Japanese American Incarceration During World War II

A Reading A–Z Level Z2 Leveled Book
Word Count: 2,353

Connections

Writing

Research some first-person accounts of life in World War II incarceration camps. Choose one person and describe his or her experiences in a camp.

Social Studies

Make a timeline of the major events related to World War II incarceration camps.

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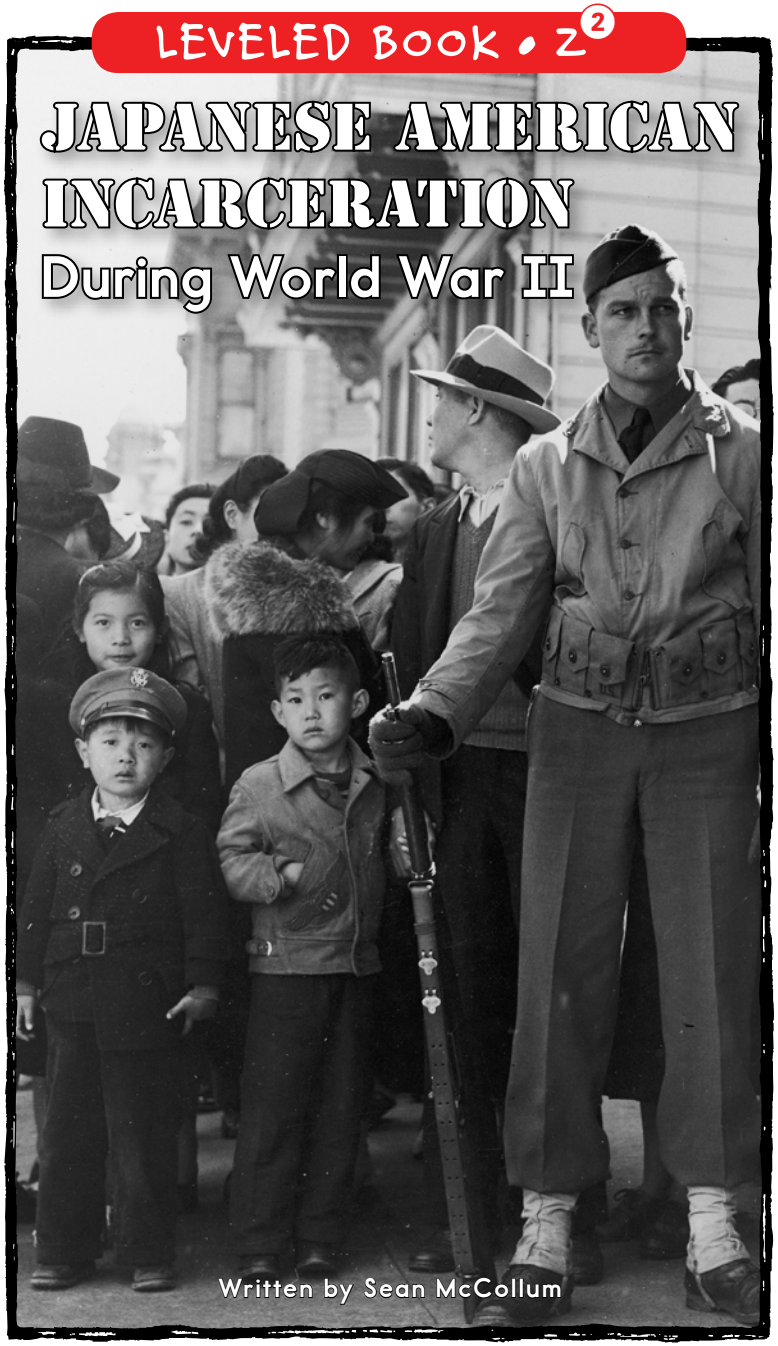

