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## EXPLOITING THE ENEMY IN THE ORKNEYS: THE EMPLOYMENT OF ITALIAN PRISONERS OF WAR ON THE SCAPA FLOW BARRIERS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

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JOHANN CUSTODIS

The British naval base at Scapa Flow in the Orkneys played a vital role during the Second World War for the Allied war effort. It housed the British Home Fleet and provided a strategic military base for Allied operations in the North Sea, Atlantic and the Arctic. Although Scapa Flow's military history is well served, the barriers built by Italian prisoners of war (POWs) to strengthen its defences in the early war years have received little attention.<sup>1</sup> Britain faced a peculiar dilemma in the Orkneys: defences needed to be fortified given Scapa Flow's key location and military role, but manpower was extremely scarce. Civilians were reluctant to work on the islands due to harsh and dangerous working conditions. Since efforts to attract them via compulsion and bonus schemes, and to employ migrant workers were insufficient, the government employed 1,200 Italian POWs instead, despite the scheme's doubtful legality under the Geneva Convention. This article examines the history and significance of the Italians' employment in the Orkneys and demonstrates that their contribution was vital for the construction of the Churchill barriers. Previous studies have neglected the multiple strikes by the prisoners and their protests against illegal work and some wrongly assume that the prisoners were not participating in the construction of the barriers. This article explicitly examines the legality issue and the prisoners' extensive employment. Although their employment violated the Geneva Convention, British authorities and neutral delegates deemed it legal, thus securing the barriers' completion.

<sup>1</sup> Stephen W. Roskill, *The War at Sea* (3 vols, London, HMSO, 1956); W. S. Hewison, *This Great Harbour Scapa Flow* (Stromness, The Orkney Press, 1985); W. S. Hewison, *Scapa Flow in War and Peace* (Kirkwall, Bellavista, 1995).

Scholars examining the Churchill barriers have tended to focus on the barriers as engineering features or as naval defence mechanisms.<sup>2</sup> Popular histories mostly look at the Italian chapel built by the prisoners and romanticise their employment and living conditions. Amateur historian James MacDonald presents the most detailed account, describing POW working and living conditions through eyewitness reports of British soldiers and Orcadians. He occasionally supplements his account with information from the secondary literature.<sup>3</sup> However, he relies solely on one type of primary source material and only presents anecdotal employment evidence which does not reveal the arduous nature of the work undertaken. This article complements his account. It examines new qualitative and quantitative evidence on POW living and working conditions, wages and output from International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) camp reports and British government files from the National Archives. Newspaper coverage of the Orkney prisoners completes the picture. The result is the most comprehensive account yet provided of the employment and living conditions of Italian POWs in the Orkneys.

This article is solely devoted to the study of the Italians' role in building the barriers during the war. It provides the historical context for the role of Italian POW labour in Britain and the reasons for the construction of the Churchill barriers. The analysis of civilian labour in the Orkneys and the prisoners' employment and living conditions illustrates that the government depended on prisoner labour and that the current literature mostly understates the arduous employment conditions and the extent of their labour exploitation. The legality of their employment in light of the 1929 Geneva Convention will also be examined here. Italian POW employment at Scapa violated the Convention, but the British government convinced the prisoners, the Protecting Power and the Red Cross that their employment was legal. This article will conclude that Britain's behaviour was in line with the so-called retaliation concept. Italian POWs filled a vital manpower gap by supplying skilled and unskilled labour for the erection of military barriers. In turn, the government undertook various measures to maintain the POW labour supply, to increase it, and to maximise its productivity.

## I

Bob Moore has found that labour economics played a key role in British policy on Italian POWs and that the British war economy benefited from their employment.<sup>4</sup> At the war's peak, approximately 152,600 Italian POWs were

<sup>2</sup> For the engineering perspective see James Abercrombie Seath, 'Causeways Closing the Eastern Entrances to Scapa Flow', *The Institution of Civil Engineers, Maritime and Waterways Engineering Division, Maritime Paper No. 5, Session 1945-46*, pp. 24-65.

<sup>3</sup> James MacDonald, *Churchill's Prisoners: The Italians in the Orkneys 1942-1944* (Kirkwall, Orkney, MacDonald, 1987), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Bob Moore, 'The Importance of Labour: the Western Allies and their Italian POWs in World War II', *Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento*, 28 (2002), p. 531; Bob Moore, 'Turning

working in Britain in August 1945.<sup>5</sup> They had been transferred from the Middle East, India and Africa between 1941 and 1944 to ease manpower shortages.<sup>6</sup> Italy's armistice in September 1943 rendered the future of the Italian POW status and their labour supply uncertain. The provisional Italian government finally agreed in April 1944 on its 'co-belligerency' status. Italian POWs could now choose between becoming 'co-operators' or remaining 'non-co-operators'. Co-operators signed a declaration that they would be willing to perform work contrary to the Geneva Convention such as loading ammunition for British troops. They were organised in Italian labour units without British supervision and benefited from higher minimum pay and free movement within a radius of two miles from their camp, while non-co-operators remained in camps.<sup>7</sup> However, co-operator conversion rates remained far below government expectations and non-co-operators frequently hardened their fascist views and refused to work.<sup>8</sup> A revised package in August 1944, which increased the freedom of movement and allowed cash payments and remittances to Italy, did not substantially increase conversions. Lucio Sponza has found that the prisoners were mostly politically indifferent and that their reluctance probably stemmed from confusion about their 'co-belligerent' status.<sup>9</sup> According to Sponza, the timely introduction of the co-operator status was vital to gain additional labour supporting the D-Day operation in summer 1944.<sup>10</sup> In other words, Italian POWs in Britain indirectly contributed to the Allied war effort. Neville Wylie has found that the Italians were ultimately 'more useful to Britain's cause in the wheat fields than the battlefields'.<sup>11</sup> Scholars thus acknowledge the vital economic contribution Italian POWs made to the British war effort. They were seen as 'a source of malleable labour who, with a modicum of effort, would willingly work for their captors', whereas German POWs were initially perceived as a serious security threat.<sup>12</sup> Italians were considered less threatening than Germans.<sup>13</sup> This changed after the end of hostilities, when German POW labour was eventually used more intensively and on a large scale. Germans replaced Italians upon repatriation in

Liabilities into Assets: British Government Policy towards German and Italian POWs in the Second World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 32, 1 (1997), p. 127.

<sup>5</sup> The National Archives, London, [hereafter TNA], WO 165/59, Summary No. 51, August 1945.

<sup>6</sup> Lucio Sponza, *Divided Loyalties: Italians in Britain during the Second World War* (Bern, Peter Lang, 2001), p. 194; Bob Moore, 'Axis Prisoners in Britain during the Second World War', in Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich (eds), *POWs and their Captors in World War II* (Oxford, Berg, 1996), p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> Moore, 'Axis Prisoners in Britain', p. 33.

<sup>8</sup> Sponza, *Divided Loyalties*, pp. 257, 271, 284; Bob Moore and Kent Fedorowich, *The British Empire and its Italian prisoners of war 1940-47* (Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2002), pp. 159-60.

<sup>9</sup> Lucio Sponza, 'Italian POWs in Britain, 1943-46', in Moore and Fedorowich, *POWs*, pp. 213-15.

<sup>10</sup> Sponza, *Divided Loyalties*, p. 211.

<sup>11</sup> Neville Wylie, 'Prisoners of War in the Era of Total War', *War in History*, 13, 2 (2006), p. 224.

<sup>12</sup> Moore and Fedorowich, *The British Empire*, p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

December 1945 and provided a vital contribution to Britain's post-war economy, with a peak of over 350,000 POW workers in summer 1946.<sup>14</sup>

The 1929 Geneva Convention in force during World War Two stipulated minimum POW maintenance and employment conditions and Britain and the Commonwealth abided by these rules very closely.<sup>15</sup> The ICRC as an independent intermediary regularly inspected POW camps around the globe to check adherence to the Convention. Moore finds that Western powers maintained the Convention's basic elements during the war, 'albeit with some bending of the rules when it suited their purpose'.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, Russia, Japan and Germany mostly ignored it.<sup>17</sup> Historians and legal scholars have debated the determinants for adherence. Morrow regards adherence to treatment standards as costly, making it tempting to cheat, for instance, through employment abuse. Still, the Convention presented a 'workable solution to strategic problems'.<sup>18</sup> However, S. Paul MacKenzie argues that it was not the legal framework but rather the credible retaliation threats which induced adherence to the Convention during World War Two.<sup>19</sup> The retaliation concept implies that enemy POWs were treated well by the captor to guarantee adequate treatment for his POWs in enemy hands.<sup>20</sup> Bruno Frey and Heinz Buhofer offer an economic interpretation of the retaliation concept. The costs and benefits of violation and of maintaining POWs determine POW treatment standards for the captor irrespective of humanitarian rules.<sup>21</sup>

Moore provides several historical examples for the retaliation concept. The harsh treatment of Germans in Allied hands after the end of hostilities suggests that retaliation, and not international legal conventions, determined POW treatment in enemy hands.<sup>22</sup> British and American officials, for example, were not concerned about the abuse of Axis POWs by the Free French as soon as German retaliation was negligible.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, the British were only 'keen to abide by the rules' concerning Italian POWs so long as Italy possessed enough

<sup>14</sup> Johannes-Dieter Steinert and Inge Weber-Newth, *Labour and Love* (Osnabrück, Secolo-Verlag, 2000), p. 33.

