

PRISONER OF WAR (POW)

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April 8, 2026

RECOMMENDED CITATION

Mohammed loot (2026). *PRISONER OF WAR (POW)*. Encyclopedia of psychology.
Retrieved from <https://encyclopedia.arabpsychology.com/?p=7941>

The Legal and Conceptual Definition of a Prisoner of War

The term **Prisoner of War (POW)** represents a specific legal status within the framework of international humanitarian law, distinguishing individuals captured during armed conflict from common criminals or political detainees. According to the **Geneva Conventions of 1949**, specifically Article 4, paragraph 1, a Prisoner of War is defined as any person captured or interned by a **belligerent power** during an active armed conflict. This definition is not merely a label but a protective shield that grants the individual a suite of rights and protections intended to preserve their dignity and physical well-being. The recognition of this status is fundamental to the regulation of modern warfare, ensuring that those who can no longer participate in hostilities are treated with **humanity** and respect, regardless of their previous actions on the battlefield.

Establishing who qualifies as a POW is a rigorous process that involves identifying members of the armed forces, volunteer corps, or organized resistance movements that belong to a party to the conflict. The legal framework necessitates that these individuals operate under a responsible command, wear a **fixed distinctive sign** recognizable at a distance, carry arms openly, and conduct their operations in accordance with the laws and customs of war. By adhering to these criteria, combatants earn the right to be treated as POWs upon capture, a status that effectively immunizes them from prosecution for lawful acts of war, such as the killing of enemy combatants, while mandating their safe custody until the cessation of active hostilities.

In the contemporary landscape of global security, the definition of a POW continues to be a subject of intense legal scrutiny, particularly as the nature of conflict shifts from traditional state-on-state warfare to **asymmetric engagements**. The 1949 Conventions were designed to address the catastrophic scale of World War II, yet they remain the bedrock of current international standards. Legal scholars and military experts frequently debate how these definitions apply to non-state actors and private contractors, but the core principle remains steadfast: the **humane treatment** of captives is a non-negotiable requirement of civilized society. This article explores the historical evolution, legal intricacies, and the profound psychological challenges that define the POW experience.

The transition from combatant to prisoner marks a radical shift in an individual's legal and social identity. Once captured, the **POW** is no longer an active threat but a protected person under the custody of the capturing power. This shift requires the capturing state to assume full responsibility for the prisoner's life, including the provision of adequate sustenance and medical attention. The legal implications of this status are far-reaching, influencing everything from the prisoner's right to communicate with their family to the specific conditions of their **internment**. Understanding the POW status requires an appreciation of the delicate balance between military necessity and the humanitarian imperative to minimize suffering during times of crisis.

Historical Perspectives on Captivity in Ancient and Medieval Warfare

The concept of the **Prisoner of War** is as old as the history of organized conflict itself, though the treatment of such individuals has varied dramatically across different eras and cultures. In ancient times, the fate of a captured soldier was often bleak, with many being executed, enslaved, or held for ransom depending on their social status and the whims of the victor. The earliest recorded examples of captivity and the ethical dilemmas surrounding it can be found in the **Bible** and other ancient religious texts, which often provided the first rudimentary guidelines for how conquered peoples and captured warriors should be handled. In these early periods, there was no concept of international law; rather, the treatment of prisoners was governed by local customs, religious edicts, and the immediate strategic needs of the capturing army.

During the **Middle Ages**, the treatment of captives remained highly inconsistent and was often dictated by the codes of chivalry or the economic value of the prisoner. For the nobility, capture often resulted in a period of relatively comfortable **internment** while a ransom was negotiated, whereas common soldiers frequently faced much harsher realities, including forced labor or summary execution. There was no universally accepted legal framework during this time, leading to a patchwork of practices that changed with every conflict. Despite the lack of a formal code, the period saw the slow emergence of the idea that **mercy** could be a political tool, as the sparing of lives sometimes facilitated easier surrenders and more stable occupations of conquered territories.

The absence of standardized protections meant that the experience of a prisoner in the medieval era was entirely dependent on the specific period and the nature of the conflict. In some instances, religious institutions attempted to intervene, promoting the idea that Christian soldiers should not be enslaved by fellow Christians, though these rules were frequently ignored in the heat of battle or when fighting those of different faiths. The **lack of legal recourse** for the average soldier meant that survival was often a matter of luck or the specific temperament of the commanding officer of the capturing forces. This historical instability highlights the necessity for the formal international agreements that would eventually emerge in the following centuries.

