Japanese American Relocation in World War II

In this revisionist history of the US government's relocation of Japanese American citizens during World War II, Roger W. Lotchin challenges the prevailing notion that racism was the cause of the creation of relocation centers. After unpacking the origins and meanings of American attitudes toward the Japanese Americans, Lotchin then shows that Japanese relocation was a consequence of nationalism rather than racism. Lotchin also explores the conditions in the relocation centers and the experiences of those who lived there, with discussions on health, religion, recreation, economics, consumerism, and theater. He honors those affected by uncovering the complexity of how and why their relocation happened and makes it clear that most Japanese Americans never went to a relocation center. Written by a specialist in US home front studies, this book will be required reading for scholars and students of the American home front during World War II, Japanese relocation, and the history of Japanese immigrants in America.

Roger W. Lotchin is Emeritus Professor in the Department of History at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, where he taught for almost fifty years. He is a specialist in US home front studies and war and urban society and the author of numerous books and articles, including *Fortress California, 1910–1961: From Warfare to Welfare* (1992), *The Bad City in the Good War: San Francisco, Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Diego* (2003), and *San Francisco, 1846–1856: From Hamlet to City* (1974).

Japanese American Relocation in World War II

A Reconsideration

ROGER W. LOTCHIN
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108419291
DOI: 10.1017/9781108297592

First published 2018

Printed in the United States of America by Sheridan Books, Inc.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-108-41929-1 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-108-41039-7 Paperback

This book is dedicated to our three Asian American grandchildren, Michael, Matthew, and McKenna Lotchin, who will carry forward the immigrant experience of their mother, Sarah Kristine Peters Lotchin, and their great-grandfather, Theodore Lotchin, people from opposite ends of the Earth who fled to America by plane and ship to escape from war, persecution, and discrimination.
And to Hatsuye Egami and Dorothy Cragen, mother and teacher, two of the unsung heroines of World War II.

Contents

Figures

Preface

Perhaps every author owes it to his readers to explain why he has written his book. For some of my books and articles this might be difficult, but the motivation for this one is clear-cut. I published *The Bad City in the Good War: San Francisco, Los Angeles, Oakland, and San Diego* in 2003 with Indiana University Press. In it, I included chapters on various groups, including the Japanese Americans and their unfortunate relocation experiences.[1] Soon after 2003, I was asked by Professor Robert Cherny to give a talk on Japanese relocation at the Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association meeting in Honolulu. Since it was an interesting challenge and because only a hidebound mainlander who was "bereft of his senses," as the Ancient Greeks would have said, would turn down a trip to Hawaii, I accepted.

That assignment led me into a closer reading of Japanese American history in general and of relocation studies in particular. At the outset of the great civil rights movement of the latter half of the twentieth century, the subject of relocation produced an enormous literature of books, articles, dissertations, and book reviews. It is a literally stupendous oeuvre. But the principal contentions of this literature – that racism inspired relocation and that the Japanese American relocation facilities functioned as "concentration camps" – struck me as overstatements that merited reconsideration. Indeed, the literature seemed so weighted that I

[1] I carefully considered whether the use of the term "unfortunate" to characterize the Nikkei experience was too mild, but eventually decided that it was not because of the vastly more calamitous experience of other twentieth-century victims, not least the victims of the World War II holocaust.

came to agree with Professor John Stephan, the noted student of the Japanese Americans in the United States, Hawaii, and Asia, who labeled the relocation "literature as an orthodoxy, an interpretation enforced by the federal government, the media, and academe."[2]

But before addressing this issue, several explanations are in order. One is that only a minority of Japanese Americans ever went into either assembly centers or relocation centers or internment[3] camps run by the Justice Department. Of these, only 112,000 (33.3 percent) were sent to WRA centers. Another 157,000–160,000 lived in Hawaii; 25,000 resided in other parts of the continental United States; 16,000 went to Justice Department internment camps; and 40,000 spent the war in the Imperial Japanese domains. Finally, 8,000 voluntarily left the prohibited zone and 1,000 repatriated themselves to Japan.[4] Five of these groups never went to centers.

Second, perhaps alone among American immigrants, the Japanese employed specific designations for each generation. The term "Issei" refers to immigrants or first-generation Americans; the term "Nisei" refers to second-generation citizens; "Kibei" were those members of the second generation who were sent to Japan to be educated or raised (often as dual citizens); and "Sansei" was the third generation, a tiny minority in 1941. "Nikkei" were the entire group.

Finally, since the term "racism" figures so prominently in the Japanese American story of historians, a word about that term is in order. I have used a twofold standard to define racism. Racism is a term variously defined, but at its core refers to antagonism based on a belief in the biological inferiority of the "other." In other words, as one historian put it, "classing and differentiating a segment of the population negatively on the basis of their race, impossible to overcome by anything the individuals can do to alter that status, is commonly considered racist."[5]

[2] Email of John J. Stephan to Roger Lotchin, July 18, 2012.

