

Italian American Studies Association

Western Regional Chapter

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Fact Sheet: *The Wartime Violation of Italian American Civil Liberties*

- ❑ On December 7, 1941, hours after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, FBI agents begin to take into custody hundreds of Italian resident aliens previously classified as “dangerous.” Without counsel or trial, some 260 of them are eventually shipped to **internment** camps like the ones in Missoula, Montana, or Fort George Meade, Maryland, where most are interned until after Italy surrenders in 1943. An unknown number are kept longer, and only released or repatriated at war’s end. Their crime: suspicion that their origin in Italy *might* make them dangerous in time of war.
- ❑ On December 8, 1941, President Roosevelt signs Proclamation 2527, declaring that “an invasion or predatory incursion is threatened upon the territory of the United States by Italy.” This turns **600,000 permanent resident aliens of Italian descent** into “enemy aliens.” Rules announced by the Justice Department forbid them to travel outside their towns without permission, and order them to surrender “**contraband**”—shortwave radios, cameras, flashlights, and hunting rifles. Those suspected of harboring these items have their **homes raided** and searched.
- ❑ Under pressure from the War Department to increase raids on enemy aliens to seize contraband, the Justice Department capitulates in January 1941 by agreeing that the requirement for “**probable cause**” necessary for a search warrant can be met merely by the fact that an alien resides in a premises, *even if it is owned by a citizen*. The Fourth Amendment rights of both aliens and the citizen children with whom many lived are thereby routinely violated.
- ❑ In February 1942, all “enemy” aliens are required to **re-register** (all had registered as resident aliens in 1940 under the Smith Act) at post offices nationwide. All are then required to carry photo-bearing **ID booklets** at all times, **forbidden to travel** beyond a 5-mile radius of home, or enter military bases where many have sons in service.
- ❑ In **California**, the Western Defense Command establishes a vast prohibited zone along the coast and around “sensitive” installations such as power plants and railroads. A late January 1942 announcement by the Justice Department orders all enemy aliens to **evacuate** this zone, some by February 15, and the rest by February 24, 1942. Some 10,000 Italian immigrants, mostly elderly women, are forced to leave their homes in towns like Pittsburg and Monterey and search for new places to live. These forced moves, solely on the basis of national origin, proceed before and aside from Executive Order 9066.
- ❑ At about the same time in **California**, 52,000 Italian enemy aliens are subjected to a **curfew** that confines them to their homes from 8:00 PM to 6:00 AM. Many lose their jobs as a result.

- ❑ At least four Italian immigrants in California, despondent over their shameful status as “enemies” of their adopted country, commit **suicide**.
- ❑ Following the mass relocation of Japanese aliens and native-born citizens in Spring of 1942, the Western Defense Command continues with its plans to clear the Pacific Slope of the other two enemy alien groups and remove them to a zone of the interior. Gen. Hugh Drum, commander of the Eastern Defense Command, announces similar plans on April 27, raising fears in the Justice Department and in Congress that such plans would affect millions on both coasts and seriously compromise the war effort. President Roosevelt in May 1942 finally orders the War Department to abandon such plans unless he specifically orders otherwise.
- ❑ Several thousand Italian resident aliens are **arrested** during subsequent months, many for curfew violations or for harboring “contraband.” Most are **detained** for months at INS facilities such as those at Ellis Island in New York or Sharp Park near San Francisco. Internments of Italian resident aliens continue throughout 1942 and beyond.
- ❑ In Monterey, San Francisco, Boston and other seaports, Italian immigrant **fishermen are grounded**, among them the father of Joe DiMaggio. Hundreds of fishermen who are naturalized citizens have their boats requisitioned by the Navy for use as minesweepers or patrol boats during the war. When the boats are returned, many are unusable.
- ❑ Scores of naturalized **citizens of Italian descent**, including San Francisco Mayor Angelo Rossi, are investigated by the Tenney Committee (Assembly Fact-Finding Committee on UnAmerican Activities) as suspected leaders of a fascist movement in **California**. About two dozen such citizens are **excluded** from California in October, 1942 and remain in exile until Italy surrenders.
- ❑ On October 12, 1942, Attorney General Francis Biddle announces at Carnegie Hall that Italian Americans are removed from “enemy alien” status. Except for those interned or excluded, all **restrictions are off**. Not a single case of sabotage or espionage has been reported. Records reveal that Italian Americans, the largest foreign-born group in the nation (1.6 million in 1940), also comprised the largest ethnic group in the U.S. Armed Forces during World War II (500,000).
- ❑ History texts and newspaper articles routinely **deny** that Italian Americans were affected. For one example, see *The NY Times*, Aug. 14, 1995, p. A6, “A Migration Created by a Burden of Suspicion,” by Dirk Johnson:

The nation was at war with Germany and Italy, of course, but there were no moves to lock up any European Americans.