

Extended Essay in History:

Japanese American
Internment Camps During WWII

Research Question: To what extent did Japanese Americans show resiliency in the face of unlawful
internment?

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Abstract

This essay addresses the Japanese internment camps set up in the United States during WWII based on paranoia and doubt within the United States' government. It considers the historical perspective of the origins that led to the camps, as well as the wrongdoings both legally and morally in the internment of citizens based only on race. It ties particularly into the citizens' response to what they faced, evaluating the question: **To what extent did Japanese Americans show resiliency in the face of unlawful internment?**

The scope of the essay extends to both the short and long term effects the camps had on their inhabitants, and considers the multiple factors of psychological, social, and financial impacts of the camps, with a lesser focus on the motivations politically and socially leading into the founding of the camps. To properly answer the research question, the sources cited are primarily primary and secondary sources to give real examples of the treatment and personal responses the population interned had, as well as recollections of the treatment received at the camps.

The evaluation concludes that the Japanese American population responded to their imprisonment to a very high extent with a sense of resiliency and persistence in all facets of life. Though many faced harsh conditions and were gravely mistreated, they still built lives both during and after the camps to better themselves and their children during such a traumatic time. This is evident in their fight to maintain connections with those they were close to despite being separated geographically, the businesses they started while interned that supported them and their families despite extended financial loss, as well as their strong spirits and values they retained while interned. Regardless of the obstacles in their path, these people stood resiliently throughout their internment and reacclimating into normal society.

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Introduction

During World War II internment camps were set up within the United States of America to house citizens of Japanese descent. They began in February of 1942 after President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 demanding the relocation of any citizen with one-sixteenth or more Japanese relation to begin*¹. Executive Order 9066 was in great part due to United States military officials urging the order to be enforced due to paranoia at the idea that Japanese American citizens living in key strategic areas would be disloyal to the United States during the war and instead would show loyalty to the emperor of Japan. They feared that leaving large clusters of primarily Japanese American citizens would leave them prone to attacks from within or dissent among the population if the area was under attack from Japanese soldiers. At the time all Japanese citizens were either first or second generation and were relocated to one of ten camps: Amache, Poston, Gila River, Topaz, Heart Mountain, Manzanar, Tule Lake, Minidoka, Rohwer, and Jerome. These camps were spread across the nation, and housed around 127,000 citizens until the end of 1945 when the last one fully closed*².

The incident serves as a dark point in American history: Neighbors were pitted against one another, and racial tensions built by years of doubt escalated once the Pearl Harbor attacks sparked national outrage and hysteria that wasn't quelled by anything less than imprisoning those they felt were responsible*³.

Looking back from a historical perspective can, however, yield answers as to how the involved community was impacted and the surrounding context of the event. Also, it can indicate the resulting

¹ Hosokawa, Bill. *Out of the Frying Pan*. Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1998.

² "Japanese American Internment." U.S. History Online Textbook. Accessed October 15, 2016. <http://www.ushistory.org/us/51e.asp>

³ "World War Two – Japanese Internment Camps in the USA." History on the Net. August 5, 2014. Accessed October 4, 2016. http://www.historyonthenet.com/WW2/japan_internment_camps.htm

relations between the citizens interned and the surrounding communities and consider the extent both mental and economic damage that was done in scale to the occurrences.

The camps' effects on individuals themselves branch into multiple forms, primarily consisting of the psychological and social effects, but also taking note of the financial impacts of the camps, which was a major point of conflict for many families that went through the camps.

The relocation into the camps took place through the evacuation of all Japanese American citizens by mostly trains to several assigned locations which were hastily converted from race tracks, amusement parks, and barren fields into makeshift housing establishments. These camps housed upwards of ten thousand people at a time in questionable conditions. The limits of the camps were quickly discovered as proper medical care, housing setups, and forms of enrichment or leisure all proved to be immensely lacking*⁴. It is this idea of shortcoming and depravity that sparked the level of resiliency that interned citizens exhibited while confined to the camps.

Camp life and the transitions both from and returning to normal life were not a strain on just one element of functioning for those who experienced it; it broke down all that they had established for themselves and forced them to rebuild it one piece at a time. Those who lost businesses, homes, and financial assets began businesses within the camps such as newspapers, farming, and silk screening*⁵.

