The Conditions of Liberty:
Ellis Island's Use as a World War II Internment Camp and Deportation Station

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Acknowledgements

I began this research while working on Ellis Island as a research intern for the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation in the summer of 2024. During this time, I made the fateful decision to examine the station's wartime usage, which I soon discovered was not only a mystery to myself, but also to most others. In the National Museum of Immigration and the Bob Hope Memorial Library, I became absorbed in genealogical and archival research into the thousands of people held on the island as internees during the Second World War and began working on the beginnings of this project. I wish to give endless thanks to the Foundation for supporting my initial research, and to all of my coworkers at the American Family Immigration History Center. In particular, thank you to Jon DaSilva, who remains an invaluable advocate, and to Matt Housch and Stephen Lean for their meaningful support and remarkable knowledge of the island's history.

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Introduction

In 1982, President Ronald Reagan triumphantly announced his plan to restore Liberty Island, home to the Statue of Liberty, and Ellis Island, both of which suffered from decades of neglect.[1] His efforts initiated an immense campaign to tear creeping vines from Ellis Island's Beaux-Arts facades, replace shattered windows, and reattach the main building's towering spires by helicopter. The National Parks Service project director noted with satisfaction that Ellis Island was finally "'losing its look of missing teeth.'"[2]

The President's initiative changed the gloomy fate of the dilapidated monument, but a barrage of propositions of what to do with the facility's prime real estate had followed its closure in 1954: should Ellis Island be sold; transformed into Pleasure Island, a luxury "Miami Beach of the North"; turned into a corporate conference center; or commercialized as a restaurant or shopping mall?[3] In the end, Ellis Island was saved as a national monument and restored owing in large part to great public support for the campaign to open the National Museum of Immigration on its soil.[4] This was a matter of personal importance for many Americans, roughly one hundred million of whom are descended from the twelve million immigrants who arrived at Ellis Island from 1892 to 1924, the high point of its usage as the United States's main immigration station.[5]

But Ellis Island's grand buildings served another purpose in the twentieth century, one which reared its head to contribute to restoration challenges. Historic graffiti was found scrawled

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[1] *President Reagan's Remarks on the Statue of Liberty Centennial Commission on May 18, 1982, n.d., Video, 10:00, accessed November 22, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X_F9xntPwAY.*
[2] Joan Hanauer, "Ellis Island Update," *United Press International*, May 3, 1987, UPI Archives, https://www.upi.com/Archives/1987/05/03/Ellis-Island-update/8603547012800/.
[3] William E. Geist, "The Iacocca Touch," *The New York Times*, May 18, 1986, TimesMachine, https://www.nytimes.com/1986/05/18/magazine/the-iacocca-touch.html; Brianna Nofil, "Ellis Island's Forgotten Final Act as a Cold War Detention Center," *Atlas Obscura*, February 2, 2016, https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/ellis-islands-forgotten-final-act-as-a-cold-war-detention-center.
[4] "Mission + History: Keepers of the Flame," Statue of Liberty & Ellis Island Foundation, accessed February 26, 2026, https://www.statueofliberty.org/foundation/mission-history/.
[5] "Ellis Island," Library of Congress, accessed November 22, 2025, https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/immigration/italian/ellis-island/.

on the walls of Ellis Island's Baggage and Dormitory building, impacting proposals to transform or refurbish the structure.[6] These marks date to Ellis Island's use as an internment camp during the Second World War.[7]

Fig. 1. "Radicals awaiting deportation, 1920."[8]

Ellis Island's use as an internment camp was the culmination of several decades of evolution in the island's usage. The immigration complex was designed from the outset with room for overnight detention on the basis of additional inspection and infectious disease quarantine,[9] but as immigration waned in the 1910s during World War I and the first Red Scare, the government first began experimenting with Ellis Island's holding capacity as a detention facility for political radicals (see fig. 1), detained ship crews, and "suspicious 'aliens' and

[6] Personal communications with SOLEIF staff.
[7] "Photographs: Historic American Buildings Survey: Ellis Island, Baggage and Dormitory Building," National Park Service, n.d., 50, Library of Congress, accessed November 22, 2025, https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/master/pnp/habshaer/ny/ny1600/ny1602/data/ny1602data.pdf.
[8] *File:Radicals Awaiting Deportation.Jpg, January 3, 1920, Photograph, Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Radicals_awaiting_deportation.jpg.*
[9] For information on the problematic aspects of this process, see Anna Pegler-Gordon, *Closing the Golden Door: Asian Migration and the Hidden History of Exclusion at Ellis Island* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century* (Princeton University Press, 2009).

spies."[10] In the mid-1920s, the passage of the restrictive National Origins Act and the establishment of U.S. consulates abroad ended Ellis Island's primary years as an immigrant processing station. However, the island was far from abandoned. Though immigration ground "to a near halt" during the Great Depression, federal funding flowed to Ellis Island, and the station handled thousands of detained immigrants and deportees.[11]

When the United States joined World War II, Ellis Island's cavernous halls were rapidly transformed into a rare East Coast internment camp and pre-deportation holding zone for people classified as "enemy aliens," a legal term encompassing almost all German, Italian, and Japanese nationals residing in the U.S.[12] Ellis Island's wartime conversion dwarfed the island's prewar detention initiatives in terms of scale, public discourse, and legal implications. This thesis is an in-depth examination of a single central question which has thus far almost entirely evaded historical interpretation: What was the nature and ultimate impact of Ellis Island's use as an internment camp and deportation station during World War II?

History of American Internment

Ellis Island's wartime history must be considered alongside and within the broader history of American internment. In February 1942, two months after Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, prompting the government to prescribe protected Military Areas encompassing California, Washington, Oregon, and Arizona.[13] In these zones, Order 9066 enabled military commanders to establish curfews, place restrictions on

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[10] "Photographs: Historic American," 22.
[11] "Photographs: Historic American," 30.
[12] There were certain distinctions made in the federal legal applications of the terms 'citizen' and 'enemy alien' during WWII. For example, German Jews were not considered German enemy aliens because they had been deprived of their citizenship. See Timothy J. Holian, *The German Americans and World War II: An Ethnic Experience* (Peter Lang Publishing, 1996).
[13] Roger Daniels, *Concentration Camps, North America: Japanese in the United States and Canada during World War II*, 4th ed. (Krieger Publishing, 1993), 28.

technology and human movement, and determine who should be excluded as a "military necessity."[14] While the EO made no specific mention of race or ethnicity, in practice, it primarily impacted people of Japanese ancestry. German, Japanese, and Italian noncitizens were all legally designated as "enemy aliens" after the U.S. officially entered the war, but people of Japanese ancestry were the only group excluded in their entirety from the West Coast Military Areas.[15] The internment of German and Italian U.S. noncitizen residents operated on a more selective basis, but was still based on the rationale of military necessity EO 9066 established. Formal Military Areas were never created on the East Coast, and internment occurred there on a more limited basis.

In March 1942, the exclusion order was followed by Executive Order 9102, which established the War Relocation Authority (WRA), a civilian U.S. government agency tasked with operating the internment camps that imprisoned the newly "excluded" West Coast Japanese population.[16] These are the internment camps that many Americans are familiar with today. Just ten total WRA camps housed roughly 120,000 civilians of Japanese descent (both U.S. citizens and aliens) who had been expelled from their homes in the Military Areas. WRA camps were scattered throughout remote areas of Wyoming, Utah, Arkansas, Idaho, California, and Colorado, and were sometimes placed on tribal lands.[17] Distinctions were not made between law-abiding Japanese and those who presented a legitimate national security threat (other than location of

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[14] "Executive Order 9066 Dated February 19, 1942, In Which President Franklin D. Roosevelt Authorizes the Secretary of War to Prescribe Military Areas," National Archives Catalog, accessed November 19, 2025, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/5730250.

[15] William Minoru Hohri et al., *Resistance: Challenging America's Wartime Internment of Japanese-Americans* (Morris Publishing, 2001), 2.

[16] Civilian, meaning not operated by the United States Armed Forces, although the Army provided armed guards to the WRA, and Coastguardsmen guarded Ellis Island.

[17] Minoru Hohri et al., *Resistance: Challenging America's Wartime Internment*, 2; Rachel Bunning, "ASU Faculty Research Intersection of Japanese, Indigenous American Displacement in US History," Arizona State University, July 19, 2021, https://news.asu.edu/20210719-asu-faculty-research-intersection-japanese-indigenous-american-displacement-us-history.

their specific WRA camp– Tule Lake in California became used as a camp for supposed "'malcontents'" and "'disloyals'").[18]

In terms of nearly all the characteristics of American internment described above, Ellis Island presents itself as an extremely unusual case, at least in the public recollection of American wartime internment. This perception is both accurate and limiting. The detention center at Ellis Island was operated by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) under the jurisdiction of the Department of Justice, rather than by the WRA, making it part of a nominally separate internment camp system. However, it functioned as part of the government's same broad effort to eliminate wartime security threats. Also unlike the majority of camps, Ellis Island is located just off of Manhattan's shores in an area which was densely populated, strikingly visible, and perhaps a foolhardy choice given the recent embarrassment of Pearl Harbor. The camp's coastal location conveniently facilitated thousands of transfers and repatriations, and it was smaller and more versatile than the ten huge WRA camps. Ellis Island did not exclusively intern any one group; instead, its vast rooms were packed with Germans, Italians, Japanese, Latin Americans, and others. The detention station was intended to hold select cases, which in practice had many different meanings.

Historiography

While WRA camps have been the subject of extensive historical research, Ellis Island and other INS internment camps frequently evade detailed examination. This trend persists even though mentions of Ellis Island appear in accounts of Japanese internment, typically in reference to repatriation. Neglect of this topic is partially due to the fact that Ellis Island already occupies a solidified place within the American consciousness, where it remains central to narratives of U.S.

[18] Daniels, *Concentration Camps, North America*, 110–14.

immigration. 'Traditional' accounts of Ellis Island, including those by Pamela Reeves, Vincent Cannato, and Robert Fleegler, address a popular audience interested in ancestral experiences.[19] These works mention certain specific stressful and negative aspects of Ellis Island (namely the medical examination process and crowded steamships), but overwhelmingly portray Ellis Island as a positive episode that commonly united future Americans under a grand shared roof. This may have been the experience of some arriving immigrants, but Ellis Island in total functioned for longer as a detention center (circa 1917 to 1954) than it did a welcome station (circa 1892 to 1924). Both sides of its history, and the ways they meshed together, must be examined to provide accurate pictures of Ellis Island and American immigration.[20]

In *Ellis Island: Gateway to the American Dream*, Reeves employs one of the most commonly-repeated lines in the historiography of Ellis Island: "After 1924, immigration slowed to a trickle and Ellis Island fell into disuse. It was closed in 1954."[21] The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation's Overview and History website page briefly references the island's wartime use, but also does so inadequately and inaccurately, simply stating that "Japanese, German and Italian nationals suspected of being enemy aliens were brought to Ellis Island to be interned."[22] (Internees were not suspected of being enemy aliens, they were legally classified as such as natives of a nation with which the United States was at war.) When historians of Ellis Island's immigration years do mention the World War II era, it consistently lacks detail and scrutiny.[23] No efforts are made to determine total numbers of internees, their experiences, or the lingering

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[19] Pamela Reeves, *Ellis Island: Gateway to the American Dream*, ed. Sharyn Rosart (Barnes & Noble, 1998); Vincent J. Cannato, *American Passage: The History of Ellis Island* (Harper, 2009); Robert L. Fleegler, *Ellis Island Nation: Immigration Policy and American Identity in the Twentieth Century* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

[20] There is also a growing body of literature focusing on less "mainstream" aspects of Ellis Island's early history. See Canaday, *Straight State*.

[21] Reeves, *Ellis Island: Gateway to the American Dream*, 9.

[22] "Overview + History: Ellis Island," The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, accessed November 22, 2025, https://www.statueofliberty.org/ellis-island/overview-history/.

[23] See Reeves, *Ellis Island: Gateway to the American Dream*; Fleegler, *Ellis Island Nation*.

personal and legal effects of internment. By expanding on the history of Ellis Island and treating it with scholarly precision, not mythologization, I aim to introduce a long-overdue reexamination of one of the United States's enduring symbols and demonstrate how inaccurate analyses minimize and miscategorize the island's functions.

Exceptions to the general silence surrounding Ellis Island's history as a detention center are limited but powerful. Anna Pegler-Gordon's *Closing the Golden Door* includes a chapter on Ellis Island WWII internment that argues it was a direct derivative of Asian exclusion policies.[24] Her research has been foundational to my thesis, but it specifically focuses on the Japanese experience. I expand on Pegler-Gordon's work by assessing all groups of internees together, thus adding depth to her arguments regarding preferential racial treatment. Pegler-Gordon has also conducted the most thorough examination of the island's physical detention conditions to date, to which I contribute new source material like original photographs.

Mary Barron Stofik discusses German and Italian Ellis Island internment, arguing it created a legacy of emotional damage and unresolved tension between the German American community and the U.S. government.[25] While my findings regarding raids and arrests are similar to Barron-Stofik's, my research differs from hers in several ways, such as through my efforts to categorize internees' cases, assess the island's security, and provide additional information about psychological harm. I will shift analysis from Barron Stofik's post-9/11 lens towards a more current understanding of the nature and uses of immigrant detention. My exploration of the island's prison-like capabilities is inspired by historian Brianna Nofil, who has also examined Ellis Island detention, though Nofil mainly studies the Cold War and migrant incarceration.[26]

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[24] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 167.
[25] Mary Barron Stofik, "Ellis Island During World War II: The Detainment and Internment of German and Italian Aliens" (California State University Dominguez Hills, 2007).
[26] Brianna Nofil, *The Migrant's Jail: An American History of Mass Incarceration* (Princeton University Press, 2024); Nofil, "Ellis Island's Forgotten Final Act."

Together, these historians' research has informed my main argument that the diversity, character, and duration of Ellis Island internment make it critical to our understanding of the United States at war and to its enduringly complex relationship with noncitizen residents.

Race and ethnicity dictated key aspects of internment from date of release, total numbers interned, unconstitutionality, public perception, and segregation within camps. However, this thesis is a discussion of Ellis Island as an internment camp, not an exhaustive comparison of INS and WRA camps, which can be gained through the expansive existing literature on Japanese internment. Historians and activists like Roger Daniels, William Hohri, Deborah Gesensway, and Mindy Roseman have previously established that the U.S. government's incarceration of all residents of Japanese ancestry was one of the nation's most severe violations of civil rights to date.[27] This thesis's analysis contributes to the understanding of the wider Japanese internment system, which Ellis Island was related to and a part of.

Through extensive examination of internment cards, oral histories, FBI reports, and other primary source materials, I concur with the aforementioned historians' argument that Japanese internment was a violation of civil rights and a military unnecessity. However, I expand on their work by providing clarity about the experiences of repatriates, transferred internees, and East Coast Japanese residents. I also inspect the common claim echoed by Daniels that Germans and Italians faced almost zero effects from internment and detention and benefitted from greater efforts towards selection of individuals.[28] While this has statistical validity and my own research concurs with Daniels's latter claim, the government made painstaking efforts to intern significant numbers of Germans, Italians, and Latin Americans during WWII. Understanding the full nature

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[27] Minoru Hohri et al., *Resistance: Challenging America's Wartime Internment*; Daniels, *Concentration Camps, North America*; Deborah Gesensway and Mindy Roseman, *Beyond Words: Images from America's Concentration Camps* (Cornell University Press, 1987).
[28] Daniels, *Concentration Camps, North America*, 34.

and implications of internment initiatives requires examining all internees' personal and legal experiences.

