

Internees (Switzerland)

By [Thomas Bürgisser](#)

Summary

Swiss governmental and non-governmental organizations were intensely involved in humanitarian activities for the victims of World War I. From 1916 on, the country opened its borders to a select number of sick or injured prisoners of war from Germany, France, Belgium and Britain for healing and recovery. Based on agreements with the belligerent nations – who paid the costs – the prisoners were interned for several months in sanatoria and hotels mainly in Alpine tourist locations, thus supporting an industry lying idle. The internment of foreign POWs also legitimized and stressed the usefulness of the Swiss neutrality policy both internally and externally.

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“Lighthouse of Humanity” in the Surge of the Great War

A postcard produced in the year 1917 shows a relief map of [Switzerland](#) as an island in a wide, roaring sea under a high and dark reddish glowing sky. Out of this small piece of land grows a disproportionately huge lighthouse, above which a Swiss cross floats, sending rays of light in all directions. “Switzerland – Island of Peace and its Charitable Activities,” is its title. The different light rays are labelled with specific fields of humanitarian aid: “Information on missing persons”; “Exchange of severely injured”; “Relief for war orphans”; “Inquiries on

persons in the zone of war”; “Intermediation of prisoners’ mail”; “Repatriation of evacuees”; “Internment of sick prisoners of war”; “Relief for refugees” and “Exchange of civil internees.”¹

The allegory of Switzerland as an island in the surge of war was quite a popular subject at the time.² The artist combined this well-known picture with the idea of the country’s humanitarian mission. Humanitarian aid, based on traditions reaching back to the 19th century, was promoted as a correlate to Switzerland’s [neutrality](#) policy. It constituted an important pillar of Swiss national identity during the Great War. As the light rays illustrate, the humanitarian aid for [prisoners of war](#) (POWs) was an important field of action. From the very outbreak of the Great War, non-governmental actors situated in Switzerland, such as the [International Committee of the Red Cross](#) (ICRC) – as well as the Swiss government itself – were involved in various humanitarian activities on behalf of POWs. This article aims to outline Switzerland’s relief for foreign POWs, focusing especially on the system of internment of sick prisoners of war. It is based on a relatively small and still growing basis of studies on a topic that was of great importance to Switzerland’s self-perception during the Great War.

Early Activities on Behalf of Prisoners of War

Captivity in the Great War

The First World War in various ways set new quantitative standards for what was understood about armed conflicts, including captivity. In Europe, approximately 7 to 9 million soldiers became prisoners during the war – a number far beyond contemporary imagination.³ Whereas before, war captivity was of a rather short duration, it now became a long-term phenomenon that lasted for years. Captivity severely strained prisoners, both physically and mentally.

Over the years, POWs were discovered to be useful and soon became “indispensable manpower” for the growing demands of the war economy.⁴ Initially, though, captivity was subject to the immense logistical problems it caused to all warring parties. Military administrations were overextended. Accordingly, the crowded camps were badly equipped, the sanitary situation was precarious and the prisoners undernourished and weak. Infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, typhus and diphtheria ravaged the camps. Hundreds of thousands of POWs got sick. Their miserable fate quickly became the subject of propaganda by belligerent powers. Public interest grew and humanitarian aid programs spread.

Exchange of Severely Injured POWs

According to the Geneva Convention, severely injured POWs were to be mutually exchanged

by the warring parties. On the initiative of the ICRC, the Federal Council (Swiss government) and the Vatican encouraged the [French](#) and [German](#) governments to enter negotiations to observe these international regulations. From March 1915 onwards, dozens of hospital trains, departing simultaneously from Lyon and Constance, crossed Swiss territory to repatriate thousands of invalid soldiers who had lost one or more limbs in battle, whose skulls, spines and faces had been severely injured, or who were partly or fully paralysed or blind.⁵ While this exchange of the [Western Front's](#) *grands blessés* (the severely injured) was carried out through Switzerland and [the Netherlands](#), tens of thousands of severely wounded POWs from the [Eastern Front](#) were exchanged via [Denmark](#) and [Sweden](#).⁶

