

Empire and Brutality: The Origins of the Concentration Camp

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There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other.... The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances.

--Thomas Jefferson

Empire, like slavery, breeds cruelty. That is to say: our historical knowledge of imperial behavior from the earliest recorded times to the present suggests that brutality--in one degree or another--forms an indispensable component of all empire-building. A corollary to this axiom follows: the brutality exercised by imperial conquerors, occupiers, and enforcers on the peripheries of empire does not impact merely the occupied populations, but works its way back to the culture and affairs of the home country or metropole. As with Jefferson's observations on the vices of slavery, the degrading effects of imperial violence are not only those meted out on the imperial victims. Imperial violence depraves the perpetrators and their society as well.

Of the many ways we might demonstrate the pattern suggested in this corollary, the origins of concentration camps represents a particularly clear example.¹ We are well acquainted with concentration camps and their centrality to twentieth-century totalitarian regimes. Indeed, one might say that the concentration camp in the finished form given it by Stalin and Hitler is one of the twentieth-century's most striking institutional inventions. But we do well to ask how this characteristically brutal institution got its start. And to do this, we must look back to the last third of the nineteenth century, in the period of the so-called "new imperialism."

It goes almost without saying that in imposing imperial rule over millions of square miles of the earth's surface after 1871, Westerners—

¹ Some of the material in this essay has been developed from a section of my chapter, "World War I and the Emergence of Ethnic Cleansing in Europe," in Steven Bela Vardy and T. Hunt Tooley, eds., *Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Boulder, Co.: Social Science Monographs, 2003; distributed by Columbia University Press), 63-97.

Europeans and others--practiced widespread violence against and manipulation of the invaded populations. It is worth contemplating that this "new imperialism" of European powers (the new-style political control of overseas empires in the last third of the century) coincided precisely with the chronological framework of a new, hard-shelled, one might say social darwinist, nationalism. Indeed, connections between imperial conquest and domestic militarism, cruelty, or authoritarianism constituted one of the central tenets of the anti-imperialist movement in Europe and the United States.² American historian Carlton J. H. Hayes suggested some very direct connections between overweening nationalism and imperial cruelty in his classic history of Europe during this period, *An Age of Materialism*, published in 1941.³ It was in large measure because imperial powers and their agents saw it as necessary to control and police the populations "on the ground" that they launched into the new phase of imperialism in any case, planting the flag so as to bring out orderly rule.⁴

Since its early beginnings European imperialism had found it necessary to move various groups to various places: American Indians to Spanish farms and mines, or Africans to sites of intensive agriculture, etc. The new imperialism intensified this process of moving and delimiting populations for a variety of reasons, many of which will be seen below. One important *tool* for carrying out such tasks, and one that would become central to nearly all subsequent cases of ethnic cleansing, genocide, class murder, and other large-scale killing was the concentration camp. The late-nineteenth-century burst of large-scale imperialist conquest and war made it essential to control populations, identify enemies, separate certain subgroups from each other, gather forced laborers, and hold groups together for disposal.

² See, for example, Booker T. Washington, "Cruelty in the Congo Country," *The Outlook* 78 (Oct. 8, 1904); Henry Van Dyke *The American Birthright and the Philippine Pottage: A Sermon Preached on Thanksgiving Day, 1898* (New York, n.d. [1898]); Anti-Imperialist League, "Platform of the American Anti-Imperialist League," given in Carl Schurz, *The Policy of Imperialism*, Liberty Tract No. 4 (Chicago, 1899). On the Anti-Imperialist League, see Jim Zwick, "The Anti-Imperialist League: A Brief Organizational History" [<http://www.boondocksnet.com/ail/ailhist.html>]; and Jim Zwick, ed., *Anti-Imperialism in the United States, 1898-1935* [<http://www.boondocksnet.com/ail98-35.html> (Feb. 24, 2001)]. On the concentration camps, see Brian McAllister Linn, *The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, 1899-1902* (Chapel Hill, 1989), 25-37, 154-169.

³ Carlton J. H. Hayes, *A Generation of Materialism, 1871-1900* (New York, 1941).