Without the high extent of ingenuity and courageous resilience displayed by the Japanese American, it would have been impossible to go through the unlawful and harsh conditions found in the camps while remaining sane.

⁴ Uchida, Yoshiko. *Desert Exile*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000.

⁵ Amache Preservation Society. "Agriculture." Accessed August 14, 2016.

1. The Origins of Order 9066

To understand and evaluate the internment camps and the conflicts they resulted in, the context leading into the camps needs to be taken into consideration. The key point that allowed the camps to override the constitutional and fundamental rights of Japanese American citizens was the signing of the Order 9066.

1.1 Tension in the nation during World War II

Prompting the activation of Order 9066 was the rising tension in the United States due to the progression of World War II and Japan siding with the Axis powers. This sparked a sense of fear and uncertainty in American society that never truly dissipated*⁶. Instead it blossomed and neighbors started to turn on one another until there was a tangible animosity that surrounded the Japanese and German American community in the United States. Legal cases arose in which citizens with a Japanese background were accused of being traitorous and assigning their loyalty to Japan rather than the United States.

Widespread was the misconception that, “The Japanese race is an enemy race,” stated by General John DeWitt. The tensions grew more intense, and though there were no documented instances of disloyal conduct during the war*⁷ the general consensus was that anyone stemming from a Japanese family was dangerous and not to be trusted.

1.2 Pearl Harbor: A catalyst for dissent

⁶ “World War II.” United States History. Accessed October 4, 2016. <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1661.html>

⁷ Muller L. Eric. “Betrayal on Trial: Japanese American ‘Treason’ in World War II – Part 1 of 4.” Discover Nikkei. May 6, 2008. Accessed September 26, 2016. <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2008/5/6/enduring-communities/>

Pearl Harbor was perhaps one of the most widely known, documented, and influential battles of World War II for U.S. citizens. Pearl Harbor shell-shocked much of the nation with the brutality and suddenness of the attack. Throughout the war, the United States made efforts to stay out of the war, signing a series of Neutrality Acts between 1935 and 1939 to signify their desire to not become involved in conflicts between other nations*⁸. However, this changed with the Pearl Harbor strike at the end of 1941. Suddenly the United States was swept up in a flurry of war-crazed emotion. United States citizens found an outlet for this emotion by targeting the Japanese American citizens around them. Hateful acts and speech targeted these citizens and some United States citizens became intensely untrusting and quick to accuse. For the Japanese American community, it felt like a tearing experience; two sides of their culture were fighting on a grand scale. Just like a child watching parents fighting they weren't so much focused on picking a side as they were hoping the conflict would end and mourning the loss on both sides*⁹.

2. The Unlawful Side of Internment

One of the lesser acknowledged aspects of the camps is that they were outright unconstitutional. Though they were justified by being cited as a military necessity*¹⁰, and that it all was due to great concern for national security particularly in that specific community, the camps still directly conflicted with constitutionally guaranteed rights. By moving and keeping innocent citizens in these camps, the 6th, 11th, and 14th Amendments were all broken. Most of the cases were passed without consent from the citizens or any evidence of them being disloyal to the United States. When citizens did rise to point

⁸ "World War II." United States History. Accessed October 4, 2016. <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1661.html>

⁹ Hosokawa, Bill. *Out of the Frying Pan*. Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1998.

¹⁰ Muller L. Eric. "Betrayal on Trial: Japanese American 'Treason' in World War II – Part 1 of 4." Discover Nikkei. May 6, 2008. Accessed September 26, 2016. <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2008/5/6/enduring-communities/>

out the injustice of their imprisonment, the court cases were promptly dismissed. Four separate cases were taken all the way to the Supreme Court pulling up various discrepancies with the law, including separation from spouses, eviction from homes, and being interned without reason or evidence. All four cases were dismissed on the grounds that the defense for the Japanese American citizens did not provide sufficient evidence to counteract the claims that they were possibly disloyal. Later on it was admitted by legal officials presiding over the cases that evidence and case details were forged or altered to win the case in favor of the camps*¹¹

