

Wallace K. Ferguson Prize Forum Author's Response: *Barbed-Wire Imperialism: Some Canadian Connections and Contemporary Considerations*

Aidan Forth

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Article abstract

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Abstract

This article reassesses the argument of Barbed-Wire Imperialism for a contemporary Canadian readership. The concentration and segregation of indigenous communities on demarcated reserves in western Canada exhibited many of the same dynamics as British concentration camps erected in the context of colonial famines, pandemics, and guerilla warfare. As Canada encounters its own colonial past in cities like Kitchener (named after the infamous British General who detained African civilians in dirty and disease-ridden wartime camps), the colonial mantra to concentrate and control also finds resonance in Canada's "racialized state" and in the burgeoning prisons, migrant labour facilities, and refugee camps of contemporary North America.

Résumé

Cet article réévalue l'argument de Barbed-Wire Imperialism pour un lectorat canadien contemporain. La concentration et la ségrégation des communautés autochtones dans des réserves délimitées dans l'Ouest canadien présentaient de nombreuses similitudes avec les camps de concentration britanniques érigés dans le contexte des famines, des pandémies et des guérillas coloniales. Alors que le Canada est confronté à son propre passé colonial dans des villes comme Kitchener (qui porte le nom du général britannique notoire ayant détenu des civils africains dans des camps de guerre insalubres et infestés de maladies), le mantra colonial associé à la concentration et au contrôle trouve également une résonance dans « l'État racialisé » du Canada, ainsi que dans les prisons, les installations de travail pour immigrants et les camps de réfugiés en plein essor en Amérique du Nord contemporaine.

I am grateful to Daniel Gorman for drawing attention to the politics of naming in the Canadian city of Kitchener, which commemorates a quintessential character of the Victorian world order (just as its sister city, Waterloo, where both this forum's discussants incidentally reside, recalls an earlier imperial battle against Napoleon Bonaparte). Early in his career, Horatio Herbert Kitchener's work surveying the Pales-

tinian desert, which he partitioned into geometric, cartographic grids, reflected the imperial drive to divide and conquer, to know, to control, and to administer the world. Several years later, in Sudan, Kitchener of Khartoum, as he became known, again approached colonial conquest with the cold calculation of military science. Avenging previous defeats, particularly that of the eccentric General Charles Gordon, Kitchener replaced the romantic adventurism of earlier generations with methodical professionalism. Like a giant, steam-driven leviathan, Kitchener's slow but determined advance down the Nile River was a model of logistical efficiency. His troops laid down a railway line—under the supervision of Percy Girouard, the Canadian railway builder and graduate of the Royal Military College in Kingston, ON—to provide supplies, as Kitchener's army closed in on Sudanese forces. At Omdurman in 1898, he presided over one of the most lopsided slaughters in the annals of imperial history.

Kitchener's steely gaze, extraordinary moustache (on full display in the World War I recruiting posters to which Gorman alludes), and predilection for cruelty made him a distinctive character. He had few friends, never had a serious romantic relationship, and was rumoured to have used the skull of the defeated Islamic leader Abdal-lahi ibn Muhammad as an inkwell. But he also exemplified the model late-Victorian soldier: disciplined and deliberate in pursuit of victory, he was uninterested, at best, in the welfare of colonial subjects. These traits had repercussions in the culminating conflict of the "scramble for Africa"—and a fitting pivot toward twentieth-century violence—the South African (or Anglo-Boer) War (1899–1902). Here, faced with a lingering guerrilla insurgency, Kitchener brought order to previously scattershot efforts to round up civilian and partisan suspects and thereby pacify the mineral-rich South African countryside. "Like wild animals," Kitchener proclaimed, the Boers "have to be got into enclosures before they can be captured."¹² Using a new technology—barbed wire, first developed to corral cattle in the American and Canadian west—Kitchener divided the South African veldt into grids from which he systematically drove out men, women, and children, both Black and Boer. Scorched earth warfare devastated farms, while military columns swept up those left behind. Garrison towns, and eventually, a system of purpose-built suburban camps, concentrated a quarter million indigenous Africans and White "Afrikanders," now destitute and starving, who saw their livelihood lapped in flames. Such was the genesis of the world's first "concentration camps." Within

their perimeters, forty thousand would die of malnutrition and epidemic disease.

