

Extended Essay

**Why was the Japanese Canadian Detainment
Arguably More Severe than that of the American?**

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Abstract

In the early months of 1942, the United States government shipped off the entire Japanese American population of its three Pacific Coast states “about 120,000 people” to detainment camps. This evacuation of the Japanese minority was a global reality not only an American one even though the attacks on Pearl Harbor were contained exclusively to the United States. 220, 000 Japanese Canadians were also deported from the coast of British Columbia. If there was a loss of direct reason for reaction, then why was the Canadian reaction arguably more severe? The Americans and the Canadians were allies in the war, but why punish one more than the other? Especially the country that was less at fault. Why were, for example, a higher percentage of people evacuated from Canada than there were from the United States? Both governments claimed that they were uprooting the Japanese due to national security. However, the FBI had advised the Americans that the mass evacuation was not necessary in addition to the fact that the senior military officials did not believe that the Japanese composed a big risk. The mass evacuation of a large group of people from a considerable amount of land without any trials or hearings and based on racial ancestry led to one of many conclusions: that the dominant element of the evacuation in Canada was racial prejudice and that the Canadians felt threatened by the economic prosperity of the Japanese

In 1942, approximately 220,000 men, women and children of Japanese descent were labeled as "enemy aliens" and uprooted from a 100-mile coastal zone on the west coast of British Columbia. In the early months of the same year, the United States government shipped off the entire Japanese American population of its three Pacific Coast states "about 120,000 people" to detainment camps. This evacuation of the Japanese minority was a global reality not only an American one even though the attacks on Pearl Harbor were contained exclusively to the United States. However, if there was a loss of direct reason for reaction, then why was the Canadian reaction arguably more severe? The Americans and the Canadians were allies in the war, but why punish one more than the other? Especially the country that was less at fault. Why were, for example, a higher percentage of people evacuated from Canada than there were from the United States? Although this action only affected a small section of each population (both Canadian and American), it reflected one of the main themes of American history according to Chief Justice Roger B. Taney; the subject of white domination, of racism in America¹. It was a continent where nonwhites "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect"². But to simply narrate the past and to scrutinize the calamitous flaws is not enough. It is the historian's duty not only to tell what has happened, but also to explain why it occurred even though they are fully aware that any explanation they come up with is bound to be fractional. This is due to the restrictions in the field of history and the problems with the reliability of the sources. What is a historical primary source? It is usually the firsthand account of happenings recounted by an eyewitness. The main limitation is the collection of primary sources; the events have happened in the past, yet historians must collect the information at a different time. These accounts will either be collected through an interview or through a diary that was kept. Both these forms are equally unreliable. A written account leads to dissimilarities in perspective of the writer and the reader. Historians will study the information using the modern standards of the world that they presently live in which is more than likely unlike those used at the time. This will alter the implications of the occurrences and certain acts will have different values. Also, the written accounts would most probably have gone through inspection and

¹ See Daniels xvi

² Words from Chief Justice Roger B. Taney's 1857 decision in *Dred Scott vs. Sanford* See Daniels xvi.

would have been censored to an extent by the government. This would lead to an incomplete account. Another factor that could lead to this exact same outcome would be the personal bias of the writer themselves. One person couldn't possibly have known all sides of the story nor could have witnessed every single act that contributed to the final happening. Another problem of history that I have personally experienced would be the interpretation of the historian. I recognize, for example, that I might have interpreted the information I read differently from the way it was meant to be taken. As a consequence the information that I write, although I believe it to be true, might not be entirely accurate. But the fault does not rest entirely on my shoulders. The writer could also have twisted the truth unknowingly. S/he could have misinterpreted the occurrences themselves, in which case two accounts of the same event would be unlike. In this case, which is the historian to use? Although interpretation does account for most of the dissimilarities of history, memory loss and embellishment both contribute to erroneous statements. The writer will always unwittingly include fabricated sections of their story in order to fill the holes. These fictions will be taken as facts and once again, the accounts of the past are not made up of truths. These are the limitations that I knowingly worked with while filling in my role as a historian.

