

4. 'A modern-day concentration camp': using history to make sense of Australian immigration detention centres

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In a letter to the *Illawarra Mercury* published on 15 July 2003, the Federal Member for Cunningham, Michael Organ (Greens), wrote of his visit to the Villawood detention centre: 'The overall impression was one of a modern day concentration camp—razor wire, mud, sad faces, and shame.'¹ Our understanding of contemporary events is shaped, in part, by how we position them within history. Particularly in times of crisis, the connections we make between the present and the past can help us to make sense of contemporary events. Such a process reveals a hidden logic in events that otherwise seem inexplicable, unfair or unjust. By retrospectively judging the historical actors, we create a template for how we should act in the current circumstance. By focusing on some aspects and not others to make the historical precedent 'fit', we can, however, arrive at a limited understanding of the present.

The policy and practice of immigration detention have been among the most controversial aspects of Australia's immigration policies and border protection strategies. Between 2000 and 2005, public concern about detention centres was at its height. During this time, the number of detainees, the length of their detention and the harsh conditions they endured peaked. Resistance from detainees against their continued confinement raised public awareness of their situation and initiated public debate about Australia's treatment of asylum-seekers.

Many of those contributing to the public discussion about detention centres established a connection between this contemporary Australian policy and German concentration camps. Organ saw parallels between the conditions of detention centres and concentration camps, and the destitution of those incarcerated within both institutions. For him, this particular historical precedent provided a means to make sense of immigration detention policy.

The comparison of concentration camps with detention centres allowed contributors to public debate to articulate their opposition to government policy by tapping into a body of shared knowledge. The focus on this comparison, however, effectively prevented recognition of the many institutional predecessors

to detention centres in Australia. Ultimately, positioning immigration detention centres in an Australian historical context can facilitate a far more comprehensive understanding of administrative detention in Australia and its contemporary form.

In this chapter, I examine the discourse that links detention centres with concentration camps. Specifically, I analyse letters that appeared in the mainstream print media to demonstrate the different ways in which this discursive shortcut facilitated public discussion. I then argue for an understanding of detention centres that positions them firmly within Australia's history. Aboriginal reserves, quarantine stations and enemy-alien internment camps were institutional predecessors. While they were implemented at different times and targeted different categories of people, there were striking similarities between these carceral practices. An analysis of these practices—who was incarcerated, for what purpose and to what effect—reveals a continuity between the different forms of incarceration and facilitates a more informed understanding of the function of immigration detention in contemporary Australia.

The policy and practice of immigration detention

Between November 1989 and 1995, about 2000 Cambodian and Chinese asylum-seekers arrived in Australia by boat. The arrival of the Cambodians, in particular, embarrassed the Hawke Labor Government, which had recently played a leading role in negotiating a UN peace agreement for Cambodia, because it undermined the government's claims that the peace process had been successful.² In 1989, the government requisitioned disused single-men's quarters from a mining company in Port Hedland (Western Australia) and turned them into the first of a new generation of immigration detention centres—ostensibly to prevent asylum-seekers from absconding, but also to limit their access to lawyers and the media. Three years later, the Keating Labor Government introduced the policy of mandatory detention into the *Migration Act 1958*. It provides that every asylum-seeker who arrives in Australia without a valid entry visa is detained until their application for a protection visa has been processed.

Although, after 1989, immigration detention centres were initially intended for asylum-seekers, they are presently used for two categories of non-citizens. Those who arrive in Australia without a valid entry visa make up the first category. They include asylum-seekers who are detained while the Department of Immigration processes their application for refugee status. If that application is successful, they are released into the community. If their application (and any subsequent appeal) is unsuccessful, they are removed from Australia (see Chapter 1). Generally, only asylum-seekers who reach Australia by boat arrive without a valid entry visa and are therefore subject to the policy of mandatory detention. Checks at international and Australian airports mean that asylum-seekers travelling to Australia by plane usually come with a valid visa,

such as a tourist, business or student visa, and seek asylum once they have entered the country. People who arrive in this way are able to live in the community for the duration of their application process. This first category of detainees also includes foreign fishermen arrested in Australian territorial waters. These people, usually young men from Indonesia or other South-East Asian countries, are held in immigration detention until they are removed from Australia or charged with an offence and transferred to the judicial prison system.

