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# The German Spring Reprisals of 1917: Prisoners of War and the Violence of the Western Front

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## Abstract

The First World War was marked by a series of violent reprisals against prisoners of war which have long been overlooked by historians. This article

explores one such sequence of collective reprisals, instigated by the German army in spring 1917, when it opted deliberately to use British and French prisoners of war to carry out forced labour on starvation rations under shellfire in the German trenches. As this article shows, this German reprisal occurred in retaliation for the British and French armies' use of German prisoner labourers, in particular, the French army's appalling treatment of German prisoners forced to work on the Verdun battlefield. The German army's use of harsh prisoner reprisals on the Eastern Front in 1916 is also revealed here as the model for these 1917 reprisals. Ultimately, this article contends that the 1917 reprisal action was successful: reprisal prisoners were encouraged to write home about their predicament, leading to public pressure upon the British and French governments that forced them to agree to limit their use of German prisoner labour to a distance of thirty kilometres from the front in exchange for Germany ending the reprisals. This study contends that prisoner reprisals illustrate new forms of violence—and thus a process of escalation or totalization operating during the war. It also emphasizes, through a comparison of the British, French and German armies' use of prisoner labour, that such totalization was not inevitable or unlimited. Finally, it suggests that prisoner reprisals reveal wartime violence in a new light—as highly rational and discriminating, deliberately directed towards obtaining a particular goal.

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