

To what extent was the Japanese exclusion in the Immigration Act of 1924 caused by U.S racial intolerance?

History SL Internal Assessment

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# Identification and evaluation of sources

This investigation will study how anti-Japanese sentiments in California led to the total ban of Japanese immigration to U.S.A in 1924. The investigation will be limited to California since the anti-Japanese sentiment was the strongest there during the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and thus provided me with the most sources. Hence, the research question is “To what extent was the exclusion of the Japanese in the Immigration Act of 1924 caused by U.S racial intolerance?”.

The first source to be evaluated is a primary source that is collection of journal articles on the matter of Japanese immigration, which presented me with a multitude of differing perspectives, and the second evaluated source will be the start of Greg Robinson’s book on factors leading to the Japanese relocation in 1942, which provided me with much of my base knowledge on the subject studied.

*The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (1921) volume 93 is a primary source compiled of articles written by a range of people with differing perspectives on Japanese immigration to America. The purpose of this source was to create conversation around the topic of immigration between knowledgeable writers and further inform the reader of immigration, its pros and cons. Since the source is meant for “academics, researchers, policymakers, and professionals”<sup>1</sup>, this may mean the articles offer good argumentation, deep and coherent analysis on the topic since such critical thinkers will read them. Thus, even the more one-sided articles must explain and defend their statements

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<sup>1</sup> SAGE Publishing. n.d. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* | SAGE Publications Ltd. Accessed April 19, 2018. <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/the-annals-of-the-american-academy-of-political-and-social-science/journal200750#description>.

with proper argumentation, which gives great information for a historian about the anti-Japanese movement's motives and reasoning. Although this may also limit the source since the writers and audience are made up of only educated individuals and thus the public's opinion is left out completely.

However, due to the wide range of writers, it is important to recognize the partiality in the articles. Unfairness seems to be evident in all articles to some extent, this could be due to the publishing time, which was a time of social and racial prejudices in America. Thus, while the source provides a great deal of interpretations, which are essential for an historian, majority of them are based on skewed ideals and prejudice and thus cannot fully be trusted.

*A Tragedy of Democracy: Japanese Confinement in North America* (2009) was written by Greg Robinson. This source's origin is very valuable since Greg Robinson has a Ph.D. in American history, specializes in American political history and has studied and written extensively about Japanese-Americans in 20<sup>th</sup> century U.S.<sup>2</sup> Also more value is added to the source due to its relative freshness, which enables the study of recently uncovered information. Furthermore, the source also highlighted multiple perspectives ranging from other countries' reactions to Japanese immigration to the national reaction.

Since this book studies the factors leading to the relocation of the Japanese in 1942 and further on, I could only use the first chapter, which is titled "Background to Confinement".

Although I used the first chapter, it still limited my usage of the source since Robinson studies such a wide year range, from 1853 when Commodore Perry opened Japan's borders up for trade till Pearl Harbour in 1941, which restricted deeper analysis on specific events

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<sup>2</sup> Robinson, Greg. *GREG ROBINSON*. Accessed April 19, 2018. <http://www.gregjrobinson.com>.

that were relevant for this investigation. However, this source still provided balanced and objective information with varying perspectives on the anti-Japanese sentiment in America, especially California, which makes it an invaluable addition for a historian studying the topic.

# Investigation

Immigration has been a vital part in U.S history from the very establishing of the nation, but even though the country's history of immigration, Americans have still fostered ill feelings towards their fellow immigrants especially from Africa, central America and Asia.<sup>3</sup> These ill feelings were especially evident in California, where long harboured anti-Japanese ideas would lead to a Japanese exclusion clause in the Immigration Act of 1924, which would signal the end for Japanese immigration to the U.S.<sup>4</sup>

The anti-Japanese movement had been brewing from the very start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the Chinese Exclusion act was in danger of not being renewed in 1902<sup>5</sup>, but only in 1906-7 did the movement come alive. Spurred on by Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese war of 1905 and the fears of espionage and invasion it created on the West Coast<sup>6</sup>, the San Francisco school board ordered the separation of Japanese children from white children.<sup>7</sup>

