Book Review: Barbed-Wire Imperialism: Britain's Empire of Camps, 1876-1903 by Aidan Forth

In **Barbed-Wire Imperialism: Britain's Empire of Camps, 1876-1903***,* **Aidan Forth** *presents a history of the concentration camp during the late nineteenth century, showing its development to be rooted less in colonial military conflict than in Victorian ideals concerning the preservation of physical and moral health. This is a fascinating account that describes the forces that created and maintained camp networks within the British empire without losing sight of the human suffering of those interned, writes* **Mahon Murphy***, and also underscores their continued relevance to twenty-first-century liberal empire.*

***Barbed-Wire Imperialism: Britain's Empire of Camps, 1876-1903*. Aidan Forth. University of California Press. 2017.**

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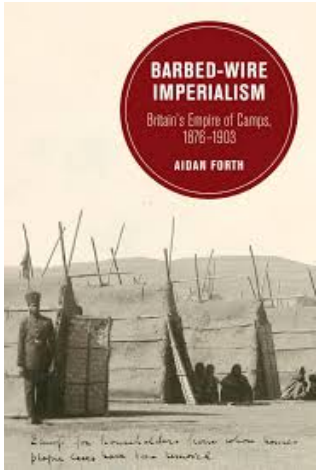

Histories of the development of concentration camps usually take their starting point as colonial military crises, with the Spanish use of '*reconcentrados*' in Cuba in the 1890s being the most cited origin. While the term 'concentration camp' was coined during this conflict, the camps themselves did not correspond to what we might think of when we imagine them today. In *Barbed-Wire Imperialism: Britain's Empire of Camps, 1876-1903,* Aidan Forth presents a broad history of the concentration camp during the late nineteenth century that maps their origin not in military conflict, but rather through their development as part of the British empire in accordance to Victorian ideals concerning the preservation of physical and moral health. At the same time, Forth addresses imperial security concerns raised by destitute and displaced populations who were considered socially, racially or politically suspect. The horrors of modern warfare developed in tandem with the birth of humanitarianism, and this is epitomised in the space of the camp.

Forth's book intertwines the history of the concentration camps in both Boer Wars with experiences of famine and plague across the British empire to demonstrate that the connections between imperial practices and developments in Western culture rendered camps conceivable and feasible technologies in diverse but related circumstances. The same forces that created prisons and workhouses in Victorian Britain also fed into the creation of the colonial concentration camp. Forth traces the evolution of internment practices from their origins in the displacement of peasant farmers as industrial capitalism took hold in Britain, their spread to the colonial sphere and their modern global legacies. The scale of internment is shocking: in the final decades of the nineteenth century, Britain interned more than ten million men, women and children in camps during a series of colonial, military, medical and subsistence crises. These people were interned 'for their own good' and in the name of relief and humanity. Yet, camps also responded to metaphors of social danger and contagion, which dehumanised those who were detained.

Camps addressed the central question of imperial rule: how do a small contingent of Europeans occupy, survey vast landscapes and effectively manage the populations in these areas? Forth demonstrates the connection between camps and the 'science of relief'. The practice of colonial famine policy had its origins in the Irish Famine of the late-1840s, which framed the agendas of the subsequent famine in India. While India did not have the permanent system of workhouses that operated in Ireland, new techniques developed that mirrored the empire's attitudes towards colonial poverty. Famine camps emerged to distribute food, relief and, most importantly, discipline to India's poor, performing much the same functions as their equivalents in the penal infrastructure in Britain and Ireland. In line with hardening attitudes towards race and poverty, the image of those affected by famine shifted from one of charity to suspicion. Famine wanderers became 'able-bodied parasites' and were seen as causing a law-and-order problem. For the imperial planners, the best method to deal with them was containment.

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The radicalising effect of the First World War on politics and the revolutionary context of inter-war Europe altered the form and function of the concentration camp. However, Forth points out that the Anglo-Boer Wars did present an important rupture in the history of war, and one that had implications for future total conflict in Europe. This was the application of 'colonial methods' to 'Europeans'. Britain's racialisation of the enemy signified a turning point in the treatment of the captured enemy. During the Boer Wars British generals dissolved the distinction between soldier and civilian. The Boers, a previously 'white and respectable' diaspora, were now transformed into an untrustworthy and conniving race.

Forth's book provides a fascinating account of the evolution of the modern concentration camp, from the workhouses of Britain and the famine camps of India to the countless refugee camps that have been normalised as components of global population management. He maps this in a way that does not lose sight of the human suffering of those interned, while at the same time describing the forces at work in creating and maintaining the camp network. He relates one powerful image from a famine relief camp in Khandesh, India, of British observers complaining that children of nine or ten were pretending to be six or seven years old in order to avoid being out to work. This connected to a pan-imperial ideology that synthesised camps with labour. Captured black Africans during the Boer War were not to be 'fed for free' as this was seen to lead to a moral and physical deterioration in those interned, despite the fact that they had been captured against their will.

Camps were a defining tool of liberal empire: methods deployed to intern people during famine, plague and war in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century offered the blueprint for the development of the modern concentration camp. Forth's book offers an insightful look into this evolution, but is rightly careful to criticise the idea of a linear progression from the colonial camp network to that established under the Nazi regime, despite Nazi leaders' own references to Boer War concentration camps as a model. The camps of the British empire had a different purpose to those used in Europe during the Second World War, and despite their violence and coercion, they maintained a humanitarian mandate. In this sense, the Nazi extermination camps present a break from the norm of the camp.

Nonetheless, British concentration camps have had their own lasting legacy. During the Mau Mau Rebellion and struggle for independence in Kenya in the 1950s and early 1960s, the British empire once again presided over a camp network that strove to isolate its inmates and prevent social contagion. As global power has shifted from Britain to the USA, the camp system transferred with it. The 'strategic hamlets' established during the Vietnam War and camps at Guantanamo Bay used similar methods, and remind us that whatever language may be used to mask them, concentration camps are still very much an integral aspect of twenty-first-century liberal empire. Aidan Forth is to be commended for making these connections so vividly clear.

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Mahon Murphy is a JSPS Post-Doctoral Research Fellow, Graduate School of Law, Kyoto University. Mahon's PhD, received from the LSE, focused on Britain's takeover of Germany's overseas colonies during the First World War and the internment of Germans from these extra-European theatres. His thesis was awarded the Annual Thesis Prize of the German Historical Institute London 2015. He is currently working on Japanese attitudes towards peace and internationalism during the period 1912-24. Mahon's first book, *Colonial Captivity during the First World War: Internment and the Fall of the German Empire, 1914-19* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), is available now.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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