

A Tragedy of Democracy: Japanese Confinement in North America

Review Number: 983

Publish date: Friday, 1 October, 2010

Author: Greg Robinson

ISBN: 9780231129220

Date of Publication: 2009

Price: £19.95

Pages: 408pp.

Publisher: Columbia University Press

Place of Publication: New York, NY

Reviewer: Rachel Pistol

How a country deals with enemy nationals within its territory during times of war is as much an issue today as it has ever been. In the western world these days such enemy nationals are most likely to be involved in the 'war on terror', and can be found masked behind a multiplicity of nationalities. During the Second World War, the list of enemy nationals was perhaps more clearly defined for the Allies. Once war had been declared by Great Britain on Germany, German and Austrian nationals at once became enemy aliens, soon followed by the Italians. In the United States of America, the day after the devastating attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor, war was declared by the Allies on Japan; and, a few days later, America was at war with Germany also. Whereas Britain had previous experience of dealing with enemy nationals, having interned all German males during the First World War, America was comparatively unschooled in this area (if one does not count the relocation of Native Americans in the previous century). Of course, not only was Britain at war; but its dominions were also, including, most significantly in this case, Canada. Robinson, in his latest addition to the field of literature on Second World War internment in Allied countries, has entered into the world of comparative history by undertaking the first study of North American internment as a cohesive whole, by examining the internment, or 'confinement', of those of Japanese ancestry in both the United States and Canada.

Not content with the ability of the existing lexicon of internment to adequately convey the internment experience, Robinson has introduced a new terminology to the field. There are good reasons for Robinson's choice of the word 'confinement' instead of 'internment'. As Robinson highlights, internment, in its true sense, refers to the 'detention of enemy nationals by a government during wartime' (p. 2). While America did in fact intern enemy nationals in Justice Department camps during the war, the scope of Robinson's study is primarily concerned with the 'removal' of Japanese Americans to 'camps'. Therefore his terminology is justified, as Japanese Americans were citizens of the United States, and therefore should not have been thus categorised as enemy nationals. Similarly, in Canada, Japanese Canadians, citizens by birth, were denied their rights by being classed in the same category as native Japanese. There can be no doubt of the implicit racism inherent in the actions of the governments of both the United States and Canada at this time. Those of Japanese ancestry were singled out for victimisation solely because of their racial ancestry. Whereas other enemy nationals such as Germans and Italians were entitled to loyalty hearings where they could 'prove' their loyalty to the nation, Japanese Americans were denied this right, ironically because it 'would be a dangerous precedent for examining the loyalty of American citizens' (p. 180). And so, loyal

Japanese Americans and Canadians found themselves ousted from their homes and livelihoods, forced to eke out an existence in some of the harshest climates and remotest locations in their respective countries.

In previous work, Robinson has examined the involvement of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the signing of Executive Order 9066, which authorised the removal of approximately 110,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans from the West Coast of America, and their subsequent confinement for any time up to the entire duration of the war. Interestingly, in *A Tragedy of Democracy*, the role of Eleanor Roosevelt is highlighted, and attention is given to how the first lady praised the loyalty of Japanese Americans. Yet, despite her praise, she was unable to intercede effectively for them as a group within government circles. While much has been written on Japanese American internment over the last few decades, Robinson has managed to create something that brings a fresh perspective to the field. Not only does he analyse the similarities and differences between confinement in Canada and America, but he does so within a larger time frame than most. Starting with Japanese immigration to North America in the 19th century, Robinson sets the scene for their eventual confinement by describing the anti-Japanese sentiment in both countries. When put into a larger legal context, it is possible to see that the build up to removal and confinement of those of Japanese ancestry in the Second World War began from the moment Japanese immigrants set foot on North American soil. In America, anti-alien land acts were passed to deny the Japanese the right to own land in western states such as California, Oregon and Washington. Japanese were excluded from working as public servants or voting in British Columbia. Anti-Japanese sentiment was expressed by multiple groups over the entire West Coast, sometimes violently. The Japanese were hard workers who often built up profitable farming enterprises on poor plots of land, a source of antagonism between the Japanese and white farmers, with the latter envying the former's industry. The Second World War proved to be the catalyst for anti-Japanese groups to bond together with the aim of ousting their Asian neighbours in the interests of 'national security' – an argument that few could argue against and still appear to the greater public as being 'patriotic'.

Historically, once a given action is argued to be in the interests of 'national security', common sense tends to be discarded in place of hysteria. When a particular group of people is suspected of being a potential danger to the nation, it is possible for unfounded allegations to spread like wildfire. The belief that Asian races were naturally shifty and untrustworthy was widespread before and during the Second World War throughout the West Coast of the United States and Canada. Fears of the existence of a fifth column encouraged Canada and the United States to introduce curfews and restrictions on those of Japanese ancestry after Pearl Harbor, in order to guard against a possible Japanese invasion of the mainland. No differentiation was made between native Japanese (*Issei*) and American or Canadian citizens (*Nisei*). Some argued that this was because no-one could be sure that someone who appeared to be Japanese by their facial features would not be attacked as retribution for Pearl Harbor; and therefore removal and confinement was really about protecting the safety of the racial group as a whole. However removal and confinement were packaged in each country, the truth remains that 'an unpopular group of American *citizens* was singled out on a racial basis and summarily dispossessed and incarcerated without charge. By arbitrarily confining American citizens of Japanese ancestry, the government violated the essential principle of democracy: that all citizens are entitled to the same rights and legal protections'.⁽¹⁾ The word 'Canadian' could easily be substituted for 'American' in the above quote, as such a damning indictment is equally true of the Canadian government. Citizenship should not be something that can be arbitrarily removed at the whim of a government, even, or perhaps especially, in time of war.

