Behind the Wire

The enemies we invented and interned

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No Place like Home: Enemy Alien Internment in Canada During the Great War
Bohdan S. Kordan
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Nykyta Budka, the first bishop of the Ukrainian Catholic Church in Canada, took up his duties in December 1912. He was hard-working and toured the dominion, reaching out to the Galicians (as most Ukrainians were then called) who had been urged by the Laurier Liberals to help populate the Canadian West. On July 27, 1914, when war seemed likely in Europe, he issued a pastoral letter urging reservists of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to return home to do their duty.

That call, not alarming when made, looked very different when Britain declared war on Germany and on the Austro-Hungarian Empire in early August. Not yet in control of its own foreign affairs, Canada was automatically at war, and Budka hastily withdrew his letter on August 6. Too late, however. The Canadian public, not particularly sympathetic to immigrants from central Europe, now was both hostile to and frightened of Ukrainian settlers. Ottawa would have to act.

Bohdan S. Kordan is a historian of these events, and his latest book, *No Place like Home*, collects updated articles from his long career in order to examine the broad subject of First World War internment. Oddly, however, Kordan does not mention the letter that put Budka and his compatriots in great difficulty.

On August 15, Parliament voted to pass the Proclamation Respecting Immigrants of German or Austro-Hungarian Nationality, which authorized the arrest and detention of such residents if there was "reasonable ground" to believe they were engaged in espionage or passing information to the enemy. The War Measures Act, passed a week later, gave Sir Robert Borden's government additional sweeping powers.

Officials were not unreasonable — initially. Enemy aliens, as they came to be known, were assured that if they were employed and not suspected of acting against the war effort, they need not fear. Soon they were required to register. But the real danger, as Kordan correctly notes, was believed to be from unemployed males. The economy had been in a serious downturn since 1912, and the onset of war made matters worse for some time. If enemy aliens had no work, Ottawa feared, they might become more dangerous to the war effort. This "selective targeting of destitute and jobless migrants of Austro-Hungarian, German, and Ottoman origin among the wider pool of unemployed," as Kordan puts it, led to the creation of internment camps.

Surely it was not unreasonable to generally limit internment to enemy aliens. Were the British- or Canadian-born unemployed to be rounded up? In fact, a few probably were: scores of homeless persons, conscientious objectors, and members of radical organizations would be interned. In all, 8,579 men (some with their voluntarily interned wives and children), including 5,954 Ukrainians and others of Austro-Hungarian origin, 2,009 Germans, 205 Turks, and 99 Bulgarians, were put into twenty-four camps located across Canada, many in rough country.

Castle Mountain Internment Camp, Alberta.

The first Ukrainian settlers had arrived in 1891, and more than 75,000 had come by 1911, mostly to Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Germans were far more numerous, with a population of over 400,000. There had been Germans in British North America since before the mid-eighteenth century, and they had integrated. That likely explains their lower numbers of internees. The Ukrainians, many living in tight farming communities, had not, and that was probably responsible for their larger numbers in the camps. It was also responsible for Budka's foolish letter.

Once the civilian internees were in the camps, the Canadian government, in a startling move, declared them to be prisoners of war — a term ordinarily reserved for enemy combatants. Ottawa desired that internees, mainly unemployed men, should be forced to work and could accomplish that only if they were classified as POWs. At that time, paupers worked in exchange for relief, and the unemployed and homeless men in the camps were analogous to the pre-war indigents. Moreover, the internees were defined as subjects of an enemy sovereign and liable for mobilization — even though that sovereign was thousands of kilometres away.

So they became POWs guarded by Canadian soldiers when they were behind the wire or working at clearing the land around Kapuskasing, Ontario, for agriculture or at Jasper and Banff, Alberta, to create roads, housing, and bridges. As the Montreal *Gazette* put it in January 1915, "It is likely that most of them will have a far better time of it as prisoners than they would have had…as alien enemies out of money and work." After all, they were being paid twenty-five cents a day.

Ironically, the most vocal protests over the internment of civilian POWs in Canada came from Germany. The Germans had their own civilian internees from Allied nations and in general treated them fairly (in contrast to how they treated the French and Belgians). Berlin complained loudly to London about the Canadian policy and even threatened retaliation against British civilians in their camps. That put pressure on Canada, a nation within the empire and without a completely free hand, to change its internment policy.

This pressure, along with a growing demand for labour as the war economy began to boom and manpower shortages increased, led to the camp populations beginning to decrease. By late August 1916, the Kapuskasing camp had only seventy-five men, down from 1,200. Numbers elsewhere declined in a similar way.

But what was to be done with 2,222 internees left at the end of the war? There was little sentiment for releasing them, and there were calls for deportation. The camp commander at Kapuskasing wrote that "being a loafing, good for nothing lot, the sooner the country [was] rid of them the better." At least 1,758 were shipped to Rotterdam, including some of the enemy aliens arrested and interned after the suppression of the Winnipeg General Strike in 1919.

As Kordan's well-researched chapters record, civilian internment was not a pretty affair. Men were locked up without the possibility of appeal (though some were later paroled) and treated as POWs. Many were then deported in a demonstration of shameful governmental and public prejudice. Canadians had much to atone for, and the apologies wrung out of Ottawa decades later, thanks to the efforts of Ukrainian Canadian activists, were entirely justified.