<sup>15</sup> Rüdiger Overmans, *Soldaten hinter Stacheldraht—Deutsche Kriegsgefangene des 2. Weltkriegs* (Munich, Oldenbourg, 2002), pp. 14, 83.

<sup>16</sup> Bob Moore, 'Unruly Allies: British Problems with the French Treatment of Axis POWs', *War in History* 7, 2 (2000), p. 197.

<sup>17</sup> Russia and Japan had not ratified the Convention and Germany only respected it for British and American POWs. B. Dear and D. Foot (eds), *The Oxford Companion to World War II* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 340, 713.

<sup>18</sup> James D. Morrow, 'Institutional Features of POW Treaties', *International Organization*, 55 (2001), pp. 979–89.

<sup>19</sup> S. P. MacKenzie, 'The Treatment of POWs in World War II', *Journal of Modern History*, 66, 3 (1994), p. 519.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 503.

<sup>21</sup> Bruno Frey and Heinz Buhofer, 'Prisoners and Property Rights', *Journal of Law and Economics*, 31, 1 (1988), pp. 41–3.

<sup>22</sup> Moore, 'Unruly Allies', p. 180.

<sup>23</sup> Moore, 'The Importance of Labour', p. 541.

bargaining power to retaliate. However, Moore and Kent Fedorowich argue that the Convention 'was never severely breached' by the British.<sup>24</sup> The 'tit for tat' games between Britain and Germany illustrate the escalation of retaliation threats. In response to alleged German POW mistreatment on board the *Pasteur*, as it was en route from Suez to Canada, Germany retaliated with similar measures against British POWs in September 1942. For Moore, this incident marks the end of a 'gentleman's war' between Britain and Germany.<sup>25</sup> Relations deteriorated even further during the 'shackling crisis'. Hitler ordered the shackling of British and Canadian POWs to avenge the handcuffing of German POWs during the Allied raid on Dieppe in October 1942. Britain and Germany subsequently shackled an ever-increasing number of POWs until Germany finally ceased shackling in November 1943.<sup>26</sup> Italian POW employment in the Orkneys is analysed in light of the retaliation debate. Britain's bargaining power and efforts of officials on the ground succeeded in retaining a workforce vital for a military project despite protesting prisoners and infringements of the Convention.

## II

Scapa Flow provided the principal strategic naval base for the British Home Fleet during the Second World War. The Fleet guarded and controlled North Sea waters and the passages to the Atlantic in the early stages of the war and subsequently operated in the Arctic, Mediterranean and as far as Madagascar. British and American battleships frequently used Scapa Flow as a base from 1941 onwards to hunt German battleships such as the *Bismarck* in the North Sea and Atlantic and to support Allied convoys in Malta and the Atlantic.<sup>27</sup> From 1943 onwards, Scapa Flow was used for training in invasion techniques, arranging exercises and providing targets and anti-submarine protection while at sea. In June 1943, all heavy battleships and the Gibraltar fleet trained in naval bombardment at Scapa Flow for the invasion of Sicily. Stephen Roskill values the training of British and American ships at Scapa Flow and the port of Clyde for the invasion of France even more highly. Both ports were extremely busy as ships practised coastal bombardment by sea and defence against aircraft targets. Roskill claims that 'there is no doubt at all that those who laboured so long at Scapa, on the Clyde and at other bases contributed greatly to the success of the invasion of France'.<sup>28</sup> Thus

<sup>24</sup> Moore and Fedorowich, *The British Empire*, p. 226.

<sup>25</sup> Bob Moore, 'Die letzte Phase des Ende des Gentleman-Krieges: Die Behandlung deutscher Kriegsgefangener an Bord des britischen Truppschiffs *Pasteur* im März 1942', in Rüdiger Overmans and Günther Bischof (eds), *Kriegsgefangenschaft im 2. Weltkrieg-eine vergleichende Perspektive* (Ternitz, Höller, 1999), pp. 36–8.

<sup>26</sup> David Rolf, 'Blind Bureaucracy': The British Government and POWs in German Captivity, 1939–45', in Moore and Fedorowich (eds), *POWs*, p. 60.

<sup>27</sup> Nathan Miller, *War at Sea: a Naval History of the Second World War* (New York, Scribner, 1995), p. 148; Roskill, *War at Sea*, vol. iii, p.63.

<sup>28</sup> Roskill, *War at Sea*, vol. iii, pp. 269–82.

Scapa Flow represented the main harbour from which the British Home Fleet undertook its military operations in the North Sea and the Arctic and its convoy escort duties in the Atlantic, Arctic and Mediterranean. The harbour was also used by Allied military ships, mostly American, and served as a vital training ground for key military operations such as the invasion of Sicily and France. Scapa Flow served three different purposes during the war. First, it played a key role in the home defence strategy against a potential German invasion. Secondly, it housed the Home Fleet during the war. Military operations in the North Sea, Atlantic and Arctic were launched from this base. Thirdly, it provided a naval training ground and was a key turnstile harbour for convoys and passenger ships.<sup>29</sup>

German U-boat U-47 entered Scapa Flow Bay on 14 October 1939, torpedoed and sunk the British battleship the *Royal Oak* and escaped unharmed. During the incident 833 British men died. Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty, stated in parliament that the U-Boat was able to enter the bay because of insufficient barriers and a lack of patrol ships guarding the bay's seven entry points on the night of the incident.<sup>30</sup> Two days after the sinking, a German air raid on Scapa Flow significantly damaged the depot ship the *Iron Duke*. The entire fleet was temporarily evacuated to HMNB Clyde and the War Cabinet considered basing it at another harbour.<sup>31</sup> While the Admiralty favoured the Clyde as a base, Admiral Forbes himself rejected this move. He argued that Scapa Flow was closer to the theatre of operations and better defended than the naval bases of Rosyth and Clyde. Churchill agreed and in turn persuaded key Admiralty staff that Scapa Flow was the optimal choice.<sup>32</sup> Following Churchill's advice, the War Cabinet agreed on 1 November 1939 to keep the Home Fleet based at Scapa Flow.<sup>33</sup> Churchill stressed the need to strengthen the defences of Scapa Flow in parliament one week later:

Measures had been taken, and were being taken, to improve the physical obstructions, and the last blockship required reached Scapa Flow only the day after the disaster had occurred. All the more it was necessary, while these defences were incomplete, that the patrolling craft should have been particularly numerous.<sup>34</sup>

Prior to the Fleet's return to Scapa Flow in March 1940, additional anti-aircraft and anti-submarine defences were installed as security measures.<sup>35</sup> Churchill

<sup>29</sup> MacDonald, *Churchill's Prisoners*, p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> *Parliamentary Debates: House of Commons* [hereafter *PD Commons*], 5th series, vol. 352 (1939), col. 686.

<sup>31</sup> Hewison, *This Great Harbour*, pp. 261–5.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen W. Roskill, *Churchill and the Admirals* (London, Collins, 1977), p.118.

<sup>33</sup> Hewison, *This Great Harbour*, p. 268.

<sup>34</sup> *PD Commons*, vol. 353 (1939), col. 253.

<sup>35</sup> Roskill, *Churchill and the Admirals*, p. 268.

mentioned that the *Royal Oak* episode ‘gave a shock to public opinion’.<sup>36</sup> The pressure permanently to secure Scapa Flow’s defences increased sharply in light of the *Royal Oak* and *Iron Duke* incidents. William Hewison argues that given this pressure, Churchill approved the construction of the barriers.<sup>37</sup> The approval was apparently granted after consultation with the Admiralty’s chief engineer in March 1940, upon the Fleet’s return to Scapa. Preliminary work began immediately, but contractor Balfour Beatty only started the actual barrier construction in August 1941.<sup>38</sup> At the end of 1942, the barriers were ‘submarine-proof’; the first of the four barriers was completed by August 1943 and the barriers’ overall completion was achieved in September 1944.<sup>39</sup> The roads connecting the islands were opened on 12 May 1945 and are still in use today.<sup>40</sup>

### III

Given its military significance, Scapa Flow was substantially fortified during the war. Apart from its strategic location for defensive and offensive operations of the Fleet, it also was a feasible target for the German Army. Situated just 300 miles from German-occupied Norway, it represented a potential invasion target and was within the range of German bombers. Scapa Flow was subject to sixteen German air raids during the war.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, the scale of facilities installed and personnel brought onto the islands was highly significant. The Orkney Defence Command was upgraded to a division of two brigades and placed under the Major General’s command in 1940. At its peak in 1941, it housed 12,500 Navy personnel and 30,000 soldiers. Including civilian workers and RAF personnel, almost 50,000 men and women were living in the Orkneys. This represented a major influx to the islands as only around 25,000 native Orcadians inhabited the islands during the inter-war period. Apart from the harbour itself, two airfields for two RAF squadrons, one underground oil storage facility, numerous anti-aircraft and anti-naval gun batteries and a radar station had been installed or were under construction by December 1940.<sup>42</sup>

However, the main resource to complete the fortifications – manpower – was constantly lacking. Labour demand in the islands rose quickly in the early stages of the war because of several simultaneous contracts for the Army, Navy and the Air Force. At their peak, 3,700 civilians were employed on these works.<sup>43</sup> Demand generally exceeded supply, with an overall shortage of 2,300 workers in the

<sup>36</sup> Winston Churchill, *The Second World War, vol. 1, The Gathering Storm* (London, Cassell, 1967), p. 440.

