

Banff Internment Camp Museum Virtual Tour: Questions for Discussion

Background:

When the First World War began in 1914 there was widespread suspicion that immigrants from enemy countries – Germany, Austria-Hungary, and later Turkey and Bulgaria – might be disloyal. In this environment, the federal government passed regulations which allowed it to monitor and even intern those who had not yet become naturalized British subjects* of Canada. These people were labelled “enemy aliens.” In total, Canada interned 8,579 men between 1914 and 1920.

Camps were set up mostly in Canada’s hinterland. In most camps, men were divided by ethnicity and by class. First Class internees were primarily German officers and their civilian equivalents. Second Class internees were mostly civilian enemy alien labourers from Austria-Hungary.

During the war, the government reduced the budget for national parks. Parks Commissioner J.B. Harkin therefore obtained permission to use enemy alien internees as low-cost labour. Four internment camps opened in Canada’s western national parks: at Banff, Jasper, Mount Revelstoke, and Yoho. Internees did a variety of work, including constructing roads and clearing land. Men were also interned at military sites such as the Citadel in Halifax, NS, and Fort Henry, in Kingston, ON, both of which are now national historic sites of Canada.

* The Canadian Citizenship Act gave legal status to “Canadian citizens” and “Canadian citizenship” beginning on Jan. 1, 1947. Prior to that, any person naturalized or born in Canada was legally recognized as a British subject.

The tour is available at ValourCanada.ca/vr/BanffInternmentCamp/

Two important questions to contemplate as you navigate through the tour:

- ✚ Is it acceptable for the state to limit civil liberties of the individual in times of crisis?
- ✚ Where should we draw the line between security (and/or safety) and freedom?

Early 20th Century Economic and Social Pressures

Positions 2, 3, 4, & 5

- Why did Canada seek to expand its population during the late 19th/early 20th century?
- What drove Eastern European immigration to Canada?
- Explain how economic circumstance in Canada shaped attitudes towards its ‘enemy aliens’.

Canada Goes to War

Positions 4, 5 & 6

- Which groups were targeted for internment in Canada?
- Why did Canada resort to these measures with civilians during wartime?
- Why were many of the to-be-interned civilians first detained in urban centres?

Internment of Enemy Aliens & Life in an Internment Camp

Positions 6, 7, 8 & 9

- What were some of the reasons why individuals were interned?
- What happened to the families of the men interned? Why were women and children treated differently?
- Think about the day-to-day life of internees in a camp. Explain their roles and/or assigned tasks and how they might spend any ‘leisure’ time in captivity.

Legacy and Reflections

Positions 8 & 9

- How might an experience like this impact multiple generations?
- Choose two current and/or historical events and draw parallels between them and what you have learned about the internment of enemy aliens in Canada during the First World War.

