

A SHORT
HISTORY



CONCENTRATION CAMPS

DAN STONE

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'This concise book provides a wealth of insights, and suggestive, but plausible, arguments on the origins, myriad functions, and mutability of the most horrifying institution of the twentieth century. It is full of clear thinking and tough talking, which is necessary, since the subject makes most of us recoil in horror and retreat into comfortable moral judgments about the singularity of the Nazi crimes.'

Alan Kramer,
Trinity College Dublin

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A book such as this must aim not to be comprehensive but to ask relevant questions. This book ranges widely, drawing on a voluminous scholarly literature, and I hope that readers will find some clearly defended opinions and some suggestions for thinking about the topic in greater detail. But most of all I hope that they will not expect all the answers; if the questions I raise are thought-provoking then the book has done its job. There are many other paths to follow than those taken here and I hope the book will encourage readers to go down some of them. This is an unpleasant topic but one that can hardly be sidestepped if one is interested in the nature of the modern world. I have not spent too much time on highfalutin theories of what it all means—though I linger with some of these ideas in the final chapter—because I wanted to explore the ways in which different sorts of concentration camps have emerged in different political, social, geographical, and chronological contexts over the last century or so. Only by knowing something of the history of concentration camps can one begin to consider their meaning for our civilization. The book is therefore arranged more or less chronologically, only turning at the end to address theories of what concentration camps tell us about the modern world.

Many friends and colleagues have helped me along the way. Not least of these are the many scholars on whose work I have

drawn, details of which can be found in the references and suggestions for further reading. Some of the ideas in this book were tested at seminars at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, the University of Bucharest, the University of Sussex, and the University of Southern California, and I'm grateful to colleagues at those institutions for their input. I am especially grateful to my colleagues who put me right on numerous points of fact, who have challenged me to set my ideas out more clearly, or otherwise helped shape the book. In particular, it's a pleasure to record my thanks to Daniel Beer, Anne Berg, Mark Donnelly, Geoff Eley, Christian Goeschel, Michelle Gordon, Helen Graham, Wolf Gruner, Becky Jinks, Christoph Kreutzmüller, Florin Lobont, Robert Priest, and Nikolaus Wachsmann for providing me with useful references and for taking the time to read some or all of the book in draft form. I would especially like to thank Jens Meierhenrich, who provided a very careful and helpful reading of the manuscript.

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What is a Concentration Camp?

In his summing up at the trial of Oswald Pohl et al., one of the so-called 'subsequent trials' at Nuremberg, Judge Michael Musmanno noted that:

In the general lurid picture of World War II, with its wrecked cities, uprooted farmland, demolished transportation facilities, and public utilities, starvation, disease, ashes, death, rubble, and dust, one item of horror seems to stand out with particularly dramatic and tragic intensity—the concentration camp. It can be seriously doubted in the world of today, even among the most meagerly informed peoples that there exists a man or woman who in some manner or other has not heard of and recoiled at the mention of the phrase concentration camp. [NMT, Vol. 5, 1067]

If this were true in 1946, how more true it must be today. The Holocaust has become in much of the world the ultimate signifier of evil; at its heart lay the Nazi concentration and death camps. Since then the world has not only learnt more about the Nazi

camps but has discovered that concentration camps originated several decades before the Third Reich began using them, and has witnessed their use again in numerous locations, from wars of decolonization in Africa to the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s. No wonder that Zygmunt Bauman calls the twentieth century 'the century of camps'; they have become defining symbols of humankind's lowest point and basest acts. Indeed, for some thinkers, concentration camps are nothing less than the key to understanding modernity, 'the *nomos* of the modern' as philosopher Giorgio Agamben puts it.

This short book will address these grand claims but it will begin on a more prosaic basis, because before we can pronounce on the significance of concentration camps for the modern world we need to be clear about what they are and how they have developed. We need a history of the concentration camp in order to consider why this institution is so important to modern consciousness and identity. First, the book will trace the concentration camp's origins in nineteenth-century colonial settings such as Australia and the United States, in Cuba, South Africa, and German South-West Africa (today Namibia) in the last years of the nineteenth and first years of the twentieth centuries, and in the genocide of the Armenians during the last days of the Ottoman Empire. It will go on to examine the Nazi camp system, comparing labour camps devised to build the 'racial community' with concentration camps set up to exclude and eventually to eradicate unwanted others. It will show that the images and testimonies of the liberation of the Nazi camps have shaped our definition of concentration camps. It will then go on to examine the Stalinist system of camps and 'special settlements' known as the Gulag and

compare the totalitarian countries' use of camps with those of other, less well-known settings, such as the American internment of Japanese-American citizens during the Second World War, Franco's camps during and after the Spanish Civil War, Britain's use of camps for Jewish displaced persons in Cyprus trying to reach Palestine after the Second World War, the colonial powers' resort to camps during the wars of decolonization, such as in Algeria, Malaya, and Kenya, the Chinese use of camps during the Maoist period, the Khmer Rouge's attempt to turn the whole of Cambodia into a giant concentration camp in the 1970s, the reappearance of concentration camps during the genocide in Bosnia in the 1990s, and the contemporary camp system in North Korea. I will show that this widespread use of concentration camps is not a coincidence; it tells us something about the modern state and about the ways in which such practices were learned, borrowed, and spread from one place to another.

