

Internment (Canada)

By [Donald H. Avery](#)

Summary

How did Canada, as a self-governing country within the British Empire, deal with the internal security challenges of the First World War? Not surprisingly, this question has elicited many different scholarly responses, particularly in terms of Canada's commitment to democratic principles and cultural toleration during this period of national emergency. For the purposes of this article three major questions have been addressed: what were the essential features of Canada's War Measures Act; how did the enemy alien internment system operate; and in what ways were Canadians affected by the Russian Revolution and the Red Scare of 1918-1919?

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Introduction

Between 1914 and 1918 [Canada](#) had its first encounter with [total war](#). It was a traumatic experience. Above all there was the devastating carnage of the [Western Front](#) where over 60,000 Canadian soldiers [lost their lives](#). Not only was this a high ratio of casualties for a country of only 8 million, but its impact was particularly pronounced on certain regions, given the nature of Canada's military enlistment system. For example, large numbers of volunteers came from Ontario and western Canada, compared with Quebec where [French Canadians](#) increasingly adopted an indifferent stance towards both patriotic military service, and the anti-German [propaganda](#) campaign. This struggle over Canada's commitment to the Allied cause reached a critical point in 1917 when the government of Sir [Robert Borden \(1854-1937\)](#) implemented mandatory conscription through the Military Service Act, a policy

that seriously disrupted the country's political party system, along with its acceptance of "white" ethnic diversity. This polarization was evident during the December 1917 election, when the recently formed Union government, totally dominated by British Canadians, carried out a vicious propaganda campaign that equated anti-conscription views with pro-German allegiance. In addition, the Wartime Elections Act disenfranchised all enemy alien citizens – largely from Germany and the Austrian empire – who had been naturalized since 1902 on the grounds of dual loyalties.

Canada's national security programmes against [enemy aliens](#) were first outlined in the War Measures Act of 22 August 1914. Under this sweeping mandate a number of restrictive regulations were established, the most controversial being the internment of potential subversives (some of whom were citizens), although in the end only 8,579, or 1.5 percent of the potential cohort were actually placed behind [barbed wire](#). This number included 2,009 Germans, 5,954 Austro-Hungarians, 205 Turks, 99 Bulgarians, and 312 classified as miscellaneous.¹

In recent years, historians have reassessed the wartime policies of the Canadian government towards its enemy alien population. In some cases the focus has been on the actions of key political figures, notably Prime Minister Sir Robert Borden; Solicitor General [Arthur Meighen \(1874-1960\)](#); Minister of Justice [Charles J. Doherty \(1855-1931\)](#); and prominent members of the British-Canadian cultural community such as journalists [John W. Dafoe \(1866-1944\)](#) of the Manitoba Free Press, and [Joseph E. Atkinson \(1865-1948\)](#) of the *Toronto Star*.² Of particular concern was the need to explain why patriotic jingoism, [xenophobia](#), and even mob violence against enemy aliens became so widespread during the later stages of the war. Equally important has been the work of ethno-cultural historians who have examined the wartime experiences of different groups of enemy aliens in Canada, with the Ukrainians receiving special attention largely because they represented over 80 percent of the civilians who were categorized as prisoners of war, and interned in the country's system of internment camps. Although these injustices received little attention for the next half century, during the 1980s a sustained campaign was launched by the Canadian Ukrainians for a formal apology from the Dominion government, which was eventually given in March 2005 by the passage of the Ukrainian Canadian Restitution Act.³

Dual Loyalty and National Security

Although there was little evidence to support these nativist sentiments, British Canadian hostility towards potentially disloyal European immigrants was widespread even before the outbreak of hostilities. This was particularly true of those enemy aliens categorized as

citizens of the [Austro-Hungarian Empire](#) since most of them were immigrants of military age who retained the status of reservists in their former homeland. On 27 July 1914, for example, while the world waited anxiously for Vienna's reaction to the [assassination](#) of the [Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este \(1863-1914\)](#), Bishop [Nykyta Budka \(1877-1949\)](#), the leading spokesman of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Canada, released a pastoral letter urging men who were military reservists to carry out their duty to the Austro-Hungarian Empire if war should occur. Despite Budka's quick retraction, the Anglo-Canadian press attacked this pronouncement, not only on the grounds of national security, but also because of deep-rooted fears that unemployed and destitute European immigrant workers might take advantage of wartime conditions "for the destruction of property...and other crazy things."⁴

