



FEATURE

ARTICLE BY
JAMES H. MARSH**REVISED BY**
ELI YARHI**PUBLISHED**
02/23/12**LAST EDITED**
11/28/16**DETAINED, DISPOSSESSED AND DISPERSED**
APOLOGY AND REDRESS

HOME EVENTS HISTORICAL

Japanese Internment: Banished and Beyond Tears

Beginning in early 1942, the Canadian government detained and dispossessed the vast majority of people of Japanese descent living in British Columbia. They were interned for the rest of the Second World War, during which time their homes and businesses were sold by the government in order to pay for their detention.



A family of Japanese Canadians being relocated in British Columbia, 1942. Image: Library and Archives Canada/C-046355.

LAC

Japanese people had long suffered the sting of racism in Canada by that point. Ever since the first Japanese person, a man named Manzo Nagano, stepped ashore in 1877 at New Westminster, White settlers in British Columbia tried to exclude people whom they considered to be “undesirables.” In so doing, they passed laws to keep Japanese people from working in the mines, to prevent them from voting and to prohibit them from working on any project funded by the province.

Then came the stunning news, on 7 December 1941, of Japan's attacks on Pearl Harbor and Hong Kong, where Canadian troops were stationed (see Battle of Hong Kong). With these shocking events, fears of a Japanese invasion were sparked and their flames fanned by a sensationalist press. Distrust of Japanese Canadians spread along the Pacific Coast. The RCMP moved quickly to arrest suspected Japanese operatives, while the Royal Canadian Navy began to impound 1,200 Japanese-owned fishing boats. On the recommendation of the RCMP and in order to avoid racist backlash, Japanese newspapers and schools were voluntarily shut down.



Japanese Canadian fishermen having their boat confiscated by a Royal Canadian Navy Officer, 1941. Image: Library and Archives Canada/LAC

"From the army point of view, I cannot see that Japanese Canadians constitute the slightest menace to national security," wrote Major-General Kenneth Stuart. Nevertheless, BC politicians were in a rage, speaking of the Japanese "in the way that the Nazis would have spoken about Jewish Germans. When they spoke I felt... the physical presence of evil," said Escott Reid, a Canadian diplomat.

Detained, Dispossessed and Dispersed

On 24 February 1942, the federal Cabinet of Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King issued Order-in-Council P.C. 1486 to remove and detain "any and all persons" from any "protective area" in the country. While those powers were broad enough to detain any person, they were specifically used to target Japanese Canadians along the West Coast. The following week, the British Columbia Security Commission, the organization that carried out Japanese internment, was established. On 16 March, the first Japanese Canadians were transported from areas 160 km inland from the Pacific coast — deemed a "protected area" — and brought to Hastings Park. More than 8,000 detainees moved through Hastings Parks, where women and children were housed in the Livestock Building. All property that could not be carried was taken into government custody.

"I was a 22-year-old Japanese Canadian," said Tom Tamagi, "a prisoner of my own country of birth. We were confined inside the high wire fence of Hastings Park just like caged animals."

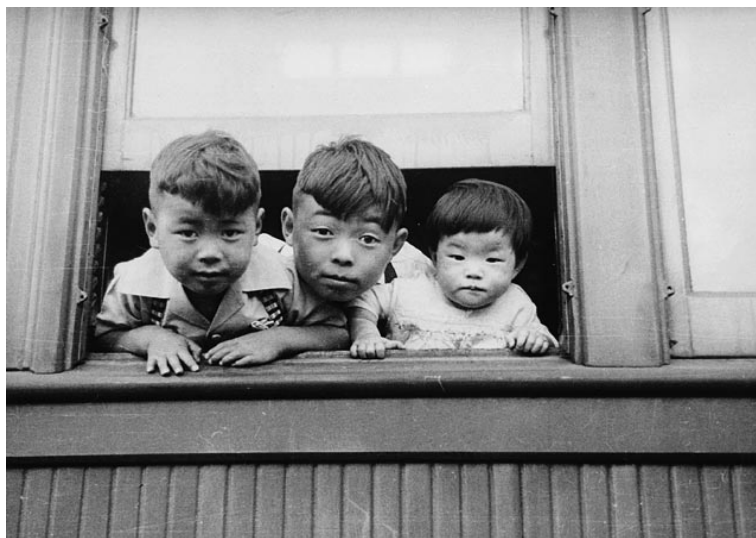


Japanese Relocation

Even those Japanese who were Canadian citizens were relocated in 1942 (courtesy Library and Archives Canada/C-46350).

