Globally Exchanged German Prisoners of War: The Orange County Context and The 1929 Geneva Convention

As young men from the United States were being sent to the front lines in Europe and the Pacific to combat the Axis powers, a different form of global exchange of persons was working in the opposite direction: Axis soldiers were being sent to the United States. However, these Axis soldiers were not an invading force, nor were they a military threat. They were Prisoners of War under the Allies’ control. The majority of the 425,871 Axis soldiers in the United States were German, totaling 371,683 individuals in the Prisoner of War population during World War II (Krammer 272). Regulating this global exchange of Prisoners of War was an internationally ratified treaty. The 1929 Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, an international collection of prescriptive principles codified by many of the world’s nations, permeated the local sphere of Orange County and loosely outlined a course of proper treatment for the globally exchanged Prisoners of War. This internationally recognized collection of rights and duties did not only have a nominal presence in the local sphere, but the 1929 Geneva Convention actually influenced the entire German POW exchange in Orange County by providing the local representatives of the detaining Power with an outline, or instructions, for administering a POW program conforming to international principles of justice. The permeation of the 1929 Geneva Convention into Orange County prominently materialized in its influence on the German POWs’ camp conditions, labor, non-labor activities, and interaction with the public.
The 1929 Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, an internationally ratified collection of prescriptive principles, was the force that transcended national boundaries and linked the global and local exchange of POWs in Orange County during World War II. As “the first enforceable treaty for the handling of prisoners [of war]...” (Gansberg 2), the 1929 Geneva Convention consisted of 97 Articles designed to regulate interaction between the detaining Power and the detained. Unfortunately, there is a lack of secondary sources examining the influence of the Geneva Convention on the Orange County POW exchange. But there are informative books and articles on the general POW program in the United States during World War II. Krammer’s Nazi Prisoners of War in America, likely the most authoritative study on the subject, recognizes the importance of the Geneva Convention in shaping the POW program in America (6,27). Likewise, Gansberg’s Stalag, U.S.A.: The Remarkable Story of German POWs in America stresses the importance of the Geneva Convention in shaping the POWs’ experience in America (1-2). Mason’s detailed 1945 article, “German Prisoners of War in the United States” clearly makes the point that the U.S. government was implementing the Geneva Convention. This necessarily implies that the POWs and the detaining Power were affected by the international treaty. Although the 1929 Geneva Convention’s provisions were “vague, chivalrous, and outdated” (Krammer 6), both Gansberg, Krammer, and Mason agree that it provided the United States government with fundamental principles and instructions to administer its “first prisoner of war program” (Krammer xv).

This rough outline for directing over 425,000 POWs was adapted to the unique conditions in Orange County and assigned duties and responsibilities to the local public and private organizations and individuals of the detaining Power. The primary sources regarding the Orange County German POW exchange contain a range of seemingly unrelated observations and
details. George A. Graham’s experience overseeing the POWs on the citrus farms, Josef P. Biela’s experience as a German POW and laborer, Heinz Zimpel’s POW documents, and local contemporary newspapers are certainly rich primary sources that offer invaluable information on the German POW exchange in Orange County. However isolated these personal experiences appear, analyzing the Orange County German POW exchange as profoundly influenced by the 1929 Geneva Convention reveals a unifying bond between these individual experiences: Both the detaining Power’s and the detained’s local experiences were in a large part determined by the rights and obligations prescribed by the Geneva Convention.

The decision to bring the POWs to America was a response to, and a maneuver within, the Articles of the 1929 Geneva Convention. In war zones, administration of POW camps was a costly burden on American forces (Gansberg 13). Gansberg notes that the importation of POWs to America “was made to alleviate the problem of feeding and housing prisoners in the war zone” (4), an issue concerning adherence to the Geneva Convention. While solving the problem of war zone burdens, sending POWs to America was simultaneously a solution “to relieve the farm labor shortage” (Gansberg 13). But bringing the Axis POWs to America surely did not free the United States of its obligation to uphold the Geneva Convention. The United States, as the detaining Power, was charged with the duty “to provide for their [Prisoners of War’s] maintenance” (Article 4). Davis, echoing the Geneva Convention, reminds that, “[h]aving taken the prisoners, the captors must get them to a secure place, guard them, [and] provide rations...” (629). The U.S. government’s response to the Geneva Convention’s requirements for sheltering the POWs was definitely unique, lacking any comparable historical precedent in American history.

