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Colonial concentration camps in Cuba and South Africa. Characteristics and significance for the evolution of the idea

SUMMARY In 1896, the Spanish general Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau decided to build the first concentration camps in order to force rebels in Cuba to submit to colonial rule. In 1900, during the Second Boer War, the British command made a similar decision – concentrating the civilian population in controlled areas surrounded by barbed wire in order to hasten the end of the conflict. In both cases, the colonial authorities' mismanagement and lack of basic supplies led to the deaths of tens of thousands of people. This paper characterizes the first concentration camps based on criteria, i.e. the goals of the camps or the reality of the camps, and then points out the similarities and differences found between the Spanish and British camps. The paper also addresses the problem of the concentration camp as a political precedent – it shows the relationship between the Cuban and Boer concentration camps and the Nazi death camps. Special emphasis is placed on the importance of the first concentration camps for the formation of the Nazi death machine (also in a purely propaganda context).

KEYWORDS concentration camps, Second Boer War, Cuban Independence War, British camps, Spanish camps, colonialism

Introduction

Although the term concentration camp is commonly associated with the Nazi regime, its roots go back to the late 19th century, when the Spanish general Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau, in an attempt to suppress the Cuban insurrection,

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ordered the concentration of the civilian population in specially fortified camps (Kamiński, 1990, p. 33). Shortly thereafter, in 1900, Spanish tactics were used by the Americans to protect the non-rebellious population on the island of Mindanao and by the British to intimidate guerrilla troops in South Africa. Thus, such projects were initially carried out by colonial authorities seeking to “pacify” the situation in the occupied territories.

Andrea Pitzer (2020) wrote about the “prehistoric” origins of the idea of the camp as an element of warfare. The author pointed out that the roots of the practice, used on a large scale in the 20th century, of concentrating the civilian population in a specific, guarded area, go back to the period of the Civil War, when, firstly, thirteen thousand prisoners of war died in the Andersonville camp due to the poor conditions, and, secondly, a code was drafted by Francis Lieber that defined the rules of warfare. This code included provisions that allowed commanders to imprison disloyal civilians, which Pitzer believes may have been groundbreaking for the idea of a concentration camp. The author of *The Night That Never Ends. The History of the Concentration Camps* also points to the importance of technological advances. After all, it was the invention of machine guns and barbed wire that made the large-scale use of camps possible (see Pitzer, 2020, pp. 21–25).

To clarify the definitional issues, however, it should be noted that the concept of a concentration camp is not the same as the concept of an extermination or death camp. This inconsistency is due to the fact that the goals of these institutions are quite different. A concentration camp is inseparable from the concept of slavery – the internee is deprived of basic freedoms, including freedom of movement. In extermination camps, the goal itself is extermination. Of course, thousands of people died in concentration camps for a variety of reasons. However, death was a by-product of the camp machinery, not an end in itself (Kamiński, 1990, pp. 29–30).

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the first (colonial) concentration camps, taking into account the purposes of their establishment, the conditions there, and the number of victims affected by the practice. The analysis includes research questions such as how the first concentration camps were established, what caused the high mortality rate of internees, what were the similarities and differences between the various countries that implemented the camp policy, and what impact the first colonial concentration camps had on the later Nazi extermination policy.

Due to the nature of the work, a linear structure was adopted. First, the various “camp policies” are characterized, i.e., the goals of the camps are stated, followed by the reality of the camps. In the next step, a compilation of these practices was made on the basis of the criteria described above, and an attempt was made to answer the question of what significance the colonial camps had for Adolf Hitler’s regime. The paper uses the method of content analysis, especially historical studies.

Spanish concentration camps in Cuba

The idea of a concentration camp as a means of warfare first emerged during the Cuban War of Independence. In the late 19th century, the island was de facto controlled simultaneously by two colonial empires: Spain and the United States. Although in 1886 Spain decided to abolish the system of patronage, that is, to abolish the system of slavery in Cuba, extremely dynamic immigration caused the “colonizer” population to numerically dominate the colonized population. In addition, the island’s problems were aggravated by the economic crisis caused by both countries – trade isolation and the elimination of preferential access to the North American market (Gawrycki, 2021, pp. 164–166). These kinds of actions became the fuel for a conflict that eventually escalated into the Cuban War of Independence on February 24, 1895, which Jose Marti called the “necessary war” (Gawrycki & Bloch, 2010, p. 44).

