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Enemy Aliens and Internment

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The internment of enemy aliens in the First World War was a global phenomenon. Camps holding civilian as well as military prisoners could be found on every continent, including in nation-states and empires that had relatively liberal immigration policies before the war. This article focuses on three of the best-known examples: Britain, Germany and the United States. Each had its own internment system and its own internal threshold of tolerance for violence. Nonetheless, they were interconnected through wartime propaganda and diplomacy, and through constant appeals to the rules of war, the rights of "civilised" nations and the requirements of self-defence.

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Introduction

In addition to 9 million militaryprisoners of war (POWs), the warring European states interned more than 400,000 enemy aliens – civilians of enemy nationality – between 1914 and 1920.[1] Other "suspect" groups and individuals were held captive by their own governments on grounds of national security, reflecting increasingly sophisticated, albeit still relatively crude forms of domestic political surveillance.[2] Even non-belligerent countries like the Netherlands interned would-be deserters, civilian refugees, escaped POWs and other unwanted "war guests" who had deliberately or accidently crossed their borders and thereby "violated" their neutrality.[3] Taking enemy aliens and other outsiders together, as many as 800,000 civilians in Europe experienced some form of internment during the Great War and its aftermath. The same applies to a further 50,000 to 100,000 non-combatants in the rest of the world.[4] In terms of scale and global reach, this was of an altogether different order than the one-sided use of internment by European colonial powers in conflicts in Cuba and South Africa at the turn of the 20th century.[5]

Until the 1990s, much of the historiography assumed, somewhat misleadingly, that during the First World War (WWI) civilian captivity was confined to men of military age caught on enemy territory at the outbreak of hostilities and held as potential combatants. Only in the last two decades has attention shifted to other, forgotten victims of internment, including enemy civilians deported from occupied territories,[6] minority ethnic groups targeted as "disloyal",[7] and refugees forced to live in enclosed barrack camps in the unoccupied parts of their own countries.[8] Although men made up the bulk of internees, it is now recognised that women and children were also affected either indirectly, through separation from their husband or other breadwinner, or directly, by being interned themselves. In general, internment was a gendered and gendering experience,

emasculating men and disempowering women.[9]

Conditions in WWI internment camps varied widely.[10] At the local level, much depended on the attitude of individual camp commandants and their staff. Governments sometimes offered better treatment or even exemption from internment to particular nationalities or ethnic groups, albeit usually for political-strategic rather than humanitarian reasons. More important still was the attitude and position of the captives' own government. Defeated and occupied countries, such as Serbia or Romania, could do little to help their citizens in enemy captivity.[11] Other belligerents, most notably Italy, deliberately decided not to "waste" resources on doing so. As early as August 1915, for instance, the American embassy in Vienna, acting as protecting power, was forced to inform an inmate at the camp at Kirchberg an der Wild in Lower Austria that the Italian authorities had "not given the necessary authorisation for the granting of financial assistance to Italian citizens interned in the Monarchy";[12] and later in the war the Austrian military censors picked up on complaints from Italian civilian prisoners about their government's wilful negligence and tendency to regard all deportees and hostages seized in enemy-occupied territories as "deserters."[13]

Most western states, on the other hand, as well as the multinational Habsburg and Romanov Empires, were anxious to project an image of active involvement in reducing hardships for subjects interned abroad, not least in order to mollify public opinion at home and avoid protests from prisoners' families. Pressure from the Vatican, neutral states such as Switzerland, Spain and the United States, and humanitarian bodies like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) also acted to some extent as a check on serious abuses of civilian prisoners.[14] However, informal mechanisms of reciprocity played a more important role. In other words, governments could be deterred from harming enemy civilians by fear of repercussions for their own citizens in enemy hands. In this sense, stateless persons or those held captive by their own governments were the least protected and did not even appear on ICRC lists.[15]

Recent trends towards the writing of transnational and comparative histories of modern warfare have also aided our understanding of what Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker called the "camp phenomenon".[16] In particular, the internment of enemy aliens and prisoners of war is now linked to broader questions about WWI "culture", including mass violence towards soldiers, POWs and civilians,[17] the destruction of cultural treasures,[18] the (mis)treatment of minorities in wartime,[19] the use of forced labour and other human rights abuses,[20] the centralisation and nationalisation of prisoner and refugee relief systems,[21] and finally the development of new definitions of citizenship designed to either exclude or include particular groups of people.[22] As Alan Kramer has put it, all of these developments were transnational in the sense that they were not simply a reflection of what went on *within* warring nations and empires, but rather "arose through interaction between" them.[23] Not only did the two rival blocs, the Allies and the Central Powers, construct parallel systems for placing civilians behind barbed wire, but they also consciously interwove these systems by projecting themselves as victims acting in legitimate self-defence and the other side as the original aggressors and wrongdoers. The following article will explore the new historiography with particular reference to internment practices in Britain, Germany and the United States.

