

Then: Japanese American Internment

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will read about Japanese American internment camps in the United States during World War II. As the United States was fighting both Germany and Japan during WWII, it was only Japanese Americans, not German Americans, who were placed in these internment camps.

Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Japanese American Internment
2. Context, Cause, and Effect



BEFORE YOU START

Why were Japanese Americans from the West Coast forced to live in camps during World War II?

1. Japanese American Internment

On December 7, 1941, Japanese military forces bombed the U.S. naval base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in a surprise attack. The United States quickly declared war and joined the Allies (Great Britain, France, Russia, and others) in World War II, facing off against the Axis Powers (primarily Germany, Italy, and Japan). In the early days of the war, fear of Japanese immigrants and Japanese American citizens ran wild in the United States, particularly on the West Coast. For many, this fear was based on the presumption that any Japanese American citizen would automatically be loyal to Japan rather than to the United States. In early 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, giving the military authority over parts of the country considered to be most at risk of invasion.

All along the West Coast, Japanese Americans were forced to leave their homes, schools, and businesses. Many had to sell their property quickly for far less than it was worth. They were sent to live in internment camps built in remote areas and were required to swear oaths of loyalty to the United States to avoid imprisonment.

Let's look at one woman's recollection of entering an internment camp (OurStory, Smithsonian National Museum of American History, n.d.):

Primary Source Excerpt

Type: Quote

Author: Mary Tsukamoto

Date: 1942

We saw all these people behind the fence, looking out, hanging onto the wire, and looking out because they were anxious to know who was coming in. But I will never forget the shocking feeling that human beings were behind this fence like animals. And we were going to also lose our freedom and walk inside of that gate and find ourselves... cooped up there... when the gates were shut, we knew that we had lost something that was very precious; that we were no longer free.

Some of the people sent to the camps were immigrants who had been born in Japan. They were barred from **naturalization**, or the process of attaining citizenship, by U.S. law, but they had built lives and families in the country. Many others who were sent to the camps had been born in the United States and were therefore U.S. citizens. They had committed no crimes, yet they were denied fundamental rights and freedoms based on their family heritage. It's important to note that although the United States was also fighting Germany and Italy in World War II, German Americans and Italian Americans were not subjected to incarceration as Japanese Americans were.

The issue of detaining Japanese Americans eventually reached the Supreme Court. In an infamous ruling from 1944, the Court upheld the government's authority to confine Japanese Americans to internment camps during the war—but also reached the opposite conclusion in a separate decision shortly afterward, declaring that citizens deemed “loyal and law-abiding” could not be indefinitely detained by the government. When the war ended in 1945, the camps began to close. Some Japanese Americans decided to settle in the Midwest or on the East Coast. Others returned to California or Oregon, only to find that their homes and neighborhoods had since been occupied by new residents. Much as they had used their skill to adjust to life in the camps, they used it to adapt to their new lives, which had been changed forever.



TERM TO KNOW

Naturalization

The process of becoming a citizen.

2. Context, Cause, and Effect

In the decades following World War II, most Americans came to see Japanese American internment as a mistake and an injustice. By the 1970s, a movement had grown that called for the government to make amends for its wartime actions. A commission was created to investigate the causes and effects of the internment, and in 1988 it released a report stating the following (Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 1982):

Primary Source Excerpt

Type: Report

Author: Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians

Date: 1988

The broad historical causes which shaped these decisions were race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership. Widespread ignorance of Japanese Americans contributed to a policy

conceived in haste and executed in an atmosphere of fear and anger at Japan.

With its investigation and report, the commission was looking to the past in the hope that the government would learn from history and apply those lessons to future decisions. The report was based on a study of many different documents from the time and on the testimonies of people who had been involved. The large number of sources allowed the commission to compare and corroborate the stories as they worked to identify causes and effects of the events. This helped them gain a more complete understanding of the past.

Agility and persistence are threads that run through most of these immigrant stories. We can learn a lot from immigrants about what it takes to survive and succeed in a changing environment, often in the face of barriers and prejudice. Their adaptability, ingenuity, and preparedness provide us with wonderful examples of agility.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about **Japanese American internment** during World War II, which affected Japanese immigrants living in the United States as well as Japanese American citizens. Since World War II, the U.S. government has studied the **context, cause, and effect** of the decision to imprison Japanese Americans during the war in an effort to learn from the past.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Strategic Education, Inc. 2020. Learn from the Past, Prepare for the Future.

REFERENCES

Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. (1982). *Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians*. National Archives.

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