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The English Prison during the First and Second World Wars:

Hidden Lived Experiences of War

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This article describes a research study still in its earliest days. Our primary reason for publishing so soon in the project's life is that we want to appeal for information. If you have any official or personal information or documentary material — including private diaries and journals, letters, service medals or simply informed thoughts — about prisons in England during either of the World Wars, please see the contact information at the end of the article and get in touch. We would particularly value any information from ex-prisoners, prison officers and governors — or relatives of such individuals — who experienced prisons during the Wars

The reason for our interest in this topic is quite simply that it is a forgotten history. Despite a wealth of data (including photographic images and autobiographical literature) on prisoners-of-war, internees and conscientious objectors, there are surprisingly few scholarly accounts of ordinary prisoners and prison staff during these periods of conflict. Commonly, the criminological literature jumps from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1960s when the death penalty was abolished and Lord Mountbatten devised the security classification system with which we are familiar today, and penal historians have tended to peg their studies on a handful of key dates rather than discussing longer periods and trends: 1901 when the first Borstal opened; 1921 when the Howard League was set up; 1932 when the first recorded prison riot occurred at HMP Dartmoor; 1936 when the first open prison was established in 1936 at New Hall in Wakefield; 1945 when a new Prison Commissioner was appointed; 1948 when the Criminal Justice Act was finally passed (having first been introduced by Home Secretary Sir Samuel Hoare in 1938 but dropped at the outbreak of the Second World War because time could not be found to pass it into law); and 1951 when the Franklin Report reviewed punishment in penal institutions. Aside from these landmark dates, existing academic studies offer virtually no discussion of prisons in wartime; either the Great War of 1914-1918 or the Second World War, 1939-1945. This is astonishing given what vivid and, at times, desperate and frightening periods these were.

We felt convinced that there was a forgotten history of prisons waiting to be written in the light of the narratives related in *Madness in its Place*¹; an oral history of Severalls Hospital, a psychiatric institution in Essex established in 1913 that held long-term patients in a custodial environment. The Great War brought with it staff shortages, including 21 Reservists who were immediately called up to fight (followed over the course of the next year by many others who had enlisted) and numerous female nurses whose services were required in other types of hospital as the wounded were repatriated. Equally disruptive to Severalls' usual regime was the fact that from August 1914, the Suffolk Brigade of the Territorials was quartered in some of its buildings and the surrounding grounds. In both wars illnesses such as scarlet fever, tuberculosis and typhoid broke out, many patients suffered dangerous levels of weight loss, and at least two members of staff died from their symptoms². In 1942, 38 patients were killed and 23 were injured when Severalls was bombed³. Scarce and/or disrupted resources, in the form of water, coal, heating, clothing, medical supplies and food were severe obstacles to the normal functioning of residential psychiatric hospitals and resulted in the recruitment of inexperienced, unqualified staff, some of whom were 'elderly and incompetent' and, for inmates, 'the return of the locked door, of inactivity, of isolation'⁴.

It is hard to imagine that war did not have equally profound effects on prisons. We have conducted preliminary, relatively small-scale research — which we are currently developing into a much more detailed study — using documentary sources, including Prison Commissioner Reports, *The Times* digital archive, local news sources, autobiographies of prison staff and the *BBC WW2 The People's War* website. Our intention here is merely to give a flavour of what we have found so far; of the stories, activities and official records which together provide a fascinating glimpse into how world war affected English prisons. We have grouped our initial findings under three headings: fluctuations in the prison population and expansion of the prison estate; bombings and evacuations; and everyday life in prison.

1. Gittins, D. (1998) *Madness in its Place: Narratives of Severalls Hospital, 1913-97*, London: Routledge.
2. Ibid: p. 61-2.
3. bid: p. 181.
4. ibid: p. 63.

Fluctuations in the prison population and expansion of the prison estate

While there is a general dearth of literature on prisons during the Wars, what information exists tends to concern a handful of key historical figures, including the charismatic Alexander Paterson, appointed to the Prison Commission in 1922, and his successor, Lionel Fox. The latter is especially interesting because, as an Editorial in the *British Journal of Criminology* recording his death notes, he became Chairman in 'a period of unparalleled difficulty' when 'our penal system had been seriously affected by the war'⁵.

