

# The campaign by Hutchinson Camp artists to be released from internment

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## Background

The Home Secretary, John Anderson, and his permanent under-secretary of state, Alexander Maxwell, had fought a rearguard action against the general internment of German and Austrians in 1940. However, with the fall of the Low Countries in May 1940 and pressure from the hawks in the War Cabinet, on 21 June 1940, Anderson reluctantly agreed to the general internment of all German and Austrian men who had previously been placed in Category C by the Enemy Alien Tribunals. In Maxwell's 'circular' to Chief Constables, dated 21 June 1940, the general rule was already subject to certain exemptions and Maxwell provided the first six categories of those to be exempted from internment labelled (a) to (f):

- a. Those under 16 years and over 70 years of age;
- b. Young persons under the age of 18 who were resident with British families or in educational establishments
- c. The invalid and the infirm;
- d. Those engaged in work of national importance who have obtained a permit for their employment from the Aliens War Service Department;
- e. Those who have been granted permission to remain in protected areas because they are engaged in work of national importance;
- f. Those who have been released from internment on the instructions of the Secretary of State since 15<sup>th</sup> May.

Eight days later, Maxwell wrote to the Chief Constables again, instructing the second tranche of arrests. However, by this time he had extended the exemptions to seventeen categories now numbered 1-17 and had given further guidance on 'invalid or infirm' and 'work of national importance'. In turn, these categories – with additions for agricultural workers, those about to emigrate, and cases for extreme hardship – formed the basis for the eighteen categories internees could apply for release under the White Paper published in July 1940.<sup>1</sup>

These categories were unashamedly designed to ensure that those released, when fit and able, could and would aid the British war effort. When viewed in the light of the fact that male British citizens aged between 18 and 41 were required to register for military national service,<sup>2</sup> it does not seem an unreasonable stance for the British authorities to expect the same of refugees who were claiming to be anti-fascist. It was not enough for them to prove they were anti-fascist; they needed to show evidence

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<sup>1</sup> For further details of these categories see: Rachel Pistol's Blog "routes out of internment a handy reference guide <https://www.rachelpistol.com/post/routes-out-of-internment-a-handly-reference-guide>. Two provisions from the original list, those about to take exams and those already released, had been excluded.

<sup>2</sup> National Service (Armed Forces) Act 3 September 1939

that they supported the British war effort. This was an issue for many of the political refugee internees, whether or not they were Jewish, particularly if they held Communist principles or were pacifists. The Communists were anti-war altogether and, until Germany invaded Russia in June 1941 and Russia joined the Allied cause, many were unwilling to aid the British war effort.

### **The Reaction of the Hutchinson Camp Artists' Café to the July White Paper**

The artists in Hutchinson Camp on the Isle of Man had formed themselves into a group which gathered in the basement laundry room of House 15 and called themselves 'The Artists' Café'. Notable members of this group included Kurt Schwitters and his son Ernst, Manfred (Fred) Uhlman, sculptors, Ernst Müller-Blensdorf, and Paul Hamann, and printmakers Helmuth Weissenborn and Hermann Fechenbach. They were 'dismayed and indignant' at the lack of provision for the release of artists from internment and started a concerted campaign to obtain their release.

Ernst Müller-Blensdorf, an eminent sculptor and pacifist who had fled to Norway from Germany in 1933, having been designated as a degenerate artist by the Nazi's. Having escaped the Germans for a second time when Norway was overrun, Blensdorf was interned along with Kurt and Ernst Schwitters when they arrived in Scotland from Norway aboard the Patrol Vessel Fridtjof Nansen. They were then transferred to Hutchinson Camp. Blensdorf was one of the forces behind the campaign by the members of the Artists' Café to solicit the support from significant members of British society for their cause. His private papers include a list of eleven letters he sent to individuals and organisations who might help secure their release with a list of 16 signatories of members of the Artists' Café.<sup>3</sup> The letter's first paragraph reads:

The undersigned interned artists – painters and sculptors of acknowledged merit and standing – have noticed with dismay and indignation they are not so much as mentioned in the 'White Paper' enumerating the eighteen categories of internees who may make applications for release to the competent authorities.<sup>4</sup>

It is evident that Kenneth Clark at the Royal Academy took up the internees cause and as he then wrote to the Advisory Committee about the internment of alien artists on 29 August 1940. The committee's reply, dated 2 September, assures Clark that the committee had already made recommendations to the Home Secretary with regard to interned artists and that if accepted, the recommendations would be published in due course.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Personal Papers of Ernst Müller-Blensdorf', Somerset County Archive A/DGK/1/19.

