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ANDERSONVILLE POW CAMP AS AN EXAMPLE OF A CIVIL WAR TIME POLIS

An interesting example of a 19th century war time polis (city) was the Andersonville POW camp. It was established by the Confederate States of America's authorities in February 1864 during the fraternal civil war waged between the Americans of North and South in the years 1861–1865. Over the 14 months of its existence the camp saw close to 45,000 prisoners coming from the army of the United States of America (the Union) of which 13,000 died. At one time in July and August 1864, 33,000 POWs lived in the camp. This made Andersonville the third city (polis) of the Confederacy, after Richmond and Charleston.

Ironically, its population was made of war prisoners whose freedom was taken away, who would have never been allowed to live in the Ancient Greek polis made exclusively for free men – citizens. Although their freedom was taken away, the prisoners were not slaves. It was rather that their freedom was temporarily suspended until the end of war or a prisoner swap. Even in such a gruesome place those federal prisoners were able to create their own city-state with its interior order, police, judicial system, etc. In this so called “city” the prisoners were living (or should we rather say “vegetating”), selling merchandise in its main streets but also participated in the political life of the country from which they had been separated. In this paper I will elaborate on the reasons for founding of the camp, the beginnings of its existence as well as various aspects of the prisoners' lives, like housing, provisions, medical care, policing or escapes.

The Civil War (1861–1865), which broke out in the United States as a result of secession of South Carolina (December 20, 1860) and six other southern states, which later established the Confederate States of America (February 8, 1861). The war began with Confederates bombardment of Fort Sumter, South Carolina (April 12, 1861) and formally ended with the capitulation of the largest army of the South at Appomattox Court House,

Virginia. Almost 620,000 people died in four-year-long struggles. However, not all these deaths resulted directly from military actions. Slightly fewer than 1/10 of them lost their lives in prisoner-of-war camps of the enemy party. 106 such camps were created in the territory of the Union, and 117 in the territory of the Confederacy. Camp Sumter (Andersonville, Georgia) was the biggest camp of the Confederate States. As I mentioned before 13,000 prisoners died there, it is considered to be the most striking example of the Civil War brutalization.¹

At the beginning of the Civil War there were no legal regulations with reference to prisoners-of-war. The experience of the first military actions led to the establishment of the practice ensuring respectful treatment of prisoners-of-war of the enemy side. President Abraham Lincoln, aware of the fact that restrictions on soldiers of the South might result in retaliation on soldiers of his own army, recognized them as belligerents. He gave them all the rights that prisoners-of-war were entitled to, with special emphasis on the right to life. The majority of issues concerning prisoners-of-war were agreed upon by representatives of the North and the South in an agreement at Haxall's Landing on July 22, 1862. The rights and duties of prisoners-of-war were dealt with on a broad basis by the Union authorities in the so-called Lieber Code of 1863 (General Order No. 100).² The Confederate authorities, however, treated the problem of prisoners-of-war only marginally, at least in the legal sense.³

The definition of a “prisoner-of-war”

The definition of a “prisoner-of-war” caused difficulties. It may be observed on the example of the Lieber Code, which in Art. 49 formulated the following definition: *A prisoner of war is a public enemy armed or attached to the hostile army for active aid, who has fallen into the hands of the captor, either fighting or wounded, on the field or in the hospital, by individual surrender or by capitulation. All soldiers, of whatever species of arms; all*

¹ L. R. Speer, *Portals to Hell. Military Prisons of the Civil War*, Mechanicsburg, Pa 1997, pp. 323–340; W. B. Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons. A Study in War Psychology*, New York 1964, pp. 133–158.

² *Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field*, [in:] *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Washington D.C. 1899, ser. III, vol. III, pp. 148–164 (later O.R.).

³ *Regulations for the Army of the Confederate States 1863*, (reprint), Harrisburg, Pa 1980, p. 73–74.

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*men who belong to the rising en masse of the hostile country; all those who are attached to the army for its efficiency and promote directly the object of the war, except such as are hereinafter provided for; all disabled men or officers on the field or elsewhere, if captured; all enemies who have thrown away their arms and ask for quarter, are prisoners of war, and as such exposed to the inconveniences as well as entitled to the privileges of a prisoner of war.*⁴

The article 56 KL reads: *A prisoner of war is subject to no punishment for being a public enemy, nor is any revenge wreaked upon him by the intentional infliction of any suffering, or disgrace, by cruel imprisonment, want of food, by mutilation, death, or any other barbarity.*⁵

The beginnings of the Andersonville Prison Camp

At the end of 1863 the South authorities decided to build a camp with barracks to accommodate 8,000 to 10,000 prisoners-of-war. It was necessary to create a new camp because of the overcrowding of the camps in Richmond, Virginia (the capital of Confederacy), scarcities in provisions, the threat of mass escape of prisoners and overtaking of the capital by them. The above mentioned difficulties caused earlier cessation of prisoners-of-war exchange by the North.