Fox oversaw a vast prison building programme between 1945 and 1952 when — due to a 50 per cent rise in the prison population between 1938 and 1946 — 17 new prisons and borstals were built. At the same time as the prison population was growing, both staff and inmates were being conscripted, and the *Times* reports that Home Secretary, Chuter Ede, had to defend staffing and conditions at HMP Holloway where the prisoner population doubled during WWII but staff numbers remained the same and included many more temporary, inexperienced personnel which, Ede acknowledged, weakened staff overall and impaired pre-war standards of administration⁶. But the possible reasons for the dramatic rise in numbers of people sentenced to prison, leading to a rapidly growing problem of overcrowding (which might include, for example, large numbers of young men returning home from active service; issues around homelessness, fractured family ties, mental illnesses related to the experience of armed combat, etc.) can currently only be guessed at. Further, while criminologists and psychologists now acknowledge the link between Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and offending — underlined by a recent NAPO report⁷ that nearly one in ten current prisoners is a former member of the armed forces — there is little historical documentation of similar

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phenomena during and immediately after the World Wars.

While the years immediately after WW2 witnessed dramatic increases in prison numbers, also worthy of consideration are the significant falls in the prison population which accompanied war. For example, in 1915-16, numbers of sentenced prisoners dropped from 114,283 to 64,160 — a decrease of 50,123. The Prison Commissioner at the time, Evelyn Ruggles-Brise, argued that a fall in petty crimes was linked to enlistment: 'There is every reason to believe that the country's call for men appealed as strongly to the criminal as to other classes'⁸. Yet at the same time, and somewhat contradictorily, the *Times* reports that short prison sentences for crimes committed *because* of the war (e.g. stealing, looting, hoarding food and rations coupons etc.) became very common. Moreover, given the shortage of medical and other qualified staff, potentially as interesting as the reasons for the fall in numbers of convicted inmates, is the comment in the same article that receptions into prison are largely confined to the 'physically and mentally weak'⁹.

Bombings and Evacuations

Reporting on the early years of the Second World War, 1939-1941, the Prison Commissioners described the period as one of 'disruption and destruction, during which the total effort of the Prison Service was devoted to keeping the machine working in conditions which were always difficult and often dangerous'¹⁰. Despite the robust nature of prison buildings (at Wandsworth, for example, some of the prison staff's children were brought inside the prison because it offered more secure shelter¹¹) and the presence of competent, trained staff, the Commissioners were preoccupied with Air Raid Precautions (ARP), appointing an ARP Officer at Head Office, and selecting individual officers at prisons who were trained at ARP schools or instructed by local fire brigades. Training exercises were held in which prisoners also 'cheerfully co-operated'¹².

5. *British Journal of Criminology* (1961) 'Editorial', 2(2): p. 109.

6. *Times*, 18th October 1945.

7. NAPO (2009) *Armed Forces and the Criminal Justice System*, [http://www.lifechangeuk.com/_webedit/uploadedfiles/All%20Files/Veterans%20Case%20Studies%202009%20\(2\).pdf](http://www.lifechangeuk.com/_webedit/uploadedfiles/All%20Files/Veterans%20Case%20Studies%202009%20(2).pdf)

8. *Times* 26th September 1916.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Report of the Commissioners of Prisons and Directors of Convict Prisons for the Years 1939-1941 (1945) Parliamentary Papers, Cmd. 6820, p. 4. (from now on RCP & DCP).

