GERMAN PRISONERS OF WAR IN THE UPPER-MIDWEST: FINDING HUMANITY IN AN ENEMY

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Introduction

Thoughts of prison camps during World War Two bring horrible images to mind. Millions of innocent civilians were detained in Germany and systematically extinguished, prisoners were forced to do harsh physical labor in Soviet Gulags, and Allied prisoners of war were tortured in Japan. These are just a few examples of the atrocities that occurred in camps. The common themes among these examples are torture, starvation, and death. Even within the United States, the notorious Executive Order 9066 sent Japanese Americans to live in camps which upended their lives with little to no evidence that they posed any threat to national security.

These events, and many more similar examples provide a basis for the assumption that all prison camps were horrid, dehumanizing places. Yet at the same time those atrocities were occurring, a prisoner of war program was taking shape within the United States which was unlike any of these other camps. Instead of torture there was common humanity, and instead of starvation and death, there was opportunity. The implementation of the German Prisoner of War program in the Upper-Midwest provided America's adversaries with valuable cultural and educational experiences, work opportunities, and personal connections, benefitted Americans economically through the labor program, and allowed the captives and captors to see one another more positively during and after the Second World War. I will prove this by first providing context and an explanation of the POW program as a whole, then by showing how the labor program impacted a specific community and the prisoners who worked there, and finally, by providing examples of the connections that were formed between adversaries and showing how these connections were positive and lasting for both Americans and Germans.

Historiography

The prisoner of war program which impacted the lives of hundreds of thousands of German prisoners and operated from 1942 to 1946 within the United States is a relatively understudied part of US involvement in the Second World War. More than 75 years after the end of the program, the memories have begun to fade. This program is worth studying to preserve the memories that are left. Historical interest in the 1970s helped create a source base for the topic. Resources vary from small regional studies to broader explorations of the entire program. The broad sources allow for analysis of the main parts of the program and how they affected prisoners all throughout the country. These sources are important for understanding the program on a national level. The national parts of the program affected all the German prisoners of war and are therefore relevant to the project, even though the project will focus on the prisoners of war who were held in the upper-Midwest. Pioneering sources on the topic began to appear in the '70s, including Pluth's article, "Prisoner of War Employment in Minnesota during World War II," Gansberg's *Stalag U.S.A.,* and Krammer's *Nazi Prisoners of War in America.*[1] Later on, particularly in the 2000s, more regionally focused histories would continue to appear, as well as more comprehensive books like Thompson's *Men in German Uniform*.[2]

Primary sources are the most valuable for this topic and provide a more human perspective to the backdrop provided by broad secondary sources. A large primary source base has been preserved in archives throughout the country, including in the upper-Midwest. The volume of primary sources for even one camp is somewhat overwhelming, making it most

[1] Edward John Pluth, "Prisoner of War Employment in Minnesota during World War II," *Minnesota History* Winter (1975): 290–303; Judith M. Gansberg, *Stalag, U.S.A: The Remarkable Story of German POWs in America*, 1st edition (New York: Crowell, 1977); Arnold Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America* (Lanham, MD: Scarborough House, 1979).

[2] Antonio Thompson, *Men in German Uniform: POWs in America during World War II* (Univ Tennessee Press, 2010).

practical to analyze the program's effects on one specific upper-Midwest community and the prisoners who spent time there. The Moorhead branch camp was branch camp number 1 for the Algona Prisoner of War Camp in Algona, Iowa and has a multitude of primary sources available including interviews with those directly involved with the program, many relevant newspaper articles from the community newspapers in 1944 and 1945, statements from community members from an investigation into the camp, and many letters from former prisoners to their wartime employer, Hank Peterson. The archives at Minnesota State University, Moorhead, Camp Algona Prisoner of War Museum in Algona, Iowa, and the Clay County Historical Society in Moorhead, Minnesota were indispensable sources of primary documents for this project.

Life as a Prisoner of War in America: Context

The POW camps themselves were organized into base camps and branch camps. For the purposes of this paper, a single base camp and its first branch camp will provide an opportunity for analysis of the program on a smaller scale, with focus specifically on the Upper-Midwest. The Upper-Midwest is a unique region that presented its own challenges and had its own successes within the POW program. Algona, Iowa was chosen as a centralized location for an upper-Midwest base camp. The community was of a suitable size to support a camp with about 5,000 residents, and there was land available for building a camp. The Algona camp was not the biggest camp in the United States but nevertheless ended up holding a significant number of prisoners—roughly 10,000 throughout its lifespan, with just over 3,000 housed there at a time. Algona was a fairly 'average' base camp, which administered 32 branch camps throughout Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota that were created to provide prisoner labor to communities facing a labor shortage.[3] Focusing research efforts on the Upper-Midwest also

[3] Wes H Bartlett, ed., *A Collection of Memories of the Algona Prisoner of War Camp 1943-1946*, 1994, 2.

allows for the identification of a few ‘problems’ that arose within the camps, such as the prominence of German heritage in the region.

Moorhead, Minnesota was the site of Algona’s first branch camp. The Moorhead camp existed solely as a result of the labor program. Two vegetable farmers from Moorhead, Minnesota, Hank Peterson and Paul Horn, saw an advertisement for available prisoner labor in the Fargo Forum newspaper and requested the help of 150 men for the 1944 growing season.[4] After some logistical setbacks their request was approved and 150 prisoners were sent from the base camp in Algona, Iowa, to Moorhead, Minnesota for agricultural work.[5] The following summer, 75 prisoners were sent for the same work, and were eventually sent back to Algona after the end of the war due to the end of the labor program and the impending repatriation of the prisoners.

The Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, signed in 1929 was used as a guiding document in the formation of the program as a whole. This 97-article document governed and shaped nearly every aspect of life as a prisoner of war in the United States.[6] This included prisoner food, housing, general treatment, opportunities for recreational time, and guidelines for a work program.[7] The articles provided a general structure to ensure the captor nation would respect the rights of their prisoners of war. These guidelines were generally followed, much to the benefit of the prisoners within the program. The United States took the Geneva Convention articles especially seriously in the creation and maintenance of their prisoner of war program, making the prisoners some of the best-treated prisoners of war in the world.