⁴ My approach to this thesis was greatly stimulated by an April 2000 discussion on population politics and empire on the email list "Forced Migration History List" (Listowner, Nick Baron) FORCED-MIGRATION-HISTORY@JISMAIL.AC.UK, an email discussion list associated with the project "Population Displacement, State-Building and Social Identity in the Lands of the Former Russian Empire, 1918-1930" at the University of Manchester (<http://www.art.man.ac.uk/HISTORY/ahrbproj/details.htm>). I am grateful to Jeff Handmaker, Jonathan Bone, and Peter Holquist for their comments and analysis in this discussion.

At some point, the technology of barbed wire, a cheap and easily used product invented in the United States in the 1870s to fence in cattle, offered itself as a practical way of fencing in human beings. The precise moment at which this use of barbed wire was envisioned is difficult to pinpoint. A recent commentator has pointed out that the applications of barbed wire were soon seen to be various: it could be used both to keep in and keep out.⁵ Australians used wire to create their famous Dingo Fence in the early eighties. This enormous fence was designed to keep dingoes and other threats to cattle out, rather than the cattle in. Apparently about the same time, American railroads in the west began fencing their right-of-ways to keep animals off the tracks.

Perhaps it was the expansion of the functional uses of wire that led to its applications to humans. The expanded conception of barbed wire as a means of controlling human movement seems to have moved around the world in the 1880s. Some time around 1888, British army manuals prescribed stringing barbed wire in front of fixed military positions as a defensive device. Perhaps it was not an especially large conceptual leap from keeping dingoes and other animals away to keeping humans away in the midst of a battle (since the precedent for obstacles to attackers in battle had a long history). In any case, this British tactical directive did, it seems, make the leap of suggesting the use of the wire as a device to control humans. Wherever else the idea occurred, the idea spread quickly within European militaries. The Spanish used it in fighting the Cuban insurrection in 1895 and the Spanish-American War, and the British used it as a matter of course during the Boer War, which broke out in 1899.

Barbed wire was central to the origin of concentration camps because it did provide a relatively cheap and rapid way of erecting barriers which could enclose thousands of people. Any materials that one can think of for accomplishing the same task are time-consuming and expensive. Barbed wire, in essence, provided the technological means to solve problems encountered by the growing imperial states. It is indeed one of the strange conjunctions of modern history that barbed wire appeared at just the moment when the aggressive, imperial state needed it, both for war and for controlling and restraining various populations.

It was thus in the midst of the increasingly large-scale imperial conflicts of the 1890s that barbed wire came to be used for keeping people in as well as keeping them out. This idea probably emerged first in Cuba. With the insurrection going strong, in 1896 Spain named an aggressive general, Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau, as governor of Cuba, with the mission of crushing the insurrection. Weyler, had broad experience, not only with colonial service in Cuba and the Philippines, but also as the Spanish military attaché in Washington, D.C., during the American Civil War. When he became governor in Cuba, Spanish forces had perhaps already been experimenting with barbed wire to help

⁵ Alan Krell, *The Devil's Rope: A Cultural History of Barbed Wire* (London: Reaktion Books, 2003), 45. See also a second recent attempt to assess the cultural meaning of barbed wire, Olivier Razac, *Barbed Wire: A History* (New York: New Press, 2002).

section off the island in order to isolate groups of civilians from certain areas. In 1896/97 General Weyler adopted a program of evacuating noncombatants from insurgent areas that became something like the reverse of what the term "concentration camp" would later denote. Spanish soldiers rounded up some 300,000 Cuban civilians in the attempt to sweep "insurgent" areas of peaceful Cubans, who not only confused the field of fire with their presence, but who might also provide aid and comfort to the insurgents. Weyler's idea was to feed and protect the "good" civilians in what were called "reconcentration camps" (*reconcentrados*). These centers were garrisoned towns, to which the reconcentrated populations were restricted. One description comes from a much published speech given in the U.S. Senate in March 1898 by Vermont Senator Redfield Proctor:

My observations are confined to the four western provinces, which constitute about one half the island. The two eastern provinces are practically in the hands of the insurgents, except the few fortified towns. It is not peace, nor is it war. It is desolation and distress, misery and starvation. Every town and village is surrounded by a "trocha" (trench), a sort of rifle pit, but constructed on a plan new to me, the dirt being thrown up on the inside and a barbed wire on the outer side of the trench. Three trochas have at every corner and at frequent intervals along the sides what are there called "forts", which are really small block houses, many of them more like a large box, loop-holed for musketry and with a guard of from two to ten soldiers each.

