

**Jewish Historical Studies**  
Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England

---

Article:

Internment: an historical overview

Bernard Wasserstein<sup>1,\*</sup>

**How to cite:** Wasserstein, B. 'Internment: an historical overview'. *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2021, 52(1), pp. 1-17.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2021v52.002>.

Published: 03 June 2021

---

**Peer Review:**

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard double blind peer-review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

**Copyright:**

© 2020, The Author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2021v52.002>

**Open Access:**

*Jewish Historical Studies* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

\*Correspondence: [bmjw@uchicago.edu](mailto:bmjw@uchicago.edu)

<sup>1</sup>University of Chicago, USA

## Internment: an historical overview\*

---

BERNARD WASSERSTEIN

I have a personal stake in the history of internment as I am a child of internees. On 28 October 1938 my father, then aged seventeen, was arrested at his home in Berlin. Together with my grandfather, he was taken to the railway station and put on a train to the Polish border. They were among a large number of Polish Jews, resident in Germany, who were deported that day. My father, although he had been born in Germany, was not a German citizen. Unfortunately, although my grandfather and his ancestors had been born on the territory of what after 1918 had once again become Poland, he was not recognized as a Polish citizen either. The Polish government, no less than the German, considered that its territory was already over-populated with Jews. So when my father and grandfather and about eighteen thousand others arrived at the Polish frontier, they were not admitted. German soldiers drove them across the border at the points of bayonets but Polish border police barred their entrance. Consequently they were stuck in no-man's-land between the two countries. For the next several months my father remained, with thousands of others, in a makeshift camp near the small town of Zbąszyń. Meanwhile, the Polish and German governments argued about where they belonged and writers in the *Manchester Guardian* and elsewhere expressed unavailing outrage at their treatment.

A year or so later, my mother, also a teenager, was interned too – in her case by the British. By then Britain was at war against Germany in support of Poland. My mother had arrived from her native Hungary at the coast of Palestine, then under British administration, aboard a tramp steamer carrying 459 Jewish refugees from Europe. Although the League of Nations mandate that formed the basis of British rule in Palestine called for the establishment in the country of a Jewish National Home, such refugees were regarded by the British authorities as illegal immigrants. The ship managed to elude British naval patrols and unloaded her passengers near Tel Aviv on 14 November 1939. But when they made landfall from small

\* I am grateful to Henry Cohn, Shirley Haasnoot, Susan Pedersen, and Michael Wood for their help in connection with this article.

rowing boats they were rounded up and transferred to a detention camp at Sarafend near Tel Aviv.

My parents' predicament was part of a larger historical phenomenon – the detention without trial of large numbers of civilians not only by totalitarian regimes but by governments, including some, such as those of interwar Poland and Britain, that had pretensions to being democracies. Actually, of course, both of these were seriously flawed democracies: Poland particularly in its treatment of minorities, Britain especially in its colonial empire. It is no accident that the two episodes suffered by my parents reflected those defects.

Internment is polymorphous. It may be loosely defined for our purposes as detention of civilians without trial. At one extreme it veers into war crimes and mass murder. At the other it touches on social welfare. Incarceration of civilians became a common feature of totalitarian states, from Dachau to the *gulag* to contemporary North Korea. But our focus is more especially on liberal democratic societies, broadly defined. There exists now a wealth of literature on the topic: memoirs, studies by professional historians, legal appreciations, and so on. Most of the extant archives are now open. What can we distil from these?

At least three main types of internment may be distinguished: 1. of enemy aliens in time of war, as well as of citizens deemed security risks; 2. of illegal immigrants; 3. of rebels or others considered hostile by colonial governments. There is also a fourth type, of which we have been forcibly reminded in recent times: quarantine of persons suspected of bearing infectious disease or suffering from mental illness that might cause danger to themselves or others. But that category raises somewhat different issues and is best considered separately.

### Wartime

A belligerent state's right to detain civilian enemy aliens was recognized far back into history, although it was rarely exercised. The imperatives of the century of total war dictated greater stringency. Several hundred thousand civilians were interned in Europe between 1914 and 1920 and at least 50,000 more elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

In August 1914 France was the first belligerent power to resort to large-scale internment of enemy aliens. The task was complicated by difficulties

1      Matthew Stibbe, "Civilian Internment and Civilian Internees in Europe, 1914–20", *Immigrants & Minorities* 26, no. 1/2 (2008): 49–81.

of identification: the Paris police complained that hardly any of the half million foreigners in the city had passports. Among those detained were German citizens from those parts of Alsace and Lorraine annexed to Germany since 1871, although the authorities tried to distinguish those who had expressed “Hun feelings” from those deemed pro-French.<sup>2</sup> Until May 1916 even French citizens in the war zone who were suspected of sympathy for the enemy were arrested. So were some politically suspect citizens of allied countries, notably Russian socialists. Altogether sixty to seventy thousand persons were interned in France at one time or another during the war.<sup>3</sup> They were confined in a variety of locations: fortresses, barracks, an old convent, or a ship. By comparison with such camps in the Second World War, security was generally light. There were no watchtowers or barbed wire.

