

Caring States: Manpower in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France

ERICA CHARTERS

Eighteenth-century states are not usually described as ‘caring’ for their general populations; early modern states are traditionally characterized as pre-welfare states, intent on extracting wealth and power through taxation and recruitment rather than investing in welfare.¹ As wars increased in size, cost, frequency, duration, and geographical scope over this period, states directed greater attention to the steady demand for soldiers, sailors, and other laborers connected to the war effort. Once forces were deployed, naval and military authorities also became acutely aware of the arduous challenge of keeping these men healthy and fit for service. Growing public interest in campaigns and colonial ventures intensified such concerns: newspapers, rumors, and partisan accusations held military and political officials accountable if proper care was not provided to men on campaign or to returning veterans. Such public and political pressure made authorities eager not only to inaugurate state-sponsored troop-welfare programs, but also to gauge and display their efficacy.

In this paper, I focus on a particularly salient aspect of Franco-British care for military manpower during the mid-century wars: the treatment of prisoners of war. Prisoner care was recorded, discussed, and debated in both Britain and France, with each side keen to sway public opinion in order to gain logistical advantages vis-à-vis the enemy, as well as moral and political legitimacy at home. Each side developed methods of calculating prisoners’ worth and evaluating treatment, and used threats and rewards of reciprocal treatment to negotiate release or better treatment for its own troops. Yet prisoner care was not simply a matter of actuarial accounting of manpower. A vocal public and mindful officials demanded that soldiers and sailors—even if enemy forces—be cared for, and they often linked military victory to humane, empathetic, and Christian practices. Later eighteenth-century humanitarianism in warfare is thus tied to earlier conventions of care, in which attention to troop welfare was both moral and strategic. In this respect, the care devoted to cultivating and preserving military manpower is similar to that devoted to agricultural and industrial manpower in the nineteenth century. Such care therefore challenges the accepted distinction drawn between modern welfare states and pre-modern extractive states, and also raises questions about distinctions drawn between humanitarianism and utilitarianism. As the case of prisoners of war demonstrates, humanitarian care was practical *and* strategic. Care advanced military and strategic aims, while also manifesting humane benevolence.

Whereas long-term military captivity was rare in the early-eighteenth century, it became the norm during the Seven Years War. Long-term captivity directed public attention to the welfare of prisoners—both enemy troops held near civilian centers at home, and home forces held captive abroad. In this period, most captives expected poor conditions during imprisonment (just as hardship accompanied war, and as war itself was a fact of life). Caring for prisoners thus traditionally focused not on improving harsh conditions, but on releasing prisoners through negotiated exchanges. Since contemporaries saw exchanges as the most effective way to alleviate the hardships of captivity, complaints of ill-treatment were usually accompanied by requests to settle

¹ John Landers, *The Field and the Forge: Population, Production, and Power in the Pre-industrial West* (Oxford, 2005); James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (London, 1999).

a form of general exchange. Petitions of exceptionally bad treatment came in the form of requests to be “exchanged as soon as possible.”²

With conditions deteriorating among French prisoners held in Britain at mid century due to their unusually long captivity and large numbers, the British public paid much attention to their plight, including through the raising of funds to supply them with clothing and other necessities. With their exact and public accounting, British charities for prisoners—often headed by merchants—mirrored commercial joint-stock enterprises, and were typical of philanthropic groups in Britain during the eighteenth century. Many of these associations, such as Jonas Hanway’s Marine Society, tied war-time national concerns with improvements in welfare for the lower orders.³ By filling a gap in state provisions, the prisoners’ charities echoed other British voluntary charities that aimed to complement government support.⁴

The case of French prisoners was linked to broader cultural concerns about charity and the nature of care and humanity during wartime. Never wanting to encourage idleness or dependence, British charities often focused on the practical ends of employment and national prosperity. Raising funds for enemy soldiers, sailors, and privateers—men who were lying idle in British institutions—could not be presented as useful and beneficial (unlike the training of street boys to serve in the Royal Navy). Yet the British charities for French prisoners made this their strength. As Samuel Johnson wrote in the Introduction to the Proceedings of the London-based Committee for French Prisoners, the debates over the nature of poor relief “vanish in the present case: we know that for the prisoners of war there is no legal provision; we see their distress, and are certain of its cause; we know that they are poor and naked, and poor and naked without a crime.”⁵ According to the British, their charity came from all ranks and, moreover, was not motivated by hasty emotions such as pity and guilt, but governed by reason.

Whether French prisoners were duly cared for is not beyond dispute, for disease killed at least 15% of those held by the British. Although the British public was clearly aware of the number of prisoners held and of accounting details behind the charities for French prisoners, rates of prisoner sickness and mortality were never published in British newspapers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the *Gazette de France* published hardly a mention of French seamen held prisoner by the British throughout the war. The *Courrier d’Avignon* painted a more complex picture: it noted that there were twenty-three thousand French prisoners held in England. At the same time, this detail was contained within a supposed translated excerpt from an unnamed English newspaper, with the purported English authors declaimed broad-mindedly against French prisoners being allowed to starve to death or being held in irons, chiding his readers that French prisoners should not be punished simply because they were French.⁶ Prisoner care was thus a matter of rhetoric and propaganda, as was the type of information circulated about French prisoners.

Since prisoners of war were a tangible gauge of military success and failure in the field, the growing public preoccupation with prisoner care linked humane care with military effectiveness and governmental legitimacy. At the same time, the differing accounts of prisoners and their care between French and British publications during the war clarify that prisoner care was a political

² The National Archives, London, SP 44/105, Hedges to Sick and Wounded, 2 August 1706.

³ Donna T. Andrew, *Philanthropy and Police: London Charity in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, 1989), esp. chaps 3 and 4.

⁴ Joanna Innes, ‘The “Mixed Economy of Welfare” in Early Modern England: Assessments of the Options from Hale to Malthus (c. 1683-1803)’, in *Charity, Self-Interest and Welfare in the English Past*, ed. Martin Daunton (London, 1996), 139-180.

⁵ *Proceedings of the Committee Appointed to Manage the Contributions....* (London, 1760), ii.

⁶ *Courrier d’Avignon* 29 jan 1760, issue no. 9.

issue. It was central to military strategy, logistics, and finance, and useful in cultivating public support for the war. As British writers explicitly stated, and French government censors implicitly acknowledged, the quality of care given to enemy troops in wartime was not simply a matter of emerging humanitarian sensibilities. It was an essential component of military strategy, of domestic politics, and of imperial legitimacy.