



Enemies among Us: The Relocation, Internment and Repatriation of German, Italian and Japanese Americans during the Second World War

by John E. Schmitz.

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Enemies among Us is a truly comprehensive investigation of wartime internment in the United States, exploring the treatment of citizens of German, Italian, and Japanese heritage. It carefully distinguishes between the interwoven processes of relocation, internment, and repatriation. Its author, historian John Schmitz (Northern Virginia Community College–Annandale), expands the chronology of these narratives as well, stressing parallels with the internment of German Americans during World War I. He also considers how the tribulations of internment and relocation during World War II rippled forward into the postwar period in terms of emotional scars and financial hardships. Although Schmitz is candid about his personal relationship to this history—his father's family was interned at a camp in Crystal City, Texas—his narrative is impartial and free from any sort of competitive victimization. Schmitz's best contribution to the extensive literature on wartime internment in the United States is his decidedly transnational framework. Especially valuable is his core argument that the wartime internment of civilians was "inextricably linked" with Allied–Axis prisoner exchange efforts like "two sides of the same coin" (9).

Schmitz succeeds in presenting a multi-causal explanation for the wartime relocation and internment of civilians. He notes that the first few decades of research in this area concentrated "solely on Japanese Americans"—a reductionist approach in which racism was viewed as "largely or solely responsible for the indignities" (4) suffered by internees. He is well aware that people of Japanese descent endured more fear and hatred than their German and Italian counterparts (121). He presents racism as a single, constant layer of causality. Its interaction with other factors—government objectives, pragmatic concerns, societal conditions, and "changing internal and external pressures" (8)—drove policymaking and altered federal authorities' responses to a perceived threat of fifth column activity.

A poignant example of the author's approach to history can be found in his discussion of shifting public sentiments toward Japanese aliens and citizens in the first few months after the Pearl Harbor attack. Schmitz contends that "initially, there was to be no difference in the government's treatment of alien enemies, regardless of race or ethnicity" (167). He emphasizes the "tremendous impact" of the early stages of the war (167). The attack on Pearl Harbor was followed up by the Japanese seizure of Hong Kong, a series of victories across the Pacific, the capture of American POWs, and attacks on US ships and oil storage tanks. These fueled irrational levels of panic. One telling example can be found in the author's account of the so-called "Battle of Los Angeles," which saw US forces fire 1,400 shells at a random weather balloon in late February 1942. The Western Defense Command tried to conceal the error for months by insisting there had been a Japanese attack (121). Without discounting anti-Japanese racism, Schmitz stresses the effect of these events in prompting Americans to view Japan as their nation's foremost enemy; this was confirmed by public opinion polls conducted in March 1942.

Schmitz probes deeply into the myth of a disloyal “fifth column,” which captured the American imagination during World War II, stoking public fears and galvanizing a consensus in favor of internment. President Franklin Roosevelt spoke publicly about the “fifth column specter” as early as 1940 and the concept figured prominently in the operations of the FBI and War Department (50). Schmitz traces the rapid diffusion of the concept across the country, noting that by 1941 national best-selling books were warning their readers of “sinister fifth-columnist machinations and national threats” (154). People began to see spies and saboteurs everywhere. This is the context in which we must view the comments of Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, who, after visiting the Hawaiian Islands following the Pearl Harbor attack, falsely blamed the tragedy on “the most effective Fifth Column work of the entire war.” Schmitz notes that this claim was readily “accepted, repeated, and reinforced” by newspapers across the country, as the vilification of Japanese Americans became ordinary fare (134-5).

While ethnic Germans and Italians also faced “hostility and stereotyping” during the interwar period (34), Schmitz astutely notes that those populations enjoyed “safety in numbers” as the two largest immigrant groups in the country (145). The Japanese community, on the other hand, was “culturally isolated” and “politically vulnerable” by comparison, lacking advocates in positions of power (64). Although anti-Japanese racism was palpable during this period, Schmitz presents the unfolding mass relocation of West Coast Japanese as emanating from this confluence of factors including the specter of fifth-column activity.