Initially, the Cuban rebels had small successes – acquiring weapons, food, and ammunition (Tone, 2006, p. 43). Significantly, the imperial troops were further decimated by diseases such as malaria and yellow fever, to which the local population had already developed immunity. In this situation, the commander-in-chief, Martínez Campos, wrote a letter to the prime minister outlining ways to quickly resolve the conflict. Among other things, he wrote about the possibility of concentrating hundreds of thousands of Cubans in guarded camps surrounded by barbed wire. At the same time, it should be mentioned that this Spanish general saw the potential risk of misery and starvation that this tactic could cause, and for this reason decided not to use it (Pitzer, 2020, pp. 30–32).

General Campos resigned because he did not want to organize a system of concentration camps. The duties of the commander-in-chief of the Spanish forces were taken over on February 10, 1896 by Weyler, called “the butcher” by the Cuban rebels (Pitzer, 2020, p. 33). The new commander’s goal was to crush the rebellion immediately and end the war with no regard for the consequences. Immediately upon his arrival on the island – February 16, 1896 – Weyler

began to issue a series of proclamations, the most important of which was that of *reconcentración* (Gilas, 1978, p. 316). Under the general's decree, all inhabitants of unfortified areas were forced to move to designated areas within eight days (Gawrycki, 2021, p. 177). On October 21, Weyler's decree on reconcentration was expanded – anyone found outside the camp boundaries established by the colonial authorities would be considered a rebel, and therefore anyone who did not report to the camp could be killed (Pitzer, 2020, p. 39).

Since the purpose of the camps was to concentrate the civilian population, not to exterminate it, local authorities were required to provide basic needs in the form of shelter and plots of land for growing food. However, only a small portion of the internees were given land, and it was decided that housing needs would be met through the construction of temporary, permanently overcrowded barracks and the use of existing buildings. As a result of this policy, the camps were rife with starvation and disease decimated the internee population (Pitzer, 2020, pp. 40–41). Death as a side effect of poor organization, however, would be undermined by the statement of General Weyler, who, when asked by the mayor of Guines to provide food and medicine, is said to have replied, "You mean to tell me that the prisoners in the camps are starving? That is what I set them up for" (Gilas, 1978, p. 317). This kind of statement by the general makes it difficult to clearly assess the goals of the Cuban camp policy – was the Spanish goal merely concentration, with death as a side effect, or were the camps intended to exterminate the population?

Two events brought about a breakthrough in the Spanish policy of concentration: media reports on the situation in Cuba and the assassination of Prime Minister Antonio Cánovas del Castillo by an Italian anarchist. Reports by U.S. journalists on the Spanish policy of reconcentration, which also affected hundreds of U.S. citizens living in Cuba, led to a conflict between Spain and the United States, first on the diplomatic level and then on the military level. What is significant in the context of the camp, however, is that after the assassination of the Prime Minister, a more liberal government was formed in Spain, which decided to dismiss General Weyler. The command in Cuba was then taken over by an outspoken opponent of the reconcentration policy – General Ramón Blanco. The new commander promised, among other things, additional food supplies and the resumption of plantation agriculture. In addition, the Spanish government decided to allocate one hundred thousand U.S. dollars, which was not enough given the massive humanitarian crisis (Pitzer, 2020, p. 45). In March 1898, Blanco finally lifted Weyler's decree of reconcentration and suspended hostilities (Gawrycki,

2021, p. 180). An estimated 300.000 people were interned as a result of Spain's camp policy, and many died of disease and starvation (Gawrycki, 2021, p. 177).

The concentration camps organized in Cuba were thus part of a war strategy to bring about the surrender of the rebels as soon as possible. Weyler's policy of concentration, implemented from 1896, led to mass genocide of the civilian population. One question that remains unanswered is the purpose of the camps. The local administration was supposed to provide for the basic needs of the interned population, which would suggest that the goal was not to kill (including by starvation) the civilians in the camps. However, General Weyler's quoted statement and the degree of cruelty of the Spanish army may indicate that the deaths of tens of thousands of Cubans were not merely the result of mismanagement. Regardless, the Spanish during the Cuban War of Independence in 1896–1898 set a dangerous precedent that would be used in the future.

