Introduction

Incarceration and Regime Change

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In July 1944, the German SS began evacuating the Konzentrationslager Herzogenbusch. During their last months in control of the site, 329 prisoners were shot, and many others were put on a transport to Germany. Many among the latter group would not survive.¹ When the southern Netherlands fell into Allied hands in autumn of 1944, the former Nazi concentration camp became a Dutch internment camp, at its peak holding 6,000 German citizens and 6,000 Dutch collaborators. Today, the former camp area is largely taken up by a high-security prison. Sites of incarceration are often remarkably long-lived and often survive multiple regime changes.

In the aftermath of liberation, the erstwhile concentration camp was a mess. Compared with the number of prisoners interned there, both supplies and (trained) staff were dramatically low. The disgruntled camp commander, a member of the former Dutch resistance, complained that the Nazis had organized camp life much better when they had been in charge.² Apparently, the comparison did not strike him as strange or inappropriate; the camp had remained roughly the same, even though guards and prisoners, sometimes literally, had switched roles during the most recent regime change. The case of the Konzentrationslager Herzogenbusch, moreover, is not at all exceptional. All over Europe, as

¹ Notes for this chapter begin on page 12.
the Nazi empire crumbled, sites of incarceration were changing hands rather than being dismantled.

Over the last two decades, a small but interesting literature has emerged that focuses on the various forms of incarceration during and immediately after World War I and World War II. The detention of ethnic minorities, political prisoners, prisoners of war and displaced persons in periods of war is becoming more fully examined and much better understood. Wartime and post-war incarceration, which play an important role both in the public imagination of war and in the collective memories of various groups of contemporaries, have gained recognition as viable and valuable areas of historical research. For good reasons, the twentieth century has been termed ‘the century of the camps’. States expanded their control over society, and incarceration was a preferred means for exclusion, social engineering and covert execution. Especially in and around times of war, these changes led to massive increases in the numbers of people confined to prisons or prison-like institutions.

This volume seeks to add to this small but growing field by investigating the impact of wartime regime change on the forms, objectives and experiences of incarceration. More specifically, the seven essays that follow explore not only the ways in which inmates, prisoners and internees were treated, but also how they were conceptualized; societies in these times of extreme instability constructed images of their inmates. These conceptualizations of prisoners developed amidst often conflicting policies, existing or newly introduced penal cultures and insecure jurisdictions. Through their shared focus on the places of incarceration, rather than on the practices of any particular regime, these chapters can reveal continuities that have escaped most, if not all, other publications in the field.

Although political prisoners necessarily play a large role in all of these chapters, the chapters also aim to correct the overrepresentation of release and incarceration of various political prisoners in the literature, by highlighting the profound impact that regime changes had on non-political prisoners as well. Of course, that does not, and should not, detract from the inmates who were imprisoned because of their (real or ascribed) role in armed or political conflict. Yet we hope to focus on all captive men and women
who experienced internment, imprisonment and detention. Prisoners, whether political or not, often went through multiple institutions and to an extent shaped them, just as they influenced the ways in which they themselves and their former places of confinement were represented and remembered after and during the transitional period.

A Note on Theory

It is unbecoming to editors to hijack the empirical work of contributors to mount their theoretical or ideological hobby horses in their introduction, but in this case a few remarks are in order. The field of prison history is but a miniscule element in the vastness of modern historiography. That is to say, empirical studies into the history of incarceration are relatively rare. Because of the work of (especially) Michel Foucault, however, it has nevertheless become an important focal point of social and historical theory and debate. There likely is no other field in historical enquiry that is so top-heavy, where such grand, and sometimes grandiose, theories have been grounded on such a small empirical research tradition. When thinking about state power in particular, it seems modern historians cannot quite escape from prisons.

The history of punishment has long been dominated by two conflicting master narratives: on the one hand, the aforementioned Foucauldian paradigm, centred on diffuse, and largely impersonal, social control and disciplinary ‘dispositives’, of which prisons were described as ‘laboratories’. In opposition to this stands a perhaps oversimplified version of Norbert Elias’ insight into the processes of ‘civilization’ and ‘collectivization’. Where the Foucauldian view sees prison history as the ever further encroachment of covert control, the Elias-inspired histories focus on the increasing humanism of prisons and the gradual strengthening of the status of the inmates. An important difference between the two traditions is their perspective on pace. In Foucault’s view, a dramatic change in practices of imprisonment took place within a few, relatively recent, decades, whereas Elias stresses a linear, longitudinal evolution in practices of punishment, best exemplified by a gradual tendency towards legalization of prisoners’ rights.
In a recent essay, Pieter Spierenburg has shown that the supposed incompatibility of these perspectives may not in fact have been as great as they seemed in the 1970s and 1980s. For all their differences, in any case, these interpretations had two fundamental points in common. As far as their object is concerned, they addressed single institutions or types of institutions and viewed the history of punishment as a sequence of clear-cut shifts from one form to another – most famously, in Foucault’s narrative, from corporal punishment to the penitentiary. Methodologically they both largely prioritized theoretical insights over empirical research, leading to major discussions about the use of archival sources but painfully little actual use of those very resources.

