



JAPANESE AMERICAN CITIZENS LEAGUE / JACL

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PRESS RELEASE

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JACL Response to the Texas Board of Education – The Race-based Exclusion of Japanese Americans During WWII Differed Significantly from the Experience of German and Italian Americans

In response to the Texas Board of Education action to amend its curriculum to include information on the World War II detention of Germans and Italians by the United States, the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) believes it is vitally important to clarify the record about the significant differences between the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II and the treatment of German and Italian Americans.

The significant differences between the Japanese American incarceration and the treatment of German and Italian Americans is fully documented in the Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC) titled *Personal Justice Denied*. The CWRIC was established in 1980, pursuant to legislation enacted by the Congress of the United States to investigate the facts and circumstances surrounding the issuance of Executive Order 9066, signed by President Franklin Roosevelt on February 19, 1942. The CWRIC Report is based on the testimony of witnesses including former government officials and materials from government and university archives.

During World War II, the United States forcibly removed virtually the entire population of 120,000 Japanese Americans from their homes on the West Coast and incarcerated them in concentration camps in America's interior. This action constituted a policy of mass exclusion targeting all West Coast citizens and permanent residents of Japanese descent. According to the findings and conclusions of the federal Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, a fundamental cause for the implementation of this policy was race prejudice.

The treatment of Germans and Italians was in stark contrast to the wartime experience of Japanese Americans. Although the United States considered the option of mass exclusion of Germans and Italians, these proposals were rejected as impractical, and instead the government pursued a policy of individualized scrutiny toward these groups based on their potential to engage in acts of sabotage or fifth column activity.

The German American Experience

In the months following America's entry into World War II, German Americans as well as Italians came under increasing scrutiny. By February 1942, the Department of Justice had arrested 1,393 Germans and 264 Italians.¹ During this period, German submarines repeatedly attacked and sank American tankers and other vessels along the East Coast and in the Gulf of Mexico. The attacks escalated and peaked in May 1942 with the sinking of 41 ships.² In addition, prior to the outbreak of World War II, the CWRIC Report noted the existence of active pro-Nazi operations among German Americans. "As late as February 20,

1939, the Deutschamerikanische Volkshund, popularly and simply known as the Bund, brought more than 20,000 people to Madison Square Garden for a rally to praise Hitler while denouncing Roosevelt and his administration.³ The CWRIC further documented that the Bund was organized into chapters throughout the United States and claimed a membership of more than 200,000.⁴ The submarine attacks together with the anxiety created by the organizing efforts of the Bund led to public fear of sabotage and fifth column activity.

On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized military commanders to designate military areas from which any or all persons could be excluded. The CWRIC Report notes that in the spring of 1942 the War Department considered whether Executive Order 9066 should be used to exclude all German and Italian aliens from certain areas.⁵ The CWRIC indicated "there were no serious proposals for the mass movement of categories of American citizens of German or Italian descent, although local commanders sought the power to exclude individual citizens."⁶ Similarly, the Tolan Committee, which was established by Congress to make recommendations on National Defense Migration, dismissed the mass movement of Germans and Italians. "This committee is prepared to say that any such proposal is out of the question if we intend to win this war."⁷

According to the CWRIC Report, the rationale for treating Germans and Italians in an individualized manner rather than implementing a mass exclusion was based in the size of the group and their political influence.⁸ The population of Germans living in the United States in 1940 was approximately 6 million.⁹ A policy of exclusion directed at the German population would have been impractical if the intent was to engage in a policy of exclusion and detention. Moreover, their sizable population brought with it a certain level of political influence.

A History of Racism toward Japanese Americans

The Japanese American incarceration was rooted in a history of race prejudice directed at Asian Americans beginning with the Chinese who first began immigrating to the United States in the mid-1800s. When California became a state in 1850, lawless violence against the Chinese was institutionalized through segregated areas for housing and restrictions on employment by public agencies and corporations. They were not permitted to become citizens, could not testify in court against a white person, attend school with whites or marry whites. Finally, the Chinese were excluded from further immigration in 1882 with the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Acts.

