

An Expert on Concentration Camps Says That's Exactly What the U.S. Is Running at the Border

"Things can be concentration camps without being Dachau or Auschwitz." ▴

By Jack Holmes Jun 13, 2019



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Surely, the United States of America could not operate concentration camps. In the American consciousness, the term is synonymous with the Nazi death machines across the European continent that the Allies began the process of dismantling 75 years ago this month. But while the world-historical horrors of the Holocaust are unmatched, they are only the most extreme and inhuman manifestation of a concentration-camp system—which, according to Andrea Pitzer, author of *One Long Night: A Global History of Concentration Camps*, has a more global definition. There have been concentration camps in France, South Africa, Cuba, the Soviet Union, and—with Japanese internment—the United States. In fact, she contends we are operating such a system right now in response to a very real spike in arrivals at our southern border.

“We have what I would call a concentration camp system,” Pitzer says, “and the definition of that in my book is, mass detention of civilians without trial.”

Historians use a broader definition of concentration camps, as well.

"What's required is a little bit of demystification of it," says Waitman Wade Beorn, a Holocaust and genocide studies historian and a lecturer at the University of Virginia. "Things can be concentration camps without being Dachau or Auschwitz. Concentration camps in general have always been designed—at the most basic level—to separate one group of people from another group. Usually, because the majority group, or the creators of the camp, deem the people they're putting in it to be dangerous or undesirable in some way."



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Trump administration, while six children have died in the care of other agencies since September. Systems like these have emerged across the world for well over 100 years, and they've been established by putative liberal democracies—as with Britain's camps in South Africa during the Boer War—as well as authoritarian states like Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union. Camps set up with one aim can be repurposed by new regimes, often with devastating consequences.

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Roll call is taken by the army at a Japanese-American internment camp during World War II in Tule Lake, CA in

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across 200 facilities on any given day—a record high. Unaccompanied minors are transferred to Department of Health and Human Services custody.) But by Pitzer's measure, the system at the southern border first set up by the Bill Clinton administration, built on by Barack Obama's government, and brought into extreme and perilous new territory by Donald Trump and his allies does qualify. Two historians who specialize in the area largely agree.

Many of the people housed in these facilities are not "illegal" immigrants. If you present yourself at the border seeking asylum, you have a legal right to a hearing under domestic and international law. They are, in another formulation, refugees—civilian non-combatants who have not committed a crime, and who say they are fleeing violence and persecution. Yet these human beings, who mostly hail from Central America's Northern Triangle of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador—a region ravaged by gang violence and poverty and corruption and what increasingly appears to be some of the first forced migrations due to climate change—are being detained on what increasingly seems to be an indefinite basis.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration continually seeks new ways to stop people from applying for asylum, and to discourage others from attempting to. The current regime has sought to restrict the asylum criteria to exclude the exact issues, like gang or domestic violence, that these desperate people often cite for why they fled their homes. The administration has sought to introduce application fees and work-permit restraints. They have tried to prohibit migrants from seeking asylum "if they have resided in a country other than their own before coming to the U.S.," which would essentially eliminate

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But most prominently, Trump's Department of Homeland Security has used "metering" at the border, where migrants are forced to wait for days or weeks on the Mexican side—often sleeping in makeshift shelters or fully exposed to the elements—until they are allowed across border checkpoints to make their asylum claims and be processed. That processing system is overwhelmed, and the Obama administration also used metering at various points, but it remains unclear whether the wait times need to be as long as they are. (DHS did not respond to a request for comment.) There are no guarantees on how long migrants will have to wait, and so they've increasingly turned to crossing illegally between checkpoints—which constitutes "illegal entry," a misdemeanor—in order to present themselves for asylum. This criminalizes them, and the Trump administration tried to make illegal entry a disqualifier for asylum claims. The overall effort appears to be to make it as difficult as possible to get a hearing to adjudicate those claims, raising the specter that people can be detained longer or indefinitely.