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[4] “100,000 War Prisoners Available As Workers,” *Fargo Forum*, May 27, 1944; Hank Peterson and Paul Horn, interview by Gloria Thompson, January 11, 1974, Henry Peterson Farm Records, Northwest Minnesota Historical Center Library, Minnesota State University, Moorhead, MN.

[5] These setbacks will be addressed in the section titled, “Community Reactions”

[6] “Treaties, States Parties, and Commentaries - Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War, 1929,” accessed November 4, 2020, https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/ihl/INTRO/305.

[7] “Treaties, States Parties, and Commentaries - Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War, 1929.”

Prisoners were guaranteed a certain level of care by the 1929 Geneva convention. They were well-fed, especially in relation to the quality and amount of food they had received in the Wehrmacht, and many underweight prisoners gained weight soon after arrival. They were given the same number of calories per day as American servicemen. The food provided was usually fitted to the tastes of the prisoners, and prisoners often served as cooks within the camps.[8] Due to the prison camps being run by the military and the stipulations of the Geneva convention, the prisoner of war camps were not subjected to the same rationing as the American public which sometimes caused tension with communities near the camps.[9] Many Americans found it counterintuitive, and perhaps it was, that their enemy should be given access to generous portions of rare, rationed food items they could not acquire for their own families. When communities learned that prisoners had been fed ham on Easter in 1945, there was public outrage and the story was picked up by newspapers throughout the country, including in Moorhead, Minnesota.[10] Though the ham incident was very negatively received, there were positive food-related encounters between captive and captor. There are multiple stories of German prisoners baking cakes for a family they worked for, or a guard they had gotten to know.[11] These cakes were significant not only because they show an authentic connection between Americans and prisoners, but because they were made with real butter, which was very difficult for families to acquire due to rationing. This gesture made the prisoner-made cakes all the more special to those who received them.

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[8] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 49.

[9] Thompson, *Men in German Uniform*, 59.

[10] Burton Heath S, “War Prisoners’ Fare Now Not So Fancy: Ham Dinner Caused Menu Change,” *Moorhead Daily News*, (Moorhead, MN) May 1, 1945, 7.

[11] Jerry Yocum, interview by Stephanie Hauf, Cellphone recording, August 12, 2020; Peterson and Horn, interview.

The German prisoners were housed in barracks that closely resembled the accommodations of the guards. Each prisoner had their own bunk, and the barracks were sufficiently heated in the winters. Prisoners were able to decorate their barracks as they wished, to make them more like home. While the prisoners were not housed in luxury accommodations, they were treated fairly in this regard. The German soldiers were certainly better off being prisoners in the United States than they were fighting in Europe. They were safe in the United States. This was relayed back to their families in letters that told their loved ones not to send food or blankets, but to keep these items for themselves.[12]

Diversions: Cultural and Educational Experiences

Within the prisoner of war camps, the men were able to access many forms of entertainment and recreation to keep themselves busy.[13] The Geneva convention took into account that prisoners should not be idle in the camps because this was thought to increase the risk of deviant behavior and the United States took the Convention very seriously in this regard.[14] A visit to the Algona Prisoner of War museum helps make this clear.[15] Prisoners produced high quality paintings, drawings, carvings, musical concerts, and theater productions. They could request materials such as paints or musical instruments, which would get approved by the camp commander and supplied to the canteen by the YMCA, International Red Cross, or another humanitarian organization. The men could then purchase these items to occupy their time. POW camps became small cultural centers due to the variety of recreational activities supplied. This rich environment not only kept the prisoners busy, but upheld their dignity and

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[12] Yocum, interview.

[13] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 51–53.

[14] "Treaties, States Parties, and Commentaries - Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War, 1929."

[15] The Camp Algona Prisoner of War Museum is located at 114 South Thornington Street, Algona, Iowa 50511. I Camp Algona Prisoner of War Museum, 114 South Thornington Street, Algona, Iowa 50511. I visited the museum on August 12, 2020. Much of the prisoner artwork (carvings, paintings, etc.) is displayed, along with pictures of musical bands performing and POW members of theater productions in costume.

provided a reason for the men to reexamine feelings of animosity toward the United States. It was beneficial to both the prisoners and the United States to have these constructive diversions available.

Prisoners who wished to further their education during their captivity were given ample opportunity. Many of the camps had libraries in which prisoners could access books in both German and in English. Prisoners could also take more formal classes in a variety of subjects. Although offerings varied by camp, most camps offered at least a course in English or United States History. Some prisoners were even given the opportunity to take courses at nearby colleges. The most amazing part of the education program is that real credits were offered and accepted by German institutions after the war, which made the classes an objectively productive use of prisoners' time and energy.[16] This was a clear and tangible advantage to the men. Other prisoners around the world at the time did not have access to an education during captivity, making this a unique feature of the US prisoner of war program.

The Labor Program

The labor program affected the prisoners in the Upper-Midwest the most closely, especially through the creation of branch camps. A critical labor shortage had developed in the United States due to the number of American men fighting overseas. This allowed new groups, such as women, to enter the workforce. However, it is often overlooked that some 400,000 German prisoners of war were also a necessary part of the American workforce during the last years of the Second World War.[17] Without German prisoners of war, the United States would have struggled to find enough workers to satisfy the level of productivity necessary to function in wartime. In Moorhead, Minnesota, Hank Peterson and Paul Horn knew there was not enough

[16] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 62–63.
[17] Thompson, *Men in German Uniform*, 1.

local help available to maintain their farming operations at the high level necessary, as they were feeling the pressure of the labor shortage. Their request for prisoner labor was placed out of need. The farmers would have lost a significant portion of their yield if their request had not been fulfilled. This would have kept them from feeding their family, community, and country.

As stipulated by the 1929 Geneva convention, prisoners were able to work in the United States for pay during their time as prisoners.[18] Contractors paid the government the regular going wage for work in their industry and were given a contract to employ prisoners. Rather than relying on contractors to pay the prisoners directly, the government handled the payment. The prisoners were paid 10 cents an hour by the government for their labor. In Moorhead alone for the 1944 season, the work 150 prisoners performed was worth about $33,207 in wages.[19] This amounts to nearly half a million dollars today, for only a few months of work. This was not a unique phenomenon. Prisoners saved the crops of farmers all across Minnesota and the United States.