The San Francisco school incident is especially important since it catapulted the Californian anti-Japanese sentiment into an international crisis<sup>8</sup> and initiated the creation of the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907, which limited Japanese coolie emigration to U.S.<sup>9</sup>

However, this agreement was considered to be ineffective by the exclusionists since it didn't limit the immigration of family members of already migrated Japanese and thus created an

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<sup>3</sup> Abney, David Lawrence. 1995. *Japan Bashing: A History of America's Anti-Japanese Acts, Attitudes and Laws*. PhD Thesis, Tempe: Arizona State University. p. 6

<sup>4</sup> Robinson, Greg. 2009. *A Tragedy of Democracy: Japanese Confinement in North America*. New York: Columbia University Press. p. 22

<sup>5</sup> Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. 1982. "Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians." Washington DC. p. 32

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 32

<sup>7</sup> Buell, Raymond Leslie. 1922. "The Development of the Anti-Japanese Agitation in the United States." *Political Science Quarterly* 37 (4): 605-638. p. 622

<sup>8</sup> Robinson. p. 14

<sup>9</sup> Buell. p. 634

influx of “picture brides”.<sup>10</sup> This saw the rise of a new generation of Japanese, the Nisei, who were American citizens although the whites refused to accept them as such.<sup>11</sup> Although, it is important to realise that Japan stopped the emigration of “picture brides” in 1920<sup>12</sup>, which virtually stopped all Japanese immigration, but in the eyes of the Californians the damage had been done. Thus, it can be argued that the Gentlemen’s Agreement rather than eased, enflamed the Californians for further immigration restrictions due to the government’s inability to curb the Japanese invasion.

The anti-Japanese agenda circulated around racial issues hidden behind a veneer of perceived economic problems. The Californian labour unions had fought against cheap Chinese labour in 19<sup>th</sup> century, but now faced the growing problem of cheap Japanese labour, who “threatened the standard of living of white workers”.<sup>13</sup> Although these arguments may have been valid in the start of 1900s, they were still used by labour unions in 1920s, even though by then Issei (Japanese born immigrants) had started their own enterprises and were no longer competing with white workers for jobs.<sup>14</sup> However, the establishing of these Japanese enterprises angered the whites further, because it created economic competition and challenged their white supremacy.<sup>15</sup> Thus, in 1913 the Californian Alien Land Law was passed, which limited aliens from purchasing and owning land, although this law did little to restrict the Issei since they could put the ownership under their American-born children’s names.<sup>16</sup> Therefore the law was modified in 1920 to

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<sup>10</sup> Robinson. p. 16

<sup>11</sup> Daniels, Roger. 1962. *The Politics of Prejudice: The Anti-Japanese Movement in California and the Struggle for Japanese Exclusion*. Berkeley: University of California Press. p. 44-45

<sup>12</sup> Robinson. p. 20

<sup>13</sup> Robinson. p. 13

<sup>14</sup> Daniels. p. 87

<sup>15</sup> Robinson. p. 13

<sup>16</sup> CWRIC. p. 34

ban any land transferring to Japanese nationals, which ultimately affected the land ownership of the Issei very limitedly since they had acquired their land in preceding years.<sup>17</sup> Hence it can be argued that economical aspects weren't the leading factors in the total exclusion of Japanese immigrants since the land law of 1920 minimised any further threat posed by native-Japanese's ownership of land and further restrictions for the Nisei would have been condemned of being unconstitutional. Moreover, the issues seemed more focused around race and the preservation of white men's integrity rather than economic factors since even the leading anti-Japanese figure, James D. Phelan, admired the Japanese's "industry and cleverness" while highlighting their danger to white men due to their great work incentive.<sup>18</sup>

The Japanese-immigrants were systematically isolated by the government and the anti-Japanese movements through the exploitation of America's laws and prejudices. America's naturalization laws only saw that free white persons and Africans could naturalize, thus signalling out Orientals and other races completely.<sup>19</sup> Although people of various ethnic backgrounds were allowed naturalization, which belittled the naturalization law itself, the courts completely denied naturalization for the Japanese from 1911 onwards<sup>20</sup>. Thus, by not allowing Japanese naturalization, the anti-Japanese groups could fearmonger the rise of a yellow California up until 1924 by accentuating the Japanese as loyal only to Japan and thus their incapability of assimilation.<sup>21</sup> Further distrust of the Japanese was caused by the