The second category of detainees comprises non-citizens who initially entered the country on a valid visa. They include, first, people who have stayed beyond the length of their visa or have been found to be working without the necessary visa, and second, people to be removed on 'character grounds'. This latter category includes permanent residents who have been convicted of a crime and sentenced to prison for more than one year, thus breaching the conditions of their visa. These people are detained until they can be deported (see also Chapter 1).

Five immigration detention centres are currently in operation. Maribyrnong (Melbourne), Villawood (Sydney), Perth and Northern (Darwin) are on the mainland and are used to accommodate Indonesian fishermen and people awaiting deportation. The fifth centre, on Christmas Island, opened in December 2008. Used to accommodate onshore asylum-seekers, it is the largest and most secure centre, with the capacity to hold 800 people. In addition, there are three immigration transit accommodation centres at airports in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. Other centres, including Port Hedland, Curtin, Baxter, Woomera and the original facility at Christmas Island, have been either closed or mothballed. In 2005, the *Migration Act* was amended to ensure that children were not accommodated in detention centres,³ and a number of immigration residential housing and community detention options were established to accommodate children and their parents. In addition, some non-immigration facilities are used for immigration detention, including prisons, hospitals and psychiatric institutions.

Three key aspects of immigration detention have been subject to public criticism: the potential for unlimited incarceration, the detention of children and the harmful effects of detention. In 1994, the reference to a time limit of 273 days, or nine months, was removed from the *Migration Act*, so that there were now no legal impediments to indefinite detention. In fact, in August 2004, the High Court found that detainees could be confined indefinitely if they could not be removed from the country and could not be granted an entry visa. Since 2005, the Commonwealth Ombudsman has had the power to review all cases in which individuals have been detained for two years or more, but not the power to order their release. So far, the longest period that someone has been detained is seven years. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission report

A Last Resort? found that, as at December 2003, the average length of detention for a child was one year, eight months and 11 days.⁴ The longest-serving child detainee was released in 2004 after five years, five months and 20 days in detention.

There is no space here to comprehensively discuss the conditions in the camps.⁵ It appears to be conclusive, however, that conditions in detention centres and the often undetermined length of confinement can cause psychological and physical damage to detainees.⁶ These problems stem from confinement within razor wire or electric fences; the remote location of some of the centres; constant surveillance, including roll calls at night; insufficient showering, toileting and cooking facilities; lack of adequate access to mental and physical health care, education and legal services; and insufficient communications technology. In addition, there are many examples of inhumane treatment of detainees by staff, and the lack of protection of detainees from abuse by staff and other detainees. Staff also have the power to punish detainees. Such punishments can include the removal of basic rights and the imposition of solitary confinement. Until 2005, no distinction was made between the treatment of adults and children. Psychiatrist Fiona Hawker, who treated a number of detainees from the Baxter detention centre, argued that the symptoms of mental illness were so similar in each patient that they must have been caused by the environment, and she called these symptoms 'Baxter Syndrome'.⁷

In the late 1990s, protests, riots and acts of self-harm within the centres brought the issue of detention to the attention of the media and the Australian public. Public concern heightened in the early 2000s as increasing numbers of asylum-seekers, including children, from the Middle East pushed the number of people in detention above the capacity of the centres, further compromising the conditions. At the same time, the Howard Coalition Government's increasingly punitive policies and language towards asylum-seekers gained a lot of support within the community. Within this climate, public discourse about detention centres reflected the heightened emotion aroused by Australia's asylum-seeker policies.

