



# Life and Death in Captivity: The Abuse of Prisoners during War

*Geoffrey P. R. Wallace*

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Why are prisoners horribly abused in some wars but humanely cared for in others? In *Life and Death in Captivity*, Geoffrey P. R. Wallace explores the profound differences in the ways captives are treated during armed conflict. Wallace focuses on the dual role played by regime type and the nature of the conflict in determining whether captor states opt for brutality or mercy. Integrating original data on prisoner treatment during the last century of interstate warfare with in-depth historical cases, Wallace demonstrates how domestic constraints and external incentives shape the fate of captured enemy combatants. Both Russia and Japan, for example, treated prisoners very differently in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5 and in World War II; the behavior of any given country is liable to vary from conflict to conflict and even within the same war.

Democracies may be more likely to treat their captives humanely, yet this benevolence is rooted less in liberal norms of nonviolence than in concerns over public accountability. When such concerns are weak or absent, democracies are equally capable of brutal conduct toward captives. In conflicts that devolve into protracted fighting, belligerents may inflict violence against captives as part of a strategy of exploitation and to coerce the adversary into submission. When territory is at stake, prisoners are further at risk of cruel treatment as their captors seek to permanently remove the most threatening sources of opposition within newly conquered lands. By combining a rigorous strategic approach with a wide-ranging body of evidence, Wallace offers a vital contribution to the study of political violence and wartime conduct.

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