

Background to Canada's first national internment operations



Background Briefs

Historic injustices and redress in Canada



"Fire alarm," Cave and Basin, Banff National Park
Source: Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Buck Collection (V295-LC-40)

Historical context

Roughly 2.5 million newcomers arrived in Canada between 1896 and 1911. A significant proportion of new immigrants came from Eastern Europe, and of these, the largest number was Ukrainian. These immigrants were actively recruited by the Canadian government, which was in search of workers to feed its growing resource and agricultural sectors. Like other immigrants, these newcomers faced many hardships and struggles in what was often an unwelcoming land. However, the outbreak of World War I profoundly altered their lives in ways they could not have imagined when they left their homeland in search of a better life in Canada.

Details about World War I internment

Having emigrated from territories under the control of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, one of Canada's enemies during World War I, immigrants from Europe and Asia Minor came under increasing suspicion. Wartime fears and anxieties led to an increase in xenophobia (intense dislike or fear of people from other countries). The passage of the War Measures Act (a law used in times of emergency) provided the legal basis for the federal government to deny basic rights to Canadians. This resulted in the internment of 8,579 Canadians labeled as enemy aliens. Over 5,000 were Ukrainians. In addition, 80,000 individuals were required to register as enemy aliens and to report

to local authorities on a regular basis. The affected communities include Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Croatians, Czechs, Germans, Hungarians, Italians, Jews, various people from the Ottoman Empire, Polish, Romanians, Russians, Serbians, Slovaks, Slovenes, among others of which most were Ukrainians and most were civilians.

Referred to as Canada's first national internment operations, the period between 1914 and 1920 saw members of affected communities separated, their property confiscated and sold and thousands of men sent to internment camps to do years of forced labour in Canada's wilderness. These internees were subjected to harsh living and working conditions, and they were used to develop Canadian infrastructure as forced labourers. They were used to develop Banff National Park, experimental farms in northern Ontario and Quebec, steel mills in Ontario and Nova Scotia, and they toiled in the mines in British Columbia, Ontario and Nova Scotia. These development programs benefited Canadian corporations to such a degree that the internment was carried on for two years after the end of World War I.

To this date, it is unclear what the driving force for the internment was. Some have argued that it was due to "war fever" and the resulting wartime fear of people from other countries and cultures. Others point to the economic benefits of a forced labour system that provided companies with abundant cheap labour.

Significance of World War I internment

Internment during the World War I era is an example of legally sanctioned injustice, where the civil rights of targeted Canadians are denied without just cause, and entire communities are subjected to indignity, abuse and untold suffering. The War Measures Act, which was first implemented during World War I, provided the legal justification for the internment, and was also used as the basis for interning Japanese Canadians and others during World War II. World War I internment exposed many of the anti-immigrant feelings of the general population of the day. Internment marked the beginning of a traumatic period in the affected communities, one that would leave deep scars long after the last internment camp was closed.



Inside the campground at Kapuskasing, 1915-1917

Source: Sergt. William D. Buck, photographer, Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, William D. Buck fonds (V295/PD 95)