Internment in Imperial Britain

The internment of over 32,000 German and Austro-Hungarian civilians in Britain between 1914 and 1919 took place against the background of a rising tide of xenophobia and panic over "imagined" spies in the run-up to the outbreak of war.[24] Although Tammy Proctor is right to say that internment was a policy enacted by the state,[25] in the British case in particular public opinion appears to have played an important role in pressuring the government to act. The main waves of internment, in October 1914 and May 1915, coincided with outbreaks of anti-foreigner violence in many British towns and cities, during which German-owned property was destroyed or looted. In some cases Germans and Austrians were arrested for their own personal safety, although the official line was that the measures had been undertaken to safeguard the nation against internal spies and to appease the "strong feeling against Germans roused by the atrocities...in Belgium."[26]

From November 1914 to the beginning of February 1915, on the other hand, many internees were quietly set free as public tensions eased. Only after the outbreak of the "Lusitania riots" in May 1915 did the government resume its move towards wholesale internment of male enemy aliens aged seventeen to fifty-five, with the total number of men in captivity rising from 12,871 on 13 May 1915 to 32,440 by 22 November 1915.[27] This was accompanied by attempts to deny captured German

submariners the rights afforded to POWs under international law, a move which was again justified with reference to German "war crimes" against Allied merchant shipping. However, the latter policy was soon abandoned after German countermeasures against British military prisoners convinced public opinion that such reprisals only harmed Britain's interests and standing abroad.[28]

Concern for national image also influenced how enemy aliens were treated after their arrest. In spite of the anti-German violence of 1914 and 1915, the conditions inside the camps were relatively good, as ICRC reports repeatedly confirmed.[29] In particular, Britain respected class distinctions, allowing privileged "gentlemen's camps" to be set up for wealthier inmates both at Douglas on the Isle of Man, where a large number of internees were sent, and Lofthouse Park near Wakefield, described by one inmate as a "true *Beamtenstaat*" [bureaucratic state] where "nearly everyone seemed to have a sort of 'official position' he was proud of."[30] At no point during the war were women and children interned, and civilian prisoners were entirely exempt from forced labour. This did not mean that life behind barbed wire was comfortable, but it did suggest that Britain was determined to protect its reputation as a "civilised" nation and to obey its obligations under international law.[31]

Given the interlinked nature of internment systems, this latter point was important, for it made it difficult for the German and Austro-Hungarian governments to justify any form of retaliation against the British civilians they held. When it came to negotiations for the release of civilian prisoners, Britain was in a strong position to dictate terms, for by March 1917, together with its colonies and dominions, it held ten times as many Germans (36,000 to 3,500) and over fifty times as many Austro-Hungarians (11,000 to at most 200) as the Germans and Austro-Hungarians held British citizens.[32] Suggestions of an "all for all" exchange, including an open offer along those lines made by the head of the German Foreign Office's legal department, Johannes Kriege (1859-1937), in the *Reichstag* on 2 November 1916, were repeatedly blocked; instead Britain offered a "head for head" arrangement which was rejected by Germany and Austria-Hungary. As a result, the only civilian prisoners exchanged between Britain and the Central Powers during the course of the war were those judged permanently incapacitated for military service (under agreements reached in 1915); a handful of prisoners from "prominent families" in 1916 (which caused some controversy in Whitehall circles resulting in a ban on further "arrangements" of this nature); and a small group of internees aged forty-five and over (under a deal signed with Germany in January 1917 and confirmed in July of that year, but not actually implemented until the first half of 1918).[33]

