

# ACCEPTED VERSION

Aaron Humphrey and Simon Walsh

**The Border Separating Us: Autobiographical comics of an Australian World War I internment camp**

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# **The Border Separating Us: Autobiographical comics of an Australian World War I internment camp**

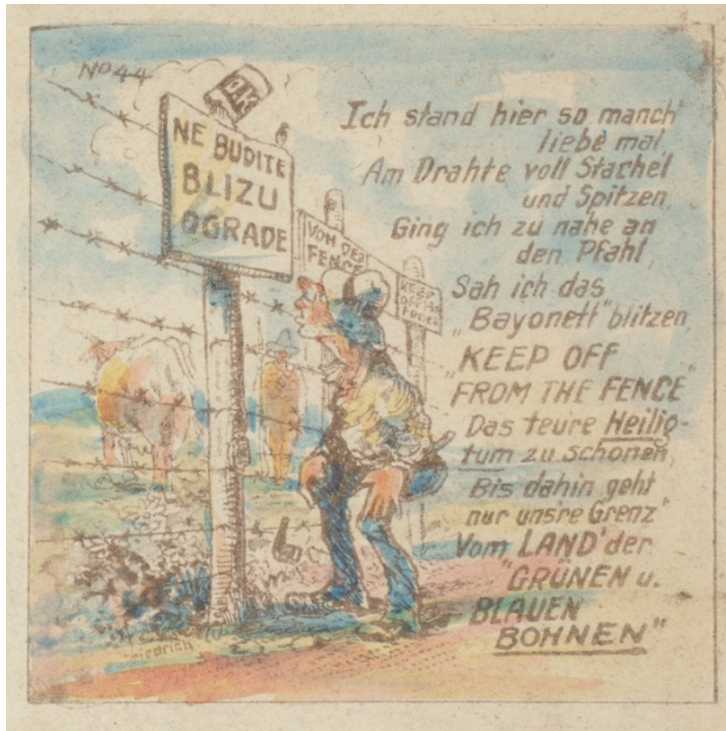
*by Aaron Humphrey and Simon Walsh  
University of Adelaide*

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## **The Voyage and Adventures of a Good Little German in Kangarooland**

One of the few examples of autobiographical comics from prior to the 1920s is a proto-graphic novel about life in an Australian internment camp, *Voyage and Adventures of a Good Little German in Kangarooland* (*Reise-Abenteuer eines braven Deutschen im Lande der Kangaroo*) by a German internee who signed his work as C. Friedrich. The *Voyage and Adventures* consist of a sequence of four small books (and a fifth volume of errata), each containing twelve self-contained cartoon panels which taken together sketch an autobiographical narrative portrait of life in the camp. These autobiographical comics seem to have been self-published in 1918 and the only known copies survive in archives at Australian universities. Possibly circulated in the camp for the enjoyment of his fellow internees, but seemingly also designed to reach a wider audience, Friedrich draws the story of an autobiographical cartoon avatar who begins a voyage dressed sharply in the suite on the deck of an ocean liner, ready to begin a new life in Australia. Shortly after his arrival, he is suspected of being a spy and hauled to the Holsworthy internment camp directly southwest of Sydney in Liverpool, New South Wales, which soon became known as the German Concentration Camp (G.C.C.). In the camp, a droopy bucket hat and ill-fitting patched pants replace the original sharp suit as the character's trademark.



*Figure 1: Translation: I stood here so many times at the wire full of barbs and spikes. If I went too close to the post I would see the flash of the "bayonet". In order to protect the precious sanctuary, KEEP OFF FROM THE FENCE. From that point onward is the border separating us from the LAND of the GREEN and BLUE BEANS.*

