

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Enemy Aliens: internment and deportation policy in Great Britain, September 1939–June 1940

Rachel Pistol 

Department of Digital Humanities, King's College London and Department of History, University of Southampton

Email: [Rachel.Pistol@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:Rachel.Pistol@kcl.ac.uk)

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### Abstract

During the Second World War, Germans, Austrians and Italians living in Great Britain were designated as 'enemy aliens' and consequently interned. The worsening situation on the continent in May and June 1940 stirred up hysteria that spies and saboteurs could be amongst the Germans and Austrians. Mass arrests started in May 1940, and Italians were soon caught up in the detentions when Mussolini declared war on 10 June, thus filling internment camps to capacity. Canada and Australia agreed to take some of the 'most dangerous characters', facilitating the most controversial aspect of internment – deportation – which led to the ultimate tragedy when the SS *Arandora Star* was torpedoed and sunk on 2 July 1940. Building on previous scholarship that focuses on either German or Italian internment, this article examines both government policy towards and the internee experience of these two groups on an equal footing, thus furthering integration of the Italian narrative within internment historiography.

**Keywords:** internment; Second World War; *Arandora Star*; Canada; Australia; Italians

### Introduction

The date 3 September 1939 marked the start of official hostilities between Great Britain and Germany and the start of the Second World War, following Germany's invasion of Poland two days previously. As soon as war was declared, all German and Austrian nationals living in Britain automatically became 'enemy aliens'. However, the British authorities were aware that many of the Germans and Austrians resident in Britain at the time were refugees who were anti-Nazi and, therefore, should not be treated in the same way as enemy aliens were during the First World War. A new system had to be designed and implemented to sift out potential threats to national security and, consequently, every individual was examined by a tribunal so that only those considered an immediate security threat were interned. Once Germany's successful invasions of Norway and Denmark took place in May 1940, and France and the Low Countries looked set to follow suit, the threat of invasion of the British mainland became a very real possibility. Spy fever gripped the nation, and it was feared the Germans and Austrians at liberty could harbour spies and saboteurs, ready to assist the Nazis attain victory should

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they cross the English Channel. This panic led to calls for mass internment with the idea that it was better to lock up many innocent people rather than leave enemies at large. The rationale behind internment was always to protect the British war effort and to ensure that any potential dangers to national security were behind barbed wire where they could do no harm. When Italy's Fascist regime led by Mussolini joined the Axis powers on 10 June 1940, Italians living in Britain joined the ranks of enemy aliens. However, there was no time to put Italians before tribunals, which had taken four months with the Germans and Austrians, and mass internment was already well underway by June 1940. This meant that all Italians were considered to have Fascist leanings and all males aged between 16 and 70 years of age were to be arrested.

This article explains the policy of internment from September 1939 to June 1940, illuminating how policy evolved, the stages of arrest and internment, and the subsequent deportation policy that contributed to the tragedy of SS *Arandora Star*. Although much of the seminal scholarship written in the 1940s and 1980s has examined this history in depth (including Lafitte 1940 republished 1988; Kapp and Mynatt 1977 republished 1997; Gillman and Gillman 1980; Stent 1980; Kochan 1983), in recent years it has become clear that there is a gap in understanding how the internment of Italians fits into the broader internment narrative. More recent scholarship, beginning with Colpi (1993) and Sponza (1993), and later monographs such as Sponza (2000a) and Ugolini (2014), focussing exclusively on the Italian experience, and Pistol (2017), placing Second World War internment in a comparative context, have helped redress this imbalance. However, there is still very little research that examines the Germanic and Italian groups simultaneously, on an equal and balanced footing. Building on the foundation of these two previous strands of study, this article not only contextualises and integrates the internment and deportation of Italians within enemy alien internment historiography as a whole, but also discusses the German and Italian experience in tandem. Additionally, sources not previously referenced are used to update earlier scholarship.

### Early internment policy and tribunals, September 1939–April 1940

To understand what happened during the Second World War, it is necessary to revisit British internment policy from 1914 to 1918. During the First World War, approximately 60,000 Germans were resident in Britain, most of them economic migrants from the late nineteenth century who had travelled to Britain to make their fortune. At the start of the war, spy paranoia left the public believing that Germans were acting 'as agents on behalf of their homeland'; a fear that later developed into 'a more sophisticated conspiracy theory which argued that Germans controlled all sections of the British establishment and were frustrating the attainment of military victory' (Panayi 1993, 55). The anti-German feeling was so great that a mere three days after Britain joined the war, on 7 August 1914, it was decided that German men between the ages of 17 and 42 should be interned for the safety of the nation.<sup>1</sup> Internment continued in fits and starts in 1914 and 1915 as space to house these internees fluctuated. On 13 May 1915, Prime Minister Asquith stated, regarding government policy:

Dealing first with the non-naturalized aliens, there are at this moment 19,000 interned and there are some 40,000 (24,000 men and 16,000 women) at large. We propose that in existing circumstances, *prima facie*, all adult males of this class should, for their own safety, and that of the community, be segregated and interned, or, if over military age, repatriated. This will not require fresh legislation. We recognize that there will be cases which call for exceptional treatment. The women and children in suitable cases will be repatriated, but there will, no doubt, be many instances

in which justice and humanity will require that they should be allowed to remain. (Panayi 1993, 58)

Many Germans took up this offer of repatriation, with those able to do so being women, children, and men not of military age. By the time the war was over, anti-German feeling had not dissipated, with Lloyd George stating on 5 December 1918, ‘Germans had “forfeited claims to remain” in the country’; ultimately 30,700 former enemy aliens – Germans, Austrians, Hungarians, and Turks – were expelled from the country after the war (Cesarani 1987, 5–6).

