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# German Historical Institute London Bulletin

Conference Report:

*Behind the Wire: Internment during the First World War.  
The Global German Experience*

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*Behind the Wire: Internment during the First World War. The Global German Experience.* Exhibition funded by the German History Society and the Arts and Humanities Research Council, with a launch event at the German Historical Institute London, 26 April 2023. Conveners: Stefan Manz (Aston University) and Matthew Stibbe (Sheffield Hallam University).

The German Historical Institute London unveiled its latest exhibition, 'Behind the Wire', on 26 April 2023. With the subtitle 'Internment during the First World War: The Global German Experience', the exhibition aims to shed light on the lesser-known history of German civilians who were interned as 'enemy aliens' in various locations across the British Empire during the First World War. Comprising eighteen panels, the exhibition also provided visitors with an immersive experience through a virtual reality depiction of Fort Napier camp in South Africa. This addition allowed viewers to gain a deeper understanding of the conditions faced by German internees during the war.

The opening symposium commenced with an introduction by GHIL Director Christina von Hodenberg. Panikos Panayi (De Montfort University) then discussed the global dimensions of internment in the British Empire during the First World War. He highlighted the significance of considering the dispersed community of German internees as part of the 'imperial turn' in internment studies. Panayi emphasized that the global aspect becomes particularly evident when examining the internment network across the British Empire, such as in Canada, West and South Africa, India, Australia, New Zealand, and Ahmednagar in India. The main internment camp was located in Knockaloe on the Isle of Man, housing an astonishing 22,000 prisoners. It is worth noting that retaliatory measures led to the internment of British citizens, both White and non-White, in Ruhleben camp near Berlin, bringing the global experience of internment back to the German home front.

One significant consequence of internment experienced by civilian internees worldwide was the deterioration of their mental health, often referred to as the 'barbed wire disease'. Matthew Stibbe emphasized this aspect during his presentation, using the case of Ruhleben to illustrate the impact on internees. The camp, situated at a German

racecourse, held 5,500 individuals, including Germans with British nationality. Stibbe drew attention to the fact that some individuals had acquired British citizenship to avoid conscription but found themselves labelled enemy aliens in their own country after the outbreak of war. The camp's occupants represented a diverse range of backgrounds, including sailors, academics, Shakespeare experts, scientists, football coaches, criminals, journalists, and colonial subjects.

Michelle Kiessling (Sheffield Hallam University) presented a separate research project focusing on the intriguing story of David and Anna Russell. David, a lower-class British-Jamaican man, had married his German girlfriend, Anna, in Leipzig. Anna had lost her German citizenship upon marriage and subsequently acquired British citizenship. Kiessling movingly described the challenges faced by this family resulting from the differential treatment of the family members by different states. David's life as a Black British man in Germany was already difficult enough, and then during the First World War he was interned with one hundred other people of colour at Ruhleben camp in Germany, which resulted in further physical and psychological suffering. He tried to contact relatives in Jamaica via the US embassy in Berlin. Meanwhile, Anna, as the wife of a British man, was forced to leave Germany for Hull, where she lived in a workhouse and faced harsh working conditions and an enforced separation from their children. A surviving letter penned by Anna in German to the British colonial authorities requesting that David be allowed to return to Jamaica showed their efforts to improve the family's situation, but also revealed the differences in their status, as David was likely illiterate. Eventually, David was allowed to return to Jamaica, but the rest of his family were not, and he passed away there in 1946. Anna died in Nottingham in 1965.

Returning to the discussion of mental health, Matthew Stibbe explored the concept of 'barbed wire disease' that emerged from the internment experience. He referred to Adolf Vischer, who spent considerable time in two internment camps studying life behind bars, and also to a lesser-known study titled 'On the Psychology of Transitional Periods' (1919).<sup>1</sup> Drawing parallels with contemporary discussions

<sup>1</sup> Adolf Vischer, *Zur Psychologie der Übergangszeit* (Basel, 1919).

around long Covid as an emotional assault, Stibbe highlighted the similarities in terms of the amorphous temporality experienced in both situations.

Susan Barton's (De Monfort University) presentation focused on internment in Switzerland, where individuals experienced a peculiar blend of luxury and deprivation. Barton is usually interested in tourism and winter sports, but she delved into this topic after learning that around 68,000 people went through the internment experience in Switzerland during the First World War. While this may sound like a small number given the nine million or so POWs interned worldwide, Barton emphasized how the international character of the internee population in Switzerland not only makes this group a valuable case study in global history, but also highlights questions of continuity and change vis-à-vis peacetime social history in areas such as tourism.

The symposium concluded with discussions on the multimedia aspect of the exhibition. Paul Long, the director of MBD, the company responsible for producing the accompanying film, and Stefan Manz, the academic director, discussed the technical features and challenges encountered during the project. Long mentioned being inspired by the Internment Research Centre in Harwick, Scotland, which motivated his deeper involvement in internment research. This exhibition originally launched in Scotland and subsequently travelled to Canada, South Africa, and Barbados.

The exhibition 'Behind the Wire' and the virtual reality experience was on display at the German Historical Institute London until the end of September 2023. It provided visitors with a fresh perspective and innovative formats for presenting the history of wartime internment, with a particular focus on the global dimensions of this often-overlooked aspect of the First World War.

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