11. McLaughlin, S. (2001) *Wandsworth Prison: A History*, London: HMP Wandsworth.

12. RCP & DCP, 1939-1941 *Ibid.*, p.5.

When war broke out it had already been decided that there should be an immediate discharge of all prisoners with less than three months left to serve and all Borstal inmates who had served not less than six months of their term. In total 5,624 prisoners were discharged¹³. Shortly afterwards, over 2,000 prisoners and Borstal inmates were transferred over a three day period by road with all their personal property and records. The idea was to reduce or remove the prison populations in areas thought to be liable to attack and to totally or partially clear selected establishments and redistribute the population. With that in mind, Wormwood Scrubs, Pentonville and Brixton were wholly cleared except for a few prisoners awaiting trial at Brixton and prisoners on remand or awaiting trial were transferred to Wandsworth. Those in other committal areas were diverted to prisons outside London. Holloway retained a small number of convicted prisoners for domestic service and those on remand or awaiting trial at an early date and the remainder were transferred to Aylesbury. Outside London; only Portsmouth was wholly cleared but five prisons — Birmingham, Hull, Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester — and one Borstal, Rochester BI, were partially evacuated¹⁴. Other prisons were re-organised to house prisoners-of-war (e.g. HMP Stafford) or military prisoners (e.g. HMP Reading).

In the summer of 1940 the air-raids came. Borstals were the first to suffer and before the end of August, Portland, Borstal and Feltham had all reported bomb damage. Portland was severely affected during the Battle of Britain with prisoner working parties frequently bombed or machine gunned by hostile aircraft. By July 1940 day-bombing had become so serious that large working parties had to be split up, and several parties had narrow escapes¹⁵. In September 1940 the heavy air-raids on the capital began, and four of the London prisons were hit within a few weeks. The raids went on for months with intermittent strikes, one of the most serious of which occurred on the night of 10th May at Pentonville. The prison was hit by several heavy incendiaries causing fires and severe damage to buildings and leading to tragic loss of life, as heard by a child living nearby:

I was five when the war began and we lived in a block of flats in Islington, London...Our air-raid shelter was next to the wall of Pentonville Prison...One night I remember an incendiary bomb fell and set fire to the roof of the prison

and we could hear the prisoners screaming to be let out. They'd been moved from the top floor to the bottom floor and carried on screaming until the fire was eventually put out. Of all the things I remember I always remembering hearing them screaming, these were hardened men, but in the end they were screaming like little girls¹⁶.

In total seventeen people, including officers, their families and prisoners, were killed. As a result the entire prison population was immediately transferred and the prison was closed.

Outside of the capital, bombing raids also inflicted serious damage. The first provincial prison to be attacked was HMP Walton in Liverpool. On 18th September 1940 three bombs struck the prison, resulting in severe destruction and human casualties. One wing was put out of action, six prisoners were killed and two were injured. Air-raids continued into December and then, after a brief lull, heavy raids began again in March 1941. The most severe strikes occurred in late spring of that year. On 26th April 1941 a large number of incendiaries fell on Walton Prison, starting fires which were eventually brought under control 'with great courage and resource' by prison staff assisted by the Auxiliary Fire Service (AFS)¹⁷. There followed a series of eight raids by the Luftwaffe on successive nights, placing immense strain on the prison. On the night of the 3rd May, Walton received eight direct hits by heavy bombs; very serious damage was done and 22 prisoners were killed. Five days later, on the 8th May another heavy bomb demolished an entire wing and caused serious damage to the administration block. Again, a neighbour's testimony describes the terror of the bombing and its aftermath:

We lived next to Walton Prison which was bombed one night and we could hear from our garden the prisoners screaming. Years later some bones were found when they were renovating the Prison Hospital. It was reported that these were prisoners lost during the air raid¹⁸.

Following the prolonged airstrikes in May 1941 the authorities had no choice but to close Walton Prison and evacuate the prisoners while repairs were carried out. A substantial part of the prison was quickly made ready for

13. This discharged group was made up of 3,482 Males in Local Prisons, 318 Females in Local Prisons, 127 Males in Convict Prisons, 8 Females in Convict Prisons, 8 Males in Preventive Detention, 1563 Males in Borstals and 118 Females in Borstals, RCP & DCP, 1939-1941 (1945), p.6.

14. RCP & DCP, 1939-1941 (1945), p.6.

15. *Ibid.*, p.11.

