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Prisoners of War and Internees (Union of South Africa)

By [Tilman Dederling](#)

A comparatively small number of German residents were interned as “enemy subjects” in the Union of South Africa. Most of them were accommodated at an abandoned military fort, Fort Napier, in Pietermaritzburg. Imprisonment caused disruptions and hardships for the internees but there is no evidence of the kind of excessive suffering that affected many prisoners of war (POWs) in other belligerent countries. Despite occasional outbursts of Germanophobia among British South Africans, the Afrikaner-dominated Union government treated the prisoners according to internationally accepted standards.

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Introduction

The history of the [German prisoners of war](#) (POWs) in [South Africa](#) has not yet received much attention from scholars. This contribution intends to explore the experience of civilian German residents who were interned as “enemy subjects”. Drawing mainly from relevant archival sources, this article shows that despite the hardships, internment was not marked by the kind of suffering that

characterised the situation of many civilian prisoners in other belligerent countries.

The Union of South Africa in 1914

The Union had been founded merely four years before the Great War. Its status as a dominion in the British Empire only thinly covered the many cracks that the South African War (1899-1902) had left in the political and social structures of the country. Faced by a large African majority, the white minority remained embroiled in bitter arguments about how Afrikaners and British South Africans could find common ground in a shared white South African identity.^[1] While the diplomatic crisis in the wake of the assassinations in Sarajevo was building up to a violent climax in Europe, local newspapers started hinting at the impending war with Germany.^[2] As in other belligerent countries, German residents found themselves exposed to a sudden wave of xenophobia and nationalist war propaganda. The Empire census of 1911 registered 1,116,806 white inhabitants in the Union of South Africa who faced a majority of 4,697,152 Africans, including members of other “non-white” groups.^[3] At the eve of the Great War, 12,798 residents indicated Germany as their place of birth. This group was dwarfed by the 181,972 white South Africans residents who were born in Britain.^[4] Since a large section of the German settlers had been absorbed by the Afrikaner segment of white South African society since the 17th century, German residents had not aspired to a hyphenated identity in the fashion of other German expatriate communities, such as the United States of America or Brazil. The close cultural and social affiliation of Afrikaners and German residents added a calming element to the outbreak of Germanophobia that gripped the country from August 1914. British South Africans were united by a groundswell of anti-German sentiment, which became increasingly vociferous after the German invasion of Belgium.^[5] Conversely, many Afrikaners remained aloof to the outbursts of jingoism that spasmodically convulsed wartime South Africa.

The South African Prime Minister, Louis Botha (1862-1919) and his Minister of Defence, Jan Christiaan Smuts (1870-1950), insisted that the Union had to comply with its obligation as a British dominion and join the war against Germany. There was substantial resistance emanating from nationalist Afrikaners. After extracting the agreement from the House of Assembly that the Union follow London’s demands to annex German South West Africa, the government was forced to put down a rebellion that was led by anti-British Afrikaner army officers who refused to fight on behalf of their erstwhile enemy.^[6]

Internment

Soon after the eruption of hostilities in Europe, the Union government began to arrest German and Austrian males between the age of eighteen and fifty-six. On 6 August, the British Governor-General in the Union was alerted to newspaper advertisements that requested German and Austrian reservists to report for military duty in Europe.^[7] The next day a government directive ordered all

German officers and reservists to be arrested. This did not yet result in the actual detainment of Germans as may be deduced from a government notice gazetted on 8 August requesting all men concerned to report daily to their local magistrate.^[8] Another notice stated later that “care should be taken not to arrest persons whose known character precluded suspicion or who were personally vouched for to the satisfaction of the Government”.^[9] Austrian reservists were initially exempted from these regulations, but on 13 August the same principles were applied to them as well, including the request to register the names of enemy aliens at sea ports and to confiscate their firearms and ammunition.^[10]

Arrests took place all over the Union. On 20 August 1914, Caledon Square in Cape Town buzzed with German and some Austrian naval and army reservists who had been instructed to register for their transfer to Johannesburg.^[11] Only those who could provide documentary proof that they were naturalised British citizens or had been discharged from reserve duty were exempted. The Union government established a Prisoners of War Information Bureau at the Defence Headquarters in Pretoria to centralise the administration of detainees.^[12] The sources do not always provide a clear picture of the transfers of prisoners between camps but the prisoners were subdivided according to a class-based system. The military school of Tempe at Bloemfontein in the Free State initially quartered the officers, while the lower ranks were taken to the Milner Agricultural Show Grounds in Johannesburg. The government implemented measures to prevent the transport of large groups of prisoners from turning into demonstrations of anti-German sentiment.^[13] Despite jingoistic comments made by some British South Africans, the public mood was characterised by a degree of civility, as it was demonstrated by the charity ladies of Cape Town who handed out cakes and refreshments to detainees arriving from Lüderitzbucht, who had been netted during the first phase of the South West African campaign in South West Africa.^[14]

