



## *Controlling Sex in Captivity: POWs and Sexual Desire in the United States during the Second World War* by Matthias Reiss.

London: Bloomsbury, 2018. Pp. 231. ISBN 978-1-350-06061-6.

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During World War II, the US military detained ca. 425,000 Axis POWs in hundreds of camps across the continental United States. These prisoners enjoyed humane treatment, certainly by Second World War standards. But captivity imposed various hardships, not least, frustrated sexual desires. German and Italian POWs' sought relief through contact with American women. That prisoners sought such contact is no surprise, but the success they enjoyed with some of the women certainly was. Military records and civilian newspapers reported alarming rates of clandestine affairs and even secret marriages. American women even sometimes helped prisoners escape. Same-sex relations also occurred in the camps, albeit at some peril, given the hostile national attitudes toward homosexuality among both the prisoners and their captors. In *Controlling Sex in Captivity*, historian Matthias Reiss (Univ. of Exeter) provides important insights into the Axis POW experience and the larger social history of World War II.<sup>2</sup>

Based on his meticulous research in US and German archives and oral histories conducted with former prisoners, Reiss rejects portrayals of captivity “as an asexual experience” (6). He also critiques the prevailing “foe into friend” interpretation of the Axis POW experience as a contributing factor in postwar reconciliation between the United States, Germany, and Italy. Though Reiss confirms the extent of intimate fraternization, he stresses tensions it caused within the larger history of changing sexual mores in the United States:

Rather than interpreting the sojourn of German and Italian prisoners in the United States as a one-sided transformative experience and a stepping stone towards the post-war friendship between these countries, [this study] ... places them in the center of the discourse about declining morals and increasing deviant sexual behavior in wartime America. (12)

There were ample opportunities for fraternization between Axis POWs and American women. Wartime labor shortages necessitated employing civilian women in service and administrative positions in the camps. Also, labor shortages brought prisoners outside the camps to work on local farms and in factories, albeit under the guard of military police. Interactions increased after February 1944, when the US military embraced a strategy of “calculated risk” to expand the use of prisoner labor by reducing Military Police supervision (57). Prisoners circumvented language bar-

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1. Nearly four thousand Japanese POWs were interned in the United States during World War II, mostly at Camp McCoy in Wisconsin, but Reiss concentrates on German and Italian prisoners. On the Japanese, see further Arnold Kramer, “Japanese Prisoners of War in America,” *Pacific Hist Rev* 52.1 (1983) 67-91.

2. His earlier work includes “Die Schwarzen waren unsere Freunde”: *Deutsche Kriegsgefangene in der amerikanischen Gesellschaft 1942-1946* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002); “The Nucleus of a New German Ideology? The Re-education of German Prisoners of War in the United States during World War II,” in *Prisoners of War, Prisoners of Peace: Captivity, Homecoming and Memory in World War II*, ed. Bob Moore and Barbara Hatley-Broad (Oxford: Berg, 2005) 91-102; and “Bronzed Bodies behind Barbed Wire: Masculinity and the Treatment of German Prisoners of War in the United States during World War II,” *Journal of Mil Hist* 69.2 (2005) 475-504.

riers and barbed wire in novel ways, and some women eagerly initiated contact on their own terms.

The most common interactions included flirtatious banter, passing notes, exchanging gifts, and trading photographs; archival records show that sexual liaisons were common, if mostly fleeting. Yet they could result in enduring relationships. Some couples even solemnized their unions through marriage during or after the war, despite the often open hostility of their families and broader society. Reuniting after the repatriation of Axis POWs following V-E Day posed formidable challenges. Yet some couples persisted.<sup>3</sup>

Reiss sets encounters between American women and Axis prisoners within the larger racial and gender dynamics of wartime America. Media representations of German soldiers frequently depicted tanned and shirtless bodies, reflecting not merely their masculinity but also a shared racial identity with white audiences. Perceptions of Italian POWs were more complex. Questions about the “whiteness” of Italian immigrants in American society, combined with the failures of the Italian military in the war, resulted in less flattering depictions.<sup>4</sup> But these enemy prisoners suddenly became wartime allies after Italy’s shift to co-belligerency against Germany. In March 1944, Italian POWs joined Italian Service Units (ISUs) and aided the US war effort. Their ISU membership gave them more freedom of movement and a uniform nearly identical to that of US servicemen. Furthermore, Italian POWs could interact with 1.6 million Italian immigrants living in wartime America. Some immigrant communities even organized USO-style dances for ISU members and Italian-American women (83). This prompted accusations of “coddling” POWs by the American press and GIs deployed overseas.

