

Gabriele Anderl, Linda Erker, Christoph Reinprecht (ed.), Internment Refugee Camps. Historical and Contemporary Perspectives, Bielefeld (transcript) 2022, 314 p., 28 Abb. (Histoire, 192), ISBN 978-3-8376-5927-6, EUR 40,00.

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This edited volume, written by an interdisciplinary array of historians, social scientists, and even musicologists, explores connections between refugee camps, a putatively humane technology of population management, and more menacing institutions of confinement like internment and concentration camps. The ambiguous title »Internment Refugee Camps« reflects the continual oscillation between care and control, between sympathy (expressed if not always practiced by international NGOs) and security (often a prime concern for host states and societies), that characterizes humanitarian containment. Hannah Arendt encapsulated the paradox in 1943 when she described modern refugees as a »new kind of human being«, one that can be »put into concentration camps by their foes and in internment camps by their friends«¹. Throughout eighteen chapters and an analytical introduction, the reader finds categories, both legal and conceptual, including refugee, migrant, enemy alien, POW, and political prisoner, subjected to useful strain.

Detained at Gurs – first a refugee camp for Spanish Republicans, then an internment camp for refugees fleeing Nazi Germany as well as for “decadent Jews” persecuted by Vichy France – Arendt spoke from experience. 1500 Austrian and German Jews detained at Dachau following *Kristallnacht*, released to British Palestine, and then deported to a prison in colonial Mauritius, recognized similar ironies. Escorted by military convoys and forced to undergo a »customs examination« in which their watches, glasses, and other personal belongings were confiscated, many called the Beau-Bassin internment camp a »British Dachau«. One colonial officer even warned, »We can treat you like the Nazis treat you!« And while living conditions in Mauritius and Dachau were »as different as light and darkness,« inmates conceded, both camps oppressed Jewish refugees as suspects who were »not entitled to equal rights« (Roni Mike-Arieli, p. 215, 226).

Conceiving the camp as a flexible »instrument of domination that has been – and continues to be – used by different political systems for different purposes« (Christoph Jahr, p. 271), many chapters trace the genealogy of individual sites, recycled to detain



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¹ Hannah Arendt, We Refugees, in: Marc Robinson (ed.), Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile, (Winchester, MA 1994).

new outcast demographics. In doing so, the volume successfully highlights the continuities – and discontinuities – between multiple episodes of encampment. Billed at former quarantine stations, Austrian Jews seeking refuge in Trinidad during WWII encountered a confinement architecture first established for indentured laborers and Chinese and Syrian immigrants, before the construction of purpose-built internment camps. These facilities, in turn, incarcerated anti-colonial activists in the 1970s (Christian Cwik). Subject to grueling toil on cotton and sugar plantations in the Jim-Crow American South, post-WWII European displaced persons (many of whom harbored painful memories of slave labor at concentration camps) fled to northern industrial cities, much like their African-American predecessors during the »Great Migration« of the 1920s (Andreas Kranebitter and Peter Pirker). »Work therapy« or »rehabilitation through labor« at post-WWII UN relief camps resurrected concerns about pauperization at Victorian-era workhouses (Rachel Blumenthal). And a former quarantine station in New Orleans, repurposed in WWII as an internment camp for German and Italian »enemy aliens« from across the United States and Latin America, now serves as a migrant detention facility operated by America's Department of Homeland Security (Marilyn Miller).

Analogies between the wartime encampment of »internal others« and »undesirable migrants« – many of them Jews who, as quintessential outsiders, bring together histories of refugee, internment, and concentration camps – with today's international policing of border crossers and asylum seekers is a striking feature of the volume. The incorporation of contemporary refugee and asylum centers – often the domain of anthropological or sociological analysis – into the same frame of reference as WWII internment likewise highlights the virtues of interdisciplinary collaboration. The emphasis on inmate experiences within the history of an institution that so often oppresses and silences its victims is similarly welcome. Camps often provided the nucleus for new forms of agency and identity, Michel Agier and Anat Kutner maintain. One highlight of the collection is the analysis of Horst Rosenthal's sketchbook »Micky Mouse in Gurs« (Pnina Rosenberg), which demonstrates how inmates playfully subverted Vichy antisemitism – and even presaged graphic treatments like Art Spiegelman's »Maus«. Another chapter, meanwhile, examines the way refugees detained for processing in Greece forge collective identity through music (Ioannis Christidis).

Yet while the volume strives for global coverage, with explorations of Trinidad, Mauritius, and South Korea (Jean-Michel Turcotte), the book's analysis is largely oriented toward Europe and the United States. The vast majority of refugees today, however, are warehoused in camps spread across Africa and the Middle East, the former spaces of empire. Attention to the historical development of international agencies, like the Red Cross and UN High Commission on Refugees, which largely operate in the Global South but trace their origins to world-war Europe, would help turn the echoes, resonances, and often startling affinities



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the volume uncovers into more direct genealogical connections. Greater emphasis on colonial history – on, for example, the »refugee concentrated camps« (as one official called them)² of the Anglo-Boer War (mentioned briefly by Jahr) – and other colonial internments, including wartime camps in Asia and the Middle East, would likewise facilitate greater understanding of today's refugee camps and their inherently coercive potential. Moreover, it would help account for the contradictory attitudes expressed at contemporary asylum centers throughout Europe, where architectures of segregation (Maximiliane Brandmaier) impose restrictive and controlling environments (Birgit Behrensen) that demarcate residents as potentially dangerous »others,« even as humanitarian aid workers administer social and cultural training designed to facilitate their eventual integration into Western society. Such are modern iterations of the »civilizing mission«. The doublespeak of »voluntary work programs« that force inmates to work for \$1 a day at America's racialized migrant detention facilities, meanwhile, suggest more sinister echoes of a colonial past (Blumenthal). Despite these criticisms, however, »Internment Refugee Camps« is a thought-provoking volume that helps us understand the complexities of an institution that has returned, in force, to our contemporary world.



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² Henry J. Hager, Horrors of the Boer War, in: The New York Times, August 4, 1901.