Chapel at Fort Reno, Oklahoma, a German POW camp in America
Reeducation of German POWs during World War II in the State of Oklahoma

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Few Americans know that the United States was home to almost half a million Axis prisoners spread out across the United states during the Second World War. Even fewer Americans know about the attempted “reeducation” of prisoners of war during their time spent interned in the United States. The lack of public knowledge about the reeducation efforts could be because of the general consensus that the program was unsuccessful.

This research provides evidence that the Intellectual Diversion Program, created to reeducate prisoners of war during World War II, can be seen as a successful attempt in the state of Oklahoma.¹ Primary source documents from the Oklahoma-based program show that the professors conducting the lectures for the reeducation program, the

¹ All of the primary source research done for the purpose of this paper was found in the University of Oklahoma Libraries Western History Collections. More specifically, the Prisoner of War Camps Collection, Box P-20, Folders 1-4.
officers running the prisoner of war camps, and even the prisoners themselves thought the program was beneficial and quite successful.²

Before presenting this evidence, I will provide a general background on prisoners of war in the United States, a brief section dedicated to the three Oklahoma prisoner of war camps that will be examined and discussed in this paper, and a general overview of the Intellectual Diversion Program itself.

The successful allied campaigns in North Africa and Italy in 1943 produced the first large influx of axis prisoners of war. A major issue became what to do with them. Great Britain was already overcrowded with POWs and could not take on the voluminous numbers of captured Axis prisoners pouring in. The United States was seen as a plausible solution to the problem because of its large land area and distance from the theaters of war even though it had made few preparations to house such prisoners; much work was still to be done.³

An administrative system had to be created to oversee prisoners of war along with construction of the camps that had to be completed prior to the arrival of Axis prisoners. This was no small feat considering the United States lack of preparation. The War Department was the

² When looking at the overall success or failure of the Oklahoma-based reeducation program, the potential biases of the two professors, Wardell and Willibrand, as well as Lt. Speakman must be noted because of their involvement and vested interest in the program.
³ Antonio Thompson, *Men In German Uniform: POWs in America During World War II* (Knoxville. The University of Tennessee Press, 2010), 1.
primary agency charged with the oversight of prisoners of war, but had help from the Office of the Provost Marshal Generals Office (OPMG) and the Military Police Corps (MPC) among others.\textsuperscript{4}

During the course of the Second World War, there were more than 430,000 prisoners of war interned within United States, the majority of whom were German (approximately 380,000).\textsuperscript{5} The prisoners of war came from all theaters of battle. The majority came from the campaigns in North Africa and Italy.

While the government created camps throughout the United States, they were primarily located in the southern and western parts of the country and areas with high labor shortages.\textsuperscript{6} Therefore, Oklahoma’s sparse population and desperate need for labor made it an ideal candidate for POW camps. The Government built eight base camps in Oklahoma along with fourteen more branch camps spread out across the state.\textsuperscript{7} Base camps were large, permanent or semi-permanent structures built to house up to 4,000 prisoners. Branch camps were smaller non-permanent

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 1-3. The War Department depended on several other agencies for assistance with the POW program but they are irrelevant for the sake of this paper. Also, the Provost Marshal General is the commanding officer of the national network of camps.
\textsuperscript{6} Thompson, 3-9.
\textsuperscript{7} Edward C. Corbett, \textit{Interned for the Duration: Axis Prisoners of War in Oklahoma 1942-1946}. Master’s thesis, Oklahoma City University, 1965), 12. (I will only focus on the base camp at Fort Reno and its two branch camps at Chickasha and Will Rodgers Field. I should also note that there is some controversy over the number of base camps located in Oklahoma, but it is not important for the focus of this paper.)
areas for a few hundred to 1,000 prisoners and were often located near areas that required seasonal labor.\textsuperscript{8} The camp located at Fort Reno, in El Reno Oklahoma, was one of Oklahoma’s eight base camps. Two smaller branch camps were built at Will Rogers Field and Chickasha and served as off shoots of the Fort Reno camp.\textsuperscript{9} These three camps will be the only ones examined in this paper because they are the camps primarily involved in the reeducation program in Oklahoma.