British concentration camps during the Second Boer War

The Second Boer War began on October 11, 1899, as a result of the rejection of Boer demands for, among other things, the withdrawal of British troops below the borders of the South African republics. This conflict was initially resolved in favor of the local population but due to the massive supply of colonial troops, General Roberts launched a massive offensive on February 11, 1900 (Leśniewski, 2000, pp. 90–92). Then the nature of the conflict changed significantly – the war took on a guerrilla character. In view of the development of this guerrilla warfare and the fact that many Boers, despite having signed a loyalty oath, returned to fight under the banner of the republics (de Wet, 1903, pp. 85–86), the commander-in-chief of the British troops decided to implement a scorched earth policy, sometimes referred to as the “farm burning policy”. Lord Roberts issued the first such statement on June 16, 1900 (Leśniewski, 2001, p. 149).

The camps established in the Transvaal and Orania were, in a sense, an extension of this scorched earth policy. The first British concentration camps (in Bloemfontein and Pretoria) were established to protect the families of those Boers who had signed a loyalty oath. Such camps were established as early as September 1900. They served as a “safety zone” where those who surrendered voluntarily (*hendsoppers*) were placed (Leśniewski, 2001, p. 187).

However, it was not long before they were transformed from “safety zones” for voluntary residents into places for concentrating the population affected by the British scorched earth policy, which caused a massive homelessness crisis

among the Boers. The decision to establish a network of camps for the population affected by these British tactics was finally approved by General Kitchener in December 1900. The purpose of the camps was to lower the morale of the Boer guerrillas as much as possible and to clear large areas of land of civilians. The camps were also intended to act as a deterrent. The British command assumed that guerrillas would be forced to lay down their arms out of fear for the fate of their loved ones confined to the camps (Spies, 1977, pp. 124–125). In addition, Kitchener pointed out the significant strategic role of the camps, with particular emphasis on their intelligence role (Leśniewski, 2001, p. 188).

General Kitchener entrusted the organization of the camp network to the administrators of the new colonies – Colonel Hamilton Goold-Adams and General John Maxwell (Żukowski, 1997, p. 98). The internees in the camps were to be provided with basic necessities – a roof over their heads, food, and basic medical care – so that they could survive there until the end of the conflict.

Although the camp administration was supposed to provide the internees with basic necessities for survival, the ever-increasing number of inmates and poor organization meant that the mortality rate among the internees steadily increased. From the beginning, conditions in the camps were poor. Not only was there a shortage of food but also of places to sleep (mattresses, blankets, tents) and adequate medical care (doctors, nurses). Extremely meager food rations – one pound of flour, half a pound of meat, and some sugar and coffee – resulted in constant hunger and disease in the camps. Although the British did not exterminate the population inside the camps, they contributed to the huge number of deaths through mismanagement (Leśniewski, 2001, p. 188).

Table 1. Number of Boers incarcerated in concentration camps and death rate from June to December 1901

Month	Deaths	Number of prisoners
June 1901	775	85410
July 1901	1412	93940
August 1901	1878	105347
September 1901	2411	109418
October 1901	3080	112619
November 1901	2907	117481
December 1901	2380	117000

Source: Own compilation based on Żukowski (1997), p. 101.

The growing number of Boers held in the camps exacerbated the phenomenon of shortages of basic commodities. In fact, from June to November 1901, the number of internees increased by almost 31.000. Information about the situation in the camps was made public by Emily Hobhouse, who had been visiting the Boer concentration camps since early 1901 in order to prepare a report on the situation in the camps and submit it to the relevant authorities. On January 24, 1901, she visited the largest camp in Orania – Bloemfontein (Żukowski, 1997, p. 99). The English activist noted that the camp lacked, among other things, bunks, mattresses, or fuel, and that inadequate rations were causing hunger among the interned population (see Hobhouse, 1901, pp. 116–119). During her visits to the other camps, she also found overcrowding, lack of basic necessities, and inadequate sanitation. Following the publication of the report, which caused considerable political controversy (Packenham, 1979, p. 509), the British government appointed The Ladies' Committee to investigate the situation there. The committee's reports largely confirmed Hobhouse's observations and drew additional attention to the diseases (including typhus and measles) that were prevalent in the camps.