<sup>37</sup> Hewison, *This Great Harbour*, p. 306.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Hewison, *Scapa Flow in War and Peace*, p. 63; MacDonald, *Churchill’s Prisoners*, pp. 33, 44.

<sup>40</sup> Hewison, *This Great Harbour*, p. 311.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 65–70.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58–62.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 273.



Orkneys being reported in March 1942.<sup>44</sup> Labour supply was insufficient because a combination of harsh climatic conditions, scarce accommodation, isolation from city life and frequent air raids made the islands an unpopular workplace. Air raids, in particular, had a significant impact, as many workers left after each raid. Miners from the Midlands sent to work on the Orkney defences after the outbreak of war rarely stayed for more than six weeks, despite being paid twice as much as in the Midlands.<sup>45</sup> The fact that workers such as miners, who were familiar with arduous work types and conditions, shunned the Orkneys despite double pay, emphasises the islands' unpopularity. The general manpower shortage, brought about by call-ups that constrained the British war economy from summer 1941 onwards, exacerbated the situation in the Orkneys.<sup>46</sup> Balfour Beatty's civilian workforce had been severely depleted by 1941 'by conscription and harsh conditions on the island'. Civilian labour was increasingly withdrawn from the barriers and deployed on other military projects, such as defence works in the south of England in 1941 and the construction of Mulberry harbours in 1943.<sup>47</sup> Mulberry harbours were artificial ports built in Britain to supply Allied troops during the Normandy campaign and two of them were deployed on the French coast in the immediate aftermath of the Allied landings.<sup>48</sup> Demand for civilian workers and engineers on critical military projects throughout Britain, such as the Churchill barriers, by far outstripped supply.

The government responded with compulsory employment, increasing monetary incentives and tapping alternative labour pools. The Ministry of Labour introduced the 'Orkney and Shetlands Labour Agreement' in 1940 whereby it recruited workmen and compelled them to stay on the job for at least three months. National Service Officers were sent on site for enforcement purposes and high monetary incentives and bonus schemes were introduced to attract workers. Migrant Irish workers initially made up the majority of the workforce, but their supply quickly dried up. After anti-British slogans were found in their huts, additional Irish workers were banned from entering the islands.<sup>49</sup> The Admiralty argued that Irish or Northern Irish labour 'might carry information regarding the disposition of the Fleet' and defended the ban against severe criticisms from the Ministry of Labour.<sup>50</sup> Other foreign workers were used instead, but these substitutes were insufficient. In 1942, for example, 120 Norwegians worked on the underground fuel facility at Lyness, but this facility still lacked 340 workers, mostly tunnel miner labourers.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>44</sup> TNA, ADM 1/12054, Fettard, Cabinet Section, 5 Mar. 1942.

<sup>45</sup> Roskill, *War at Sea*, vol. i, p. 79.

<sup>46</sup> Margaret Gowing, 'Organisation of Manpower in Britain during the Second World War', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 7, 1–2 (1972), p. 153.

<sup>47</sup> MacDonald, *Churchill's Prisoners*, pp. 33–7.

<sup>48</sup> Dear and Foot (eds), *Oxford Companion*, pp. 596–7.

<sup>49</sup> Hewison, *This Great Harbour*, pp. 273–4, 306.

<sup>50</sup> TNA, ADM 1/12054, 'Visit to Orkneys 4–7 Mar. 1942' by Morgan (Ministry of Labour) and Nowlan (Admiralty), 10 Mar. 1942, p. 4, point 3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3, point 3.

Admiralty and Ministry of Labour representatives visited the Orkneys in March 1942 to investigate the ‘considerable wastage of labour during the past 8–10 months’. Their visit had two objectives. First, to amend the Orkney Agreement to ‘retain the largest possible number of men on the contracts’ and to ‘recruit as early as possible the necessary number of workmen’.<sup>52</sup> Second, the visit was intended to assess the viability of extending the ‘payment by results scheme’. The representatives found that labour shortages persisted and that whilst the payment by result scheme was widely used for eighteen different jobs on the island, it could be extended further.<sup>53</sup> Two main factors caused the wastage of labour, the ‘loneliness’ on the islands and the low standard of basic amenities, notably ‘food and sleeping accommodation’.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the representatives recommended tightening the Orkneys agreement. Civilians would now work on the islands for a minimum of six months instead of three;<sup>55</sup> transport arrangements and payments for home leaves would be eased and monetary incentives were introduced for workers who forewent their entitlement to a one week holiday after three months of work.<sup>56</sup>

Labour was extremely scarce in the Orkneys because of excess demand, accommodation bottlenecks, arduous working conditions and exposure to enemy air raids. Government officials fought the labour scarcity on two different fronts. Monetary rewards for foregoing holidays and piece rate schemes were implemented to raise output; coercion augmented labour supply. Despite these efforts, voluntary civilian labour remained insufficient. British workers shunned the islands or were withdrawn for other projects; Irish workers were not desired; foreign workers were lacking in both numbers and skills. A solution became apparent – the use of Italian POWs. Their supply was abundant; they could be forced to work; they were perfectly spatially mobile; and they had no exit option.

#### IV

The Admiralty employed Italian POWs in the Orkneys from 1942 to 1945. Its allocations received priority over other departments. POW employment increased over time both in quantity and in quality. As labour shortages on the islands rose, POWs were gradually substituted for civilian labour. After the armistice in September 1943, POWs were increasingly employed on skilled jobs and gained the trust of civilians. Red Cross reports reveal that the two camps were fully geared towards heavy manual employment and that the welfare concerns raised by the

<sup>52</sup> TNA, ADM 1/12054, ‘Secret memorandum in explanation of the Amendments proposed to the Above Agreement’, point 2.

<sup>53</sup> TNA, ADM 1/12054, ‘Visit to Orkneys’, p. 1, point 1 and enclosure ‘A’.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4, point iv.

<sup>55</sup> TNA, ADM 1/12054, ‘Orkneys and Shetlands agreements 1940 amendments’, 1 Apr. 1942, p. 2; WO 32/1740, ‘Orkneys and Shetlands agreements 1940’, 27 Jul. 1940, p. 3, paragraph 6.

<sup>56</sup> TNA, ADM 1/12054, ‘Orkneys and Shetlands agreements 1940 amendments’, 1 Apr. 1942, pp. 2–3.

POWs through strikes were not unfounded as living and working conditions were initially harsh, but these had improved by 1945.

The construction of the Churchill barriers proceeded in three stages. First, stones were quarried and concrete blocks casted. Second, the quarried rockfill was filled into steel net bags, so-called 'bolsters', which were transported to the sounds by lorry or railway, hoisted over the sea and tipped out via cable ways. Finally, concrete blocks formed the final layer of the barriers once the rockfill layers were above sea level. POWs were involved in all three production stages performing heavy manual work for the actual construction process. They built production facilities such as quarries or block yards, worked in the quarries, mixed cement, casted concrete blocks, drove and repaired lorries, managed compressors, acted as signalmen, operated cableways and deposited rocks into the sea.<sup>57</sup> The workforce included both POWs and civilian workers, but over time the civilian share decreased and POWs were increasingly used for skilled work.

At the time, the barriers were an unprecedented and daring engineering project and many experts predicted that adverse weather conditions would wash them away before completion. Over 250,000 stones and 66,000 concrete blocks were used and the project was extremely costly.<sup>58</sup> Total construction costs of the barriers were estimated at £2.5 million. Compared to the accumulated Admiralty expenditure of £10.5 million on plant and machine tools for naval shipbuilding and marine engineering contracts between 1940 and 1944, the cost of the barriers represents a sizeable amount.<sup>59</sup> The scarcity of highly specialised equipment and heavy manual labour also posed persistent problems. For instance, one of the two cableways used to dump the rockfill into the sea was imported from Iraq. Furthermore, a 15,000 ton accommodation and transportation ship, numerous lorries, railway wagons, cranes and boats were shipped to the islands. The Admiralty noted in its final report that the barriers prevented enemy entry into the bay and that they were a 'significant engineering feat', but it considered them 'an uneconomical scheme of defence' given the large amount of wartime labour and shipping required.<sup>60</sup>

When the government first proposed to transfer Italian POWs to Britain for employment in June 1941, the Admiralty requested that 2,900 of the first 25,000 Italians be allocated for employment in the Orkneys on the Churchill barriers to replace Irish civilian labour.<sup>61</sup> The request illustrates the Italians' key role as a substitute for the Irish and reveals uncertainty about the feasibility of the proposed employment. The Orkney defences were also prioritised over other POW labour

<sup>57</sup> TNA, WO 32/10740, 'Orkneys. Bonus cigarette issue to POWs'.

<sup>58</sup> Chapel Preservation Committee, *Orkney's Italian Chapel* (Kirkwall, The Orcadian, 1992), p. 3.

<sup>59</sup> Michael M. Postan, *British War Production, History of the Second World War, Volume 2* (rev. edn, London, HMSO, 1975), p. 204, table 27.

<sup>60</sup> Hewison, *This Great Harbour*, pp. 311–12.