The majority of prisoners held in the United Sates came from either the African or Italian campaigns. As a result, all of the men interned at the three Oklahoma camps listed above came from Erwin Rommel’s famous \textit{Afrika Korps}, and were captured in Tunisia.\textsuperscript{10} The first batch of prisoners arrived in Oklahoma in the summer of 1943.\textsuperscript{11}

The Provost Marshal Generals Office created the Intellectual Diversion Program earlier that year in the fall of 1943, but they did not put a real emphasis on the project until the latter part of the war. The program fell under the control of the newly created Special Projects Division (SPD). Among the goals of the program were to provide and encourage ideological alternatives to National Socialism for German

\textsuperscript{8} Thompson, 9-10.  
\textsuperscript{9} Corbett, 16. 
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 361-369.
prisoners while promoting democracy and American history and idealism.\(^{12}\)

The project had to be done covertly in the beginning because regulations in the 1929 Geneva Convention forbade indoctrination of imprisoned combatants; yet, the broadness of the Convention’s article allowed for an equally broad interpretation.\(^{13}\) The program also recruited University professors from around the country to give lectures on democracy and other relevant themes deemed acceptable by the Provost Marshal Generals Office.\(^{14}\)

It must first be noted that many historians regarded the Intellectual Diversion Program as unsuccessful. Ron Robin argues in his book *The Barbed-Wire College* that the program had little if any lasting effect at all.\(^{15}\) Antonio Thompson, author of *Men In German Uniform*, seems to agree that the overall program was unsuccessful.\(^{16}\) Critics of the program said that it only reached a fraction of the prisoners interned in the United States, was too brief (only lasting about a year in most camps), and had a broad, ambiguous mission.\(^{17}\) Another issue that must be addressed is the vagueness of the definition of successful when

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\(^{12}\) Robin, 3-9.

\(^{13}\) Thompson, 125-126.

\(^{14}\) Correspondence from John B. Cheadle the Office of the President at the University of Oklahoma to Colonel Francis P. Howard of the Provost Marshal Generals Office. October 4, 1944. Prisoner of War Camps Collection, Box P-20, Folder 1. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

\(^{15}\) Robin, 5-13, 127-134.

\(^{16}\) Thompson, 125-127.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.
examining the reeducation program. It is hard to measure something like the successfulness of such a program; however, for the sake of the focus of this paper I will use the opinions of people involved in the program (on the teaching and receiving side) as evidence of the Oklahoma-based program’s success.

The University of Oklahoma was one of many schools around the country that assisted in the intellectual diversion of German prisoners. Although the University of Oklahoma received requests for assistance in October of 1944, the program did not start in Oklahoma until the following year in the fall of 1945 after the war in Europe had ended.¹⁸ The two professors selected for the program were Dr. Morris L. Wardell, a history professor as well as Director of the Extension Divisions, and Dr. William A. Willibrand, a history and language professor at the University of Oklahoma.¹⁹

The two University of Oklahoma professors gave six lectures at the base camp in Fort Reno and the two surrounding branch camps at

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¹⁸ It must be noted that the time period in which the program took place is extremely relevant when examining the prisoners’ opinions of the reeducation program. It is after the war’s end. They are no longer Nazi soldiers in the Wehrmacht.
¹⁹ Cheadle to Howard, October 4, 1944; Lt. Cummins E. Speakman to Dr. M. L. Wardell, August 13, 1945; Lt. Speakman to Dr. Wardell (schedule of lecture dates attached to correspondence), September 1, 1945. Prisoner of War Camps Collection, Box P-20, Folder 1. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.
Will Rogers Field and Chickasha-- 18 lectures in all. The first three lectures, in October 1945, covered topics such as the rise of National Socialism and democracy in America. The following month and into early December, the professors gave three more lectures, where they continued on with the underlying theme of democracy.

Both Wardell and Willibrand were pleased with the success of the reeducation program, and were impressed with the curiosity and attentiveness demonstrated by the prisoners during their lectures and the time allotted for questions. Dr. Wardell commented on the success of the program along with his own personal satisfaction with it multiple times in correspondence with Lt. Cummins E. Speakman Jr., who was the officer in charge of the reeducation program at the camp in Fort Reno and who will be further introduced later in the paper. Wardell thought that the reeducation program was successful locally, and moreover that it should have been implemented much earlier and deployed more aggressively nationally to have had more positive effects like the program in Oklahoma. Wardell wrote to Lt. Speakman, “My own feelings about the whole educational program is that more should have been done in all of the prisoner of war camps from the earliest

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20 There were also a series of lectures in February of 1946 at the three camps, but I could not find sufficient information regarding an opinion of success or failure of these lectures so they were omitted from this paper.

21 Lt. Speakman to Dr. Wardell (schedule of lecture dates attached to correspondence), September 1, 1945. Prisoner of War Camps Collection, Box P-20, Folder 1. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.
beginnings of the program.”

He continued on and commented about the prisoners themselves suggesting, “Many of these men are willing to learn about a better way in which Germany can live in the future.”

Wardell genuinely believed that the lectures and discussion were getting through to the German prisoners on some level, and that the program was fulfilling its objective. Evidence of this can be seen in the rise in attendance over the two-month period along with lively discussions after the lectures according to newspaper articles in the *Oklahoma City Times*. Further evidence of this view can be seen in a correspondence with Lt. Speakman in November after the first series of lectures took place, where Wardell wrote, “I feel sure that some of them are sincerely interested in knowing more...” As the quote suggests, Wardell’s faith in the effectiveness of the program came from what he believed to be his student’s sincere interests in what the program had to teach them.

