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Civilians in a World at War, 1914-1918

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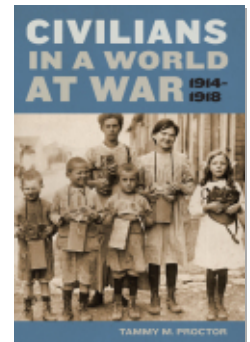
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Civilians behind the Wire

All the world's a cage,
And all the men within it weary players;
They have no exits, only entrances,
Where each spends many months 'ere he departs.
—L. E. Filmore, "The Seven Ages of a Kriegsgefangener,"¹

The nightmares began almost as soon as he reached neutral territory. The dreams were vivid, featuring faceless officials wresting him from his comfortable Dutch hotel room and returning him to the horse stall where he'd spent the last three years. Gilbert Graham, a 28-year-old Australian electrical engineer released into Dutch custody in late April 1918 from a German civilian internment camp, wrote to his wife about the dreams:

Here I usually sleep too heavily to dream but when I do it is quite disturbing, because I always find myself back in Ruhleben, awake, with the knowledge that Holland was only a dream. It is always the same with slight variations, but I always have the same obsession, that is my brain worries and worries how to get back the letters which I wrote you and the Dad [sic] announcing my false freedom, such letters having been written under the dream impression that I was in Holland. It is quite disturbing while it lasts.²

Like many of his comrades also released into Holland during prisoner exchanges, Graham found himself unable to throw off the experience of confinement, longing alternately for solitude and for company, bothered

by dreams, memories, and melancholy. At one point, he mused to his wife, "I shall indeed be like an Antarctic explorer returning to the world after this [experience]."³

Graham was certainly not alone in this experience of civilian internment in the First World War, and in fact, he was one of hundreds of thousands of ordinary civilians taken into custody by nations involved in the war. Millions more were displaced by the war, forced into refugee camps or housed in private homes and public institutions, either because they fled voluntarily or because military officials mandated movement from war zones. Enemy alien men of military age (roughly seventeen to forty-five years old) were particular targets, but men, women, and children around the world were affected by these policies of internment as well as by deportation and repatriation programs during and after the war. Altogether close to a million civilians spent at least part of their war behind barbed wire or in other forms of confinement.

While not a new invention in 1914, the widespread use and systematic organization of concentration/internment camps in the First World War was an innovation that became a precedent for later conflicts. The first to use concentration camps (*reconcentrado*) was Spanish general Valeriano Weyler in the fight against rebels in Cuba (1898), and such camps were also utilized by the British in South Africa during the Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902), when civilians were detained in camps or concentrated areas, supposedly in order to control support networks for guerilla fighters.⁴ The major difference in World War I was that civilian internment was a deliberate state policy regardless of whether the nation in question was fighting on its own territory. Even nations as far removed from the battle lines as Canada, Australia, Brazil, and Chile interned civilians. Numbers of internees varied widely by country. For example, the Isle of Man housed more than twenty-five thousand civilian men interned by the British during the war, while in Germany, more than one hundred and ten thousand civilians were in captivity by 1918. Italy interned seventy thousand people in the Friuli and Dolomite border zones, sending the men of military age to Sardinia. In France, camps accommodated enemy men and women but also undesirable French and Belgian people from the military zones. In all, an estimated sixty thousand people spent some time in the French concentration camps of the war period.⁵ In fact,

internment camps existed in all combatant countries (Romania, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Empire, Australia, Canada, United States, Chile), in neutral countries (Switzerland and the Netherlands), and in many colonial possessions (German East Africa, Malta, Singapore). Were these interned men and women still civilians when they were being held in military custody, guarded by soldiers, and subject to military control? The internment practices of World War I highlighted the difficulties in determining which civilians constituted military threats to the home population.

