

Asian Americans During the World War II

World War II was the single most critical historical era for Asian Americans in the century since immigration had begun. The war exacerbated existing tensions created by hostilities in the homelands. Japan had colonized Korea in the early twentieth century and was ravaging much of China's coastline and its major cities, as well as most of the Philippines and many islands in the Pacific. In the United States, immigrants from Korea, China, and the Philippines engaged in efforts to liberate their countries, sometimes in the form of political lobbying or financial support, but even in paramilitary training in the countryside of California and Hawai'i. At the same time, their children were in the American military, fighting fascism abroad and racism at home.

The United States entered World War II in December 1941 as a result of Japan's attacks on Pearl Harbor in Hawai'i and on the Philippines, but hostilities had begun long before, in the mid-1930s in China. And the United States had long anticipated military confrontation with Japan. There were dramatic shifts in the fortunes of Asian Americans, both on battlefields and on the home front, as the war highlighted issues of race and nationality. More than 50,000 Asian Americans, primarily sons and daughters of Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, and Korean immigrants, fought in nearly every theater of the war and in every military service. But that record was accomplished only with great difficulty and after overcoming a variety of barriers. President Franklin Roosevelt had set the tone on January 19, 1942, by signing Executive Order 9066, paving the way for mass removal of Japanese Americans from their homes into concentration camps in the interior.

The selective internment of 2,000 Japanese Americans from Hawai'i (out of 160,000) and complete "evacuation" of all 120,000 individuals of Japanese descent on the West Coast became the single worst case of civil rights violations perpetrated by the U.S. government in American history. Coupled with a long record of anti-Asian racism, these actions provided substantial ammunition for Japan's military to convince Asian leaders that the war was being fought on their behalf against European and American white racist oppressors. To counter these claims, the United States finally began to reverse laws and policies ex-

cluding Asians and preventing them from becoming naturalized citizens. In 1943, most notably, Chinese were given a token annual quota of 105 immigrants—although, unlike with any other ethnic group, anyone of Chinese descent from anywhere in the world was counted against that number.

In early 1942, the army began removing all those of Japanese descent, two-thirds of them American citizens, from the western portions of California, Washington, and Oregon, and the southern tip of Arizona. Through much of 1942, they were forced into assembly centers, often commandeered racetracks and fairgrounds, and then into hastily constructed camps confined by barbed wire and armed guards. Hundreds left to continue college on the few campuses willing to accept a few of the internees, while others were able to find sponsors and employment in the Midwest or East before the end of the war.

But most of the internees endured several years in humiliating circumstances: numbered for identification, living in cramped barracks, taking all meals in central cafeterias, doing their laundry and bathing in communal facilities without privacy, all in desolate areas subject to severe cold in the winters and blistering heat in the summers. There were no hearings, no trials, no due process; no one was even accused of espionage or sabotage. Dozens of camps were scattered around the Midwest, as far east as Arkansas and south into Texas, close to the Mexican border. Some internees were employed, but with minimal compensation. The highest paid were doctors, for example, who received \$21

per month.

The community responded to these conditions in a wide variety of ways. Schools were maintained; elections were held to provide a small measure of democratic self-determination; newspapers, albeit seriously censored, were published; and cultural events like plays and concerts were performed. The internees formed Boy Scout troops and organized serious baseball and football leagues, as well as art and civics courses. But there were suicides and depression; the immigrant generation had lost nearly everything, including authority over their families, and despair was palpable. Young men faced the problem of deciding, at first, whether to volunteer to fight and, even more wrenching, how to respond when the draft was imposed.

Within the American military itself, the war provided the context for major changes. This would be the last war fought by racially segregated—Japanese American, Filipino American, and African American—units. For most of 1942, almost every American of Japanese descent was declared “4C”—enemy alien unfit to serve. In the meantime, volunteer and draftee Japanese Americans were already serving as American spies in the Pacific, translators and interpreters with the Military Intelligence Service, and combat soldiers in the 100th Infantry Battalion. Frustrated by their nation’s lack of trust, 169 Japanese Americans in

Hawai'i formed the "Varsity Victory Volunteers" to support the war effort by doing manual labor on an army base.

