
A History of Immigration Detention in the UK (1914-2018)

Resource from Refugee History and Right to Remain, September 2018

This resource provides a brief overview of the major moments of detention in modern British history. By looking back over the past century of internment and detention, we can see the stark disjuncture that the 1990s represented in histories of asylum and immigration. To understand this change we need to set it within the social, political and legal history of immigration to Britain.

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World War I

1914-1918

Laws and Policies:

- The peacetime control of ‘aliens’ into Britain began in **1905**.
- In **1914**, the [Aliens Restriction Act](#) made deportation and internment part of the British state’s response to alien immigration for the first time.
- The *Aliens Restriction Act*, passed as a reaction to Britain’s entry into the First World War, granted extended powers to the Crown to protect the home front from ‘enemy aliens’ in times of ‘national danger or great emergency.’ The Act:
 - required all German and Austrian nationals to register with the police.
 - placed limits on their travel and prohibited them from entering certain areas.
 - provided for their deportation and internment when this was seen as necessary.
- In **1915**, following the sinking of the passenger ship [the Lusitania](#), the government ordered the internment of all German and Austrian men of military age living in the UK.

Groups Affected:

- Over the course of the First World War over **28,000** – mostly German – aliens were repatriated. Many of these came from Britain’s well-established German population, which by the outbreak of the war numbered around **57,000**.
- By **November 1915**, **32,440** German and Austrian people had been detained.

Facilities and Treatment:

- Civilian detainees – as opposed to prisoners of war – were mainly held in camps on the Isle of Man, with a few scattered in camps on the mainland, notably Alexandra Palace and Stratford in London and Lofthouse Park near Wakefield.
- During the years of internment Britain followed the rules for their treatment set out in the ‘Laws and Customs of War on Land’ sections of the Hague Conventions of [1899](#) and [1907](#). This allowed international observers – mainly Swiss and American – to visit and inspect the camps.

- Unlike POWs, civilian internees were not required to work, standards of accommodation and food were adequate, if not luxurious, and many camps saw internees organizing educational, sporting and religious activities.
- However, boredom from enforced inactivity was often the defining feature of camp life. The Austrian internee Paul Cohen-Portheim (1880-1932) remembered that time *'really had to be killed, for it was the arch-enemy, and everyone tried to achieve this as best he could.'*
- Overcrowding and poor conditions also led to riots at some locations, including Cunningham Camp in November 1914. An inquiry afterwards into the shooting of protestors expressed concern about overcrowding, leading Lord Kitchener to order the release of as many internees as possible to ease the problem.

Attitudes and Responses:

- The Red Cross and other observers began to speak of *'barbed-wire disease'*. This was caused, Swiss observer Adolf Vischer said, by inactivity, an absence of privacy, ignorance as to the length of captivity, and the irregularity of communication from home.
- Organisations like the Society of Friends Emergency Committee advocated on behalf of certain groups subject to restrictions as *'enemy aliens'*, such as British women who had lost their nationality through marrying Germans or Austrians.
- The press and popular opinion were generally in favour of internment, so its use increased. There were, however, some dissenting voices and regional variations regarding the treatment of *'enemy aliens'*. Opponents of full-scale internment described it as *'anti-British'* in public forums, including letters to newspapers.

World War II

1939-1945

Laws and Policies:

- By **28 September 1939**, the *Aliens Department* of the Home Office set up 120 internment tribunals across the United Kingdom to examine all UK-registered adult enemy aliens. They divided the aliens into three categories:
 - Category A: to be interned.
 - Category B: to be exempt from internment but subject to restrictions.
 - Category C: to be granted exemption from both internment and restrictions.
 Those not interned still faced restrictions, having to obtain police permits to travel, own a car or change residence. A curfew was also introduced for foreigners living in Britain.
- In **May 1940**, following the fall of Belgium, the Netherlands and France to the Nazis, fears that Britain was facing imminent invasion led the British government to authorise the internment of around **8,000** German and Austrian nationals living along the south coast.
- In **June 1940**, when Italy declared war, Britain detained **4000** Italians who were known members of the Fascist Party, or who were aged between 16-70 and had been resident in Britain for less than twenty years.

