eurozine

Richard Overy

The concentration camp

An international perspective

The concentration camp is still popularly viewed as a distinctly national–socialist phenomenon. The focus on Germany has prevented a broader analysis of the prevailing 'camp culture' in the first half of the twentieth century, argues Richard Overy. Camps were widespread geographically and began well before the coming of the Third Reich. They reflected abrupt changes in mass politics, ethnic conflict and ideological confrontation following the dislocations caused by the Great War and became an expedient (and cheap) way of isolating those deemed to be biological, social or political outsiders. The perpetrators in all countries with camps saw themselves as heroic defenders of a threatened system. Victims need to be given a more positive historical narrative, to be better able to understand the traumatic consequences of exclusion and incarceration.

The idea that the concentration camp was a defining institution of Hitler's Third Reich became a commonplace of the 1930s. So too did the idea that the German camps were more brutal instruments for breaking the spirit and body of their human cargo than any other form of internment. In 1940 the Hungarian writer and journalist Arthur Koestler published an account of his experiences as a communist and a Jew in a French concentration camp for enemy aliens, set up at Le Vernet, near the frontier with Spain, in September 1939, from which he had been fortunate to emerge before the Germans arrived. He compared the camp, a grim work camp with little food or medical help, with the most notorious German camp at Dachau:

> The scale of sufferings and humiliations was distorted, the measure of what a man can bear was lost. In Liberal–Centigrade, Vernet was the zero–point of infamy; measured in Dachau–Fahrenheit it was still 32 degrees above zero. In Vernet beating up was a daily occurrence; in Dachau it was prolonged until death ensued.[1]

Like Koestler's *Scum of the Earth*, other books which focused on German terror were best sellers. Stefan Lorant's *I Was Hitler's Prisoner*, published as a cheap Penguin Special in January 1939 was reprinted every month that year and sold around 100,000 copies.[2] The idea of the camp as a unique arena for 'Nazi' terror became embedded in the cultural discourses of the democratic West. The novel by the South African writer John Coetzee, *The Life and Times of Michael K*, first published in 1971 as a commentary on the terror of *apartheid*, is based on the cultural idea of the camp, but it mentions only one, Dachau.[3]

After 1945 the term concentration camp was almost completely associated with the German dictatorship; the dictionary definition of 'concentration camp'

in English describes them as German and locates them firmly in the brief twelve years of the Third Reich. This focus on the concentration camp as a German phenomenon entirely distorts the historical reality, not only because it ignores the long history of concentration camps in other geographical locations, from the Cuban civil war in the 1890s to North Korea today, but because it ascribes to the German camps a kind of meta–historical significance, ignoring the wider history of the German penal system under National Socialism and the context within which concentration camps operated (alongside extermination centres, labour camps, Gestapo camps, POW camps; and so on).[4] The proper contextualization of the German camps does not mitigate their role as a central site of National Socialist terror, but it makes their emergence and development more historically comprehensible and permits the construction of transnational narratives of camp culture and camp terror.

The first form of contextualization is chronological. It is tempting to search for the roots of the concentration camp in nineteenth–century narratives of colonial expansion or civil wars, and although homologies can be suggested, particularly in the crude effort to isolate and contain large population groups in the South African War or the German colonization of South West Africa (Namibia), the concentration camp is essentially a product of the First World War and its immediate aftermath.[5] This was the period in which what might be described as a 'camp culture' developed, encouraged by the growth of a large camp structure for prisoners–of–war and refugees, but more specifically the camps set up for enemy aliens. These camps concentrated the targeted group, created the physical pattern of future camps, and bred a crude popular culture of exclusion. In Britain 29,000 enemy aliens were interned in camps; in France camps included enemy aliens and unreliable political elements.[6] These forms of exclusion were the product of intense popular prejudices; they were less examples of ideological victimization, more expressions of national vendetta. But in the aftermath of war, encouraged by the Bolshevik Revolution (during which informal camps soon came to be a standard way of holding enemies of the people), the civil war crisis in central Europe engendered a fierce ideological divide between communist/socialist radicalism and popular radical nationalism. During this contest concentration camps were used as sites for holding political enemies; the idea of 'political crime' against the nation introduced a new category of ideological justice and the mentality of 'them or us' which was to colour European politics for at least a generation. Italian Fascists and German National Socialists both forged their political identities in the immediate post–war conflicts and both thrived on the construction of 'the other' as a profound social and political menace.

