Criminalizing a Culture:

Race, Citizenship, and Internment in World War I Georgia

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Bouquets of flowers surround a simple black casket. Wreaths covered in white blooms encircle the space, so much so that those viewing the funeral must stand back several yards.

Ribbons and flowers drape over the top of the dark wooden coffin as it rests on bars above a six-foot hole in the red Georgia clay. Under the shade of the trees, six men stand around the deceased, all wearing naval dress uniforms and grave faces. One of the sailors holds a bugle, ready to play his role in the honorable ceremony. A U.S. Army soldier stands at attention several feet behind the sailors, rifle in hand. Beside him, a man in a suit and brimmed hat looks on with crossed arms and a stern face. While the sailors look directly at the camera, the soldier and his perturbed colleague look toward the sailors, the only sign that this was no ordinary military funeral.[1]

In fact, the men gathered under the hot Georgia sun in May 1918 were members of the *SMS Prinz Eitel Friedrich*, a German auxiliary cruiser that had overstayed its time in neutral U.S. waters following the outbreak of the Great War in Europe. The crew had first been detained in Virginia and then transported to Philadelphia before finally being sent to Fort McPherson, Ga., when the United States declared war against Germany in April 1917. Now, a year later, the men were standing around the grave of fellow sailor, Heinrich Knappke, a fireman for the *SMS Prinz Eitel Friedrich*. A German prisoner of war, Knappke had been shot by a guard while chasing a fly ball during a game of baseball at Fort McPherson. The incident caused widespread tension between prisoners and guards at the camp, a sentiment clear on the faces of the men at the gravesite.[2]

Curiously, at a time when even African-American and Latino soldiers could not be buried alongside their white brothers in arms, Heinrich Knappke and three other German sailors were interred beside American soldiers in the Marietta National Cemetery.[3] Despite being naval sailors of the enemy state, the four men were given elaborate funeral ceremonies and buried with full military honors. While German culture, language, and education were being criminalized throughout the United States, these men were interred wearing German naval uniforms, with Imperial German flags draping their coffins, and American soldiers firing honorary shots over their graves.[4] These contradictions involving the internment of German citizens in the United States played out in the context of uncertainties and shifting ideas surrounding national heritage, citizenship, and criminality.

On the one hand, some scholars investigating the internment system in the United States during World War I have emphasized the role of vigilante actions by ordinary Americans in criminalizing Germans in the United States.[5] That perspective, however, minimizes the strict legislation and propaganda drive undertaken by the federal government. On the other hand, many historians have suggested that anti-German sentiment resulted from the massive propaganda campaign waged by the government, interdepartmental collaboration within the government, and cooperation by large institutions and businesses to investigate and arrest enemy aliens.[6] That interpretation, however, minimizes the voluntary acceptance as well as the production of anti-German sentiment by the general population.

The American people were far from an unwitting audience ready to accept anything the government advocated. As a result, the reorganization of Germans' status required top-down actors to adjust their propaganda in accordance with established bottom-up anxieties. In the early 20th century, these apprehensions tended to surround questions of race, immigration, and citizenship.

Rather than considering the issue either from the top-down or from the bottom-up perspective, this article suggests that German criminalization occurred through a complex process in which the U.S. government and American citizens debated and negotiated the status of Germans so as to be consistent with prevailing fears surrounding race, immigration, and citizenship. Far from powerless bystanders, however, those of German descent also employed the fluidity of their status to actively fight efforts to criminalize them.