Cash could be used in an attempted escape, so prisoners were paid in a form of credit that they could redeem at their camp canteen for extra clothes, cigarettes, books, or other desired materials. The earnings could also be saved and redeemed upon repatriation as a treasury check. This would be helpful to many prisoners who needed to help their families rebuild shattered lives in Germany and give them a leg up from the rest of the population.

The labor program was one part of the prisoner of war experience that helped prisoners feel less imprisoned, despite being forced to work for their enemy. Many of the prisoners found working preferential to being confined indoors or in a small compound and found the idea of

[18] "Treaties, States Parties, and Commentaries - Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War, 1929."
[19] Presley Watts, "Prisoners Working in Clay County Saw Many Battle Fronts: Objective of Nazi Prison Camp Is Work, Not Punishment," *Fargo Forum*, August 5, 1945.

making money while imprisoned quite appealing. Prisoners who went on work details were able to see more of the United States than just the inside of a camp and they sometimes met Americans while on the job. Prisoners were assigned to work that made sense based on the skills they had, which made America feel more like home. Working on a farm in Germany or in America was not too different. As Jerry Yocum, archivist at the Camp Algona Prisoner of War Museum humorously put it, "Manure is going to smell the same in both places."[20]

The small guard-to-prisoner ratio on work details may have helped prisoners feel less trapped. Large groups of prisoners were supervised by only one guard, who trusted that the prisoners would not try to escape. Despite the risk in having a small number of guards, very few prisoners attempted to escape and even fewer successfully escaped for more than a day or two.[21] Some prisoners even purposefully turned themselves in after a day or two of freedom. Some of these men just wanted to see if they could get out, and soon realized there was not really anywhere they could go, and the camp was not so bad. While escape stories may seem sensational, the lack of escapes may be more historically relevant and interesting. Life as a German prisoner of war in America was comfortable, and many men were determined to make the most of their time in captivity through the programs available to them.

Working for the Enemy: Prisoner Politics

The men were willing to work for their enemy, possibly aiding Allied victory, without attempting to escape. This can really only be explained by examining who the imprisoned men really were, and what beliefs and assumptions they brought with them to America. First, we must note that the German soldiers who were captured were not all Nazis. This is one aspect of the prisoner of war program that has not been interpreted fairly by all major historians. Quite

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[20] Yocum, interview.
[21] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 136.

dramatically and unfairly, Arnold Krammer's book title makes the claim, or perhaps assumes, that the prisoners were all Nazis.[22] Judith Gansberg makes the case that rampant Nazism within the camps was one of the biggest challenges the United States faced in the program.[23] While undoubtedly some of the men were Nazis, and some of the camps dealt with major problems of the internal spread or strengthening of National Socialism, this was not the most important part of the camp experience in the upper-Midwest.

The men held in the prisoner of war camps were members of the Wehrmacht, or German armed forces. This was not the same thing as being a member of the Nazi party, which is a political designation reserved for those who were indoctrinated with Nazi ideology. Many of the men were forced into service and may not have supported Hitler's regime or believed in what they were fighting for. Many were not even German but had been conscripted from conquered territories such as Poland.[24] This is why Antonio Thompson made a distinction for the title of his book about the prisoners, *Men in German Uniform*. They all wore a German uniform, yet they were not all German, and they were certainly not all Nazis. This estimation is likely the most fair assessment of the program's prisoners, possibly as a result of the amount of time that passed between the program and the writing of his book versus Krammer's or Gansberg's.

Out of the 150 prisoners in Moorhead in 1944, it is likely that a few held Nazi sympathies, but little trouble was caused. We do know, based on a newspaper article published in the Fargo Forum, brief biographies of a few of the Moorhead prisoners. The prisoner who acted as an interpreter for the camp was a 37-year-old car salesman named Karl. Another prisoner, the youngest at the age of 21 (Otto), had been serving for five years, meaning he had been a

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[22] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*.
[23] Gansberg, *Stalag, U.S.A*, 2.
[24] Thompson, *Men in German Uniform*, 17.

Wehrmacht soldier since the age of 16.[25] Ultimately, we can see from this article that the men imprisoned in the camps were regular people who found themselves fighting on the wrong side of a world war. It is interesting to note here that the local newspaper ran this story about the prisoners while they were still in Moorhead, even though the public was not supposed to interact with the prisoners. It was also against the Geneva convention for the prisoners to be made a public spectacle, so this event could have caused lots of controversy.[26] Moorhead residents who read this article could have realized that these men were not so different from themselves.

Because the prisoner of war program was created quickly out of necessity, the United States was not prepared to sort and separate prisoners effectively. Although there were a few specific camps created for Anti-Nazis and some for true Nazis, most of the camps contained a large mix of prisoners from varying backgrounds. Only the most virulent Nazi fanatics were separated from the general prisoner population to decrease the likelihood of them making trouble in the camps.[27] As the war went on, fewer of the captured men were members of the Nazi party because the supply of volunteers had dried up, and the German army was relying more on conscription. Men of many backgrounds and of varying political beliefs were held in Algona, Iowa, and likewise, in Moorhead, Minnesota.

The Non-Fraternization Policy

A strict non-fraternization rule was established by the military, to keep prisoners from interacting with guards or American civilians. The non-fraternization rule was an ineffective policy which was generally disregarded, leading to positive interactions between prisoners and communities. In turn, these interactions provided a basis for personal connections and emerging

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[25] Watts, "Prisoners Working in Clay County Saw Many Battle Fronts: Objective of Nazi Prison Camp Is Work, Not Punishment."

[26] "Treaties, States Parties, and Commentaries - Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War, 1929."