The 1929 Geneva Convention imposed certain “disadvantages” (Davis 629) on the
detaining Power. To be more accurate, the U.S.’s interpretation of the 1929 Geneva Convention at the national and local level ultimately determined the extent of the self-imposed “disadvantages” in maintaining a POW population. As Mason observed in 1945, there were roughly two distinct stages of the POW program in America (214) to cope with the Articles of the Geneva Convention and reduce labor deficits. During the first stage, larger camps designed to hold thousands of prisoners were constructed “in isolated areas, surrounded by barbed-wire fences...” (Mason 214). However, as the war progressed and further drained manpower, a second stage in the POW program arose as a direct response to the labor deficit. The War Department thus devised a new strategy that involved branch camps, which held fewer prisoners, “were...located in the more populated areas and...wherever labor was particularly needed” (Mason 214). The formation of the branch camps, which facilitated “labor utilization” were driven by “the nation’s increasing need for manpower...” (Mason 214). Sheltering the globally exchanged German POWs, the POW camp in Garden Grove accurately reflected the War Department’s strategy to disperse the POWs in “[a] network of branch camps” (Krammer 35) to fill the labor deficit that arose as a result of wartime pressure on the labor force.

Although the Garden Grove camp, as other branch camps, was decentralized and tailored to meet the needs of private industry, the United States government’s interpretation of the 1929 Geneva Convention significantly guided the administration and material conditions of the Orange County branch camps. The national government’s interpretation was, in turn, interpreted in Orange County in response to its specific conditions and needs. Locally, as one of the approximately 500 Branch camps that held between 250 to 750 POWs (Krammer 35), the Garden Grove camp’s facilities had to satisfy various Articles in the Geneva Convention. Included was the essential Article 10 which stated that “Prisoners of war shall be lodged in
buildings or in barracks affording all possible guarantees of hygiene and healthfulness.” Citrus Growers, Inc., a local cooperative consisting of the packing houses in the area, constructed the living facilities at the Garden Grove camp (Graham 3). The local representatives of the detaining Power sheltered the German POWs in tents (Graham 12) and enclosed the camp with wire fences (Graham 3). These local facilities were adapted to local conditions and satisfied the Geneva Convention’s vague Article 10. While Graham notes that the Army was responsible for feeding the POWs (3), Article 12 required that “Canteens shall be installed in all camps where prisoners may obtain, at the local market price, food products...” to supplement daily rations. Although it is not clear if Biela is referencing the Pomona or Garden Grove camp, he recalls the German POWs “had everything that we wanted to buy...” in the camp canteen (22). To adhere to Article 9, which states that “prisoners of different races or nationalities...” should not be detained in the same camp, the Garden Grove POW camp consisted of all German POWs. Implementing the Geneva Convention’s granting of prisoners’ health rights, the Garden Grove camp established “medical facilities” for the German POWs (Graham 9). This decision was influenced by Article 14’s instruction that “Every camp shall have an infirmary, where prisoners of war shall receive every kind of attention they need.” Evidenced by its shelter, medical facilities, food rations, and racial composition, the local POW camp was a reflection of international principles codified in the Geneva Convention’s Section II regarding “Prisoners-of-War Camps.”

Regulating the labor of globally exchanged POWs, the 1929 Geneva Convention guided local POW usage by providing internationally sanctioned practices regarding utilization of POWs. Specifically, Section III, containing Articles 27 through 34, regulated the “Labor of Prisoners of War.” These labor Articles provided the local representatives of the detaining Power with a vague outline for legal utilization of POW labor. Establishing a basis for
utilization of POW labor, Article 27 of the 1929 Geneva Convention states that “Belligerents may utilize the labor of able prisoners of war, according to their rank and aptitude...”. With a vast and idle POW population within the borders of America, the U.S. government decided to utilize the POWs’ capacity to perform productive labor. The intention was to relieve an acute labor deficit and free U.S. military personnel from menial military base occupations (Krammer 81-82). As a partial solution to the problem, the U.S. government had 425,871 POWs detained in America (Krammer 272) that were available for usage. Derived from the Geneva Convention, the two basic divisions of POW labor, consisting of maintenance at camps (Article 34) and employment in private industry (Article 28), were the most important functions performed by the German POWs in America (Krammer 81). The majority of the labor performed by the POWs consisted of maintenance and menial tasks at the military installations in which they were detained (Levie 332). As the most common type of POW labor, work at military installations totaled 90,629,233 man-days of work from 1943 to 1945 (Krammer 85). A significant minority worked in private industry. In November 1945, during the decline of the POW population in America to 358,419 individuals (Krammer 272), 115,369 POWs were assigned to labor on farms (Wilcox 734). Employment in private industry, of which agriculture was a main component, generated $22,000,000 for the United States government (Krammer 107). These national, general trends regarding POW utilization reveal that the Geneva Convention’s authorization of POW utilization significantly impacted the POWs’ experience in America. But how were the local German POWs and representatives of the detaining Power affected by the Articles regarding labor?

