

The Influence and Limitation of the 1929 Geneva Convention Relative to Prisoners of War

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Abstract: This paper aims to find the influence and limitations of the 1929 Geneva Convention relative to prisoners of war. To achieve that, an analysis of primary and secondary resources about treating POWs before and after the convention is made. Through the study, the 1929 Geneva Convention had a limited but real impact on treating prisoners of war. Concluded the way failed to solve many problems of treating POWs like the camp facilities, but the Red Cross provided help to many POW camps to improve prisoners' living. The research on this topic can tell us the importance of the convention in history.

Keywords: geneva convention, prisoners of war, World War I, World War II, prisoners of war

1. Introduction

1916, Germany. The Germans forced a group of French prisoners of war to build defensive facilities. Some of them were injured, but no one could get cured. Some French soldiers weren't satisfied with their treatment and soon got shot. What they had experienced caught the attention of the Red Cross after the First World War. They thought military personnel should also have human rights even after they have been caught in the war. As a result, in 1929, twelve high contracting parties created the first multilateral convention in peacetime specifically targeting prisoners of war, the 1929 Geneva Convention relative to prisoners of war, to try to solve the problems of prisoners of war who had suffered from the First World War [1]. It is hard to know just how impactful the 1929 Convention was and whether governments at war followed it correctly. As we can see by comparing POW conditions in the First and Second World Wars, the 1929 Geneva Convention had a limited but real impact on treating prisoners of war [2-4].



Figure 1: German POWs in the Second World War.

2. Background

The Red Cross was responsible for the creation and supervision of the execution of the convention. According to the 1929 Convention Relative To Prisoners of War, prisoners should be kept out of the combat zone in places like a village, a castle, or a specialized area. They should not be confined or imprisoned unless it is necessary for security or health. Prisoners of war camps should be housed in buildings or barracks that provide all possible hygiene and health guarantees. Rooms should also be secured, and there should be lighted and heated. Dormitories should have the minimum cubic amount of air and be the same as the troops in the POW camp. For living, prisoners should receive enough food, water, and clean clothes; they may also ask for extra. Centers should also provide baths and showers as well as possible. Also, prisoners should receive good medical care to keep them healthy. Prisoners with injuries or diseases should get well cured.

Moreover, captors can't torture prisoners to get information and should protect prisoners from being hurt. So, in general, the convention made regulations to protect the human rights of POWs, and it was a critical process in the history of protecting human rights. Even today, many scholars are studying it.

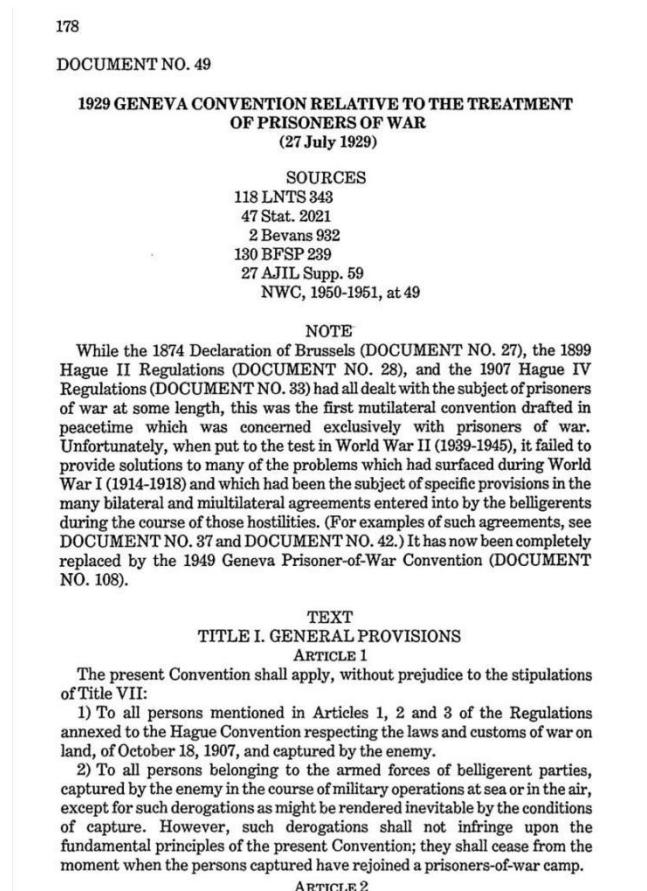


Figure 2: 1929 Geneva Convention relative to prisoners of war.