Those interned during the war were often outsiders or were living on the margins of society. Governments used various guidelines for internment of civilians, but the most common factor that led to internment was foreign birth. So-called enemy aliens who were purposefully or inadvertently residing in nations at war in 1914 often found themselves in camps or under supervision. Civilian internment exposed the problems of the civil/military divide, creating categories of people who did not fit neatly in either. Officials tried to categorize people by simple nationality, but national citizenship was neither simple nor static. People moved and their loyalties shifted, while in other situations, families stayed in the land in which they were born but their government (and therefore their nationality) changed.

The story of civilian internment in the First World War is the tale of thousands of ordinary individuals held in captivity for reasons that seemed oblique at best to most of them. Perhaps the best documented of the internment camp experiences are those in Western Europe, where the governments of Germany, Britain, and France paid close attention to the conditions in camps, publishing reports and inspections. In addition, the highly literate prisoners of high-profile camps such as Ruhleben and Knockaloe published stories, books, and letters detailing their experiences both during and after the war, creating a useful record for understanding camp life, the stresses of internment, and the larger impact of internment policies in World War I.

Their very status as civilians complicated their lives in multiple ways as international rules written to protect prisoners of war targeted soldiers and officers, not civilians. For men of military age, the purgatory of internment was difficult to endure; they could not fight and “prove” their mascu-

linity, nor could they contribute work to their home or adopted country. This enforced passivity meant that civilian internees experienced the war behind wire, powerless to support or resist the war in any meaningful way.

The Internees

The war broke out at the height of the summer tourist season in 1914, so many on pleasure trips ended up staying in enemy territory longer than they had planned. In addition to tourists, travelers, workers and business people, political dissidents, or suspected subversives, unemployed or underemployed workers, prostitutes, religious leaders, and political hostages could also be subject to internment or supervision. In most countries that interned civilians, the bulk of those imprisoned were male, as officials reasoned that men of military age were “reservists” in their own countries, and if able to return to their natal homes, would bear arms. However, in some cases wives, children, single women, and the elderly were interned “for their own protection” or because of some action that made them suspect.

While Gilbert Graham dealt with life in a former horse stable because he was an Australian male of military age, another Australian located a world away was caught up in a living nightmare because she married the enemy. Detained by her own nation, Daisy Schoeffel tried to protect her family from what she saw as an absurdly tragic situation. Born in Australia to a well-established manufacturing family, Daisy technically “lost” her own nationality upon her marriage in 1913 to Alfred Schoeffel, a naturalized British citizen of German origin living in Fiji. Under Australian law, women took the nationality of their husbands. When war broke out, the Schoeffels continued their lives in Fiji, while Daisy’s brother served in the Australian forces and her father, a boot manufacturer, supplied the army under a Defence Department contract. Their circumstances changed in 1917 when a panic about naturalized Germans in Fiji ensued, leading to accusations of espionage and trading with the enemy. All Germans, whether naturalized or not, were deported in the name of their own protection. They were sent to Australia under guard and in the hold of a ship, then to Bourke in New South Wales, a “family” internment center known for poor conditions and a “murderous climate.”⁶ Because all of

their money and property had been seized in Fiji, they had no means to make their lives more bearable and could purchase no additional food or clothing. As Daisy wrote to a government official after the war, "The first week at Bourke was hell on earth. . . . About six weeks after we arrived in Bourke we all got dysentery . . . and for two months one time we received absolutely nothing but bread and meat, the latter being flyblown."⁷

Daisy and her two small children (aged three years and fifteen months, respectively, in 1917) were among hundreds of civilians sent to Australian internment camps from British colonies and territories, including Fiji, Ceylon, Hong Kong, and Singapore. China even applied in 1917 to send its enemy aliens to Australia, but that plan never reached fruition. In all, close to seven thousand people were interned in Australia during the war, most of them residents and some of them even Australian citizens under suspicion merely for having a German surname or ancestry.⁸ Other British colonies in Asia and the Pacific also maintained internment centers at various times during the war, with the largest being those in New Zealand, at Stonecutters Island in Hong Kong, in India, and in Singapore. These camps often housed a wide range of individuals from all over the Pacific and Indian Ocean regions; one camp in Rajputan, India, housed approximately three thousand men from a dozen language groups, including Afghan, Persian, Kurd, Armenian, Greek, Turk, etc.⁹