On 21 August the first 100 prisoners arrived in Johannesburg. According to [press](#) reports, the mood was sombre but composed.^[15] The Johannesburg newspaper, *The Star*, reported in the last week of August that the numbers of prisoners in Johannesburg had increased to 610.^[16] A total of 890 Germans and Austrians had been interned by 4 September throughout the Union.^[17] A few days later, 936 interned Germans and Austrians were gloomily pondering their fate behind the [wire](#).^[18] On 11 September *The Star* reported that the prisoners had been transferred from Johannesburg to the military base of Roberts Heights in Pretoria. The numbers of the detainees increased to about 1,500 a few days later, supplemented by a sprinkling of German prisoners from the Belgian Congo and Rhodesia, including some women and [children](#).^[19] Perhaps in response to more stringently implemented security measures “the semblance of a mutiny” at Roberts Heights had to be suppressed “before any violence became necessary”.^[20] The public was only dimly aware of the conditions prevailing at the base, but the ensuing questions from the Afrikaner [nationalist](#) opposition in parliament about rumours of ill-treatment of the prisoners were categorically refuted by the government.^[21] The ongoing detention of German residents did not prevent Prime Minister Botha

from making conciliatory comments on the trustworthiness of naturalised Germans.^[22] Magistrates were instructed to use their discretion in identifying Germans for internment. Guidelines that were kept hidden from the public by the Minister of the Interior stipulated “not to intern enemy subjects living in outlying districts if they conduct themselves quietly and peaceably”.^[23] During this first wave of arrests, 300 German reservists were released on parole for health reasons, or because they were church ministers or members of the medical profession.^[24] There are indications, however, that the paroling of German missionaries was viewed with a measure of suspicion by the authorities. The Department of Native Affairs registered its concern when Africans interpreted the return of a released missionary of the Berlin Mission Society to his station as evidence of a German victory in Europe.^[25]

The question of where the prisoners were to be finally detained was overshadowed by the ongoing [Afrikaner rebellion](#).^[26] Readers’ letters to English language newspapers frequently referred to the collaboration between the Afrikaner rebels and the German *Schutztruppe* to argue the case for the internment of all Germans regardless of their citizen status.^[27] The rebellion was finally crushed in January 1915, but there were disconcerting rumours about the Afrikaner rebels planning to free the German prisoners in Pretoria. It seemed to be the safest option to move the prisoners from the Transvaal out of the reach of the rebels.^[28] Natal was the only one of the four South African provinces without any insurgent activities. Here pro-British as well as anti-German sentiments were most stridently displayed as the hallmark of settler identity.^[29] Men of ordinary rank and civilian prisoners of a working class background were taken in batches to Fort Napier in Pietermaritzburg.

Life in the Camps

On 25 October, 2,000 prisoners arrived at the Pietermaritzburg station from Pretoria.^[30] Only two days after their arrival rumours about a prison mutiny sprang up, which resulted in hundreds of citizens rushing to the fort. It is difficult to establish the facts on the basis of the scattered sources, but one newspaper claimed that some German prisoners had suffered bayonet wounds in a scuffle with their guards.^[31] The commander of the fort stationed seventy-five additional guards around the prison and at strategic spots in the city.^[32]

In January 1915, “approximately 2,800” prisoners were interned at Fort Napier.^[33] There was some ebb and flow in the statistics, depending on the releases given on parole, but these numbers remained relatively constant until the last stage of the war, never exceeding 3,000 civilian internees. Military POWs, i.e. mainly soldiers captured in South West Africa, were not permanently interned in the Union but detained at Aus in the south of the conquered territory.^[34] On 2 November 1914 men with the rank of reserve officers were sent from Pietermaritzburg to Lords Ground in Durban, a cricket field that had been converted into a barb-wired camp for a smaller number of detainees.^[35]

Reports from March 1915 indicated that there were three sub-camps housing 2,314 prisoners at Fort