All the other Great Power belligerents, save one, followed the French example and interned at least some enemy aliens. The single exception, perhaps surprising given its later conduct, was Japan.

Britain at first interned quite selectively: only about 10,500 were held in the first phase in September 1914. But the sinking of the *Lusitania* in 1915 provoked a wave of anti-German feeling – or what the prime minister, Asquith, called “righteous indignation”.<sup>4</sup> In response, the government eventually rounded up more than 47,000 Germans and Austro-Hungarians (plus a few Bulgars and Turks) in Britain and all over the British empire from New Zealand to Bermuda. That was, however, only a small proportion of the 317,000 German citizens in Britain plus more than 50,000 in the empire.

By way of retaliation for the initial British actions, the German government in early November 1914 announced the internment of most adult, male, British citizens on its territory. Several thousand British, French, and Dominions citizens were placed in camps, notably in stables at the Ruhleben racecourse, north-west of Berlin. As their armies advanced, the Central Powers interned much larger numbers of enemy civilians seized in occupied territory: these were removed from war zones,

2 Jean-Noël Grandhomme and Louis Thibon, “Internment Camps for German Civilians in Finistère, France (1914–1919)”, *The Historian* 68, no. 4 (2006): 792–810.

3 The estimate is by Jean-Claude Farcy: “Les Camps d'internement de 14–18”, *Criminocorpus: Revue d'Histoire de la justice, des crimes et des peines*, 2012, <https://journals.openedition.org/criminocorpus/1878?lang=de> (accessed 24 Nov. 2020).

4 Zoë Andrea Denness, “‘A Question Which Affects Our Prestige as a Nation’: The History of British Civilian Internment, 1899–1945” (Ph.D. diss., University of Birmingham, 2012), 127.

used as forced labour, and often abominably treated. Austria-Hungary interned many of its own citizens, among them seven thousand allegedly Russophile Ukrainians from Galicia who were held at Thalerhof near Graz: one third of those died there of typhus.<sup>5</sup> The Austrians also sent thousands of Italian-speakers to what came to be called the *campo della morte* at Steinklamm, near St Pölten in Lower Austria. Italy, for her part, interned 70,000 Slovenes. Worst of all was the fate of tens of thousands of civilians interned by the Austro-Hungarians and Bulgarians in occupied Serbia and Macedonia, in the course of a savage conflict in which vast numbers lost their lives.

In the United States the declaration of war in April 1917 brought outbreaks of anti-German hysteria. This found a convenient symbolic target in vegetables: *Sauerkraut* was renamed “liberty cabbage” – a precursor of the “freedom fries” of 2003. Yet only between 6,000 and 10,000 carefully selected Germans were interned out of an estimated 2.5 million German citizens in the country (plus at least 8 million US citizens of German origin). No doubt, those very large numbers precluded wholesale arrests. As it turned out, the largest number of wartime internees in the United States in the First World War, as in the next war, were US citizens: at least 30,000 so-called “silk-stocking girls”, women infected with venereal disease, were interned in 1917 and 1918 in federal, state, and local facilities, supposedly for their protection and also to safeguard the health of soldiers and war workers.<sup>6</sup>

In the Second World War France was again the first democratic Great Power to intern civilian enemy aliens, starting even before the outbreak of hostilities: under a decree issued by Daladier’s government in November 1938, foreign “undesirables” were held in “specialized centres”. The first opened in the spring of 1939 at Rieucros (near Mende, Lozère). In her exemplary study, Anne Grynberg reports that the sudden implantation of this foreign presence in the heart of the French countryside aroused consternation among local citizens. Mayors and other officials protested against the presence of these undesirables. The commandant of the camp

5      Gerhard Oberkofler and Eduard Rabofsky, “Tiroler Kaiserjäger in Galizien”, in Sabine Weiss and Ulrike Kemmerling-Unterthurner, eds., *Historische Blickpunkte: Festschrift für Johann Rainer zum 65. Geburtstag* (Innsbruck: AMOE, 1988), 505–28.