The culture of exclusion/inclusion grew out of a pronounced shift in European political thinking away from individualist liberalism and in favour of varieties of collectivism. The principal collectivist ideologies –– communism, socialism, fascism –– adopted an intellectual agenda in which the collective (whether revolutionary society or socialist planned economy or race and nation) took precedence over the individuals that composed it. The individual's behaviour was validated only by these collective goals, which also allowed those who organized the collective to penalize non–compliance and compel belonging. The collective was always predicated on threat: in Soviet communism the threat from agents of capitalist imperialism or the defunct bourgeois order; in fascism the threat of racial contamination or cosmopolitan subversion.[7] The impulse to collectivist thinking had a number of roots, but a common strand can be found in a vulgar Darwinism in which biological metaphors were mobilized for social ends, with the collective defined as an

organic whole and the threat described in anatomical and medical language (the cancer within, the rotten limb, the hidden racial bacillus).[8] The community enemy came to be feared as the agent of social decomposition and infection. This helps to explain the desire to contain and then separate the threat in camps, like a form of political quarantine. It also helps to explain the vicious physical treatment meted out to camp prisoners everywhere, in Europe and in the empires; biological metaphors encouraged biological solutions. The link between this intellectual transformation and the historical reality is clear in the case of the young Soviet state, where the children of bourgeois or aristocratic parents were deemed to be a source of possible social infection; or in the case of German radical nationalism, where the stab–in–the–back legend generated a culture that defined Marxism and the Jews as social cancers in need of violent excision.

The chronological context is important in explaining why camps became a major phenomenon in the age of the two world wars and its aftermath. The geographical context makes clear that the National Socialist camps were one species from a broad genus; they were not even the only German camps, since concentration of political prisoners took place in a number of German *Länder* in the civil conflicts of the early 1920s, and camps were established in the Soviet Zone of occupation after 1945 for former members of National Socialist organizations.[9] In Fascist Italy, for example, camps and colonies were set up for Italian political prisoners, while concentration camps in the full sense of the term (complete with barbed wire, barracks and machine guns) were used first in the Italian colonial empire. The camps for political prisoners were based on two pieces of legislation, the 6 November 1926 Law of Public Security and the so–called 'Legge Rocco' of 25 November 1926, 'for the defence of the state'. Political prisoners could be sent in exile to colonies of 'confini', in which varying degrees of confinement were imposed. There were nine set up between 1926 and 1943, the first on the islands of Favignana, Lampedusa, Pantelleria and Ustica. A camp for incorrigible political criminals was opened at Tremiti, but the first concentration camp, with the typical topography of camp incarceration, was opened in April 1939 at Pisticci. In total 12,330 political prisoners were put in colonies or camps, but in 1939 a further 3,600 'aliens' were also rounded up for camps or colonies.[10] The worst camps resulted from Italy's wars. During the insurgency in Libya in the early 1930s, General Rodolfo Graziani set up concentration camps for 100,000 Senussi men, women and children as a way to isolate the insurgents. Around 40,000 died in the camps from disease and malnutrition.[11] During the war, concentration camps for Yugoslav and Greek partisans, soldiers and suspects were sites of mass starvation and needless cruelty. Estimates of the numbers interned, including women and children, differ widely, but Yugoslav figures produced in the 1980s suggest around 110,000.[12]

In Spain the events surrounding the Civil War and its aftermath also provoked the use of camps as a way to concentrate potential political enemies or captured militiamen. The dichotomies between insider and outsider in Spain were complex, but the barrier between the two sides was real and the definition of political enemy open to wide interpretation. Unlike Italy, it was the very large number of prisoners that made camps the obvious solution. Some 270,719 were in camps and prisons in Spain in 1940 and they were used by the regime as forced labour for reconstruction following the war. The *Commission Internationale contre le régime concentrationnaire* published a report in 1953 on the poor conditions and high mortality of the camps, which were classic examples of the dehumanizing function of the camp.[13] 'We were the beaten ones,' wrote one survivor of the camp system, 'the defeated, those who never

had any rights. We were treated like animals with a contagious disease, surrounded by barbed wire and guards intoxicated with vengeance and hatred.'[14] The Spanish camp system was temporary and by January 1944 there were only 74,000 still in the makeshift penal system. Thousands of Spanish republicans nevertheless found themselves imprisoned in camps on the other side of the Spanish–French frontier. In early 1939 eight camps were set up for the 226,000 Spanish refugees, including families. Thousands returned or were sent back, but those regarded as a serious political threat were kept in the first of a number of French concentration camps. The first was created following a decree law of 21 January 1939 directed at allegedly dangerous elements among the large population of asylum seekers in France, 'in interests of order and public security'. Between September 1939 and May 1940 a further 87 camps were established, holding as many as 20,000 camp prisoners, including Arthur Koestler. They were legally instituted under the War Decree of 18 November 1939, and were used to house not only aliens but also political prisoners (mostly communists) and vagrants.[15] The camps were the product of a mix of motives prompted by the war but also by the growing hostility to the extreme left and fears of social contagion.

