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## German-American Internees in the United States during WWII

(adapted from Arthur D. Jacobs' research and [website](#): [click here for interview](#) with Art.)



Christmas 1943—A celebration not to be found in the photographic histories of Ellis Island. (from Jacobs' web site caption:) The dark years of Ellis Island, 1941 through 1948, remain a secret. Many German Americans found themselves locked up in this place three years after the war in Europe had ended. They were held behind barbed wire fences and iron-barred windows. By 1947 hundreds had already been held for more than five years.

### Introduction

by *Karen E. Ebel* [kebel@yahoo.com](mailto:kebel@yahoo.com) [www.gaic.info](http://www.gaic.info)

German Americans are the largest ethnic group in the U.S. Approximately 60 million Americans claim German ancestry. German-American loyalty to America's promise of freedom traces back to the Revolutionary War. Nevertheless, during Second World War the U.S. government and many Americans viewed German Americans and others of "enemy ancestry" as potentially dangerous, particularly recent immigrants. The Japanese-American World War II experience is well known. Few, however, know of the European American WWII experience, particularly that of the German Americans. The government Used many interrelated, constitutionally questionable methods to control those of enemy ancestry, including internment, individual and group exclusion from military zones, internee exchanges for Americans held in Germany, deportation, "alien enemy" registration requirements, travel restrictions and property confiscation. The human cost of these civil liberties violations was high: families were disrupted, reputations destroyed, homes and belongings lost. Meanwhile, untold numbers of German Americans fought for freedom around the world, including their ancestral homelands; some were the immediate relatives of those subject to oppressive restrictions on the home front. Pressured by the United States, many Latin American governments arrested at least 4,050 **German Latin Americans**. Most were shipped in dark boat holds to the United States and interned. At least 2,000 Germans, German Americans and Latin Americans were later exchanged for Americans and Latin Americans held in Germany. Some allege that internees were captured to Use as exchange bait.

During WWII our government had to do its utmost to ensure domestic security against dangerous elements in its midst—but it should have exercised greater vigilance to protect the liberties of those most vulnerable because of their ethnic ties to enemy nations. Some were dangerous, but too many were assumed guilty and never able to prove their innocence. Admittedly, U.S. wartime governmental actions are difficult to assess decades later. To prevent possible future erosion of our civil liberties, however, the federal government must fully review and acknowledge its wartime civil liberties violations. A comprehensive federal review of the European American experience has never been done. On 3 August 2001 Senators Russell Feingold (D-WI) and Charles Grassley (R-IA) introduced S. 1356, *The European Americans and Refugees Wartime Treatment Study Act* in the U.S. Senate, joined by Senator Ted Kennedy (D-MA) and Senator Joseph Lieberman. This bill would create a much-needed independent commission to review U.S. government policies directed against European "enemy" ethnic groups during WWII in the U.S. and Latin America. This commission also would review the U.S. government's denial of asylum to European (primarily Jewish) refugees seeking refuge in the U.S. from persecution in Europe. It was reported favorably to the Senate by the Senate Judiciary Committee in March 2002 and renamed *The Wartime Treatment Study Act*.

The following summarizes two particularly onerous methods of control—internment and exclusion—and a timeline of related events:

*Selective Internment.* Pursuant to the Alien Enemy Act of 1798 (50 U.S.C 21-24), which remains in effect today, the U.S. may apprehend, intern and otherwise restrict the freedom of "alien enemies" upon declaration of war or actual, attempted or threatened invasion by a foreign nation. During WWII, the U.S. Government interned at least 11,000 persons of German ancestry. By law, only "enemy aliens" could be interned; however, with governmental approval, their family members frequently joined them in the camps. Many such "voluntarily" interned spouses and children were American citizens. Internment was frequently based upon uncorroborated, hearsay evidence gathered by the FBI and other intelligence agencies. Homes were raided and many ransacked. Fathers, mothers and sometimes both were arrested and disappeared. Sometimes children left after the arrests had to fend for themselves. Some were placed in orphanages. DOJ instituted very limited due process protections for those arrested. Potential internees were held in custody for weeks in temporary detention centers, such as jails and hospitals, prior to their hearings. Frequently, their families had no idea where they were for weeks. The hearings took place before DOJ-constituted civilian hearing boards. Those arrested were subject to hostile questioning by the local prosecuting U.S. Attorney, who was assisted by the investigating FBI agents. The intimidated, frequently semi-fluent accused had no right to counsel, could not contest