Secondary literature regarding German and Italian internment is more limited than that on Japanese internment, in part because it occurred on a much smaller scale. However, source material does exist. The German American Internee Coalition has published National Archive materials on its website, and historian Timothy Holian provides some information about Ellis Island, arguing the camp was viewed as more oppressive than other INS locations.[29] Mary Elizabeth Basile Chopas examines Italian internment through an attorney's perspective, describing elements like the flawed hearing process, while Mike Wallace reveals how New York City's fragile social and ethnic wartime composition withstood the tides of war.[30]

A Note on Terminology

Following Mae Ngai, I recognize the issues inherent in the term "alien," but use it as the American legal term to refer to a person who is not a U.S. citizen and to mark the language which appears in primary source documents.[31] Similarly, I use "enemy alien" (alternatively "alien enemy") in its context as the legal term referring to a person who is a citizen, subject, or native of a foreign nation with which the United States is at war.[32] The vast majority of those who were held on Ellis Island during WWII were enemy alien detainees or internees. A detainee refers to someone awaiting a formal board hearing or the outcome of a legal ruling in a

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[29] Holian, *German Americans and World War II*, 157.
[30] Mary Elizabeth Basile Chopas, *Searching For Subversives: The Story of Italian Internment in Wartime America* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Mike Wallace, *Gotham at War: A History of New York City from 1933 to 1945* (Oxford University Press, 2025).
[31] Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton University Press, 2004), xix.
[32] "What Is an Enemy Alien? A Comprehensive Legal Overview," US Legal, accessed December 25, 2025, https://legal-resources.uslegalforms.com/e/enemy-alien.

temporary holding facility.[33] Internment "refers to legally established practices of imprisoning enemy aliens," typically after a person has received a hearing.[34] As Ngai writes, "'immigrant' is also a legal status that refers to an alien who comes for permanent settlement– a 'legal permanent resident.'"[35] Many historians refer to Japanese American WRA camps as concentration camps,[36] but this thesis will not use this term to describe Ellis Island because of its inseparable association with Nazi Germany and because it denotes extralegal detention. The term *Issei* refers to immigrants from Japan, and *Nisei* denotes second-generation U.S. citizen Japanese Americans.[37] My aim in this thesis is to use federal officials' language for clarity and legal accuracy, but to seek humanization whenever possible.

Structure and Methodology

This thesis is an in-depth examination of Ellis Island during World War II over the course of three chapters, titled Arrival, Internment, and Departure. In Arrival, I describe and categorize who was held on the island and why, assessing internment cards, FBI reports, and newspaper articles; in Internment, I include the first full-scale examination of the island's physical conditions as a camp through photographs, floorplans, Red Cross inspection reports, and instructions to guards; and in Departure, I analyze the long-term practical and psychological effects of deportation and internment through internees' own words and life experiences. This thesis relies on source material from the National Archives, the Ellis Island Oral History Project, the FBI Vault, and the Bob Hope Memorial Library.

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[33] Holian, *German Americans and World War II*, 7.
[34] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 171.
[35] Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, xix.
[36] Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*; Daniels, *Concentration Camps, North America*.
[37] Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 173.

The reclamation of the island's damaged structures in the 1980s saved Ellis Island's dignity, but it did not brush away the dust from the histories of thousands of detainees held on the island. The story of this location, steeped in meaning from a century of personal narratives, is not yet complete. By focusing on the island's history as an internment camp, my intent is not to paint an alternative history of Ellis Island or deny its positive aspects. Rather, I seek to provide a more truthful and accurate account of the island's WWII-era history, which is far more closely related to current political and legal debates than Americans realize.

Chapter 1: Arrival

Fig. 2. View of the Statue of Liberty from the ferry to Ellis Island. Photo by author.

In September 1939, the same month Nazi Germany invaded Poland, the Federal Bureau of Investigation reestablished its General Intelligence Division and created a custodial detention index, "a card file of likely candidates for [wartime] internment."[38] The agency had been

[38] Beverly Gage, *G-Man: J. Edgar Hoover and the Making of the American Century* (Viking, 2022), 230.

amassing information on groups deemed potentially subversive (typically communist and fascist) in the United States since at least 1936, but it dramatically increased its activity as the war expanded.[39] One month later, Congress passed the Alien Registration (Smith) Act, which required the fingerprinting and yearly registration of all U.S. noncitizen residents above the age of fourteen. The act also outlawed violent revolutionary language, required the submission of a sworn statement of political affiliations, and "permitted deportation of non-citizens who 'advocate, abet, advise, or teach the duty, necessity, desirability or propriety of overthrowing or destroying any government in the United States by force or violence,' or were members of any group that did." Over one million resident aliens in New York alone were compelled to register themselves under the Smith Act.[40] President Roosevelt did little to quell growing concerns regarding the internal safety of the nation, and in a May 1940 fireside chat, he spoke of a "'Trojan Horse' and 'the Fifth Column that betrays a nation unprepared for treachery': enemy saboteurs, spies, and sympathizers lying in wait."[41]

In hindsight, the passage of the Smith Act and the government's inventories of potential subversives appear as steps towards internment. However, they do not provide a full picture of the intentions, logistics, or outcomes of the United States's internal mobilization. This chapter addresses these questions by examining who was held at Ellis Island during World War II and why. The core of the chapter is structured in a three-tiered classification system of internees aimed at describing evidence, or lack thereof, of subversive actions and illuminating racial disparities. By providing greater insight into the nation's pre- and post-Pearl Harbor security programs, this chapter seeks to meaningfully expand our understanding of how the United States exercised drastic emergency protocols while at war.

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[39] Gage, *G-Man*, 228–31.
[40] Wallace, *Gotham at War*, 36, 203.
[41] Roosevelt in Gage, *G-Man*, 238.

Dragnets and Raids

Fig. 3. FBI agent searching the home of a Japanese American family, December 1941.[42]

On December 8, 1941, the day after Pearl Harbor, the United States formally declared war on Japan, followed three days later by declarations towards Germany and Italy. Although thousands of miles separated New York residents from the Hawaii attack, politicians warned that Axis bombers might visit them next. New York responded with urgency– Japanese residents were warned not to try to exit the city, and anti-aircraft guns and searchlights were installed in Bryant Park, just behind the New York Public Library.[43] The FBI's lists and detection indexes were rapidly put into action, and the agency began to investigate thousands of individuals. As shown in fig. 3, initial FBI raids on newly-classified "enemy aliens" focused on the Japanese.[44] *The New York Times* reported that "most, if not all, of the estimated 2,000 to 2,500 Japanese

[42] Ellen Levine, *A Fence Away From Freedom: Japanese Americans and World War II* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1995), 10–11, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/fenceawayfromfre00levi_0/page/258/mode/1up?q=ellis+island.
[43] Wallace, *Gotham at War*, 353.
[44] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 174.

nationals living in New York… were to be taken into custody."[45] Arrests commenced just hours after the attack and stretched into the early hours of the morning, generating terror and disorientation among detainees. Columbia graduate student Ichiro Shirato, a U.S. citizen detained on Ellis Island, recalls the FBI agents being courteous and professional, but was so nervous awaiting his middle-of-the-night interrogation that his nose began to bleed, smearing on the courthouse's white stone floor.[46]

Officers paid particular attention to the Japanese Consulate; the Nippon Club, an elite Upper West Side Japanese social center; and nightclubs and hotel kitchens, where they knew unregistered aliens might be employed.[47] Agents also "pounced on German merchant seamen and Italian waiters who had worked at the [1939] World's Fair," and detectives escorted away Japanese restaurant workers after their patrons finished dinner. In the coming days, thousands of enemy aliens were rounded up and questioned, especially in New York neighborhoods with high concentrations of Japanese, Italian, and German residents.[48] Many were released, but others were detained for further inquiry or interned for the war's duration– an indefinite period. In the New York area, most enemy alien detainees were ferried to Ellis Island (see fig. 4).

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[45] *"Entire City Put on War Footing," New York Times, December 8, 1941, 3, TimesMachine.*
[46] "Shirato, Ichiro," Oral History Library, The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc, accessed January 24, 2026, https://heritage.statueofliberty.org/oral-history-library.
[47] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 165.
[48] Wallace, *Gotham at War*, 329.

Fig. 4. "Two Japanese men aboard the ferry to Ellis Island after being taken into custody by federal agents on December 7 in a roundup in New York City," 1941.[49]

During WWII, there were approximately 600,000 Italian, 300,000 German, and 90,000 Japanese registered enemy aliens in the United States, many of whom had U.S. citizen children.[50] New York State alone had a population of 2,319 Japanese, 128,845 German, and 246,134 Italian enemy aliens. After Pearl Harbor, resident aliens were required to re-register with federal authorities, even if they had already done so when the Smith Act passed in 1940. Aliens who were deemed non-suspicious were given a Certificate of Identification which they were expected to carry at all times, and their movements were restricted, meaning "they could not cross state lines after 8:00 p.m., take long trips without permission, or possess cameras, flashlights, firearms, or radio communication equipment." The consequence of being found with forbidden items or failing to register was punishable by internment for the duration of the war.[51] By the war's end, approximately 31,000 German, Italian, and Japanese individuals had been arrested

[49] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 167.
[50] "Photographs: Historic American," 34.
[51] Wallace, *Gotham at War*, 368.

under the FBI's Enemy Alien Control Program and interned in INS camps like Ellis Island. Throughout the country, there were at least eleven main INS camps, plus numerous temporary locations.[52]

Nofil asserts that "at the peak years of wartime internment, Ellis Island held between 1,600 and 1,800 people," a tripling or quadrupling of the island's average number of prewar detainees.[53] The National Park Service records that nearly 4,000 enemy aliens had "cycled through the island" by June 1943.[54] No complete master list has emerged to provide a single estimate of the island's number of wartime detainees and internees. However, separate date-based tallies provide insights into general numbers and the evolving ethnic composition of the camp, revealing an overall trend towards more Germans and fewer Japanese and Italians at Ellis Island as the war progressed.[55] This reflects the war's evolution and the government's shifting priorities. In total, I surmise that at least several thousand but probably no more than ten thousand individuals were detained or interned at Ellis Island during World War II, but future examinations may provide more exact estimates.

Arrivals

Reflecting its prewar functions, Ellis Island continued to receive a varied group of arriving individuals even while operating as an internment camp. Thousands of men from German and Italian ship crews were detained on the island after war broke out, and documents

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[52] "World War II Enemy Alien Control Program Overview," National Archives, accessed January 24, 2026, https://www.archives.gov/research/immigration/enemy-aliens/ww2.
[53] Nofil, "Ellis Island's Forgotten Final Act"; "Photographs: Historic American," 35.
[54] "Photographs: Historic American," 35.
[55] See "Ellis Island 29 Feb 1944 Name List," German American Internee Coalition, June 21, 2017, https://gaic.info/ellis-island-29-feb-1944-name-list/; "Civilian Alien Enemies in Custody," Freedom of Information Times, accessed January 24, 2026, https://foitimes.com/internment/CampLists/EllisIsland021944-121945.pdf.

also record the presence of Polish-Brazilians, Romanians, and others.[56] Recently-arrived repatriates, including wounded soldiers and American civilians from abroad, were sometimes detained at Ellis while awaiting clearance to enter the country.[57]

Reasons for internment were diverse and can often be impossible to uncover. This is partially because the category of "subversive persons," as defined by the FBI, was expansive. Beverly Gage argues it could include "virtually anyone who expressed sympathy toward a foreign power or hostility to the war effort, including striking workers and critics of White House policy."[58] The vast majority of internees had not committed any crime, but were rather interned on the premise of their being potential subversives.[59] In the absence of overt acts, the government could not establish clear definitions of loyalty or disloyalty.

From a research perspective, determining an individual's reason for internment is challenging because lists rarely provide insight into the government's rationale, focusing instead on personal or logistical information like internees' physical attributes, citizenship status, names, and addresses.[60] Additionally, multiple federal agencies collaborated in the removal, documentation, and detention of enemy aliens. However, by examining internment cards, naturalization papers, oral histories, and other source materials, I have created a general classification system for Ellis Island internees with the intent of clarifying who and what the camp was used for. I have determined that some internees were likely innocent, others presented

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[56] Possibly in relation to the United States's Latin American internment program. John Christgau, *Enemies: World War II Alien Internment* (Iowa State University Press, 1985; repr., University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 15–18; Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 179.

[57] *"70 Repatriates Detained: 10 Others Released by Federal Authorities at Ellis Island," New York Times (New York), March 19, 1944; "457 on Gripsholm Clear: 188 of Civilians Are Still Being Examined at Ellis Island," New York Times (New York), February 25, 1945.*

[58] Gage, *G-Man*, 242.

[59] Gage, *G-Man*, 242.

[60] For example, I know that German internee Kurt Otto Wilking was detained at age nineteen, worked as a grocery store clerk in Brooklyn, was five foot seven, and had blue eyes, brown hair, and a ruddy complexion. His address, signature, and dates of internment (he was still confined close to his twenty-second birthday) are accessible, but I have been unable to determine why he was interned. "Kurt Otto Wilking," FamilySearch, accessed January 24, 2026, https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:WZXL-LRZM?lang=en.

a legitimate reason for examination or internment, and a minority may be considered a serious national security threat. I have sought to include internees' voices and stories whenever possible, though future research may help clarify aspects of these individuals' specific cases or designate their situations more accurately.

People who were most likely innocent

Among the first category of internees who presented minimal, if any, national security threats were U.S. citizens– often wives and children– who chose to be confined alongside their interned family members. An example of this scenario is Arthur Jacobs, a U.S. citizen born in Brooklyn who was interned at age twelve with his family and "forc[ibly] repatriat[ed]" to Germany in 1945.[61] The majority of Ellis Island internees were male, but female family members commonly appear on the camp's civilian internee lists.[62]

In rare cases, U.S. citizens were detained or interned on Ellis Island by accident. Although INS memos placed an emphasis on clearing detainees who were American citizens, Naoye Suzuki was interned on the island for seven months before he realized through his own research that as an American citizen, he could not legally be held there. He was then released, but only temporarily.[63] Suzuki was born in San Francisco, but he had been educated in Japan, registered with the Japanese consulate, and worked for Mitsubishi, attributes which attracted scrutiny after Pearl Harbor. Likewise, U.S. citizen Nori Sato worked for the Japanese government and was a high-ranking Mitsubishi employee prior to internment.[64] Sato and Suzuki's employment (in this case, at a company which played a major role in manufacturing

[61] John E. Schmitz and Bradley W. Hart, "A Crisis of Identity: Good Aliens, Bad Americans, or Bargaining Chips? U.S. Civilian Exchanges with the Third Reich during World War II," *The International History Review* 44, no. 6 (2022): 1269; Holian, *German Americans and World War II*, 229.
[62] German American Internee Coalition, "Ellis Island 29 Feb 1944 Name List."
[63] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 174.
[64] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 174–75.

