

Book Review

Enemies in the Empire: Civilian internment in the British Empire during the First World War

Stefan Manz and Panikos Panayi

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The war came to Potsdam, a small, sleepy hamlet in the Eastern Cape, in September 1914. German immigrants had settled the country districts surrounding the port of East London after the Crimean War.⁵⁹² Others had followed, and the towns of Stutterheim and King William's Town, and the hamlets of Berlin, Hamburg, Breidbach, Frankfort, Kwelega and Potsdam sprang up to support the growing farming community. The small German school at Potsdam, with 44 registered pupils, hosted a concert at the Lutheran Church on 2 September 1914. Arranged by the schoolmaster – the 35-year-old, Mr GAF Johl – the concert unleashed a storm of protest that the community's elders might have anticipated. September 2, was Sedan Day. The service had been conducted in German, German songs were sung, and Schoolmaster Johl gave a presentation in German. Johl and his assistant teacher, the 20-year-old Miss Winkelmann, were South African-born but of German descent. Outraged, local, 'English' farmers reported that they had shown 'magic lantern' slides depicting scenes from the Franco-Prussian War, including images commemorating the German victory at Sedan. The local South African Police investigated; the pictures were of towns and scenery in Germany and of the old vessels that had brought the German immigrants to South Africa. However, there were no battle scenes, and the pictures had no bearing on the Battle of Sedan. Moreover, the police found that the concert – arranged some time before the outbreak of hostilities in Europe – had been held to raise funds for the local church.⁵⁹³

With the 'English' farmers of the district inflamed, the government reacted immediately. The newly appointed Chief Intelligence Officer of the Union, Lt Col Hon. Hugh Wyndham, tracked the German residents of the East London District; if they were 'enemy subjects' they fell under the province of the Commissioner for Enemy Subjects; if British subjects of German origin, then under the Provost Marshal.⁵⁹⁴ An intelligence officer drew up a list of the prominent, German businessmen. Carl Malcomess headed the list; he had been born in East London, of German parents, but was said to express openly strongly anti-British views. His motor car allegedly made frequent trips to German farms and villages along the Komgha Road. Employment or business connected most of the other men on the list to Malcomess. Some were born in South Africa. Some had served in the German army during the Franco-Prussian War, but were now naturalised. Others were 'unnaturalised enemy subjects', although still at large. People disavowed their neighbours. Franz Muller –

a music agent, who was naturalised – was said to sit down deliberately during the playing of ‘God save the King’, something that had again “happened recently”. AO Hoppe, the manager of the Beach Hotel and also a naturalised British subject, was said to be “very anti-British”. Hoppe had served in a German cavalry regiment and “always arranged public German functions at East London, and flew the German flag over his hotel until the outbreak of war.”⁵⁹⁵ This information was passed by a local informant, who stressed that:

A large section of the East London public strongly resent these Germans being allowed to be in their midst and if action can be taken to have, at any rate the unnaturalised ones, interned, it would be appreciated by the British section of the community.⁵⁹⁶

The local divisions were still perceptible in the East London of my youth, and several of the names on the ‘arrest list’ were well known in the city. Several of their children and grandchildren had become city councillors. Herman Malcomess was a multi-term mayor and a parliamentary candidate during the 1980s.

South Africa interned migrants and the children of migrants from Germany and Austria–Hungary during the War. Their lot was largely in the hands of one man: Lieutenant Colonel HW Hamilton-Fowle, the Provost Marshal of the Union, who later became the Commissioner for Enemy Subjects, the Custodian of Enemy Trading, and the controller of the Pietermaritzburg internment camp – the ‘home’ of internees for four years. Some four thousand German males were living in South Africa in 1914. Approximately 2 500 of them were interned. Another 500 were considered too old or too infirm to incarcerate. Then there were the 500, many missionaries among them, whom Hercules Pakenham – the MI5 officer sent to South Africa in 1917 – felt ought to have been interned. That left another 500 whom the authorities considered ‘harmless’. However, Fowle – not satisfied and although facing vehement opposition in and out of Parliament from the Dutch community, with whom the Germans were largely intermarried – continued with the internments. As Pakenham noted in 1917, Fowle quietly “gets a few at intervals”.

There had of course been a considerable German diaspora in the British Empire in the decades and centuries before the outbreak of war in August 1914 – to Britain, particularly, but also in the settlement dominions. They shared their common German heritage, sometimes leading to cultural appropriation by their neighbours, and communicated Pan-German ideas through publication, at German-medium churches and schools, and, as Schoolmaster Johl had probably done, through concerts and performances. Clearly, as Manz and Panayi argue, the mobilisation of religion and education “had turned ethnic contact zones into colonial friction zones”.⁵⁹⁷ The outbreak of the First World War brought matters to a head.

Despite – or perhaps because of – the divisions it caused, the historiography of internment in South Africa during the two world wars is scant. The same pertained for many other countries and, where internment histories were written, the national unit of analysis dominated. As the authors of this book argue, there was “no comprehensive and little interpretive treatment”.⁵⁹⁸ In large part, the South African literature, focusing on the anti-

German feeling on the wider home front, mentions the matter of internment in passing only. There are also appreciably few journal articles.⁵⁹⁹ The reasons for this are multi-faceted: post-war aversion for the wartime divisions the internments had caused; the global nature of internment, which by late 1914 spanned much of the world; and the daunting task facing the historian in terms of the varied and scattered nature of the historical source materials. Writing a monograph, covering the internment experience during the First World War across its global context, would be no ordinary feat, and this makes *Enemies in the empire* such a seminal study.