In a panel from the fourth book that sums up the project's tone, artistic style and use of multiple languages to depict transnational identities, Friedrich's avatar appears hunched over, pathetic, gargoylesque. Surrounded by barbed wire he stares from under his bucket hat at a sign written in Serbian: "Ne budite blizu ograde (stay away from the fence)". Identical signs in German and English can be glimpsed further down the fence. Beyond the barbed wire in an area the text designates as the land of green and blue beans, a cow freely grazes, and beyond the cow, a soldier's bayonet gleams in the antipodean sunshine. The sign is adorned with an empty can of 'OK' brand jam, an Australian condiment that is a recurring motif in Friedrich's cartoons. The scribbly detail of Friedrich's art exemplifies the ability of autobiographical comics to confer humanity within inhumane conditions, while his poetic, polylinguistic captions highlight the transnational conditions would come to characterise comics of migration and detention in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

The first book of twelve cartoons, which tells of the initial 'voyage' have the most linear narrative, as Friedrich's avatar arrives in Australia and is subsequently arrested and interned. The second group documents the 'adventures' of routine and privations of a typical morning in the camp, while the third provides scenes of social life of the camp, and satirical glimpses of camp characters. The fourth group relates the increasing homesickness of the internees, with the final cartoon depicting an internee escaping from the camp. A fifth group of twelve cartoons also exists, and was possibly an early draft of what eventually became the four-book sequence.

Throughout the comics, Friedrich details the life and struggles in the Liverpool G.C.C. as he is forced to construct his own rustic bed, haul provisions across camp and contend with the everpresent bayonets of the camp guards. Each of Friedrich's cartoons is accompanied by an inventive text, likely authored by Friedrich himself, typically of four or eight lines with a simple rhyming scheme. Although the avatar figure appears throughout the cartoons, the narrative voice is not consistent, switching as it does between the first, third and second person. Some cartoons are furnished by a framing caption and some depict the internees speaking, either within the main text itself or within speech bubbles.

Despite being drawn many decades before the formative years of Western autobiographical comics, Friedrich's ironic and self-deprecating wit that mark him as an important, if long-forgotten forerunner to graphic novelists of conflict and displacement, such as Art Spiegelman (1997), Joe Sacco (2001, 2002) and Marjane Satrapi (2007) (Chute 2016; Refaie 2012; Witek 1989). Little is known of who C. Friedrich was. The name could potentially have been a pseudonym referencing the arch-Romantic German painter Caspar David Friedrich, whose lush and mysterious landscapes seem far removed from the exigencies and privations of the camp.

## **Life in Internment: Australia's 'German Concentration Camp'**

Australia's system of internment camps were set up by the Australian government of PM Billy Hughes and supported by increasingly draconian legislation, eventually interning nearly 7,000 'enemy aliens' during World War I. Although the War was not the first time that countries had used internment camps to detain residents who were viewed as potentially sympathetic to a wartime enemy, the global scale of the conflict meant that the camps in Australia had a transnational quality to them that reflected a new kind of globalism. Implicated in Friedrich's comics are problems of borders, national identities and migration that the world is still grappling with more than a decade later.

The majority of those interned in the G.C.C. were 'German,' a broad category that purposely made no distinction between recently rounded up and transferred German sailors and naturalized Australians of German heritage. They were joined by more than 1000 Austro-Hungarians, itself a catch-all category that included 700 internees from the greater Habsburg Empire of Serbian, Croatian and Dalmatian background. Gerhard Fischer, the leading historian of the WWI German-Australian internment camps, has argued that fabricating an enemy on the home front allowed Australians to feel involved in a war that was otherwise unfolding on the other side of the world.

Although several camps existed, the G.C.C. was by far the largest of these – and the only one still operating by the end of the war. Fischer glosses the conditions prevailing at the camp as follows:

With more than 6000 internees, the camp was oppressively overcrowded. There were only basic sanitary facilities, and the accommodation offered little protection against the searing heat and dust storms in summer, and the freezing cold and heavy rains that turned the camp into a sea of mud in winter. The internees were housed in long

wooden sheds divided into cubicles nine by twelve feet wide, each to be shared by five prisoners. There was little space and less privacy. No furniture was provided in the barracks; burlap sacks filled with straw were the only bedding made available. The internees had to construct their own beds, tables and chairs if they did not want to eat and sleep on the floor. (Fischer and Helmi, 2011: 37)

