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On Their Way Home: The Role of Aachen in the Exchange and Repatriation of British and German Prisoners of War during the First World War

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ABSTRACT
This paper analyses the role that Aachen, the western most German city located close to the Netherlands, played during the exchange and repatriation of British and German military prisoners of war from 1914 to 1918. It is argued that Aachen served as an important staging post. British prisoners were assembled in the city, medically examined, and, depending on the examination result, allowed to leave Germany across the border to the neutral Netherlands. The analysis contributes to the historiography by illuminating the neglected role that Aachen played during the exchange and repatriation process.

Introduction

On 4 August 1914, the British Empire declared war against Germany. That evening, Sir Edward Goschen, the British Ambassador, was sitting in the drawing room of his embassy in Berlin when a mob threw cobble stones through the window. The ambassador eventually had to leave Germany. 'Aside…from some insulting gestures and jeering by the crowds which thronged the platforms…, the ambassador's long and tedious journey to the Dutch frontier was without incident.'[1]

Prince Lichnowsky, his German counterpart in London, experienced a more civilised farewell. 'Our departure was put through in a thoroughly dignified, quiet way…A special train took us to Harwich…I was treated like a departing sovereign.'[2] Britain

*Bennet Strang is an independent scholar and wrote this article in the context of completing his Master's at Kellogg College, University of Oxford, UK.
DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v9i3.1738
[1]James W. Garner, *International Law and the World War,* (London: Longmans, 1920), p. 41.
[2]Ibid,. Prince Karl Max von Lichnowsky cited on p. 44.

and Germany exchanged many more of their nationals during the war after this first exchange of their most senior emissaries.

This paper focuses on the exchange and repatriation of British and German military prisoners of war (POWs) during the First World War. It analyses the role that Aachen, the western most German city bordering the neutral Netherlands, played in this process. The Netherlands served as a transit country for POWs. It will be argued that Aachen played a critical role as a staging post.

Within this paper the following terms will be used:

> Exchange is defined as 'the transfer of prisoners of war between belligerents as the result of bargaining, each being concerned in obtaining the best terms for himself'.[3]
>
> Repatriation is understood as 'transfers of prisoners…, where the grounds for the transfer are generally humanitarian, and there is no question of equality of numbers'.[4]
>
> Internment, 'the transfer of prisoners of war to neutral countries on account of sickness or length of captivity falls within none of these definitions. They were…held…by the neutral Power on behalf of the captor' until the end of the war.[5]

Historiography

In light of more than eight million military and five million civilian casualties, it is surprising that historical scholarship has only recently paid serious attention to the war's eight to nine million POWs.[6] The topic only began to attract scholarly attention in the 1990s.[7] As the First World War's historiographical emphasis shifted away from the grand diplomatic and military narratives towards cultural history, 'human beings

[3]The UK National Archives (hereinafter TNA) WO 106/1451, Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War, September 1920, p. 63.
[4]Ibid.
[5]Ibid.; Susanne Wolf, *Guarded Neutrality: Diplomacy and Internment in the Netherlands during the First World War,* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), p. 16.
[6]Ian Kershaw, 'War and Political Violence in Twentieth-Century Europe', *Contemporary European History*, 14, 1 (2005), pp. 107–23, p. 109; Heather Jones, 'Prisoners of War', in Jay M. Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the First World War. Vol. 2,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 266-90, p. 269.
[7]Jay M. Winter and Antoine Prost, *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 28.

[were] once again [placed] at the centre of historical developments'.[8] Accordingly, the internment of POWs and civilians has become the subject of historical research.[9] A new generation of historians are investigating the social and cultural dimensions of the war, themes of memory, identity and the destinies of individuals.[10]

Key themes within British POW historiography include violence, the internment of civilians and escape. Jones offers a comparative, transnational and influential account of violence against POWs on the Western Front and in its staging areas.[11] Stibbe and Oltmer focus on the internment of civilian POWs and their forced employment in Germany.[12] Nachtigal discusses the treatment of POWs by Britain and the United States.[13] The escape narrative also features very prominently in the historiography. '[E]scapes remained a fundamental part of captivity mythology and later memoirs; aspiring to escape, allowed prisoners, confined in the domesticated, uniformly male, home front camp to project a sense of agency and masculinity'.[14] While the act of becoming a POW was associated with cowardice, escape stories carried adventurous and courageous connotations, which facilitated their inclusion into the victorious narrative of the First World War.[15] They also cast POWs in a positive light even though only a minority of escape attempts succeeded.[16] What the British literature is missing is a discussion of the exchange and repatriation of British and German POWs during the war – and the role that Aachen played within this context.

Significant themes within German POW historiography include prisoners taken on the eastern front, forced labour and the prisoner camp system. The focus on Russian POWs appears to be due to Germany taking more prisoners in the East than were

[8]Matthew Stibbe, 'Introduction: Captivity, Forced Labour and Forced Migration during the First World War', Immigrants & Minorities, 26, 1–2 (2008b), pp. 1–18, p. 6.
[9]Alan R. Kramer, 'Recent Historiography of the First World War: (Part I)', *Journal of Modern European History*, 12, 1 (2014a), pp. 5-27, p. 16.
[10]Winter and Prost, *The Great War in History*, pp. 25-26; Jay M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Winter and Prost, *The Great War in History*, p. 205.
[11]Heather Jones, *Violence against Prisoners of War in the First World War: Britain, France and Germany, 1914-1920,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
[12]Kramer, 'Recent Historiography (Part I)', p. 21.
[13]Reinhard Nachtigal, 'The Repatriation and Reception of Returning Prisoners of War, 1918-22', *Immigrants & Minorities*, 26, 1-2 (2008), pp. 157-84, p. 175.
[14]Heather Jones, 'A Missing Paradigm? Military Captivity and the Prisoner of War, 1914-18', *Immigrants & Minorities*, 26, 1-2 (2008a), pp. 19-48, p. 25.
[15]Jones, *Prisoners of War*, p. 277; Jeffrey S. Reznick, 'Oliver Wilkinson. British Prisoners of War in First World War Germany', *American Historical Review*, 124, 1 (2019), p. 333.
[16]Jones, 'A Missing Paradigm?', p. 25.

taken in the West, five million two hundred thousand versus one million five hundred thousand, respectively.[17] Nachtigal focuses on captivity in the East by discussing the Russian violations of international law that led to the mass death of POWs during the construction of the Murmansk railway.[18] Forced labour is also Rawe's focus, who investigates the employment of various societal groups, including POWs, as the German economy became increasingly reliant on additional labour during the war.[19]

According to Speed, the fact that Germany entered into agreements with Britain and France to regulate the exchange of POWs provides evidence for Germany's commitment to the humane treatment of prisoners in line with the 'liberal tradition of captivity'.[20] Oltmer and Hinz contribute to the historiography with an investigation of the German prison camp system.[21] The German historiography does not contain either an analysis of the exchange and repatriation of German and British POWs or the role played by Aachen.