The state of Georgia offers a valuable case study in exploring this process of criminalization and resistance. Initially, Georgians opposed entry into World War I by the United States. Local populist leader Tom Watson asserted strong isolationist views, arguing against President Woodrow Wilson's preparations for war while simultaneously claiming neutrality. Other than African-Americans, Germans constituted the largest ethnic group in Georgia.[7] Nativist prejudice in the state tended to exclude Germans—who were viewed as white and assimilated—and instead target other ethnic, racial, and religious groups, such as the state's significant African-American and growing Eastern European populations.[8] In fact, when conflict erupted in Europe in 1914, Georgians originally felt more animosity toward Britain, whose naval blockade limited the state's trade with continental Europe. Even as late as 1916, Georgians' attentions were directed elsewhere; their National Guardsmen were deployed to defend the country's southern border against Pancho Villa. Finally, Georgia hosted two of the country's four internment camps; one at Fort McPherson just outside of Atlanta and another at Fort Oglethorpe near the Tennessee border. The other two camps were in Fort Douglas, Utah and Hot Springs, North Carolina. As a result, many Georgians supervised or otherwise interacted with camp detainees in one way or another.

Thus, to justify and gain popular support for war intervention, a stronger federal government, and the establishment of internment camps, Germans had to be criminalized according to Georgians' pre-existing anxieties surrounding national heritage. By highlighting German brutality toward Belgian women, hinting at German efforts to develop an alliance with Mexico, and suggesting German spies were instigating mutiny by local African-Americans, the federal government generally succeeded in unifying Georgians against Germans,

both domestically and abroad. Despite this criminalization, the continued confusion surrounding Germans' position in the state's social hierarchy allowed them to negotiate their status in both Georgia and the country as a whole.

Resisting the Criminal Label

Just as the end of the 19th century brought ideas surrounding race, immigration, and citizenship into question, World War I also blurred the line between soldiers and civilians. Enemy aliens—non-naturalized citizens of enemy nations living in the United States—floated in limbo between the two, in some ways being portrayed as civilian criminals and in other aspects being painted as loyal soldiers of their home nations. Because of the negative connotations surrounding criminality, however, enemy aliens actively fought efforts to depict them as criminals and, in doing so, often employed the ambiguity of their labels to negotiate their status. Both men and women interned in the United States went to great lengths to distinguish themselves, physically, legally, and socially, from common criminals. Instead, they emphasized the lack of legal rights they had been provided to defend their innocence and demonstrate their loyalty to the United States.

Women of Waverley

In June 1918, the Swiss Legation received numerous requests to inspect the Waverley House in New York, where enemy alien women had been detained while the women's barracks at Fort Oglethorpe, Ga., were under construction.[9] The women living at Waverley House were not complaining about unsanitary living conditions, lack of food, hostile treatment, or even the fact that they had been interned in the first place. Rather, the concern they brought forth to the Swiss Legation was the simultaneous use of Waverley House "as a place of detention by the State Courts" for non-enemy alien "delinquent girls."[10] Viewing their status as superior to these young women, the four enemy alien women detained at Waverley complained that they had to interact and share facilities with "fallen women."

The women accused their housemates of being the worst kind of criminal a woman could be at the turn of the century: "street walkers."[11] Below even professional prostitutes, street walkers were viewed as lower class, immoral, and diseased.[12] In fact, one of the concerns raised by the enemy alien women at Waverley was that the delinquent women with whom they were forced to live carried communicable diseases. Thus, they claimed that living alongside these women not only damaged their reputation but also their health. Like the Immigration Acts of 1903 and 1907, the Immigration Act of 1917 denied entry to immigrants who were deemed immoral, sickly, or likely to become wards of the state. By differentiating themselves from these immoral and diseased criminal women, the enemy alien women distinguished themselves from undesirable immigrants and, instead, portrayed themselves as respectable white women.

In October 1918, the Swiss Legation reported that "the enemy alien women, in complaining to the Swiss representatives, have been seriously exaggerating their grievance" and, "having nothing else to do, spend a good deal of time thinking up trouble."[13] After interviewing the women in charge of Waverley House, the Swiss Legation inspector, a Mr. Sprague, determined that the delinquent girls at the facility were neither street walkers nor even professional prostitutes. Waverley's matron also explained that each woman sent to the house by the courts underwent a medical exam, including blood tests for communicable diseases. Ironically, it was only the enemy alien women who had not been required to undergo medical inspections. Furthermore, it was revealed that the only interaction between the two groups of women was crossing paths in the hallway. They slept in different quarters, ate at separate tables, and had separate hours for using their shared bathroom.[14]

