UNA STORIA SEGRETA: THE INTERNMENT OF ITALIAN AMERICANS AND THE VIOLATION OF THEIR CIVIL LIBERTIES DURING WORLD WAR II
Una Storia Segreta: The Internment of Italian Americans and the Violation of Their Civil Liberties During World War II

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While the United States has had a long history of anti-Italianism, hostility directed at Italian Americans reached another peak during World War II, when the United States joined the Allied powers in the fight against Germany, Italy, and Japan. Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, 600,000 Italian American residents of the United States who had not become naturalized citizens were declared “enemy aliens.” Many were arrested, imprisoned at internment camps, forced to evacuate their homes, and ordered to surrender property to the United States government. Italian Americans call this event Una Storia Segreta, or “a secret history,” because it remained secret for many decades. Today, most people are still unaware of this tragic series of events.

Prelude to War

At first, the United States supported Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini. Mussolini’s policies helped modernize Italy, and improve the economy and agricultural, education, and transportation systems. This changed in 1937, when Mussolini joined the Axis powers. As fascism became increasingly unpopular, many members of the Italian American community tried to distance themselves from their ethnicity and reaffirm their loyalty to the United States. When Britain and France declared war on the Axis powers, President Roosevelt asked FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover to make a list of possible “enemy agents” among the Japanese, Italian, and German populations in the United States to be arrested in case of a national emergency. The list included language teachers, journalists, war veterans, influential members of the communities and anyone suspected of having “anti-American” beliefs.

Una Storia Segreta: The Internment and Violations of Italian Americans’ Civil Liberties During World War II

World War II propaganda poster, with caricatures of Adolf Hitler (of Germany), Emperor Hirohito (of Japan), and Benito Mussolini (of Italy), urging Americans to not speak German, Japanese and Italian, “the enemy’s languages” Courtesy of the Italian American Studies Association Western Regional Chapter

Newspaper announcing the United States’ entry into WWII
Enemy Aliens

Immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and the United States’ entry into World War II, Roosevelt issued Presidential Proclamations 2525, 2526, and 2527, which authorized the United States to detain potentially dangerous “enemy aliens.” Nationwide, approximately 600,000 Italian-born residents of the United States were declared enemy aliens. The term “enemy alien” traces its history to the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, which stated that if the United States was at war with a country, then any “natives, citizens, denizens, or subjects of the hostile nation” residing in the United States who were not naturalized citizens were considered “enemy aliens.” Using this power, the FBI and other law enforcement agencies arrested thousands of individuals, most of whom were of German, Italian, or Japanese ancestry.

Registrations and Restrictions

In the weeks following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, enemy aliens in the United States and its territories were ordered to surrender cameras, short-wave radios and radio transmitters. Other prohibited items included flashlights, boats, binoculars and weapons, such as hunting rifles. Enemy aliens were banned from traveling outside a five-mile radius of their homes, even for employment, and were forbidden from entering “strategic areas” such as power stations and airports. In San Francisco, Giuseppe DiMaggio, father of baseball great Joe DiMaggio, could not visit his son’s restaurant because it was located in a prohibited zone.

Enemy aliens were subject to a curfew from 8 pm to 6 am and many lost their jobs because of the curfews and travel restrictions. In Santa Rosa, California, Aristide Bertolini, who owned a fruit and vegetable market, arrived home one evening just minutes after 8 pm. A neighbor reported him, and Bertolini was arrested and held at an Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) detention center for two months. In January 1942, enemy aliens 14 years and older were ordered to register at their local post office, where they were
fingerprints and provided enemy alien identification cards, which they were required to carry at all times. Failure to obey the restrictions could result in serious penalties, required internment. Maria Ricci, a political satirist, writer, and so-called enemy alien, was visited by the FBI every month for nearly a year because a shortwave radio and revolvers were found in her home.

Evacuations and Internment

On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which, along with Executive Order 9102, authorized the removal of persons from specified areas in the interest of national security. While this order cleared the way for the removal of Japanese Americans, including those who were citizens of the United States, nowhere in the order are the Japanese mentioned specifically. This law allowed for the removal of any person from prescribed sensitive military areas. Approximately 10,000 Italian Americans were evacuated from their homes located in the “restricted zones” along the California coast, including the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles, as well as locations close to oil fields, aircraft plants, and hydroelectric installations. Evacuees were often given very little notice before being forced to leave. Because of wartime housing shortages, some Italian families resorted to living in chicken coops or garages or having multiple families live in a single home.

In February of 1942, two agents from the Department of Justice arrived at the Santa Cruz home of Batistina Loero, who was seventy-eight years old and weighed less than 100 pounds. Batistina did not speak English, and the federal agents spoke no Italian. Her granddaughter, who lived next door, translated for the agents. The agents informed her that, as an enemy alien who lived in a restricted area, Batistina was in violation of federal law and had 48 hours to move or face arrest. Batistina was the mother of two sons and two grandsons then serving in the U.S. Navy and had lived in her home for almost 50 years.

