

## Persecution and Service: Japanese Americans During the War

### How were Japanese Americans treated during the war?

Following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, many Americans lived in fear of a Japanese invasion of the West Coast of the United States. Stoked by the government's anti-Japanese propaganda campaign, these fears were often directed toward Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans who lived in western states. Many of these people had been born in the United States and only knew of Japan through their parents' stories.

In February 1942, President Roosevelt signed [Executive Order 9066](#). This action ordered all first- and second-generation Japanese Americans to be relocated and detained in internment camps. Japanese Americans were given one week to sell their property or abandon it before they were transported to temporary holding quarters. They were only allowed to bring possessions they could carry. Placed in temporary housing far from the coast, families were forced to live in small rooms, often without doors. Some of the structures were cleaned-out stables that offered little privacy. Ordinary Japanese American families were trapped behind barbed wire and guarded at all times.

New government rules also targeted Americans of German and Italian descent. It allowed the government to exclude people of German, Italian, or Japanese descent from military areas. About 11,000 German residents were arrested under the order, and more than 5,000 were interned, or held in detention. Similarly, about 3,200 Italian residents were arrested and 500 interned. Most of the actions taken under this law, however, targeted Japanese Americans. Approximately 122,000 Japanese Americans, including almost 70,000 American citizens, were forced to move to relocation centers in sparsely populated areas such as Manzanar, California, and Heart Mountain, Wyoming.

Because Italy and Germany were part of the Axis powers, Americans of Italian and German descent were also targets of Executive Order 9066. Within the first week of the order, the Immigration and Naturalization Service held a total of about 3,000 German Americans, Italian Americans, and Japanese Americans in custody primarily due to nothing but their ancestry. Throughout the course of the war, around 11,000 German Americans were detained as "enemies." However many were released and thus only about 5,000 or 6,000 were kept in internment camps. Japanese Americans fared much worse. Around 120,000 U.S. residents of Japanese ancestry were incarcerated in internment camps. Half of the internment camp population was children.

Because of their ancestry, Japanese Americans were accused of being spies and often asked to prove their loyalty to the United States. Japanese Americans who remained in their homes were arrested. Toyosaburo Korematsu, also known as Fred Korematsu, was a 23-year-old welder who had been fired from his job at a naval shipyard because of his Japanese ancestry. When the order to leave for the camps was given, Korematsu disobeyed. He submitted to plastic surgery to change his facial appearance and changed his name. Still, he was stopped on the streets by police and arrested for violating the president's order.

Korematsu brought his case to the U.S. Supreme Court, claiming that Executive Order 9066 violated his Fifth Amendment rights. The Fifth Amendment protects citizens against the government stripping life, liberty, or property without due process of law. At the conclusion of the case of *Korematsu v. U.S.*, the Supreme Court sided with the government. The court accepted the government's claims that its motive was to protect national security and that its action was not based on race discrimination. While the Supreme Court's decision in *Korematsu v. U.S.* upheld Japanese internment, it also noted that any legal restrictions on the civil rights of a single racial group were questionable.

Interned Japanese Americans sometimes were eligible to enlist in special U.S. army units established for Japanese Americans. These units fought mainly in Europe. Other Japanese Americans provided vital translation support for military intelligence operations. Technical Sergeant Shinyei Matayoshi enlisted at age 19 and served in the U.S. Army while his father was held at an internment camp in New Mexico. During a 2011 ceremony, when he received the Distinguished Service Cross—the nation's second-highest military honor for valor—Matayoshi said his father told him after his internment to make America proud. The army gave Matayoshi the award for his combat service in Italy in 1945. Many Japanese Americans received awards for their service, and even more died on the battlefield.

In 1980, the U.S. government began investigating the treatment of Japanese Americans at the camps. Eight years later, Congress passed the Civil Liberties Act and issued an apology to all Japanese Americans. Reparations in the amount of \$20,000 were provided to surviving families. An education fund was also created to inform the public about the camps and prevent similar incidents in the future.

## African Americans and the War

### How did the war affect African Americans?

With the rise in patriotism after Pearl Harbor, many Americans felt it was their duty to enlist in the armed forces. While white men traditionally formed the majority of the military, many African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Japanese Americans also enlisted. The military often segregated troops according to race, and minority units generally did not serve alongside white soldiers. Several African American units were recognized for making significant contributions to the war effort.

For those who did not enter the military, new workforce opportunities opened up as the country's wartime production expanded. The total number of manufacturing jobs increased to supply airplanes, vehicles, weapons, ammunition, and other military equipment. Minorities were given jobs that had been previously closed to them, but often were paid less than a white man doing the same job.