<sup>61</sup> TNA, CAB 66/16, 120 (41), 'Proposal to bring 25,000 Italian POWs to this Country—Report by the Lord President of the Council', 4 Jun. 1941.

	<b>Burray: Camp 34</b>	<b>Lamb Holm: Camp 60</b>	<b>Total strength</b>
<b>Camp capacity</b>	400	460	860
<b>Actual strength</b>	576	594	1,170
<b>Excess strength</b>	44.0 %	29.1 %	36.5 %
<b>Housed in barracks</b>	400	500	900
<b>Housed in tents</b>	174	93	267
<b>Medical officers</b>	1	1	2
<b>Chaplains</b>	1	0	1
<b>NCOs and privates</b>	574	593	1,167
<b>In hospital</b>	7	8	15

**Figure 1.** Orkney POW camp strengths, 30 August 1942.\*

\*ACICR, Camps 34 and 60, 30 Aug. 1942.

projects. The War Office gave up six hundred POW workers in June 1942, at the Admiralty's request, 'for urgent work in the Orkneys'.<sup>62</sup>

The first batch of Italian POWs for employment in the Orkneys reached Britain at the end of 1941. Six hundred out of seven thousand recently arrived Italian POWs were designated to 'a special Admiralty job in the Orkneys'.<sup>63</sup> They were collected from Edinburgh Waverley railway station in January 1942 and distributed to two camps, Burray (Camp 34) and Lamb Holm (Camp 60). An ICRC report confirms that six hundred additional POWs arrived in July as the War Office's concession had suggested, so by 30 August 1942, 1,170 POWs were housed in the Orkneys (see Figure 1).<sup>64</sup> Still, accommodation bottlenecks constrained the maximum desired POW labour strength. Of the 1,200 Italians who had previously arrived, 255 were sent back to the mainland in September 1942 'owing to the lack of sufficient permanent accommodation'; they were employed in agriculture in England and Wales leaving 945 POWs in the islands for employment.<sup>65</sup> In 1943, at its peak, 1,200 Italians and 520 British workers were employed on the barriers, compared to 'normal times' where the Italians numbered around 920 and the British about 350.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, only a third of the workforce was civilian while the majority consisted of POWs. Most POWs left in September 1944 when the barriers had been completed. They were transferred to Skipton, Yorkshire, for agricultural employment prior to repatriation to Italy.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>62</sup> TNA, WO 165/59, Summary of Actions Taken, no. 9, July 1942, point 7c.

<sup>63</sup> TNA, LAB 8/126, General Gebb to Barnes, 29 Oct. 1942, 'Italian POWs', point 3.

<sup>64</sup> Archives du Comité International de la Croix Rouge, Geneva [hereafter ACICR], C SC, Service des camps, Grande-Bretagne, RT, camp de prisonniers de guerre 34, 30 Aug. 1942, file B.de P/JPS/MBG [hereafter camp 34, 30 Aug. 1942], p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> TNA, WO 165/59, Summary no. 10, August 1942, point 11c.

<sup>66</sup> TNA, ADM 116/5790, 'An Account of the Closing of the Eastern Entrances', point 22.

<sup>67</sup> TNA, ADM 116/5790, 'An Account of the Closing of the Eastern Entrances', point 44.

A small POW 'rear party' remained behind to clear up the sites and a few artisan POWs stayed until 1945 to complete the conversion of a Nissen hut into an Italian chapel. All POWs had left the islands by 15 December 1945.<sup>68</sup> The chapel still exists today and attracts 90,000 visitors per year as a major Scottish tourist site.<sup>69</sup>

Most POW workers were unskilled and only a minority was technically skilled.<sup>70</sup> According to the August 1942 ICRC report, 54 per cent of Lamb Holm's POWs were illiterate.<sup>71</sup> Assuming skilled labour is mostly literate this implies a high proportion of unskilled workers. The contractors attempted to attain 'additional POWs with tradesmen's skill' in March 1942, but it is unlikely that the second batch of Italians arriving in July 1942 was more skilled because the high proportion of illiterate POWs was observed in August after the second batch had arrived.<sup>72</sup> The officer ratio in both camps was extremely low. Only two medical officers and one lieutenant chaplain were among the inmates, the remainder being non-commissioned officers (NCOs) and privates, yielding an officer ratio of 0.26 per cent.<sup>73</sup> This undercuts the average of 0.42 per cent in Britain and is substantially lower than the average Italian POW officer ratio within the British Commonwealth of 6.25 per cent.<sup>74</sup> High POW labour demand explains the extraordinarily low officer ratio. As officers could only volunteer and could not be forced to work, a lower officer ratio would maximise the POW labour force. POWs seem to have been screened twice for employment in the Orkneys to ensure a suitable workforce. At the point of origin, mostly privates were chosen to be shipped to the Orkneys. Upon arrival, sick and physically unfit POWs considered to be unsuitable for the kinds of heavy manual work involved were removed from the islands.

The prisoners complained about employment conditions shortly after their arrival in March 1942, arguing that their work was directly linked to the war effort and hence illegal under the Geneva Convention. Their protest and ensuing refusal to work were unsuccessful as the British authorities claimed that they were not building military barriers but civilian causeways. However, three more strikes followed. A second strike in July against the 'insufficiency of the [camp] canteen' was punished by a seven-day water and bread diet.<sup>75</sup> The six hundred newcomers who had arrived in the same month and whom the British camp commander considered more hostile than the incumbent POWs probably triggered this strike,

<sup>68</sup> TNA, WO 165/59, Summary no. 54, November 1945, point 31.

<sup>69</sup> *The Scotsman*, 5 Jul. 2008.

<sup>70</sup> MacDonald, *Churchill's Prisoners*, pp. 38–40.

<sup>71</sup> ACICR, C SC, Service des camps, Grande-Bretagne, RT, camp de prisonniers de guerre 60, 30 Aug. 1942, file B.de P/JPS/MBG [hereafter camp 60, 30 Aug. 1942], p. 5.

<sup>72</sup> TNA, ADM 1/12054, Visit to Orkneys, 10 Mar. 1942, p. 2.

<sup>73</sup> Chaplains and medical officers count as officers, yielding an officer ratio of 3/1,170 (0.256%). ACICR, camp 34, 24 Aug. 1942 and camp 60, 30 Aug. 1942.

<sup>74</sup> Average calculated from TNA, MT 39/568, War Cabinet Draft Paper, 'Employment of German POWs in the UK after the Cessation of Hostilities', Annexes B and C, 4 Apr. 1945.

<sup>75</sup> ACICR, camp 60 report, 30 Aug. 1942, p. 7.

given the unexpectedly harsh living conditions and the monotonous diet that prisoners frequently criticised.<sup>76</sup> Lamb Holm camp stopped working again from 5 to 12 August 1942.<sup>77</sup> A fourth strike followed in September at one camp and lasted for almost one month.<sup>78</sup> In addition, three attacks on guards and several cases of 'insubordination' and 'disobedience' on Lamb Holm during 1942 were met with disciplinary punishment. The ICRC considered general discipline 'not too bad', but recommended the 'removal of certain indisciplinary elements'.<sup>79</sup> The incidents were always caused by the same eight 'rebels' in Lamb Holm while prisoners in Burray were less hostile.<sup>80</sup> MacDonald mentions a one-day 'rebellion' of one hut, but he neither specifies which hut nor when it occurred. In this 'rebellion', the prisoners refused to work because they were fed up with the 'biting wind and rain' and the arduous work. They resumed work the following day given weather improvements and persistent overnight searches by British guards.<sup>81</sup> It is unclear from MacDonald's account whether the four strikes discussed above include this rebellion. The 'one camp' to which both MacDonald and the ICRC referred but did not identify, must be Lamb Holm which the ICRC described as more hostile. The prisoners thus protested with strikes against the alleged illegal nature of work and raised welfare concerns, particularly about the harsh work conditions that had alienated civilians already.

POWs worked under the same conditions as civilian workers.<sup>82</sup> They always worked together with civilian workers, mainly complementing Balfour Beatty staff as unskilled workers performing heavy manual work and completed a variety of different tasks related to dumping the bolsters and concrete blocks in the sea. The initial language barrier was apparently no significant impediment to the performance of these unskilled tasks.<sup>83</sup> POWs from Lamb Holm were shipped daily to St Mary's, near Holm on the Orkney mainland, to make concrete blocks, attend on cableway dumping, unload barges of cages and cement and perform camp maintenance work. POWs and civilian workers depended on each other during the production process. British civilians for instance operated the excavators in the quarries producing the rockfill which POWs dumped in the sea. The cableway and the blockyard at St Mary's were solely manned by British civilians. POW work also relied on good weather conditions. The Lamb Holm squads needed boats to reach their workplace at St Mary's, so bad weather disrupted production. POWs sometimes had to return to Lamb Holm early because of gale warnings or could not work at all if boat passages were impossible.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> TNA, WO 32/10740, Johnson-Burt (Civil-Engineer in-Chief's Department, Admiralty) to Gardner (War Office), 17 Aug. 1942.

<sup>78</sup> TNA, WO 32/10740, Johnson-Burt to Gardner, 20 Nov. 1942.

<sup>79</sup> ACICR, camp 60, 30 Aug. 1942, p. 7.