Using history to make sense of immigration detention centres

According to Brändström et al., in times of crisis, decision makers have to act quickly, often with little information about the current event and without informed projections of the consequences of their decision. They argue that, to overcome these limitations, decision makers rely on 'shortcuts' drawn from references to the past:

Among these shortcuts are a resort to personal experience, educated guesses by key associates and advisors, readily available precedents

embedded in institutional memory and official contingency planning...and storylines developed in mass media accounts of the events. All of these mechanisms make reference to the past, whether the personal or the shared, the recent or the distant, the community's own or some other people's past.⁸

While their analysis focuses on decision makers, Brändström et al.'s insights are equally useful in analysing the use of the past to make sense of current events in wider community discourse. The shortcuts used in public debate facilitate the creation of a sense of meaning about a sometimes inexplicable issue. They are, according to the authors, often emotional rather than cognitive connections. In addition, the shortcuts provide a guide for how, or how not, to respond to the crisis at hand.

This chapter argues that, in the early 2000s, concentration camps became a shortcut within the public discourse about detention centres. In an analysis of newspaper and magazine articles and letters to the editor in mainstream print media between 2000 and 2007, I identified 168 articles and letters in which immigration detention centres were compared with concentration camps. In some news articles, the authors made the connection directly, either by drawing parallels or by simply referring to detention centres as concentration camps. Other news articles reported on individuals making the connection, including Members of Parliament, a former Federal Court judge, the head of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, lawyers, church leaders, local councillors and former detention centre staff.⁹ In addition, the comparison often appeared in other forms of mainstream and alternative media.

Here I focus on the comparison between the two forms of incarceration in letters to the editor. These are interesting because they are often emotive and illustrate the energy of the public discussion at the time. They also reveal how this particular shortcut was used in different ways to support a number of arguments and viewpoints.

In some letters, the link is straightforward. Alan Donald wrote to the *Northern Territory News* that '[a] detention centre by any other euphemism still smells like a concentration camp'.¹⁰ The shortcut was also used to describe the conditions within detention. Otto DeVries wrote to the *Hobart Mercury*:

For the first time in my life I am ashamed to be an Australian. I became ashamed after I was made aware that the Woomera detention centre was actually a concentration camp, complete with three layers of security; razor wire, barbed wire and steel palisade fencing, with Australian protective services officers patrolling the perimeter. The conditions of the camp are atrocious. The illegal immigrants who are detained there are treated as criminals or worse; they are detained under stricter rules

than most prisoners, while the only wrong-doing they have been accused of is arriving in Australia without a visa. In a place which can become intolerably hot in summer, inmates have no air-conditioning or fans. As soon as detainees arrive there, they lose their [sic] identity and are given a number. They are required to wear this identification number at all times. There are allegations of child sexual abuse as well as under-age prostitution. Australia is probably the only country in the Western world which uses concentration camps, something which the Australian government strenuously denies.¹¹

Brändström et al. observe that one of the functions of historical shortcuts is to provide a guide for how people should respond. This was evident in a number of letters. In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Don Palmer used the example of the Germans' professed ignorance of concentration camps to call for more information about detention centres:

My father, an army veteran, recently returned from Europe where he visited one of the World War II Nazi concentration camps. He spoke to people who had lived nearby when the camps operated. Many said they had no idea at the time about what was happening just up the road. Now Australians are being kept in the dark about the detention/concentration facilities run in our name. If there is nothing to hide, then the Prime Minister and the Minister for Immigration must allow us to know everything. Decency requires it. Justice demands it.¹²

Similarly, Abraham Cykiert, a survivor of the concentration camps, used the shortcut to support protests outside the detention centres. He wrote to the *Age*:

The arrested demonstrators outside the detention camp in [South Australia] should not be prosecuted but saluted. They have done for Australia what the Germans failed to do for themselves and the world in 1933 when the first concentration camp in Germany, Dachau, was legally established...From the final edge of my old life I, a survivor of Buchenwald, fear the way the Government handles the asylum seeker issue. Those who have not experienced its similarity to the past may not begin to understand it, but I salute the demonstrators for their healthy instinct of doing everything possible to stop this shameless and dangerous development.¹³

The comparison of the two forms of incarceration was controversial. Indeed, nearly half of the letters to the editor protested against the comparison. The protests were mostly along two lines. First, writers were upset on the basis of the purpose of concentration camps, which, they argued, was not comparable with the purpose of detention centres. Henk Verhoeven wrote to the *Manly Daily*:

Some humanitarians have referred to the Woomera detention centre as a concentration camp. How silly and how preposterous! Anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of Nazi concentration camps, and of the atrocities committed both within and outside the precincts of those camps, would never dare to use that word in a Woomera context. Using the misnomer is also a horrible insult to those who did suffer shockingly and survived, and to the many millions more who perished after having been taken to the death camps. Woomera detainees were never forced into Australia against their will.¹⁴

Others protested on the grounds that the shortcut gave an incorrect picture of conditions in detention centres. Barbara Horkan wrote to the *Newcastle Herald*:

I find it infuriating when correspondents...describe Woomera detention centre as a concentration camp. Are the inmates branded like cattle, starved to death, given no access to medical attention, little shelter and allowed to freeze to death in winter? I was in Europe when the concentration camps were liberated and heard first hand from a nursing colleague who entered Belsen what the conditions were like. Surely your correspondents have seen the films? It must be very hurtful for the few remaining survivors.¹⁵

Finally, some writers compared the behaviour and actions of the inmates of concentration camps with those in detention centres to support the argument that asylum-seekers deserved detention. In the *Mornington Peninsula Leader*, a correspondent argued:

To compare the Woomera Detention Centre to a concentration camp, shows an unbelievable ignorance and it is an insult to all the people that were transported to such places against their will. Talk to some of the survivors. I have lived with refugees in Germany. I can assure you, they did not burn their papers in there, nor did they riot. It would be helpful for you to brush up on your geography. Firstly, refugees cannot go to a travel agent and buy a ticket. Afghanis could have asked for asylum in Russia, India, Iran, Irak [sic], Thailand and of course, Indonesia. All these countries would have Australian, American, or British consular services. Why did they not go there for protection.¹⁶

The comparison of detention centres with concentration camps is a potent and emotive shortcut which taps into a body of assumed knowledge about the lowest human treatment of others. The analogy evokes images of shocking inhumanity, of extreme power and powerlessness, of injustice and of frustration at the inaction of people with the ability to speak out. Without having to make a comprehensive argument, using the shortcut was a way of articulating one's objection to the Howard Government's asylum-seeker policies. In the same way, rejection of the

shortcut articulated support for these policies. As evident in the letters to the editor, whether in support of the analogy or against it, all correspondents understood its use.

Some politicians also appreciated the subtext of the comparison and similarly employed the shortcut to express their support for, or objection to, the policy and practice of immigration detention. In Parliament, Shadow Immigration Minister, Con Sciacca, used the shortcut when speaking against proposed legislation that would give guards more power to sedate detainees: 'What are you going to do, make [the detention centres] into stalags? Are you going to invoke the ghost of Dr Mengele and go around injecting them with chemicals?'¹⁷

When former Federal Court judge Marcus Einfeld compared the behaviour of detention centre staff with that of SS guards in concentration camps,¹⁸ Prime Minister Howard demonstrated the potency of this shortcut; that, when the comparison was made, every Australian knew how to read it. Howard referred to Einfeld's speech as 'outrageous and offensive':

I don't mind people attacking the policy but to endeavour in any way to liken what is occurring in detention centres to Nazi gas camps; it is just outrageous that kind of comparison...The SS were the evil of the evil, the most evil of the lot. They were the people who carried out the dirtiest deeds.¹⁹

The power of this discursive shortcut, therefore, lies in the widespread understanding within the community of what concentration camps 'mean'. There are also some important structural similarities between the two forms of incarceration. Both are forms of administrative detention, to which people are subjected not because of what they have done, but because of who they are. Being outside the judicial system, it is the State, not the courts, that determines who will be incarcerated. Furthermore, inmates of detention centres are not sentenced for a defined period and their incarceration may be indefinite.