Japan's military arms[65]) was a common rationale for internment. However, the treatment of these U.S. citizens remains extremely problematic.

In other cases, Japanese American U.S. citizens were held on Ellis Island in the absence of any logical war-sensitive concerns. Some of these individuals were transfers from WRA camps who had been sent to Ellis after being denied a place aboard a repatriation ship.

Fig. 5, Left. Sumi Utsushigawa, center, with family.[66] Fig. 6, Right. Yae Aihara.[67]

This happened to both fifteen year-old Sumi Utsushigawa (fig. 5) and seventeen-year old Yae Aihara (née Kanogawa, fig. 6). Sumi and Yae were born in the U.S. and interned in the indiscriminate roundups of residents of Japanese descent on the West Coast. Their families were transferred to the Crystal City INS internment camp in Texas after spending several unpleasant nights on Ellis Island.[68] Yae and Sumi's internment serves as an example of, arguably, the most unjust category of Ellis Island internment, because it was not based on any specific concern

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[65] See Victor Avecilla, "Mitsubishi and World War II," *Manila Standard*, July 8, 2017, https://manilastandard.net/?p=241320 for information on Mitsubishi's wartime activities.
[66] Alissa Hiraga, "The Price of Freedom," Pacific Citizen, JACL, December 16, 2016, https://www.pacificcitizen.org/the-price-of-freedom/.
[67] Japanese American National Museum, *Yae Aihara - Crystal City Family Portrait*, 2011, YouTube video, 1:18, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6bAt9tQ0kg.
[68] Jan Jarboe Russell, *The Train to Crystal City: FDR's Secret Prisoner Exchange Program and America's Only Family Internment Camp During World War II* (Scribner, 2015), 175, 26, 126.

about the merits or actions of the individual. They were also minors, and holding them in a camp alongside theoretically dangerous individuals deserves, but has not received, additional scrutiny.

Some of Ellis Island's alien detainees and internees also do not appear to have presented a substantial security threat. Dr. Saburo (alternate spelling Sabro) Emy was a physician and NYU graduate who had lived in the U.S. for thirty-five years and fought for the U.S. in World War I. Despite this, he was detained at Ellis Island after Pearl Harbor.[69] Dr. Kinichi Iwamoto was a husband, father of young children, and medical doctor also detained even though he had served as a U.S. Air Force major.[70] Eberhard Fuhr (fig. 7), a German teenager, was held on Ellis Island until 1947 and attested he never knew why he was interned. He presumed it was to send a message to German alien residents, or based on the tip off of some Cincinnati neighbor.[71]

Fig. 7. The Fuhr family. Eberhard, back, second from right.[72]

A final category of innocent internees were the residents of over fifteen Latin American countries which collaborated with the U.S. during WWII to deport 'enemy aliens' under the premise of reducing Axis influence in Latin America.[73] In what many historians describe as a

[69] Wallace, *Gotham at War*, 370.
[70] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 165–83.
[71] "Fuhr Story," German American Internee Coalition, October 14, 2025, https://gaic.info/fuhr-story/.
[72] German American Internee Coalition, "Fuhr Story."
[73] Nofil, *Migrant's Jail*, 90–92; Wallace, *Gotham at War*, 305.

forced arrival, during WWII over 6,600 individuals of German, Japanese, and Italian descent were deported from Latin America to the U.S. for INS internment.[74] A 1944 repatriation list shows that numerous individuals from El Salvador, Haiti, and Guatemala were detained on Ellis Island.[75]

People with some legitimate reason to be interned

While many Ellis Island internees appear to have been innocent or lacked unfavorable affiliations, others presented at least some suspicious attributes. These were primarily people with ties to organizations like the German American Bund, the main American pro-Nazi organization, which had as many as 25,000 members in the late 1930s.[76] The Bund was violent and openly anti-Semitic, but after 1938, even Nazi leaders in Germany concluded the organization was more stress than it was worth, and its leader Fritz Kuhn "'stupid, noisy and absurd.'"[77] Germans with substantive reasons for internment include Henry Kohlhaas, a professional boxer possessing Nazi paraphernalia; a man with Nazi ties who wanted to be reunited with his wife; two men who had worked in war industries in Germany; and Paul Borchardt, the principal figure in a group of alleged Nazi spies.[78]

Japanese internees with some logical rationale for investigation included professionals employed in war-sensitive industries. *Kaishain*, or temporary Japanese employees, worked in the

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[74] Nofil, *Migrant's Jail*, 91–92; National Archives, "World War II Enemy Alien Control Program Overview."
[75] "Feb 1944 Exchange Voyage Manifest," German American Internee Coalition, accessed November 11, 2025, https://gaic.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Gripsholm.U.S.-Lisbon.Feb_.1944.pdf.
[76] "The German American Bund: A Pro-Nazi Organization in the United States," Holocaust Encyclopedia, accessed January 25, 2026, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/german-american-bund; Wallace, *Gotham at War*, 19.
[77] Wallace, *Gotham at War*, 19.
[78] "FBI Seizes Pugilist: Sparring Partner of Schmeling Is Sent to Ellis Island," *New York Times* (New York), March 28, 1942; "U.S. Grants Nazi All of His Wishes," *New York Times* (New York), July 16, 1942; "2 Germans Lose Plea to Quit Ellis Island: Clancy Rules They Forfeited Citizenship by Work in Reich," *New York Times* (New York), May 16, 1943; "Borchardt's Bail $25,000: Prosecutor Wants Alleged Spy Leader Taken From Ellis Island," *New York Times* (New York), January 1, 1942.

U.S. for approximate five-year periods and made up about one-third of the Japanese New York community, which was overall small, relatively elite, and included many recently-arrived immigrants.[79] Some Japanese companies had established their New York branches back in the 1890s, but their tradition of a rotating professional class marked by its impermanence and connections to Imperial Japan became regarded as highly suspect after Pearl Harbor.[80] So did the fact that most Japanese resident professionals were single males, a common espionage demographic. Detaining all of New York's Japanese professionals after Pearl Harbor was extreme, but appears to have been motivated at least in part by legitimate wartime concerns. Other enemy aliens working in war-sensitive industries (such as Karl Kolb, an executive for the German camera company Zeiss Ikon) were sometimes interned at Ellis Island, but as a whole, German and Italian professionals faced less scrutiny than Japanese professionals.[81]

Finally, a number of internees were survived by records that paint ambiguous pictures of their beliefs. An FBI report declares that internee Bundo Enzo "If drafted would fight for US but does not know if he could kill Japanese. Does not know whom he wishes to win war, and does not know whether he would commit an act of sabotage or furnish info to Japan if requested by Japanese officials."[82] Complex loyalties, organization affiliations, and professional connections do not indicate criminality or an inclination towards subversive activity, but they do provide insight into what the FBI and the Department of Justice considered detention- or internment-worthy qualities.

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[79] Other members of the Japanese New York community included students, merchants, diplomats, lawyers, doctors, and service workers. The community's relatively elite status was primarily due to the United States's policies of Asian exclusion, which restricted labor immigration. Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 173.
[80] Wallace, *Gotham at War*, 103.
[81] Jarboe Russell, *The Train*, 95.
[82] "Japanese Internee Card for Bunzo Endo," National Archives Catalog, accessed January 24, 2026, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/1090154.

People who presented a national security threat

While the majority of Ellis Island internees appear to have been innocent or to have had relatively marginal questionable attributes, a small minority of internees seem to have presented a legitimate national security threat, thus justifying their internment under U.S. wartime policy. Internee Hans Karl Diebel is listed among twenty-seven others "indicated as participants in a nationwide conspiracy to counsel and cause disloyalty in the armed forces" and labeled as "some of the best known anti-democratic propagandists in the United States."[83] Fritz Kuhn, the leader of the German American Bund, had his U.S. citizenship revoked and was held at Ellis Island before being deported to Germany in September 1945.[84] Kurt Lüdecke, a Nazi supporter who bragged about his personal relationship to Hitler, underwent a similar process.[85]

[83] "Memorandum Regarding the Espionage Act," National Archives Catalog, accessed January 25, 2026, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/239791765.
[84] *"Fritz Kuhn, Former Bund Chief, Ordered Back to Germany," The Evening Independent, September 7, 1945, 15, Google News.*
[85] Arthur L. Smith, Jr., "Kurt Lüdecke: The Man Who Knew Hitler," *German Studies Review* 26, no. 3 (2003): 603.

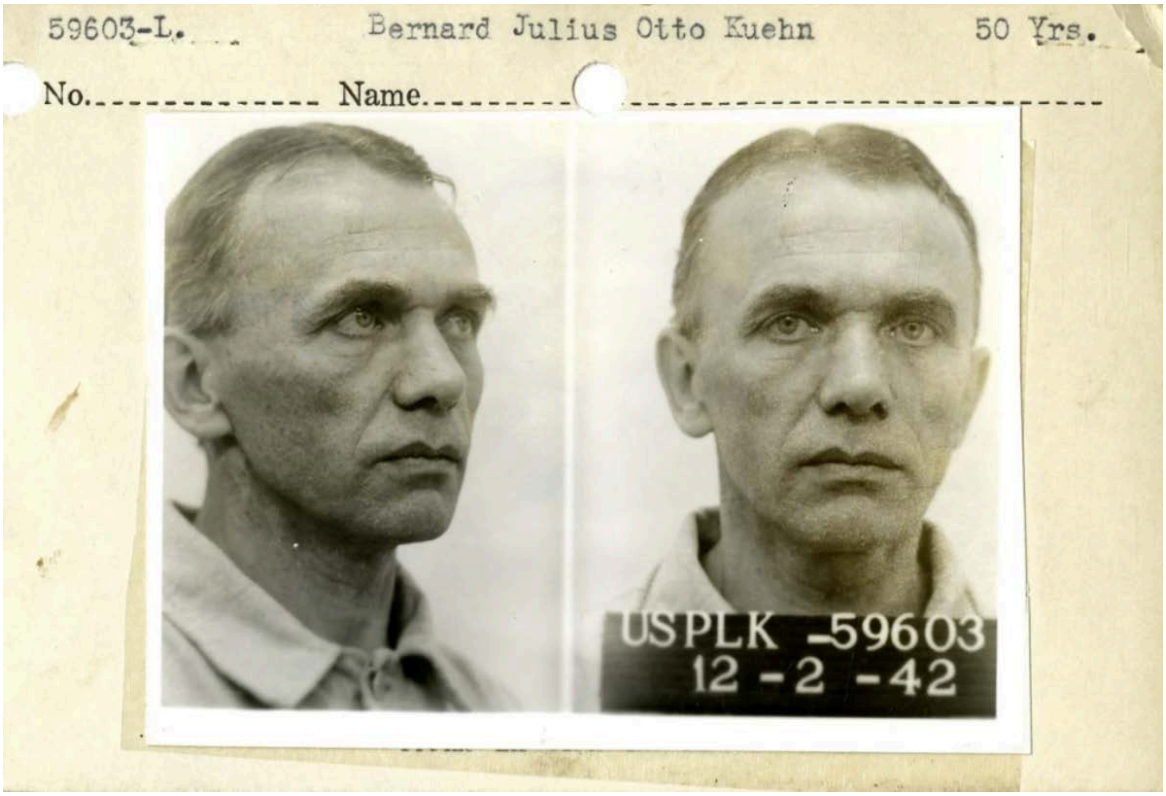

Fig. 8. Bernard Kuehn's mugshot, 1942.[86]

German national and prior Nazi party member Bernard Julius Otto Kuehn (fig. 8) presents another severe case. Kuehn had reportedly operated a cryptic signalling system from his Honolulu home to advise the Japanese Consulate on the strength and size of the U.S. fleet at Pearl Harbor. In exchange, he was set to receive large sums of money from sources in Tokyo.[87] Kuehn was discovered and sentenced to execution by firing squad, but was sent to the Leavenworth penitentiary instead. In September 1946, he was transported to Ellis Island, where he was held while awaiting transportation to Germany.[88] On December 3, 1948, Kuehn, who had

[86] "Pearl Harbor Spy," History, FBI, accessed January 25, 2026, https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/pearl-harbor-spy.
[87] "Bernard Julius Otto Kuehn Part 04 (Final)," FBI Records: The Vault, accessed January 24, 2026, https://vault.fbi.gov/bernard-julius-otto-kuehn/Bernard%20Julius%20Otto%20Kuehn%20Part%2004%20%28Final%29/view.
[88] FBI Records: The Vault, "Bernard Julius Otto Kuehn Part 04 (Final)."

helped enable Pearl Harbor, "voluntarily departed from the United States to Buenos Aires, Argentina."[89]

Kuehn's case demonstrates that those who had actually engaged in espionage occasionally managed to receive sentences that were similar to or less harsh than the average internee, many of whom were innocent or U.S. citizens. This assessment is not applicable in all cases (some German spies did receive the death penalty), but it is corroborated by the fact that diplomatic personnel were detained at luxury resorts across the U.S. (see figs. 9 and 10) instead of in internment camps,[90] even though their access to confidential information arguably made them more likely to be involved in espionage. Additionally, Shunosuke Yoshimoto, the brother-in-law of a general in the Japanese army, was held at Ellis Island with his family, but was given special treatment like being allowed to visit a dentist and physician because the government believed it would "have beneficial effect on treatment of our Nationals, interned in Japan, when Subject returns and describes our methods of handling internees."[91] This strategy had humanitarian motivations, but it also demonstrates that at times, the more high-profile an internee, the more courteous the treatment they received.

[89] FBI Records: The Vault, "Bernard Julius Otto Kuehn Part 04 (Final)," 10.
[90] Anna Pegler-Gordon, "'New York Has a Concentration Camp of Its Own': Japanese Confinement on Ellis Island during World War II," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 20, no. 3 (2017): 382.
[91] "Japanese Internee Card for Shunosuke Yoshimoto," National Archives Catalog, 4, accessed January 25, 2026, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/1096512?objectPage=4.