3. Secondary Source Analysis

Many scholars have studied the experience of POWs in World War I and World War II. In *A Life of Torture and Hell': Australian Prisoners of War on the Western Front and the German Reprisals of 1917*, written by Aaron Pegram, the author shows that Australian POWs were often treated quite poorly by their German captors, leading to fatal outbreaks of disease. Likewise, Wang Ya-hong and

Jia Kai, in their recent article on German POWs during World War II, US Disposal of German Prisoners-of-War in World War 2—Comment on “New Thinking about Prisoners of War,” shows that the Americans had a diverse approach to POWs: camps at home, in America, tended to be quite good, while centers on the battlefield still had poor conditions, and did not meet the standards set by the Geneva Convention. Lastly, in *Unbroken*, Laura Hillenbrand details the appalling conditions suffered by American POWs in Japan during World War II. However, none of these authors gives a detailed comparison of POW conditions between the two wars. This makes it impossible to tell how much conditions improved between the two World Wars and how effective the 1929 Geneva Convention was.



Figure 3: Britain POWs were carrying the wounded during the First World War.

4. Primary Source Analysis

To solve this problem, primary sources from both the First and Second World Wars should be analyzed. Three primary sources about POWs in the First and Second World Wars will be used in the analysis. The book *Wounded And A Prisoner Of War* by Malcolm Vivian Hay provides evidence of the treatment of POWs in the First World War. It's a Memoir written by a veteran of the First World War, so that it will be relatively reliable; *Experiences of a Prisoner of a War: World War 2 in Germany* by Stephenson Eric and two reports of prisoners of war camps in Japan from recovery team of the US military provide the information of POWs in the Second World War. The article by Stephenson is also a memoir, and two reports can show the evidence objectively, increasing the analysis's validity.

In the book *Wounded and A Prisoner of War*, the author writes about his experiences during the First World War as a French prisoner under German control. According to his description, medical supply and food were always insufficient: “No one brought in any food.” [5], “They watched one of the prisoners die because of disease but were unable to cure him,” “The French doctors came round, but what could they do? They had nothing to give you and could do nothing” [5]. Besides that, the shelters they lived in were cold and had poor living quality, with no supplies from the Red Cross. According to the description, there were only “small areas in the center, the whole floor-space was

filled with beds” [5], and “It was cold, dark and inhospitable in the corridor” [5]. Based on the description, all of the conditions mentioned in the book didn’t meet the treatment standards for prisoners of war under the 1929 Geneva Convention, so we can find out that prisoners of war weren’t treated nicely during the First World War.

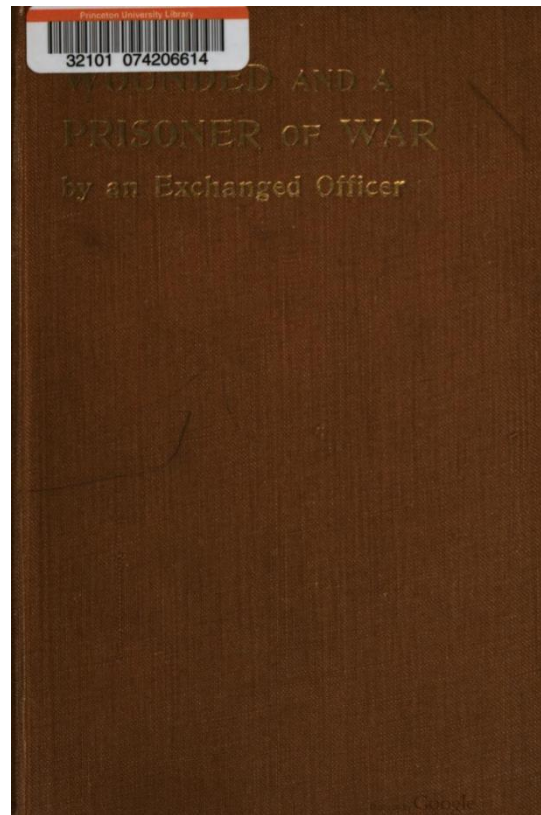


Figure 4: Wounded And A Prisoner Of War by Malcolm Vivian Hay.

After the 1929 convention had been created, the Second World War broke out; Experiences of a Prisoner of a War: World War 2 in Germany is a memoir written by a British pilot during World War II about being in a German prisoner of war camp. In this memoir, he first mentions that ‘I came to in a German doctor’s surgery being stitched up with our pilot’ and ‘My leg and arm were plastered’ [6]. These records demonstrate that injured prisoners could get medical support in the camp. Also, the author indicates: “We could get an occasional hot water dunk in a wooden tub and shave at least every day. Shirts and underclothes would be washed weekly if possible” [6]. It was a proper follow of the 1929 Geneva Convention, and the living standard of these prisoners was high. In addition, the author mentions a lot about the Red Cross, like “Red Cross Rations” and “Red Cross Boxes.” The More detailed description includes “Hot water and a barley porridge were prepared in the kitchen where the Red Cross food parcels were stored and issued weekly under German supervision” [6]. These phrases and sentences all show the participation of the Red Cross in Prisoner management; the Red Cross provided many supplies to Germans so the prisoners could be well treated. Their involvement represents the power of the 1929 Geneva Convention. More importantly, all of the information above shows the difference the Convention had made in treating POWs; it’s evident that the treatment had significantly improved compared to the First World War.

