5 Economics and External Relations of Prisoners of War

5.1 Labor and finance

After the average prisoner of war had been captured, processed, and sent to a permanent camp, the next major evolution in his captivity which he could expect was the beginning of a work regime. It was, according to all of the countries which had signed the Geneva Convention, entirely reasonable to expect that at least some of the costs for maintaining the prisoners would be defrayed by putting them to work, and the Convention dedicated a separate section, comprised of articles 27 to 34, to this issue. The basic rule was that, with the exception of officers, the Detaining Power had the right to require labor of any prisoner who was physically fit. Noncommissioned officers could only be compelled to work in a supervisory capacity. Officers could, upon their request and if work “suitable” to their rank existed, be employed for pay; noncommissioned officers could likewise be employed for pay as general laborers (and not supervisors), if they so requested. Accident benefits and compensation for prisoners of war were to be the same as those which existed for normal workmen in the country.¹

The Detaining Power was responsible for the conditions of labor, payment of wages, living arrangements, and treatment of the prisoners of war in the workplace. No prisoner could be forced to work in a position to which he was “physically unsuited,” the duration of the workday was to equal that of civilian workers likewise employed, and one 24-hour rest period per week, preferably on a Sunday, was to be allowed to each prisoner.²

It was forbidden to employ prisoners of war in any work which had a “direct connection” with the war operations; specifically, using them
in the manufacture or transport of arms or munitions, and the transport of any material destined for combatant units, was expressly forbidden. In the event that prisoners of war believed they were employed in war-related work, they had the right to present their complaints, through their MOC, to their Protecting Power delegates. Unhealthy or dangerous work was also forbidden, and the conditions of employment could not be made more difficult by the introduction of disciplinary measures. Labor detachments were to have the same conditions and rights, as regards accommodations, hygiene, post, food, and healthcare, as the main prisoner-of-war camps; each work detachment was to be a subunit of a specific camp, and the representative of the workers was allowed contact with the Man of Confidence of the main camp.

The last article on prisoner-of-war work in the Convention stated that no pay was to be given to the prisoners of war for work done for the administration and internal maintenance of the camps; any other mandatory work resulted in an entitlement to a wage, to be determined by the belligerents. As well, the Detaining Power had the right to determine how much money could be held in the immediate possession of the prisoners of war, and how much would be placed in an account. Generally, the arrangements for pay were: (a) the same pay for prisoners of war as for soldiers of the home army employed on similarly tasks, or on the work being done by civilian workers; if prisoners of war were used for labor by private companies, the wages were to be agreed to in advance by the Detaining Power and the prospective employer; pay was the personal property of the prisoner, and had to be credited to him – in the event of death, the remainder of a prisoner’s savings was to be forwarded to his next-of-kin through diplomatic channels.

The German regulations in place at the start of the war followed the terms of the Geneva Convention closely; as with other subjects concerning the treatment of prisoners, the commandants were often instructed to refer directly to the Convention, in this case articles 27–34. Prisoner-of-war regular soldiers, and volunteer noncommissioned officers, could be employed for the upkeep of the camp without remuneration. Prisoner-of-war labor could be a boon and a danger for Germany – a boon if the prisoners of war were properly supervised, but a danger because of the risk of espionage and sabotage. And as stated in articles 27–34, the prisoners could be compelled to work. Special attention had to be given to the prohibitions listed in article 31. As for possibly dangerous work mentioned in article 32, prisoners of war could only be employed in work that German workers also performed, provided they met the physical requirements, as per article 29.