Figs. 9 and 10. Diplomat internees were held in resorts like the Greenbrier, WV and the Homestead, VA.[92]

Like other camps, Ellis Island's records indicate that Japanese aliens were proportionally far more likely to be detained than Germans or Italians, even when there was less evidence they were involved in activities that endangered the United States. Some Germans and Italians also appear to have been held at Ellis Island under insubstantial or inconclusive evidence, but this was most common in Japanese and Latin American cases.[93] There were several reasons why confinement at Ellis Island was applied harshly towards the city's Japanese residents. First, Japan had directly attacked the U.S., inspiring deep resentment and anger. Additionally, Japanese Americans lacked a strong political voice, while it was believed that interning large numbers of German and Italian aliens would lower morale in the U.S. Armed Forces.[94] As Wallace writes, "there were far too many Euro-aliens, and they were far too white: [interning them all] would have been a logistical and political nightmare."[95]

Anti-Asian racism had also long been an overt reality. The U.S. was still actively pursuing official policies of Asian immigration exclusion, and Japanese immigrants were forbidden from becoming naturalized as U.S. citizens.[96] This meant that there was no option for a Japanese immigrant, even one who had been a legal permanent resident in the U.S. for decades, not to be classified as an enemy alien when the United States entered the war. Besides, U.S.-born Japanese Americans were also subject to wartime internment. Efforts were made to determine which Japanese residents posed substantial threats, but all people of Japanese descent were

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[92] "State Department Related Sites: Hotels and Resorts," German American Internee Coalition, accessed February 27, 2026, https://gaic.info/internment-camps/state-department-related-sites-hotels-and-resorts/; "The Greenbrier Resort," Greenbrier Valley, accessed February 27, 2026, https://greenbrierwv.com/places/the-greenbrier-resort; "The Homestead," The Virginia Department of Historic Resources, accessed February 27, 2026, https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/historic-registers/008-0025/.
[93] Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 175.
[94] Daniels, *Concentration Camps, North America*, 75.
[95] Wallace, *Gotham at War*, 372.
[96] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 16, 175.

deemed subversive regardless of what information was found. Comparatively, Italians were subject to the least scrutiny, in part because the United States doubted Italy's military strength, and more Nazi saboteurs were discovered than Italians.[97]

Hearings

A key difference between Ellis Island INS and WRA internment is that the majority of the former group of internees received hearings from Alien Enemy Hearing Boards, which afforded them slightly more due process.[98] Pegler-Gordon asserts that "like all enemy aliens, Ellis Island detainees were not entitled to counsel," but unlike West Coast Japanese internees, they could call character witnesses.[99] The board would recommend that detainees be released, paroled, or interned, and detainees were also asked if they wished to repatriate to their home countries. Basile Chopas asserts that "as of May 1942, the disposition in approximately 42 percent of Italian alien enemy cases was internment."[100]

Hearing boards evaluated detainees' ties to the U.S. and connections to their country of origin. Favorable examples of U.S. acculturation included marriage or relation to American citizens, U.S. military service, and Christian beliefs, while membership in cultural organizations, poor English language skills, and complex loyalties were marked as red flags. Pegler-Gordon acknowledges that hearing boards tried to be fair and nuanced, but concurs with Chopas that they frequently made arbitrary or inconsistent decisions.[101] Though having American relatives often reduced the chance of internment, Iwajiro Noda's hearing board concluded "he had 'no ties in America not easily removable'" despite his being married to a white American woman and

[97] Basile Chopas, *Searching For Subversives*, 1.
[98] With the exception of most Latin American internees and the WRA internees who had been transferred to Ellis Island. Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 179–80.
[99] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 181.
[100] Basile Chopas, *Searching For Subversives*, 81.
[101] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 181, 169.

having a U.S.-born daughter. Noda was interned and then repatriated.[102] In contrast, internee Eberhard Fuhr described his Ellis Island hearing as "fair."[103] A repeat criticism of the hearing process is that internees were often "not formally advised of what crime they may have committed, and were likewise kept in the dark about their status as prisoners, where they were being taken to, and for how long."[104] These complaints stem from the fact that the enemy alien hearings were granted as a "courtesy," not a "right," which meant the proceedings lacked the due process of a criminal hearing and instead more closely resembled "the informality of the preliminary hearings in deportation proceedings."[105]

Public knowledge

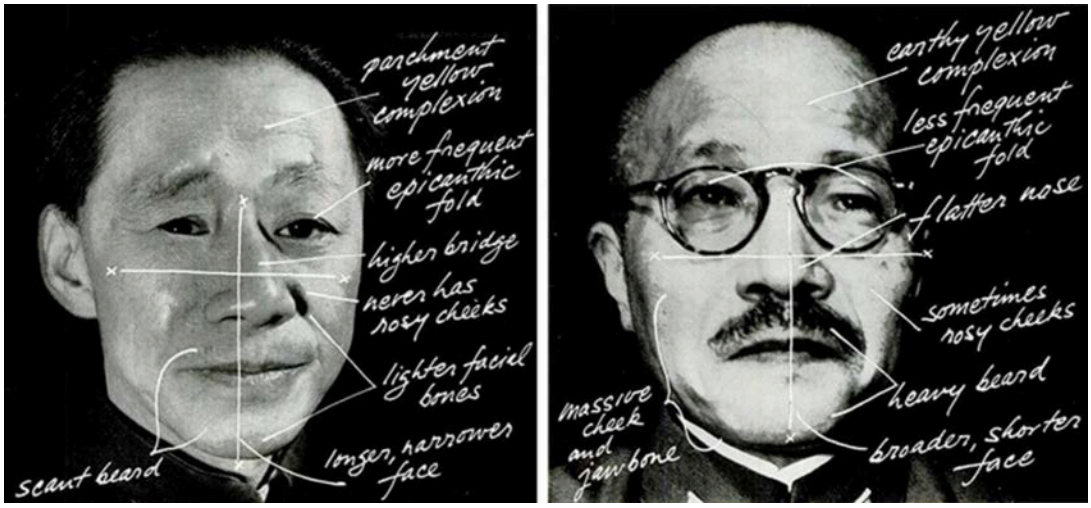

Fig. 11. A racist illustration published by *Life* magazine on December 22, 1941, titled "How to Tell Japs From the Chinese."[106]

Pegler-Gordon asserts that "the role of Ellis Island as a confinement site was widely known during World War II," which is most evident through repeated newspaper references to

[102] Memorandum for Chief of Review Section, Alien Enemy Control Unit, re: Iwajiro Noda in Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 181.
[103] Jarboe Russell, *The Train*, 308.
[104] Holian, *German Americans and World War II*, 139.
[105] Basile Chopas, *Searching For Subversives*, 76, 83.
[106] Wallace, *Gotham at War*, 448.

the camp.[107] In 1942, *The New York Times* reported to its readers that "for the time being… New York has a concentration camp of its own" and described enemy aliens pacing "their bleak and treeless exercise ground," visible from Manhattan with binoculars.[108] For the most part, Americans found the arrest of enemy aliens reassuring and justified. New Yorkers actively relayed information regarding suspicious activity to the police (though this did not yield anything useful), and though some Americans referred to the police and the FBI's raids on alien residents as "Gestapo tactics," the discovery of real German spies made it harder to criticize the operation.[109] Plus, INS internment was quickly eclipsed in terms of public attention by the WRA camps, which proved far more controversial.[110] Support for wartime internment was fueled by popular media, propaganda, museum exhibitions, and magazines which encouraged racial and national divisions (see fig. 11). During the war, then, New Yorkers were at least roughly aware of Ellis Island's repurposement, but were in no mood to end it.

There were certainly fascist individuals and organizations in the U.S. and concern about them was legitimate, especially in the late 1930s. New York dealt with violent rhetoric and physical attacks from the anti-Semitic Christian Front, though many of the assailants were Americans or Irish Catholics, not soon-to-be enemy aliens. Many Italians supported the Lictor Federation and the Duce Fascist Alliance of New York, but neither of these succeeded in becoming a counterpart to the German American Bund. Several real instances of espionage were also unveiled. In 1938, a German spy network led by Dr. Ignatz Theodor Griebl (a naturalized U.S. citizen) was exposed as having been operating out of New York and smuggling military information to Germany. There was also the discovery of the Sebold spy ring, which began to

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[107] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 170.
[108] Clair Price, "Harbor Camp for Enemy Aliens," *New York Times*, January 25, 1942, 164, TimesMachine.
[109] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 178; Wallace, *Gotham at War*, 329.
[110] Gage, *G-Man*, 255.

come undone in 1939, and of George Sylvester Viereck being on the Third Reich's payroll as a propagandist. The most publicized incident involved Nazi saboteurs from Germany arriving by submarine near Amagansett, Long Island in 1942 with instructions to blow up strategic infrastructure. They were tracked down by the FBI, and six of the eight promptly received the death penalty.[111] All of the men had previously lived in the United States and two were U.S. citizens, but none were current alien residents. Overall, the war generated countless threats, some legitimate, others less so. Enemy aliens could covertly work for their home nation, but it appears very few did. When there were cases of real enemy saboteurs, they typically turned out to be German, not Japanese.[112]

Conclusion

A close examination of Ellis Island's use during WWII is illuminating in several regards. It demonstrates that tense wartime conditions frequently endangered careful deliberation, but occasionally unveiled reliable evidence of subversive activity or affiliations. Ellis Island's composition illustrates the ways in which INS detention was more diverse than WRA internment. It featured far greater racial and ethnic variation, and internees, repatriates, recent ship arrivals, and others cohabitated on the island. Internment also exposed the ways in which the rights of noncitizens can be "ill-defined," especially in emergency situations, and reveals how immigrant detention became increasingly linked to the rhetoric of national security in the mid-twentieth century.[113] It illustrates that the FBI's arrest system, though purportedly based on carefully compiled information, could be "nebulous" and "highly subjective."[114] These complex

[111] Wallace, *Gotham at War*, 118, 86–87, 39–40, 21, 367.
[112] Gage, *G-Man*, 265, 262.
[113] Nofil, *Migrant's Jail*, 4; Brianna Nofil, "Detention Power: Jails, Camps, and the Origins of Immigrant Incarceration, 1900-2002" (Doctoral Thesis, Columbia University, 2020), 23, https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/d8-shd7-6m38.
[114] Gage, *G-Man*, 255.

aspects of internment draw attention to the U.S.'s most fundamental struggles with its self image and internal character, which became especially pronounced during WWII. Zealous roundups occurred despite FDR's declarations that the U.S. must remain free of the Old World's "'dividing forces'" which "'set group against group, faith against faith, race against race… [in an] undiluted poison.'"[115]

Many of those interned at Ellis Island had arrived there once prior as immigrants. Some internees were innocent civilians; others posed a demonstrable risk to fellow U.S. residents. Then and now, it is difficult to demonstrate internees' clear-cut virtue or culpability. It is, however, far more feasible to provide a clear assessment of their living conditions.

[115] Wallace, *Gotham at War*, 203.

Chapter 2: Internment

Fig. 12. Aerial view of Ellis Island, 1926, Baggage and Dormitory building in right foreground.[116]

It is notoriously difficult to gain insights into the inner workings of prisons and detention centers.[117] To a certain extent, this is true in Ellis Island's case, but the existence of sources from the island's archive, oral histories, and Red Cross reports make this task possible. Ellis Island is unique in that its main detention building still physically stands and remains mostly untouched apart from deterioration. Most other internment facilities were temporary, dismantled, or demolished following the war.[118] Despite the unique perspective of wartime and immigration detention Ellis Island can offer, no historians other than Pegler-Gordon and Barron Stofik have attempted to document and analyze the physical and logistical conditions of internment at Ellis Island in detail, and neither of these authors employed the use of images. As a research intern working on Ellis Island in 2024, I had the opportunity to be shown the typically closed-off interior of the detention building by National Park Service staff. This chapter uses photographs and the source material described above to provide as comprehensive as possible an overview of

[116] "Photographs: Historic American," 68.
[117] See Nofil, *Migrant's Jail*.
[118] See Lynne Horiuchi, "History of the War Relocation Authority (WRA) Sites," National Japanese American Historical Society Digital Archives, accessed February 6, 2025, https://njahs.org/confinementsites/history/.

the island's detention conditions. I argue that despite continuous efforts to ameliorate living conditions, deterioration and logistical challenges meant that Ellis Island's detention spaces were unsatisfactory to the majority of internees. I also posit that in contrast to historian Roger Daniels' assessment that WRA camps resembled the Native American reservation system because of their isolated locations and focus on American assimilation, the format of Ellis Island was more akin to a traditional prison or migrant jail, as it operated from one main building and was not envisioned as a 'planned community' or 'Americanizing project.'[119] The island was not read as a site for democracy, but instead focused on the practical detention capabilities of housing and confinement.

Ellis Island is separated by several hundreds of meters of water from the Statue of Liberty and features approximately thirty separate buildings.[120] Internment and detention operated from the Baggage and Dormitory building (B&D, seen in the foreground of fig. 12), a massive red brick Beaux Arts Neoclassical structure designed alongside the island's other buildings to "project the strength of U.S. state power."[121] Aesthetically, B&D matches other structures on Ellis Island, its stature overshadowed only by the impressive Main Building. Fig. 13 shows B&D situated amongst the other buildings on Ellis Island, illustrating its prominent position and scale.

[119] Daniels, *Concentration Camps, North America*, 105; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 177.
[120] "Ellis Island," UNESCO World Heritage Convention, accessed November 23, 2025, https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6233/.
[121] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 9.

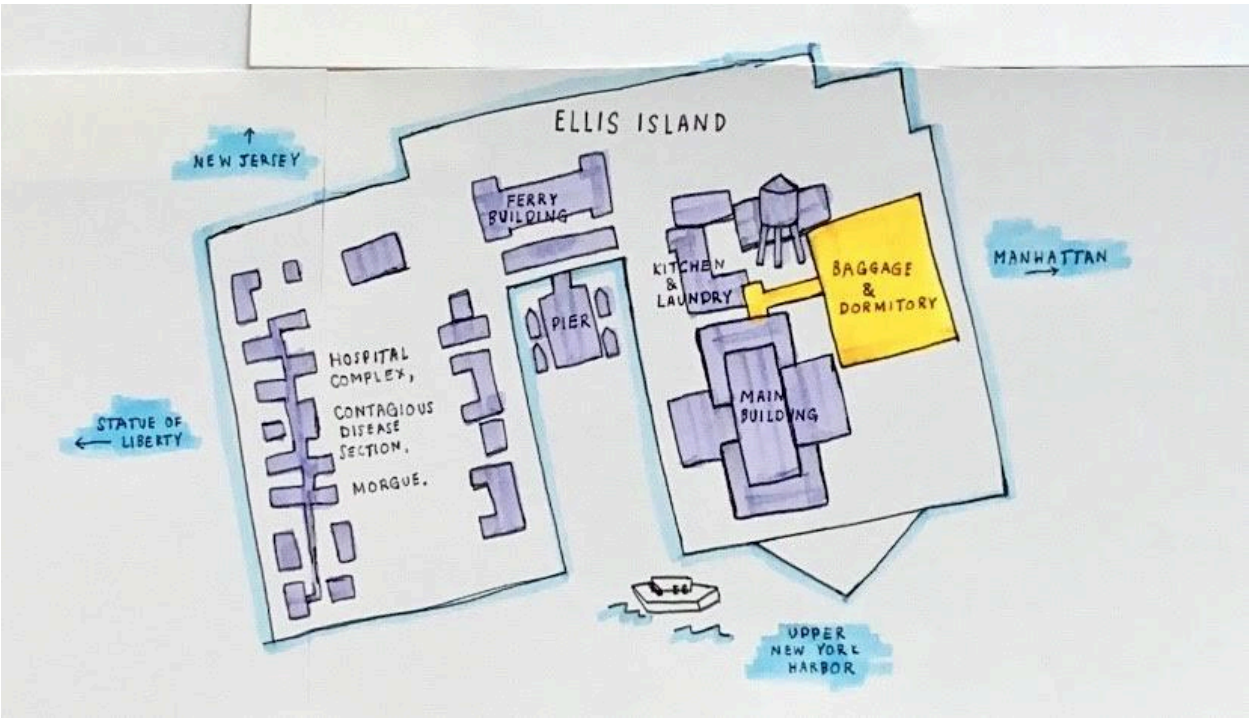


Fig. 13. Map of Ellis Island, Baggage and Dormitory building in yellow. Illustration by author, not to scale.

