

Bounty And Ransom: Hostage Taking Provided Lucrative Political Capital

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Review

BOUNTY AND RANSOM

Hostage taking provided lucrative political capital

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Garrison, Webb *Civil War Hostages: Hostage Taking in the Civil War*. White Mane Publishing Company, 2000-06-01. ISBN 157249199X

During the Great War, submarine conflict was less a game of cat-and-mouse than of political finger pointing between the British and German governments. Britain accused Germany of purposely sinking neutral ships. British warships, however, had given the Germans ample room for error. They not only flew neutral flags in an attempt to ward off destruction but received blatant orders (written in typically noncommittal Lloyd-Georgian language) in 1915 to deceive the Germans by disguising themselves as noncombatants.

The early stages of hostage taking during the Civil War, detailed in the late Webb Garrison's **Civil War Hostages**, were framed by a similar conflict. Privateers had been instrumental in winning American independence almost a century before, and in April 1861, reasoning that the Confederacy was free under international law to license privateers, Jefferson Davis proclaimed that letters of marque would be offered for "private armed vessels" willing to prey upon Yankee shipping in exchange for a share of the profits.

For Abraham Lincoln, there would be no repeat of the Revolutionary War. Two days after Davis's statement, Lincoln issued one of his own. As he refused to recognize the Confederacy's secession, any persons harassing the Union blockade under the "pretended authority" of the Rebel states would be "held amenable to the laws of the United States for the prevention and punishment of piracy."

Faced with the possibility of captured privateers being executed, the Confederate government decided to use Union prisoners of war as hostages. Captured Yankees were selected and their lives placed on the line - if a

Confederate privateer were killed, the Union counterpart would die, too. The first big prison "lottery" to select such hostages was held in November 1861, at Ligon Prison, Richmond. Congressman Alfred Ely of New York, captured at Manassas, was forced to draw 13 names. Such Confederate ploys eventually worked, and formed the basis for the hostage and prisoner exchanges that would occur throughout the War.

Garrison vividly details various accounts of high seas intrigue and other incidents of Civil War hostage taking in a breezy, anecdotal, and highly readable style. Recounting obscure tales like the exploits of "Zarvona" (the Confederate colonel who allegedly hijacked ships while disguised as a woman), the various attempts to seize government officials such as Davis and Lincoln as POWs, the desperate hostage scheme to save Charleston in 1864, and how men tried to hold hostage Lincoln's corpse in 1868, **Civil War Hostages** rarely fails to hold the reader's interest.

Sean Salai, editor of The Wabash Commentary, prepared this review while in residence at the Institute for Political Journalism at Georgetown University.