The purpose of these trochas is to keep the reconcentrados in as well as to keep the insurgents out. From all the surrounding country the people have been driven into these fortified towns and held there to subsist as they can. They are virtually prison yards, and not unlike one in general appearance, except the walls are not so high and strong, but they suffice, where every point is in range of a soldier's rifle.⁶

Proctor had military experience both as an army officer and as former Secretary of war, and his careful description points up several significant features of the reconcentration camps. The barbed wire which followed the entrenchment was clearly on the outside of the trench and hence employed at least primarily for defense against *insurrectos* rather than as a barrier to enclose the detained persons. Yet, it was all a part of the same barrier. In fact, one wonders whether precisely this arrangement formed a kind of conceptual nexus for using barbed wire exclusively to contain. Another characteristic feature of the system is that, as with so many later concentration camp settings, Weyler's plan seems to have including small provision for providing food and shelter to the reconcentrated populations. In the event, over thirty percent of those "reconcentrated"—upwards of a hundred

⁶ Proctor's speech is printed in Clara Barton, *The Red Cross* (Washington, D.C.: American National Red Cross, 1899), 534-539. See also John L. Offner, *An Unwanted War: The Diplomacy of the United States and Spain Over Cuba, 1895-1898* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 130-134.

thousand people, and perhaps many more—starved to death or died of disease.⁷

The next development in concentration camps was not long in coming. Just over three years later, during the Boer War (1899-1902) in South Africa, the British Army used barbed wire for the range of purposes displayed by the Spanish in Cuba, but with some innovations. In 1899 the British started the war by invading the Boer Republics, South African political units founded by European settler populations of Dutch descent who had migrated northward from the British-dominated coast. After a brief period of conventional warfare, the Boers adopted a strategy of insurgency, fighting mostly in small groups of irregulars, or *kommandos*. This kind of fighting (quite similar to the "insurgents" faced by Spain in Cuba) led the British to adopt similar measures to those of Spain.

On the one hand, like the Spanish in Cuba, the British found it necessary to "clear" the friendly countryside. This they did by burning all the Boer farms they could in the famous "scorched earth" phase of fighting, in which the British simply burned Boer houses, killing or driving off their livestock. The resulting refugees (both white Boers and black African workers and bystanders) faced starvation, and most made their way to British camps set up to house them. These were dubbed "concentration camps," no doubt in echo of the Spanish "*reconcentrados*."

General Roberts (Frederick Lord Roberts) initiated the system in 1900, partly in response to the growing number of refugees resulting from the British attempt to starve the Boers out by burning their homes (some 30,000 of them), partly with the idea of using the incarceration of Boer women and children to force the Boers to stop fighting. Roberts was soon replaced by the Lord Kitchener, and it was under the aggressive hero of Omdurman that the British built some forty concentration camps, eventually containing about 116,000 Boer prisoners, most of them women and children. These "concentration camps" begin to approximate the modern meaning of the term: these barbed wire enclosures were used not so much for sheltering the refugees as for holding them hostage until the Boer guerilla fighters, the *kommandos*, would surrender.