### African Americans in the Services

Through World War II, the U.S. military continued to practice segregation and discrimination. In the vast majority of cases, African Americans could serve in African American units only, although frequently their commanding officers were white. Numerous plans for reducing segregation were discussed and hotly disputed, but little was changed. Many African Americans did serve during the war, for example:

- In January 1941, the U.S. Army created its first armored battalion of African American soldiers. An armored unit is one with tanks.
- The first Army Air Corps unit of African Americans was formed in July 1941. This was the first time African Americans were allowed to serve as pilots. The unit was called the Tuskegee Airmen because its members trained in Tuskegee, Alabama. The 926 men of the Tuskegee Airmen also included navigators, bombardiers, airplane mechanics, and flight instructors.
- Della Raney became the first African American military nurse to become an officer. She was promoted to lieutenant in the Army Nurse Corps.
- The 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion was the only all-African American Women's Army Corps unit to serve overseas in World War II.

Seven African Americans were awarded the congressional Medal of Honor, the country's highest military honor, for extraordinary heroism against an armed enemy. One of these was Army First Lieutenant John R. Fox, of Indiana. Fighting in Italy, Fox volunteered to remain in an observation post in a town that was being overrun by the Germans. After the rest of his company left the town, Fox used his position to direct artillery fire at the enemy. Gradually, the enemy, and the artillery fire, moved closer to his outpost. When Fox directed the shelling straight at himself, he insisted that his colleagues fire. His body was recovered in the wreckage of his lookout post, along with about 100 enemy dead.

Although Fox and other African Americans earned the Medal of Honor, the medals were not awarded until 1997. The Army, Congress, and the president made an effort to address a "racial disparity" in recognizing African Americans' achievements and heroism.

### African Americans Fight Discrimination at Home

African American leaders hoped that, during wartime, members of their communities might be able to contribute to the nation and also make economic gains. Many African American leaders supported a "Double V" campaign during World War II. The two "Vs" stood for victory against the Axis Powers abroad and victory against racial discrimination on the home front. African Americans were risking their lives on the battlefield but did not have full citizenship rights at home. In the opinion of many Americans, something had to change.

[A. Philip Randolph](#) was one African American leader who spearheaded the Double V campaign on the home front. Randolph was a civil rights activist who worked to organize African American workers into unions in the 1920s and 1930s. He built one of the first African American labor unions and helped African Americans workers win a government contract to work for a major railroad company. His organization, called the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), fought against discrimination and worked to get federal and industrial contracts for African Americans. During World War II, Randolph worked to increase opportunities for African American workers and reduce discrimination against African Americans in the workplace and the military.

Randolph's ability to organize people into action caught President Roosevelt's attention. In 1941, Randolph planned to lead a massive protest march of African Americans on Washington, DC. Roosevelt asked Randolph to cancel the march, which he thought would be disruptive. To address some of Randolph's concerns, Roosevelt responded by creating the Fair Employment Practices Commission. This agency aimed to end discrimination against African Americans in the workforce, including government positions and in defense-related industries.

Although the Fair Employment Practices Commission did not end racial discrimination in the workplace, it did inspire many African Americans to continue pushing for equality at home. Organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) were established

to end discriminatory practices. CORE, founded in 1942, adopted a nonviolent approach to fighting against discrimination. For example, CORE members held a sit-in in a Chicago coffee shop to protest racial segregation. The efforts of A. Philip Randolph and groups such as CORE helped set the stage for the civil rights movement that was to come in the 1950s and 1960s.

## **Mexican Americans and the War**

### **How were Mexican Americans' experiences shaped by the war?**

About half a million Hispanics served in the military during World War II. There was no official army discrimination policy against Mexican Americans, and they were not segregated into distinct units. However, many in the military service did experience discrimination on an individual level, as they did in civilian life.

The 158th Infantry became known as the Bushmasters. This was an Arizona National Guard unit made up of mostly Mexican Americans and Native Americans from more than 20 nations. The unit fought in the South Pacific during World War II. It was one of the few groups to complete the battle-filled journey from Australia to Japan.

Eleven Mexican American soldiers were awarded the Medal of Honor. One was army Staff Sergeant Lucian Adams of Port Arthur, Texas, who served in the 30th Infantry in France. Leading his company, he borrowed an automatic rifle from one of his men and made a lone assault on a German force. The enemy force was spread through the woods and included three machine guns as well as grenade launchers. Without any cover except scattered trees, facing machine-gun fire and grenades, Adams moved through the woods and killed nine German soldiers, knocked out all three machine guns, and cleared the way for his company to complete its mission.

### **Mexican Americans on the Home Front**

On the home front, U.S agricultural producers argued that the employment demands of the military industrial plants left too few workers to harvest the country's fruits and vegetables. President Roosevelt responded with an executive order creating the bracero program. Beginning in 1942, this program brought millions of Mexicans to the United States as temporary guest workers.

