

A Brief History of Japanese Canadians in Canada & Japanese Canadian Internment

1895 – Japanese Canadians lose the right to vote in provincial and federal elections.

1896 – Japanese Canadians lose the right to vote in municipal elections.

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September 7th, 1907 - Vancouver Riots – One of the largest outbursts of white supremacy to grip Vancouver. It began as an anti-Asian organized parade of roughly 5 000 participants primarily led by the Asiatic Exclusion League. Roughly 1000 people would split off from the main group and rampaged through Chinatown and Little Tokyo injuring Chinese and Japanese Canadians and destroying their property. The Gentlemen's Agreement, which limited immigration from Japan, followed the riot.

1919 – An effort by the government was made to reduce the presence of Asian Canadians in the fishing industry and competing with non-Asian Canadians. Before 1919 Asian Canadians (predominantly Japanese) held nearly half of all fishing licenses issued in Canada. A goal was set to reduce fishing licenses handed out to Asian Canadians by 10% a year.

1923-1925 – Part of the attempt to reduce the presence of Japanese Canadian fishermen was to make it difficult for them to sustain this avenue of work. Between this highlighted period Japanese Canadians were prohibited from using gasoline powered boats.

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December 7th, 1941 - Japan launches an attack on the United States at Pearl Harbour. Canada declares war with Japan in hours.

December 8th, 1941 - The Royal Canadian Navy impounds 1200 fishing boats owned by Japanese Canadians as a “defense measure.”

January 14th, 1942 – Restrictions begin on “enemy alien” Japanese Canadians.

February 25th, 1942 – *War Measures Act* is utilized to order the removal of all Japanese Canadians from the coast of British Columbia, PM Mackenzie King states “for reasons of national security”.

Of the roughly 23 000 Canadians of Japanese ancestry residing in Canada roughly 22 000 lived along the coast of BC.

March 9th, 1942 – All adult male Japanese Canadian “enemy aliens” are ordered to report to the RCMP and receive their date of removal to road camps. Failure to comply to any orders would result in person(s) being arrested and sent to POW camps.

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March 16th, 1942 – First of many waves of Japanese Canadian families (women, children, elderly) are received and housed at the Livestock Building at Hastings Park in Vancouver before transferal to the interior internment camps.

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1945 – Internment of Japanese Canadians ends.

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1977-1987 – Movement for reparations & redress & redress settlement for Japanese Canadians.

Intro: Japanese Canadians are a settler group who have lived in Canada since the 19th century. Throughout their existence in Canada, they have persevered through many racist barriers. Their imprisonment during World War Two is a notable historical obstacle. The first page of this fact sheet is to illuminate and situate the event of internment within the larger history of Japanese Canadians. The second page will highlight the narratives and actions which Japanese Canadians undertook to resistance racism.

Consequences of Losing Voting Rights: Exclusion from occupying positions as school trustees, public office, participating in jury service, working in government positions such as the post office, civil service, nursing, and policing. Although the repealing of their Canadian right to vote would not void Japanese Canadians of all their political power, as citizens, it would severely hamper it.

The December 7-8 1941 fallout:

- 38 Japanese Canadians are immediately arrested.
- Language schools and Japanese Canadian press are shutdown.
- All Japanese Canadians whether British subject, immigrant, or Japanese Canadian veteran become designated as “enemy aliens” and required to register with the RCMP.
- All Japanese fishing vessels ordered to the nearest port for impounding.

The January 1942 fallout:

- All Japanese Canadians are prohibited from fishing, being on a boat, possessing and or using a short-wave radio or camera.
- All Japanese Canadian automobiles are impounded.
- Japanese Canadian mail is censored.
- A sunset to sunrise movement curfew is forced up on all Japanese Canadians.

Events During Internment:

- While imprisoned within interior of Canada the possessions of Japanese Canadians fell to the Custodian of Enemy Property. The CEP would sell Japanese Canadian's property (estate & personal items) without their consent. The money accumulated from dispossession would pay for the incarceration of Japanese Canadians.

Immediate Post War Repercussions:

Japanese Canadians...

- Were forbidden from returning to the BC coast and their former communities.
- Had no homes to return to upon their release since they were dispossessed of all their property during internment.
- Were faced with a choice by the federal government **repatriation** or **deportation** in a “Repatriation Survey” conducted by the Canadian government.

Reclaiming the Narratives of Japanese Canadian Internment & Afterwards

Intro: Although it is easy to perceive Japanese Canadians as simply victims of the government when reviewing their history of marginalization, racism, imprisonment, repatriation, and forced assimilation, it should not be done so. Japanese Canadians were a people like any other who refused racism and did not accept the marginalization. It has come to light through recent historical literature that Japanese Canadians have exercised power and resistance during the internment period and how they did it afterwards.

***Terminology:** *Nisei* (second generation of Japanese ancestry, Japanese Canadians born in Canada)

Power During Internment Period

During the period of internment some Japanese Canadians took on leadership roles as intermediaries to prevent violence between their community and the government, while others actively resisted the demands of the government. The actions of both types of Japanese Canadians exemplify power and resistance.

Intermediaries

In Hastings Park where Japanese Canadians were housed before dispersal to detention camps the atmosphere was tense, issues were everywhere, and communication was difficult. *Nisei* denied most jobs in Canadian society suddenly became badly needed in Hastings Park during WWII. Some *Nisei* took those job openings to make use of their education and make conditions for the Japanese Canadian community from worsening.

Some of the *Nisei* in Hastings Park...

- With their education worked administrative roles.
- They worked as intermediaries to mitigate the traumatic effects of Hastings Park.
- When violence erupted due to poor communication between the Japanese Canadian community and government representatives *Nisei* were there to defend the interned and deescalate the situation before they became something larger or worse.

Resistors

In March and April of 1942 in Vancouver when government representatives failed to provide assurances to the Japanese Canadian community that they would be treated as Canadians and not as “enemy aliens” some members hardened to open defiance against the government.

To avoid internment, dissident Japanese Canadians...

- Hid in vacant buildings.
- Hid in broad daylight by wearing “I am Chinese” buttons.
- Hid with sympathetic friends or relatives.

If found and arrested they would be given an ultimatum between internment (POW camps) or road camp work. Most chose internment. Japanese Canadians would not yield to the violation of their civil rights.

Power After Internment Period

In recent literature discussing the experiences of internment, Japanese Canadians have exercised power and resistance by controlling how much of their personal lives is shared in public documentation and who records those stories. This is noted by historian Pamela Sugiman in her writing and oral history/interview project. Across interviews with roughly 75 *Nisei* women and men, although stories varied, interviewees expressed certain consistent attributes in the recollection of their lives.

When telling their stories Japanese Canadians...

- expressed candour and humility in their narration.
- Acknowledged moments of agency and the powerlessness in their lives.
- Situated their stories into the larger collective history of Japanese Canadians.
- Provided whole life histories when answering interview questions instead of brief description of life during the war years.
- interweaved their present thoughts/life within their wartime stories.
- Recollected stories of triumph alongside those of suffering.
- Acknowledged many experiences of kindness on the part of *Hakujin* (Japanese term for “White”) neighbors, missionaries, friends, and RCMP alongside as many accounts of bigotry and racism.
- (not all but some) held back information or stories. They did this not as act of silence with the interview but as of authority retaining their agency (selectively choosing their audience).

By telling their stories in this particular way Japanese Canadians wish to have their hardship and pain acknowledged while also refusing the status or label of victims. They show through their interviews with Sugiman that “life is sweet” after all the pain and joy experienced.

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