

**Family and the Carceral State: First World War Internment at Vernon Camp**

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Around the borders of the internment camp at Vernon, British Columbia during the First World War were residential streets. The camp was part of the neighbourhood.<sup>1</sup> The site had formerly been used as an asylum and was repurposed by the military for the housing of troops, guards and enemy alien prisoners. The internment camp at Vernon held women and children, as did only one other camp at Spirit Lake, Quebec. These families imprisoned behind barbed wire spent years of incarceration trying to make a prison their home. This article will focus on experiences of families in the internment camp at Vernon, in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia. The camp at Vernon was one of 24 camps across Canada, the largest in British Columbia central part of a network of 7 camps in the province.<sup>2</sup> The complexity of internment experiences lends itself to the use of case studies as a method of analysis.<sup>3</sup> Family life at internment camp will be explored through glimpses of family life at Vernon camp in government records, particularly around discussions of children and records relating to an altercation between two prisoners, Karl Wagner and Leo Mueller.

Viewing internment as putting families, and children, behind barbed wires challenges us to understand the process of internment within familial networks: both the familial networks among prisoners and the so-called familial network of empire. Implicit and explicit within this familial framing are gendered assumptions about the relationship between military service and imperial subjecthood. The outbreak of war called into question peoples loyalties based on this assumption: to whom would they be loyal? An additional layer includes the economic pressure related to the incarceration of a household's male economic breadwinner, without whom families

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<sup>1</sup> This property was owned by the Province of British Columbia, firstly built as a provincial jailhouse. McNair, 3.

<sup>2</sup> CFWWIRF, Digital Interactive Map of Internment Camps, available at: <https://www.internmentcanada.ca/map.cfm>  
Other internment sites in BC in addition to Vernon included camps at Revelstoke-Field, Jasper, Monashee-Mara Lake, Fernie/Morrissey, Edgewood, and Nanaimo.

<sup>3</sup> Stefan Manz et al, "Internment During the First World War: A Mass Global Phenomenon" in *Internment during the First World War: A Mass Global Phenomenon*, edited by Stefan Manz, Panikos Panayi and Matthew Stibbe (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 2.

might be left in financial strain. This economic concern pushed not only a wide-spread system of family relief to support families experiencing internment, but this same concern also forced some women to make the impossible choice to accompany their husbands, and bring their children, into internment camps at Vernon and Spirit Lake, Quebec. These economic supports suggest Canada's First World War internment operations can be placed alongside a growing system of state-sponsored family relief programs that positioned the state as a paternal care-giver both morally and economically to struggling or "undesirable" family dynamics. This framing of internment through familial networks of belonging, both in the traditional sense of close relations and in the imagined sense of the nation, can fundamentally expand our current understandings of internment operations during the First World War.

### **Historiography**

Civilian internment during the First World War shifted the relationship between civilians and warfare in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It blurred distinctions between militant combatant and civilian non-combatant so that "the very concept of *enemy* was reinterpreted."<sup>4</sup> The war was a multi-ethnic and multi-nation conflict and coincided with a period of migration that saw mass migration to Canada from Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>5</sup> When war was declared, many nations called into question people's loyalties. In these ways, internment during the First World War connects with global contexts and assumptions about the martial duties of imperial subjecthood.

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<sup>4</sup> Bohdan Kordan, First World War Internment in Canada: Enemy Aliens and the Blurring of the Military/Civilian Distinction, *Canadian Military History* vol. 29 (2020) (2): 2.

<sup>5</sup> This global context does not mean there was a standard approach to internment during the war. For example, policies and conditions of internment differed between countries and even within the British Empire. Approaches to internment were complex rather than standard. While Canada used the forced labour of interned men to build national infrastructure projects, including national parks, other dominions of the British Empire did not. See Stefan Manz et al, "Internment During the First World War: A Mass Global Phenomenon" in *Internment during the First World War: A Mass Global Phenomenon*, edited by Stefan Manz, Panikos Panayi and Matthew Stibbe (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019), 2.

There was a common dual rationale for internment and registration of enemy aliens during the First World War. First, a martial fear that active or former members of other armies would mobilize in support of enemy armies. That, for example, former or active soldiers and officers would support Austrian and German armies from within Canada or leave to take up arms against the British empire. Second, a fear that enemy aliens presented social and economic threats to communities. This fear was placed on single, young men and labourers who made up the work parades of prisoners who built infrastructure projects, including national parks, for unfair and sometimes unpaid wages. Both rationales for surveillance and internment of enemy aliens relied on shared assumptions that gendered military service and wage earning potential as masculine. Women and children were interned, in relatively fewer numbers, out of economic necessity to accompany a husband or father who was the main family wage earner. Recalling the experiences of his grandmothers and mother with internment, Jerry Bayrak shared: “They said that it was all voluntary but if you see any of the photographs, there were soldiers with fixed bayonets on their rifles.”<sup>6</sup>

Conditions in the internment and work camps were difficult. Interned prisoners faced harsh weather, were made to construct their own camps, and required to work on construction, land-clearing, and road-building projects for unpaid or unfair wages.<sup>7</sup> They faced mistreatment from guards that included physical violence, solitary confinement, and restriction of food and water. Mail and information were censored. Men were sometimes interned in locations unknown to their family and friends.<sup>8</sup> As many historians have pointed out, the internment and mass

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<sup>6</sup> “It happened, son of interned Ukrainian says” *St. Albert Today* 10 January 2020. Available at:

<https://www.stalberttoday.ca/local-arts-and-culture/it-happened-son-of-interned-ukrainian-says-2012867>

<sup>7</sup> Kassandra Luciuk, “Reinserting Radicalism: Canada’s First National Internment Operations, the Ukrainian Left, and the Politics of Red” in *Civilian Internment in Canada: Histories and Legacies*, pp. 49-69 (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), 18. The political and physical violence of internment and forced work included the seizure of property and assets at the time of internment.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

surveillance of enemy aliens was both unjust and contested. During the war, prisoners escaped protested through insubordination, and called attention to their unfair treatment through insubordination, escapes, petitions, letters, and legal action against the state after their release.