Similar to developments in the historiography of psychiatric institutions and knowledge, a growing number of scholars, starting from the 1990s and in different parts of the globe, convincingly questioned these approaches – or, more specifically, Foucault’s heritage, which had been by far the most influential perspective in the previous decades. Recent scholarship predominantly stresses the very limitations of the ability of the authorities to control their ‘subjects’, which is so central to Foucault’s work. These impersonal, even somewhat elusive, powers have always had tremendous difficulty implementing their more modest plans and laws. Moreover, the limitations of public control within institutions have been shown not to have been caused exclusively by incompetence, financial limitations and other such problems at the top of society but also by prisoners’ own agency.

This new scholarship has tended to focus (almost) exclusively on empirical approaches. This may seem like a welcome breath of fresh air after theory-heavy earlier decades, but the unmistakable downside is that it has resulted in interpretative and thematic fragmentation. More important for the present volume, new historians of confinement, with few exceptions, have not questioned the traditional focus on single forms of punishment. Within this literature, therefore, prison studies largely remain dominant and separated from research on other forms of punishment and internment, be it concentration camps, gulag, galley service or the workhouses.

This volume is designed to challenge these limitations, and it does so through two fundamental strategies. First, by focusing on periods of regime change, we have put ourselves in a privi-
leged position to observe the entanglements among various forms of punishment and internment. It is especially in these periods of very rapid change that practices of, and ideas about, imprisonment become visible, because they are necessarily called into question. At the same time, we acknowledge that no linear, deterministic connection exists between regime changes and shifts in the forms of imprisonment. Rather, to put it in Charles Tilly’s terms, we view regime changes as a ‘recurrent causal mechanism’ that operates by ‘concatenating [various elements] differently, with different outcomes, depending on local circumstances’. In other words, periods of regime change facilitate the emergence of social conditions that, in turn and within specific contexts, promote changes in the interaction between different forms of punishment and control. Therefore we aim to use the impact of regime changes to show the entanglements among multiple forms of punishment, through case studies, thus acknowledging the importance of issues as diverse as prison overcrowding, economic interests, ideological and security priorities and prisoners’ agency. In this way, we also hope to demonstrate the necessary circularity between theoretical perspectives and empirical research.

Secondly, the volume builds on Nikolaus Wachsmann’s groundbreaking research into the role played by the legal and prison systems in Nazi Germany and on the ‘new histories’ of the concentration camps that Wachsmann, together with Jane Caplan, has pioneered. Taken together, these studies reveal an important potential to transcend the usual focus on single institutions or types of institutions and to overcome the fragmentation among related subdisciplines. Along this line of thought, and by introducing the social-scientific concept of ‘transcarceration’ into historiography, we address the entangled histories of various forms of (legal and administrative) imprisonment, detention and internment as well as the ways their mutual connections marked both the functioning of each institution and convicts’ experience.

Wartime Incarceration

The choice to address periods of regime change around World War II has allowed the researchers writing in this volume to con-
nect directly to Wachsmann’s and Caplan’s studies. At the same time, the following chapters seek to further expand the scope of research in two fundamental ways. First, inspired by transitional justice history, they investigate changes that took place before, during and after military conflicts, while at the same time understanding ‘war’ as a complex of social, political, economic, cultural and military processes. Moreover, the contributors move beyond Wachsmann’s and Caplan’s focus on Nazi Germany to deal with case studies related to Western and Southern Europe and with the Netherlands Indies; and they implicitly suggest the possibility to expand the geographical and chronological scope further.

Thomas Irmer shows the potential of a longer-term perspective by exploring the impact of multiple regime changes – the German Empire, the Weimar Republic, the Nazi Reich and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) – on a single site of detention, the municipal workhouse of Berlin-Rummelsburg. The chronological limits of World War II are likewise stretched in Alicia Quintero Maqua’s contribution. Her focus on post-civil-war Francoist Spain produces a truly innovative change of perspective and reveals the importance of multiple periodizations, i.e. periodizations that take into account the different paths followed by various countries, in order to understand the relationship between regime changes and imprisonment in a broader geographical scope. Christian G De Vito also offers a long-term perspective. A chronology covering the years from 1943 to 1954 allows him to address the impact of multiple regime changes on Italian prisons, covering the Fascist regime and the contemporary presence of the neo-Fascist regime in the North and the Allied Forces’ occupation in the South, as well as the democratic regime.

