

# Internment in Switzerland during the First World War

Susan Barton



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Cover image: British prisoners interned at Mürren, Switzerland, enjoying winter sports.  
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## Introduction

Studies of tourism history either come to an abrupt end with the outbreak of war in 1914 or skip over the four years of conflict between the *belle époque* and what is termed the 'inter-war years'. Research into the history of the Swiss tourism industry revealed that visitor numbers had increased steadily since the 1880s in the increasingly fashionable alpine resorts. Communities and hoteliers had invested heavily in capital infrastructure projects, including new hotels and sanatoria, to meet the demands of both health and pleasure seekers. The 1900s saw even greater growth in visitors as winter sports began to attract a wider section of the European elite and hotel owners extended or upgraded their facilities, often with the aid of loans, with the result that the year 1913 to 1914 brought record numbers of visitors to Switzerland, over 2 million annually, about 24 per cent of them British.<sup>1</sup> This raised the question of how the tourism industry survived the war and what did those involved in the business do during the years when there were few or no visitors.

In the *Dokumentationsbibliothek* in Davos, newspapers produced for visitors who remained there during the war years told of the preparations for and arrival there of wounded German prisoners from France during January 1916. Simultaneously, French prisoners were also arriving in Switzerland from German prisons. Curiosity aroused, the research for this book about the internment of wounded prisoners of war in Switzerland eventually followed. What was discovered was an unusually positive and little-known First World War story, a contrast to the plethora of works focusing on the tragic waste of human life, the causes of the war, its conduct, military history, the home front and individual biographies. Switzerland is an interesting case to study as it demonstrates the impact of the First World War on a neutral state and the humanitarian role such nations can play.

Although Switzerland was a neutral nation and managed to stay out of the fighting, the country was still adversely affected by the war. War meant rationing

and inflation causing hardship, particularly to the poorest. Being dependent on imports of food, coal and other necessities, it was essential to keep cross-border transport routes open. At the beginning of the war Swiss men of military age were mobilized to defend the borders and ensure there was no breach of neutrality by foreign armies crossing into Swiss territory. This suited the belligerents who had no wish to open another front. The men's absence left a serious labour shortage. Horses were requisitioned for military use, including farm horses, making agricultural work difficult for the women and older men left behind to manage alone, particularly at ploughing and harvest time. In the tourism resorts, many hotels were heavily mortgaged and the sudden decline in visitor numbers and associated revenue caused cash-flow problems and debt, although some resorts, like Davos, continued scaled-down summer and winter sports seasons. The possibility of interning wounded prisoners of war transferred from prison camps in the belligerent nations offered them a financial lifeline.

Switzerland had some previous experience of interning foreign military personnel and civilian refugees when, following the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, around 87,000 French soldiers of General Bourbaki's Eastern French Army crossed the border into Switzerland where they were interned for six weeks.<sup>2</sup> This event became ingrained in Swiss popular culture by the huge 110-metre-long panoramic painting of the scene by Red Cross volunteer, Edouard Castres, who witnessed the events first hand. The giant *Bourbaki Panorama* was installed in 1889 in a circular gallery to be viewed by visitors to Lucerne's Tourist Mile.<sup>3</sup>

The subject of this book is not one that has been examined in detail in a monograph-length study. There are few, if any publications that investigate internment of wounded prisoners in Switzerland written in English, French or German. There have been some publications in English that look at themes relating to military prisoners of war and civilian internment in both the First and Second World Wars. None look at their transfer to Switzerland and what happened to them while they were there. What these publications have in common with this work is the emphasis placed on the importance of routine and the role of work, sport, entertainment and the development of individual interests as means of discipline and to maintain morale and mental survival. Oliver Wilkinson, for instance, in *British Prisoners of War in First World War Germany* writes, 'Inmates in many camps in Germany exercised semi-autonomous government, and structured their captive world in a way which imitated their previous round of life within an organised military regime.'<sup>4</sup> He also notes that non-officers had the routine of work and drill that created continuity with pre-captive military life. 'They were kept occupied, which reduced their