The legal foundations

The revolution in warfare represented by the First World War exposed the shortcomings of the international legal order pertaining to POWs and led Germany and the United Kingdom to conclude bilateral agreements for the internment and repatriation of their prisoners in 1917 and 1918. Prior to 1914, the Geneva and Hague Conventions were the only major legal works relating to POWs.[22] While POWs had been taken *en masse* during the Franco-Prussian War, the First World War 'marked the advent of mass industrialised, militarised captivity' on a much larger scale.[23] Approximately eight and a half million soldiers were captured, and no country was prepared for the number of prisoners taken..[24] This lack of preparedness was particularly evident at the beginning of the hostilities, when military and political elites

[17]Nachtigal, 'The Repatriation and Reception', pp. 159-60.
[18]Reinhard Nachtigal, *Kriegsgefangenschaft an der Ostfront 1914 bis 1918: Literaturbericht zu einem neuen Forschungsfeld,* (Frankfurt/ Main [u.a.]: P. Lang, 2005).
[19]Kai Rawe, *"…wir werden sie schon zur Arbeit bringen!": Ausländerbeschäftigung und Zwangsarbeit im Ruhrkohlenbergbau während des Ersten Weltkrieges,* (Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2005); Gregor Schöllgen and Friedrich Kießling, *Das Zeitalter des Imperialismus,* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2009), p. 200.
[20]Richard B. Speed, *Prisoners, Diplomats, and the Great War: A Study in the Diplomacy of Captivity,* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), p. 7.
[21]Jochen Oltmer, *Kriegsgefangene im Europa des Ersten Weltkriegs,* (Paderborn; Munich [u.a.]: Schöningh, 2006); Uta Hinz, *Gefangen im Großen Krieg: Kriegsgefangenschaft in Deutschland, 1914-1921,* (Essen: Klartext, 2006).
[22]TNA WO 106/1451 - *Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War*, p. 5.
[23]Jones, *Prisoners of War*, p. 268.
[24]Jones, 'A Missing Paradigm?', p. 20.

still expected a swift victory, so it seemed there was no need to build the infrastructure required for handling tens of thousands of prisoners. Reality showed that the Hague Conventions were insufficient to regulate the growing numbers of captured soldiers. Hence, the belligerents needed to conclude complementary bilateral agreements. These specified the treatment, internment and exchange of prisoners and compensated for the shortcomings in the Hague Conventions.[25]

The historiography references two Anglo-German agreements concluded in 1917 and 1918 but neglects a third.[26] Primary sources indicate that Germany and Britain must have entered into negotiations about POW matters as early as 1914. The "Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War", published by the War Office in 1920, covers the activities of the Directorate from August 1914 to February 1920. It presents a detailed synopsis of POW matters that have arisen during the war and includes the 1917 and 1918 agreements. It also contains a reference to '[a]n agreement for the mutual repatriation of incapacitated officers and men…concluded in January, 1915'.[27] Feltman is one of only a few scholars who have referenced it.[28] As the report notes, 'a very harsh schedule of disabilities was adopted', which determined whether POWs were eligible for exchange and this schedule also reappeared in the subsequent bilateral agreements.[29] The severity of this schedule might explain why the agreement had relatively little impact and was neglected, although there are additional indications that Britain and Germany maintained an ongoing dialogue on POW matters. On 17 March 1915, Germany consented to a British proposal 'to adopt a scheme for the reciprocal inspection of prison camps by representatives of neutral governments'.[30] Finally, the *Aachener Anzeiger*, one of Aachen's daily newspapers, refers to the Anglo-German negotiations on the exchange of their prisoners in its edition of 1 July 1915 and notes that the city was expecting the arrival of 'exchange prisoners'.[31] This analysis will return to this topic later.

[25]Jones, *Prisoners of War*, p. 272.
[26]Brian Feltman, *The Stigma of Surrender: German Prisoners, British Captors, and Manhood in the Great War and Beyond,* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), pp. 68-9.
[27]TNA WO 106/1451 - *Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War*, p. 68.
[28]Maartje M. Abbenhuis, *The Art of Staying Neutral: The Netherlands in the First World War, 1914-1918,* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), p. 109; Brian Feltman, 'Tolerance As a Crime?: The British Treatment of German Prisoners of War on the Western Front, 1914-1918', *War in History*, 17, 4 (2010), pp. 435-58, p. 441.
[29]TNA WO 106/1451 - *Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War*, p. 68.
[30]Garner, *International Law (vol. 2),* p. 6.
[31]'Der Zoologische Garten in Erwartung der Austauschgefangenen', *Aachener Anzeiger*, 1 July 1915, p. 1, https://zeitpunkt.nrw/ulbbn/periodical/zoom/6745894.

The 1917 Anglo-German agreement on POW matters represented a breakthrough, and Lord Newton and Lieutenant-General Belfield were the primary British actors. Newton served as the Controller of the Prisoners of War Department and also held the position of Assistant Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office.[32] In theory, the Controller was supposed to represent the British government on POW matters on behalf of the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.[33] In practice, Newton struggled to impose his authority on the other Departments of State that were involved in POW affairs, such as the Admiralty, the War Office and the Colonial Office.[34] As a result, controversial matters had to be referred to the War Cabinet for decision.[35] Lieutenant-General Belfield, the Director of Prisoners of War at the War Office, accompanied Lord Newton on his trip to The Hague to discuss POW matters in 1917. Newton describes the genesis of his first encounter with the enemy as follows:

> June, 1917. I had heard from various sources that the Germans were anxious to discuss prisoner questions with us at The Hague, and in view of continual delays, disputes and threats of retaliation on both sides, was much disposed to try the experiment of personal contact.[36]

Negotiating with the adversary while fighting him on the battlefield was always going to be a political balancing act.