For those that were descendants of the Japanese, the attack on Pearl Harbor was a nightmare come true. During the 1930s, the generation of Nisei³ feared the possibility of war between Japan and the United States. The Nisei understood that the hopes that the American and Japanese communities held of the coming Nisei being the bridge that would close the gap between rival Pacific powers was simply an illusion. As the tensions between the two countries increased, the Nisei anxieties did as well. In this concern, some Nisei tried to stress their Americanism and loyalty by depreciating their fathers' generation and trying to become completely "American". While speaking to college students in early 1941, newspaper editor Togo Tanaka insisted that the Nisei must

³ "Japanese Canadians have named each generation in Canada, the immigrants from Japan being the 'first generation'. This differs from other ethnic groups for whom the first Canadian-born generation is the 'first generation.' The Issei are the pioneers from Japan who chose Canada as their home. Japanese males immigrated from about 1877 to 1907, and most women came after 1908. Those who came after World War II are called 'new immigrants' or 'shinjusha'. Nisei or the second generation, are the Canadian-born children of the Issei." See Miki 19

address what he named "the question of loyalty" and thought that since Issei were "more or less tumbleweeds with one foot in America and one foot in Japan" true loyalty to their country could only be expressed by denouncing the Issei generation.⁴ This sentiment of increased loyalty to the host country was felt by the Canadian Nisei as well. The Nisei adopted a

common point of view that they wished to prove their 'Canadianism' by fully co-operating with the government. However, this 'loyalty' was "demanded" by Mackenzie King and his cabinet instead of the voluntary will of loyalty espoused in the United States. The Canadian government viewed any "non-acceptance" as a form of disloyalty and insisted that the Japanese should show their allegiance by accepting evacuation and co-operating with the authorities. This coercive matter placed an unnecessary load on the evacuees.⁵ Not only were the Japanese persecuted, they were forced by the Canadian government to prove their loyalty and were punished if they did not obey. This type of behavior was not revealed in the United States, they did not punish people who were disloyal, to a country that was discriminating against them. Despite the years of propaganda and conception about a Pacific war, the attack on Pearl Harbor on Sunday, December 7, 1941, came as a surprise to the Americans. All over the nation, the shared reaction was that of disbelief which was quickly followed by a sentiment of determination to vindicate a defeat. With this attack, the Americans entered the war with an overwhelming emotion of unity which preceded all other notions of unity held previously by the country. But if the serene determination was the model mood for the entire nation, the mood of the Pacific Coast was nervous and "trigger-happy".⁶ The War Measures Act began the "evacuation" on February 27th. The word 'evacuation' was used as the official euphemism in order to differentiate between this specific exercise from formal internment.⁷ The Nisei could not legally be interned because under the Geneva Convention, internment only applies to aliens and Nisei were Canadian citizens. If they were 'interned', they would have been protected by international law. However, the

⁴ see Daniels 27

⁵ see Nakayama 226

⁶ see Daniels 32

⁷ See Nakayama 16

Canadian Government was aware of this and decided to use the word 'detained' instead. Thereby allowing the Japanese to be stripped of all their rights with no means to challenge it. Yet we continue to view this 'detainment' as internment.⁸

The basic treatment for Japanese Canadians and Japanese Americans was very similar. For example, both underwent relocation, dispossession and confinement. However, there are slight differences that tend to suggest that the treatment that the Japanese Canadians received was arguably more austere than that of the Japanese Americans. An example that has already been presented is the number of people that were uprooted. A huge 220,000 people; 75% of which were Canadian born were uprooted in Canada compared to a small 120,000 uprooted from west coast United States.⁹ Almost twice as many people, in addition to a larger percentage of people were relocated in Canada than in the States. But why take more people out of a country where there were no attacks? Surely these Canadian people posed less of a threat than the Americans.