free time and so maintained discipline.<sup>5</sup> Prisoners had sport in the afternoons after fatigues. The structured life of prisoners was reproduced in civilian internment camps where men deemed to be aliens were held to prevent them leaving to join enemy armies. Panikos Panayi in *Prisoners of Britain* describes how German civilians and also military captives interned in Britain between 1914 and 1918 created their own routines which included work, education, organized sport, musical and intellectual activities. Their opposite numbers, British civilian men interned in Berlin at Ruhleben camp, did the same, creating their own prison camp societies, the title of Canadian psychologist J. David Ketchum's posthumous account of his personal experience of internment during the First World War, *Ruhleben: A Prison Camp Society*.<sup>6</sup> One group interned in Ruhleben, the musicians is discussed in the paper *In Ruhleben Camp* by Lewis Foreman, based on the camp's journal of the same name *In Ruhleben Camp*.<sup>7</sup> The importance of routine and occupation to prisoners is also emphasized by Clare Makepeace in *Captives of War, British Prisoners of War in Europe in the Second World War*. Routines that included classes, reading, writing, walking round a field for exercise, perhaps an evening lecture or concert, followed by bridge in their rooms, kept prisoners of war (POWs) disciplined, active and occupied, in what Makepeace describes as a 'Kriegie Way of Life'. Kriegie is short for *Kriegsgefangener*, German for prisoner of war.<sup>8</sup> Orchestras, bands, concerts, art and sports, such as football, boxing, cricket and rugby, were part of the POW experience in the Second World War, just as they were in the First, a theme pursued by historian Midge Gillies's monograph *The Barbed-Wire University, the Real Lives of Allied Prisoners of War in the Second World War*. Gillies devotes a chapter to sport and looks in depth at the role of the arts, that provided mental escape through creativity. Learning a new skill or uncovering a new talent was a way of stealing back some of the time the war had taken away.<sup>9</sup> Lena Radauer, in her PhD research on prisoners of war held in Russia, looks at the experiences of captives of the Russians within military internment facilities in Siberia, who developed similar artistic and cultural pastimes as survival strategies.<sup>10</sup> These routines and activities were important to the lives of wounded prisoners interned in Switzerland. Because they were not living in a closed homosocial environment those interned in Switzerland could extend their activities to include civilians and females while sport created opportunities to travel to other communities to compete with other nationalities.

In his paper *Diluting Displacement, Letters from Captivity* Wilkinson emphasizes how keeping in touch with home, through letters and parcels, helped maintain close relationships with family and wives, contacts that were important

psychologically.<sup>11</sup> Letters from family were important to civilian internees too. Panayi recognizes that the post played a central role in the mood of the camps and quotes an internee, Gunther Plüschow, who wrote of his experience: 'The post was the Alpha and Omega of our existence. We divided our whole day according to its delivery, and the temper of the camp was regulated by it.'<sup>12</sup> Makepeace's research on the Second World War also emphasizes the importance of letters as a connection with home, a place that prisoners would often fantasize about.<sup>13</sup> This recurring theme is also central to Michael Roper's psychological history *The Secret Battle, Emotional Survival in the Great War*. Roper looks beyond the walls of prison camps and identifies that connections between home and war fronts were a central part of the experience of battle.<sup>14</sup> Letters were eagerly awaited by soldiers in the trenches. However, Roper is concerned that the importance of home links may be overstated as young men at the front were reluctant to engage honestly with their wives or mothers about the horror they faced and perhaps their very protestation of good spirits suggested that all was not well.<sup>15</sup> Realizing that people at home could not understand what conditions were really like could emphasize isolation rather than bring closeness. For Roper, the mother and son relationship was the primary one for most young working-class soldiers. For internees in Switzerland letters and postcards also played an important role. Postage was free during the early stages of the internment scheme and was enthusiastically made use of. The first thing most internees did on arrival in Switzerland was send a postcard home showing their new address. The postcards were then followed up by letters. As prisoners, men formed close relationships with each other and so picture postcards and letters helped maintain friendships with comrades from whom they were separated. For those interned in Switzerland, family links could be maintained by stronger means than a letter as officers' wives, mothers and children could come over to stay in the internment centres for the duration of the war. For the ordinary soldiers on low incomes their wives or mothers could visit for a fortnight, supported by public subscription. The fact that these visits were officially sanctioned and encouraged demonstrates how important maintaining family links was judged to be by both governments and the public.