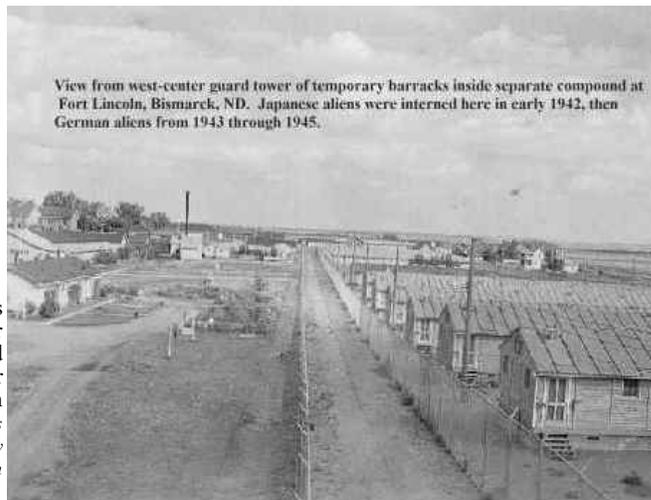
the proceedings or question their accusers. Hearing board recommendations were forwarded to the Alien Enemy Control Unit of the Department of Justice for a final determination that could take weeks or months. Internees remained in custody nervously awaiting DOJ's order—unconditional release, parole or internment. Policy dictated that the AECU resolve what it deemed to be questionable hearing board recommendations in favor of internment. Based on AECU recommendations, the Attorney General issued internment orders for the duration of the war. Internees were shipped off to distant camps. Families were torn apart and lives destroyed. Family members left at home were shunned due to fear of the FBI and spite. Newspapers published stories and incriminating lists. Eventually destitute, many families lost their homes and had to apply to the government to join spouses in family camps, apply for welfare and/or rely on other family members who could afford to support them. Eventually, under such duress, hundreds of internees agreed to repatriate to war-torn Germany to be exchanged with their children for Americans. Once there, food was scarce, Allied bombs were falling and their German families could do little to help them. Many regretted their decision. Considering the spurious allegations, which led to the internment of a majority of internees, their treatment by our government was harsh indeed. Their experience provides ample evidence of why our civil liberties are so precious.

*Exclusion.* In cooperation with the War Department, DOJ created a network of restricted areas. Enemy aliens were forbidden to enter or remain in certain areas and their movements severely restricted in others. The restrictions imposed great hardship on those living or working in these areas. Pursuant to Presidential Executive Order 9066, the military could restrict the liberties of citizens and aliens, as it deemed necessary. This led to the exclusion of individuals and groups from extensive "military zones" comprising over a third of the U.S. The most well-known group exclusion was the massive Japanese American relocation from the West Coast. Several hundred individual exclusion orders were issued. The government was particularly suspicious of naturalized citizens of enemy ethnicity. Citizens could not be interned, so the military threatened those it deemed dangerous with exclusion. Many felt contesting exclusion orders was futile and moved before an order was actually issued. Unlike group exclusion, hearings were required for individual exclusion. Resembling enemy alien internment hearings, these hearings were subject to very limited due process protections, clearly violating the rights of American citizens. If an exclusion order was issued following a hearing, excludees were given little time to depart. Homes were abandoned. Some excludees left their families behind. FBI agents followed them to their new communities. The government often advised police and employers how "dangerous" excludees were, so finding and keeping jobs was difficult. Little or government resettlement assistance was given to excludees. Some contested their exclusion orders in court, protesting the government's violation of their due process rights. After several federal courts found the military's actions of questionable constitutionality, the individual exclusion program decreased in popularity. Although more unusual, in lieu of exclusion the government also sought to denaturalize citizens, so they could be interned as enemy aliens or deported.

#### Survey of Internment and Detention Centers

**Fort Lincoln, Bismarck/North Dakota** (courtesy John Christgau; visit his [website](#))

**Internee-Camp Crystal City/Texas** | **Ellis Island as an Internee Prison** | **Map of Internment Camps**



View from west-center guard tower of temporary barracks inside separate compound at Fort Lincoln, Bismarck, ND. Japanese aliens were interned here in early 1942, then German aliens from 1943 through 1945.

#### Specific Cases

The following stories include the fates of families or individuals who either lived in the Midwest when the United States entered the Second World War in December 1941 or were interned in the Midwest thereafter. (These accounts were researched, written and presented by Arthur D. Jacobs, Karen E. Ebel and John Christgau; used with permission.)

**the Eiserloh Family** | **the Fuhr Family** | **the Greis Family** | **Karl Vogt** | **Max Ebel**

**Other German Internees' Stories** (see list in yellow box) or [www.gaic.info](http://www.gaic.info)

#### Time Line/Aftermath

#### Conclusion

by Karen E. Ebel

Thanks to federal legislation and effective activism by their ethnic group, U.S. government mistreatment of Japanese Americans is well known. After almost 60 years, the German American experience remains buried. The few surviving, aged internees remember their experiences well, despite years of trying to forget. Their memories haunt them. Mostly, because they are Americans who revere freedom, they want the dreadful saga of their wartime mistreatment told so it will never happen again. The CWRIC reviewed a significant portion of government's discriminatory wartime policies. Another commission should be established immediately to complete the study of these policies as they affected European Americans, particularly German Americans.

#### Related Resources

**Freedom of Information Times website** | **National Archives link**

**Chronology of Internment** | **History of Internment** | **General Stories of Internees**

**Latin-American Internees** | **Books/Journals** | **Videos/Radio** | **Print Media**

**Wartime Policies** | **Congressional Efforts** | **Exhibit** | **Exhibit Flyer** | **Exhibit Opening** | **Reunion**