The 'Agreement between the British and German Governments concerning Combatant and Civilian Prisoners of War', concluded at The Hague on 2 July 1917 and signed by Newton and Belfield, included several paragraphs on the internment, exchange and repatriation of POWs.[37] In the preamble, the 'Netherlands Government declare[d] their readiness to intern…a number of German and British combatant or civilian prisoners of war, not exceeding 16,000'.[38] Paragraph 3 on the 'New Schedules of Disabilities' for repatriation and internment held that '[n]ew and more lenient schedules of disabilities shall be drawn up for guidance in choosing combatant

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(The *Zoologische Garten* is expecting the exchange prisoners.) Accessed 6 September 2022.

[32]Thomas W. L., 2nd Baron Newton, *Retrospection,* (London: John Murray, 1941), p. 255; Ibid., p. 264.

[33]TNA WO 106/1451 - *Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War*, p. 7.

[34]Ibid., p. 5.

[35]Newton, p. 219.

[36]Ibid., p. 236.

[37]TNA WO 106/1451 - *Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War*, p. 92.

[38]Ibid.

prisoners of war'.[39] The reference to new schedules implies the existence of previous ones. Arguably, such a non-lenient schedule was drawn up in the context of the Anglo-German agreement for the exchange of the most severely wounded prisoners, concluded in 1915. Paragraph 4 of the 1917 Hague agreement, on 'Barbed Wire Disease', for the first time acknowledged the depression that POWs might suffer due to an extended stay in captivity. It held that those 'who have been at least 18 months in captivity…shall for the future be recognized as suitable for internment in Switzerland or other neutral country'.[40] The benefits of the agreement in general and this paragraph in particular only applied to officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs). Accordingly, paragraph 11 stipulates that '[a]ll officers and non-commissioned officers…so soon as they have been in captivity at least 18 months, shall…be interned in Switzerland or other neutral country'.[41] This wording reflected and extended the privileged treatment that officers had historically enjoyed in captivity.

Switzerland also set an example for the Netherlands in terms of interning POWs.[42] Swiss internment was characterised by '[a] warm welcome and generosity'.[43] Interned POWs were not perceived as enemies and were not imprisoned.[44] As the Dutch were keen to learn from the Swiss experience of POW internment and exchange, they even sent a senior officer 'on a fact-finding mission to Bern'.[45]

Paragraph 7 on the examination of POWs, who might qualify to benefit from the arrangement, was particularly important. It stated that

> [c]ommissions, composed of two medical officers of a neutral State and *three medical officers of the captor State*, shall proceed to examine the prisoners, who have been *recommended for internment by the camp medical officers of the captor State* after having made a thorough examination according to the new schedule of disabilities for internment [own emphasis].[46]

This paragraph implied that British POWs would not be presented to the medical commission for a decision as to whether they could leave Germany unless they had

[39]Ibid., p. 93.
[40]Ibid.
[41]Ibid., p. 94.
[42]Wolf, *Guarded Neutrality*, p. 147, p. 150.
[43]Susan Barton, *Internment in Switzerland during the First World War,* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic), p. 6.
[44]Ibid., p. 8.
[45]Wolf, *Guarded Neutrality*, p. 153.
[46]Ibid., p. 93.

first been referred by German camp medical officers. If the German doctors thought the POWs qualified, they would send them to the medical commission, which would examine them and take the final decision. Importantly, this medical commission sat at Aachen.

The contentious issues with this arrangement soon became apparent. The British side complained that the German camp medical staff were biased in their pre-selection. In a letter from Major-General Sir J. Hanbury Williams of the Prisoners of War Department from 6 March 1918 to Sir Walter Townley at The Hague regarding the examination of British POWs eligible for internment under paragraph 7, the general states: '[u]nder the present system the preliminary examination is entirely in the hands of the German doctors and there is no chance of any man reaching the Aachen Commission except on the recommendation of the Germans'.[47] The explicit reference to the 'Aachen Commission' underlines the centrality of Aachen as a staging post in the POW exchange and repatriation process[48] The War Office acknowledged these issues in a letter written on 8 April 1918. However, it stated that the arrangement was without any alternative. It would be logistically impossible for medical commissions to examine every POW. Neither would it be practical for POWs to ask to present themselves before these medical commissions.[49] By 1917, there were already too many of them for this to have been possible.

The implementation of paragraph 7 of the Anglo-German agreement concluded in 1917 resulted in accusations between Germany and Britain, which the agreement of 1918 sought to remedy. The War Office believed that paragraph 7 was applied 'far more conscientiously in this country than in Germany'.[50] Unsurprisingly, Germany disputed that view. In a note dated 23 July 1918, Germany accused Britain of violating the 1917 agreement. 'The sick are not being examined in the English camps in a manner prescribed by paragraph 7'.[51] Furthermore, 'English doctors have frequently classified as eligible for internment cases which have been pronounced by the Dutch members of the [Medical] Commission as eligible for repatriation [original emphasis].'[52] The British side vehemently rejected these allegations.[53] The accusatory tone of these

[47]TNA FO 383/412 - Letter, 6 March 1918, from Major General J. Hanbury Williams, Director, British Prisoners of War Department, to Sir Walter Townley.
[48]Ibid.
[49]TNA FO 383/412 - Letter, 8 April 1918, from the War Office to the Secretary, Prisoners-of-War Department.
[50]Ibid.
[51]TNA FO 383/412 - Memorandum No. 15, 23 July 1918, on the Exchange of the Sick presented to the British Delegates by the German delegation at The Hague.
[52]Ibid.
[53]Ibid.

statements illustrates that the atmosphere between both parties had become tense. Lord Newton noted that 'difficulties in connection with prisoners-of-war questions began to accumulate' in the spring of 1918.[54] These included food scarcity, delayed exchanges and alleged cruelties.[55] 'The Germans were already clamouring for another meeting at The Hague in order to discuss matters', he wrote.[56] Contextually, the German spring offensive of 1918 had resulted in many prisoners being taken.[57] Food shortages were acute not least because of the Allied blockade since August 1914.[58] The second Anglo-German conference began on 8 June 1918 at The Hague against this background.[59] Larger delegations, the charged atmosphere and mutual accusations about the implementation of paragraph 7 resulted in disappointing outcomes.[60] 'Ultimately a patched-up agreement was signed' on 14 July 1918 but not ratified until November 1918, as it had become conceivable that the war was going to end and 'that in any case the prisoners would be liberated shortly'.[61] Under the Armistice, the Allies insisted on immediate and unconditional release of all their prisoners, while exempting themselves from any obligation to release German prisoners.