The history of prisoners of war is mainly written from two perspectives, argues Makepeace, the first being the policies of governments and neutral observers, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) or a protecting power, a neutral state nominated by a belligerent government, who visited prisoners and monitored their incarceration. The second perspective is that of the prisoners, what they went through and what POW life was like.<sup>16</sup>

Makepeace distinguishes her own work on POWs in the Second World War from these perspectives by adopting a cultural approach, explaining how POWs made sense of their experiences as men, in a gendered environment, linked to concepts of masculinity. She also points out that prisoners' families are rarely discussed by historians.

So far the discussion has focused solely on wartime internees, men who had no choice about where they were or how long they would be forced to stay. The strict regime of the prison camp had some similarities with the routines of colonies of health seekers, mountaineers and winter sports enthusiasts in Switzerland during the forty years or so leading up to the First World War. These groups of visitors created their own entertainment of concerts, theatricals and dances and formed clubs to organize winter sports, a particularly British habit.<sup>17</sup> These people were free to leave whenever they chose, except when medical advice dictated otherwise, but there were many parallels with the lives of the internees who replaced them in the hotels they vacated in 1914.

In *Wounded Prisoners of War Interned in Switzerland* a variety of approaches and historical methods are incorporated to create a broad perspective: diplomacy, the effect on the Swiss hosts, what internee life was like, how they occupied their time, how internment affected women and families. The book overlaps a number of thematic areas of historical study including gender and sports history. Although it is about prisoners of war the work does not look at prison camps and although there were similarities with both military and civilian internment, there were significant differences. There were also similarities to the routines of pre-war hotel guests and sanatoria patients, the main difference being that the internees could not choose to leave. These similarities can be explained by comparison with closed communities where structure and familiarity are important to emotional survival.

As this book is about soldiers who were wounded or ill, Joanna Bourke's *Dismembering the Male* was invaluable background reading to the project.<sup>18</sup> Its focus on the male body during the First World War clarified some of the contemporary social, cultural attitudes towards disability and disfigurement and the psychological impacts on individuals. Every prisoner who went to Switzerland was seriously ill or maimed in some way: some with disfiguring facial injuries and others walked with crutches or a stick or had lost limbs. Life-changing injuries brought into question what Makepeace describes as the '3 "P"s of the manly role – procreator, provider and protector'.<sup>19</sup> Their stay in Switzerland gave the wounded a time of seclusion to recover and adjust to their changed circumstances and learn appropriate new skills before returning home,

to give them a chance to restore or renegotiate their masculinity and create an independent life, hopefully as a wage earner.

Another important work on the history of POWs in the First World War is Heather Jones's *Violence against Prisoners of War* in which she describes a radicalization of violence against unarmed captives in France, Germany and Britain. Prisoners told stories of abuse from their captors and civilians during transit to prison camps and during captivity, stories which in turn were used in propaganda and justified retaliation.<sup>20</sup> *Internment in Switzerland during the First World War* shows an opposite dynamic, of the contrast between the violence of being taken into captivity and the kindness, warm welcome and generosity shown on their arrival in Swiss communities. What Jones's work shares with this book is a comparative approach, investigating the experiences of British, French and German prisoners.

Books about the First World War or military prisoners tend to be written from the point of view of one nation only. Another of the few books that adopt a comparative approach to a war time study is Susan Grayzel's *Women and the First World War*. In *Internment in Switzerland during the First World War* efforts have been made to include the experiences of internees of all nations involved. To accomplish this, research visits were made to several regions of Switzerland where wounded prisoners of different nationalities were interned, in French and in German-speaking areas. Local histories of internment in particular communities demonstrate how internment affected individuals and villages. The internees themselves and their leaders have been given a voice through the magazines produced by and for them: *British Interned Mürren/Magazine*, *Journal des Internés Français* and *Deutsche Internierten Zeitung* gave an insight into the preoccupations, interests, activities, occupations and social life of the communities of internees. Rather than showing differences that could be compared, the magazines show that the internees had more interests in common than differences. The private papers and letters of mostly British men who experienced internment, held at the Imperial War Museum in London, give further insight into the internees' perspectives. Another key source was the British Foreign Office records in the National Archive which contain material from the POW section of the War Office. Swiss archives provided documentation on French and German internment.