6      Adam Hodges, “‘Enemy Aliens’ and ‘Silk Stocking Girls’: The Class Politics of Internment in the Drive for Urban Order during World War I”, *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 6, no. 4 (2007): 431–58.

reported that a veritable panic had broken out in the area and there was talk of setting the camp on fire.<sup>7</sup>

The pre-war French internees were mainly political refugees from the Spanish civil war. Shortly after the French declaration of war on Germany, however, 18,000 Germans and Austrians, nearly all males, were rounded up and distributed to camps all over the country. Other politically suspect foreigners, such as the writer Arthur Koestler, a Hungarian citizen, were also picked up. Some were released in a process of *criblage* (sifting) in the spring of 1940. But after the German attack in May the government resorted to mass internment of enemy citizens, including women and children. As the Germans advanced, detainees were caught up in the general panic and confusion: some were evacuated to the rear, others released or recruited to the Foreign Legion. Historians continue to debate the degree of linkage between the French internments and subsequent deportations. What can be said is that the armistice of 22 June sealed the fate of many internees, above all Jews, for whom the tragic consequence was that in due course they became available for delivery to the death camps in Eastern Europe.

The internments in the UK between 1939 and 1945 have elicited close attention from historians and occasioned much contemporary and even more retrospective indignation – notwithstanding the precedent that had been established in the First World War. Objections were for the most part on grounds of policy rather than law. It was generally accepted at the time that the protection of habeas corpus did not extend to enemy aliens. As the distinguished legal scholar E. J. Cohn, himself a refugee from Nazism, wrote in 1941: “International law does not object to the internment of enemy nationals, because it presumes that enemy nationals will be inclined to help their country because of their allegiance and in return for the protection which they enjoy from it. They enjoy that protection even during war time.” But Cohn also observed that the refugees from Nazism enjoyed no such protection, rather the contrary, and “International law knows no precedent for the internment of enemy nationals who are not enjoying the protection of their own country.”<sup>8</sup>

The rationale for internment was the danger of a civilian “fifth column” of Nazis or Fascists, but the overwhelming majority of victims were fugitives from Axis Europe. In a term that became famous, interned refugees

7 Anne Grynberg, *Les Camps de la honte: les internés juifs des camps français 1939–1944* (Paris: La Découverte, 1999), 20–21.

8 E. J. Cohn, “Legal Aspects of Internment”, *Modern Law Review* (Jan. 1941): 206.

became known as “friendly enemy aliens”. Like much else, this oxymoron had its root in the previous war, when some French speakers from Alsace and Italians, Poles, and Czechs from Austria-Hungary had been granted preferential treatment by the French authorities in camps à régime de faveur.<sup>9</sup>

Several thousand of the internees in Britain, including “friendlies”, were deported to camps in Australia and Canada. In a tragic disaster in July 1940, 146 Germans and 473 Italians, who were being transported to Canada, were drowned when their ship, the *Arandora Star*, was struck by a torpedo from a German submarine. That episode brought about a recoil in popular feeling that led to the rapid release of many internees in Britain.

A curious inversion was observable in Palestine. While many illegal Jewish immigrants, including from non-enemy states, were interned there, legally resident German Jews were allowed to walk free. At the same time, two thousand or so members of the German Christian pietist community known as the Tempelgemeinschaft, settled in the Holy Land since the 1860s, were interned. Some had been active in the 1930s as members of the Palestine Nazi Party. In the Palestine camps many of the guards were German Jews. Perhaps the idea was to use their knowledge of German to facilitate communication with the internees. But a strange triangular relationship developed, whereby Jewish guards complained of collusion between their British superiors and the German detainees and of mistreatment by both.<sup>10</sup> In mid-1941 about a third of the Templers were deported to camps in Australia. Others, mainly women and children, were subsequently repatriated from Palestine to Germany in exchange for Jews held by the Nazis. After the war the Zionist Organization strongly protested against their return to Palestine. Some Templers remained in camps in Palestine until the eve of the dissolution of the British mandate in 1948. In this case the reason given for their continued detention for three years after the end of the war was to protect them from the danger of revenge attacks by Jews. This was no mere pretext: three were murdered by Jews and others were roughed up.<sup>11</sup> Most of the Templers, however, remained in Australia, where many of their descendants live to this day.

Aliens were not the only persons interned in wartime Britain. Under

9 Mahon Murphy, *Colonial Captivity during the First World War: Internment and the Fall of the German Empire, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 102.

10 Lior Yohanani, “Zionist Identity and the British Mandate: Palestine’s Internment Camps and the Making of the Western Native”, *Nations and Nationalism* 26, no. 1 (2019): 246–62.

11 Heidemarie Wawrzyn, *Nazis in the Holy Land 1933–1948* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 125–7.

Defence Regulation 18B of September 1939, later broadened in scope, the Home Secretary was granted power to detain indefinitely and without trial any person of whatever nationality who was believed to be a security danger. By December 1941, 1,769 persons had been so detained – although most were released after a short time. Among the detainees were members of the IRA as well as British Fascists and far-right figures, including Sir Oswald and Lady Mosley, Admiral Sir Barry Domville, a former Director of Naval Intelligence, and Captain A. H. M. Ramsay, Unionist MP for Peebles. Their conditions of confinement compared favourably with the rough treatment accorded some refugee internees (particularly those unfortunates dispatched to Australia and Canada). Sir Oswald and his fellow inmates in Brixton Prison “could order their meals from outside, wear their own clothes and play cricket and rounders in the prison courtyard (which they did during the summer of the Battle of Britain). They even arranged an outdoor silent room”, which Domville recalled was “just like at the club”. He went so far as to call Brixton “the Mecca of the 18Bs.”<sup>12</sup> Ramsay was denied parliamentary immunity but was permitted to submit written questions to ministers from prison – which right he exercised regularly.