The internees responded by fashioning a vibrant camp life, made additionally possible by the installation of a more sympathetic camp commander in 1916. As the authors of a recent volume on the camps note, “by the end of the war Holsworthy had grown into something akin to a small town, with many distinctively German elements” (Fischer and Helmi, 2011: 51). Cafes, restaurants and other small business ventures abounded, and internees had increasing access to recreational facilities such as a gym built in 1917. Of particular note is the theatre scene that came to flourish at Holsworthy. The venue of ambitious productions of canonical German-language plays, the theater houses also hosted dozens of cabaret performances making light of camp life and parodying various camp figures. Funny but realistic, calibrated to provoke a melancholic reflection on camp life touched with humor, Friedrich’s cartoons speak directly to the cabaret as performative genre.

## Cartooning the G.C.C.: Friedrich and Wiese

Out of this combination of prison and cultural village, Friedrich and some of the other internees were able to develop as artists. In an account of camp life *Hinter Stein und Stacheldraht* (Behind Stone and Barbed Wire), which he published in Germany following his forced deportation (a fate that befell nearly all of the internees) fellow internee Martin Trojan reproduces a booklet accompanying an ambitious arts and crafts exhibition in which we find one of the only historical mentions of C. Friedrich, mentioned in passing as a camp member who excelled in the graphic arts (1922: 190). Another artist, whose subsequent biographical trajectory contrasts sharply with Friedrich’s present-day status as an obscure and forgotten cartoonist, is Kurt Wiese, a German businessman who used his Australian interment to develop a hitherto unrealized passion for art. Wiese and Friedrich were colleagues of a sort in the camps, and as developing artists each drew cartoons for a weekly newsletter called *Der Kamp-Spiegel* that the internees of the G.C.C. began publishing in April 1916. Most issues of the *Spiegel* included at least one satirical cartoon or drawing during its first year of publication, but these were discontinued entirely in the *Spiegel*’s second year as the publication took on a more officious appearance. Despite this setback, both Wiese and Friedrich appear to have had greater aspirations for their work as illustrators and cartoonists.

In a surviving sketch of the internment camp, Wiese deftly, with noted attention to artistic detail, and an obsessive use of cross-hatching (possibly facilitated by the monotony of camp life), makes fun of the primitive habitation at the camp, suggesting that conditions in 1916 were no better than in 1916 BC.