The location of the Andersonville camp was Captain Sidney Winder's idea. By the terms of the Confederate Secretary of War, James A. Seddon's order of November 24, 1863, Winder was to find a site in the deep South, which would be secure from external attacks, situated close to a railway and abundant in food. Having visited several places, Sidney Winder finally chose a place in central Georgia. It was situated 11 kilometers west of the Flynn river and almost 70 kilometers east of the Chattahoochee river, about 600 meters east of the Anderson station, in Sumter County. Officially the camp was called "*Camp Sumter*" because of the county it was located in. In the North and among the prisoners-of-war the name "*Andersonville*" prevailed, and it became a part of history.⁶

At the end of December 1863 Captain Richard B. Winder (his predecessor's cousin) was given orders to establish a stockade construction (the inner area of the camp and the "wall" of pine trees surrounding it). It was to accommodate 6,000 prisoners-of-war. Around several auxiliary establishments

⁴ O.R., ser. III, vol. III, p. 154.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ O. L. Futch, *History of Andersonville Prison*, Gainesville, Fl 1999, p. 3.

were to be built, among others guards' barracks, a bakery, a smokehouse, hospitals – one within the camp, another outside, etc. In January 1864, works consisting in cutting pines began. The trees were tall, their height frequently reached 6 meters. All the local slaves were hired to build the camp. The pines were hewed, barked and set tight one by another in a 1.5 meter deep ditch. The area of almost 7 hectares was surrounded by this pine fence. Along the palisade 52 guard towers, which could be reached by ladders, were raised at regular distances.⁷

Two gates called “*the gates to hell*” led into the camp. Additional transitory gates were built so that when one was open the other stayed closed, which created extra protection preventing mass escapes. In addition to this, it was decided that the camp would be surrounded by a ring of four wooden forts. From each entrance inside the camp led a street on which the prisoners were not allowed to build shelters – in the north the Broadway and in the south the South street. Establishing them eased communication inside the camp.⁸

Due to the lack of funds, time and labor force barracks for prisoners-of-war were not built. The territory of the camp was slit by a creek. The Andersonville camp was constructed as a fortification of both offensive and defensive character. The main stockade was strengthened with another 5-meter-high row of pine logs. The third row of pine logs (4 meters high) was not finished. The second row was to protect guards against unexpected attacks from outside. It was also to serve as an additional obstacle to prisoners-of-war who, trying to escape, would force the first row. Embankments were raised at a geometrical angle in the four corners of the second palisade and rifled guns (taken from the enemy), capable of covering the chosen area of the camp with fire, were placed on them.⁹

On February 17, 1864 Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander W. Persons of the 55th Georgia Infantry Regiment became the first camp's Commandant and Quartermaster. He had been in charge till June 17, 1864. Then the supervision over the camp's forces and means was taken over by General John H. Winder. The horrifying living conditions which he found here convinced him that it was crucial to move the prisoners away from Andersonville and to a new camp. He suggested establishing it in Union Springs, Alabama

⁷ *National Archives and Records Administration*, Record Group 109, Entry 464, Box 1, *Papers Relating to Confederate Camps and Other Places Where Federal Prisoners Were Confined during the Period 1861–1865*, p. 1.

⁸ R. R. Stevenson, *Andersonville Prison (1876)*, (in:) *Andersonville. The Southern Perspective*, ed. by J. H. Segars, Gretna, La 2001, p. 20.

⁹ W. M. Marvel, *Andersonville. The Last Depot*, Chapel Hill, N. C. 1994, pp. 14–22.

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or in Silver Run, Georgia. Additionally he warned that the limited guarding system was not prepared to prevent an uprising: *breaking out of these prisoners of war would be more disastrous than a defeat of the army.*¹⁰

All matters concerning prisoners-of-war were under a Swiss Captain's – Henry Wirz's – authority. Wirz, who came on March 25, 1864, was Commandant of the prison, yet he was not in charge of the guard garrison. Prisoners-of-war called him "*the death on a grey horse*", as they always saw him dressed in light colors and on a saddle-horse. On October 1864, George C. Gibbs became the last Camp Sumter Commandant (with the exclusion of the prisoners-of-war' camp).

Lodging

When the first prisoners-of-war arrived at the camp on February 25, 1864, the part of the palisade – in the south-eastern corner – had not been finished yet. Two days later the first of 13,000 Yankees died. Prisoners-of-war built shelters using the remnants of wood that had been left within the stockade. Those who arrived later, used canvas and blankets. They dug ditches and dens and covered them with tents, clothes and litter of conifer needles. Of course after showers the ditches and dens became useless. In summer prisoners-of-war suffered from burning sunshine and in winter from acute cold. Mainly white soldiers – non-commissioned officers and privates – were kept in Andersonville. Until April 1864 prisoners-of-war from other camps had been admitted there. From May 1864, with the development of General Ulysses Simpson Grant's offensive in Virginia, the number of prisoners-of-war considerably increased. Prisoners-of-war from the North were transported to Camp Sumter soon after being captured. In June 1864 the stockade area in the north was enlarged by additional 4 hectares. 130 prisoners-of-war worked on it for almost a month. In July 1864 the main stockade area counted 11 hectares. 29,000 prisoners-of-war were located there, while its capacity was 10,000. In August 1864 there were 34,000 prisoners-of-war in the camp and Andersonville became the biggest and the most known prisoner-of-war camp in the South.¹¹

One of the most crucial matters for the federal prisoners was the issue of clothing. They were all clothed in a variety of ways. The earlier prisoners

¹⁰ O.R., ser. II, vol. VII, p. 546.