The largest and most lethal camp system was the countrywide institution of corrective labour camps (GULag) founded in the Soviet Union in April 1930. There were a handful of concentration camps for political prisoners in the 1920s operated by the security service (GPU) under the loose supervision of the Commissariat of the Interior (NKVD), but the formal structure instituted in 1930 at the height of the collectivization drive produced a system that concentrated millions of political prisoners and regular criminals. Galina Ivanova has calculated that at one time or another 476 camps existed in the Soviet Union. From a population of 95,000 in 1930, the system grew to hold 2, 472,247 at its peak in 1953, the year of Stalin's death. Altogether an estimated 20 million experienced internment of some form.[16] These numbers dwarfed the camp system in Germany. In 1935, for example, there were an estimated 3,500 in the German camps, but 792,000 held by the GULag system.[17] The Soviet system was legally constituted and institutionally dynamic. The camps fulfilled a combination of purposes: they were places of correction and reform for people accused of political deviancy; they were open air prisons for regular criminals who were expected to work rather than have the community's resources wasted on them; they were intended to exploit the labour of social outcasts (kulaks, priests, vagrants, prostitutes) as a contribution to building the workers' paradise. Alongside the regular GULag camps there were also more loosely supervised labour colonies which housed exile ethnic groups, or peasants deemed to be hostile to agricultural reform, or criminals guilty of minor offences. First established in February 1930, there were approximately 2,000 colonies housing in 1930/1 an estimated 1.8 million people.[18] There was almost no family in the Soviet Union untouched by the reach of the Soviet camps.

It would be possible to find camps, mainly temporary and politically motivated, in other European states and in the European empires during the age of the two World Wars. There was nothing politically specific about a camp, though the totalitarian dictatorships operated permanent systems with a firm institutional base for longer than anywhere else. Even in Britain in 1939 plans were made by the War Office to set up a network of 27 camps to hold aliens and political enemies, and although some were relinquished for other uses, the remainder held at the peak 27,200 interned aliens, as well as British Fascists. [19] There were evident differences between the camps and camp systems across Europe. Some were the product of contingent pressures (war,

civil war), some were the consequence of ideological or racial prejudices. They housed a variety of excluded groups defined by security threat or social menace or political deviancy. It was possible for the same unfortunate European to be regarded as an enemy in different systems for different reasons. German communists were to be found in Soviet camps and German camps; in 1940 some were returned from Soviet imprisonment to face execution or a camp in Germany.[20] Soviet prisoners in German camps found themselves at the end of the war interrogated and abused by their Soviet liberators; a substantial fraction was sent to the camps, accused of collaboration. Arthur Koestler met prisoners for whom Le Vernet was their third camp in as many different countries. All of the camps were an expression of an institutionalized distrust, the product of a contemporary obsession with issues of identity, belonging and exclusion.

For all the differences, however, there are grounds for comparison. The following description from Koestler's experience at Le Vernet could stand for camp regimes anywhere:

> The next morning we were grouped into working squads. I was sent with about thirty others to dig up and level the uneven waste behind our double row of barracks. It was a stretch of ground about 300 yards [280 metres] long and 150 yards [140 metres] wide, inside the barbed wire enclosure of Section C. We used it as our exercise ground –– a privilege which distinguished us, simple suspects, from the 'Criminals' in A and the 'Politicals' in B; they had no space to exercise other than the narrow path between their hutments.[21]

There was a natural convergence between camp systems which derived partly from the physical landscape of camp architecture, partly from the quasi–military rhythms of life imposed on the inmates, partly from common patterns of behaviour between victims and perpetrators. The camps were easy to construct (often using the prisoners' own labour) and cheap to maintain compared with conventional prisons. The camp routines and the social structure of the camps were endlessly reproducible. Most camp accounts reveal not a homogeneous class of oppressed and dehumanized victims, but a flexible and dynamic social structure, with collusion between some prisoners and guards, corruption, victimization of some categories of prisoners by other prisoners, and hierarchies of advantage and disadvantage among the many different kinds of prisoner. A convicted murderer in a Soviet camp had a very different experience from the university professor accused of Trotskyism. In German camps, Jews and homosexuals were penalized by other prisoners as well as by the guards. In almost all camps there was an absence of normative justice and legal redress; the right to punish physically and brutally was enjoyed by the guards, although in both the Soviet and the German system excessive sadism, brutality or corruption could lead to their transfer or even incarceration.