Napier. The prisoners from the officers' camp in Durban were transferred back again to Pietermaritzburg.^[36] A reason for their removal may have been that the port town of Durban was not viewed as a safe place of internment. A ruling forbade the release on parole of prisoners to coastal areas and large towns.^[37] In August 1915, the camp commander reported to the American consul in Durban, who performed diplomatic good offices on behalf of the German prisoners, that three sub-camps accommodated 2,608 internees, which included 267 Austrians and six Turkish nationals.^[38]

Camp 1, including a "recreation ground", was described as consisting of eighteen barrack rooms constructed from wood and iron with brick foundations. The building had a veranda and was furnished with twenty-six WCs, twelve showers and two bathrooms. There also was a kitchen with cooking utensils. Camps 2 and 3 were described in very similar terms. A new fourth sub-camp was slightly more luxurious and comprised 136 rooms with fifty-one kitchens attached because it was reserved for prisoners of "the better class and elderly men".^[39] Resembling military barracks, the rooms were equipped with basic furniture. Each prisoner was given a mattress, blankets, and simple tableware and cutlery. Each of the four camps had a kitchen staff comprising one white cook as well as several Indian and African assistants. A so-called "camp captain" in each camp acted as the spokesman of the inmates.^[40] One medical officer and twelve orderlies staffed the basic camp hospital with support from a prisoner. Some records later mention a Camp 5, but its function does not clearly emerge from the sources apart from a reference to being reserved for "isolated cases"^[41] and it accommodated only five to six internees.^[42] Boredom always being a curse of prison life, many men passed their time with woodcarving and painting.^[43]

Since women and children of [enemy aliens](#) were treated as [refugees](#) and not as prisoners, two camps were set aside for those who had been captured in German South West Africa, Rhodesia and the Belgian Congo. Information on these refugee camps is sketchy, but they must have been located beyond the confines of Fort Napier and they were unguarded.^[44] The sources on these women and children do not provide much insight into their numbers or their living conditions.^[45] Some women and children of prisoners seem to have remained as refugees at Tempe until the last stages of the war.^[46] The government collaborated with a German prisoner's relief committee in Johannesburg to alleviate the costs for the upkeep of destitute family members. Members of this committee were permitted to visit the Pietermaritzburg camp.^[47] The camp was occasionally inspected by the American consul in Durban, [George R. Murphy \(1860-1924\)](#) and the Swedish consul, the latter charged with representing the interests of Austrian and Hungarian prisoners. [Henri Guillaume Boshoff \(1862-1930\)](#), Judge President of the Natal Native High Court, also undertook visits to the Pietermaritzburg camp, and the records show that he stood up for the rights of the prisoners in a spirited manner.

The records indicate that parole was given to prisoners in a relatively liberal if sometimes erratic manner. Exact numbers are difficult to compute, but the authorities acted in a lenient manner when

applications for parole were submitted by elderly, sickly or reputable prisoners who had resided in South Africa for long periods and had lost ties with Germany. A number of internees raised objections to their classification as Germans. Some of these complaints may have been purely opportunistic, but many residents of German descent could convincingly argue that their cultural or family connections with Germany had faded or had always been insignificant. Some prisoners had fought for the British in the South African War. Others referred to sons who had joined the military in other dominions and were fighting for the Empire.^[48] The fathers of soldiers serving with the Union Defence Force in South West Africa or of members of the police force could also be exempted from internment, even if they were not naturalised British subjects.^[49] Parolees had to sign forms that bound them by their honour to abstain from any comments that could be construed as moral support of the German war effort.^[50] It was more difficult to be paroled if the prisoners could not provide evidence of returning to places where they could be easily supervised by the authorities. Some Germans were re-interned because their release from internment was only temporary, for example for the purpose of medical treatment.^[51] Re-internment may have become more frequent in the wake of the [torpedoing of RMS Lusitania](#) in May 1915 which provoked ferocious anti-German riots throughout the Union.^[52] According to [Sydney Charles Buxton, Earl Buxton \(1853-1934\)](#), the British Governor-General from 1914 to 1920, a total of 1,700 Germans were released on parole at different stages during the war.^[53]