Other nations far from the front lines also interned civilians, albeit in fairly small numbers. In the United States, rather than interning all German-born males of military age, officials targeted naturalized or enemy citizens accused of disloyalty. Karl Muck (1859–1940), director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, was among four thousand civilians interned in the United States during World War I.¹⁰ Muck spent close to a year in internment at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, as a "dangerous enemy alien"; his crime was a false accusation of espionage and "refusing to play the Star-Spangled Banner" at a concert in October 1917. On this occasion, Muck stated publicly that: "Art is a thing by itself, and not related to any particular nation or group." His concerts led to protests and eventually to his arrest in spring 1918.¹¹ Muck shared his confinement with scholars, scientists, musicians, and poets, a mere handful of "dangerous" men held captive in a nation with more than four and a half million citizens who had been born in countries tied to the Central Powers. With what seemed



Civilian men wait for transfer to the U.S. internment camp at Fort Oglethorpe in Georgia. *Library of Congress.*

to be arbitrary policies toward those of German or Austrian descent, the United States only interned those who had been denounced for pro-German or anti-American activities or those considered too influential to remain free citizens.¹² This policy led to the captivity of a strange mix of prominent German-born men, including Muck, bankers Rudolf Hecht and Ernst Fritz Kuhn, scientist Richard Goldschmidt (who was on a temporary appointment at Yale when he was arrested), and Ernst Kunwalt, a concert pianist and conductor of the Cincinnati Orchestra.¹³ Many of these men had only vague ideas about the charges against them, and they had to suffer the uncertainty of not knowing why they were incarcerated or for how long they might remain behind barbed wire.¹⁴ Like the United States, Canada also operated enemy alien internment camps during the First World War, but its camps held few prominent bankers, scholars, or musicians. Rather, its concern was with unemployed and underemployed recent immigrants, many of whom were Ukrainians who had been invited to Canada as workers prior to the war. Most of these workers had little education and few ties in Canada, and their status was uncertain in 1914. Arrested as enemy aliens and officially classified as part of the Austro-

Hungarian Empire, these worker-immigrants comprised the bulk of the more than eight thousand people interned by the Canadian government during the war. Others interned included political dissidents and sailors from merchant vessels taken from ports in Canada and British colonies of the Caribbean (Jamaica, Barbados, Bermuda, etc.). Perhaps because of their class status or Canada's unwillingness to create protective policies, the civilian internees in Canada were among the few in the First World War to be forced into hard labor.¹⁵

Labor projects varied for those interned, but a large number were sent to camps in the Rocky Mountains to build roads using hand tools such as picks, shovels, and wheelbarrows. Their labor was part of a scheme in the fledgling national parks system to make these wilderness areas more accessible to tourists. Internees were engaged in road, bridge, and other building projects, but weather conditions were harsh, and the remote location of these camps meant poor access to fresh water and difficult supply issues. For most of the civilian internees and their keepers, this life was hellish, as is evident in this description of the camp at Banff:

[T]he prisoners and their guards put in exceptionally long days walking to and from the project sites. In some cases they marched from four to six miles each way; according to the inspection report [February 1916], this amounted "practically to a day's work in itself," especially given the snow conditions that winter. To make matters worse, the distance from the camp precluded a warm midday meal and the men had to choke down frozen food.¹⁶

Canada ran more than two dozen internment centers during the war, with most of them requiring work from inmates. Yet many of the civilians refused to accept the conditions offered them by Canadian authorities. In a November 1916 report on another internment work camp at Spirit Lake in Quebec, U.S. consul G. Willrich found a majority of the civil inhabitants on strike, claiming that as civilians they should be provided with wood for heat and good food. Willrich recorded pitiful stories of inadequate food and heat, guard brutality, and poor lodging, as with this account from Oftude Boka (interned for more than a year): "Do not want to work any more, did not get enough to eat. Corporal hit me, nobody

lets me see the Colonel, nor the orderly officer. Worked all winter getting wood on sleighs, and when sick, was not permitted to go to the hospital. Do not care whether I die or not.”¹⁷ This treatment was a far cry from the life of better-educated, mostly German internees, who were assigned to nonwork internment centers in Ontario, where they were put in a “privilege camp.”¹⁸