As the Middle Ages gave way to the early modern period, the rise of sovereign states began to change the dynamics of captivity. The **centralization of power** allowed for more organized exchanges of prisoners and the development of formal treaties between warring nations. However, it was not until the 17th century that European powers began to adopt more consistent regulations aimed at the **humane treatment** of POWs. These early steps were driven by a growing recognition that the mistreatment of prisoners often led to reciprocal atrocities, creating a cycle of violence that served no strategic purpose. Thus, the historical foundations of modern POW rights were laid not just by altruism, but by a pragmatic desire to regulate the costs of war.

The 17th Century and the Napoleonic Code of Conduct

By the 17th century, the landscape of European warfare began to shift toward a more professionalized and regulated model, leading to the adoption of specific regulations for the **humane treatment** of Prisoners of War. During this era, the burgeoning concepts of international law, influenced by thinkers like Hugo Grotius, started to emphasize that prisoners were not the property of the individual captor but rather the responsibility of the capturing state. This transition was crucial in establishing that captives had a right to survive their **internment**. Agreements between nations began to include clauses regarding the provision of basic necessities, reflecting a growing consensus that the objective of war was the defeat of the enemy's military capacity, not the destruction of individual lives after they had surrendered.

The **Napoleonic Wars** marked a significant turning point in the formalization of POW treatment. During this period of intense continental conflict, a more comprehensive code of conduct was established among the major powers. This code included provisions for the **exchange of prisoners**, a practice that allowed captured soldiers to return to their home countries in exchange for an equal number of captives from the opposing side. Furthermore, the concept of **parole**--whereby an officer might be released on the promise that they would not take up arms again--became more common. These practices were documented by historians such as **Lacroix and McCulloch (2015)**, who noted that these early codes were essential precursors to modern humanitarian treaties.

A major innovation of the Napoleonic era was the emphasis on the **repatriation of prisoners** upon the conclusion of hostilities. Before this period, the release of prisoners was often an afterthought or a subject of prolonged negotiation that could last years after a war ended. The Napoleonic code sought to streamline this process, establishing the principle that once the reason for internment--namely, the state of war--had ceased, the justification for holding prisoners also vanished. This era also saw the first significant attempts to document the names and conditions of captives, providing a level of **accountability** that had been previously absent in the chaos of large-scale military campaigns.

Despite these advancements, the reality on the ground during the 17th and 18th centuries often fell short of the stated ideals. Logistics, disease, and the sheer number of captives frequently overwhelmed the capacity of states to provide **humane conditions**. Prisoners were often kept in overcrowded hulks or makeshift camps where mortality rates remained high. However, the legal and ethical framework established during this time provided the necessary foundation for the 19th-century reformers who would eventually codify these practices into **international law**. The shift from seeing prisoners as "spoils of war" to "protected individuals" was a slow but definitive movement toward the modern humanitarian era.

The 19th Century and the Birth of the Geneva Conventions

The 19th century witnessed a dramatic acceleration in the codification of international humanitarian standards, driven by the horrors of industrialized warfare and the advocacy of humanitarian pioneers like Henri Dunant. The **Geneva Convention of 1864** was the first major international treaty to address the condition of the wounded and sick in armed forces in the field. While its primary focus was on medical personnel and the wounded, it established the revolutionary principle that certain individuals in a war zone should be considered "neutral" and protected from harm. This laid the groundwork for the **legal definition** of a POW as a person deserving of specific protections under a unified international framework.

Following the 1864 treaty, the **Geneva Convention of 1906** further refined these rules, expanding the scope of protections and clarifying the obligations of capturing powers. These conventions were instrumental in shifting the responsibility for prisoner welfare from the whim of individual commanders to the formal obligation of national governments. They established a set of rules for the **humane treatment** and systematic exchange of prisoners, ensuring that the basic rights of captives were recognized across borders. The 1906 update was particularly important in addressing the logistical challenges of modern armies, requiring states to provide adequate housing and food for those they interned.