Important to the understanding of internment and why and how it took place are the negotiations between the warring countries and the Swiss to reach agreements on the transfer of sick and wounded prisoners from prison camps in Germany, France and Britain to Switzerland. The first agreement was for the

transfer of tuberculosis sufferers held in camps in Germany and France. This agreement between France, Germany and the Swiss took effect from early January 1916. A few months later, the categories of illness or injury eligible for internment were extended to include those seriously wounded but who were expected to eventually recover. Internment in Switzerland would prevent them making a useful contribution to the war effort should they return home. The British were hesitant and not involved in these negotiations until a few months later when eventually agreements were reached between Great Britain, Germany, Switzerland and also France which had to be crossed by any prisoners travelling from Britain. Swiss historians, Thomas Bürgisser, Christophe Vuilleumier, Cédric Cotter and Irène Herrmann have studied the diplomatic and political aspects of internment. Bürgisser and Vuilleumier from a diplomatic and Swiss governmental perspective while Cotter and Herrmann examine the important role played by the ICRC in Geneva which had close links with the government. For Vuilleumier, welcoming wounded prisoners played an important role for the image, economy and identity of Switzerland.<sup>21</sup> The 2014 doctoral thesis of German historian Marcelin Oliver Draenert, *Kriegschirurgie und Kriegsorthopädie in der Schweiz zur Zeit des Ersten Weltkrieges*, investigates Swiss medical history during the time of internment and the opportunities this created for surgeons to develop their skills.<sup>22</sup> In comparison with the internment of the French, Belgians and British, a story which is relatively well known in Switzerland, Vuilleumier acknowledges that internment of Germans is hardly studied. This book will address that by investigating the conditions of internment for Germans, as well as the other nationalities. Bürgisser emphasizes that internment is a small but growing area of study of a topic of great importance to Switzerland's self-perception during the Great War.<sup>23</sup>

Cotter and Herrmann's study discusses the role of the ICRC in diplomacy, repatriation of the seriously wounded, and as an intermediary between belligerents.<sup>24</sup> They investigate the positive impact of internment on national cohesion between French- and German-speaking cantons and how humanitarianism became an aspect of Swiss identity at a time when it was threatened by doubts about the viability of neutrality, with different linguistic regions taking opposing sides.<sup>25</sup> The transport, hospitalization and care of sick and wounded internees provided employment for some of the Swiss medical staff left unemployed at the start of the war as spas and sanatoria were forced to close.<sup>26</sup>

This work seeks to investigate and analyse a number of aspects regarding internment of wounded military prisoners in the neutral state of Switzerland.



In what ways did internment in a neutral country differ from imprisonment in a military-run prisoner-of-war camp or a civilian internment camp? A thematic approach has been adopted as the research highlighted a number of themes, all integral to the experience of internment. A focus on the negotiations to enable internment to take place comes from the rich source of the records of the British Foreign Office and the War Office in the National Archives, which document the process leading up to the agreement for the exchange and transfer to Switzerland of British and German wounded prisoners. Light is cast on the reason why this took place after the exchange between France and Germany was already implemented. Why internment of foreign wounded prisoners within the borders of their neutral nation was important to the Swiss is discussed looking at international research on this theme and contemporary documents. How did internment affect Switzerland politically, economically and also socially is another theme to discuss. The impacts on the internees themselves are investigated by looking at their experiences of transfer and arrival in Switzerland, how they were occupied by employment, education, training, sport and entertainment and leisure activities, both as participants and as observers. How these experiences were related to similar themes in civilian internment, the military and military-run prisoner-of-war camps will be explored. A major difference between military and civilian internment and neutral internment was that internees were able to associate and socialize with females, both native Swiss and their own wives, mothers and fiancées who could come and stay or visit. In neutral countries the wounded soldiers and officers were not enemies and so were not kept in confinement, unless they had committed a crime. Even so, they were subject to military discipline according to their rank and status within their own military hierarchy and also under the supervision of the Swiss Army. In contrast to a military or civilian camp, the internees enjoyed relative freedom.