16. Contributor to BBC WWII *The People's War* website, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/91/a5961891.shtml>

17. RCP & DCP, 1939-1941 (1945), p.12.

18. Contributor to BBC WWII *The People's War* website, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/55/a1986555.shtml>

use again and on 28th July 1941 it was reopened. The rest of the year was spent in comparative peace but no other provincial prison suffered so heavily as Liverpool.¹⁹

As the quotes from the BBC website illustrate, the prisoners had good cause to be terrified during the German bombing raids. One interesting point of discussion that emerges from the Commissioners reports is whether or not prisoners should be locked in their cells during air-raids. The report notes that as the 'behaviour of prisoners, considering their unenviable position during air-raids, was on the whole remarkably good and rarely occasioned anxiety to the staff'²⁰ they should be allowed to remain in their cells: in fact, it was decided that, with the exception of those on the top floors, cells were one of the best forms of air-raid shelter and were the safest place for prisoners to be. The question of whether or not the cell should be locked during a raid was, however, a more contentious issue. On the one hand, it was recognised that being locked alone in a cell during a raid was unpleasant and frightening. On the other hand, experience showed that if a wing was hit by an incendiary the landings were likely to collapse and, where casualties occurred, they were often due to prisoners rushing out of their cells as the landing was falling through. It was decided that physical safety should take precedence over psychological anxiety and a rule was laid down that, during air-raids at night, prisoners should be kept locked up²¹, although at HMP Wandsworth bolts were added to the cell doors to allow for a rapid evacuation of inmates if necessary²².

According to the Commissioners, subsequent experience regularly proved the soundness of this decision. Harley Cronin, later General Secretary of the Prison Officers Association (POA), but then working at Holloway Prison, notes in his autobiography that he urged the Home Secretary to revise Holloway's policy of leaving cell doors open at night:

I had seen some of the unsavoury results of this policy at Parkhurst... My case there was proved when Pentonville, reoccupied, was actually hit

by a bomb. Most of the killed and injured were amongst those sheltering on the ground floor of the prisons. Men locked in cells were unharmed by bomb or blast²³.

Everyday Life in Prison

Prison work may not have become more purposeful during the wars but it did enable inmates to contribute to the war effort and thus provided an 'outlet for the patriotism of convicts'²⁴ with, for example, the manufacture of articles for Government Departments and the armed forces (e.g. coal sacks for the Navy and kit bags for the Army). During the Great War, the *Times* comments that many prisoners volunteered to work overtime to support the war effort despite the menial nature of the work for, as the paper notes, it had become impossible for prisoners to engage in work that competed with the occupations of the working-classes outside. The article ends by noting that 'it is hoped that the improvement which has been shown with regard to work will help them when they are discharged'²⁵; a sentiment reflecting the growing faith in new forms of 'treatment' which brought psychotherapeutic and rehabilitative discourses into prisons, as well as into 'asylums' and hospitals in the early decades of the twentieth century.

In World War II female prisoners contributed to the war effort by making dolls and teddy bears for evacuee children²⁶. Mary Size, then Deputy Governor at Holloway Women's Prison, notes in her biography that both staff and prisoners knitted comforts for men and women which were sent to the Red Cross Depot at Oxford for distribution. The prisoners were highly commended for their work and a supply of wool was then provided by the Red Cross. The Mayor of Aylesbury set up a Comforts and Welfare fund which many prisoners contributed to from their modest wages. Most of the women donated a penny a week out of their earnings of three-pence: some paid three

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19. RCP & DCP, 1939-1941 (1945), p12.

20. RCP & DCP, 1939-1941 (1945), p14.

21. Ibid.

22. McLaughlin, Ibid.

23. Cronin, H. (1967) *The Screw Turns*, London: Long: p. 154.

24. *Times*, 9th February 1915.

25. Ibid.

26. Industrial Training in Borstals, PRO 45-19688-442964/15, /16 7 Oct 1943 cited in Forsythe, W. J. (1990) *Penal Discipline, Reformatory Projects and the English Prison Commission, 1895-1939*, Exeter: Exeter University Press, p.236.

half-pence, others a halfpenny. A bank account was opened and £1 a week paid into the Mayor's account. When the balance reached £5 it was sent to the Spitfire Fund which resulted in the prison receiving a letter from Lord Beaverbrook saying he was deeply touched by the gift²⁷.