The passage of hospital trains through Swiss border and stopover towns attracted masses of spectators and voluntary helpers. Nowhere else had the terrible fate of their warring neighbours come so clearly into focus for Swiss citizens. The sight of severely crippled war veterans made a lasting impression on all who saw them. All the more, this called attention to the fates of those who still suffered in the camps. "What could be more natural than placing our country's exceedingly available health resorts at the disposal of the cure of all the million wounds this horrible war has stricken?", a popular book on Switzerland's charity work during the war asked:

Was it not our country with its magnificent mountains, its silent valleys, with its pure and aromatic alpine air and its curative waters that was able to cure the wounded, ease the exhausted, strengthen the shattered, offer recovery and new courage to face life?⁷

Negotiations and Categories

During the Great War, several neutrals faced the internment of foreign civilians and military personnel. At the very outbreak of war, the Dutch, for example, saw themselves confronted with 1 million civilian [refugees from Belgium](#) and tens of thousands of members of the Belgian Armed Forces crossing their borders. Later, based on an Anglo-German agreement dating from July 1917, around 10,000 British and German POWs each were interned in the Netherlands. Sweden, Denmark and [Norway](#) developed similar projects.⁸ Switzerland had some experience with the temporary internment of foreign soldiers during the Franco-Prussian War in 1871: after the French Eastern Army, named after its commander General [Charles-Denis Bourbaki \(1816-1897\)](#), had crossed the border, a large number of military units were interned for around six weeks.

As early as 1915, the ICRC, the Holy See and the Swiss Federal Council launched initiatives to intern and hospitalise lightly wounded and sick POWs on Swiss soil. The intention to provide a

large-scale and long-term internment of foreign POWs for medical treatment based on mutual agreements between the warring parties was a completely new concept, both diplomatically and logistically. The unique system, developed in Switzerland and later crowned by the Berne Agreements of spring 1918, set new international legal standards for the exchange and repatriation of POWs. Following difficult Franco-German negotiations, first conditions were agreed to at the beginning of 1916.

Sick and wounded prisoners were selected for hospitalisation in Switzerland not only by camp physicians but also by commissions of Swiss medical officers visiting those camps. Their selection was based on medical criteria agreed upon beforehand and was reviewed by Swiss control commissions in Constance and Lyon before the prisoners could be transported to Switzerland. The categories favoured prisoners who suffered from the widespread tuberculosis – especially pulmonary tuberculosis – or other respiratory diseases which at the time were thought to be best cured by fresh air therapies, for which Switzerland's alpine climate was considered ideal. Other categories included: prisoners with chronic cardiovascular diseases; those with illnesses of sense, digestive or sexual organs; those with severe dysfunctions of the nervous system; those who were blind or had lost an eye; those who were deaf; those who had lost one or more limb; those suffering from rheumatism, arthrosis, other diseases caused by injuries; or those with illnesses that rendered them incapable of military service indefinitely.

Internment of Sick and Wounded POWs

Internment Regions and Military Hospitals

In January 1916, the first contingent of [French](#) and [German](#) POWs suffering from tuberculosis arrived in Switzerland – 100 prisoners from each country. The French were sent to Aigle in the Romandie; the Germans to the Grison resort of Davos. Thousands were to follow them in the subsequent months. After the successful launch of the project, the [Belgian](#) and [British](#) governments joined the system under the same conditions that had been negotiated with Paris and Berlin. From the beginning of the project until the signature of the armistices in 1918, more than 67,000 POWs kept by the Allied and Central Powers were interned in Switzerland. Of these prisoners, just under 38,000 were French; more than 21,000 German; 4,000 Belgian; 4,000 British; and 600 from [Austria-Hungary](#). Apart from a short period in the summer of 1918, there were never more than 30,000 POWs simultaneously interned in the country.