Special trains then carried the Japanese detainees to Slocan, New Denver, Kaslo, Greenwood and Sandon — ghost towns in the BC interior. Others were offered the option of working on sugar beet farms in Alberta and Manitoba (see Sugar Industry), where they would be able to keep their families intact. Though the camps were not surrounded with barbed wire fences, as they were in the United States, conditions were overcrowded and poor, with no electricity or running water.

Those who resisted their internment were sent to prisoner of war camps in Petawawa, Ontario, or to Camp 101 on the northern shore of Lake Superior.



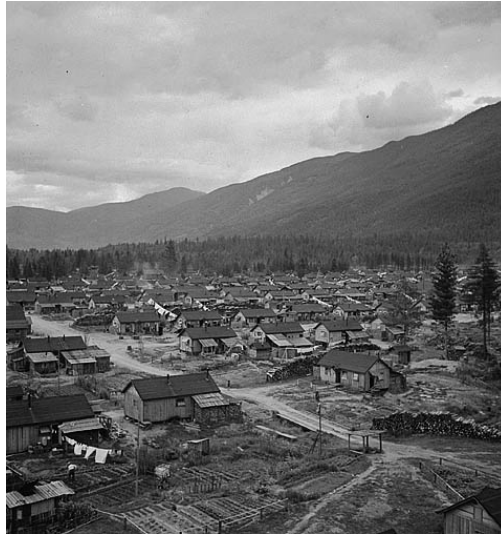
Young Japanese Canadians being relocated in British Columbia, 1942.

Image: Library and Archives Canada/C-057251.

LAC

In a further betrayal, an order-in-council signed 19 January 1943 liquidated all Japanese property that had been under the government's "protective custody." Homes, farms, businesses and personal property were sold, and the proceeds used to pay down the social assistance received by detained Japanese Canadians.

Anti-Japanese racism was not confined to British Columbia, but was spread across Canada. Though acutely in need of labour, Albertans did not want Japanese Canadians in their midst. Alberta sugar beet farmers crowded Japanese labourers into tiny shacks, uninsulated granaries and chicken coops, and paid them a pittance for their hard labour.



An internment camp for Japanese Canadians in British Columbia, 1945.
Image: Jack Long / National Film Board of Canada/Library and Archives Canada/PA-142853.
LAC

Just over 90 per cent of Japanese Canadians — some 21,000 people — were uprooted during the war. The majority were Canadian citizens by birth.

Even at the end of the war, Mackenzie King continued to bow to the most strident demands of the politicians and the citizens he represented. He offered Japanese Canadians two choices: move to Japan or disperse to provinces east of the Rocky Mountains. He never expressed any regrets for the treatment of Japanese Canadians — during the war or after.

In 1946, nearly 4,000 former internees sailed to a bombed-out Japan. About 2,000 were aging first-generation immigrants — 1,300 were children under 16 years of age. The last controls on Japanese Canadians were not lifted until 1948, when they were granted the right to vote. Finally, Canadian society began to open to the Japanese.

Apology and Redress

The military threat cited to justify the evacuation of the Japanese never existed outside the overheated imaginations of some British Columbians. Not a single Japanese Canadian was charged with any wrongdoing. Still, some have been uncomfortable judging the acts of our predecessors from the exalted perspective of hindsight. When Japanese Canadians campaigned for compensation on 29 June 1984, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau said, "I do not see how I can apologize for some historic event to which we... were not a party. We can regret that it happened." He then went on to ask where such claims for compensation would end. Indeed, other communities in Canada also sought redress and apology from the government for its racially motivated policies of the past, including Chinese Canadians who paid the head tax and Indigenous peoples forced to attend residential schools — among others. History leaves many victims.

But as expressed in the April 1947 issue of *Saturday Night* magazine, "It is the first step which costs; an injustice once performed is fatally easy to repeat." On 22 September 1988, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney rose in the House of Commons to apologize on behalf of the Canadian government for the wrongs it committed against Japanese Canadians during wartime. The apology came with symbolic redress payments to individuals and to community funds. But the most enduring accomplishment of the Japanese campaign for redress was the abolition of the *War Measures Act*, which had provided the legal basis for the removal of the Japanese from their homes. Ultimately, the redress campaign was a strong reminder of the poisonous effects of racism.



Japanese Canadians

September 1988, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney signs the agreement to compensate the Japanese-Canadians for the expropriation of their property and their internment during World War II (photo by Mike Binder).

BRITISH COLUMBIA

WORLD WAR II

FEATURE

INTERNMENT CAMP

WAR MEASURES ACT

MACKENZIE KING

WWII

JAPAN

INTERNMENT

JAPANESE