Not every prisoner survived the camps; 107 prisoners died, 59 of them at work camps in Ontario. Illness spread within in the camps, both influenza and tuberculosis, and Quebec reported deaths of one women and six children interned at Spirit Lake.<sup>9</sup> Descendants of internees have shared how the impacts of internment lasted generations. Three generations of Jerry Bayrak’s family, whose mother was born in the Spirit Lake internment camp, were affected by tuberculosis: his great-grandmother Anna, grandmother Felicia, and mother, Mary. His mother was hospitalized for tuberculosis years after her internment, and his sister similarly hospitalized for tuberculosis as a teenager. Bayrak never got to know his grandmother Anna, who died of tuberculosis in her thirties.<sup>10</sup>

Children—either identified as enemy aliens themselves or minors of naturalized or interned parents—found themselves caught up in the changing conditions of war and perceptions and fears of the enemy at home. For example, officials wrote for clarification in the case of 20-year-old prisoner whose father presented his own certificate as proof of his son’s naturalization in 1916. The Acting Deputy Minister of Justice replied that in this particular case the son must be considered a naturalized British subject within Canada. However, he did point out that the laws concerning Naturalization were changing:

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<sup>9</sup> Lawrna Myers, “Project 107 Report to CFWWIRF” 22 June 2016: 4. Available at: <https://www.internmentcanada.ca/resources-cemeteries.cfm> Names of the deceased include: Jeanette Baby (child), before December 1915; Iwan Bator (child – 10 months) May 3, 1915; Olga Ciupa (child), before December 1915; Andrez Huczak (child), before December 1915; (74) Nellie (child), May 22 1915; Jan Pabi (child), 29 March 1916; Mrs. Frederick/Acousta, 3 Feb. 1919.

<sup>10</sup> Sandra Semchuk, *Their Stories Were Not Told: Canada’s First World War Internment Camps* (University of Alberta Press, 2018), 96; “It happened, son of interned Ukranian says” *St. Albert Today* 10 January 2020.

... the Naturalization Act which was in force in 1907 provided that if the father, or the mother, being a widow, obtained a certificate of naturalization within Canada, every child of such father or mother who, during infancy, became resident with such father or mother within Canada shall, within Canada, be deemed to be a naturalized British subject. Under the Act which is at present in force, and which became effective on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1915, the naturalization of the father or mother does not affect the status of any children of such father or mother unless the child is named in the certificate of naturalization granted to the parent.<sup>11</sup>

Internment and surveillance were closely linked with ideas of belonging and community networks. Local contexts mattered in the treatment and experiences of enemy aliens.<sup>12</sup> Colonial and imperial spaces are bound together in what theorists have called a “web” of empire. Colonial states looked to each other and to the metropole to develop administrative processes and practices.<sup>13</sup> These practices, and the intimacies of empire, affected individuals and families during the Great War as some families sent soldiers overseas and as interned men wrote to wives and family in Europe. Interned men and their families found themselves outside of the body politic but also caught up within the web of empire and the limits of belonging.<sup>14</sup>

Two internment camps during the First World War held families at Vernon, in the interior of British Columbia, and Spirit Lake in northern Quebec. In his final report, Otter stated that a total of 81 women and 156 children were interned at Spirit Lake, QB, and Vernon, B.C. He reported that monthly allowances were awarded to a further 40 women 81 children, also wives and children of interned men with no other means of support.<sup>15</sup> From Otter’s report:

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<sup>11</sup> RG 13, Series A-2, Vol. 1926, file 175/1916, Internment Operations Office - If children of a naturalized father become Canadian citizens automatically. On naturalization see James Farney and Bohdan Kordan, “The Predicament of Belonging: The Status of Enemy Aliens in Canada, 1914” *Journal of Canadian Studies* vol. 39 (1) (2005): 74-89.

<sup>12</sup> See Mary Chaktsiris, “The Enemy at Home: Defining Enemy Aliens in Ontario during the Great War”, in *The Great War: From Memory to History*, edited by Kellen Kurschinski, Steve Marti, Alicia Robinet, Matt Symes, and Jonathan Vance, pp. 287-302 (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Adele Perry, *Colonial Relations: The Douglas-Connolly Family and the Nineteenth-Century Imperial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 257 – 258.

<sup>14</sup> Bohdan Kordan, *Enemy Aliens, Prisoners of War: Internment in Canada during the Great War* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002), 294.

<sup>15</sup> A.F. Duguid, *Official History of the Canadian Forces in the Great War, 1914-1919*, Vol. 1, Part 2. Ministry of National Defence, Canada, 1938: Appendix 235.