<sup>4</sup> A copy of this letter appears on the website relating to Hermann Fechenbach's artworks and is believed to have been included in the 'Schwitters in Britain' exhibition held at the Tate Britain 30 January to 12 May 2013. It is likely to be found in the Papers of Kenneth Clark held in the Tate Archive GB 70 TGA 8812 but is not individually catalogued. <https://www.hermannfechenbach.com/> accessed 1 May 2025.

Klaus Hinrichsen, another member of the Artists' Café, recounts the debate over the wording of the letters, in particular the letter sent to the *New Statesman and Nation*. Heinrich Fraenkel, who was a writer and journalist and member of the Café and had been writing the chess column in this weekly political and cultural magazine, suggested if a letter was sent to the editor, his friend Kingsley Martin, it would likely be published in support of their release.<sup>5</sup> The wording of this letter was similar to the one addressed to Kenneth Clark at the Royal Academy, but its tone was rather more strident with 'dismay and indignation' becoming 'great injustice' because they were subjected to the privations of internment which stifled their artistic creativity. However, Hinrichsen recalls that Frederic Burschell, an author and Hutchinson Camp's elected spokesman, thought this was overplaying their hand given the level of artistic creativity already witnessed in the Camp.<sup>6</sup> The letter was published in the issue of Saturday 24 August 1940, of which this is an extract:

Art cannot live behind barbed wire - whatever attractive pictures of life in an Internment Camp may have been painted by some newspapers. The tension under which we live here, the feeling that a great injustice has been done to us, the restlessness created by living in such close community with thousands of persons, the situation in which our wives and children are, from whom we have had no news for weeks, and the uncertainty as to the fate of works begun by us, which may since have been put into some cellar to moulder there, prevent all work and creative thought.<sup>7</sup>

There were 17 signatories recorded in a list which had clearly been interpreted from the handwritten signatures as it contains many misspellings. 16 of the signatories were on Blendorf's list, with the addition of the portrait artist Herbert Markiewicz but omitting the lawyer Helmut Segall.

By the time this letter was published, Ralph Vaughan Williams, President of the Royal College of Music, had already taken up the cause of interned musicians and wrote in his correspondence of 21 August 1940 with the composer Grenville Bantock that:

Musicians do not appear to come under any category in the 'White Paper' and this makes it difficult for us, but perhaps by a joint letter we could persuade the authorities to broaden their interpretation of 'work of national importance' (see 'White Paper' Section 8) and to point out that to fructify the life of the country is

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<sup>5</sup> Simon Parkin, *The Island of Extraordinary Captives* (London: Sceptre, 2022). p177

<sup>6</sup> Hinrichsen, Klaus, 'Martin Milgate, A German for Ten Weeks.' (2008.) An unpublished creative nonfiction narrative based on the author's recollections as an internee in Hutchinson Camp and his membership in the Artist's Cafe. It is based on the experiences of a young aspiring artist, Peter Fleischmann also interned in Hutchinson Camp on the Isle of Man. 59

<sup>7</sup> Extract of the letter which was published on 24 August 1940 in the *New Statesman and Nation* magazine.

of national importance and the fact that artistic and intelligent people who will spread the gospel of anti-Nazism are an asset to the country.<sup>8</sup>

Vaughn Williams also cites a report by a Professor Rosenberg about the conditions in the camps. Without a given name it has been impossible to identify this individual with any certainty, however there is a strong suspicion that he is the same as the Dr Rosenberg recorded in Hutchinson's Camp Newspaper as giving lectures in the camp.<sup>9</sup> In his follow-up letter of 28 August, he states: 'I have had a promise from Sir Cyril Asquith that the case of musicians shall be 'sympathetically considered'.<sup>10</sup>

With the release tribunals considering enemy aliens for release under the first 18 categories there was already a very considerable delay in the review of applications made for release and the government did not hurry to add further categories for consideration, particularly as they would have preferred these men to be employed supporting the war effort. However, there is clear evidence that the Hutchinson internees' campaign did have a considerable impact, and that this ultimately led to the introduction of Category 20 in White Paper of October 1940 which was created to cover, Artists, Architects, Writers, Musicians and Lawyers. The provisions of the October White Paper were:

**Category 20. Persons of eminent distinction who have made outstanding contributions to Art, Science, Learning or Letters.**  
*(At the request of the Home Secretary special committees to consider the cases of artists, architects and men of letters and submit recommendations to him have been set up by the Royal Academy, the Royal Institute of British Architects and the P.E.N. Club. Committees to consider and submit recommendations relating to the cases of musicians and lawyers have been appointed under the chairmanship of Dr. R. Vaughan Williams, O.M and the Right Honourable Lord Justice Scott, respectively. Applications for release under this category will be referred by the Home Office to the appropriate Committee.)<sup>11</sup>*

As can be seen, Category 20 went beyond the release of just artists, it included those who had made outstanding contributions to science, learning or letters. It is interesting to note that there was no longer a requirement for their work to be of national importance, as there was in category 6 (those engaged in work of national importance)

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<sup>8</sup> VWL1430 'Letter from Ralph Vaughan Williams to Granville Bantock', 21 August 1940, accessed 11 May 2025, <https://vaughanwilliamsfoundation.org/letter/letter-from-ralph-vaughan-williams-to-granville-bantock-2/>

<sup>9</sup> Parkin, *The Island of Extraordinary Captives*, 371.