Britain had no desire to repeat such a scenario in the Second World War and made its position clear at the outbreak of war:

Germans and Austrians in this country, being nationals of a state with which His Majesty is at war, are liable to be interned as ‘enemy aliens’, but most of the Germans and Austrians now here are refugees from the regime against which this country is fighting, and many of them are anxious to help the country which has given them asylum. Others have been here a long time and have formed such ties and associations here that their sympathies are with this country rather than their country of origin. Some of them have British-born wives and British-born children. It would, therefore, be wrong to treat all Germans and Austrians as though they were enemies. (HO 213/231 1939)

With this in mind, a new system was devised with tribunals established throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, to examine the cases of all enemy aliens resident in the country. As all foreigners were required to register with the local police, the information about the number and whereabouts of enemy aliens was already known to the authorities. Recent author research indicates that just over 75,500 individuals over 16 years of age were considered by the tribunals between September 1939 and January 1940 (HO 213/459 1942). Files not released at the time of Lafitte’s original research (1940), nor by the time Gillman or Stent published in 1980, show that the figures previously quoted as 73,800 (Lafitte 1988, 63, re-quoted in Gillman 1980, 45) or 73,355 (Stent 1980, 37),<sup>2</sup> are in actuality higher. Including stateless persons and correctly adding the figures of all those who went before a tribunal means the number is 75,665.

Enemy aliens were classified into three categories: ‘A’ an imminent danger to national security requiring immediate internment; ‘B’ able to remain at liberty but with restrictions, such as limiting the individual to remaining within five miles of their home and preventing him or her from owning binoculars, a camera, or a bicycle; and ‘C’ a genuine refugee from Nazi oppression with no restrictions on individual liberty (Lafitte 1988, 63). Tribunal decisions were subjective and open to influence from a number of factors, including prejudice towards foreigners or a mistrust of those who did not speak English. Equally, the magistrate could be generously disposed towards refugees, understanding the struggles they had gone through to reach Britain. For those who had established themselves in British society it was possible to get letters of recommendation that could be presented before the tribunal to strengthen a case for exemption from internment (‘Papers Relating to the Internment of Members of the Beermann Family’ n.d.; HO 213/231 1939). General questions asked by the tribunal officials often included questions about employment, why an individual had chosen to come to Britain, and plans for the future (Pottlitzer 1978). Of course, this all assumed that the tribunal was interested in hearing particulars about an individual or their family; in many cases the decisions were already made before the person in question appeared at the tribunal, such as in the case of Ludwig (Lou) Baruch, a staunch Communist, who appeared before a Mr Holmes at his tribunal:

Mr Holmes, listened in my case to some mumbled remarks of a police officer. I was only asked, 'Where is your passport?' To which I replied, 'I do not know', and then Mr Holmes said, 'You will be interned until further notice'. (Baruch 2007)

The key factor in any decision by a tribunal was whether or not an individual was likely to be a risk to national security. For this reason, Communists and radical trade unionists were considered as dangerous as Nazis, 'not from any desire on their part to help the Nazis, but from their policy of provoking and fostering industrial discontent', as Britain could not afford any interruption in its factories or war production (Anderson 1940). Many anti-Nazis had, understandably, been members of left-leaning German political parties or had joined the Communists in order to fight the rapid rise of Fascism in Spain or within Germany, and this often affected the classification given. After the tribunals were completed, a mere 600 men were interned as Category A, with a further 300 who had been rounded up by MI5 at the start of the conflict. Their numbers were swelled with around 2,000 merchant seamen captured in British ports or at sea who were automatically placed into Category A (CAB 67/6/15 1940). Outside of these Category A aliens, other enemy aliens were left at liberty, though Category Bs were under certain restrictions on what they could own or how far they could travel from their home address.

It was not until May 1940, after the devastatingly swift fall of Denmark and Norway and the very real threat of a German invasion of Britain after France also fell, that the internment policy was revisited and the decision was made that it was better to be safe than sorry. The plans for mass internment were in place before Churchill became prime minister and when he addressed the House of Commons on 4 June 1940 he acknowledged:

I know there are a great many people affected by the orders which we have made who are the passionate enemies of Nazi Germany. I am very sorry for them, but we cannot, at the present time, and under the present stress, draw all the distinctions which we should like to do. (Wasserstein 1979, 96)

By this time, arrests had already been made of all Germans and Austrian men aged 16 to 60 living on the east and south-east coasts of Britain 'in a zone marked out by the Military Authorities as an area of possible military operations' (Anderson 1940). Around 4,000 arrests were made in these areas on 12 May 1940, and these were swiftly followed on 16 May by the arrests of men classified as Category B, also aged 16 to 60. Category B women with some of their dependent children were arrested on 28 May 1940; the total Category B arrests numbering some 6,000 (Pistol 2023, 18). The process of internment was, therefore, well underway by the time Italy declared war on Britain and France on 10 June 1940.