Groups Affected:

- When war was declared on **3 September 1939**, **70,000** UK-resident Germans and Austrians automatically became classed as enemy aliens.
 - **66,000** German and Austrian *'enemy aliens'* in Britain were granted *'C'* status by the Home Office and so were exempted.
 - **6,700** were classified as *'B'*, and thus faced restrictions.
 - **569** were given *'A'* status and were immediately interned.

- However, Britain's blanket approach to internment led to large numbers of category 'C' aliens being interned, many of whom were Jewish refugees from Nazism.
- In **July 1940**, the Home Office published clear guidelines over who was exempt from internment. This was due to the scandal that followed the torpedoing of the *SS Arandora Star*, which sunk 75 miles west of the Irish coast on its way to Newfoundland while carrying 1,150 internees and 374 British seamen. Over half of those on board died.
 - Those exempt from internment included:
 - Under 16s.
 - The elderly.
 - Medical professionals with permission to practise in the UK.
 - Key workers in industry, agriculture and refugee organisations.
 - Pioneer Corps members.
 - Those with sons in the British armed forces.
- By **March 1941**, **12,500** internees had been released. Numbers steadily increased so that by **1942** fewer than **5,000** people remained interned, mainly on the Isle of Man.

Facilities and Treatment:

- Camps were makeshift, and were often converted race tracks, schools, army barracks and unfinished housing estates. Mass internment in a short space of time, when the armed forces were also being mobilised, put severe pressure on space for holding internees.
- In **June-July 1940**, the Australian and Canadian governments offered to take internees in, and **7,500** people were shipped overseas.
- Interned women and children were often placed in Holloway Prison or in camps on the Isle of Man.
- An internee of Warners Camp in Seaton recalled it was *'dilapidated, dirty, drafty and cold, stripped of all furnishing.'* Facilities in most camps were limited to essentials, and while most camps allowed internees to cook their own meals, food was *'adequate if unexciting and repetitive.'*
- Again, Britain followed the Hague Conventions of [1899](#) and [1907](#) in its treatment of internees, providing basic board and accommodation and barring them from employment.
- In line with the Hague Convention, the camps were not run as prisons, although they were surrounded by barbed wire restricting internees' freedom. This ensured there was a level of autonomy for internees to participate in art, music, education and other creative endeavours.
- In Hutchinson camp on the Isle of Man, where many of the internees were highly educated, the publication *The Camp* emerged, as well as a 'Camp University', with regular lectures and discussion groups covering topics ranging from chemistry, history and Greek philosophy to town and country planning and agriculture.
- However, as with earlier internees, the trauma of imprisonment and separation from family, combined with enforced inactivity caused frustration, boredom and for some, mental illness.

Attitudes and Responses:

- Public opinion towards internment varied in this period. Mass Observation reported in **April 1940** that detailed interviewing in London and West Scotland revealed a low level of support for mass internment. However, the fall of Holland, Belgium and France in **May 1940** led to increased fear of a 'Fifth Column'. As a result, the right-leaning press advocated for increased internment and a number of town and city councils called for a blanket internment of enemy aliens.

- Public and political condemnation of internment focussed on the chaotic and indiscriminate internment of **May 1940**, and the subsequent over-crowding, poor communication, and ill-advised policy of shipping internees overseas.
- The Home Office were also sharply criticised for holding Nazi-sympathisers in the same accommodation as Jewish refugees, and for the bureaucratic impediments which made it difficult for internees to communicate with family members or to challenge the Home Office's decision to intern them.
- MPs such as Eleanor Rathbone consistently raised the issue of internment in the House of Commons, citing individual cases but also criticising conditions and the implementation of the policy as a whole.
- On **10 July 1940**, after the sinking of the *Arandora Star*, there was a six-hour parliamentary session on internment in which MPs called for a rapid review of the cases of individual internees who may have been imprisoned unfairly, and for improvements in conditions in the camps.
- Letters in opposition to internment were written to newspapers, including a letter to The Times on **11 July 1940**, referring to internment as '*clouding the national honour.*' Petitions were also launched against the internment of fellow community members.