This class division, based on wealth, occupation, and education, was a feature of civilian internment in all the combatant countries, leaving some internees in distinctly better situations than others. Wealthier interned civilians even managed to use their own funds to hire servants from among the poorer internees. Artist Paul Cohen-Portheim described Knockaloe, an ordinary internment camp on the Isle of Man, as having “[t]wo sharply divided classes, the £1 a week class and the moneyless class,” but he himself was soon transferred to a “gentleman’s camp” at Wakefield, England, for a more privileged existence.¹⁹ Other internment sites purposefully separated social classes, such as Fort Oglethorpe (United States). This center in Georgia had three camps, one of which was known as the “millionaires’ camp” because it included internees who could afford to pay for better food, servants, and little luxuries.²⁰ The French had two categories of special camps—those for “notables” or famous people, and those for the wealthy or privileged.²¹ In India, some of the colonial administrators held in concentration camps there lived quite well, with servants, household amenities, and whole family groups in one place. As one inspector noted in his 1917 report, the civilian internees “seemed like visitors on a holiday rather than enemy subjects in captivity.”²² Likewise in Australia two camps for elite internees emerged as the war progressed, one at Berrima and one at Trial Bay. Trial Bay held “merchants, physicians, priests” as well as the German consuls from all the Australian states and many British colonies in the Pacific. Two foreign scientists who were interned because they were in Australia attending a professional meeting also became well-known inhabitants of Trial Bay.²³

Perhaps one of the greatest examples of the contrast between the work camps and “privilege camps” was the internment center at Berrima in New South Wales, which even became a tourist attraction during the war. The German concentration camp at Berrima was a privilege camp mostly reserved for sailors and ships’ officers taken from vessels in the region but

housing a few civilians as well. The crew of the SMS Emden, famously captured by a British warship in the Indian Ocean, was held here along with other German civilians and military personnel captured from naval and commercial vessels. Unlike many others interned in Australia, the Berrima inmates slept in cells of an old prison at night but had free run of the small village and its river during the day. Amazingly, the internees developed friendly relations with the townspeople, helping them with chores, gardens, and building projects, and in return, the village allowed the internees to make the river their playground. The interned men built huts and gardens on the shores of the river, a footbridge, a dam, and an “American-style water chute,” and eventually they constructed small boats for racing regattas.²⁴

The mariners’ aptitude for carpentry was apparent in their created village within a village, but other skilled internees helped develop the town even further. Friedrich Machotka, a 34-year-old farmer and agricultural expert from Bohemia (Austria at that time, the Czech Republic now), brought his whole family to live in Berrima while he was detained. His American wife and three young daughters set up house in the village, and Machotka and his daughters, with the later help of other internees and villagers, created astounding vegetable and flower gardens that became showplaces in the region. Not only did they gain fame but the gardens (called New Pomerania) provided an almost continuous supply of fresh produce for the camp, a boon many internees in other countries and indeed in Australia coveted.²⁵ Berrima, like many of the other privilege camps, still limited its inhabitants’ freedom, but its advantages over “regular camps” were multiple and visible. As one of the Australian guards noted in his history of Berrima, “It is a charming site for a concentration camp, and . . . internees generally are very satisfied and recognise that this is the best concentration camp to be found anywhere.”²⁶

The differences between the privilege camps at Berrima and Trial Bay and the large multipurpose camp, Holdsworthy, in the Sydney suburb of Liverpool, underline the ways in which class and occupational status provided benefits, even in internment settings, in the First World War. Friedrich Machotka, who had spent time in both Berrima and Holdsworthy, petitioned the U.S. Embassy for a transfer to Berrima, where Mrs. Machotka and the children would be allowed to live under internment

conditions as well. In Holdsworthy, wives and families were not allowed, and in fact, they were often sent to the dreaded outpost at Bourke.²⁷ Another internee, H. Sauerbeck, who was living at the privilege camp at Trial Bay, explained the difference between Holdsworthy and Trial Bay in a written description:

In our camp [Trial Bay] there is a very good institution, called "Genossenschaft [The Cooperative]" which has a monopoly for selling all kinds of provisions: coffee, beer, milk, sausages, fruits, etc. The profit from this endeavor provides upkeep for the theater, the orchestra, etc., and each month the chef receives a large portion for improving our menu. Thus the prices are fixed for all things and the camp benefits from each penny that one spends. Sadly, there is no equivalent institution in the large camp at Liverpool [Holdsworthy] where nearly 5000 Germans are interned.²⁸

Another internee, Georg Boysen, wrote to his family expressing gratitude for a cell (in an old jail) at Trial Bay over the barracks at Liverpool, where "it was rightly said, that a coolie in Ceylon would when dead have more room on the Cemetery [sic] than we have here in the barracks. . . . [Liverpool] is a dreadful place."²⁹ Even the Holdsworthy camp commandant, Lt. Col. R. S. Sands, recognized that the general camp conditions were harsher than those at the privilege camps. Despite having no official approval for mandatory work, Sands instituted "working gangs of prisoners" at Liverpool, "[t]o keep the prisoners physically fit I insisted at that time that all should do 4 hours work daily, and I put them on to congenial work such as clearing bush lands, grubbing trees, building fences, etc." Sands also created a "feeding system" borrowed from cattle yards that funneled men through mazelike races toward the food. He admitted that "[t]he prisoners at first did not take kindly to the change and to vent their displeasure they used to 'bah' like sheep as they went through the races."³⁰ No wonder the men were unhappy; in addition to mandatory work programs, regimented "feeding," and crowded barracks, there were only forty-two cold showers, all in the open air, and open pit latrines with no privacy for the more than six thousand men interned there in 1918.³¹

While internment camps featured divisions based on class, camp officials also divided prisoners on the basis of their nationalities. Cer-

tain enemy aliens could escape internment entirely if their nationality was termed a “friendly” one, or if they were perceived to be a subject people within a larger empire. For example, the United Kingdom often exempted Arabs or Greeks from the Ottoman Empire or Czechs and Poles living under Austro-Hungarian rule.³² The French also made allowances for Syrians and Armenians who were technically Ottoman subjects, but they initially interned most men from Alsace and Lorraine because of the difficulty in determining their loyalties (French or German).³³ Within the camps themselves, certain nationalities were quarantined. At Ruhleben, which was filled with British nationals, the “PGs,” or pro-Germans, among the internees were segregated in a special barracks called “the Tea House” for their own protection.³⁴

In some cases having an indeterminate nationality or a confusing family history could lead to internment as surely as being a clear enemy alien subject, and mistakes were made. Internment seemed an almost arbitrary decision when men with almost similar backgrounds found themselves on opposite sides of the barbed wire. One instance of such national difficulty is the case of Paul Waller, an internee at Knockaloe on the Isle of Man, who was arrested while trying to arrange travel from the UK back to France to join the army. Technically he was a German because of his birth in the territory of Lorraine in 1886 (under German control after 1871), but his sympathies and family background were French. His family had lived in London since he was a teenager, and in 1914, he was engaged to marry a British woman. The complexity of his national background and his age (thirty years, or military age) seems to have occasioned his arrest, despite his fifteen-year residence in London and the fact that all his “interests and associations are in Great Britain.”³⁵ Like Daisy Schoffel in Australia, some civilians found themselves interned through accidents of birth or circumstance, victims of modern definitions of citizenship in the nation-state.

