

The Great War Internment Camps of Canada

Great Britain declared war on Germany on August 4, 1914 and Canada, as a Dominion of the British Empire, was called upon to aid in the effort. Formally, the Governor General declared a war between Canada and Germany on August 5.

Shortly thereafter, the Cabinet of Prime Minister Robert Borden introduced a series of measures to restrict the movements of enemy aliens. An Order in Council dated October 14, 1914 provided for registration and internment.

Internment Operations were established on November 6, 1914, although Major General Sir William Dillon Otter had actually begun his work as the new head of that agency on November 1. The headquarters were set up in the Banque Nationale Building in Ottawa.

Arrests of those considered to be of the greatest risk had already been effected by the North West Mounted Police and the Dominion Police. The first prisoners were turned over to Internment Operations in Montreal on November 5. Ultimately, there would be camps set up at twenty-four locations in Canada. In all, 8,579 prisoners would pass through the camps. Of this number, just under 5,000 were of Austro-Hungarian origin, most of whom were, in fact, Ukrainians. The Ukraine was at the time under the control of the Austro-Hungarian empire. Although the sympathies of the majority of Ukrainians were with the Allies, they were technically enemy aliens. However, most would be paroled before the war was over.

Mail to and from most of the internment camps is rare or non-existent. Some of the larger camps with German prisoners who were, as a group, mostly literate, generated more mail, but none is common. This exhibit examines the mail relating to the camps in Canada, starting with mail that was examined by censors centrally. Throughout the war, some censorship was handled in Ottawa. Early in the war, responsibility for censoring POW mail resided with the Dominion Police. Also, there was some early centralized censorship of POW mail in British Columbia, a departure from the practice elsewhere in the country.

Beginning in 1915, censors were located at most of the camps. That mail is presented in the order of the opening of the camps.

The principal emphasis of this exhibit is on the censorship of this mail, but other features are also noted.

The Germans were, in the main, designated to be Class 1 prisoners because they were considered to be higher risk. Most were military or merchant marine. Others were designated as Class 2 and were generally civilian internees. Philatelically, there is no difference between the classes in terms of censorship or privileges relating to mail.