Split off in relatively small groups, the foreign POWs were interned in a wide variety of hotels and sanatoria distributed among some 200 mainly alpine towns and villages with an already strongly developed tourist and spa infrastructure. The warring nations had mutually agreed

to hand over internees who had escaped to their home countries back to their captors. For this reason, the localities did not need to be guarded and the foreign guests were taken care of by hotel and medical personnel only. Selected internees, subordinated to Swiss officers in charge of several facilities, were themselves responsible for their comrades' correct behaviour. Specially designated internment regions were created by joining towns and villages which hosted internees into one administrative unit. The top of the command structure was in the hands of Colonel [Carl Hauser \(1866-1956\)](#), head of the Swiss Army's medical services.⁹

The internees were placed in internment regions according to their nationality. More or less, the regions mirrored the tourist preferences of the pre-war period. A register from August 1916 shows that French and Belgians were quartered in the regions of Montreux and Lake Geneva, in Aigle, Leysin and surroundings, Montana and Lower Valais, Gruyère, in the western Jura Mountains, Upper Valais, in the Aargau spa town of Schinznach and in wide parts of the Bernese Oberland, whereas the British were placed in Château-d'Œx, Mürren and partially also in Leysin. German internees were allocated accommodations in Davos, Arosa and the surrounding areas, in the regions of Glarus-Weesen, St. Gallen, Appenzell, Ragaz-Päfers, Chur as well as in the Grison Oberland. In central Switzerland around Lake Lucerne both Germans and French were interned; delinquents were locked up in the prison of Witzwil in the Bernese Seeland.¹⁰ The administrative division changed slightly over time, though generally remained stable.

In the summer of 1916, a military hospital (*Armeesanitätsanstalt*, or ASA) was founded in Lucerne, where POWs of all nations were treated. In autumn 1917, the ASA was dissolved and replaced by a hospital for German internees, also in Lucerne, and by a new ASA for allied internees in Fribourg.¹¹ Here, Swiss surgeons operated on wounded prisoners who had initially been treated in captivity but whose injuries required further medical attention. They suffered mainly from skull and brain injuries, extremities injuries, badly healed fractures and pseudoarthrosis, as well as from trauma of the peripheral nervous system and corollaries.¹² These complex orthopaedic and neurological surgeries were considered a very important field of practice for a Swiss war surgery otherwise untested for decades due to a lack of military conflicts.¹³

Internees' Everyday Lives, Problems and Conflicts

In addition to the physical recovery of the POWs, authorities focused on their "moral regeneration". This latter aspect was important for the Swiss authorities, who were concerned that the internees return to their home country as valuable members of their

society – which would have to be rebuilt once the war had ended. Discipline, labour and education were considered appropriate means to achieve these aims. For every internee capable of work, an occupation adapted to his respective strengths and abilities was compulsory. The authorities, as well as several relief organizations, such as the Swiss Red Cross, maintained special workshops and establishments where internees produced goods like furniture, orthopaedic shoes and artificial limbs for the ASA. Hundreds of internees got the opportunity to study at regular Swiss [universities](#) or technical colleges; moreover, several of the internment facilities maintained their own libraries and schools, where language courses or education in craft or trade were provided. The internees published their own newspapers and could engage in cultural activities.¹⁴ POWs fully able to work could also be employed in local companies or in agriculture. Such employment of internees as skilled or unskilled workers was from the very beginning viewed with scepticism by Swiss trade unions. In fact, several enterprises could profit from this welcome resource in an otherwise dried-out labour market, and employers – at least partially – explicitly favoured internees, who worked under bargain conditions.¹⁵

On various occasions, the Swiss population showed its sympathy for the internees. Especially in the beginning, the arrival of internees at the border, in stopover locations or at their final destinations was treated as a celebrated event attracting masses of onlookers and volunteers who took care of the sick and wounded soldiers and regaled them with gifts. Soon enough, though, the overwhelming sympathies, especially of the female population for the foreign internees, became an object of criticism. Alarmed by the “effusive conduct of all too keen” ladies and girls, women’s associations solicited from them “a bit more of the austere aloofness of our mountains, that raise their heads in quiet pureness and still remain rooted firmly in the ground of their native country.”¹⁶ Major [Edouard Favre \(1855-1942\)](#) – a historian from Geneva, chief of the internment’s historical service and author of the authorities’ white book on the internment – noted “numerous accounts of indiscipline” caused by internees “of which many, still devitalized, morally and physically scarcely resistant, surprised by this reception – which in certain places resembled a delirium – surrendered themselves to these unexpected delights.”¹⁷