The principal difference between camps and camp systems lies in the variety of political motives that produced them. Most camps in the past century have been improvised or temporary, to meet a particular set of circumstances. This was true of wartime camps for aliens and dissenters, for camps resulting from civil war, for camps in colonial conflicts and counter–insurgency projects; it was even true for National Socialist camps in the first year of the regime, when it was not yet clear whether they would be retained or on what scale. Many of those incarcerated were later released or transferred, as in the case of Spain, to

the normative prison system. In the camps for aliens in Britain, or the camps set up for Japanese Americans during World War Two, it was possible for some of the prisoners to leave the camps to work for the war effort of the state that had interned them in the first place.[22] The exception to the idea of camps as temporary and contingent lies with the camp systems set up in the Soviet Union and Germany, or the surviving camps in communist Asia. The camp systems in these cases became permanent, institutionalized and dynamic. They reflected the nature of the dictatorships which spawned them, and defined the evolving social and political goals of the regime by conceptualizing the 'other' and reinforcing the desire to belong among the rest of the population. The camp in this broader sense could also be a site of inclusion as well as exclusion.[23] The *Reichsarbeitsdienst*, which became compulsory for young Germans in 1934, operated a nationwide system of labour service camps, with strict paramilitary regimes, political education sessions, punishment for infractions and an ethos of collectivist endeavor.[24] In Italy, colonies for the Fascist youth movement brought young Italians together to create a sense of national and racial belonging which they would take back to their home communities. The Soviet *Komsomol* youth movement held regular camps which instilled revolutionary discipline and a sense of community. [25] The 'camp' or collective as an arena for raising racial or social consciousness became a parody of the camp as an arena for punishment and isolation.

The German and Soviet camp systems provided the means to define the nature of the social utopian project on which the two dictatorships embarked in the 1930s. These projects were predicated on the idea of a permanent state of war or civil war whose terms were defined by rigid ideological parameters. Political opponents or racial and social outcasts were defined as 'enemies of the people' as if these were societies in a state of war. Since most of those incarcerated were guilty of little or nothing, both dictatorships created a culture of imagined or illusory conflict –– against a Jewish–Bolshevik world conspiracy, or Trotskyite–imperialist counter–revolution. In neither case were these victims entirely fenced off from the normative justice system. The camps were part of a wider structure of judicial and police terror and did not function just for themselves. In Germany, as Nikolaus Wachsmann has shown, political prisoners were tried in regular courts and held in regular prisons; in the Soviet Union in 1939 there were 352,000 in the regular prison system, some of them criminals, some political prisoners.[26] The camps were the acute expression of the desire to concentrate and isolate those regarded as the most incorrigible or malevolent enemies of society, but there were many lower levels of discrimination and punishment. Both systems paid lip service to the idea that the camps would reform those who entered them; Felix Dzerzhinski, head of the GPU in the 1920s, called them 'a school of labour'.[27] The camp at Dachau had a large placard set up in the open which explained that there was one 'path to freedom': 'obedience, diligence, honourableness, order, cleanliness, sobriety, truthfulness, willingness to sacrifice and love of the Fatherland'. In reality penalizing labour and routine punishment came to define the camps. The social mix reflected a range of priorities beside the desire to reform. Regular prisoners and gangsters (*urki*) in the GULag camps served their term and persecuted the other prisoners. Political prisoners were given occasional propaganda talks, but most accounts suggest that the guards and criminals regarded them as permanently tainted, rather than capable of improvement. The German camps held communists and social–democrats from working class and educated backgrounds, neither of whom had much in common with each other nor with the Catholic activists who were punished for their conscientious rejection of National Socialism. When in the mid–1930s both dictatorships began to incarcerate those defined as 'asocials' in Germany or

'social parasites' in the Soviet Union –– alcoholics, prostitutes, the workshy, vagrants, recidivist criminals –– the object was not to educate, but to purify the population.[28] By this stage the camp system, in Wolfgang Sofsky's phrase, came to create 'the conditions for its own existence'.[29]