Another way to extend research beyond studies that look at a singular type of punishment in a single political constellation is to look at more than one country. Jonas Campion’s chapter turns to France, Belgium and The Netherlands and proposes a comparative analysis of the gendarmeries’ relationship to internment in the time before, during and after Nazi occupation. His contribution is an excellent example of the ways in which regime change, in this case due to a foreign occupation, can call existing practices and institutional legitimacy into question. The same problem plays an important role in Sarah Frank’s essay, which explores the
first three years of the Vichy regime in France, with a focus on the colonial prisoners of war (CPOWs), devoting special attention to their experience of imprisonment. Here colonial practices and social codes were confronted with both the ambitions and fears in the motherland.

This perspective is reversed in Esther Zwinkels’ chapter, which focuses on the internment of members of the (Dutch) National Socialist Movement (NSB) in the Netherlands Indies during and after World War II. The regime change in the Netherlands affected the internment policy in the colony and was, initially, a victory of their comrades – but members of the NSB in the Netherlands Indies were just in the wrong part of the empire to enjoy it. In the complex power structures of colonial empires, regime change could have unexpected consequences. We will get back to this issue shortly.

Finally, there is the question of the irregular prisoner. Periods of regime change almost without exception affect families rather than individuals, which rapidly change their position in the social order. Particularly the children of people connected to deposed regimes, but also children who become perpetrators of crimes under war-like circumstances, form an especially interesting and important group. Addressing the Belgian context, Aurore François chooses the period 1944–50 to address the way Belgian institutions for delinquent children dealt with young collaborators, and she discusses the coherence of this experience with the ‘protectational model’ embedded in the 1912 Child Protection Act.

Incarceration during and around armed conflict has several distinctive functions. States use imprisonment in times of war, which in the modern era are by definition extraordinary times, because they feel acutely threatened by political, social and/or economical tensions. Individuals who represent these threats, as well as groups which are ex ante regarded as threatening (internal enemies), are isolated and imprisoned. In this way, states, or more fluid state-like authorities, hope to maintain public order and provide internal security. While incarceration thus provides a seemingly ideal solution to a difficult problem, authorities generally face two important challenges. In the first place, they need to provide public justification for incarceration by emphasizing both the threat posed by prisoners and the (cost-) effectiveness of
keeping them locked up. Secondly, they need to provide an infra-
structure (camps, prisons, transportation, nourishment, opportunities for forced labour) in which large numbers of people can be incarcerated.

The former issue lies at the very centre of this book and is explicitly dealt with in the contributions by Maqua, Campion, Frank, Zwinkels and François: how were these prisoners conceptualized? And how was internment justified and defended? Extraordinary times, generations of politicians have emphasized, also require extraordinary legal measures. In times of crisis, governments try to increase their power and become ‘states of exception’.14 This makes it possible to suspend certain civil rights, such as due process or habeas corpus, in order to ensure safety. In contrast to the legal system in ‘normal’ times, an individual does not need to be guilty to be arrested. Political conviction or ethnic background, such as the famous case of American citizens of Japanese extraction after Pearl Harbor, can be sufficient reason for internment. When a state in times of war decides to use the measure of internment, the interned group does not have to commit a legal offense. On the contrary, the possible threat a group represents to the future internal order and security are grounds for internment. In times of regime change, when positive law is often absent or diffuse, this tendency becomes stronger.

The second problem regards the way the state provides an infrastructure for mass incarceration.15 In such exceptional situations, the space available in existing prisons is rarely sufficient, and internment in forts, schools and barracks becomes inevitable. But most of all, large internment camps are set up. These camps, again, tend to outlive their political architects. In a significant number of cases, former Nazi Konzentrationslager (such as the Herzogenbusch case mentioned above) were later used for the incarceration of the enemies of the next regime.16

None of the regimes discussed in this book could make do with only one site of detention. In all cases presented here, sites were many and their locations spread out (albeit mostly peripheral) and sometimes impermanent. Together these sites formed a ‘web of detention’, and prisoners were often transported from one to another. In turn, as De Vito’s chapter shows for the prisons of the Repubblica Sociale Italiana, the need for this transportation of-
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ten conflicted with rapidly shifting military frontiers, shortage of any means of transport and mass bombings that destroyed penal facilities. At the same time, the deportation of prisoners across borders, motivated by the need to exploit their labour or aimed at their extermination, implied the organization of, among other things, complex systems of transportation and transit prisons and camps, as well as offices and personnel for the selection of prisoners. This situation most famously affected prisoners and internees deported to the Nazi concentration camps and prisons, but it applies also to the members of the Dutch NSB from the Netherlands Indies to Suriname, as Zwinkels’ chapter makes clear.