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<sup>17</sup> Daniels. p. 88

<sup>18</sup> Phelan, James D. 1921. "Why California Objects to the Japanese Invasion." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 93. p. 17

<sup>19</sup> Daniels. p. 50

<sup>20</sup> Malcolm, Roy. 1921. "American Citizenship and the Japanese." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 93. p. 79

<sup>21</sup> Motte, Marshall de. 1921. "California-White or Yellow?" *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 93. p. 20

Japanese's practice of a foreign religion, Buddhism and Shinto, and the establishment of supplementary Japanese lessons for the Nisei, which were thought to only highlight their allegiance to "their national ruler".<sup>22</sup> On the contrary, the Japanese immigrants adjusted their religions to fit their new surroundings by incorporating Western-style methods of preaching<sup>23</sup>, while the lessons for the Nisei only enforced Americanisation since they only added extra work for the children.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, through the limited narrative of the anti-Japanese movement and America's restrictive laws could the Japanese immigrants be deemed as unassimilable due to their differing culture and race and thus be segregated from American society.<sup>25</sup>

A major factor for the total exclusion of Japanese in the Immigration Act was the social atmosphere in 1920s. After the First World War U.S experienced a surge in nationalism and Americanism, which translated into racial discrimination.<sup>26</sup> Pseudo-scientific race literature, the fear of Bolshevism and radicalism encouraged the want for immigration restrictions.<sup>27</sup> These views were especially evident in Senator Ellison DuRant Smith's speech during the congressional debate over the 1924 Act, where he stated that the best choice of America is to "shut the door and to breed up a pure, unadulterated American citizenship."<sup>28</sup> Although Smith's radical views weren't mirrored by the majority to that extent, they did show the extremes the racist ideas had reached.

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<sup>22</sup> Motte. p. 20

<sup>23</sup> Robinson. p. 11

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 26

<sup>25</sup> CWRIC p. 31

<sup>26</sup> Robinson. p. 21

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 22

<sup>28</sup> Smith, Ellison DuRant. 1924. "Shut the Door." Washington DC, 9 April. Accessed March 30, 2018. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5080>.

To conclude, the multitude of factors that led to the total exclusion of the Japanese in the Immigration Act of 1924 seemed to be primarily focus around racial issues. This is especially evident in the aftermath of the poorly planned executions of the Gentlemen's Act and Land Laws, which ignited great anger among the population and further fuelled the racial prejudices against the Japanese immigrants. Also, the 1920s social unrest created the perfect stage for the Californian anti-Japanese movements to enforce a Japanese exclusion clause into the Immigration Act. And by far the most dominant factor that lead to the exclusion was America's inherently racist idea of preserving the superiority of America's Anglo-Saxon majority by restricting the immigration of less superior races.

# Reflection

During the investigation, I was greatly overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information and sources, which were available to me. It was a huge task to decipher all that information and then to pick out the most topical sources for my research question. For me, this struggle highlighted the challenges that historians experience while choosing accurate and important information for their studies. During the research process I also noticed that historians face the problem of possibly succumbing to their own presumptions and predispositions while choosing information. Since it may be very tempting to leave out information that doesn't support your conclusion.

In my investigation I used an array of secondary and primary sources that provided me with a wide range of perspectives. It was especially interesting to compare the secondary sources to the primary since the primary held such strong partial perspectives. Thus, it is particularly important for the historian to detect any possible one-sidedness in their sources so to create a truthful and critical investigation. Furthermore, due to some of the primary sources' blatant racism, it was hard to stay objective and consider all perspectives equally. Hence, a historian should acknowledge their own social context that might limit their understanding of historical contexts and stay objective.

While writing my investigation, I noticed how easily my own knowledge mixed with the knowledge I learnt from my sources, which created the danger of accidental plagiarism on my part. This emphasised the importance of doing thorough and concise notes before writing the investigation to minimise confusion between the writer's own ideas and the ideas presented in the sources. Also, by making proper notes in the beginning, the writing of the investigation would have been less overwhelming and more efficient.

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