[3] Western Defense Command and Fourth Army (General John DeWitt), *Final Report Japanese Evacuation from the West Coast 1942* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1943), pp. 79–83ff.

[4] Statistics on the Nikkei experience do not always tally. For example, the total number evacuated varies from 107,000 to 130,000. The former would appear too low and the latter too high. I have accepted the figures of Professor John Stephan, an expert on the Hawaiian-Japanese and those who migrated or went back to Japan. See J. J. Stephan, "Review of Nikkei Amerikajin no Taiheiyo senso," *Journal of American History* (1998), 1142–3, and Stephan's reader's report on this book. The figure of 112,000 was employed by the WRA itself. I have also relied on figures presented in De Witt, *Final*, 216.

[5] Merry Ovnick, comment on reader's report for "A Research Report: Imperial Japanese, Japanese Americans, and the Reach of American Racism." *Southern California Quarterly*, Vol. 97: No. 4 (Winter 2014).

For the particulars of racism – that is, its metaphorical shorthand – I have borrowed the definitions and terms from John W. Dower's *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*. In it, he uses a number of markers to signify racism, including the frequent terminology of racism that posits the "other" as subhuman, "little men," serpents, reptilian creatures, lice, vermin, animals, monkeys, etc., and pictures the Japanese as a "Yellow Peril."[6] I realize that this is only one definition of racial worldviews, but to me the idea is not in need of redefinition. Superiority and inferiority stand at the heart of the concept, and Dower's litany of the allegorical characteristics of the racist is sufficiently widely accepted to justify using it as a model. So when I speak of racism, these are the standards that I am using. Others may prefer another standard, but this is mine. To argue endlessly about this meaning of racism or other words such as "racialized" is to lose sight of the ultimate goal of reinterpreting the relocation story.

The racial hypothesis both surprised and puzzled me because of the many Asians involved in World War II, most of them were US allies – Chinese, Koreans, Burmese, Indians, and Melanesians. The Japanese were the only significant body of people of another race – that is, Asians – who willingly fought against the United States. Moreover, as I have found over my career, in the world since the French Revolution, including the mid and late twentieth century and early twenty-first century that I have lived through, it seemed clear to me that the most brutal political episodes of genocide, rebellion, war, and civil war happened between peoples of the same race, whatever they might have been called. In the twentieth century that would include both world wars, the Mexican Revolution, the Russian Revolution and purges, the Spanish Civil War, the 1960s Nigerian Civil War, the World War II Eastern Front, the Maoist upheavals in China, the Cambodian genocide, the Armenian massacres, the Balkan mayhem of either the pre- or post-World War I era, of the post-World War II period, and of the 1990s, and the Rwandan genocide of the same decade. These were always catastrophic tragedies within races, not between them. The brutal American treatment of African-Americans and Indians was an anomaly, though its Civil War was not.

In fact, history would almost turn the argument of race as a fundamental explanation of extreme political behavior on its head. Something else usually was fundamental. Yet the literature on relocation follows that

[6] J. W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1986), pp. 3–180–190.

standard line on race and racism and ignores many other matters, especially nationalism and nationality.

It seemed to me that this literature was in need of another overview on racism and the real government bumbling and supposed concentration camps that emanated from it. Recent overviews, like Greg Robinson's studies of Roosevelt's decision-making, are firmly in the orthodox mold.[7] So in my mind, the need for a new and larger viewpoint coincided. Thus, I decided to write a different kind of book. With it, I hope to open a re-examination of the orthodoxy by offering an alternative hypothesis about the role of racism in the story.

Nationalism in the form of great power rivalry caused the Imperial Japanese–US collision. Since so many historians have understood relocation through a parent, uncle, brother, or friend, I feel the need and freedom to confess my own connection to the world wars. My own father hailed from the tragic Balkans. He fled as a seventeen-year-old boy to North America to avoid the tragedy of World War I. I think of the world wars through his Balkan experience – not of race, but of nationalism, which World War I augmented. I also always think of another boy, Gavrilo Princip, whose assassination of the Archduke and Duchess triggered a Balkan war that became a world war.

Interpretively, I wish to provide improvements to two problems with the current literature. The first is that the literature does not supply a concise, interpretive explanation of relocation and the second is that it largely disregards the context of the war. The canon blames racism, concentration camps, Roosevelt's identity, and so forth for relocation, but seldom stitches those matters together in an interpretive statement. So I would propose that relocation occurred because the Imperial Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor triggered a backlash against Americans of Japanese ancestry and the backlash produced the removal of that group from the West Coast. There were many attendant complexities, but war, especially Pearl Harbor, and not racism did the essential damage.