No exchange agreements were reached with Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire on the grounds that repatriations were impossible to arrange via land or sea while the war continued.[34] On the other hand, the number of Bulgarians and Turks held in civilian captivity in Britain was miniscule: a mere twenty-two and sixty-four respectively were incarcerated at Knockaloe Camp on the Isle of Man in November 1917, compared to 15,773 Germans and 2,450 Austrians.[35] In part, these low numbers reflect an earlier government decision to allow all Bulgarians free passage out of Britain following the onset of hostilities in October 1915, and to intern only the destitute and "suspect" among those who chose to remain.[36] German, Austro-Hungarian and Turkish men of military age were not allowed to leave Britain's shores voluntarily, but some were granted exemptions from internment, especially if they were considered to be opponents of the Central Powers. Such was the case, for instance, with anti-German Alsatians and anti-Habsburg Czechs and Poles, as well as "Armenians who have fled here from Turkish oppression."[37]

Nonetheless, the relatively good conditions in British camps should not obscure some of the less benign sides of the British government's treatment of enemy aliens. Although women, children and men over fifty-five were not interned, some were forcibly repatriated and others had to submit to a series of humiliating controls on their day-to-day activities under the Aliens Restriction Act of 5 August 1914 and subsequent Orders in Council. For instance, they were required to register their names with the police, obey local curfews, refrain from entering "prohibited areas", which by November 1914 included the entire east and greater part of the south coast, and were not allowed to own cars, motorcycles, cameras, military maps or homing pigeons. German clubs and newspapers were shut down, and a further piece of parliamentary legislation, the British Nationality and Status of Aliens Act of August 1918, gave the Home Secretary sweeping new powers to repeal the naturalisation certificates of former alien subjects.[38]

Following London's lead, many of these measures were also adopted in British colonies and dominions, with similar consequences for German communities there. In Australia, for instance, Gerhard Fischer has argued that the internment of around 6,890 Germans and Austro-Hungarians, 4,500 of them Australian residents and the rest deportees from South-East Asia

and elsewhere, reflected both fears about the empire's internal and external security and the desire to "strengthen...the British identity of the country." In the process, the "White Australia" policy was reimagined to exclude not only Asians and coloureds but all non-members of the "British race", including up to 700 naturalised German-Australians.[39] In British, French and Belgian colonies in Africa, German communities were deported and/or interned, in clear breach of undertakings from the Congress of Berlin in 1885 to keep this part of the world neutral in the event of conflict in Europe. The same applied to German colonies overrun by Allied troops. Germans trapped in British East Africa at the outbreak of war were sent to camps in India, while German missionaries in British-occupied Palestine were expelled to Helwan in Egypt in late 1917 for reasons of "military security."[40] After over four years of fighting, some 300 Germans were being held in Egypt, 2,300 in South Africa, 1,200 in India, 194 in Barbados, Bermuda and Trinidad, 2,100 in Canada, 236 in New Zealand, eleven in Gibraltar and 1,323 in Malta.[41] The German government also accused Britain and France of deliberately encouraging the internment and/or expulsion of Germans from Allied countries such as Portugal and its Atlantic and African possessions (in 1916), Brazil and Greece (in 1917) and Siam (in 1918).[42]

In Britain itself public opinion began to impact policy towards enemy aliens again in 1917/18. On the one hand, families of British men held in Germany organised a "Ruhleben Prisoners' Release Committee" to pressure the government into accepting the German offer of an "all for all" exchange. They were supported by Sir Timothy Eden (1893-1963), one of the "prominent" prisoners exchanged in 1916 and older brother of the future Prime Minister Anthony Eden (1897-1977); by a number of Conservative and Liberal backbench peers; and by the right-wing, anti-foreigner *Daily Mail*, which ran a campaign for the immediate deportation of all Germans, including internees, under the slogan "send them all home."[43] The cabinet rejected these demands in March 1917, but the government did draw up plans to expel as many Germans as possible after the war. The subsequent round of deportations meant that the overall German population in Britain was reduced from 57,500 in 1914 to 22,254 in 1919.[44] Some individual exemptions from expulsion were granted, especially to British women who had acquired German or Austrian nationality through marriage but were otherwise "loyal" to the King and Empire. Nonetheless, the overall result was the eradication of a once vibrant German community in Britain, concentrated in London, Bradford, Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool and Glasgow.[45]

