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Banff Symposium A Timely Examination of the Great War and Internment of “Enemy Aliens”

A scholarly gathering devoted to the theme “Canada, the Great War and the Internment of Enemy Aliens, 1914-1920,” was successfully held in Banff on 17-18 October. The sessions appropriately took place at the Cave and Basin National Historic Site, a facility that was originally built during the war by internee labour. The event was organized by the Kule Ukrainian Canadian Studies Centre at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies in collaboration with the U of A’s Wirth Institute for Austrian and Central European Studies. The other key partners in the project were Canada’s First World War Internment Recognition Fund and the Ukrainian Canadian Civil Liberties Foundation.

Attendance at the presentations ranged from twenty to thirty people, who had an opportunity to hear and discuss talks on the impact which the First World War had on Ukrainians and other immigrants to Canada from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Dr. Joseph Patrouch of the Wirth Institute provided an overview of immigration from Austria-Hungary around the turn of the 20th century, and Jars Balan, of the Kule Centre at CIUS, related the story of a failed attempt to establish a “Ruthenian Regiment” in the Canadian Armed Forces in the years immediately preceding the war. Three papers dealt with the fates of individuals who had the misfortune of being caught up in the federal government’s internment campaign, one by Mark Minenko, another, by Peter Melnycky, and the third by retired Library and Archives Canada archivist, Myron Momryk. Gordon Yaremchuk contributed a topical account of the built legacy of internee labour in Banff National Park.

Other papers examined the plight of interned Serbs, Croats and citizens of Ottoman Turkey, while Dr. Jeffrey Keshen of Mount Royal University in Calgary gave an overview of the state of civil liberties in Canada during the war years. In addition to sharing his findings of internment-related materials in the archives of Ukrainian Catholic Church in Winnipeg, Rev. Dr. Athanasius McVay presented his recently published biography of Bishop Nykyta Budka—appointed in 1912 as the first Ukrainian Catholic hierarch in Canada—at a reception held at one of Banff’s historic homes. Moving slightly beyond the issue of the internment itself so as to provide a broader context for the period, two papers dealt with the destinies of Slavs who managed to serve in the ranks of the Canadian Expeditionary Force despite the widespread “anti-foreigner” sentiments in the country. Another paper by a scholar from Austria discussed the history of the infamous Thalerhof internment camp, situated on what is now the site of Graz international airport.

Closing the academic sessions on both days were talks by the well-known internment experts, Drs. Lubomyr Luciuk and Bohdan Kordan, the former offering a personal account of the Ukrainian Canadian Civil Liberties Association’s role in the long and difficult struggle to obtain redress, and the latter reading from the conclusion to his forthcoming book on the internment.

Included in the program were a visit by participants to the site of the Castle Mountain Internment camp on the old highway to Lake Louise, as well as a free public screening of three documentary films: Yurij Luhowy's "Freedom Had a Price," James Motluk's "Jajo's Secret," and "Unspoken Territory" by Marusia Bociurkiw.

In the view of its organizers, the symposium achieved its scholarly objective of stimulating new research that contributes to a greater understanding of the internment, while at the same time constructively marking the 100th anniversary of a rather dark and little-known chapter in Canadian history. The discussions were characterized by a collaborative spirit, and generated a better appreciation of the "collateral damage" caused by the Great War that extended well beyond the trenches of Europe. Preparations are now being made to publish select papers from the symposium, and in the meantime to post video recordings of sessions on the internet.