The legal framework established in the 19th century was not just about physical survival; it was also about maintaining the **human dignity** of the captured soldier. The conventions began to outline the rights of prisoners to practice their religion, communicate with their families, and receive packages of food and clothing from relief organizations. This period saw the rise of the **International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)** as a neutral intermediary, a role that remains vital to this day. By creating a system of oversight, the 19th-century conventions ensured that the treatment of POWs was no longer a private matter between belligerents but a concern for the entire international community.

As noted by **Krouse (2017)**, these early conventions provided the essential legal structure that would be tested and expanded during the global conflicts of the 20th century. The 19th-century reforms were born out of a realization that as the lethality of weapons increased, so too must the strength of the laws designed to protect those caught in the crossfire. The transition from **customary law** to written, ratified treaties represented a monumental step forward in the evolution of human rights, setting the stage for the comprehensive 1949 Geneva Conventions that govern the world today.

The 1949 Geneva Conventions and the Modern Legal Framework

The **Geneva Conventions of 1949** were adopted in the immediate aftermath of World War II, a

conflict that saw unprecedented levels of prisoner abuse and mass internment. These conventions represent the primary and most comprehensive legal framework for the treatment of **Prisoners of War** in the modern era. They were designed to address the catastrophic failures of previous agreements and to close the legal loopholes that had allowed for the inhumane treatment of millions during the war. The 1949 treaties, specifically the Third Geneva Convention, provide an exhaustive list of protections, ranging from the moment of capture to the final act of **repatriation**.

Under the current 1949 framework, capturing powers are legally obligated to provide for the **humane treatment** of all prisoners in their custody. This includes the mandatory provision of:

Nutritious food and clean drinking water in sufficient quantities to maintain health.

Adequate **clothing and shelter** that is protected from the elements and suitable for the climate.

Comprehensive **medical care**, including treatment for both physical injuries sustained in combat and illnesses developed during internment.

The right to be treated with **respect** for their person and their honor, protecting them from acts of violence, intimidation, and public curiosity.

These requirements are non-negotiable and apply from the very first moment an individual falls into the power of the enemy.

One of the most significant updates in the 1949 Conventions was the detailed regulation of **interrogation practices**. The law strictly prohibits any form of physical or mental torture, or any other form of coercion, to obtain information from a prisoner. POWs are only required to provide their surname, first names, rank, date of birth, and army serial number. This protection is vital for maintaining the **psychological integrity** of the prisoner, preventing the captor from using the vulnerability of internment to break the individual's will or force them into betraying their country.

Furthermore, the 1949 Conventions established clear guidelines for the **repatriation of prisoners**. Article 118 mandates that "prisoners of war shall be released and repatriated without delay after the cessation of active hostilities." This principle ensures that internment is never used as a form of punishment or long-term detention, but solely as a means to prevent the individual from returning to the battlefield. The **Geneva Conventions** remain the most widely ratified treaties in the world, reflecting a global consensus on the necessity of protecting those who have been rendered "hors de combat" (out of the fight).

Psychological Challenges: Isolation, Fear, and Helplessness

The experience of being a **Prisoner of War** is characterized by profound psychological stressors that can have devastating effects on an individual's mental health. Upon capture, the sudden transition from an active, empowered combatant to a passive, controlled captive often triggers a state of **acute psychological shock**. POWs frequently experience overwhelming feelings of

isolation, as they are cut off from their units, their families, and the familiar structures of their daily lives. This sense of being "lost" is compounded by the inherent uncertainty of their situation, as they have no way of knowing how long their internment will last or what their ultimate fate will be.

A dominant feature of the POW experience is the pervasive sense of **helplessness**. In a camp environment, every aspect of a prisoner's life--when they eat, where they sleep, and how they move--is controlled by the capturing power. This loss of autonomy can lead to a condition known as **learned helplessness**, where the individual begins to feel that their actions have no impact on their environment, leading to severe apathy and withdrawal. The psychological impact of being constantly monitored and subjected to the whims of an enemy force creates a chronic state of high-alert stress, which can erode the individual's resilience over time.