Although the national government and private industry were forces directing the Orange County POW exchange, the 1929 Geneva Convention was an international influence that
significantly guided the development of local POW usage. Realizing Article 27’s authorization of exploiting POW labor, the local representatives of the detaining Power constructed the POW camp at Garden Grove to facilitate the harvest of the citrus crops of 1945 and 1946. Consistent with Wilcox’s observation that “[e]nlistments in the military services, selective service calls and the attraction of high wages in the war industries...contributed to excessive drains on the farm labor supply” (723), the primary sources confirm that labor deficits were a severe dilemma in Orange County. A brief report that appeared in the Garden Grove News on March 16, 1945 accurately summarizes the conditions in Orange County that necessitated the importation of German POWs: “The serious labor shortage has made necessary the employment of the prisoners to help save the valuable citrus crop of Orange County.” Likewise, George A. Graham, local manager/secretary-treasurer of Citrus Growers, Inc. reveals that the decision to import foreign workers, one of these groups being German POWs, was spurred by a lack of “manpower” (1). In Orange County, Article 27 and local labor needs translated into the importation of 1,100 German POWs to harvest citrus crops and to perform menial labor at the Santa Ana Army Air Base. Although labor was a dire need in Orange County, additional initiatives were undertaken to implement the 1929 Geneva Convention’s articles regarding POW utilization.

The strategy to exploit POW labor in Orange County was constructed within the boundaries established by the 1929 Geneva Convention. Regulated by several flexible Articles in the Geneva Convention, the German POW labor used by private industry to accomplish the local task of harvesting citrus had to be utilized within the confines of international law. The major role German POWs played in Orange County was employment in private industry harvesting citrus crops. Required by Article 27’s mandate to use prisoners “according to
their...aptitude...”, the German POWs, without the knowledge and skills to harvest citrus (Biela 27), had to be educated in their new occupation. The Anaheim Gazette, on May 17, 1945, reported that “[t]he Santa Ana school system’s adult education department will train the war prisoners...how to pick and handle citrus fruit.” With a sufficiently developed “aptitude” (Article 27), the POWs were assigned to pick a quota of 36 boxes of oranges a day (Biela 27). According to local manager/secretary-treasurer of Citrus Growers, Inc. George A. Graham, this “very low quota”, task-oriented labor generally allowed the POWs to complete their assignments by the afternoon (4). Nevertheless, Dean Millen, a long-time resident of Brea, recalls that the German POWs “worked hard and did very well as orange pickers...” (80). Assigned to work in Anaheim in 1946, former German POW Josef Biela recalls that “[w]e [German POWs] picked oranges all over” (21) and picking oranges “was the hardest work I ever did in my life” (27). Possibly reflecting his position in the power-relation scheme of the detaining Power and the detained, Dean Millen remembers a detachment of good-natured POWs working in Brea, “singing and having a great time” (Fanning 22). Quoting Major MacKnight, Mason notes that Article 27’s vagueness allowed “‘prisoners [to] be used in agriculture...’” (211). These local observations reveal that the local representatives of the detaining Power interpreted the open-ended Section III to sanction the utilization of the German POWs to harvest the citrus crops.