Probably the most notorious case of wartime internment was that of 117,000 persons of Japanese origin, two thirds of them US citizens, in the western United States in 1942. One might have thought that, after Pearl Harbor, the same (twisted) security logic would require no less rigorous action in Hawaii. But Japanese-origin residents constituted a third of the civilian population there and, as with Germans in the US in the First World War, sheer force of numbers precluded wholesale internment. The US was neither alone nor first in moving against Japanese-origin civilians. Canada began rounding up 21,000 people of Japanese ancestry, most of them Canadian citizens, before the United States. Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the New Hebrides, and other Pacific islands also interned Japanese civilians. The Japanese retaliated by setting up camps of their own for American, British, and Dutch civilians in territories they occupied.

The internment of Japanese Americans was widely approved in the United States at the time and aroused little dissent. In a famous decision in 1944, the Supreme Court voted by six votes to three to uphold the Roosevelt administration’s policy. Justice Hugo Black, later a liberal hero, delivered

12 Aaron L. Goldman, “Defence Regulation 18B: Emergency Internment of Aliens and Political Dissenters in Great Britain during World War II”, *Journal of British Studies* 12, no. 2 (May 1973): 120–36.

the majority opinion that “exclusion of those of Japanese origin was deemed necessary because of the presence of an unascertained number of disloyal members of the group, most of whom we have no doubt were loyal to this country.” He maintained that the order was justified, given that “it was impossible to bring about an immediate segregation of the disloyal from the loyal.” Justice Felix Frankfurter, also a liberal hero, in his case before elevation to the court, concurred. Frankfurter, the only Jewish justice, did not address the question whether the policy involved racial discrimination.<sup>13</sup> Speaking for the minority, Justice Robert Jackson, later chief US prosecutor at Nuremberg, issued a notable dissent, condemning the decision as racially discriminatory.<sup>14</sup> The court’s majority decision was not definitively renounced until 2018 when Chief Justice Roberts pronounced it unconstitutional, “morally repugnant”, and “overruled in the court of history” – though paradoxically he made this declaration in the context of a decision upholding President Trump’s ban on travel into the United States by citizens of several predominantly Muslim countries.<sup>15</sup> While the 1944 decision has long been recognized as a stain on the reputation of the court, what is less well understood is that it was specifically a stain on the record of several liberal members of the court.

Another group who were interned even though they were not, as individuals, regarded as a security risk were 881 residents of the American-owned Aleutian Islands, between Alaska and Kamchatka. In 1942, when the islands came under attack by the Japanese, the US Navy deported 841 of the aboriginal inhabitants at short notice, on the ground of “military necessity”, and deposited them in abandoned fish canneries in southern Alaska. They were held until 1945 in primitive, overcrowded, insanitary conditions: ten per cent of them died. As in the case of the Japanese-American internments, there was a racial element in this episode: white inhabitants of the islands were allowed to choose whether they wished to be evacuated; meanwhile, as a naval order put it, “all natives, or persons with as much as one eighth native blood were compelled to go.” Families were divided, with an Aleut wife removed while her white husband remained. The US government eventually apologized to the Aleuts and in 1988 offered compensation to the victims; by then barely one hundred of the 881 former internees remained alive.<sup>16</sup>

13 William M. Wiececk, *The Birth of the Modern Constitution: The United States Supreme Court, 1941–1953* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 352.

14 323 U.S. 214 *Korematsu v. United States* (No. 22), 11 and 12 Oct. 1944.

15 *New York Times*, 26 June 2018.

16 Ryan Howard Madden, “An Enforced Odyssey: The Relocation and Internment of

Between 11,000 and 14,400 persons of European origin were interned in the United States during the Second War, some until as late as 1948. Most were German citizens but a few were Americans. The leader of the pro-Nazi German-American Bund, Fritz Kuhn, had been convicted of embezzlement in 1939, imprisoned at Sing Sing, and had his US citizenship revoked. He was interned at the conclusion of his prison sentence and deported to Germany in 1945. Although relatively few German-Americans were interned, the US government offered to intern dangerous enemy aliens living in Latin American countries. At least fifteen countries accepted the offer and deported more than 6,600 suspects, mainly Germans, to the US. The administration briefly considered internment of Italians until Roosevelt dismissed the idea, saying that they were “a lot of opera singers”.<sup>17</sup>

