

Penitentiaries, Punishment, and Military Prisons: Familiar Responses to an Extraordinary Crisis during the American Civil War

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Review

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Zombek, Angela. *Penitentiaries, Punishment, and Military Prisons: Familiar Responses to an Extraordinary Crisis during the American Civil War.* Kent State University Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9781606353554

Angela M. Zombek, an assistant professor of history at St. Petersburg College, Clearwater, offers a well-researched monograph examining the similarities between antebellum and Civil War penitentiaries and military prisons. Zombek's comparative framework not only investigates parallels between these institutions in the early republican, antebellum, and Civil War eras, but she also assesses likenesses in regional northern and southern carceral institutions. In particular, Zombek focuses on both state penitentiaries and military prisons in Washington, D.C., Ohio, Virginia, Georgia, and North Carolina. While the rationale for the selection of these regions and institutions might be explained in more detail, Zombek's targets are well selected because, as she explains, this focus does some heavy lifting in countering the northeastern bias present in much of the scholarship on nineteenth-century prison history. Overall, Zombek finds far more similarities than she does differences both between eras and among the different regions under examination and successfully explains in rich detail "how antebellum assumptions about imprisonment informed administrators and influenced inmates at numerous military prisons regardless of their physical construction and populations" (xvii). Far too little explicitly comparative history of regions and time periods is attempted by historians of all stripes, with differences often assumed but never actually tested, and Zombek should be lauded for her efforts here.

This book is most successful when drawing out the specific ways that antebellum approaches to constructing, organizing, and operating new and imposing state penitentiaries provided a template for the ways in which Union and Confederate authorities during the Civil War managed their military prisons. For example, Zombek explains how authorities running Civil War prisons, like their antebellum counterparts, drew on similar disciplinary procedures,

approached inmates' reformation in the same manner, and expected prisoners to labor both as an element of rehabilitation and in an effort to help defray the costs of running large and expensive state institutions. As Zombek demonstrates, often those operating Civil War military prisons had experience running antebellum state penitentiaries, and she concludes that, "wartime penitentiaries and military prison operation, administration, and the daily experiences of officials, therefore, were modeled on antebellum practices" (53).

Zombek's work functions as an extended effort to counter the twin and related notions that the Civil War represented a stark break with the antebellum past and that northern and southern modes of prison discipline were fundamentally dissimilar. Her conclusion, that "the development of the penitentiary program in the antebellum period shaped Americans' interpretations of the Civil War crisis" (x) serves as an important reminder for scholars to question how they organize their framework of distinct periods of history. While this is a worthwhile effort, it is, in the final analysis, not as groundbreaking as one would like. Of course, Civil War officials tasked with organizing military prisons drew extensively on what they knew from before the war. That insight, finely detailed by Zombek, is not especially surprising. Further, in her effort to demonstrate similarities across time periods, institutions, and regions the work often appears to downplay or erase meaningful differences. Certainly, the Civil War was not the total rupture that it is sometimes made out to be and Zombek's work reminds us of that. However, if the Civil War did not constitute a break with the past age, then nothing did. Reading through this book one can lose sight both of the war's meaningful impact both in shaping carceral institutions and in shaping regional North and South, Union and Confederate differences.

Zombek's work also details the wide gap that existed between the various theories of prison reform and rehabilitation and the actual operation of prison life in both antebellum state penitentiaries and military prisons during the Civil War. This is accomplished through several chapters in the center part of the book that examine in detail the lived reality of guards and inmates: both criminals and prisoners of war, including an especially strong chapter on female inmates. Zombek explains how both types of inmates internalized the stigma of incarceration, often feeling a searing despair, and at times embraced administrators' and chaplains' attempts to gain their reform. At the same time Zombek examines how other inmates resisted their captors' effort to control through an array of tactics from open violence, rebellion, and escape attempts to

more subtle strategies like self-mutilation to avoid the punishment of hard labor and efforts to curry favor with prison guards by informing on other prisoners' escape plans. Zombek's research here is extensive, and she has read through official, published prison records, penitentiary and prison archival material in all the corresponding states and D.C., as well relevant newspapers. While the primary sources drawn on are fulsome, one wishes that an effort had been made in places to generate some comparative broader statistical portrait of prisoners, their punishments, escapes, the number of pardons by race and over time and at different institutions, and the like. Statistics such as these, and others, might have revealed some key differences among the many similarities Zombek locates in the impressive primary source material under review.

While Zombek should be lauded for her effort to produce a history of penitentiaries and military prisons that seeks to uncover the realities of life inside these carceral institutions and advance a history of incarceration from the perspective of the incarcerated, her approach suffers at times from a lack of sustained engagement with some of the more involved theoretical approaches to carceral studies and state formation. In constructing a detailed "history from below" (79) of inmates' world view and experiences, Zombek's work can begin to feel like a straightforward catalogue of events or a simple reporting on the day-to-day realities of the carceral world. Missing from this study is an involved discussion of theorists and philosophers of prisons and punishment from Karl Marx and Émile Durkheim to David Garland and Michel Foucault. On the one hand, Zombek's work stands in its own right. On the other hand, Zombek's excellent research calls out for a more powerfully structured analytical framework. For example, scholars like Durkheim and Foucault have constructed theories of punishment and prisons' relationship to state formation that ignore or downplay the social reality of incarceration. However, if inmate resistance is an endemic feature of antebellum and Civil War carceral institutions, as Zombek seems to argue, then what might be the implication for these larger and powerfully argued theoretical interventions? Similarly, the manifest tensions between the theory and practice of prison life detailed by Zombek should lead her to question prison architects' initial stated goals of humanitarian reform. Instead, Zombek more often than not accepts reformers at their word, ignoring the interpretative frame of scholars like David Garland who emphasized the social control agenda of middle- and upper-class reformers in creating prisons as tools of class-based and ethnic or racial subordination.

A sustained discussion of race and the ideology of white supremacy as an organizing feature of nineteenth-century incarceration is also missing from Zombek's work. This eliding of race is felt most in the discussion of the reasons why North Carolina decided not to construct a state penitentiary in the antebellum era but finally determined to build one in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. Zombek could have pushed deeper for an analysis of the influence of a white supremacist ideology on penitentiaries and military prisons, especially when so much of correctional history is focused on the impact of race on prisons and punishment in both in the nineteenth century and today. Despite shortcomings such as this, Zombek has produced a powerfully researched comparative study of prisons and punishment in mid-nineteenth century America. Her work will serve as a needed reminder for historians to pay close attention to how they chose to periodize history and encourage future scholars to conduct more explicitly comparative research.

Henry Kamerling is a history professor at Seattle University. He is the author of Capital and Convict: Race, Region, and Punishment in Post-Civil War America (Charlottesville: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).