Both the Soviet and the German camp system also became sources of labour power. In the Soviet case this had been an important element in the establishment of what were called 'corrective labour camps'. On 11 July 1929 the Soviet government adopted a resolution specifying the use of prisoner labour to help the forced pace of industrial and infrastructure development under the first of the Five Year Plans. Prison labour was used for major construction projects and for producing timber or mining for precious minerals in inhospitable areas of the union. Unfree and free labour often worked side–by–side, with living conditions not very different between them.[30] During the war GULag camps contributed to the Soviet production effort. By 1949 around one tenth of Soviet gross industrial production was generated by the camps. Prisoners were hired out by the GULag chiefs to major production sectors, resulting in the development of a large circle of sub–camps around the main camp, where conditions could often be worse and the violence unsupervised.[31] In the German case the labour value of the camps emerged only during the war when the camp population increased from around 60,000 in 1940 to 714,000 by 1945, composed chiefly of non–Germans (prisoners of war, foreign labourers accused of crime, resistance fighters, foreign political opponents). These prisoner populations were hired out to local businesses or used for the major construction projects of the Organisation Todt, or for the programme of underground dispersal adopted in 1943. The use of prison labour, as in the Soviet Union, resulted in thousands of sub–camps across Germany and occupied Europe where conditions varied widely according to the behaviour of local supervisors.[32] The habit of employing both free and unfree labour together makes it difficult to estimate what camp labour contributed. Camp prisoners were evidently less productive (in the Soviet Union it was estimated postwar at 50 per cent of free labour) and they also suffered from excess rates of mortality. In the German case this made camp labour a declining resource and provoked some pressure to improve local conditions of employment. Mortality was lower in the Soviet labour camps, since extracting economic value from prisoners was a central purpose of the system. What is known about SS plans for remodeling the economy and social structure of central and Eastern Europe after a German victory suggests that labour camps would have become a permanent feature of the postwar system of punishment and exploitation.[33]

The wide geographical and chronological parameters of the camp phenomenon raises an important question about the place that camps played in the wider political culture and society that gave rise to them. In the case of liberal democracies there was a vested political interest in not revealing the full extent of the camps; this was the case with the camps for *Mau–Mau* insurgents in Kenya in the 1950s (whose recent revelation has met with hostile criticism) or with the H–Block internment camp in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, which failed to arouse a great deal of political protest because of its distant geographical location. [34] British use of a concentration camp in southern Iraq during the occupation after 2003 also met with denials and press controls. The American concentration camp at Guantanamo Bay is also shielded from the American public and the wider world, as if it were external to the society in whose name the camp operates. The situation was different with the Soviet and German dictatorships because of the wider function the camps performed in detaining alleged enemies, protecting the organic collective and supplying

labour. No one in either society could have remained in ignorance of the existence of the camps. Their visibility was magnified by the use of forced labour and the multiplication of sites and function. Their deterrent effect is less clearcut historically, since many of those who ended up in the camp were there because of who they were, not for something they had done. In both cases the social function of the camp was to encourage the desire for inclusion and to create popular prejudice against those excluded.

This social function suggests that the conventional division between perpetrators, bystanders and victims, for all its methodological drawbacks, has something to say about the relationship between camp and society. The principal perpetrators, those who established and ran the system and determined policy, saw themselves as guardians of the public interest, in the Soviet case by protecting the revolutionary heritage and the proletarian state from social contamination, in the German case as guardians of the national revolution and engineers of Germany's eugenic future. Difficult though it is to comprehend, there existed 'perpetrator esteem' as a social reality. Heinrich Himmler saw the camp personnel as the front line in the conflict against social and racial disease and himself as one of the instruments for the salvation of Germandom.[35] Nikolai Yezhov, Interior Commissar from 1936 to 1939, dedicated himself to rooting out enemies until he, in turn, was defined as one. At his subsequent trial he broke the agreement not to renounce his confession to claim that he had spent twenty–five years 'fighting honourably against enemies and exterminating them'.[36] The security apparatus in both dictatorships saw themselves as part of an elite force and were respected (and feared) by the rest of the community for the job that they did. One NKVD guard, recruited to execute prisoners, was, according to a Soviet memoir, 'convinced that his job was important and honorable, because he was destroying the enemies of Soviet power.'[37] Ironically some of those at the bottom of that apparatus, who guarded the camp populations and had to cope with the long hours of boredom and routine, suffered from low self–esteem, which they compensated by sometimes mistreating the people they guarded. The guards were generally recruited from modest social backgrounds with limited prospects for career advancement. In the GULag system 71 per cent of guards, according to a survey conducted in 1954, had only a primary education, 8 per cent no education at all. A review in 1953 found that guards were 'out of control', drunken, criminal and violent.[38] Almost all accounts of camp life confirm that guards used what limited power they had to distinguish themselves from those they guarded (though at times corruption produced a close collusion between the guard and prisoner populations). Recent social psychological research has tried to present a more sophisticated account of perpetration than the conventional models based on Stanley Milgram or Philip Zimbardo, which saw ascribed roles determining psychological orientation. It is nevertheless difficult not to see perpetration as a search for status defined in terms of the victim population.[39]