Several high profile cases of American women helping POWs escape caused considerable alarm. Reiss discusses the treason trial of five Japanese-American internees in Colorado for aiding the escape of two German prisoners. Prosecutors argued the five were “little Benedict Arnolds in skirts,” and the incident provided a dubious justification for the mass internment of 120,000 Japanese-Americans (64–68) and fueled debates over the erosion of sexual morality among American women. Military and civilian authorities instituted policy changes, prosecutions, and even public shaming—to little effect.

The US military confronted similar challenges in its regulation of homosexuality. POWs sought out same-sex partners within the camps, despite the disapproval of other prisoners and their American captors. Reiss skillfully links such attitudes to the distinct perceptions of homosexuality in the United States and the Third Reich. Both German military tradition and Nazi ideology were bases for severe sanction of homosexuality. Yet Germany’s deteriorating military situation compelled practical flexibility. The Wehrmacht came to distinguish homosexual *acts* from homosexual *inclination*. Acts were explained as stemming from a same-sex environment, the tedium of military life, the breakdown of discipline, and alcohol. Military officials persecuted those perceived as expressing a distinct gay or lesbian identity. In certain contexts, prisoners ignored or tolerated same-sex desire: “German prisoners who did not identify as gay brought with them a military subculture in which same-sex activities among consenting soldiers was an excusable and redeemable offense as long as it was not the expression of a fixed identity” (105). Nonetheless, such behaviors were risky. Inmate leaders responsible for military discipline within the camps sometimes demanded that POWs accused of homosexuality be punished or removed. Pris-

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3. See, e.g., Alexis Clark, *Enemies in Love: A German POW, a Black Nurse, and an Unlikely Romance* (NY: New Pr, 2018).

4. See, further, Thomas Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890–1945* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2003).

oners also used the stigma of homosexuality against political minorities, non-Germans, and social misfits.

The US military's reactions to these dynamics shed light on American wartime attitudes toward homosexuality in general. Like the Wehrmacht, the US Army and Navy increasingly discriminated between what they considered homosexual inclination and actual behavior. Rather than criminalizing sodomy, the War Department focused on psychological screening and treatment. Individuals exhibiting so-called "inherent and/or acquired constitutional defects" (95) were to be court-martialed or removed from service. "Reclaimable" soldiers could be counseled and reintegrated into military life (97-98).

As in Germany, wartime considerations resulted in uneven application of such policies, and gays and lesbians served widely in the American war effort.<sup>5</sup> Similarly erratic were American efforts to police homosexuality in POW camps. Crafting official policy was hampered by internal debates within the military, which consulted agencies like the Surgeon General's Office for guidance. In the end, no unified policy emerged and local authorities were left to use their own judgment. Some gay prisoners were court-martialed or prescribed psychological "treatment" in US military hospitals, including electro-shock therapy (118-19). As in the case of heterosexual fraternization, the "calculated risk" of employing prisoners outside the camps stymied efforts to regulate POWs' sexual activities.

Other nations, Reiss notes, tried to regulate intimate fraternization between POWs and civilians during the war. He argues that, beyond physical gratification, sex enabled POWs "to assert agency in captivity and reclaim their identity as masculine soldiers, ... a form of resistance in an asymmetrical power relationship" (143).

For American women, too, fraternization with Axis POWs represented an assertion of sexual autonomy against "the widely voiced expectation that women should use their sexuality and bodies solely in support of the American war effort. Refusing to do so by fraternizing with the enemy can therefore also be interpreted as a form of resistance against the conservative and patriarchal pressures" of the American home front (143-44).

In contextualizing the US government's wartime efforts to regulate sexuality, particularly homosexuality, Reiss reveals sharp differences from the sexual politics of the Red Scare, a subject one wishes he had explored more deeply. Nonetheless, his lucid prose and thorough command of the pertinent sources make *Controlling Sex in Captivity* a compelling and salutary contribution to the social history of World War II.

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5. Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (NY: Free Pr, 1990).