Sources used to explore the internees' experiences include the magazines they produced that reported on all aspects of internment life in Switzerland: comings and goings, sport, concerts, cultural pursuits, festive celebrations, weddings, births, funerals and repatriation. These magazines were produced regularly by and for British, French and German internees. Other sources were discovered in Swiss archives and collections in the regions of internment. These include regulations that internees had to abide by, rations supplied, photographs and artefacts. Particularly helpful were the museum archives in Montreux and Engelberg, the cantonal archive in Fribourg and the Documentation Library in Davos. Swiss local histories of life in the First World War were also important sources. The frequent reports sent to the War Office in London from Lieutenant

Colonel Picot, in overall charge of the British internees, and the senior British officers in the centres of internment give an insight into the management and some of the problems and concerns of internment. Another valuable source of information about internment life are the many reports in regional newspapers about local men transferred to Switzerland and some of the women who went out to visit them. The Imperial War Museum in London contains personal papers, including letters and photographs belonging to some of the interned soldiers which provide individual, sometimes intimate, accounts not available in more public documents. The Red Cross papers and records are another source of information. For information on the development of winter sports, the Ski Club of Great Britain archive, housed among De Montfort University's Special Collections was consulted.

Heather Jones and others have estimated there were around 9 million prisoners of war around the world during the First World War.<sup>27</sup> Germany held the highest number of captives, an estimated 2.5 million of them by the war's end. Of these 185,329 were British military prisoners imprisoned in Germany.<sup>28</sup> The nearly 68,000 or so, of all sides, that came to Switzerland was only a tiny minority of up to 9 million imprisoned, including an estimated 2.4 million held in the Russian Empire.<sup>29</sup> The scope of this work does not cover refugees, deserters, war resisters or civilian internees, who were in Switzerland, many of whom were less welcome than the wounded POWs. Prisoners of war were also interned in neutral Holland, which is not discussed in this book but worthy of a comparative study in its own right.

## Notes

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25 Ibid., p. 250.

26 Ibid., p. 257.

27 Jones, *Violence against Prisoners of War in the First World War*, p. 2.

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## Negotiations and agreements between the belligerents and Switzerland

The decisions by the Swiss government and the warring nations to allow some prisoners of war to exchange their place of incarceration for a Swiss hotel came about after lengthy and complex negotiations. As a neutral state, Switzerland was unable to take sides, but with war raging all around them, the Swiss could not ignore what was happening to their neighbours. The Swiss Army had conscripted men of military age and requisitioned farm horses, in order to build a force it was hoped would be capable of defending Switzerland's borders and preventing any combatants violating its neutrality by intruding onto its territory, risking opening another front. There were also fears that Italy might attempt to annexe Ticino.<sup>1</sup> Swiss neutrality was therefore desirable for the belligerents. Another threat to neutrality was partisanship: it was a concern that people in the eastern part of the country, where the majority spoke German dialects, might favour the Central Powers, led by the German Empire whose Kaiser Wilhelm II had received a triumphal welcome when he visited Switzerland only two years earlier. German-speaking Swiss politicians had studied at German universities and so had links with Germany. Inhabitants of French-speaking areas, *Suisse Romande*, favoured the Entente allies, especially after the invasion of Belgium. For the Swiss, observing the suffering and chaos surrounding their island of peace was problematic and also caused division and doubts about the viability of neutrality.<sup>2</sup> Some of this was due to the influence of the media. Swiss from the different linguistic communities would naturally read newspapers written in their own language with information originating from German or French sources. This meant that readers received information biased to the different sides of the conflict.<sup>3</sup> The media waged war with the weapon of public opinion, disseminated to serve the needs of the belligerent governments who had 'the exclusive monopoly of imparting news from the front. Different nations received entirely conflicting versions of the same event that followed the boundaries

of languages and dominant intellectual influences.<sup>4</sup> As Charles Borgeaud, a professor at the University of Geneva in 1914, wrote of the effect on neutrals of differing versions of the news from different national sources, it had 'the nefarious effect of extending the action of war across their boundaries by encroaching on the battle-field of thought, upon their declared neutrality'.<sup>5</sup> Action was needed from the Swiss government to prevent any divisions becoming a political danger. What was needed was an initiative to unite the Swiss as one nation with a common purpose and identity. The federal government issued an *Appeal to the Swiss People*, signed by President Hoffmann, on 1 October 1914 urging citizens to refrain from any partiality in order to preserve Switzerland's obligations as a neutral state and to maintain good relationships with other countries. Hoffmann called on Swiss journalists and citizens of all parties and languages to show moderation rather than sew division by taking sides.