¹¹ O.L. Futch, op. cit., pp. 12–45.

were wearing what was left of their uniforms. Very few received any clothes from the committee of hygiene. In order to get some clothes the prisoners were stealing, swapping with other prisoners, selling and buying. They used duvets, blankets, tent canvas, shawls or shirts. Some of them owned bags, rucksacks, pans, mugs and other things. The Confederate authorities were unable to provide them with clothing as they were lacking it for their own army. At times the camp guards were wearing worse rags than the prisoners.¹² Although the Union was more often providing the prisoners with clothing and blankets, they were usually of very low quality. But even those supplies were under the scrutiny of many rules, quotas and limitations regarding the quantity, quality and timing of their distribution.¹³ Possession of clothing was so important feature to facilitate survival: *it was the custom of the mess in which a man died to remove from his person all garments that were of any account, and so many bodies were carried out nearly naked.*¹⁴ The prisoners felt humiliated by their nakedness, particularly during the common viewing of the camp by local people.

The more enterprising prisoners were able to earn a living by offering various services. There was a kind of business district in Andersonville where people were able to buy some items. They were selling water, wood, tobacco, and coffee as well as hairdressing services. Even the ground on which to build shelter was available to sell and buy. Gambling was quite common in the camp, where the Yankees could earn some extra money by betting on variety of things. The prisoners in Andersonville had the opportunity to work in a variety of jobs. In return for their services they usually received extra food rations. There was also a mail box on the Andersonville grounds, but the letters were carefully censored by the camp guards.¹⁵

Prohibition on killing and discipline maintenance in the camp

In the history of military conflicts numerous instances of killing and tortures of prisoners-of-war can be found and the Civil War was no exception in this respect. It sometimes happened that in the fervor of the battle no prisoners-of-war were taken.

¹² J. McElroy, *This Was Andersonville*, (reprint), New York 1957, pp. 115–118.

¹³ O.R., ser. II, vol. IV, p. 565; vol. VI, pp. 98, 132, 161, 193; vol. VII, pp. 573–574.

¹⁴ J. McElroy, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

¹⁵ E. F. Roberts, *Andersonville Journey. The Civil War's Greatest Tragedy*, Shippensburg, Pa 1998, pp. 37–39.

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Art. 60 of KL allowed not giving pardon (which actually meant killing), but at the same time forbade dispatching the injured.¹⁶ Prisoners-of-war could lose their lives while being transported to the camp, making an attempt to escape from trains or not following their escort's orders. Such situations were often mentioned by prisoners-of-war. Sergeant James H. Dennison of 113th Illinois Infantry Regiment remembered that one of them had been shot during the stop in Meridian (Georgia), while he was running away from the train.¹⁷

On their arrival at the camp, prisoners-of-war remained soldiers. Their were liable to the army discipline, of course, with the alternations resulting from their change of their status. Maintenance of discipline within the camp was to be ensured first of all by non-commissioned officers of the army, but also by supervisors of the camp. Escapes constituted a serious breach of discipline and might result in loss of life. For instance, under Art. 77 of KL, an escaping prisoner-of-war may be shot during the escape, or killed in another manner, yet, no vexations or barbaric methods may be applied in such a situation.¹⁸ There were various kinds of escapes: while working outside the camp, digging tunnels, pretending to be dead, (the dead were carried out of the camp to the nearby cemetery), etc. The camp's guards had dogs specially trained to hunt and search for people, and they frequently used them. In spite of this 329 escapes were noted down, many of which were successful.¹⁹

John L. Ransom of the 9th Michigan Regiment stated in his diary that after an unsuccessful escape he and his comrades had been put in chains with iron balls for two days. He also added that he had expected a more serious punishment.²⁰ John McElroy from the Company L of the 16th Illinois Regiment remembered that the caught escapers had been either chained or stocked.²¹

It often happened that attempts of escapes (e.g. via tunnels) were nipped in the bud, as they had been revealed earlier, as a result of a betrayal. Attempts of escape were punished in a similar manner to unsuccessful escapes. According to me punishment for an attempt should have been applied. It was also confirmed by, among others, the Lieber Code. Discipli-

¹⁶ O.R., ser. III, vol. III, p. 155.

¹⁷ J. H. Dennison, *Dennison's Andersonville Diary*, (reprint), Kankakee, Il. 1987, p. 38.

¹⁸ O.R., ser. III, vol. III, p. 157.