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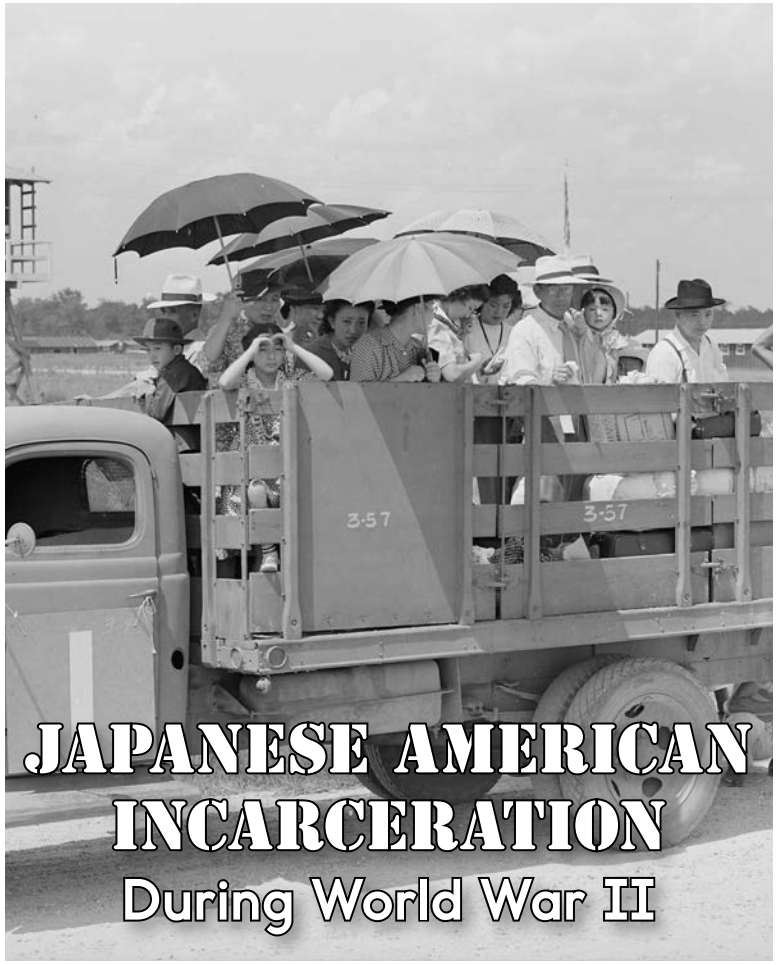

JAPANESE AMERICAN INCARCERATION
During World War II

Written by Sean McCollum

www.readinga-z.com

Focus Question

What lessons can people today learn from the historical events presented in this book?

Words to Know

ancestral	hysteria
barracks	incarceration camps
detained	injustice
evacuation	martial law
exclusion	opportunists
first-generation	prejudice

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The editor wishes to thank Carrie Andresen-Strawn, park ranger at Manzanar National Historic Site in California, for her help in reviewing this book. The National Park Service works to preserve Manzanar and other incarceration sites, along with stories about the Japanese American incarceration.

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Correlation

LEVEL Z2	
Fountas & Pinnell	Y–Z
Reading Recovery	N/A
DRA	70+

Table of Contents

Planes Over Pearl Harbor

The sky was partly cloudy over Honolulu, Hawaii, that Sunday morning—December 7, 1941. Daniel Inouye, age seventeen, was getting ready for church and listening to music on the radio. Suddenly the announcer's voice broke in: Pearl Harbor was under attack. "This is not a test! This is not a test!" the announcer yelled.

Daniel and his father went into the front yard and saw the puffs of antiaircraft fire from the direction of the U.S. naval base. Suddenly, three fighter planes roared low overhead, and Daniel got a good look at the markings. "They were pearl gray with red dots on the wing—Japanese," Inouye remembered. "I knew what was happening. And I thought my world had just come to an end."

The Japanese navy had launched a surprise attack from aircraft carriers at sea. Pearl Harbor, the base for the U.S. Pacific Fleet, was burning—

Battleship Row is under attack in Pearl Harbor, 1941.

