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INTERNMENT OF CIVILIANS DURING THE FIRST AND SECOND WORLD WARS

A COMPARISON

The First World War was the first major conflict to witness the mass incarceration of non-combatants, including 'enemy aliens', deportees, refugees, internally-displaced persons, political suspects and socially outcast groups. With at least 800,000 civilians held in camps in Europe, and a further 50,000 to 100,000 in the rest of the world, internment became part of a global war culture. However, surprisingly little has been written to date on the legacy of this experience for the practice of holding 'enemy aliens', including refugees, during the Second World War. This paper will consider just one aspect of that legacy: the impact of lessons 'learned' from the 1914/18 war on policy-making by belligerent and neutral states and humanitarian bodies such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). It will focus on concrete examples of Second World War internment camps in Britain (including the Isle of Man), Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland, and in each case will draw out continuities and breaks in practice at both the national and inter-state levels. One area of investigation will be instances in both conflicts where the principle of reciprocity (Gegenseitigkeitsprinzip) and interventions by the ICRC worked, or failed to work, to prevent or minimise abuse of civilian prisoners. The paper will also address possible flows and ruptures in the cultural meanings ascribed by state actors to internment, and will explore its on-going connection to questions of international power and global inequalities based on class, race and gender.

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