### Italy joins the war, June 1940

How the British government viewed Italians in the years preceding the war played an important part in determining wartime policy. This can be seen in many ways, including how the Home Office considered naturalisation applications during the 1930s as to whether an applicant's nationalist sympathies were

... genuinely British. In this connection the police are directed to enquire and report about membership of a foreign political organisation. If an applicant is or has recently been a member of an Italian Fascist Organisation or the German Nazi Organisation we refuse his application on the ground that membership shows that his political interests are in the country of his origin and that, therefore, it is

doubtful whether he is sufficiently identified with the national life of this country. (HO 213/40 1937)

Furthermore, Italians and Germans were treated differently in their naturalisation applications as Italian applications had to go via MI5, while German applications did not (HO 213/40 1937). The policy of treating Italian citizens differently to those from Germany or Austria was already well entrenched long before 10 June 1940. Britain had been anticipating Italy's declaration of war and strategies were already in place with regard to how to treat Italians as enemy aliens if war was declared. Indeed, one month before Italy joined the Axis powers, the War Cabinet already had plans to intern all male Italians aged 16 to 70 who had lived in Britain for fewer than 20 years, as well as males of any age whom MI5 considered to be linked to the Fascist Party (CAB 65/7/23 1940).

In the lead-up to Italy joining the war, Ministry of Information reports on public opinion showed a growing anti-Italian sentiment, along with some anti-Jewish sentiment, particularly in the Scottish capital. In Birmingham, just three days before Italy joined the Axis powers, there was 'wide apprehension about Fifth Column, spies seen all over the place. Strong feeling for interning more Aliens' (INF 1/264/44 1940). The apparatus for internment was well underway by June 1940, and with the heightened anxieties surrounding the possibility of Fifth Column activity, it was inconceivable that a proportion of Italians resident in Britain would escape arrest. Although Italians were, by the 1930s, integrated into British society, they were not always assimilated. Prior to the 1930s, Terri Colpi notes that

Italians continued to live in a traditional family-centred way, with birth, death and marriage ceremonies, conducted through the church, forming the cornerstones of life. Italian or Italian dialect was spoken at home and the food consumed Italian in style. Where a family was in business all members were involved and this activity further united them as a socio-economic unit. Although the immigrants and their offspring were well-settled they preserved and cherished a love of, and nostalgia for, Italy. (Colpi 1993, 169)

Upon the rise of Fascism, this changed to a certain extent. The basic principle of Fascism – Honour, Family and Fatherland – was 'the very principle by which most lived their lives anyway', and so involvement with the party was primarily due to involvement within the Italian community. Italians saw many benefits of Fascism, including clubs, Italian language schools, and free holidays to Italy for children. It should also be noted that 'it became increasingly difficult, in a bureaucratic sense, to conduct one's affairs in Italy, which were administered through the Italian Consulates, if one was not a member of the Fascist movement' (Colpi 1993, 170). As notable Italian historian, Lucio Sponza, concluded: 'In the end ... fascism became synonymous with patriotism to the vast majority of Italians in Britain, and anti-fascist activity was confined to some elder anarchists and even fewer political refugees' (Sponza 2000b, 259). Ultimately, this involvement in the Fascist movement would cause huge problems for many in the British Italian community.

Public opinion towards the Italians had fluctuated over the years and had significantly deteriorated after the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935–1936, as a result of the use of poison gas and the bombing of hospitals and ambulances. The calling of derogatory names was commonplace, as was a general belief that Italians were 'dirty' (Ugolini 2014, 38). As Joe Pieri wrote in his memories of this time

Almost daily I was reminded of the fact that I was an Italian ... Italy's invasion of Abyssinia and Mussolini's intervention in the Spanish Civil War had created a

wave of ill feeling against Italy in the general population. The childhood taunts of 'dirty wee Tally' had given way to more frequent, forceful and insulting remarks about my nationality ... 'Dirty wee Tally' had given way to 'Tally bastard' ... These remarks bothered me no more than the weather did, they were part and parcel of my environment. (Pieri 1997, 8)

A Mass Observation study undertaken in the four days preceding Italy's entry into the war had Italians described as 'wops', 'yellow', 'rotten fighters' and 'lousy scum – not fit even for the dustbin' (Kushner 2004, 182–184; Sponza 2006, 71; Ugolini 2014, 41). Ministry of Information reports in the same days included comments such as 'Italian shopkeepers in Glasgow may fare badly if Italy comes into war' (INF 1/264/44 1940). Yet, knowing that this was the sentiment in the general population, no measures were taken to protect the Italian community when war was declared. Anti-Italian riots broke out in major cities around the country on 10 June 1940, and these were 'particularly vicious' in Edinburgh and Glasgow (Ugolini 2014, 122). The violence was not limited to these two cities, however, with the *Greenock Telegraph* reporting:

Scenes unprecedented in Greenock and Port Glasgow took place late last night when gangs of infuriated persons gave vent to their feelings about local Italians following Mussolini's declaration of war on the Allies. The police had difficulty in coping adequately with the situation. Some of the most violent incidents took place in Ann Street, where shops owned by Italians were indiscriminately smashed. (Colpi 1991, 107)

Hundreds of shops and homes were damaged across the country, with Italian restaurateurs putting signs in their windows saying they were British to try and prevent violence against their property or person (Colpi 1993, 175).