Although picking “thirty-six boxes [of oranges] a day for the inexperienced was quite a chore” (Biela 27), the labor was tailored to avoid violation of the Geneva Convention’s rather flexible restrictions on POW labor. As long as a POW was not “physically unfit” (Article 29) for the labor he was assigned and the labor “ha[d] no direct relation with war operations” (Article 31), POW labor assignments did not violate the Geneva Convention. Evidence that the local administration of the Orange County POW camps made an effort to determine physical fitness
can be found in Heinz Zimpel’s POW medical documents. These documents demonstrate that Zimpel received two medical examinations at the Santa Ana Army Air Base, including a chest X-ray (Radiological Report) and several vaccines (Immunization Register). While these documents do not absolutely prove that there was no violation of the Geneva Convention, they show that the local representatives of the detaining Power were concerned with prisoners’ health rights (Articles 14,29). And, while picking oranges clearly was not classified as a direct contribution to the war effort, the POW labor “as cooks, bakers, mechanics, janitors and general duty helpers” performed at the Santa Ana Army Air Base (Miller 128) was indirectly licensed by the Geneva Convention’s Article 34, which mentions “administration, management and maintenance of the camps.” Because Article 28 commands that “[t]he detaining Power shall assume entire responsibility for the...payment of wages of prisoners of war working for the account of private persons”, the POWs received 80 cents a day for their labor (Biela 22).

Despite the “disadvantages” (Davis 629) of restrictions on POW labor, providing medical care, and paying the POWs’ wages, the German POWs “legitimately play[ed] a positive role in the enemy’s economy...” (Davis 623).

The national interpretation of the 1929 Geneva Convention, fused with a local interpretation, characterized and determined the social life and non-material conditions of the POW camp in Garden Grove. Although Graham characterizes the POW camps as similar to “regular Army life” (9), the implementation of the local interpretation of the Geneva Convention in Orange County resulted in quite a liberal environment for the German POWs. Considering that the POWs were stationed in Orange County for a short duration, the 1929 Geneva Convention’s “Intellectual and Moral Needs of Prisoners of War” (Section II, Chapter IV) was instituted with the available means. Essentially, the detaining Power was the ultimate interpreter
of the extent to which it would “encourage intellectual diversions and sports organized by
prisoners of war” (Article 17). This Article was realized in the availability of “different papers
such as the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the Chicago Tribune” (Biela 1991, 35)
to the POWs at the Garden Grove camp. Josef Biela recalls that the German-American paper,
the Staatszeitung, was also available in the camps (1991, 36). The German POWs were even
shown movies. However, as Biela recalls, the movies were not necessarily entertainment. At the
Pomona camp, the parent camp to the Garden Grove camp, the German POWs were shown
footage of the Holocaust (Biela 1991, 40). Biela reports the film “was shocking. That is what it
was” (1991, 40). Biela’s recollections prove that the local POW camp made an effort, especially
in the availability of newspapers, to fulfill the detaining Power’s duty to encourage “intellectual
diversions” (Article 17) among the detained.

The Articles regulating camp social life were adapted to the local reality in Orange
County both by the detaining Power and the detained. Besides newspapers, prisoners could
utilize their free time after completing their labor assignments on the citrus farms for various
activities and intellectual purposes. In observance of the Geneva Convention, German POWs
had access to their respective “religious services” (Biela 28). This religious liberty is licensed
directly by Article 16, which states that “Prisoners of war shall enjoy complete liberty in the
exercise of their religion, including attendance at the services of their faith...”. In the Garden
Grove camp, Graham notes that religious services were offered by local denominations (9).
Exemplifying the detained’s adaptation to local conditions and their right to engage in
intellectual activity as POWs, George A. Graham reports that the German POWs at Garden
Grove managed to create a water fountain from a rock wall, a tube, and weeds (8). As another
individual interpretation of Article 17, one German POW constructed a violin from wood,
accompanied by a bow that was ingeniously made from horse hair that collected on a nearby fence (Graham 9). These activities, ranging from religious services to personal creations, indicate that the Orange County camp’s non-material, non-essential conditions were guided by the obligations and duties outlined in the Geneva Convention.

The Geneva Convention’s permeation and interpretation in Orange County not only established allotted times of recreation, but the works created during these periods were regarded as protected private property. Guarded under Article 6 of the Geneva Convention, “All effects and objects of personal use...shall remain in the possession of prisoners of war...”. Heinz Zimpel, a German POW who was detained in the Garden Grove branch camp, crafted several works during his imprisonment. At the POW branch camp in Santa Ana, an official list of Zimpel’s objects of value, including a wooden picture frame and a painting (Certificate), was drawn up and signed by the camp commander. This is a particularly revealing example of the extent to which the Geneva Convention influenced the POW exchange. To serve as a contrast, when the war ceased and the U.S. government transferred the German POWs to the British authorities, Biela recalls that “all the goodies that we had were taken away from us. Everything” (22).