[27] Krammer, *Nazi Prisoners of War in America*, 14.

favorable perceptions between captor and captive. The non-fraternization policy was clearly not followed or enforced in many instances. Most historians who have studied the prisoner of war program agree that the rule was ineffective. Jerry Yocum, archivist at the Algona Prisoner of War Museum believes that the non-fraternization rule was simply unrealistic, especially in regions where German heritage was prevalent and prisoners were sent out to work for German-speaking Americans.[28]

The prisoners in Algona and Moorhead were generally able to interact with Americans due to lack of enforcement of the non-fraternization rule. The Algona base camp and its first branch camp in Moorhead provide a view of this issue that can be used to understand the German prisoner of war experience more generally in the Upper-Midwest, although it should not be used to generalize the program on a national level. An investigation of events from the branch camp in Moorhead, Minnesota, makes it clear that there was little done to dissuade the community from interacting with the prisoners besides some half-hearted surface level efforts which were ultimately not effective.[29] The non-fraternization rule was not enforced, and in fact was generally ignored in Moorhead, to the benefit of the captives.

Hank Peterson and Paul Horn were the two individuals who worked most closely with the prisoners and were most likely to interact with prisoners in Moorhead. While both farmers were clearly initially motivated by financial reasons, the program became more meaningful once the men arrived.[30] Hank Peterson was particularly affected by the presence of the prisoners and enjoyed their tenure in Moorhead by generously bringing prisoners into his home for meals, and even taking a couple prisoners out to a bar for an evening. Peterson and Horn acknowledged that

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[28] Yocum, interview.
[29] See “Upper-Midwest German Heritage” section for an analysis of this investigation.
[30] Peterson and Horn, interview.

prisoners who were working hard in the fields all day needed more food, and so they would feed the prisoners extra in hopes that they would work harder or more efficiently.[31] The contractors were not supposed to give the prisoners gifts or anything extra, but Peterson could not seem to stop himself. Many of Peterson's actions are clearly against the military's non-fraternization rule. He was willing, on many occasions, to break the protocol he had agreed to in the labor contract in order to show kindness to his enemy.

Sherry Watt is unsure why her father, Hank Peterson, was so kind to the prisoners, specifically in light of the non-fraternization policy. While she does not know the exact reasons, she has a couple ideas. Her father was very friendly in general and his kindness did not stop when he encountered the 'enemy.'[32] Sherry also suspects that her father might have liked the prisoners because they were like sons to him, since Hank had two daughters and no sons. Ultimately, a blind eye was turned to Mr. Peterson's actions regardless of his motivation. This was a widespread occurrence in the Upper-Midwest. While Hank Peterson's actions were directly at odds with the non-fraternization rule, there is no clear evidence that his actions had any real negative consequences on the prisoners and their experience of America, or on Mr. Peterson himself.

Throughout the country there are many stories about prisoners and Americans interacting and even becoming friends. Some of these stories originate from interaction between internees and the community in Moorhead. Not many community members in Moorhead had direct or personal interaction with individual prisoners. However, one impromptu meeting between two girls and a few prisoners made a lifelong impact on one of the girls. Sister Cordelia Bloch wrote about her experience in a 1986 publication. The two girls were working for an area hospital, St.

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[31] Peterson and Horn.

[32] Sherry Watt, interview by Stephanie Hauf, Cellphone recording, August 21, 2020.

Ansgar's, when they were sent by the sisters to get some vegetables from the Peterson farm. They were naturally curious about the prisoners who were in Moorhead, much as any other resident. On their way to get the vegetables from the field, the girls struck up a conversation with a prisoner or two that was working in the field at the Peterson farm because Cordelia (age 16) spoke German. They even argued about who would win the war. A neighbor saw the girls and the prisoners and came to check on them. Cordelia believes this neighbor is who called for the police. The police found the girls talking with two prisoners and were sent to jail for the evening and questioned about their fraternization. Cordelia prayed in jail that if she got out of the situation, she would "be good for the rest of my life"; she kept her word by later becoming Sister Mary Cordelia Bloch, with the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota.[33]

The girls were not actually punished, just given a scare to make sure they did not try to interact with the prisoners again and they were embarrassed beyond belief at having been in jail. Sister Cordelia's experience being thrown in jail for fraternizing with a prisoner not only strengthened her resolve to enter religious life but made prison ministry her main focus many years later.[34] The two girls were not punished or prosecuted any further for the incident, despite clearly breaking the non-fraternization rule, which was supposedly a serious offense. In Moorhead, following up on these charges was clearly not a priority, as the girls were released from jail that evening after the sisters at St. Ansgar's reported them missing and came to pick them up. Ultimately, Cordelia's experience fraternizing with the prisoners had a positive impact on the rest of her life.

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[33] Sister Cordelia Bloch, "Teenage Experience Leads to Prison Visitation Ministry," *Our Journey*, 1986, 5, Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls, Minnesota.
[34] Sister Cordelia Bloch, "Teenage Experience Leads to Prison Visitation Ministry."

The outcomes reported from prisoners and communities who ignored the rule were generally positive, while those who followed the rule may have had negative outcomes for prisoners in relation to isolation and feelings about America. According to Amy C. Hudnall, "Later interviews of German prisoners who were able to create relationships with Americans showed that they retained strong, positive memories of America. The Germans who maintained a distance reported only negative experiences of captivity."[35] Hudnall's conclusion goes beyond acknowledging the ineffectiveness of the rule and warns that the rule may have been harmful. Prisoners who had positive interactions with Americans came out of the program with positive views of America. Possibly the best advertisement for the 'American way of life' was for prisoners to have the opportunity to form positive relationships with regular American citizens. The prisoners in Moorhead were able to have these positive interactions which made the advancement of positive feelings toward America and Americans more likely.

Community Reactions

Not everyone in Moorhead was directly involved with the program, and community members were not automatically on board. The initial response to prisoners being placed near communities was apprehension. Many residents did not feel safe having the enemy prisoners right in their neighborhood. They were not as excited about the labor program as the farmers. The idea of having an enemy so nearby, especially one that may have been shooting at your sons or brothers in Europe was not appealing.[36] In Moorhead, there was definite pushback from residents about the prisoners being there. The plan to house the prisoners within the city limits

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[35] Amy C. Hudnall, "Humiliation and Domination Under American Eyes: German Pows in the Continental United States, 1942-1945," *Social Alternatives* 25, no. 1 (First Quarter 2006): 37.

