

First World War internment camps a dark chapter in Canadian history

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Though the main battles of the First World War were fought across the ocean, back in Canada, there were prisoners and casualties of another kind.

In 1914, immigrants from Austria-Hungary, Germany and the other Central Powers were rounded up and locked away in internment camps. More than 8,000 people who considered themselves Canadian were imprisoned for being "enemy aliens."

For many, it's a dark secret. It wasn't until Jerry Bayrak was in his 70s that he first learned of his family's past. Like most of those in the camps, his family was Ukrainian. Bayrak's mother was the last known survivor of the 24 internment camps across Canada.

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"It does make you angry. You're sort of resentful, I guess," he says. "At the time, they branded you an enemy alien and called you names and told you to go back to where you came from. For us today, it's hard to understand."

This xenophobic government policy was, at the time, justified under the War Measures Act. The act would be brought into force two more times in our country: during the Second World War, when Japanese-Canadians were interned following the bombing of Pearl Harbour, and during the 1970 October Crisis in Quebec.

PHOTOS



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There is little tangible evidence left of the hardships forced upon those who immigrated to Canada from the wrong parts of Europe. The camps that housed prisoners from Nanaimo to Halifax have been destroyed. So have the official government records.

This part of history has left its mark on the country, though. Banff National Park, for example, was partially built by prisoners healthy enough to be put to work. Others, unfit for slave labour, died of tuberculosis and pneumonia, or while attempting to escape. More than 100 people died during internment, which lasted until the last camp closed in Kapuskasing, Ont., on Feb. 24, 1920.

But now, after the last of those imprisoned have passed away, a renewed effort to remember the past has come to life. The government created a \$10-million "Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Fund" in 2008 to support commemoration projects and "recognize the experiences of ethno-cultural communities affected by the First World War Internment."

And later this August, 100 plaques commemorating the 100th anniversary will be unveiled across the country.

After all this time, it's not about hard feelings or guilt, says Lubomyr Luciuk from the Ukrainian Canadian Civil Liberties Association.

"Canadians today should not be apologizing for something your grandfather did to my grandfather," he says.

"Acknowledge it, perhaps provide some kind of symbolic redress, but the most important thing really is memory."

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