War Measures Act, August 1914

The outbreak of war on 4 August forced the Dominion government to develop a comprehensive set of national security guidelines, a process that had involved British experts associated with the Committee on Imperial Defence. Of particular concern were the large numbers of so-called enemy aliens in the country, which included 393,320 persons of German origin, 129,103 from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, 3,880 from the Turkish Empire, and several thousand from Bulgaria.⁵ And the Cabinet wasted little time in exercising its powers. On 7 August, there was a proclamation that declared that a state of war existed and that any persons who were assisting the enemy would be apprehended and incarcerated. On 15 August, at the behest of the British government, another Cabinet proclamation prohibited the exit from Canada of German and Austro-Hungarian military reservists, while guaranteeing the civilian enemy alien population freedom from unwarranted arrest and harassment. But the most important development came on 22 August when the War Measures Act (WMA) received royal assent.⁶

Modelled on two British statutes, the [Defence of the Realm Act](#) (DORA) and the Aliens Restriction Act, the Canadian WMA specified that during a "state of war, invasion, or insurrection...the Governor in Council may do and authorize such acts...orders and regulations, as he may...deem necessary or advisable for the security, defence, order and welfare of Canada ...".⁷ The various sections of the Act outlined the scope of these powers, including [censorship](#) on all forms of communication and the arrest, detention and deportation of dangerous enemy aliens. Significantly, this transition towards government by order-in-council instead of parliamentary debate did not concern either the Liberal opposition, or the Canadian media. In fact, former Prime Minister Sir [Wilfrid Laurier \(1841-1919\)](#) assured the country that his party would "offer no criticism, so long as there is danger at the front".⁸ What

makes this compliance rather surprising was that, unlike the British DORA, there was no provision for amending the WMA in response to changing circumstances, or legal appeals; instead, these emergency powers were viewed as unalterable until the end of hostilities.

But since the most draconian aspects of the War Measures Act only involved enemy aliens, most English- and French-speaking Canadians were unconcerned with the various security enactments. These included orders-in-council of August and September 1914 that prohibited enemy aliens from possessing firearms, communicating information that could aid the enemy, along with the warning that any hostile act of contravention of the WMA could result in arrest and internment. On 28 October, by order-in-council PC 2721, a system of police and military registration was established under the auspices of the Department of Justice, with the actual administration of the system being entrusted to the Dominion Police and the Royal Northwest Mounted Police (RNWMP). In addition, plans were made to deal with the alleged threat that German-American communities of several US cities might launch cross-border attacks, “a repetition of the [Fenian] invasion of 1866 [but] on a larger scale”.⁹ What made this threat from the [United States](#) even more ominous was the steady flow of migrant labourers across a virtually un-patrolled border: particularly since many of these workers were viewed as potential enemy saboteurs, or members of radical trade unions such as the International Workers of the World (IWW), the famous American-based syndicalist organization which had been involved in a number of bitter railway and mining strikes in western Canada between 1910 and 1914.

Throughout the war years Ottawa attempted to establish an effective censorship system over newspapers, international cables and [wireless transmissions](#), and even the evolving motion picture industry. Although control over these forms of communication was mentioned in the War Measures Act, it was not until 10 June 1915 (PC 1330) that the Press Censorship Branch was created under the direction of Colonel [Ernest J. Chambers \(1862-1925\)](#). In monitoring the approximately 1,490 publications in Canada Chambers faced a daunting task: particularly since his manpower and financial resources were limited.¹⁰ On the other hand, the federal government assumed that the English-language press could basically operate under self-regulatory guidelines because of its collective determination to support the Canadian war effort. In contrast, there was limited tolerance of enemy alien newspapers, particularly those serving immigrant communities in western Canada and northern Ontario. Indeed, by the end of the war, the Chief Censor’s Branch had closed down or excluded 126 foreign-language papers: fifty-six German, twenty-seven Russian, twenty Ukrainian, sixteen Finnish, and eight Yiddish.¹¹