### *Illegal immigrants*

Large-scale internment of illegal immigrants is a phenomenon of the past century in a world of rapid mobility and heightened border restrictions. In Palestine, where Jewish immigration was severely restricted after the spring of 1939, the prospect of being placed in detention camps failed to deter desperate refugees from Nazi Europe trying to reach the country. They knew, after all, that in the end they would be released. Unable to deport them back whence they came, the government sought to send them to the colonies. Most colonial governors would not accept them, but in late 1940 1,580 Jews, nearly half of them women and children, were shipped from Palestine to Mauritius. Many died of typhoid or other causes en route or in the internment camp at Beau Bassin. Some males were released to serve in the Allied armed forces; their womenfolk remained in detention. The 1,310 survivors were permitted to return to Palestine only in August 1945.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile a new wave of illegal immigration from liberated Europe, organized by the Zionist Organization, put even greater pressure on the Palestine government, as the country descended into civil war. Efforts to stem the flow again proved fruitless and from 1946 onwards more than fifty thousand Jews, mainly survivors of the *shoah* from Europe, were held

Aleuts during World War II” (Ph.D. diss., University of New Hampshire, 1993).

17 Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (Washington, DC: The Commission, 1982), vol. 1, 287.

18 Geneviève Pitot, *The Mauritian Shekel: The Story of the Jewish Detainees in Mauritius 1940–1945* (Port Louis, Mauritius: Vizavi, 1998).

in camps on Cyprus, then a British colony. Even after May 1948, when the newly established state of Israel opened its doors to all Jewish newcomers, the British government refused to allow males of military age to leave Cyprus, lest Britain be accused of taking sides in the Israeli-Arab war. The camps were not liquidated until early 1949.

Unlike the British, the United States rarely interned refugees from Nazi Europe. But 982 former concentration camp inmates, 89 per cent of them Jews, were brought from liberated areas of Italy to Fort Ontario at Oswego, N.Y., on the shore of Lake Ontario, and held there between August 1944 and February 1946. These formed an unusual exception to the generally *non possumus* attitude of the Roosevelt administration to wartime proposals for the admission of refugees to the US outside the rigid restrictions of the quota system that governed immigration law. The so-called “Oswego Emergency Refugee Center” was, in effect, an internment camp – so much so that upon arrival some of the residents were at first frightened that they were being installed, once again, in a concentration camp. Their newspaper was censored and the installation was surrounded by a barbed-wire fence with security guards. Although internees were permitted limited access to the neighbouring town of Oswego, they were not otherwise allowed to leave the camp. Not unjustifiably, they complained that they were being “held virtually as prisoners.”<sup>19</sup> Of course, their predicament was as nothing compared with what they had left behind – or with that of the hundreds of thousands caught in recent years in the jaws of the world’s largest contemporary illegal immigrant detention system: that of the United States.

In Britain, the “really hostile environment for illegal immigration”<sup>20</sup> promised in 2012 by the then Home Secretary, Theresa May, resulted in large-scale internment. Although the number of detainees has declined somewhat in recent years, the total number entering what the Home Office quaintly calls the “detention estate” was over twenty thousand in each year between 2009 and 2019. In the latter year, according to official figures, about 24,400 immigrants were detained, most for short periods, but a third for more than twenty-eight days (there is no legal upper limit). The most common nationalities were Albanians and Iranians. The 2019 total included 3,942 European Union citizens, notwithstanding so-called “free movement”. Detainees were held in a variety of premises, described

19 Harvey Strum, “Fort Ontario Refugee Shelter, 1944–1946”, *American Jewish History* 73, no. 4 (1984): 412.

20 *The Guardian*, 27 Aug. 2018.

as “Immigration Removal Centres, Short-Term Holding Facilities, pre-departure accommodation facilities, short-term holding rooms based at ports of entry, and prisons.”<sup>21</sup> Management of most of these institutions was outsourced to private firms at an average cost of more than £34,000 per detainee per year. Conditions in some of these centres were criticized as distressing, with high levels of violence, self-harm, and suicide.<sup>22</sup> Although the term was not officially countenanced, these people were, in reality, internees.

Another country that, perhaps surprisingly in view of its history, has interned large numbers of illegal immigrants is Israel. Since 2012 these have been mainly refugees and asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan. At the end of 2018 there were 33,627 such so-called “infiltrators” in Israel. Many thousands were deported each year. Until 2018 most of the remainder were accommodated in four centres, three “closed” and one supposedly “open”. This last, at Holot, was in a remote desert location, guarded, and surrounded by two high fences. The authorities claimed that the residents, who included women and children, were being held “for the purpose of identification and to explore options for relocation.” Following a supreme court judgment in March 2018, the Holot camp was closed. But the government failed in efforts to deport the Holot inmates to Rwanda or Uganda and, *faute de mieux*, they were eventually freed in Israel.<sup>23</sup>

Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, millions of refugees have fled to countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and further afield. Most have taken shelter in refugee camps, often in conditions that resemble those in internment camps. Many of the refugees from Syria, as well as from North Africa and elsewhere, who attempted to enter the European Union have not fared much better. The tens of thousands vegetating on the Italian island of Lampedusa and the Greek islands of Samos and Lesbos are internees in all but name. This points again to the difficulty of precise definition of our subject.