¹⁹ H. P. Riconda, *Prisoners of War in American Conflicts*, Lanham, Md 2003, p. 121.

²⁰ J. L. Ransom, *John Ransom's Andersonville Diary*, (reprint), New York, 1994, p. 69.

²¹ J. McElroy, op. cit., p. 18.

nary offences should have been punished by e.g. sentencing the person to confinement or any other kind of detention. Smaller food rations were also permissible but chains and stocks were considered by prisoners-of-war to be barbaric.

The prisoners who were caught after an escape described their punishments in the following way. Soon after entering Andersonville John R. Compton stated: *The next morning the fifteen who had got over the stockade were brought in, each chained to a sixty-four pound ball.* Another time, he described the situation: *One time some traitor reported a tunnel when there was none, and the old captain stopped the rations of the entire prison till we would tell them where the tunnel was. In order to save the prisoners, two poor, starved wretches volunteered to start a tunnel, and when they got it started they went to Wirz and told him that they were the men that had started the tunnel, and the prisoners drew rations again. But alas, these two poor wretches were taken and tied up by the thumbs, and when they were cut down, they both fell to the ground. One of them finally got on his feet, but the other one expired.*²²

Another kind of punishment was experienced by the aforementioned Private Compton. After he was captured he was allegedly addressed by Captain H. Wirtz in the following words: *I makes a hell for you. You shall bury all the prisoners who die.*²³

After the first escape a deadline was constructed within the camp. It was built by slaves of local planters. It was a kind of a low fence made of poles and pickets stuck in the ground. The line ran within the camp's palisade poles invariably 6 meters from it. Those who transgressed, touched or even approached it were shot at without a warning by the guards who were watching the territory from the nearby towers. It is worth adding that such lines functioned in camps of both sides of the conflict. This fact had been concealed from the public opinion in the North by its own government, and was only revealed after prisoners-of-war from the South came back home, after the war. Because of propaganda the enemy was to be shown in the

²² J. R. Compton, *Andersonville. The Story of Man's Inhumanity to Man*, Des Moines, Ia 1887, pp. 45–46.

²³ Compton stated: *This was a hard sentence. The stocks would have caused death in less than ten days, but the fear of death had long departed, death on every hand had become so familiar that he seemed a friend to the poor, wretched shadows that we were. We did not, however, have to endure this long. I wish to state what was meant by "stocks". Two planks made to fit the neck, wrists and ankles, which were keyed up tight; with the apparatus adjusted, a man could not sit down nor lie down* – J. R. Compton, op. cit., pp. 62–63.

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worst possible light. Had this been revealed, it would have balanced the rebels' practice.²⁴

The area outside the camp was guarded by front army soldiers from the South, coming from the 55th Georgia Infantry Regiment and the 26th Alabama Infantry Regiment. From summer of 1864 on, the prisoners-of-war were watched by regiments of so-called "Georgia Reserves", consisting of young boys and elderly men. It was mainly in that period that prisoners-of-war were the most frequently shot at, e.g., Sergeant Dennison noted ten such instances in the period shorter than a month.²⁵

Young guards seemed to have had the hardest time while fulfilling their duties. On the other hand, they acted in the most cruel way. Many of them wanted to be able to boast that they had killed a Yankee. According to prisoners-of-war, they even organized competitions in killing. The camp hearsay had it that for each killed prisoner-of-war they were given two weeks off, which, however, could not have been true, as they would soon run out of alive prisoners-of-war. Such guards were usually delegated for a couple of days to fulfill other duties or they were simply detained.²⁶

The bad treatment, gruesome quality of life, ever-changing weather, disease, lack of appropriate clothing and hunger caused serious mental problems among many prisoners. It can be seen clearly when reading diaries of those who survived.²⁷ In close to 13,000 deaths only about 100 (less than 1%) cases resulted from guards shooting. Some of the victims fulfilled their death wish in that way (the notion supported by other prisoners). Mental breakdown pushed many to search for a quick death and a relief from the suffering. The death was not always instant, though. There were cases where prisoners severely injured from a gunshot were dying for hours beyond the death line, and their screams were detrimental to others' mental health.

Often the guards behaved in a cruel way towards the prisoners, verbally abusing them. According to some prisoners, commander of the camp, Captain Henry Wirz in particular excelled in this. When a few prisoners wanted to take one of their companions to an outside hospital, the Rebel guard refused opening the gate for them, saying: *no medical treatment for you, Yankees*.²⁸ One of the prisoners described a situation, where one of the

²⁴ J. McElroy, op. cit., p. 18.

²⁵ J. H. Dennison, op. cit., pp. 42–54.

²⁶ J. L. Ransom, op. cit., pp. 108–109.

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 71, 93; J. McElroy, op. cit., p. 19.