As the above suggests, vast numbers of staff and guards are needed in times of mass incarceration, and that is exactly when the shortage of trained officers is most often felt. Sometimes soldiers were entrusted with this position, as especially Campion shows in his chapter. As the agents of public order, the gendarmes had a structural relationship to detention. From the late 1930s onwards, they were put in charge of internment camps for displaced persons. During the war, the gendarmes were involved in the incarceration of members of the resistance and escaped allied prisoners, and they continued their surveillance duties in prisons or camps where victims of racial persecution started to be detained. During the liberation, the gendarmes continued to guard these same places of detention, which were now crowded with individuals suspected of collaboration. These and other technicalities were not usually addressed after careful consideration and effective preparation. More typical was a high degree of improvisation, especially in internment camps that did not have the same facilities as prisons and had no experienced staff to provide information or training.

How did prisoners experience detention and internment, and to what extent were they able to shape it? How did they conceptualize (see and judge) other (groups of) prisoners, and how did they relate to them? Maqua’s and Frank’s chapters are especially interesting regarding these issues. Maqua looks into the Spanish prison system in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War, that is to say, the functioning of penal institutions in a society that had by that time become deeply divided. The fierce repression of the Francoist regime against its defeated enemies gave rise not only
to an entirely new network of provisional prisons but also to a wholly new functional role for penitentiary institutions. Rather than merely punitive institutions, they became part of a much wider attempt on the part of the government, together with institutions such as the Catholic Church, to re-educate dissenting compatriots both inside and outside the prison system.

As Sarah Frank demonstrates, however, wartime imprisonment can be a much more complicated matter when the ‘othering’ of the inmate is stronger. By looking at the experiences of colonial, predominantly North African, troops who had been made prisoners of war during the German attack on France and subsequently interned in camps inside Vichy France, she shows how different social divisions were acutely apparent in these camps – between colonial subjects and French citizens, between the Vichy government and the empire and also between different ethnic groups among colonial troops. Just as Vichy and Germany were identifying themselves through the colonial troops, colonial soldiers in the camp were in an excellent position to reflect on their role within the empire and their relationship with its new overlords.

These approaches suggest that more questions could be asked. For instance, relocations of prisoners were common, but what was the effect of these multiple experiences? And how did prisoners see the differences between the various places of internment they went through? Needless to say, the ambition of this volume is as much to raise questions as to answer them.

Towards a New History of Imprisonment

The time seems ripe for comparative, transnational and entangled studies regarding the impact of imprisonment. As Campion’s chapter suggests, a comparative approach might shed new light on allegedly ‘traditional’ issues such as the continuity or discontinuity in penal cultures and practices in the post-war period or the impact of the experience of political imprisonment on post-war prison reforms. Moreover, it is tempting to view all territories occupied by Nazi Germany during World War II, notwithstanding legal, political and economic differences, as part of a single integrated system of internment, incarceration and detention and
to study the impact that multiple regime changes had on it. This would entail the inclusion of case studies from both Western and Eastern Europe, and possibly also comparisons with areas within specific countries that were never occupied, previously liberated or were occupied by other countries. Finally, Frank’s and Zwinkels’ chapters in this volume show the importance of a twofold further expansion of the scope, to include, respectively, the experience of colonial prisoners and internment in the colonies. In addition to this, following the trends in new imperial histories and recent colonial and postcolonial studies, colonial imprisonment should be addressed in order to study its influence on the penal practices within the motherland and postcolonial states as well as intercolonial circulation of knowledge, personnel, prisoners and practices.18

Awareness of the relativity of national borders, and of the impact of mass transportation of prisoners in periods of war and regime changes, also points to the need for spatially aware perspectives. In addition to subnational and transnational case studies and a long-term approach to single institutions – as in Thomas Irmer’s chapter – further insights might stem from the study of circulation of knowledge, techniques, prisoners and staff, from regionally based research and prosopographical approaches.19 All in all, research on incarceration and regime change can benefit from global history approaches as well as from those of the new, promising subdiscipline of ‘carceral geography’,20 in turn contributing to its historical awareness. This is especially necessary with regard to the movement of prisoners. A gigantic undertaking for contemporary officials, and often the source of tremendous hardship for prisoners, mass transportation of prisoners remains a great unknown in the history of twentieth-century imprisonment, notwithstanding the growing attention that early modern and nineteenth-century convict transportation has attracted in the last decades.21

We contend that the chapters in this volume offer an insight in what could be fruitful inroads for expanding the theoretical framework for the history of imprisonment. A future agenda of research, as we see it, envisages more sophisticated methodological approaches to empirical research, as well as a widened geographical and temporal scope. We hope that this volume makes clear that an integrated study of incarceration, which brings together
existing research traditions, will be of great value for our understanding of the meaning of incarceration during regime change.

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Notes


