



In the Highest Degree Odious: Detention without Trial in Wartime Britain

A. W. Brian Simpson

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During the Second World War just under two thousand British citizens were detained without charge, trial, or term set, under Regulation 18B of the wartime Defence Regulations. Most of these detentions took place in the summer of 1940, soon after Winston Churchill became Prime Minister--when belief in the existence of a dangerous Fifth Column was widespread. At first, Churchill was an enthusiast for vigorous use of the powers of executive detention. He later came to lament the use of a power which was, in his words, "in the highest degree odious." Although many detainees were soon released, a considerable number remained in custody for prolonged periods--some for the duration of the war. This book provides the first comprehensive study of this Regulation and its history. Based on extensive use of primary sources, it describes the complex history of wartime executive detention: the purposes which it served, the administrative procedures and safeguards employed, the conflicts which surrounded its use, and the effect of detention upon the lives of individuals concerned, few of whom constituted any threat to national security. This study is the first to penetrate the veil of secrecy, telling the story of the most serious invasion of civil liberty which has occurred in Britain this century.

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