

Historica Canada Education Portal

Canadian Internment Camps During the First World War

Overview

The beginning stages of the First World War saw increasing suspicion by the Canadian populace of immigrants from Germany and Eastern Europe, particularly Ukrainians, Austrians, Poles, Czechs and Slovaks. Over 80,000 immigrants from these nations were forced to carry special identity cards and report for regular interviews with local authorities. Further, 8,579 "enemy aliens" (5,000 of which were of Ukrainian origin) were interned in twenty-four detention camps during the course of the war, the federal government confiscating their property and monies in the process.

Aims

Students will gain the following understandings:

- That the perceived emergency created by participating in the First World War impacted the relationship between collective rights and individual rights of citizens.
- The trials of a war that seemed to continue with no prospects of victory, aroused intense and hostile feelings towards specific minorities within the Canadian community.
- That the actions and policies of other nations influence the actions and

well-being of the Canadian people and the unity of the Canadian nation.
- That within each society, a divergence of views exists concerning key societal relationships, including whether the well-being of the society should take precedence over the rights and well-being of individual members or groups within the society.

Background

Creating spaces to hold perceived “enemies of the state” during a time of conflict is not a recent development. In fact, during the Boer War (1899-1902), British authorities developed what came to be known as concentration camps to hold Boer women and children after their farms were destroyed by British troops and while their husbands and fathers were fighting. By that war’s end, over 20,000 Boer women and children had died in the incredibly unhygienic conditions of these camps, ostensibly called “refugee camps” by the British.

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Activities

Procedures:

Begin by showing students photos of Canadian internment camps from First World War (without revealing their origins). Ask the students to describe the figures/action in the photographs, i.e., are they happy, glad to be working, comfortable with their surroundings, what type of work is taking place, etc. Ask them to guess what time/place the photos were taken, using this as an opportunity to develop research/analytical skills. Once students have had ample time to discuss their theories, ask the students if they have heard of the term ‘concentration camp’, and give some brief background regarding the development of internment camps by the British government during the Boer war. Then reveal that these photos were of Eastern European immigrants to Canada placed in concentration camps during the First World War.

Proceed to a larger class discussion using the following questions:

1. Why do you think the Canadian government chose to place these residents of Canada in concentration camps?
2. Did the Canadian government have solid evidence to support their action?
3. Was the Canadian government justified in taking this action, given the political/military/social realities of that time?
4. Can you think of any other time that Canadian authorities have taken similar actions (do students come up with Japanese internments in WW2, FLQ crisis in 1970)?
5. Is a national government ever justified in segregating a portion of their population on the basis of belonging to a ‘suspect’ ethnic, political, racial, or religious group?
6. What steps can/should a government take during war to ensure internal security?

7. Is the profiling of Muslims in the United States by police and Homeland Security agents a justifiable response to a perceived threat by terrorists? As the class nears its end, play Maria Dunn's "In the Shadow of the Rockies".

Evaluation:

Consider the extent to which students are able to:

- apply the fundamental elements of dialectical evaluation (gathering information; defining the issues within the information; testing the viewpoints for factual accuracy; testing the viewpoints for their morality; evaluating the factual and moral testing; and, forming a conclusion about the issue)
- apply moral tests (role exchange, universal consequences, and new cases)
- practise making hypotheses based on reasonable assumptions and inferences
- practise identifying connections and interactions
- practise identifying cause and effect relationships
- practise applying the thinking skills of: stating the criteria that can be used to determine decisions and actions; and, evaluating consequences as a means to evaluate the criteria selected

Resources

<http://www.infoukes.com/>

[The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

