

Bohdan S. Kordan. *No Free Man: Canada, the Great War, and the Enemy Alien Experience*. McGill-Queen's UP, 2016. McGill-Queen's Studies in Ethnic History: Series Two 39, edited by John Zucchi. xvi, 400 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Index. \$39.95, cloth.

One of the many challenges facing a democratic polity in times of war is the need to balance security considerations with the rule of law. An attempt to contextualize the enemy alien experience in Canada during World War I, the book *No Free Man* is a case study that unequivocally shows how security trumped rights. Indeed, during World War I, no fewer than 8,579 (7) so-called enemy aliens, that is, those born in countries at war with Canada, were interned in twenty-four camps that were located throughout the country (from west to east: in Vernon, British Columbia; Brandon, Manitoba; Kapuskasing, Ontario; Spirit Lake, Quebec; and Amherst, Nova Scotia—to name but a few). So, why and how did all of this happen?

Once at war in early August 1914, Canada quickly found itself in a state of resentment, fear, and anxiety; these feelings, in turn, were nourished by rumours and suspicions of sabotage, espionage, and treachery. As Canadians searched for ways to explain their sense of unease and insecurity, many concluded that the alien population posed an existential threat—nothing less!—and, therefore, could not be trusted. As a matter of fact, there was some evidence of the questionable loyalty of the Ukrainians, the ethnic group that comprised the majority of those interned. For example, the letter of Bishop Nykyta Budka dated 27 July 1914 encouraged Ukrainians in Canada to come to the defence of a benevolent Austria-Hungary against a rapacious Russia, an empire that represented a threat to the autonomy that Ukrainians enjoyed under the Habsburgs (23). Since all reservists were seen as a security threat, they were prevented from leaving the country and became subject to possible arrest and internment as prisoners of war. The federal government, egged on by public calls for mass internment, issued a proclamation on 15 August 1914 that allowed for such an eventuality. And thus, the security question in Canada became racialized.

By December 1915, a system of internment camps was in place (119). The camps were located in regions where internee labour could be used toward the clearing of forests and the planting of trees; on experimental farms; or for the construction of roads and national parks, not only to reduce the significant and mounting costs of maintaining the camp internees/enemy aliens but also to create new economic opportunities in the frontier hinterlands—a preoccupation of the governments of Ontario, Quebec, and British Columbia, in particular. Behind Canadian barbed wire fences, the enemy aliens had a precarious existence. Indeed, they faced many challenges beyond the mere stigma of social rejection. These included poor weather

conditions (heat, cold, and rain) and the constant presence of insects; isolation and the endless monotony of daily existence; and worry over the fate of families left behind. Also, they were denied supplies and provisions, and their complaints were frequently dismissed as inconsequential. Last, prisoners were intimidated and coerced through widespread abuse and punishments (beatings, strappado, bayoneting, solitary confinement, and reduced diets) in response to labour and hunger strikes and riots on their part (276-77). In a nutshell, as Bohdan S. Kordan concludes, internment was a sordid, nasty, and “unbearable affair” (160). It is not surprising, then, that a strong adversarial relationship quickly developed between the prisoners and their overseers—many of the overseers believing that the prisoners were both incorrigible and dangerous.

In 1916, a shift occurred. Hundreds of interned civilian enemy aliens in Canada were released, and several of the internment camps were closed. Domestic concerns (an increasingly tight labour market) and external politics (the discussion and negotiation between the warring powers about captured personnel) shaped decisions relating to prisoner release. Public reaction, however, was generally negative, even hostile, as the following example clearly illustrates: in early August 1918 “[i]n Toronto, where anti-alien sentiment was running at a fever pitch, an eight-week-old baby, born of Austro-Hungarian parents and designated an enemy alien by municipal authorities, was denied assistance at a city hospital” (225). Furthermore, former internees faced a multitude of other problems, such as a lack of money, trying work conditions, threats of arrest, and disenfranchisement in 1917; they were also the subject of the concerns of Canadian veterans. Following the Armistice of 11 November 1918 and the steady return home of Canadian soldiers, the chorus clamouring for the replacement of enemy aliens by returning soldiers who had done their patriotic duty overseas became louder and louder. This voice reached a crescendo in the wake of the labour troubles in Winnipeg in 1919 that involved some enemy aliens. Indeed, unwelcome taunts and vicious attacks remained the norm: even though aliens were theoretically no longer aliens after the cessation of hostilities, they were still perceived as an undesirable social element whom Canada should purge. The federal government, influenced by a public opinion that consistently maintained that there was a link between enemy aliens and alleged sedition, authorized the deportation of hundreds of aliens. Kordan, while acknowledging that the federal government had to be mindful of the necessity of controlling situations that could prove to be explosive and of managing public expectations, contends that state officials were quite disingenuous in claiming that the work performed by internees was not compulsory and that the fate of the enemy aliens would have been far worse had they not been interned. Although Canada rejected the political charge of

wrongdoing, the country nevertheless had violated international understanding and practice.

The idea of Canada's coming of age as a nation as a result of the Great War has long been a favourite theme of Canadian historiography. Kordan's book, like Ian McKay and Jamie Swift's recent work *The Vimy Trap; or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Great War*, convincingly debunks this myth: a fairly strong nativist current did exist within Canadian society during World War I. Although Kordan acknowledges that "the abuse of rights echoed the tenor of the times" (281)—indeed, is not truth always the first casualty of war?—he nevertheless concludes that Canada broke the promise that it had made to the people who had come from Europe during the Wilfrid Laurier years and who had, before 1914, showed loyalty to their adopted land. Such a conclusion comes as no surprise since the author, in the very first line of his book, confesses that "[h]uman rights are a passion of mine" (xv).

The book *No Free Man* is well written. It is supplemented with some revealing illustrations, and its stories are anchored in both primary sources (Canadian newspapers and material from the National Archives of Canada, the Provincial Archives of Ontario, the Colonial Office Records [UK], and the United States National Archives) and secondary sources. The use of this treasure trove of sources inevitably leads to a narrative that privileges the points of view of the traditional elites and (as some readers will likely deplore) does not give the enemy aliens' own voices all of the space that they deserve. The book will appeal, first and foremost, to historians, political scientists, and sociologists interested in ethnic studies. Regrettably, however, more than one reader will surely lament the fact that the author did not more effectively synthesize the massive amount of information that he gathered during his research. Such a synthesis would have made for a less repetitious and more fluid narrative and a more enjoyable reading experience overall.

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Work Cited

McKay, Ian, and Jamie Swift. *The Vimy Trap; or, How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Great War*. Between the Lines, 2016.