Identifying the Enemy in First World War Canada: The Historiography and Bureaucracy of Enemy Alien Internment and Registration

Mary Chaktsiris

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh

Part of the Military History Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholars.wlu.ca/cmh/vol28/iss2/19

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian Military History by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.
Identifying the Enemy in First World War Canada

The Historiography and Bureaucracy of Enemy Alien Internment and Registration

MARY CHAKTSIRIS

Abstract: Over 8,000 people identified as enemy aliens were interned in Canada during the Great War. Another 80,000 people were required to register with authorities and report regularly. This article presents an overview of historiography about First World War internment in Canada from 1914 to 1920 and explores the changing internment and registration regulations during that period. The results suggest that narratives about First World War internment sit uncomfortably within a Canadian historiography focused on a nation-building narrative. During the Great War, the ability to use wartime legislation to control populations viewed as problematic overshadowed government claims that the internment of enemy aliens was principally about national security. Internment regulations consistently changed over time and were unevenly enforced, leaving both citizens and authorities unsure about their responsibilities. These changes serve as an important reminder that regulations about national security are not carried out in isolation, and they usually involve other contributing social and economic pressures and prejudices.

In 1920, William Otter, Director of Internment Operations during the Great War in Canada, submitted a final report to the Minister of Justice about the internment of identified enemy
aliens.¹ Otter reported that approximately 8,000 people identified as enemy aliens had been interned in Canada between 1914 and 1929. Another 80,000 people were placed under regular surveillance by local authorities.² Officially, internment and registration operations aimed to limit the ability of foreign nationals to take up arms against Canada. These policies reflected British imperial understandings of citizenship that positioned national defence and military service as a demonstration of patriotism and masculinity. In practice, the majority of those interned in Canada during the First World War were civilians. Did wartime conditions in Canada justify the incarceration of over 8,000 people identified as enemy aliens, the majority of whom were civilians, and the surveillance of a further 80,000 people? Even Otter’s report detailed that factors other than national security impacted how people were identified as “enemies” during the war, since municipalities and local authorities viewed internment as an opportunity to “unload” their indigent.³

During the First World War, “fear of an internal threat remained, and this fear revealed the dark side of human nature.”⁴ These fears predated the Great War but shaped wartime experiences with internment.⁵ Canadian internment and registration regulations during the Great War aimed to reduce the risk of espionage and other wartime threats to sabotage Canada’s war effort. However, the regulations were also broad enough to allow different interpretations of what constituted “a threat.” As a result, internment and registration operations were

---

¹ Privy Council Order 2150 issued 15 August 1915 identifies enemy aliens as foreign nationals from the German Empire and Austro-Hungary. Not all foreign nationals in Canada were considered enemy aliens between 1914-1920. Nationalities of enemy aliens identified in Otter’s final report (1920) identified Austro-Hungarians including “Croats, Ruthenians, Slovaks, and Czechs, Bulgarians, Germans, and Turks.” The report also lists 312 people as “Miscellaneous” which likely included those whose nationalities could not be identified and political prisoners. “Final Reports on Internment Operations, Report, From Major General Sir William D. Otter, Director, Internment Operations to The Minister of Justice, Ottawa,” 30 September 1920, RG 6, File 9326, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), 7.

² Ibid.

³ The report indicated: “It is also suspected that the tendency of Municipalities to “unload” their indigent was the cause of confinement of not a few.” Ibid.


not limited to national security but expanded to respond to growing unemployment and anti-alien sentiment across Canada during the Great War. This paper explores some of the bureaucratic processes and decision-making that facilitated this shift. This paper also provides an overview of the historiography of internment in Canada during the First World War. It first demonstrates how the literature has focused principally on the experiences of men interned in labour camps. This focus comes at the expense of broader inquiries about enemy alien registration, suspicion of enemy aliens and foreigners, and their impact on social and familial relationships. This work also makes an original contribution to the literature about internment by exploring the bureaucratic machinery that underpinned experiences with enemy alien registration and internment in Canada.

Exploring the treatment of enemy aliens in Canada complicates distinctions between homefront and battlefront. Enemies were not only found overseas; they were also feared and found at home. By discussing the processes through which enemy alien internment operated, and including relevant Privy Orders-in-Council, the hope is that this work will inspire future research in this area by bringing fragmented literature on the subject into conversation. This conversation is timely. Concerns about national security are again rising in importance within our contemporary world. Another possible by-product of this work might be to reveal how national security policies in the past were shaped by perceptions and imaginings of “enemies” in ways that impacted the daily lives and livelihoods of ordinary civilians.

CONTEXT

Decisions made by the Privy Council during the First World War had consequences for over 8,000 men and their families. The Privy Council

---


7 Otter’s Final Report on Internment Operations identified that 8,579 were interned in Canada during the war, and accompanying them were eighty-one women and 155 children. “Final Reports on Internment Operations,” 30 September 1920, RG 6, v. 819, file 9326, LAC, 7.
of Canada, which was established at the time of Confederation under the *Constitution Act 1867*, is the executive decision-making arm of the federal government. Its members include Cabinet members and heads or ministers of departments in the administration of federal agencies. From around their table, regulations for the internment and surveillance of enemy aliens in Canada were issued during the war in a series of Orders-in-Councils under the powers of the *War Measures Act* (1914) and the *Defence of Canada Act* (1917). Both of these statues were modeled on similar British legislation and the *Defence of the Realm Act* (DORA). The Government of Canada based its decision to intern and place identified enemy aliens under surveillance within an imperial context where similar legislation was carried out by other Dominions.