Originally, the Baggage and Dormitory Building was designed as a logistical center for arriving immigrants. It contained a vast luggage handling room, public lobby, office areas, and a lunch counter. Immigrants who were "excluded [or] deferred" were housed in rooms on its second and third floors.[122] Throughout the twentieth century, the building's physical organization and layout changed frequently, revealing reconfigurations of what began as part of one of the nation's first border control systems.

[122] "Photographs: Historic American," 26.

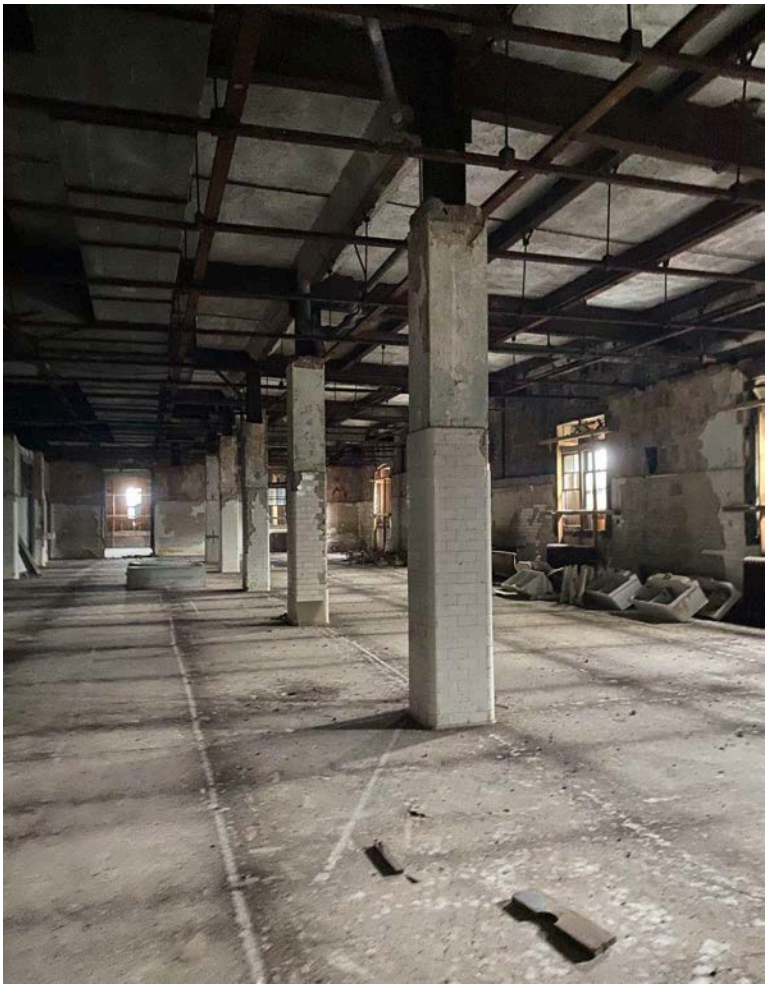
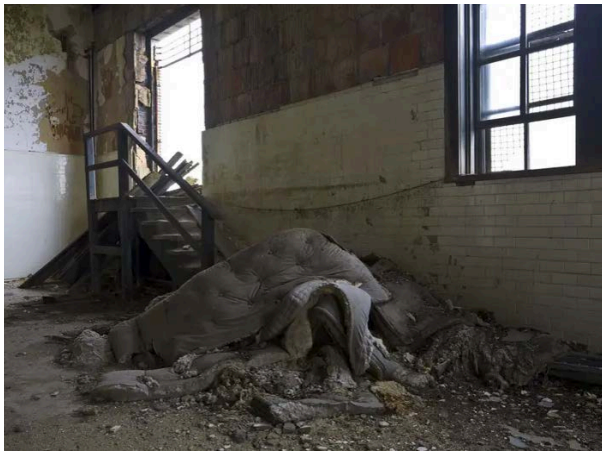


Fig. 14. A Baggage and Dormitory building detention room, with structural columns and stripped bathroom sinks. Photo by author.

B&D's detention areas were organized in vast open dormitory rooms such as the one in fig. 14. Its sprawling rooms are gymnasium sized, with blocky structural columns interspersed throughout open floor space. During WWII, they were crammed with rows of metal cots. The building also contains smaller side rooms, possibly where members of specific ship crews were housed together. While less isolating than individual confinement, this setup provided no privacy for internees, hundreds of whom occupied the same rooms. Crystal City is considered the only INS "family" camp, but Ellis Island also held whole families and had specific floor sections for this purpose. B&D's interior was stark and unadorned, with floor drains and bare walls now

peeling to reveal layers of paint (see figs. 15 and 16). Yae Aihara remembers it as "'a dark, miserable place.'"[123]



Figs. 15 and 16. Internees assert that Ellis Island's B&D building had peeling paint even in the wartime years. Now, discarded furniture and deteriorating materials scatter its floors.[124]

[123] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 190.
[124] Spector Dina, "Tour The Parts Of Ellis Island Tourists Never See [PHOTOS]," *Business Insider*, May 23, 2013, https://www.businessinsider.com/ellis-island-baggage-and-dormitory-building-photos-2013-5.

Graffiti

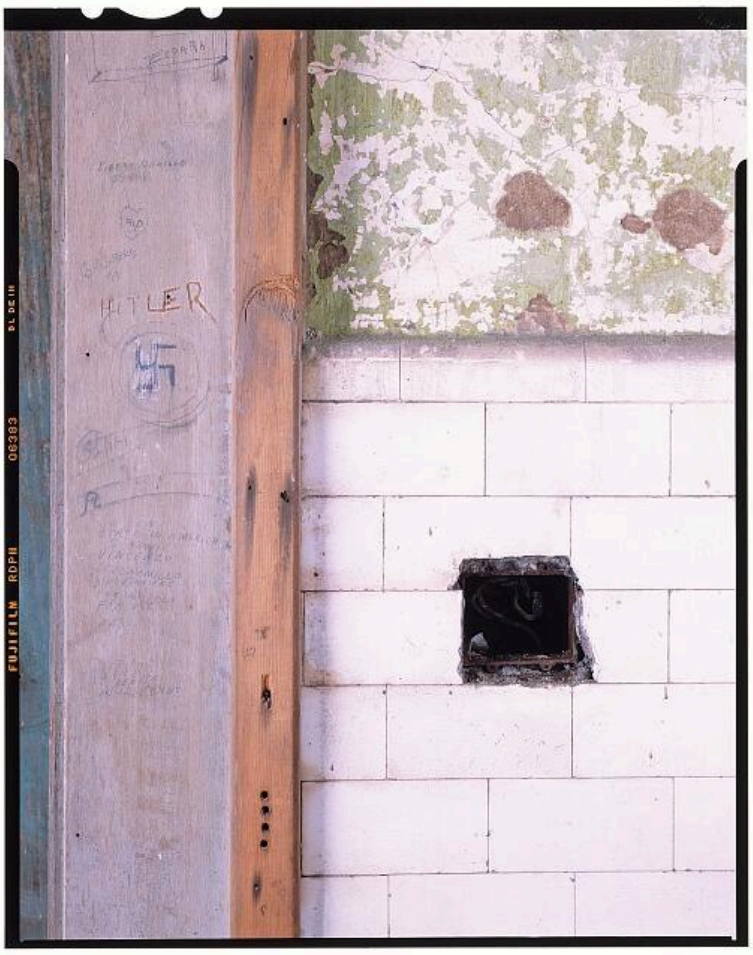


Fig. 17. "Detail of World War II-era graffiti on door frame of a Family Dormitory/Detention Room, second floor - Ellis Island, Baggage & Dormitory Building."[125]

B&D's second floor contains graffiti left by detainees and internees. Some of it dates to before the war or was created by detained Cubans in the 1950s, but other elements are a product of WWII. Fig. 17 shows that someone prominently etched a swastika on a wooden doorframe. Below it, in a different hand, is a paragraph: "Io sono stato in America 5 anni, Vincenzo Scognamillo diportazione per Napoli fra due mesi [sic]" ("I have been in America for five years. Vincenzo Scognamillo to be deported to Naples in two months."[126]) Underneath it, in the same

[125] "47. Detail of World War II-Era Graffiti on Door Frame of a Family Dormitory/Detention Room, Second Floor - Ellis Island, Baggage & Dormitory Building, New York Harbor, New York County, NY," Library of Congress, accessed February 6, 2026, https://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/hhh.ny1602.color.582358c/.
[126] Translated by Mary Sassi.

handwriting, “Vivo Benito Mussolino [sic]” (see fig. 18). Elsewhere in the building, there is a KKK drawing and a frustrated scrawl of “FUCK USA.”

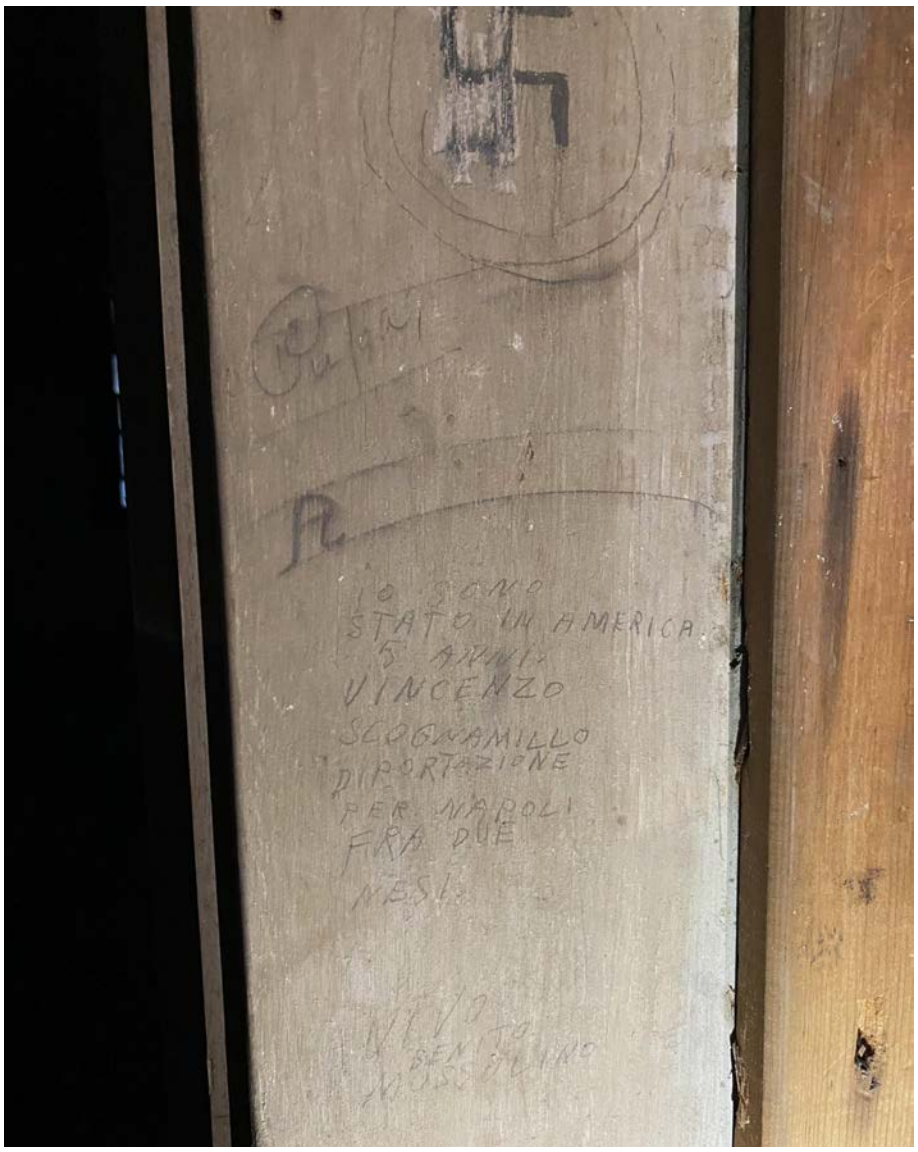


Fig. 18. Detail of same B&D doorframe, Vincenzo Scognamillo’s paragraph. Photo from Jonathan Da Silva, June 9, 2024.

Much of the graffiti is less overtly political, consisting of small hearts, faces, numbers, boats, and flags. Poetry and graffiti were common outputs of the prewar immigration detention process, and were often used to express lamentations.[127] The B&D graffiti can be read as a

[127] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 60.

continuation of this detention tradition, revealing the frustrations, friendships, and problematic allegiances of some internees.

Daily routine

During the war, Ellis Island internees maintained a daily schedule similar to those followed by inmates at federal prisons.[128] The internees' daily routine had been set by January 1942: they rose to a clanging bell (some remember it being at 5:30 A.M., others recall 6:20 A.M.; either way, internee Naoye Suzuki commented that he "[didn't] know why… [it was so early as] there was nothing to do."[129]) Breakfast was served at approximately 7:30 A.M., lunch at noon, and dinner at 5:15 P.M. Lights were turned off at 10 P.M.[130] Besides mealtimes, there was little to do. Time dragged on slowly, and internees occupied their time quietly talking, playing games, and reading on their bunks. They took care of their wrinkled laundry by spreading damp clothes on the tile walls and catching them before they fell to the ground.[131] Outside, the Statue of Liberty's torchlight was dimmed in observance of city blackout protocols.[132]

During the war, segregation remained a defining characteristic of the island. Separating Germans, Italians, and Japanese could have had war-related rationales, but the island's pre-existing segregation system indicates racist motivations. Pegler-Gordon describes that Ellis Island's dormitory facilities were racially segregated as early as the 1930s, and in 1944, she writes, the island's "'Chinese section' appears to have also included Japanese and South

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[128] "Progress in Prison: A Survey of the Activities and Aims of the Correctional Institutions Administered by the United States Bureau of Prisons," National Library of Medicine Digital Collections, United States Bureau of Prisons, 1942, 20, https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/nlm:nlmuid-101634521-bk.
[129] Han, "'Enemy' Camp,' 22 in Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 185.
[130] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 185–86.
[131] "Suzuki, Naoye," Oral History Library, The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc, accessed January 24, 2026, https://heritage.statueofliberty.org/oral-history-library.
[132] Wallace, *Gotham at War*, 382.

Asians."[133] Internees were further divided between men and women plus children, and between immigrants, sailors, and detainees.