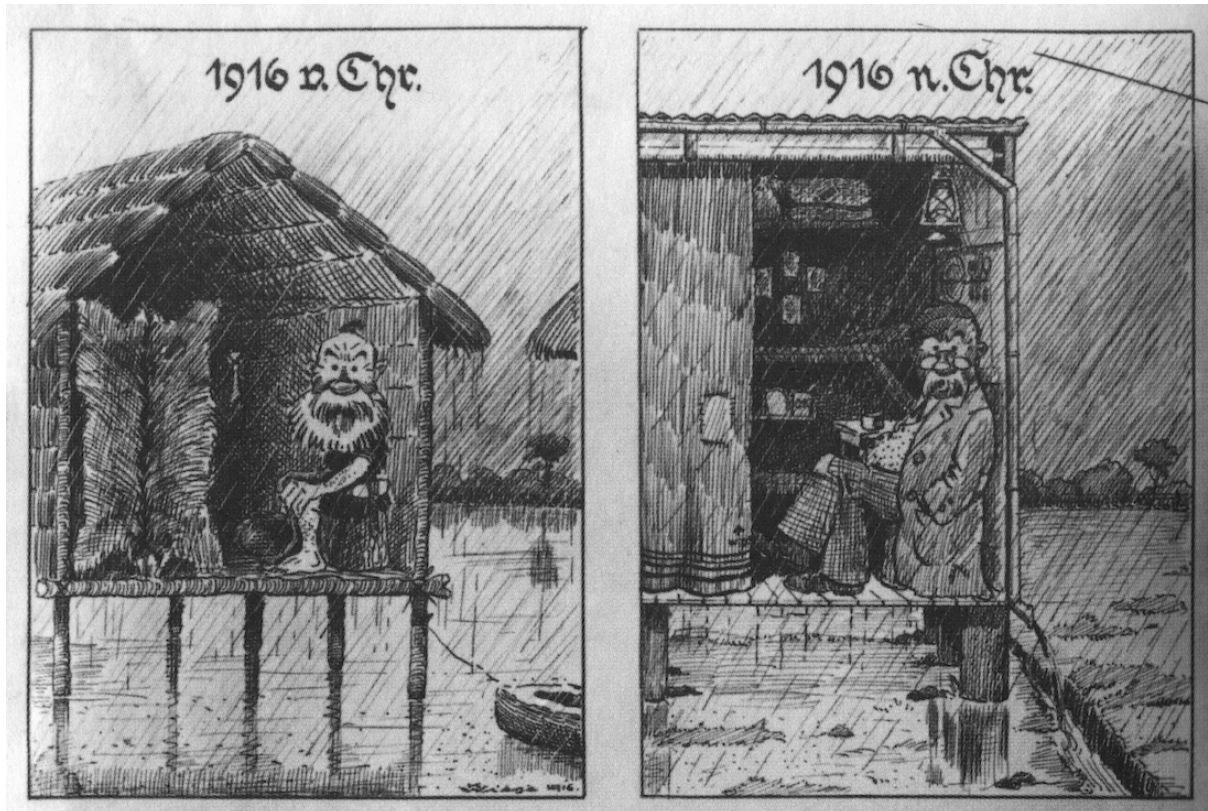


Figure 2: Kurt Wiese's sketch of camp conditions at Holsworthy

Wiese's art provides a good point of departure for a discussion of the unique qualities of Friedrich's style. While Wiese's cartoons seem to be inspired by the modernist poise of many contemporary American newspaper comics, including Herriman's *Krazy Kat* and Opper's *Happy Hooligan*, Friedrich's illustrations betray more romantic touches. His lines are exaggerated and expressive, and he seems determined to convey his characters' inner lives through their contorted postures and expressions, right down to the creases of their clothes. While there are traces of the great 19th century British caricaturists like Gilray and Cruikshank here, perhaps Friedrich's most obvious touchstone is Wilhelm Busch's picture stories like *Max und Moritz*. This influence links Friedrich to other German and German-American cartoonists; for example, there are parallels between his drawing style and that of Dirk's early Buschian *Katzenjammer Kids* strips, alongside Outcault's similarly lumpy and rough-hewn world of *Hogan's Alley*. While not as composed as Wiese's strips, the fluid, sketchy romanticism of Friedrich's drawings depict particularly well the chaotically elemental life of the internee, at the same time conveying Friedrich's urge to relate that to his (imagined) audience.

For his part, Wiese was able to establish a successful career in the United States as a writer and illustrator of children's books. He received multiple Caldecott and Newbery honors, and provided the illustrations for the English translation of Felix Salten's *Bambi, a Life in the Woods* (1923), which later became the basis for the animated Disney film. Friedrich, on the other hand, has remained obscure, but his work that has been preserved in Australian university archives nevertheless demonstrates considerable ambition. While today this work can be identified as an autobiographical proto-graphic novel, it is unlikely that Friedrich would have had contemporary examples of this kind of illustrated, autobiographical narrative

to draw from. His cartoons have been meticulously planned, curated and presented as if for publication, and this careful presentation suggests that Friedrich envisioned a wider audience for the story. Perhaps he imagined that the ironies and absurdities of life in an internment camp would be of interest to 20th century readers facing an increasingly complex and globalised world.