As a result, a network of internment camps and receiving stations were created across Canada to manage enemy alien internment and registration. New administrative bureaus and procedures were created to intern enemy aliens and keep a close eye on identified “enemy aliens” that remained out of custody. Enemy aliens were defined as foreign
nationals from territories in the German Empire or under the rule of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Those classified as enemy aliens were primarily of German origin, followed by those from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then from the Turkish Empire and Bulgaria.\(^8\) The census of 1911 identified a total of 129,123 Austro-Hungarians, 186,865 Germans, 4,334 Bulgarians and Rumanians, and 2,835 Turks living in Canada.\(^9\) The final report on Internment Operations identified 8,579 people interned during the war. Another 80,000 categorized as “enemy aliens” were issued identity papers and required to carry them at all times or risk arrest, fines, or imprisonment.\(^10\)

The relationship between subject and empire was militarized during war. Wartime loyalties were imagined within imperial contexts. As Farney and Kordan explain, “subjects had links to the empire; citizens did not.”\(^11\) One motivation for suspicions against enemy aliens had to do with fears about contested imperial loyalties. It was unclear where loyalties of non-British subjects might lie during wartime. This was based on concepts of citizenship that held military service in high regard, and as a prestigious form of public service.\(^12\)

As a result, enemy alien regulations made a distinction between two classes of aliens within Canada: foreign nationals and aliens of enemy nationality. The terminology “alien of enemy nationality” referred

---


\(^9\) The total population of Canada reported in the 1911 census was 7,206,343 people. Those classified as of “Austro-Hungarian” origin was the total of people identified as Austrian, Bukovinian, Galician, Hungarian, and Ruthenian. “Table XII: Origins of the People, male and female, by provinces” Fifth Census of Canada 1911, 368-369, http://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/census/1911/pages/about-census.aspx, accessed 22 April, 2019.


\(^12\) See James Wood, Militia Myths: Ideas of the Canadian Citizen Soldier, 1896-1921 (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010).
to the context of the war and the ways it was perceived to affect loyalties. This, combined with pre-war nativist sentiment, existing suspicions of foreigners, and economic competition helped shape attitudes towards internment and enemy aliens.13

Treatment of enemy aliens within Canada was closely linked to perceptions of the enemy in wartime. Perceptions of the enemy were reflected in propaganda about the war that presented it as a Christian struggle between good and evil, and this iconography was important to continued support of the war effort and to justify it as necessary and righteous.14 These ideas influenced attitudes towards local minority communities.15 The popular press viewed events like the sinking of the RMS Lusitania and the death of Edith Cavell in 1915 as expressions of the inhumanity of the Austro-Hungarian and German armies.16 It was feared that foreign nationals living in the country would use similar tactics on Canadian soil in attempts to influence the outcome of the war. Despite widespread anxiety, there is little evidence that suspected enemy aliens sought to commit an act of sabotage within Canada in numbers that warranted their incarceration.17 This is perhaps one of the reasons that the historiography of Canada and the Great War, and the place of internment within it, is so fragmented.

The stories told about internment and the First World War in Canada have changed over time, as will be explored in the next section. These changes provide insights into how official histories and popular national narratives have, in their focus on battles and mobilization, missed connections to the consequences of the war effort within Canada. Registration and internment were framed by concerns about national security. However, over the years, each new order expanded the scope of earlier ones to identify more nationalities required to register and report to authorities.18 This suggests that the motivations for internment included other economic and prejudicial

14 See Pearl James, Picture This: World War I Posters and Visual Culture (Nebraska, USA: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Jeff Keshen, Propaganda and Censorship During Canada’s Great War (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1996).
17 Rutherford, Hometown Horizons, 119; Kordan, No Free Man, 60.
18 Ibid., 2.
fears unrelated to national security. It also suggests that the threat posed by the enemy was “more hypothetical than real.”19

**HISTORIOGRAPHY OF FIRST WORLD WAR INTERNMENT IN CANADA**

The historiography of internment during the First World War in Canada remains a well-documented but fragmented field. It begins with the official histories of the world wars. These works, completed in the employ of the Canadian government (and closely overseen), laid a foundation for later studies of the wars within Canada.20 The complete official history of the First World War was a few decades late. It was produced alongside the official history of the Second World War, leaving its narrative to stand in comparison to this later conflict. The undoubted focus of these official histories was to “stake down the history, understand plans and operations, and determine whether the units in question were able to carry out their orders.”21 These works shaped the national memory of the conflict. They also safeguarded the personal reputations of politicians and veterans who had a stake in how the wars were remembered.

The official history of the First World War mentioned few events on the “homefront” other than conscription. This helped to shape a focus in future research about the wars on military operations and planning. The *Official History of the Canadian Army in the First World War* (1969) by G.W.L. Nicholson, which replaced an earlier unfinished attempt by A. F. Duguid to produce a multi-volume official history, discussed neither internment nor enemy aliens.22

---

21 Ibid., 107.
Interestingly, the earlier version of this official history published by A. F. Duguid (1939), the first installment of the never-realized multi-volume account of the war, does refer to internment in detail within its appendix. Duguid’s appendix section outlined the Orders-in-Council that framed internment and also the registration and camp system, but included little about the broader social, economic, and political contexts that framed experiences with internment.

These early sources did not ignore the existence of interned civilians, the conditions of the camps, and labour wage concerns. However, they were restrained in their discussion of them, which could suggest they were considered unimportant, controversial, or both. For example, Otter’s report on *Final Internment Operations* (1921) documented the internment of civilians but provides little analysis or social context. Duguid mentions that the pay for interned workers was equal to that of a Canadian wage-earner, ignoring civil unrest and fears of mutiny from poorly paid workers. He also explained that camps were installed with:

> ...a system of baths, with hot and cold water, was installed at every camp or station, and provision was likewise made for libraries and, canteens, and facilities were given for recreation football, skating, quoits, gymnastics and lawn-tennis being the favourite amusements.

This description does not acknowledge some of the more contentious issues around pay, supplies, and conditions. In doing so, Duguid overlooks the conditions of the camps explored by later works. As Lubomyr Luciuk explains:

> Conditions in the internment camps were, by all accounts, strenuous. Prisoners were denied access to newspapers; their correspondence was censored and limited. They were forced not only to maintain the camps but to work for the government and private concerns.