²⁸ J. L. Ransom, op. cit., p. 76.

young guards threw a piece of bread beyond the death line and proceeded to shooting a man who reached for it.²⁹

Another form of cruel treatment was organized by the commander attendance rolls. One can speculate if the rolls were a form of cruelty or a means to keep the order. According to the prisoners who more than once had to stand hours of rolls without any regard for their health, it was a torture. On the other hand, the camp authorities had to account for all present and prevent escapes and uncover their possible preparations. There is no doubt that limiting or even completely denying the prisoners their food rations was not only a form of taunting them but an expression of cruelty as well. In a similar way one should view killing any hope for a swap. In this case the Union authorities carry more responsibility than the Confederate government.

It was very common for the guards to disrupt the prisoners' sleep by very loudly reporting the calm status of each post every half an hour. There were more than fifty posts in the camp, so for a few minutes every hour the prisoners had to listen to those loud calls.³⁰

Another serious problem resulting from the way the camp was run was the issue of prisoners' death and burial. According to the calculations of one of the Andersonville prisoners a person was dying every 11 min. As a consequence of such high number of burials it became necessary to organize a big group of people whose only job was to bury the deceased. The Confederates were encouraging joining this group by offering double food rations.³¹

Multiple cases of robbing the gravely ill and dying were noted. The victims were so emaciated and weak that they were unable to defend themselves. The dead were laid into ditches beyond the death line by the southern gate. Every day at 4pm the bodies were collected on a wagon drawn by mules. At all other times the corpses were lying among the living.³² It was damaging on the prisoners' morale. One of them described that in the following way: *Some of them lay there for twenty hours or more, and by that time are in horrible condition.*³³

²⁹ Ibid, p. 71.

³⁰ J. R. Compton, op. cit., pp. 49–50.

³¹ Ibid, pp. 53, 56; U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Treatment of Prisoners of War*, 40th Congress, 3d Session, 1869, Report 45, Washington D.C. 1869, pp. 52, 56, 68, 75, 119, 156, 231; G. S. Henig, E. Niderost, *Civil War Firsts: The Legacies of America's Bloodiest Conflict*, Mechanicsburg, Pa 2001, pp. 335–337. More about it, (in:) D. G. Faust, *This Republic of Suffering. Death and the American Civil War*, New York 2008.

³² J. L. Ransom, op. cit., p. 117.

³³ Ibid.

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The task of collecting and burying the dead was carried out mainly by black prisoners. This activity was perceived as too drastic and reprehensible for the white prisoners. The only exception was enrolling escapees as a form of a punishment for their failed attempts. This was the reality at least from the moment soldiers of color appeared in the camp. The dead were buried by 100 in each ditch. The almost naked bodies were laid in layers directly in the mass graves. They were not covered with anything. Only in the very beginning, the prisoners were buried in caskets or in makeshift boxes. There was also a requirement of identifying each of the bodies by attaching to it (mostly at the toes) small tags with the soldier's name, military position and the name of a regiment in which he served. This last gesture was carried out by the friends and companions of the deceased. Although the Rebels were careful to follow this rule, many were buried as unknown.³⁴

The prisoner J. R. Compton, who, as a captured escapee, was participating in such tasks, remembered: *About 9 a.m. we were sent to dig graves, with a guard of forty men placed over us. We dug trenches about one hundred and sixty feet long and three feet deep, and at the bottom of this we dug a vault of one foot in depth. Jake Helamaker, of Ohio, and myself split slabs and placed one over each of our dead. We also, as far as could be done, placed a board with regiment, company and name. The reader is well aware that it is no small task to bury one hundred and twenty men each day; that was about the number carried out every morning. So badly would they decompose during the interval between death and burial that often we found, when we attempted to lift them, that the skin slipped from the flesh, and often the flesh cleared from the bone, for most of the poor fellows were suffering from scurvy.*³⁵

The favorite subject of prisoners' conversations was exchange. Discussing food was next in popularity. J. R. Compton in a very interesting way describes the Confederates' attempts of using the prisoners in order to acquire permission from Union for an exchange: *We held a meeting while at Andersonville, by permission of the rebel authorities, and there appointed five delegates to go to Washington to see if they could not effect an exchange. The terms upon which the rebels agreed to exchange were these: The Union Government was to release all their prisoners held by the North, and the*

³⁴ Ibid; *Roll of Honor, Names of Soldiers who died in defense of the American Union, interred in National Cemeteries*, vol. III, Washington D.C. 1868.

³⁵ J. R. Compton, op. cit., pp. 63-64.

rebels to release all held by them, the excess held by the Union army to be paroled.³⁶ The federal government could not accept a petition presented in such a way and the mission of the five delegates failed.