Malnutrition and diseases killed a high percentage of these internees. In a year and half, well over 26,000 Afrikaners died, over 20,000 of them children under sixteen. Of a total Boer population of about 200,000, fifteen percent died, and the disproportionate mortality level among young people presents a genuine demographic catastrophe. Perhaps less known, the well over a hundred thousand black Africans who had been rounded up wandering and homeless because the British "scorched earth" policy, were likewise shut up in concentration camps. Over 14,000 died of disease and poor conditions, about 12,000 of those children.⁸

⁷ Sebastian Balfour, *The End of the Spanish Empire, 1898–1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 13ff; James S. Olson, "Weyler Y Nicolau, Valeriano," in *Historical Dictionary of the Spanish American War*, ed. Donald H. Dydal (Westport, Conn.: 1996), 347-348;

⁸ S. B. Spies, "Women in the War," in *The South African War: The Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902*, ed. Peter Warwick (New York, 1980), 161-185; Peter Warwick, "Black People and the War" in *The South African War*, 186-209.

At about the same time, the United States launched into full-fledged imperialism in the Philippines (as a result of the Spanish-American War, 1898), taking the vast area from Spain and imposing its rule on the local peoples. In the ensuing resistance, American commanders (many of them veterans of American "Indian wars" aimed at the expulsion or liquidation of specific groups of Indians) carried out a "dirty" war against Filipino forces, in the end losing about 5,000 troops against an enormous death toll of over 200,000 Filipino deaths. In the course of this war of conquest and "pacification," General Jacob Smith, a "veteran" of the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890, sent to a subordinate the order: "I want no prisoners, I wish you to kill and burn, the more you kill and burn the better it will please me. I want all persons killed who are capable of bearing arms (ten years of age and above) in actual hostilities against the United States." He emphasized what might be called the demographic function of his mission: "The interior of Samar must be made a howling wilderness."⁹ Smith was later court-martialled, but American efforts throughout the war of conquest and the subsequent "pacification" were consistent with Smith's behavior. General Leonard Wood ordered an attack on six hundred Moros huddling in a crater in the mountains, fugitives from new taxes being collected by the United States. After the "battle," he reported that all were killed: men, women, and children. Concentration camps made their appearance here too, again constructed from the practical technology of barbed wire, at about the same time that the British were employing them in South Africa.¹⁰

Slightly later, in the "protectorate" of German Southwest Africa, later to become Namibia, the German government was directly involved in "cleansing" areas of the Herero people, whose revolt against German colonizers had left several hundred German settlers dead. To deal with the problem, Berlin sent General Adolf Lebrecht von Trotha, a soldier known for his inflexible and draconian policies in German East Africa and in China during the Boxer Rebellion, a war in which the Kaiser had enjoined his officers to act like "Huns." Sent to chastise the Hereros, Trotha commented upon his arrival in 1904: "I know the tribes of Africa.... They only respond to force. It was and is my policy to use force with terrorism and even brutality. I shall annihilate the tribes in revolt with streams of blood and streams of gold. Only after a complete

⁹ Steven M. Gillon and Cathy D. Matson, *The American Experiment* (Boston, 2002), 864-865.

¹⁰ See Helen C. Wilson, *Reconcentration in the Philippines* (Boston [Anti-Imperialist League pamphlet], 1906); reproduced online by Jim Zwick at <http://www.boondocksnet.com/ai/ailtexts/wilson060121.html> as a component of Jim Zwick, ed., "Anti-Imperialism in the United States," 1898-1935. <http://www.boondocksnet.com/ai/> (Aug. 30, 2002). Studies of the concentration policy also include Stuart Creighton Miller, "Benevolent Assimilation": *The American Conquest of the Philippines, 1899-1903* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), in particular chapters 9-12; Glenn Anthony May, *Battle for Batangas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 242-269.

uprooting will something emerge." In October 1904 he issued an order along the lines of Smith's: "Every Herero found within German borders, with or without guns, with or without livestock, will be shot. I will not give shelter to any Herero women or children. They must return to their people, or they will be shot." No male prisoners were to be taken. Women and children were to be harried into the wasteland. His army followed these orders and in the process killed outright or by starvation between 50,000 and 70,000 Hereros.¹¹

In his classic 1902 study of imperialism, British anti-imperialist John A. Hobson pointed out that the new imperialism had really created forms of "forced labor" in a period when "slave labor" had largely disappeared from the world. Hobson pointed out that the confiscations of the property of the conquered populations, and the imposition of taxes on the same populations had been the motor of both the constant "warfare" in the colonies and in the "recruitment" of labor, a term used widely by imperial enforcers who meant to designate "forced labor" in some degree or another.¹² Management of large numbers of people was implied in this process. Hobson outlined the system in some detail:

Break up the tribal system which gives solidarity and some political and economic strength to native life; set the Kaffir on an individual footing as an economic bargainer, to which he is wholly unaccustomed, take him by taxation or other "stimulus" from his locality, put him down under circumstances where he has no option but to labour at the mines—this is the plan which mineowners propose and missionaries approve.

