

## Book Review

# Prisoners of Jan Smuts: Italian Prisoners of War in South Africa in WWII

Karen Horn

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Johannesburg & Cape Town: Jonathan Ball Publishers  
2024, 278 pages  
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*Prisoners of Jan Smuts: Italian Prisoners of War in South Africa in WWII* is the product of almost ten years of dedicated research by the knowledgeable and well-established South African historian, Karen Horn. The large audience at the book launch in May 2024 at the Dante Alighieri Society in Houghton reflected the ongoing fascination with the history of the hundreds of thousands of Italian prisoners of war (POWs) detained in South Africa during the Second World War. By utilising a myriad of sources, ranging from interviews and unpublished memoirs to correspondence and formal military reports, Horn finally sheds some light on this exciting topic.

Within the broader historiography, Second World War POW experiences are an exciting research area with abundant fertile ground for future studies.<sup>1</sup> *Prisoners of Jan Smuts* adds yet another layer to this body of knowledge. Horn's interest in POWs was already visible in her first book, *In Enemy Hands: South African POWs in WWII* (2015), which tells the stories of South African soldiers in captivity in Germany and Italy during the Second World War.<sup>2</sup> While South African men endured captivity in Europe, many Europeans, specifically Italians, were shipped to South Africa, where they faced similar encounters in the POW camps throughout the country. With this in mind, Horn started researching the stories of survival and endurance of these Italian men.<sup>3</sup>

One of the many praiseworthy elements of *Prisoners of Jan Smuts* is that it manages to tell the narrative of thousands of contemporaries by focusing closely on the experiences of five individuals. Just like her previous book, the strength of *Prisoners of Jan Smuts* lies in the fact that Horn focuses on individual stories rather than on collective narratives. By doing so, she provides the reader with a glimpse into several elements of Second World War Italian prisoner experiences in South Africa without generalisations and sweeping statements. As readers become engulfed in the personal stories of Giovanni Palermo, Pietro Scottu, Luigi Pederzoli, Paolo Ricci and Raffaello Cei, they also learn about several important historical considerations. Included among these considerations are how the Geneva Convention of 1929 informed the authorities on the treatment of POWs; how the guards and the camp personnel experienced the war years; various escape attempts; opportunities to better education; challenges with co-existing among radicalised fellow prisoners; and the way many of these Italians found love and formed lasting relationships in the country holding them captive.

All sixteen chapters of *Prisoners of Jan Smuts* are based on primary documents, and cover diverse topics.

The first chapter introduces the reader to the five main characters of the book. After that, Chapters 2 to 5 relay the stories of the early years of captivity in South Africa, including the struggles of the first camp commandant of the Zonderwater POW camp. Chapters 6 and 7 portray the prisoner experiences after the South African government started paying close attention to the requirements laid out in the 1929 Geneva Convention and how this improved the overall condition within the camps. Chapters 8, 9 and 10 will be especially interesting for the reader who is especially interested in the big political picture, as these chapters cover everything from pro-fascist threats within the Union of South Africa and the fall of Mussolini to the Italian Armistice in 1943.

The remaining six chapters give insight into more personal elements of the Italian POW experience, including romantic relationships with South Africans, business ventures, as well as some hopes and anxieties related to returning to Italy after the end of the war.

Horn's dedication to using less-known primary sources, including acquiring professional assistance to translate numerous unpublished memoirs from Italian to English, ensures that the book adds a novel contribution to the existing literature. With the publication of *Prisoners of Jan Smuts*, several nuanced experiences and historical considerations finally receive some deserved attention. One example is that she does not overemphasise the experiences of those detained in Zonderwater by showing that Italian POWs spent time in several other camps, as well as on farms and working sites. Up to this point, these considerations were merely placed in the shadow of Zonderwater, which looms large within the broad history of the Italian POW experiences in South Africa.<sup>4</sup> A further example is how the book investigates Colonel Dawid de Wet and Colonel Hendrik Prinsloo, the two camp commandants of Zonderwater. Scholars have directed their attention almost entirely to Prinsloo's time as commandant for many years.<sup>5</sup> By providing some information on his predecessor, De Wet, *Prisoners of Jan Smuts* offers new and exciting insights into the topic.

The book, *Prisoners of Jan Smuts*, holds considerable value for relatives, relations and descendants of those who were detained in South Africa during the Second World War. Many of the attendees at the book launch relayed stories about their relatives and how captivity in South Africa affected them. To be sure, many of the descendants and relatives of these men are currently living in South Africa, but many more are in Italy. It thus stands to reason that *Prisoners of Jan Smuts* should not only be translated into Italian but also made available in Italy. Doing so will ensure that this exciting piece of history reaches even more audiences interested in the Italian experiences in South Africa during the Second World War.

Within the broader historiography, *Prisoners of Jan Smuts* contributes to a better understanding of how the Geneva Convention was understood and applied by the South African Union Defence Force (UDF). As Horn maintains, the history of the Italian POWs in South Africa 'is as much about the Italians as it is about the camp guards, the welfare officers, and the larger UDF hierarchy'.<sup>6</sup> Within South African historiography, *Prisoners of*

*Jan Smuts* thus provides valuable insights into this one aspect of the South African home front during the Second World War. In a more international context, the book contributes valuable insights into some of the challenges faced by the administration of large POW camps while attempting to adhere to the regulations of the Geneva Convention. *Prisoners of Jan Smuts* is a well-written publication and a testament to Horn's dedicated research. The book is highly recommended for scholars, history students, and the public.

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Some prominent examples include C Rollings, *Prisoner of War: Voices From Behind the Wire in the Second World War* (Reading: Random House, 2011); J Pattinson, L Noakes & W Ugolini, 'Incarcerated Masculinities: Male POWs and the Second World War', *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 7, 3 (2014), 179–190; C Lloyd, 'Enduring Captivity: French POW Narratives of World War II', *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 6, 1 (2013), 24–39; K Gregory, *The German World War Two Prisoner and His Experience in the United States* (MA Thesis, California State University, Dominguez Hills, 2001); and K Horn, *In Enemy Hands: South Africa's POWs in World War II* (Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2015).
- <sup>2</sup> K Horn, *In Enemy Hands: South Africa's POWs in World War II* (Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2015).
- <sup>3</sup> K Horn, *Prisoners of Jan Smuts: Italian Prisoners of War in South Africa in WWII* (Cape Town: Jonathan Ball), ix–xiii.
- <sup>4</sup> C Kruger, 'The Zonderwater Italian Prisoners of War 1941–1947: Fifty Years Down the Line', *South African Journal of Cultural History*, 10, 2 (1996), 88–104; D Somma, 'Music as Discipline, Solidarity and Nostalgia in the Zonderwater Prisoner of War Camp of South Africa', *SAMUS: South African Music Studies*, 30, 1 (2010), 71–85; A Delpont, 'Changing Attitudes of South Africans Towards Italy and its People During the Second World War, 1939 to 1945', *Historia*, 58, 1 (2013), 167–190.
- <sup>5</sup> Horn has already published some research on De Wet's time as camp commandant. See K Horn, "'Only the Rags We Had On ...': Zonderwater Italian Prisoner-of-war Camp, 1941–1942", *Journal of African Military History*, 6, 2 (2022), 81–106. Most other studies on Zonderwater focused purely on Prinsloo's period. See, for instance, Kruger, 'The Zonderwater Italian Prisoners of War', 88–104.
- <sup>6</sup> Horn, *Prisoners of Jan Smuts*, 232.