American involvement in the Second World War begins with the 1941 Pearl Harbor bombing. One consequence of the bombing was Executive Order 9066, enacted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, which created the Japanese-American internment camps. These camps targeted any Nikkei, a person of Japanese descent, and interned them until the war had ended. While these camps were created to protecting American secrets from potential Japanese spies, the imprisonment revoked the American identity held by the Nikkei. Canada followed suit, imprisoning their citizens of Japanese descent into similar camps. Not only did the internment of Nikkei revoke their identities, the governments of the United States and Canada had blurred the line between the Nikkei and the Japanese natives. The native Japanese, however, shared the lack of acceptance towards the Nikkei, being entirely apathetic towards the internees.

Nikkei shifted into a new perspective due to this treatment: traitor without guilt. To understand this identity, one must examine both the Nikkei during and after internment and the native Japanese reaction.

One would assume that the Japanese government would have a defined, hateful reaction for the American and Canadian decisions to intern the Nikkei. That assumption, however, would be wrong as the native Japanese simply had no reaction to the internment. While the lack of reaction seems strange, the Japanese government had reason to not negatively comment on both the American and Canadian internment of Nikkei. The Japanese needed to find a way to return to the good graces of America as it stood tall as the world power. While this was not an incredibly difficult task due to America’s need of friendly nations close to the Soviet Union, the Japanese had to repay the Americans for disregarding some of the Japanese war crimes, such as the Nanking Massacre, and the exoneration of the royal family. To this end, the Japanese simply ignored the anti-democratic methods the United States and its ally Canada had performed on its own citizens, helping to create the narrative that the Americans were ethically righteous. The importance of this feigned ignorance is that the native Japanese government chose political connections over the lives of its migrated people, cutting off the relationship between the Nikkei and their culture. This separation from their root culture impacted the Nikkei’s identity as not only did America/Canada condemn them as Japanese spies, but the Japanese identity relegated to the Nikkei had become apathetic to them.

Life after being imprisoned in an internment camp was incredibly difficult and different. Most of the Nikkei who arrived at their old homes simply no longer felt at home. Most homes were heavily vandalized and ransacked by anti-Japanese citizens, leaving internees a grim reminder that they were no longer American/Canadian but another form of the enemy. As internee Chiye Tomihiro’s testimony mentions in John Tateishi’s And Justice For All, Tomihiro’s father was arrested by the FBI while the rest of her family was at a social affair. While this is standard for arrests, the caveat is that Tomihiro’s apartment was ransacked with the door left agape, demonstrating the disdain and disregard towards Nikkei during the World War II era. Another aspect that distanced the internee Nikkei’s identity as American/Canadian was that of the loss of time with family members. During the evacuations of Nikkei, certain family members would be taken at a time as opposed to the entire family, separating parents from children and spouses from one another. This manner of evacuation occasionally ended with the deaths of internees entirely separated from their families. While these deaths were not exclusively due to internment camp conditions, returning internees reflected on the lost time and realized what the camps had irreversibly cost them, worsening what little ties they had as an American/Canadian.

Selective Bibliography