From the interviews of both professors provided in the *Oklahoma City Times* Newspaper articles and the correspondence

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22 Dr. Wardell to Lt. Speakman, December 6, 1945. Prisoner of War Camps Collection, Box P-20, Folder 1. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.
23 Ibid.
25 Dr. Wardell to Lt. Speakman, November 24, 1945. Prisoner of War Camps Collection, Box P-20, Folder 1. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.
between Wardell and Speakman, one can conclude that both Dr. Willibrand and Dr. Wardell believed the project to be very successful. Wardell told the *Oklahoma City Times*, “it’s one of the most miraculous features of this truly amazing program.”

Willibrand was also impressed with the program and his students as well. An Oklahoma City Times reporter wrote, “Professor Willibrand remarked that the Germans showed a greater curiosity about the structure of American life than the average college student.” He seemed to be impressed with his German students when comparing them to other students outside of the prison camps.

Lt. Cummins E. Speakman Jr., as the officer in charge of the reeducation program at the prisoner of war camp in Fort Reno, organized the lectures, kept in touch with Wardell, handled compensation for the visiting professors, and worked out logistical issues in the program.

Speakman was assigned to the prisoner of war educational division in the

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27 Mike Gorman, “German’s Thirst for Knowledge of America Called Keener than Average U.S. Student’s,” *Oklahoma City Times*, March 2, 1946. Prisoner of War Camps Collection, Box P-20, Folder 3. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma. The correspondences referred to previously were only between Wardell and Speakman and did not include Willibrand, therefore his opinion was not documented in the Prisoner of War Camps Collection correspondences and thus could not be provided.

28 Lt. Speakman to Dr. Wardell, August 13, 1945; Lt. Speakman to Dr. Wardell, September 1, 1945; Lt. Speakman to Dr. Wardell, November 10, 1945. Prisoner of War Camps Collection, Box P-20, Folder 1. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.
fall of 1944 and came to Oklahoma to begin the reeducation of German prisoners of war.\textsuperscript{29} Lt. Speakman was held in high regard for going above and beyond the norm to create an exemplary education program at the Fort Reno camp. He created his own small school within the camp separate from the lectures with Wardell and Willibrand. He also organized a team of well-educated German prisoners who conducted voluntary classes at night for the prisoners to take after their day’s work.\textsuperscript{30} A \textit{Daily Oklahoman} reporter wrote, “Lieut. Speakman’s school is the only one of its kind among American prisoner of war camps, and he worked out the idea on his own and without suggestion from the higher command. He deserves all the credit.”\textsuperscript{31} 

Lt. Speakman was passionate about creating a program in which German prisoners could actually learn about the characteristics and values of democracy. He was not interested in creating “robot like imitations of American democrats” but instead wanted his students to truly learn about democratic ideals.\textsuperscript{32} One can also see his seriousness in regards to the program, along with his positive opinion of the success of

\textsuperscript{29} Mike Gorman, “Deep Suspicions of Men Molded by Hitler Almost Wrecked Fort Reno School Program,” \textit{Oklahoma City Times}, February 27, 1946, p. 10. Prisoner of War Camps Collection, Box P-20, Folder 3. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{31} Elmer T. Peterson, “Teaching the Nazis Better than Bombs,” \textit{Daily Oklahoman}, March 11, 1946. Prisoner of War Camps Collection, Box P-20, Folder 3. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

the program, in a correspondence with Dr. Wardell. Lt. Speakman applauded Wardell for the lecture held the previous night, but criticized him for sidestepping a few important issues regarding the negative aspects of democracy, such as racial issues, that are present in the American democratic system.\(^{33}\) Lt. Speakman expressed his feelings about the positive aspects of the lectures and the success of the program overall, but he was not afraid to point out the shortcomings of the lectures as well in order to provide a well-rounded view of democracy to the prisoners. Wardell duly noted Lt. Speakman’s suggestion and acknowledged in a later correspondence that he had made the adjustments and improved the lecture at the other two branch camps.\(^{34}\)

One can see that Lt. Speakman was passionate and dedicated to the reeducation effort in Oklahoma and did everything in his power to make improvements to the already great program. Lt. Speakman created a unique system that amounted to a high quality prisoner of war educational system. It is clear that Lt. Speakman’s diligent efforts in the Oklahoma-based reeducation program was part of the reason for the Oklahoma program’s success within a reeducation program that failed overall.