In the camp there were plays in which one could win food and both internal and external (with guards) exchange of goods took place. Numerous gangs were created with the aim of gaining food or other useful products which were obtained through extortion, assault or murder. New prisoners-of-war – the so-called *fresh fish* – not yet aware of realities of the Andersonville, were especially liable to suffer a robbery. The scale of this pathology was so big that, eventually, the majority of the prisoners-of-war came together and captured the members of the gangs, with no reaction on the side of the guards.³⁷ As one of the prisoners-of-war stated: *The raiders are the stronger party now, and do as they please; and we are in nearly as much danger now from our own men as from the rebels.*³⁸

As John L. Ransom noted: *The raiders are the stronger party no, and do as they please; and we are in nearly as much danger now from our own men as from the rebels.*³⁹ Another prisoner of war stated that he and his colleagues: *We were soon armed with clubs, which had been prepared before for their benefit. Crandall marched his men up to the man that got the tobacco and demanded it, and he remarked: "Here is where you get it," and grabbed a club and gave the signal for fight, and in less than three minutes there were seventy five raiders on the spot armed with clubs. The fight opened at once, but we soon found that we had undertaken more than we could accomplish, as they outnumbered us six to one. They rushed around us with a hop as though they were going to have some fun, but we made it hot for them for a short time, that is, until we could get away. Our clubs were about four feet in length and about the right heft to handle well, and we plied them right and left until we had wounded fifteen, and one mortally.*⁴⁰

General J. H. Winder allowed a trial according to the martial law of the Union. A prisoner-of-war could be brought to trial of the state that had captured him, but only for crimes against the army or citizens of this state. Thus, the Andersonville prisoners-of-war could themselves try their

³⁶ Ibid, p. 55.

³⁷ E. F. Roberts, op. cit., pp. 35–54.

³⁸ J. L. Ransom, op. cit., p. 67.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ J. R. Compton, op. cit., p. 47.

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kinsmen, who had acted against them. Six of them were hanged,⁴¹ and three died in consequence of beating.⁴²

As one of the prisoners noted: *We arrested him and his gang, and got permission from General Winder to try them for their lives. We chose a judge and jury-several lawyers volunteered for the prosecution; Mosby had some money, and hired the best counsel in the camp for his defense. Each man was tried separately. The court was in session several weeks. The jury found six guilty, and the judge sentenced them to be hung until dead. The papers were then sent to Washington, and came back signed by Abraham Lincoln. The day of execution came, and they were hung.*⁴³ Compton correctly noted that the approval of the US President was required to confirm a sentence.⁴⁴ He was mistaken, though, about the length of the trial – the sentence was executed on July 11th, 1864.⁴⁵ Personally I doubt if they received such approval or if any documents in this matter were sent to A. Lincoln. W. Marvel believed, and I am willing to agree with him, that the appropriate documentation was sent to Richmond rather than to Washington and the sentence was approved by J. Davis and not A. Lincoln.⁴⁶

Maintenance

Article 76 of the Union's Lieber Code dealt with providing the prisoners of war with food: *Prisoners of war shall be fed upon plain and wholesome food, whenever practicable, and treated with humanity.*⁴⁷ But the reality in POW camps on both sides was much worse than any accepted legal standards.

Every second sentence in prisoners-of-war's diaries is about food. At the very beginning the food was bearable. As John McElroy put it: *The RATIONS diminished perceptibly day by day. When we first entered we each*

⁴¹ William Collins („Mosby”), Charles Curtis, John Sullivan, Patrick Delany, John Sarsfield, Andrew Muir. All of them were of Irish origin – W. Marvel, *Andersonville: The Last Depot*, Chapel Hill, N. C. 1994, p. 100.

⁴² O.R., ser. II, vol. VII, p. 426; J. H. Dennison, op. cit., p. 47; J. McElroy, op. cit., pp. 73–95; J. L. Ransom, op. cit., pp. 105–127.

⁴³ J. R. Compton, op. cit., pp. 42, 47.

⁴⁴ O.R., ser. II, vol. IV, p. 49.

⁴⁵ K. Drew, *Camp Sumter: the Andersonville Chronology, October 28, 1863 – November 21, 1865*, Americus, Ga 1989, p. 23.

⁴⁶ W. Marvel, op. cit., p. 100.

⁴⁷ O.R., ser. III, vol. III, p. 156.

*received something over a quart of tolerably good meal, a sweet potato, a piece of meat about the size of one's two fingers, and occasionally a spoonful of salt. First the salt disappeared. Then the sweet potato took unto itself wings and flew away never to return... The rations decreased in size, and the number of days that we did not get any kept constantly increasing in proportion to the days that we did, until eventually the meat bade us a final adieu and joined the sweet potatoes in that undiscovered country from whose bourne no ration ever returned.*⁴⁸

With the increasing number of prisoners-of-war, food rations were becoming smaller and smaller and their quality deteriorated. Originally a daily portion consisted of 250 g boiled corn flour, 200 g beef and one spoonful of salt. In the middle of summer it was limited to a piece of bread, occasionally broken meat or a handful of boiled pees. It sometimes happened that no food rations were given out, e.g. after successful escapes – then prisoners-of-war were simply starving. Not infrequently they were given raw products, and they were supposed to prepare them by themselves, which was not easy as there was no wood in the camp. As a retaliation, prisoners-of-war from the South in camps of the North were given smaller portions and temporarily they were even devoid of food. The Confederate authorities did not manage to cope properly with supplying the camp with provisions in a place situated so far away from the front line and with one railroad only.⁴⁹

In their diaries prisoners-of-war described their portions in great detail. They complained about stinking meat and rice full of bugs and worms. The shortage of food gave rise to trading. In the two “main” streets of the camp one could get different kinds of food. Prisoners-of-war traded among themselves and with the guards. The latter was rather risky because of the deadline which was not supposed to be crossed by prisoners-of-war.