Deciding it was better to be safe than sorry, as had already been executed in the case of Germans and Austrians, some 5,346 Italian men and 16 Italian women were interned, making up approximately one in five of all civilians interned by the British government in the UK in July 1940 (FO 371/29174 1941).

### Temporary and transit camps, May–July 1940

The police, who had already arrested Germans and Austrians living on the east and south-east coasts on 12 May 1940, male Category Bs on 16 May 1940, and female Category Bs on 28 May 1940, were well prepared to arrest Italians on 10 and 11 June 1940. After arrest, internees were initially held in local police stations before being moved to temporary camps on the British mainland. Some of the temporary camps were internment camps that had been in existence since the early months of the war, whilst others were hastily constructed only a few weeks previously. Accommodation could vary from prisons, army barracks, or grandstands at racecourses, to disused factories, partially built housing estates, or fields surrounded by barbed wire and filled with bell tents. The camps that sent Italian internees to be embarked upon the *Arandora Star* were Lingfield Park and Kempton Park racecourses in Surrey, Warth Mills in Lancashire, Paignton in Devon, Southampton in Hampshire, Pembroke in south-west Wales, Milton Bridge and Donaldson School in Edinburgh, and (briefly) Huyton, near Liverpool.<sup>3</sup>

One of the earliest camps where Italians were sent had been in existence since September 1939 – Dixon's holiday camp in Paignton. Paignton was a more luxurious camp and had previously been an option for 'Officer Class' internees who could afford to pay 4s. 6d. per day for superior accommodation and better food. Only a few people

had enough money to pay for this arrangement, which gave internees greater privacy, amongst other perks. Internees lived in 'pairs in the separate huts, which are heated by oil stoves, and have a dining room and lounge, with easy chairs, and the use of an entertainment hall, with stage' (FCRA/25/40 1939–1941; Kochan 1983, 7). A handful of Italians enjoyed the better facilities at Paignton before they were boarded onto the *Arandora Star*.

Many of those arrested, particularly those living in the south of England, including London where the largest concentration of Italians was located, were sent to Lingfield Park racecourse. Uberto Limentani, later a professor of Italian Literature at Cambridge University, recalled of his time at Lingfield that he 'slept in a horse-box with at least 10 or 12 other internees on a mattress stuffed with straw. Here we suffered, quite literally, from hunger' (Limentani 1980, 41). In the German part of the camp, George Leiser said he

must have spent most of [his] Lingfield days peeling potatoes, which was better than nothing because there were no facilities for anything other than sleeping and eating, and the latter activity was very severely rationed. Fortunately, the weather was warm and dry, and one could at least walk round certain parts of the course or even lie on the grass, interrupted only by roll calls morning noon and night. (Leiser n.d., 74)

Conditions at Lingfield were not bad, but there were, as in all these camps, tensions between different nationalities, factions, and political groups.

Of all the transit camps, by far the worst that Italians, Germans and Austrians were sent to was Warth Mills, an abandoned cotton mill on the outskirts of Bury, near Manchester. Many hundreds of Italians were housed at Warth Mills, including Victor Tolaini, who described the camp as follows:

Warth Mills was a broken down disused Cotton Mill at Bury in Lancashire. It was a derelict filthy structure, the floors covered with grease and overrun with rats and other forms of vermin. Most of the roofing was made of glass, much of it broken, therefore letting in the rain. (Tolaini 1982)

Camillo D'Allesandro described the camp as a 'disused cotton mill ... dark dirty lofty rooms, several storeys, no light at night, strife among the internees, no chairs or tables' (D'Allesandro 1981). Monsignor Gaetano Rossi, a young priest interned during the war, recalled that the internees were ordered not to lie down on their beds during the day, 'There were no chairs or stools, so we had to stand around, not knowing what to do' (Rossi 1991). Rossi was given permission to celebrate Mass in the camp for the Italians, and an internee who later perished on the *Arandora Star*, artist Severino Trematore, painted a triptych using watercolour on paper for the altar. 'The idea that everybody had forgotten [the internees], that no one was caring about them was widespread ... from this mood it was easy to fall into sentiments of despair', which is why it was so important to give the internees some form of distraction (Rossi 1991). The Society of Friends visited Warth Mills on 10 July 1940 and recorded that:

The men I talked to were almost uniformly miserable and indignant. Through their leaders and others they urged me in any way I could to make representations of their point of view, as follows. 'We accept the fact of internment, though most of us are anxious to help the British cause. But internment under these conditions is cruel and punitive.' (FCRA/25/40 1939–1941)

It was from this camp that hundreds of the Italians were embarked upon the *Arandora Star*. Camps like Warth Mills, along with the ships that took the internees and prisoners-of war abroad, were the most chaotic elements of British internment policy.