Nationalism reared its head in other ways, most notably through purposeful reprisals, which became a feature of internment experiences. When certain nations were perceived to be treating internees badly, their counterparts might retaliate in kind. For example in Austria-Hungary, stories about British mistreatment of Germans and Austrians in its camps led to an 8:00 p.m. curfew for British internees in Austrian camps and a policy whereby Russian and French prisoners were allowed walks out-

side the wire, while British prisoners were not.³⁶ Germany and France developed a particularly nasty policy of reprisals over the course of the war, while early internment policies in Germany and Britain were partly shaped by government orders for reprisal.³⁷ Local camp commandants were told not to order reprisals without clearance from their states, but camp officials sometimes found such restraint difficult in the heightened wartime atmosphere. The commandant at Holdsworth camp in Australia explained his feelings about reprisals in a report:

The instructions issued to me by the Minister for Defence in connection with the treatment of internees, was to treat them with the consideration that I would desire to be treated if I was interned, and not to let my feelings be influenced [sic] by rumours and reports of bad treatment upon our own men, but to remember that it was an Englishman's privilege and his desire to carry into effect the dictates of his own conscience. Any reprisals which were to be made were not to be of a local nature but would be ordered by the Secretary of State to Great Britain. These instructions I have faithfully tried to carry into effect, and I have endeavoured not to let my temper overrule my judgment, but I must say reading the reports from other camps in enemy countries furnished by Mr. Gerard the Ambassador for the United States in Germany, I have often been tempted to give them as it is commonly observed "one to go on with", but I have refrained.³⁸

Beyond the national question, countries divided internment camps by language and ethnicity as well. In Germany, most British civilians were sent to Ruhleben while Belgian and French civilians found themselves at Holzminden or Gütersloh. Those minority nationalities who were interned often petitioned for separate accommodations in camps, so, for instance, at the Isle of Man camps Austrian prisoners often were segregated from Germans. In France, there were three different kinds of internment camps for those from the disputed French-German territories of Alsace and Lorraine, depending on the level of security risk each person was assigned.³⁹ Ethnic groups were sometimes targeted for unique treatment, as with gypsies who were forcibly deported as suspect aliens by the Russians and who were confined to special camps for nomads by the French.⁴⁰

In other circumstances, some of the warring nations tried to use nationalist or ethnic allegiances to their advantage. Germany set up special “propaganda” camps for Ukrainians and for Muslims from the Russian Empire, Africa, and India, hoping to find recruits for their armies on the eastern front (Ukrainians) and in the Middle East (Muslims).⁴¹ Irish prisoners were a special source of concern in both Germany and the United Kingdom. The Germans held special meetings of all Irish Roman Catholics from various internment centers and tried to entice them to join the German army or to fight against England in other ways. At one such meeting, “Sir Roger Casement⁴² and five Irish priests from Rome . . . [proposed] that these Irishmen should form a special corps . . . to ‘fight for their country’ (against England, of course).”⁴³ Meanwhile, the British tried to find special internment accommodations for “ringleaders” from the Irish Easter Rebellion of 1916 who were awaiting trial, but with mixed success. The Isle of Man refused to house Irish revolutionaries because of proximity to the Irish mainland and fears of sympathy from the mainly Irish camp guards, so many of the male revolutionaries were sent to prisons in northern England, and female revolutionaries spent their internment at a former inebriates’ reformatory in Aylesbury and at Holloway prison in London.⁴⁴

More ominously, separate Ottoman camps for Armenians in Mesopotamia and Syria were used to isolate this minority group as part of a genocidal plan that led to the extermination of more than a million Armenian civilians.⁴⁵ Those Armenians who tried to flee into surrounding territories sometimes found themselves little better off, as they were taken as civilian prisoners again. One Ottoman prisoner of war described with pity these civilian refugees who arrived in Russia by rail convoy only to be “held” in internment centers “mostly wearing old, tattered clothes. Sinking to their knees in mud and dragging themselves along, they were taken to sheds” as holding centers.⁴⁶ On the eastern front, deportation and internment sometimes became an excuse for pogroms against Jewish or other minority communities.⁴⁷