<sup>80</sup> ACICR, camp 34, 30 Aug. 1942, p. 5.

<sup>81</sup> MacDonald, *Churchill's Prisoners*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>82</sup> ACICR, camp 60, 30 Aug. 1942, p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> MacDonald, *Churchill's Prisoners*, p. 7.

POWs at Lamb Holm operated two cableways, did plumbing, unloaded sand, coal, bolster cages and cement, constructed a blockyard, painted buildings and mixed concrete.<sup>84</sup> While the POW employment conditions were set by the rules of the Geneva Convention, the incentive schemes put in place at Scapa Flow were highly unusual. The Geneva Convention prescribed a maximum weekly work period of forty-eight hours (eight hours per day six days a week). The prisoners were paid  $\frac{3}{4}$ d. for unskilled and  $1\frac{1}{2}$ d. for skilled work per hour, but only a fraction of their credits could be converted into token money redeemable for goods in the camp canteen. Over time they were allowed to remit parts of their credits home and the maximum daily amount that they could spend in the canteen was increased.

The government devoted extraordinary attention to the prisoners' productivity. The War Office contemplated a bonus scheme in spring 1942 to increase prisoner productivity in view of 'the extreme importance attached by the Admiralty to the furtherance of this project'.<sup>85</sup> The Admiralty estimated that on average both camps deposited 2,200 bolsters into the sea per week. Bonus cigarettes would be issued if weekly output exceeded this average.<sup>86</sup> However, the scheme was dropped because efficient management techniques were already in place and because external factors independent of POW output, such as weather problems and low civilian labour productivity, would have reduced POW bonuses.<sup>87</sup>

By 1943, the camp commanders' personal management style and reward systems yielded good results in increasing POW compliance and productivity. The Admiralty noted in January 1943 that 'there certainly has been an improvement since the strike in the men's attitude'. The two camp Commandants had used their personality 'to the maximum effect' and issued cigarette rewards for workdays exceeding eight hours.<sup>88</sup> A reward system compensating for long working hours therefore appeased the prisoners' work resentments. After the hard winter of 1942-3, 'task work' was introduced which reduced the POW work burden. A POW gang was relieved for the day and civilians took over after the fulfilment of daily quotas or 'tasks'. Captivity conditions were eased following the Italian armistice in September 1943. They were now paid in cash, allowed to purchase a radio and to own bicycles.<sup>89</sup> They could leave the camps and 'mix freely with the local people' and also performed farm work.<sup>90</sup>

In addition to the incentive schemes, prisoner productivity and efficiency increased over time through training and diversification of use. The prisoners were

<sup>84</sup> TNA, WO 32/10740, Johnston-Burt (Civil-Engineer-in Chief's Department, Admiralty) to Gardner (War Office), 1 Jan. 1943.

<sup>85</sup> TNA, WO 32/10740, Johnston-Burt to Director of P.W., 25 Apr. 1942.

<sup>86</sup> TNA, WO 32/10740, Bell Pettigrew (Balfour Beatty) to Superintendent Civil Engineer, Kirkwall, 2 Apr. 1942.

<sup>87</sup> TNA, WO 32/10740, Johnston-Burt to Gardner, 1 Jan. 1943.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> MacDonald, *Churchill's Prisoners*, pp. 32, 35.

<sup>90</sup> 'Orkney exhibitions', *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 5 Apr. 2002, p. 19.

trained and used as skilled or semi-skilled labour; for instance they manned water pumps at Echnaloch providing water for the entire Warebanks operations. POW labour transfers from unskilled to skilled tasks stemmed mostly from the withdrawal of civilian labour through conscription and alternative defence projects. In July 1943, another blockyard to cast concrete blocks was opened at Tankerness. As its civilian quarry workers were transferred to the south of England to complete the Mulberry harbours, they were replaced by POWs. The first barrier had been completed by August 1943, releasing further POW labour to replace civilian labour on tasks like blockcasting.<sup>91</sup> POW employment on more sensitive and skilled jobs only increased significantly after the armistice in September 1943. About a dozen POWs were employed in the Balfour Beatty machine workshop, such as a former Ferrari engineer, who repaired and tuned engines on pumps and concrete mixers. Cases of fraternisation, although officially forbidden, occurred frequently. Balfour Beatty workers traded food for handicraft items or bought the prisoners snacks for illegal cash; a lorry driver took a POW to Kirkwall so that he could sell handmade artefacts and make purchases in town.<sup>92</sup> The government's and camp commanders' successful efforts to increase POW productivity and the gradual training and substitution of prisoners for civilian labour—the latter particularly intensifying post-armistice—demonstrate the extraordinary dependence upon the prisoners for the timely construction of the barriers.

In May 1944, the British government introduced the 'co-operator' status amongst Italian POWs and encouraged the prisoners to become 'co-operators' rather than remaining 'non-co-operators'. 'Co-operators' would receive more privileges such as cash payments and more freedom of movement in return for more extensive usage of their labour.<sup>93</sup> There is no explicit proof that the prisoners in the Orkneys accepted the co-operator proposal in May 1944, but some evidence suggests it. Remittances to Italy mentioned by MacDonald and advantages in pay and mobility cited by the ICRC in 1945 were only available to co-operators.<sup>94</sup> The barriers were almost complete prior to the proposal and most prisoners left four months later, so the effect of these incentives on the barriers' completion must have been rather small. It could be argued that the longer the prisoners remained on the islands displaying cooperative behaviour, the more they would be integrated into skilled labour processes. However, extensive integration only occurred post-armistice. The Commandants' efforts had improved the prisoners' attitude by January 1943, but it remains unclear to what extent and how cooperative prisoners were in general. One ex-POW stated in 1994 that he and his fellow inmates had initially been reluctant to work on a military project.<sup>95</sup> There had been four POW strikes in 1942, newcomer POWs

<sup>91</sup> MacDonald, *Churchill's Prisoners*, pp. 13, 33, 37.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.18, 37–8, 42.

<sup>93</sup> Sponza, 'Italian Prisoners in Britain', pp. 210–11.

<sup>94</sup> MacDonald, *Churchill's Prisoners*, p.18.

<sup>95</sup> *The Daily Mail*, 13 May 1995, p. 3.



remained hostile towards their captors and resented the harsh conditions and the nature of the project, so full POW cooperation was unlikely. MacDonald asserts that the prisoners were 'generally speaking quite cooperative' after the removal of the two camp leaders in March 1942 and that they welcomed the armistice.<sup>96</sup> However, he may have presented POW-captor relations as excessively idyllic. First, the ICRC delegates and camp commanders still mentioned uncooperative POWs in August 1942, five months after the camp leaders' removal. Second, MacDonald only mentions two 'rebellions', including the March 1942 strike, while at least four proper strikes occurred according to ICRC and government documents. Admittedly the improvement in attitude by January 1943 and the absence of strikes after 1942 imply that co-operation increased, but only to a limited extent. The POWs were only allowed on sensitive jobs post-armistice and their welcome of the armistice was probably motivated by repatriation prospects rather than their willingness to help Britain's war effort. Several studies on German and Italian POWs in Britain show that their morale largely depended on repatriation prospects, as 'going home' was their top priority and political considerations mostly came second.<sup>97</sup> MacDonald's account thus downplays the prisoners' tendency to strike and exaggerates their cooperation with the captor.

ICRC delegates visited both camps on 30 August 1942, providing an insight into camp conditions. The delegates were satisfied in general but acknowledged the disadvantageous location and climate compared to other POW camps. The prisoners complained about long working hours, but the ICRC found them permissible since ten-hour days during summer were compensated for by six-hour days in the winter. The length of the working day depended on the availability of daylight.<sup>98</sup> However, the government's frequent emphasis on making full use of the long daylight in the summer months reveals its intentions to maximise prisoner productivity.<sup>99</sup> The prisoners also criticised overpopulation, monotonous food and a lack of soap and drinking water.<sup>100</sup> A new fresh water reservoir pump was being installed because gales had repeatedly destroyed the previous ones. The delegates noted that fifty POWs suffered from dysentery upon arrival 'from their stay in the Orient'. Together with those POWs 'who did not possess a sufficiently robust physical constitution', they were relieved from work and moved from the Orkneys to other camps.<sup>101</sup> The report exposes accommodation and medical problems on the islands. Both camps were overcrowded as Figure 1 illustrates; actual camp strength exceeded capacity by thirty-six per cent. As a result, 267 POWs unable to be housed in barracks lived in tents. The camp commander assured the Red Cross delegates that tents 'would not be used anymore from the

<sup>96</sup> MacDonald, *Churchill's Prisoners*, pp. 9, 35.

<sup>97</sup> Moore and Fedorowich, *The British Empire*, p. 6; Sponza, 'Italian POWs in Britain', pp. 213–15.

<sup>98</sup> ACICR, camp 60, 30 Aug. 1942, p. 6.

<sup>99</sup> Moore and Fedorowich, *The British Empire*, p. 241, n. 40.

<sup>100</sup> ACICR, camp 60, 30 Aug. 1942, p. 6.

<sup>101</sup> ACICR, camp 60, 30 Aug. 1942, pp. 2–3.

end of September' for Burray.<sup>102</sup> While this comment implies that these POWs would be housed in proper barracks with the advent of colder weather, the above evidence suggests that those POWs housed in tents actually left the islands in September because no permanent accommodation was available for them.