## **Language and Transnational Identity: An Analysis of C. Friedrich's Comics**

The circumstance that this remote, dusty patch of Australian land came to house both a German and an Austrian theatre reminds us of the complex national identity spaces available to the internees. While transnationalism is sometimes characterized as involving 'border-crossings', the G.C.C. involved the creation of new borders. Although, as noted above, people from many walks of life were rounded up into the camps, including naturalised Australian citizens, they were all regarded as potentially hostile to the new nation. Kept within Australia, yet classified as 'un-Australian', within a camp designated for "Germans", the internees of the camps were caught between a range of national identities and alienated in some way or another from all of them. Pictorially and at the level of linguistic content, Friedrich's cartoons exemplify this simultaneous mingling and alienation. At the same time they reflect back on Australia's own shifting identity, reminding us that The Commonwealth of Australia, established in 1901, was still a relatively new entity. The war was seen as a time when Australian soldiers were tested abroad in the international theatre, but the G.C.C. demonstrates how this identity was tested domestically as well.

### **"Fair play and Zivilisation": Britain, English and 'Denglish'**

Friedrich's comics are mostly written in German, but this language is constantly intermingled with others – it is an immigrant German, a camp German, and the Friedrich's hand-written, sans-serif lettering emphasises this casual, under-construction nature of the language. Some cartoons show internees mixing English words or phrases into their German, along with Denglish neologisms such as "smellen" or "tippeln", the latter an apparent derivative of the informal English verb "tipple," meaning to drink. Polylinguistic puns abound: when Friedrich's avatar struggles to cut an overcooked piece of liver, he dubs it "hard labor", transforming the German word for "liver", *leber*, into a parallel between camp cuisine and regimes of prison work. However, the play with languages goes beyond homonyms, as Friedrich uses the form of comics to present multiple languages simultaneously, drawing out the complex and contrasting ways that language shapes cultures and identities.



Fig 3. Translation: How lovely it is in the German state, where every person has a place for his bed. According to **humanity**, however, you're still **healthier** without a bed.

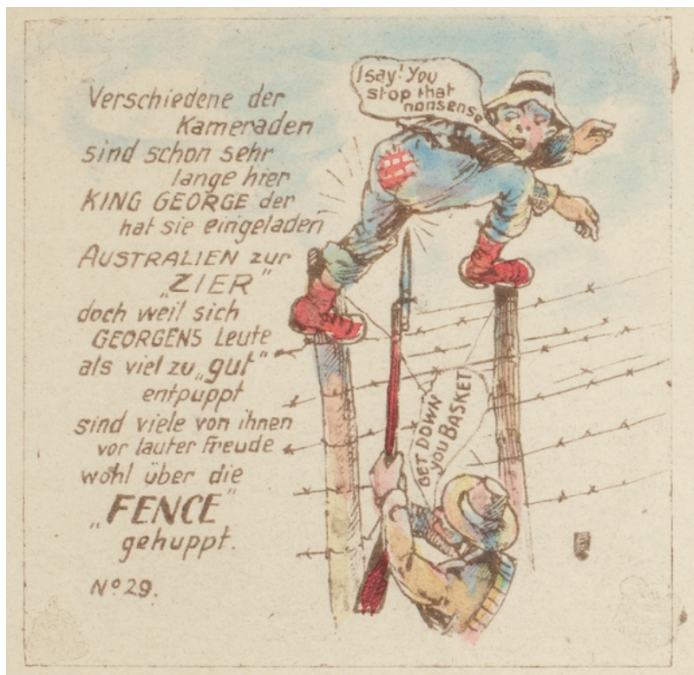


Fig 4. Translation: Umpteen comrades have already been here for a long time. KING GEORGE invited them here as an ADORNMENT to AUSTRALIA. But because GEORGE'S people turned out to be much too "good" many of them jumped with joy over the "FENCE".



In a cartoon depicting the internees contending with their first -- and conspicuously bedless -- night in the camp, Friedrich's caption includes the English word 'humanity', while the British phrases "rather cold" and "fair play" pass through the harried minds of sleeping internees, along with the German "Zivilisation" and "Humanität". While Friedrich's avatar, still attired in his steamliner suit, looks comfortable enough under a smiling cartoon moon, and the shared Germanic roots of words "civilisation" and "humanity" suggest shared cultural values that are being transgressed by this treatment. "Fair play", a notion originating in nineteenth-century British sporting circles, but soon expanding to encompass "a more general philosophy of respect for others and...for rules," (Renson, 2009: 5) which would become an established part of Australia culture, is here constructed ironically as something which the Australian authorities can easily deny the detainees.