[36] "Report of Investigation of Moorhead Branch Camp Activities," March 1945, sec. D, Moorhead Collection, Camp Algona Prisoner of War Museum, 114 South Thornington Street, Algona, Iowa 50511.

was met with protest.[37] One of the main protest organizers was John Nemzek, a member of an influential Moorhead family. This likely influenced other residents and their view of the program considering John's father Alex Nemzek was popular enough to become Mayor of Moorhead in 1948.[38] Due to these forces, the entire project was almost scrapped until ultimately a new more satisfactory location was proposed for the camp, on the very edge of town. The residents were appeased for the time being, and the first 150 prisoners were able to come work in the vegetable fields near Moorhead.

In 1944, Moorhead residents were generally aware that German prisoners were in the community. If they read the newspaper, they would find out what the prisoners were doing in the community, who hired them, how much they were being paid, and other information from the camp commander.[39] Community members were welcome to attend public forums where they could learn more about the program.[40] There was an attempt made to address the apprehensions of the community before the prisoners arrived to make sure everything went smoothly when they came, including public information events before the second season in 1945.[41]

Upon the arrival of the prisoners, the community reacted mostly with curiosity. Residents may have seen the prisoners ride through town on flatbed trucks on the way to the fields for the day, although the prisoners appeared to be much the same as any ordinary American farm worker—besides the PW stamped onto their uniforms.[42] Although the Geneva convention stipulates that prisoners are not to be subjected to the public gaze, Moorhead residents found it

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[37] "Moorhead Residents Protest Housing of German War Prisoners Within City," *Fargo Forum*, May 23, 1944.

[38] "Moorhead Residents Protest Housing of German War Prisoners Within City"; "Facilities," MSU Moorhead Athletics, accessed November 14, 2020, https://www.msumdragons.com/facilities/alex-nemzek-hall/4.

[39] "150 German Prisoners Here," *Fargo Forum*, June 1, 1944.

[40] "150 Nazi War Prisoners May Work On Clay County Farms," *Fargo Forum*, April 13, 1944.

[41] "Army Officials Here For Meet: Discussion On Use of Prisoners To Be Tonight," *Moorhead Daily News*, July 18, 1945.

[42] "150 German Prisoners Here."

exciting to drive past the camp to see the prisoners. Young women were especially prone to hanging around near the camp to catch a glimpse of the men which caused problems for camp administration.[43] The community was asked to stay away from the camp, and the road past the camp was even blocked off certain hours of the day during the summer of 1944, especially on Sunday afternoons to decrease the number of gawking residents who just wanted some excitement for the weekend. Despite these measures, members of the community still noticed the prisoners' presence. For Moorhead, the Second World War was closer to home than many could have imagined.

Upper-Midwest German Heritage

One concern unique to the camps established in the Upper-Midwest was the large number of people with German heritage who had settled in the area. Some of the people directly involved in the program in Moorhead, including farmer Paul Horn, actually still spoke German.[44] The cook at the Peterson farm spoke German, and one or two of the hired hands or truck drivers on the Peterson farm also spoke German.[45] These community members were able to overcome a major problem within the prisoner of war program as a whole: the language barrier. The ability to connect with the enemy through a common language opened up a new way to understand the prisoners. This connection was deeper in the upper-Midwest than in other areas around the country due to the widespread German heritage in the region. Some people were concerned that those of German heritage would 'coddle' the enemy or be sympathetic to them. For those with this concern, stories of prisoners being taken to a bar for a night out or enjoying a home-cooked meal in a family's home would be aggravating. These concerns are understandable. It is certainly

[43] "Curb Travel to Prisoner Camp," *Fargo Forum*, June 6, 1944.
[44] Peterson and Horn, interview.
[45] Watt, interview.

questionable that a prisoner of war from the aggressor nation in a world conflict should be on the receiving end of generous kindness from Americans.

One man who found the region's German heritage and the presence of the prisoners especially troubling was Mr. A.H. Olesburg, a resident of Moorhead, Minnesota. Based on the language of his letter, this man was a part of an anti-German nativist movement that had stemmed from the First World War. He took it upon himself to write to the Department of Justice about his concerns. His letter explains that it is dangerous for the German prisoners of war to return to the Moorhead community for a second season due to the large number of Moorhead residents with German sympathies.[46] He suggested that prisoners of another nationality, specifically Italian prisoners, should be sent instead if the labor force is necessary. It should be noted that he was not against prisoner labor being used but was specifically concerned about the dangers of German prisoners being employed in a community that heavily consisted of people of German descent.

He describes the following: "Last summer these German prisoners were "cuddled" [sic] and whorshipped [sic] by a number of our citizens. They were given plenty of freedom. On several occasions I saw them in groups of 6-8 (with a guard) eating ice cream and pie in our restaurants."[47] The content of the letter caused an investigation into the matter to take place.[48]

[46] A.H. Olesberg to U.S. Department of Justice, "German Prisoners at Moorhead," February 15, 1945, Moorhead Collection, Camp Algona Prisoner of War Museum.
[47] A.H. Olesberg to U.S. Department of Justice.
[48] The collection of documents contains the initial letter from A. H. Olesburg, as well as the response from Smith, and pages of 'exhibits' including letters from some Moorhead residents who live near the camp, at least one who had lost a son in the war, and interviews and personal statements from Olesburg and other community members including the owners of bars and restaurants. Despite much evidence that the non-Fraternization rule was being broken, the investigation was deemed 'inconclusive.'