Fear is an ever-present companion for the POW. This fear is not only directed toward the possibility of physical harm or **harsh treatment** but also toward the unknown. Prisoners often worry about the safety of their families, the outcome of the war, and whether they will ever be able to return to a normal life. Interrogations, even when they do not involve physical violence, are designed to be psychologically taxing, using **isolation** and sensory deprivation to break the prisoner's spirit. The mental strain of maintaining one's silence and loyalty under such pressure is immense, often leading to deep-seated feelings of guilt and anxiety.

The long-term effects of these psychological challenges are well-documented in clinical literature. The lack of **social support** and the constant threat of violence create a fertile ground for the development of complex psychological disorders. Even in camps where the physical conditions are relatively humane, the **mental burden** of captivity can be debilitating. Understanding these challenges is crucial for developing effective post-conflict support systems, as the "invisible wounds" of war often take much longer to heal than physical injuries.

Long-Term Psychological Impacts: PTSD and Depression

The psychological toll of captivity often extends far beyond the duration of the conflict, manifesting in chronic mental health conditions that can persist for decades. **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** is perhaps the most common diagnosis among former Prisoners of War. The symptoms of PTSD--including intrusive memories, flashbacks, severe anxiety, and emotional numbness--are a direct result of the extreme trauma experienced during internment. For many POWs, the environment of the camp was a place of **constant threat**, and their brains remain "wired" for survival long after they have returned to safety, making it difficult to reintegrate into civilian society.

In addition to PTSD, former POWs suffer from high rates of **clinical depression**. The loss of time, the disruption of career and family life, and the memories of comrades lost in captivity can lead to a profound sense of grief and hopelessness. This depression is often exacerbated by **survivor's guilt**, where the individual feels responsible for the fact that they survived while others did not. As

noted by **Paukert et al. (2019)** in a systematic literature review, the psychological impacts of the POW experience are uniquely severe due to the prolonged nature of the trauma and the systematic attempts by captors to undermine the prisoner's identity.

The long-term psychological health of former POWs is also affected by the quality of the **repatriation process** and the support they receive upon their return. Those who return to a supportive environment with access to specialized mental health care tend to have better outcomes, but many veterans struggle to find clinicians who understand the specific nuances of POW trauma. The **stigma** surrounding mental health in the military can also prevent former prisoners from seeking the help they need, leading to a cycle of suffering that impacts not only the individual but also their families and communities.

Research indicates that the **psychological resilience** of POWs can be bolstered by strong bonds formed with fellow prisoners during internment. These relationships often provide a crucial buffer against the worst effects of isolation and abuse. However, even with such support, the "long-term psychological and physical impacts" highlighted by **Paukert et al. (2019)** suggest that the POW experience is a transformative event that permanently alters the individual's worldview. Addressing these needs requires a **comprehensive approach** that integrates psychological therapy with social and economic support to help survivors rebuild their lives.

Physical Health Challenges and the Impact of Inhumane Conditions

While the psychological scars of captivity are significant, the physical health challenges faced by **Prisoners of War** are often equally severe and life-altering. In many historical and contemporary conflicts, POWs have been subjected to **inhumane conditions**, including extreme overcrowding, lack of sanitation, and exposure to the elements. These conditions facilitate the rapid spread of infectious diseases such as typhus, cholera, and tuberculosis, which can be fatal in a camp setting where medical resources are scarce. The physical environment of the camp itself often becomes a secondary enemy that the prisoner must fight daily to survive.

Malnutrition is a recurring theme in the history of POW internment. Capturing powers often fail to provide the **caloric intake** necessary for individuals who may still be recovering from the physical demands of combat. Chronic starvation leads to muscle wasting, weakened immune systems, and long-term metabolic issues. Even after repatriation, many former POWs suffer from **permanent physical ailments** resulting from nutritional deficiencies, such as vision loss, cardiovascular problems, and skeletal deformities. The systematic withholding of food is frequently used as a form of coercion, further linking the physical and psychological suffering of the captive.

Furthermore, POWs are often subjected to **harsh labor**, which can exacerbate existing injuries and lead to new physical traumas. Forced labor in mines, factories, or on infrastructure projects--often in direct violation of international law--places an immense strain on the prisoner's body. The

combination of heavy physical work and inadequate rest leads to **chronic fatigue** and a higher susceptibility to workplace accidents. The lack of proper medical care for these injuries often results in permanent disabilities, leaving the individual with a lifetime of physical pain and limited mobility.

