Napoleon’s Lost Legions: French Prisoners of War in Britain, 1803–1814

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Abstract
During the Napoleonic Wars, over 100,000 French prisoners of war were held captive in Britain. These prisoners remain a marginal group in the military history of the period, yet they represent a key turning point in the history of European prisoners of war, and their predicament offers insights into the nature of the French Revolution. This article considers the treatment and experiences of French prisoners, and in particular seeks to understand the circumstances surrounding their long-term captivity. Unlike eighteenth-century prisoners of war, prisoners of the Napoleonic Wars remained captive for the duration of the conflict, unable to return home through the traditional means of prisoner exchange or officer parole. This radical departure from the past gave rise to the modern practice of interning prisoners of war for the entire duration of a war. This historic shift was, on the one level, a result of the actions of one man – Napoleon Bonaparte. Yet, as this article highlights, it must also be understood as part of the long-term social and cultural legacy of the French Revolution.

On 5 May 1821 Napoleon Bonaparte died as a prisoner of the British on the remote island of Saint Helena. Since his second abdication, Napoleon had spent five and a half years there under the vigilant eye of his gaoler and the island’s governor, Sir Hudson Lowe. Although he did not consider himself so, Napoleon was indeed the last French prisoner of the Napoleonic wars. The fate, however, of over 100,000 French prisoners of war in Britain between 1803 and 1814 is far less well known than the captivity of their emperor. And whilst Napoleon may have raged against the inclement weather at Longwood and at Hudson Lowe’s slights to his august status, the majority of French prisoners of war in Britain had earlier endured far worse conditions than their emperor did on Saint Helena.

During the Napoleonic wars (1803–14), the traditional prisoner exchange system between Britain and France ended, heralding the concept of the modern prisoner of war. Both British and French prisoners remained captive throughout the duration of the war. This radical development had major implications for both prisoners and governments. Between 1803 and 1814 the number of French prisoners in Britain...
dramatically climbed, placing a growing burden on the British government and its prison system. In all, a staggering 102,000 French prisoners of war were held in Britain during the conflict.\(^1\)

Despite their numbers and the many problems that they posed the British government, these prisoners have not captured great historical interest. With the exception of Philippe Masson’s study, Les Sépulcres flottants, dealing exclusively with the subject, it is necessary to go back to the early twentieth century to find histories – still valuable, but now somewhat dated – of war prisoners and prisoners of war in Britain during the Napoleonic wars.\(^2\) Denis Smith has recently written on prisoners, including French, held on the Spanish island of Cabrera during the Peninsular War, and Michael Lewis has studied the fate of British prisoners of war in Napoleonic France, but no comparable study of French prisoners in Britain has appeared in English.\(^3\) Moreover, whilst Masson’s study, like the early British works, provides a wealth of information about the treatment and daily lives of prisoners, it does not integrate its subject into the wider history of the Revolutionary-Napoleonic era. In turn, the history of French Napoleonic prisoners of war has not been absorbed into the general military historiography of the period. In recent decades, excellent histories have appeared on the Napoleonic wars, and on the French army and its conscript soldiers.\(^4\) Detailed accounts have appeared of how French soldiers were recruited, trained and fought. Yet the experience of French prisoners of war rarely rate a mention in these studies. This absence is also apparent in works addressing the history of the war from the British perspective.\(^5\) Once lost to the emperor on the battlefield or high seas, French prisoners of war in Britain have also been lost to the general history of the period.

This article suggests that French prisoners of war in Britain deserve a more important place in Revolutionary-Napoleonic history than has

\(^1\) Philippe Masson, Les Sépulcres flottants: prisonniers français en Angleterre sous l’Empire (Rennes, 1987) [hereafter Masson, Les Sépulcres flottants], p. 47. Although French prisoners of war made up the vast majority of prisoners of war in Britain, other nationalities included Spanish, Dutch, German and Polish, and Americans from 1812.

\(^2\) Francis Abell, Prisoners of War in Britain, 1756 to 1815 (1914) [hereafter Abell, Prisoners of War]; Basil Thomson, Story of Dartmoor Prison (1907); T. J. Walker, Depot for Prisoners of War at Norman Cross (1913) [hereafter Walker, Depot for Prisoners]; Arthur Brown (Rev.), The French Prisoners of Norman Cross. A Tale (1895); see also Harvey Wallace, Whitstable and the French Prisoners of War (Whitstable, 1983) [hereafter Wallace, Whitstable].

\(^3\) Denis Smith, The Prisoners of Cabrera: Napoleon’s Forgotten Soldiers, 1809–1814 (New York, 2001); Michael Lewis, Napoleon and his British Captives (1962) [hereafter, Lewis, Napoleon and his British Captives].


traditionally been their lot. Their sheer numbers are reason enough to rescue them from relative obscurity. Yet more importantly, rather than providing a source of captive and escape narratives, the history of French prisoners of war can illuminate the wider history of the period, in particular the political and social meanings of the French Revolution. The collapse of eighteenth-century traditions concerning the exchange, treatment and behaviour of prisoners of war has generally been blamed on Napoleon. However, the reason why an unprecedented number of French prisoners languished in Britain throughout the Napoleonic wars is not to be found solely in the personality of Napoleon, but in the French revolutionary attack on established cultural practices, and in new French conceptions of citizenship, soldiers and war. Like Napoleon Bonaparte himself, the history of French prisoners of war can be fully understood only in the context of the epoch’s dialectic between the old world and the new. The first part of this article explores these issues, describing and accounting for the transformation of prisoner-of-war traditions in the Revolutionary-Napoleonic era, whilst the second part addresses the treatment and experiences of Napoleonic French prisoners of war in Britain.

