

Japanese-American Relocation in the U.S. During World War II

By National Archives, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.02.17

Word Count **774**

Level **980L**



This photo, taken on May 9, 1942, in Centerville, California, shows Japanese-Americans boarding an evacuation bus. People of Japanese ancestry were sent to be housed in War Relocation Authority centers for the duration of World War II. Photo from: U.S. National Archives and Records Administration

On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, an American Navy base in Hawaii. Close to 20 ships and about 300 planes were destroyed, and more than 2,000 soldiers and sailors were killed. Within days, Congress declared war against Japan and Germany, its ally. The attack launched the United States fully into World War II. Before Pearl Harbor, the United States supplied England and other allies with weapons, but did not join in the fight.

Widespread fear about national security after Pearl Harbor

The attack on Pearl Harbor also created widespread fear about national security, especially on the West Coast. In February 1942, just two months after Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066. It said that all people of Japanese ancestry, both citizens and noncitizens, must move inland from the West Coast and away from the Pacific military zone. The

order had two purposes. The first was to prevent spying by Japanese. The second was to protect people of Japanese-Americans from being hurt by people who were angry at Japan.

The military zone ran along the entire coast of the Pacific Ocean. In Washington and Oregon, the eastern boundary of the military zone was an imaginary line along the Cascade Mountains. This line continued down the center of California from north to south.

All persons of Japanese ancestry ordered to relocation centers

Roosevelt's order affected 117,000 Japanese-American people. Two-thirds of them were born in the United States. The first generation of Japanese in this country were called the Issei. The second generation was the Nisei. At the time of Roosevelt's order, there were 70,000 Nisei American citizens. Within weeks, all persons of Japanese ancestry — whether citizens or not, young or old, rich or poor — were ordered to report to centers near their homes. Soon they were sent to permanent relocation centers outside the military zone.

Centers far from the ocean, often in remote areas

For example, Japanese-Americans in western Washington State went to the assembly center at the Puyallup Fairgrounds near Tacoma. They lived for the next several months in a cowshed at a fairgrounds or a horse stall at a racetrack. Next, they were taken to permanent relocation centers many miles from the ocean, often in remote and desolate areas. Sites included Tule Lake, California; Minidoka, Idaho; Manzanar, California; Topaz, Utah; Jerome, Arkansas; Heart Mountain, Wyoming; Poston, Arizona; Granada, Colorado; and Rohwer, Arkansas.

At the relocation centers, four or five families squeezed into barracks. Life went on and children went to school. Families ate together in dining halls, and there were few jobs. People who caused trouble were sent to a special camp at Tule Lake, California.

Japanese-Americans of 442nd fighting unit win many medals

In 1943 and 1944, the government organized a fighting unit of Japanese-Americans to fight in Europe. It was called the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and became famous for winning the most medals in World War II. Many Americans claimed that Japanese-Americans were loyal to Japan. Their military record shows patriotic they really were.

As the war drew to a close, the relocation centers were slowly emptied. While some people returned to their hometowns, others went to live in new places. For example, only 3 out of 10 members, or 30 percent, of the Japanese-American community of Tacoma, Washington, returned to Tacoma after the war. About 80 percent of Japanese-Americans from Fresno, California, went back to Fresno.

Arguments over whether internment was fair

The internment led to legal challenges and arguments over whether it was fair. In the 1940s, three Japanese people in the camps said that the orders were against the U.S. Constitution. Two of them lost their cases. However, in 1944, the Supreme Court ruled that a woman named Mitsuye Endo should be released from an internment center.

Some people refer to the relocation centers as concentration camps. During World War II, Nazi Germany forced Jews into concentration camps. They lived there in terrible conditions and were

given little food. In 1988, Congress passed a law recognizing that the Japanese internment was unjust, apologized and gave \$20,000 to each person who was interned. On December 7, 1991, on the 50th anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack, President George H. W. Bush said, "The internment of Americans of Japanese ancestry was a great injustice, and it will never be repeated."

"Why were the guns pointed inward?"

After the war, a Japanese-American was told they were put in those camps for their own protection. The person said, "If we were put there for our protection, why were the guns at the guard towers pointed inward, instead of outward?"