\(^{33}\) Lt. Speakman to Dr. Wardell, November 10, 1945. Prisoner of War Camps Collection, Box P-20, Folder 1. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

\(^{34}\) Dr. Wardell to Lt. Speakman, November 24, 1945. Prisoner of War Camps Collection, Box P-20, Folder 1. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.
Finally, the German prisoners themselves were very receptive to the camps’ education program and the two visiting University of Oklahoma professors. According to Lt. Speakman, the program started off slowly because the prisoners were not sure if it was an attempt to indoctrinate them with American propaganda. Yet, Lt. Speakman brilliantly incorporated qualified POWs into the teaching of his education program, which gave other prisoners more confidence in the program. Soon the program became popular among the inmates. It was so popular, in fact, that classrooms were not big enough to hold all the prisoners who wanted to attend. Mike Gorman wrote in an *Oklahoma City Times* article in March of 1946 that the program “achieved a tremendous popularity…. No classroom was big enough, so classes were transferred to the mess hall. Average attendance was 275 out of a prison population of 700….“ Such stories and statistics serve as evidence of the enthusiastic response to the education program at the Oklahoma Camps. It should be noted that the classes and lectures were completely voluntary and most men attended at night in a cold mess hall after a long day’s work in the labor program.

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36 Mike Gorman, “German’s Thirst for Knowledge of America Called Keener than Average U.S. Student’s,” *Oklahoma City Times*, March 2, 1946. Prisoner of War Camps Collection, Box P-20, Folder 3. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.
37 Mike Gorman, “German’s Thirst for Knowledge of America Called Keener than Average U.S. Student’s”
The same article quoted one of the German prisoners, who served as a teacher in the program, as saying, “After each lecture, groups of men came up and asked me question after question. In every barracks, there was animated discussion until lights out.”38 The lectures and classes stimulated discussion among the inmates about new ideologies and the future of Germany. There seemed to be nothing superficial about the prisoners’ receptiveness of the program.

Further insight can be drawn from the camp newspaper created by the inmates at Fort Reno and the surrounding branch camps at Chickasha and Will Rogers Field. The camps paper was fittingly titled, *Die Neue Welt*, which translates in English to “the new world.” The lead article of the first issue of *Die Neue Welt*, published in November of 1945 after the first set of lectures, was a prisoner’s statement about their goals. The article was littered with references to freedom and democracy and the goal of creating a new democratic Germany. In one section of the article, the author stated, “Germany’s future lies solely in her sincere return to the ideals of genuine democratic thought.”39 The author goes even further and called on his fellow prisoners to help create this future for Germany by utilizing their time interned in Oklahoma to learn and

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38 Ibid.
39 Bruno Neckerman, “Our Paper, Our Road and Our Goal,” *Die Neue Welt*, November 7, 1945. p. 2. Prisoner of War Camps Collection, Box P-20, Folder 2-a. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma. (Die Neue Welt was the prisoner of war camp newspaper for Fort Reno and surrounding camps)
understand other ideologies and opinions. He wrote, “We can help prepare this future while we are still here in America by patiently attempting to understand the personal opinions of the others.” The camp newspaper promoted the reeducation program to other inmates in an attempt to recruit more students for the program, which provides further evidence of the success of the reeducation project in Oklahoma.

In an article in the same issue of Die Neue Welt, prisoner Ferdinand Scherer of the Chickasha branch camp wrote about the prisoner’s positive opinion of the education programs guest lectures. Scherer starts off by suggesting that Dr. Wardell’s lecture, on the rise of National Socialism, was “very eloquent and aroused great interest in 150 listeners.” One hundred and fifty listeners seems quite remarkable considering the significantly lower population of the branch camps in comparison to the base camp. Scherer wrote that after consulting with other prisoners in attendance, they concluded that, “They are aware of the facts that we, Germans, need the help and understanding of men like Dr. Wardell in the spiritual and physical rebuilding of Germany.” Scherer suggested that he and his comrades were pleased with the first lecture given by Dr. Wardell and welcomed more to come. It seems that they saw some value in the lectures and that the lectures would be

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40 Ibid.  
42 Ibid.
beneficial to them in helping create a new democratic Germany after the war.

It may well be true that the Special Projects Divisions’ Intellectual Diversion Program was a failure overall, but there is at least one case that contradicts this view-- Oklahoma’s prisoner of war reeducation program. Newspaper articles from the Daily Oklahoman and the Oklahoma City Times, correspondence letters between Dr. Wardell and Lt. Speakman, and the prison camp newspaper all pointed to a successful program that provided an alternative ideology for the prisoners, who by the end of the program believed in democracy and the necessity of a future democratic Germany. This can be attributed in part to the hard work of Lt. Speakman, for his efforts to create an exemplary education program at the Fort Reno Camp, Dr. Wardell and Willibrand’s competent and enthusiastic delivery of instruction, and also the prisoners for their willingness to learn and desire to create a new Germany for the future. Perhaps there are more pockets of success like the Oklahoma experience that remains to be found for this depreciated educational program.