Furthermore, when the Japanese Americans were evacuated, special measures were taken so as not to break up families and to ensure incarceration in family groups. The U.S. Wartime Civil Control Administration made sure that "evacuation would not split family units or communities where this could be avoided".¹⁰ Whereas the Japanese Canadian families were broken up without a second thought.¹⁰ The removal was carried out by civilian police authorities instead of the military. This BC Security Commission was assisted by the evacuations most cruel aspect of the forced separation of families. There were 750 men who refused to voluntarily leave their families and they were forced to join the Nazis, Fascists and Communists in the official internment camps.¹¹

In terms of the dispossession of all the personal property of the Japanese of either nationality; the Canadian government seized and sold land and the personal property. The evacuees could only take what they could carry with them and otherwise had to surrender

⁸ See Miki 24

⁹ see Miki 51 chart

¹⁰ See Adachi 230

¹¹ See Nakayama 16

their items under the so-called protection of the "Custodian of Japanese Property".¹² The Canadian government passed Order in Council PC 469 on January 19, 1943. This new order gave the Custodian of the Japanese Canadian Property the power to sell all the items without the owner's consent. Starting during the spring of 1943, the businesses and properties of all the evacuated Japanese Canadians were sold by the Custodian of Enemy Property are a small fraction of their value.¹³ This contrasts with the actions of the American government which did not involve themselves with the sale of property due to constitutional protections. The civilians were the ones to rid themselves of their items using panic sales and looting. Even after the war was over and the Japanese were asking for some sort of restitution, the Bird Commission in Canada only paid \$1.2 million whereas \$37 million American dollars were reimbursed.¹⁴

75% of the Japanese Canadians that were uprooted were Canadian born. This atrocity occurred because there was no legislation protection of human rights, not even for the Canadian-born. On March 25, 1942, over one hundred Nisei men refused to go by train to Schreiber, Ontario. These men were confined immediately and then sent to prisoner of war camps. These 100 are in addition to the 470 Nisei that were interned behind barbed wire without being charged with a crime between April and June 1942.¹⁴ "We were called the [Nisei] Mass Evacuation Group. We negotiated with the government and said we would go wherever they wanted only after we were sure our families were adjusted to their move. When the BC Security Commission refused our request, we refused to go. We were taken to the Immigration Shed, behind bars, and from there we were shipped in the dark of night to the internment camp where [...] we were guarded 24 hours a day"¹⁵ The Security Commission had all the authority to "restrict, control, evacuate and detain"¹⁶. The fact that the Security Commission were able to carry out their assignments without any serious injuries was due to the Japanese being inclined to "follow lines of least resistance" because of their culture dictating obedience and

¹² See Nakayama 16

¹³ See Miki 42

¹⁴ See Miki 37

¹⁵ Michael Ochiai, from '40 Years of Waiting Over for Montreal Family.' Barbara Newborn, *The Senior Times* (Montreal), October 1988 See Miki 38

¹⁶ See Nakayama 126 and Adachi 220

conformity.¹⁷ The United States had a very different constitution which provided that American citizens could not be held without just cause.¹⁸

Even with little to no money, the Japanese Canadian internees paid for their own food, clothes and improvements in their basic housing from their meager personal savings and any proceeds that they received from their property sales. The Americans had it much easier since their housing and food was provided to them.¹⁹ And with paying everything for themselves, the Canadians' living conditions were absolutely atrocious; a personal account gives a vivid account of the reality. "You should have seen the house we used to live in. Just one layer of siding, that's all, and a wood stove to heat the house. It was about 20 by 12 feet, every room just a hanging curtain. In the winter our bed froze solid and the blankets all stuck to the side...The first year we came it went down almost 43 below. We just burned wood all night long. The house wasn't insulated. I don't know how we stood it, really, when we look back".¹⁸

With their overwhelming loyalty to their respective countries (forced or not), the Japanese yearned to join the armed forces to help their country in the time of war. However, the Canadian government refused the Japanese the right to enlist until January 1945 due to the insistences of BC Premier, T.D. Patullo. He sent a letter to Mackenzie King dated September 23, 1940 stating that the Japanese would "be given the franchise, which we in this province can never tolerate".¹⁹ It was only when the Japanese Canadians were asked by the British government to join the British army as translators in southeast Asia, did the Canadian government allow them to enlist.²⁰ The American government was much more lenient in allowing the Japanese to be drafted and able to enlist almost immediately.²⁰ Even in such places like Hawaii where one third of the population was Japanese and not uprooted, people that were descendants of the Japanese were able to continue working at the Pearl Harbor US Naval base.²¹

Finally, the Japanese Americans were able to return back to their home on the coast much earlier than the Canadians. The Canadian government allowed the Japanese