If perpetrators could regard themselves as performing a necessary social and security function, endorsed by the system, the role of victims is more complex. The camp populations can generally be divided into four categories: real enemies (political dissenters, resistance groups, insurgents); imagined enemies; social outcasts; regular criminals. This accidental mix meant that victimization was itself fragmented. Habitual criminals or gangsters could hardly complain about incarceration; if or when they were freed they remained criminals in the view of wider society. The more difficult category was the political enemy, real and imagined. There is a temptation to think of these victims as in some sense cut off from the society they came from and with no history thereafter.

But for those who survived, their victimization coloured the way they might be reintegrated into society. The survey of Spanish prisoners found that only 50 per cent were able to find jobs afterwards, while professionals were forced to take manual work.[40] In the Soviet Union many former prisoners became guards or functionaries of the camp system because they had become bound up in the society represented by the camps after years of incarceration. Most freed political prisoners were confined to certain geographical areas and limited to certain jobs. German political prisoners had to sign a paper when they were released agreeing to undertake no further political activity. Too little is still known about how victim groups adjust to social existence outside and beyond the camp, even when the regime that victimized them has disappeared. The camp was also an environment in which victims could come to understand more about themselves and patterns of survival in an alien and alienating community. Michael K, eponymous anti–hero of Coetzee's novel, reflects on his camp: 'Is this my education?' he wondered. 'Am I at last learning about life here in a camp?'[41] Seen from this perspective, it is clear that victim narratives should be seen not as the passive 'other' to the narratives of perpetration, but as narratives in their own right, rooted in the history of the individual before imprisonment, sustained by what the prisoner made of life in the camp, and continued as a narrative of social relocation and dialogue with trauma for those fortunate to emerge. Individual narratives certainly exist, but the systematic exploration of camp and post–camp communities is a rich area for future research.

What can be said about the camp as a generic phenomenon? Sofsky famously described camps as 'laboratories of absolute power'.[42] Useful as this is as a description of an existential reality, it says little about the historical place of the camp. It also begs the question of why power needs to be exercised in such a context; what it is about the regimes that developed camp systems that they required a theatre in which that power could be reflected back. Clearly more is gained by sustaining camps than from simply killing all those defined as outsiders, except in the exceptional case of the European Jews between 1941 and 1945. In the German camps thousands were worked to death, but thousands more were found to replace them. The camps became necessary sites of social definition. 'Perhaps the truth is that it is enough to be out of the camps,' Michael K. again, 'out of all of the camps at the same time...'[43] Yet sense can only be made of the political culture that sustained camp systems, or allowed camps to be imitated and exploited temporarily in other contexts –– European, imperial, and military –– if the phenomenon is located in a particular time and a particular set of historical circumstances. The first half of the twentieth century was an exceptional period of transition from an older order of empires and status–based societies to a modern order of mass political mobilization, dynamic social re–ordering and anti–imperialism. The First World War and its aftermath accelerated that change and encouraged an exclusive, collectivist view of the social organism and a fear of the 'enemy within' –– either biological, political, or social. This reality was sustained by social–biological metaphors with the implication of internal degeneration or decomposition or political metaphors of betrayal (the term 'Fifth Column', coined during the Spanish Civil War, developed an exceptional cultural power in a matter of months). The 'camp' as a site of exclusion and social protection, or even of inclusion, developed its own dynamic as a practical solution to the problem of creating visible separateness and ending any putative threat from the defined outsider. The camp reflected political and social insecurities, and a public discourse of fear, part real, part sustained by regimes built on warring ideologies. There are lessons here for today's orchestrated anxieties about terror, refugees, asylum–seekers and anarchism.

