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Comment on Aidan Forth's, *Barbed-Wire Imperialism: Britain's Empire of Camps, 1876–1903* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017)

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Article abstract

This review essay assesses Aidan Forth's Barbed-Wire Imperialism: Britain's Empire of Camps, 1876–1903 within the broader historical context of imperial repression. It looks at how the British used camps as tools of control, how they reflected spatial concepts of imperial rule, and how they challenged the idea of liberal imperialism.

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Abstract

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Résumé

Cet essai critique évalue l'ouvrage Barbed-Wire Imperialism : Britain's Empire of Camps, 1876-1903 d'Aidan Forth, en le replaçant à l'intérieur du contexte historique plus large de la répression impériale. Il examine comment les Britanniques ont utilisé les camps comme des outils de contrôle, la manière dont ceux-ci ont reflété les concepts spatiaux de la domination impériale et comment ils ont défié l'idée de l'impérialisme libéral.

As most readers of this journal will know, the southwestern Ontario city of Berlin changed its name to Kitchener in 1916. As elsewhere in the country, the First World War led to an upswing of anti-German sentiment in “Canada’s German Capital.” Three teenagers ripped a bust of Kaiser Wilhelm II off its memorial in the city’s Victoria Park and threw it into a lake, and many citizens of German descent found their patriotism questioned. Defensive about the city’s name amid the wartime swell of imperial fervour, Berlin’s voters approved a referendum to adopt a more “appropriate” name. Voters were asked to choose from a shortlist of Adanac, Benton, Brock, Corona (!), Keowana, and Kitchener. The last choice emerged late in the process, following the death of Herbert Horatio Kitchener, Lord Kitchener, on 5 June 1916.¹ Kitchener was one of 653 passengers who drowned when the cruiser HMS Hampshire sank in the North Sea after likely hitting a German mine. As Secretary of State for War, an imperial hero, the image on the famous First World War recruiting poster, and now a martyr, Kitchener proved the winning choice for a Canadian city looking for a suitably patriotic new name.

In the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, Kitchener's name has again caused controversy, this time for its imperial and racial connotations. Kitchener oversaw the concentration camp system the British used in South Africa during the South African War (conventionally known as the Boer War) from 1899 to 1902. Britain's "methods of barbarism," to use the phrase deployed by the pro-Boer Liberal politician David Lloyd George, were criticized at the time, and have been subject to increased opprobrium as historians have unpacked the connections between ideas of race and imperial strategies of rule, including the concentration camp. These connections are the subject of Aidan Forth's *Barbed-Wire Imperialism*. The book's central contribution is to situate Kitchener and Britain's system of concentration camps in South Africa in a wider, inter-imperial context of mass encampment. A work of acute insight and exhaustive archival research, Forth's book is a worthy winner of the Wallace K. Ferguson Prize.

Barbed-Wire Imperialism begins by locating Britain's imperial system of plague, famine, and concentration camps into a wider late-Victorian context of social control and the detention and confinement of "dangerous classes" as tools of imperial rule. The book's first half details the construction and administration of famine and plague camps in India from the 1870s to the beginning of the twentieth century. Forth shifts his attention in the book's second half to Britain's South African concentration camps. One of the book's strengths is how Forth demonstrates the many commonalities between the Indian and South African camp contexts in terms of the confinement of civilians as a component of imperial control. He concludes with some suggestive thoughts on how Britain's late-Victorian imperial camp system anticipated the use of detainment and concentration camps in later eras.