It took some time for the authorities to separate Nazis and pro-Nazi sympathisers from the racial and political refugees in the German and Austrian camps. Fascist and non-fascist allegiance was less clear-cut amongst the Italians and proved problematic during their internment. A Home Office memorandum dated 3 September 1940 noted:

The separation of Fascists and Anti-Fascists is a more difficult matter, since membership of the Fascist party has often been taken as indicating that a man is a Fascist. A memorandum from Professor Bruno Foa ... shews [sic] that any Italian was almost forced to be a member of the Fascist party, whatever his sympathies ... [and] a letter from Sir George Warner [states] that he is informed by a released internee that practically all captured Italian seamen are keen Fascists, whereas the bulk of the Italian civilian internees were anti-Fascist. (HO 215/124 1940)

Questions were raised in parliament over this lack of willingness to deal with the problem of separating Fascist from antifascist Italians. Colonel Josiah Wedgwood, for example, asked the Home Secretary on 8 August 1940 if 'Danilo Lebrecht, known as Lorenzo Montano, an Italian refugee and anti-Fascist journalist' could be immediately released due to his antifascist credentials. Sir John Anderson answered that he did not feel there was justification to provide 'preferential treatment in the matter of release' as he thought the information provided was insufficient to prove his credentials (HC Deb 8 August 1940). In the same parliamentary session, Mr S.O. Davies asked the Secretary of State for War the reason the late Giuseppe Conti was taken from Warth Mills and placed on the *Arandora Star*, leaving a widow and two young children. The response from Mr Law was because 'this man was reported to be a member of the Fascist party' (HC Deb 8 August 1940). The truth of the matter was that the British security services had a very limited understanding of who was or was not a Fascist, particularly when it came to Italians. Gaetano Rossi, the young cleric at Warth Mills, wrote in his memories of internment about the diversity of identities and conflicting political beliefs amongst the Italians. At Warth Mills, they put together a few bricks in a corner they called 'Hyde Park', in reference to Speaker's Corner, where Italians were able to have their say, be they pro-Mussolini or anti-Mussolini. Rossi noted:

They were all Italians, they all loved their country, but their political opinions were so different that it would have been difficult to classify – clearly demonstrating that the largest number of internees had never taken part in any political movement (Rossi 1991).

Although descriptions of these internment camps are broadly consistent regardless of the nationality of the internee, one striking fact was that Germans and Austrians were generally kept segregated from Italians. Each nationality was either kept to its own part of the camp or moved into a camp after another nationality had been relocated. Evidence of the differing views MI5 had of Germans and Italians in the years preceding the Second World War continued throughout the war. Part of the reason for keeping the nationalities segregated was because many of the Germans and Austrians were refugees and Britain expected to be able to release them in order to help in the war effort. In 1939, most Germans and Austrians had not long been in Britain, in marked contrast with most Italians, who were well settled with families and established businesses at the outbreak of war. German and Austrian refugees had been forced out of their countries



of birth due to horrific persecution, which meant that such individuals would not profess loyalty to the Hitler regime. By direct contrast, most Italians had family members in Italy and were proudly Italian or British-Italian, resulting in potentially conflicting identities and 'divided loyalties' in wartime (Sponza 2000a). Germans and Austrians had already been before tribunals prior to internment, which proved useful as soon as the White Papers on 'Categories of Persons Eligible for Release from Internment' were published (Pistol 2021). When Italy joined the war there was no time for tribunals; consequently, all individual examinations had to be conducted after arrest and during internment itself. It was not until the more permanent camps were established on the Isle of Man, along with those in Canada and Australia, that such evaluation could be undertaken. By this time the deportations had already taken place.

### Deportations to Canada and Australia

With the haste of the arrests and the numbers involved, suitable space to house the internees was soon exhausted within the UK and enquiries were made elsewhere (Gillman and Gillman 1980, 166). Several of the Dominions were approached to take some of the 'most dangerous characters among the Germans and Italians' (Radok n.d.). Canada agreed to take 4,000 internees and 3,000 prisoners-of-war; Newfoundland agreed to accept 1,000 internees; and Australia and New Zealand were expected to accommodate 6,000 and 4,000 respectively (Chamberlain 1940). In the end, only Canada and Australia were called upon to take internees and four ships were dispatched to Canada and one to Australia. The idea initially was for only Category A internees to be sent abroad. This category covered not only the Germans and Austrians who had been classified as such by a tribunal, but also all Italians who were on an MI5 list detailing members of the Partito Nazionale Fascista and those associated with the *Fasci*. Such individuals were also automatically classified as Category A, considered sufficiently dangerous to warrant being transported abroad. However, as there were not enough internees falling within these two groups – Category A Germans and Austrians and Italians Fascists – to fill the number of places available on the ships the government had prepared for deportation, it was decided to broaden the categories of those to be sent overseas to include B and C Categories.

With regard to the interned Italians, those who were believed to have links to the Italian Fascist Party from the MI5 list were embarked upon the SS *Arandora Star*. The other ship that sailed for Canada with Italians on board was the MV *Ettrick*. Just over 400 Italians were boarded onto the *Ettrick*, not because they were considered *Fascisti*, but because 'being single and between the ages of 20 and 30 it was considered that they were suitable for deportation since no hardship of separation from wives or children would be involved' (HO 213/566 1940). The *Arandora Star* and the *Ettrick* were the second and third ships to set sail for Canada. All ships bar the MS *Sobieski* sailed from Liverpool. The first ship to depart on 21 June 1940 was SS *Duchess of York*, which transported some 2,100 German and Austrian internees (including merchant seamen), the vast majority of whom were Category A, alongside just over 500 prisoners-of-war. The next ship to sail, on 30 June 1940, the *Arandora Star*, was embarked with 707 Italians (Pacitti, this issue) and around 475 Category A Germans and Austrians, some of whom were merchant seamen. On 3 July 1940 the third ship, the *Ettrick*, carried over 1,300 German and Austrian B and C Categories who were purportedly selected because they were single men between the ages of 16 and 50; plus the 400 supposedly single Italians mentioned above, and approximately 885 German prisoners-of-war. The fourth ship, which set sail on 4 July 1940 from Glasgow, MS *Sobieski*, contained around 550 prisoners-of-war, alongside just under 1,000 German and Austrian men in Categories B and C, again between the ages of 16 and 50 and supposedly single. The final ship despatched as part of the deportation