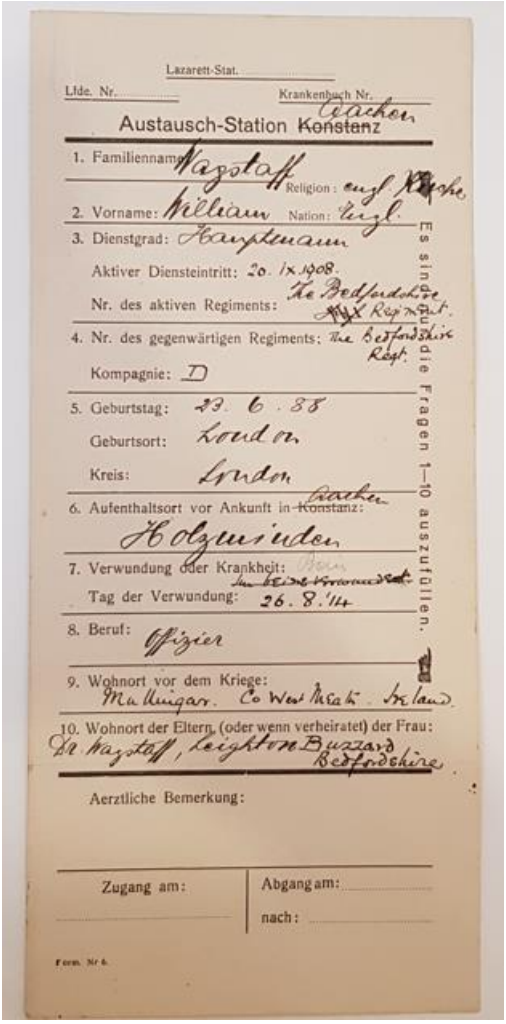
Aachen as a Staging Post

The importance of Aachen as a staging post for POW exchanges resulted from the existence of an exchange station in the city. An undated registration card, entitled '*Austausch-Station* Konstanz [*sic*] Aachen' (exchange station Aachen), provides evidence for its presence (see Figure 1).[62]

This document indicates that Captain William Wagstaff of the Bedfordshire Regiment, born on 23 June 1888 in London, was wounded on 26 August 1914 and imprisoned at Holzminden POW camp. At the bottom is a blank space for medical notes. It can be assumed that this section was reserved for the Aachen Commission, which had the final say on whether POWs would be able to leave Germany. The secondary literature

[54]Newton, p. 255.
[55]Ibid.
[56]Ibid.
[57]Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe, 1914-1949,* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), p. 60.
[58]*Der Erste Weltkrieg: eine europäische Katastrophe*, ed. by Bruno Cabanes, Anne Duménil and Birgit Lamerz-Beckschäfer, Schriftenreihe / Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, Band 1300, (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2013), p. 118.
[59]Newton, p. 256.
[60]Ibid., pp. 257–60.
[61]Ibid., p. 260; Ibid., p. 263.
[62]The Imperial War Museum, London (hereinafter IWM), LBY K.07/347, *Austausch-Station* Aachen.

describes Aachen as the city 'through which all British prisoners being repatriated to England or neutral Holland would pass'.[63]



Lazarett-Stat.

Lfde. Nr. Krankenbuch Nr.

Austausch-Station ~~Konstanz~~ Aachen

1. Familienname: Wagstaff Religion: ~~evgl.~~ kath.
2. Vorname: William Nation: Engl.
3. Dienstgrad: Hauptmann
   Aktiver Diensteintritt: 20. IX. 1908. The Bedfordshire
   Nr. des aktiven Regiments: ~~XIX~~ Regiment.
4. Nr. des gegenwärtigen Regiments: The Bedfordshire Regt.
   Kompagnie: D
5. Geburtstag: 23. 6. 88
   Geburtsort: London
   Kreis: London
6. Aufenthaltsort vor Ankunft in ~~Konstanz~~ Aachen: Holzminden
7. Verwundung oder Krankheit: Wunde im linken Oberschenkel
   Tag der Verwundung: 26. 8. '14
8. Beruf: Offizier
9. Wohnort vor dem Kriege: Mullingar. Co Westmeath. Ireland
10. Wohnort der Eltern (oder wenn verheiratet) der Frau: Lt Wagstaff, Leighton Buzzard Bedfordshire.

Aerztliche Bemerkung:

Zugang am: Abgang am:

nach:

Form. Nr 6.

Es sind die Fragen 1—10 auszufüllen.

Figure 1: Aachen Station registration Card (IWM LBY K.07/347)

[63]Philip D. Chinnery, *The Kaiser's First POWs,* (Barnsley: Pen & Sword Military, 2018), p. 74.

Captain Charles Stanley Johnson's ship was torpedoed by a German submarine off the coast of Italy. He arrived in Aachen on 24 June 1918 and noted,

> Here we found about 180 other officers who had come from different camps. We expected to be here for one night and then proceed to Holland. Only a party of 8 was sent to Holland, the remainder staying in the camp for 7 weeks.[64]

Captain Johnson's reference to a 'camp' suggests the existence of a holding facility for the exchange of prisoners where they were held while they were waiting for the decision on whether they would be able to leave Germany. John Halissey, a British private, is said to have conducted a concert in the city, presumably for POWs.[65] The presence of a British private suggests that it was not just officers and NCOs, who passed through the city, but also other ranks, who may have been officers' servants.