3. Psychological Effects of Camps

Being interned deprived Japanese American citizens of multiple things: Time to prepare, an organized relocation, personal dignity, and even a functional housing unit or proper restrooms. It stripped these citizens down and treated them not as citizens with rights like any other but as animals, dangerous and menacing. This is reflected in the mental state and recollections of those who went through the camps and the effects on the next generation who grew up in or immediately after the internment camps. They grew up in a time where they were outright told they were an enemy to society so dangerous they had to be locked away behind fences and watched by armed patrols at guard towers around the clock*¹². Another aspect to take into consideration is the level of respect elders are given in Japanese culture and society. These esteemed and often very well educated and successful heads of the households were thrown into conditions where the families would maintain personal buckets or other vessels for the elders to use as restrooms to avoid the crowded and open public latrines and restrooms that were in some of the camps such as Amache (recorded in their preserved records on site).

¹¹ Hosokawa, Bill. *Out of the Frying Pan*. Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1998.

¹² Amache Preservation Society. "Site of Guard Tower." Accessed August 14, 2016.

For some, being interned in such a manner proved to be too overwhelming. There was little acknowledgment of or respect paid to a 61-year-old Issei resident of the camps, Tomoki Ogata, who committed suicide via hanging*¹³. It was determined that his suicide was likely due to feeling dishonored by his imprisonment and feelings of hopelessness interned without family to fight off his despair. At one camp, Manzanar, two people were killed and ten were injured in December 1942 in an incident dubbed the “Manzanar Riot”*¹⁴.

3.1 Resilience against psychological distress

Despite the subpar conditions the Japanese American community was exposed to in the camps and the toll it took on them, many citizens overcame the stresses they were subjected to both during and after their time in the camps. There are some exceptional cases that came out of the internment camps where those interned showed great resilience. In one case, the woman wasn’t even of Japanese descent herself. Estelle Ishigo was a fully Caucasian woman with a Japanese husband, and was offered the option of going with him or remaining free. She chose to stay with her husband, and lived in the Heart Mountain internment camp alongside her husband and the thousands of other Japanese Americans held there. While interned, she didn’t find a sense of immense despair and distress like many faced by imprisonment. Instead she would later write, “Strange as it may sound, in this desperate and lonely place, I felt accepted for the first time in my life. The government had declared me a Japanese and now I no longer saw myself as white. I was a Japanese American. My fellow Heart Mountain residents took me in as one of their own.”*¹⁵ Instead of this being a traumatic experience for her, it was

¹³ “61-Year-Old Resident Hangs Self!” *Granada Pioneer*, June 17, 1944.

¹⁴ “Japanese Americans at Manzanar.” National Park Service. Accessed October 19, 2016.
<https://www.nps.gov/manz/learn/historyculture/japanese-americans-at-manzanar.htm>

¹⁵ Okihiro, Gary. *Encyclopedia of Japanese American Internment*. Los Angeles: Japanese American National Museum.

one of finding herself and finally acknowledging a sense of acceptance within the tight knit community she found herself in while interned. Though not a Japanese American citizen herself, as an interned citizen she showed resilience in her response by not only staying firm in her commitment to be with her husband but also her optimism in her newfound sense of belonging.

Another group which showed the grand extent to which Japanese Americans showed resilience in the face of their internment were the No-No Boys. This is the term used for the young men (and women despite the misleading name) who answered no to both loyalty based questions on the loyalty test distributed to all citizens residing in the camps. The test itself was a short series of papers with questions labeled simply as a "Statement of United States Citizen of Japanese Ancestry". It was never labeled as or called a loyalty test by the government, but after a series of basic questions like name, languages spoken, and marital status, it had two final questions that determined which interned citizens were labeled as loyal or disloyal to the United States. The first asked, "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, whenever ordered?" and the second asked, "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization?"*¹⁶ If either of these were left unanswered or as no, then the citizen was automatically labeled as disloyal and under suspicion of possibly betraying the United States for Japanese forces if the opportunity occurred. Since many of the young men and women highly regarded and respected their elders, they were anywhere from displeased to outraged that they were asked to serve for a country's military while that same country imprisoned their family and friends in camps. Out of respect and commitment to their elders and relatives, there was a significant population of youth who answered no to both, under the condition