We see the ideal of our fatherland in a community of culture which rises above races and tongues. First of all we are Swiss, and only secondarily Latins or Germans. Above all sympathies for the nations to which we feel tied by common descent, we place the welfare of Switzerland, our common good. To that welfare we must subordinate all the rest.<sup>6</sup>

To bring the country together as one nation with a common aim, the federal government looked to the Swiss role in the founding of the ICRC and the Geneva Convention. The ICRC originated in the experiences of Henry Dunant (1828–1910) who witnessed the dreadful suffering of wounded soldiers after the Battle of Solferino in Italy in 1859. Dunant was appalled by the complete lack of appropriate medical care which meant the injured were just abandoned to die or left dependent on the kindness of local people. Dunant wrote about his traumatic experiences of the aftermath of the battle in his book *A Memory of Solferino* published in 1862. At the end of the book he made two practical proposals that he believed might prevent future neglect of injured combatants. One of these was the founding of relief societies during peacetime, made up of civilians in every country, with the purpose of aiding wounded soldiers. If war were to break out the volunteers would move into action to support the army's medical provision. The second proposal was that European governments sign up to a binding international agreement or convention which would provide the basis for organizations or societies to offer relief to the wounded in the different countries.<sup>7</sup> Inspired by this, Gustave Moynier (1826–1910), the chairman of the Geneva Society for Public Welfare, was determined to put these proposals into action. Moynier created a committee of five members from the Society of

Public Welfare, which included Dunant and himself, in February 1863. At its first meeting this group declared itself to be an international and permanent committee. It was known as 'the International Committee for Relief to Wounded Soldiers' until its name was changed in 1875 to the ICRC. At a conference in Geneva in October 1863, the new organization secured a commitment from sixteen countries to set up national committees to provide relief for wounded soldiers, staffed by voluntary medical personnel who would be identified by wearing an armband with a red cross on a white background, or a red crescent in the Ottoman Empire. Individual states had their own Red Cross Societies, independent from the ICRC which acted as a co-ordinator.

At a diplomatic conference organized by the Swiss government in collaboration with the new ICRC in August 1864, a treaty was drawn up, the Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded Armies in the Field, commonly known as 'the first Geneva Convention'. The signatories agreed that in the event of war, medical workers, ambulances and hospitals would be considered neutral, and the wounded would be cared for without regard to nationality.<sup>8</sup> This was the Swiss foundation of modern international humanitarian law. The ICRC played an important role in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 to 1871 when it realized the importance of not only dealing with wounded prisoners of war but also helping families trace uninjured ones too. By 1914, the ICRC had grown from five members to nine, still a small voluntary organization led by Gustave Ador, its president since 1910, with part-time volunteer members, all upper-class Geneva protestants.<sup>9</sup> Despite being president of both the ICRC and of the Swiss Federal Council, bound to strictly adhere to neutrality, Ador, in common with many of his fellow *Suisse-Romandes*, was a Francophile who hoped to minimize pro-German feelings among Swiss-Germans, something feared by the French.<sup>10</sup>

The ICRC, with its nine part-time members, was completely unprepared for the scale of need the Great War would bring. Initially the Committee tried to do all the work by itself but was soon overwhelmed by the volume of letters seeking information about missing men, the wounded and prisoners. Within two months of the outbreak of war, the ICRC had increased its staff twelvefold. By the end of 1914 it had around 1,200 workers, some salaried and most involved in the International Prisoners of War Agency.<sup>11</sup> This tracing service for POWs was established in Geneva by the ICRC. It was organized into fourteen national sections: one for each country involved in the war plus specialized sections for civilians and medical staff. More than seventy women worked to make lists of prisoners and to create card index files recording them. A total of 4,805,000 files were created, and thousands of letters and parcels were delivered daily.<sup>12</sup>