World War I Japanese-Canadian volunteers

Photograph of World War I Canadian Japanese volunteer corps.
Fears of attack

Political cartoon, published in the Victoria Daily Times on February 17, 1942 following the fall of Singapore to the Japanese.

Victoria Daily Times, 17 February 1942
The evacuation

Photograph taken on February 26, 1942 of a police officer escorting Japanese-Canadian children after they were evacuated on February 26, 1942.

Province Newspaper photo, Vancouver Public Library VPL 1345
The Japanese threat in Canada

I was one of seven federal employees engaged in the R.C.M.P. barracks and also up at Hastings Park when the Japanese evacuation was going on, and every one of those 12,000 files went through my hands. And I don't think that some of you people who didn't live through those war years in Vancouver realize just what was going on. If you had seen some of the files on these people you would have realized we had to be very cautious.

Well, for instance, up the coast, some of the dear old daddies (retirees) were retired Japanese admirals. I can't disclose what was in the files. Some had high-powered binoculars. Now don't ridicule me, please, and we did sight a submarine off Vancouver Island. In fact, I typed the first report on the sighting.

I admit, there are still some very influential people in Vancouver in charge of this evacuation who made their rake-off (a percentage of the money) on the forced sale of the Japanese fish boats and their lands and businesses. Now we didn't go along with that....

I can't tell you what was in those files. They were all classified, secret. We were at war.

Loyalty of Japanese-Canadians

Political cartoon published in the Vancouver Sun on June 1, 1943 following the battle between Japan and the United States of America over control of the Aleutian Islands.
Results of internment

Before the war there was no future for a Nisei (second-generation Canadian-born). Even if you graduated from university you went fishing with your father or on his garden farm or in a sawmill. No company would ever hire us. The only professional whoever made use of his education was a doctor.

The opportunities today for ... well, the door is wide open.

So I say, to the second and third generation the end results were good. I still oppose the method of doing it. I could see their point of wartime hysteria for one thing, plus they said it was for our own protection and safety. If there had ever been an invasion of Japanese it would have been pretty hard for the Japanese, like my parents who were born in Japan, to ignore them completely. But there was not one case of sabotage the entire time.

Impounded Japanese-Canadian fishing vessels

Photograph taken in the early 1940s of impounded Japanese-Canadian fishing vessels at Annieville Dyke on the Fraser River.

University of British Columbia Library, Rare Books and Special Collections, JCPC 12b.001
World War II Japanese-Canadian translators

Photograph taken in 1945 of second-generation Japanese-Canadians working as interpreters alongside British units in India.

Courtesy of the National Association of Japanese Canadians.
**Economic losses survey**

Survey recorded in 1946 documenting the total value of personal losses of Japanese-Canadians in Toronto as a result of internment.

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**TABLE V**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Economic Losses Survey, Toronto, 1946: Real and Personal Property</th>
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<tr>
<td>Estimated</td>
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<td>Real estate:</td>
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<td>Businesses</td>
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<td>Personal property</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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Source: Calculated from the original data.

During the spring and summer of 1942, there was good reason to fear an attack. At the beginning of June, the Japanese launched their main endeavour, a twin offensive against the Aleutians, Operation AL, and against the western Hawaiian Islands, Operation MI. As part of this plan, they attacked Dutch Harbor, Alaska, from the air on 3 June and occupied Kiska and Attu in the Aleutian Islands four days later. These successes in the Aleutians suggested Japan might seek a base in the Queen Charlotte Islands from which aircraft could easily strike the Canadian and American mainlands. Closer to the centres of population, submarines shelled Santa Barbara, California, and points in Oregon, and, on 20 June 1942, Estevan Point on Vancouver Island. A submarine also sank two ships at the entrance to the Straits of Juan de Fuca. Prime Minister King feared an attack on British Columbia; he did not know that Japan was readying two plans for the invasion of Hawaii and eventual strikes from there against the North American mainland.

Had such raids occurred, no one knows what the Japanese-Canadians might have done or what other Canadians would have done to them.

Certainly the decision of the Canadian government in February 1942 to remove all Japanese-Canadians from the coast did ease civilian tensions. In early March, despite fears that the revelations about atrocities committed by Japanese forces at Hong Kong might lead white British Columbians to vent their anger on local Japanese, British Columbians were quiet.