The prisoners' medical conditions mirrored the harsh climate. Both camps only had provisional infirmaries without electrical lighting, so seriously ill patients were transferred to the Kirkwall military hospital. On the day of the ICRC visit fifteen POWs, or 1.3 per cent of the POW population, were kept in the Kirkwall military hospital. Most patients suffered from symptoms caused by arduous work and cold weather. Burray reported cases of Otitis media, common colds and rheumatism and Lamb Holm had five cases of bronchitis.<sup>103</sup> The fact that a 'robust physical constitution' was a prerequisite for selection for the Orkneys and the frequency of rheumatisms confirms the consequences of the arduous manual work that the prisoners performed. Fatality rates, however, were relatively low. The Admiralty noted that over the entire construction and clearing up period of the barriers, there were 'only ten fatal accidents' among civilian and POW workers, seven of which were due to drowning.<sup>104</sup> Of these ten fatalities, eight were civilians and two were Italian POWs.<sup>105</sup>

However, by November 1945 considerable improvements in living and working conditions were revealed in an ICRC report on Burray. Camp facilities had been upgraded through the provision of more barracks, electricity and heating. The prisoners could move freely within five miles of the camp and make purchases in shops. The ICRC judged camp morale as 'excellent', due to the POWs elevated mood in awaiting repatriation. Lamb Holm had been closed, so overall POW strength had fallen to 420, less than half of the number present in 1942.<sup>106</sup> Although the lower camp strength indicates a lower labour demand for POWs after the barriers' completion, they were still being employed, mainly on road construction, building works or repairing fences.<sup>107</sup>

## V

The POWs went on multiple strikes in 1942 not only to express their dissatisfaction with the harsh living and employment conditions but, more importantly, to protest against the illegality of work under the Geneva Convention. While government authorities and the ICRC considered these latter protests not to be justified, the following discussion reveals that the prisoners' appraisal was correct and that the authorities rebranded the project as civilian to

<sup>102</sup> ACICR, camp 34, 30 Aug. 1942, p. 1.

<sup>103</sup> ACICR, camp 34, 30 Aug. 1942, p. 2 and camp 60, 30 Aug. 1942, p. 3.

<sup>104</sup> TNA, ADM 116/5790, 'An Account of the Closing of the Eastern Entrances', point 22.

<sup>105</sup> MacDonald, *Churchill's Prisoners*, p. 14.

<sup>106</sup> ACICR, C SC, Service des camps, Grande-Bretagne, RT, camp de prisonniers de guerre 34, 26 Nov. 1945, file B/PEB/JRhMBG, p. 1.

<sup>107</sup> MacDonald, *Churchill's Prisoners*, p. 40.

disguise its military nature and continue employment. In March 1942, the Italian POWs in the Orkneys 'had ceased work on the grounds that it was of a character forbidden under article 31 of the 1929 Geneva Convention'.<sup>108</sup> According to article 31, 'work done by prisoners of war shall have no direct connection with the operations of the war'. In case of violation, POWs had the right under article 42 to complain through their 'Protecting Power', a neutral country representing their interests.<sup>109</sup> The POWs did so, since they assumed that they were working on military defences against Germany. The two POW camp leaders wrote a letter to the camp commander claiming that they were compelled to carry out 'works of a warlike nature' contrary to article 31. Also, their maintenance directly in the vicinity of a British naval base put them in a dangerous position and violated article 32 prohibiting 'unhealthy or dangerous work'. They requested transfers to a different camp where the Convention was respected. If transfer arrangements did not commence within a week, the Italian POWs insisted that they would cease to work.<sup>110</sup> Eventually, both camps stopped working on 9 March 1942.<sup>111</sup>

Following the strike, an officer of the POW Directorate and a representative of the Protecting Power visited the Orkneys to investigate the claim. Switzerland was Italy's Protecting Power at the time. The ICRC, although also based in Switzerland, possessed a different role, inspecting POW camps as an independent intermediary as mentioned above. British authorities found it 'satisfactory to note' that the Protecting Power representative had agreed that the Geneva Convention had not been breached.<sup>112</sup> ICRC delegates confirmed in August 1942 that article 31 was 'respected' and that article 32 had not been breached as 'the work is neither unhealthy nor dangerous'.<sup>113</sup> MacDonald claims that Major Buckland, the new second British camp commander, persuaded the POWs to end the strike.<sup>114</sup> Prior to spring 1942, there was only one commander for both camps, but subsequently camp commands were split and Buckland had been appointed for Lamb Holm camp. Buckland spoke Italian fluently and conversed with the prisoners every day after roll-call, immediately gaining the prisoners' trust. The POWs were assured in a meeting with him and the Kirkwall Provost that no danger would arise from the naval base and that they would work on a civilian causeway benefiting the local people.<sup>115</sup> Henceforth, the barriers in official documents were always referred to as 'causeways' to avoid charges of illegality.<sup>116</sup> The prisoners accepted and endured

<sup>108</sup> TNA, WO 165/59, Monthly Directorate letter No.5, April 1942, point 10d.

<sup>109</sup> Dietrich Schindler and Jiri Toman, *The Laws of Armed Conflicts* (Dordrecht, Martinus Nijhoff, 1988), p. 348.

<sup>110</sup> MacDonald *Churchill's Prisoners*, p. 8.

<sup>111</sup> TNA, ADM 1/12054, Visit to Orkneys, 10 Mar. 1942.

<sup>112</sup> TNA, WO 165/59, Monthly Directorate letter no. 5, April 1942, point 10d.

<sup>113</sup> ACICR, camp 60, 30 Aug. 1942, pp. 5–6.

<sup>114</sup> MacDonald, *Churchill's Prisoners*, p.8.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> MacDonald, *Churchill's Prisoners*, pp. 8–9; *The Orcadian*, 14 Mar. 2002; *The Daily Mail*, 12 May 2005, p. 15.

a two-week punishment diet as a disciplinary action for having refused work while the Protecting Power's investigation was ongoing.<sup>117</sup> The two camp leaders and 'one or two' others considered responsible for the mutiny were removed from the Orkneys and work was resumed.<sup>118</sup> While MacDonald portrayed Buckland's dealings with the prisoners as friendly, Buckland's actions described above convey determination to continue the labour project. He manipulated the prisoners, downplayed the military nature of work, rebranded the barriers as 'causeways', removed non-compliant POWs, immediately resumed employment and sustained work morale in 1943 using cigarette issues as rewards for long workdays.

Although Italian POWs in Britain frequently refused to work, the Orkney strike received extraordinary attention from the government. It distinguished between individual incidents such as fraternisation, assault or theft and collective incidents (mainly work refusals). Based on government reports, Sponza found sixty-seven Italian POW camps had at least one collective incident of work refusal between January 1943 and June 1944, mostly down to alleged violations of the Convention or bad working conditions.<sup>119</sup> The Orkney strike stands out for Sponza as one of the three most important cases. The other two, protests against British press statements about Italian POWs and against employment in lead mines in Cumberland, also occurred in 1942. These other protests lasted several weeks and ended Italian POW employment in mining.<sup>120</sup> Following these strike waves, the War Office was careful to avoid work refusals on legal grounds to prevent a loss in production. In 1943 it issued a recommendation to avoid 'employing POWs borderline cases'. Proposals to employ Italian POWs on road construction near artillery ranges were rejected in case the prisoners ceased work because they considered this an infringement of article 31.<sup>121</sup> Economic and military considerations therefore brought the Orkney strike to the government's attention.

Government sources also emphasised the Orkney incident. Monthly War Office reports listed the Orkney strike separately, which was highly unusual. Sir Harold Satow, director of the POW Department at various times between 1940 and 1944, also mentioned it in a publication concerning the department's history.<sup>122</sup> Most importantly, however, the upsurge in government activity following the strike mirrors the importance of the Churchill barrier project. Government investigations, the despatch of an additional Italian-speaking British major, the removal of rebellious POWs and the rebranding of the project as civilian, all demonstrate how highly the government valued the project's continuation. The Admiralty admitted in March 1942 that the POWs were

<sup>117</sup> MacDonald, *Churchill's Prisoners*, pp. 8–9.

<sup>118</sup> TNA, WO 165/59, Monthly Directorate letter no. 5, April 1942, point 10d.

<sup>119</sup> Sponza, *Divided Loyalties*, p. 220.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 218–23.

<sup>121</sup> TNA, WO 165/59, Directorate Letter No. 20, June 1943, point 6d.

<sup>122</sup> Sir Harold Satow and M. J. Sée, *The Work of the Prisoner of War Department during the Second World War* (London, Imperial War Museum, 1950), p. 35.

necessary to pursue this defence project: 'If the POWs are withdrawn, the work cannot proceed unless it is manned with British labour.'<sup>123</sup> The threat of losing them posed a serious problem, because obtaining British labour at a time of severe manpower shortages and other pressing military projects was almost impossible; arduous working conditions in the Orkneys deterred civilians and Irishmen were banned. There was no viable alternative to employing the POWs, so significant efforts to declare their work legal and to allow it to continue are hardly surprising.