The camp was slit by a creek, which was to provide prisoners-of-war with water they needed for different purposes. In no time, however, it had turned into a swampy puddle, so throughout the period of the functioning of the camp there were huge difficulties with obtaining fresh water. This fact made prisoners-of-war complain. Warren Lee Goss of the Company H 2nd Heavy Artillery Regiment from Massachusetts wrote: *There was a portion of the camp, forming a kind of a swamp, on the north side of the branch, as it was termed by the rebels, which ran through the centre of the camp. This swamp was used as a sink by the prisoners, and was putrid with the corruption*

⁴⁸ J. Mc Elroy, op. cit., pp. 27–28.

⁴⁹ C. W. Sanders Jr., *While in the Hands of the Enemy. Military Prisons of the Civil War*, Baton Rouge, La 2005, pp. 241–244.

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*of human offal. The stench polluted and pervaded the whole atmosphere of the prison.*⁵⁰

People who were in charge of supplying the camp with provisions had put some efforts into unburdening prisoners-of-war's fate. A bakery was built, and bread was baked in it. Yet, first batches of bread caused various digestive diseases among prisoners-of-war – as the ingredients had not been properly chosen. Still, it is to be admitted that dramatic problems with supplying provisions were widespread in the whole Confederate territory, and its army was sometimes fed as badly as federal prisoners-of-war.⁵¹

Healthcare

In the beginning of the war both the North and the South had only one short legal statement that dealt with the situation of injured prisoners. It stated that: *and the wounded prisoners of war are to be treated with the same care as the wounded of our own army.*⁵²

In April 1863, the Lieber Code in Article 79 further provided that: *Every captured wounded enemy shall be medically treated, according to the ability of the medical staff.*⁵³ It is necessary to clarify that these possibilities were not yet very good. In cases of severe limb injury the most common procedure was amputation, whose rate of success was, depending on the patient's strength, about 20–30%. Chloroform was, particularly in the Confederate territories, a very scarce commodity. They tried to cope with the simplest methods, prescribing herbs and bigger food rations to the injured.

The climate, undressed wounds, insects, dirt, famine, changeable weather, awful quality of food and water, fast consumption of raw food, lack of fruit and vegetables as well as overcrowding of the camp contributed to fast development of various diseases. The sick and wounded were originally taken to hospital within the camp. It was recalled by John McElroy: *A makeshift of a hospital was established in the northeastern corner of the Stockade. A portion of the ground was divided from the rest of the prison by a railing,*

⁵⁰ W. L. Goss, *The Soldier's Story of His Captivity at Andersonville, Belle Isle, and other Rebel Prisons*, Boston, Ma 1869, p. 89.

⁵¹ J. M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, New York 1988, p. 800.

⁵² *Revised United States Army Regulations of 1861. With an Appendix containing the Changes and Laws Affecting Army Regulations and Articles of War to June 25, 1863*, Washington D.C. 1863, p. 108; *Regulations for the Army of the Confederate...*, op. cit., pp. 73–74.

⁵³ O.R., ser. III, vol. III, p. 157.

*a few tents flies were stretched, and in these the long leaves of the pine were made into apologies for beds of about the goodness of the straw on which a northern farmer beds his stock. The sick taken there were no better off than if they had stayed with their comrades. What they needed to bring about their recovery was clean clothing, nutritious food, shelter and freedom from the tortures of the lice. They obtained none of these. Save a few decoctions of roots, there were no medicines; the sick were fed the same coarse corn meal that brought about the malignant dysentery from which they all suffered; they wore and slept in the same vermin-infested clothes. There could be but one result. The official records show that seventy-six per cent of those taken to the hospitals died there.*⁵⁴

Soon the hospital was transferred outside the camp, although a lot of the sick remained in the camp, e.g. in August 1864 in hospital there were 1305 patients looked after by 15 doctors, while over 5000 of the sick were still in the camp. An additional hospital was opened for those suffering from smallpox. 2000–3000 prisoners-of-war were vaccinated, yet it brought about results contradictory to what had been expected. Prisoners-of-war's health deteriorated as they had been suffering from scurvy. Additionally, after the vaccination their wounds developed gangrene.

One prisoner of war wrote: *It was some time in April, – we were not dying off fast enough to suit the Southern Confederacy, – so one morning we were called up in line and “vaccinated” with a deadly virus, which in all probability was poison taken from the decaying corpses, for the material caused symptoms identical with those which follow dissecting wounds... One of our boys who was detailed to bury the dead, said that one day he would receive a great many arms to bury, and the next day he would get the same number of armless bodies... I escaped vaccination, having had the small-pox previous to my admission.*⁵⁵

The main causes of death were: scurvy, diarrhea, dysentery, bronchitis, typhus, smallpox, and hospital gangrene.⁵⁶ These were contagious and dige-

⁵⁴ J. McElroy, op. cit., p. 39.