In other comics, the supposed politeness of British/Australian culture is contrasted with the military force needed to protect the borders of the camp. One panel (Fig 9) pictures a fantasy scenario of Friedrich's avatar climbing over the camp's barbed wire fence, as a soldier jabs at him with a bayonet. The escapee responds, in English, with a sneer conveyed only through an arched eyebrow: "I say! You stop that nonsense", while the caption describes British hospitality in sardonically glowing terms, using only two English words: "King George" and "Fence". In another panel, two boisterous and youthful internees drunk on moonshine assure the reader in upper-case letters, in English, that "we are still going strong," a phrase well-known at the time as an advertising slogan from the Scottish whisky maker Jonnie Walker.

All three instances discussed immediately above reveal a defiant and provocative edge. The internees appropriate arch-British language, reproducing it in contexts that reveal its triteness or which demonstrate that the internees consider themselves far from defeated. If this is the idiom of the British Tommy soldier, it bears remembering that Friedrich is likely mimicking the English spoken by the Australian camp guards. From this perspective, the inventiveness and creativity of these cartoons demonstrates an easy familiarity with local vernacular, one that arguably constitutes a performance of the Australian-German identity to which many internees would have laid claim before the war. It should be remembered that the *Kangaroo* comic begins with a disillusioned German willingly and enthusiastically making passage to Australia and presumably open to fashioning an Australian-inflected identity among the thousands of German-Australians who had already done so. At the same time, these English-language touches serve as a reminder of wartime Australia's own identity: despite the growing sense of independence and national pride fostered by its still-recent federation, Australia was still very much shaped by its continued fidelity to Britain, and it was not until 1949 that Australian passports started to identify holders as Australian citizens and not merely British subjects.

## “Many Important and Clever Generals”: Antipodean German identities

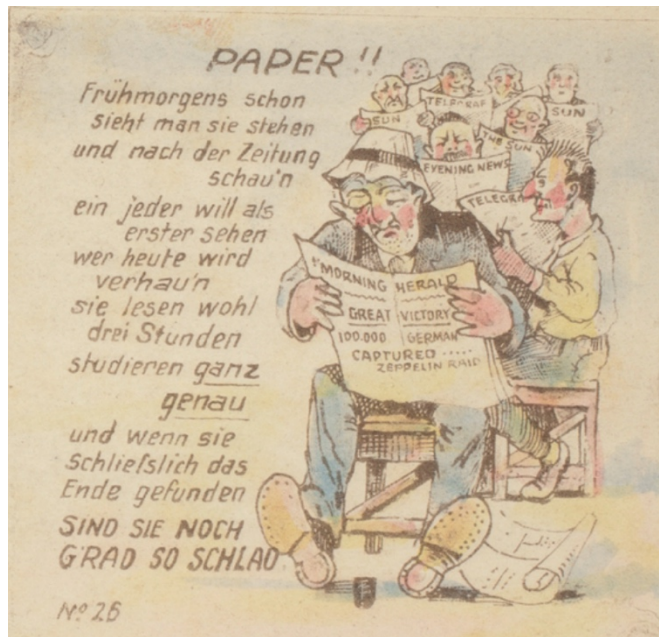


Figure 5: Reading the morning papers: translation: PAPER!! Early in the morning we already see them standing there looking at the paper. Everyone wants to be the first to see who's been walloped. They examine everything **studiously** for three hours and when they've reached the end THEY'RE AS CLEVER AS WHEN THEY STARTED.