Besides camps from Germany, bases from Japan should also be considered. Four reports of POW camps in Japan during World War II are also found. They are the Report on Omari camp, the Report on Ofuna POW camp, and two reports on Kawasaki camp from the recovery team 56 from the US

military in 1945. Evidence of improper following of the 1929 Geneva Convention can be found in these sources. The description states, "Very few Japanese assortments of American medical supplies found." [7], "The general condition of the camp was deplorable" [8]. As for the living condition, "there were facilities for electric lights in each room but no facilities for heating. The medical supplies were inadequate; besides a few Japanese first aid kits and assorted items, the only medical supplies were those dropped by American planes" [9]. These examples obviously show that Japanese POW camps didn't satisfy the standard of the convention, and American POWs had lived a poor life there. It means the pattern was ineffective in improving the treatment of POWs. However, the reports also indicate the participation of the Red Cross, like 'before the POWs left, the camp food and medical supplies were dropped by B-29s' and "few Red Cross supplies were found" [10]. This means the Red Cross was involved in managing POWs and providing supplies. So the convention made a difference.

RECOVERY TEAM NO. 56
HQ. AMER. DIV. ARTY.
APO 716
25 September 1945

SUBJECT: Report of Recovery Team 56

To : HQ. XI Corps
APO 471
Attention: Recovered Personnel Det.

1. Report on Omori Camp:

a. Location: on reclaimed land in Tokyo Bay about 3 miles South of Shinagawa on Omori beach, Tokyo Omoriku Iriarak. Coordinates 67.35-1407-30 on Central Honshu Map Scale 1/5000. Omori camp is the main prisoner of war camp in the Tokyo-Yokohama area. It has 21 branch camps. The branches that are in the Americal Div. Arty. area are: 1. Ofuna 2. Kawasaki #1 Punsho 3. Kawasaki #2 Camp 4. Yokohama Camp #17 5. Yokohama #1 Camp 6. Yokohama Camp #13 (Asano) 7. Yokohama #18 Camp 8. Yokohama #19 Camp. The above names and numbers of camps were taken from official Japanese records of his ed POW Camps. Omori is an Army POW Camp.

b. Description of camp: The Omori POW camp was opened 25 Sept. 1942 and closed at the end of the war. The buildings are of one story wooden barracks. The camp was constructed to for the purpose of housing Prisoners of War. The camp has 4 supply and store rooms, 8 latrines buildings, individual type stools, 8 barracks for POW's 1 barracks for Japanese Soldiers, Officers mess hall, 1 POW mess hall, 1 large kitchen 1 small dispensary, 1 guard house, 1 orderly room and 3 sheltered washing places. For more details concerning buildings and their locations see inclosed map. Medical supplies were inadequate. Very f w Japanese assortment of American medical supplies found. Of supplies found most were American and were dropped by plane. Before the Prisoners of War left the camp food and Red Cross packages were dropped by B-29's. In storage house were found large supplies of blankets and clothing. In the food storage houses were found sacks of flour, soybeans and an assortment of Japanese food stuffs.

The camp was 600 feet long and 250 feet wide and surrounded by a solid board fence 8 feet high. Facilities for electric lights were found but no facilities for heating the barracks was visible. Running water for washing purposes was observed. There were 6050 Prisoners of War in Omori Camp and it's branches. On the 20th of Aug. 1945 there were a total of 556 prisoners in Omori Camp, 144 Officers, 412 NCO's and EM. The prisoners of war in the camp worked in Shibaura Branch Transportation Command and Shiodome Branch also a Transportation Company. The prisoners were used to load and unload trucks and trains. The Shibaura Transportation Company,

Figure 5: Report of Japanese POW camps from the US Recovery group.



Figure 6: An American soldier was watching over some POWs during the Second World War.

5. Conclusion

Through all the analyses above, in conclusion, the 1929 Geneva Convention had a limited but real impact on the treatment of prisoners of war. Of those limitations, the convention failed to solve many problems of treating POWs like the camp facilities. According to secondary and primary sources, many POW camps created after the way had been made were still poor in condition, including the lack of heating devices or medical treatment. And the state of the camps depended on the location. If the camps were in safe and stable places like America, conditions were suitable, but when the camps were in dangerous places like the battlefield or poor areas like Japan, the situation would be much worse. However, for the actual difference the 1929 Geneva Convention had made, the living condition of POWs had improved in some ways. The most significant change is the participation of the Red Cross. Before the convention had created, little sign of the Red Cross was involved in the management of POWs, but after the way had appeared, Red Cross provided help to many POW camps to improve prisoners' living; I think that's the most significant difference. Through these analyses, we can know that the 1929 Geneva Convention Relative To Prisoners of War was a progress in the history of safeguarding the human rights of prisoners of war, and it led to a series of adjustments made after World War II to improve the survival of prisoners of war.

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