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How and why did Japanese Americans show resistance in Japanese Internment camps?

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Internment camps were used in the United States as an excuse to lock up Japanese Americans because of a scare that came with the Pearl Harbor bombing. Japanese Americans had done nothing wrong, but they were used as a scape goat because of their Japanese ancestry. There were many anti-immigrant feelings that were caused by World War 2, which led people to believe that they were traitors and spies, even though there was no evidence that linked them to it. It led the United States to take action against them, and issue Executive order 9006, to make Japanese people move out of their homes and into internment camps.[[1]](#footnote-1) As a result, the United States sent 120,000 people to internment camps, which were two thirds of the total Japanese population.[[2]](#footnote-2) If anyone resisted, they were immediately arrested and accused of treason.

This caused a lot of unrest in the United States with such controversial actions that were taken against Japanese Americans. By enforcing racist laws to move Japanese Americans out of their home, it caused lots of animosity between the government and Japanese people. The majority of historians agree that there was never any evidence for such a drastic step. Many historians focus on this lack of evidence and also highlight how difficult life was for Japanese-Americans inside these camps. However, not as much historical research has been done on the experience of the Japanese-Americans themselves. Or the majority of research again focuses mostly on how difficult life was for them. Therefore, historical research should also explore the different ways that Japanese-Americans resisted this oppression and fought bravely for their equal rights as American citizens. In reality, Japanese Americans found both violent and nonviolent ways to resist the rule of America, inside and outside of internment camps. It was significant because it showed the bravery and dedication of the Japanese to prove their innocence and establish themselves as American citizens. They were put in a very difficult situation where they were being imprisoned by the very country they loved and had to find ways of showing their patriotism yet show their frustrations at the same time. Japanese-Americans through showing signs of resistance in internment camps not only resisted unfair oppression but also proved themselves true American citizens fighting for equality in various forms: using legal battles in court; developing thriving communities within the camps themselves; using cultural resistance such as baseball and art; and even bravely volunteering to serve in the military.

Fred Korematsu was a Japanese American who showed resistance against the United States by avoiding being imprisoned in internment camps. When Roosevelt passed executive order 9006, it gave the military the authority to exclude Japanese citizens from critical areas.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is the order that was used to force anyone of Japanese descent out of their homes and into internment camps. As a result, many Japanese tried to take on a different identity, just like Korematsu. He had surgery to change his eye shape, used skin whitener, and changed his name to Clyde Sarah.[[4]](#footnote-4) He was eventually caught, and was arrested on the spot. Although his bail was paid, the military police seized him and took him to a military fort, where he was soon tried again and convicted. This unfair treatment of an American citizen led to a lot of unrest in the United States. With lots of different opinions on his cause, juries often had a hard time deciding on a definite answer, which eventually caused it to reach the Supreme Court. It resulted in the Supreme Court ruling against him, and it declared that the threat of espionage was more important than his constitutional rights.[[5]](#footnote-5) Many years later, it was discovered that the government had destroyed evidence that proved Korematsu’s innocence. The United States cleared his name on November 10, 1983 and justice Robert Jackson issued a formal apology to him.[[6]](#footnote-6) The injustice that he faced, really signifies the struggle that all other Japanese Americans had to face as well. Korematsu didn’t only just face the problems of discrimination, but also had the government that worked against him, to make sure that he would be imprisoned. Even though imprisonment robbed him of many years of his life and affected his chance of employment, Korematsu only wanted the United States’ government to “admit that they were wrong and do something about this so will never happen again to any American citizen of any race, creed or color”. [[7]](#footnote-7)He did not use his feelings of hatred to rebel against the government, but actually forgave them instead. After his court case was overturned, he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Bill Clinton and helped the Supreme Court by filing to be a “friend of the court”. His actions of understanding and forgiveness truly showcase his love for his country and establishes him as a true American citizen.