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Donald Trump 'Joked' in Response to 'Shoot 'Em'

All this has been achieved through two mechanisms: militarization and dehumanization. In her book, Pitzer describes camps as “a deliberate choice to inject the framework of war into society itself.” These kinds of detention camps are a military endeavor: they are defensible in wartime, when enemy combatants must be detained, often for long periods without trial. They were a hallmark of World War I Europe. But inserting them into civil society, and using them to house civilians, is a materially different proposition. You are revoking the human and civil rights of non-combatants without legal justification.

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"In the origins of the camps, it's tied to the idea of martial law," says Jonathan Hyslop, author of "The Invention of the Concentration Camp: Cuba, Southern Africa and the Philippines, 1896–1907," and a professor of sociology and anthropology at Colgate University. "I mean, all four of the early instances—Americans in the Philippines, Spanish in Cuba, and British in South Africa, and Germans in Southwest Africa—they're all essentially overriding any sense of rights of the civilian population. And the idea is that you're able to suspend normal law because it's a war situation."

This pairs well with the rhetoric that Trump deploys to justify the system and his unconstitutional power grabs, like the phony "national emergency": he describes the influx of asylum-seekers and other migrants as an "invasion," language his allies are mirroring with increasing extremism. If you're defending yourself from an invasion, anything is defensible.

That goes hand-in-hand with the strategy of dehumanization. For decades, the right has referred to undocumented immigrants as "illegals," stripping them of any identity beyond an immigration status. Trump kicked off his formal political career by characterizing Hispanic immigrants as "rapists" and "drug-dealers" and "criminals," never once sharing, say, the story of a woman who came here with her son fleeing a gang's threats. It is always MS-13 and *strong, scary young men*. There's talk of "animals" and monsters, and suddenly anything is justifiable. In fact, it *must* be done. Trump's supporters have noticed. At a recent rally, someone in the crowd screamed out that people arriving at the border should be shot. In response, the president cracked a "joke."

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advancing hordes, and we're being overrun and flooded and this sort of thing, it's creating the sense of this enormous threat. And that makes it much easier to sell to people on the idea we've got to do something drastic to control this population which going to destroy us."

In a grotesque formulation of the chicken-and-the-egg conundrum, housing people in these camps furthers their dehumanization.

"There's this crystallization that happens," Pitzer says. "The longer they're there, the worse conditions get. That's just a universal of camps. They're overcrowded. We already know from reports that they don't have enough beds for the numbers that they have. As you see mental health crises and contagious diseases begin to set in, they'll work to manage the worst of it. [But] then there will be the ability to tag these people as diseased, even if we created [those conditions]. Then we, by creating the camps, try to turn that population into the false image that we [used] to put them in the camps to start with. Over time, the camps will turn those people into what Trump was already saying they are."

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Spanish Republican refugees are held at a concentration camp in Perthus, France, in 1939. Tens of thousands fled the Spanish civil war and were kept in French camps, which were turned over to the Nazis when France fell a few years later.

KEYSTONE-FRANCE / GETTY IMAGES

Make no mistake: the conditions are in decline. When I went down to see the detention facility in McAllen, Texas, last summer at the height of the "zero-tolerance" policy that led inevitably to family separation, Border Patrol agents were by all appearances doing the very best they could with limited resources. That includes the facilities themselves, which at that point were mostly built—by the Clinton administration in the '90s—to house single adult males who were crossing the border illegally to find work. By that point, Border Patrol was already forced to use them to hold families and other asylum-seekers, and agents told me the situation was untenable. They lacked requisite staff with the training to care for young children, and overcrowding was already an issue.

But according to a report from Trump's own government—specifically, the inspector general for the Department of Homeland Security—the situation has deteriorated significantly even since then. The facilities are overcrowded, underfunded, and perhaps at a perilous inflection point. It found adult detainees are "being held in 'standing-room-only conditions' for days or weeks at a border patrol facility in Texas," Reuters reports. But it gets worse.



Single adults were held in cells designed for one-fifth as many detainees as were housed there and were wearing soiled clothing for days or weeks with limited access to showers, the report said. Pictures published with the report show women packed tightly together in a holding cell.