In Australia, too, up to 6,150 Germans were expelled in 1919, a move which was justified with explicit reference to similar measures enacted in Britain. Among them were both German-born Australians and Germans who had been transported to Australia during the course of the war from Singapore, Hong Kong, Ceylon, Fiji and erstwhile German colonial possessions in the Pacific.[46] In Africa, the ex-German colonies were taken over by the victorious Allies under the League of Nations mandate system and, except in South African-controlled South-West Africa, former and prospective German settlers were often refused residency permits.[47] In metropolitan Britain, the denial of self-determination to colonial peoples and the expulsion of Germans went hand in hand with the extension of suffrage to previously excluded white (but non-German) groups, including women over thirty years of age and returning soldiers from lower-class backgrounds. Here and in the self-governing white-settler dominions, the move towards democratisation and expanded notions of citizenship was interwoven with the emergence of new, more vicious forms of anti-alienism and colonial racism.[48] The wave of anti-coloured/anti-immigrant "seaport riots" that took place in January-August 1919 in Liverpool, Cardiff, Glasgow, London and elsewhere was one manifestation of this.[49] Another was the tendency to redefine hierarchies of national or imperial belonging in a way that placed "white Britishers first, next black Britishers, [and] last of all aliens."[50]

Internment in Imperial Germany

Whereas British imperial policy was proactive, the German approach towards enemy aliens, at least in the initial stages of the war, was largely reactive. It was also more obviously directed by the state, which was anxious to assert its power in the international arena. The desire to appease domestic public opinion and to safeguard the home front against spies and saboteurs also played a role, but not a very important one. The main motive behind the internment of British enemy aliens in November 1914, French citizens in December 1914, Canadians, South Africans and New Zealanders in January 1915, and Australians in February 1915, was retaliation for the internment of German nationals in those countries. At the same time, in the wake of early military setbacks in the war and the Allies' economic blockade of the German coastline, the Reich was anxious to show that it could still hit back at the enemy, especially Britain.[51]

In fact, when war broke out in early August 1914, Germany had at most 15,000 British and French residents.[52] In the first few weeks of the conflict, they were barely regarded as a security risk, and were merely required to obey a curfew and report once a week to their local police station. Women, children and men over military age were allowed to leave Germany after the initial mobilisation was completed. The retaliatory measures introduced in November and December 1914, and extended to subjects of the British Empire's self-governing dominions (*Kolonialengländer*) in early 1915, saw the imprisonment of 4,273 British males at a former racecourse at Ruhleben, near Berlin,[53] and a smaller tally of Frenchmen sent to the main civilian camp at Holzminden.[54] However, both groups were too small to act as serious bargaining counters in negotiations with the enemy over camp conditions and prisoner exchanges. At the same time, they had to be fed, guarded and sheltered. In other words, over time these enemy alien prisoners became an economic and psychological burden on the German war effort, especially because, unlike rank-and-file military POWs and civilian deportees from occupied territories, they could not be made to work.

From the beginning of the war, prominent Frenchmen, Belgians and Russians, and local officials who dared to speak out against German occupation policies, were also seized as hostages or in reprisal for supposed misdeeds by the enemy, and sent to Holzminden or other camps at Rastatt and Havelberg, sometimes with their entire families. Again, this made little difference to Germany's overall bargaining position and as a general rule these political prisoners were not required to contribute labour to the German war economy.[55]

Russian-Polish civilians were a different matter, however. Each year hundreds of thousands of Russian Poles entered the eastern parts of the German Reich to work as seasonal labourers in agriculture, and less frequently, in industry.[56] As of 1 August 1914, when Germany declared war on Russia, they were also technically enemy aliens. However, on 27 July 1914 the Reich Office of Interior had already taken pre-emptive action to prevent these Poles from being interned or expelled, requesting instead that they be granted exemption from any restrictions on their continued employment, provided they were "in possession of one of the identity cards issued by the labour exchange."[57] Further decrees emanating from the deputy general staff between 4 August and 10 October 1914 forbade roughly 300,000 Russian-Polish seasonal workers from returning home or leaving their employers.[58] In effect they were now forced labourers, as were at least an additional 240,000 Russian Poles and 60,000 Balts "recruited" to work in the Reich following Germany's occupation of their homelands between 1915 and 1918.[59]