Discussing the lack of basic human rights of those subject to administrative detention, Giorgio Agamben highlights the continuity between detention centres, concentration camps and other such forms of incarceration.²⁰ These forms of administrative detention constitute 'zones of exception' in which people have no access to rights granted by nation-states. He argues that these zones of exception, which were once historical anomalies, are now a permanent part of the landscape of the modern nation-state. In fact, nation-states depend on them to facilitate the exclusion of certain groups of people; nation-states are defined by those they exclude. Agamben's theory of incarceration has been applied to the Australian context by a number of scholars, who have emphasised the lack of basic human rights that detainees in immigration detention enjoy.²¹ The

absence of rights makes detention centres, in Suvendrini Perera's terms, simultaneously part of Australian territory but at the same time 'not-Australia'.²²

It is here that we find a problem with this discursive shortcut. The comparison of immigration detention in Australia with concentration camps in Europe has the effect of making detention seem exceptional in the Australian context. As Brändström et al. explain, when particular historical analogies monopolise the discourse, other possible analogies become 'blind spots' or 'silences'.²³ The comparison reveals a blind spot in public memory towards Australia's own history of administrative detention.

As a form of administrative detention, immigration detention is not anomalous in Australian history. To the contrary, Australia has a long history of administrative detention that spans most of European settlement. Other examples include Aboriginal reserves, quarantine stations, civilian internment camps, psychiatric institutions, reformatory schools and homes for the disabled and blind. The first three forms in particular share with immigration detention the specific function of managing social and geographical boundaries. Inmates are incarcerated not because of what they have done, but because of who they are. In addition, all three share the particular social function of regulating the entry of people into Australia and regulating membership to the community for those who already reside here. As such, these forms of incarceration, like immigration detention centres, are intimately connected with the nation-state. Recognising that these other forms of incarceration are institutional predecessors to immigration detention, with shared aims and methods, ultimately contributes to a more informed understanding of immigration detention in contemporary Australia.

Aboriginal reserves

From the last decades of the nineteenth century to the 1960s, a system of reserves, missions and other institutions isolated, confined and controlled Aboriginal people. While the aims of these institutions and the purposes of confinement changed over time, incarceration was always the solution to perceived social problems. Of particular concern to administrators was the perceived need to keep Aboriginal people separate from the white population.

By the late nineteenth century, disease and violence had devastated the Aboriginal population throughout Australia. It is estimated that in Queensland, for example, the Aboriginal population decreased from 100,000 in 1788 to 26,670 in 1901.²⁴ Precise figures of the drop in population after 1788 are difficult to establish as original numbers can only be estimated, and the numbers of deaths by disease and massacre were obscured. Social Darwinist notions of racial hierarchy and of the survival of the fittest helped rationalise the decline in the

Aboriginal population. It was widely believed that Aboriginal people were a primitive race doomed to extinction.

To quell the violence on the frontiers, to reduce devastation by disease and to provide Aborigines with a 'humane' environment while their race died out, colonial governments introduced systems of 'protective' legislation. The first was in 1860 in South Australia, where a Chief Protector was appointed to watch over the interests of Aboriginal people and to 'smooth the dying pillow'.²⁵ Similar legislation was passed in Victoria (1869), Queensland (1897), Western Australia (1905) and New South Wales (1909). These laws were a way of 'protecting' Aborigines from violence on the frontier. By designating territory for Aborigines, it was hoped that the conflict between settlers and Aborigines over land would stop and that Aborigines would use the settlement land to farm and become self-sufficient, thus improving their 'destitute' state and reducing their reliance on the government for rations.

The reserve laws gave governments a great degree of regulatory powers over all aspects of Aborigines' lives. They lost basic human rights such as freedom of movement and labour, custody of children and control over personal property.²⁶ In some states and the Northern Territory, the Chief Protector had legal guardianship over all Aboriginal children, usurping the power of the parents.²⁷ These restrictive policies reached their peak in the 1930s.²⁸ 'In the name of protection,' suggest the authors of *Bringing Them Home*, 'Indigenous people were subject to near-total control.'²⁹