¹⁶ "The Loyalty Questionnaire." Japanese Internment in Time and Contact. July, 2008. Accessed December 5, 2016. <http://www.intimeandplace.org/Japanese%20Internment/reading/loyaltyquestions.html>

that they would serve and pledge allegiance once their family was released from internment. These “No-No Boys” were viewed as disloyal rebels, but they showed firmness in holding to their values and the strength of their joined community and families when pressed to cave in to allegiance by the United States government. This displayed the extent of their spirit’s resilience to the psychological stresses of internment, and the strength of their will to uphold what they thought was right and just.

4. Financial Impacts on Residents

A major point of panic when many Japanese American citizens found out they were being relocated to the camps was how they would handle their financial assets during this time. Though some residents were interned for six months and some for three years, there was no way to initially know what would happen. Due to this reason, many sold their financial assets in the form of their housing, large purchases like boats, and even businesses. The property loss was estimated at \$1.3 billion, and the total net loss is estimated to ring in around \$2.7 billion*¹⁷.

This matter didn’t stop the residents from making the best of their predicament though; many started up businesses or found work within the camps. Agriculture boomed, as the Japanese American citizens raised crops like celery, spinach, lettuce, onions and lima beans, supplementing bumper crops with plants like corn and potatoes. They were only paid fifty cents a day per resident, but just at Amache, the Amache Consumer Enterprises grossed over \$362,000, bringing income in to the camps through new business*¹⁸. In addition, they also started business like silk screening and newspapers that provided both a manner to produce income and work to fill time and provide something to do and build upon

¹⁷ *Documents from the National Archives: Internment of Japanese Americans* [Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1989] pp. 9–10.)

¹⁸ Amache Preservation Society. “Agriculture.” Accessed August 14, 2016.

while interned. It is this idea of making the most of their time while interned and staying positive that depicts the resiliency of residents, particularly in the financial aspects of their lives.

The resiliency of interned people did not end at their time in the camps for some, however. Some had the opportunity to properly handle their assets before entering the camps, such as the father of Dan Yoshii. Dan recounted that his father sold their property and major possessions for cash before entering the camps because they didn't know when they would get out and if their money would be seized upon entry into the camps. He buried this money by a tree as a marker, and once they were released three years later, he found the tree and dug up the family's money, using it to start a carnation business that would grow to support the family and send Dan and his two siblings through college. *¹⁹

5. Resiliency in the Face of Social Change

From the very start of relocation, one of the biggest changes the camps brought was a struggle to maintain social bonds. Not only was communication between camps difficult, it also was hard to locate old social ties when the camps were set up and then during moves between camps.

5.1 Families being separated

One main struggle when it came to the separation of social bonds was the disconnecting of families. Some couples went to the extent of marrying just so that they wouldn't be separated into different camps*²⁰. Grandparents were sent to different camps, torn from their children during relocation. Only immediate family in the same area was considered when dividing citizens into camps. Oftentimes it would take residents time to find their relatives and get into contact through letters and scattered news. If family wished to be reunited, then depending on the camp they were in, they would have to send

¹⁹ Dan Yoshii (survivor of the Japanese American internment camps), personally conducted interview, December 2016

²⁰ Hosokawa, Bill. *Out of the Frying Pan*. Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1998.

letters to correspond back and forth until petitions to camp administrators would allow them to get on one of the transfer trains between camps. The harsh living conditions could lead to health complications for older residents, so being together as a family in case of medical incidents was a primary concern. Though interned citizens faced harsh living conditions and rapid changes, the real pain came from many nuclear families, or families that lived as one whole unit combining all relatives and generations continually, being split apart by regulations on moves or initial stationing of families within camps. Families refused the idea of being separated by the United States government for wrongful suspicion of disloyalty, and went through the lengthy processes of keeping in contact through whatever means necessary. The Japanese virtue of having a strong will, referred to as 'gaman', reflects the depth to which resiliency in the face of obstacles is rooted in the culture and ideals of the Japanese American community, something greatly tested by the separation of many nuclear families. Frances Palmer, a survivor of the camps stated, "To me, that's the bigger loss," referring to the splitting of her nuclear family being a bigger loss than the financial ruin the family faced upon exiting the camps. Though she was only 2 upon entering the camps, Ms. Palmer belonged to one of many families that were split by generations while interned. She recalled that it "changed our cultural values" when her father took the immediate family and moved for better work, being split for the first time from his parents and step-parents by the camp's rule of immediate family only being allowed to move as well. *²¹