Post-War Years

1950s-1980s

Laws and Policies:

- After the Second World War, the need for large-scale detention facilities decreased. The small numbers of aliens deported each year – normally as a result of criminal acts – were held in local police stations prior to deportation.
- Before 1962, incoming aliens were expected to register with the local police force whenever they changed address, but no restrictions on movement were placed on them during peacetime. They just had to demonstrate they had sufficient funds to support themselves and did not suffer from particular medical conditions or infectious diseases.
- But in **1962**, the [Commonwealth Immigrants Act](#) changed the legal landscape of immigration to the UK. Before the act was passed, everyone living in the British empire and Commonwealth had an automatic right to enter and remain in the United Kingdom, and it was only those from outside the empire and Commonwealth – 'aliens' – who had their entry to Britain controlled.
- The [1971 Immigration Act](#) gave the Home Office the authority to use detention powers in relation to the administrative acts of examination, removal or deportation. In the first decade after the Act came into force, the power to detain was used mainly as a short-term measure to enforce a refusal of leave to enter.

Groups Affected:

- Camps and holding facilities were used in this period, but as places of welcome, reception and orientation for large cohorts of refugees arriving in Britain. These groups included:
 - Hungarians in 1956.
 - Ugandan Asian expellees of 1972-3.
 - Vietnamese refugees arriving in the early 1980s.
 - Sri Lankan refugees in the late 1980s.
 - For more info about these groups, see our [timeline of refugee movement to the UK](#).

- All of these refugee groups first went to temporary reception centres – normally ex-RAF bases – which were large enough to cater for hundreds of refugees until they could be found housing and work.

Facilities and Treatment:

- Signalling the beginning of a new era, [Harmondsworth Detention Centre](#) was opened in **1970** to process Commonwealth immigrants after the [1969 Immigration Appeals Act](#) made the current holding facilities in airports inadequate for the new timeframes put in place for this process.
- Some temporary centres which acted as welcome and reception centres for Vietnamese refugees in the **early 1980s** have since become detention centres, sometimes following periods of other use. For example, [Morton Hall in Lincolnshire](#) began as a temporary centre, then became a prison, until its reopening as an Immigration Removal Centre in 2011.
- As numbers of asylum seekers rose, the Home Office found the existing detention capacity inadequate and in the late 1980s experimented with alternative holding facilities, such as a disused car ferry.

Attitudes and Responses:

- From the **late 1960s**, political and public debate tended to focus on immigration as a problem rather than a benefit to society, and one which could only be solved by deterring entry.
- Despite this, there was also opposition to detention at this time, including frequent and successful anti-deportation campaigns, particularly from communities affected by the changes in law regarding the migration of Commonwealth citizens.

Post-Cold War

1990s-2010

Laws and Policies:

- In contrast to the sporadic and government-sponsored arrival of large refugee cohorts from the 1950s to the 1980s, the end of the Cold War caused a more consistent movement of individuals across borders due to the collapse of states, the rise of nationalism, civil war and economic instability, alongside the struggles of post-colonial states.
- Individual asylum applications rose from around **300** a year in the **late 1970s** to **71,160** by **1999**. At the same time, changes to immigration law made it increasingly difficult for those without strong family links to Britain to enter and remain in the UK.
- Legislation in the 1990s – notably the [1999 Immigration and Asylum Act](#) - formalised the existence of detention centres, which were officially re-named 'Removal Centres' in **2001**. This Act marked a shift in Britain from detention as an exception, something temporary to be resorted to in times of major crisis, to detention as an administrative measure and mechanism underpinning Britain's refugee and asylum regime.
- At this time, current powers for detention were very widespread with *'no automatic or independent scrutiny of the lawfulness, appropriateness or length of detention.'*

Groups Affected:

- In **1990**, **1,304** Commonwealth citizens had been detained. This was the first year this figure had gone above **200**. The total capacity of the detention estate itself expanded rapidly, from **250** places in **1993** to **2644** in **2005**.
- Controversially, detention procedures are used routinely and are applied to men and women of all ages, including pregnant women, victims of torture and rape, and children.

