



## *The Stigma of Surrender: German Prisoners, British Captors, and Manhood in the Great War and Beyond* by Brian K. Feltman.

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Recent scholarship on the history of masculinity has struggled with a difficult question: how did men form ideals of manhood in the traumatic context of total war? While scholars like George Mosse<sup>1</sup> have studied how medical and political authorities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries defined images of manhood, the more complex, often contradictory self-conceptions of ordinary soldiers coping with the physical and psychological stresses of combat have remained more elusive. Hegemonic images of manhood<sup>2</sup> in the age of total war featured the “martial masculinity” of steel-nerved, emotionally controlled heroes willing to die for the nation. But this ideal was challenged as many men had to incorporate a “softer side” of nurturing and compassion to survive the destructive effects of modern industrialized war.<sup>3</sup>

In *The Stigma of Surrender*, Brian Feltman (Georgia Southern Univ.) investigates the understudied experiences of German POWs from 1914 to 1920. He analyzes the psychological and emotional universe of men enduring the emasculating conditions of capture and imprisonment. In a military culture prizing the glory of heroic death as the ultimate expression of manhood, they suffered the stigma of falling short of prescribed gender roles. Feltman argues that these POWs underwent a crisis of identity and had to re-establish themselves as “real men” who served their country even while imprisoned. To this end, they cultivated a camp culture of resistance and redemption in a new kind of battle against their captors. This gave them a much needed higher purpose beyond the crushing routine of daily life in British prisoner camps.

The author seeks to expand our understanding of manhood in war by revealing how men negotiated and changed prevailing images of masculinity in a specific context of trauma and defeat. Inspired by new perspectives on the history of emotions, Feltman uses POW voices to clarify the effects of their humiliation, depression, and separation. Drawing on over a thousand letters in various German archives and samples from camp newspapers, capture reports, and unpublished memoirs, he offers fascinating glimpses into the everyday lives and emotions of men who were made to feel like failures and even traitors to their families and their nation.

Chapter 1, “Between Victory and Death,” concerns the immediate effects of surrender on a German soldier’s sense of self: “If going to war confirmed an individual’s manhood, the act of battlefield surrender challenged a soldier’s masculine identity and cast doubt upon his commitment to Germany’s national struggle” (13). Of the more than 997,000 German soldiers captured during the Great War, about 325,000 fell into British captivity. German military authorities often portrayed surrendering sol-

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1. In, e.g., *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1996).

2. See further R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 2005).

3. See Thomas Kühne, “Comradeship—Gender Confusion and the Gender Order in the German Military, 1918-1945,” in Karen Hagemann and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, eds., *Home/Front: The Military, War and Gender in Twentieth-Century Germany* (NY: Berg, 2002) 233-54.

diers as cowardly failures who fell short of masculine ideals. Avoidance of such shame, Feltman argues, was certainly a prime motivator for men in combat, but he rightly notes that the emphasis on heroic sacrifice was not unquestioned by ordinary soldiers. While officers equated “surrender” with “desertion,” most men in the front lines avoided making any suicidal last stand, particularly in the war’s final months. The propaganda myth of “heroic death” had lost its hold on men who did not want to die for a hopeless cause. Military officials scapegoated POWs by blaming them for hastening Germany’s defeat. The disgrace of surrender haunted the prisoners long after November 1918.

In chapter 2, “In British Hands,” Feltman concentrates on the stages of the POW’s experience from capture to internment. The British, ill-prepared for the stream of prisoners, had to quickly improvise an infrastructure of quarters, food supply, and guards to administer camps. Despite these organizational challenges, the British treated their POWs with respect, and abuse was rare. Feltman observes that, while Anglo-German rivalries could fuel brutality in the heat of battle (men were sometimes killed at the moment of capture), such antagonisms gave way to the professionalism that marked British management of prisoner camps and labor battalions. His skillful use of soldiers’ letters is on full display here. They reveal not only the physical circumstances of surrender and capture, but also the psychological trauma of their sudden transformation from “iron men” to helpless, emasculated, humbled captives. Their sense of pride was wounded, but the letters report admirable physical treatment at the hands of the British. Far from battle, the animosities between British guards and German prisoners abated, and the main problem facing captives became the mental strains of isolation and bruised masculine identities.

In chapter 3, “Separation,” the author contends that prisoners lived “in a state of emotional and physical limbo,” a kind of purgatory separate from both combat zones and home fronts (72). The men tried to redeem themselves from a pervasive sense of powerlessness, stagnation, anxiety, and sexual frustration by escape attempts that displayed their commitment to the nation and military manhood.

Chapter 4, “Redemptive Manhood,” is the most interesting in the book. Feltman here reconstructs the nuanced, complex efforts of prisoners to regain their masculine identities in their present extreme circumstances. They saw their camp activities as a means to prove their still active devotion to their fatherland. POW newspapers called on men to reawaken their manhood through comradeship, sports, and cultural activities, including music and theater, where they shared their national bonds. Play productions provided humorous relief as cross-dressing prisoners entertained their comrades. Feltman sees this type of gender transgression as an acceptable outlet for sexual frustrations through the illusion of femininity. A Swiss doctor who toured the camps to investigate “barbed-wire disease,” a psychological malaise that affected POWs, reported that it was ultimately healthy for men to talk about their sexual deprivation and to decorate their quarters with sexually explicit pictures. And female impersonators, officers believed, provided temporary, “safe” fantasy images that diverted prisoners in an all male environment from engaging in homosexual behavior out of desperation. Though cross-dressing created an ambiguous zone where men could explore feminine emotions, it alleviated the deadly boredom and despair of the camps through humor and comradeship.

The POWs’ war did not end with the armistice on 11 November 1918. Chapter 5, “Prisoners of Peace,” considers the German prisoners’ repatriation, which for some took until 1920, well after the Treaty of Versailles was signed. The prospect of homecoming filled the men with anxiety and uncertainty. How would the home front perceive them? While they may have rehabilitated their own personal sense of manhood, they feared civilians would still judge them according to prewar prejudices about surrendering soldiers. Their correspondence reveals feelings of abandonment, sorrow, and frustration with the endless war. Relief associations tried to organize repatriation, but the new Weimar Republic was powerless to persuade the Allies. Worse, once men did return home, the financially

drained new government could not provide back pay for veterans' years of captivity. Disgruntled ex-soldiers interpreted this as animosity.

As chapter 6, "National Socialism As Redemption," argues, the Nazis exploited this situation by promising to restore honor to veterans, including ex-POWs: seeking redemption in the new, quasi-militaristic movement, many of the former prisoners threw their support behind Adolf Hitler. However, Feltman demonstrates that an "illusion of respect" (192) did little to erase the stigma of captivity and many in the Nazi regime, as in the broader society, still associated the mass surrenders in the last months of the war with abject defeat. Despite their restored self-identities, POWs still occupied a space of ambiguity. Even though Nazi propaganda portrayed veterans as the cornerstone of the nation, the pervasive "stab-in-the-back" (*Dolchstoß*) legend lumped those who surrendered together with the alleged traitors on the home front.

Brian Feltman's well written, carefully researched study persuasively clarifies the elusive and intricate definitions of manhood at the grass roots level of soldiers' everyday lives. In particular, it proves that POWs actively modified dominant images of masculinity to cast themselves as loyal rather than weak men. *The Stigma of Surrender* deserves the attention of not only students of masculinity and modern German history, but anyone interested in the social and cultural contexts of men in modern war.