I

During the Napoleonic wars, the number of French prisoners in Britain reached unprecedented levels. In 1795 Britain held only 13,666 prisoners of war of various nationalities; yet by March 1810 there were 43,683 French prisoners of war in Britain, with the figure increasing to approximately 70,000 by 1814. In contrast, approximately 16,000 British prisoners of war were held in France. The French prisoners comprised soldiers and three classes of seamen – naval, privateer, and merchant; the last group having long been considered legitimate prisoners of war in European maritime conflicts. In June 1812, amongst 25,420 imprisoned French sailors, naval and privateer seamen accounted for 11,198 and 10,146 prisoners respectively, alongside 4,076 merchant seamen. Initially, French sailors of all types outnumbered soldiers amongst the prisoners. This was especially true following Trafalgar in 1805 when 210 naval officers and 4,589 sailors were transferred to Britain. In March 1810, amongst non-ranking French prisoners of war, 58 per cent (23,711) were sailors, whilst 42 per cent were soldiers. However, as the Peninsular War escalated and the French army incurred greater losses, the ratio of sailors

6 Abell, Prisoners of War, p. 117.
7 Public Record Office (PRO) ADM 105/46, Transport Board table on French prisoners of war, 19 March 1810.
8 This is Michael Lewis’s estimate given the available evidence; see Lewis, Napoleon and his British Captives, pp. 48, 264–6.
9 Walker, Depot for Prisoners, p. 203.
10 Masson, Les Sépulcres flottants, p. 47.
11 PRO ADM 105/46, Transport Board table on French prisoners of war, 19 March 1810.
to soldiers was reversed. By 1814, according to French government statistics, soldiers made up 58 per cent of non-ranking French prisoners of war in Britain. French civilians, generally captured at sea, were also imprisoned in Britain, with 1,557 civilians held captive in June 1812, including 152 women and children.

The care of prisoners of war in Britain traditionally lay with the Sick and Hurt Board, but in 1796 the responsibility for caring for healthy prisoners of war passed to the Transport Board, which liaised closely with the Admiralty. The Transport Board’s greatest problem was accommodating and confining the movement of the growing number of prisoners. Initially, the Board housed many of the prisoners of war in existing war prisons. Most of these – Millbay, Stapleton, Forton and Portchester – had been used prior to the French Revolution. They were located near the southern ports that received the prison ships. During the French Revolutionary Wars only one large land prison was built – Norman Cross in Peterborough, which received its first prisoners in 1797. As the Napoleonic wars dragged on, however, further war prisons were constructed. The most notorious of these, Dartmoor, received its first French prisoners in 1809; further large land prisons were built in Scotland, at Valleyfield in 1811 and Perth in 1812. By 1814, there were nine large POW prisons in Britain, housing the majority of French prisoners: Dartmoor contained 7,882, Portchester 7,068, Perth 6,379 and Norman Cross 5,167.

A significant number of prisoners were also held in ‘hulks’ (decommissioned naval vessels), in Portsmouth, Plymouth and, to a lesser extent, Chatham. Many European countries had used hulks since the sixteenth century, but during the Napoleonic wars the British government confined unprecedented numbers of prisoners in this manner, with the larger three-deck ships capable of holding 1,200 men. In 1806, there were twenty hulks in use, but by 1814 this figure had climbed to fifty-one, with French figures showing that 33 per cent of all French prisoners of war in Britain were housed in hulks at the war’s end.

Rather than being detained in the hulks or land prisons, officers enjoyed the privilege of parole. In 1804 the British government offered parole to the following officer categories: commissioned officers in the army (from the rank of sub-lieutenant); naval officers from the rank of midshipman; officers of privateers; and officers of merchant ships greater

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12 Archives Nationales (AN) FF² 17, government table on French prisoners of war from 22 May 1803 to 30 May 1814.
13 Walker, Depot for Prisoners, p. 203.
14 From 1806 the Transport Board was also responsible for sick prisoners of war.
16 Masson, Les Sépulcres flottants, p. 86.
17 Ibid., p. 106.
18 AN FF² 23, letter from the French commission sent to Britain in 1814 for the return of prisoners of war to Rivière, London, 9 May 1814.
than 50 tonnes. Under the conditions of parole, officers were allowed to live amongst local communities in designated parole towns under the supervision of a parole agent. There were fifty parole towns in Britain during the war. Wincanton received the most officers with 555; Chesterfield was next with 366.\(^{19}\) By 1814, there were approximately 4,000 French officers on parole in Britain.\(^{20}\)

To understand the historical significance of these French prisoners, it is necessary to consider the treatment of prisoners of war in eighteenth-century Europe, during what has been referred to as a late Enlightenment consensus on the conduct of European warfare.\(^{21}\) Although there were no international laws regulating armed conflict, and enlightened philosophes such as Vattel and Rousseau disagreed about the nature of war, the warfare of eighteenth-century European states and their aristocratic-led armies was regulated by a series of accepted conventions. The Swiss-German lawyer and philosopher Emerich de Vattel’s influential work on the civilized behaviour of states, *Le Droit des Gens*, published in 1758, addressed many such customs, including those on prisoners of war. Vattel argued for the humane treatment of prisoners, a practice he found in the French and English states: ‘When we hear the story of the treatment which prisoners of war have experienced on the part of the English and the French, we admire and revere those noble nations.’\(^{22}\)

Prior to the Revolutionary-Napoleonic Wars, however, state responsibility towards prisoners of war was eased by a number of traditions that helped reduce the number of prisoners and the length of their internment.

First, the exchange of prisoners of war was a regular practice amongst eighteenth-century European belligerents. Cartels – the name given to ships carrying exchanged prisoners of war – were established with exchanges generally made on the basis of grade for grade, man for man. The traditional cartel port for British and French exchanges was Morlaix. The exchange system had an obvious appeal to soldiers and governments alike. Prisoners looked forward to only a short period of internment – it was simply a question of awaiting the next cartel – whilst governments were spared the long-term administrative, policing and financial burdens of confining, clothing and feeding an ever growing number of prisoners. Secondly, parole d’honneur further eased the problem of prisoners of war. For Vattel this practice reflected ‘the honour and the humane spirit of European nations’.\(^{23}\) Under parole, officers were released from captivity and allowed to return to their homeland on condition that they gave their word not to take up arms for the duration of the conflict or for a set period of time. Once the war or the specified

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\(^{19}\) AN FF 22, French government table on paroled officers for the period 22 May 1803 to 1 Jan. 1814.


