

Sammelrez: Internment Operations against Civilians

Forth, Aidan: *Barbed-Wire Imperialism. Britain's Empire of Camps, 1876-1903*. Berkeley: University of California Press 2017. ISBN: 9780520293977; 352 S.

Murphy, Mahon: *Colonial Captivity during the First World War. Internment and the Fall of the German Empire, 1914-1919*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017. ISBN: 9781108418072; 245 S.

Kordan, Bohdan S.: *No Free Man. Canada, the Great War, and the Enemy Alien Experience*. Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press 2016. ISBN: 9780773547780; 394 S.

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Internment operations against targeted societal groups have recently experienced a surge in scholarly interest. Although the two most brutal and complex operations – Nazi concentration camps and the Russian Gulag – remain an important reference point for this scholarship, we now have a clearer picture of historical and geographical scope.¹ From the nineteenth century onwards, the policy of locking away civilian or military population groups has become a truly global phenomenon. Sophisticated camp infrastructures have isolated those who pose an alleged security threat or do not fit into constructions of ethno-religious or ideological body politic. From independence wars in Cuba (1868–1898) and Algeria (1950s) to the Cambodian Killing Fields, and from the Yugoslav Wars to Guantánamo Bay, camps have proven to be flexible tools of suppression. Refusal to memorialise can taint international relations up until today. Ottoman death camps against Armenians during World War I and Japanese camps in mainland China before and during World War II are just two examples. In a recent intervention the conservative Austrian interior minister, Herbert Kickl, suggested that asylum seekers should be held „concentrated (konzentriert) in one place“.² The issue is here to stay, and historical scholarship is all

the more called for to consider its importance and complexity. Perhaps the most important insight is that internment is by no means an exclusive hallmark of authoritarian regimes. It can just as well indicate the limits of liberal societies in times of real or perceived crises. The three books under review fall into this category. They highlight the key role played by Britain and its Empire in making civilian internment an integral part of crisis management and warfare. Taken together, they question traditional and still quite common narratives of unbroken British liberalism.

Aidan Forth's wide-ranging study on „barbed wire imperialism“ investigates camps in India and South Africa in the latter third of the nineteenth century. From the 1870s onwards, a combination of starvation and plague hit the Raj, not least caused by British economic policies. In order to contain the dangers of hunger and social unrest, the colonisers established a vast system of camps. By 1900 around 10 million Indians had experienced some form of internment. Forth interprets these operations as a combination of Empire stabilisation and humanitarian endeavour. Drifting groups which were prone to join the urban criminal classes were confined and received subsistence wages in return for heavy labour. The colonisers strove to alleviate suffering, but in doing so denied subaltern colonial subjects the individual right to freedom. The blessings of British liberalism were only extended to those who found themselves inside the Victorian social order. Race was an important category to legitimise exclusion. Imperial disaster management received an additional strain through the outbreak of plague in India and South Africa from 1896.

The strength of Forth's study is to see the „Indian Ocean World“ as an integrated space which was densely connected through trade, transport, communication, and the movement of people, all accelerated by the globalising dynamics of British rule. The plague first travelled from inland China to Hong Kong.

¹ E. g. Bettina Greiner / Alan Kramer (eds.), *Die Welt der Lager. Zur „Erfolgsgeschichte“ einer Institution*, Hamburg 2013.

² Caterina Lobenstein, *Neue Härte*, in: *Die Zeit*, 25. 01. 2018, p. 5.

As soon as it had reached the trading hub Bombay, it spread all across India via British-built trains. After the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War in 1899, British troops were moved from India to South Africa, carrying the disease across the Indian Ocean. This, in turn, necessitated an interimperial response in the form of travelling medical and internment officers to isolate infected individuals from the general population. In South Africa, this was in addition to those camps that mushroomed as a direct consequence of warfare against Boers. According to Forth, they were not established for insurgents as such, but rather for the collateral victims of scorched-earth warfare which aimed to interrupt supply chains for Boer guerilla fighters. A quarter-million white and black civilians of all ages were interned, the total of 50,000 casualties through disease and starvation equally divided between the two groups.

By presenting camps as relief institutions for civilian scorched-earth victims, Forth fails to give military aspects due attention. He does not reference, for example, work on the thousands of Boer military Prisoners of War who were transported to camps in Ceylon, St Helena, India and the Bermudas.³ When discussing legacies, he does not refer to military and civilian mass internment during the First World War despite growing scholarship on the subject and direct continuities. Camps for Boers were „recycled“ only 15 years later to accommodate German enemy aliens. These omissions, however, do not distract from the importance of the book. Forth has produced an excellent original study whose significance goes beyond its empirical findings. In an exemplary way, he takes the imperial camp system as an interpretive prism to give the reader deeper insights into the British imperial mindset of biopolitics, racialised humanitarianism and global thinking.

