

## Internment in Canada Lesson

(FYI: At the time of writing, this was part of the Grade 11 social studies curriculum in Alberta)

### *How might students identify injustices and build empathy regarding internment in Canadian history?*

The aim of this lesson is to build an understanding from two basic perspectives:

- *Members of the Canadian government and broader society:* Why they were afraid of so-called enemy aliens (e.g., fetishizing evil, worldview threat)
- *Those who had been interned:* Engaging with their stories to foster empathy

#### **Introduction:**

1. Ask students to imagine that they are at home and someone has told them that they and their family have to leave in a few minutes, never to return to that house, or even that neighbourhood.
2. Ask students to list the top 10 items that they feel they would need to bring with them (e.g., essentials, mementos, etc.). Give students 5 minutes to write down (on a piece of paper or on an electronic device) what they would carry with them. They are limited to what they could physically carry by themselves.
3. Have students rank these items from 1 (most important item) to 10 (least important item).
4. Be prepared for a few glib responses. Decide whether to address those at the time (e.g., if they call out), or whether to see what happens when they start thinking about what they are leaving behind as classmates share sentimental or valuable items.
5. Share responses in small groups (e.g., elbow partners) for a few minutes.
6. Share top two ranked item responses as a class.
7. Talk openly about the emotions associated with what to keep and what to leave behind, and that we will be discussing instances where something similar happened to people just like you and them.
8. Discuss the circumstances in which people would be told they must leave their home (e.g., natural disaster, terrorist threat, forced evacuation/displacement).
9. Discuss under what circumstances it would be justified and/or unjustified for a government to force people out of their homes/communities.

#### **Internment during WWI**

- Wartime paranoia led to public hostility toward “enemies within,” and so formerly valued immigrants began to be treated terribly
- The **War Measures Act** gave the government under PM Robert Borden the power to:
  - arrest and detain anyone suspected of being an enemy;
  - force people of German, Austrian, Hungarian, Ukrainian\*, and Turkish descent (“enemy aliens”) who lived in cities to register with police and carry identification cards, and they could not own a gun;
  - move unemployed “enemy aliens” to internment camps for forced labour, where the conditions could be sub-standard
- 8,579 men were held at 24 internment camps and receiving stations across Canada, including 5,954 men of Austro-Hungarian origin, the majority of whom were Ukrainian; 2,009 Germans; 205 Turks; and 99 Bulgarians.
- As well, 81 women and 156 children — the dependants of male internees — were voluntarily interned. Other internees included homeless people, conscientious objectors and members of outlawed cultural and political associations.
- In addition to those placed in camps, another 80,000 enemy aliens, again mostly Ukrainians, were forced to carry identity papers and to report regularly to local police offices.
- The government frequently employed internees on massive labour projects, including the development of Banff National Park and numerous mining and logging operations.
- In 2008, the federal government announced a \$10 million grant to recognize the internment of Eastern European immigrants in Canadian work camps during the First World War.

## Internment during WWII

- Internment during this war included those of Japanese, Italian, and German descent
- Between 1940 and 1943 habeas corpus was suspended, and the Minister of Justice signed an order that effectively labelled 31,00 Italian Canadians as “enemy aliens” and roughly 700 were arrested and sent to internment camps
- The **1942 War Measures Act** called for the relocation and internment of thousands of Japanese Canadians in British Columbia. Prime Minister King established a 160-kilometre “safety zone” along the Pacific Coast in 1942. Those of Japanese descent, regardless of citizenship or length of time spent in Canada, were removed from this area
- 22,000 people of Japanese ancestry (14,000 of whom had been born in Canada) were forced to move, taking with them only what they could carry themselves. Of these, nearly 1,000 men were placed in forced labour camps, 700 in prisoner-of-war camps, and over 12,000 were in detention camps in the interior of BC. The remainder were placed on farms, etc. and had severe restrictions placed on their movement and activities
- Many Canadians treated Japanese-Canadians terribly due to xenophobia and racism. The bombing of Pearl Harbour and the defeat of the British and Canadians defending Hong Kong from the Japanese only made the situation worse, and the Canadian government would have felt pressure to align itself with the policies of the United States.
- **1943 Custodian of Enemy Property** allowed the federal government to confiscate and sell Japanese Canadian property. All money made from these auctions were used to pay for storage and handling of Japanese people who were being interned by the Cdn. government. At the end of the war in 1945, Japanese Cdns. are offered repatriation to Japan or to settle east of the Rockies, but in 1947 the repatriation order was called off.
- In 1988 Japanese Cdns. received an official apology from the federal government and 1400 people get monetary compensation in the form of \$21,000 each.
- In 1990 Italian Cdns, received an official apology from the federal government, and in May 2009 Bill C-302 was introduced to provide restitution and funds for education on Italian Canadian history. The bill did not pass into law.