\(^{23}\) Ibid.
period ended, the paroled officer was freed of his obligation and could
resume military service. Rather than an agreement between nation-states,
parole reflected the shared cultural values of an international order of
gentlemen.\textsuperscript{24} The right of parole was reserved only to officers, deemed to
be gentlemen, and was therefore inextricably tied up with \textit{ancien régime}
privilege, aristocratic honour, and the strict class division between
officers and common soldiers. Thirdly, the European states of the late
Enlightenment did not consider civilians or non-combatants as prisoners
of war. Vattel, whilst arguing that an enemy state’s peoples were indeed
enemies, drew a distinction between soldiers and non-combatants, hence
their different treatment in war.\textsuperscript{25} In the eighteenth century, wars were of
a ‘limited’ kind, increasingly fought by private royal armies, with a
moderate impact on civilian life relative to the conflicts of seventeenth-
century Europe, most notoriously the Thirty Years War.

These eighteenth-century practices either ceased or were significantly
weakened during the Napoleonic era. Regular prisoner cartels and
exchanges broke down, and the nature of parole was fundamentally
altered with officers no longer automatically granted the privilege of
returning home. Moreover, a much harsher stance was taken towards
non-combatants. On 23 May 1803, following the rupture of the Peace of
Amiens, Napoleon ordered the internment of all British male civilians in
France aged between 18 and 60.\textsuperscript{26} He argued that they were prisoners of war
because they were eligible for the British Militia. Under this French law
between 700 and 800 British civilians became \textit{détenus} in France.\textsuperscript{27} The
British government did not adopt a similar policy towards French
civilians in Britain, although some French civilians, most often taken at
sea, were considered prisoners of war. As the duke of Wellington wrote
in 1813 to an imprisoned French non-combatant: ‘In this war, which on
account of the violence of animosity with which it is conducted, it is to
be hoped will be the last, for some time at least, everybody taken is
considered a prisoner of war, and none are released without exchange.’\textsuperscript{28}

Before investigating the reasons behind this decisive shift in prisoner-
of-war conventions, it is important to highlight that a degree of prisoner
transfer did continue during the Napoleonic wars, allowing a significant
minority of French prisoners of war in Britain to return to France. The
statistics of the Transport Board reveal that 17,607 French prisoners of
war returned to France during the Napoleonic wars.\textsuperscript{29} With the exception
of a tiny number who gained their liberty through acts of bravery, for
example saving British marines from drowning off hulks or helping to put

\textsuperscript{24} Best, \textit{Humanity in Warfare}, p. 60; John Childs, \textit{Armies and Warfare in Europe, 1648–1789} (New
York, 1982), p. 27.
\textsuperscript{26} For Napoleon’s internment of British civilians see Lewis, \textit{Napoleon and his British Captives},
pp. 20–3.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p. 36.
\textsuperscript{28} Quoted in Walker, \textit{Depot for Prisoners}, p. 218.
\textsuperscript{29} Abell, \textit{Prisoners of War}, p. 44.
out fires in local parole towns, French prisoners of war could gain their liberty through three means: as invalids, as paroled officers, or through exchanges. To the anger and frustration of the Transport Board, these methods of transfer were not reciprocated by the French government.

The most common form of release was as an invalid. Such men were deemed to be permanently incapacitated and therefore unfit for future military service. The Transport Board received many letters from French prisoners claiming to be invalids. Typically, the Transport Board’s medical inspector, Dr Weir, visited prisoners in jail to determine the validity of their claim. Despite the Transport Board tiring of investigating what it deemed to be false claims, a total of 12,787 French prisoners were declared invalids and sent home. The French government, however, did not extend this humane practice to British prisoners in France. In May 1811, the Transport Board complained to Rivière, the French minister of the navy and responsible for prisoners of war, that: ‘Many thousand French prisoners have been sent to France in consideration of their wounds and infirmities since the commencement of the war . . . not one British prisoner has under similar circumstances been sent from France to this country.’ Indeed in July 1811, the Transport Board claimed that since the Peace of Amiens, 10,476 French prisoners of war had been released as invalids, whilst only thirteen British prisoners of war had been similarly freed.

Parole provided another avenue of release for officers. In the early days of the Napoleonic wars the British government maintained the tradition of allowing French officers to return to France on parole. The chief condition of their parole was that, if a British officer of similar rank was not released, then the French officer would return to Britain. The British government soon discovered, however, that French officers sent back to France failed to honour their agreement to return. By August 1803 the Transport Board had allowed 500 paroled French officers to return to France, yet no British officers had been similarly released, and no French officers had returned. The British government soon ended this practice, although the right of paroled French officers to return home was never formally abolished. French officers continued to be given their parole throughout the war, but now they had to remain in Britain in a designated parole town, and observe a number of restrictions on their liberty.

French prisoners of war were also released under exchange and cartel agreements. According to French figures, 1,979 French prisoners of war were released through such means. Despite repeated negotiations between the French and British governments, a general exchange of

30 Ibid., p. 95.
31 Ibid., p. 44.
32 PRO ADM 98/301, letter from Transport Board to Rivière, 11 May 1811.
33 PRO ADM 105/46, report of the Transport Board to Admiralty, 30 July 1811.
34 Abell, Prisoners of War, p. 377.
35 Ibid.
36 AN FF2 17, table on French prisoners of war in Britain between 22 May 1803 and 30 May 1814.
British and French prisoners of war was never established. Nevertheless, various conventions and cartels established by individual commanders in the field enabled the release of some French prisoners of war in Britain. This was the case, for example, with the controversial Convention of Cintra, signed on 30 August 1808 between British and French forces in Portugal. The convention detailed the terms of the French surrender, and allowed General Junot and the French army of Portugal to return safely to France. Articles 18 and 19 related specifically to prisoner-of-war exchange. In subsequent years these articles proved problematic for the British government, as some captured French veterans of the Peninsular War, imprisoned in Britain, claimed that they should be released under the terms of the convention. The correspondence of the Transport Board reveals that, whilst the British government was convinced that these prisoners did not have a legitimate claim relative to the specific requirements of the convention, some French prisoners were nevertheless released. Less problematic was the exchange established in the East Indies by Vice Admiral Bertie and General Decaen. In July 1811, the Transport Board released 301 French prisoners of war under the provisions of this exchange. French prisoners yet to be sent to Britain also benefited from the 1812 exchange agreement reached by the duke of Wellington and Admiral Legge with French commanders in the peninsula.