Many prisons also had their own small-holdings and farms during the Second World War. Prisoners at Aylesbury cleared gardens and small areas of land to grow their own food, and donated what they could to people who had been evacuated to Aylesbury after air-raids on London²⁸. At New Hall, the new, open training prison in Wakefield, 'trusted prisoners' lived simply in huts in the middle of a wood, with 'no walls or fences and just a splash of paint on a tree to mark the boundary'²⁹. Prisoners kept pigs and hens and grew soft fruit trees, strawberries and some fields of cereals. They baked their own bread and sold it to local people, as well as supplying other nearby prisons³⁰. Once again, reflecting penal ideologies of the time, Home Secretary Herbert Morrison decided to see New Hall's 'enlightened methods in dealing with offenders' for himself³¹. His visit in March 1944 convinced him that some prisoners could be handled well in 'minimum security' establishments: in fact the experience was described by the *Times* newspaper as an 'eye-opener to him — the only one [prison] he had ever visited from which he came out happier than he went in'.

As was the case in the wider population, war also brought positive experiences to prisoners in the form of morale-boosting leisure activities such as musical bands, concert parties and sporting competitions. Another contribution to the BBC *The People's War* site notes the importance of social events (at a Naval prison for military offenders) for prison officers, as well as inmates, who 'became almost as institutionalised as the prisoners'³². He describes 'Saturday Open Socials', when staff, who mostly lived in prison lodgings, invited local residents to come and enjoy the entertainment. This was a good PR exercise because not all the locals were happy to have a large prison on their doorstep, but this gave them an opportunity to meet the staff and 'find they were human and not monsters'³³.

Prison staff were, of course, adversely affected by the war in numerous ways. Research from psychology has noted the presence of 'shell-shock' (a term first used in *The Lancet* in 1915) among staff at secure hospitals

returning from active service in both Wars and, given that 80,000 cases of shell-shock had been diagnosed by 1918³⁴, and that alcoholism became increasingly common in this period, it seems highly likely that both were represented among the officers who staffed prisons.

Conclusion

Academic research into the history of prisons and punishment has a long and distinguished history but it has been dominated by studies either which examine the 'birth of the prison' at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, or which focus on the 1960s and 1970s when several important developments occurred and when there was a growing politicisation of both prisoners and prison officers. There exists little, if anything, about any of the events described in this article in the academic 'prison studies' literature. Our aim, then, is to explore the impact and effects of war on the management of the prison population; on the buildings in which prisoners and officers lived and worked; on the lives and careers of prison officers and governors; and on the everyday experience of imprisonment for those in custody. As this article has hopefully demonstrated, there is a rich vein of information waiting to be uncovered — data which might not only shed light on a forgotten chapter in penal history but might also offer valuable insights into current problems and issues facing the prison service; coping with rises and falls in prisoner numbers, the re-rolling of institutions to accommodate different populations, and the relatively high numbers of ex-military personnel within the prison population to name but a few.

CONTACT US

Do you have any information or stories to tell about prisons, prisoners, prison officers, or anyone else connected in any way with prisons during World War I or World War II?

We are interested in hearing from anyone who has anything that might add to our research — from diaries, letters and reports to simply a story to tell. Please contact us: Yvonne Jewkes, Department of Criminology, University of Leicester, LE1 7QA yj25@le.ac.uk; and/or Helen Johnston, Centre for Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Hull, HU6 7RX H.Johnston@hull.ac.uk

27. Size, M. (1957) *Prisons I Have Known*, London: George Allen & Unwin, p. 136.

28. Ibid.

29. Contributor to *BBC WWII The People's War* website, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/08/a4093508.shtml>

30. Ibid.

31. *Times* 29th March 1944.

32. Contributor to *BBC WWII The People's War* website, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar/stories/43/a5343743.shtml>

33. Ibid.

34. Busfield, J. (1996) *Men, Women and Madness: Understanding Gender and Mental Disorder*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.