As the deadline to relocate approached, immigrant families often panicked. In many families, only one member, perhaps the mother or uncle, was not a citizen or was in the process of becoming a citizen. If the mother was forced to leave, what would happen to her children? If the family’s store or farm was located in the prohibited zone, who would operate the business? How would the family survive? When Josephine Billeci of Pittsburg, California, gave birth in a hospital located in a prohibited
zone, her husband, Nino, an enemy alien, could not visit her unless he was accompanied by law enforcement. The first time he saw his child, Billeci was wearing handcuffs, escorted by police.

When relocating enemy aliens, no exceptions were made for the elderly or ill. Eighty-nine-year-old Placido Abono was carried out of his San Francisco home on a stretcher because it was in a prohibited zone. Perhaps one of the most heartbreaking stories among the evacuees is that of Rosina Trovato, of Monterey, California. Trovato was informed that both her son and nephew had died at Pearl Harbor. The following day, she was forced to evacuate her home.

Rosina's story, and that of the majority of enemy aliens, contain numerous ironies. Many enemy aliens had been living in America for decades and had American-born children and grandchildren. The mayors of important U.S. cities—Fiorello LaGuardia in New York and Angelo Rossi in San Francisco—were of Italian ancestry. During World War II, Italian Americans were the largest ethnic group in the U.S. military, yet the loyalty of their families was questioned. Italian American fishermen, who proudly contributed their catches to the war effort, often had their boats seized or were prohibited from fishing in coastal waters. Newspapers wrote about the ridiculousness of this: “Fishermen With 23 Sons in Army and Navy Are Bound to Wharf While Boats Lie Idle and Sea Food Is Needed,” one headline read. Other enemy aliens were anti-fascist refugees who had fled Mussolini’s regime; some were Jews who had escaped Nazi Germany. When the Ghio brothers of Santa Cruz returned from serving in the U.S. Military in the spring of 1942, they discovered their family home empty, and their family missing. Steve Ghio, still in his Navy uniform, then went to the police station. After reviewing a series of records, he discovered that his family had been evacuated and was living miles away.

Map depicting zones prohibited to enemy aliens Courtesy of the U.S. War Department

Italian American and Lincoln Heights resident Joe Romano, who enlisted in the U.S. Navy during WWII and perished in combat Courtesy of the IAMLA
In the early days of the war, many of Roosevelt’s advisors called for the relocation of German, Italian, and Japanese Americans in various parts of the country, regardless of citizenship status. Roosevelt eventually ignored his advisors, recognizing that the mass evacuations of Germans and Italians, which would have involved the removal of approximately 10 million people, would likely create hysteria and would be detrimental to the war effort. Because of the difficulty of enforcing Executive Orders 9066 and 9102, relocations were often inconsistent, limited to the Pacific Slope (coastal lands of Washington, Oregon, and California, to about 60 miles inland), and enforced primarily in the Japanese American community. Japanese Americans were easier to identify, based on phenotypes, and had long been the subjects of racially discriminatory laws that prevented them from owning land, voting, and testifying against Caucasians in court. While 40 percent of the population of Hawaii was of Japanese ancestry, few were detained or incarcerated. Meanwhile, on the West Coast, 120,000 men, women, and children of Japanese ancestry, two-thirds of whom were American citizens, were evicted and held in internment camps. The Japanese community of Terminal Island, near San Pedro, California, which numbered 3,500, was the first to be evacuated and interned en masse. Their neighborhoods were razed and replaced with defense industry operations, such as shipbuilding. These actions suggest that greed and racism motivated the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans, in addition to wartime prejudices.

By June 1942, the FBI had arrested over 1,500 Italian enemy aliens; approximately 400 were considered threatening enough to incarcerate in internment camps. Filippo Fordelone, a popular radio broadcaster in Los Angeles, was arrested by the FBI and imprisoned at an internment camp. The family’s assets were frozen. Fordelone’s wife was left to care for the couple’s three young children without any financial resources. It took months and sometimes years before relatives and friends learned what happened to their loved ones. When Filippo Molinari, employee of L’Italia newspaper in San Francisco, was arrested the evening of
December 7 at his home, he was wearing slippers. The policemen did not allow him to put on his shoes before being taken into custody. When he arrived at the internment camp, it was 17 degrees below zero, and he had neither a coat nor shoes.