Finally, the traditional practice of releasing prisoners at sea continued throughout the Napoleonic wars. These agreements were reached by individuals and small groups of combatants, and were later ratified by the French and British governments. They operated in a number of ways. The most common form involved the release of captured officers at sea after they had signed a document declaring that an equal number of enemy officers would be released in the future. In other instances, French corsairs released captured British merchant officers and seamen on condition that a similar number of French prisoners of war were released in Britain; often specific prisoners were named in the exchange agreements. Another practice that became common in the later years of the conflict, and which the Transport Board found irksome, was French corsairs freeing British seamen on condition that the corsairs themselves would be released if later captured.

Through various means, therefore, a significant number of French prisoners of war returned home during the Napoleonic wars. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority remained prisoners of the British. This is explained by French attitudes and policies rather than British actions. In

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38 See for instance PRO ADM 98/117, letter from Transport Board to Admiralty, 6 Feb. 1811.
39 PRO ADM 98/301, letter from Transport Board to Rivière, 25 July 1811.
40 Ibid., letter from Transport Board to Rivière, 23 Oct. 1811.
41 Ibid., letters from Transport Board to Rivière; and ADM 98/117, letters from Transport Board to Admiralty.
42 PRO ADM 98/117, letter from Transport Board to Admiralty, 30 Jan. 1811.
fact, the British government continued to honour many eighteenth-century customs, including the release of invalid prisoners, the non-detention of French civilians living in Britain, and strictly observing officer parole. Between 1803 and 1811 only twenty-three British officers broke their parole in France, and they faced serious consequences upon their return to Britain ranging from reprimand and demotion to being sent back to France or discharged from the service. Parole violators also ran the risk of social ostracism from family and peers. In contrast, parole violation was a much more common occurrence amongst French officers in Britain. Between May 1803 and August 1811, 860 French officers breached their parole, with 590 successfully escaping; from 1811 to 1814 another 299 army officers escaped, including nine generals and nineteen colonels. The Transport Board was outraged at this scandalous French behaviour. Parole was clearly not as sacred an undertaking for French officers as it was for British. Nor was it sacred for the Napoleonic regime, which failed to reprimand French parole violators. Indeed, in 1809 the Transport Board claimed that the French government had stopped General Frescinet from returning to Britain to honour his parole agreement.

What accounts then for the French actions and the collapse of traditional practices concerning prisoners of war? Typically, historical explanations focus on one individual, Napoleon Bonaparte, whose conduct singularly brings about the end to the ‘good old days of “gentlemanly” warfare’. Napoleon as an individual is undoubtedly important in the history of prisoners of war, but French policy towards prisoners should not be reduced to the ‘uncivilized’ behaviour of an implied Corsican bandit. Rather, Napoleon should be understood as a child of the revolutionary epoch, and new French attitudes and practices concerning prisoners of war should be situated largely within the social, political and military history of the French Revolution itself.

In this regard, recent histories of the French revolutionary army and the work of Geoffrey Best provide a valuable interpretative framework. Over the last three decades the traditional confines of military history have been broadened through social and cultural approaches. Historians of the French Revolution and Napoleonic era have contributed to this development, highlighting the importance of the French army as a social institution, stressing its interconnectedness with, rather than remoteness from, civil society. The French army was arguably the most revolutionary

44 Lewis, *Napoleon and his British Captives*, pp. 46–7, 64–5.
45 Abell, *Prisoners of War*, p. 391. AN FF3 50 contains reports on French officers arriving in the French Channel ports after having escaped from captivity in Britain. Upon arrival, the officers were interviewed about the manner of their capture and escape.
46 Lewis, *Napoleon and his British Captives*, p. 63.
48 Lewis, *Napoleon and his British Captives*, p. 28.

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social institution of the era, indoctrinating its soldiers with the political and cultural values of the revolution, and providing a melting pot for a new society. Many of the radical challenges to the treatment of prisoners of war under Napoleon have their roots in these earlier revolutionary changes. Indeed, there was a dose of Jacobinism in how the Napoleonic regime addressed prisoners of war. Nevertheless, French warfare during the Revolutionary-Napoleonic era did not represent a complete break with the past, but was marked rather by the coexistence and conflict of old and new behaviours and mentalities. This struggle between change and continuity, the very essence of revolution itself, is also true of the history of prisoners of war during the era.

In the early liberal phase of the French Revolution, the French government’s policies and decrees on warfare and prisoners of war were in keeping with the ethos of the late Enlightenment. With the beginning of the French Revolutionary Wars in 1792, the Legislative Assembly proclaimed that the French struggle was against foreign monarchs rather than peoples, and issued a decree ‘to regulate by the principles of justice and humanity the treatment of . . . enemy soldiers’. However, when the revolution entered its radical Jacobin phase, many past military practices were abandoned and new conceptions of war emerged. The French government’s decree of 26 June 1794 shattered the former humane principles guiding the welfare of prisoners of war by ordering that no British or Hanoverian soldiers were to be taken alive. Unlike Britain and other European nations, French society experienced a ‘total war’ in 1793–4. Drawing upon classical notions of citizen-soldiers, partly embodied in the revolution’s National Guard, the French republic became a self-proclaimed ‘nation-in-arms’. With the unprecedented introduction of conscription for all single males between the ages of 20 and 25, and women, children and the elderly encouraged to assist the war effort, the distinction between soldier and non-combatant was weakened. Prior to Napoleon’s rise, then, the French state passed through a phase that challenged in practice the traditional separation of military and civil society. Although military–civil distinctions were never this blurred in Napoleonic France, the institutionalization of conscription from 1798 conceived of all young males as combatants; and the horrendous struggle between imperial troops and Spanish guerrillas in the Peninsular War challenged traditional notions of who constituted the enemy.

