

Dina Gusejnova
Associate Professor, LSE
d.gusejnova@lse.ac.uk

From *Weltbildverlust* to Cold War realism: internment in two World Wars and the emergence of new comparative thinking about states and empires (ca. 1935-ca. 1955)

The escalation of Russia's war against Ukraine on 24 February 2023 has made many people want to rethink how different states define their interests, and what lessons can be learned from the past. There are several previously established paradigms which are being called into question by current events, of course, but among the most prominent frames to be questioned is the interpretive framework of realism. Though it has interwar origins, it came to be established in the early Cold War and experienced a revival in the 1990s. As Matthew Specter convincingly shows in a recent book, realism itself has been rigorously historicised in US intellectual culture since the critique of the US War in Iraq of 2003, but it is with this new war at the heart of Europe that this critique has reached a new relevance. The present international crisis provides an occasion to look back even further, at the Second World War, as a period during which earlier generations revised their assumptions about the natural or reasonable behaviour of states and empires.

As we experience acutely now, wars provide unique conditions for rethinking historical paradigms, enabling and even enforcing comparative thinking and imposing new temporalities on understanding historical change. When people are forcibly displaced, states disappear, etc., a combination of existential and intellectual experiences leads them (us) to question, among other things, what constitutes national interest, whether the claims of some powers to spheres of influence take precedence over others, what historical lineages of group identities in territories might have to say about it, and to what extent it was justified to juxtapose notions such as reason and emotion, attributing them to different types of regimes. Generally, along with the destruction of the built environment, cultural artefacts, and nature, wars contribute to an intellectual destruction in the mind as well, or what the German anti-Stalinist communist and later Cold War liberal Richard Löwenthal has described with the Heideggerian term 'Weltbildverlust'.

Faced with this present intellectual soul-searching, my actual case study goes back to what could be described as the intellectual consequences of a specific intellectual situation typical of the First and Second World War as well as the twentieth-century dictatorships: the internment of civilians of enemy nationality. Provided with a strange opportunity for thinking, former internees rethought their past assumptions, among other things, about geopolitical considerations in history. While many of them have been considered independently of each other, assembling their intellectual efforts jointly in the context of internment posits the question about the relationship of historical experience and political thought in a new way.

Forced displacement and internment were formative, and visceral, experiences for millions of civilians in the twentieth century. In Europe internment on a mass scale resumed in the USSR in the 1930s and in the rest of Europe during the Second World War. Apart from

deprivations of a physical nature, however, which have been widely studied by social historians, internment also constituted an intellectual experience with legacies which outlasted the experience of internment itself by decade. Internment not only meant isolation from ordinary flows of information, but people who met in camps also forged new connections and contributed to the emergence of contingent communities. This included connections among the internees as well as links to the outside world, as internees negotiated their status or experienced violence, discipline, and propagandistic interventions from outside. They experienced alienation from existing traditions and were forced to revisit established canons. Civilians of enemy nations were being held captive in all the belligerent states, dictatorships, democracies, as well as mixed regimes such as France. Characteristically, institutions of internment frequently housed different 'generations' of internees, such as in France, participants in the Spanish Civil War followed by German enemy aliens; or in the USSR, displaced internal enemies of the USSR from national republics or states such as Poland to German prisoners of war and alien nationals. In Britain enemy aliens often found themselves interned in geographical areas which had a prior history of colonial era transportation. Importantly, despite ruptures in information flows, the internees in several states developed awareness of each other's situations via word of mouth, as evidenced by records such as camp newspapers.

Former internees began to change the way Europeans conceptualised the relationship between states and empires. My argument is that the combined experience of emigration, exile, forced displacement and internment brought to the fore a new level of comparative thinking among intellectuals. Where previously, territory, culture, and sovereignty would have been the core concepts for thinking about states and empires and establishing their essential difference, new categories emerged which enabled to think about the similarities and parallels between different sizes and types of regime.

Revisiting the history of political thought in the context of intellectual encounters in specific locations, I argue, provides a different angle of vision on the question of knowledge transfer between national epistemologies. The enemy alien internees left a lasting mark on a whole range of dimensions in academic and school education as well as social policy in the two decades following the Second World War, both in Europe and beyond (including UK, Germany Australia, the United States, Ghana, and Canada). As a cosmos of the Second World War, it also provides insights into a cultural process of separation between East and West, communism and liberalism, which in the rest of the world emerged visibly only after the Second World War. Knowledge here was not just transferred but transported, not only formed but transformed from previous political contexts in the continental empires to the worlds of the late British empire and a new Anglophone academic world. Against the uncertainty of states, many intellectuals discovered alternative institutions as sites of orientation: universities, trade unions, groups, parties, and associations. Taken together, I would say that their views amounted to a new kind of realism, one which was sceptical of ideological commitments to specific regimes and instead demanded constant comparative and value-neutral thinking, critical of dictatorial elements in democracies and aware of the existence of resistance and pockets of freedom in dictatorships.

Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) [interned in a French camp in Gurs during WWII]

Heinz Arndt, *The Economic Lessons of the Nineteen-Thirties* (1944), and other economists in 'development economics' [German, interned in a British camp on the Isle of Man during WWII]

Richard Löwenthal, *Der romantische Rückfall. Wege und Irrwege einer rückwärts gewendeten Revolution* (Stuttgart, 1970) [interned in a British camp on the Isle of Man during WWII]

Yuli Margolin, *Puteshestvie v stranu Ze-ka* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1949) [interned in a Soviet camp in the 1930s]

T.H. Marshall, 1977. [1949]. "Citizenship and Social Class." In *Class, Citizenship, and Social Development*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 71-134. [interned in Germany as an enemy alien during WWI]

Henri Pirenne, *Histoire de l'Europe des invasions au XVIe siècle* (1935) [Belgian, interned in a German camp during WWI]

Iwan Solonewitsch, *Die Verlorenen* (Germany, 1938) [interned in a Soviet camp in the 1930s]

Minna Specht, "Education for Confidence", in *Children's Communities* (Experiments in Democratic Living), Monograph 1 (London: New Educational Fellowship, 1944) [German, interned in a British camp on the Isle of Man during WWII]

Walter Ullmann, *Principles of Government and Politics in the Middle Ages* (1961) [interned in a British camp on the Isle of Man during WWII]

Alex Weißberg-Cybulski, *Hexensabbat. Rußland im Schmelztiegel der Säuberungen* (Frankfurter Hefte, 1951), previously published in Nazi Germany under guise „Im Schmelztiegel. Bilden aus dem Leben eines deutschen Wissenschaftlers“ (1940) [interned in a Soviet camp]