The exchanges via the Netherlands were preceded and inspired by French, German and British POW exchanges via Konstanz after Switzerland had also concluded agreements with the belligerent parties 'on the transfer of sick and wounded prisoners from prison camps in Germany, France and Britain'.[66] France and Germany began exchanging invalid prisoners in March 1915.[67] The success of the Swiss-Franco-German POW exchange agreement led Britain to pursue a similar arrangement regarding the transfer and internment of invalid POWs in early February 1916, which was implemented in May 1916.[68] British POWs entered Switzerland via Konstanz.[69] The Konstanz exchanges served as a role model for those via Aachen. This is illustrated by the crossing out of 'Konstanz' and the handwritten insertion of 'Aachen' on the registration card (see Figure 1).[70]

The military and civilian authorities played an important role in organising the POW exchanges. The main local military actor and most senior medical officer was *Reservelazarettdirektor* Jaeger. The Aachen city archives contain several letters, which he exchanged with the civilian administration, on POW matters in general and their accommodation in particular. In a letter written on 25 November 1915 and addressed to the mayor, Jaeger announces that exchange prisoners (*inter alia* one English officer

[64]IWM Document. 13319 - Private Papers of Captain C S Johnson, p. 39.
[65]Oliver Wilkinson, *British Prisoners of War in First World War Germany,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 207.
[66]Barton, *Internment*, p. 6.
[67]Speed, *Prisoners*, p. 34.
[68]Barton, *Internment*, p. 19; Ibid., p. 17, p. 53.
[69]Ibid., p. 24.
[70]Ibid., p. 25.

and eighty-seven English other rank prisoners) will be arriving 'again'.[71] This letter provides evidence that British soldiers passed through Aachen long before the conclusion of the Anglo-German exchange agreements in 1917 and 1918. The reference to 'other rank' prisoners is intriguing. It suggests that the agreement, which regulated the exchange of POWs in 1915, might not have been limited to officers and NCOs, in contrast to the subsequent ones. Jaeger asked the mayor to make the *Lochnergarten* available to accommodate English exchange prisoners. The facility served primarily as a recreational home for convalescent German soldiers. The *Reservelazarettdirektor* also noted that the British POWs would leave Aachen on 4 December 1915 to travel to Vlissingen on the Dutch coast.[72] From there, it can be assumed they sailed back to Britain.

German POWs coming from England travelled in the opposite direction. Aachen was the first city they came to after leaving the Netherlands. The first record of repatriated Germans is an article entitled 'Returned from England', published on 28 August 1915 in the *Aachener Anzeiger*.[73] It notes that 'some German warriors' returned 'again' from England.[74] This reference suggests that this was not the first exchange. The first German exchange prisoners returned in June 1915, as noted above. The article furthermore specifies that three hundred Englishmen were sent to England in exchange for twenty-two Germans, who 'stepped over the threshold of their home in Aachen'.[75] They arrived on a hospital train from Vlissingen. This reference to the Dutch coastal town in German primary sources corroborates its important role in the POW exchange process. Vlissingen is also mentioned in British primary sources and is referred to there as "Flushing". The article mentions that the hospital train that ran between both cities had a maximum capacity of two hundred and fifty beds. Many train journeys must have taken place to transport German and British POWs back and forth.

While the exchanges were progressing, the war began to impact the provision of food to the civilian population of Aachen. American newspapers described the precautions that were taken regarding the supply of bread to prevent shortages. '[T]he imperial,

[71] *Stadtarchiv*, Aachen (StaAC), 5703 - Letter, 25 November 1915, from *Reserve Lazarett Direktor* Professor Dr. Jaeger, *Generaloberarzt*, to 1.) *den Herrn Oberbürgermeister der Stadt Aachen z.H. des Herrn Bürgermeister Bacciocco*, 2.) Professor Dr. Hertwig.
[72] Ibid.
[73] 'Aus England zurückgekehrt', *Aachener Anzeiger*, 28 August 1915, p. 2, https://zeitpunkt.nrw/ulbbn/periodical/zoom/6746374. Accessed 18 September 2022.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid.

royal and municipal authorities have established strict regulations...'.[76] A local pastor described the act of being economical with bread as the patriotic contribution of women and children to the national war effort.[77] The desire to help the state became imperative.[78] Saving bread became a patriotic duty.

The Red Cross played an important role in catering for German and British prisoners during their stay. Primary sources describe the activities of a wartime *Verpflegungsstation* (bar) run by the Red Cross outside Aachen central station and detail who passed through *en route* to the Netherlands. The records held in the city archives list the number of enemy POWs attended to at the central station on a daily, monthly and annual basis from 1914 to 1918. However, they do not contain references to British POWs during the period from 4 September 1914 to 16 August 1915.[79] Only two 'English prisoners' are explicitly mentioned in the entry on 17 August 1915. No more are referred to as of this date until 13 May 1917.[80] They are missing the three hundred Englishmen, who were repatriated to England, as noted in the article in the *Aachener Anzeiger* from 28 August 1915. This suggests that the records of the Red Cross *Verpflegungsstation* are inaccurate. As they must have passed through Aachen they should have been recorded by the Red Cross at the central station. Alternatively, they might have left the city from *Aachen-West*, which is a smaller station for which no records seem to exist.

The files cover the period from 17 May 1917 to 13 November 1918 and clearly illustrate the impact of the Anglo-German exchange agreements on Aachen. They also underline the central role played by the city in the POW exchange and repatriation process.[81] Approximately sixteen thousand 'English prisoners' are recorded as having

[76]James O'Donnell Bennett, 'Simple Fare Now Pride of German Housewives: Rigorousness of System Worst Hardship of War Bread, Which Used To Be a Delicacy – Preachers Use Saving as Texts for Sermon', *New York Tribune*, 20 April 1915, p. 2, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/dlc_quinn_ver01/data/sn83030214/00206531885/1915042001/0424.pdf. Accessed 18 September 2022.

[77] James O'Donnell Bennett, 'Germany's War Bread System', *The Wheeling Intelligencer*, 20 April 1915, p. 11, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/wvu_cornwell_ver01/data/sn86092536/00414186373/1915042001/0249.pdf. Accessed 18 September 2022.

[78]Ibid.

[79]StaAC, Acc 1932/32a - (1) *Hauptbahnhof* Aachen. 4. September 1914 -16. Aug. 1915. (Central station Aachen.)

[80]StaAC, Acc 1932/32a - (2) *Hauptbahnhof* Aachen. *Tagebuch für Verpflegungsstelle Rote* [*sic*] *Kreuz*, Aachen *Hauptbahnhof, Bahnsteig IV*. 17. Aug. 1915 -13. Mai 1917. (Diary of the Red Cross bar at Aachen central station, platform 4.)