The radical Jacobin phase of the French Revolution also saw an official rejection of parole d’honneur, a custom that was seldom broken before 1793. The National Convention’s decree of 22 June 1793 ordered that French officers who had been released by the enemy on condition

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50 Best, Humanity in Warfare, pp. 76–7, 121–3.
52 Best, Humanity in Warfare, p. 81.
53 Ibid., pp. 112–21.
54 Lewis, Napoleon and his British Captives, p. 45.
that they did not take up arms, should not honour this obligation but rather immediately return to active duty. The majority of French officers evidently complied.\textsuperscript{55} Many deemed their loyalty to the republic as a much more sacred duty than honouring their word as gentlemen. As one Lieutenant Gauthier said: ‘Perjury is a virtue when the oath is a crime.’\textsuperscript{56} Many Jacobins, Robespierre and Carnot among them, were deeply suspicious of ‘honour’, viewing it as individualistic, aristocratic and threatening to republican virtue.\textsuperscript{57} The Jacobin attack on parole, however, should not only be seen as a product of the crisis of 1793–4 but as a natural outcome of the principles of the revolution itself. The revolution’s attack on noble privilege, the opening up of careers to talent which saw commoners flooding into the previously aristocrat-dominated officer corps, the emphasis upon citizenship and the sacredness of the republic – all this helped to weaken the hold of traditional aristocratic values, and consequently officer parole. This helps to explain the tolerant attitude of the Napoleonic regime towards parole-breakers.

It is generally accepted that the French national army changed in character during the Revolutionary-Napoleonic period: the Jacobin ‘Army of Virtue’ of 1792–4, schooled on civic republicanism, gradually gave way to an ‘Army of Honour’ under Napoleon, which increasingly drew inspiration from the emperor, regimental \textit{esprit de corps}, and promotions and rewards, especially the Legion of Honour.\textsuperscript{58} Napoleon’s officer corps was in many senses ideologically distant from the Jacobin-controlled officers of the early republican armies. Yet the concept of honour amongst Napoleon’s officer corps did not always extend to \textit{parole d’honneur}: as already noted, not all officers felt strongly bound by their parole in Britain, and were certainly more inclined to breach parole than their British counterparts.

Nevertheless, the majority of Napoleonic officers in Britain did honour their parole. The tradition, whilst weakened, was still binding for many. Indeed, some officers argued that they broke their parole precisely because they felt that the traditions and honour of parole were not being respected by the Transport Board. It is impossible to ascertain whether this was a genuine conviction amongst such officers or simply used as a pretext for their escape. In fact, greater numbers of French officers escaped following the Transport Board’s decision to stop officers returning to France on parole.\textsuperscript{59} The Board was simply responding to the French government’s refusal to extend this right to British officers. However, from the perspective of imprisoned French officers in Britain, who were not privy to the official breakdown of parole, the Transport Board was denying their natural and traditional rights as officers. Others

\textsuperscript{55} Bertaud, \textit{The Army and the French Revolution}, p. 258.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., pp. 152–75; Forrest, \textit{Napoleon’s Men}, pp. 93–104.
protested the strict conditions of their parole, resenting the limitations to their liberty in parole towns. As is evident in a letter from the Transport Board to General Privé, who complained about the strict parole conditions, the board argued that these measures were in response to parole violation: ‘I am directed to observe that there was a little necessity for this, as a great many Persons who style themselves Men of Honour, and some of them members of the Legion of Honour, have abandoned all Honour and Integrity by running from parole . . .’. Each side accused the other of being dishonourable, with the Transport Board’s growing vigilance encouraging only further parole violations.

French officers also violated their parole when they felt that the Transport Board had not honoured cartel and exchange agreements. The board received letters from French prisoners, both individual officers and groups of imprisoned soldiers, claiming that they should be released under a particular cartel or exchange agreement. Most often these claims were rejected, causing further problems for the board. This was the case, for example, with General Pillet, who was wounded and taken prisoner at the battle of Vimiero in 1808, and subsequently sent to Britain. He claimed that under the second article of the Convention of Cintra he should never have been taken out of Portugal as a prisoner of war. He therefore felt no obligation to honour the conditions of his parole at Alresford, where he escaped, only to be captured and put on a hulk at Chatham. In another case, Lieutenant Montbazin was captured in the Caribbean in 1809 and sent to Britain where he remained on parole for several years. In 1812 he claimed that a recent agreement had been reached at sea whereby he was to be exchanged for four British sailors. According to Montbazin the British government kept the four British seamen but refused to release him. Montbazin no longer felt bound by his parole and unsuccessfully tried to escape. Parole violation and escapes, then, were sometimes affected by those officers who claimed to be tenaciously defending the traditions of the past. In seeking to preserve the spirit of those conventions, they often only undermined them further.

Finally, in explaining the weakening, and in some senses collapse, of traditional prisoner-of-war practices, the question arises why a general prisoner exchange was never established between Britain and France. During the Napoleonic wars, cartel negotiations between the British and the French took place in 1803–4, 1806, 1810 and 1812–13. The Morlaix negotiations from April to October 1810, between the British representative, Mackenzie, and the French representative, Moustier, were the closest the two nations came to ratifying an agreement. After intense negotiations,
debate and conflict, an agreement was reached for a general exchange of all prisoners of war held by the respective governments and their allies. The negotiations, however, ultimately collapsed with both sides typically blaming the other. Coquelle, in his lengthy analysis of the negotiations, argues that Napoleon sabotaged the talks because, as always, he felt that the 11,000 British prisoners in French hands were of much greater value to Britain’s war effort than the 41,000 French prisoners in Britain were to his own military machine.66 In short, France could bear the loss more so than Britain. In taking this approach, however, Napoleon’s actions and thinking did not represent a complete break with the past. His government was not the first French government to break off cartel negotiations with the British. Throughout much of the late 1790s the French government under the Directory had refused to broker a cartel deal on the grounds that France could bear the loss of its prisoners more than Britain.67 And Napoleon’s cold rationale for rejecting the exchange was in accordance with principles that Vattel had articulated fifty years earlier:

If a Nation finds a considerable gain in leaving its soldiers prisoners in the hands of the enemy during the war, rather than restore to the enemy those whom it holds captive, there is nothing to prevent it from following the policy most to its interest, if it is not bound by a cartel. A case of this kind would arise when a State having large military forces is at war with a Nation whose strength consists far more in the bravery than in the number of its soldiers.68

II

A number of factors account for the unprecedented long-term detention of tens of thousands of French prisoners in Britain. In many senses abandoned by their government, the prisoners were forced to sit passively on the sidelines of the war, some absent from home and family for over a decade. What was life like for these prisoners? Most memoirs and histories of French prisoner-of-war life in Britain focus on the brutal and inhumane conditions of imprisonment.69 Here, the hulks and Dartmoor take centre stage. Abell claims that the former remain a ‘stain upon our national record’,70 with most contemporary prisoner memoirs providing graphic descriptions of life on board the hulks. Captain

