



# MANZANAR NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

California, USA

36.7265929, -118.156615



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## Executive Summary

During World War II, the U.S. Government incarcerated thousands of Japanese Americans in so-called War Relocation Centres around the country. One of them was the Manzanar Relocation Center, which at its peak, housed around 11,000 detainees. Incarcerated behind barbed wire and guard towers, Japanese American families lost their freedom which disrupted family dynamics and led to the 1942 Manzanar Riots. After Manzanar closed in November 1945, Japanese Americans lived with deep trauma, a sense of shame, and an unwillingness to tell their stories. Decades later, incarceration survivors and descendants led the effort to preserve Manzanar as a site for healing and learning. This case analyses the controversies around the memorialisation of this part of American history that was overlooked for decades.

## Introduction

Immediately following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941, the U.S. Government imprisoned Japanese American men without due process.

On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which called for the relocation and internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans, 11,000 of whom were kept in Manzanar. After functioning as a 'relocation centre' for Japanese Americans from 1942 to 1945, the Manzanar National Historic Site in California today acts as a memorial to an often overlooked chapter in recent US history. One of the few remaining historical resources from the original camp is the Soul Consoling Tower, which is dedicated to those that died there. The National Park Service, in partnership with the Japanese American community, has made significant investments to provide a visitor centre and restore historic resources.

The camp aroused controversy from 1972 onwards when state authorities designated the site a Historic Landmark and authorised the erection of a plaque referring to Manzanar as 'the first of ten such concentration camps.' As part of the Japanese American communities' fight for redress, President Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act in 1988, which acknowledged the 'grave injustice' of internment and compensated the disenfranchised Japanese Americans. Today, the Manzanar National Historic Site, located 226 miles northeast of Los Angeles in Owens Valley, Central California,<sup>1</sup> is formed by a visitor centre and a reconstructed complex of two barrack buildings, a mess hall, a guard tower, the women's latrines, and other historical resources.<sup>2</sup>

## Background

### *The Apparition of Incarceration Sites*

The forced removal and incarceration of Japanese-Americans began shortly after the outbreak of war between the United States and Japan on December 7, 1941, when 1,291 *issei* – first-generation Japanese Americans – were detained in Hawaii by the FBI. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorising the US Military to establish zones 'from which any or all persons may be excluded' on the grounds of military necessity. This order started the mass incarceration supervised by the War Relocation Authority – established on March 18, 1942 – which issued 108 Civilian Relocation Orders, uprooting

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<sup>1</sup> Glen Kitayama, "Manzanar", *Densho Encyclopedia*, June 19 2020. ; American Southwest, "Manzanar National Historic Site", *American Southwest*, accessed January 25, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> US-Parks.com, "Manzanar National Historic Site Facilities", *US-Parks.com*. ; Jeffery F. Burton, Jeremy D. Haines, and Mary M. Farrell, "I REI TO: Archeological Investigations at the Manzanar Relocation Center Cemetery, Manzanar National Historic Site, California", *Publications in Anthropology*, 79 (2001), p. V – 9.

112,581 Japanese Americans in the West Coast area and confining them to 10 'relocation centres'.<sup>3</sup>

After the exclusion order was issued, Japanese Americans had one week to register with the authorities, gather their belongings, which could be carried, and report to specified locations; they were also required to liquidate their assets, so homeowners and business owners had to sell their properties 'hurriedly and at steep discounts', often for 'pennies on the dollar', or find friends to manage their property.<sup>4</sup> These assembly centres were usually converted racetracks and fairgrounds where thousands stayed while waiting to be transported to their assigned 'relocation centres'.<sup>5</sup> The 'relocation centres' were usually constructed many miles inland, often in remote and desolate sites.<sup>6</sup> In them, families shared 'tar-papered army-style barracks' (see Figure 2).<sup>7</sup> These centres were: Tule Lake (California), Minidoka (Idaho), Manzanar (California), Topaz (Utah), Jerome (Arkansas), Heart Mountain (Wyoming), Poston (Arizona), Granada (Colorado), Gila River (Arizona), and Rohwer (Arkansas).<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 1:** 'Manzanar Shrine' Image by Daniel Mayer via Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 3.0



**Figure 2:** 'Manzanar Barracks' Image by Don Graham via Flickr CC BY-SA 2.0

## *The Manzanar War Relocation Centre*

The hastily constructed camp, with its communal outhouses and cramped living barracks (see Figure 2), was poorly adjusted for family living and did little to protect the internees from the