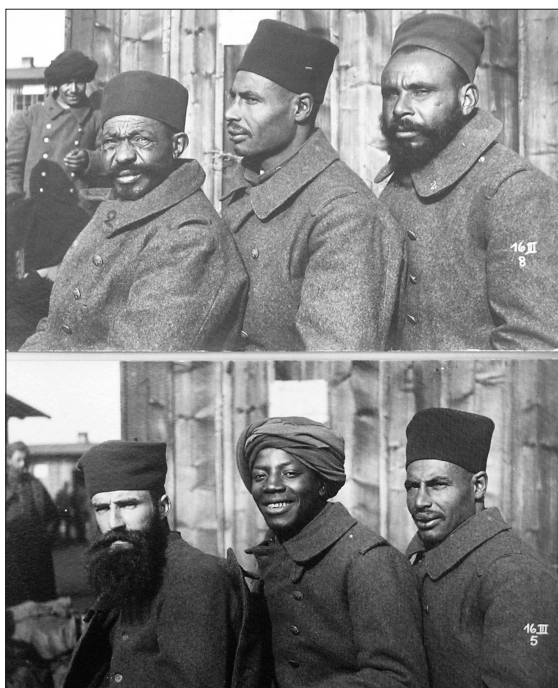
Religion often dictated separate accommodation as well. The Douglas Internment Camp (Isle of Man) provided three different subcamps within its facilities: a class-based “privilege camp,” an ordinary camp, and a Jewish camp.⁴⁸ The camp for the “better class of prisoners” cost each man ten

shillings per week, but these men got choice lodging (even private tents, if they paid extra) and personal servants. At the Jewish subcamp within camp compound 2, there was a “separate kitchen where Kosher food is prepared for orthodox Jews,” of which there were more than four hundred by 1917.⁴⁹ Likewise, at Ruhleben Camp in Berlin, Jewish prisoners were segregated in a special barrack with its own kitchen and many of its own activities.⁵⁰ The French provided separate kitchen facilities and food for Ottoman Muslims interned in their camps, when it was possible.⁵¹ If an internee died, many of the camps tried to make arrangements for proper funeral rites and burials.⁵² Despite some sensitivity to religious issues regarding rites, food preparation, and housing, religious tension remained in many internment facilities.

Colonial subjects faced different accommodations and treatment from their metropolitan counterparts during internment also, and often racism was a feature of life in the camps. Ruhleben housed a large contingent from the British Empire, most of whom were confined to one barrack, the “Negerbaracke,” and whose presence was described in a memoir by 24-year-old Irish internee John Patrick Bradshaw:

The tropical quarters of the British Empire were represented by some 150 of his Majesty’s dusky subjects. The great majority of these were Africans, and most of the remainder came from Jamaica. With the exception of about half a dozen who had been living in Germany and had arrived in the camp along with different parties of white men, they lived in a barracks where no white face was to be seen. . . . [F]ew of them could speak any English. . . . [A] number had their tribal marks burned or cut on their cheeks. . . . [T]heir greatest earthly bliss appeared to be a cricket match. . . . They played cricket daily, regardless of wind and weather.⁵³

As this account suggests, European internees often depicted black inmates as childlike and simple, and there are multiple accounts, some paternalistic and some hostile, of the music and sport-loving internees, suggesting a pervasive racial prejudice that accompanied anti-Semitism and class distinctions in many of the camps.⁵⁴ Although a number of imperial internees like those at Ruhleben found themselves eventually in European internment camps, some unfortunates were interned in colo-



Photographs showing prisoners in German internment camps. These photos were taken by camp officials as documentation of the diversity of prisoners in their custody. *Library of Congress.*

nies that were ill-prepared to intern civilians. The primary predictors of civilian internment camp conditions in World War I were the readiness of the facility and the organizational level of the government's war office. Some of the worst internment experiences were in Russia and the Ottoman Empire, where the general level of societal preparation for war was low, but the internment experiences in colonial settings could also be particularly harsh. Otto Wienecke, a German living in the Cameroons, complained bitterly of his treatment when the British rounded up civilians and kept them interned on a ship docked in port for several weeks while they decided on a course of action.⁵⁵ While Wienecke was loud in his complaints, his ordeal was of relatively short duration. In fact, the thing that seemed to make him most angry was that he and his fellow German colonial officials and their families were marched through the streets past their colonized subjects, who shouted abuse at them. Nonetheless, Wienecke's charges were investigated, and rumors of poor treatment in the colonies often affected policy elsewhere. The U.S. ambassador in Berlin,