Facilities and Treatment:

- Campsfield House – previously a young offenders’ institute – opened as a detention centre in **1993**.
- Tinsley House was opened in **1996** as the UK’s first purpose-built immigration removal centre.
- Yarl’s Wood and Dungavel (Scotland’s only detention centre) opened in **2001**, with Haslar and Dover IRCs following in **2002**.
- Colnbrook detention centre (at Heathrow airport) was opened in **2004** and Brook House (at Gatwick airport) in **2009**.
- In **2000**, Oakington ‘reception centre’ in Cambridgeshire opened as a detention centre for people whose asylum claims the Home Office determined as ‘fast track’. The centre was closed in **2010**.

Attitudes and Responses:

- In **1994** the ‘Campaign to Close Campsfield’ was launched and monthly demonstrations outside of the detention centre began. These demonstrations continue to this day.
- In **1997**, 50 people held in Campsfield House demonstrated against an attempt to move two detainees to a prison.
- In **February 2002**, there were disturbances and fires in Yarl’s Wood which destroyed one part of the centre. The centre was not reopened until September 2003.
- In **1995**, the UNHCR deemed detention an undesirable solution to immigration control, suggesting alternatives should be considered at every turn. However, the lack of concrete demands from the UNHCR for states to end detention has led to little change in the UK’s immigration policy.

The Hostile Environment

2010-Today

Laws and Policies:

- The use of detention as part of British immigration policy was normalised even further with the Home Office’s ‘hostile environment’ policies, which began in **2010** but were implemented mostly through the [2014](#) and [2016](#) Immigration Acts.
- The Home Office detained increasing numbers of people, reaching an all-time high of **32,447** in **2015**.

Groups Affected:

- The most high-profile detentions caused by hostile environment policies are members of the [Windrush generation](#), although these are a tiny proportion of those detained.
- Almost half of people detained in 2017 had claimed asylum. In **2017**, over **5000** EU nationals were held in UK detention centres (a **600%** increase since **2009**).

Facilities and Treatment:

- Current detention centres lack regulation and adequate management, with numerous inspection reports finding that they are run like prisons, that detainees are made to feel unsafe, and that legal and mental health provisions are often inadequate.
- Research demonstrates that anxiety, depression and posttraumatic stress disorder are all common for detainees, as are self-harm and suicide, and that the severity of distress increases with the length of time in detention.

- Difficulties communicating with family members and legal advisors, uncertainty over the length of time before removal, and problems with the appeal procedure all add significant stress to the experience of detention.
- The UK is the only country in Europe that detains indefinitely. While some detainees may be processed in a matter of weeks, there are several cases of individuals being held for years.
- Hundreds of foreign nationals are also detained under immigration powers in prisons.
- There are currently 8 'removal centres' in the UK:
 - [Campsfield House, Oxfordshire](#)
 - [Colnbrook, Middlesex](#)
 - [Harmondsworth, Middlesex](#)
 - [Dungavel House, South Lanarkshire](#)
 - [Morton Hall, Lincolnshire](#)
 - [Tinsley House, Gatwick](#)
 - [Brook House, Gatwick](#)
 - [Yarl's Wood, Bedfordshire](#)

Attitudes and Responses:

- There are multiple campaigns run by civil society groups, human rights organisations and political lobbying groups. These include Detention Action's 'Time4ATimeLimit', Right to Remain's 'These Walls Must Fall', and Movement for Justice's 'Shut Down Yarl's Wood'.
- The first ever parliamentary inquiry into immigration detention was held in **2015**. The report issued by the cross-party inquiry called for the introduction of a maximum 28-day time limit on detention, and for the government to use alternatives to detention more widely.
- In **2015**, several years of legal challenges culminated in the ending of the [Detained Fast Track](#) system for people seeking asylum.
- In **2014-15**, a local and national campaign successfully prevented the proposed expansion of Campsfield House detention centre, which would have doubled its detention capacity.

More Information

[Association of Visitors to Immigration Detainees \(AVID\)](#)

[Asylum Aid](#)

[Asylum Welcome](#)

[Bail for Immigration Detainees](#)

[Detained Voices](#)

[Detention Action](#)

[Free Movement](#)

[Freedom from Torture](#)

[Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group](#) and [Refugee Tales](#)

[Music in Detention](#)

[No Walls](#)

[Right to Remain Toolkit](#)

[Scottish Detainee Visitors](#)

[SOAS Detention Support](#)

[The Detention Forum](#)

Further Reading

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