Japanese Aggression

Before Hitler took all of Europe into war in 1939, there was already a war raging in Asia. In 1931, Japan invaded Northern China, a territory called Manchuria. They wanted the land because it offered an endless supply of natural resources to supply the Japanese war economy. Then on September 27, 1940, Japan signed a Pact with Germany and Italy entering into the military alliance known as the “Axis” making Japan a dangerous enemy to the Allied nations.

When Hitler defeated France in 1940, Japan attacked the French colony of Indonesia. Then after Hitler attacked the Soviet Union (Russia) the Japanese knew they no longer had to fear an invasion from Russia so they attacked Hong Kong (a British colony), Malaya and the many islands of the Pacific. Japan’s attacks on nearby territory was to gain access to more natural resources so they could continue to expand their empire through aggression.

Japan Attacks Pearl Harbour

It was a warm Sunday morning on the American naval base at Pearl Harbour, Hawaii in December 1941. Sailors were sleeping in their beds and most looked forward to a lazy day off. Suddenly, waves of Japanese bombers and fighter planes came out of nowhere. In just two hours, much of the American Pacific fleet lay at the bottom of the harbor, sunk by Japanese torpedo bombers. Japan saw that conflict with the US was inevitable and so launched a surprise attack hoping to cripple the American naval fleet. With this attack by Japan, America was brought into the war on the side of the Allies.

Japan Enters the War - Impact in Canada

Japan’s entry into the war almost caused a mass panic in Canada. Canadians saw a world dominated by enemies: Hitler in Europe and Japan sweeping through Asia on Canada’s doorstep. Once America was attacked, many Canadians felt it was only a matter of time before...
Canada would be attacked too. Some Canadians wanted revenge and lashed out at the closest target - Japanese Canadians.

**Japanese Canadians Face Discrimination**

Before World War Two, Japanese Canadians were in no way seen as equals to white Canadians, but at least there was relative peace and modest respect for them. Even still, Japanese Canadians were barred from voting and were often treated like second class citizens.

When Japan attacked Pearl Harbour and then Hong Kong, things became even worse for Japanese Canadians. Other Canadians feared that they would remained loyal to Japan and would help if Japan tried to invade Canada. They believed this even though few Japanese Canadians agreed with Japan’s aggressive behaviour in the Pacific and some had even fought for Canada during World War One. With so much fear, many companies, like the Canadian Pacific Railway, fired all Japanese workers. And the Canadian Navy seized all fishing boats of Japanese fishers in British Columbia taking away their ability to feed and provide for their families.

**Internment**

Worried that Japanese Canadians might be spies or threats to Canada, the government ordered that they be moved away from the coast of British Columbia to isolated camps deep in the interior of the province. Japanese Canadians were rounded up and shipped to these camps. In total 22,000 people were moved. Families were often split up as fathers were sent to one camp and mothers and children sent to another. In addition, their homes, property and businesses were taken away and sold off at incredibly low prices - far less than they were worth - just to get rid of them. The profit from sales was used to keep the camps running.

**Life in the Camps**

Conditions in the camps were generally not good. The buildings were of poor quality and made life extremely hard during the freezing winters deep in the B.C. mountains. Houses were very small and families felt cut off from their loved ones. The government took these actions even though no Japanese Canadian was ever charged with disloyalty to Canada. When the war ended, Japanese Canadians tried to get payment for the things that were sold off, but it wasn’t until 1988 that the government officially apologized and offered to compensate the survivors.