Figure 6: translation: Woe betide, when, at the eternal fire the war commission toil away, the allies are feeling uneasy. The secret court holds a meeting, many important and clever GENERALS advise on the WAR, and if they had planned everything correctly VICTORY would have been OURS a long time ago

The German identities that Friedrich presents are also complex. While the internees seem united in antipathy towards the Australian guards and their imprisonment in general, Friedrich paints a somewhat ambivalent picture of their opposition to the Allies and a wish for German victory. That internees made significant efforts to follow the course of the war is demonstrated by a cartoon which shows them studiously scrutinizing the morning newspapers in an attempt to discover who has been walloped (*verhauen*) by whom. This daily ritual is undertaken with considerable skepticism as to the veracity of reports in the English-language press, as witnessed by the exaggerated headlines in the *Morning Herald* and by the closing observation that readers were left no smarter (*schlau*) than when they began. The following panel shows a group of internees forming a *Kriegsrat* or war council huddled around a lowly burning fire, a scenario that recasts the internees as influential wartime agents. The visual style Friedrich uses here is much more serious than usual, full of shadow and uncharacteristically straight postures, but this is undercut by the caption, which ironically describes these detainees, located about as far from the battlefield as geographically possible, as “many important and clever generals”, with the power to turn the tide of the war. Following the panel of the internees struggling to grasp any real news from the Australian press, it is clear that this *Kriegsrat*'s impotence is only overshadowed by its own self-importance.

### “The Hintern-Burg Offensive”: rear-ends and frontlines



Figure 7: Translation: The great G.C.C. offensive on the Hintern-Burg Line 1918



Figure 8: Translation: THE STORMING OF THE MEAT BALLS. How lovely it is after all in the G.C.C. To the delight of the **vagrants**: the craziest time is -- oh dear -- when **lunchtime** draws near. It all takes place with a hurrah and a storming, just like it was at the DARDANELLES, with KNIVES and FORKS they brawl over the MEAT BALLS

Other cartoons place internees on a collective, oppositional footing by directly referencing significant wartime events. The cartoon on the left (fig. 4) reworks the decisive breaching of the last line of German defense on the Western Front, the Hindenburg Line, finally achieved by the Allies in September 1918. Friedrich reimagines the defensive line as a fortress (*Burg*) of backsides (*Hintern*), the provocative pun represented by a row of internees bent over backwards, their backsides proffered against a line of advancing bayonets and boots. The action is designated a military offensive, but the German word also suggests that what is taking place is “offensive”, in the additional meaning of the word in English. A further cartoon (fig. 5) depicts a “storming of the meatballs,” realized in the image of a group of internees racing toward the mess hall, their knives and forks raised in anger. The German word “Frikadellen” puns with “Dardanellen”, the Dardanelles. In an attempt to recapture the Turkish strait, the Allied troops had landed in nearby Gallipoli in 1915, only to suffer a protracted military defeat involving a disproportionately high number of Australian troop casualties. (The catastrophic though honorable failure later came to be regarded as foundational for the development of a modern, supra-British Australian identity.) Thus, in professing that the storming recaptures events “as they were at the Dardanelles,” the scenario provocatively appropriates and makes light of a recent Australian military disaster while perhaps also suggesting that the internees quest for the meatballs (a meal, as other cartoons indicate, greatly preferred to the more commonly served goulash) is equally doomed.

The cartoons discussed immediately above share the common feature of depicting the internees as a densely packed collective, united in their opposition to the Allies, whether outrightly or in the proxy form of the camp guards. Transmitted with self-deprecating

irreverence, this opposition corresponds to the widespread pro-German sentiment among the internees that prevailed in the camp. From Trojan's hectoring account of internment life, this opposition appears ingrained and long standing, a matter of inexorable cultural differences now finding expression.

But in another sense, the us versus them mentality reflected in the above cartoons was the expected result of the harsh treatment meted out by the Australian authorities and governed by their resolve to lump internees together as a homogenized "German" enemy.

On another level, however, the cartoons paint a less cohesive and more complicated picture of internee identity. The dialect used in several cartoons cuts across the notion of a pan-German internee identity, instead reinforcing the regional allegiances that prevailed in the camp.

### **“You lot, make peace so I can get out of here”: dialects and regional identities**



Fig. 9 Translation: In truth I've already been here for three years. I'm known as a PRISONER of WAR. In former times I didn't have anything to complain about because I always carried BEER KEGS. But now, confound it, it's awful when I see the god-dammed TEA because I want a litre of Bavarian beer. You LOT, make PEACE so I can get out of here.