Again, many of the prisoners had wives and families dependent upon them for support, consequently when the bread winners were interned their women and children had to be cared for. This was accomplished in two ways, either by allowing families to remain at their former homes and issuing to them a monthly sum for rent, food and fuel, in which manner 40 women and 81 children were cared for, or by permitting them to accompany the men to the internment station and there providing for them. The number looked after by the latter mode was already intimated 81 women and 156 children, for whom the necessary additional accommodation was only available at the Spirit Lake and Vernon camps.<sup>16</sup>

However, in his report, “Canada’s Response to Aliens of Enemy Nationality”, Mark Minenko suggests that Otter significantly underestimated the support provided to families of internees in the *Final Report on Internment Operations*.<sup>17</sup> In general, earlier reports of aid suggest a number far higher than the 40 women and 81 children stated in Otter’s report received financial support from the state while a husband or father was interned.<sup>18</sup> This scale of support provided to interned families places First World War internment operations parallel to other growing family relief and systems of social reform funded by the government in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Authorities regularly received appeals for financial support related to the families of interned men. To identify belonging, local contexts are important. Were individuals settled in one community for a period of many years? Did local business owners vouch for their character as employees?<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Otter, *Final Report*, 80 in Lubomyr Luciuk, *In Fear of the Barbed Wire Fence: Canada’s First National Internment Operations and the Ukrainian Canadians, 1914-1920* (Kingston: Kashtan Press, 2001), 130.

<sup>17</sup> Other reported from 1915 listed that government financial support was issued to 3,500 wives and children of interned men. Relief payments were paid at a rate of \$1.00 per week per person and dispersed through civilian relief agencies. A total sum of \$15,439.37 was paid between February and March 1915 for relief to families of internees. This amount suggests support was provided for 1,718 dependants. By August 1915, that total had risen to \$19,978.07 in a sum that included costs related to relief, escorts, moving prisoners, wages, and canteen. Family relief for was no longer its own budgetary line unlike earlier reporting. Even taking into accounts the costs associated with other budget lines, it is possible as much as \$5,000 went to relief of families in August 1915. Mark Minenko, “Canada’s Response to Aliens of Enemy Nationality Enemies during the First World War – the Internment Operations Office and Registration System” Prepared for the Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund, 20 July 2017: 48 – 49.

<sup>18</sup> Minenko, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Chaktsiris, “The Enemy at Home,” 294-296. See also See Robert Rutherford, *Hometown Horizons: Local Responses to Canada’s Great War* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004), 119-153; Farney and Kordan, *The Predicament of Belonging*, 74-89; Bohdan Kordan, *Enemy Aliens, Prisoners of War: Internment in Canada during the Great War* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002).

The process generally involved petitions for relief that through other agencies, including municipal Boards of Public Welfare, working on behalf of families.<sup>20</sup> In one case, the Edmonton Board of Public Welfare wrote to Otter appealing for family relief on behalf of the wife and two young children, one and four years old, of an internee. Otter's response provided insight into his approach to internment and family relief. He questioned the interned man's ability to obtain employment, "without which it is quite likely he will be back on our hands again. Subsistence will be issued to his family if required while the man is interned, but if he is released this cannot be done, and consequently if no work is available for him he will be worse off than ever."<sup>21</sup> In these ways, internment was linked to the framed social "problems" posed by jobless people while also positioning the state as a kind of care-taker of prisoners and their families. In this way, relief for families with members interned was similar in approach to other systems of state relief that were growing before, during, and after the war. Internment, then, was linked with rather than separate from anti-immigrant sentiment and state surveillance of the jobless. As Kassandra Luciuk states:

Internment, while abhorrent, was not a lone enterprise or isolated event; it was part and parcel of Canada's longstanding and unjust treatment towards populations it deemed "undesirable others."... The bodies of undesirable migrants could be used to build the country, but they could not join it.<sup>22</sup>

The internment and mass surveillance of enemy aliens during the First World War both reflected and fueled existing anti-immigrant sentiment in Canada. With the outbreak of war came increased harassment of enemy aliens; men were pulled off the streets in cities like Toronto and

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<sup>20</sup> Mینenko, "Canada's Response", 50.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Kassandra Luciuk "Introduction" in *Alien: A True Story of Life Behind Barbed Wire*, edited by Kassandra Luciuk and nicole marie burton, vii – xi (Between the Lines: Toronto, 2020), vii; See also, Kassandra Luciuk, "Reinserting Radicalism: Canada's First National Internment Operations, the Ukrainian Left, and the Politics of Red" in *Civilian Internment in Canada: Histories and Legacies*, 49-69 (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020).



sent to internment camps because they looked, sounded or dressed differently or were jobless. Anti-German riots broke out in Victoria, BC in response to the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915.<sup>23</sup> Within this context, the experiences of enemy aliens during the war varied and local connections with communities and employers mattered.<sup>24</sup> Frequent interventions were made on behalf of internees and under this pressure Otter, as director of internment operations, often approved their release. It was difficult to apply internment policies in a standardized way because of the different conditions across the country. It was, as Otter conceded, “impossible for us to select the ‘sheep from the goats’ as it were.”<sup>25</sup> In light of the important of local context matters and contexts to internment, the camp at Vernon presents an especially interesting case for analysis.

### **Overview: Internment Camp at Vernon**

Vernon was a growing town of 3,500 people at the outbreak of the First World War. It was a railway hub located in British Columbia’s Okanagan Valley that featured a school, courthouse, train station, electrical powerhouse, hospitals, and treatment centers, and an Armoury.<sup>26</sup> During the war, the military presence at Vernon expanded to include an internment camp. When the camp opened in 1914-1920, it held 324 men, 20 women and 24 children. As many as 80 women and children passed through the camp during the war.<sup>27</sup> The families that lived in the camp at Vernon made homes for themselves there, as much as they could, though surrounded by barbed wire. To understand where prisoners in the camp lived, it was important to understand how they

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<sup>23</sup> Kordan, *No Free Man*, 96.