Not surprisingly perhaps, the official reports from the camp commander emphasised the healthy and orderly conditions prevailing among the prisoners, who were given much leeway in organising their camp life under the prevailing difficulties.^[54] There are no indications of extreme hardships, however, that could be described as resembling the sufferings that many other detainees in other parts of the world had to endure during the Great War. There is no evidence of starvation or epidemics. The German POWs were not exploited for economic purposes, which was the harsh fate of many people in occupied countries.^[55] The prisoners in Pietermaritzburg received the same rations as the South African soldiers in South West Africa.^[56] They were allowed to read South African newspapers, and the official camp visitor, Judge Boshoff, appealed to Pretoria to provide the prisoners with a wider range of [British newspapers](#).^[57] The married men were permitted to receive visits from their wives. There was outrage among the prisoners when these contacts were reduced to only one visit every ten days instead of once per week.^[58] The precise numbers are difficult to establish, but some of the prisoners were repatriated after the end of the war while many were gradually released back into South African society. In August 1919, 336 prisoners whose release may have been delayed due to the difficulties in arranging for their repatriation were still recorded at Pietermaritzburg.^[59] When pro-Empire loyalists started a campaign after the war to have all German residents irrespective of their naturalisation repatriated from the Union, this stirred vehement resistance among Afrikaners which led to the withdrawal of the Enemies Repatriation and Denaturalisation Bill.^[60]

Conclusion

The history of the internment of German residents in South Africa indicates the trend towards a sharper definition of ethnic and national identity during the First World War. Many Germans had not conceptualised their identity within such clearly demarcated categories until the war forced them to reassess their alignment with the complexities of a multi-ethnic society. Conversely, the political struggles between Afrikaners and British South Africans contributed to the relatively benign treatment of the German prisoners because Afrikaner sympathies provided an antidote to excessive Germanophobia. A comparatively small number of German civilians were interned during the war and there was no stigmatisation of released prisoners in South Africa after 1918.

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Notes

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3. ↑ *Officieel Jaarboek van die Unie, No. 7 – 1924. Lopende over het Tijdvak 1910-1924*, Pretoria 1925 [Official year book of the Union of South Africa, No.7 -1924. Covering the period 1910-1924], p. 118.
4. ↑ *Ibid.*, p. 134.
5. ↑ Nasson, Bill: *Springboks on the Somme. South Africa in the Great War, 1914 – 1918*, Johannesburg et al. 2007, p. 29.
6. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 35-59.
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8. ↑ *The Star*, 11 August 1914.
9. ↑ NASA, CES, box 53, ES70/938/14, part II, Report, 14 January 1915.
10. ↑ *Ibid.*
11. ↑ *The Star*, 20 August 1914.
12. ↑ NASA, CES, box 53, ES70/938/14, part II, Report, 14 January 1915.
13. ↑ *The Star*, 22 September 1914.
14. ↑ *Ibid.*, 28 September 1914.
15. ↑ *Ibid.*, 21 August 1914.
16. ↑ *Ibid.*, 26 August 1914.

17. ↑ NASA, CES, box 53, ES70/938/14, Report, 14 January 1915.
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19. ↑ Ibid., 25 September 1914.
20. ↑ The Brisbane Courier, 28 September 1914; The Star, 28 September 1914.
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22. ↑ Ibid., 10 September 1914.
23. ↑ CES, box 142, General Internment of all Enemy Subjects. General File, ES 70/3025/14, Thomas Watt to Merriman, 29 June 1915.
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26. ↑ Nasson, Springboks 2007, p. 42.
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29. ↑ Dominy, Graham: Pietermaritzburg's Imperial Postscript: Fort Napier from 1910 to 1925, in: Natalia, 19 (1989), p. 35.
30. ↑ Ibid.
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34. ↑ Dierks, Klaus: Chronology of Namibian History, <http://www.klausdierks.com/Chronology/73.htm>
35. ↑ NASA, CES, box 96, Camp General, Durban (Officers), part II, Sub-Inspector, South African Police, to Commissioner for Enemy Subjects, 27 March 1915.
36. ↑ NASA, CES, box 53, ES70/938/14, Treatment of Enemy Subjects, part III, Commandant Manning, to Commissioner of Enemy Subjects, 3 March 1915.
37. ↑ NASA, box 97, ES 70/1843/14, Report on Camp by Judge Boshoff, 1915-1917, Commissioner of Enemy Subjects to H. Boshoff, 21 December 1917.
38. ↑ NASA, CES, box 53, ES70/938/14, Treatment of Enemy Subjects, part III, Commandant Manning, Pietermaritzburg, to American Consul, Durban, 9 August 1915.
39. ↑ Ibid.
40. ↑ NASA, CES, box 53, ES70/938/14, Treatment of Enemy Subjects, part IV, Commandant Manning, to Commissioner for Enemy Subjects, 6 June 1916.
41. ↑ NASA, CES, box 97, ES 70/1843/14, Report on Camp by Judge Boshoff, 1915 – 1917, Inspection visit, Pietermaritzburg, 9 November 1917.
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60. ↑ Dederling, *Anti-German Riots* 2014, p. 260.

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