¹⁷ See Adachi 225

¹⁸ Mrs. Hirayama, on winter in Manitoba, from *A Dream of Riches* (Japanese Canadian Centennial Project, 1978) p. 115) see Miki 35

¹⁹ Cited in *Democracy Betrayed* [NAJC, 1984]

²⁰ see Miki 44-45

²¹ See Miki 51

to return on April 1st, 1949; almost four years after the Americans were able to return on 1945.¹⁶

It is obvious that the treatment of the Japanese Canadians was more arduous than that of the Japanese American one. But what was the reason for this? Weren't the attacks on Pearl Harbor that started this ordeal occur in the United States? It would be logical to follow this thought process and assume that the biggest Japanese threats would be located in the United States. However, what if the attacks on Pearl Harbor was not the initial event that propelled these string of occurrences? Sunahara had it correctly when she stated that the "[a]buse of Japanese Canadians did not begin with the Second World War. Rather, [...] (it was the) culmination of a long history of discrimination resulting from Canadian social norms that cast Asians in the role of second-class citizens."²²

Firstly, both governments claimed that they were uprooting the Japanese due to national security. However, the FBI had advised the Americans that the mass evacuation was not necessary in addition to the fact that the senior military officials did not believe that the Japanese composed a big risk.²³ In light of all this information and discouragement, the Americans still went ahead with the uprooting which questions their motives. By August 1944, King declared that there was no longer a threat to national security brought about by the Japanese. No acts of violence, vandalism or disloyalty of any measure had occurred and yet, they were not allowed back to the coast. This illustrates the underlying motives of the Canadian government. It showed that the evacuation had not undergone under the premise of adhering to the War Measures Act, but rather was phase one of the government's plan to "permanently erase the presence of the Japanese Canadian community on the BC coast for reasons other than national security".²⁴ The succession of events also decreased the claims of urgency. For one, Mackenzie King ordered mass evacuation as much as three weeks after the attacks on Pearl Harbor. Yet another three weeks went by before the first person was relocated and by this time, the defenses on the coast had been strengthened. The evacuation was not completed until eleven months after the Pacific War had begun. This "slow march" of

²² See Sunahara 161

²³ See Miki 51

²⁴ See Miki 46-49

events hardly suggests a sense of danger from the Japanese or even a military emergency.²⁵ The mass evacuation of a large group of people from a considerable amount of land without any trials or hearings and based on racial ancestry led to one of many conclusions: that the dominant element of the evacuation in Canada was racial prejudice.²⁶ Another motive could be that the Canadians felt threatened by the economic prosperity of the Japanese. The Japanese controlled over 450, 000 acres of agricultural land, some of it among the most fruitful;²⁷ the Japanese man ceased to be a pauper immigrant but rather a successful businessman. The "yellow man's" taking of what the Caucasians thought to be their rightful place in society. The white man was increasingly threatened proportionally to the increase in success of the Japanese man as an entrepreneur.²⁸ Although the grounds for objection towards the Japanese were evidently economic, most "flavored" their words with racist undertones.²⁹

Although the problems of knowledge in the field of history have been addressed earlier in this essay, another aspect of the unreliability of history must be dealt with. This aspect is bias. Personal bias, whether purposely shown or otherwise is a factor which alters the credibility of the research. For instance the authors who wrote the sources of information from which I referred to are somewhat prejudiced. An American author will undoubtedly attempt portray the American internment as a reasonable act with many supporting statements glorifying the war and putting to shame the Japanese. The Canadian will probably take this same plan of action as well. This poses questions on the accuracy of the information that I have collected.

I made sure that I used information on both internments that was shared between authors of both nationalities. In this way, I ensure that I collect the core information regardless of the prejudices. I succeeded in this task because of the number of sources that I visited.

²⁵ See Adachi 222

²⁶ See Adachi 218

²⁷ See Daniels 7

²⁸ See Daniels 15

²⁹ See Daniels 10

Another important bias is my own. As a person of Japanese ancestry, my initial interpretation of information would be in favor to the Japanese. I tended to have much sympathy toward the evacuees and may have read certain measures taken by the Canadian and American government as malicious acts instead of deeds that would protect the respective countries. This bias might have slightly altered the implication of the actions but it wouldn't have changed them substantially so I am confident that I have not misread the information.

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