In addition, the Japanese also resisted through their indirect expression of feelings, to show that they still had spirit and would not be put down by the dire situation they were in. For example, the Japanese created art in the camps, to symbolize their hope for the future and their tenacity to not give up. Many painted beautiful landscapes, often depicting their homeland, to remind them of a better time.[[8]](#footnote-8) It was a way to take their minds off of the jail-like surroundings. They also created jewelry out of peach pits and furniture made of wood, to transform the camp into something like a home.[[9]](#footnote-9) This shows how the Japanese were determined to make the best out of this dreadful situation by showing their high spirits and proving to Americans that they cannot be put down. They also made homemade moonshine, which is a type of alcohol, that was prohibited in the camps. This rebellious act highlights[[10]](#footnote-10) their strong feelings towards being imprisoned in the camps. By deliberately breaking the rules, it connotes that they were not going to let themselves be treated like prisoners. Also, they were known to plant plentiful gardens, nicknamed “defiant gardens”, because this was banned as well. It was used to create a temporary illusion of home, and provide them with an activity to do while in the camp. These beautiful gardens symbolized how even in such an awful environment, they are still able to flourish, just like the Japanese. Just like these defiant gardens, they will defy all odds and prosper despite the situation they were in.

Another important act of resistance in internment camps were sports because it was a way of showing the United States that they were true American citizens. People in the camps really enjoyed playing baseball, since it distracted them from facing the harsh reality of their imprisonment. It was supposed to be shut down because of the war, but Roosevelt issued a “green light letter” that allowed for its continuation.[[11]](#footnote-11) Many inmates described the league as “lifesaving” and “enlightening” because it helped change their lives in prison for the better.[[12]](#footnote-12) Prisoner Takeo Suo stated “putting on a baseball uniform was like wearing the American flag”, showing how baseball helped connect them to America and reassured them that they were still proud of their country.[[13]](#footnote-13) It helped them regain hopes that they would be truly recognized as a true American citizen. Another prisoner said, “without baseball, camp life would have been miserable”, which is telling how big of an impact baseball had on the lives of the prisoners.[[14]](#footnote-14) It gave them motivation and hope that life would soon be better.

Furthermore, the Japanese demonstrated resistance through violent acts of defiance, to highlight the mistreatment of their people and how they will not stand for it. Many protests occurred in camps for numerous reasons, ranging from poor conditions, to drafting, to mistreatment. The conditions in the camps were very poor. They were often infested with rodents and insects, and did not have the proper sanitation which caused many diseases. With diseases rampant, there were no doctors, dentists, or psychologists that could help cure them.[[15]](#footnote-15) What’s even worse, is that they were forced to be drafted and forced to fight for the United States in World War Two, the very country that imprisoned them for their race. They also had to swear allegiance to the United States and swear that they had no allegiance to the emperor of Japan.[[16]](#footnote-16) Some people were brave enough to resist and were called the “No Nos”, but ultimately, they were thrown in jail.[[17]](#footnote-17) This caused lots of anger towards the Americans, and caused lots of resistance in Camp Topaz. People in this camp succeeded in slowing down the registration process, by refusing to sign up for the army. Tule Lake Camp also refused registration, which caused the registration crisis of 1943.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Overall, the racist crimes that the United States committed towards the Japanese were found unconstitutional and each victim was given 20,000 dollars.[[19]](#footnote-19) It is extremely commendable that the Japanese did not lose their spirit during this troubled time, and continued to push through. They rebelled against these crimes in order to gain their constitutional rights. Through these actions of the United States, it can be seen that there is an underlying ideal of fascism in these actions, which they used to overcome their “so called enemy” of fascism. It is important to highlight that during these times, the US government acted more dangerous than the Japanese. This paper has thus highlighted that in many respects it was minorities themselves (in this case Japanese-Americans) who acted more "American" and "patriotic" than the US government. In specific, Japanese-Americans used a variety of methods to fight for their rights as American citizens during this time, ranging from legal, political, military, and cultural resistance. This connects to the larger theme of US History that much of US History still needs to be reinterpreted to ask who are the true "Americans" and the true patriots? This paper has revealed that in the case of Japanese Internment during World War II the evidence suggests it was the US government that was un-American and it was minorities fighting for rights against the government that was truly American.