4 battleships and additional ships sunk, 188 aircraft destroyed. More than 2,400 Americans died that day. A day later, the United States declared war on Japan, officially entering World War II.

Daniel's father had come from Japan at the age of three, but Daniel had been born in Hawaii, making him an American citizen by law. Both, though, instantly feared what war with Japan meant for them.

Those worries would have to wait as fire and smoke rose over Pearl Harbor. Daniel was a Red Cross volunteer with medical training. He rode his bike toward the devastation, where he spent the next five days helping people who were wounded. Despite his loyalty to the United States, however, he was now under suspicion—along with all ethnic Japanese living on U.S. soil.

War Hysteria

World War II was already raging by the time Pearl Harbor was attacked near the end of 1941. Japanese forces had invaded China in 1937 and were poised to conquer the rest of Asia. Since attacking Poland in September 1939, Nazi Germany had overrun almost all of Europe. Together with Italy, their three-nation alliance was known as the Axis, and their military might seemed unstoppable.

The United States had steered clear of the war, but President Franklin Roosevelt and many Americans suspected it was just a matter of time before the country would be forced to join the fight. A major U.S. military buildup was underway even before Pearl Harbor, and in the fall of 1941 Roosevelt ordered an investigation of Japanese Americans and Japanese immigrants on the West Coast and in Hawaii. Would they be true to their adopted country, or would their **ancestral** ties to Japan turn them against the United States?

The investigation concluded that Americans had nothing to fear from ethnic Japanese living among them. However, many Americans had a long history of anti-Asian bias, and many communities harbored deep feelings of **prejudice** and hostility toward their ethnic Japanese neighbors, who were often recruited to work for lower wages than Caucasian workers. The vast majority of ethnic Japanese lived in California, where Japanese farmers were becoming increasingly successful, and many Caucasian landowners saw them as unwelcome rivals.

Then came Pearl Harbor, an attack that shocked and enraged Americans. Wild reports quickly circulated that Japanese forces might be preparing to invade California.

Like a whirlwind, fears and war fever began to spin into **hysteria**, and having ethnic links to Japan was enough to cause suspicion. On February 19, 1942, Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066—the **exclusion** order. It authorized U.S. military commanders to remove anyone considered a potential enemy from "military exclusion zones"—areas where military bases and other sensitive sites were located. Plans were set in motion to remove everyone of Japanese ancestry from areas along the West Coast and imprison them in **incarceration camps**.

Public Opinion

After the Pearl Harbor attack, many newspaper columnists played on anti-Japanese fears and prejudice:

I am for the immediate removal of every Japanese on the West Coast to a point deep in the interior. I don't mean a nice part of the interior either. Herd 'em up, pack 'em off and give 'em the inside room in the badlands. . . . Personally, I hate the Japanese. And that goes for all of them.

—Henry McLemore, columnist for Hearst Newspapers, January 1942

A viper is nonetheless a viper wherever the egg is hatched. . . . So a Japanese-American born of Japanese parents . . . grows up to be a Japanese, not an American. . . .

—W. H. Anderson, *Los Angeles Times* editorial, February 2, 1942

"We have no one to go to for help," author Kiyo Sato later wrote about her family being forced from their home. "Not even a church. Anything goes, now that our President Roosevelt signed the order to get rid of us. How can he do this to his own citizens? . . . There's not a more lonely feeling than to be banished by my own country."

Evacuation

In 1941, people of Japanese ancestry were a small minority of the U.S. population. About 127,000 lived on the mainland, and of those, 112,000 lived on the West Coast. *Issei* (EE-say) was the term for **first-generation** Japanese immigrants, who by law were not allowed to become U.S. citizens—an extension of anti-Chinese legislation from the late 1800s. Their children were *Nisei* (NEE-say), second-generation Japanese who had been born in the United States and were therefore American citizens. No ethnic Japanese could avoid the **evacuation** orders, however. Anyone who was at least one-sixteenth Japanese—in other words, anyone with a single Japanese great-great-grandparent—was to be removed.