Lastly, the book will examine the meaning and significance of the concentration camp. Are concentration camps 'states of exception' divorced from society and the rule of law, and, if so, do they therefore function as windows onto the deeper desires of modern states' leaders, or are they aberrant sites? Can a meaningful comparison be made between concentration camps such as the Nazis' and refugee camps or detention centres? What about contemporary settings such as favelas, shanty towns, and sweatshops in the global south? That such questions can be posed suggests that sociologists and philosophers who have asked them are not troubled only by the historical existence of concentration camps but by the possibility that for large sections of today's population the world is effectively a giant concentration

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camp. There is clearly a need to obtain clarity over the concentration camp's history so that distinctions can be drawn between meaningful insight and political polemic. I will suggest that although concentration camps exist on a continuum of carceral practices that includes prisons, detention centres, and extraterritorial holding pens such as Guantánamo Bay, and although there is no easy or one-size-fits-all definition to be found, yet there is something that distinguishes concentration camps from other sorts of camps where civilians are temporarily held against their will, such as displaced persons (DP) camps, internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, or refugee camps. This book will offer an up-to-date history of concentration camps in a global setting and engage with the philosophical literature dealing with the complex question of what the camps tell us about the nature of the modern world.

What is a concentration camp? A working definition is that it is *an isolated, circumscribed site with fixed structures designed to incarcerate civilians*. A concentration camp is not normally a death camp, although death camps in the context of the Holocaust obviously derived from concentration camps and the killing of asylum patients (the so-called 'Euthanasia programme') in terms of their institutional history. No one was 'concentrated' in the Nazi death camps of Chełmno (which was actually not really a 'camp' in any meaningful sense), Sobibór, Bełżec, or Treblinka, where Jews (and a small number of Roma and Sinti) were sent to die. The so-called 'work Jews' held as functionaries at these camps—as carpenters, blacksmiths, and so on—to facilitate their running were few in number and also destined to die. The Holocaust has confused our understanding of concentration camps, in that the SS's camp

system, as well as the many other camps in Nazi-occupied Europe run by other agencies such as the Wehrmacht, industry, or local councils, was separate from the programme known as the 'final solution to the Jewish problem' until quite late in the war and because two camps, Majdanek and Auschwitz, combined the functions of concentration camp and death camp. As we will see, the Nazi concentration camps in the strict sense were not established to murder the Jews; their history of change and, during the war, massive expansion, was primarily in response to the Nazis' wish to eradicate political and 'asocial' enemies in the first place, and to provide slave labour for the Reich later on in the context of total war. The confusion arose primarily because Holocaust survivors were found at the concentration camps liberated by the Allies in spring 1945 after having been forcibly marched westwards from camps evacuated in the face of the Soviet advance.

Following the defeat of Nazi Germany the world thought it knew what a concentration camp was. Take, for example, journalist Patrick Gordon Walker's description in his 1945 book *The Lid Lifts*, which described concentration camps as 'one of the exclusive characteristics and manifestations of our own age... one of the distinguishing marks by which you may know the twentieth century':

What is it exactly that distinguishes in our minds a concentration camp from other forms of confinement? Barbed-wire, herded and crowded masses of humanity, the open-air, armed guards mounted on raised towers. These are the outward aspects of the concentration camp.

They are the consequences of *large numbers* of opponents. That is, I think, the essential peculiarity of the concentration camp. The very large number of

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those whom you wish to deprive of liberty—far too many for the discipline, order and expense of prisons.

When the concentration camp becomes a permanency it is the sign of a regime that knows it cannot command national support or even tolerance. It accepts the fact that very large numbers of its citizens, far beyond the normal percentage of criminals, are in irreconcilable opposition—or at any rate that these very large numbers of people must be deprived of their liberty.

Together with this goes the inescapable corollary of a lowered respect for humanity—men and women are herded there who have been deprived of the elemental legal rights that clothe the human being who is still regarded as such: naked men and women. [*The Lid Lifts*, p. 65]

Although accurate in many ways, Gordon Walker missed some essential points here: these very large numbers of people are ‘irreconcilable opponents’ insofar as the regime in power perceives them to be, they are not necessarily people who have committed a crime. Indeed, they are highly unlikely to be criminals in any proper legal sense, although there are usually real criminals in concentration camps to give some appearance of truth to the regime’s claims and—in the case of Nazi Germany at least—to aid the regime’s goal of ‘social cleansing’. They are ‘enemies’ only because the regime has defined them as such, due to some characteristic—appearance, ‘race’, class, political identification, religion—that the regime perceives as intolerable or threatening. They are also, most important, usually civilians (one should note that sometimes POWs or resistance fighters have also been held in concentration camps). These civilians are not armed opponents of a regime—rebels, terrorists, or insurrectionists—who have been incarcerated and are treated