Annotated Bibliography

Candela, Kimberlee. 2013. "Japanese American internment." *Salem Press Encyclopedia Research Starters*, EBSCO*host* (accessed February 1, 2018).

This research paper written by Kimberlee Candela talks a lot about the background information that allows for me to have a deeper understanding of my topic. The author is a prestigious political science professor at California State University Chico. She provides details about how FDR alienated the Japanese by declaring certain areas of land to be military dedicated. Also, explains in more detail about the conditions of the camps and what the US did to repay them for what they did. This is relevant to my paper by providing sufficient information for my body paragraphs, so I can support my thesis with relevant evidence.

Carr, Gilly, and Mytum, Harold, eds. *Cultural Heritage and Prisoners of War : Creativity Behind Barbed Wire.* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2012.) Accessed February 7, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central.

This book is written by Harold Mytum and Gilly Carr, who are both profesors. Gilly Carr is a professor at the University of Cambridge. She has taught numerous courses about this subject, and is truly an expert in her field. Harold Mytum is a professor at the University of Liverpool and teaches about archaeology. This book focuses on how the prisoners endured the internment camps, and what they did for fun. It showcases how the Japanese prisoners totally created their own society while held behind bars. It is useful to my project because it gives me inside information on what the prisoners did during their free time.

Greg Robinson, *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

This book is written by Greg Robinson, who is a history professor at I’Universite de Quebec. He teaches courses about the minorities of the United States, and has a PhD in American history. His book talks about the actions that FDR took to either oppose or support Japanese internment. He writes about how the government treated the Japanese at the time, and how the internment camps were planned and executed. This information is necessary for my essay because it is important to understand how the Japanese were treated at that time. By seeing how the US discriminated this minority, I am able to see the extent of fascism rising in the United States.

Gruenewald, Mary Matsuda. *Looking Like the Enemy : My Story of Imprisonment in Japanese American Internment Camps.* (NewSage Press, 2005.) Accessed February 6, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central.

The author of this book is a woman who is a second generation Japanese, who was imprisoned in an internment camp. This book is a primary source, and is essential to truly understand the turmoil that these internment camps caused. She writes about the horror when she was forced to live behind bars for an indefinite amount of time. Also, she talks about the challenges she constantly faced living in the camps, and how she overcame them, or how they forever scarred her. This is very important to my paper because it provides a different perspective of the internment camps with a primary source.

Linda Ivey and Kevin Kaatz., eds. *Citizen Internees: a Second Look at Race and Citizenship in Japanese American Internment Camps.* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2017.) Accessed February 1, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central.

This book is written by Linda Ivey and Kevin Kaatz. Kevin Kaatz and Linda Ivey are history professors at Cal State University, which means they are an expert in this field of work. They also both earned their PhD in history as well. This book talks about the gruesome truths of how the United States’ government created upheaval for law by demonstrating racism towards the Japanese. It talks a lot about how the anti-immigrant hysteria started in the first place, and how it affected the people who were forcefully evicted from their homes to live in internment camps. This is very useful to my paper because it focuses on the important details of what life was like in the internment camps. With these useful details, I am able to look at the internment camps in a different perspective.

Jane E. Dusselier, *Artifacts of Loss: Crafting Survival in Japanese American Concentration Camps* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), <http://www.questiaschool.com/read/125321658/artifacts-of-loss-crafting-survival-in-japanese>.

The author of this book, Jane E Dusselier, is a history professor at Iowa State University, who is an expert in Asian American studies. With her extensive Asian American studies, the book teaches me about the ways Japanese Americans resisted against the US. It gives numerous examples of how the Japanese felt, and how they expressed themselves through peaceful protest. This is my research question, and it is very necessary to truly understand the diverse ways that the Japanese Americans resisted against their oppression.

Mary E. Williams, "*An American’s Viewpoint of Internment Camps*," in America's Home Front Heroes: An Oral History of World War I*I*, by Stacy Enyeart (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2009).

