

Densho's Note on Terminology

At present there is no clear agreement about the most appropriate terminology for what Japanese Americans underwent during World War II. In the 1940s, officials of the federal government and U.S. military used euphemisms to describe their actions against people of Japanese ancestry in the United States. The deceptiveness of the language can now be judged according to evidence from many sources, notably the government's own investigation, as documented in *Personal Justice Denied* (1982-83) the report of the U.S. Congressional Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC).

Evacuation or Exclusion?

In early 1942, Japanese Americans were forcibly removed from the West Coast and forbidden to return. The government called this an "evacuation," which implies the forced move was done as a precaution for Japanese Americans' own safety, as in a natural disaster. In fact the CWRIC found that the true motivations were "race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership." An additional factor was a desire for economic gain. "Exclusion" and "mass removal" are more apt terms, because Japanese Americans were expelled from the West Coast and subject to arrest if they returned.

Internment or Incarceration?

The commonly used term "internment" is misleading when describing the concentration camps that held 120,000 people of Japanese descent during the war. "Internment" refers to the legally permissible detention of enemy aliens in time of war. It is problematic when applied to American citizens; yet two-thirds of the Japanese Americans incarcerated were U.S. citizens. Although "internment" is a recognized and generally used term, Densho prefers "incarceration" as more accurate except in the specific case of aliens detained in a separate set of camps run by the army or Justice Department. "Detention" is used interchangeably, although some scholars argue that the word denotes a shorter time of confinement than the nearly four years the Japanese American camps were in operation.

Japanese or Japanese American?

The Nisei ("second generation") were U.S. citizens born to Japanese immigrant parents in the United States. The accurate term for them is "Japanese American," rather than "Japanese." In public documents, the government referred to the Nisei as "non-aliens" rather than "citizens." Their parents, the Issei ("first generation") were forbidden by discriminatory law from becoming naturalized American citizens. By the 1940s, most Issei had lived in the United States for decades and raised their families here. Many had no plans for returning to Japan, and would have become naturalized citizens if allowed. (The ban on naturalization remained until 1952, when immigration law was changed.) To reflect this condition, Densho and other sources use the term "Japanese American" to refer to the Issei as well as the Nisei.

Assembly center, relocation center, or concentration camp?

At first, Japanese Americans were held in temporary camps that the government called “assembly centers,” facilities surrounded by fences and guarded by military sentries. For purposes of identification, Densho uses this euphemistic term as part of a proper noun, for example, “Puyallup Assembly Center,” and in quotation marks when referring to this type of facility.

Japanese Americans were later confined within longer-term camps that the government called “relocation centers.” In fact, they were prisons—compounds of barracks surrounded by barbed wire fences and patrolled by armed guards—which Japanese Americans could not leave without permission. “Relocation center” inadequately describes the harsh conditions and forced confinement of the camps. As prison camps outside the normal criminal justice system, designed to confine civilians for military or political purposes on the basis of race and ethnicity, these so-called relocation centers also fit the definition of “concentration camps.” As such, Densho’s preferred term is “concentration camps,” e.g. “Minidoka concentration camp.” We do also use other terms, such as “incarceration camp” or “prison camp.”

On the Use of Euphemistic Language

Should euphemistic language from an earlier era be used today? This is an important question for students, teachers, and all people concerned with historical accuracy. Many Japanese Americans, some scholars, and other credible sources use the terminology of the past, which they believe is true to that era and unlikely to invite controversy. In contrast, many Japanese Americans, historians, educators, and others use terminology that they feel more accurately represents the historical events. Densho encourages individuals to think critically about the language used during the 1940s by the U.S. government in its punitive treatment of American citizens and legal resident immigrants based on their ancestry.

Densho’s terminology conforms with the “Resolution on Terminology” adopted by the Civil Liberties Public Education Fund (see <http://www.momomedia.com/CLPEF/backgrnd.html>).

See also: Roger Daniels, “Words Do Matter,” (see <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2008/2/1/words-do-matter/>) a 5-part article on the Discover Nikkei website.