Olesburg got a response from the Chief of the Camp Operations Branch, Prisoner of War Division, Howard Smith.[49] In his response, Smith states:

> War Department regulations expressly forbid prisoners of war from fraternizing with civilians to any degree. They also provide that prisoners of war will be allowed outside their stockade only for the purposes of performing work and that they will not be permitted to frequent public eating establishments or places of public entertainment. These regulations were formulated to ensure that the presence of prisoners of war who are at work in American communities will not be objectionable to the residents of the community.
>
> The information in your letter has been forwarded to the appropriate military authority and if it is determined that violation of War Department regulations has occurred in connection with the employment of prisoners of war at Moorhead, Minnesota, you may be sure that appropriate action will be taken.[50]

Based on this letter and what we know about prisoner activities Moorhead, the prisoners should not have been able to return to Moorhead for a second season of work. Why were prisoners allowed to return to Moorhead if it was known that there was blatant fraternization with the community? Other residents weighed in, as well as the Moorhead camp's former commander. Some residents claimed they had never seen fraternization occur, while others admitted they had served prisoners in their establishments—the Aquarium Bar's bartender admitted to serving the prisoners, although he did not notice they were prisoners until he saw the PW stamped on their clothes after they had their beers in hand.[51] The camp's former commander, Richard M Blair, essentially lied about what happened in the camp, presumably to save his own reputation.[52] Eventually the concerns were dismissed due to inconclusive evidence, but it is important to note that the dissent within the community did not completely end when a new housing location was chosen for the prisoners in 1944. The Peterson and Horn farms were able to hire prisoner labor

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[49] Howard V Smith, Jr., Major, C.M.P., Chief, Camp Operations Branch, Prisoner of War Operations Division to A.H. Olesberg, February 27, 1945, Moorhead Collection, Camp Algona Prisoner of War Museum.

[50] Howard V Smith, Jr., Major, C.M.P., Chief, Camp Operations Branch, Prisoner of War Operations Division to A.H. Olesberg.

[51] "Report of Investigation of Moorhead Branch Camp Activities," sec. G and H.

[52] "Report of Investigation of Moorhead Branch Camp Activities," sec. A.

for a second season, despite these concerns, although they only requested 75 prisoners the second year. This investigation was the second 'close call' for the program in Moorhead.

Mr. Olesburg's concerns were not completely wrong or misguided. There were many Moorhead residents with German heritage who still spoke German, the prisoners were treated well, and there was certainly plenty of unlawful fraternization. The main question that stems from this is whether that positive treatment or fraternization with German-speaking Americans was in any way harmful to the Moorhead community or the prisoners. So, what harm, if any, was caused by the interaction of German prisoners with Americans? The power of these interactions helped form lasting connections between Moorhead and the prisoners. These interactions gave both groups positive views of each other. These feelings and connections can be seen in the many letters sent to Mr. Hank Peterson after the end of the war, after the prisoners had returned to Europe.

Post-War Impact: After Repatriation

Time in the United States and interaction with everyday Americans affected prisoners after repatriation. Many prisoners wrote to Hank Peterson to thank him for their time on his farm in Moorhead. Some of these letters were saved, found by a very surprised Sherry Watt in her parent's house after her father passed away.[53] The letters are a great source for understanding how the former prisoners viewed their own experience as a prisoner of war.

As stated earlier, a major barrier within the prisoner of war program was the difference in language. However, letters sent in both English and German from former prisoners were received and read by those in Moorhead, Minnesota. Despite Mr. Peterson not speaking German, there were certainly community members who could have translated the letters for him. In at

[53] Watt, interview.

least one letter, the prisoner writes in German that Mr. Peterson should get one of the German-speaking truck drivers on the farm to translate it.[54] Some of the prisoners were also able to write in English because they had received some training in the language as prisoners while in the United States. The lack of language barrier in some places in the upper-Midwest allowed connections to be formed and maintained.

Some of the prisoners who wrote to Mr. Peterson were simply asking for help. The post-war conditions in Germany were very poor. Their homes had been destroyed, and they were left with nothing. They asked for care packages of food, socks, cigarettes, or money. Other prisoners requested help getting back to the United States. Some wished for Mr. Peterson to hire them on his farm again. These requests are relatively surface level. These heartbreaking letters could certainly be attributed to the prisoners being hungry and in dire need of assistance in post-war Germany. One former prisoner, Josef Barbarini, wrote in 1947 and explained explicitly that he was writing because he needed help. His letter reads, "The need and hunger drive me to write to you," yet then he continues later in the short letter, "The only reason I write this to you is because you told me when I left to write to you if things went bad in the homeland."[55]

Mr. Peterson asking the prisoners to write to him is a pattern that can be seen in many of the letters. A few more prisoners besides Barbarini mention Mr. Peterson asking them to write as well. The following is the opening of a letter from Kurt Grothmaach, former prisoner, written in English: "Dear Mr. Peterson! When we prisoners of war left you in the October 1945, you exact [sic] a promise from us, to wright [sic] you a letter."[56] Many of the other letters mention this

[54] Werner Knauer to Hank Peterson, trans. Gisela Nobel, Dept. of Languages, MSUM, March 8, 1947, Moorhead Collection, Camp Algona Prisoner of War Museum.
[55] Josef Barbarini to Hank Peterson, trans. Gisela Nobel, Dept of Languages, MSUM, February 16, 1947, Moorhead Collection, Camp Algona Prisoner of War Museum.
[56] Kurt Grothmaach to Hank Peterson, April 6, 1947, Moorhead Collection, Camp Algona Prisoner of War Museum.

request.[57] Why would Mr. Peterson ask the prisoners to write to him if they were in need if he did not care about what would happen to them after they left his farm? If the prisoners were only a labor force, they would not have been asked to write. Mr. Peterson must have thought of the prisoners as more than just his enemy or his laborers. There was some level of care or intent to help the former prisoner from Mr. Peterson if he told the prisoners to write to him when the going got tough. Peterson and Horn did respond to some of these letters with care packages or assistance of some kind, according to a 1974 interview with the two farmers.[58]

Some of the letters are even more meaningful than just a cry for help. Most contain some sort of request, but others go much deeper. Michael Oberlehner, an Austrian and a former POW, wrote to Mr. Peterson in 1948. He says that the time he spent working for Mr. Peterson "was the best time of my life, today I can not [sic] achieve that anymore although I was a prisoner at that time."[59] Former prisoners describe the wonderful memories they made while working for Mr. Peterson in Moorhead. Some describe being invited to the Peterson home for a hot meal.[60] One letter even contained a story about the time Mr. Peterson took a couple of the men to the Magic Aquarium Bar for an evening, and the former prisoner included a postcard he got from the bar as proof of the event.[61] This was definitely against the non-fraternization rule! Another letter, from Paul Joachim, contains a special note specifically for Mrs. Peterson, thanking her for her

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[57] Josef Hasselbach to Hank Peterson, April 14, 1947, Moorhead Collection, Camp Algona Prisoner of War Museum; Sepp Mayer and Willy Monde to Hank Peterson, August 2, 1946, Moorhead Collection, Camp Algona Prisoner of War Museum.