When I visited the city of Kitchener in 2009 for a guided tour of city hall, the docents and public servants with whom I spoke knew the namesake of their city, whose portrait hung prominently outside the mayor's office, as a British military leader who served and died (dramatically, in a U-boat bombing) in the First World War. Their awareness of his exploits in Africa, however, were vague at best, and my continued queries on the subject evinced a polite Canadian reticence. Though the brochure for Kitchener City Hall's self-guided tour still makes no mention of Kitchener's imperial past,¹³ I am heartened to learn from Gorman and Barrington Walker, on the ground in Kitchener-Waterloo, that the Black Lives Matter movement has drawn renewed awareness to the colonial legacies of social and racial injustice that continue to shape both the city of Kitchener, and the wider world. In its own small way, I hope that *Barbed-Wire Imperialism* might do the same. Indeed, recent world events, coupled with my own return to Canada to accept a teaching position at MacEwan University in Edmonton, have prompted me to reassess the legacies of Britain's nineteenth-century empire of camps, and its particular relevance to Canadians.

Cultures of Encampment

One of my principal aims in writing *Barbed-Wire Imperialism* was to explore connections across time and space between the concentration camps of wartime South Africa and related institutions of social and spatial control in Britain and its empire. Military historians have long identified similarities between Kitchener's counterinsurgency campaign and those of Spanish and American generals in Cuba and the Philippines, who likewise concentrated unruly populations within fortified towns (though not purpose-built camps) in order to isolate guerrillas from their civilian supporters. Such strategic similarities are obvious. For too long, however, the history of Britain's colonial concentration camps has been dominated by military history and South African national politics. Dissolving distinctions among divergent scholarly "camps"—military, social, and cultural history; the domestic, imperial, and global past; archival research and cultural theory—is one of *Barbed-Wire Imperialism's* central ambitions. British concentration camps, I argue, were more than rational products of

military instrumentality; rather, they emanated from widespread colonial aspirations to detain, segregate, and survey dirty, destitute, and potentially dangerous populations, while reordering chaotic colonial spaces according to registers of race and social class. On the eve of the South African War, imperialists like Kitchener, then, could draw on an extensive archive of colonial practice in the forced concentration and management of undesirable groups.

As Gorman points out, workhouses, prisons, factories, mines, and other “protocamps” pioneered practices of confinement and control that would later inspire Boer War concentration camps. Of vital importance, too, were the plague and famine camps of South Asia, which provided direct models for wartime South Africa. The Colonial Office confirmed as much when it recruited senior officials with “very analogous experience at [Indian] plague and famine camps” to billet populations displaced by Kitchener’s scorched earth warfare (193). In the 1870s and again in the 1890s, a series of devastating famines caused widespread destitution and mass population displacements across British India as emaciated masses wandered into cities seeking charity, raiding food supplies, or rioting against moneylenders. In response to this insurgency of the hungry, the Governor of Bombay, Sir Richard Temple (whose namesake Mt. Temple near Lake Louise is among the most majestic peaks of the Canadian Rockies) established “relief work camps” that billeted nearly ten million Indians over the course of the nineteenth century. While these facilities distributed food aid in return for heavy labour on public works projects—the celebrated railways, roads, and canals of the British Raj—they were primarily instruments of colonial security and fiscal discipline that incarcerated colonial bodies in punitive conditions. Inmates received fewer calories than prisoners of Buchenwald in World War II. Millions perished from malnutrition and disease.