Forth's study is an indispensable backdrop to understand why and how camps emerged in all corners of the British Empire right after the outbreak of war on 1 August 1914. Mahon Murphy's revised PhD thesis focuses on those Germans who found themselves trapped in the Reich's overseas territories. When British forces captured these African and Asian territories, they went about confining civilian „en-

emy aliens“ and military POWs. Again, they made full use of global empire structures, transporting prisoners across continents and oceans to internment hubs such as Ahmednagar in India, Liverpool in Australia and, most importantly, Knockaloe on the Isle of Man which held a peak number of 22,000. Mahon uses a number of perspectives to describe the tectonic disruptions of war in colonial settings. Collective European identities which had been forged through a common „civilising mission“ now eroded. White settlers were apprehended in front of their former black servants, upsetting established racial hierarchies and constituting a form of symbolic violence. Actual violence, however, was rare, and conditions in the camps were relatively good. British internment operations in Africa and Asia followed those humane principles which had been laid out in prewar international conventions. In the end, „ethnic cleansing“ of former German colonial territories played into British strategic goals of Empire enlargement. One strength of Mahon's study is its comparative focus. He has a whole section on other internment operations, including those of Germany, France and Japan, as well as Belgium, Portugal and Spain. Transnational learning processes and tit for tat reprisals – with prisoners as bargaining chips in the pawns of diplomats – highlight global political implications of internment. Mahon's chronological interpretive scope, in contrast, is relatively narrow. There is little attempt to gauge the significance of First World War camps against those of earlier or later international conflicts. In sum, however, Mahon's is an excellent study based on an impressive array of original sources. It lays the groundwork for further scholarship into specific camps, internment systems, and thematic aspects.

Whereas Mahon and Forth adopt a transnational and interimperial perspective, Bohdan S. Kordan's study on internment in Canada is more narrowly confined, both in terms of geography and theory. 8,579 enemy aliens of German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman origin were interned in the course of the war.

³ Isabel Hofmeyr, *South Africa's Indian Ocean. Boer Prisoners of War in India*, in: *Social Dynamics. A Journal of African Studies* 38/3 (2012), pp. 363–380.

Kordan is particularly concerned with (and about) the legal position adopted by the Dominion government which defined de facto civilian non-combatants as military Prisoners of War. They were not only deprived of rights and liberty but could also be used for hard labour in public infrastructure works such as road and national park building. Conditions in camps were often poor. When US Consul Gebhard Willich inspected Spirit Lake camp in the Québécois wilderness, he reported of substandard accommodation in the harsh climate, insufficient rations, neglect, solitary confinement and beatings. In the diplomatic propaganda war, the German government used such reports to counter allegations of own atrocities in Belgium. This was a price worth paying for the Canadian and provincial governments in return for cheap labour. Justification efforts redefined the operation as a humanitarian relief effort for unemployed urban immigrants who, in addition, had to be protected from public Germanophobic outbursts. The original aim of internal security became increasingly muddled with utilitarian, political and socio-economic motivations to intern enemy aliens. The strength of Kordan's study is mainly on the empirical side. He has uncovered a wealth of material in Canadian archives to support his argument that by interning civilians, Canada not only neglected its responsibility towards a fragile immigrant group but also violated human rights. Although this argument is convincing, the study would have benefited from wider theoretical and historiographical considerations. The bibliography basically consists of only three pages in the footnotes, and as a consequence source interpretation and argumentation appear largely self-referential throughout the book. It is therefore best read in conjunction with the other two books in this review in order to see wider chronological, theoretical and geographical connections.

All three publications demonstrate that the theme of civilian internment has now moved from a peripheral issue to the heart of both British Empire and First World War studies. Camps were an integral part of Empire building, maintenance and expansion. They did not only unhinge the lives of millions, but also offer telling lessons about Empire and war-

fare. The idea that human confinement could solve biopolitical or security issues was efficiently rolled out through global infrastructures. Camps were physical manifestations of „othering“, directed against perceived threats from specific social, racial or political groups. These had not committed a criminal act but lost their liberty, without trial, purely for who they were. Camps can be taken as a platform to discuss issues of belonging, diplomacy, human rights and many other themes. Given this versatility, they offer promising potential and a wealth of hitherto unseen archive material for further scholarship. None of the three studies under review, for example, give much insight into cultural life in camps.⁴ Especially during the First World War this was significant, with prisoners producing theatre, music, artefacts and – mostly censored – texts. Another aspect awaiting further theorisation is that of gender. Internment did not only impact on those inside the camps but also on the wives and families left behind.⁵ The rich sources are waiting to be (re)interpreted from new angles. Ex negativo, the three books under review also point to the glaring gaps of knowledge about other countries' camp systems, with France at home and *outré mer* being the most obvious reference point for Britain. It is hoped that the books will trigger further scholarship in the field, not least to provide historical depth to current policy discussions.

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HistLit 2018-2-079 / Stefan Manz über Kordan, Bohdan S.: *No Free Man. Canada, the Great*

⁴ Gilly Carr / Harold Mytum (eds.), *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War: Creativity Behind Barbed Wire*, Abingdon 2012.

⁵ Zoë Denness, *Gender and Germanophobia: The Forgotten Experiences of German Women in Britain, 1914-1919*, in: Panikos Panayi (ed.), *Germans as Minorities during the First World War. A Global Comparative Perspective*, Farnham 2014, pp. 71–98.

War, and the Enemy Alien Experience. Kingston
2016, in: H-Soz-Kult 14.05.2018.