As the authors note, Britain in particular – and her empire by extension – was the “epicentre of global mass internment and deportation operations” during the First World War.⁶⁰⁰ Men, and sometimes women and children, of nationalities classified as ‘enemy alien’ were registered and suffered a variety of constraints placed on their basic freedoms: on personal movement, expression of opinion, ownership of property, conduct of business. Some of them, suffering the most severe form of ‘alien’ control, were interned across the British Empire for the duration of the war. The number may have reached 50 000: mostly men but including a small proportion of women. Internment policy, formulated largely in London, was disseminated across the Empire: finding interpretation and application from Delhi to Durban. *Enemies in the empire*, the first study to examine internment operations across the British Empire during the First World War from an imperial viewpoint, “argues that the British Empire played a key role in developing civilian internment as a central element of warfare and national security on a global scale”.⁶⁰¹ Of course, civilian internment would find application more extensive and more vigorous in the next war, but Britain firmly laid the foundations during the 1914–1918 conflict.

This handsome volume has its origins in two doctoral theses – focusing on the German communities in Britain during the First World War – submitted by Manz and Panayi between 1985 and 2003. The authors realised that local and national perspectives were too narrow. Internment had to be examined in imperial or global terms. This was how officialdom tasked with internment had thought – something confirmed by the published narratives and the official documentation held in Britain, Germany and elsewhere. This mapped an archival journey that took the authors to repositories in London, Pretoria, New Delhi and elsewhere. In fact, while *Enemies in the empire* may have had its genesis in their doctoral studies, its weight rests on vast amounts of scholarly work done since then. Few stones were left unturned. The result is a book that is magisterial in its approach and scope, and a fine example of the recent shift to study the First World War in global terms.

In this way, Manz and Panayi have added considerably to the ‘imperial turn’ in world war studies with a focus far removed from the clash of arms and the killing of soldiers on the Western Front. Two things pointed them in this direction: the personal narratives published during and after the war, and their growing realisation that the main archival material, in Germany and the Britain, worked at an imperial level. The German officials, when writing about England, meant the British Empire. The documentation in these countries – be it Britain or Germany, or indeed the other European belligerents –

was at an imperial and policy level. For the lower-level material, they had to travel much more widely. As is so often the case in a global study, the research materials lay scattered across the world: from the official records of the National Archives of the United Kingdom and the India Office Records in London, to the national archives of the dominions and colonies of the then British Empire, and the demi-official and private correspondence of key players.

However, there is another exciting development. Individual histories of internment can be lost in a global, holistic approach. The authors argue that case histories of individual men and women prise open oft-hidden themes. For this reason, the book is written at three levels – the strategic, the operational, and the individual – and is presented in three parts. Part I gives the historical and global perspective of internment as a phenomenon; Part II, the application of internment in Britain and two extremities of empire – South Africa and India; and Part III examines life in the Knockaloe, Fort Napier, and Ahmednagar internment camps. In this way, the chapters cascade down, from the policy level to internment on the ground, and the authors connect larger processes to individual case studies. While this division makes absolute sense in the context of this study, there will be historians in Australia and Canada and elsewhere who will question this selection.

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ENDNOTES

- ⁵⁹² ELG Schnell. *For men must work: An account of German immigration to the Cape with special reference to the German military settlers of 1857 and the German immigrants of 1858*. Grahamstown: private publication, 1954.
- ⁵⁹³ Sworn statement of W Eldridge, 7 September 1914; Sub-Inspector GH White to District Commandant East London, 10 September 1914; Inspector TC Whelehan, District Commandant No. 13 District SAP, to District Staff Officer No. 3 Military District East London, 10 September 1914; Cpl AJ Cork, SAP, to Inspector TC Whelehan, District Commandant No. 13 District SAP, 12 September 1914, PMK, box 101, file PM 1994 Enemy Subjects East London, Department of Defence (DOD) Archives, Pretoria.
- ⁵⁹⁴ Commissioner for Enemy Subjects to Chief Intelligence Officer, Pretoria, 30 December 1914, PMK, box 101, file PM 1994 Enemy Subjects East London, DOD Archives.
- ⁵⁹⁵ Intelligence Officer, Railway Unit, to Lt Col Hugh Wyndham, 24 December 1914, PMK, box 101, file PM 1994 Enemy Subjects East London, DOD Archives.
- ⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁹⁷ S Manz & P Panayi. *Enemies in the Empire: Civilian internment in the British Empire during the First World War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 65–66.
- ⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 185.
- ⁵⁹⁹ G Duminy & D Reusch. “Handicrafts, philanthropy and self-help: The Fort Napier Kamp-Industrie during World War 1”. *Natal Museum Journal of Humanities* 5. 1993, pp. 207–224; P Thompson. “The Natal home front in the Great War (1914–1918)”. *Historia* 56/1. 2011, pp. 101–137; P Thompson. “‘Wipe out the Vons!’ The Pietermaritzburg Citizens Vigilance Committee and the sinking of the *Lusitania*, May 1915”. *New Contree* 74. 2015, pp. 90–111; S Manz & T Dederling. “‘Enemy aliens’ in wartime: Civilian internment in South Africa during World War 1”. *South African Historical Journal* 68. 2016; D du Bruyn & A Wessels. “13 May 1915: Bloemfontein’s night of broken glass”. *New Contree* 76. 2016, pp. 148–170.
- ⁶⁰⁰ Manz & Panayi *op. cit.*, p. 3.
- ⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.
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