Permeating into the local Orange County sphere, the 1929 Geneva Convention not only guided the POWs and the administrators of the detaining Power, but was also supposed to regulate the Orange County general public as a local representative of the detaining Power. Derived from Article 2’s protection of the POWs “against acts of violence, insults and public curiosity,” the Army personnel assigned to guard the camps also performed the function of distancing the public from the POWs. Reporting on Graham’s press release, the Garden Grove News on March 16, 1945 explains that “[t]he guards are necessary more to keep the public away
from the prisoners than to keep the prisoners from escaping...”. However, the evidence from primary sources indicates that the German POWs were not threatened, nor resented by the Orange County community members. According to Graham, public reaction was nearly non-existent and the community members harbored “no resentment” (6) toward the German POWs. In fact, some German-speaking community members “would go out and talk to the men [POWs] and...had high praise for the type of men that they were” (Graham 6). Apparently, the spirit of the Geneva Convention’s Article 2 was voluntarily accepted by the Orange County community members.

In Orange County, George A. Graham notes that “the POWs received special care” (7) because of local observance of the Geneva Convention. This “special care” (Graham 7), sometimes derogatively labeled as “‘coddling’” (Krammer 78) by the national press, engendered resentment among local populations throughout America. However, local primary sources reveal that this was clearly not the public’s reaction in Orange County. Graham’s recognition that the German POWs received special treatment implies that the Geneva Convention was significantly influencing and directing the Orange County POW exchange. After all, the United States government did agree to “humanely trea[t] and protec[t]” POWs (Article 2) by signing the 1929 Geneva Convention. It is interesting to note that the local primary sources, containing voices from both the detaining Power and the detained, essentially indicate the same conclusion: The Geneva Convention guided and regulated nearly every aspect of the German POW exchange in Orange County by providing fundamental principles on which to establish a POW program. All of the voices who had a direct relation to the German POW exchange in Orange County reveal that the 1929 Geneva Convention not only permeated, but was implemented in, the local context. This conclusion is derived from the local primary sources’ observations of labor, the
social and material life of the POW camps, and the interaction of the POWs with the public.

Despite the press’ accusations of “‘coddling’” (Krammer 78) the POWs, another contemporary interpretation of events was that the U.S.’s adherence to the Geneva Convention was “a credit to the good name of the United States” (Mason 198). Gansberg notes a similar contemporary slogan, which held that humane treatment of POWs is the “‘American way of doing things’” (39). As the study of the Orange County German POW exchange discloses, the detaining Power’s local representatives clearly made an effort to observe the 1929 Geneva Convention in the Orange County context. But this raises yet another question: How were the other globally exchanged workers treated who vastly outnumbered the German POWs? George A. Graham notes that there were around 75,000 Mexican Nationals, 1,600 Jamaicans, Chinese students, “displaced persons from the Balkans” (7), and Navajos (5) imported to Orange County during World War II. What is ironic is that “[t]here was quite a little resentment...” (Graham 6) directed toward these other workers, while the German POWs were respected “for the type of men that they were” (Graham 6).

Revealing his acute awareness of this relatively unknown topic in American History, Jake W. Spidle, Jr., in 1975, warned that “some of the most useful source material for its [Axis POWs in America] study is ephemeral and will not be available to historians of the future” (62). Despite the lack of local secondary sources, valuable information about the Orange County POW camps is preserved in local oral histories and POW documents. Especially interesting is the oral history of Josef P. Biela, a former German POW who “returned to the land of [his] imprisonment” (Spidle, Jr. 64). A living reminder of the German POW exchange in Orange County, former German POW Josef Biela embodies one more form of exchange - that of return. Biela’s life has embodied many of the themes of this paper: a globally exchanged POW whose
local experience as a POW was greatly affected by the international 1929 Geneva Convention. Returning to Orange County seven years after he was repatriated to Germany, Biela decided to settle where he once harvested citrus crops as a POW (21). Yet, there is one last point worthy of mention involving Biela’s return to Orange County. Surely, it was surprising to read Biela’s 1972 interview when he says, “‘I’m working at the University of California, Irvine’” (25).
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