The reserve system was designed primarily to separate Aborigines from white society. This was complicated, however, by the growing population of people of mixed descent. By the 1920s, it became clear that while the 'full-blood' Aboriginal population was still declining in number, the population of people of mixed descent was increasing. A problem of classification therefore emerged: were 'half-castes', 'quadroons' (people with one-quarter Aboriginal blood) and 'octoroons' (people with one-eighth Aboriginal blood) white or were they Aboriginal? Should people containing some 'European blood' be allowed to continue to live with Aborigines or should they be integrated into settler society? Should they be encouraged to marry whites, further 'diluting' the degree of Aboriginal blood, or should their choices be restricted to Aborigines or others of mixed descent? Where could the boundary between white and Aboriginal society be positioned?

The policy of assimilation provided one solution to this problem. Conveniently, this required the continued incarceration of Aborigines of all degrees of descent. Reserves were intended to be sites for training Aborigines, particularly those of mixed descent, in the ways of white society. Children were removed from their parents and taught the values and behaviours that would make them acceptable to white society. With the reserve system, governments created and

maintained social and territorial boundaries between Aboriginal people and the white community. At a time when Australia, as a young nation, was defining itself, the reserve system helped to delineate who was included in the nation and who was not.

Quarantine stations

From the 1830s to the 1950s (when air travel to Australia largely replaced sea travel), all vessels, cargo, crew and passengers entering Australia were subject to quarantine. Like other forms of administrative incarceration, this involved spatial segregation and confinement from the rest of the Australian community. Originally determined by each colony, the policy was brought under federal jurisdiction with the *Quarantine Act 1908*. One important aspect was how notions of hygiene, pollution and public health functioned to classify certain categories of people as a threat to the Australian community. In the era of the White Australia Policy, ideas of cleanliness corresponded with ideas of whiteness.

Like Aboriginal reserves, quarantine stations are an example of administrative detention used for many decades and throughout Australia. While Aboriginal reserves were a method of maintaining boundaries between groups already living in Australia, quarantine was primarily about controlling and regulating the entry of people from the outside. As such, quarantine stations functioned as the threshold to the newly federated nation. By far the majority of people in quarantine were eventually allowed to enter, but only after they had demonstrably met the requirements for entry. Quarantine was therefore one means by which the government could regulate entry into the country and ensure exclusion when it was deemed necessary.

Just as the healthy and sick received different treatment, so too were people treated differently because of their race or class. These often shaped one's experience of quarantine, determining different levels of medical treatment, access to facilities and, ultimately, the possibility of entering Australia.³⁰ People of particular racial backgrounds were considered more likely to carry contagious diseases and were subsequently treated differently in quarantine. Krista Maglen explains that before the smallpox pandemic of 1881, Asian ports were not regarded as a potentially dangerous source of disease. In contrast, vessels from England, where smallpox was always present, were checked thoroughly. In 1881, Australian health authorities determined that the smallpox pandemic affecting hundreds of people in Sydney had originated in China. From this time, ships, cargo and people of Asian origin became the key targets of quarantine, and ideas of race and of Asia as a source of disease began to inform medical theory and policy.³¹ Such ideas also supported more widespread derogatory stereotypes about the Chinese in Australia.³²

Quarantine, like Aboriginal reserves, played an important role in the formation of Australia as a new, federated nation. In particular, it contributed to the symbolic 'imagining' of the new nation.³³ Geographically, the quarantine boundaries outlined the boundaries of the nation. With regard to population, quarantine identified particular races as a threat to the nation and provided a mechanism for their exclusion.