Moral, Medical, and Social Control

Forth draws on the concept of biopolitics and the language of the body to explain the moral, medical, and social control goals of British governments and camp administrators in India and South Africa. Plague and famine camps in India, and wartime concentration camps in South Africa, shared the common purpose of "cleansing the body politic." This insight allows us to understand the motivations of colonial actors "from the inside out," revealing the ways in which they internally reconciled humanitarian and reformist concerns with racial discrimination. Administrators used the language of disease and quar-

antine (prescient in our COVID-19 era), control and observation. Forth places late-Victorian imperial camps in the context of the period's concerns with racial pseudo-science, social welfare, and social imperialism. These are well-established themes in imperial history, connecting more recent work in the (now not so) new imperial history and its focus on the cultural and social interconnections between the old binaries of "metropole" and "periphery," and an older and still valuable historiography that studied the history of imperialism as a tool of social reform.²

British camps in India and South Africa epitomized modernist ideas of institutionalization, surveillance, organization, and routinization. Forth shows how they descended from earlier spaces of colonial confinement, such as slave ships and hulks, as well as other colonial institutions, such as prisons and sites of resource extraction like mines. They also reflected prevailing British stereotypes of colonial societies. British preconceptions of Bengalis as "idle," for instance, drove administrators to conceive of famine camps as a means of sorting out of society the "undeserving poor." Here imperial camps applied to the Empire lessons from Victorian domestic institutions of social control, such as the workhouse, asylum, and prisons, that sought to separate from society those deemed "weak," "unproductive," or otherwise "degenerate."³

Indian famines in the 1870s and 1890s were market driven and exacerbated by colonial neglect. Plagues were near existential threats in an age that only recently dismissed miasma theory, which asserted that disease was caused by "bad air," and the British responded to them first as security threats rather than public health crises. Security concerns also led to encampment strategies in South Africa, where Afrikaner guerrillas confounded the regimented British army. The British viewed each of these challenges as public order concerns that threatened disease and insurrection, an approach also evident in other colonial social governance fields, such as prostitution.⁴ They responded not by trying to treat the problem itself, but by separating its victims from the rest of society. Imperial camps were thus institutions that sought to reorder imperial space.

Spatial Cultures of Imperial Rule

The term "concentration camp" began as a descriptive, rather than pejorative, term. The British used it in the late-Victorian era to denote the "spatial concentration of scattered populations." (4) Camps were

a tool of imperial control used to relocate “mobile bodies to fixed and observable sites.” (7) Famine and plague camps in India and wartime concentration camps in South Africa “reflected analogous anxieties about colonial mobility, fiscal economy, and the control of mass populations case simultaneously as destitute and dangerous.” (131) These anxieties were shared by other imperial powers, and they help explain German camps for Herero and Nama in South West Africa in the early 1900s and American camps for Filipinos in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War. Plague, famine, and concentration camps were nodes in imperial networks of control, information, and interaction. Inmates in Indian labour camps, for instance, made tents that were shipped to South Africa for use in Boer concentration camps.

Forth uses the metaphor of the fence to illustrate the various spatial means by which the British attempted to exercise social control in India and South Africa. Internees were divided by race, gender, and caste. Military organizing techniques were applied to plague and famine camps, such as roll call, inspections, and other tools of regulation and control. (125) The British intended their South African camps to be places of “cleanliness and order” that brought sanitary education to Afrikaner detainees, whom the British deemed “unclean,” in a parallel to Indian plague and famine camps. This view belied the unsanitary conditions of the South African camps themselves, which led to death rates of up to 30 percent at their peak. (176) The camps also violated many detainees’ preferences to minister to health problems at home. The British in South Africa failed to learn from mistakes made in running Indian famine and plague camps, and did not provide adequate service, especially clean water, to prevent outbreaks of typhoid, measles, and smallpox. While Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain recruited Indian Medical Service (IMS) experts with experience in plague and famine camps to reform Britain’s South African camps in 1901, IMS officials saw martial law as the ideal tool to enforce sanitary procedures. They drew medical lessons from the imperial experience of running camps in India, but not political ones concerning how to improve relations with colonial internees. Financial efficiency trumped morality.

A Liberal Empire?