[1] Arthur Koestler, *The Scum of the Earth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1941), p. 103.

[2] Stephan Lorant, *I Was Hitler's Prisoner* (London: Penguin Special, 1939).

[3] John Coetzee, *The Life and Times of Michael K* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 146: '... he arrived here looking like a skeleton. He looked like someone out of Dachau.'

[4] See for example Gabriele Lotfi, *KZ der Gestapo: Arbeitserziehungslager im Dritten Reich* (Stuttgart: DVA, 2000). Michael T. Allen, *The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor and the Concentration Camps* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 2002).

[5] See for example David Olusoga, Casper Erichsen, *The Kaiser's Holocaust: Germany's Forgotten Genocide and the Colonial Roots of Genocide* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010).

[6] See for example Panikos Panayi, *The Enemy in Our Midst: Germans in Britain during the First World War* (Oxford: Berg, 1991).

[7] On these issues of threat see Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Ascribing Class: The Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia', *Journal of Modern History*, 65 (1993), pp. 745–70; G. Alexopoulos, *Stalin's Outcasts: Aliens, Citizens and the Soviet State 1926–36* (Ithaca: New York UP, 2003), pp. 14–17, 21–5; F. Rouvidois, 'Utopia and Totalitarianism' in Roland Schaer, Gregory Claeys, Lyman Sargent (eds), *Utopia: The Search for the Ideal Society in the Western World* (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), pp.

[8] See on this the papers in parts I and II of Sabine Maasen, Everett Mendelsohn, Peter Weingart (eds), *Biology as Society, Society as Biology: Metaphors* (Dordrecht: Springer Verlag, 1995); Robert Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine under the Nazis* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1988); Loren Graham, 'Science and Values: The Eugenics Movement in Germany and Russia in the 1920s', *American Historical Review*, 82 (1977), pp. 1132–47.

[9] Klaus Drobisch, Günther Wieland, *System der NS–Konzentrationslager 1933–1939* (Berlin: Wiley VCH, 1993), pp. 16–18; Achim Kilian, *Einzuweisen zur völligen Isolierung NKWD–Speziallager Mühlberg/Elbe 1945–1948* (Leipzig: Forum Verlag, 1993), pp. 79 ff.

[10] Carlo Capogreco, *I campi del duce: L'internamento civile nell'Italia fascista [1940–1943]* (Turin: Einaudi, 2004), pp. 17–33, 65.

[11] Ibid., pp. 54–5.

[12] Alessandra Kersevan, *Lager italiani: Pulizia etnica e campi di concentramento fascisti per civili juogslavi 1941–1943* (Rome: Nutrimenti, 2008), pp. 96–102.

[13] Commission Internationale contre le régime concentrationnaire, *Livre blanc sur le système pénitentiaire espagnol* (Paris: Commission Internationale, 1953), p. 59.

[14] Rafael Torres, *Los eschavos de Franco* (Madrid: Oberon, 2000), p. 42, citing Juan Caba Guijarro. On repression and imprisonment see too Antonio Sánchez, *Fear and Progress: Ordinary Lives in Franco's Spain* (Oxford: Wiley–Blackwell, 2010), pp. 30–1.

[15] Anne Grynberg, *Les camps de la honte: les internes juifs des camps français 1939–1944* (Paris: Éditions la découverte, 1991), pp. 8–9, 34–6, 59.

[16] Galina M. Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism: The GULag in the Soviet Totalitarian System* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2000), p. 188. On the history of the Soviet camps see too Oleg Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004), chs. 1, 3.

[17] On Germany see Johannes Tuchel, 'Dimensionen des Terrors: Funktionen der Konzentrationslager in Deutschland 1933–1945' in Dittmar Dahlmann, Gerhard Hirschfeld (eds), *Lager, Zwangsarbeit, Vertreibung und Deportationen: Dimensionen der Massenvebrechen in der Sowjetunion und in Deutschland* (Essen: Klartext, 1999), pp. 372,383; Nikolaus Wachsmann, 'The dynamics of destruction: The development of the concentration camps, 1933–1945' in Nikolaus Wachsmann, Jane Caplan (eds), *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 18–21. Wachsmann estimates 4,000 by summer 1935.

[18] Lynne Viola, *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), pp. 6–7.

[19] Peter and Leni Gillman, *Collar the Lot! How Britain interned and expelled its wartime refugees* (London: Quartet Books, 1980), pp. 5, 97, 265.