The British concentration camps were thus places where civilians were interned in order to end the war as quickly as possible. The poor conditions and organization there contributed to the deaths of some 18.000–28.000 Boers (Packenham, 1979, p. 570). It should be noted, however, that unlike the classic death camps, the occupiers' goal was not to kill the local population, although British policy towards the Boers did result in a humanitarian disaster on a massive scale. Hector Ribeiro argues that we can treat these camps as an act of genocide because the command that ran the entire camp machinery was aware of the consequences – including a significant reduction in the number of Boers. In addition, he points out that Kitchener's goal as commander-in-chief was to achieve military victory in the shortest possible time at any cost, including inflicting death and suffering on the civilian population (Ribeiro, 2020, p. 10).

The colonial concentration camp as an archetype of the camp

The above characteristics of concentration camps in Cuba and South Africa suggest that the first, colonial concentration camps were remarkably similar in nature. It is not difficult to find parallels both in the aims of the camps, in the way they were managed, and in the timing of their liquidation. First, it should be noted that in both countries the concentration camps were the colonizers' response

to the intensification of guerrilla warfare in the occupied territories. Originally, they were intended to hasten the end of the war – this was the argument used by the commanders-in-chief. What distinguished the Spanish camps from the British camps, however, was that in the first phase the British used the camps as a “safety zone” for surrendering Boers, while the Spanish policy of reconcentration – even in its initial assumptions – targeted the civilian population. The reality of the camps was also analogous – huge crowds of people crammed into controlled areas surrounded by barbed wire, shortages of basic commodities, lack of places to sleep, and rampant disease among the internees.

Both the concentration camps created by the British for the Boers and those created by the Spanish for the Cubans can be described as archetypes of concentration camps because of the analogies within the factors described above but also because of the analogies in time. The years 1896–1902 would thus be the first stage in the formation of the idea that would lead to the deaths of millions of people in the 20th century.

An extremely important element in the analysis of concentration camps is the aspect of responsibility. Weyler faced much criticism from Americans who called him a “butcher” and the idea of the camp itself “barbaric” (Kamiński, 1990, p. 34). Shortly thereafter, however, with the outbreak of an anti-American insurgency in the Philippines, where fighting took on a guerrilla character similar to that of the Cuban War of Independence, the American command decided to establish concentration camps to protect non-combatant civilians in Mindanao (Kamiński, 1990, p. 34). In this context, it would be appropriate to ask the question – what mandate did the Americans have to criticize the Spaniards? As for responsibility at home, Weyler served as Secretary of War three times between 1901 and 1907 (Kamiński, 1990, pp. 33–34).

In the case of the British Boer concentration camps, however, the importance of the social factor should be noted. The wave of protests that erupted in England after the publication of reports on the situation in the camps led to the creation of a special relief fund for the victims of these camps and the subsequent liberal government condemned the actions of the British army in South Africa (Kamiński, 1984, p. 25). In this case, media coverage of the war and the concentration camps was crucial. Some even point out that the Second Boer War was one of the first conflicts in which the media played such an important role (see Miazek, 2009).

Concentration camps – a dangerous political precedent

Undoubtedly, the concentration camps in Cuba and South Africa were chronologically the first. But can we call them the ideological source and justification for the Nazi death camps? British Prime Minister and concentration camp opponent David Lloyd George told the House of Commons in 1901:

Who would have thought when General Weyler had his concentration camps in Cuba that similar measures would be adopted within the bounds of the British Empire? [...] I would venture to say, looking at these 40.000 children in the camps, that we are only sowing the seeds of discontent, and that we may reap a terrible harvest some day – not perhaps this year or next year but in time coming a nation will grow up which will remember all these iniquities (quoted in Pitzer, 2020, p. 99).

In retrospect, we can see the British Prime Minister's words as prophetic. The Nazis repeatedly invoked the British concentration camps to justify their own or to disgust the Allied leaders in the eyes of the public. The use of propaganda can be seen not only in direct political messages but also in the cultural texts promoted by the institutions of the Third Reich. In 1941, the film *Uncle Kruger* was released in German cinemas, depicting Winston Churchill as a brutal concentration camp C. The movie, of course, had nothing to do with historical truth – it was just a demagogic, propaganda work designed to show Churchill as a monster. In this case, the purpose of the film was to dishonor the enemy and create an image of the British Prime Minister as a hypocrite. The co-author and co-creator of the film was the German Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels (Kamiński, 1990, pp. 35–36).