⁵⁵ J. R. Compton, op. cit., pp. 38–39.

⁵⁶ *The chief causes of the deaths were the scurvy and its effects, and bowel affections – chronic and acute diarrhoea and dysentery. The bowel affections appeared to have been due to the diet, the dejected state of the nervous system and moral and intellectual powers, and to the effluvia arising from the filth of the prison. The great disease of scurvy seemed to be prevalent; this disease, without a doubt was also caused, to a great extent, in its origin and course, by the foul animal emanations. From the sameness of the food and from the action of the poisonous gases in the densely crowded and filthy stockade and hospital. The blood was altered in its condition even before the manifestation of actual disease –* J. R. Compton, op. cit., p. 53; U.S. Congress, *Treatment of Prisoners...*, op. cit., p. 110; D. F. Cross, M. D., *Why did the Yankees Die at Andersonville?*, „North & South” 2003 (September), vol. 6, no. 6, pp. 26–32.

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stive system diseases. The highest death rate was in summer months – June through September, also due to considerable overcrowding of the camp. August 1864 turned out to be the most tragic month, as 3000 prisoners-of-war died then. The largest number of people 97 to 127 died on August 23. The last prisoner-of-war lost his life on April 28, 1865. 20 out of 40 Poles kept in Andersonville died.⁵⁷

The prisoners complained about the medical care and accused doctors of inhumane attitude or even contributing to the deaths of their companions: *The rebel doctors claimed, with evident satisfaction, that they were killing more men than Lee's whole army, and this was true. But was this not a cowardly, inhuman depravity? Such depravity as this belongs only to the South; no Northern soldiers could turn themselves into such inhuman fiends.*⁵⁸

In September 1864 the majority of Andersonville prisoners-of-war were transferred to other camps, which were situated further from battlefields – even though there was no direct threat. Above 8,000 prisoners-of-war, the weakest and the injured remained in the camp. From September 1864 to April 1865 5,000 of them died. The rest looked as walking skeletons. After they had been liberated by their own army, they were photographed with full particulars. The pictures were sent to the North for propaganda reasons. Unfortunately, for the majority of those who had managed to live through the hell of the Andersonville camp the horror had not come to an end. Some of them were transported to Vicksburg, Mississippi, from where they were supposed to be sent home, via the Mississippi River. Over 2,000 people were loaded on the USS “*Sultana*” steamer, which was capable of carrying only 400 passengers. On April 27 the largest catastrophe in the history of American water transport took place. After the explosion of two steam boilers on the ship, almost 1,700 former prisoners-of-war ended their lives in the waters of the Mississippi River.⁵⁹

Resume

In July 1865 the US Congress sent a commission to Andersonville, which was to supply documentary evidence of the crimes in the camp. The report

⁵⁷ O. L. Futch, op. cit., pp. 99–112; *Roll of Honor*, op. cit., vol. III.

⁵⁸ J. R. Compton, op. cit., p. 43.

⁵⁹ G. E. Salecker, *Disaster on the Mississippi. The Sultana Explosion, April 27, 1865*, Annapolis, Md 1996, p. XII.

caused a great stir among the public opinion of the North. The consequences of the report touched the perpetrators of the tragedy only in the limited scope. General John H. Winder had died on February 1865 – before the war ended. Army commanders were not charged with any allegations. In this situation one might wonder why only Captain Henry Wirz, responsible for the situation the prisoners-of-war had found themselves in, was tried for war crimes (August 21, 1865 – November 6, 1865). Was he believed to be, as a Swiss immigrant and a Catholic, the proper person to function as a scapegoat? He was found guilty of the crime and executed on November 10, 1865. It is to be remembered that this kind of a show trial was demanded by the public opinion, which, to some degree, was influenced by the propaganda of both the authorities and the press of the North. The majority of the Union citizens did not know anything about the crimes committed on the prisoners-of-war from the South. As the perpetrators fought in the winning army, they were never tried.

Andersonville was rightly called by its contemporaries: *“the best example of the hell on the Earth”*. Almost 13,000 graves fill the American society with remorse.

S U M M A R Y

An interesting example of a 19th century war time polis (city) was the Andersonville POW camp. It was established by the Confederate States of America’s authorities in February 1864 during the fraternal civil war waged between the Americans of North and South in the years 1861–1865. Over the 14 months of its existence the camp saw close to 45,000 prisoners coming from the army of the United States of America (the Union) of which 13,000 died. At one time in July and August 1864, 33,000 POWs lived in the camp. This made Andersonville the third city (polis) of the Confederacy, after Richmond and Charleston. In this paper I will elaborate on the reasons for founding of the camp, the beginnings of its existence as well as various aspects of the prisoners’ lives, like housing, provisions, medical care, policing or escapes.