Mary E Williams is an American writer who has written for the New York Times. This book talks about her perspective on internment camps when it was going on. This provides a very interesting other perspective for my essay because you don’t usually hear the other side of the story. I think it is interesting to have both sides of the story, in order to understand the turmoil that was occurring in America.

Susan Dudley Gold, *Korematsu v. United States: Japanese-American Internment* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, 2006).

Susan Dudley Gold has wrote numerous books about the history of Supreme Court Decisions and their backstories. She is an established writer who has over 30 published pieces of writing. Her book focuses on the story of a Japanese American called Korematsu, who disguised himself to be American. He was eventually caught and jailed, and then wasn’t released even when his bond was paid. This book will help my essay because my 1st body paragraph is all about the resistance that Korematsu demonstrated.

Toyo Suyemoto, *I Call to Remembrance: Toyo Suyemoto's Years of Internment*, ed. Susan B. Richardson (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

Toyo Suyemoto is a poet who experienced Japanese discrimination firsthand in internment camps. It talks about the struggles that he faced and how it changed him and his friends. It recalls details about his life there, and how he overcame challenges he faced. This provides a good insight to these internment camps for my paper, which is essential because I need to understand what they went through in these camps and how they resisted.

Wohl, Alexander. "*The Japanese Internment*." In *Father, Son, and Constitution: How Justice Tom Clark and Attorney General Ramsey Clark Shaped American Democracy*, 28-48. (University Press of Kansas, 2013.) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1d4txk2.7>.

This article is written by Alexander Wohl is a professor who works at the University of Washington in the law department. His law background is shown throughout this article because he constantly mentions the rights of the Japanese and how they lost their constitutional rights. This is useful for my paper because it is important to understand the perspective of the Japanese. For them to be denied their equal rights even when they are American citizens, it is truly an atrocious crime that America has committed.

1. Greg Robinson, *By Order of the President: FDR and the Internment of Japanese Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), <http://www.questiaschool.com/read/119277219/by-order-of-the-president-fdr-and-the-internment>, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kimberlee Candela, *Japanese American Internment* (Salem Press EncyclopediaResearch),12. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Candela, Japanese American Internment, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Susan Dudley Gold, *Korematsu v. United States: Japanese-American Internment* (Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark, 2006), 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Gold, *Korematsu v. United States: Japanese-American Internment*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Gold, *Korematsu v. United States: Japanese-American Internment*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Gold, *Korematsu v. United States: Japanese-American Internment*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Jane E. Dusselier, *Artifacts of Loss: Crafting Survival in Japanese American Concentration Camps* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), <http://www.questiaschool.com/read/125321658/artifacts-of-loss-crafting-survival-in-japanese>, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Dusselier, *Artifacts of Loss: Crafting Survival in Japanese American Concentration Camps*, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Dusselier, *Artifacts of Loss: Crafting Survival in Japanese American Concentration Camps*, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Suyemoto, *I Call to Remembrance: Toyo Suyemoto's Years of Internment*, ed. Susan B. Richardson (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), <http://www.questiaschool.com/read/120714680/i-call-to-remembrance-toyo-suyemoto-s-years-of-internment>, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Suyemoto, *I Call to Remembrance: Toyo Suyemoto's Years of Internment*, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Suyemoto, *I Call to Remembrance: Toyo Suyemoto's Years of Internment*, 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Suyemoto, *I Call to Remembrance: Toyo Suyemoto’s Years of Internment,* 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Candela, *Japanese American Internment*, 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Suyemoto, *I Call to Remembrance: Toyo Suyemoto’s Years of Internment*, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Mary Matsuda Grunewald, *Looking Like the Enemy : My Story of Imprisonment in Japanese American Internment Camps* (NewSage Press, 2005), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Candela, *Japanese American Internment*, 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Alexander Wohl, *The Japanese Internment. In Father, Son, and Constitution: How Justice Tom Clark and Attorney General Ramsey Clark Shaped American Democracy* (University Press of Kansas, 2013.), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1d4txk2.7>, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)