Enemies among Us benefits from its author’s careful distinction between relocation and internment. This is evident as well in his precise delineation of the various types of civilian camps: (1) INS internment camps, (2) WRA Relocation Center Camps, (3) Assembly Centers, and (4) Citizen Isolation Camps. Besides addressing a point of confusion in the existing literature, Schmitz’s taxonomical exercise buttresses his case that US policy toward the three Axis communities was consistent. Schmitz insists that his readers differentiate between relocatees and the 31,275 enemy aliens and citizens held at INS facilities, where the US “interned roughly the same number of Japanese as German and Italian Americans” (248).

As for relocation, while the early literature focused on President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 and the more than 100,000 Japanese and Japanese American civilians whose lives it upended, Schmitz stresses that EO 9066 also prompted the forcible relocation of thousands of Italian and German aliens. Schmitz proves that Gen. John DeWitt actively lobbied for the mass evacuation of Germans and Italians from the West Coast as well.

The author’s most significant intervention appears in his penetrating analysis of the ties between internment and transnational prisoner exchange. On a positive note, the desire of belligerent nations to ensure the safety of their own nationals held in captivity by their enemies ensured a “benevolent reciprocity of treatment” of internees on all fronts (248). On the other hand, this situation incentivized each combatant nation to intern greater numbers of alien enemies; these were reduced to the status of “bartered commodities” used to procure the return of their own nationals.

Arrest and internment numbers were roughly equal among German and Italian as compared to Japanese aliens, since all were seen as a threat. Officials exchanged undesirable types for Americans held by the Axis. In short, the multilateral wartime repatriation and exchange of enemy aliens and civilians served a number of purposes, including getting rid of “bottom of the barrel” types such as criminals, the insane, the ill and elderly, hobos, drifters, and the poor. Internment and exchange were pragmatic steps in ridding society of undesirables while obtaining individuals who, given their firsthand observations and knowledge of events in Nazi- or Japanese-occupied lands, might be useful. (128)

The sordid underbelly of internment as a tool for prisoner exchange is visible in US wartime policy in Latin America, where 6,610 civilians were moved from eighteen different countries to the United States for the purposes of internment and exchange. Schmitz points out that these machinations commenced after Germany announced it would be willing to “mutually exchange and repatriate Americans in Nazi occupied Europe with Germans throughout the Western Hemisphere” (214). This transnational internment program also provided justification for the United States to increase its security influence in Latin America, where it established military bases in Guatemala and Panama.

I certainly applaud Schmitz’s development of an explanatory model that shifts the direction of the larger historical narrative. But his argument has a few subtle vulnerabilities that warrant attention. First of all, he provides moving examples of virulent anti-Japanese prejudice among US congressmen and President Roosevelt’s cabinet members. While such evidence is relevant, it may lead his readers to think that racism played the preeminent role in justifying the mass relocation of Japanese citizens.

Furthermore, Schmitz asks his audience to believe “the U.S. government interned roughly the same number of Japanese as German and Italian Americans” (248). But most of those 31,275 internees—16,849 by Schmitz’s count—were Japanese or Japanese Americans, even though the Japanese community in the United States was dwarfed by its German and Italian counterparts. This means that internment rates were dramatically higher for Japanese civilians.

It must also be remembered that race-based immigration policies kept Japanese immigrants from being eligible for US citizenship. Although the author (in chap. 7) acknowledges the Immigration Act of 1924, he omits this point earlier, when discussing German immigrants’ proclivity for pursuing US citizenship as a symbol of heightened “desire to embrace the American culture” (19). A wonderful chance to explore the relationship between institutional racism and interpersonal racism consequently vanishes.

These quibbles aside, the breadth of *Enemies among Us* makes it well suited for inclusion in undergrad and graduate school courses in history, American studies, war studies, and international relations.