<sup>24</sup> Chaktsiris, *The Enemy at Home*, 296.

<sup>25</sup> As cited by Kordan, *No Free Man*, 327.

<sup>26</sup> Don McNair, *Vernon Internment Camp 1914-1920*, Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund and Greater Vernon Museum and Archives 2017, 2-3, 8.

<sup>27</sup> McNair, “Vernon Internment Camp,” 9. According to both Bohdan and McNair the population numbers at Vernon camp fluctuated. Starting in 1914 with 80 internees, over time the camp housed 250-350 prisoners. Kordan’s numbers differ slightly from McNair’s with 22 women and 33 children. Kordan, *No Free Man*, 253.

were classified. The prisoners at Vernon were separated by military class, first or officer class and second class, as were prisoners in other camps across the country.<sup>28</sup> Both single and married first class prisoners at Vernon and their families were held in a corner of the camp, furthest away from the second class prisoners. Unlike first class prisoners, single and married second-class prisoners were held in different areas. A series of barracks held single second class prisoners at the opposite end of the camp from first second-class prisoners. Second-class prisoners with families lived in small, individual family dwellings or “huts” located beside the barracks for single prisoners that faced a central open square. These “huts” or “portables” were small wood-frame dwellings covered in treated black tarpaper and used year-round with a woodstove.<sup>29</sup> Many were surrounded by gardens. There was a school at Vernon with instruction for adults and children with support from the YMCA that provided:

“...classes of instruction for both adults and children in English, arithmetic, and grammar, etc. etc., the teachers coming from themselves and amongst whom there was considerable proficiency” with space and supervision provided by the YMCA at Vernon.

A unique social ecosystem existed at Vernon.<sup>30</sup> Over 80% of internees were first class, primarily affluent pre-war German immigrants from Vancouver who received favour in the camp and formed committees to better their camp conditions. For example, first class prisoners were permitted to hire a housekeeper in the summer of 1915 to escape the suspect food served in the camp. They could engage in recreational activities like tennis, ice hockey, football, skating, dramatics, concerts, and movies.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, second-class prisoners were forced to join work

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<sup>28</sup> In his final report on Internment Operations, Otter stated: “Owing to the difference existing in their previous occupation and in order to observe the Hague Regulations, which call for a better quartering and subsistence of those of the officer class or its equivalent, it became necessary to divide our prisoners into 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> classes.” Otter, *Final Report*, 80 in Luciuk, *In Fear of the Barbed Wire Fence*, 130.

<sup>29</sup> McNair, *Vernon Internment Camp*, 8-9; GVMA, Friends of History Meeting, tape 426. Andrea Malysz of the Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund (CFWWIRF), 9 September 2010: 16:00 minute mark.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 17:07 – 18:55 minute mark.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 35:40 minute mark.

forays outside of Vernon camp and moved around construction sites for roads and telegraph lines.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the interment of families at Vernon added additional familial dynamics and disputes. During the summer, women from both the second and first class sections of the camp ran a soft drinks booth for summer festivals that included gymnastics and wrestling.<sup>33</sup> As for disputes, the Mueller trail, which arose from a dispute between two families in the camp, will be explored below. The presence of children in the camp also added an additional complex layer to camp life. Children who lived in the camp tried to find ways to reclaim parts of a childhood behind barbed wire with games and play. Pictures in the private collection of Fred Kohse and at Library and Archives Canada show children playing within the internment camp.<sup>34</sup> The images and memories of children who grew up in the camp for six years remind us of the ways the internment camp was a complicated space. It was at once home and, at the same time, could never be home. The following two sections of this paper will explore family life through state records and the memories of descendants of internees, unpacking the patriarchal approach of the state towards family relief and family care for families caught up in internment.

### **Living at Vernon Camp**

Once prisoners, including women and children, entered the camp it was difficult to leave again. Barbed wire that surrounded the camp kept prisoners in and other citizens of Vernon out. These fences discouraged friendships between those inside and out of the camps, with on-going “town-versus-camp” feuds that left Vernon citizens suspicious that prisoners were treated too well within the camps, despite the hard conditions they endured.<sup>35</sup> However, despite these

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 17:07 – 18:55 minute mark; See also McNair, *Vernon Internment Camp*, 18-19.

<sup>33</sup> GVMA, Friends of History Meeting, Malysh: 36:40 minute mark.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 22:06 minute mark; McNair, See also McNair, *Vernon Internment Camp*.

<sup>35</sup> McNair, *Vernon Internment Camp*, 21; K. Luciuk, “Reinsterting Radicalism,” 59.

separations, young mothers with families in the camp found Glenda Kohse, whose grandparents and Uncle were interned at Vernon, recalls: “My grandmother actually made friends with a lady who lived here in Vernon through the fence and she supplied her with some milk for the baby...” At the time Glenda’s uncle was a baby of three months old; he stayed in the internment camp until he was six years old.<sup>36</sup> The experience of being interned stayed with him. Glenda explains that when her grandfather returned to the site of the internment camp for the unveiling of a commemorative plaque, he reflected on the surrounding views of the mountains: “... he stood and he looked and he said that was the view I had for the first six years of my life. I had this chain link fence between me and the rest of the world and I wondered why, why was I here?”<sup>37</sup>