In 1896, meanwhile, a bubonic plague pandemic swept both India and South Africa, generating new efforts to encamp undesirable populations in demarcated enclosures. Though plague quarantine camps did little to stem contagion (in fact, they likely spread it), they proved highly effective at clearing slums, evicting the colonial poor from select quarters, and racially segregating imperial cities. And their legacies live on. Just as wartime concentration camps for Black Africans became templates for Bantustans in apartheid South Africa, as Gorman’s response attests, plague segregation camps, like the famous Soweto outside Johannesburg, were nuclei for developing Black town-

ships, the “inner city ‘zones of exception’” referred to by Barrington Walker. Resentment among Boers regarding their wartime suffering—and, particularly, their supposedly analogous treatment to Black Africans—I might add, stoked a politics of grievance central to twentieth-century White supremacism in South Africa.

In the twenty-first century, meanwhile, the Pakistani government has recently revived the 1897 Epidemic Diseases Act, a British colonial inheritance, to forcibly detain travellers in sprawling “coronavirus camps” near Quetta (where another portrait of Horatio Kitchener hangs at the Military College, founded in 1907, when the Boer War general became Commander-in-Chief of the British Indian Army). Described by one inmate, Mohammed Bakir, as “a prison” and “the dirtiest place I have ever stayed in my life,” such facilities resemble those of British India in their general inhumanity, if not their racial agendas.¹⁴ In a colonial landscape where British officials associated Blackness with dirt, and cleanliness with godliness, medical languages had powerful coercive potential. In our own age of disinformation, however, far-right politicians (like one neophyte Alberta MLA spreading conspiracy theories that the Trudeau government is establishing “coronavirus concentration camps”) would do well to study world affairs and the realities of imperial history to consider what real injustice looks like.¹⁵

Canadian Connections

Not only did India, the “crown jewel” of the British Empire, generate millions of camps for the destitute and dangerous, but it established disciplinary routines that would inform practices in wartime South Africa. H. G. J. Lotbinière, a Canadian national with direct experience in South Asia, cited the “lessons of Indian famine camps” in “keeping natives employed.” If “fed for free,” he concluded, Black inmates concentrated in South Africa would “deteriorate physically and morally.” Apart from transnational connections between South Asia and southern Africa, however, future research might broaden the analysis to consider other institutions and geographic regions. Having largely written *Barbed-Wire Imperialism* in the United States, the deadly Civil War camp at Andersonville and the violent ethnic cleansing of the American West both featured in my research: Boer guerrillas embraced the “ambushes [and] the trickeries of war as formerly [did] the Sioux Indian,” British officers believed, and they even

recruited as their Chief Military Scout a Minnesotan man, Frederick Burnham, who was raised on a Sioux-Dakota Reserve (173–4). The detention of India’s upland Adivasi or “criminal tribes” at barbed-wire work camps in the 1890s likewise pointed to functional solidarities between efforts to monitor aboriginal populations and the barbed-wire camps of famine, plague, and war. Since returning to my hometown of Edmonton, however, I have come to recognize the many ways in which Canadian history, too, has made active contributions to Britain’s global empire of camps. Though *Barbed-Wire Imperialism* is based on material uncovered at distant archives, from Mumbai to Bloemfontein, local iterations of the colonial mantra to concentrate and control are no less relevant.