67 Abell, Prisoners of War, pp. 30–1.
69 Among the most famous memoirs are Baron de Bonnefoux, Mémoires (Paris, 1900) [hereafter, Bonnefoux, Mémoires]; Louis Garneray, Captivité de Louis Garneray. Neuf années en Angleterre, mes Pontons (Paris, 1853); René Martin Pillet, Views of England during a Residence of Ten Years, Six of them as a Prisoner of War (Boston, 1818) [hereafter Pillet, Views of England]; Colonel Lebertre, Aperçu du traitement qu’éprouvant les prisonniers de guerre français en Angleterre (Paris, 1813) [hereafter Lebertre, Aperçu du traitement]. For an account of an American prisoner of war at Dartmoor with the French see Charles Andrews, The Prisoners’ Memoirs (New York, 1815).
70 Abell, Prisoners of War, p. 1.
Charles Dupin, for instance, called them ‘floating tombs’; 71 Baron de Bonnefoux claimed: ‘It is difficult to imagine a more severe punishment’; 72 according to General Pillet: ‘Most of the men who have been confined there have lost the use of their limbs, and will never be able to stand upright again’; 73 and Louis Garneray described the prisoners on board the Prothée in Portsmouth as ‘dead people come out for a moment from their graves, hollow-eyed, earthy complexioned, round backed, unshaven, their frames barely covered with yellow rags, their bodies frightfully thin’. 74

Of the land prisons, Dartmoor was the most infamous. Its isolation, poor climate, reputed diseases and brutality ensured it was the most feared prison amongst the French. Its evil reputation entered the public domain in 1811–12. In July 1811, Dartmoor was criticized in the House of Commons by Lord Cochrane following the publication of a damning article in the Independent Whig, which accused the British government of barbarity. 75 This was followed in 1812 by Daniel Lovell, the owner of The Statesmen newspaper, successfully being sued by the Transport Board and imprisoned for eighteen months, after publishing a letter that attacked Dartmoor prison and the Transport Board’s overall treatment of French prisoners. 76 The letter – signed by an anonymous ‘Honestus’ – claimed that Dartmoor had:

The most inclement climate in England: for nine months there is no sun, and four and a half times as much rain as Middlesex. The regiments on duty there have to be changed every two months. Were not the deaths during the first three years, 1,000 a year, and 3,000 sick? 77

Accounts of horrific prison life, however, must be tempered as the experiences of prisoners varied between prisons, within prisons, and between officers and men. Prisoner-of-war life was not universally bleak. Conditions on board the hulks were far worse than in the land prisons; in turn, Dartmoor was generally worse than other land prisons; whilst the experience of paroled officers was a very different one from that of interned common-ranked prisoners of war. Moreover, the contemporary accounts of shocking mortality rates amongst the prisoners are exaggerated, sometimes grossly. Despite General Pillet’s belief that ‘men fit for service are killed, and then sent home to France to finish dying there’, and his claim to have seen a field at Norman Cross where 4,000 French prisoners were buried, 78 mortality rates were not horrendously high.

71 Wallace, Whitstable, p. 10.
72 Abell, Prisoners of War, p. 54.
74 Abell, Prisoners of War, p. 66.
75 Correspondence in PRO ADM 97/109, and Abell, Prisoners of War, p. 239.
76 PRO ADM 97/109, letter from Bicknell, the Admiralty’s solicitor of investigation, to the Transport Board, 20 Nov. 1812; see Abell, Prisoners of War, p. 239.
77 Copy of the letter in PRO ADM 97/109; see also Abell, Prisoners of War, pp. 21–2, 240.
78 Pillet, Views of England, p. 245; Abell, Prisoners of War, p. 151.

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Prisoners were more vulnerable on the hulks, which had mortality rates of 3 to 4 per cent throughout the war.\textsuperscript{79} Of the land prisons, Dartmoor had the highest mortality rate (4 per cent), with 1,455 deaths during the war, one third caused by an epidemic in 1809–10.\textsuperscript{80} The sick prisoners were often new arrivals from Portugal, who had suffered harsh conditions of captivity on the Iberian peninsula, and entered the British prisons and hulks already in a state of poor health; they were also considered those most likely to spread disease amongst the prison population.\textsuperscript{81}

Many prisoners endured terrible conditions, especially on the hulks, where thousands of men were kept in cramped, poorly ventilated spaces, sometimes enduring inhumane treatment at the hands of the ships’ lieutenants, medical officers and marines. The correspondence of the Transport Board also attests to the widespread problem of corruption amongst prison contractors. The daily ration for prisoners was half a pound of bread, and half a pound of beef supplemented with barley, onions, and cabbage or turnips; twice a week the meat was replaced with herring and cod.\textsuperscript{82} Corrupt contractors, however, often supplied poor-quality food and clothing.\textsuperscript{83}

Many prisons and hulks had groups of prisoners who fell into a life of violence, gambling, alcohol and depression. Portchester castle and the hulks had the \textit{raffalés}, who traded their clothing and food to satisfy gambling and alcohol dependency. Dartmoor had the infamous Romans, so named because they slept in the \textit{capitole}, the top of one of the buildings. These groups of poorly educated common soldiers, traumatized by prison life, were shamelessly treated according to the early historiography of French prisoners of war.\textsuperscript{84} It has been claimed that the Transport Board was largely indifferent to the suffering of prisoners, with inquiries and inspections being rare, and announced beforehand.\textsuperscript{85} This is not an entirely fair assessment of the board’s attitude and activities. The board’s commissioners inspected the land prisons, hulks and prison hospitals, sometimes arriving unannounced. They wrote lengthy and detailed reports of their inspections, which included personally testing the quality of the food and clothing, and inviting prisoners to voice any complaints.\textsuperscript{86} Whenever there were reports of sickness in prisons or hulks, the Transport Board’s medical inspector, Dr John Weir, was sent to investigate.\textsuperscript{87} It was not uncommon for Weir to criticize surgeons for neglecting sick prisoners of war under their care. For instance, in 1810 he found fault with the