As, in the course of the tightening conditions of economic warfare, the supply situation of the Swiss population grew worse and worse, the extra mouths to be fed were questioned increasingly. “Whereas, during the arrival of Indians, Senegalese negroes, brown and yellow Asians, the crowd is racing to distribute gifts,” stated a newspaper article on the advent of Swiss militaries suffering from the [flu](#) in Berne in July 1918, “our soldiers were left with nothing.”¹⁸ Although authorities stressed that the internees were in no way privileged in

terms of [nutrition](#), clearly this was precisely what some suspected. As a consequence of the harshening attitude toward the “foreign war guests”, the possibilities for families of the interned to visit their fathers, husbands and sons were restricted more and more.^{[19](#)}

In his final report, Major Favre mentioned other conflict zones the internment caused from the very beginning: “Every day evidence arrives at the office of the army’s head doctor that the internment service is not being understood at all”, he wrote. “Abroad, they talk of bribes adroitly distributed by families to achieve the internment of one of theirs. Here, many say that the internment is merely an issue of hoteliers.”^{[20](#)} Corruption during the selection procedure did seem to cause serious problems to the authorities. In fact, records indicate that repeated threats of serious punishment were made to those who tried to manipulate the selection committees, or were involved in placement services.^{[21](#)}

On the other hand, the hotel industry was undeniably one of the main beneficiaries of the internment. In the decades before the war, during the booming *belle epoque* of Swiss alpine tourism, infrastructure such as hotels, sanatoria, and spas as well as trails, mountain and rack railways, had been expanded in the most spectacular way. The fact that, during the summer crisis of 1914, the vacation guests departed and had yet to return was a blow to the Swiss tourism industry from which it did not recover for a long time. The placement of internees as paying guests from 1916 onwards saved the included hotels from the certain bankruptcy they had been facing. Accordingly, it was the hospitality lobby from the various tourist regions that most resolutely opposed the authorities’ primary ideas to construct barracks for the internees.^{[22](#)} During the course of the internment, regional interest groups repeatedly urged the federal government to allocate more POWs to certain establishments.^{[23](#)} The often vigorous attitude with which hoteliers defended their business interests hardly corresponded with the propaganda image of generous and selfless hospitality.

Despite this criticism, the internment of sick and wounded alien POWs as a whole was hardly ever questioned by the public, the media or by political parties. The internees themselves were well aware of the privilege they enjoyed by being allowed to rest, cure their ills and regain new strength in Switzerland. Dozens of thank you-letters show the depth of the gratitude of interned POWs, their relatives and government representatives.^{[24](#)}

The “Others”: Unloved Fugitives and War Resisters

Not all foreign military personnel came to the country as invited patients and spa guests. Hundreds of [Russian POWs](#), for example, fled camps and labour commandos in [Germany](#) or [Austria-Hungary](#) and crossed the border into Switzerland between 1915 and 1920. Despite

continuing negotiations, the [Tsarist government](#) never achieved the regular internment of Russian prisoners of the Central Powers in Switzerland.²⁵ They were the largest in number, however, and their situation was one of the most deplorable because they were hardly supported by their government.²⁶ The Russians were treated harshly and outnumbered prisoners of all other powers in their rate of mortality by illness – mainly tuberculosis – and general weakness.²⁷ Whereas in the first years, escaped Russian POWs were kindly received in Switzerland and mostly journeyed on to [France](#), the [revolutionary turnovers](#) in the Tsarist Empire after 1917 caused, on the one hand, an expanding number and a prolonged stay of Russian military fugitives, and, on the other hand, a growing mistrust among the Swiss authorities and a wide swath of the public towards their real or imagined Bolshevik sympathies. When, in the first months of 1918, more than 1,000 deserters of a [mutinous Russian expeditionary corps to France](#) entered the country, authorities became seriously worried. All Russian soldiers – regardless of how they arrived in Switzerland – were now treated like deserters, put under military custody and subject to [forced labour](#) in rural engineering, agriculture and the construction of hydroelectric power stations.²⁸