Mike Davis’s provocative work *Late Victorian Holocausts* examines a series of interconnected subsistence crises, principally in India but also in China and Brazil, fomented by social inequality and the fiscal policies of a racist, laissez-faire imperial state. Descriptions of “heavy physical labour and dreadful sanitation” at British relief work camps offered early inspiration for my own research. Yet “tropical humanity,” as Davis puts it, was not the only victim of famine in the 1870s.¹⁶ Though he does not cite Davis’s work, the Canadian historian James Daschuk, in his masterful *Clearing the Plains* (a book I only discovered after rejoining Canadian academe), points to a related complex of economic and military concerns that led to the coercive concentration of Canadian First Nations on demarcated reserves amid devastating famine in the late 1870s. John A. MacDonald’s Dominion government in Ottawa shared the same priorities as Richard Temple in India, who incidentally toured western Canada in 1884. As thousands of Cree and Blackfoot perished from hunger and disease in 1877/78, a “work-for-rations policy” would “require labour from able-bodied Indians for supplies given to them.” In the event, famine relief in western Canada, legally guaranteed by treaty, offered “less than half the rations provided to state prisoners in Siberia.” And while Canada did not organize formal work camps, famine, as in India, offered impetus for new measures of social and spatial control. By confining famine relief to government reserves, Dominion authorities aimed to concentrate the hungry at strategic military points, while pacifying agricultural corridors in preparation for European settlement. In this way, food relief offered an imperial strategy for keeping natives segregated from European communities, converting reservations into “centres of incarceration.”¹⁷

My return to Canada has also reinforced, in my mind, the degree to which the politics of food relief, coupled with the use of reservations, camps, and other enclosures, continues to echo in our contemporary moment. Amid hunger and disease that has been exacerbated by economic recession and the global coronavirus pandemic, a town Councillor in the northern Alberta community of Slave Lake recently stated, “we need to work to get them [destitute members of the Driftwood Cree First Nation] home [back to the reserve]. We need to stop being so nice to them. We need to stop feeding them.”¹⁸ In 1916, the residents of Berlin, Ontario, chose to rename their city Kitchener (rather than Keowana or Adanac, two other candidates), because they were steeped in a British imperial world view. Kitchener’s portrait still hangs at city hall because many Canadians still adhere to a colonial mentality inherited from the Boer War Field Marshall. If Canadians in World War I were ready to de-Germanize, Canadians in 2021 are still not entirely ready to decolonize. We have not yet escaped the camp.

A Useable Past?

The term “concentration camp” immediately recalls the horrors of Nazi Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union. Yet Britain’s rights-based culture, open civil society, tradition of humanitarian (if patronizing) reform, and efforts, as noted in Gorman’s review, to respond to public criticism and improve conditions for inmates, distinguished British colonial camps from their murderous German and Soviet counterparts. In a recent op-ed, published in the *Toronto Star*, I argued that a liberal tradition of concentrating suspect populations in camps, spanning from the South African War to Japanese internment in World War II, offers a more useful referent than Nazi *Konzentrationslager* (concentration camps) to understand (and critique) the racist and inhumane migrant detention policies of Donald Trump’s America.¹⁹ The article’s profanity-laced comment section, however, indicates the degree to which readers continue to resist any suggestion that camps are in fact longstanding features of Anglo-American governance rather than simply isolated aberrations of the twentieth century’s “evil empires.” It is thus worth repeating, yet again: there is no moral equivalence between British colonial camps and Auschwitz. Kitchener was neither Hitler nor Stalin.²⁰ Nonetheless, the world’s first concentration camps (so-called by their colonial architects) appeared in the British

Empire, and liberal democracies, like Britain, Canada, and the United States, have a long tradition of concentrating undesirable populations, in coercive and often extralegal contexts, in camps, compounds, and other enclosures.

As remarks by the town councillor in Slave Lake (a suggestive name) make clear, this is a tradition that continues today. In this respect, I welcome Barrington Walker's contribution to this forum, which considers the ways in which Britain's empire of camps continues to reverberate in "Canada's racial state." *Barbed-Wire Imperialism* briefly examines Atlantic slave ships and plantations as templates for British colonial camps, but Walker rightly suggests they deserve more attention. Sugar plantations, like the sprawling compound at Roehampton, Jamaica (which I am currently studying for a forthcoming book²¹), disseminated key logistical and ideological practices and vocabularies—formalized in published "planter manuals"—that would govern the management of colonial populations for the next two centuries. As Walker affirms, the Emancipation Act in 1834 did not mark a straightforward end to slavery in the British Empire; tracing continuities from chattel slavery in the Atlantic to indentured, convict, and captive labour across the Indian Ocean in the late nineteenth century, would open a more global genealogy than *Barbed-Wire Imperialism* achieves. The enclosed mining compound at Kimberley, South Africa (opened in 1885 by the De Beers company, a multinational that now operates throughout the Canadian north²²), suggests one important avenue in the transmission of carceral practices from slavery to colonial concentration camps and beyond, as does the use of prison labour at public works projects and cash crop plantations in colonial Bengal. In a post-emancipation empire, British colonial camps constituted important depots of coerced or unfree labour in economies where free markets, and other associated freedoms, did not fully function or apply.