[81]StaAC, Acc 1932/32a - (3) *Hauptbahnhof* Aachen. 17. Mai 1917 -13. November 1918.

passed through during this time. All of whom arrived before the negotiations on the 1918 agreement had even begun. As expected, the number of British POWs passing through Aachen on their way home increased after the conclusion of the Anglo-German exchange agreement in 1917. Notably, only fourteen prisoners are explicitly referred to as officers. In reality, many more officer prisoners can be expected to have come to Aachen under the terms of the 1917 agreement. In light of the number of POWs, Jones's contention that the bilateral agreements were generally ineffective seems difficult to uphold.[82]

The main place in Aachen where many exchange prisoners were accommodated was the *Lochnergarten*. This facility played an important role in the exchange process and is located close to the two railway stations at which the British POWs arrived, *Aachen Hauptbahnhof* (central station) and *Aachen-West*. The *Lochnergarten* was made available to the military hospital administration in mid-June 1915. It was intended to be used by 'wounded German and British exchange prisoners' with the city's agreement.[83] However, it also served as a *Kriegerheim* (warriors' home) for convalescent German soldiers. This dual role led to tensions between the civilian and military authorities.

The military medical administration, represented by *Reservelazarettdirektor* Jaeger, primarily intended to use the *Lochnergarten* for exchange prisoners in line with the Geneva Convention, according to which enemy soldiers should be treated with the same level of care as one's own troops. The civilian administration, represented by the mayor, insisted on it being used by recovering German soldiers. When the facility was used by exchange prisoners, it could not be used by recovering German soldiers and vice versa. Interestingly, its capacity of two hundred and fifty beds matches the number of beds on the hospital train that travelled between Aachen and Vlissingen.[84] The report of a visit by the American Consul, Henry C.A. Damm, to British POWs at Aachen provides an independent and objective description of the *Lochnergarten* and its use.[85] The United States represented British interests in Germany, and German interests in Britain, until it entered the war in April 1917.[86] Visits to POW camps were routinely undertaken to verify that POWs were adequately treated and to build trust

[82]Jones, *A Missing Paradigm?*, p. 26.
[83]StaAC, Altablage 5704, p. 116.
[84]StaAC, C643K - *Die Vereine vom Roten Kreuz Aachen-Stadt im Weltkriege 1914/1915: Im Auftrage des Haupt-Ausschusses der Vereine vom Roten Kreuz Aachen-Stadt, Herausgegeben von Dr. H. Schweitzer*, no page numbers. (The Red Cross Charities of Aachen during the World War 1914/1915: Commissioned by the Main Committee of the Red Cross Charities of Aachen, edited by Dr. H. Schweitzer.)
[85]TNA CO 323/693 - Report, 24 August 1915, from Henry C.A. Damm to The Honourable James W. Gerard, American Ambassador, Berlin.
[86]Garner, *International Law (vol. 1)*, pp. 45, p. 53.

between the belligerents. About three hundred British POWs left for Holland on 24 August 1915. It can be assumed that these were the same three hundred prisoners who were described in the article that was published on 27 August 1915 and referred to above. Before returning to England, they stayed at the *Lochnergarten*, 'a large airy building with extensive grounds, and the British soldiers were given the use of the entire establishment'.[87] Damm's report further notes that '[t]he German prisoners of war released by Great Britain will arrive here in a few days', which underlines the importance of the *Lochnergarten* for the exchange of British and German prisoners.[88] The Consul's report was also covered in the *Aberdeen Daily Journal*, a Scottish newspaper, on 19 October 1915.[89] While the *Lochnergarten* was not explicitly mentioned, it was referred to in the article, which also confirmed that the prisoners were treated well. The publication of this article illustrates that the exchange of German and British POWs via Aachen was public knowledge.

The senior regional military command of the army corps district that Aachen belonged to rejected the mayor's view that the interests of German wounded soldiers should take precedence over the *Lochnergarten's* use by British POWs. 'On the contrary, the exchange of wounded POWs is a matter of significant political importance', it stated.[90] This correspondence highlights the relevance of the *Lochnergarten* for the exchange and repatriation process and the sensitivity around its use.

The *Lochnergarten* also served an important propagandistic purpose in the context of the positive reception of returning German prisoners. As discussed, the first German soldiers arrived in Aachen on 30 June 1915. The mayor was notified about their arrival on 20 June 1915. A celebratory reception at *Aachen-West* station was organised for the two hundred and fifty former prisoners. Local newspapers covered the event extensively. The overall tone of the article published in the *Aachener Anzeiger*, which marked the occasion of the returning German invalids, is one of a hero's welcome. It notes that the *Lochnergarten* was draped with flags, laurels and a bust of Wilhelm II. to celebrate their homecoming.[91] The article describes the facility as a big hall with 'very clean beds' that are aligned with 'military precision'.[92] It appears that no propagandistic

[87]TNA CO 323/693 - Report, 24 August 1915, from Henry C.A. Damm.
[88]Ibid.
'American Consular Report', *The Aberdeen Daily Journal*, 19 October 1915, p. 6, https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000576/19151019/059/0006. Accessed 11 September 2022.
[90]StaAC, 5703 - Letter, 10 Februar 1916, from *Generalleutnant* von Hepke, *Stellvertr. Generalkommando des VIII. A. - K.*, to *Herrn Oberbürgermeister*, p. 144. (Letter from Lieutenant-General von Hepke, regional military command, addressed to the mayor.)
[91]*Aachener Anzeiger*, 1 July 1915, p. 1.
[92]Ibid.; Ibid.

effort was spared to mark the occasion of the invalids' return. In this context, an article published on 28 August 1915 in the *Aachener Anzeiger* claims that their sacrifice was not in vain.[93] The speech at *Aachen-West* station by the commanding general of the local garrison indicates the propagandistic value inherent in the prisoners' return:

> You are returning as heroes. Your homeland welcomes you with pride and gratitude. With a deep sense of gratitude for everything that you have done for your fatherland and for everything that you have suffered through while serving your country. Rest assured that you will receive any available form of medical treatment and government support in abundance. You have kept your soldierly oath.[94]