\textsuperscript{79} Masson, \textit{Les Sépulcres flottants}, p. 115.
\textsuperscript{80} Abell, \textit{Prisoners of War}, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{81} For the Transport Board’s concern over the health of prisoners of war arriving from Portugal, see for instance, PRO ADM 98/117, Transport Board to Admiralty, 6 Dec. 1810.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., report of the Transport Board to Admiralty, Dec. 1810.
\textsuperscript{83} PRO ADM 98/306, especially letters sent by the Transport Board to the Dartmoor contractor, Josh Rowe, in Jan.–Feb., May and July 1811.
\textsuperscript{84} Abell, \textit{Prisoners of War}, pp. 140, 245.
\textsuperscript{86} PRO ADM 105/44, commissioners’ inspection reports to the Transport Board.
\textsuperscript{87} Weirs’ reports are in PRO ADM 105/22 for 1806–12 and ADM 105/23 for 1813–14.
surgeon Vickery on board the Marengo hulk; and in 1811, he was critical of the surgeon Madden, responsible for sick prisoners of war on board the Suffolk in Portsmouth.\textsuperscript{88} On the basis of his reports, some medical doctors were removed from their positions. In 1807, Jeffcott, the surgeon at Stapleton prison, was dismissed after Weir found him negligent.\textsuperscript{89} In 1810 Dr Kirkwood of the \emph{Europe} hospital ship in Portsmouth was removed from his position.\textsuperscript{90} The Transport Board also investigated the many complaints made against contractors supplying poor quality beef, bread, fish, clothing and hammocks. During 1810–11, for instance, Captain Cotgrave, the agent for Dartmoor prison, constantly complained to the Transport Board about the prison’s corrupt contractor, Josh Rowe.\textsuperscript{91} After many months of complaints and official reprimands, the Dartmoor contractor was finally sacked in October 1811. Then in 1814, the Transport Board enacted criminal proceedings against another contractor at Dartmoor.\textsuperscript{92} The dismissal of corrupt staff was therefore not unheard of, but most complaints were simply met by reprimands.

Whilst some prisoners led wretched lives, others found life bearable, deriving positive experiences from their time in Britain. These experiences often came through interaction with local British society. This was especially true of paroled officers who lived in British towns for a number of years and came to be an integral part of local community life. Indeed, following the departure of paroled French prisoners of war in 1814, the secretary of the Hawick archaeological society wrote of a ‘great sadness’ in the local community that felt as if it had been ‘orphaned’.\textsuperscript{93} Certainly, few paroled officers lived contented lives. They faced a number of restrictions on their liberty – they could not venture further than one mile from the parole town; they had to adhere to a curfew bell for both morning and night; and they were required to maintain regular contact with their parole agent.\textsuperscript{94} The officers also deemed insufficient the allowance they were paid by the British government. Until 1813, the allowance was ten shillings and sixpence per week for captains and above, and eight shillings and sixpence for lower ranks.\textsuperscript{95}

However, the boredom, frustration and loneliness of paroled life were eased by interaction with local society in a number of contexts. First, there was economic interaction. Given that the French army largely comprised conscripts from diverse occupational backgrounds, a significant number of artisans ended up as prisoners of war. Many such prisoners whiled away their days by producing items such as bracelets, gloves, hats,
bonnets, purses, pipes, chests, combs, chess sets, dominoes, models of war ships, and figurines of soldiers and prisoners. These were sold to the public on prison market days. Some prisoners went further by establishing their own textile industries, which became so successful that they posed a significant threat to local industry. At Portchester castle, for example, a thriving lace industry employed 3,000 prisoners. Such was the quality and popularity of the lace that local manufacturers complained and persuaded the authorities to shut down the operation.

Secondly, French prisoners interacted on a cultural level with local society. Despite the violent excesses of the French Revolution and the ongoing war, sections of British society continued to identify Frenchness with civility and culture. The French prisoners at Portchester castle ran a theatre that proved so popular that it was closed down after complaints from the Portsmouth theatre. Cultural interaction was strongest between paroled officers and local society. Some officers earned additional money by teaching French, Latin, drawing, music, dancing and fencing. Some French doctors, on parole at Chesterfield and Welshpool, even vaccinated locals against smallpox, much to the consternation of the Transport Board. In the parole towns it was common to see French officers, dressed in uniform, strolling through the streets or eating at restaurants. They were invited to local dinners and cultural events. At Thame, for example, Baron Bonnefoux and other paroled officers were regular guests of an Englishman, Lambert, and his wife.

Inevitably, given this degree of fraternization, French officers formed relationships with local British women. Official liaisons indicate how common this was. For example, the parish register at Ashby reveals fifteen marriages between French prisoners of war and British women between 1806 and 1814. The British government paid for the subsistence of the wives and any children. Some French officers remained in Britain after the war, for example Alred Jauréguiberry, a privateer captain on parole at Bishop’s Castle, who married Mary Morgan; whilst others, such as General d’Henin, returned to France with their British wives. Local women, motivated through friendship, love or money, were also prominent in the escape of French officers. For instance, Baron Bonnefoux escaped from parole in Oldham with the help of a sixteen-year-old female friend, Sarah Cooper, who later married a French prisoner of war and spent time in France after the war. In November 1812, a Mary Clarke was imprisoned for assisting the escape of Lieutenant Montbazin, who

97 Abell, *Prisoners of War*, p. 177.
100 Bonnefoux, *Mémoires*, p. 199.
102 Ibid., p. 307.
103 Ibid., p. 305.

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had absconded from his parole at Lichfield. In February 1812, Elizabeth Slater, a lace-maker at Ashbourne, was caught with Lieutenant Joseph Pierri after the latter had broken his parole. Slater was not charged, however, as the investigation revealed that she had fallen in love with Pierri, and fearing that her father would forbid their marriage, had persuaded the Frenchman to elope.

The escape of French prisoners of war was a constant problem for the British authorities. Especially in the final years of the war, parole agents were frequently reporting escapes, with prisoners often fleeing in groups of between three to nine in number. The planning and execution of escapes generally brought French officers into contact with either sympathetic locals or organized smuggling networks. These networks sometimes charged each prisoner up to 300 guineas to effect his escape. They were often large sophisticated gangs, providing transport, shelter and boats. In November 1812, for example, a total of fifteen British subjects, mostly smugglers, helped eight French prisoners escape from Andover. The most famous escape agent was Thomas Moore, who operated under various aliases, and devoted much time and effort to his pastime, visiting parole towns, establishing contacts with the prisoners, and providing boats, sails, oars, charts and provisions. Escapes became so common that in 1812 the British government passed harsher penalties, including transportation for life, for British subjects found guilty of aiding escaped prisoners.

