

# New research traces roots of 'prisoners of war'

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Credit: University of Southampton

Research by a historian at the University of Southampton shows the term 'prisoner of war' was first used in the 14th century, around three centuries earlier than previously thought.

Dr. Rémy Ambuhl has found the very first mention of the phrase was in 1357 in Anglo-Norman, a form of French used in English courts of the time. It appears in a document naming the Count de Ventadour as a 'prisonnier de guerre' (prisoner of war) after being captured the previous year at the Battle of Poitiers, in western France, during the Hundred Years War.

Dr. Ambuhl says: "It is ironic that the term prisoner of war was first expressed in the French language, in an English court – but Anglo-Norman was routinely used to record legal matters. It's possible this early use of the phrase was prompted by the very large number of soldiers captured at Poitiers and their acquisition by Edward III, who bought them off his subjects."

The study, which examined a wide range of archival sources, mainly from France, is published in the journal *English Historical Review*. As well as establishing the first known use of the term, it also examines its origins and changing meaning – emphasising that early uses were focussed more on expressing the rights of a prisoner's master than those of the prisoner.

Today, we associate 'prisoner of war' with a degree of protection and with human rights for wartime captives under the Geneva Convention, established in 1949 following the Second World War. However, this new research shows that six centuries earlier it was less about protection and more about establishing prisoners as tradable commodities – giving economic value to a captive and property rights for the captor or "master."

A good example of this is Joan of Arc. Joan was a peasant girl who believed God had chosen her to lead France to victory in its long-running war with England. After a momentous victory over the English at the French city of Orléans in 1429, she was captured by Anglo-Burgundian forces, tried for heresy and burned at the stake at the age of just 19. During captivity, she was named a 'prisonnière de guerre' by the English – probably the first woman to be recorded as a prisoner of war using the French feminine form.

Dr. Ambuhl suggests this status was mainly about raising money: "In giving Joan of Arc prisonnière de guerre status, the English did not mean

to afford her protection, which would ultimately be denied by her execution. This would not have made sense. Rather she was presented as a prisoner of war to the Norman population – as a tradable property who could be purchased from her Burgundian captors – to justify the need to raise taxes from them for her ransom."

Joan of Arc's case highlights in a most vivid way the brutal reality of what contemporaries understood by prisonniers de guerre. The late medieval prisoner of war was not first and foremost a combatant whose life ought to be spared, but rather an individual who could be traded (like a slave), either ransomed, exchanged or sold, and for whom even the Crown had to pay the master.

The late Middle Ages has been coined as the golden age of private ransoms. But the status or rights of prisoners of war would remain closely linked to their [economic value](#) for centuries. Such treaties as Hugo Grotius's *On the Law of War and Peace* (1625) which is supposed to have inspired the more humanitarian Geneva Conventions, is still firmly rooted in the medieval mentality, describing the individual rights of masters over prisoners.

**More information:** Rémy Ambühl. Joan of Arc as prisonnière de guerre\*, *The English Historical Review* (2017). [DOI: 10.1093/ehr/cex347](https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/cex347)

Provided by University of Southampton

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