Though women and children were considered to have voluntarily entered internment camps, it was hard for them to secure release. As told by her son, Hilda Kohse tried to give letters to guards at the camp to send to the government asking for her release. Having made friendships with women outside the camp along the neighbouring streets, she wrote a note and threw it over the fence crumpled up inside a tennis ball. Her friends on the other side of the fence send the letter finally got to the House of Lords in the United Kingdom, as Hilda claimed she was British. She was finally released a few weeks earlier than the other prisoners.<sup>38</sup> In his book *No Free Man* Bohdan Kordan recounts the story of Fanny Priester, a prisoner at Vernon camp who cooked for other prisoners. She appealed for release a year into her internment at the camp, citing a domestic dispute with another cook as the reason for her request. Though Otter seemed willing at first to agree to the release, Priester’s request was later denied because of worries she knew too much about the workings of the camp and admitted there was stated dislike for the

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<sup>36</sup> CFWWIRF, “Videos: Vernon, British Columbia. Digital Map: Vernon” Armistice Films, 2016. Includes interview with Glenda Kohse. Available at: [https://www.internmentcanada.ca/videos\\_by\\_camp.cfm?lid=31](https://www.internmentcanada.ca/videos_by_camp.cfm?lid=31)

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> GVMA, Friends of History Meeting, Malys, 48:56 minute mark.

release of enemy alien internees within the province. Continuing to pursue her appeal for release, eight months later Priester's case was brought to the attention of the Minister of Justice who approved her release. Otter stood by his initial decision stating: "I have personally seen the woman, who is decidedly a German, young, and to my mind a cunning, determined type."<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, in December 1919, Florence Mühlberg wrote to Otter from the internment camp at Vernon inquiring about her families release and repatriation. She also shared frustration at her internment and tension towards German, mostly first-class, internees in the camp:

I presume from your telegram received here August 20<sup>th</sup> regarding the release of 1<sup>st</sup> class women and children, that you are contemplating transporting them first. As a British Born woman whose been 4 years in Camp and whose family have sacrificed 10 members not including some crippled for life and whose sisters have been 4 years engaged in War Work, I feel that a little consideration is due to me, and ask that my family and I be repatriated with the [rest] families that leave here. I do not ask this thinking that perhaps the 1<sup>st</sup> class will have better accommodations. I am quite willing to go steerage. My sold object is that I feel I cannot see the German women given their freedom, while I remain longer a Prisoner in a British Dominion.<sup>40</sup>

Family life played out behind the barbed wire at Vernon internment camp: babies were born, friendships were made, and resentments built both among prisoners and towards the state. The actions of the state in family matters, and disputes, created records of the intersection of family concerns and the infrastructure and practices of internment.

Just before the Christmas of 1918, Col. Otter – Director of Internment Operations within Canada – wrote to the Deputy Minister of Justice on behalf of two orphan boys left at the Vernon B.C. internment camp. Prisoner Bernard Heiny's wife Luise Kohse had died some time before, and his two boys, aged 10 ½ and 4 ½, were left in camp after Heiny's death from pneumonia

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<sup>39</sup> Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), RG 25 G1, vol 1200 file 15 – part 1 and RG 6 HI, vol. 752, file 3102 as quoted in Kordan, *No Free Man*, 169.

<sup>40</sup> LAC, RG6, R174-59-6-E, vol: 762, File 4654-1, Florence Mühlberg #5020, Vernon Camp B.C to General William Otter, Director of Internment Operations, Ottawa 22 August 1919.

followed by influenza.<sup>41</sup> There was no shortage of volunteers to take care of the boys, and Otter reported in his letter that:

Two other Prisoners, Fred Kohse who claims to be a brother-in-law of deceased, and Curt Starkman, no relation, have requested to be allowed to take charge of the children. Again two Prisoners Mackenson and Witt, also of no relation, have each offered to take charge of one of the boys.<sup>42</sup>

In view of these conflicting reports and offers of care, Col. Otter instructed his staff to inquire further about the boy's immediate relatives in the hopes that he might find for them the most suitable home. The Deputy Minister of Justice echoed the concerns of General Otter in his return letter and urged Otter to "make careful enquires [sic] to ascertain if possible whether they have any relations or property and who is the most suitable person to have them in charge. We seem to be under some obligation with regard to these unfortunate children and we ought, I think, to do what we can to protect them."<sup>43</sup>

Lt. Col. Ridgeway Wilson reported what he found about B. Heiny through his enquiries and conversations with W. Luney, who employed Heiny and was also his brother-in-law. Wilson uncovered that Heiny was Polish rather than German, though he was born and raised on that country. Wilson continued in his report that:

...[Heiny] worked as a gardener and later as a labourer for this contractor Luney and as always a quite steady man; when war broke out no one would employ him, and after the German riots here, being afraid of getting into trouble I believe he came and asked to be interned.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> It is likely the oldest boy was named Bruno Heiny based on immigration papers in 1913 that identify Bernard Heiny's son as 5 years old. Myers, "Vernon & District Family History Society Report to CFWWIRF."

<sup>42</sup> LAC, RG 13, Series A-2, Vol. 230, File 1918-2719, Col. Otter to Deputy Minister of Justice, 21 December 1918.

<sup>43</sup> LAC, RG 13, Series A-2, Vol. 230, File 1918-2719, Deputy Minister of Justice to Col. Otter, 24 December 1918.

<sup>44</sup> LAC, RG 13, Series A-2, Vol. 230, File 1918-2719, Col. Otter to Deputy Minister of Justice, 23 January 1919.