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torture by many psychologists—is widespread. As a reminder, by DHS's own assertion, these detainments are civil, not criminal, and are not meant to be punitive in the way of a prison. Many of these people have not even been accused of a crime.

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Migrants awaiting processing are held in temporary fencing underneath the Paso Del Norte Bridge on March 28, 2019 in El Paso, Texas.

CHRIST CHAVEZ / GETTY IMAGES

Again: these are inhuman conditions, and crystalize the dehumanization. So, too, does the Trump administration's decision, reported by *The Washington Post*, to cancel classes, recreational programs, and even legal aid for the children held at facilities for unaccompanied minors. Why should these kids get to play soccer or learn English? Why should they get legal assistance? They're detainees.

The administration is citing "budget pressures" related to what is undoubtedly a dramatic spike in arrivals at the border last month: 144,000 people were detained in May. It remains unclear how much of this is tied to the Trump administration's border policies, like metering, which have severely slowed the process of declaring oneself for asylum and

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release with ankle bracelets has proven very effective as an alternative to detention: 99 percent of immigrants enrolled in one such program showed up for their court dates, though ICE claims it's less effective when someone is set to be deported. Those subjected to the bracelets say they are uncomfortable and demeaning, but it's better than stuffing a detention cell to five-times capacity. Unless, of course, that's exactly what you want to happen.



"Over time, the camps will turn those people into what Trump was already saying they are."

"At one point, [the administration] said that they were intentionally trying to split up families and make conditions unpleasant, so the people wouldn't come to the U.S.," Beorn, from UVA, says. "If you're doing that, then that's not a prison. That's not a holding area or a waiting area. That's a policy. I would argue, at least in the way that [the camps are] being used now, a significant portion of the mentality is [tied to] who the [detainees] are rather than what they did.

"If these were Canadians flooding across the border, would they be treated in the same manner as the people from Mexico and from Central and South America? If the answer is yes, theoretically, then I would consider these places to be perhaps better described as transit camps or prison camps. But I suspect that's not how they'd be treated, which then makes it much more about who the people are that you're detaining, rather than what they did. The Canadian would have crossed the border just as illegally as the Mexican, but my suspicion is, would be treated in a different way."

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"What those camps had in common with what's going on today is they involved the wholesale detention of families, separate or together," Pitzer says. "There was very little in the way of targeted violence. Instead, people died from poor planning, overloaded facilities and unwillingness to reverse policy, even when it became apparent the policy wasn't working, inability to get medical care to detainees, poor food quality, contagious diseases, showing up in an environment where it became almost impossible to get control of them."

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A camp for British prisoners of war during the Boer War.

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"The point is that you don't have to intend to kill everybody. When people hear the phrase 'Oh, there's concentration camps on the southern border,' they think, 'Oh, it's not Auschwitz.' Of course, it's not those things, each camp system is different. But you don't have to intend to kill everyone to have really bad outcomes. In Cuba, well over 100,000 civilians died in these camps in just a period of a couple years. In Southern Africa during the Boer War, fatalities went into the tens of thousands. And the overwhelming majority of them were children. Fatalities in the camps ended up being more than twice the combat fatalities from the war itself."

In-custody deaths have not reached their peak of a reported 32 people in 2004, but the current situation seems to be deteriorating. In just the last two weeks, three adults have died. And the Trump administration has not readily reported fatalities to the public. There could be more.

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the supremacy of Stephen Miller over (the reliably pliant but less extreme) Kirstjen Nielsen—the camps will continue and grow. Almost by definition, the conditions will deteriorate, even despite the best intentions of those on the ground.

"It's a negative trajectory in at least two ways," Beorn says. "One, I feel like these policies can snowball. We've already seen unintended consequences. If we follow the thread of the children, for example, the government wanted to make things more annoying, more painful. So they decided, *We're going to separate the children from the families*. But there was no infrastructure in place for that. You already have a scenario where even if you have the best intentions, the infrastructure doesn't exist to support it. That's a consequence of policy that hasn't been thought through. As you see the population begin to massively increase over time, you do start to see conditions diminishing.