Direct references to Boer concentration camps can also be found in speeches by Hitler himself. In a speech on January 30, 1940, Hitler spoke of more than 20.000 victims among Boer women. At the same time, he argued that the concentration camp was not a Nazi invention – it was an element of warfare used by the Allies. In this way, the leader of the Third Reich justified the German camp machine. The head of the Reich Labor Service Konstantin Hierl spoke in a similar vein about Hitler's concentration camps after World War II, stating that a camp as a method of warfare was invented by the British (Kamiński, 1990, pp. 35–36). The first concentration camps thus served as a propaganda

justification for the Nazi extermination machine. The Spaniards and the British set a dangerous precedent that turned from concentration to mass extermination within a few years.

Conclusions

The first colonial concentration camps in Cuba and South Africa were created under similar wartime circumstances and, in the opinion of their commanders, would serve as an effective method of conducting military operations. Although the first camps held mostly civilians, they were military in nature. The assumption was that these camps would be places where the civilian population could survive until the end of the conflict, while at the same time the rebels would decide to lay down their arms out of fear for their loved ones interned in the camps. However, it cannot be overlooked that the camps ultimately led to the deaths of tens of thousands of people from rampant starvation and disease.

On the other hand, when looking for connections between the colonial concentration camps and the death camps of the Third Reich, one cannot help but notice that they were quite different in nature. The differences in the approach to the camp as an element of war policy are already apparent at the level of objectives – for the Nazis, the camps served as places of mass extermination. However, it is impossible to clearly separate colonial practices from Nazi practices. Finally, in the context of the evolution of ideas, it should be noted that the concentration camps created by the Spanish and the British not only had propaganda significance but were also the first political project to be developed. The restriction of freedom and imprisonment of civilians used by the colonial empires in 1917 “evolved” into forced labor in camps in Russia, and then into mass extermination in the Third Reich. What they all had in common was the concentration of a large population in a small area and the absolute power that the camp guards had over the internees (see Sofsky, 2016). The mechanisms were thus analogous, while the level of terror differed. In fact, it can be argued that the later the concentration camps were established (by the end of World War II), the greater the terror applied to the prisoners in them.

According to Hannah Arendt, when violence is used as a means to an end, that end sometimes changes or is never achieved (Arendt, 1999, p. 103). The concentration camp, which initially served as the ultimate means of suppressing rebellions, evolved into a regular “weapon.”

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Kolonialne obozy koncentracyjne na Kubie i w Afryce Południowej. Charakterystyka i znaczenie dla ewolucji idei

STRESZCZENIE W 1896 r. hiszpański generał Valeriano Weyler y Nicolau podjął decyzję o budowie pierwszych obozów koncentracyjnych, aby zmusić rebeliantów na Kubie do poddania się władzy kolonialnej. W 1900 r. w trakcie drugiej wojny burskiej podobną decyzję podjęło brytyjskie dowództwo – w kontrolowanych, otoczonych drutem kolczastym strefach skoncentrowali ludność cywilną, aby przyspieszyć zakończenie konfliktu. W obu przypadkach władze kolonialne poprzez złe zarządzanie i braki podstawowych artykułów doprowadziły do śmierci dziesiątek tysięcy ludzi.

W niniejszym artykule scharakteryzowane zostały pierwsze obozy koncentracyjne w oparciu o kryteria, tj. cele obozów czy rzeczywistość obozowa, a następnie wskazane zostały podobieństwa i różnice występujące pomiędzy obozami hiszpańskimi i brytyjskimi. W pracy podjęty został także problem obozu koncentracyjnego jako precedensu politycznego – wskazane zostały zależności pomiędzy obozami koncentracyjnymi dla Kubańczyków i Burów a nazistowskimi obozami zagłady. Szczególny nacisk położony został na znaczenie, jakie dla kształtowania się nazistowskiej maszyny śmierci (także w kontekście czysto propagandowym) miały pierwsze obozy koncentracyjne.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE obóz koncentracyjny, druga wojna burska, kubańska wojna o niepodległość, brytyjskie obozy, hiszpańskie obozy, kolonializm

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