<sup>10</sup> VWL1433 'Letter from Ralph Vaughan Williams to Granville Bantock', 28 August 1940, accessed 11 May 2025, <https://vaughanwilliamsfoundation.org/letter/letter-from-ralph-vaughan-williams-to-granville-bantock/>. Asquith was a judge who chaired an advisory body for the Home Office on the policy and procedure for the release of internees.

<sup>11</sup> Home Office White Paper. CIVILIAN INTERNEES OF ENEMY NATIONALITY. Categories of Persons Eligible for Release from Internment and Procedures to be Followed in Applying for Release (Revised October, 1940.

and category 8 (scientists, research workers and persons of academic distinction). Neither was there a requirement to show loyalty to the Allied cause. However, this was mitigated by the fact that applications for release needed to be vetted and submitted to the Home Office by special committees run by the relevant professional organisations or leading individuals. There was, however, a significant hurdle to be overcome, which was the requirement for those applying to show they were eminent and had previously made outstanding contributions to their fields. Hinrichsen later lamented that this precluded younger internees who had not had the opportunity to reach that lofty status.<sup>12</sup>

### **Analysis of releases under Category 20**

Detailed weekly statistics of the categories under which internees' release had been authorised were kept by the Home Office at least until the end of 1942. Not all these weekly returns have survived, but **Table 1** shows the cumulative numbers authorised for release at the end of 1940, 1941 and 1942.

Return Date	German and Austrians					Italian	Total
	Men UK	Australia	Canada	Women	Total	Men	
29/12/1940	24	0	0	0	24	1	25
27/12/1941	99	8	9	5	121	1	122
02/01/1943	103	7	9	5	124	1	125

*Table 1 – Category 20 - Release Authorisations*

It shows that the 125 releases under Category 20 were all but complete by the end of 1941. The return of 2 January 1943 shows that 16,478 German and Austrian men had been released and Category 20 accounted for just 1 in every 138 releases. Only 5 women of the 3,139 released utilised Category 20, since the vast majority of women only needed to be reclassified as Category C to secure their release. Of the 17 signatories to the published letters mentioned above, only 1 had applied to join the Pioneer Corps with nearly half being eventually released under Category 20 including Blensdorf himself.

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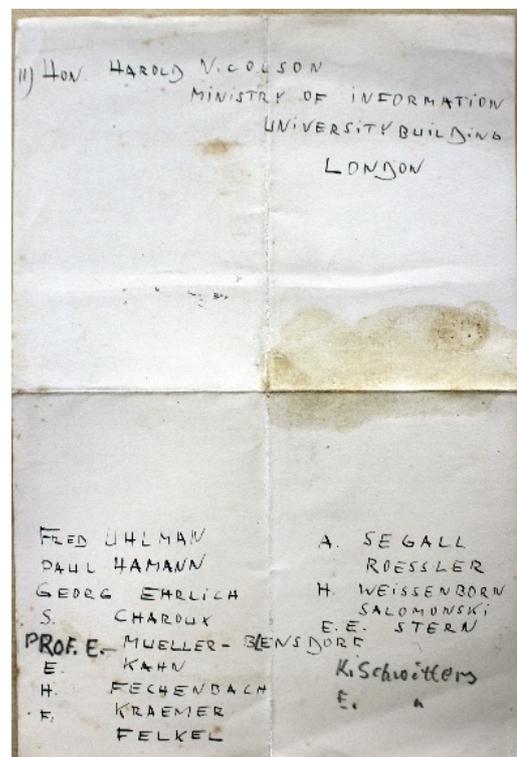
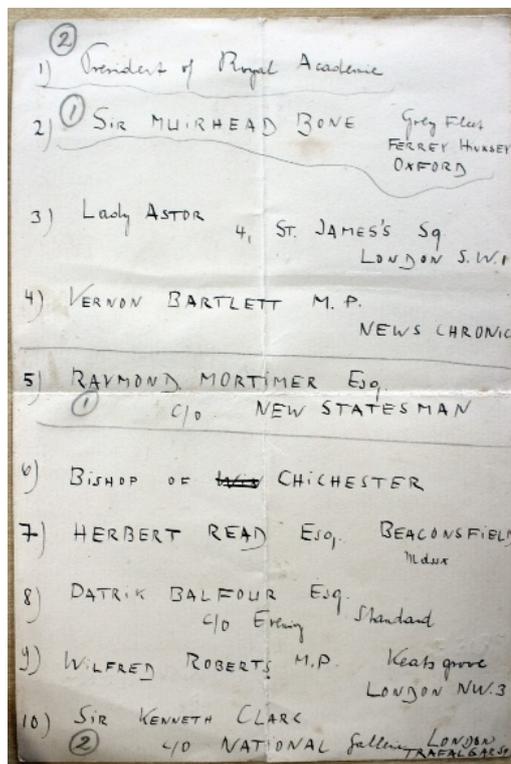
<sup>12</sup> Hinrichsen, Klaus E, 'Visual Art Behind the Wire', in *THE INTERNMENT OF ALIENS IN TWENTIETH CENTURY BRITAIN*, ed. Cesarani, David and Kushner, Tony (Routledge, 1993), 196–97.

