



Such Splendid Prisons: Diplomatic Detainment in America during World War II by Harvey Solomon.

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Although much has been written in the past few decades about internment in the United States' during World War II, journalist Harvey Solomon has uncovered a fascinating, less well known part of this story—the treatment of enemy diplomats in America after the outbreak of war—using a vast array of relevant primary and secondary sources.

Solomon writes in a clear and readable style, drawing on newspaper sources to paint a picture of diplomats' lives before the war, during their detainments, and after their ultimate repatriations. Twenty-three short, easily digested chapters sustain the book's momentum. The early chapters set the scene with vivid illustrations of high-society life as portrayed in contemporary newspapers and periodicals. Solomon introduces a host of characters and describes their personalities in elaborate detail, setting up his account of the effects that internment had on their behavior. An epilogue on the postwar lives of these men and women provides needed closure for readers.

Internment of enemy aliens is a recognized international convention of war, but diplomats are by definition not standard foreigners and cannot be treated as such. How one nation handles representatives of another does not go unnoticed. In the interest of reciprocity, nations must behave toward others' diplomats as they would like their own to be, until they can be exchanged and repatriated.

Soon after war was declared, German and Japanese embassy staff were placed under house arrest at their respective embassies until suitable longer-term solutions could be found. The sites ultimately chosen for detainment were two luxury hotels in the Appalachian mountains—the Greenbrier in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia, and the Homestead in Hot Springs, Virginia. Robert Bannerman, the State Department agent who oversaw the detainment, quipped that “The officials of these nations [Japan and Germany] could not object to the class of accommodations offered by these two hotels” (116). That did not, however, stop the diplomats from complaining. Understandably, seeing their enemy treated so well left typical Americans resentful, particularly in the case of Japanese detainees.

Looking after diplomatic detainees in luxury hotels involved various law enforcement agencies and many local staff in the hotels. The owners of the hotels encouraged their sometimes reluctant personnel to see their work as invaluable to the war effort. These employees were monitored, though not very closely—the Immigration and Naturalisation Service arrested three of them who had entered the country illegally and been cleared for work by the FBI.

1. E.g., Roger Daniels, *Prisoners without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II* (NY: Hill & Wang, 1993); Greg Robinson, *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2001); Mary Elizabeth Basile Chopas, *Searching for Subversives: The Story of Italian Internment in Wartime America* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2017); Stephen Fox, *America's Invisible Gulag: A Biography of German American Internment and Exclusion in World War II* (NY: Peter Lang, 2000).

The Greenbrier, where the Germans were detained, employed German-American waiters, many of whom were pro-Fascist. On 9 February 1942, the FBI and West Virginia State Police officers arrested seven men—one Italian and six Germans—who expressed admiration of the Axis powers. By contrast, the Homestead, where the Japanese were detained, had an entirely different problem: African American waiters were loath to serve the Japanese, many of whom were racist and treated them in a patronizing manner. *Such Splendid Prisons* captures the nuances of life in luxury residences more used to receiving wealthy holiday-makers than overprivileged prisoners.

Diplomatic detainees and embassy staff enjoyed “a routine of luxurious monotony” at both hotels (148). The diplomats, accustomed to having their every wish granted, even requested amenities to make their stay still more acceptable. Pettiness and frustration on both sides continued throughout their detainment experience. Aware that when they were repatriated to their home nations they would be living in far from luxurious surroundings during the war, many detainees stocked up on products likely to be in short supply at home, such as coffee, silks, soaps, and toothpaste. They turned shopping into a virtual sport during their stay in the Appalachians.

The FBI did what it could to give the impression they were monitoring the activities of the detainees, who assumed their phones were tapped and their rooms were bugged. However, the Bureau, lacking the needed equipment and manpower, instead recorded only high-level detainees’ long-distance calls. Its most effective form of surveillance involved the use of selected informants to gather information. Both hotel employees and detainees were paid bribes to loosen their tongues. Since some detainees did not support their nation’s regimes and others, having lived so long in the United States, felt Americanized and did not wish to return home, they were amenable to assisting US law enforcement.

The book highlights the tensions between ambassadors and staff of different nations. The Italians were not rounded up initially and were very reluctant to be interned with the Germans, who treated them as underlings. Americans in Rome were enjoying far greater freedom than Americans in Berlin; Solomon comments that “as much as [the] State [department] believes scrupulously in reciprocity, it treats the Axis diplomats here equally because they’re under one roof” (189). This caused no end of problems for those responsible for the Italians at the Greenbrier.

Despite such minor inconveniences, US authorities, to their credit, treated detainees exceptionally well, often better than their American counterparts were being handled abroad. However long their luxury imprisonment may have seemed, it lasted only until the detainees were exchanged in mid-1942.

Such Splendid Prisons is a detailed, thoroughly researched study that should be essential reading for anyone interested in the Second World War in America, diplomatic history, and the history of internment in general. Thanks to author Harvey Solomon’s fluent prose, his book will attract both academic and general audiences.²

2. The book has been expertly proofread, save for one typo: on page 108, read “Executive Order 9066,” not 9096.