As German prisoners arrived in Germany, their British counterparts hoped to travel in the opposite direction. In order to do so, they first had to submit themselves to the examination and decision of the Aachen Commission. As noted earlier the Aachen Commission had the authority to send a British POW home based on the 1917 agreement. It was composed of two medical officers of a neutral state, the Netherlands and three medical officers of the captor state, Germany. This arrangement highlights the pivotal role that Aachen played in the exchange process. Several primary sources provide evidence for the gatekeeper role of the Aachen Commission. Captain Charles Stanley Johnson, the naval officer referred to above, kept notes of his time as a prisoner. He recorded that the German doctor at Aachen refused to pass British POWs in March 1918 following their medical examination in line with paragraph 7 of the 1917 agreement.[95] According to another officer, Captain H.K. Ward,

> the present system [of exchanging POWs] leaves too big a loop hole [*sic*] for the German dishonesty… [A] purely German Medical Committee sitting at Aachen… [decides whether] a man is allowed to proceed to England. As far as I know there is no appeal against the decision of the Aachen Committee.[96]

The reference to a 'purely German' medical board neglects the presence of the two neutral medical officers on the Aachen Commission. Their omission by Captain Ward suggests that they might not have had a noticeable impact.

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[93]*Aachener Anzeiger*, 28 August 1915, p. 2.
[94]Ibid.
[95]IWM Documents. 13319 - *Private Papers of Captain C S Johnson*, p. 38.
[96]TNA FO 383/412 - Statement by Captain H.K. Ward, R.A.M.C., regarding the working of the Swiss Commission in Germany, made to the Government Committee on the Treatment by the Enemy of British Prisoners of War, 14 March 1918.

The Prisoners of War Department was aware of the shortcomings of paragraph 7 of the 1917 agreement. A departmental file entitled 'Examination of British prisoners by the Dutch Medical Commission at Aachen' dated 25 March 1918 with handwritten notes on it is instructive. One comment reads: '[t]he arrangement is an absolutely rotten one. The worst cases among our men…are not getting home, and the Germans are concealing the cases of which they are most ashamed'.[97] Lord Newton concurred but saw no alternative to the arrangement,

> It is quite true that the arrangement is unsatisfactory and gives the Huns unlimited opportunity for brutality. But on the other hand, how can the [Dutch] Commission go everywhere, especially in view of the enormous increase in the number of prisoners? N. 26.3.18.[98]

Lord Newton must have been alluding to the impact of Operation *Michael*, the German spring offensive, which had started five days earlier on 21 March 1918.[99] The Aachen Commission would become more important as a result of the number of prisoners that would be taken during this offensive.

The doctors at Aachen frequently refused to pass British POWs on medical grounds. There were also instances when prisoners were used as bargaining chips and were held up in the city.[100] When the 'St. Denis' sailed from Flushing to Tilbury on 25 May 1916, it left with only ninety-five wounded men but no officers on board. However, there were meant to be one hundred and twenty British invalids on board, including four officers. The officers and NCOs were held back at Aachen because they might be employed to train new recruits. Lord Newton had received a message on 25 May 1916 at about 2.30am stating that 'all the British prisoners were detained at Aachen, and that the matter was extremely urgent'.[101] He instructed the crew of the 'St. Denis' to detain the German officers and NCOs, who had already sailed to Flushing for exchange. However, they had disembarked the day before. When Sir Edward Grey asked the United States to enquire about the reason for the detention of the four officers, he was informed that they had been removed from the hospital train at Aachen.[102] Other records of the Prisoners of War Department suggest that Germany

[97]TNA, FO 383/412 - File No. 54276, 25 March 1918, entitled 'Examination of British prisoners by the Dutch Medical Commission at Aachen'.
[98]Ibid.
[99]Cabanes *et al.*, p. 340.
[100]Jones, *Prisoners of War*, p. 266.
[101]TNA, FO 383/148 - File No. 99389, entitled 'Return of British incapacitated prisoners'.
[102]TNA, FO 383/148 - Letter, 25 May 1916, from Alan Johnstone, British Legation at The Hague, to Sir Edward Grey.

withheld British POWs, who had already been cleared by the Aachen Commission, to put pressure on the British government because it suspected Britain of moving German prisoners around the country to prevent them from being exchanged.[103]

While Britain denied these allegations, there is evidence that the British government did use POWs to put pressure on Germany.[104] The transfer of several German officers interned at Donington Hall, a large house in Leicestershire, was delayed due to 'the omission of the German Government to transfer British officers and non-commissioned officers in accordance with the [1917] Agreement', according to a letter from the War Office addressed to the Prisoners of War Department dated 16 October 1918.[105] The 'Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War', written by the War Office, also notes that Britain retained about one thousand four hundred German officers 'pending the performance by the German Government of their obligations under the Armistice'.[106]

It is clear that both sides used prisoners as bargaining chips.

Approximately seven thousand eight hundred German invalids crossed Dutch territory from England to Germany between December 1915 and November 1918. Four thousand seven hundred British prisoners travelled in the opposite direction facilitated by the Dutch Red Cross.[107] Overall, 'the Dutch interned approximately 4,500 German and 6,000 British POWs [during the war]'. This was well below the 16,000 set at the British-German conference' in 1917 and suggests that the practical impact of the agreement was indeed not as significant as it could have been.[108]

The means of transport that was available to move prisoners between Germany and Britain presented an inherent obstacle to the full implementation of the 1917 agreement. '[T]he [German] U-boat campaigns, the existence of mines, and the British blockade made any sea-bound journey…potentially life threatening'.[109] In January 1917, Germany alleged that Britain had used its hospital ships for military purposes in

[103]TNA, FO 383/412 - File No. 11397, 19 August 1918, entitled 'Internment in Holland of British P/W'.
[104]TNA, FO 383/412 - Letter, 17 August 1918, from the War Office to the Secretary, Prisoners of War Department.
[105]TNA, FO 383/411 - Letter, 16 October 1918, from the War Office to the Secretary, Prisoners of War Department.
[106]TNA, WO 106/1451 - *Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War*, p. 79.
[107]Abbenhuis, p. 109.
[108]Ibid., p. 110.
[109]Ibid., p. 127.

violation of the Hague Convention.[110] Germany declared a maritime zone around Britain within which it would attack enemy hospital ships.[111] An unrestricted submarine warfare campaign also began in February 1917.[112] By threatening to attack hospital ships, Germany violated the Hague Convention on maritime warfare, which conferred an 'immunity on hospital ships and their staffs as well as upon ships engaged in the transportation of the wounded'.[113] As a result, British ships ceased to transport prisoners across the Channel.[114] Dutch paddle steamers were still able to operate between Britain and the Netherlands but transport capacity had decreased.[115] In a personal note on 30 March 1917, Lord Newton acknowledged the threat posed by German submarines.[116] He was also confused by the inherently contradictory German position. Germany stated that ships could not be used for the transfer of English and German POWs after the end of April 1918 between Boston, Lincolnshire and Rotterdam because safe passage could not be assured.[117] Newton described the dilemma as follows: 'But if the sailings stop at the end of next month, I wonder how the Huns expect that their 18 months men will ever get to Holland. N. 12.3.18.'[118]

Seemingly, unrestricted submarine warfare took precedence over the exchange of POWs.