In addition to the members of the former Russian expeditionary corps, foreign deserters and war resisters who found refuge in Switzerland were quite large in number. Up until May 1919, around 26,000 were still registered in Switzerland, of which 12,000 were Italian, 7,000 German, 2,000 from France and Austria-Hungary respectively, as well as smaller numbers of Turks, Serbs, Romanians, Belgians and Bulgarians.²⁹ Nearly all of them were regarded with great distrust and disapproval for their “unpatriotic behaviour” by the liberal and conservative press as well as the authorities. Except for Alsatians who had deserted, for whose conduct the Swiss partisans of France showed understanding and even compassion, war resisters were denounced for general disloyalty, cowardice and [war profiteering](#).³⁰ Whereas in the early years, they could almost freely settle down and find a job to make a living, the growing social opposition in Switzerland – that would find its dramatic peak in the [General Strike](#) of November 1918 – led to the tightening of measures in regards to their entry and residence.³¹

Conclusion: Calculated Humanity: The Use of POW Internment

The internment of foreign POWs in Switzerland from 1916 to 1919 was not merely the selfless act of a “Good Samaritan”, but an important pillar of Swiss politics during the Great War. As the postcard mentioned at the beginning of this article shows, the internment was meant to be one of the humanitarian rays the peaceful “Swiss lighthouse” sent out to lighten the

bellicose darkness around it. Internment was an act of external propaganda in order to promote the advantages of a neutral Switzerland in the middle of a warring continent to all parties. With reference to the internment, Switzerland was also able to regain some freedom of action in its trade policy, which had been under growing pressure due to the economic warfare of its neighbours. Pointing to the foreign POWs harboured within the country's borders, the Federal Council was able to obtain an increase of the import quota several times for fertilizers, potatoes and charcoal.³² In September 1917, for example, Germany agreed to deliver, on behalf of the internees, 74,000 extra tons of charcoal that the Swiss authorities could however use at their sole discretion.³³ This corresponded to more than 3 percent of the total Swiss coal imports in 1917 and was an amount that – in times of extreme shortage – was not to be underestimated.³⁴

On the other hand, internment functioned internally, too. While Swiss society during the war was divided along the language borders – French-speaking Switzerland generally was in favour of the Entente; whereas most people in the German-speaking part of the country supported the Central Powers – the internment of members of both warring parties was an opportunity to reconnect the quarrelling social factions in a common humanitarian cause – at least according to the picture drawn by the propaganda. Regardless, at a time when many – in contemplation of the horrors going on outside the country – suffered from forced inactivity, humanitarian aid for the POWs offered a possibility for numerous volunteers to focus on something “useful” they could do for the victims of war. The internment reassured society that neutrality did not simply mean non-interference in the course of the world, but could also serve to do something “good”.

At the same time, the internment generated tangible gains for quite a range of actors: an underdeveloped military surgery was able to adapt to the effects of modern [warfare](#) and several companies profited from the welcome labour forces. The total costs of internment added up to some 137 million Swiss francs, which was lower than the gross value of the tourist sector in pre-war 1913 alone, but still nearly equalled the export of the flourishing Swiss machine industry in 1918.³⁵ With all the bills being paid by the countries of origin, the placement of internees meant big business, too, for an important branch of the national economy.³⁶ The fact that non-internee foreigners – for example, fugitives and war resisters – were not at all welcome guests shows the extent to which humanitarian engagement in Switzerland was narrowly tied to political and economic interests. Its opportunistic function notwithstanding, Switzerland's calculated humanity nevertheless provided basic relief to tens of thousands of captured soldiers who were among the most distressed victims of the Great War. In addition, the agreements on internment in Switzerland set a legal basis for the later

codification of the treatment of POWs in armed conflicts, thus, for example, inspiring the 1929 Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War.³⁷ The internment of sick and wounded POWs during the First World War marks a specific chapter in a long and ambivalent history of Switzerland's humanitarian role in international politics.

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Notes

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