## Possible Application of Knowledge:

- Read a passage from *Obasan*, by Joy Kogawa (e.g., Chapter 14 where Naomi explains that Japanese Canadians along the coast of Vancouver were forced into Hastings Park, a holding area, before being sent to labor and concentration camps)
- Ask students to imagine what that might have been like, and how scared those in the Canadian government must have been to do that to a group of fellow Canadians
- Ask: What might we, as people living in Canada, do in order to feel safe? Does the maintenance of safety and security ever come at the expense of others? How are these actions justified?
- Ask them where in history or recent events have governments acted either justly or unjustly in removing people from their homes/communities? Have similar events occurred in Canada, or do they occur mostly elsewhere? Responses will vary, but generally speaking Canadians tend to believe the myth that we are “nice” people. Using terror management theory (TMT) directly or indirectly (see: <https://omeka-s.library.ualberta.ca/s/Grim-Educator/>), talk with your students about:
  - The likely worldview threat and fetishization of evil by some Canadians against so-called “enemy aliens”
  - how we take pride in being part of a helpful, peaceful nation, and that we can feel defensive and/or sad when our nation is not as perfect as we would like it to be. How might we deal with those uncomfortable feelings as we explore a difficult topic like internment? See what you can develop with your students.

## Suggestions for Assessment:

- Compose a historically-based diary entry of someone from one of the Internment camps (what, where, when, how, as well as how you feel about this experience)
- Compose a letter to a Member of Parliament (MP) in 1942 to protest the internment of Japanese Canadians (consider: why the Canadian government voted in the War Measures Act, as well as why an alternative to Internment is needed)

### Suggested Mini Research Project (in-class):

1. Split the students into two groups (one researching Japanese internment, and the other researching Italian).
2. Each student (or in pairs) use the websites provided to answer the following questions about their assigned group:
  - What is an “enemy alien”?
  - What were the motivations for internment?
  - How many people were interned?
  - What kind of camps were they placed in?
3. Students (or pairs) then partner with those who researched the other group and compare information.
4. As a class, discuss the following questions:
  - How did the Canadian government justify its actions at the time, and why might later governments apologize?
  - What do these internment camps tell us about Canada during wartime, but also during times of peace?
  - How does learning this information make you feel and why?

#### *Websites for Japanese Internment:*

<http://www.cbc.ca/history/EPISCONTENTSE1EP14CH3PA3LE.html>

[http://www.japanesecanadianhistory.net/the\\_war\\_years.htm](http://www.japanesecanadianhistory.net/the_war_years.htm)

#### *Websites for Italian Internment:*

[http://www.italiancanadianww2.ca/theme/detail/internment\\_camps](http://www.italiancanadianww2.ca/theme/detail/internment_camps)

[http://www.italiancanadianww2.ca/theme/detail/italian\\_canadians\\_as\\_enemy\\_alien\\_memories\\_of\\_wwII](http://www.italiancanadianww2.ca/theme/detail/italian_canadians_as_enemy_alien_memories_of_wwII)

<http://www.italiancanadianww2.ca/theme/detail/italophobia>



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C. van Kessel, K. Edmondson, & F. Catena (2018)