Fig. 10 Translation: The Austrian STRIKE during the construction of the theatre. We are the merry LUMBERJACKS. And we'll knock everything over all the more because we haven't been paid a penny.

Quite possibly reflecting Friedrich's Munich roots (the exhibition booklet referred to above praises a cartoon, now lost, depicting the life of a *Münchner*, an inhabitant of Munich), several of the accompanying texts employ Bavarian dialect. In figure 6, three internees convoy large containers of water, their straining efforts closely supervised by a stern guard. The accompanying text delivers a first-person lament in Bavarian dialect, which revolves around the speaker's wish to reacquaint himself with his beloved Bavarian beer. The lament ends with an appeal, tellingly directed at both sides, to make peace so that he can pack his bags (*I hau' im Sack*) and get out of there. The use of Southern German dialect contrasts here with another cartoon in which a camp character called Ede, who is shown playing the bladder fiddle, is speaking in a Berlin dialect from the "Prussian" north. Figure 7 depicts an "Austrian strike" during the construction of a theater. The workers, depicted as sabotaging the theater by apparently cutting down its frame because they had not been paid, proclaim in Austrian dialect to be the merry "Holzhackersbum" or lumberjacks, the appellation also a reference to a popular military march associated with the Tirolean region. Significantly, an onlooker offers a word of encouragement - "Dobra" -- in Serbian, suggesting the formation of an alliance that spread beyond regional Austria to take in the Habsburg Empire.

## Conclusion

Friedrich's cartoons are a rare early example of autobiographical comics (or "autographics" - cf. Whitlock, 2006) from before the form was solidified as a literary genre more than half a century later. The past twenty years have seen a cavalcade of comics that function as memoirs, autobiography and reportage. Friedrich's comics prefigure many of the themes that

have become common in these sorts of comics: migration, transnational identity, and the mundanity and irony of daily life. His depiction of daily life in an displacement camp has similarities to Joe Sacco's graphic reporting in books like *Palestine* (2001) and *Safe Area Goražde* (2002), while his detached amusement at the absurdity of daily routines marks him a predecessor of alternative comics' stalwart chroniclers of mundanity, like Harvey Pekar and Eddie Campbell. Most strikingly, by virtue of being autobiographical cartoons drawn from within the confines of an Australian internment camp, they offer a parallel to the Eaten Fish comics drawn by the refugee Ali Dorani during the five years he was imprisoned on Manus Island for attempting to seek asylum in Australia, nearly 100 years later (Humphrey 2019; Perera 2019).

Although *Voyage and Adventures of a Good Little German in Kangarooland* would be a significant work in the field of autobiographical comics if it were just a long-forgotten proto-graphic novel, the way that Friedrich depicts the trevails of life in a detention centre have parallels to modern problems of displacement, detention centres, migration, transnationalism and globalisation that makes his work urgent and important after all this time. Friedrich's squiggling depictions of the detainees emphasizes their struggles and striving, and points to the human and emotional cost of borders. His play with language, and the attention he pays to the way it both constructs and contradicts national identities suggests that languages and by extension national identities are not insurmountable borders on their own. Instead, it is the fences, bayonets and draconian systems of detention that are enacted without due cause, which serve to separate people not only from each other, but from their shared humanity. Language, including the language of cartoons, can be a means of bridging these barriers, as Friedrich's no-longer-forgotten comics demonstrate.

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## Author Biographies

**Aaron Humphrey** is a lecturer of media and Digital Humanities at the University of Adelaide. His academic writing has been published in *The International Journal of Comic Art*, *The International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, *Media International Australia* and *The Comics Grid*. He has published academic comics in *Persona Studies*, *Composition Studies* and *Digital Humanities Quarterly*. He is a member of the J.M. Coetzee Centre for Creative Practice.

**Simon Walsh** is Lecturer of German Studies at the University of Adelaide. Currently conducting research on the WWI internment of Australian-Germans, he has published several papers on music and national identity in postwar Austrian literature.