[20] The most well–known was the communist Margarete Buber–Neumann who wrote a moving memoir of her experience, *Under Two Dictatorships: Prisoner of Stalin and Hitler* (London: Pimlico, 2008).

[21] Koestler, *Scum of the Earth*, pp. 110–11.

[22] Robert Asahina, *Just Americans: How Japanese Americans Won a War at Home and Abroad* (New York: Gotham Books, 2006), pp. 48–51.

[23] See for example Thomas Kühne, *Belonging and Genocide: Hitler's Community, 1918–1945* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010), pp. 42–6, who develops the idea of 'the racial nation as a training camp'.

24 Richard Overy, *The Dictators: Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), pp. 463–4.

25 On the Komsomol see Olga Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children went to War 1941–1945* (Oxford: OUP, 2010), pp. 34–41; on Italy see Claudia Baldoli, 'Le navi. Fascismo e vacanze in una colonia estiva per I figli degli italiani all'estero', *Memoria e Ricerca*, no. 6 (July/Dec 2000), pp. 163–71.

26 Nikolaus Wachsmann, *Hitler's Prisons: Legal Terror in Nazi Germany* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2004); Soviet figure in Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, p. 187.

27 Ibid, p. 186.

28 For the changing pattern of the German camps see Karin Orth, *Das System der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager: Eine politische Organisationsgeschichte* (Munich: Pendo Verlag, 2002), pp. 33–62; on Soviet camps see Khlevniuk, *History of the Gulag*, pp. 387–327.

29 Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1993), p. 80.

30 For a good description see Fyodor Mochulsky, *Gulag Boss: A Soviet Memoir*. Edited by Deborah Kaple (New York: Oxford UP, 2011), esp. pp. 31–43.

31 Edwin Bacon, *The Gulag at War: Stalin's Forced Labour System in the Light of the Archives* (London: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 139–44; Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, p. 189.Khlevniuk, *History of the Gulag*, pp. 237–41.

32 See for example J. E. Schultze, *Zwangsarbeit und Vernichtung: Das Wirtschaftsimperium der SS* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2001); Felicja Karay, *Death Comes in Yellow: Skarzysko–Kamienna Slave Labor Camp* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1996), pp. 235–46; Hermann Kaienburg, 'KZ–Haft und Wirtschaftsinteresse: Das Wirtschaftsverwaltungshauptamt der SS als Leistungszentrale der Konzentrationslager und der SS–Wirtschaft' in Kaienburg (ed), *Konzentrationslager und deutsche Wirtschaft 1939–1945* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 1996).

33 See for example W. Pyta, ' ³Menschenökonomie²: Das Ineinandergreifen von ländlicher Sozialraumgestaltung und rassenbiologischer Bevölkerungspolitik im nationalsozialistischen Staat', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 273 (2001), pp. 31–94.

34 On Kenya see David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's dirty war in Kenya and the end of Empire* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005). On Northern Ireland, Peter Shirlow, Kieran McEvoy, *Beyond the Wire: Former Prisoners and Conflict Transformation in Northern Ireland* (London: Pluto Press, 2008).

35 On Himmler see Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler: Biographie* (Munich: Siedler Verlag, 2008); on the senior Gestapo see Hans Safrian, *Die Eichman– Männer* (Vienna: Europa Verlag, 1993).

36 Michael Parrish, 'The Downfall of the ³Iron Commissar²: N. I. Ezhov 1938–40', *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 14 (2001), pp. 72–99.; J. Arch Getty, Oleg V. Naumov (eds), *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self–Destruction of the Bolsheviks 1932–1939* (New Haven: Yale UP., p. 561.

37 Mochulsky, *Gulag Boss*, p. 48.

38 Ivanova, *Labor Camp Socialism*, pp. 140, 161–3; Mochulsky, *Gulag Boss*, pp. 37–8.

39 See for example Alexander Haslam, Stephen Reicher, 'Rethinking the psychology of tyranny: the BBC Prison Study', *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 45 (2006), pp. 1–40; idem. 'Questioning the banality of evil', *The Psychologist*, 21 (2008), pp. 16–19.

40 Commission Internationale, *Livre Blanc*, p. 62.

41 Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 89.

42 Sofsky, *Order of Terror*, p. 87.

43 Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, p. 182.

Published 2011–08–25
Original in English
Contribution by Mittelweg 36
First published in Mittelweg 36 4/2011
© Richard Overy / Mittelweg 36
© Eurozine