[58] Peterson and Horn, interview, 2.

[59] Maria and Michael Oberlehner to Hank Peterson, trans. Gisela Nobel, Dept. of Languages, MSUM, March 1, 1948, Moorhead Collection, Camp Algona Prisoner of War Museum.

[60] Werner Kubisch to Hank Peterson, November 14, 1947, Moorhead Collection, Camp Algona Prisoner of War Museum.

[61] Unknown POW to Hank Peterson, December 11, 1974, Moorhead Collection, Camp Algona Prisoner of War Museum.

kindness to him.[62] If the rules had been followed, there would have been no reason for Mrs. Peterson to be around the prisoners. Some former prisoners sent pictures of themselves with their wives or families, Christmas letters, or thank-you notes and well-wishes.

Other letters contain descriptions of pictures taken on the farm, explaining who they are, hoping Mr. Peterson would remember them. Two prisoners who wrote a letter together explain who they are by the following description: "We both always worked together, especially in the cabbage and finally we had to repair the shaft of the spring in your courtyard. One of us (Willy) often has driven the tractor, and one (Sepp) you may recognize by telling you, that I considerable [sic] hurt a finger, when I cut cabbage. Now we think you are able to know us."[63] Some of the former prisoners reference pictures that were taken on the Peterson farm to remind Mr. Peterson who they are.[64] Many of these pictures can be found in the Minnesota State University, Moorhead archives, and it is possible to determine which prisoner in the picture wrote the letter from their descriptions (which humorously usually reference their position in relation to the dog in each picture). Clearly, the Petersons made some sort of impact on these former prisoners that lasted beyond their time in Moorhead that made them want to reconnect with Mr. Peterson and the others they met on the farm while working in the United States.

The fond memories of the prisoners provided them with hope, and even brought the prisoners together after their repatriation. Former prisoners visited one another: Sepp Mayer and Willy Monde wrote their letter to Mr. Peterson when they were together for a visit after their repatriation.[65] In his letter to Mr. Peterson, Kurt Grothmaach says he went to Hamburg to visit

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[62] Paul Joachim to Hank Peterson and Mrs. Peterson, trans. Gisela Nobel, Dept. of Languages, MSUM, December 12, 1947, Moorhead Collection, Camp Algona Prisoner of War Museum.
[63] Mayer and Monde to Peterson, August 2, 1946.
[64] Knauer to Peterson, March 8, 1947.
[65] Mayer and Monde to Peterson, August 2, 1946.

another former prisoner, "Hans."[66] There so happens to be a letter to Peterson from another former prisoner, Hans Johannsen, from Hamburg, to Mr. Peterson. It seems these two men kept in contact after the war and even visited one another, and both wrote to Mr. Peterson. Grothmaach mentions in his letter that the two reminisced about their time in the United States while they were visiting one another.[67]

Although the cynical may say these letters were because of the horrid post-war conditions in Germany and the dire need of the prisoners, they point to something much deeper. It cannot be denied that some of the letters were written out of desperation, yet it can be seen through the letters that the prisoner of war program advanced feelings of respect and admiration between supposed enemies during one of the most horrific events in world history. Those directly involved on both sides were left with positive perceptions of the other, and in some cases, a lasting relationship or at least hopeful connection. While many prisoners made requests to return to the United States, the number of prisoners who were actually able to return and stay is not known. At least one former prisoner from Camp Algona was able to return to the United States permanently. Through his assigned camp work, Alfred Mueller became friends with an American salesman who delivered produce to the camp. This connection made it possible for Alfred and his future wife, Edith, to find a sponsor and to return to the United States in December 1949.[68] There are other success stories of this nature throughout the country, but unfortunately Hank Peterson and Paul Horn did not sponsor the immigration of any of their former prisoners.

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[66] Grothmaach to Peterson, April 6, 1947.
[67] Grothmaach to Peterson.
[68] Barbara Schmitter Heisler, "Returning to America: German Prisoners of War and the American Experience," *German Studies Review* 31, no. 3 (October 2008): 544.

Post-War Impact: Memories

There are not many people left living who were personally involved in the prisoner of war program. Most are long gone, over 75 years later. However, there are a few people who have memories of the program. Those who were children during the program and are still involved in the preservation of its memory are now in their eighties. Sherry Watt and Jerry Yocum are two of these individuals. They were happy to share their experiences and expertise with me about the prisoner of war program.

Sherry Watt was eight years old when her father hired prisoners to work on their farm.[69] Sherry and her family did not live on the farm, but instead lived a few blocks away from the farm, while another family lived on the property. She has very little memory of the events because she was so young. Her family's participation in the program was not much out of the ordinary for an eight-year-old because her family simply did not make a big deal of it, and did not talk about the event with her after the prisoners left. Sherry remembers seeing the prisoners riding through town on trucks on their way to the field. She also remembers seeing the prisoners behind the chain link fence at the camp and is reminded of the prisoners whenever she sees baseball players peering through a chain link fence. Her most vivid memory is when she walked the five blocks to the farm with her black lab, and one of the prisoners took a break from painting the barn to paint a white stripe down the dog's back to make him look like a skunk. This made her very upset, which is probably why she remembers it so well, although she now says she forgives the former prisoner.[70]

Despite Sherry's limited memory of the event, she is an incredible resource. She has taken it upon herself, with the Clay County Historical Society, to help preserve this part of

[69] Watt, interview.
[70] Watt.

Moorhead's history. She is deeply invested in the history. When she found the letters and other documents written by former prisoners to her father, she donated them to the local historical society and the archives at Minnesota State University, Moorhead. She cherishes a wood carving that one of the prisoners made while in Moorhead that was given to her family as a gift. She loves to talk about her family's role in the success of the prisoner of war program.