---


24 Ibid.

The writings of these official historians, which set a foundation for those to come, was meant to be uncontroversial and non-judgmental.\textsuperscript{26} As a result, more contentious topics were often minimized. This would change. Unlike Duguid’s relegation of internment to the appendix, later work introduced a broader set of sources and pointed out the lack of personal narrative accounts by prisoners at the time of publication, which would become a defining feature of newer literature.\textsuperscript{27}

Revived interest in internment and the homefront during the Great War arrived through political activism and the lenses of social and political history in the 1970s. Desmond Morton’s article, “Sir William Otter and Internment Operations in Canada during the First World War” (1974), explored the bureaucracy of internment and acknowledged the ideological and racial tensions that underpinned First World War internment. The assumptions and fears that supported internment and gained strength during the war “...had deep peacetime roots.”\textsuperscript{28} Morton’s article about internment signaled an important movement past the limited earlier histories and government documents. Critically, his account highlighted Otter’s suspicions about the primary motives for internment and surveillance of enemy aliens. Morton outlines Otter’s suspicions that some municipalities interned enemy aliens not out of fears about national security but to “relieve themselves of the taxation necessary for the relief of unemployed or destitute foreigners.”\textsuperscript{29} Other work reinforced this finding. Historians, including Ramsay and Brown in \textit{Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed} (1974) and Carruthers in \textit{The Great War and Canada’s Enemy Alien Policy} (1978), continued to shift focus from the utility of internment as a national defence strategy towards the social factors impacting its policy and enforcement.\textsuperscript{30} “The alien became a problem for the government,” writes Carruthers,
“not because he was disloyal—in fact the evidence indicates the contrary—but because many native-born Canadian suspected him of being disloyal.”

In 1995, Bill Waiser’s *Park Prisoners* declared that “Canadian authorities were given the power to detain unemployed or destitute workers from Austria-Hungary and then send them to distant work camps” in an attempt to limit proletarian unrest.

National popular histories about Canada and the Great War in the 1970s and 80s did not always reflect this focus on the social and political factors that influenced internment. This writing discussed some of the contradictions and complications of the war, particularly around recruitment and conscription. Internment and the existence of anti-alien sentiments were acknowledged but marginalized. Popular national histories, including the work of Jack Granatstein and Pierre Berton, continued to focus on military strength and capability, patriotism, and the transition of veterans back into civilian society.

Even Morton’s *A Military History of Canada* (2007), written for a general audience, mentions internment only a handful of times and only once in the context of the First World War. Morton writes, “If men would not fight overseas, perhaps they would help guard Canadian ports, canals, and internment camps.”

This references the militarization of spaces considered of strategic importance in Canada, including infrastructure and even public streets, in the interests of national security. Pierre Berton’s *Vimy* (1986) addresses little other than the battle itself, and *Marching as to War* (2007) does not comprehensively address internment in the context of either world war.

---

Similar trends exist in contemporary popular histories and commemorations focused on a narrative of the Great War as a national coming of age for Canada. Christopher Moore argued that there has been an "absence of debate" about the reasons Canada participated in the First World War, both at the time and in contemporary commemorations. He identified two trends: first, that commemorations often focus on individual lives and commemorating names of soldiers, and secondly, that the war continues to represent a national coming of age for Canada. The political and social divides caused by the war remain out of focus. As Jonathan Vance argues, many English Canadians constructed a preferred version of events that took place during the Great War—a version that remains with us today.

A focus on the politics of redress emerged in the late-1980s and led to new perspectives and less restrictions on the history of internment in Canada. The social and political history of internment in Canada gained more attention within a redress movement launched by the Ukrainian-Canadian community. A growing body of literature explored and continues to explore connections between internment, pre-war nativism, and economic tensions. Research by scholars including Lubomyr Luciuk and Bohdan Kordan brought context and

---


detail to conversations about internment and the Great War.\textsuperscript{39} They also advocated for a public apology from the Canadian government for First World War internment, as the Japanese-Canadian community received in 1988 for the internment and forced relocation during the Second World War.\textsuperscript{40} Ten years later in 2008, the Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund was created by a ten million dollar endowment fund set up by the Canadian government.\textsuperscript{41} The goal of the fund was to commemorate and recognize “the experiences of ethno-cultural communities affected by the First World War Internment” and to bring awareness to the reality that:

During Canada’s first national internment operations of 1914 to 1920 thousands of men, women and children were branded as “enemy aliens.” Many were imprisoned. Stripped of what little wealth they had, forced to do heavy labour in Canada’s hinterlands, they were also disenfranchised and subjected to other state sanctioned censures not because of anything they had done but only because of where they had come from, who they were.\textsuperscript{42}


\textsuperscript{41} This was the result of several months of negotiations between the Federal Government of Canada and the Ukrainian Canadian community, as represented by the Ukrainian Canadian Civil Liberties Association (UCCLA), the Ukrainian Canadian Foundation of Taras Shevchenko (UCFTS), and the Ukrainian Canadian Congress (UCC). Canada’s First World War Internment Fund (CFWWIRF), “The Fund and its Objectives,” \url{http://www.internmentcanada.ca/about-the-fund.cfm}, accessed 6 August 2018.

Renewed focus on the complexities of wartime experiences during the First World War generated studies on internment and other contested wartime experiences in addition to the impacts of grief, loss, and mourning.\textsuperscript{43} The study of internment alongside ideas about belonging and community networks by scholars including Bohdan Kordan and Robert Rutherdale situated internment as the result of prejudice and economic tensions rather than only concerns for national security.\textsuperscript{44}

Unlike the restrained narratives of early official histories, contemporary explorations of internment expose both its complicated legal framework and the importance of local contexts to internment experiences. Bohdan Kordan’s \textit{No Free Man: Canada, the Great War, and the Enemy Alien Experience} (2016) brought together fragmented scholarship about internment camps in a full-length monograph that analyses national experiences of enemy aliens with internment. Kordan explores how internment and enemy alien registration were justified by discourse about national security but were instead firmly rooted in the politics of fear and labour relations rather than in actual risk. The public at large and government officials dealt with enemy aliens as a “problem” during the war. This “problem” was defined both by the government regulations concerning enemy aliens and broader social ideas about community and belonging.