Not all French–British interaction was harmonious. At times there was friction and violence between French officers and British ‘polite’ society. The Marquis d’Hautpol, for instance, recalled being subjected to much anti-French sentiment as a dinner guest of Lord Malville’s. Duels were also fought between the French and local British officers and gentlemen. Some French officers on parole were particularly critical of the British lower classes. For instance, officers at Thame complained to the Transport Board ‘of the insults to which they were exposed from the lower orders of the people’.

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105 PRO ADM 97/110, report of the Justice of the Peace of Warwick on the case of Mary Clark and Montbazin, 9 Nov. 1812.
106 PRO ADM 98/118, report from Bicknell, the Admiralty’s solicitor of investigation, to Transport Board, 2 March 1812.
109 The French reports in AN FF2 50 on escaped prisoners of war highlight how common it was for escaped French officers to arrive in the French Channel ports on board the ships of British smugglers.
110 PRO ADM 97/110, letter from Bicknell to Transport Board, 6 Nov. 1812.
111 Abell, Prisoners of War, p. 367.
112 Ibid., p. 366.
114 Abell, Prisoners of War, pp. 428–9, 437.
115 PRO ADM 105/44, report from commissioner of Transport Board to Transport Board, 12 Sept. 1807.

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into violence. Baron Bonnefoux, for example, was accosted whilst walking through Thame;116 Louis Garneray and two other French prisoners were attacked one morning in a field outside Bishop’s Waltham by a bill-hook-wielding farm worker, who left one of Garneray’s companions dead and the other wounded.117 In 1807, there was a serious incident near Wincanton when a local farm worker, having spotted General Rochambeau and six or seven other officers walking dogs well beyond the one-mile limit, threatened to tell the authorities.118 The French officers responded by assaulting the worker; nearby haymakers then assaulted the French officers, including Rochambeau who was badly beaten. The French officers returned to town, collected weapons, and threatened to burn down Wincanton. In his assessment of the incident, the local parole agent claimed that the French officers had been excited by recent news of Napoleon’s victories.

Indeed, the figure of Napoleon remained a common source of tension between French prisoners and the British public. For the French prisoners, of course, Napoleon was beyond reproach, and they remained passionately committed to him. They held annual fêtes every 15 August to celebrate the emperor’s birthday; prisoners who tried to raise white royalist flags in April 1814 following the emperor’s abdication were threatened by the majority of prisoners who remained pro-Bonapartist;119 some prisoners who were executed in Britain even went to their deaths defiantly shouting ‘Vive l’Empereur’.120 Strong public displays of support for Napoleon were likely to arouse local hostility. In Selkirk in 1813, for example, ninety-four French prisoners of war were celebrating the emperor’s birthday in a café when they invited the local crowd to enjoy their food and wine, on condition that those accepting the food cried ‘Vive l’Empereur’.121 This outraged the locals and led to stone-throwing. In 1810, the thoughts of French officers on parole at Alfresford turned to escape, after a dinner they were hosting to celebrate the marriage of Napoleon and Marie-Louise was interrupted and stopped on the orders of the Transport Board.122 Likewise, local ridicule or condemnation of the emperor was likely to arouse French passions. On parole at Bridgnorth, the Marquis d’Hautpol was outraged when some locals mounted an effigy of Napoleon on a donkey, parading it under the marquis’s window.123 Following Napoleon’s abdication, a French officer at Dumfries was thrown into a rage after spotting on display in a bookshop an unflattering caricature of the emperor.124 The French prisoners, then,

116 Bonnefoux, Mémoires, pp. 201–2.
117 Abell, Prisoners of War, p. 311.
118 PRO ADM 105/44, report from commissioner of Transport Board to Transport Board, 2 Oct. 1807.
119 Abell, Prisoners of War, pp. 164, 182.
120 Ibid., p. 97.
121 Masson, Les Sépulcres flottants, p. 36.
123 Abell, Prisoners of War, p. 313.
124 Ibid., p. 342.
never lost their love of the emperor. Upon their release in 1814, none among them could have conceived that Napoleon was only twelve months away from sharing their own earlier fate. Yet by the late imperial years, only Napoleon’s captivity could ensure their liberation.

Held in British land prisons and hulks, often enduring harsh conditions, the majority of Napoleonic French prisoners of war, unlike their predecessors from other conflicts, had little chance of seeing France before the war’s end. General Pillet – Napoleonic officer, prisoner of war in Britain, unsuccessful in his claim for release under the Convention of Cintra, unable to return home on parole, finally held captive on a hulk – naturally blamed his predicament on the ‘uncivilized’ behaviour of the British government and its people. In turn, the British government held Napoleon solely accountable for the long-term captivity of both French and British prisoners.

Yet, to understand the fate of Pillet and his fellow prisoners, it is necessary to move beyond Napoleon’s personality, and the enmity that existed between the British and French governments, and position the history of Napoleonic prisoners of war within the legacy of the French Revolution. This is not to deny the important role played by Napoleon, and among other things, the protracted duration and bitterness of the struggle, and the relative imbalance between the number of French and British prisoners. But above all else, the prisoners were victims of a historic shift in the conduct of war; a shift that was an integral part of wider French revolutionary social and political change. The French Revolution, rather than the Napoleonic era, was the epicentre of this shift. The history of prisoners of war under Napoleon is further proof of the many continuities that link the revolutionary and Napoleonic eras. Many French practices and attitudes concerning prisoners of war – the challenge to parole, the blurring of the distinction between combatant and non-combatant, even the failure to establish cartels – drew upon antecedents from France’s revolutionary past. In this sense, with the exception of his internment of British male civilians resident in France, Napoleon was not a great innovator in the treatment of prisoners of war. Rather, he built upon certain practices from France’s recent past, and ruthlessly and consistently applied them for over a decade. This combination of the French Revolution and Napoleon gave rise to a watershed in the treatment of prisoners of war, repudiating many traditions of the eighteenth century and prefiguring those of the modern era. The twentieth-century prisoner of war, held captive for the length of the war, had come into being.