<sup>3</sup> NJAMF, "Forced Removal and Incarceration", *National Japanese Memorial Foundation*, accessed January 25, 2022. ; Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Executive Order 9066", *Ourdocuments.gov*, February 19, 1942. ; "House Bill Report E2SHB 1572", House Committee on Education, February 11, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> National Archives, "Japanese-American Incarceration During World War II," *National Archives*, accessed January 25, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

harsh desert conditions.<sup>9</sup> Manzanar had 36 blocks of 14 barracks, each of which comprised four 20'x25' apartments. In total, there were 504 20'x100' barracks, making up more than 2000 apartments which were furnished with 'a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling, an oil-burning stove, and up to 8 cots.'<sup>10</sup> While there were facilities, the conditions in the camp remained poor. Water was sourced from one faucet outside each barrack, and 'separate men's and women's group latrines and showers, laundry and ironing rooms, a recreation building, a mess hall, and an oil storage tank'<sup>11</sup> were shared among internees of each block. Highly crowded, the Manzanar Relocation Centre housed more than 11,000 people between March 21, 1942, and November 21, 1945.<sup>12</sup> Manzanar was also different from other centres as it was the only camp to confine Japanese American orphans (in total 101 children) who lived in the section known as 'Children's Village.'<sup>13</sup>

On June 2, 1942, the War Relocation Authority (WRA) took over the administration of Manzanar. Their task was to oversee the confinement at Manzanar.<sup>14</sup> One of their goals was to create a cultural 'Americanization' program, where life would appear 'as normal as possible.'<sup>15</sup> As in other camps, Manzanar had some kind of self-government, where detainees would take some decisions regarding everyday life, and due to the Americanization program, those who cooperated were rewarded, and those who resisted were isolated. Furthermore, only US citizens, comprising mainly second-generation Japanese Americans (or *Nisei*), were given jobs, which widened divisions between *Nisei*, who, as a result, were given positions of greater responsibility, and the *Issei*, who were sidelined.<sup>16</sup> These differences and divisions culminated in the Manzanar Riot of December 6, 1942<sup>17</sup>, during which military police fired into a crowd of internees, killing two and injuring nine.<sup>18</sup> The Riot was the result of accumulating tensions between those internees who were perceived as more loyal to the US government than their own community, mainly the members of the Japanese American Citizens League who were rumoured to have allied themselves with the FBI and the Office of Naval Intelligence.<sup>19</sup>

In May 1942, Matsunosuke Murakami became the first of 150 men, women, and children to die in the camp. He and 14 others, mostly infants and older men without families, were buried in a

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<sup>9</sup> To know more about daily life at the Manzanar Internment Camp, see: Glen Kiyatama, "Manzanar," *Densho Encyclopedia*, June 19, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> National Park Service, "Manzanar Camp Layout," *National Park Service*, accessed September 12, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Glen Kiyatama, "Manzanar," *Densho Encyclopedia*, June 19, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> To know more about the Manzanar Riot see: <https://densho.org/catalyst/remembering-manzanar-riot/>

<sup>18</sup> Kitayama, "Manzanar"; Brian Niiya, "Manzanar riot/uprising", *Densho Encyclopedia*, June 5, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Densho, "Remembering the Manzanar Riot." *Densho.org*, accessed January 25, 2022.

cemetery outside the barbed wire fence ‘in an old peach orchard from Manzanar’s farming era.’<sup>20</sup> Some of the other 135 dead were sent to their hometown cemeteries, but most were cremated.<sup>21</sup> In August 1943, a stone obelisk, funded by 15-cent donations from each of the families who lived in the camp, was erected by the camp stone mason, Ryozo Kado.<sup>22</sup> The obelisk is located in the centre of what once was the camp’s cemetery;<sup>23</sup> the inscription has three Japanese characters *I REI TO*, which translates as ‘Soul Consoling Tower’ (see Figure 1).<sup>24</sup>

