working knowledge of prisoner life, with recent discoveries highlighting the diverse living conditions within various prison communities. Excavations at sites such as Johnson's Island, Camp Lawton, Camp Douglas, and Elmira have produced a rich record of material culture, especially from features such as prison latrines, that has been critical to better understanding how Union and Confederate POWs lived, worked, and died in Civil War prisons.

[1] All statistics from this and the preceding paragraph from Speer, *Portals to Hell*, 323-340.

