
The British popular image of the First World War has long been one of innocence shattered—the golden Edwardian summer disrupted by the outbreak of the conflict; a lost generation of young men, sent to die. Yet this depiction ignores many more culpable aspects of Britain’s role in the war, including the one examined in this interesting new book by Panikos Panayi—how the United Kingdom established modern systems of mass captivity for Central Power civilians and combatants. The internment of combatant prisoners of war was perhaps to be expected in a war based upon doctrines of attrition and mass conscription; the state with access to the most men gained military advantage, hence prisoners had to be retained rather than exchanged in 1914–1918. However, it is the internment of German and Austro-Hungarian male civilians of military age that Panayi argues marked the most shocking break with British prewar norms.

Arrests of suspect Central Power citizens began immediately following the outbreak of war—over 11,500 civilian men were interned by September 1914 (p. 48). Wholesale internment of enemy aliens of military age soon followed in May 1915, in the wake of the Lusitania riots that targeted German property, when ‘virtually every German shop in Britain had its windows broken during a week of pogroms’ (p. 50). The riots were so extreme that, Panayi states, some Germans saw internment as a safer option than remaining at liberty to face such mob violence. The number of civilian internees in the United Kingdom peaked at 29,511 in November 1917; the overall number of captives, combatant and civilian, reached 115,930 in November 1918 (p. 44). Most civilian internees were from the well assimilated German immigrant community living in the UK at the outbreak of the war, although others were hapless travellers in transit, tourists or students: Panayi uncovers the global scale of British seizures of German civilians off ships in 1914.

As Panayi points out, the fate of these First World War captives in the UK has been largely forgotten. Although some previous research has been done on German combatant prisoners of war in Britain, this book is the first comprehensive study of civilian internment in the UK during the war and the first to compare the captivity experiences of civilians and combatants. It shows for the first time the extent to which the combatant prisoner of war and civilian internee camp systems were interlinked. Panayi’s introduction provides an interesting set of reasons as to why the topic has been so long neglected: the dominance of the Second World War and the uncomfortable reality of the strength of British Germanophobia in the First World War featuring among them.

This book proves particularly strong in its account of what life was like for those incarcerated in Britain’s First World War camps on the home front. Captivity is examined here using an ‘everyday history’ (Alltagsgeschichte) approach that provides valuable insight into the prisoners’ daily lives. Chapter 5, which is particularly interesting, focuses on the sociology of how virtual ‘prison camp societies’ were developed by camp inmates, echoing John Ketchum’s earlier ideas about how men create new masculine social worlds in prison camps. The book is also strong on detailing the prisoners’ food, work and leisure activities.

Panayi finds that living conditions in camps in Britain were generally good and humane, although there were some incidents of disease, such as at Leigh, where five prisoners succumbed to typhoid fever. Although Panayi finds that cases of physical mistreatment were relatively rare, he does unearth one very serious incident where five civilian internees were shot and killed at Knockaloe camp during a riot by inmates, as well as revealing that German
civilians were often mistreated during repatriation in 1919. The main trauma for German prisoners of war and civilian internees, however, was psychological. The book examines the shock that civilians felt at being interned and the disorientation of transport to a camp. Panayi writes of how prisoner sources detail an ‘apparent epidemic of barbed wire psychosis’ the captives’ term for depression. Middle-class civilian internees, Panayi argues, suffered more than working class men ‘used to cramped living and working conditions’ (p. 157).

There are some flaws in what is generally a very well-researched and interesting study. There needed to be more distinction between the categories of military prisoners of war and civilian internees who are very different cases, with dissimilar expectations of captivity, masculine roles and contrasting wartime experiences prior to incarceration. There could have been more discussion of how the camp system in the UK interacted with the web of camps across the British Empire, from which captives—both civilian and combatant—were often transported to Britain. There were also some rather under-developed and problematic attempts to compare First World War British camps with the Nazi concentration camp system of the Second World War (for example, pp. 79, 95). The following sentence, The true symbol of First World War internment in Britain is Knockaloe with the same significance for this experience that Auschwitz has for the Nazi murder of European Jewry or, perhaps more aptly that Ruhleben has for the German incarceration of Britons during the Great War (p. 95) is jarring, as Knockaloe, as this book’s detailed research shows, bore so little resemblance to Auschwitz.

More fruitful is the author’s argument that the British treatment of German civilians in the United Kingdom, during and after the First World War, resembled a form of ethnic cleansing. While the term is one from the 1990s, the ways in which we can see its antecedents during the First World War merits discussion, as Panayi shows, making a strong case for seeing the Great War as ‘a turning point in the persecution of minorities’ (p. 303). Panayi relates how in the ‘intense Germanophobia’ after the Armistice, the Coalition government adopted deportation of German civilian internees as an election policy, and how an Aliens Advisory Committee adjudicated on the appeals of those internees who wished to remain in the UK. By October 1919, 84% of alien enemies ‘interned at the Armistice had been repatriated’, many after decades in Britain and with half-British families (pp. 278f). Britain, which emphasized its liberal democratic credentials in its war propaganda, failed to live up to them in this history of what was effectively deportation of an ethnic minority. Panayi’s valuable research shows that while Britain’s camps were relatively humane, elements in British society proved eager and innovative wartime xenophobes. Overall, this book is a welcome, useful and thought-provoking contribution to the growing historiography on First World War captivity.

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To this day, the Beetle arouses emotions of enthusiasm and admiration in many different parts of the world, among them Brazil, Mexico, Israel, South Africa, the United States and, of course, Germany. It was the first car that sold more often than Ford’s Model T, but it did so on a much more global scale and it embodied a larger variety of cultural meanings. There