**Internees** were transported on trains with darkened and barred windows. At the rear of each train car stood a guard armed with a machine gun. As the train traveled north, it picked up other internees, who often wept or became increasingly anxious as the journey continued. It seemed impossible for them to believe. Was the United States not the home of the free? Didn’t the American justice system guarantee that they were innocent until proven guilty? What crime were they accused of committing? Italian internees were most often sent to Fort Missoula in Montana, which was nicknamed *Bella Vista*, or “Beautiful View,” by internees. Other detention camps existed in New Mexico, Texas, and California, including Tuna Canyon Detention Center in Sunland-Tujunga. Armed guards in towers monitored internees at all times at the camps. **Lodgings** at most camps were relatively comfortable. Ft. Missoula had a hospital, school, library, theater, and **mess hall**, which served Italian and Japanese food. Internees were often assigned to camp maintenance projects, and some found work at local farms. Although the camp routine could be boring, internees made the best of their situation, playing baseball and organizing musical entertainment. They remained, however, prisoners in freedom’s land, their lives on hold, not knowing when they would be released and reunited with their families.

As World War II continued, it became clear to President Roosevelt that he needed as much support for the war as possible. Italian Americans were an important group of voters; they were the nation’s largest ethnic group and 10 percent of the United States’ population. As a result, on Columbus Day, October 12, 1942, Roosevelt removed the enemy alien restrictions from the Italian community, though many would remain imprisoned or evacuated until the war’s end. After thousands of investigations, not a single Italian American was found to be participating in subversive activities.
The Aftermath

While Italian Americans were no longer considered enemy aliens, the restrictions, relocations, and internments left deep scars in the community. As a result of the wartime stigma, many Italian Americans stopped speaking their native language and distanced themselves from their heritage. The effects of these wartime stigmas can still be felt today.

In 2000, President Bill Clinton signed the “Wartime Violation of Italian American Civil Liberties Act,” an apology from the United States government for the mistreatment of Italian Americans during World War II. This document acknowledged the injustices that the community suffered and provided a detailed report of the wartime restrictions on Italian Americans. The state of California also issued an apology to Italian Americans in March 2010. California admitted its “deepest regrets of these acts,” and stated that it would protect the civil rights of its people in the future. No Italian American has filed suit against the U.S. Government for reparations.

Report to the Congress of the United States

A Review of the Restrictions on Persons of Italian Ancestry During World War II

November 2001
Glossary

**Fascism:** A way of organizing a society in which a government ruled by a dictator controls the lives of the people and in which people are not allowed to disagree with the government.

**Enemy Aliens:** A resident living in a country at war with the country that he or she is a citizen of.

**Internment:** To confine, especially during war.

**Satirist:** Someone who writes satire; satire is a way of using humor to show that something is weak, foolish, or bad.

**Hydroelectric Installations:** Facilities that create electricity produced by moving water.

**Internee:** A prisoner at an internment camp.

**Civil Liberties:** Rights that protect individuals’ freedoms, and ensure one’s ability to participate in society without discrimination. Civil rights include freedom of speech and expression and freedom of religion.

**Anti-Italianism:** A negative attitude toward Italian people or people of Italian ancestry.

**Pearl Harbor:** A lagoon harbor on the island of Oahu, Hawaii, that is a United States deep water naval base.

**Internment camps:** Government-run camps used to keep certain people prisoner during war time.

**Evacuate:** To remove someone from a place.

**Benito Mussolini:** An Italian fascist dictator. He was appointed prime minister by King Victor Emmanuel III and assumed dictatorial powers. He allied Italy with Germany.

**Axis Powers:** Germany, Italy, and Japan, which were allied before and during World War II.

**Ethnicity:** A particular racial, national, or cultural group.

**Reaffirm:** To state again as being true.

**National Emergency:** A state of emergency resulting from a danger or threat of danger to a nation.

**Naturalized:** To become a citizen from a country other than where you were born.

**Short wave Radios:** A radio that transmits or receives short waves.

**Radio Transmitters:** An electronic device which, with the help of an antenna, produces radio waves.
**Radius:** The distance from the center to the edge of a circle.

**Curfew:** An order specifying a time during which certain people must remain at home or indoors.

**National Security:** A collective term for the defense and foreign relations of a country.

**Evacuee:** A person that has been evacuated from a place.

**Seize:** Take hold of suddenly or forcibly.

**Anti-Fascist Refugees:** People who have fled a fascist government.

**Regime:** A government, especially an authoritarian one.

**Hysteria:** Uncontrollable emotion or excitement, especially among a group.

**Detrimental:** Tending to cause harm.

**Phenotypes:** The expression of a specific trait, often in physical appearance, such as stature or blood type, based on genetic and environmental influences.

**Incarcerated:** Imprisoned or confined.

**En masse:** In a large group.

**Razed:** Completely destroyed.

**Frozen:** Can not be used in any way.

**Lodgings:** A place in which someone lives or stays temporarily.

**Mess Hall:** A room or building where groups of people eat together.

**Stigma:** A mark of disgrace associated with a particular circumstance or characteristic.

**Reparations:** The compensation for war damage paid by a defeated state or government.
Further Reading


Presidential Proclamation no. 2526. President Franklin Roosevelt. Dec. 8, 1941.

Presidential Proclamation no. 2527. President Franklin Roosevelt. Dec. 8, 1941.


