



# BEARING THE WEIGHT OF WAR: US JAPANESE INTERNMENT CAMPS DURING WWII

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For anyone who has seen the film *Unbroken* (2014), one cannot avoid feeling sorry for the terrible time its protagonist, Louis Zamperini, had during his captivity at the Japanese internment camps for American prisoners in World War II. Times of war usually lead governments to take inhuman measures in the interest of national security. For that reason, both the United States and Japan developed several policies to avoid Japanese espionage on the West Coast shortly after the US declared war on Japan after the bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1941. Almost eighty years ago, on February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, sending thousands of Americans of Japanese origin to internment camps, beginning one of the most atrocious violations of American civil rights in the twentieth century.

It is estimated that around one hundred and twenty thousand Americans were interned in these types of camps, which were scattered across California, Washington, and Oregon. Canada also relocated twenty-one thousand of its Japanese residents, while Peru, Brazil, Chile, and Argentina removed their Japanese population to the United States. The conditions these people were put into exceeded the limits of democracy. Many Japanese were unable to inform their families of their allocation, while their houses were inspected by the FBI and their goods seized without explanation. Around one thousand five hundred people were also arrested for having Asian features, and most of them remained in the internment camps until the end of the war in 1945. Furthermore, to justify these deprivations of liberty, some US officials, like General John DeWitt, developed a report filled with falsehoods, such as accusing these people of sabotaging power lines.

Anyone who was at least 1/16<sup>th</sup> Japanese was obliged to go to the camps, and that included seventeen thousand children under the age of ten, as well as thousands of elderly. These people were sent to a 'relocation center', so named to avoid calling



them 'internment camps'. There were a total of ten of these centers, and their conditions were atrocious. The Japanese lived in barracks, where several families were housed together and shared a communal eating area. Each camp had the structure of a town, featuring schools, post offices, farmland, and work facilities. These 'towns' were surrounded by barbed wire and guard towers, as acts of violence often took place. For example, three men were shot and killed while trying to escape, while another three were just murdered for getting too close to the perimeter. There were also many riots reported all along the different relocation camps.

The hardships of these one hundred and twenty thousand Americans of Japanese origin have not gone unnoticed on the big screen. There are several movies and short films portraying the experiences of these people. For those interested on the topic of internment camps, I would recommend *American Pastime* (2007) by Desmond Nakano, set in the Topaz War Relocation Center in Utah, and *Come See the Paradise* (1990) by Alan Parker, depicting the treatment of Japanese Americans in the US following Pearl Harbor. Regarding the discrimination of Japanese on US soil after 1942, some options are *Go for Broke: An Origin Story* (2018) by Alexander Bocchieri, and *Under the Blood Red Sun* (2014) by Tim Savage which is based on a 1995 Graham Salisbury's historical novel. Yet, for those who do not have too much time to go deeper, I would suggest the fifteen-minute film *Kommando 1944* (2018) by Derek Quick, which represents the oppression the Japanese suffered both from the Nazis and the Americans.

Many Japanese had to endure these conditions until the end of the war. The last of these Japanese internment camps was closed as late as March 1946. It was not until 1976, thirty-one years after the end of WWII, Executive Order 9066 was repealed by Gerald Ford. Even still, it was not until 1988 that Congress issued a formal apology and awarded twenty thousand dollars each to over eighty thousand Japanese Americans as reparations for their hardships.

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