scheme, on 10 July 1940, was the HMT *Dunera*, which carried some 251 Category A Germans and Austrians and 200 Italians, all of whom had survived the sinking of the *Arandora Star*. They shared the ship with 2,095 B and C Category Germans and Austrians (HO 213/566 1940; HO 215/257 1940). The mix of different nationalities and categories, merchant seamen, civilian internees, and prisoners-of-war created a maelstrom of confusion for the Canadian and Australian authorities to work out. It was not until the end of July that Canada and Australia were officially informed via memoranda of exactly who the ships were believed to have transported (HO 213/566 1940; HO 215/257 1940).<sup>4</sup> These memoranda fully detail the rationale behind internment and deportation, and explain how the British had originally intended to send only the ‘most dangerous’ enemy aliens abroad, but which quickly became all those available of any internment category, with the hope the Dominion governments would figure out what happened and treat refugees with leniency. Such confused communications caused many problems for the internees, who suffered as a result of the delay in accurate communication between Britain, Canada and Australia. Australia succeeded in separating the competing factions within two weeks (Morgenroth 2023, 249). However, it took Canada seven months to separate the Jewish refugees sent aboard the *Duchess of York* from the Nazis in Camp ‘R’ Red Rock (Zimmerman 2015, 281).

The deportation policy evolved, even within the short space of time between the departure of the *Duchess of York* and that of the *Dunera*. For example, the reason no new Italians were deported after those on the *Arandora Star* and the *Ettrick* (those who were shipped on the *Dunera* were part of the original deportation policy as they were all survivors of the *Arandora Star*), was because the British government was considering, at that time, a scheme of exchanging Italian citizens for British citizens in Italy (Chamberlain 1940). This moved German and Austrian Categories B and C up in terms of priority for deportation and led to calls for volunteers from those most likely to be refugees to fill the ships. However, the Home Secretary hoped that internees who would be required for war production, those interned in error, or ‘married men with wives and children in this country, upon whom special hardship would be imposed by separation’ would not be sent abroad (Chamberlain 1940). In the haste of the deportations, this was a vain hope; indeed, much conflicting information was provided to the internees before they were sent overseas, including being told wives and children would follow or that going abroad would help future emigration (‘The *Dunera* Memorandum, No. 7 Camp’ 1940; HC Deb 13 August 1940). It is perhaps no wonder that so many men ‘volunteered’ for the *Dunera*, though such an option was not given to internees dispatched on the earlier sailings. In the case of the interned Italians from Warth Mills who were embarked onto *Arandora Star* and subsequently *Dunera*, they were not given any information at all so had no idea they were being sent abroad.

The deportations took place against a changing background of events, and this somewhat altered public opinion. There had always been dismay from intellectual circles over the premise of internment, although internment in general received popular support from across the country. As early as 2 July 1940, Ministry of Information reports noted that the ‘indiscriminate internment of aliens is strongly deprecated in intellectual circles and the distress which internment has brought is being reflected in morale’ (Addison and Crang 2010, 180). By 6 July,

Although the internment of aliens has popular support, in intellectual and professional circles the situation has created grave alarm and some defeatism. Letters carry news of this ‘breakdown of high principle’ to other countries. There is criticism not only of the desirability of internment but of the methods by which it is carried out. (Addison and Crang 2010, 196–197)

As news became public about the overseas transports, relatives and friends of internees expressed dismay ‘that interned aliens will be sent to Canada without appeal or second tribunal. Intellectual circles uneasy at arbitrary treatment of refugees; e.g. several Italians who lived for years in England taken on *Arandora Star* without trial; remaining Italians bitter at apparent injustice’. There was particular outrage about the treatment of Italians: at the end of July, in London there was a ‘sense of injustice reported among British citizens in districts where Italians ran small businesses at summary internment of people they had known for many years’(Addison and Crang 2010, 238). Once news leaked out about the *Arandora Star* disaster, public backlash and pressure from Members of Parliament, coupled with the fact that pressure had eased on the British camps because of internees starting to be released, ultimately put an end to the controversial policy (Burleston 1993, 116).

The end to the deportation policy broadly coincided with the Home Secretary, Sir John Anderson, announcing a change in policy with the development and subsequent publication of the first White Paper with the first 18 categories for release at the end of July 1940 (Lafitte 1988, 195–196). Italians were eligible for release under the same categories as Germans but had to go before an Advisory Committee to assess their case because they had not appeared before a tribunal (Pistol 2021). Through this, the emphasis shifted from interning enemy aliens to developing strategies to get enemy aliens out of the camps into roles that would assist the British war effort. The critics of internment grew more vocal in parliament, even regarding the policy of release. Rhys Davies MP compared the idea of releasing individuals who could be useful to the country as something that smelled ‘a little too much of Hitlerism’. Davies went on in the same speech to parliament to say:

How on earth the Government conceived the idea of sending some of these people to Canada and Australia is beyond my comprehension. The agony of the families in this connection is indescribable. Imagine the plight of a mother of whom I know with two sons. She has not the remotest idea where they are, but she presumes that they have been sent to Australia. (HC Deb 22 August 1940)

The haphazard nature of how deportation was organised meant that records of selections and embarkations were either non-existent or inaccurate and it took some time to unravel exactly what had happened in the heat and secrecy of the moment (HO 215/260 1940). However, it was too late for anything to be done for those who had lost their lives on the *Arandora* and those already abroad beyond trying to figure out how they might return to the UK. In the meantime, thousands of individuals had endured long and arduous journeys to Canada or Australia and faced an equally dangerous return.

