

Background to Japanese internment



Background Briefs

Historic injustices and redress in Canada



Impounded Japanese Canadian fishing vessels at Annieville Dyke on the Fraser River in the early 1940s.

Source: University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections, JCPC 12b.001.

Historical context

During the late 1800s, many young Japanese men left lives of extreme poverty in Japan in search of a better future. Some ended up in Canada, mostly on the west coast, only to face new hardships and an unwelcoming society. Many were already skilled fishermen in Japan and a few found work in the fishing industry on the west coast, either in the boats or at one of the dozens of canneries where the fish were processed and canned. Many others found seasonal work in other natural resource industries such as logging and mining, which were hungry for cheap labour. As the number of Japanese immigrants to Canada grew in the early 20th century, the phrase “Asian invasion” became widely used in the media, along with the term “yellow peril.” Citizens of British Columbia, who were already angry with the growing Chinese immigrant population, saw the Japanese as an additional threat to their jobs and culture.

On September 10, 1939, Canada, a loyal British dominion, followed Britain’s decision and declared war on Germany. Allied with Canada’s enemies, Germany and Italy, Japan had attacked countries in Southeast Asia. As a result, Japanese Canadians came under increasing suspicion and their loyalty to Canada began to be questioned.

Details about Japanese internment

Immediately following Japan’s attack on Hawaii’s Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Canada, like its ally, the United States, declared war on Japan. The *War Measures Act* was passed, making every Japanese person in Canada, regardless of where they were born and whether they were a citizen of Canada or not, an enemy alien. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the lives of Japanese Canadians changed dramatically. Many lost their jobs, their fishing boats were seized, and Japanese cultural organizations and newspapers were closed. Curfews were imposed, and a “secure zone” that excluded Japanese men, was set up along the west coast.

Of the over 23,000 Japanese in Canada at the time, more than 75% were Canadian citizens. All were labeled enemy aliens. Local newspapers and radio stations continuously reported that Japanese spies were in their communities and would help the enemy when they invaded. In early 1942, the Canadian government ordered Japanese families to leave their homes and evacuate BC’s coast. They were sent to internment camps in the province’s interior and were permitted to bring with them only what they could carry. As the evacuation continued, the government began to take the possessions and belongings of Japanese Canadians. Cars were impounded and businesses and their contents were seized. The government took land, homes and their contents, as well as any other possessions that could not be carried in suitcases. In January 1943, an Order-in-Council was approved by the Canadian government requiring that all of the property be sold.



Women and children were sent to a variety of camps, most separated from their husbands and fathers. Men were sent to remote locations in the BC interior to perform forced labour. Living conditions in the camps were harsh, and the pay was well below subsistence level (what is needed to survive). Japanese Canadians who were interned lost their dignity and freedom.

In early 1945, when the end of the war was near, many politicians pushed for the Japanese to be deported from Canada. Those that stayed in BC during the war and chose not to go back to Japan were strongly encouraged to move east of the Rocky Mountains once the war was over. Going back to the BC coast was not an option. Some internees who had gone to the Prairies chose to stay there, while others left for areas farther east, including Ontario, Quebec and the Maritimes. About 13,000 Japanese Canadians decided to go east. Less than one third of the original Japanese population remained in BC.

Significance of Japanese internment

When the *War Measures Act* was lifted in December 1945, several thousand Japanese Canadians returned to the BC coast to start again, but they could never recover what was lost. Not only were their homes and businesses gone, but also their communities had been widely dispersed (separated). Although the war ended in 1945, discrimination against Japanese Canadians continued. Along with First Nations people, they were not allowed to vote in BC until 1949.

The internment of Japanese Canadians exposed the deep-rooted anti-Asian feelings in Canada in general and in BC in particular. Already a disenfranchised (lacking rights) minority group despite their efforts to adopt Canadian customs, the branding of Japanese Canadians as enemy aliens and the subsequent hardship and humiliation of internment left a painful imprint on the community. More than just an isolated incident, Japanese internment during World War II marks a deliberate and legally sanctioned policy by the Canadian government to take away the rights and property of a group of Canadians based on their race and country of origin/ancestry.



Dining hall at the Slocan internment camp, British Columbia.

Source: University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections, JCPC 17.005.