This system of "native locations," fortified by hut and labour-taxes, and by pass laws which interfere with freedom of travel and practically form a class of *ascripti glebæ*, is the only alternative to an expensive system of indentured labour from India, China, or distant parts of Africa. It will be adopted as the cheapest mode of getting a large, reliable, submissive supply; it will be defended as a means of bringing large masses of the natives under influences of civilisation, education, and Christianity.

Recent work by Leiden historian Jan-Bart Gewald has illuminated similar patterns in connection with the Herero war. Gewald points out

¹¹ Jon Bridgman, *The Revolt of the Hereros* (Berkeley, 1981); Günther Spraul, "Der Völkermord an den Herero: Untersuchungen zu einer neuen Kontinuitätsthese," *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 12 (1988): 713-739. See also Jon Bridgman and Leslie J. Worley, "Genocide of the Hereros," in *Genocide in the Twentieth Century: Critical Essays and Eyewitness Accounts*, ed. Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons, and Israel W. Charny (New York, 1995), 3-48. For the official view, see *Die Kämpfe der deutschen Truppen in Südwestafrika*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1906-1907).

¹² John A. Hobson, *Imperialism: A Study* (New York: James Pott and Co., 1902), esp. Part II, chapter IV. This work is available online in its entirety at the Liberty Fund's *Library of Economics and Liberty*: <http://www.econlib.org/library/YPDBooks/Hobson/hbsnImp.html>.

that the German war was in part touched off by extensive “recruiting” of Hereros for work in British South African mines, with the blessing of the German Southwest African government. Significantly, some of the earliest use of barbed wire camps in Southwest Africa were the holding camps for coerced laborers to be shipped to South African mines, many of them never to return. German forces also rounded up “prisoners of war” who were held as labor resources. As one missionary observed on the spot at a camp at Swakopmund: “When... [I] arrived at Swakopmund in 1905 there were very few Herero present. Shortly thereafter vast transports of prisoners of war arrived. They were placed behind double rows of barbed wire fencing, which surrounded all the buildings of the harbour department quarters and housed in pathetic structures.” The workers were fed only enough to keep them alive, then driven to work by brutal overseers. The observer added, “Like cattle, hundreds were driven to death and like cattle they were buried.”¹³

This last point provides an appropriate stopping place for this short history. Where thousands of the dead might be left lying, as in famous cases from Omdurman to the Philippines, once people were concentrated, they died in concentration: some provision had to be made for their burial, if for no other reason than the hygiene of the guards. Hence, in every particular—from barbed wire enclosure to ethnic and class concentration to forced labor, and including the need for concentration camp personnel to search for ways of disposing of the dead—the concentration camp was complete as an institution by 1905 or 1906.

It was a short step indeed for European officers whose service careers had been spent in such places as South Africa, German Southwest Africa, and the Philippines to bring back to Europe, the United States, Australia, and Canada the institution they had developed out on the edges of empire. Various groups of the European populations began to be interned in various theaters of the World War I as early as September 1914. Australian “Germans” would be interned from 1915 onward. Ukrainians were interned in Canada.

Auschwitz and Dachau would later represent changes in the scale, but not the nature of the concentration camp. Hence, in this small way, the concentration camp, an idea realized in the violence of empire, had made its way home.

¹³ Jan-Bart Gewald, “The Road of the Man Called Love and the Sack of Sero: The Herero-German War and the Export of Herero Labour to the South African Rand,” *Journal of African History* 40 (1999): 21-40 (quotation is from 27-28).