Studies on propaganda during and after the First World War rarely address prisoners of war. The Germans captured over 2.8 million Allied POWs and interned civilians from 29 countries. This threatened security and drained the German war economy. The Germans utilized these men as a labor supply and for propaganda purposes. Propaganda involving POWs was an important part of Germany’s total war effort to enhance flagging morale within the empire, to influence Allied behavior through reprisal camps, to prepare for post-war policies by winning support of colonial troops and minorities in propaganda camps, and recruiting Allied soldiers for wartime military efforts.1

For the purposes of this paper, propaganda is defined as the process of negotiation which is designed to persuade states and people to behave in a certain way through methodical and planned strategies to achieve specific objectives. This approach is more aggressive than simply attempting to manipulate and persuade other agents regarding beliefs, values, and behavior, even if these agents consider these ideas to be controversial, since this process would benefit the party implementing this strategy. During World War I, the German War Ministry used propaganda to negotiate with Allied soldiers to convince them to surrender or, after becoming prisoners, to fight in foreign legions to gain their national independence; with Entente governments to force these states to improve prison camp conditions for German POW’s or alter military strategies; and with the German people to continue their support for the war effort against overwhelming odds.

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German propaganda was controversial, subtle, and complicated, and sought to achieve both wartime and post-war goals.²

POW Propaganda and German Civilians

After German forces failed to break through the Western Front by December 1914, the imperial government sought to bolster the morale of the German people. Pre-war newspapers and journals ran stories on the Central Power war effort and the victories achieved by the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Turkish armies. In addition, wartime magazines, such as Der Weltkrieg (The World War) and Der Krieg (The War), printed articles and images (photographs, drawings, and paintings) which provided an overview of the conflict. Allied soldiers surrendering and POWs marching to railroad stations for transportation to prison camps made compelling photos. While the first photographs illustrated British, French, and Belgian POWs captured on the Western Front in August 1914, the German press focused on Russian prisoners captured at Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes in September 1914. Though the German Army lost the war in the West, which became a three-year war of attrition, German forces in the East had halted the Russian invasion of East Prussia. As the war progressed, photographs of Kaiser Wilhelm II or various army corps commanders reviewing dejected Allied prisoners filled German papers. The imperial government commissioned paintings reflecting the subservience of Entente POWs, art work designed to stimulate patriotic fervor and faith in a German victory. The German people could embrace the victories of their armies against numerically superior Allied forces, underlining the might of the German Empire.³

The vast flood of Allied POWs into the Reich affected the German war economy. Until the summer of 1915, prisoner labor constructed facilities for their incarceration. The War Ministry anticipated a swift end to the conflict and not millions of POWs. By 1918, the Allied prisoner population in Germany exceeded the populations of all of the German states except Prussia, Bavaria, and Saxony. Journals publicized the vast array of Allied soldiers captured in combat. Photographs depicted British, French, Russian,