In 1943, like in the rest of the camps, the War Department, together with the WRA, created a ‘loyalty questionnaire’<sup>25</sup> as a bureaucratic way of assessing the loyalty of detainees. All adults were asked to answer a questionnaire, and those who refused or were deemed disloyal were isolated and sent to the camp at Tule Lake.<sup>26</sup> A year later, in December 1944, after the *habeas corpus* case of Mitsuye Endo – challenging the exclusion of Japanese Americans from the workplace – the United States Supreme Court held unanimously that ‘the federal government could not confine indefinitely US citizens of Japanese ancestry who were ‘concededly loyal.’<sup>27</sup> Thus, all those deemed ‘loyals’ were allowed to leave the camp on January 2, 1945. The camp eventually closed months later, on November 21, 1945. Despite many having lost their homes, businesses, and life savings, the remaining internees were only issued \$25 (\$387 today – 343€) each and a rail ticket home.<sup>28</sup>

## History of the Contestation

### *The Works of the Manzanar Committee*

From December 1969, the camp became a site of annual pilgrimage for members of the Japanese American Community, particularly *Sansei* – third-generation – students, who formed the Manzanar Committee under the leadership of former detainee Sue Kunitomi Embrey. The Committee worked to preserve the site by having it declared a California Historic Landmark in 1972 and partnered with the Parks and Recreation Department and the Japanese American Citizens League the following year to erect a plaque on the site of the camp reading:<sup>29</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Ansel Adams, “history of the Manzanar Cemetery,” *National Park Service*, May 23, 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> To know more about the camp’s cemetery, see: National Park Service, “Manzanar Relocation Center Cemetery,” *National Park Service History Electronic Library & Archive*.

<sup>24</sup> Kitayama, “Manzanar”; Andrew Glass, “U.S. rescinds internment of Japanese-Americans, Dec. 17, 1944”, *Politico*, December 16 2016; Jeffery F. Burton, Jeremy D. Haines, and Mary M. Farrell, “I REI TO: Archeological Investigations at the Manzanar Relocation Center Cemetery, Manzanar National Historic Site, California”, *Publications in Anthropology*, 79 (2001): 5-6 and 21 (Table 2).

<sup>25</sup> Cherstin M. Lyon, “Loyalty Questionnaire,” *Densho Encyclopedia*, August 24, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Glen Kiyatama, “Manzanar,” *Densho Encyclopedia*, June 19, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Greg Robinson, “Ex parte Mitsuye Endo (1944),” *Densho Encyclopedia*, July 15, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Manzanar Project, “Closing the camp/Facts about Manzanar,” *Manzanar Project*, accessed January 25, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Manzanar Committee, “Who we are”, *Manzanar Committee.org*, accessed January 25, 2022.

In the early part of World War II, 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry were interned in relocation centres by executive order NO. 9066, issued on February 19, 1942. Manzanar, the first of ten such concentration camps, was bounded by barbed wire and guard towers, confining 10,000 persons. The majority being American citizens. May the injustices and humiliation suffered here as a result of hysteria, racism and economic exploitation never emerge again.<sup>30</sup>

In 1984, the Committee succeeded in having the site designated as a National Historic Landmark but was unable to conduct preservation works on the site until after it was designated a National Historic Site by Public Law 102-248 in 1992, which allowed for the land to be transferred from the Los Angeles Department for Water and Power to the National Park Service in 1994.<sup>31</sup> Throughout this process, Japanese American attorney, and civil rights activist Rose Ochi played a key role.

In 2002 work began on the Visitors Centre housed inside the Manzanar Camp High School, and the restored mess hall was transferred in the same year. The Soul Consoling Tower, one of the few remaining original structures, was fully restored in 2014, and the two barracks buildings were added in 2015. The women's latrine was reconstructed in 2017 to 'depict the harsh realities of living at Manzanar.' The Committee's annual pilgrimages continue to draw more than 1,000 participants each year. Since 1997, the Manzanar Committee has also been conducting the annual Manzanar At Dusk residential program in order to 'engage young people and make the connection between the injustices of the camp experience and present-day issues ... and to provide a program for sharing, educating and learning from intergenerational group discussions and cultural performances.'<sup>32</sup>

After a three-year investigation, the Federal Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians published a 467-page report entitled 'Personal Justice Denied' which found that:

The promulgation of Executive Order 9066 was not justified by military necessity, and the decisions which followed from it – detention, ending detention and ending exclusion – were not driven by analysis of military conditions. The broad historical causes which shaped these decisions were race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership.<sup>33</sup>

The recommendations of the report formed the basis of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which acknowledged and apologised for the "grave injustice" of internment and awarded \$20,000 to each surviving internee.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Weekend Explorer, "The Manzanar Controversy", *Weekend Explorer*, accessed January 25, 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Manzanar Committee, "Who we are"; Manzanar Committee, "House Resolution 543 – Enabling Legislation Creating Manzanar National Historic Site", *Manzanar Committee.org*, accessed January 25, 2022.