There remains a tendency within the literature to separate homefront and battlefront in narratives of the war. In 2014, the \textit{Canadian Historical Review} published a set of articles by Mark Humphries, Mourad Djebabla, Amy Shaw, Tim Cook, and Christopher Moore reflecting on the Great War at its centenary.\textsuperscript{45} Humphries argued that military history often minimizes the divisions defined by race, class, and gender by continuing to emphasize national narratives, commemoration, and unifying aspects of military service.\textsuperscript{46} Additionally, as argued by Amy Shaw, existing literature underplays the personal and emotional sides of war. She explains, “only when we understand what the war meant...for the vast number

\textsuperscript{43} See Amy Shaw, “Expanding the Narrative: A First World War with Women, Children, and Grief.” \textit{The Canadian Historical Review} 95, 3 (September 2014) 398-406.


\textsuperscript{45} For all four articles in the series see \textit{The Canadian Historical Review} 95, 3 (September 2014) 382-432.

\textsuperscript{46} Humphries, “Between Commemoration and History”, 392–93.
who stayed at home, will we truly have a sense of what it meant for
the country to be at war.”47 Tim Cook continued with the appeal
for interdisciplinarity, writing “just as military history encompasses
aspects of political, economic and social history, so too must it now
push into the realms of gender, cultural, and intellectual history…”48

These trends influenced the placement of internment within national
narratives meant for public consumption, and also help to explain its
marginalization within official histories of the Great War.

Kordan acknowledges: “The story of internment, its general outline
and details, has been fairly well documented. Less understood are the
implications that the prisoner-of-war designation had on the mindset
of those in authority and what this meant, practically speaking, for
the internees.”49 Existing literature speaks to the experiences of those
who ended up in the network of internment camps across Canada
during the First World War. However, marginalized within this
body of work is the bureaucratic process of surveillance and reporting
that, perhaps, characterized the experiences of those registered but
not interned during the Great War—over 80,000 registered enemy
aliens were not interned.50 As explored in the following two sections,
the bureaucracy of internment and registration in Canada impacted
people’s lives and livelihoods across the country. This is a story that
is neither linear nor straightforward; instead, regulations changed
over time and responded principally to the changing needs of the war
effort and shifting social and political tensions within Canada.

An overview of the historiography of First World War internment
in Canada suggests that the place of First World War internment
sits uncomfortably within a Canadian historiography focused on the
place of the war within nation-building narratives. As a result, as
other scholars have identified, there remains a divide between studies
exploring the military operations of the war and social and political
developments within Canada. Internment bridges these two areas of
analysis. While launched as a result of war operations with an initial
focus on national security, internment and registration decisions were
often arbitrarily based on personal and economic considerations rather
than the rule of law. This was further complicated by internment

47 Amy Shaw, “Expanding the Narrative,” 403.
48 Cook, Clio’s Warriors, 250.
49 Kordan, No Free Man, 7.
50 Ibid., 280.
and registration regulations being cumbersome and unevenly enforced. Drawing on the research of historians and legal scholars, the section below brings together discussions often found separately in the literature about the bureaucratic process of internment and registration, experiences within them, and how historians in Canada have addressed experiences of identified enemy aliens during the Great War and, at times, skimmed over them. After having explored this literature, this paper now shifts to discussing the practicalities of how internment functioned from a legal perspective through relevant Orders-In-Council as well as the response from different municipalities within Canada. Internment regulations shifted over time in response to the changing economic realities of the war. This shift demonstrates the malleability of concerns over national security in relationship to economic concern and fears about foreigners.

THE BUREAUCRACY OF INTERNMENT: ORDERS-IN-COUNCIL AND ENEMY ALIEN REGISTRATION

The outbreak of war in 1914 brought with it accounts of suspected unusual activities within Canada. In one instance, the Police Magistrate in Haileybury, Ontario wrote of his suspicions about the Austrian and German men employed in the town mines in 1915. He wrote to the Attorney General in Toronto, saying:

> From what [we] have seen of the German method of making war, I would not be surprised at anything they might do...with this class of men employed in the mines they have a great chance of obtaining explosives...I do not want to appear alarmist but I do feel there are sufficient grounds to warrant these people being looked after.”

Persistent rumors across the country involved suspected sabotage by enemy agents at grain elevators, water plants, bridges, train tracks, and municipal works. Local militia were called out to guard important structures and infrastructure. In the months after the outbreak of the war “the early patriotic euphoria,” writes Desmond

---

Morton, “was supplanted by fear and uncertainty.”52 Enemy agents, spies, and saboteurs were feared to be working to sabotage the Canadian war effort.53

This section outlines some of the relevant Orders-in-Council that oversaw the internment and registration of enemy aliens in Canada during the Great War. National security was only one motivation for the internment and registration of enemy aliens. Some suggest other motivations for internment were to establish a series of labour camps to build infrastructure projects, while others argue it was about surveillance and control, the need to create a penalty for those that did not comply with undertaking agreements, and to deal with increasing numbers of unemployed men gathering in Canada’s larger towns and cities.54 The War Measures Act (WMA) granted the federal government the power to create regulatory “Orders-in-Council” without parliamentary approval (see Appendix B).55 It allowed the executive branch of the government to “intervene in all aspects of Canadian life and to do so in an unconstrained manner.”56 Using these powers, the state approved the creation of a system of Enemy Alien Registrars. These Registrar offices provided a bureaucratic machinery to make decisions about who was interned, who registered, and who was released.57 Foreign nationals were forced to register with authorities, report to them on a regular basis, and sign an undertaking agreement that amounted to an oath of allegiance to the British Empire and a promise not to leave the country for the duration of the war. Any deviation from this promise was considered a criminal offence and, as is discussed in the last section below, border crossings into the United States were where many enemy aliens were questioned and arrested.