The children's maternal grandparents were reportedly "very anxious to get the children and bring them up and have apparently been worrying about it, as they were afraid they would be sent to Germany."<sup>45</sup> A result which the Minister of Justice reportedly found to be "quite satisfying"<sup>46</sup>

In working to find a solution for the orphaned boys, government officials gathered information on Heiny. Their reporting

"It appears he was really of Polish extraction, his proper name being Bernard Heinowski born and raised in Germany... [He] followed the rest of the family out here arriving about 1912, he worked as a gardener and later as a labourer for this contractor Luney and was always a quiet steady man; when war broke out no one would employ him, and after the German riots here, being afraid of getting into trouble I believe he came and asked to be interned."<sup>47</sup>

The last line speaks to the confusion regarding the enforcement of internment legislation and practices. Without employment, and with two young boys to care for, Heiny possibly faced the difficult choice of entering the internment camp. He was joined there by his wife's brother, the Kohse's, whose family was also interned at Vernon. Without income because of prejudice against hiring enemy aliens, as a single father he may have felt he had little choice.

The case of Bernard Heiny, whose death left behind two young boys at Vernon Internment Camp, illustrates the dangers and consequences faced by those identified as enemy aliens in Canada during the Great War. Investigations into Heiny's background by officials looking for the most appropriate caretakers for his young sons revealed a portrait of a man who tried his best to avoid the uncertain wartime conditions and provide for his young family, yet who could not escape the precarious wartime conditions that identified him as enemy. The

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<sup>45</sup> LAC, RG 13, Series A-2, Vol. 230, File 1918-2719, Col. Otter to Deputy Minister of Justice, 23 January 1919; Fred Kohse Sr. was made guardian of the boys, Victor and Bruno Heiny. Victor died at age 12 of a brain hemorrhage and Bruno ran away from home at the age of 15. The family never heard from Bruno again. Andrea Malysh, CFWWIRE, 5 February 2022.

<sup>46</sup> LAC, RG 13, Series A-2, Vol. 230, File 1918-2719, Deputy Minister of Justice to Col. Otter, 10 February 1919.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

discussions around two orphaned boys in an internment camp, and the willingness of fellow prisoners – related or not – to the care for them. The offers of care for two young boys raises interesting questions about the role of fraternal and familial relationships within internment camps. The response of Canadian officials too, in case, raises interesting questions about the role of the state in internment operations and the “care” of those in wartime Canada. Ideas of care and protection and care differed between communities facing internment and surveillance and from the perspectives of authorities in charge of enforcing wartime laws.

### **Familial disputes at Vernon Camp: Wagner Murder Trial**

The Vernon internment camp housed a set of family tents around a central square. Over their years of imprisonment, families grew gardens and tried to find a sense of home and community behind the barbed wire. Families got to know one another and, like in any neighbourhood, not everyone got along. A dispute between two families on July 8, 1919 escalated into a fight that resulted in the death of a prisoner, Leo Mueller.<sup>48</sup> The altercation happened in less than a minute. The tension that led to it started between two children, then to their fathers and mothers. As Martha Mueller testified during the trial of her husband’s accused murderer, “we haven’t been friendly for the last three years with the Muellers.”<sup>49</sup>

The trial of Karl Wagner for the murder of his fellow prisoner and neighbour Leo Mueller took place in July and October 1919. The records of this trial provide a window into interpersonal family life within Vernon camp, and the ways interned families built social relationships and resentments while interned. Particularly in the testimony of witnesses in the

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<sup>48</sup> See “Dead From Effect of Broken Neck,” *Vernon News*, 17 July 1919; “Court of Assize Now in Session, Manslaughter Charge” *Vernon News*, 30 October, 1919.

<sup>49</sup> Provincial Archives British Columbia (hereafter known as PABC), GR 0419, Box 229, File 122. Mrs. Martha Wagner being sworn.



Wagner's trial, scenes within the camp can be re-created to provide a scene of life in the internment camp around 8pm on the evening of Tuesday, July 8<sup>th</sup> – the time when the incident between Mueller and Wagner occurred. The account of the altercation should both challenge and unsettle existing understandings of First World War internment in Canada. The murder trial situates the internment as a domestic experience and reminds us of the intimate and domestic layers of internment that existed at Vernon and Spirit Lake, Quebec, and the ways that the internment of these families brought domestic politics and disputes under surveillance by the state. As explored in the examples above, the state showed varied interest in these domestic spheres of imprisoned enemy aliens. In the case of the Heiny boys, Otter's interest and expressed care in finding a home for the boys suggests a kind of paternal care-giving approach by the state as an interested party in the boy's welfare. In this way, this approach positions internment operations alongside other growing family and social relief programs administered by the state before and during the war. In other cases, such as the claim by charwoman Fanny Priester that a domestic dispute necessitated her appeal to leave the camp at Vernon, the state was decidedly less interested. Through its internment of enemy aliens, the state brought together by virtue of their confinement groups of people, and families, that otherwise would not be living in such close quarters. In the case of Leo Mueller and Karl Wagner, these enforced close quarters altered the course of both of their lives.