British prisoners, who returned to England, were initially welcomed as positively as their German counterparts. After having left Aachen in 1918, Private Ranner, who has been discussed above, arrived at Boston. '[W]e were taken on tugs down the river to Boston, and were greatly cheered by people who lined the Banks [*sic*] all the way down.'[119] He then travelled to London, where an enthusiastic reception awaited the former prisoners,

> [A]s the train drew in…the uproar started. Whistles blowing, hooters sounding and the shouts of children outside the gates of St. Pancras… I and another chap

[110]Garner, *International Law (vol. 1)*, p. 508.
[111]Ibid., pp. 508-09.
[112]Cabanes *et al.*, p. 247.
[113]Garner, *International Law (vol. 1)*, p. 497.
[114]TNA WO 106/1451 - *Report on the Directorate of Prisoners of War*, p. 67.
[115]Ibid.
[116]Newton, p. 234.
[117]TNA FO 383/412 - Telegram No. 696, 15 February 1918, entitled 'Very Urgent. Your telegram No. 99 and my telegram No. 628. Following from Dutch Minister. Begins.'.
[118]TNA FO 383/412 - File No. 44481, 11 March 1918, entitled 'Internment of prisoners in neutral country [*sic*] (para. 7)'.
[119]IWM Documents.12065 - Private Papers of H.C. Ranner, p. 14.

> were driven through the crowd of people and children who were still yelling and throwing cigarettes and chocolates into the car as we passed.[120]

This example suggests that British former POWs were welcomed in a similarly positive way as their German counterparts, who had arrived at Aachen station to a hero's welcome. Private Ranner even received a welcome letter from King George V.[121] The positive reception that he and the German POWs experienced does not suggest that the loyalty and patriotism of returning POWs was questioned by either side, as Nachtigal notes.[122] However, Stibbe argues that having been a POW carried a social stigma at home.[123] Wilkinson also suggests that POWs were marginalised within the post-war discourse, as they were neither 'among the heroic dead…[nor did they appear as] successful warriors'.[124] The same applied to former German POWs.[125] Overall, POWs were low down in the 'commemorative pecking order'.[126]

Whether the Anglo-German agreement of 1917 had an impact depends on the perspective of the observer. The agreement had a significant impact for each German and British prisoner that benefited from it. Conversely, having made arrangements for the exchange of prisoners in the thousands could also be described as insignificant given the much higher numbers of prisoners held by each side. This view appears to dominate in the historiography. Stibbe agrees with Jones:

> by November 1918 the number of prisoners who had actually benefited from these [Anglo-German] arrangements was pitifully small, and progress towards implementation was painfully slow'.[127]

Abbenhuis concurs and points out that the number of German and British prisoners that were interned in the Netherlands was 'well below the 16,000 set at the British-German conference' in 1917. Undoubtedly the German submarine campaign represented an obstacle to the potential exchange of more prisoners given its threat to ship transport, even for hospital ships. The records from the Red Cross station at Aachen provide evidence that thousands of British prisoners passed through the city

[120]Ibid., p. 15.
[121]Ibid. (no page number).
[122]Nachtigal, *Kriegsgefangenschaft an der Ostfront*, p. 178.
[123]Stibbe, *Introduction*, p. 13.
[124]Wilkinson, *British Prisoners of War*, p. 280.
[125]Feltman, *Stigma of Surrender*, p. 165.
[126]Iris Rachamimov, *POWs and the Great War: Captivity on the Eastern Front,* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), p. 227.
[127]Matthew Stibbe, 'Civilian Internment and Civilian Internees in Europe, 1914-20', *Immigrants & Minorities*, 26, 1-2 (2008), pp. 49-81, p. 70.

on their way to Britain from 1914 to 1918. The agreement clearly did impact them. Being overly dismissive of it seems unwarranted when viewed from the perspective of the '16,000 or 17,000 [prisoners, who had] either [been] repatriated or interned in neutral countries in the course of the war', as Lord Newton pointed out in a debate in the House of Lords in March 1919.[128]

In a twist of fate, one of the exchanged POWs was Lieutenant Goschen, the son of the former British Ambassador. He had been wounded and captured at the beginning of the war. James W. Gerard, the American Ambassador, intervened personally with senior German government officials to secure his repatriation, which the British press reported on in November 1915.[129]

Conclusion

This paper has analysed the neglected role that Aachen played in the process of exchanging and repatriating German and British military POWs during the First World War. Bordering the neutral Netherlands, Aachen undoubtedly served as an important staging post.

The Aachen Medical Commission decided whether British POWs were eligible to leave the country and travel over the border to the neutral Netherlands, and while there were disagreements on its impartiality, some sixteen thousand British POWs did pass through the city on their way home based on the two treaties concluded between Britain and Germany.

The historiography has not previously analysed the central role played by Aachen in the POW exchange and repatriation process. Moreover, it has also largely neglected to investigate the manner in which British POWs were treated in the city during their captivity and whether some of them might have tried to escape. Such matters could be the subject of further research.

[128]TNA FO 383/499 - File No. 3326, 10 March 1919, entitled 'Search for Missing', House of Lords, Hansard, Prisoners of War debate in Lords Chamber, The Controller of the Prisoners of War Department (Lord Newton), 6 March 1919, p. 570.
[129]James W. Gerard, *My Four Years in Germany,* (The Project Gutenberg EBook, 2015), pp. 85-6, https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7238. Accessed 11 September 2022.; 'Lieutenant Goschen', *Sheffield Evening Telegraph*, 27 November 1915, p. 5, www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000276/19151127/098/0005. Accessed 11 September 2022.