A series of proclamations from the Canadian Government set regulations for the internment and registrations of identified enemy aliens. On 15 August 1914, the Privy Council and executive arm of the government first issued a proclamation (P.C. 2150) that granted

52 Morton, Sir William Dillon Otter, 33.
53 Moogk, “Uncovering the Enemy Within,” 60.
55 Moogk, Uncovering the Enemy Within, 47.
57 Morton, Sir William Dillon Otter, 38.
the power to arrest and detain enemy aliens. The proclamation outlined the classifications of enemy aliens to be arrested and detained which included:

- All German or Austrian or Austro-Hungarian officers, soldiers or reservists who attempted to leave Canada;

- All subjects of the German Empire or of Austria-Hungary who attempted to leave Canada and in regard to whom there was reasonable ground to believe that their attempted departure was with a view to assisting the enemy; and

- All subjects of the German Empire or of Austria-Hungary in Canada engaged or attempting to engage in espionage or acts of a hostile nature, or giving or attempting to give information to the enemy, or assisting or attempting to assist the enemy, or who were on reasonable grounds, suspected of doing or attempting to do any of the said acts.\(^\text{58}\)

Critically, P.C. 2150 also authorized the militia and police to release any person after the signing of an undertaking paper that promised he was “to report to the authorities as prescribed, to obey the laws, to abstain from taking up arms, to refrain from communicating military information, and to do no act of injury to the British Empire.”\(^\text{59}\) Non-compliance with requirements to report and register were considered criminal offences.\(^\text{60}\)

The series of Orders-in-Council detailing procedures and regulations concerning enemy aliens changed throughout the war. Many of them focused on limiting the movements, possessions, and employment of aliens from enemy countries. For example, on 2 September 1914, a proclamation assured that action against enemy aliens—including their property and business transactions—would only be taken against enemy alien reservists attempting to leave Canada or against any enemy alien “who engaged or attempted to engage in espionage acts of a hostile nature, or to give information


\(^{59}\) Ibid.

\(^{60}\) Minenko, “The Laws Establishing Canada’s First World War Registration and Reporting System,” 1.
to otherwise assist the King’s enemies.” 61 This came in response to confusion about the intent of the 15 August proclamation. It emphasized the initial “hands-off” approach to internment by the Canadian government. 62 This would change, later, with the establishment of Registrars for Enemy Aliens.

By the end of October 1914, 10,000 enemy aliens were either interned or paroled, and the government sought a centralized way to organize internment operations and registration. 63 The appointment of Registrars for the registration of enemy aliens and a Director of Internment Operations was outlined in proclamations issued on 28 October 1914 (P.C. 2721) and 6 November 1914 (P.C. 2817), respectively. After the introduction of P.C. 2721 on 28 October 1914 the numbers of enemy aliens detained increased sharply. It was, as Kordan argues, “no ordinary executive order.” 64 It embodied an “underlying dualism” because the control and supervision of enemy aliens conflicted earlier promises in PC 2150 to allow enemy aliens “quietly pursuing their usual avocations” to be left without interruption. 65 The responsibilities of the Registrars were to interview each enemy alien and register age, nationality, occupation, desire to leave Canada, and names of family in Canada. The Registrar, along with police, were responsible for issuing Exeat (exit) papers.

61 Another proclamation, issued on 3 September 1914 (P.C. 2283), prohibited the possession of firearms, ammunitions, or explosives by enemy aliens. Later changes were made to relax this regulation based on approval by authorities, although “these provisions seem reasonable and justifiable, but their application was increasingly harsh, punitive, and unselective.” Moogk, Uncovering the Enemy Within, 50.


64 Kordan, No Free Man, 128, 124.

No enemy alien could leave Canada without permission from the Registrar in the form of Exeat papers, which were only to be granted “if the Registrars were satisfied that the enemy alien would not assist, by active service, information or advice, the forces of the enemy.” Otherwise, enemy aliens were instructed to report monthly to the Registrar or were interned if “it were not considered desirable that the enemy alien should be allowed to remain at large.”

Internment camps were established across the country, with a concentration in western Canada along the southern border in the Rockies between British Columbia and Alberta (Appendix 1). Those interned were divided into two classes: the first “officer” class reserved for those of a standing considered to be officer grade, and others were interned and forced to labour on government works. Bohdan Kordan explains that Ukrainians comprised the majority of those interned but that other “friendly” enemy aliens to be registered from Austro-Hungary included “Czechs, Croats, Italians (from Trieste and Trentino), Poles, Romanians, Serbs, Slovaks, Slovenes, [and] Ukrainians… The majority of those interned were unemployed, and an overrepresentation of Ukrainian Canadians within the interned population was related to a lack of political influence.

Internment and registration regulations were aimed at reducing the risk of espionage and other threats as evidenced by the restrictions on holding arms. However, they were also broad enough to allow different interpretations of what constituted a threat. Worsening employment resulted in pressure on the government to deal with destitute and unemployed enemy aliens. P.C. 2721 allowed for the detainment of those destitute to provide them with employment, presenting internment as a make-work program. In reality, as discussed below, it offered a way for the government to appease

---

66 William Otter was appointed Director of Internment Operations, a post that was at first under the Department of Militia and Defence but subsequently brought under the Department of Justice. Duguid, Official History, Vol. 1, Part 2, Appendix 235. For a full explanation of government within the registration system, see Minenko, “The Laws Establishing Canada’s First World War Registration and Reporting System,” 14.
68 Ibid., 133.
69 Kordan, No Free Man, 141, 133.
70 Ibid., 76-79.
pressures placed on them by municipalities dealing with anti-German sentiment and increasing unemployment and vagrancy.

The focus of internment and registration expanded beyond national security to respond to growing unemployment and anti-alien sentiment within Canada during the Great War. Proclamations issued in response to the changing economic conditions of war were subjected to changes and revisions. For example, Order-in-Council (P.C. 810) issued on 24 April 1915 granted permission for enemy aliens to leave Canada for the United States in search of employment. This was in response to a considerable number of unemployed aliens of German and Austro-Hungarian nationality from building works either completed or suspended during the war. By June 1915, regulations from 1914 were amended in response to growing anti-enemy alien sentiment due to increased competition for work “with native-born or British-born citizens.” As a result, P.C. 1501 allowed for the detention of enemy aliens “whose presence in any works, employment or community is a cause of such apprehended peril”—the peril being that their presence would contribute to a “breach of the peace” as a result of anti-alien sentiment.71 Bohdan Kordan argues: “Internment, originally meant to address the issue of security, had now been so enlarged as to make it possible for any alien of enemy birth to be interned—not because of what they did but because of who they were.”72 Most camps closed due to labour shortages between 1916-1917, with large numbers of internees released and paroled to work with employers that guaranteed their employment. This led to the closure of some camps and the consolidation of others; those camps that remained open detained those internees perceived by the state to be more politically hostile.73

As the war neared its end more questions were asked about the purpose of internment and the experiences of those interned. Conditions at the camps were strenuous—even Duguid’s official history notes that “attempts of prisoners to escape were numerous, tunneling being a common means employed: some were successful but nearly all recaptured; the risks were serious, six were killed and four wounded, all by rifle fire.”74 Resistance at the camps was common.