5.2 Friends and work disconnects

In cases of friends, it was a game of odds to end up in the same camps and be allowed to stay there. There were occurrences of residents purposefully being separated if they were under suspicion of being

²¹ Frances Palmer (survivor of the Japanese American internment camps), personally conducted interview, December 2016

disloyal, particularly if they were in a role of leadership within the Japanese American community. If residents were marked as suspicious, it would follow them from camp to camp and result in separation from close friends or contacts. Government and military officials presiding over the matter of disloyal Japanese ties wanted to break apart any ideas of uprising or dissenting*²². Despite these obstacles, friends and work associates kept in contact through sending mail, newspapers, and other updates to one another, and by holding local meetings within camps.

5.3 Communicating with newspapers

The *Granada Pioneer*, the newspaper for Amache, and the *Heart Mountain Sentinel* of the Heart Mountain camp were two of the newspapers created during the internment period for the camps. They served as a means of communication within the community, and as one editor of the *Sentinel*, Bill Hosokawa, put it, “We saw the paper as a sentinel watching over the rights and interests of its readers.”*²³ Through the newspapers the community could feel more connected to one another and could feel more at ease about their situation. With articles about new developments in the camps, the adults felt more informed about the community they were in. By including more lighthearted pieces like the comic “Lil’ Neebo” (from the *Granada Pioneer*)*²⁴, they provided a sense of comic relief that raised spirits by parodying life in the camps. These papers showed the vast extent of resilience found within the camps because they were started during the time of internment by those interned. They were run as a means of showing the communities held within that they could not only rebuild a sense of normality and home under such poor circumstances, but also that they would not be stopped from keeping the local community linked.

²² Hosokawa, Bill. *Out of the Frying Pan*. Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1998.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ishii, Chris. “Lil’ Neebo. *Lil’ Neebo*, November, 1942

5.4 Education improvement/reform

Within the camps, there was an initial struggle to continue the education and extracurricular involvement of the children who were brought into the camps. Many of the students and children were new to any sort of nursery school, and teachers often advised against the learning of Japanese for children*²⁵. However, over time not only did students learn to excel in the classroom, but also parents would still try to teach them about Japanese culture and how to speak Japanese. The extracurricular activities improved in the camps as the residents developed sports teams, movie groups, and school clubs.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration all the obstacles the Japanese American community faced during the internment camps and the diversity and adaptive qualities of their response, this evaluation comes to the conclusion that the residents of the camps showed a powerful and high extent of resiliency to what they went through, and responded with an extremely positive and optimistic attitude. Instead of succumbing to the dread of imprisonment and giving in to the sense of hopelessness that came with giving up their possessions and being separated from friends and family, they worked to come out above it all. Not only did they work hard to improve their lives within the camps during the period of their internment, they worked to build something and keep improving what they had as they stayed. By building up new work opportunities, a sense of community both within and between the camps, and a mental firmness that they would prevail, they overcame one of the darkest periods of history for the United States as a nation. It was this sense of resiliency that allowed for the community to move on past the tragic mistake of American history that resulted in the internment and unwilling relocation of

²⁵ Uchida, Yoshiko. *Desert Exile*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000.

thousands of innocent citizens. Though reviewing history cannot stop the events of the past from happening once again, it can provide a better look at not only what led to such events and how to work and move past it just as the Japanese Americans worked to move past their internment. Even regarding the scars and pains the internment camps left on the Japanese American citizens who went through them, the startling extent of the resiliency this community responded with truly echoes their cultural values of hard work and being strong willed in the face of struggles.

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Dan Yoshii (survivor of the Japanese American internment camps), personally conducted interview,
December 2016

Frances Palmer (survivor of the Japanese American internment camps), personally conducted interview,
December 2016