



GERMAN AMERICAN INTERNEE COALITION

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U.S. World War II Treatment of German Americans and Latin Americans

During WWII, the U.S. violated the civil liberties of American and Latin American citizens and resident aliens of “enemy” ethnic groups, primarily those of German, Italian, and Japanese ancestry. Violations included internment and relocation. Members of these ethnic groups, including millions of European Americans, served in the U.S. armed forces. Some were immediate family members of internees. While fully acknowledging the violations Japanese Americans faced at the time, the U.S. government has never comprehensively reviewed the experience of civilians of German or Italian ethnicity.

Between 2001-2011, the German American Internee Coalition worked with Senators Russell Feingold, Charles Grassley, Ted Kennedy, and Joseph Lieberman, as well as Rep. Robert Wexler, to pass legislation forming congressional commissions to review the facts and circumstances surrounding injustices suffered by European Americans, European Latin Americans, and Jewish refugees during World War II. Sadly, legislation was never passed, and reintroduction is not planned at this time.

U.S. Government Wartime Policies in the United States (All numbers are estimates and are likely higher.)

- Alien registration branded 300,000 Germans as “enemy aliens,” restricting travel and property ownership rights.
- Exclusion from large military areas under military orders caused family disruption, loss of homes and jobs. Relocated families were subjected to hostility and suspicion in new homes. Men had difficulties finding employment. There was no government support for relocation. At least 39,000 were subject to curfews, travel limitations and other restrictions in military zones.
- Hostile FBI raids and ransacking of homes and arrests with no warrants, resulting in unlimited imprisonment while awaiting parole and internment hearings. *Hearings with minimal, if any, due process—no witnesses or counsel allowed.* Internees did not know why they were interned. Families did not know where their loved ones were taken for days or weeks.
- Internment of at least 11,000 German aliens, some with their families, including U.S.-born children. Families separated, homes and belongings lost. Little or no government support for families left behind. Limited admittance to family camps based upon application to government. Some children placed in orphanages when parents arrested and interned.
- At least 2,000 German Americans, including families with U.S.-born children, were exchanged for Americans held in Germany. Exchanged families survived cruel wartime conditions, such as hunger and Allied bombing.

- Persons of German ancestry were the last ethnic group released from camps, with some held until late 1948.
- Internees and excludées returning to communities faced unemployment, financial straits, loss of homes and belongings, and stigmatization. No government support. Many families disrupted permanently. Many internees forbidden to speak of internment. Most internees have not spoken out of fear of the government, shame or other personal reasons.

U.S. Government Wartime Policies in Latin America

The United States implemented a secret, illegal State Department program in Latin America during WWII, targeting both legal resident aliens and naturalized citizens whose ethnicity was suspect. This Latin American program, eventually called the Special War Problems Division (SWPD), is little known. U.S. policies were motivated by three concerns; national and hemispheric security; economic rivalry for Latin American market; and the third, least savory purpose—gathering captives to use for barter with Axis countries holding Americans.

As the result of U.S. arrangements and financial support, thousands of civilians of German, Italian or Japanese ethnicity, legal residents in Central and South America as well as countries of the Caribbean, were swept into local detention centers and held without hearings or legal recourse. Conditions in which they were detained varied widely, but many were truly miserable. The U.S. military ran some of the sites, such as Camp Empire, in Balboa, Panama Canal Zone, while the U.S. funded others, like Isle of Pines, Cuba. Many prisoners were then sent directly back to the country of their ethnic origin, while others were forcibly expelled from their home countries for internment in the U.S. and eventual repatriation to Germany, Japan, or Italy. The true number of people displaced and families disrupted is unknown, since there is no central archive of SWPD materials. One list from the U.S. National Archives shows 1,813 German Latin Americans sent directly to Germany. Another 4,058 Germans, 2,264 Japanese, and 287 Italians were deported to the United States with their families. These captives were housed in the Department of Justice's Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) camps. 3,317 German Latin Americans were later exchanged.

- As in the U.S., alien registration was required; possessions such as radios, cameras, and guns were confiscated; and travel restrictions were in place.
- Alien enemies could be jailed indefinitely or sent to the U.S. or Germany, without family members knowing their destination. As in the U.S., families were separated, sometimes permanently, properties and businesses were confiscated.
- *There were no hearings to determine innocence or guilt. No one knew why he/she was detained.*
- Blacklists, enforced by the U.S., meant loss of employment and income. When breadwinners were interned, wives and children had no financial support.
- Enemy aliens and their families were stripped of their passports and visas before being transported to the U.S., allowing U.S. officials to claim they entered the U.S. illegally. They could then be interned indefinitely in U.S. internment facilities.
- Internees sent to war-ravaged Germany faced bombings, famine, and ostracism as “foreigners.”

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www.gaic.info (the German American Internee Coalition website)

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