## Appendix 1 – Letter Recipients

List of recipients of the Blensdorf letters and the signatories. Taken from the hand written notes (pictured below) in the Muller-Blensdorf private papers in the Somerset County Archive. A/DGK/1/19. Information in red has been extracted from the list, with additional notes in black.

Table 2 - Recipients of Hutchinson letters

	Individual	Institution/Position	Notes
1	Sir Edwin Lutyens	President Royal Academy	Designed houses and gardens including for Lady Sackville mother of Vita Sackville-West.
2	Sir Muirhead Bone	Ministry of Information	Etcher and watercolourist. Was on War Artist's Advisory Committee in WWII
3	Lady Astor	Member of Parliament	
4	Vernon Bartlett M.P.	Member of Parliament	Independent then a founder of The Common Wealth Party.
5	Raymond Mortimer	Literary Editor New Statesman	Writer on art and literature, in relationship with Harold Nicholson.
6	Right Rev George Bell	Lord Bishop of Chichester	Champion of refugee causes. House of Lords
7	Herbert Read Esq		Art historian, poet, literary critic and philosopher,
8	Patrik Balfour Esq	Evening Standard	
9	Wilfred Robert M.P.	Member of Parliament	Liberal MP – Associations with Spanish Civil War and the Basque Children
10	Sir Kenneth Clark	Director National Gallery	
11	Hon Harold Nicholson	Ministry of Information – Private Secretary	Politician, writer and in a relationship with Raymond Mortimer, Married to Vita Sackville-West whose family were friends with Fred Uhlmann's wife Lady Croft and Edwin Lutyens.



The hand written notes by Ernst Müller Blensdorf

## Appendix 2 - Letter Signatories and release categories.

	<b>Signatory</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>EBL</b>	<b>NS</b>	<b>Category Released<sup>13</sup></b>	
1	E. Müller Blensdorf,	Sculptor	✓	✓	20	02/04/1941
2	Kurt Schwitters,	Artist	✓	✓	SC	25/10/1941
3	Ernst Schwitters,	Photographer	✓	✓	23	14/07/1941
4	Siegfried Charoux	Sculptor	✓	✓	6	04/09/1940
5	Paul Hamann,	Sculptor	✓	✓	20	13/01/1941
6	Hermann Rössler,	Artist	✓	✓	12	16/11/1940
7	Carl Franz Felkel	Artist	✓	✓	3	22/08/1940
8	Fred Uhlman	Artist	✓	✓	19	31/12/1940
9	Erich Kahn	Artist	✓	✓	20	17/02/1941
10	Ernst E Stern aka Este	Stage Designer	✓	✓	3-20	03/09/1940
11	George Ehrlich	Sculptor	✓	✓	8	14/10/1940
12	Helmuth Weissenborn	Artist	✓	✓	20	31/12/1940
13	Hermann Fechenbach	Artist	✓	✓	20	17/03/1941
14	Friedrich (Fritz) Kraemer	Artist	✓	✓	3	07/01/1941
15	A Helmut Segall	Lawyer	✓		23	03/08/1941
16	Fritz Salomonski	Artist	✓	✓	20	24/03/1941
17	Herbert Markievicz	Portrait Artist		✓	20	11/12/1940
<b>EBL</b> E. Müller Blensdorf List, <b>NS</b> New Statesman Signatories						

Ernst Stern's release was originally authorised under Category 3 (aged of infirm) at the beginning of September 1940. However, this was changed to Category 20 at a later date, presumably so he could gain employment as an artist which would otherwise not have been permissible.

<sup>13</sup> Internee records in TNA HO 396 series