Coast Guard

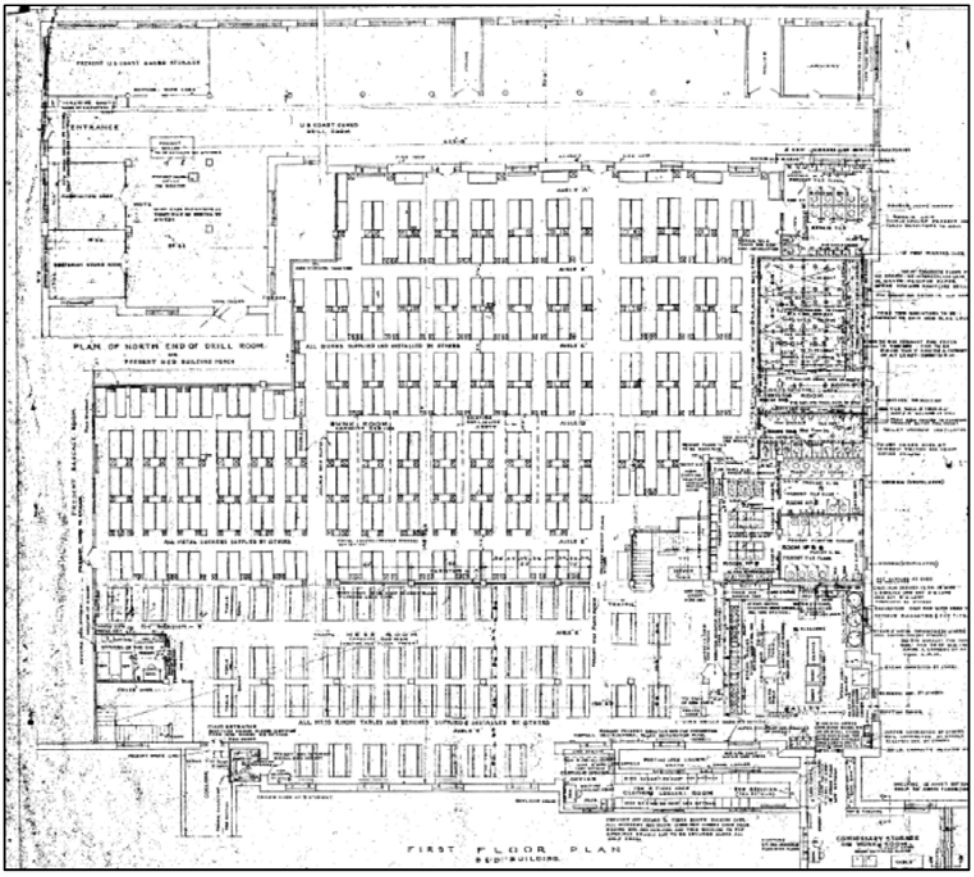

Fig. 19. Coast Guard quarters, first floor of B&D, November 1939. Rectangles represent bunks.[134]

The final form of separation was between civilian and military. Some 60,000 Coast Guard enlistees and 3,000 officers trained and patrolled on Ellis Island from 1939 to 1946. While purportedly dangerous enemy aliens slept just one and two floors above, B&D had beds and lockers for 538 Coast Guardsmen on its first floor (see fig. 19.)[135] Like the internees, most of the Coast Guard personnel were men, but women like Educational Officer Eleanor Schuyler (see fig.

[133] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 13, 98.
[134] "Photographs: Historic American," 67.
[135] "Photographs: Historic American," 34.

20) also worked on the island. Recruits learned to identify enemy aircraft, practiced with unloaded rifles, and patrolled the island's seawall. Joe Hannan, who enlisted at age eighteen, also remembers standing guard over huge rooms of internees. Hannan states that "enemy alien didn't mean anything to me… and I don't think anyone ever explained it," and he found the situation very mysterious: "they were Americans! Most of them." There were even teenage girls his same age, speaking English.[136] A 1942 document of instructions to guards reveals the Coast Guard was told to be on call in case it was necessary to suppress an internee riot, which does not appear to have happened.[137] This aspect of Ellis Island's wartime years has been overwhelmingly neglected despite being a defining part of daily life and security on the island.

Fig. 20. Ellis Island Coast Guard Educational Officer Eleanor Schuyler.[138]

[136] "Hannan, Joseph," Oral History Library, The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc, accessed February 7, 2026, https://heritage.statueofliberty.org/oral-history-library.
[137] "Instructions for Guards, Matrons, and Laborers," October 15, 1942, Folder 44, Box 25, Series II. INS Records, B. Immigration Records, 6. Detention, Deportation, & Parole Branch- Ellis Island Field Collection Archives., Bob Hope Memorial Library.
[138] Photo of Educational Officer Eleanor Schuyler in "The Coast Guard On Ellis Island," 1947, Bob Hope Memorial Library.

Security initiatives

Administrators worked to devise additional security initiatives such as hiring designated guards to monitor internees. Pegler-Gordon asserts that INS officials demonstrated consistent anxieties regarding the numbers of guards on the island, even though there were 111 employed guards in 1944 and numbers increased throughout the war. She also notes the island's officials "explicitly compared their work to that of U.S. prisons," particularly in terms of staff-to-prisoner ratio.[139] Instructions to guards reveal both rational security efforts and a degree of paranoia: they were told to "Remember that your country is at war…!", but were also advised to "be dignified and courteous with detainees" and pay attention to depressed behavior so they could ask for help.[140] Nick Collaer, chief of the Detention and Deportation Service, "acknowledged that most INS prisoners… were law-abiding people… caught up in larger political events," but stressed guards needed to ensure internees "had not engaged in disloyal activities." Escape prevention remained a primary concern, and some internees recall guards conducting five separate counts of internees a day.[141]

In 1954, as Ellis Island's conditions continued to deteriorate, immigration officials discussed their "dream" new surveillance facility, a station which would be "modeled on a panopticon." They wanted it to include a central staircase enclosed with a protective grille and circular viewing platforms which would allow "'one Detention Officer to observe all Warrant Day rooms, Night Rooms, Baggage room in basement, and roof area, without physically entering these areas, and, even without being under observation by those areas.'"[142] Though this new facility was never created as a direct Ellis Island replacement, these musings indicate how

[139] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 187.
[140] "Instructions for Guards, Matrons, and Laborers."
[141] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 187, 95.
[142] Shaugnessy to Downer, letter, 1954 and File 56126-619, Subject and Policy Files, INS, NARA–D.C. in Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 207.

wartime internment empowered the INS to consider new forms of confinement and to explore optimal treatment of detainees. As Michael Foucault famously argued, panopticon facilities "project the subtle segmentations of discipline onto the confused space of internment," but such a "cruel, ingenious cage… must not be understood as a dream building." Evidently, though, the challenges of running the Ellis Island detention center made administrators crave a so-called "house of certainty," even at the expense of humane treatment of detainees.[143]

Food

Figs. 21 and 22. Baggage and Dormitory kitchen area with existing appliances. Photos by author.

B&D contains a first floor dining hall and kitchen with industrial-sized ovens and cafeteria fixtures, as shown in figs. 21 and 22. There were recurrent complaints about the quality of food served on the island, which led to occasional moments of solidarity between different groups of internees, who were kept separate except at mealtimes (Japanese who did not want to

[143] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Editions Gallimard, 1975; 2nd ed., Vintage Books, 1995), 199–205.

eat sauerkraut and pig knuckles would pass their extra food to the Germans).[144] Like other aspects of the detention center, the category of food was subject to individual preference. While "Kinichi Iwamoto described the food as 'adequate' and the rooms as 'comfortably heated,'" Yae Aihara said everything she ate was terrible other than a shriveled-up orange.[145] Internees were eventually permitted to assume more control of their food situation, and by July 1944, almost all of the kitchen work was done by interned Germans (see fig. 23).[146] This presented one opportunity for paid work.

Fig. 23. INS photograph of enemy aliens working in the employee's dining room.[147]

By 1943, internees could be paid 80 cents a day to work on upkeep and administration, which was also the minimum wage for German POW labor and roughly equal to the wages of

[144] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 185.
[145] Iwamoto in William Minoru Hohri, *Repairing America: An Account of the Movement for Japanese-American Redress* (Washington State University Press, 1984), 179; "Yae Aihara Interview Segment 12," Densho Digital Repository, July 4, 2008, https://ddr.densho.org/interviews/ddr-densho-1000-221-12/.
[146] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 188.
[147] "Historic Structure Report: Unit One Buildings, Volume 2, Part One, Ellis Island, Statue of Liberty National Monument," Internet Archive, 1988, 135, https://archive.org/details/historicstructur00v2pt1/mode/1up.

U.S. privates.[148] However, New York labor statistics indicate the average weekly earnings of men in repair services and hand trades in 1943 was equivalent to $1.46 per hour for an eight hour, five day-a-week work schedule, significantly higher than what internees had the opportunity to earn.[149]

Conditions

Despite public complaints that enemy aliens were being coddled in internment camps, Ellis Island's conditions generally appear to have been poor, as they had been for some time.[150] In 1918, German detainees sent a letter to the DOJ asserting that "'every man in the United States will tell you that Ellis Island was only built for one purpose, that is… not for keeping healthy men interned indefinitely.'" They critiqued B&D's "cellar like appearance… [and] dangerous draughty condition which has given us colds, which we seem to be unable to get rid of."[151] In 1921, an immigrant declared she "felt like committing suicide to get out of the horrors of cruelty, disease and terrible filth."[152] Though repairs and renovations were made, these problems persisted throughout the war, and internees called B&D filthy, crowded, and bleak.

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[148] "Three Inspection Reports For the Ellis Island, NY, Internment Camp," German American Internee Coalition, May 9, 2017, 4, https://gaic.info/three-inspection-reports-ellis-island-ny-internment-camp/; Antonio Thompson, *Men in German Uniform: POWs in America during World War II* (The University of Tennessee Press, 2010), 79.
[149] "Handbook of New York Labor Statistics, 1948," HathiTrust, 95, accessed February 6, 2026, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=coo.31924085768137&seq=95.
[150] John E. Schmitz, *Enemies Among Us : The Relocation, Internment, and Repatriation of German, Italian, and Japanese Americans During the Second World War* (University of Nebraska Press, 2021), 222.
[151] R.C. Harloff et al., letter, 1918 in "Photographs: Historic American," 22–23.
[152] "Just Hell on Earth: Horrors of Ellis Island," *Rand Daily Mail* (Johannesburg), September 6, 1921, 8, Readex.

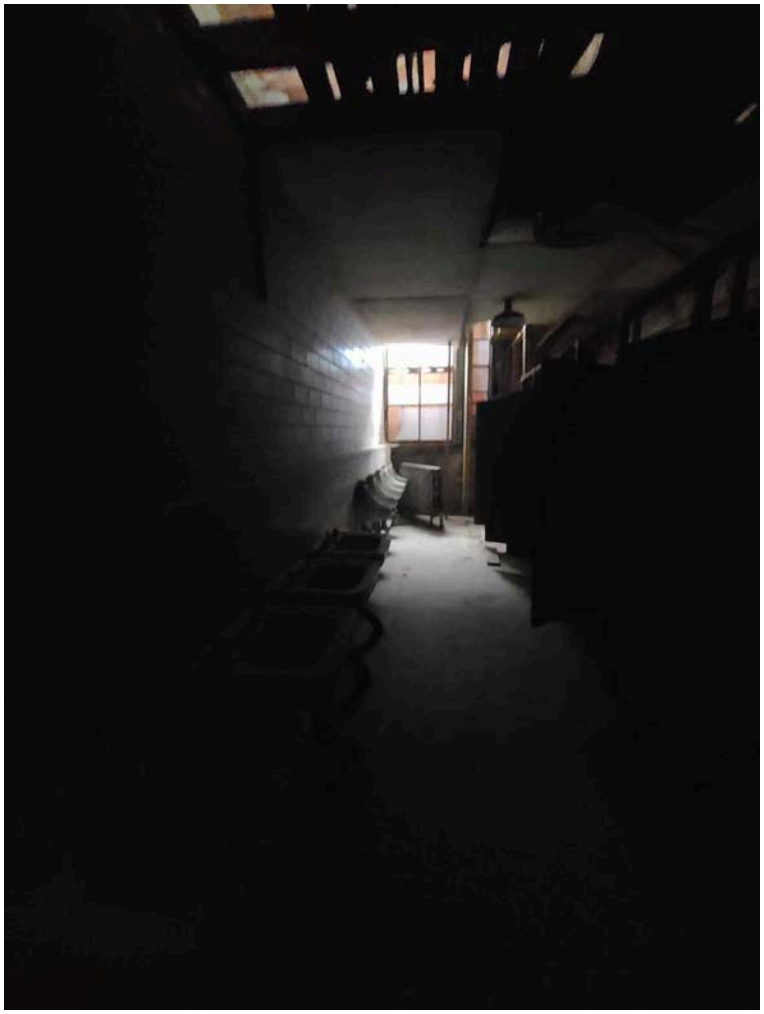
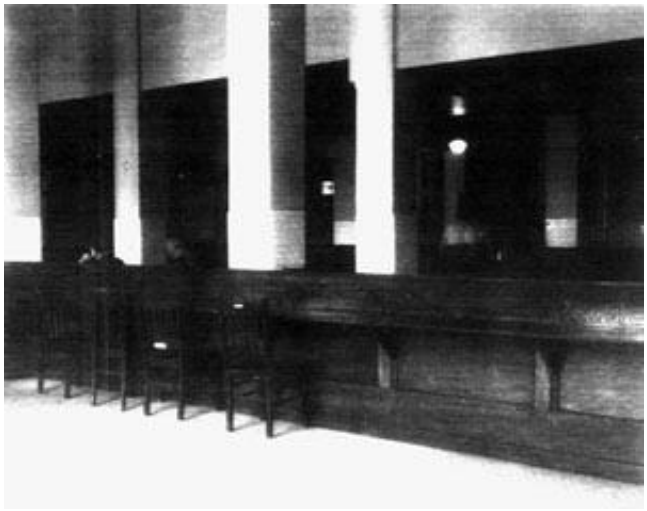


Fig. 24. Baggage and Dormitory has windows and ceiling bulbs, but natural light is limited and spaces feel uncomfortable and exposed. Photo by author.

The main issue Ellis Island faced during WWII was overcrowding, although numbers of internees varied significantly over time. The island was so full that administrators searched for additional quarters in New York City and transferred their offices to Manhattan in 1942.[153] A 1946 Red Cross inspection report of Ellis Island (which also described unsanitary conditions and bedbugs) noted that the bed space provided "square foot space per man [which] is much lower than the Army minimum."[154] These complaints mirror issues at American prison facilities, where bed space remains a simple but sought-after commodity.[155]

[153] "Photographs: Historic American," 35.
[154] German American Internee Coalition, "Three Inspection Reports," 12.
[155] Nofil, *Migrant's Jail*, 219.

Problems were manifold. Despite intense overcrowding, internees were initially only allowed outside for exercise and fresh air for two to three hours a week.[156] Italian seamen detainees' belongings were lost during their transfer to Ellis Island. And the Red Cross described bad air quality and allegations of medical malpractice by the island's hospital staff, who a 1946 inspector said had mismanaged an internee's injured arm so badly that it "[stuck] out and [was] useless."[157] Internees could have visitors and receive mail, but both were subject to restrictions. Visitation took place in a loud, crowded room lined with benches and tables.[158] Having to talk across a partition was "regard[ed] as a particular and unnecessary hardship," (see fig. 25) and one internee explained "'that a man interned 2 ½ years cannot even sit beside his wife for an hour a week is truly hard.'"[159] Between visits, internees could place phone calls and write letters, but "both of these means of communication were subject to censorship and observation," resulting in strained family ties and relationships.[160]



[156] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 186.
[157] German American Internee Coalition, "Three Inspection Reports," 6, 12, 15.
[158] Lawrence DiStasi, ed., *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret History of Italian American Evacuation and Internment During World War II*, with Sandra M. Gilbert (Heyday Books, 2001), 219.
[159] German American Internee Coalition, "Three Inspection Reports," 13.
[160] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 186.