No matter what information was or was not provided to the internees, nothing could have prepared them for the conditions they endured on the transport ships, where the internees were overcrowded and held in insanitary conditions for the duration of their voyage (Stent 1980, 98–100; Kapp and Mynatt 1997, 116–120; Pistol 2017, 46–50). The first voyage to Canada, on the *Duchess of York* – like all of the transport ships – was terribly overcrowded. The merchant seamen and prisoners-of-war outnumbered the British guards on the ship but there was a reasonable amount of freedom of movement on board. This led to a tragedy when British officers ordered the internees to clear the deck: there was a delay, and shots were fired, killing one man. One of the Jewish refugees on board recalled: ‘The excitement was terrific. Passions ran high, and some demanded immediate action such as to throw the officer in charge overboard, or to burn or to sink the whole ship’ (Spier 1951, 140). The effect of this loss of life was to have huge ramifications, leading to increased security measures and barbed wire on future transports (Stent 1980, 100).

A ‘not for publication’ summary of the conditions on board the *Ettrick* makes for uncomfortable reading and had much in common with the conditions on all the transports abroad:

The 1200 internees were accommodated in troop decks, luggage room and Sergeant’s Mess, sleeping in hammocks, on tables and on the floor, and in conditions of indescribable congestion and overcrowding. During daytime congestion was relieved by 2-hourly shifts of half the complement on deck. There were 2 inadequate meals a day, at 8 a.m. and 6 p.m., and only after 6 days mid-day ration of 2 biscuits was obtained, half the ration supplied from the first day to the German prisoners of war on board. Two successive barbed wire doors, locked at night, guarded the only access to the upper decks. W.Cs were inaccessible at night. While the sinking of the ‘*Arandora Star*’ became known on the second day, no precautions were taken beyond the issue of lifebelts. The Officer commanding the transport ... refused to see representatives of the internees throughout the voyage. His exclamations (‘you lousy lot’, ‘scum of the earth’) and his behaviour on the day of arrival (kicking and beating internees) were unworthy of his position. (HO 215/265 1941)

The smaller *Ettrick* was even more overcrowded than the *Arandora Star*,<sup>5</sup> and ‘was nothing less than a potential floating coffin’, exactly what the *Arandora Star* turned out to be (Pieri 1997, 31). Conditions were no better on the one ship that travelled to Australia with the *Arandora Star* survivors on board. The British guards on the *Dunera* systematically looted their charges and their sometimes violent behaviour created an atmosphere of fear. One internee on board recalled how he

lived below deck in overcrowded and appalling conditions. To use the few washrooms and toilets one had to queue for 15 to 20 minutes. At irregular times we exercised on deck for half hour and were compelled to walk barefoot. In the meantime soldiers went to our quarters and took valuables which we had hidden. We were frightened people ... not knowing what would happen and where and when our voyage would end. Discipline on the *Dunera* was harsh. Not even an angry, tormented and desperate prisoner would have dared to attack an officer. This would have meant severe punishment ... After eight weeks on this hell-ship we landed in Sydney. (Frommer 1985)

It is perhaps surprising that only three men died during the voyage – one committed suicide, one died as the result of a fight, and the third from a heart attack. Compensation was eventually agreed to be paid by the British government to internees who had lost belongings on the *Ettrick* and the *Dunera* (HO 215/213 n.d.; HO 215/209 n.d.). The government accepted its liability for physical possessions lost or stolen in transit, but no such responsibility for casualties of war. This is perhaps best summed up by the last Italian survivor of the *Arandora Star*, Rando Bertoia:

I always stated there shouldn’t be an apology from the British government, but there should have been an apology from Mr Mussolini. If Italy hadn’t gone to war there wouldn’t have been any *Arandora Star*, so blaming the British government for what happened is wrong. I can’t say anything against the British government; after all they were trying to make the country safer. You must remember that, while many Italians were alright, there were others who might have been dangerous. There have been journalists who asked me why the U-Boat sank The *Arandora Star*. Well,

this is not a mystery: it was sunk because Günther Prien was a Hitlerian gangster and had orders to sink as many ships as they could to get a medal. Others asked me if there were any signs of a red cross on the ship, but I think it would have made no difference if there was a sign of the zodiac or a red cross, that man was just out for a medal. ('Arandora Star Memories' 2010)

## Conclusion

Although the deportations of civilian internees took place over just a few weeks in late June and early July 1940, the ramifications of the policy continued throughout the war and continue for some to the present day. Figuring out not only who had been sent abroad but also facilitating their return journeys to the UK would take many years to resolve. In December 1941, a report was written for the Home Office that explained the rationale behind the policy:

