

Context of the World War I internment operations



Background Briefs

Historic injustices and redress in Canada

World War I

- When the British Empire, alongside Russia and France, declared war against Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire in 1914, Canada was automatically at war.
- On August 22, 1914 the Canadian government led by Prime Minister Robert Borden passed the *War Measures Act* giving the government certain powers during times of war.
- Canada fought in World War I from 1914 until the armistice on November 11, 1918 (Remembrance Day) that ended the fighting.
- World War I officially came to an end with the signing of the final peace treaty in 1920; this officially ended the internment operation.

Enemy aliens

- The Canadian government was greatly worried about the hundreds of thousands of immigrants living in Canada who were citizens of such enemy nations as Austria-Hungary, Germany, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire.
- The government of Canada issued an Order-in-Council providing for the registration and, in certain cases, the imprisonment of aliens of “enemy nationality.”
- An estimated 120,000 people living in Canada were designated as “enemy aliens” (citizens of a country at war with the land in which he or she is living).
- From August 4, 1914 to February 24, 1920, 80,000 individuals were forced to report regularly to special registrars or to local or North West Mounted Police forces. These individuals included Ukrainians,

Bulgarians, Croatians, Czechs, Germans, Hungarians, Italians, Jews, various people from the Ottoman Empire, Polish, Romanians, Russians, Serbians, Slovaks and Slovenes, among others, of which most were Ukrainians and most were civilians. They were issued identity papers that had to be carried at all times, and those failing to do so could be subjected to arrest, fines or even imprisonment.

- Restrictions were also imposed on freedom of speech, association and movement of enemy aliens. Municipalities were told to watch all Germans and Austrians living within their areas, and all enemy aliens were prevented from leaving the country.

World War I internment operations

- In total, 8,579 enemy aliens (including 81 women and 156 children) were interned in 24 internment camps across Canada. The internment camps held 5,954 Austro-Hungarians (believed to be mostly Ukrainians), 2,009 Germans, 205 people from the Ottoman Empire and 99 Bulgarians.
- Throughout the war years, numerous letters, petitions and memoranda were addressed to the federal and provincial authorities by Ukrainian Canadian organizations, asserting that the Ukrainian Canadians were loyal to the Dominion of Canada and the British Empire, not Austria-Hungary.
- Although many camps closed from 1916 to 1918, camps in Vernon (British Columbia), Kapuskasing (Ontario) and Amherst (Nova Scotia) were not closed until 1919 or 1920, a full year and a half after the end of the war.