---

73 Ibid., 116-117.
Prisoners refused to work. Other protests were more violent, including a disturbance at the Fort Henry camp and a riot at Kapuskasing internment camp that involved 900 prisoners. Escape attempts were made, and prisoners fell ill. Otter’s final report indicated:

Insanity was by no means uncommon among the prisoners, many being interned it was suspected to relieve municipalities of their care, while in others the diseases probably developed from a nervous condition brought about by the confinement and restrictions entailed. Authorities in general were careful and exercised caution in their administration of the camps in compliance with international law regarding Prisoners of War (POW). However, administration of the campus and decisions made often rested with the quality of commanders and soldiers in local contexts.

Complaints were received both from authorities meant to enforce regulations and those who felt unfairly targeted during the war years. Local authorities wrote to Ottawa asking for clarification about regulations and their enforcement. Registration regulations not only changed regularly, they were also cumbersome. Over a dozen different forms were used during registration and internment. Citizens wrote to provincial and federal authorities asking for explanations about recent treatment by both authorities and other local citizens. For example, Fritz G. E. wrote to authorities in August 1914 asking for clarification about requirements to register. He explained that he did not hear much, living east of Red Deer, and telegrams were received only twice a week at a local town 30 miles away. As an “under

77 Kordan, No Free Man, 136.
officer” in the German military, Fritz reported to authorities, was identified as a POW, and placed on parole.\textsuperscript{79}

A proclamation issued on 14 August 1914 specified, “that all persons in Canada of German or Austro-Hungarian nationality, so long as they quietly pursue their ordinary avocations, be allowed to continue to enjoy the protection of the law and be accorded the respect and consideration due to peaceful and law-abiding citizens.”\textsuperscript{80} Despite this seeming protection afforded by the law, fear of the enemy at home translated into prejudicial fears of “the other”—those men that looked different, spoke foreign languages, or suffered tenuous employment. Under wartime conditions, suspicion, fear and opportunity motivated some to suspect and jail foreign nationals under the justification of wartime emergency conditions. There were also those who challenged government identifications of enemy aliens, such as Frank Y. G. of Regina, Saskatchewan who tried to explain to authorities that, “Bohemians are not with the Germans and, although under German rule, they have nothing to do with the Germans and, therefore, should not be classed as Alien enemies.”\textsuperscript{81} Yet broad categorizations of “enemy aliens” characterized the identifications of enemy aliens in Canada during the Great War.

\textbf{INTERNMENT AND SURVEILLANCE: EXPERIENCES OF INTERNMENT}

The experiences of internment and registration were defined by local contexts: it mattered who the identified enemy alien appeared before, and who they were within their communities. This contributed to the often-arbitrary nature of decisions related to the enforcement of regulations during the Great War. Canadian legal systems were not prepared to deal with the interpretation of these changing wartime regulations in hundreds of different local contexts. Authorities including Justices of the Peace and the police lacked understanding of the very laws they were expected to enforce. How internment


\textsuperscript{80} Proclamation, Ottawa, 15 August 1914, RG 24, v. 4276, 34-1-3, vol. 1, LAC.

\textsuperscript{81} “Synopsis of a Bohemian Letter.” Immigration Branch, vol. 603, file 885866, pt. 5, RG 76, LAC.
and registration regulations were enforced could depend on the day and the person enforcing them, rather than the rule of law.\textsuperscript{82} This impacted the treatment of enemy aliens, which varied across local regions and across the country. Additionally, Justices of the Peace were paid only when someone was fined or found guilty.\textsuperscript{83}

In the context of Canadian First World War internment operations, local contexts and the application of the law within them, was an important factor in the identification, surveillance, and internment of enemy aliens. Regulations were enforced more strongly in some locales than others. For example, there was a reluctance to defend the Canadian – US border between Windsor, Ontario and Detroit, Michigan. Brandon Dimmel argues “Windsorites expressed little fear that their city would become a target for enemy aliens living across the river, and as a result little was done to ensure no such attack would occur.”\textsuperscript{84} Windsor residents protested against regulations that sought to restrict cross-border travel and saw themselves as part of a transnational community to be maintained during the war years. Complaints about the lack of inspections at Windsor resulted in an inspection by government officials. Despite internment regulations, the official report concluded there was no system in place to prevent enemy aliens from entering the United States.\textsuperscript{85}

Border crossings between Canada and the United States were prime sites to observe the movements of suspected enemy aliens by Canadian officials. They were also spaces where the arbitrariness of enforcement related to enemy alien registration was clear. Exit (or Exeat) papers, filled out by Border Officers, were required to be completed by those foreign nationals entering and leaving Canada. Some of those leaving Canada—many of whom were required to sign undertaking papers pledging their allegiance to the British Empire and their promise not to engage in the cause of “the enemy” during wartime—found their movement restricted. A letter of complaint from the Canadian


\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 8.

\textsuperscript{84} Brandon Dimmel, \textit{Engaging the Line: Great War Experiences along the Canada-US Border} (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016, 45.

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 56.
Pacific Railway Company (CPR) in March 1917 exposed some of the inconsistencies in the inspections of enemy aliens at Canadian borders. “One of our agents at Sault Ste. Marie,” CPR officials explained, “has advised us that your instructions are being carried out to the letter... one of the Michigan Central representatives has recently advised us that the regulations are not as rigidly enforced at Windsor, Ont.... Will you be so kind as to advise me if there is any difference in the instructions issued to your representatives at the Soo and Windsor.”