Despite the Swiss Legation's claims that the women were embellishing their suffering, the internees were successful in obtaining changes to their living conditions. Although they were unable to

acquire separate bathing and dining facilities, the women succeeded in gaining additional exercise and walks outside the confines of the house's backyard. The women accomplished this by once again differentiating themselves from common criminals. The inspector's report emphasized that even "regular criminals of the stronger sex in state prisons are usually granted more freedom of exercise and fresh air."[15] Astonishingly, the women caused enough commotion that by November 1918, they were moved from Waverley House to "more commodious and comfortable quarters on Ellis Island."[16] A statement by the U.S. attorney general that the move "should obviate practically every ground of complaint" reveals how impactful the women's complaints actually were.[17]

Regardless of whether the women were exaggerating, their complaints reveal the complicated status of enemy aliens during World War I and the dramatic steps they took to differentiate themselves from common criminals. Although interned, the women of Waverley ensured that they were distinguished from common criminals. They capitalized on their detainment as a result of war rather than as a legal consequence of delinquent actions. In this way, their detention was an honorable, acceptable, and temporary consequence of war, rather than the result of unchangeable immoral, criminal behavior. By contrasting themselves from those in criminal jails, the women intentionally influenced both their internment and their status within American society.

The President and the Pope

While the Swiss Legation was busy with the Waverley women in October 1918, the men interned at Fort Oglethorpe were also actively resisting their criminal status. Just as their female counterparts reached out to the Swiss Legation, the men at Fort Oglethorpe began writing letters to the U.S. government to negotiate the ambiguities of their enemy alien label. Near the end of the war, the men organized into the Central Committee of Internees and wrote to the Swiss Legation, U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Senate, U.S. president, and the pope. The act of writing to Congress in and of itself served to reflect that these men were loyal U.S. citizens, knowledgeable about and engaged in their government.

Of primary concern to the Oglethorpe internees was HR 6750, legislation proposed by the House of Representatives to deport undesirable aliens—including interned enemy aliens—and permanently ban them from future re-entry into the United States. Building off the Immigration Acts of 1903 and 1907, the Immigration Act of 1917 listed criminality as a justified reason to deny immigrants entry into the United States. Subsequently, HR 6750 targeted immigrants already in the country who were perceived as criminals.[18] Denying this criminal label and its legal implications, enemy alien men actively capitalized on the "undemocratic" means by which the U.S. government had arrested and detained them.

Significantly, the men argued that "the only offence which may possibly be charged against them, are sympathies with their native country."[19] These sympathies, however, "never led to offensive works, far less to offensive acts, and therefore should not be held against them."[20] In this way, the men emphasized the "military" side of the enemy alien label. They characterized their internment as due to honor and natural loyalty to their home nation, rather than criminal immorality or devious acts toward the United States.

Just as the women detained at Waverley House compared their situations to those of criminals in state prisons, the men at Oglethorpe highlighted the legal rights afforded to criminals but not to enemy aliens. In a letter to the Senate, they suggested their convictions were not based on evidence but on the "exaggerated reports from overzealous or hysterical sources, the natural result of war psychosis."[21] The internees also argued that their right to a trial was ignored. Furthermore, they claimed that the economic toll of their internment would prevent them from hiring competent lawyers even if they were awarded a trial. As a result, the detainees accused the Department of Justice of using them as "scapegoats."[22]

In October 1919, the Committee of Austro-Hungarians interned at Fort Oglethorpe, Ga., drafted a similar letter to the chairman of the Senate Committee on Immigration. They too emphasized the "inflated and manufactured charges based on colored reports, blackmail by personal enemies and business competitors during a state of war excitement."[23] More than any other point, however, the Committee of Austro-Hungarians stressed the lack of legal rights afforded to enemy aliens, as reflected by the "apprehension of innocent victims who had no recourse to legal proceedings enabling them to [prove] their innocence."[24] In this way, they suggested that they were not being afforded the basic rights granted even to criminals by the U.S. Constitution. The men argued they "were neither convicted of, nor indicted for, any offense in connection with the war" but were "interned at the pleasure of the Department of Justice as 'potentially dangerous' after no other than perfunctory hearings, if any at all."[25]