Enemy-alien internment camps

In both world wars, individuals regarded as a threat to Australia's war effort were incarcerated in internment camps. Ostensibly, an individual could be interned because of their birth or familial connections with enemy nations or because of their allegiance. In practice, however, internment was used much more broadly. Many people were interned with very little evidence of their threat to either the war effort or Australian society. Some ethnic groups, such as Japanese in World War II, were interned en masse. Internment, then, became a tool for social control and provided a mechanism for the removal of certain categories of people from Australian society.³⁴

In World War I, 6890 people were interned.³⁵ At the peak of World War II, the number of civilian internees was closer to 12 000.³⁶ In World War I, the policy stipulated that local authorities could intern 'enemy subjects with whose conduct they were not satisfied'.³⁷ Originally, the policy was concerned with people who had recently migrated to Australia. In 1915, however, it was broadened so that naturalised British subjects who were born in Germany or Austria could be interned, as well as people of 'enemy descent'—that is, those who were born in Australia but whose father or grandfather was a subject of an enemy nation. Also interned were Australians of British descent who were thought to be 'disaffected and disloyal'.³⁸ They were singled out on account of their anti-war and anti-patriotic political persuasions and included radical pacifists, socialists, unionists and political and church leaders who campaigned against conscription.

In a time of war, when national security took priority over civil liberties, the people in the community who were not of British heritage became the objects of suspicion, surveillance, internment and, in many cases, more permanent exclusion. Australians of British descent who had worked for years alongside naturalised Europeans went on strike until the latter were sacked, and people reported on their neighbours. In some cases, even naturalisation was viewed with suspicion. Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, and other politicians in World War I argued that for the Germans naturalisation was only a ruse, 'a cunningly and ruthlessly exploited cover' that allowed them to continue their quest to undermine Australian society.³⁹ Despite good relations in times of peace, the ethnic other remained an outsider in the Australian community. The internment

experience, therefore, raised the question of whether people of non-British heritage could ever become Australians, and at what point they did belong to the Australian community.

Like Aboriginal reserves and quarantine stations, internment camps provided a mechanism for regulating the social boundaries of the Australian nation. While quarantine stations regulated the entry of people into the nation, Aboriginal reserves and enemy-alien internment camps regulated the membership of people who already resided in Australia. In much the same way, immigration detention centres regulate the entry of people into Australia and the membership of people who already live here. As a contemporary form of administrative detention, immigration detention centres raise the same questions of race, citizenship and belonging in the Australian nation-state as their institutional predecessors.

Conclusion

I have shown how references to German concentration camps were used to object to the policy and practice of immigration detention in Australia. This discursive shortcut reflected the high emotion surrounding the issue in the first years of the twenty-first century. By connecting the two forms of incarceration, members of the public were able to articulate, in shorthand, their objections to the Howard Government's immigration policies. The comparison also made detention centres seem exceptional to the normal workings of the Australian nation-state when, in fact, many forms of administrative detention in Australian history have performed similar social and political functions.

In his social history of incarceration in the United States, David Rothman stresses the importance of positioning it in a historical context.⁴⁰ To do so, he explains, reveals a continuity between carceral practices that might be forgotten when examining specific instances. Since the 'invention' of the penitentiary, the insane asylum and the almshouse in the early nineteenth century, incarceration has been an 'enduring' feature of the modern nation-state. Rothman explains how incarceration, as a political solution to a social problem, is reinvented to fit each social circumstance.

Concentration camps in Germany, like immigration detention centres in Australia, were a government solution to the 'problem' of certain categories of people. As in the case of the other forms of administrative detention explored in this chapter, people were incarcerated not because of what they had done, but because of who they were. By controlling who had membership to the community, all these forms of administrative detention were intimately connected with the nation-state.

Ultimately, though, the study of administrative detention in the Australian context can facilitate a far more comprehensive understanding of the contemporary policy and practice of immigration detention than can be achieved

by making the comparison with German concentration camps. Throughout Australia's history, administrative detention has been used to manage social and geographical boundaries. This has involved the classification of people into social groups, the identification of some of these groups as outsiders to Australian society and the attempt to regulate these groups.

Immigration detention is not a new solution invented to solve a particular social problem. Neither is the social problem unique to our times. Rather, immigration detention is best understood as a reinvention, a recycling, of an old solution to a perennial issue. Recognition of this continuity, however, does not mean that incarceration is an inevitable part of our social and political landscape. For Rothman, the knowledge that carceral systems have been recycled and reused to respond to particular social situations encourages us to experiment with new solutions: 'We need not remain trapped in inherited answers.'⁴¹

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Endnotes

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