

A Tale of Two Wars

To what extent can the dichotomy intercultural war/trans-cultural war explain the different treatment meted out to prisoners of war at various times and places? To answer this question within the limits of the time available, I shall focus on two case studies. The first of these, drawn from the American Civil War, comes as close to being an intercultural war as possible, the two sides belonging to the same race, speaking the same language, and, until the outbreak of war, having been united within a single political entity. The second, drawn from the period when the followers of the Mahdi were facing the British in the Sudan, is as pure an example of trans-cultural war as can be found. What makes these two case-studies particularly suitable for our purpose is that they were separated by no more than twenty years; there was no question here of a change, say, from “the ancient world” into “the middle ages” or from “the middle ages” into “the modern age”. Even so, we shall find that the above-mentioned dichotomy can only explain a small part of what actually took place. If some people find this conclusion disappointing, then so be it.

To begin, then, with the fate of prisoners of war during the American Civil War.¹ In fact, the name itself is a misnomer; a compromise between Northerners, who regarded it as the result of a Southern “rebellion”, and Southerners, who to this day often call it “The War of Northern Aggression”. These distinctions are important because, had they been followed and the logical consequences from then drawn, the outcome for prisoners of war on both sides would have been dire indeed. Southern prisoners in Northern hands would have faced the treatment normally reserved for rebels. Northern prisoners in Southern hands might have been regarded not as legitimate soldiers but as criminals on an illegitimate crusade. Either way, they would have been punished. This, as already

¹ My main source for this part of the article is William Hesseltine, *Civil War Prisons: A Study of War Psychology* (Columbus, Ohio, 1930).