

ED

The Japanese Internment

“On December 7, 1941; an event took place that had nothing to do with me or my family and yet which had devastating consequences for all of us—Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in a surprise attack. With that event began one of the shoddiest chapters in the tortuous history of democracy in North America.”

— *Dr. David Suzuki, whose family was interred during the Second World War, in his book Metamorphosis: Stages in a Life, 1987*

Before the war, 22 096 Canadians of Japanese descent lived in British Columbia. Three-quarters of them were born in Canada. After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and attacked Hong Kong, some Canadians became fearful of Japanese Canadians.

Both the military and the RCMP argued that Canadians of Japanese descent did not pose a threat to Canada. Pressured by the public, on February 24, 1942, Prime Minister Mackenzie King ordered that all male Canadians of Japanese descent between the ages of eighteen and forty-five be sent to camps in the interior of British Columbia. Two days later, the government gave the remaining Japanese Canadians in British Columbia twenty-four hours to pack a few belongings and move inland. On March 4, they were ordered to turn over their property and belongings, including houses, fishing boats, and businesses, to the Custodian of Enemy Property. All the belongings were later auctioned off for a fraction of their worth, and much of the proceeds were used to pay for housing in the camps.

Able-bodied men were often separated from their families and sent to work in road camps, and the families that managed to stay together were sent to harvest sugar beets in Manitoba and Alberta. The conditions of the internment camps were often deplorable. Most shelters did not have running water and few had sources of heat, even in the winter.

When the war ended, many Japanese Canadians were encouraged to leave Canada, and some were stripped of their Canadian citizenship and deported to Japan. Those who stayed were not allowed to return to Vancouver until 1949.

REDRESSING THE JAPANESE INTERNMENT

In 1988, the Canadian government formally apologized to internees and their descendants for the indignity and injustice that they had endured. The landmark settlement included

- a formal apology to Japanese Canadians and an acknowledgement of the violation of human rights that occurred
- a payment of \$21 000 for each Japanese Canadian who was interned
- the sum of \$12 million for educational, social, and cultural activities promoting human rights and the well-being of the Japanese Canadian community
- the sum of \$24 million to establish the Canadian Race Relations Foundation to help eliminate racism
- Canadian citizenship for people of Japanese descent who had been expelled from Canada or who had their citizenship revoked during this time

Figure 13-28 Thousands of Canadians of Japanese descent were taken from their homes in 1942 and sent to internment camps.



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1. In times of war, what can the Canadian government do that is ethically responsible to ensure the security of Canada without violating basic human rights?
2. Do you believe the Canadian government's restitution and apology to the Japanese Canadians who were interned during the Second World War was enough? Why or why not?