Before moving on to our discussion of Wagner's trial, it is important to pause and understand the broader context of internment and treatment of enemy aliens at the time of the altercation between Mueller and Wagner. Attitudes towards enemy aliens only worsened during the war. What started as expressed cross-country paranoia from 1914 onwards about enemy alien activities, including unsubstantiated rumours of spy networks and sabotage effects, had by 1919

reached popular calls for the deportation of enemy aliens after the Armistice in 1918. Leading the calls for deportation of enemy aliens were returned men, veterans of the war who returned in ever larger numbers. Newly formed veteran's associations campaigned for preferential treatment related to employment and for increased benefits from the state as earned based on their wartime service.<sup>50</sup> The Great War Veteran's Association Vernon branch called for the deportation of enemy aliens as "...we are now fully convinced that said enemy aliens are not desirable people to have reside with our borders, and knowing the feeling of contempt which exists in the heart of every Canadian soldier who has seen active service, and realizing the possibilities of strife throughout the land if our returned army is compelled to mingle should to shoulder with these enemies."<sup>51</sup>

Causing further tension around the rising resentment towards identified enemy aliens during the war, many families in the internment camp had been there for years since it opened in 1914. Since the armistice in November 1918, interned prisoners waiting on decisions about their deportation and travel arrangements. For those identified as enemy aliens and facing deportation or a fight for fair compensation related to internment wages and the confiscation of all assets at the time of internment, life after the war seemed quite uncertain. This uncertainty is even referenced during the court proceedings of Wagner's trial, as council placed pressure on the judge to make a decision related to his case as they faced the real possibility that key witnesses may be deported before the court might meet again.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Desmond Morton and Glenn Wright, *Winning the Second Battle: Canadian Veterans and the Return to Civilian Life, 1915–1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

<sup>51</sup> "Ask that Enemy Aliens be Deported" *Vernon News* 12 December 1918.

<sup>52</sup> PABC GR 0419, Box 229, File 122.Index, Rex vs. Karl Wagner, 84.



Figure 1: Group photo of a family of men, women and children who were internees in the Vernon internment camp during WWI. [GVMA #9062](#)

The altercation that resulted in Mueller's death started in the garden on a summer evening around 8 pm. Gardens surrounded many family tents during the internment camps, as prisoners grew food and carved out space resembling some semblance of home for themselves during their imprisonment. In one of these gardens Rudie Wanger (11 years old) struck Alfred Mueller (5 years old) in the back of the head. Rudie, the older boy, was considerably larger and smaller than Alfred, who was only five. A witness to this incident, watching from her nearby front porch, stood up and yelled "Ruddie, Ruddie!" as she saw the strike between the two boys. Alfred headed home, bleeding from his nose and mouth, where he met his mother Martha Mueller on the porch doing some ironing. While Martha attended to the boy, Alfred's father, Leo Mueller, laced up his boots and left the house. Multiple witnesses testified he walked over to Wagner's place and shouted "come on." Returning the taunt, Wagner yelled: "come on." A witness to the event shared, "Mr. Wagner stood practically in front of his house and Mr. Mueller came close to

him and still arguing the point, that is over the kids.”<sup>53</sup> While there are some inconsistencies in the witness testimony, the common course of events that emerged indicated that Muller instigated the physical fight and charged at Wagner headfirst with arms at his side, after doing so lost all feeling in his legs and arms. It happened in less than a minute. An autopsy revealed a broken neck.<sup>54</sup>

Shortly before his death, Mueller wrote a statement releasing Wagner from any responsibility for his death, agreeing to the following statement at Vernon Jubilee Hospital on July 11, 1919:

I, Leo Mueller, Prisoner of War no. 369, of the Vernon Internment Camp, being of sound mind and fully convinced my injury is fatal, wish to state that I do not consider Prisoner of War Wagner of Vernon Internment Camp responsible for my injuries. I think that when I charged him and butted him with my head, that I injured my neck, as I immediately lost all power and feeling in my arms and legs.<sup>55</sup>

This statement complicated the case for the courts. Testimony and cross-examination of the doctor, Dr. Boyce of Vernon Jubilee Hospital, revealed that he had suggested Mueller write the statement lest an innocent man, Wagner, be hung for murder. The doctor took down the oath, read it to Mueller before he died, and in front of nurses as witnesses Mueller agreed that the contents of the statement were true. However, in the initial court hearing on 25 July 1919 the court decided that the case should go before a jury trial and that until then, Wagner should be held in custody. In the time between this decision and the jury trial on October 30 – 31 1919, the initial charge of murder was lessened to manslaughter, and on this charge Wagner was ultimately acquitted.

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<sup>53</sup> PABC, GR 0419, Box 229, File 122. Testimony of Karl Fenzel.

<sup>54</sup> The particulars of the assize trial of 25 July 1919 are found in PABC GR 0419, Box 229, File 122. Vernon Fall Assizes, Rex vs. Wagner, Murder, Crown Buef.

<sup>55</sup> PABC GR 0419, Box 229, File 122. Vernon Fall Assizes, Rex vs. Wagner, Murder, Crown Buef. Statement of Leo Mueller.

The case of Wagner and Mueller indicate how an internment camp could never be a home. Tensions between neighbours forced to live together as prisoners rose high; there was no escape from each other, to cool off, to go for a walk, to move further away from disliked neighbours. Witnesses recounted their activities and placement in the camp at the time of the altercation between Mueller and Wagner. In these short snippets of time, recounted only as relevant to the altercation in question, we can see preserved a snapshot of life at Vernon camp, where they were at the time of the incident, and what they were doing. For example, Martha Mueller was on her front porch ironing. Another witness stated: “We had just finished a game of cards and had a little chat.”<sup>56</sup> Witness testimony also revealed how the altercation also included the wives of both families. Herman Porschein, a German prisoner at the camp, reported:

After supper I heard Mr. & Mrs. Mueller and Mr. & Mrs. Wagner having words about the children, they went to their homes, then came out again. Mueller went up to Wagner, Mueller put his head down and ran into Wagner hitting him in the stomach, and grabbing him by the legs. Wagner fell with Mueller on top of him. Wagner turned Mueller over and hit him twice with his hand. Mrs. Mueller ran up and took hold of Wagner. Wagner pushed Mrs. Mueller away. Then, Mrs. Wagner ran up and she and Mrs. Mueller had a scrap. Corp Smith came right down from the porch but it was all over then. It lasted only half a minute.<sup>57</sup>

The altercation between Leo Mueller and Karl Wagner at Vernon camp brings together currents that speak to the complexities of experiences during the First World War in Canada. These men, and their families, were incarcerated during the war because of who they were. They had no options, unlike the approximately 80,000 forced to register with authority as enemy aliens and report on a regular basis. This carceral interaction with the state through internment created the conditions for their forced removal from their homes and communities in Canada, confiscation of any property and assets, and possible deportation after the war. Many interned

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<sup>56</sup> PABC GR 0419, Box 229, File 122. Index, Rex vs. Karl Wagner, 55.

<sup>57</sup> PABC GR 0419, Box 229, File 122. Testimony Hermann Porschein.

were naturalized citizens. Leo Mueller was a hairdresser from Vancouver before his internment at Vernon; he was a naturalized British subject as of 1909 yet still was arrested and interned in 1916.<sup>58</sup> If he had not been interned, he may have survived the war as might have the 107 other prisoners, plus women and children at Spirit Lake, who died under the harsh conditions and close quarters of internment and work camps.

### **Conclusion:**

If the stories of those interned are only starting to be told, the experiences of women and children in internment camps at Vernon and Spirit Lake still remain silent in most research and writing on the topic. Though their numbers were relatively small compared to the total of over 8,000 people, mostly men, interned and forced to work on national infrastructure projects. However, their experience remains a critical part of Canada's First World War military operations. Under the vestiges of economic caretaking and family relief, Canadian military authorities allowed women and children to enter internment camps with husbands, fathers, and breadwinners. Without them, many believed they had little hope of survival. Once women and children entered the internment camps, it was difficult for them to leave. In the case of Spirit Lake, Quebec, some never did leave or survive the camps.

The experiences of enemy aliens in Canada focusses mostly on a masculine framing of the young, male, sojourn labourer jailed under the auspices of war. Thinking about the ways internment camps connected to family life, most directly in the cases of interned women and children and more broadly within a family relief network for interned men that spanned the country and other parts of the United States and Britain, presents an opportunity to reframe

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<sup>58</sup> Vernon Museum, "The Vernon Internment Camp" 17 September 2021. Available at: <https://vernonmuseum.ca/internment/>

internment operations as part of a growing state interest in the surveillance and maintained social and economic health of families.

Stories told by survivors provide some into the ways they made sense of their experiences with internment as children. Fred Kohse, interned at one month old at Vernon, became friendly local animals including a resident raven bird. He described the raven as his friend decades later while sharing memories at an event marking the unveiling of a plaque at the former internment site at Vernon in 1997.<sup>59</sup> Prisoners in the camp knew each other and memories capture a shared fondness for the children. For example, Fred also brought with him to the plaque unveiling a “swagger” or walking stick carved with his nick-name created by a prisoner in the camp. Other descendants of internees tell stories about fearful knocks on the door before being taken away and the confusion around why they were being targeted by authorities. For these families, memories of internment stayed with them even when buried and kept secret. Even when they could only be felt by later generations who may not have ever been told.<sup>60</sup>

Despite the on-going impacts of internment on internees and their descendants, memories about the camp faded out of view for many families in Vernon after the war who were not directly affected. At a talk of the Friends of History association, a local history group in Vernon, in 1990 a local resident Fred Allen was invited to speak about his memory and life in the town. Allen’s father had been a soldier guard at the internment camp during the war. He used to live just across the street from the internment camp and had a clear view into the courtyard and the goings on there. During the audience discussion, stories emerged from local residents about the internment camp and the war, and particularly about the Armistice Day celebrations. One

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<sup>59</sup> GVMA, Friends of History Meeting, Malysh, 45:25 minute mark.

<sup>60</sup> See Sandra Semchuk, *Their Stories Were Not Told: Canada’s First World War Internment Camps* (University of Alberta Press, 2018).

member of the audience shared as a child she remembered a parade on Armistice Day but felt sorry for the prisoners in the internment camp “because they had lost the war.”<sup>61</sup> Others recounted stories of bonfires to mark the Armistice, and a chilling alleged story of German prisoners singing a German patriotic song during Armistice Day celebrations and guards posted at the four corners of the camp. One participant shared she did not have the same memories as the others of Armistice Day, though this may have been because of “the German question” of her own family heritage, tipping a hat to on-going suspicions during the war of any so-called foreign enemy connection. Stories were told about an explosion at the bonfires of Armistice Day involving anvils and more gunpowder than seemed wise. These stories, mused talk participants, were not told in the papers!<sup>62</sup> Then, from the moderator of the talk came a question: where children interned at Vernon camp? Fred Allen said he could not remember children being there, but imagined there must have been.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> GVMA, Friends of History Meeting, tape 221a – 221b. Fred Allen and Edna Oram, 1 March 1990: 44:20 minute mark, side a.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 39:00 minute mark, side a.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 2:14 minute mark, side b.



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### *Images*

Figure 1: [GVMA #9062](#) Group photo of a family of men, women and children who were internees in the Vernon internment camp during WWI.