Internment Operations

The actual machinery of enemy alien internment was established in October 1914 when the venerated Lieutenant General [William Otter \(1843-1929\)](#), one of Canada's most distinguished soldiers, was given command of this novel and controversial state programme. While dependent upon the Department of Militia for prison guards and logistical support, administratively the internment directorate operated under the Department of Justice, which supervised the actual registration of enemy aliens as stipulated under orders-in-council PC 2721/2920. Under this system Otter personally selected the commandants of the twenty-four camps that were soon established throughout the country during the first two years of the war; although most internees were first identified by local registrars of enemy aliens and then forcibly removed by either the Dominion Police or the RNWMP.¹² Of central importance, however, was the determination of the Borden government to avoid large-scale internment because of concerns about the enormous expense in operating the camps, a reluctance to adopt "police state" tactics, and evidence that many municipalities viewed the camps as a way of getting rid of their unemployed alien workers. As a result, despite pressure from other levels of government and veterans organizations for expanded internments, by 1917, the actual numbers of incarcerated enemy aliens were reduced by 75 percent through camp consolidation, and the work parole system. Indeed, at the end of the war only Amherst (Nova Scotia), Kapuskasing (northern Ontario) and Vernon (British Columbia) were still in operation, with many of the 2,000 "hard core" internees scheduled for deportation being so-called Bolshevik aliens, who had been arrested because of their involvement with industrial conflicts such as the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919.

During the first year of the war the internment camp system went through several stages. First, there was the challenge of dealing with the approximately 800 actual [prisoners of war](#), most of whom were German officers and enlisted personnel who had been apprehended either in Canada, in [Newfoundland](#) (then a separate British colony), or in the British West Indies. Another cohort was German and Austrian reservists who were apprehended at the US-Canadian border on instructions from London that these men might be a military asset for the Central Powers. While the Borden government was unhappy with this policy since it prevented them from getting rid of large numbers of resourceful enemy aliens and avoiding any potential confrontation with American border officials, they reluctantly carried out the imperial decree.

For his part Otter regarded the German internees as his great challenge since they were "educated, pushful and intelligent and many of them have seen service with the German forces".¹³ As a result, he provided instructions that these men should be concentrated in

special camps such as Amherst (Nova Scotia), Fort Henry (Kingston), and Niagara Falls, where they could be kept under close supervision, and separate from the more diverse Austrian enemy alien population. There were, however, several flaws with this strategy. First, since these camps were located relatively close to major population centres, and the Canada-US border, there were on-going problems of individual and group breakouts. In addition, many of the German internees were insistent on their rights under [The Hague Convention](#) (1907), in terms of the basic necessities of life, camp discipline, and [forced labour](#), while also demonstrating an ability to bring their grievances to the attention of the German government. This situation further deteriorated in June 1917 when a group of German prisoners in the Kapuskasing camp, dissatisfied with the living conditions, and forcible labour, mounted a brief rebellion. Although there were no casualties, the incident increased the possibility that Berlin might authorize retaliatory measures against Canadian and British POWs as a way of preventing further persecution of its nationals in Canada.¹⁴

The largest and most vulnerable group of enemy aliens however, comprised Ukrainians and other groups from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Although many of these men had been interned during the first stages of the war, most of them were released after signing loyalty pledges. But this was only a temporary reprieve given the serious social situation that existed in many Canadian cities where unemployed enemy alien workers faced not only starvation, but also the possibility of vigilante violence from an increasingly hostile Anglo-Canadian population.¹⁵ As a result, thousands of Ukrainians were relocated, sometimes with their wives and children, to primitive and remote camps in the Canadian Shield such as Spirit Lake (Quebec) and Kapuskasing (Ontario). Even larger numbers were dispatched to a plethora of facilities in western Canada (Brandon, Lethbridge, Vernon, Nanaimo), where they were expected to perform hard labour for local road construction, or in expanding the national park system.¹⁶