Economic motives were also paramount in deportations of civilians from the occupied parts of Belgium and northern France in 1916/17 for forced labour in Germany or behind the military lines on the Western Front. The context was the growing "economic totalisation of the war," including the forced recruitment of enemy POWs into domestic industry and agriculture,[60] and the brutalisation of the occupation regimes themselves, especially in the army operational and staging areas (*Operations- und Etappengebieten*) which were under the High Command's direct authority.[61] Germany was not entirely unique in this matter, since Tsarist Russia forcibly recruited civilian labour in occupied Galicia in 1914/15; Austria-Hungary in frontier regions and in occupied Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Romania and Italy; Bulgaria in occupied Vardar-Macedonia; and Turkey among its Armenian, Greek and Syrian Christian populations. However, Germany stood out in terms of scale and organisation.[62]

Already over Easter 1916 around 20,000 French girls and women were deported from the industrial cities of Lille, Tourcoing and Roubaix to perform forced agricultural work in other parts of occupied France. Class and gender differences were no longer respected, as all of the prisoners were treated like common prostitutes and were required to undergo compulsory gynaecological examinations.[63] Occupied French civilians, it was suggested, would be "paying with their own persons" for the sacrifices required of German women on the home front.[64] This was followed, in October 1916, by the deportation of roughly 60,000 male Belgian workers to Germany for forced labour. A further 62,000 were obliged to work in so-called "Civil Workers' Battalions" (*Zivil-Arbeiter-Bataillonen*) behind military lines in France and Belgium itself. Both sets of deportees were placed under military discipline, quartered in special camps, and forced to wear red armbands identifying them as civilian prisoners.[65]

Eventually the Belgian deportations to Germany were halted in February 1917 in the wake of strong domestic and international criticism, but the use of forced civilian workers on the Western Front, and of coercive recruitment methods in Poland, Lithuania, Romania and other occupied territories in the east, lasted until the end of the war.[66] Hundreds of prominent civilians, political suspects and alleged spies were also held in Romania after its defeat in December 1916 in an attempt to secure compliance with the demands of the occupying Central Powers and force the government in Iaşi to accept peace terms.[67] Beyond this,

thousands of enemy civilians continued to be deported as hostages, bargaining chips or suspected saboteurs to camps and prisons in Germany, including women, children and men over fifty-five years of age. The German government's own figures reveal a rise in the number of civilian detainees from 48,513 in June 1915 to 111,879 in October 1918,[68] while in the last month of the war the ICRC continued to report fresh cases that had come to its attention:

> Every week we are supplied with new lists, some of them relating to very particular groups: English civilians held in Finland, French, Italian, Belgian and Portuguese diplomatic personnel expelled from neutral Ukraine and interned in Germany, etc. … Some civilian detainees in Germany appear to have been transferred to prisons in Belgium and occupied France, where they can neither communicate with their families in unoccupied France, nor receive aid parcels, nor have visits from representatives of the neutral powers charged with their protection. We regret that up till now it has proved impossible to obtain any kind of information on the conditions those prisoners are being held in.[69]

In general, German policy towards enemy civilians greatly damaged the Reich's international standing yet did little to ease the on-going labour shortages in the domestic war economy and occupied territories.[70] More importantly still, it failed to offer much by way of protection to German civilians held in enemy countries. As already seen, Kriege's public offer to Britain of an "all for all" exchange in November 1916 was rejected in London. Under the armistice of 11 November 1918, Germany was obliged to release all of its civilian and military prisoners immediately. By contrast, the Allies held on to their German internees for much longer. In Britain and France, for instance, the last civilian prisoners were not released until October-November 1919, almost a year after the end of the war.[71]

Internment in the United States

Internment practices in the United States were partly influenced by the fact that America had already come into contact with this new weapon of war through its role as "protecting power" representing the interests of enemy states in a number of different warring countries.[72] In particular James Watson Gerard (1867-1951) and Walter Hines Page (1855-1918), the American ambassadors in Berlin and London, respectively, were in close contact and regularly swapped notes about the treatment of Germans in Britain and Britons in Germany, as well as sending each other more formal camp inspection reports. Their exchanges indicate that they were well aware of the harmful effects of sensational media reports in creating a vicious circle of reprisals and counter-reprisals. On 8 November 1914, for instance, Gerard warned Page that:

> Great popular resentment has been created by the reports of the arrest of Germans [in Britain]...The order for the general concentration of British males between the ages of seventeen and fifty-five, which went out on the 6th instant, was occasioned by the pressure of public opinion which has been still further excited by the newspaper reports of a considerable number of deaths in the concentration camps...I cannot but feel that to a great extent the English action and the German retaliation have been caused by a misunderstanding which we should do our best to remove ...[73]

Although American diplomats were anxious to lessen hatred between London and Berlin, in practice they were often far more negative in their assessment of Germany's treatment of enemy civilians compared to Britain's. Gerard in particular was known for his "plain-speaking" on this and other issues.[74] Upon his return to America in March 1917 he penned two publications which denounced German militarism as a threat to all free peoples, including the United States, and which played no small part in the mobilisation of domestic public opinion for war. One of his wilder claims, based on an alleged boast made to him by the German Under-Secretary of State Arthur Zimmermann (1864-1940), was that 500,000 German reservists were living in America and poised to engage in open revolt once war was declared.[75]

Gerard's views had some effect, although he was warned by the State Department to be more "discreet in [his] utterances."[76] After America entered the war on 6 April 1917, German nationals were subject to a series of restrictions on their lives, property and freedom of movement imposed by President Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) under the 1798 Alien Enemy Act, including bans on entering "forbidden zones", compulsory registration with the police or U.S. postmasters, prohibition on owning signalling apparatus, radios and firearms, and so on. At various points these restrictions were increased or exemptions revoked, largely to appease public opinion. They were also extended to Austro-Hungarians in December 1917 and to all female enemy aliens in April 1918.[77] Violations were dealt with harshly, and police round-ups became common. Surveillance operations indeed led to over 10,000 arrests, 8,500 of which were conducted under presidential warrants, the rest carried out by local justice officials who

then reported their actions to the Justice Department in Washington D.C. Most were paroled after a short period of "investigation" into their circumstances, although the arrest itself was a humiliating experience and could lead to loss of employment, social standing, housing or all three.[78]

Given that only sixteen of the 1,200 Americans registered as living in Germany in April 1917 were interned,[79] Washington was not under pressure to retaliate directly in the face of German measures against its own citizens. In general, the Justice Department used its summary wartime powers to control and monitor enemy aliens rather than opting for mass internment on the European model. There were some exceptions, however. About 2,300 "dangerous enemy aliens" were permanently incarcerated in two camps set up by the War Department: Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia and Fort Douglas, Utah.[80] The vast majority were German nationals or German Austrians, suggesting that this particular ethnic group was targeted as disloyal. On the other hand, the United States differed from France, Britain and Australia in the sense that it targeted individuals and did not indiscriminately round people up on grounds of nationality or ethnicity alone.[81] At worst, 8 percent of male, military-age enemy aliens spent some time in custody. An even lower proportion than this – indeed, probably only about 2 percent – were actually interned for the duration of the war and beyond.[82]

Around 10 percent of the 2,300 civilian internees held at Fort Oglethorpe and Fort Douglas were wealthy German-born immigrants suspected of disloyal behaviour, including financing pro-German propaganda. A much bigger contingent was made up of ordinary workers, however, including the destitute and unemployed, and many whose only "crime" was to have been involved in radical politics or labour unrest. As in Australia, non-naturalised Germans and even first and second generation naturalised German immigrants were widely seen as an "enemy within", especially as the socialist, pacifist and anti-war movements in the United States contained many activists from ethnic German backgrounds.[83] However, even in the case of anti-war agitators, the American authorities were still inclined to investigate each individual case rather than making blanket referrals for internment.

Alongside the civilian internees, up to 2,800 seamen of various kinds (naval officers and crew accused of "violating American neutrality", together with merchant mariners captured after 6 April 1917 in American ports and in colonial possessions like the Philippines, Hawaii, Guam and Puerto Rico), were also interned at Fort McPherson, Georgia, and in Hot Springs, North Carolina.[84] From April 1918 plans were even laid to intern female enemy aliens suspected of aiding the enemy, but in the end, although scores of women were arrested, most were quickly released and only fifteen were held indefinitely.[85]

