The Internment of Japanese Americans

When the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred, there were about 150,000 Japanese Americans living in the Hawaiian Islands. Some people questioned their loyalty, even accusing them of helping plan the surprise attack. Fearing sabotage, the War Department recommended the mass evacuation of Japanese Americans from Hawaii. But the American military govern10814or of Hawaii urged everyone to stay calm. Businesses on the islands opposed evacuation. They noted that losing so many workers would ruin the islands' economy. The press backed this position and worked hard to keep false rumors from circulating. In the end, nearly all of the Japanese Americans in Hawaii stayed there.

Dealing with the Fear of Potential Collaborators

On the mainland, concerns about disloyalty extended to people of German or Italian ancestry. They were seen as potential collaborators—people who work with an enemy to undermine a nation's security. Shortly after the Pearl Harbor attack, President Roosevelt signed proclamations declaring all German, Italian, and Japanese nationals, or non-U.S. citizens, to be “enemy aliens.” These orders affected more than 314,000 people of German ancestry, 690,000 people of Italian ancestry, and 47,000 people of Japanese ancestry.

All “enemy aliens” had to register with the government and carry special identification cards. They had to turn in all firearms and cameras, as well as shortwave radios, which might be used to send information to the enemy. They also needed a travel permit to go more than 5 miles from their homes.

Government officials considered putting all “enemy aliens” into camps. However, the task of relocating all the German and Italian aliens posed huge problems. Also, politically influential groups of German Americans and Italian Americans resisted such a measure. The government did round up several thousand German and Italian aliens and sent them to internment camps [internment camp: a center for confining people who have been relocated for reasons of national security] in the middle of the country. An internment camp is a center for confining people who have been relocated for reasons of national security.

Roosevelt Authorizes the Removal of Japanese Americans

The people of Japanese ancestry, in contrast, were a much smaller group with much less political power. They faced more racial discrimination than did people of German or Italian ancestry because they were of nonwhite, non-European ancestry. Their social isolation also worked against them. They had not assimilated into American culture as well as other immigrant groups had. They kept largely to themselves, in ethnic communities outside the American mainstream. In addition, they lived mainly on the West Coast, where fear of a Japanese invasion was strongest. Unlike in Hawaii, the mainland press whipped up that fear by accusing Japanese Americans of spying or of being more loyal to Japan than to the United States.

All these factors made it easier for the government to act against people of Japanese ancestry. In February 1942, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 [Executive Order 9066: an executive order issued by FDR in 1942 allowing internment camps to be set up to exclude current residents believed to be a threat to security] . This order declared that large military zones could be set up to exclude current residents who were believed to be a threat to security. In March 1942, the military used this executive order to launch a mass evacuation of people of Japanese ancestry from the Pacific Coast. Evacuees had just a few weeks to sell their homes and possessions.
The order to “move out and stay out” applied not only to Japanese “enemy aliens” but also to Japanese American citizens. Of the 127,000 people of Japanese ancestry living in the mainland United States, 80,000 were native-born American citizens. As such, they were entitled to the same constitutional rights as all citizens. This was the main argument made by a Japanese American named Fred Korematsu, who did not obey the order because it would mean leaving his non-Japanese girlfriend. After two months, Korematsu was arrested and convicted with remaining in a restricted military area.

Korematsu appealed the verdict all the way to the Supreme Court. In the case Korematsu vs United States [Korematsu vs United States: the 1944 Supreme Court decision declaring that the government had the right to keep Japanese Americans in internment camps], the Court upheld his conviction on the grounds that a group’s civil rights can be set aside in a time of war. Three of the nine justices dissented from this opinion, including Justice Robert H. Jackson. He expressed his fear that “the Court for all time has validated the principle of racial discrimination in criminal procedure and of transplanting American citizens.”

Life in the Internment Camps

More than 100,000 Japanese “enemy aliens” and Japanese American citizens were forced to evacuate. Families collected their belongings in a few pieces of luggage and left their homes. First they gathered at assembly centers. Then, in the summer of 1942, they boarded trains for internment camps scattered throughout the western states. They had no idea where they were headed. The typical camp, officially known as a relocation center, was in a desert region far from any town. “No houses were in sight,” one internee recalled. “No trees or anything green—only scrubby sagebrush and an occasional low cactus, and mostly dry, baked earth.” In this setting, internees endured extreme heat in the summer and cold in the winter.

The camps had been constructed in a hurry. They consisted of “row after row of barracks,” as one surprised visitor recalled, with “high barbed wire fences” and “machine gun towers all around.” The single-story, wooden barracks contained several one-room apartments. Each came with cots, blankets, and a bare light bulb. Here, an entire family tried to make a home. They shared toilets with others in the barracks and used common bathing and dining facilities. The crowded conditions meant that sanitation was often a problem.

Despite these hardships, most of the internees worked to make camp life more bearable. They built chairs and tables from scrap lumber. They grew vegetables. They set up schools, libraries, hospitals, and newspaper offices.

As early as 1942, while the camps were still filling up, the government realized that the threat of a West Coast invasion had passed. Officials began allowing certain groups of Japanese Americans to leave the camps. These included about 10,000 farm workers and 4,300 college students. Starting in 1943, thousands of young men left the camps to join the army. Most of them served in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. This all-volunteer Japanese American unit became famous for its bravery in battle. In fact, it earned more medals than any other unit of its size in American history. In 1944, the government began letting the remaining internees return to the West Coast. Within the next year, all were free to leave the camps.