Those who were transferred to Canada or Australia were sent there in pursuance of the further decision that it was desirable to remove overseas as many internees as possible, whether individually dangerous or not, in order to reduce the risks involved in having a large number of internees here. (HO 213/442 1941)

With the haste with which the policy was implemented, there was hardship and suffering for many. The British government was not without feeling for those lost on the *Arandora Star*, but noted in the same report:

Any suggestion that the Government admits any responsibility for the loss of life in the 'Arandora Star' should be indignantly repudiated. The responsibility for this rests solely with the German Government which, by its barbarous and inhuman methods of submarine warfare, added to the story of its outrages on refugees the attack on this defenceless ship and the deplorable loss of life which it caused. It follows that no liability can be admitted in respect of loss of life insofar as it involves admission of responsibility. There are, however, certain rights to compensation for loss of life caused by enemy action under the Personal Injuries Scheme, for which the Ministry of Pensions is responsible, and these rights apply even when the persons murdered are compatriots of the murderers. Applications may, therefore, be made under that scheme by the widows or dependents in this country of Germans or Italians lost on the 'Arandora Star'. (HO 213/442 1941)

The speed at which German and Austrian internment happened in May and June 1940, followed in quick succession by detention of Italian enemy aliens resident in Britain after Mussolini declared war on 10 June, meant that space was soon exhausted for the accommodation of all enemy aliens interned within the British Isles. The somewhat haphazard nature of the early days of internment created harsh and difficult living conditions for those unfortunate enough to be arrested. Given the perceived imminent threat of invasion alongside that of a potential 'enemy within', the most appropriate solution to overcrowding in the camps at this time was considered to be the removal of several thousand men to Canada and Australia. For some of these men this would result in but a footnote in their lives, whilst for others and their families, as is so often the case in wartime, there could have been no greater tragedy.

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## Notes

1. An unknown number of ethnic Italians from the Trentino area, at this time part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, were also interned. Colpi (2015, 89) mentions Adolfo Lorenzetti, from Pinzolo, who had been living in Glasgow and was interned in 1915 when Italy joined the war.
2. Stent's figure of 73,355 is actually a transposition of 73,553 from Home Office documentation.
3. The Italians who came from Paignton spent only a few days in Huyton before being boarded onto the *Arandora Star*.
4. Though the existence of such memoranda is mentioned by Gillman and Gillman (1980, 240) and indirectly referred to by Stent (1980, 216–217), Lafitte (1988, 136), and Kapp and Mynatt (1997, 123), prior to this article, references have not been made to the original source material.
5. The *Arandora Star* was previously used to transport around 1,600 military personnel from Norway and on another journey transported around 1,700 troops and refugees from St Jean de Luz. These transports were more overcrowded than the internee journey, though the military personnel were not confined by barbed wire (Dorling 1973, 40–42).

## References

### Abbreviations

FCRA = Friends Committee for Refugees and Aliens  
 HC = House of Commons  
 HO = Home Office  
 INF = Ministry of Information  
 IWM = Imperial War Museum  
 MNH = Manx National Heritage  
 TNA = The National Archives, Kew, UK

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**Dr Rachel Pistol** is a digital historian based at King's College London and the University of Southampton, where she is the National Coordinator of the UK Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI-UK) and on the project management board for the European Holocaust Research Infrastructure (EHRI). Rachel has published extensively as well as presented on TV and radio about Second World War internment of Germans, Austrians, and Italians in the UK and of those of Japanese ancestry in the USA. Her most recent co-edited collection, with Dr Gilly Carr, *British Internment and the Internment of Britons: Second World War Camps, History and Heritage*, was published by Bloomsbury in 2023. Rachel's 2017 monograph, *Internment during the Second World War: A Comparative Study of Great Britain and the USA* is the first trans-Atlantic comparison on this topic. She is the Honorary Historic Advisor to World Jewish Relief, helping to make their unique archive about refugees they rescued from Nazi oppression more accessible. Rachel also a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Exeter, and committee member of the Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies.

### Italian summary

Durante la Seconda Guerra Mondiale i cittadini tedeschi, austriaci e italiani residenti in Gran Bretagna furono classificati come 'enemy aliens' ('nemici stranieri') e di conseguenza internati. Questo fu in larga parte dovuto al deterioramento della situazione militare in Europa nei mesi di maggio e giugno del 1940, che alimentò un'isteria collettiva riguardo alla possibilità che spie e sabotatori si nascondessero tra tedeschi e austriaci. Anche gli italiani furono colpiti da provvedimenti di internamento dopo che il 10 giugno Mussolini dichiarò guerra alla Gran Bretagna. Presto i campi di internamento raggiunsero il limite della loro capacità. Il Canada e l'Australia accettarono di accogliere alcuni dei 'soggetti più pericolosi', gestendo l'aspetto più controverso dell'internamento – la deportazione. È in questo quadro che si situa la tragedia della SS *Arandora Star*, silurata e affondata da un sommergibile tedesco il 2 luglio 1940 con il suo carico di internati, principalmente italiani. Fino a ora gli studi accademici hanno analizzato separatamente l'internamento di tedeschi e italiani. Questo articolo considera invece entrambi gli internamenti come aventi la stessa importanza storiografica e si concentra sia sulla politica governativa nei confronti dei due gruppi sia sulle esperienze dell'internamento. Con ciò si intende promuovere l'inserimento delle prospettive degli internati italiani all'interno della storiografia dell'internamento.

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