James Gerard, was asked to conduct further investigation of allied treatment of Germans after Berlin officials heard that “Germans taken prisoners in German African Colonies were forced to work in the sun, watched and beaten by coloured guards.”⁵⁶ In many cases, the accounts of poor treatment became just one more weapon in the propaganda war being waged.

Like the German Otto Wienecke, British missionary John Williams left a compelling account of his time in internment centers in Africa. This account shows how very different internment experiences could be depending on location. While some men lived it up on the river in Berima and others played cricket in Ruhleben, some civilians suffered hard labor in Canada’s western wilderness or, like Williams, battled tropical disease and starvation diets. Williams, along with four women and three men, was interned in early 1915 as an enemy alien in German East Africa. His group was marched on foot through difficult terrain for hundreds of miles as they were moved between internment sites during his two years of captivity. His first long-term internment center, Kiboriani, was an old mission station located at six thousand feet above sea level. The internees included medical personnel, missionaries, planters, and businesspeople, both men and women, from the region. Williams described the diet and conditions in his diary:

We had nothing to eat but millet (Kaffir corn) & a few poor European potatoes, with now & then a little rice, and meat. Drink milk & coffee. The millet was old, & disgustingly dirty, had been overrun by rats, and smelt badly. It was made into bread, the crust of which when burnt was passably eatable. With this bread we were given a piece of butter as big as a nut for breakfast and tea. To drink with this we had coffee—the great amount of 4 dessert’s spoons’ full of coffee for 40 people. For lunch we had millet made up into small dumplings and boiled—they were nauseous & one could only eat them by holding one’s nose and swallowing one quickly. It was often that even one made one sick, & there were serious epidemics of diarrhea from time to time.⁵⁷

Williams was eventually moved along with several others to the civilian camp at Tabora, which held British, French, Belgian, Greek, and Ital-

ian civilians and some soldiers. While conditions were somewhat better at Tabora for the British such as Williams, African-born missionaries were treated particularly badly in these camps, often whipped, put in chains, and forced into hard labor. Zacharia Mazengo, a teacher for the Church Missionary Society, testified in 1916 to the treatment he had received from the Germans when he was interned. He told a magistrate in Mombasa, "There we were stretched out on the ground and greatly beaten, each of us receiving 110 strokes with a kiboko [rhinoceros-hide whip]; again we were bound with cords and our hands tied behind from 8 a.m. till 3 p.m. until we fainted and were nearly dying." Despite such torture, Mazengo and the four other "native" teachers so punished refused to admit to trumped-up charges of learning signaling from the English.⁵⁸

The experience of internment varied widely according to nation, age, and status of internee, and period of the war, but in all cases, internees were removed from society and placed in a strange state of limbo for the duration of the war or until their repatriation. Civilian internees, like military prisoners of war, fought a different war of boredom and confinement, leaving them in an uneasy spot upon their release as bystanders to the conflict with little power to serve their nations or to refuse service.

The Camps

As all these accounts demonstrate, internment of civilians could vary greatly according to their wealth, location, sex, age, race, nationality, and sometimes even luck. A trip at the wrong time, a stray word disparaging the government, or an accident of birth was enough to lead to internment of an individual. In one unusual case, several hundred Turkish families returning from pilgrimage to Mecca were interned in Cairo in 1917, with men in an internment camp while their wives and children were housed in an old citadel.⁵⁹ Here bad luck and poor timing were both factors in the internment of these individuals.

One of the most important issues for most internees was their housing situation. Privacy, or more accurately, lack of privacy, was a great strain for most internees, but for older prisoners, the physical hardships of some of the camps' housing made internment a torture. The worst luck for an internee came with an early arrest because as camps were being built