A Tragedy of Democracy sets out to bring the field of Japanese confinement up to the present day by using newly available resources available through the digitisation of archival stock. The book is clearly structured by chapter headings that cover events from the arrival of Japanese immigrants in North America up to and including the redress movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Each chapter is then subdivided, which makes the book easily digestible and aids the historian in locating specific events. Robinson has condensed a huge amount of research into a few hundred pages and yet does not sacrifice the detail. He has achieved exactly what he set out to do, namely to document what is still, in some areas, a relatively unknown subject area, in an accessible way to both the novice and experienced reader of internment history. *A Tragedy of Democracy* is an excellent introduction for those wishing to know what happened in North America during the Second

World War, why it happened, how it affected those confined, and what was done to compensate the victims of this stain on the Allies' record. In order to paint as full a picture as possible, Robinson draws on a wide range of sources including government files, personal papers, transcripts of interviews conducted with those involved on both sides of the barbed wire, and newspaper articles; as well as drawing on the diverse body of secondary literature available on the subject.

Significantly, Robinson also touches on the transportation of Japanese from Peru to the United States of America, their subsequent incarceration, and their fight against deportation after the war. Together with the Aleuts and Pribilof Islanders, they form the 'forgotten' victims of internment, as highlighted in the government inquiry that took place 40 years after these events.⁽²⁾ Robinson also discusses the effect of martial law on Hawaii, an often neglected topic; as, in comparison with the mainland, those of Japanese ancestry were allowed to continue their lives in relative freedom. However, as Robinson demonstrates by the number of convictions for cases brought before military tribunals, martial law was hardly a desirable state of affairs either. It is indeed possible, as Robinson concludes, that the 'sacrifice of the *Issei* and *Nisei* in accepting removal may thus perhaps be said to have preserved the fundamental liberties of other West Coast Americans' (p. 246). However, one would have to ask those who were confined whether this was a sacrifice worth making. After the war it was proved that not a single spy employed by Japan was actually of Japanese ancestry, demonstrating the true futility of the predominant racist beliefs of the time. Confinement served to destroy the close-knit ethnic communities established on the West Coast prior to the War, by causing Japanese and Japanese Americans to spread across the rest of the United States and east of the Rocky Mountains in Canada. Many who were confined carried the shame of the events of the Second World War with them for a lifetime. Truly it was only with the movement for redress, in which many of the main players were the children of the Japanese American citizens interned (or *Sansei*), that many were finally able to draw a line under the whole drama.

During the war, the all-*Nisei* 442nd Regiment received more decorations than any other regiment of a comparable size. Through the incredible sacrifices that were made by men fighting for freedom when their families were often still confined behind barbed wire within the World's largest democracy, the Japanese were able to be recognised for what they invariably were: loyal to the United States. Robinson discusses the role of the 442nd, but also makes mention of the fact that those who resisted the draft should also be recognised as courageous. The draft resisters decided to stand up and fight a government that denied them their freedom and yet expected them to offer up their lives in service for their nation. Draft resisters underwent incarceration and ostracism, but they did not falter, and after the war were offered presidential pardons.⁽³⁾ Whereas the Japanese Americans were able to demonstrate the loyalty of their ethnic group to their Nation and thus ease their transition back into mainstream society, the Japanese Canadians were denied such a right. It cannot be denied that the decision to prevent loyal Japanese Canadians from fighting for the Allies had extremely negative repercussions on the group as a whole, and caused problems for those of Japanese ancestry attempting to reintegrate into a society that quite clearly did not welcome them.

As the western world attempts to negotiate its way in the 'post-9/11' landscape, *A Tragedy of Democracy* serves as a timely reminder of how badly things can get out of control in times of war. Robinson devotes the last part of his conclusion to discussing the similarities between America's actions in the Second World War and the current 'war on terror'. In the aftermath of September 11th, revisionists expressed doubts about Japanese American loyalties in the Second World War and argued in favour of the extraordinary powers granted by Executive Order 9066. Interestingly enough, there was no such similar movement within Canada. One cannot help but agree with Robinson's final words concerning the importance of 'maintaining constitutional safeguards, even – especially – in wartime' (p. 304). Robinson's words serve as a warning to us all that 'Governments and their leaders simply cannot be given arbitrary powers and trust on faith to assure fundamental freedoms ... we owe it to ourselves to be jealous of our liberties' (p.304). There is no point in having a constitution if it can be discarded like a scrap of paper when the going gets tough. If the western world truly believes in democracy, then it should take care to heed the lessons of the Second World War.

Notes

1. Greg Robinson, *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), p. 6.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For a more detailed analysis of all groups affected by internment in the United States of America see the Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, *Personal Justice Denied* (Washington, DC, 1997), a combined publication of the reports that were published in 1982 and 1983.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See Eric L. Muller, *Free to Die for their Country: the Story of the Japanese American Draft Resisters in World War II* (Chicago, IL, 2001) for an in depth study of the draft resisters and the consequences of their moral stand.[Back to \(3\)](#)

Other reviews:

History Cooperative

http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/97.2/br_98.html [2]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/983#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/5074>

[2] http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/97.2/br_98.html