21 “Immigration Detention in the UK”, briefing paper, Migration Observatory, University of Oxford, 20 May 2020, <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/immigration-detention-in-the-uk/> (accessed 24 Nov. 2020).

22 *The Guardian*, 20 Feb., 4 and 10 March 2020.

23 *Immigration Detention in Israel: Annual Monitoring Report 2018* (Tel Aviv: Hotline for Refugees and Minorities, 2019); US Department of State, 2018 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Israel, Golan Heights, West Bank, and Gaza, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/israel-golan-heights-west-bank-and-gaza/> (accessed 24 Nov. 2020).

### *Colonial internment*

That difficulty becomes all the greater if we turn to our third category: internment of rebels or others considered hostile by colonial governments. The concentration camps established by the German General Lothar von Trotha in the course of his subjugation of South-West Africa between 1904 and 1907 formed part of a programme of mass murder in which 60,000 of the Herero people, eighty per cent of their total, were killed. This was perhaps the most horrifying instance of the use by many colonial governments of internment as a method of repression.

The most notorious British case was that of “concentration camps” set up in South Africa during the later stages of the Boer War (1899–1902). The expression and its realization are often mistakenly said to have originated in this episode – a view eagerly propagated later by Josef Goebbels. But the British invented neither the concept nor the term. The OED records that it was used for civilian camps established by the Spanish military authorities during the Cuban War of Independence (1895–98). Of the 26,000 internees who died in the Boer War camps, mainly from poor food and inadequate sanitation, 22,000 were children. These were the “methods of barbarism”, exposed and denounced by the British humanitarian Emily Hobhouse. At least another 14,000, most of them children, died in separate camps that were established for black African civilians.<sup>24</sup> Unlike that of the Boers, the internment of Blacks has been largely forgotten. No doubt the white skins of the Boers had much to do with this differential amnesia and with the contemporary indignation aroused at their treatment – though the commander of the British army in the later stages of the war, Lord Kitchener, declared that the Boers were merely “uncivilized Africander savages with only a thin white veneer”.<sup>25</sup>

Other examples of British colonial internment include Palestine (Arab rebels in the 1930s, Jewish ones in the 1940s), Kenya during the Mau Mau revolt in the 1950s, and Ireland where internment was used against Irish nationalists in the nineteenth century, in 1916 after the Easter rebellion, before and during the Second World War, in 1956–62 to counter an IRA bombing campaign, and again in Northern Ireland from 1971 to 1975.

From the 1870s onwards the French colonial administration in New Caledonia resorted to internment, often coupled with deportation, as a device to control opposition to French rule by indigenous Kanak. Grounds

24 Denness, “‘A Question Which Affects Our Prestige’”, 40.

25 Murphy, *Colonial Captivity*, 2.

offered for the policy there included sorcery, drunkenness, poisoning, brawls, refusal to pay taxes, or dementia. Nearly all these internees were male, though a few women were interned for allegedly debauched behaviour.<sup>26</sup>

During the Algerian war in the 1950s, the French National Assembly passed a law granting state authorities in Algeria extraordinary powers to control the movement of suspected nationalist rebels – but, no doubt conscious of the poisoned history of internment camps in wartime France, included a caveat: “In no case”, legislators wrote, would these measures “be permitted to produce the creation of camps.” In practice, as Emma Kuby has noted, the prohibition turned out to be in name only: “from 1955 to 1962 French military and civilian authorities constructed an increasingly extensive network of barbed-wire enclosed, windswept detention centers for many thousands of Algerian ‘agitators’ and ‘terrorists’ who were charged with no formal crime.”<sup>27</sup>

In its occupation or, as some see it, quasi-colonial regime in Palestinian territories since 1967, Israel has long used internment under emergency laws inherited from the British mandate. As of the end of December 2019, 464 Palestinians were held in what was euphemistically termed “administrative detention” in Israel Prison Service facilities. It should be emphasized that these are a small fraction of the much larger numbers of prisoners from the occupied territories in Israeli gaols; the remainder have been subject to judicial proceedings in military courts. The main ground for detention invoked by the government has been state security. It has frequently come into conflict on the subject both with international bodies and with the Israeli supreme court. In 2000, for example, the court decided that the state could no longer hold Lebanese civilians as “bargaining chips” for the return of Israeli prisoners of war. Yet in 2008 it issued a judgment upholding the constitutionality of detentions of civilians under the Internment of Unlawful Combatants Law, whereby Palestinians accused of terrorism and other security-related offences were imprisoned without trial.