Camps, of course, are not only physical spaces, but ideological constructs. As sites of unfreedom and disempowerment, camps help us appreciate the limitations of liberal freedom. Just as the practices and discourses of slavery helped Britons (who "ruled the waves, and never would be slaves") value freedom as a uniquely Anglo-Saxon inheritance, so did camps represent the constitutive other of liberal inclusion—as spaces of exception, they were reserved for the diseased, the dirty, the destitute, and dark-skinned, for those apparently incapable, either racially or politically, to exercise the rights and

responsibilities of liberal subjecthood. (Of course, the detention of Boers, whom Kitchener described as “Afrikander savages with only a thin white veneer”²³ reveals the extent to which colonial racism could be employed as a discursive tactic of exclusion rather than a biological reality). And though Canada never erected slave compounds on the scale of Caribbean sugar or American cotton plantations (or camps comparable to those of the South African War), it nonetheless inherited colonial mentalities—six out of sixteen members of the first parliament of Upper Canada were, after all, slave owners.²⁴ These legacies endure, Walker suggests, in the racialized prison-industrial complex and segregated “ghettos” of contemporary North American cities, which employ the foundational technologies of surveillance and carcerality first pioneered in imperial Britain. A colonial camp mentality, the belief that certain groups, in a supposedly equal and free society, must be subjected to special measures of spatial and social control, may still imprison Canadian horizons.

I am delighted for readers of this journal to engage with my work and was honoured to receive the Ferguson Prize and to read Daniel Gorman’s and Barrington Walker’s insightful contributions to this forum. If *Barbed-Wire Imperialism* offers a useable past to understand and critique contemporary injustices—racialized prisons, migrant labour camps, native reservations, or the carceral installations now detaining more than fifty million refugees on the borders of Europe and America—it has achieved its goals.

AIDAN FORTH is an Associate Professor of History at MacEwan University. His first book, *Barbed-Wire Imperialism: Britain’s Empire of Camps, 1876–1902*, won the Wallace K. Ferguson Prize from the Canadian Historical Association and the Stansky Book Prize from the North American Conference on British Studies. He is now completing a global and longue-durée history of the concentration camp for the University of Toronto Press (forthcoming in 2023) and conducting research for a new monograph titled *The Passage East: Connection and Mobility in a Globalizing World*. His essays and op-eds appear in the *Toronto Star*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, the *Conversation* and elsewhere. He recently relocated back to his hometown of Edmonton, AB.

AIDAN FORTH est professeur agrégé d'histoire à l'Université MacEwan. Son premier livre, *Barbed-Wire Imperialism : Britain's Empire of Camps, 1876-1902*, a remporté le prix Wallace K. Ferguson de la Société historique du Canada et le prix Stansky Book de la North American Conference on British Studies (NACBS). Il termine actuellement une histoire globale et de longue durée des camps de concentration pour la University of Toronto Press (à paraître en 2023) et mène des recherches pour une nouvelle monographie intitulée *The Passage East : Connection and Mobility in a Globalizing World*. Ses essais et ses articles d'opinion sont publiés dans le *Toronto Star*, le *Los Angeles Review of Books*, le *Conversation* et ailleurs. Il s'est récemment réinstallé dans sa ville natale d'Edmonton, en Alberta.

Endnotes

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