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While in the Hands of the Enemy: Military Prisons of the Civil War (Conflicting Worlds: New Dimensions of the American Civil War)

Charles W. Sanders Jr.

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During the four years of the American Civil War, over 400,000 soldiers -- one in every seven who served in the Union and Confederate armies -- became prisoners of war. In northern and southern prisons alike, inmates suffered horrific treatment. Even healthy young soldiers often sickened and died within weeks of entering the stockades. In all, nearly 56,000 prisoners succumbed to overcrowding, exposure, poor sanitation, inadequate medical care, and starvation. Historians have generally blamed prison conditions and mortality rates on factors beyond the control of Union and Confederate command, but Charles W. Sanders, Jr., boldly challenges the conventional view and demonstrates that leaders on both sides deliberately and systematically ordered the mistreatment of captives.

Sanders shows how policies developed during the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Mexican War shaped the management of Civil War prisons. He examines the establishment of the major camps as well as the political motivations and rationale behind the operation of the prisons, focusing especially on Camp Douglas, Elmira, Camp Chase, and Rock Island in the North and Andersonville, Cahaba, Florence, and Danville in the South. Beyond a doubt, he proves that the administrations of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis purposely formulated and carried out retaliatory practices designed to harm prisoners of war, with each assuming harsher attitudes as the conflict wore on.

Sanders cites official and personal correspondence from high-level civilian and military leaders who knew about the intolerable conditions but often refused to respond or even issued orders that made matters far worse. From such documents emerges a chilling chronicle of how prisoners came to be regarded not as men but as pawns to be used and then callously discarded in pursuit of national objectives. Yet even before the guns fell silent, Sanders reveals, both North and South were hard at work constructing elaborate justifications for their actions.

While in the Hands of the Enemy offers a groundbreaking revisionist interpretation of the Civil War military prison system, challenging historians to rethink their understanding of nineteenth-century warfare.

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