While enforcement of regulations in some communities was relatively relaxed, it was strictly enforced in others. In some cases even naturalization papers proving British subjecthood were not sufficient protection from the new powers afforded to authorities within wartime Canada. Complaints to Canada’s Immigration Bureau reinforced the ability of authorities to question—and even to retain—naturalization papers of suspected enemy aliens. Officials responded to inquiries about the confiscation of Miller U.’s naturalization certificate, which had been removed from him in 1914 and in 1917 had still not been returned. Unfortunately, the original letter was not present alongside the response. However, Canada’s Immigration Office replied:

The impounding of naturalization certificates in such cases as you refer to appears to rest with your own offices. They have the authority to inspect the naturalization certificates of persons about whom suspicions have been raised across the border, and when these are handed over, they can simply retain them for investigation.

In the same case, the Superintendent of Immigration reinforced comments in his earlier letter but also shed some light on the motivations behind the seizure of Miller’s naturalization certificate:

With regard to the general subject I may say that there have come to my attention in the past two years, a number of instances in which persons of enemy origin, who acquired naturalization in Canada, have

---

87 Superintendent of Immigration, Ottawa to Department of the Secretary of State of Canada, 7 March 1917, RG 76, Immigration Branch, vol. 603, file 884866, pt. 5, LAC.
been found residing outside of Canada, and in some instances they left because of their antipathy to our cause.\textsuperscript{88}

Despite fears of antipathy or worse, detailed records kept by border officials on the exits and entrances of foreign nationals shed some light on the possible causes for transnational movements other than antipathy towards the British war effort.

Canadian border officials collected detailed information from passengers at the point of their crossings, and especially in cases where foreign nationals from enemy countries were entering or attempting to leave Canada. A key condition of many undertaking papers—which included agreeing to an oath of allegiance to the British Empire—came along with promises to report at regular intervals to local authorities and remain within Canada for the duration of the war. The fear that kept the Government of Canada interested in the whereabouts of foreign nationals either leaving or entering Canada was that they might use their change of location to aid the enemy cause, either by joining enemy reservists overseas or by collecting sensitive information and committing acts of sabotage. However, the reasons recorded by Canadian officials at border crossings revealed far less sinister motivations for leaving the country:

“\textit{To obtain employment}”
—Leopold Z., 20 years old, Austrian, Waiter, 22 May 1915

“\textit{To obtain employment}”
—Julius Y., 45 years old, Hungary, Music Teacher, 18 Sept. 1915

“\textit{To go to his brother}”
—Frank T., 35 years old, Hungary, Miner

“\textit{To settle up business affairs in the United States}”
—Rudolphe F., 30 years old, German, Arctic Explorer, 1 October 1915.\textsuperscript{89}

The casual and frequent crossing of the US-Canadian border was an important part of the culture of many border cities, including

\textsuperscript{88} Superintendent of Immigration, Ottawa to Under Secretary of State of Canada, 16 March 1917, RG 76, Immigration Branch, vol. 603, file 884866, pt. 5, LAC.
\textsuperscript{89} Immigration Branch, vol. 604, file 884866, Exeats, RG 76, LAC.
Windsor, Ontario. People crossed the border for recreational purposes, or to go to school and to work. Increased security measures put such a culture and lifestyle, enjoyed for generations, at risk.  

Many Canadians living on the border with the United States did not fear an attack, and so took few precautions to prevent one. However, there was an attack in Windsor on 21 June 1915 where an explosion took place at a uniform factory in Windsor and, hours later, it was discovered a bomb was also placed at the Windsor Armouries. Dynamite was found all over Windsor, including firms that had only recently secured contracts with the British army. Officials in Windsor admitted to having received a letter threatening such action, but had dismissed it. Eventually, the culprit was identified as an American watchman working at a local plant and he was arrested and locally prosecuted along with his accomplices. Despite these actions, and the rise of public fear regarding enemy activity in the city, the people of Windsor continued to resist government attempts to secure the border even when it brought them into conflict with provincial and federal governments in addition to other municipalities.

The people of Windsor resisted changes to create more secure and regulated borders, just as others challenged the government’s rationale for internment and registration more broadly. Internment and registration were not introduced without opposition. Petitions were sent to the Canadian Government, some from internees themselves. Letters written to authorities complained about the treatment of those suspected to be enemy aliens and lobbied for the release of those interned. Local law enforcement was sometimes reluctant to enforce registration regulations on members of their communities. There was an arbitrariness that impacted the application of enemy alien regulations throughout the war.

Legal and bureaucratic systems were characterized by change during wartime. During the war, naturalization law, voting legislation, Canadian Expeditionary Force recruitment standards, the state’s emergency powers, and internment regulations changed in tandem.

---

90 Dimmel, Engaging the Line, 90.
91 Ibid., 45.
92 Ibid., 49.
93 Luciuk, In Fear of the Barbed Wire Fence, 24.
94 Chaktsiris, The Enemy at Home, 295.
with shifting wartime needs and popular opinion on debates like conscription. In this changing climate it was sometimes difficult for officials to keep up. For example, one local policy magistrate wrote to authorities asking for permission to remove fines he placed on two enemy aliens who did not register. He confessed that the men could not afford to pay the fines, and that after learning they also had families and farms the magistrate confessed, “I feel that I have made a mistake in these cases and would ask your permission to release these men from any further penalty…” The case was referred to other federal authorities, but it is unclear what happened next.

These are only a few examples of the voices emerging from correspondence related to internment in Canada during the Great War. The consistencies in experiences of enemy aliens during the Great War present a sense of prevailing uncertainty and shifting regulations responding, not principally to concerns about national security, but to changing economic and political contexts. Internment and registration regulations, while unevenly and arbitrarily enforced, affected the lives and livelihoods of thousands of people living in Canada. It also contributed to a public rhetoric that vilified the enemy in wartime that was present in newspapers, public speeches, recruitment efforts, and jingoist poems and literature. Within this context it was acceptable, even patriotic, to fight and suspect the enemy—even when “the enemy” lived next door.