Chinese Americans joined the volunteer "Flying Tigers" in China, battling

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the Japanese before Pearl Harbor, and many more, including women, volunteered or were drafted during the war. The First and Second Filipino Regiments, formed by Filipino Americans, were trained and sent to the Philippines to help liberate that country. In January 1943, Japanese Americans were finally allowed to form the voluntary, segregated, 442nd Regimental Combat Team, commanded at first by all-white officers. Amazingly, one of its GIs, Young Oak Kim, a Korean American, became a highly decorated veteran. Fewer than 2,000 left the concentration camps to volunteer for the 442nd or the Military Intelligence Service, where they used their Japanese language skills against the Japanese empire. In 1944, in a highly controversial move, the draft was extended to Japanese Americans, including those already imprisoned in the camps, precipitating resistance efforts by several hundred internees.

Nearly 30,000 Japanese Americans served in World War II, compiling a remarkable record of tenacity and bravery. The 442nd RCT became the most highly decorated army unit of its size in American history. One of its members, Sadao Munemori, was awarded a Medal of Honor. A review conducted half a century after the war revealed that bias in the original process justified the awarding of 22 more Medals of Honor to one Chinese/Hawaiian, one Filipino, and 20 Japanese Americans. Fighting in the military was one way of trying to secure full citizenship rights; resisting the draft until their families were released from concentration camps was another; a third was recourse to the judicial system, and several notable cases remain on the books.

Gordon Hirabayashi, then a student at the University of Washington at Seattle, deliberately violated curfew regulations applied only to Japanese Americans. He was convicted, and appeals to the U.S. Supreme Court resulted in a prison sentence in 1943. Minoru Yasui met a similar fate that same year. Fred Korematsu defied the order to move from the West Coast and was caught—in

1944 the Supreme Court ruled that forcible relocation on the basis of race was constitutional. But, also in 1944, the court determined that Mitsuye Endo's *habeas corpus* petition was justified and ordered her released from camp. These four Supreme Court cases are among the most important in American constitutional and racial history.

The Japanese American community was sharply divided over the appropriate reaction to the government's decision to detain them in concentration camps. The "official" response came from the Japanese American Citizens League, barely a decade old, comprised of the *nisei*, American-born children of the immigrants. Their leaders urged cooperation with the internment and criticized dissenters, including those who took the government to court or who resisted the draft.

The situation in Hawai'i was very different. One reason was the imposition of martial law on December 7, immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Military control, lasting into 1944, ensured tight security and less concern over the fact that 160,000 individuals, almost 40 percent of Hawaii's population, were

of Japanese descent. But the need for this ethnic community's manpower, more than half of the entire labor force, as well as a tradition of relative racial tolerance allowed a multiracial civilian/military leadership to adroitly harness the potentially dangerous mix of ethnic and racial tensions in the islands.

The end of World War II had one immediate impact on Asian American communities. Approximately 200,000 women arrived as "war brides" from various countries. A modest number of Japanese American GIs returned with brides from Japan. In some cases, as with the Chinese and Filipino servicemen, these women were critically important because anti-Asian laws had created communities overwhelmingly male. In an era when interracial marriages were illegal—at least with whites—many mature Chinese and Filipino men were seemingly destined to live out their lives as bachelors; the war dramatically changed their personal lives. Some of the women returned with white or African American veterans, and their children became the first significant generation of multiracial "Amerasians."

The first half of the twentieth century was marked by escalating anti-Asian racism, leading to numerous restrictions on immigration, naturalization, and the freedom to find employment, own land, seek education, and marry whom they chose. But Asian Americans were hardly passive victims, as the enormous

numbers of lawsuits and work actions indicated. Further, “paper sons” and “picture brides” indicated how the restrictive laws were manipulated or evaded in order to continue building communities in the United States.

The end of World War II left the United States as the uncontested power in the entire Pacific. The next half century would bring enormous tensions throughout the globe, with the contest between the United States and the Soviet Union. Asia and the Pacific became one major battlefield of the “Cold War,” certainly a term inappropriate to describe a region that would see China emerge as a Communist nation in 1949, Korea become a very “hot” battlefield in 1950, the Pacific become a nuclear testing ground soon after the war, and Southeast Asia become a quagmire for the French, and then the United States, after the 1950s. This context emerged as a central motif for Asian Americans in the period 1945–75, when some observers saw the Pacific Ocean as an “American lake.”