In addition, the United States carried out internment in colonial contexts, for instance in Panama, which imprisoned thirty-two Germans after its declaration of war on Germany and then deported them, under the guidance of U.S. immigration officials, to Ellis Island in April 1918.[86] Enemy aliens were not allowed to reside in the Canal Zone or the District of Columbia, under a proclamation issued by President Wilson in November 1917.[87] Here, as in Britain and Australia, the reinforcement of racial hierarchies in the colonies and the metropole went hand in hand with the isolation and expulsion of German nationals. The United States was also accused of pressuring the governments of Cuba and Peru to introduce internment measures there.[88] In all cases, release and/or repatriation after November 1918 was slow, and it was not until March 1920 that the Swiss delegation in Washington D.C. was able to inform the German government that no more German citizens were being held.[89] In the meantime, as Jörg Nagler has put it, "Transition from the enemy alien hysteria to the Red Scare of 1919 and 1920 had its impact on the prolonged stay of the last inmates of the camps, who were considered to be radicals and too dangerous to be paroled."[90]

Conclusion

Internment practices, as Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker have argued, offer some important insights into "what was new" about the First World War. In particular, they shed light on the growing brutalisation of social relations, the mobilisation of new emotions and hatreds, and the cultural interplay between warring states and societies, all of which helped to transform the conflict into a sacred "crusade" in which "people ... believed they were defending the … values of their country, their region [and] their family" against a "barbaric" foe.[91] More generally, the deliberate targeting of enemy civilians as representatives of the "enemy nation" became a crucial part of "total war". Internees could be both "victims of the home front" and victims of harsh occupation policies.

In Britain and America anti-foreigner violence preceded and accompanied the mass internment of enemy aliens. In Germany there were no such riots, but internment here went hand in hand with a "dual system of prisoner labour companies" which extended from the fighting fronts to the camps on the home front, and from POWs to civilian deportees.[92]

Having said that, scholars are still rightly cautious about drawing any direct link with the far greater atrocities committed against civilians during the 1939-45 period. At best WWI is seen as having provided a "background of experience" rather than an "example" or "prototype" for what was to come.[93] Moreover, while a case can be made for "German singularity", in the sense that this country more vigorously pursued the link between internment and mobilisation of all resources for total war, the British and American examples also stand out in various ways. Britain, for instance, as Panikos Panayi has astutely observed, was the only belligerent in both world wars that was capable of, and willing to follow, a policy of "global incarceration", affecting Germans and Austrians (and to a lesser extent, Turks and Bulgarians) in all corners of the world.[94] The United States is best known for its internment of up to 120,000 Japanese nationals and Japanese Americans after the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941.[95] The number of enemy aliens incarcerated in 1917-20 was much smaller by comparison, and here internment decisions were made on a case-by-case basis rather than being the result of blanket labelling of an entire immigrant group. Even so, questioning the loyalty of individual citizens and non-citizens from particular ethnic backgrounds became standard practice for American agencies involved in domestic security after 1918 and the association of German- as well as Russian-born émigrés with left-wing subversion continued through to the late 1940s and beyond.[96]

The three cases we have looked at, then, provide both strong evidence of the global interconnectedness of WWI internment systems and the importance of seeing those systems within different national, imperial and local contexts. It is probably in Britain and its empire that WWI internment had the longest cultural impact, given the near complete destruction of German communities there. In the United States too German-speaking communities were largely erased by the war and its aftermath, albeit less through internment and expulsions, and more through aggressive "assimilationist" measures, for instance the closure or renaming of German churches, schools, newspapers, shops and firms at the local level; the rebranding of Sauerkraut as "Liberty Cabbage" and German measles as "Liberty measles"; and the general ousting of the German language from public life.[97]

In Germany, on the other hand, resident or immigrant English- and French-speaking communities were simply not large enough to have had an appreciable impact on economic and cultural life before 1914, either nationally or – with the exception of Alsace-Lorraine – locally. While civilians in occupied territories might be exploited for their labour or seized as hostages as part of an increasingly violent total war strategy, the internment of enemy aliens on the home front was unlikely to reap any meaningful commercial or security benefits. In terms of domestic and foreign propaganda, the key issue by late 1914 was: could Germany do anything to protect the interests of its citizens trapped in hostile countries or deported from its overseas colonies during the course of the war (or more negatively, could it seek revenge or redress for the alleged mistreatment of its citizens by enemy powers)? Looking back from the vantage point of 1919, there could only be one answer to this question. In this sense, internment was much more of a failure for Germany than for its erstwhile opponents.

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Section Editor: Roger Chickering

Notes

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