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Stephen Miller appears to have persevered in the power struggle.

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"The second piece is that the longer you establish this sort of extralegal, extrajudicial,

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And for a variety of reasons, these facilities are incredibly hard to close. "Unless there's some really decisive turn away, we're going to be looking at having these camps for a long time," Pitzer says. It's particularly hard to engineer a decisive turn because these facilities are often remote, and hard to protest. They are not top-of-mind for most citizens, with plenty of other issues on the table. When Trump first instituted the Muslim Ban—now considered, in its third iteration, to be Definitely Not a Muslim Ban by the Supreme Court—there were mass demonstrations at U.S. airports because they were readily accessible by concerned citizens. These camps are not so easily reached, and that's a problem.

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Migrants board buses to take them to shelters after being released from migration detention as construction of a new migrant processing facility is underway at the Customs and Border Protection - El Paso Border Patrol Station on the east side of El Paso on April 28, 2019.

PAUL RATJE / GETTY IMAGES

"The more authoritarian the regime is, and the more people allow governments to get away with doing this sort of thing politically, the worse the conditions are likely to get," Hyslop says. "So, a lot of it depends on how much pushback there is. But when you get a totally authoritarian regime like Stalin's regime in the Soviet Union, there's no control, or no countervailing force, the state can do what it likes, and certainly things will then tend to break down.

"It's more of a political question, really. Are people prepared to tolerate the deteriorating conditions? And if public opinion isn't effective in a liberal democratic situation, things can still get pretty bad."

Almost regardless, the camps will be difficult to dismantle by their very nature—that extrajudicial "no-man's land" Beorn mentioned. The prison at Guantanamo Bay is a perfect example. It began in the early 1990s as a refugee camp for people fleeing Haiti and Cuba. The conditions were bad and legally questionable, Pitzer found, and eventually the courts stepped in to grant detainees some rights. In the process, however, they granted the camps tacit legitimacy—they were allowed to continue with the approval of the judiciary.

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Suddenly, they were enshrined in the law as a kind of gray area where detainees did not enjoy full human rights. That is actually why it was chosen by the Bush administration to house terror suspects: it was already rubber-stamped as a site for indefinite detention. By the time President Obama came into office with promises to close it, he found the task incredibly difficult, because it had been ingrained in the various institutions and branches of American constitutional government. He could not get rid of it. As courts continue to rule on the border camp system, the same issues are likely to take hold.

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Another issue is that these camp systems, no matter where they are in the world, tend to fall victim to *expanding criteria*. The longer they stay open, the more reasons a government finds to put people in them. That's particularly true if a new regime takes control of an existing system, as the Trump administration did with ours. The mass detention of asylum-seekers—who, again, have legal rights—on this scale is an expansion of the criteria from "illegal" immigrants, who were the main class of detainee in the '90s and early 2000s. Asylum seekers, particularly unaccompanied minors, began arriving in huge numbers and were detained under the Obama administration. But there has been an escalation, both because of a deteriorating situation in the Northern Triangle and the Trump administration's attempts to deter any and all migration. There is reason to believe the criteria will continue to expand.

"We have border patrol agents that are sometimes arresting U.S. citizens," Pitzer says. "That's still very much a fringe activity. That doesn't seem to be a dedicated priority right now, but it's happening often enough. And they're held, sometimes, for three or four days. Even when there are clear reasons that people should be let go, that they have proof of their identity, you're seeing these detentions. You do start to worry about people who have legally immigrated and have finished paperwork, and maybe are naturalized. You worry about green-card holders."

In most cases, these camps are not closed by the executive or the judiciary or even the legislature. It usually requires external intervention. (See: D-Day) That obviously will not be an option when it comes to the most powerful country in the history of the world, a country which, while it would never call them that, and would be loathe to admit it, is now running a system at the southern border that is rapidly coming to resemble the concentration camps that have sprung up all over the world in the last century. Every

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