26 Adrian Muckle, “Troublesome Chiefs and Disorderly Subjects: The ‘Indigénat’ and the Internment of Kanak in New Caledonia (1887–1928)”, *French Colonial History* 11 (2010): 131–60.

27 Emma Kuby, “‘Concentration Camps’ in French Algeria? Political Internment and the Perils of Memory, 1954–62”, paper read to annual meeting of the American Historical Association, Washington, DC, 2018; see also Emma Kuby, *Political Survivors: The Resistance, the Cold War, and the Fight against Concentration Camps after 1945* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), ch. 7.

Another quasi-colonial case of internment arose in occupied Germany between 1945 and 1949. Here the military administrations established by the Allied powers saw internment less as a method of repression than as an instrument of rehabilitation. In the course of so-called “denazification”, 150,000 ex-Nazis were interned in the US zone, 90,000 in the British, and at least 11,000 in the French. Around 200,000 were also interned in the Soviet zone but there the programme swiftly became indistinguishable from East Germany’s broader development into (or continuation as) a police state. An interesting aspect of this episode was the fact that, after a short time, administration of most camps in the US zone was handed over to local German officials so that Germans were then guarding Germans under the aegis of the American occupation regime.

### *Some general reflections*

What, if anything, did all these cases share? Our default tendency is to think of internment by the liberal state as a last resort in emergencies. Actually, it has often been a first rather than a last reaction – as, for example, with enemy aliens in Britain in 1940 and the US detentions at Guantanamo in 2002.

As those cases illustrate, one might propose a rule of thumb that internment usually comes to be seen in retrospect as politically counter-productive. The Boer War camps became an important element in Afrikaner historical consciousness and national identity. The plight of Jewish detainees on Cyprus between 1946 and 1949 galvanized Zionist determination to resist Britain and helped mobilize world public opinion against British policy in Palestine. No less futile was the imprisonment without trial of nearly two thousand men, mainly IRA terrorists or sympathizers, in harsh conditions at Long Kesh in Northern Ireland between 1971 and 1975. As a former Northern Ireland official later admitted: “It soon became clear that far from quelling the uprising, the policy hugely increased recruitment into the IRA.”<sup>28</sup>

I have been discussing internment mainly from the point of view of policymakers. But of course historians must be no less concerned with the impact on the victims. Three significant elements in the experience of internment emerge: class, race, and gender/sex.

In many cases nice class distinctions were drawn. In the First World War the British established so-called “gentlemen’s camps” in which upper-class Germans enjoyed special privileges. France too had its *camps des*

28 “NI Internment remembered 40 Years on”, BBC News, 9 Aug. 2011.

notables. In Ruhleben, the more “respectably dressed” and older men were allocated military beds in horse-boxes. The rest were consigned to haylofts where the men slept on straw. Privileged prisoners there were permitted to dine in the nearby Casino restaurant. To some extent, such social distinctions arose as much from the British as from the German side. One old Etonian inmate in Ruhleben is said to have hired another prisoner as his valet.<sup>29</sup>

In Ruhleben there was an additional principle of division: *race*. “Lascars and Jamaicans, West Africans and Zanzibarees” were placed in a “negroes’ wooden barracks”. Jews too were segregated: they were assigned filthy quarters in the waiting room of the nearby railway station. This was ostensibly on the basis that they would be provided there with kosher food; but as it turned out, Jews were deposited there whether or not they wished to eat kosher. At first, the kosher food seemed marginally better than the fare in the main camp. That impression was soon dispelled by an epidemic of diarrhoea, whereupon the Jews were moved back to the “oldest and dirtiest stable” in the main camp. The head guard there bellowed orders at them, accompanied by such epithets as “Verdammt Judenpack” and “Saujuden”. The Jews remained there until June 1915, when, after a protest by the American ambassador, responsible for protecting British interests in Germany, they rejoined the main body of internees.<sup>30</sup>

Non-discrimination by reason of race could also arouse protest. In South-West Africa during the First World War, interned Germans felt racially humiliated to find themselves behind not barbed wire but rather thorn-tree fences like those that had been used in the same territory by Germans to confine the Herero a few years earlier. The Germans elicited the sympathy of the US consul who reported that the fence “unnecessarily humiliates them in the eyes of the natives.”<sup>31</sup>

Gender was a basic principle of selection for internment in several cases. This could work in both directions. In South Africa, as the Boer menfolk were in the field fighting, a majority of internees were women and children. In Britain during the First World War, next to no women were interned; and only fifteen per cent of the internees in the UK between 1939 and 1945 were women. Gender led sometimes to segregation, in other cases to enforced intimacy. The latter inevitably stimulated sexual activity. Not for nothing did contraceptives command a higher value as ersatz currency

29 Israel Cohen, *The Ruhleben Prison Camp: A Record of Nineteen Months' Internment* (London: Methuen, 1917), 48.

30 *Ibid.*, 115, 197.