The first question that must be raised, and one that has not been asked before, is this: what resources did Ottawa’s civil, military and police authorities have on the west coast before the outbreak of war to secure information about the 22,000 Japanese-Canadians living in British Columbia? The answer is readily available.

The responsibility for internal security rested with the R.C.M.P., assisted as necessary by the armed forces. In July 1941, five months before the outbreak of war with Japan, the R.C.M.P.’s E Division, responsible for the Pacific coast, had on its staff three persons concerned with gathering intelligence [information] on the Japanese-Canadians in British Columbia: a sergeant who did not speak Japanese, a constable who did and a civilian translator.

This intelligence presence did not amount to very much. There was a danger of subversive activities [spying] on the part of elements in the Japanese community. “The police,” he went on, “are not in a position to ferret out the dangerous Japanese as they have done with the Germans and Italians; they have lines on a few Japanese who might be expected to take part in attempts at sabotage … but that would not really solve the problem.”

Such intelligence information as there was tended to agree that the Japanese consulate in Vancouver was the focus of Japanese nationalism, propaganda, and possible subversive activities in BC. One RCMP report surveying the general activities of the Japanese-Canadians noted that the consul and his staff regularly visited areas where Japanese-Canadians lived to deliver speeches and to talk privately with individuals about the Tokyo government’s views of world events. The Consul was also thought to exercise considerable influence on the local Japanese language schools and press.

The decryption team had intercepted important telegrams from the foreign affairs office in Tokyo to the Japanese embassy in Washington, dated 30 January 1941, that gave the Gaimusho’s orders to its officials in North America to de-emphasize propaganda and to strengthen intelligence gathering. Special reference was made to the [use of Nisei] and for the necessity of great caution so as to not bring persecution down on their heads. Those messages were copied to Ottawa and Vancouver as “Minister’s orders”—instructions, in other words, that were to be carried out in Canada just as in the United States. The Consulates success in carrying out these orders remains unknown.

An ugly episode


In February 1942, the federal cabinet ordered the expulsion of 22,000 Japanese-Canadians residing within one hundred miles of the Pacific coast. That order marked the beginning of a process that saw Canada’s Japanese minority uprooted from their homes, confined in detention camps, stripped of their property, and forcibly dispersed across Canada or shipped to a starving Japan.

An ugly episode in Canadian history, the events of the eight years between 1942 and 1950 left Japanese-Canadians in a state of trauma that has been compared to that of a rape victim. Although conscious that they were innocent victims, Japanese-Canadians felt humiliated by their degrading experiences. Their humiliation was compounded by the knowledge that the general public held them at least in part responsible for what had happened to them. Like rape victims, they responded with silence, with an aversion to discussing their experiences.

Longstanding racial hostility

Excerpt from a textbook written by Dougls R. Francis, Richard Jones and Donald B. Smith entitled Destinies: Canadian history since confederation, published in 2004.

More than any other group, Japanese-Canadians felt the brunt of Canadians’ animosity [hatred]. After the Japanese surprise raid on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, which brought fears of invasion of the Pacific coast, the federal government evacuated more than 20,000 Japanese and Japanese-Canadians living in coastal British Columbia. Evacuees were first housed in the exhibition buildings in Hastings Park, Vancouver, where wooden bunks were installed in horse stalls in the livestock barns. Later, most were transported to camps in the interior of the province, but several hundred males deemed “dangerous” were placed under armed guard at a camp in the Lake Superior bush country. Those interned saw their property confiscated and auctioned off. Families wishing to stay together had to agree to go to sugar beet farms in Alberta and Manitoba, where they had to perform the back-breaking labour of sugar-beet topping. After the war, Ottawa resettled the Japanese-Canadians across Canada and even attempted to deport thousands—many of whom were Canadian citizens—to Japan. Although the federal government abandoned these plans in 1947, hundreds of Japanese-Canadians, embittered by life in Canada, chose to return to Japan.

Most historians view wartime government policy toward the Japanese in Canada as the result of longstanding racial hostility toward this group. “The threat of Japanese subversion was created by the union of traditional racial attitudes and perceptions shaped by the fears and anxieties conjured up by war,” writes Peter Ward. A hostile public easily convinced federal politicians to act.