Mexican Americans were caught in the middle. Because of their Mexican heritage, they encountered a hostile culture, as white farmers viewed them as a threat to their jobs and way of life. However, Mexican Americans' jobs and wages were also being undercut by the braceros. Employers were supposed to hire braceros only for specified jobs that the government had certified to suffer from a labor shortage. The law also prohibited employers from using braceros as strikebreakers. In practice, these rules were often ignored by employers and were not enforced by the government. Between the 1940s and mid-1950s, farm wages dropped sharply compared to manufacturing wages.

Even though there was no shortage of jobs during the war years, the memory of hard times during the Great Depression was still fresh. In 1943, tensions escalated in Los Angeles, California, when sailors on leave attacked a group of Mexican American boys. Retaliation led to a week of rioting, known as the Zoot Suit Riots, because of the style of dress many Mexican Americans favored. Racism was blamed as the central cause. The military was criticized by the Mexican government, but Los Angeles officials blamed the Mexican youths.

America's minorities contributed greatly to military advances, as well as life on the home front during World War II. In defense factories, minority groups received training and took on new types of skilled jobs, but still faced discrimination and violence.

## **The Call of Rosie**

### **What was the role of women in American society?**

As men enlisted in the military, jobs that were traditionally filled by men became available. Women were asked to step in to fill the employment gaps. The government launched a propaganda campaign to urge women to take on jobs in the defense plants. "[Rosie the Riveter](#)" was a strong, patriotic woman who would take on a man's job for her country. Made popular through posters and songs, women answered the call of Rosie and became welders, riveters, and clerks. Even though many women took on jobs in the name of their country, the jobs offered to women during the war paid better than they ever had before. Women joined unions and had a choice of jobs. If they did not like the job they had, they could leave and easily find another.

Women did encounter discrimination in the workplace. This was surprising to some as the work shortage was so severe. Why would men not accept women? This was because even though the circumstances had changed, people's attitudes had not. A 1936 poll showed that 82 percent of males and 75 percent of females surveyed believed that wives with working husbands belonged at home. Even though those working husbands were now overseas, people saw women's proper place as managing the home. While the

government urged women to work, at first it also said that women with young children should care for their children first. Businesses seemed to agree, as many stores did not change their hours, making it nearly impossible to go food shopping. By the time the factory day ended, stores were closed.

Having women in the workforce was hardly a new concept. Out of necessity, poor and disadvantaged women had always worked to help feed their families. However, American women were now allowed into jobs that refused to take them before. The change was seen as temporary. Once soldiers returned, women were expected to return to their homes to care for their families. After the war, many women were relieved to give up their double shift of working outside the home and caring for their families. They felt that housework and children was a full-time job already. However, many women relished their experiences in the workplace. When the men returned from war, some women were reluctant to give up the independence their jobs had given them.

### Women in the Military

Women did not just help in the factories during the war. Many women enlisted in the military. Frontline combat was viewed as a man's realm, but women served as well. Congress approved women to serve in the U.S. Army, Navy and Coast Guard after Pearl Harbor was bombed. In 1943, the U.S. Marines temporarily allowed women into their ranks as well.

The Navy Women's Reserve, called Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, or WAVES, was created in 1942. More than 80,000 WAVES worked in communications, intelligence, supply, medicine, and administration during the war.

The force of army nurses exceeded 12,000. Nurses were valuable during the war, and the Nurses Corps assisted doctors close to the front line. Nurses were taken as Japanese prisoners of war and sustained battle casualties. By the end of the war, women served in every military role except direct combat on the front lines. Women worked as cryptographers, mathematicians, engineers, surgeons, and pharmacists. Army Sergeant Henrietta Williams was awarded the Air Medal for her work mapping a flight route across the Himalayas to be used for delivering armaments to China.

Congress approved the creation of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, or WAAC, on May 14, 1942. In 1943, the corps was renamed the Women's Army Corps, or WAC, and made a regular component of the military. Oveta Culp Hobby was the first director. WAC units were stationed in Australia, India, Egypt, China, and elsewhere.

In July 1944, a group of WACs landed at Normandy. After training, WACs could work as clerks, typists, drivers, cooks, and unit assistants. Air WACs worked with the Army Air Corps as weather forecasters and observers, electrical and sheet-metal workers, control tower specialists, airplane mechanics, photography technicians, and interpreters. More than 500 women qualified as pilots. Ground force WACs did bookkeeping and ordered supplies. They also repaired and installed radios in tanks and other vehicles. Like the regular army, the WAC was racially segregated.

After Pearl Harbor, Americans felt it was their duty to help win the war. A direct threat had come upon American life, and citizens stepped forward in various ways to help the government in wartime measures. Sacrifice of freedoms, lifestyle, and social standards was just another method to win the war. While many viewed these changes as temporary, the culture that developed during the war affected American society for decades to come.