CONCLUSION

Did wartime conditions—perceived and real—justify the incarceration and internment of over 8,000 foreign nationals, the majority of whom were civilians, and the surveillance of a further 80,000? Despite its open-endedness, it is an important question to ask. Understanding the complexity of wartime experiences can help understand the past on its own terms and draw better parallels to today. Complicating some narratives about Canada and the Great War is the reality that most of those interned did not pose a threat to the Canadian state; those interned often lacked political power and were newcomers to

---

96 W.J. White, Police Magistrate, Bracebridge: Request for permission to remit fines imposed on certain Austrians for failing to register as enemy aliens, 1918, Attorney General Central Registry Criminal and Civil Files 1914-1919, Creation Code: 1406, AO.
their communities, thereby remaining outside of community networks that protected many from internment. Over half of those interned during the Great War were civilians.97

This article outlined relevant internment and registration regulations and discussed how they changed over time. These Orders-in-Council stand as important reminders that rights do not disappear overnight, but are instead eroded over time. The emergency powers of the state enacted under the *War Measures Act* stayed with Canada long after the war ended.98 Narratives about First World War internment sometimes exist uncomfortably within a Canadian historiography focused on the place of the war within a nation-building narrative. Internment bridges these two areas of analysis that do not often meet: studies of military operations and political and social consequences of the war effort. Further complicating the place of internment within the historiography is that decisions were often arbitrarily based on personal and economic considerations rather than the rule of law.

Internment and registration regulations were unevenly and often unfairly enforced, also constantly changing over time, leaving both citizens and authorities unsure about their responsibilities. During the Great War the doctrine of ensuring national security through the internment of enemy aliens in Canada was quickly overshadowed by pressure to use wartime legislation to remove immigrant populations deemed problematic by municipalities across Canada. This serves as an important reminder that regulations about national security are often also about other social and economic pressure and prejudices. The threat posed by enemy aliens during the First World War was more a “phantom presence” than a reality—but one that was all too real for too many.99

---

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Mary Chaktsiris** is a Wilson Fellow, Assistant Professor with the L.R. Wilson Institute for Canadian History. Her research interests include the First World War, commemoration, and experiences of First World War veterans with disabilities.

## Appendix A: Internment Camp Locations and Operation Dates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date of Opening</th>
<th>Date of Closing</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Winnipeg, Man.†</td>
<td>1.i.x.14.</td>
<td>29.vi.16.</td>
<td>Fort Garry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halifax, N.S.</td>
<td>8.i.x.14.</td>
<td>3.x.16.</td>
<td>The Citadel.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vernon, B.C.</td>
<td>18.i.x.14.</td>
<td>20.i.20.</td>
<td>Provincial Govt. Bldg.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nanaimo, B.C.</td>
<td>20.i.x.14.</td>
<td>17.x.15.</td>
<td>do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandon, Man.</td>
<td>22.i.x.14.</td>
<td>29.xi.16.</td>
<td>Exhibition Bldg.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lethbridge, Alta.</td>
<td>30.i.x.14.</td>
<td>7.xi.16.</td>
<td>Exhibition Bldg.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petawawa, Ont.</td>
<td>10.xii.14.</td>
<td>8.v.16.</td>
<td>Militia Camp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirit Lake, Que.</td>
<td>13.i.15.</td>
<td>28.i.17.</td>
<td>Bunk Houses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amherst, N.S.</td>
<td>17.iv.15.</td>
<td>27.xi.19.</td>
<td>Malleable Iron Works (rented).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monashee-Mars Lake, B.C.</td>
<td>2.vi.15.</td>
<td>29.vi.17.</td>
<td>Tents and Bunkhouses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revelstoke-Field-Otter, B.C.</td>
<td>6.i.x.15.</td>
<td>23.x.16.</td>
<td>Bunk Houses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valcartier, Que.</td>
<td>24.xiv.15.</td>
<td>23.x.15.</td>
<td>Militia Camp</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† Receiving stations only, where prisoners were kept till they could be sent to a permanent station.

---

# APPENDIX B: SELECTED PRIVY COUNCIL ORDERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Privy Council Order or Communication</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P.C. 2150</td>
<td>15 August 1914</td>
<td>Identified enemy alien classifications for internment and surveillance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Notice to Alien enemies in the <em>Canada Gazette</em></td>
<td>2 September 1914</td>
<td>Clarified that action would only be taken against enemy alien reservists attempting to leave Canada or against any enemy alien “who engaged or attempted to engage in espionage acts of a hostile nature, or to give information to otherwise assist the King’s enemies.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.C. 2283</td>
<td>3 September 1914</td>
<td>Prohibited the possession of firearms, ammunitions, or explosives by enemy aliens. Later changes were made to relax this regulation based on approval by authorities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.C. 2721</td>
<td>28 October 1914</td>
<td>Appointed Registrars for the registration of enemy aliens. The Minster of Justice explained this was meant to prevent espionage and the return of enemy reservists to their home countries. It was amended on 14 November, 1914 to define the undertaking process and determine questions asked in undertaking papers. It was amended again identifying that anyone who had already taken the Oath of Allegiance to His Majesty pursuant to the Oath of Allegiance Act and held Office did not need to report (this exempted Armenian Christians from registering and reporting). The purpose of the amendments was to relieve the extra workload of local authorities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.C. 2817</td>
<td>6 November 1914</td>
<td>Appointed William Otter Director of Internment Operations, a post that was at first under the Department of Militia and Defence but subsequently brought under the Department of Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privy Council Order or Communication</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.C. 2721</td>
<td>28 October 1914</td>
<td>Allowed for the detainment of those destitute to allegedly alleviate their suffering and provide employment, presenting internment as a make-work program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.C. 810</td>
<td>24 April 1915</td>
<td>Granted permission for enemy aliens to leave Canada for the United States in search of employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.C. 1501</td>
<td>24 June 1915</td>
<td>Allowed for detention of enemy aliens whose presence would contribute to a “breach of the peace” as a result of anti-alien sentiment. This was in response to increased competition for employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P.C. 1908</td>
<td>5 August 1918</td>
<td>Amended 27 January 1919 transferring control of enemy alien registries to police duties.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>