Unable to impact Congress through direct letters, in November 1919, the Central Committee of German Internees and the Committee of Interned Nationals of the former Austro-Hungarian Monarchy

collaborated on a letter to Pope Benedict XV. Once again, the men of Fort Oglethorpe underscored the lack of legal options afforded them. As in their previous letters, the committees pointed out that they were interned for being "potentially dangerous," rather than actually committing any dangerous acts. They called out the U.S. attorney general for openly stating, "these men have been interned not because they have done anything, but because they might do something." Despite their appeals, the men claimed, the American government failed to provide enemy aliens the opportunity to defend themselves in court.[26]

In their letter to the pope, the Fort Oglethorpe internees drew attention to their ambiguous status as enemy aliens. At the same time that they were being portrayed as devious criminals in newspapers, posters, cartoons, and songs, they were not even afforded the rights of criminals, based on the premise that they were wartime prisoners. Because they were not prisoners of war, however, they lacked the benefits received by interned soldiers or sailors under The Hague Convention. While their unclear status as German-Americans had been a key factor in their internment to begin with, it was this same fluidity that allowed enemy aliens to negotiate their status once interned.

Conclusion

The confusion over enemy aliens' status in the United States continued after their deaths. Between the Spanish influenza pandemic, natural deaths, and the killing of prisoners by guards, 78 men who were detained at Fort Oglethorpe and a camp in Hot Springs, N.C., died and were buried in the Chattanooga National Cemetery. The same enemy aliens who had been deemed a danger to the American war effort were interred alongside U.S. soldiers. More puzzlingly, in 1935 the German government erected a monument to the deceased men buried in the Chattanooga National Cemetery. Thus, the same men whose German-American label was disputed during World War I continued to be debated as they were laid to rest in an American military cemetery next to a German commemorative monument.

In 20th century Georgia, race was far from static. New waves of immigrants, foreign conflicts, and pre-established racial hierarchies all interacted to make racial labels fluid and maneuverable, particularly for immigrants who could assimilate into white Southern culture. World War I challenged and changed Georgians' mindsets toward those of German descent and, as a result of their shifting status, German-Americans actively negotiated their new place in both Southern and American society by emphasizing their detainment as a result of war rather than criminality.

One hundred years later, these questions surrounding criminality, citizenship, nationalism, and identity are still at the forefront of conversations in the United States. No longer things of the past, the registration, detainment, and deportation of people based on race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion are being debated at the highest levels of government. Once again, propaganda is operating on American anxieties to criminalize targeted groups.

Understanding the historical precedent of internment and methods of resistance in the United States during World War I may lead to further insights on how to deal with these issues today. ⊙