Less than a week after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States also declared war on Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.

A few thousand German and Italian Americans were **detained** for portions of the war; however, wholesale incarceration because of ethnicity was reserved for people of Japanese descent.

In April, notices were posted across the western states. Families with Japanese roots were given a week to settle their affairs. After that, they had to report to assembly centers to await transportation to incarceration camps. All they could bring was what they could carry.

The sudden removal from their homes and businesses was a terrible blow for Japanese Americans. Farmers tried to find friends who would care for their land while they were gone. Families had to sell their homes and belongings in just a few days. **Opportunists** took advantage of the predicament of their Japanese neighbors and bought their houses at very low prices. Many Japanese Americans lost everything they owned.

In preparation for incarceration, a San Francisco merchant posts a sale sign on his store.

Japanese American Incarceration Camp Locations

The ten camps were scattered across the United States, all in remote areas.

Few Americans protested the government's actions. Legal challenges brought by Japanese Americans fell on deaf ears. Robert Kashiwagi and his family had been forced from their home in Sacramento. In a PBS documentary made decades later, he said he thought the Bill of Rights would protect him—right up until the moment he was ordered to board the evacuation train.

War fever and anti-Japanese sentiment were too strong to beat back, however. Some 110,000 Japanese Americans were sent to fifteen assembly centers at stockyards, racetracks, and fairgrounds in West Coast states. There, families were housed

in horse stables and other makeshift quarters before being shipped to one of ten incarceration camps. Two-thirds of them were American citizens, the other third Japanese immigrants who were legal U.S. residents.

The fate of ethnic Japanese people in Hawaii unfolded very differently. At the time, Hawaii had 158,000 ethnic Japanese people living on the islands—nearly 40 percent of the Hawaiian population. They supplied much of the islands' workforce in agriculture, transportation, and other industries. An estimated 90 percent of Hawaii's carpenters were ethnic Japanese people, instrumental in rebuilding Pearl Harbor after the December 7 attack.

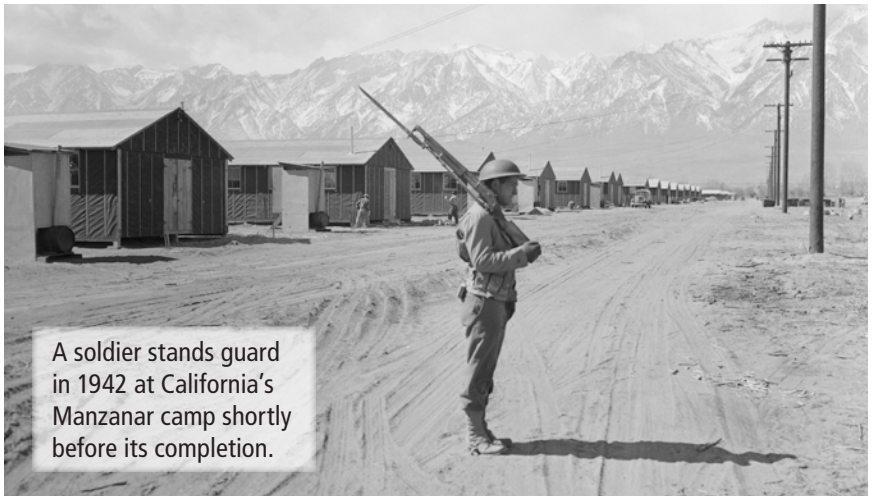
When U.S. officials suggested that Hawaii's Japanese population should be incarcerated for security reasons, Hawaii's business leaders strongly opposed it. They successfully argued that the islands' labor force of ethnic Japanese people was too essential to their plantations and other businesses. In the end, fewer than 1,800 Hawaiian Japanese people were incarcerated. However, Hawaii was placed under **martial law** with a strict curfew. The U.S. Army censored all letters and publications, and closely monitored communications by ethnic Japanese people.