Modern international law, as codified in the **Geneva Conventions**, mandates that prisoners must be provided with medical care equivalent to that of the capturing power's own forces. However, the reality of war often disrupts supply lines and prioritizes the health of active soldiers over captives. This disparity in care remains a major humanitarian concern. The physical health of a POW is a critical indicator of the capturing power's adherence to **international standards**, and the long-term ailments reported by survivors serve as a stark reminder of the high cost of failing to uphold these legal protections.

Repatriation and the Complexity of Returning Home

The conclusion of a conflict marks the beginning of the **repatriation process**, a legally mandated but logistically and emotionally complex transition. Under the 1949 Geneva Conventions, the end of active hostilities requires the immediate release of all **Prisoners of War**. While this is a moment of profound relief, the process of returning home is often fraught with difficulty. Many POWs have been away for years, and they return to find that their families, communities, and countries have changed significantly in their absence. The "homecoming" is rarely a simple return to normalcy; rather, it is the start of a new and often difficult chapter of **reintegration**.

The legal requirements for repatriation are clear, but the political reality can be more complicated. Negotiations over the **exchange of prisoners** can sometimes be used as leverage in peace talks, leading to delays that prolong the suffering of those still in captivity. In some cases, prisoners may even fear returning to their home countries due to changes in the political regime or the threat of being accused of collaboration with the enemy. International organizations like the **Red Cross** play a vital role in monitoring these repatriations to ensure they are conducted safely and that the rights of the individuals are respected throughout the transition.

Upon returning, former POWs often face a range of **social and economic challenges**. They may struggle to find employment, catch up on lost years of career development, or reconnect with children who have grown up in their absence. The transition from the highly controlled environment of a prison camp to the freedom and responsibility of civilian life can be disorienting. Many veterans report a sense of "alienation" from a society that cannot fully grasp the depth of their experiences. Successful **reintegration** requires not just the absence of war, but the presence of active support systems that address the unique needs of the returning captive.

Finally, the process of **repatriation** is also a time for legal and medical accountability. Returning prisoners are often debriefed to gather information about their treatment and to document any

violations of international law. This information is crucial for the **prosecution of war crimes** and for the improvement of future humanitarian protections. The journey of the POW does not end at the camp gates; it continues through the long process of healing, seeking justice, and finding a place in a world that has moved on without them.

Conclusion: The Evolving Legacy of POW Protections

In conclusion, the history of **Prisoners of War** is a testament to the ongoing struggle to inject humanity into the inherently inhumane practice of warfare. From the arbitrary treatment of captives in ancient times to the highly codified legal protections of the 21st century, the evolution of POW rights reflects a growing global commitment to **human dignity**. The 1949 Geneva Conventions remain the cornerstone of this effort, providing a robust framework that mandates the **humane treatment**, medical care, and eventual repatriation of those captured during conflict. These laws are essential for maintaining the moral boundaries of international engagement.

Despite these legal advancements, the experience of being a POW remains one of the most challenging trials a human being can endure. The **psychological impacts**, including PTSD and depression, and the physical toll of internment create a legacy of trauma that often lasts a lifetime. The work of researchers like **Krouse (2017)** and **Paukert et al. (2019)** highlights the need for continued vigilance in protecting prisoners and for providing comprehensive support to those who survive captivity. The legal framework is only as strong as the international community's willingness to enforce it and to hold violators accountable.

As the nature of global conflict continues to change, the protections afforded to **Prisoners of War** must also adapt. New challenges, such as the rise of non-state actors and the use of technology in detention, require a constant re-evaluation of how we define and protect the vulnerable. The core principles of **mercy** and respect for the individual must remain at the heart of these discussions. By honoring the rights of the captured, nations not only protect their own soldiers but also uphold the very values of civilization that war so often threatens to destroy.

Ultimately, the story of the **POW** is a reminder of the resilience of the human spirit in the face of extreme adversity. It is a call to action for governments, legal bodies, and humanitarian organizations to ensure that the "laws of war" are never sacrificed for the sake of "military necessity." The **humane treatment** of prisoners is not a luxury afforded during times of peace, but a fundamental obligation that defines our shared humanity during the darkest hours of conflict.

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