In the private sector, most labour intensive corporations strongly resisted popular demands for the large-scale dismissal of their enemy alien employees since, they argued, Anglo-Canadian workers would not undertake rough, dirty and low-paying jobs. And Ottawa listened: by 1916 a system had been adopted of releasing non-dangerous interned prisoners of war (POWs) under contract to selected mining and railway companies at the depressed wage of \$1.10 a day (the same amount paid to a Canadian private serving overseas). This scheme quickly became popular with the corporate sector, as was evident in December 1917 when [James Henry Plummer \(1848-1932\)](#), founder of the powerful Dominion Iron and Steel Corporation, attempted to convince Prime Minister Borden that German POWs interned in Great Britain be transferred to Canada so that they could work in the company's mines on Cape Breton Island.¹⁷

National Insecurity, the Russian Revolution and Press Censorship

As the war progressed there were a number of major events that further polarized relations between the enemy alien community and Anglo-Canadian society. In 1915, for example, there was increased emphasis on German military [atrocities](#) with particular emphasis placed on the use of [poison gas](#) during the April [Ypres offensive](#); as well as the 7 May U-boat attack on the SS. [Lusitania](#). Indeed, news of these events resulted in mob attacks on German businesses and newspapers throughout the country. Closely related was the hysteria associated with the mysterious fire that gutted the nation's parliamentary building in February 1916; and the even more disastrous Halifax explosion of 6 December 1917, which killed over a thousand people and left the city in ruins. In both cases these tragedies were initially blamed on enemy saboteurs.¹⁸ But the most controversial government measure was the September 1917 Wartime Elections Act which removed the franchise from enemy aliens who had been naturalized after 31 March 1902, or who had applied for a certificate of exemption from combatant military service on conscientious grounds. In turn, the subsequent Unionist election campaign of December 1917 not only justified the removal of the vote from potentially disloyal Canadians, but also successfully exploited anti-alien sentiments among the electorate of western Canada.¹⁹ And worse was to come when concern over a global Bolshevik conspiracy gripped the country in 1918-1919.

Canadian reaction to the [Russian Revolution](#) went through several stages. At first, there was widespread support for the overthrow of the tsar, in part, at least because of the belief that the authoritarian character of the imperial government impeded Russia's war effort. In fact, it was within this political context that [Leon Trotsky \(1879-1940\)](#), the charismatic Communist organizer, was released from the Amherst internment camp where he was briefly detained, and allowed to continue his revolutionary journey to St. Petersburg.²⁰ By the fall of 1918, however, public opinion was definitely anti-Bolshevik, and the decision to send Canadian troops to Siberia was generally supported by the British-Canadian press. At this stage, the Borden government also decided to commission its own internal security investigation under the direction of [C. H. Cahan \(1861-1944\)](#), a wealthy Montreal lawyer. In the course of his inquiry, Cahan solicited information from businessmen, "respectable" labour leaders, police officials in both Canada and the United States and various members of the anti-socialist immigrant community in Canada. The report which Cahan submitted to Cabinet in September 1918 was the basis of a series of coercive measures: by two orders-in-council (PC 2381 and PC 2384) the foreign-language press was suppressed, and fourteen socialist and anarchist organizations were outlawed. Penalties for possession of prohibited literature, and continued membership in any of these outlawed organizations were extremely severe: fines of up to

\$5,000 or a maximum prison term of five years could be imposed.²¹

Red Scare 1919

The hatreds and fear stirred up by World War I did not end with the Armistice of 1918; instead social tension spread in ever-widening circles. Anglo-Canadians who had learned to despise the Germans and the Austro-Hungarians had little difficulty transferring their aroused passions to the Bolsheviks. This was particularly the case in western Canada where there was widespread agitation against potentially disloyal aliens and those involved in socialist organizations. Nor was the Unionist government opposed to these developments, in part because of the fears of imminent class warfare, and, in part, because of concerns that battle-tested veterans might be recruited into militant trade unions. This siege mentality was evident in February 1919 when federal officials endorsed the Manitoba government's decision to establish the Alien Investigation Board with powers to detail and deport dangerous foreigners, despite its obvious constitutional illegality. The country's social fabric was further weakened by the appearance of a deadly [influenza epidemic](#) (Spanish Flu) that claimed over 50,000 lives—almost equalling the number of Canadians killed on the battlefield.