Several sources demonstrate that contemporaries were aware of the military nature of project. Sir Austin Hudson, Civil Lord of Admiralty, emphasised the barriers' military motive in 1940: 'This [permanent blocking of the eastern entrances] is all the more necessary in view of possible M.T.B. [Motor Torpedo Boat] attack and will have to be carried up to high water level.'<sup>124</sup> MacDonald confirms that the prisoners rightly complained about the illegality of work:

The POWs were of course quite correct in their original appraisal of the situation at Scapa Flow. The prime purpose of their project was to deny enemy submarines access to the Flow, which was a tremendously busy naval base throughout the wartime period. There, the Home Fleet was strategically placed. Convoys came and went. 'Lame Ducks' limped in from every action at Norway, and casualties of the North Atlantic weather were escorted in.<sup>125</sup>

Sponza concurs that 'it was arguably a military project', as the causeways were constructed 'to prevent the repetition of a German U-Boat penetrating the defences of Scapa Flow and inflicting serious damage to the fleet harboured there'.<sup>126</sup> Hewison also concludes that the barriers had a military purpose defending the eastern entrances of the Flow 'against seaborne attack either on the surface or under it'.<sup>127</sup> Hewison mentions the claim that the prisoners complained about the illegality of employment and that the barriers were renamed to causeways. However, he continues: 'Whether this is true or not, it appears that latterly the Italians were not employed on the actual Barrier-building'.<sup>128</sup> This claim can now be rejected, as it is clear from the above evidence that POWs were actively involved in the construction of the barriers and contributed much more to its construction than civilian labour. It remains unclear why Hewison makes this incorrect claim but his preceding comment indicates that he wanted to distance himself from the illegality debate. More recent accounts also illustrate the belief in the military objective. Ex-POWs returning to the Italian Chapel in 1992 and 2008 mentioned the barriers' objective to protect Scapa from

<sup>123</sup> TNA, ADM 1/12054, Visit to Orkneys, 10 Mar. 1942, 'Contract 3144', point a.

<sup>124</sup> TNA, ADM 116/4111, Civil Lord Hudson, 16th Scapa Flow defence report, 18 Apr. 1940, p. 2.

<sup>125</sup> MacDonald, *Churchill's Prisoners*, p. 11.

<sup>126</sup> Sponza, *Divided Loyalties*, p. 218.

<sup>127</sup> Hewison, *Scapa Flow in War and Peace*, p. 63.

<sup>128</sup> Hewison, *This Great Harbour*, p. 308.

U-Boats.<sup>129</sup> Similarly, a booklet published by the *Orcadian* on the Italian Chapel 1992 notes that the Italians were 'sent to Orkney to work on the Churchill barriers, a massive series of concrete causeways which seal the eastern approaches to Scapa Flow'.<sup>130</sup> While these accounts are aware of the nature of the work, like MacDonald they rarely mention the harsh living and employment conditions to which the prisoners were exposed. Conversely, this article has illustrated that harsh conditions triggered multiple strikes. The ICRC considered the conditions satisfactory and they improved considerably over time, but hard manual labour on an isolated island must have been harder to endure than, for example, rural employment in England.

While contemporary sources, including those generated by the Admiralty, do agree on the military nature of the project, the ICRC left a more open interpretation. The August 1942 ICRC report, which found the POW work permissible under the Convention, considered the work as:

the construction of a breakwater which will connect three neighbouring islands, as well as the construction of a causeway along this route. Some prisoners work in a quarry from which the building materials are extracted. The beginning of these works may have been decided long before the war.<sup>131</sup>

The ICRC delegates acknowledged POW employment in quarries but most importantly they referred to the works not as barriers but as a 'breakwater' with a 'causeway' on top. Their description implies that they had accepted the British rebranding from 'barriers' to 'causeways'. However, their speculation that the project had been approved before the war is unfounded. While it had been planned since World War One to permanently close off the eastern entrances using blockships, orders to erect barriers using rockfill and concrete blocks had not been given until after hostilities had commenced.<sup>132</sup> As mentioned above, Churchill approved the project in March 1940. Evidence from Admiralty files shows that the decision for permanent blocking was made between February and March 1940: In February, Scapa Flow's Director of Local Defences, R. M. Servaes, had signalled strong support for the Admiralty's suggestion of 'specially designed permanent obstructions' at the eastern entrances.<sup>133</sup> Yet, his previous correspondence had never mentioned permanent blocking. In addition to this, the idea of permanent blocking was only to appear in weekly defence reports from March 1940.<sup>134</sup> Later

<sup>129</sup> *The Daily Mail*, 5 Jul. 2008; *The Glasgow Herald*, 5 Jun. 1992.

<sup>130</sup> Chapel Preservation Committee, *Orkney's Italian Chapel*, pp. 3, 16.

<sup>131</sup> ACICR, camp 60, 30 Aug. 1942, p. 4, author's own translation from French.

<sup>132</sup> Hewison, *Scapa Flow in War and Peace*, p. 63.

<sup>133</sup> TNA, ADM 116/4111, 'Blocking of Eastern entrance to Scapa Flow', R. M. Servaes, 22 Feb. 1940.

<sup>134</sup> The Civil Lord furnished weekly Scapa Flow defence reports on Churchill's behalf from December 1939 onwards to monitor the progress of defence measures. Until March 1940, they only mentioned blockship sinkings. TNA, ADM 116/4111, 1st to 12th Scapa Flow defence reports,

reports describe preliminary work and construction was expected to commence in April 1940.<sup>135</sup> Therefore, the plan to permanently block off Scapa Flow's eastern entrances was only drawn up and implemented after the war had started. The construction clearly had a military and not a civilian objective. In light of this evidence, the reasoning of the ICRC that the barrier's use and intention was civilian, while this clearly was not the case, has to be examined more closely.

In August 1942, the ICRC reported that POW employment at Scapa Flow was legal and that general camp conditions were satisfactory. However, ICRC correspondence with the Foreign Office four months later was more critical. The ICRC condemned conditions at Lamb Holm in a covering letter accompanying the submission of all recent camp reports from Britain to the Foreign Office:

Nevertheless, let me allow us to draw your attention to the requests made by the POWs from camp 60 and also to the observations made by our delegates, observations that mostly refer to the overcrowding of the camp, the insufficiency of the infirmary and the material and the duration and nature of the work. We thank you in advance for the attention that you will devote to the aforementioned points.<sup>136</sup>

The legality of work was mentioned indirectly but no urgent action was recommended. However, this letter explicitly singles out the Orkney camp from all recent reports undertaken in Britain and indirectly criticises camp and employment conditions in the Orkneys. The prisoners' complaints from the August report are mentioned and raised more directly. As the ICRC, in general, employed very cautious language in its communications, indirect criticisms can be interpreted as actually far more serious than the reports indicate on the surface.<sup>137</sup> Thus, the ICRC's approval was not as straightforward as portrayed in its official reports.

Sponza puts forward a reason for the ICRC's diverging accounts: Switzerland had replaced Brazil as a Protecting Power for Italy in early 1942.<sup>138</sup> The change had occurred only a few weeks before the complaint at Scapa Flow. Sponza claims that the Swiss would rather approve doubtful cases of POW employment than the Brazilians because Switzerland was generally 'regarded more understanding of the British position, whenever actual or potential diplomatic disputes arose'.<sup>139</sup> This might have helped the British in declaring POW employment at Scapa Flow

January to March 1940. The preparatory work for the permanent blocking is first mentioned in the thirteenth weekly defence report at the end of March. TNA, ADM 116/4111, 13th Scapa Flow defence report, 28 Mar. 1940, point 4.

<sup>135</sup> TNA, ADM 116/4111, 14th defence report, 4 Apr. 1940, point 4.

<sup>136</sup> TNA, FO 916/308, ICRC to Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, 2 Dec. 1942, author's own translation from French.

<sup>137</sup> Sponza, 'Italian POWs in Britain', p. 209.

<sup>138</sup> Sponza, *Divided Loyalties*, p. 189.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218, n. 20.

legal and continuing to make full use of it. In other words, the Protecting Power change shifted the bargaining power regarding the legality of POW employment in Britain's favour. Once the Swiss had approved, it seemed more difficult for the ICRC to disagree and criticise conditions. This may explain the ICRC's statement about the civilian purpose of the barriers. Thus, the legal approval of 'causeways' at Scapa Flow may have contributed to the completion of defences against German U-Boats. These circumstances might have directly aided Britain's war effort. While the POW workforce in the Orkneys was relatively small compared to the peak of Italian POW employment in Britain, the prisoners' work still prevented enemy entry into a harbour central to the British naval war strategy.

The War Office justified the legality of employment at the time, using an argument very similar to that of the ICRC, namely that the barriers were intended for civilian use. Although the Admiralty had mentioned the prisoners' potential employment on 'barriers' in 1941, the War Office referred to them in 1942 as 'causeways between the islands' and argued that 'the propriety of this employment had been carefully considered long before the prisoners were put to it'.<sup>140</sup> Civilians were indeed employed on the barriers before the prisoners arrived, but this argument does not mitigate the violation of the Convention. The POWs were not employed on the construction of causeways, but on a military defence project. The 'propriety of this employment', referring to the legality of employment, appeared to only have been of concern after the intervention of the Protecting Power in 1942, so it was actually not considered prior to it. In the official history of the POW department, Sir Harold Satow, who served as its director several times during wartime, has argued the POW employment was legally permissible, and has suggested that both complaints lodged by the POWs were unfounded:

Italian POW labour on a causeway across a channel forming one of the entrances to a harbour in the north of Scotland was considered to be justifiable, although the prisoners themselves thought not and for a time refused to work. Our reasons for considering the work permissible were that the Italian camp was two miles from a military objective and much further from the harbour and that the causeway would be primarily for civilian use and convenience and only secondarily for military traffic. After intervention by the Swiss representatives the Italians resumed work.<sup>141</sup>

Satow did not consider that the camps' situation, two miles from a potential target for air raids, bombings and submarine attacks was problematic. However, bombing by air was extremely inaccurate during the Second World War. For instance, only

<sup>140</sup> TNA, WO 165/59, Monthly Directorate letter No.5, April 1942, point 10d.