A final word on sources may be in order. My work has relied heavily on primary sources and especially on the prewar press and the center newspapers. Since the relocation center newspapers had limited budgets and facilities, they depended heavily on each other. Many materials from one place came from stories or quotes from another. Often neglected by the orthodox historians of relocation, these journals are gold mines of

[7] G. Robinson, *A Tragedy of Democracy: Japanese Confinement in North America* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009).

information. The latter may have been "influenced" by the WRA administrators, but they were by no means censored. Aside from politics, these papers, written by lucid young editors and columnists like Larry Tajiri,[8] carried wonderful and diverse information about every aspect of center life, from art to theater, work, sports and recreation, economics, visitation, geographic mobility, religion, and leave policy. I have not found a better source.

I have also relied heavily on oral history, such as that of the Fullerton Collection, which is equally revealing. Oral history has both its strong and weak points. I did not find the oral literature to be any more problematical than any other sources, such as the mainline commercial newspapers, politicians' memoirs, or government hearings. In any case, the orthodox side of this argument has relied as heavily on oral history in support of the canon as I have against it. It must be approached from the same critical perspective as other historical sources.

Finally, the authors of this relocation oeuvre are honest and good people and I do not mean to impugn their scholarship – I just do not agree with them. Nonetheless, as the footnotes reveal, I have consulted this scholarship extensively, but I have also added a broader context.

In writing this book, I have created more debts than I can possibly repay. My secretaries, Joy Jones, Diana Chase, Pamela Fesmire, and Renée McIntire, have done everything possible to keep the show on the road. They were aided by Christine Gang, who contributed much crucial typing. Violet Anderson, Burwell Ware, Cameron Bowe, and James Hines repeatedly restored my word processor to sanity when it seemed that only violence would counter its many indignities. Rob Noel guided me gracefully through the last stages of publication. Liz Gray served as my invaluable in-house editor. Professor John J. Stephan made valuable suggestions, which helped me understand better the relocation canon. Ken Masugi provided inspiration by opposing the extreme version of relocation history propagated by the redress movement. I found creative interpretive encouragement from historians Brian Hayashi, Gary Okihiro, Echiiro Azuma, Robert Shaffer, Masuda Hajimu, and Lon Kurishige. The late Zane Miller employed his matchless and wide-ranging experience as both a heavily published historical scholar and an empathetic editor to inform my manuscript in many ways. Ralph Levering was especially helpful at getting my ideas across and into print. I am also indebted to the readers of

[8] G. Okihiro, *Storied Lives: Japanese American Students in World War II* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1999), p. 137.

the *Journal of the Historical Society* and assistant editor Scott Hovey for giving a close reading to a version of my basic ideas that appeared in article form in that journal. Editor Robert van Maier and the readers of *Global War Studies* did the same for an article in that journal. Merry Ovnick helped me sharpen my ideas for wider circulation of my research in the *Southern California Quarterly*.

I benefited greatly from other friends and readers, including Burk Huey, Ian Crowe, and Will Schultz, who afforded me friendly but trenchant and constructive advice. The staff at the National Archives was its usual helpful self. Geoffery Stark and his staff, Megan Massanelli, Jordan Johnson, and Kathryn Dunn, at the Special Collections of the University of Arkansas afforded me many shortcuts into their wonderful materials of the Rohwer and Jerome centers in Eastern Arkansas and also into the many records of the central office of the War Relocation Authority in Washington in their possession. My department chairman, Professor Lloyd Kramer, found monies to help fund our trip to the Fayetteville campus tucked into the beautiful, rolling Boston Mountains. I am also indebted to Larry Malley, Director of the University of Arkansas Press, and his wife Maggie, who constructively scolded me for an entire evening over good food and indifferent jazz about my heterodox interpretation of relocation.

Interlibrary Loan at the University of North Carolina (UNC) obtained many materials that we did not have at UNC, though we do have a formidable amount. Mike van Fossen, Amanda Henley, Robert Dalton, Tommy Dixon, and Beth Rowe gave unstintingly of their time and energy to identify and open these numerous relocation materials at UNC, especially the US Government documents and the invaluable center newspapers. They are extraordinarily skilled professionals.

I also benefited from the comments of diverse professional audiences, especially the noontime seminar of the UNC History Department, the Joint UNC–Duke–NC State Triangle Institute for Security Studies seminar, and a session at the biennial meeting of the Historical Society.

As always, my greatest debt is to my wife, Phyllis Morris Lotchin, who took time from her own literary pursuits to serve as my research assistant and to apply her unmatched skills as a grammarian and literary stylist to several versions of the manuscript. She refuses the formal title, but she should be considered a coauthor of this book.