
**Reviewed by** Derek Mallett (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Gordon, Georgia)

**Published on** H-War (April, 2022)

**Commissioned by** Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The study of civilian internees and prisoners of war continues to be an important and growing field. How a nation treats its prisoners, both civilian and military, provides an interesting perspective of that nation and its values. With civilian internment, what people a nation elects to intern in wartime also speaks to that nation’s values. Rachel Pistol is currently a digital historian at King’s College London, working on the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure. Her first book, *Internment during the Second World War: A Comparative Study of Great Britain and the USA*, offers a compelling comparison of civilian internment in Britain and the United States.

Pistol argues that, while internment of enemy aliens in wartime is a recognized component of international law, the differing circumstances in Britain and the United States focus attention on the history of racial discrimination in America. Her study compares the treatment of the enemy aliens from what she argues were each country’s most likely threat: Germany, Austria, and Italy for the British, Japan for the Americans. Through this comparison, she demonstrates that Britain’s internment of German, Austrian, and Italian enemy aliens arose largely because of national security concerns, whereas the process of Japanese American internment involved racial discrimination as much as it did national security. The fact that American authorities interned some seventeen thousand Japanese American children under the age of ten, including orphans, supports this interpretation.

Pistol’s book consists of four main chapters. The first, “The Origins of Internment,” highlights the two countries’ public perceptions of enemy aliens and the legal framework governing their treatment during the century or more prior to the Second World War. She concludes that “discrimination towards immigrants was prevalent in both societies” but notes that British policy toward refugees immediately prior to the start of the Second World War was more generous—“tens of thousands of European refugees were granted at least temporary leave to remain in Britain”—where American policy was “completely inflexible” (pp. 30, 31).

“Life in the Camps,” the second chapter, details the general daily living conditions and some of the experiences of the internees in both countries. She demonstrates the temporary nature of British camps compared to the more permanent construction of camps in the United States, the differing internment policies in Hawaii compared to mainland United States, and a variety of other issues surrounding the internment of civilians on both sides of the Atlantic. The third chapter, “Endings and Aftermath,” looks at the release of in-
ternees and their efforts to rebuild their lives post internment. In Britain, internment began in the spring of 1940, yet some internees gained their release as early as August of the same year, and large numbers of internees were freed by early 1941. In the United States, by contrast, internment was more prolonged, lasting from early 1942 until early 1946. The final chapter, “Memory,” illustrates that there is little public engagement with Second World War internment in Britain, other than the memorials to the lives lost in the sinking of the transport ship Arandora Star. Pistol states, however, that, in the United States, “internment falls into a history of racial prejudice” where former internees and their families want to keep the memory of Japanese American internment alive for future generations to prevent this kind of discrimination from happening again (p. 131).

The kind of comparative history in which Pistol engages in this book yields valuable and timely insights. Yet the comparison might have benefited from a bit more expansive examination. Pistol contends that “the book is, therefore, a comparison of similar enemy alien groups.... The harshest penalties were imposed on those who originated from countries that were considered to be the greatest threat” (p. 6). Two-thirds of Japanese Americans were US citizens, however, rather than enemy aliens, which makes American behavior even more damning but complicates this comparison. Some additional consideration of the small number of Japanese nationals interned in Britain or the sizable number of German, Austrian, and Italian enemy aliens interned in the United States might have both broadened and deepened the book’s analysis.

Yet, in all, this is a good book that makes valid points. It would be of interest to scholars of the Second World War in general and civilian internees in particular. Moreover, Pistol’s fluid writing style might also make this book appealing to the casual reader.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-war


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53626

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.