

BY JOE SANO

THE ITALIAN AMERICAN INTERNMENT REVISITED

The Italian American internment refers to the forced relocation and detention of Italian citizens and Italian Americans in the United States during World War II. Following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, U.S. government officials developed a heightened suspicion of immigrants from Germany, Japan and Italy.

As a result, over 3,000 Italians were interned in camps. The actual detention of individuals in camps was less extensive than the internment of Japanese Americans. Still, approximately 600,000 were categorized as "enemy aliens" and subjected to restrictions on their movement and activities.

The internment was part of a broader Enemy Alien Control Program that allowed for the investigation and detention of individuals deemed suspicious. Although the initial wave of arrests predominantly targeted Japanese and German individuals, many Italians faced similar fates as the war progressed. Interned individuals were kept in camps surrounded by barbed wire, often separated from their families, and their properties were confiscated.

Thousands of Italian Americans were forced from their homes, some sent to camps (Camp Bella Vista- Missoula, Montana pictured here) and hundreds of thousands suffered curfews, confiscations and mass surveillance during the war.

They were targeted despite a lack of evidence that traitorous Italians were conducting spy or sabotage operations in the United States. Most Italian internees remained in these camps for around two years, with



many being released following Italy's surrender in September 1943.

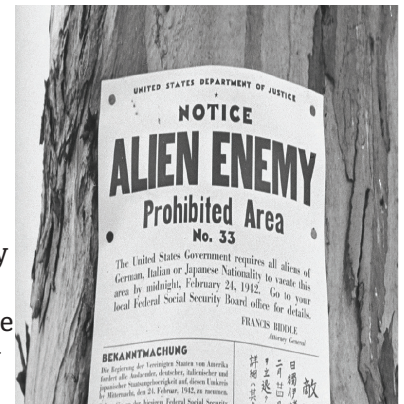
Despite their experiences, the stories of Italian Americans are not well known due to the survivors' reluctance to share their experience. The outbreak of the Second World War gave comfort to an outbreak of prejudice and bias against Italian Americans. The roots of the actions taken by the U.S. government against Italian Americans can be found not just in Italy's role as an Axis power during World War II, but in longstanding prejudice in the United States itself. Beginning in the second half of the 19th century, Italian immigration to America exploded. By 1920, more than 10 percent of all foreign-born people in the U.S. were Italian, and more than 4 million Italian immigrants had come to the United States. Vibrant successful Italian American communities sprang up around the country. As the number of Italian immigrants grew, so did anti-Italian sentiment. Italians were painted as subhuman and undesirable, and employers often refused to hire people of Italian extraction.

The ties between friends and familia in Italy to Italian Americans received increasing review as America inched towards joining the World War. In the late 1930s, we now know that the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover began to closely examine Italian organizations and individuals.

The FBI created a large list of "suspicious individuals" which was named the "ABC List." It divided people into categories based on their likelihood of danger to the nation. For many people on the list, which included tens of thousands of American citizens, the only basis for suspicion was their ethnicity.

December 7, 1941 put the plans into action. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the Axis powers declaration of war against the USA triggered the initial rounding up of Italian Americans deemed to be dangerous.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued a series of proclamations that declared citizens of Japan, Germany and Italy to be "alien enemies of the United States." These Italian American "enemy aliens" had to abide by





At least 10,000 Italian Americans were evacuated in California and forced to move out of their homes to areas outside of the evacuation zone. The government even came close to evacuating all Italians and Italian Americans along a massive stretch of the state stretching from Los Angeles to Orange County, California, but were stopped by a President Roosevelt order.

In spite of this treatment, the patriotism of Italian Americans was clearly demonstrated by the estimated over one million Italian Americans serving in the armed forces during the conflict. 14 Italian Americans received the Medal of Honor for their service.

In 1942, as the allied forces planned to invade Italy, Roosevelt realized that Italian American support for this campaign was an absolute need. On October 12, 1942, U.S. Attorney General Francis Biddle declared that Italians were no longer enemies of the state.

Though Italian American groups rejoiced at the proclamation, it was not the end of their internment. The majority of interned Italians did not gain freedom for another year. And even beyond, Italian Americans were subject to bias and stereotypes that had been reinforced during the years they were assumed to be traitors.

The extent of the persecution of Italian Americans during World War II was only revealed in 2001, when Congress was presented with a report on their treatment in response to the Wartime Violation of Italian American Civil Liberties Act of 2000.

Today, the persecution and internment of Italian Americans is a relatively unknown episode in the history of World War II, in part because of the humiliation and silence of the Italian Americans forced to live it. It does invite us to look at how immigrant populations are being treated in America. While today there is no declared war, we can witness and draw close parallels to how the Italian-Americans were treated during the early years of WWII.

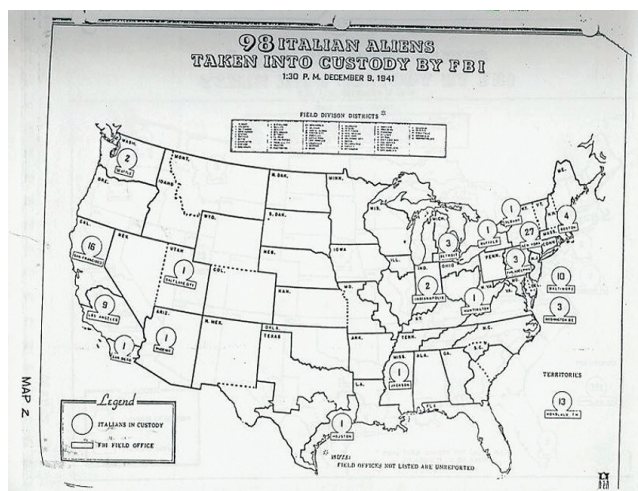
Historian Alice Yang says there are important reasons to remember this history. For the government: "Not to use ethnicity to determine who is dangerous and not to let wartime fears subvert civil rights."

A history lesson we should all remember and hopefully practice.



curfews and turn in their weapons, radios and cameras. Anyone named on the list could not travel more than five miles from home without getting permission. The FBI began arresting and detaining people who were eyeballed as threats.

While Italians and Italian Americans awaited hearings to determine whether they would stay in detention, the Congress legislated that the West Coast was declared to be an area of special military and intelligence significance. The military determined who they thought should stay and who should go, and individuals could not be represented by legal counsel in the hearings that determined their fate. Certain areas were declared



off-limits to other individuals considered enemy aliens, including the San Francisco waterfront, areas around hydroelectric plants and areas near military bases.

The FBI searched houses for contraband items, confiscating radios and other items, and forced Italians, even those who were naturalized citizens, to report changes of address and employment. The government restricted the employment and movement of Italian fishermen, confiscating their boats and cutting off their access to the waters that provided their livelihoods. Joe Di Maggio's dad was one of these fishermen.