It was into this environment that the Japanese began immigrating to the United States in the 1890s and during the first two decades of the new century. The American agricultural industry recruited Japanese laborers to work in the sugar cane fields of Hawaii and the fruit and vegetable farms of California. From the handful who were in the U.S. prior to the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Japanese population increased to about 61,000 in Hawaii and 24,000 on the mainland by 1900. As long as the Japanese remained docile, their hard labor was welcomed, but as soon as they showed signs of initiative, they were perceived as threats to white dominance. The Japanese farmers, like their Chinese predecessors, reclaimed much of the less desirable land and developed these into rich agricultural areas.

As with the earlier Chinese pioneers, the Japanese were also denied citizenship, barred from certain occupations, forced to send their children to segregated schools, and prohibited from marrying whites. In addition, some laws were specifically directed against the Japanese, including the denial of the right to own or lease agricultural land.

Like the Chinese exclusion movement before, California lobbied the federal government to stop all immigration from Japan. As a result of these pressures, Japanese laborers were excluded by executive action in 1907, and all Japanese immigration for permanent residence was prohibited by the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924. The CWRIC Report affirms this history of racism with the following, "the exclusion and removal were attacks on the ethnic Japanese which followed a long and ugly history of West Coast anti-Japanese agitation and legislation. Antipathy and hostility toward the ethnic Japanese was a major factor of the public life of the West Coast states for more than forty years before Pearl Harbor."¹⁰

Expulsion and Incarceration of Japanese Americans

Because of the long history of prejudice and stereotypes, the public found it easy to believe false stories about espionage and sabotage attributed to Japanese Americans. By mid-January 1942, public opinion began to turn against Japanese Americans. Elected officials, city councils and civic organization in California, Oregon and Washington demanded the ouster and incarceration of all Japanese Americans. "On February 19, 1942, ten weeks after the Pearl Harbor attack, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which gave to the Secretary of War and the military commanders the powers to exclude any and all person, citizens and aliens, from designated areas in order to provide security against sabotage, espionage and fifth column activity. Shortly thereafter, all American citizens of Japanese descent were prohibited from living, working or traveling on the West Coast of the United States."¹¹

The Western Defense Command posted notices instructing all persons of Japanese ancestry to report to fifteen temporary detention camps, which consisted of fairgrounds, racetracks and livestock pavilions. It was from these temporary detention camps that Japanese Americans were later transported to ten permanent concentration camps. "This policy of exclusion, removal and detention was executed against 120,000 people without individual review, and exclusion was continued virtually without regard for their demonstrated loyalty to the United States. This was all done despite the fact that not a single documented act of espionage, sabotage or fifth column activity was committed by an American citizen of Japanese ancestry or by a resident Japanese alien on the West Coast."¹²

"No mass exclusion or detention, in any part of the country, was ordered against American citizens of German or Italian descent. Official actions against enemy aliens of other nationalities were much more individualized and selective than those imposed on the ethnic Japanese."¹³

In its report the CWRIC concluded, "The promulgation of Executive Order 9066 was not justified by military necessity, and the decisions which followed from it – detention, ending detention and ending exclusion – were not driven by analysis of military conditions. The broad historical causes which shaped these decisions were race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership."¹⁴

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¹ Personal Justice Denied, Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, p. 284

² Ibid, p.283.

³ Richard O'Connor, The German-Americans, An Informal History (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1968). P. 449.

⁴ Personal Justice Denied, Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, p. 288.

⁵ Ibid, p. 283.

⁶ Conn, Guarding, p. 145; Jacobus tenBroek, Edward N. Barnhart and Floyd W. Matson, Prejudice, War and the Constitution (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), pp. 103-05.

⁷ Report of the Select Committee Investigating National Defense Migration, U.S. House of Representatives, 77th Cong., 2nd Sess., HR Report No. 1911, p. 24.

⁸ Personal Justice Denied, Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, p. 289.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 2-3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.