31 Murphy, *Colonial Captivity*, 62.

even than cigarettes among Allied civilians in Japanese camps in China between 1942 and 1945. Gender segregation, however, had a consequence recalled by one Ruhleben prisoner in language characteristic of the time: “Unfortunately the promiscuous crowding together of men and boys led to the indulgence by a few in secret vice.”<sup>32</sup> A combination of racial and sexual taboos produced a potent brew in some camps in China, Singapore, and Malaya in the Second World War. British internees, especially women, expressed disquiet at the presence among them of “Malay keeps” (local-born mistresses of British men) as well as of mixed-race Eurasians who were accused of filthiness and to whom various untoward sexual activities, including prostitution, homosexuality, and paederasty were attributed.<sup>33</sup>

As one might expect, former internees looked back on the experience in many different ways, running the gamut from outrage to something approaching nostalgia. Recalling his childhood in a civilian camp in Japanese-occupied Shanghai between 1943 and 1945, the writer J. G. Ballard reminisced: “This was a relaxed and easy-going world . . . I enjoyed my years in Lunghua, made a huge number of friends . . . and on the whole felt buoyant and optimistic, even when the food rations fell to near zero, skin infections covered my legs, malnutrition had prolapsed my rectum, and many of the adults had lost heart. . . . Lunghua Camp may have been a prison of a kind, but it was a prison where I found freedom.”<sup>34</sup> Of course, that was the view of a child, albeit a preternaturally observant and sensitive one. Ballard’s relatively happy recollections do not stand alone. One German-Jewish internee on the Isle of Man in the Second World War described the atmosphere there as like a “seaside holiday resort in peacetime.”<sup>35</sup> That sentiment was echoed by others. But some years ago when I mentioned that in print, another former internee, the historian H. G. Koenigsberger, objected: “We certainly knew that we weren’t in Dachau but I didn’t meet anyone who had ambivalent feelings. Everyone resented it bitterly.”<sup>36</sup> Subsequent historical writing has tended to reinforce Koenigsberger’s negative view.<sup>37</sup>

32 Cohen, *Ruhleben*, 194.

33 Felicia Yap, “Eurasians in British Asia during the Second World War”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3rd ser., 21, no. 4 (2011): 485–505.

34 J. G. Ballard, *Miracles of Life: Shanghai to Shepperton: An Autobiography* (New York: Liverlight, 2013), 60–61, 73.

35 Eugen Spier, *The Protecting Power* (London: Skeffington, 1951), 245.

36 Letter to the editor, *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 July 1984.

37 E.g., David Cesarani and Tony Kushner, eds., *The Internment of Aliens in Twentieth Century Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1993).

Internment often left psychological scars. In the case of Oswego, treatment of the inmates was relatively benign. Yet a historian tells us that “the lack of privacy, uncertainty about the future and losses that most families suffered before coming to Oswego contributed to extreme mood changes, great outbursts of hysteria and a number of cases of severe withdrawal.”<sup>38</sup> Elsewhere, internees suffered what came to be called *Stacheldrahtkrankheit*, “barbed-wire disease”. Symptoms included “mood swings, irritability, failure of memory and difficulty in concentrating, symptoms that would today fall under post-traumatic stress disorder.”<sup>39</sup>

My parents certainly had no rose-tinted memories of their internment. Half a century later my father still burned with indignation at the treatment meted out by Polish guards. Both he and my mother were eventually released. My father narrowly escaped being caught in the vice of the “final solution”. As for my mother, British officials in Palestine, as I discovered in the archives, were deterred from deporting her and others to Hungary only by the refusal of the Hungarian authorities to countenance being burdened once again with their presence. She and my father eventually met and married in Palestine. But the months they spent in Polish and British internment camps were traumatic episodes that coloured their outlooks for the rest of their lives. Their experiences reflected the general helplessness of individuals caught up in the maw of the pitiless leviathan that is the modern state.

What can we conclude? First, that even liberal societies, when confronted suddenly with circumstances that do not fit within established lines of policy, seem unable to shake off an almost default resort to internment. Secondly, that more often than not, having interned in haste, they have repented at leisure. Thirdly, that class, race, and sex played a larger part in the internment experience than was acknowledged until recently. And finally, that in most cases these are not episodes that any country can look back on with pride. More and more they have come to contemplate them with unease, remorse, or, perhaps most properly, shame.

© Bernard Wasserstein, 2020

38 Sharon Lowenstein, “A New Deal for Refugees: The Promise and Reality of Oswego”, *American Jewish History* 71, no. 3 (1982): 341.

39 Murphy, *Colonial Captivity*, 60.