Fig. 25. Ellis Island visitation area, 1945.[161]

Internees reacted to their situation in different ways. Many remember simply attempting to comply with the process and pass the time. Ichiro Shirato recalled that internees were generally satisfied with their treatment and established a "pretty good self-government system" and exercise routines.[162] This assessment is among the most positive. Internee Eberhard Fuhr's statement appears to be a fairly representative account:

> At least at Crystal City [INS camp] we had a big perimeter we could walk around, so there was a certain feeling of freedom. At Ellis Island you were confined to this big room. It was a real, total bore…. I painted for ten cents an hour because I needed that for cigarettes, but above all because you needed to keep yourself busy. Otherwise you'd go daffy.[163]

Though most internees feared prolonging their internment, some attempted to exert greater control over their situation. Pegler-Gordon documents that four Japanese detainees "bridged their segregation to attend a mass meeting of almost 400 detainees in the German dormitory" in 1942, and in the postwar years, detainees conducted formal meetings and hunger strikes.[164]

Efforts to improve conditions

Ellis Island's conditions were generally poor, but attempts were made to improve the situation– or at least to minimize backlash from abroad and meet the standards of the 1929 Geneva Convention, the guidelines of which were adopted by the U.S. for the treatment of

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[161] "Ellis Island, New York City, New York," German American Internee Coalition, accessed February 26, 2026, https://gaic.info/internment-camps/temporary-detention-facilities/ellis-island-new-york-city/.
[162] Oral History Library, The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc, "Shirato, Ichiro."
[163] Fuhr in Holian, *German Americans and World War II*, 157.
[164] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 187.

POWs and civilian internees.[165] Internees could purchase noncontraband items like tobacco and stamps or have visitors run errands for them, if they had the connections or money to do so.[166] A notice to detainees from September 1942 gave them permission to use outlets and their own electric stoves, go on the porch during all daylight hours except mealtime, use recreation and exercise equipment, elect representatives, and set up a small canteen.[167] Various aid societies, churches, and workers also attempted to provide assistance. Church services were held for those interested, and "in later years, volunteers from the American Friends Service Committee… assist[ed] in various ways, including providing Christmas packages and fruitcakes to detainees."[168] Internees were given song books, shown movies twice a week, and had access to a reading room.[169] There was also a Christmas party for detainees, which may have brought slight cheer amidst gloomy times. Some of these amenities may have been the result of the Red Cross inspections, but similar recreation opportunities were provided to inmates in federal prisons.[170] In addition, the Bureau of Prisons offered education opportunities including access to university classes, but Ellis Island internees could not avail of similar programs.[171]

Conclusion

Ellis Island's deteriorating physical conditions, overcrowding, and constant push-and-pull between treating internees as innocent civilians and dangerous prisoners highlights the tensions

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[165] American officials were aware that Axis governments made note of how they treated internees and took it into account in dealing with trapped Americans. P. Scott Corbett, *Quiet Passages: The Exchange of Civilians Between the United States and Japan During the Second World War* (Kent State University Press, 1987), 32; Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 187.
[166] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 186.
[167] "Notice to Detainees," September 18, 1942, Folder 44, Box 25, Series II. INS Records, B. Immigration Records, 6. Detention, Deportation, & Parole Branch- Ellis Island Field Collection Archives., Bob Hope Memorial Library.
[168] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 185.
[169] German American Internee Coalition, "Three Inspection Reports," 4.
[170] German American Internee Coalition, "Three Inspection Reports"; United States Bureau of Prisons, "Progress in Prison," 10–25.
[171] United States Bureau of Prisons, "Progress in Prison," 13.

generated by the island's use as a detention center. One journalist concluded that the island's conditions "indicated that the United States '(was) not aping Hitler's concentration camp methods,'" but as Nofil remarks, this was "faint praise indeed."[172] The treatment of enemy aliens was generally in accord with the Geneva Convention, but internment was by nature distressing and uncomfortable.[173] Additionally, it operated from a highly confined space, presenting issues regarding privacy, fire safety, and sanitation.

Examining Ellis Island's atmosphere and logistical challenges demonstrates how the government dealt with a complicated humanitarian and security issue, provides insights into the INS's strategies and anxieties, and reveals the adaptation of a key physical locale to changing attitudes regarding immigration and detention. Ellis Island was not a torture camp, but primary source material indicates that internment operated on a bloated scale and featured severely unpleasant living conditions which lingered despite efforts at improvement. The combination of these issues, plus the stress and unhappiness of internment, contributed to a lastingly negative environment that left an unfavorable impression on inspectors and internees alike, and had detrimental effects on the lives of many internees. The next chapter will explore these dynamics.

[172] Raskin, "New Role for Ellis Island" in Nofil, "Ellis Island's Forgotten Final Act."
[173] Daniels, *Concentration Camps, North America*, 105.

Chapter 3: Departure

"It was as if Sogoika were challenging us: Draw your own conclusions. You figure out what it must have been like to be in our shoes."[174]

Fig. 26. Watercolor by Gene Sogoika, a WRA internee.[175]

A writer for the *New York Herald Tribune* described looking at Manhattan through the high fence surrounding Ellis Island as "'a subtle torture… for inmates could divert themselves… with this picture postcard view of the Promised Land while reflecting that this might be as close as they'd ever get.'"[176] This chapter examines how internment could be experienced as a "subtle torture" by delving into two often-overlooked but meaningful aspects of the process: the ways an individual's internment could come to an end, and the multiple serious after-effects internment could have on people's lives and wellbeing. Each person's experience within and outside the

[174] Gesensway and Roseman, *Beyond Words*, 9–10.
[175] Gesensway and Roseman, *Beyond Words*, 68.
[176] Blake Ehrlich, "Inside Ellis Island," *New York Herald Tribune* (New York), November 26, 1950, SM12.

camp were different, but departing from Ellis Island by ferry did not mean leaving this period of their lives behind. In some cases, the lingering effects of internment could be dire, spanning from financial loss to personal problems and depression. This chapter also discusses how negotiations regarding the end of internment forced new interpretations and applications of the law, which left a legal legacy extending to the present day.

Means of departure

A common means of exiting internment was through parole, which was extended to some internees on the recommendation of their hearing board. While parole was seen as preferable to internment, it was difficult to secure and placed challenging restrictions on people's lives. These included frequent check-in appointments that necessitated travel and impeded peoples' abilities to maintain employment. Additionally, paroled enemy aliens' social lives were closely monitored. Japanese parolees were instructed not to interact with other Japanese or they risked rearrest, which damaged community ties and personal happiness.[177] Pegler-Gordon writes that on average, Japanese New Yorkers spent 961 days each under parole restrictions which, despite "offer[ing] relief from imprisonment… did not offer freedom from discrimination, suspicion, or shame." The development of the parole system at Ellis Island is significant in that the use of parole was extended to the whole postwar immigration regulation system after having first been applied in a major capacity during WWII.[178]

A second form of departure from Ellis Island was through exchange or transfer to other U.S. camps. Nofil writes that "the INS-run enemy alien program ran parallel to the confinement of ethnic Japanese by the War Relocation Authority."[179] While this statement reflects the most

[177] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 191.
[178] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 181, 191, 167, 193.
[179] Nofil, *Migrant's Jail*, 89.

common understanding of the wartime internment apparatus, in reality, the two systems often intersected. INS and WRA camps conducted frequent transfers and exchanges of internees within their own systems and with each other, which served several purposes: grouping categories of people together (like diplomats, "disloyal" Japanese, ship crews, and families), easing overcrowding, adapting to camp closures, and making space for POWs. Internee exchanges accounted for many of the arrivals and departures from Ellis Island. The transfer system was constant, and, to internees, often unpredictable. The INS operated this new network of human transfer by employing the same train cars they had used since 1919 to facilitate immigrant deportations.[180] Pegler-Gordon also asserts that immigration authorities used dehumanizing language when describing incoming transfers and exchanges, and that they conducted spectacular and humiliating displays of authority like parading internees through Grand Central station under armed military guard.[181]

Internees who were not released, paroled, or transferred to another American camp departed Ellis Island by way of deportation or repatriation. The differences between these terms are nuanced and sometimes hazy. Repatriation entails returning someone– often POWs, civilians living abroad, or undocumented immigrants– to their home country.[182] It can be either voluntary or forced, but is often framed as a decision made by the individual. Larisa Veloz has coined the term "depatriation" to denote particularly complex cases.[183] She and other historians outline that repatriation often involves a level of pressure or coercion, particularly in contexts such as the

[180] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 91–92.
[181] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 191.
[182] "Repatriate: A Comprehensive Guide to Its Legal Meaning and Context," US Legal, accessed February 16, 2026, https://legal-resources.uslegalforms.com/r/repatriate.
[183] Larisa L. Veloz, *Even the Women Are Leaving: Migrants Making Mexican America, 1890-1965* (University of California Press, 2023), 121.

United States's 1930s Mexican repatriation campaigns.[184] During WWII, this was certainly the case for Latin American enemy aliens, many of whom the U.S. government forcibly repatriated to Japan or Germany.[185] The nuances of repatriation, particularly during a time of war, complicate the questions of what constitutes "voluntary," "expulsion," and "removal."

Deportation is the formal, state-sanctioned removal of an alien from the U.S. for violating immigration law, threatening public safety, or participating in criminal acts.[186] While most WWII removals of enemy aliens were repatriations, other cases are specifically referred to as deportations, and sources frequently apply both terms within the same contexts.[187] Deportation versus repatriation also depended on the case or category of internee. Departing Japanese were typically considered repatriates, while detained German ship crew members were first instructed to "voluntarily depart" before being placed under deportation orders.[188] Historians Hart and Schmitz describe the situation as full of "awkward legal questions."[189] I chose to refer to Ellis Island as a "deportation station" in the title of this thesis because this reflects its pre- and postwar usage[190] and most effectively conveys that the island was used to facilitate the removal of people from the mainland United States.

Ellis Island's role in the wartime repatriation and deportation processes was that of a temporary holding facility for people readying to exit from New York, "the only U.S. port from which ships departed as part of a prisoner repatriation and exchange program."[191] Internees were

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[184] Brian Gratton and Emily Merchant, "Immigration, Repatriation, and Deportation: The Mexican-Origin Population in the United States, 1920–1950," *The International Migration Review* 47, no. 4 (2013): 949.
[185] Corbett, *Quiet Passages*, 166.
[186] "Understand the Deportation Process," USA.Gov, accessed February 16, 2026, https://www.usa.gov/deportation-process.
[187] For example, one inspection report notes that "a 'deportee['s]... departure was postponed to the next repatriation convoy, as his wife is expecting a baby." German American Internee Coalition, "Three Inspection Reports," 7.
[188] Christgau, *Enemies: World War II*, 18.
[189] Schmitz and Hart, "A Crisis of Identity," 1275.
[190] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 13.
[191] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 188.

frequently presented with the option to repatriate, which would allow them to end their detention and depart to their home nation but would sever their ties with the U.S. and physically relocate them thousands of miles from their residence. By 1945, two times as many immigrants were being held on Ellis Island for deportation than interned enemy aliens. Of the *Issei* detained at Ellis Island, "about 40 percent were repatriated," which was "higher than [the] national average." By the war's end, nearly half of New York's Japanese population was repatriated to Japan.[192]

The primary reasons why people requested repatriation were to avoid further internment, shorten their detention, and reunite with family members.[193] It could also be selected based on finances, employment, political loyalties, or spouses' decisions. Internees were not required to repatriate, but unpleasant living conditions, camp transfers, and indefinite internment, plus repeatedly being asked if they wished to leave, make the decision to repatriate appear less than fully voluntary. Some internees may have felt there was little left for them in their home states, as politicians like Representative Clair Engle declared, "'We don't want those Japs back in California and the more we can get rid of the better.'"[194]

[192] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 193.
[193] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 179, 188, 189.
[194] Engle quoted by Weglyn in Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 187.

Fig. 27. The SS *Gripsholm* in the foreground of the New York City skyline.[195]

Repatriation from the U.S. was facilitated by the neutral Swedish "mercy ships" MS *Gripsholm* (see fig. 27) and SS *Drottningholm*, which together conducted more than a dozen civilian and POW exchanges with Germany, Japan, and Italy.[196] From 1939 to 1946, these voyages quietly moved some 10,770 people from the U.S. to combat nations in a process which has been described as a "human game of chess."[197] Repatriates departed from New York and were transferred at specified intermediate points including Lisbon, Maputo, and Goa.[198] These exchanges allowed for the safe transfer of thousands of diplomats, ordinary civilians living or stranded abroad, and sick and wounded military personnel.

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[195] "Gripsholm 1925-1954," accessed November 11, 2025, https://www.salship.se/grip2.php.
[196] "The Gripsholm WWII Exchanges," Densho Encyclopedia, accessed February 21, 2026, https://encyclopedia.densho.org/The_Gripsholm_WWII_Exchanges/.
[197] Schmitz and Hart, "A Crisis of Identity," 1280; Jarboe Russell, *The Train*, 124.
[198] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 188.

Fig. 28. Family preparing to board the *Gripsholm*, 1944.[199]

To understand the stakes of repatriation, one must contemplate the experience of traveling across the ocean towards Japan or Europe during the Second World War. This extraordinarily risky process necessitated months of coordination between the U.S., Japan, and Germany through non-aligned intermediaries,[200] but even then, the threat of death was legitimate. The Battle of the Atlantic made ships vulnerable to crossfire or direct attack. In 1940, the passenger ship SS *Arandora Star* was torpedoed by a German U-boat while conducting a

[199] "Repatriation and Exchange," German American Internee Coalition, accessed February 27, 2026, https://gaic.info/history/6029-2/.
[200] See Corbett, *Quiet Passages*.

deportation voyage on Britain's behalf, killing more than 800 of the 1,213 enemy aliens it had on board.[201] After hostilities ended, thousands of people classified as enemy aliens continued to be repatriated to Japan and Germany.[202] Hart and Schmitz assert that the fall of the Third Reich actually accelerated forced expatriation and repatriation, and in January 1946, notices were placed in some INS camps informing internees that their deportation may be imminent. Those who were sent to Germany or Japan in 1945 or later were returning to countries "in literal ruins" with extreme shortages of critical resources.[203] Holian records that some German repatriates were sent to prisoner camp upon their arrival.[204]

Repatriation is a crucial element of American internment because it broadens the perspective of these camps to the wider world stage. Ellis Island was one small zone in an almost inconceivably large global network of human transfer. As legitimately terrifying and unjust as internment could be, these elements were dwarfed by the prevailing conditions in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, Manchuria, and elsewhere. The WWII era fully embraced the potentials of organized "camp" systems, which were idolized as the best and most efficient means of organizing people and treating a variety of disparate "problems," real or imagined, including imprisoning POWs, pursuing the Final Solution against Jews, interning enemy aliens, holding resettled "Germanizable" East Europeans, and housing civilian workers and slave laborers. Forced resettlement was powered by the war's creation of millions of refugees. In Europe, historian Mark Mazower refers to a "concentration camp universe" with "more than 10,000 camps… in addition to the eight [Nazi] extermination camps and the twenty-two main concentration camps with their 1,200 offshoots."[205]

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[201] "The Story of the Loss of SS Arandora Star," The National Archives, accessed January 23, 2026, https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/explore-the-collection/stories/the-loss-of-ss-arandora-star/.
[202] Christgau, *Enemies: World War II*, 280–81.
[203] Schmitz and Hart, "A Crisis of Identity," 1281.
[204] Holian, *German Americans and World War II*, 157.
[205] Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (Vintage Books, 2000), 175, 181.