<sup>141</sup> Satow and Sée, *The Work of the Prisoner of War Department*, p. 35.



twenty per cent of US precision bombs on Germany reached their target area.<sup>142</sup> Luftwaffe bombs might have been similarly inaccurate and missed their targets by more than two miles and hit the Italian POW camps by mistake. This concern was not unfounded. The Luftwaffe operated almost daily reconnaissance flights to Scapa Flow in 1940 as it was a popular military target. Sixteen German air raids and attempted bombings took place, during which at least one bomb went astray. The threat of bombing was realistic and evidence demonstrated that bombs could miss their targets.<sup>143</sup> The prospect of enemy bombing near POW camps violated article 32 of the Geneva Convention, the very article that the ICRC had found to be respected in August 1942. By the time the Italian POWs had arrived in 1942, German bombing had ceased, but it was still a potential risk as Scotland was within reach of the German air base at Trondheim, a base from which attacks occurred on Allied convoys until 1943.<sup>144</sup> Satow in his statement mentions 'military traffic' but claims that it would be secondary to civilian use. However, the above discussion has shown that the barriers were not planned as causeways for military or civilian traffic but as naval defences. Also, two of the four islands to be joined by the 'causeways' were uninhabited when construction commenced.<sup>145</sup> This fact renders the argument that the barriers would allow traffic and aid civilian use obsolete because it reveals that the barriers would not significantly ease civilian (or even military) traffic between the islands, which were mostly uninhabited. Satow's justifications for the legality of employment thus do not hold. It appears that the British government had convinced the Protecting Power and the Red Cross of the civilian nature and the legality of POW employment, even though in reality this was not the case.

Against this it could be argued that the violations at Scapa Flow were not severe in relative terms. Germany's breaches of the Convention concerning British POW employment were more frequent and severe than Britain's contraventions. British POWs often worked hours that were too long and under bad conditions, they were exposed to RAF bombings in Germany and coerced to unload bombs in North Africa. British POWs in Italian hands were treated better and experienced fewer violations.<sup>146</sup> Nevertheless, the timing and nature of the Orkney incident still mattered. First, the POWs protested when the German U-Boat threat was still imminent and Scapa Flow's defences were not yet secured, so their protests threatened to delay the completion of defences vital for national security. Second, the shackling crisis escalated because of similar breaches of the Convention. Also, the Orkney strikes occurred six months before the *Pasteur* incident, which marked the turning point in British–German relations from a 'gentleman's war'

<sup>142</sup> The United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Summary Report (European War), (Washington DC, Government Publishing Office, 1945), p. 5.

<sup>143</sup> Hewison, *This Great Harbour*, p. 284; Hewison, *Scapa Flow in War and Peace*, p. 70.

<sup>144</sup> Cajus Bekker, *The Luftwaffe War Diaries* (London, MacDonald, 1967), p. 260.

<sup>145</sup> TNA, ADM 116/5790, 'an account of the closing of the Eastern Entrances', point 9.

<sup>146</sup> Satow and Sée, *The Work of the Prisoner of War Department*, pp. 36–7.

to a total war. A thorough public examination of the Orkney incident at a time when Germany was highly sensitive towards violations would not have been in Britain's interest. Third, Satow highlighted the Orkney incident as one of six examples of numerous 'doubtful cases'. One of these, POW employment to build aerodromes, was not found permissible.<sup>147</sup> Disputes concerning POW employment were common and taken seriously. Seen in their immediate historical context, the incidents at Scapa Flow were highly significant.

## VI

Scapa Flow was a crucial military hub for the British Home Fleet during the Second World War, providing a training ground for invasion techniques and a key turnstile for the Admiralty to support convoys and hunt German battleships. In light of its strategic importance, it was therefore essential to improve its defences. Despite government efforts to increase labour supply by reward schemes and coercion, labour for the construction of the barriers was persistently lacking. POW employment alleviated manpower shortages and enabled the release of civilian labour to other military projects such as the Mulberry harbours, which supported the D-Day operations. Italian POWs accounted for two thirds of the workforce building the Churchill barriers by 1943 and were the chief contributors to their construction. Without them, the completion of the barriers would have taken much longer. The prisoners' employment secured the barrier's completion and relieved labour bottlenecks for other projects critical to the war effort.

The government considered the Orkney project to be of utmost importance in its military strategy. It was keen to retain the POW labour force and extend its size and use. POWs were withdrawn from other departments and shipped to the Orkneys in 1942. However, accommodation bottlenecks ultimately constrained additional POW labour transfers. Schemes were considered to increase productivity and skilled POW labour was sought after. POW protests in the Orkneys in spring 1942 were met by a change in command structure, reclassification of the project as civilian and the withdrawal of non-compliant POWs. During the same year, the prisoners voiced their dissatisfaction concerning the heavy manual work and long working hours through several strikes. Both contemporary observers and the secondary literature have understated the arduous nature of work and the prisoners' tendency to strike. POW output in terms of bolster and block deposits was given utmost attention, but the introduction of payment by result schemes to increase POW output was scrapped because the Commandants' existing management methods were considered sufficient. POWs assumed more skilled jobs over time as civilian labour was withdrawn, so the dependence on POW labour rose steadily towards the barriers' completion in 1944.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

The prisoners also protested against the illegality of their employment in accordance with the Geneva Convention in March 1942, but the government, Protecting Power and ICRC deemed the work legal. Some observers considered the project to be civilian or denied the prisoners' involvement in the actual construction process, but this article has demonstrated that the evidence does not bear out either of these assumptions. In contrast to War Office and ICRC reports, it is also now clear that POW employment in the Orkneys did breach the Convention. POW workers constructed military harbour defences against enemy ships and submarines. Italian POWs directly aided the British war effort in this case.

This study also supports the argument that retaliation was more important than adherence to the Geneva Convention. Labour demand for a vital military project made Britain breach the Convention: Britain risked retaliation as a price for tapping the POW labour pool. Italian holdings of British POWs were treated fairly well, so the risk of Italian retaliation appeared low, but a German reaction might have been different. Officials dealing with POW working hours and the bonus plan based their decisions on British POW employment in Germany. They suggested making the Italians accept ten-hour shifts as they would be still better off than British POWs working eleven to seventeen hours daily in Germany.<sup>148</sup> In other words, British officials applied the retaliation concept. They considered their actions appropriate as long as they were not worse than those committed by the enemy. Labour scarcity was the key driver for POW employment in areas and under conditions prohibited by the Convention. While Germany, Russia and Japan removed this manpower constraint by only adhering to the institutional framework when retaliatory action was credible, Britain deployed a slightly different strategy in this case.<sup>149</sup> The institutional framework was not officially breached, but bent in her favour by declaring illegal work legal. The approval of legality pre-empted any dispute over POW mistreatment. The recent change in Protecting Power in early 1942 worked to her advantage. Britain's actions received the institutional seal of approval and rebellious POWs were either removed or tamed under a new Italian-speaking British major. The construction of defence fortifications was secured without officially breaching the Convention.

While violation of the Geneva Convention was common during the Second World War, the case of Scapa Flow is exceptional for three reasons. First, Britain was one of the few major belligerents that generally respected the Geneva Convention. Alleged cases of POW mistreatment like the shackling and *Pasteur* episodes were exceptional and increased the tension between the belligerents. In terms of POW employment, it has been suggested that Britain never committed

<sup>148</sup> TNA, WO 32/10740, Gardner to Johnston-Burt, 11 Aug. 1942.

<sup>149</sup> Russia and Japan had not ratified the Geneva Convention by 1939. Dear and Foot (eds), *The Oxford Companion to World War II*, p. 340. Germany only selectively adhered to the Convention, see Mark Spörer, *Zwangsarbeit unter dem Hakenkreuz* (Munich, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2001), pp. 99–101.

any severe breaches.<sup>150</sup> However, the Orkney case clearly constituted a severe breach. Second, the project was declared legal despite the violations. This exceptional procedure confirms Moore and Fedorowich's argument that Britain occasionally bent the Convention's rules. The Orkney case also shows, however, that Britain received legal approval for a clear violation of the Convention. Third, Britain's efforts to retain POW labour and maximise its productivity following the prisoners' complaints were extraordinarily extensive, indicating the vital military role of the barriers and the dependence on the POWs. They provided skilled and unskilled workers who, in contrast to the civilian workers, could be compelled to work and stay in the islands. Thus it would appear that exploiting the Italian enemy through employment of POWs was indispensable to complete the Churchill barriers as naval defences against the Germans.

<sup>150</sup> Moore and Fedorowich, *The British Empire*, p. 226.