The tension between the coercive and relief goals of Britain’s plague, famine, and wartime camps reflected the duality at the essence of liberal imperialism.⁵ As Forth argues in reference to South Africa, there

was a “conceptual confusion” about camps; were their occupants refugees or suspected insurgents? Was their purpose relief or internment? (168) Indian plague and famine camps were ultimately tools of social reform where “security trumped liberty.” (3) Like the British officials George Orwell portrays in *A Hanging* (1931), Forth characterizes camp administrators as lacking empathy for the colonial subjects under their charge; they were “ethically blind.” (71)

Ironically, given the camps’ later role in defining Kitchener’s legacy, they were not an essential part of his campaign in South Africa, but “humanitarian afterthoughts.” (156) As such, their critics attacked them on the grounds that they failed to live up to the empire’s progressive self-image rather than as tools of empire themselves. Imperial humanitarianism walked hand in hand with imperial coercion and control. Forth usefully shifts attention from historians’ reflexive “great woman” focus on the prominent reformers Emily Hobhouse and Millicent Fawcett, both of whom drew connections between suffering in South Africa and earlier India plague camps, to the broader trans-imperial process by which South African camps were reformed in the last years of the war. Similar to how labour unionists collaborated across the empire, or anti-colonial actors shared resistance tactics like the hunger strike, a network of reformers in Britain and across the empire collaborated to pursue social reform causes.⁶ Imperial humanitarians drew on gendered perceptions of camp administration while critiquing the conditions under which internees suffered. Even the Fawcett Committee, comprised entirely of women, criticized poor camp administrators as “weak” and advocated for “strong men” to replace them. The campaign to reform the camps, while driven by humanitarian concerns, was ultimately conservative in that it criticized the camps’ conditions but not the imperial system of which they were a part.

Afrikaners’ Whiteness marked them in British eyes as suited for reformation—a twist on the “White man’s burden.” Concentration camps were used to educate internees in English and various trades, with the goal of transforming Afrikaners into imperial citizens. They were “White enough” to evoke sympathy in Britain, engendered by media such as atrocity photos of victims like the emaciated body of seven-year-old Lizzie van Zyl. Indian and African internees were not. We know comparatively little about the latter, as archival records for British camps for Black Africans were destroyed (172). What is apparent is that these camps anticipated the Bantustans into which

the post-1948 Apartheid South African government forcibly moved many Black Africans.

Contemporary Legacies

Forth demonstrates that the camp system was a symptom of imperial decline. The fact that the British responded to mass social crises by attempting to separate “undesirable” imperial subjects from the rest of society speaks to the late-Victorian imperial state’s struggles to exert control over an expanded and increasingly complex empire. While the British governed 250 million Indians with barely 6,000 officials, the camp examples show that British control was maintained by the command of public and discursive space rather than the Indian Civil Service as such.

In the epilogue, Forth compares British camps, particularly those in South Africa, with the camps established in the 1930s and 1940s by the Nazi and Soviet regimes. The totalitarian powers invoked the British example in justifying their own camps. Such comparisons are difficult, however, because, as Forth notes, the dichotomy between refugee (humanitarian) and concentration (repressive) camps we use today did not exist until after World War II. This point does not absolve British governments of the sundry sins of commission and omission Forth details in *Barbed-Wire Imperialism*, but rather that it is important to place camps in their historical contexts. British famine, plague, and concentration camps were means by which the imperial state sought to control what it perceived as “undesirable” populations, part of a wider Victorian preoccupation with social reform. Britain’s South African camps thus anticipated Germany’s extra-judicial concentration camps in the 1930s, which detained people the state deemed social, political, or cultural threats to the nation, rather than the extermination camps of World War II.

What British imperial camps, World War I relief camps, and the Nazi and Soviet camps of the 1930s and 1940s did share was that their respective administrators justified them (in very different ways, it must be stressed) through a shared language of public hygiene. This is the conclusion that resonates most starkly with twenty-first century systems of incarceration, refugee camps, and the social governance of marginalized people.⁷ Perhaps an even more apt comparison is to other later nineteenth and early twentieth century tools of imperial social control such as residential schools in Canada and the removal

of Aboriginal children from their families by Australian governments that created Stolen Generations.

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