The Camps

In May 1942, Japanese Americans from the West Coast started arriving at the incarceration camps. They got off the trains or buses to find U.S. soldiers armed with guns and bayonets, as if they were captured enemy troops.

Joyce Nakamura Okazaki was seven years old when her family was forced to relocate to Manzanar, a California camp. She was "surrounded by barbed wire fencing and eight guard towers with armed sentries," she said later.

Most of the incarceration camps were located in remote, arid regions of Colorado, Utah, and other western states—hot in summer, cold in winter, dusty most of the time. The **barracks** were drafty,



A soldier stands guard in 1942 at California's Manzanar camp shortly before its completion.

having been hastily and shoddily built with cheap materials. Cots served as beds, and woodstoves provided little heat on cold nights. Families were often forced to share sparsely furnished quarters with strangers, meals were served in mess halls, and toilets had no privacy.

More than thirty thousand of the incarcerees were school-age children. However, little planning had gone into continuing their education. Classrooms were overcrowded since there were few teachers willing to work at the camps. Books, textbooks, and desks were in very short supply. Doctors were few and far between, and camp clinics were routinely understaffed. Some of the doctors, dentists, and nurses were Japanese Americans working for poverty-level wages.

Under those harsh circumstances, the incarcerees did their best to keep their dignity and stay active. They formed committees to organize camp activities. Sports were a popular diversion, especially the game of baseball. At some camps, Japanese American teams traveled to nearby towns to compete against local squads. Some college-age incarcerees were eventually allowed to leave the camps to study at colleges in the East and Midwest—the colleges that accepted Japanese Americans, that is.

Shikata ga nai (shee-KAH-tah gah NYE) became a refrain at the camps. Loosely translated from Japanese, the phrase means "It cannot be helped." Incarcerees counseled each other to stay calm and not do something rash they might regret. But there was no escaping the resentment many incarcerated Japanese Americans harbored toward the U.S. government. They felt humiliated by the racism directed at them and their families and the mistreatment they endured at the camps. Most of all, they felt betrayed by their country and by fellow Americans.

Korematsu v. United States

Korematsu received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1998 from President Bill Clinton.

Fred Korematsu was a Japanese American who was arrested in 1942, put on trial, and convicted for disobeying the evacuation orders. He decided to fight his conviction, hoping his case might prove that the incarceration of Japanese Americans because of their ethnicity was unconstitutional. In 1944, his case was appealed all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. The nine justices upheld his conviction by a vote of 6-3, arguing that the peril of the war was more important than individual rights. In 1983, though, a federal judge vacated Korematsu's conviction and cleared his name. At the 1983 proceedings, Korematsu said, "I would like to see the government admit that they were wrong and do something about it so this will never happen again to any American citizen of any race, creed, or color."

Fighting for Honor

In 1943, the U.S. War Department and Office of Naval Intelligence needed more men for the war effort. Representatives visited the incarceration camps looking for recruits. They distributed questionnaires to assess how "Americanized" the incarcerees were and whether the incarcerated Nisei men would be willing to serve in uniform.

Most men of military age said yes, they would serve under one condition—that they and their families would be freed and their rights as American citizens restored. The U.S. military was unwilling to consider that, but 6 percent of Nisei in the camps still volunteered to serve. They saw military service as a means to change public opinion by proving their loyalty as Americans.

The Nisei fighting men distinguished themselves—and more. The 442nd Regimental Combat Team was mainly composed of Japanese Americans. They were deployed to Europe, where they faced German and Italian forces. Their motto was "Go for Broke," and their bravery matched the slogan. Nearly ten thousand of them earned Purple Hearts for being wounded in combat, and more than six hundred lost their lives. Twenty-one were awarded Medals of Honor, which are reserved for the greatest acts of valor.

One of those to earn the Medal of Honor was Daniel Inouye. The teen who had witnessed the attack on Pearl Harbor went on to fight for his country, lost his right arm in a grenade blast, and later became a long-serving U.S. senator from Hawaii.