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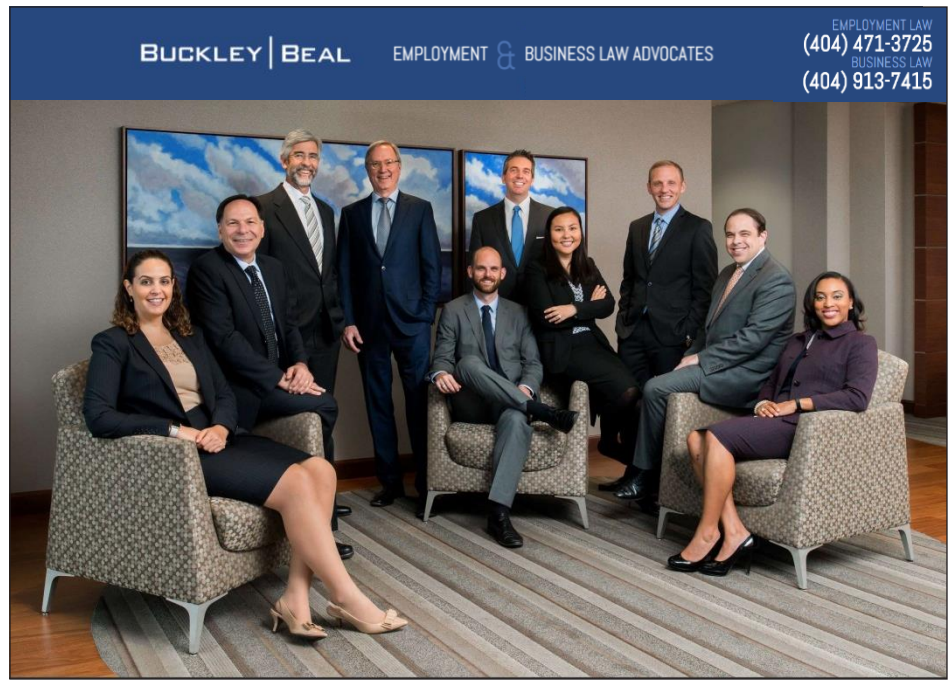

Endnotes

[1]Enemy Activities—Internment Camps—Fort McPherson, Georgia—War prison barracks number 1, Fort McPherson, Georgia; Funeral of the sailor Knappke, at the cemetery, Nat'l Archives Catalog, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/31479161 (last visited May 11, 2017).

[2]*Political Relations: Prisoners of War, October 1918—January 1919*, File No. 27318967, Microcopy 367, Roll 312.624, Nat'l Archives Catalog, *available at* https://catalog.archives.gov/id/27318967 (last visited May 11, 2017).

[3]The men's remains were moved to Westview Cemetery in Atlanta between January and February 1919, another display of the debate over their status and treatment. Adolf Brandes, Best. 332-5 Standesämter, Personenstandsregister, Sterberegister, 1876-1950 (Staatsarchiv Hamburg); Adolf Brandes, Burial Registers of Military Post and National Cemeteries, compiled ca. 1862-ca. 1960 ARC ID 4478151 Rec. Grp. 92, Recs. of the Off. of the Quartermaster Gen., 1774-1985 (Nat'l Archives & Recs. Admin.); Heinrich Knappke, Burial Registers of Military Post and National Cemeteries, compiled ca. 1862-ca. 1960, ARC ID 4478151, Rec. Grp. 92, Recs. of the Off. of the Quartermaster Gen., 1774-1985 (Nat'l Archives & Recs. Admin.); Heinrich Knappke, Interment Control Forms, 1928-1962, A1 2110-B , Rec. Grp. 92, Recs. of the Off. of the Quartermaster Gen., 1774-1985 (Nat'l Archives at Coll. Park); Johann Ficken, Burial Registers of Military Post and National Cemeteries, compiled ca. 1862-ca 1960, ARC ID 4478151 Rec. Grp. 92, Recs. of the Off. of the Quartermaster Gen., 1774-1985 (Nat'l Archives & Recs. Admin.); Kurt Moraht, Germany & Austria, Directories of Military and Marine Officers, 1600-1918, Ancestry.com [online database] . Images reproduced courtesy of the Military History Research Institute (Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, MGFA), in Potsdam, Germany; the Federal Archives, Military Archive Department (Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv), in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany; and the Naval Academy (Marineschule Mürwick) in Flensburg, Germany.

[4]Several photographs of the funerals of Johann Ficken, Adolf Brandes, Heinrich Knappke, and Kurt Moraht are available at Enemy Activities—Internment Camps—Fort McPherson, Georgia, Nat'l Archives Catalog, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/31199916 (last visited May 11, 2017).

[5]Christopher Capozzola, Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen (2008).

