

Canada's "Tradition" of Internment

Introduction

Ninety years ago, in Canada's rural hinterland, Canadian soldiers guarded thousands of prisoners during the First World War. Many were forced to work six-day weeks in the dead of winter. Some prisoners were beaten, others were fed only bread and water. A few prisoners were unfortunate enough to be hung from a wall with handcuffs, such that only their toes touched the ground.[\[1\]](#) But these prisoners were in no prison. They were in internment camps set up by the Canadian government. These prisoners were punished, but had committed no crime. They were detained and imprisoned by the misfortune of having Ukrainian, German, or Eastern European roots.

Throughout Canada's history, thousands of innocent individuals have been punished through coercive governance: Acadians were expelled from the Maritimes in the eighteenth century; Ukrainians and Germans were interned during the First World War; Japanese and Germans were imprisoned during the Second World War. The pattern of each of these large-scale operations is disturbingly similar. They begin with doubts about the loyalty of a people group. Coercive actions are then taken by a government to minimize upheaval in acting on these doubts by engaging in forced relocation, imprisonment, or disenfranchisement. Rights are suspended and property is confiscated, stolen, or destroyed. Some years later, another innocent people group is targeted. These operations surely stain Canada's recent proclamations celebrating its multicultural heritage[\[2\]](#) and traditional respect for minorities.[\[3\]](#) The following essays on Canadian government actions against Acadians, Ukrainians, Germans, and the Japanese, speak for themselves. They detail how the misuse of government powers can defy traditional rights and liberties, and injure innocent people for generations.

See:

- Le Grand Dérangement (1755-1763)
- German Internment During the First and Second World Wars
- Ukrainian Internment: 1914-1920
- Japanese Internment During World War II

Conclusion

Internment is not a new phenomenon in Canada. The stories of Omar Khadr, Adil Charkaoui, and many others who have been detained in Canada on suspicion of threats to national security, make the news on a daily basis. This practice has roots in many significant events in Canadian history, events discussed in the previous sections. The Ukrainian internment of 1914-1920 saw the detainment of 8,579 individuals as “enemy aliens” in concentration camps, and due to the presence of the *War Measures Act*, this was done without cause. Mistreatment of the Ukrainians was rampant, leading some to become insane or commit suicide. Some were also sent overseas to battle for the country that was treating them so poorly, the country that stripped them of their right to vote. The Japanese internment during the Second World War bears many similarities to the thousands of “aliens” being sent away from a protected area to work. The *War Measures Act* again reared its ugly head, allowing the federal government to remove anyone they wanted from the area. The *Act* also played an integral role in the internment of Germans during the First and Second World Wars. From arrests for suspicious behaviour to acts of violence, Germans were only able to fully reclaim their group identity in the 1980s. Finally, the Acadians were caught in a century long battle between France and England, and their presence on the rich and fertile lands of current Nova Scotia was no longer welcomed. The mass deportation of 1755, while horrible in that over 10,000 people were displaced from their homeland, many of whom died in travel, is today a rallying cry for the growing Acadian population and their desire for equality and linguistic rights.

In all four cases, much debate still exists as to why these events had to happen in the first place. From a war with the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the desire to punish the Acadians for presumed deception, proper justifications are few and far between. Redress and apology are also something these groups have been actively campaigning for for years, some being more successful than others. Some groups have used terrible events from the past to foster a greater sense of cohesion and pride in their heritage.

Canada has a long tradition of internment, one that is ongoing even without a declaration of war with another particular group or country. Will we see victims of the current obsession with punishing anyone associated with terrorism demand compensation from the government for all the undue hardship they have suffered? Could a section 15 *Charter* challenge be a solution? Some groups, like the Japanese, were offered some compensation while others keep being denied this

possibility. Only the future will tell, but by studying these four examples of internment in Canada, it appears that success looks rather dim.

[1] Lubomyr Luciuk, *In Fear of the Barbed Wire Fence* (Kingston: Kashtan Press, 2001) at 84-86.

[2] Canada, "Canadian Diversity: Respecting our Differences," online: Canadian Heritage <http://www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/progs/multi/respect_e.cfm>.

[3] In *Reference re Secession of Quebec*, [1998] 2 S.C.R. 217 at paras. 79-82, for example, the Court stated Canada's "long tradition" of respect and protection of minorities was an unwritten constitutional principle.