By war's end, the 442nd had become one of the most decorated units in U.S. military history. After the war, President Harry S. Truman addressed them, saying, "You fought the enemy abroad and prejudice at home and you won."

President Harry Truman shakes hands with WWII veteran Wilson Makabe in 1946.

As 1944 came to a close, the defeat of Germany and Japan was in sight. U.S. officials began planning to close the incarceration camps. After more than two years of living as prisoners of the U.S. government, Japanese Americans were freed. "Finally getting out of the camps was a great day," said Aya Nakamura, a camp survivor. "It felt so good to get out of the gates, and just know that you were going home . . . finally."

Learning from the Past

The exclusion order was canceled on January 2, 1945, officially ending the incarceration of Japanese Americans. With an Allied victory imminent, U.S. officials no longer saw the incarceration camps as necessary. The war in the Pacific would end the following August with the surrender of Japan. Survivors of the camps were each given $25 and a train ticket.

But where to go? Sadly, many had no home to return to. Thousands had lost their businesses and property while they had been incarcerated. Others had to chase out people who had illegally moved into their old homes. While some neighbors welcomed back their Japanese American friends, many communities met the returnees with distrust and discrimination.

Enough to Right a Wrong?

A *financial reparation* is money paid to make amends or compensate for a wrong. In 1948, the Senate passed the Japanese American Evacuation Claims Act, and the government eventually paid out a total of $38 million to the incarcerees. Yet according to the *New York Times*, that equaled less than ten cents for every dollar Japanese Americans had lost by being taken away from their homes, careers, and businesses. Forty years later, President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which paid each survivor of the incarceration camps $20,000.

Many Japanese Americans carried deep emotional and psychological scars. Many urged their children to excel in school and at work to protect themselves from being victimized again. For decades afterward, most other Americans forgot about this unjust chapter in U.S. history. That began to change in the 1970s as more survivors spoke about their experiences. In 1981, the U.S. Congress formed a commission that found no evidence of any anti-American espionage or sabotage carried out by a Japanese American or Japanese immigrant during the war. In 1991, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack, President George H. W. Bush issued another formal apology: "No nation can fully understand itself . . . if it does not look with clear eyes at all the glories and disgraces, too, of the past. . . . The internment of Americans of Japanese ancestry was a great **injustice**, and it will never be repeated."

Japanese Americans have continued to remind their fellow citizens of that commitment. Since World War II, some Americans have called for rounding up other groups in the United States and repeating the same injustice. Survivors of the incarceration camps have been some of the loudest voices urging that this must never happen again—to any group.

Actor and activist George Takei, whose family was incarcerated in Arkansas when he was five, called the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans, "a decision steeped in racism, war hysteria, and lack of political leadership." He added, "We must never repeat the mistakes of the past. To hold to this, our civic leaders must not only stand up to fearmongering, they must also understand our history so it does not ever repeat."

George Takei spent time in an incarceration camp in Rohwer, Arkansas (left); played *Star Trek*'s Commander Sulu on both television and in film (center); and has spoken out on political issues for years (right).

Glossary

ancestral *(adj.)* having to do with relatives from long ago (p. 6)

barracks *(n.)* a building or set of buildings, often simple in design or construction, used to house a group of people (p. 12)

detained *(v.)* held in custody (p. 9)

evacuation *(n.)* the process of moving people because of safety concerns (p. 8)

exclusion *(n.)* the act of keeping people away from a place or privilege (p. 7)

first-generation *(adj.)* of or relating to people who become citizens of a new country (p. 8)

hysteria *(n.)* extreme negative emotion that results in uncontrolled behavior (p. 7)

incarceration camps *(n.)* places where people are forced to stay without having had a trial (p. 7)

injustice *(n.)* the unfair treatment of a person or group of people (p. 18)

martial law *(n.)* a special set of rules that are imposed over a community and enforced by the military during war or an emergency (p. 11)

opportunists *(n.)* people who take advantage of circumstances that arise (p. 9)

prejudice *(n.)* a preformed opinion, usually negative (p. 6)