Sherry became even more personally involved when she got a call from the Clay County Historical Society that they had been contacted by the grandson of a former prisoner who wanted to come back to visit Moorhead. Unfortunately, the former prisoner, Hans Kroder, was unable to make the long trip due to advanced age. Sherry and her husband were able to visit this former prisoner in Germany before he passed away and spent two weeks in Europe with the family. Sherry is still in contact with the family and consistently emails Harald, grandson of the former prisoner who originally reached out. Ultimately, Sherry is proud of her family's involvement in the program, in large part due to the positive impact it seems to have had on all those involved. She was incredibly happy that someone was planning to continue telling the story of the prisoner of war program in Moorhead, Minnesota.

Jerry Yocum is another person who is deeply involved in the prisoner of war program. He was six years old and has a few memories of the prisoners who were in Algona. Jerry grew up 50 miles from Algona, but still managed to come in contact with the prisoners through the labor program. His father was a school bus driver and was asked to use his bus to transport prisoners from Algona to a worksite near their community so the prisoners could help with cleanup from a storm.[71] Jerry regularly went along with his father on bus routes, and that day was no different; six-year-old Jerry hopped on the bus with his father and rode along with the enemy captives on

[71] Yocum, interview.

the bus. Jerry remembers the prisoners in their PW uniforms being on the bus with him, yet the most exciting part of the ride to him as a six-year-old was a big hill they got to drive over.[72] The significance of the prisoners and that bus ride did not occur to Jerry until much later. Jerry's parents must have thought it would be safe enough for Jerry to go with that day and were not afraid of anything bad happening or the prisoners making trouble.

As a retired history teacher Jerry strongly believes that the history of his community must be taught. He is one of the founding members of the Camp Algona Prisoner of War Museum. He works tirelessly to preserve the event and its impact on his community. Since their museum opened in 2004, they have hosted approximately 2500 visitors per year. The compelling nature of the prisoner of war story draws much curiosity and deserves to be told again and again.

The Algona Nativity Scene

One of the main legacies of the Algona prisoners is incredibly unique to the Algona camp. After seeing a nativity scene made out of baked mud in one of the prisoner's barracks in 1944, the camp commander asked the prisoner, Eduard Kaib who was an architect, if he would build a larger version for the whole camp to display to the community for Christmas in 1945. Kaib agreed and recruited a few other prisoners to assist him. The group of six men began construction of a half life-sized nativity scene made out of concrete, wire, and painted plaster. By Christmas the next year, the scene contained not only Mary, Jesus, and Joseph, but the three kings, two camels, over thirty sheep, and multiple shepherds. The nativity scene was a success in 1945 and was made into a permanent display with the help of the prisoners who built it along with the Algona Junior Chamber of Commerce in 1946 before the repatriation of the prisoners. It has been preserved and taken care of by the Men's Club of Algona First United Methodist

[72] Yocum.

Church since 1958.[73] The nativity scene has been displayed every Christmas season since 1945 and has been visited by people from around the country.[74] At the request of the prisoners, admission to see the scene is free. Former prisoners and their children and grandchildren have returned to Algona to view the scene. The nativity scene is a lasting sign of the program's impact on the prisoners and the community of Algona. The Christian message of the Algona Nativity Scene is uniting. It makes the distinction between captive and captor irrelevant. The scene is peaceful. It brings out the humanity of the enemy. The nativity scene's powerful message of peace draws hundreds of visitors to a place of which most people have never heard and would otherwise never travel to see: Algona, Iowa.

Christianity was not consistent with Nazism. It is directly contrary to fascism. The nativity scene brings about a sense of wonder and causes a question to arise. Did the United States love and care for their enemy as Christ, or were they just trying to follow international rules and guidelines to protect their own soldiers abroad? On a surface level, the latter seems to be true. It is unlikely that this principle entered the minds of those planning the program. However, the positive outcomes of the program point to something deeper than what was planned: connections between those who were supposed to be fighting one another.

Conclusion and Implications

The German prisoners of war in the upper-Midwest were part of a program that cared for them as humans, not just as enemies. The men benefited from the program on a national level by taking advantage of cultural experiences, educational opportunities, and the labor program, while

[73] "The Algona Nativity Scene Pamphlet," n.d., Camp Algona Prisoner of War Museum, 114 South Thornington Street, Algona, Iowa 50511.

[74] Unfortunately, I must report that 2020 will be the first year the Nativity Scene will not be open to the public since 1945, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of the usual volunteers involved in the museum and the Nativity Scene are elderly or at a higher risk. I was able to visit the Nativity Scene when I went for a special research visit in August 2020, and I am deeply saddened by the news that it will not be open to the public this year.

also gaining from the kindness they were shown by those they encountered in upper-Midwest communities.

Many of the benefits the prisoner received during their time in the United States were not tangible. Hope, connection, and friendship are some of the most valuable things a person can receive in a time of need. The prisoner of war program provided safety, positive treatment, hope, and connections to men from a broken nation in one of the worst events in human history. Powerful and lasting connections formed between enemies that would not have been possible without the prisoner of war program's determination to follow the Geneva convention and even provide the prisoners with opportunities. The prisoner of war program in the upper-Midwest made it clear that although we were enemies with Germany, we may not have been enemies with the German people. We had more in common than we realized, and powerful connections formed. People who would have never met were connected in unbreakable ways, and in some cases these connections have lasted generations.

The prisoner of war program is an example of how personal connections between individuals can overcome the constraints of global conflict. These positive interactions provide hope and connection once the conflict has ceased. In the case of many of the German prisoners, their imprisonment was a positive point in their experience of the war due to the good treatment they received and the connections they formed. The cultural and educational experiences, work opportunities, and personal connections all helped provide this positive experience. American communities, particularly in the upper-Midwest, benefitted economically through the labor program, and provided a unique setting for captives and captors to meet and even become friends.

An examination of this program in the upper-Midwest shows an example of a type of camp during the Second World War that upheld the dignity of its captives. This research should lead to broader questions about the impact of genuine human interactions between enemies during conflict, and what can be done to break down barriers between adversaries. The success of the prisoner of war program was not merely due to logistics but was made possible by the individuals on the home front who were able to see their enemy as human.

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