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Internment during the Second World War

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Internment during the Second World War

A Comparative Study of Great
Britain and the USA

Rachel Pistol

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In memory of David Cesarani

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Introduction

The topic of this book could not be timelier. In both Great Britain and the United States of America, much is being made in the political sphere of the issues of race, immigration, and the rights of foreigners residing in each nation. It is impossible to consider the treatment of enemy aliens during the Second World War without exploring the treatment of foreigners in preceding centuries. As the first chapter of this book discusses, protests over immigration and calls for restriction are invariably heightened during times of economic discontent. Throughout history, immigration is perceived negatively whenever a country is experiencing economic problems. The financial crisis of 2007–2008 and the subsequent recession and austerity measures hark back to the economic crises of the late 1800s, and the Wall Street Crash of 1929. Both countries have been in this position before, but arguably little has been learned. Current events are therefore not surprising, but are disappointing for the lack of attention paid to the history of the preceding centuries. It is, therefore, of even greater importance to be aware of the way foreigners have been treated in Great Britain and the United States of America, both in peace and war, in order to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

Evidence of the turmoil both Britain and America are experiencing is found in recent political events, not dissimilar to those experienced during the 1930s and 1940s. Great Britain unexpectedly voted to leave the European Union, and the Leave campaign triumphed using a campaign of fear, which included massive distortion of facts surrounding foreigners and immigration. Nigel Farage, former leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), unveiled a billboard during the campaign that showed a picture of Syrian refugees fleeing their homeland, for which he was reported to the police for inciting racial hatred – not only was the image in incredibly poor taste, but it harked back to Nazi propaganda footage of migrants.¹ While UKIP tried to distance itself from the comparisons made between their rhetoric and that of the Nazis, there can be no mistaking the message UKIP was trying to portray – that immigrants are parasites,

not refugees, and that many of them are trying to take advantage of Western countries. Such sentiments have been oft repeated in Britain, such as when eastern Europeans arrived in Britain because of Russian persecution in the late nineteenth century, and when Jewish refugees sought asylum in Britain during the 1930s. The 'Brexiters' consistently campaigned for the idea of 'taking the country back'. Gisela Stuart, Labour member of Parliament and spokesperson for the Leave campaign, claimed that the only way to 'take back control' on immigration was to leave the European Union, because of concern that 'no matter how great the pressure on schools, hospitals and housing becomes or how much wages in our poorest communities are pushed down, the needs of ordinary British people would not be met.'² The problem with such arguments is that they encourage a 'them and us' mentality, which feed xenophobic and racist attitudes. Proof that this attitude engenders violence was tragically given when Jo Cox, member of Parliament for Batley and Spen in West Yorkshire, was gunned down by a man who gave his name in court as 'Death to traitors, freedom for Britain.'³ In the days following the vote to Leave, thousands of stories were posted on social media that showed how those who were not white, or who spoke with an accent, were harassed, threatened, and told to 'go home.'⁴ In the first few days following the EU referendum, hate crimes increased in Britain by as much as 57 per cent.⁵ Regardless of nationality, no one should suffer insult or injury as a result of their nationality or skin colour. As the grieving family of Jo Cox said during this tragic and turbulent time, it is necessary for the British public 'to focus on that which unites us and not which divides us.'⁶ This is a message needed not just in Britain, but across the globe, as men, women, and children are imprisoned and killed for the sake of their race or religion.

Both Great Britain and the United States of America are currently nations divided, and in America, immigration and the presence of foreigners is also being used as an explanation for social and economic problems. Refugees from the Middle East have been brought up in debates about the threat of terrorism. Since the tragedy of September 11, 2001, there has been a fear of anyone of Middle Eastern appearance, or more specifically, anyone who appears Muslim. Much in the same way that Japanese and Japanese Americans were targeted because of the way they looked, those who appear Muslim are subject to increased scrutiny and discrimination. This follows a long history in America of discrimination based on skin colour, particularly experienced by the African American community. There have been many atrocities committed in the name of Islam, and since 9/11, many have been charged and found guilty of 'jihadi terrorism.'⁷ The problem America faces is that the attacks that have taken place in the past fifteen years have been



perpetrated by American citizens. In the Orlando massacre – the largest mass killing on American soil since 9/11 – the gunman was an American citizen. The growth of technology and accessibility via the World Wide Web of terrorist literature and chatrooms where vulnerable children and teenagers are groomed for violence is perhaps the most serious threat to American national security that exists today. However, the issue is not as simple as America being targeted by these individuals. Those most vulnerable to such grooming are those who live on the edge of society. As the divide between the rich and the poor continues to grow, and the divide between different ethnicities fails to diminish, the number of marginalized individuals in society is increasing. One only has to look at the case of Flint, Michigan, where the residents have been poisoned by the water supply since 2014, and even today lead-filled water continues to enter their homes. Over half the population of Flint are black and 41 per cent live in poverty, forced to exchange food stamps for bottled water.⁸ The residents feel that their concerns are not adequately addressed because of the colour of their skin, and because they are poor. Racial inequality is still prevalent in American society, and until this is eradicated, it is highly likely that the rise of extremism will continue.



This is a period of isolationism, where both Britain and America are calling for tougher border control. Right-wing politicians in both nations believe that the only way to protect a country is to keep out foreigners. There are many different issues involved in the immigration debate, such as illegal versus legal immigration; however, there is very little distinction made between these categories when talking about immigration, leaving all foreigners victim to negative connotations. Not since the 1930s and 1940s has there been such hatred directed at foreigners living in Britain, with calls for foreigners and non-whites to 'go home'. In America, there have been various times during the twentieth century when immigrant or refugee groups have been targeted by racists, and



the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter movement demonstrate how unequal American society continues to be in the present day. The fact that individuals are still targeted and stereotyped as a threat to be feared because of the colour of their skin shows how little progress has been made in the past century. The issues of racial inequality and the inherent fear of the 'other' are just as prevalent in modern-day society as they were in the early twentieth century. The First World War was a conflict between nation-states, whereas the Second World War was a conflict based more on ideology than nationality. The lack of greater understanding of this issue caused the detention of tens of thousands of individuals who would have gladly fought for the Allied powers from the beginning of the conflict. Ultimately, as shown in Chapter 3, many internees in both countries were admitted or drafted into the Armed Forces, and the heroic efforts of these former internees is impressive. As the chapter also discusses, many of the former internees have contributed incredibly positively to their adoptive nations post-war, or in the case of those of Japanese ancestry, they have gone on to achieve greatness in spite of their treatment by their country of birth. There is much to be learned from the actions and reactions of the internees to their incarceration, and the sacrifices they and their families have made cannot be overlooked.



Notes

Introduction

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