<sup>32</sup> Manzanar Committee, "Who we are"; Manzanar Committee, accessed January 25 2022. ; "Manzanar at Dusk", *Manzanar Committee.org*, accessed January 25, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> "Personal Justice Denied: Summary", *US Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians*, December 1982.

<sup>34</sup> Rep. Thomas S. Foley, "H.R.442 — 100th Congress (1987-1988)", August 10, 1988.

## *The Challenges for the Commemoration*

The Manzanar Committee faced a serious challenge in its initial attempts to designate the site as a California Historic Landmark from 1970 onwards. The Committee's initial wording for the landmark plaque was rejected due to the inclusion of 'hysteria,' 'racism,' 'economic exploitation,' and 'concentration camp.' The landmark designation was only approved after what the Committee described as 'a year of debate, hearings, emotional appeals, a nationwide petition, and a letter-writing campaign.' The original wording was retained, with the exception of 'economic exploitation' being replaced with 'greed,' and the bronze plaque was added to the site during the 1973 annual pilgrimage. The term 'concentration camp' angered members of the Owens Valley community, one of whom struck off the letter 'c' from the phrase.<sup>35</sup>

Following the camp's designation as a National Historic Landmark in 1992, the Committee again received further local opposition from a group styling itself 'a circle of patriots' who began to issue protestations at any negative portrayal of Manzanar, citing spurious historical accounts of the treatment of internees:

People in Manzanar were not confined, they were free to go any time they wanted [...] Mr Hopkins [Manzanar Committee member] told me that he wanted to teach the Americans a lesson about Manzanar and how wrong we were in relocating Japanese Americans. Where does he come up with an attitude like that?<sup>36</sup>

Some issued threats of dismissal campaigns and even death threats if 'a Jap museum' were to be erected. At the same time, the National Park Service began to receive letters of complaint from veterans groups, decrying the portrayal of Manzanar as an 'internment camp' as 'treason.' One claimed that committee Hopkins 'sneers at patriotism and has nothing but contempt for veterans,' while another described the move as a 'wrong un-American direction that will wind up in several resignations.'<sup>37</sup> The Committee responded by holding meetings with local residents and members of the Inyo County Board of Supervisors to reach an understanding. Senior National Parks Service Historian Gordon Chapelle also responded to alternative history claims in the press:

The War Relocation Authority made a strenuous effort to limit what could be photographed because it wanted to present the camp experience as more benign than was in fact the case. It prohibited any photographs of the sentries, the sentry towers, or the military guards ... The idea that Japanese Americans were not confined behind barbed wire is nonsense.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Manzanar Committee, "Who we are", *Manzanar Committee*, accessed January 25, 2022. ; Kitayama, "Manzanar"; Martin Forstenzer, "Bitter Feelings Still Run Deep at the Camp", *LA Times*, April 4, 1996.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* ; Robert A. Jones, "Whitewashing Manzanar: Various veterans groups want to (bully) the government into denying the site of its historic meaning", *LA Times*, April 10, 1996.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* ; Martin Forstenzer, "Bitter Feelings Still Run Deep at the Camp", *LA Times*, April 4, 1996.

While no dismissals were made and none of the threats was realised, Robert A. Jones of the *LA Times* wrote in 1996 that the National Park Service 'has handled Manzanar like an unwanted guest at dinner:'

After four years, the government has no visible presence at the site. Rangers do not offer tours, nor has a visitor centre opened. The park service has assigned exactly one employee to the job of converting 500 acres of ruins into a usable national monument.<sup>39</sup>

Application of the term 'concentration camp' to Manzanar and the other 9 internment camps encountered further criticism in 1998 when the Ellis Island Immigration Museum offered to host the Japanese American National Museum's 'America's Concentration Camps' exhibit. However, the Ellis Island Museum stipulated that the title of the exhibit should be changed out of sensitivity to New York's Jewish community. The Japanese American National Museum held a number of meetings with Ellis Island officials, and Senator Daniel K. Inouye of Hawaii wrote in support of the term to Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt. Ultimately, the Ellis Island Officials agreed to host the exhibit under the original name, provided that it contained a placard explaining the differences between Japanese American and Jewish concentration camps.<sup>40</sup>