[6]Jacob L. Wasserman, *Internal Affairs: Untold Case Studies of World War I German Internment* (May 2016), MSSA Kaplan Prize for use of MSSA Collections, Paper 8, EliScholar, http://elischolar.library.yale.edu/mssa_collections/8 (last visited May 11, 2017); David M. Kennedy, Over Here: The First World War and American Society (1980).

[7]Bulletin for Georgia, Census of Population and Housing, 1910, U.S. Census Bureau, *available at* https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html (last visited May 11, 2017); Supplement for Georgia, Census of Population and Housing, 1910, U.S. Census Bureau, *available at* https://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html (last visited May 11, 2017).

[8]Ronald H. Bayor, *Another Look at "Whiteness": The Persistence of Ethnicity in American Life*, 29 J. Am. Ethnic Hist. 13-30 (Fall 2009); Capozzola, Uncle Sam Wants You; Kathleen Neils Conzen et al., *The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective From the U.S.A.*, 12 J. Am. Ethnic Hist. 3-41 (Fall 1992); Not Just Black and White: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States (Nancy Foner et al. eds., 2005); Kimberly Jensen, *From Citizens to Enemy Aliens: Oregon Women, Marriage, and the Surveillance State During the First World War*, 14 Or. Hist. Q. 453-73 (2013); Kennedy, Over Here; David R. Roediger, Colored White: Transcending the Racial Past (2002); David R. Roediger, How Race Survived U.S. History: From Settlement and Slavery to the Obama Phenomenon (2010); David R. Roediger, Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and

Working Class History (1994); David R. Roediger, Working Towards Whiteness: How America's Immigrations Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs (2005).

[9]Waverley House is also spelled "Waverly" House in some records. Because Switzerland was neutral during the war, the Swiss Legation oversaw and inspected internment camps and acted as mediator between and among prisoners, their families, their home countries, and the countries in which they were detained. Political Relations: Civil Prisoners, Enemy Noncombatants, February 1918-January 1919, *microformed on* Recs. of the Dep't of State Relating to World War I and Its Termination, 1914-1929, File 27353183, Microcopy 367, Roll 353.241 (Nat'l Archives & Recs. Admin.) (hereinafter Political Relations: Civil Prisoners).

[10]Political Relations: Civil Prisoners, Rolls 353.497-498.

[11]Political Relations: Civil Prisoners, Roll 353.498.

[12]For discussions on different classes of prostitutes and the stereotypes surrounding them during the 19th and 20th centuries *see* Dagmar Herzog, Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History (2011); Mary Louise Roberts, What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France (2013).

[13]Political Relations: Civil Prisoners, Roll 353.495.

[14]Political Relations: Civil Prisoners, Rolls 353.498-499, 505.

[15]Political Relations: Civil Prisoners, Roll 353.506.

[16]Political Relations: Civil Prisoners, Rolls 353.559, 639. After the women's barracks were finished at Fort Oglethorpe, a Spanish flu outbreak further delayed the women's movement to Georgia. By the time they were moved to Georgia, the war was over, and they were released and/or repatriated.

[17]Political Relations: Civil Prisoners, Roll 353.559.

[18]Most enemy aliens were inevitably repatriated after the war. Few were given permission to remain in the United States, but some internees did later return to the country.

[19]Political Relations: Prisoners of War, October 1919-February 1920, *microformed on* Recs. of the Dep't of State Relating to World War I and Its Termination, 1914-1929, File 27323125, Microcopy 367, Roll 317.65 (Nat'l Archives & Recs. Admin) (hereinafter Political Relations: Prisoners of War).

[20]Political Relations: Prisoners of War, Roll 317.65.

[21]*Id*.

[22]*Id*.

[23]Political Relations: Prisoners of War, Roll 317.115.

[24]*Id*.

[25]Political Relations: Prisoners of War, Roll 317.116.

[26]Political Relations: Civil Prisoners, Enemy Noncombatants, June 1919-December 1920, *microformed on* Recs. of the Dep't of State Relating to World War I and Its Termination, 1914-1929, File 27354947, Microcopy 367, Roll 355.688 (Nat'l Archives & Recs. Admin.).

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