But how serious was the radical alien threat? Post-war surveys by the Department of Justice revealed that there were over 88,000 enemy aliens registered, 2,222 of whom were located in internment camps. There were also 63,784 Russian subjects in Canada, many of whom officials in Ottawa believed to be potentially hostile. The policy of mass deportation was rejected however because of both its likely international repercussions and the demands it would make on the country's transportation facilities at a time when the troops were returning from Europe. Ironically, by the spring of 1919 the Borden government had received a number of petitions from ethnic organizations demanding either protection of their property against mob attacks, now being carried out by returned soldiers, or the right to leave Canada.²²

The Winnipeg General Strike of 15 May to 28 June 1919 brought the elements of class and ethnic conflict together in a massive confrontation. The growing hysteria in the city produced intense anti-alien propaganda, close co-operation between security forces and the local political elite, and attempts to use the immigration machinery to deport not only alien agitators but also British-born radicals. As a result, Section 41 of the Immigration Act was amended in June 1919, to greatly expand the definition of seditious behaviour to include those who advocated "the unlawful destruction of property...or attempt to create a riot or public disorder in Canada, or who is a member of or affiliated with any organization

entertaining or teaching disbelief in or opposition to organized government”.²³ The violent confrontation of 21 June between the strikers and the RNWMP, in which scores were injured and two killed, encouraged the hard liners in the Borden government. On 1 July a series of raids was carried out across the country on the homes of known alien agitators and the offices of radical organizations. Many of those arrested were denied the formal deportation proceedings specified by section 41; instead they appeared before Winnipeg magistrate [Hugh John Macdonald \(1850-1929\)](#) – son of Canada’s first prime minister – who ordered them sent to the internment camp at Kapuskasing for “safe keeping”.²⁴ They were subsequently deported in secret, despite any credible evidence that they were guilty of subversion or illegal activities of any kind.

In its attempts to remove the approximately 200 “anarchists and revolutionaries” rounded up in 1919, the Immigration Branch worked very closely with the United States immigration authorities, who were busy planning their own expulsion of “Reds” after the controversial [Palmer Raids](#).²⁵ This cooperation was indicative of the links being forged between Canadian, American and British security agencies towards the formation of organized communist parties in all three countries. An essential component of this tripartite system was the lists of undesirable immigrants and known Communists that were regularly transmitted between Ottawa, London and Washington.²⁶

Conclusion

For many scholars Canada demonstrated a deplorable lack of tolerance towards its enemy alien citizens during the First World War. In contrast, other experts point out that the basic guarantees extended by the Borden government in August 1914 were observed, and that state repression only occurred on a very small scale at the very end of the war. The truth is somewhere between these extremes. First, while it is true that the War Measures Act was not subject to judicial review, Ottawa did not assume dictatorial powers in dealing with the country’s enemy alien population, the majority of whom were neither incarcerated nor harassed. At the same time, however, there was always the threat that more excessive measures could be adopted, or that the government would fail to protect these vulnerable citizens from mob violence. Second, for those enemy aliens who were forced into the twenty-four internment camps, the working and living conditions were often unhealthy, with some internees succumbing to tuberculosis and other infectious diseases. Third, for British Canadians the war years demonstrated the challenges of maintaining the principles of democracy within a culturally diverse population, particularly when the burdens of sacrifice appeared so unfair. One aspect of this frustration was a surge of anti-French Canadian sentiment; but even more hostility was directed towards enemy aliens. As a result, in 1919

there was a groundswell of support for a more restrictive immigration policy, beginning with the June order-in-council (PC 1203) that restricted the entry of Germans, Austrians, Hungarians, Bulgarians and Turks because of their wartime associations. But this expression of nativism was short lived: within four years, these barriers had been discarded as Canadians rediscovered the advantages of cheap malleable labour within the context of the economic boom of the 1920s.

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- [Canadian War Measures Act \(University of Toronto\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
- [Conscription \(Wartime Canada\) \(Database\)](#)
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- [The Laws of War. Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, Geneva Conventions and Miscellaneous Treaties, Conventions and Agreements \(The Avalon Project\) \(Database\)](#)
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