The representatives of the Japanese American community have consistently maintained that the term is accurately applied to all ten camps, and it was historically applied in this way by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Harry S. Truman, and other prominent officials.<sup>41</sup> According to Webster's dictionary, a concentration camp is defined as:

a place where large numbers of people (such as prisoners of war, political prisoners, refugees, or the members of an ethnic or religious minority) are detained or confined under armed guard<sup>42</sup>

According to *Densho*, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the history of Japanese American incarceration in World War II, the term is not intended to conflate internment with the Holocaust but rather to convey the function of the camps:

Relocation centre fails to convey the harsh conditions and forced confinement of these facilities. As prison camps outside the normal criminal justice system, designed to confine civilians for military and political purposes on the basis of race and ethnicity, these sites also fit the definition of concentration camps.<sup>43</sup>

## Decision-Making Processes

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<sup>39</sup> Robert A. Jones, "Whitewashing Manzanar: Various veterans groups want to (bully) the government into denying the site of its historic meaning", *LA Times*, April 10, 1996.

<sup>40</sup> Teresa Watanabe, "What is a concentration camp? It's an old debate that mostly started in California", *LA Times*, July 26, 2019.

<sup>41</sup>Weekend Explorer, "The Manzanar Controversy", *Weekend Explorer*, accessed January 25, 2022..

<sup>42</sup> Merriam-Webster, "Definition of *concentration camp*", *Merriam-Webster.com*, accessed January 25, 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Densho, "Terminology", *Densho.org*, accessed January 25, 2022. ; See also: Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga, "Words Can Lie or Clarify: Terminology of the World War II Incarceration of Japanese Americans", *NPS.gov*, December 14, 2009.



The Manzanar Committee, an all-volunteer nonprofit organisation, held almost all the initiative during the thirty-year process leading to the designation of Manzanar as a National Historic Site, the eventual construction of a museum, and the restoration of the soul consoling tower. In the first instance, the California Parks Service delayed the historic landmark designation by contesting the commemorative plaque's wording, while the ownership of the site by the Los Angeles Department for Water and Power prevented the preservation and restoration of the camp until it was transferred to the National Park Service (NPS) in 1994. As reported in the *LA Times*, the NPS provided limited resources and personnel to the project of developing Manzanar, and consequently, major work did not begin until 2002 with the groundbreaking of the Visitors Centre.<sup>44</sup>

In resolving the local controversy over the development, the Manzanar Committee and the National Park Service provided an effective private-public partnership by responding to public criticism and reassuring the Owens Valley community of their aims and intentions while not compromising on the intentions of the project.<sup>45</sup>

Effective resolution of the 'concentration camp' controversy was made by the Japanese American National Museum (with the support of Senator Inouye) in their negotiations with the Ellis Island Immigration Museum, which recognised the applicability of the term while being careful not to insensitively conflate the wartime experience of Japanese Americans and European Jews.<sup>46</sup>

Dynamics to consider: disputes over definitions and terminology, slowness of responses and/or lack of commitment by governmental bodies, local attitudes to memorial plans, site-ownership complications, and allaying local concerns and misunderstandings.

## Summary and Conclusions

The Manzanar Committee has worked tirelessly over a fifty-year period to develop the Manzanar Camp as a National Historic Site in order to commemorate the victims of internment and educate future generations. These plans aroused controversy among some Owens Valley residents and veterans groups who rejected their interpretation of the camp's history and its designation as a "concentration camp", culminating in a campaign of threats against Committee members and National Park Service personnel. Through effective consultation with the local community, the Manzanar Committee and the NPS responded to the controversy with only one minor incident of vandalism occurring.

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<sup>44</sup> Manzanar Committee, "Who we are," *Manzanar Committee*, accessed January 25, 2022. ; Robert A. Jones, "Whitewashing Manzanar: Various veterans groups want to (bully) the government into denying the site of its historic meaning", *LA Times*, April 10, 1996. ; Martin Forstenzer, "Bitter Feelings Still Run Deep at the Camp", *LA Times*, April 4, 1996.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Watanabe, "concentration camp"

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## About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions, whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

## About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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