By the 1940s, the U.S. had already experimented with large housing projects through the reservation system, Civilian Conservation Corps camps, and WWI POW camps. The United States's Japanese American internment was a particularly notorious mass violation of civil liberties, but WWII enemy alien internment initiatives were also pursued by the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia; and numerous Latin American countries consented to the United States removing aliens from within their borders.[206] To varying degrees, each combatant nation embraced confinement without recognizing or caring that detention is, by nature, both inhumane and a logistical nightmare. The purpose of this thesis is not to compare vastly different forms of suffering or to argue that internees in American internment camps were uniquely victimized by their situations. It does intend to draw closer scrutiny to the logic and logistics of total war, and to afford all people the grace of recognizing the negative impacts that war had on their lives.

Release

For Italians, internment came to an early end on October 12, 1942 (Columbus Day) when Attorney General Biddle announced they would no longer be classified as enemy aliens. Mike Wallace describes this decision as a politically motivated "peace offering" from FDR intended to limit an exodus of Italian votes and secure Democratic success in the New York gubernatorial election.[207] The Western Defense Command announced it would revoke its general exclusion order of Japanese Americans and exclude people from West Coast military areas solely on an individual basis in 1944, though most WRA internees did not leave the camps until the war with

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[206] See Robert Kershaw, "Collar the Lot! Britain's Policy of Internment During the Second World War," *Records and Research, The National Archives*, July 2, 2015, https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20250613143236/https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/collar-lot-britains-policy-internment-second-world-war/.
[207] Wallace, *Gotham at War*, 375.

Japan had ended.[208] German internment was not terminated with the end of hostilities in 1945; instead, it remained an official policy of the U.S. government for approximately two years after the end of the war in Europe.[209] By 1947, attention surrounded the 200-odd German enemy aliens still awaiting deportation at Ellis Island, who submitted a petition to Congress requesting their release.[210] Their efforts were supported by Senator William Langer, who sponsored a bill calling for internees' freedom. Though the bill did not pass, the internees were finally released by 1948, in part due to "heightened awareness of [their] plight."[211] This decision was met with disbelief, joy, and fear among internees.[212]

Eberhard Fuhr, one of the last Ellis Island internees, had been held in INS camps from age seventeen to twenty two. He recalled that "'no one can appreciate the intense terror of government power and the despair of hopelessness that we felt behind that barbed-wire fence…. By the same token, no one can appreciate the thrilling sense of freedom I felt when it was over.'"[213] Fuhr believed that as a nation at war, the U.S. had the right to intern him, but felt that once the war ended, his internment as an enemy alien should have been over.[214] However, the landmark Supreme Court case *Ludecke v. Watkins* (1948), which addressed the legality of Ellis Island enemy alien internment, determined exactly the opposite, stipulating that war does not end with a cease-fire order. It concurred with President Truman's belief that "enemy aliens who were justifiably deemed fit subjects for internment during active hostilities do not lose their potency

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[208] Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 188–89.
[209] Holian, *German Americans and World War II*, 145–47.
[210] "Investigation Resumes: Step Taken by Senator Langer on 200 Held at Ellis Island," *New York Times* (New York), September 24, 1947; "Ellis Island Petition for Release of German Civilian Internees," German American Internee Coalition, June 21, 2017, https://gaic.info/ellis-island-petition-release-german-civilian-internees/.
[211] "Related Laws: Alien Enemies Act and Related World War II Presidential Proclamations," German American Internee Coalition, accessed February 27, 2026, https://gaic.info/history/related-laws/; German American Internee Coalition, "Ellis Island Petition for Release of German Civilian Internees."
[212] Holian, *German Americans and World War II*, 158.
[213] Fuhr in Jarboe Russell, *The Train*, 309.
[214] Holian, *German Americans and World War II*, 152.

for mischief… even when the guns are silent." It also confirmed that the president has the specific power to "direct the conduct… towards the aliens" if peace has yet to be fully concluded.[215] *Ludecke* supported Truman's 1945 Presidential Proclamation 2655, which stated that dangerous enemy aliens still interned in the U.S. may be deported.[216] The legal precedents internment established have the potential to significantly impact the U.S.' current affairs, even outside periods of declared war. In March 2025, the Alien Enemy Act of 1798, which was used to justify internment, was invoked in order to detain and deport Venezuelans who were alleged members of the gang Tren de Aragua.[217] This expanded the potential applications of the law outside of periods of declared war and made *Ludecke v. Watkins* strikingly relevant once again.

Effects of internment

Individuals who were released from internment worked hard to reestablish normalcy in their lives. However, doing so could be extremely challenging. Because many INS internees were adult men, internment not only broke apart families but stripped them of their main wage earner. Attempts to lessen this blow included freezing enemy aliens' assets and providing family members with monthly allowances. Occasionally, other small forms of assistance were provided. Internee Toru Matsumoto's parole case was expedited, for example, because his wife and son lacked financial support.[218] However, internees who lacked sufficient savings suffered greatly. U.S. citizen Naoye Suzuki recalls being stranded because he lost access to everything other than a small amount of cash, and he lost his savings because his bank account was with his Japanese

[215] "Ludecke v. Watkins, 335 U.S. 160 (1948)," Justia, accessed February 22, 2026, https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/335/160/.
[216] "Proclamation 2655—Removal of Alien Enemies," The American Presidency Project, UC Santa Barbara, accessed February 26, 2026, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/proclamation-2655-removal-alien-enemies.
[217] Katherine Yon Ebright, "The Alien Enemies Act, Explained," Brennan Center Explainer, May 1, 2025, https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/alien-enemies-act-explained.
[218] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 176.

company.[219] Women whose partners were interned were the left-behind byproducts of an emotionally and financially traumatic scenario. Internee Matsuhei Matsuo's wife was reported as "'seriously ill,' 'unable to speak English,' 'destitute,' 'helpless,' and 'alone'; nonetheless, her husband was repatriated to Japan."[220] Of the Japanese New Yorkers who were not interned, Wallace writes that "those in business were soon bankrupt, those with jobs soon fired. Most were reduced to dependence on religious charities… in April 1942, one minister found 'almost total unemployment' among the city's Japanese."[221] In addition to these common financial stressors, some Ellis Island internees faced an unimaginable insult: in 1944, James F. Roe, who "for twenty years had held an exclusive contract with the Government to provide bonds and act as fiduciary agent for immigrants and deportees on Ellis Island," was sentenced to four to eight years in prison for defrauding Ellis Island deportees and war internees of $200,000 over the prior ten years. His actions impoverished the beneficiary relatives of internees and deportees, including "one on crutches, another blind and still another a deaf woman."[222]

The effects of internment were further-reaching and more impactful than financial loss alone. Ellis Island's lonely setup was praised by prewar immigration officials, who wrote that "the ideal arrangement for detention purposes [is] one under which applicants can actually be isolated, such as that existing at Ellis Island."[223] This isolation could feel overwhelming, especially for the thousands of internees who endured long waiting and detention times. If and when personal connections formed in internment camps, they were often met with a painful end when one person was transferred, though some relationships did endure. Naoye Suzuki met his wife at Ellis Island, perhaps contributing to his statement that he "[had] no regrets about being

[219] Oral History Library, The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc, "Suzuki, Naoye."
[220] Toru Matsumoto and Matsuhei Matsuo cards in Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 177.
[221] Wallace, *Gotham at War*, 372.
[222] "Ellis Island Attache Sentenced To 4 to 8 Years in Fraud on Aliens," *New York Times* (New York), December 14, 1944.
[223] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 208.

interned here."[224] Some internees made friends for life and recalled humorous stories; others remembered it as the darkest period in their lives.

Instead of earning or suspending peoples' loyalties, internment further complexified peoples' identities. Many internees wished to make the best decisions for their families regardless of national sentiment. Mae Ngai calls these people "pragmatic" and "influence[d by] dual nationalism," helping to explain the decisions of U.S. citizens to relocate themselves to join family members in internment.[225] Other internees fully prioritized the interests of the United States, believed it was their duty to be interned, and accepted their loss of their freedom as a public sacrifice. Some internees questioned where they had been best treated; others supported the United States but felt uncomfortable with the idea of personally taking up arms against their relatives and friends. As Pegler-Gordon writes, "these complex responses did not fit neatly into many Americans' understanding of mutually exclusive loyalty."[226] Ultimately, "the war put enormous pressure on these slender reeds of patriotisms" and forced people to "respond to an impossible choice," especially when it came to the option of repatriation.[227]

Barron Stofik underscores that Ellis Island internment had "both practical and psychological long-term effects" like inspiring lingering feelings of shame and guilt. Internees' testimonies support this finding and frequently point towards significant emotional distress generated by their situations.[228] Fear and anxiety often began at or prior to the moment of arrest, which could be traumatizing in itself.[229] Awaiting hearings, not knowing what was happening next, and fearing re-internment after parole or release also upset people's lives. A letter

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[224] Oral History Library, The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc, "Suzuki, Naoye."
[225] Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 200.
[226] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 175.
[227] Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 201.
[228] Barron Stofik, "Ellis Island During World War II," 82–84.
[229] Daniels, *Concentration Camps, North America*, 43.

addressed to FDR by internee Theodor Graber (see fig. 29), written as a "last resort" begging for his family's release, illustrates many of these factors. Graber's pregnant wife gave birth to a premature disabled baby named Teddy while the family was under the extreme stress of nighttime FBI home searches. The family was interned at Ellis Island and eventually chose repatriation to Germany out of desperation.[230] There, their home was destroyed, family members were killed while gathering food, and Teddy died of pneumonia due to medicine shortages.[231] The Graber family's story is extreme, but it exposes the gamble that internees made with repatriation and highlights the lifelong tragedies internment could induce.

Fig. 29. The Graber family with sons Werner and Gunther.[232]

Naoye Suzuki and Ichiro Shirato felt that they generally received fair treatment at Ellis Island.[233] However, as Holian asserts, "for many internees, living in internment camps during

[230] "Letter to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 31 December 1942—Theodor Graber," German American Internee Coalition, January 26, 2016, https://gaic.info/letter-to-franklin-delano-roosevelt-31-december-1942-theodor-graber/.
[231] "The Grabers," German American Internee Coalition, October 13, 2015, https://gaic.info/the-grabers/.
[232] German American Internee Coalition, "The Grabers."
[233] Oral History Library, The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc, "Suzuki, Naoye"; Oral History Library, The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc, "Shirato, Ichiro."

World War II represented the most traumatic experience of their lives."[234] In many instances, direct post-internment testimonies do not exist, but documents point towards the sting of lingering injustices. Internee Saburo Emy's pregnant wife begged for her interned husband's hearing date to be expedited, explaining that she "'need[ed] him so much, especially now,'" but he was not permitted to leave Ellis Island on parole until she had already given birth.[235] Sumi Utsushigawa recalls her father, Tom, who was held at Ellis Island and other camps, having flashbacks of internment into his nineties. He would stash personal items inside his pillowcase for safekeeping, agitated and afraid he was going to be moved to another camp.[236]

Numerous internees documented or allude to experiencing serious mental health problems while interned. Ellen Knauff, a woman detained at Ellis Island after the war, wrote in her memoir: "Many people do die on Ellis Island. They don't die physically, but a sort of mental death…. [P]eople are shut away from the outside world long enough, most of them will stop caring about what happens in the world, as well as to themselves."[237] The Ellis Island death could also be literal, as the island had a track record of suicides in the Baggage and Dormitory building.[238] A 1946 Red Cross report describes mental health issues among Ellis Island internees, stating that "those who have been interned here for long periods are rapidly cracking up and should be given psychiatric care." It records that a man imprisoned or interned for six years was "now slightly insane."[239] There were also several documented instances in the 1940s of detainees attempting to escape from Ellis Island by swimming or rowing across New York Harbor. Some

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[234] Holian, *German Americans and World War II*, 138.
[235] Josephine Emy to Attorney General Francis Biddle, letter, in Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 177.
[236] Jarboe Russell, *The Train*, 315.
[237] Knauff, *Ellen Knauff Story*, 42 in Nofil, *Migrant's Jail*, 117.
[238] Oral History Library, The Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation, Inc, "Suzuki, Naoye"; "Immigrant a Suicide: Woman, Denied Entry to U.S., Hangs Herself on Ellis Island," *New York Times* (New York), February 12, 1947.
[239] German American Internee Coalition, "Three Inspection Reports," 13.

of them were found floating, dead, in the water; others were caught and were promptly returned to the island.[240]

Conclusion

The end of internment is a frequently neglected aspect of the history of wartime internment. Though accounts of repatriation, release, and parole exist, they often follow as afterthoughts to dramatic tales of raids and arrests. However, the departure from wartime internment established its own powerful legal precedents, some of which underlie major current developments in the United States. Like today, there were few constitutional safeguards for deportations,[241] but in spite of this, many internees strived to assert their rights by rejecting offers of repatriation or resisting deportation. As Holian describes, court action helped attract attention to "the enemy alien issue" and eventually secured the release of remaining German internees.[242] The conclusion of this thesis will demonstrate how legal scrutiny and public criticism played key roles in ultimately ending Ellis Island detention.

The outcomes and implications of wartime internment were long-reaching for former internees. Each person's life and experiences were different, but stories of suffering, separation, and feeling unheard appear consistently throughout internees' recorded recollections. For a subset of people, being detained, interned, or repatriated contributed to significant financial or emotional stress. Nori Sato, a U.S. citizen, lost his community, job, and physical health due to

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[240] "Two-Mile Swim In Vain: Man Held for Deportation Fails to Escape From Ellis Island," *New York Times* (New York), October 14, 1940; "Flees From Ellis Island: Italian, Facing Deportation, Swims to Jersey to Escape," *New York Times* (New York), August 15, 1942; "Due to Be Deported, 7 Flee Ellis Island," *The New York Times* (New York), August 30, 1946; "River Victim Identified: Body in Hudson That of Italian Who Fled Ellis Island," *New York Times* (New York), May 18, 1946.
[241] Nofil, *Migrant's Jail*, 93.
[242] Holian, *German Americans and World War II*, 158.

Ellis Island internment.[243] Eberhard Fuhr, fifty years after internment, stated: "I still feel stigmatized."[244] Though internment drew to a close, its lifelong personal and political impacts did not.

[243] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 184.
[244] Fuhr in Holian, *German Americans and World War II*, 160.

Conclusion

"By the end of World War II… the *New York Times* reported that… 'the Island's name had become a symbol for being unwanted by America.'"[245]

Fig. 30. Child in bed, Ellis Island, 1950.[246]

From the late 1940s until its closure in 1954, Ellis Island continued to operate as "a deportation detention center," now mainly for ideological enemies like suspected communists.[247] Following the Internal Security (McCarran) Act of 1950's passage, people from Italy, Germany, Cuba, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and elsewhere were detained due to their connections, however fleeting, to their country's totalitarian government or organizations. Immigration officials had the broad power to implicate huge swaths of people, many of whom had been displaced by WWII.[248] Like before, some detainees remained on Ellis Island for months or years. Nofil calls 1950s Ellis Island a "de facto prison."[249]

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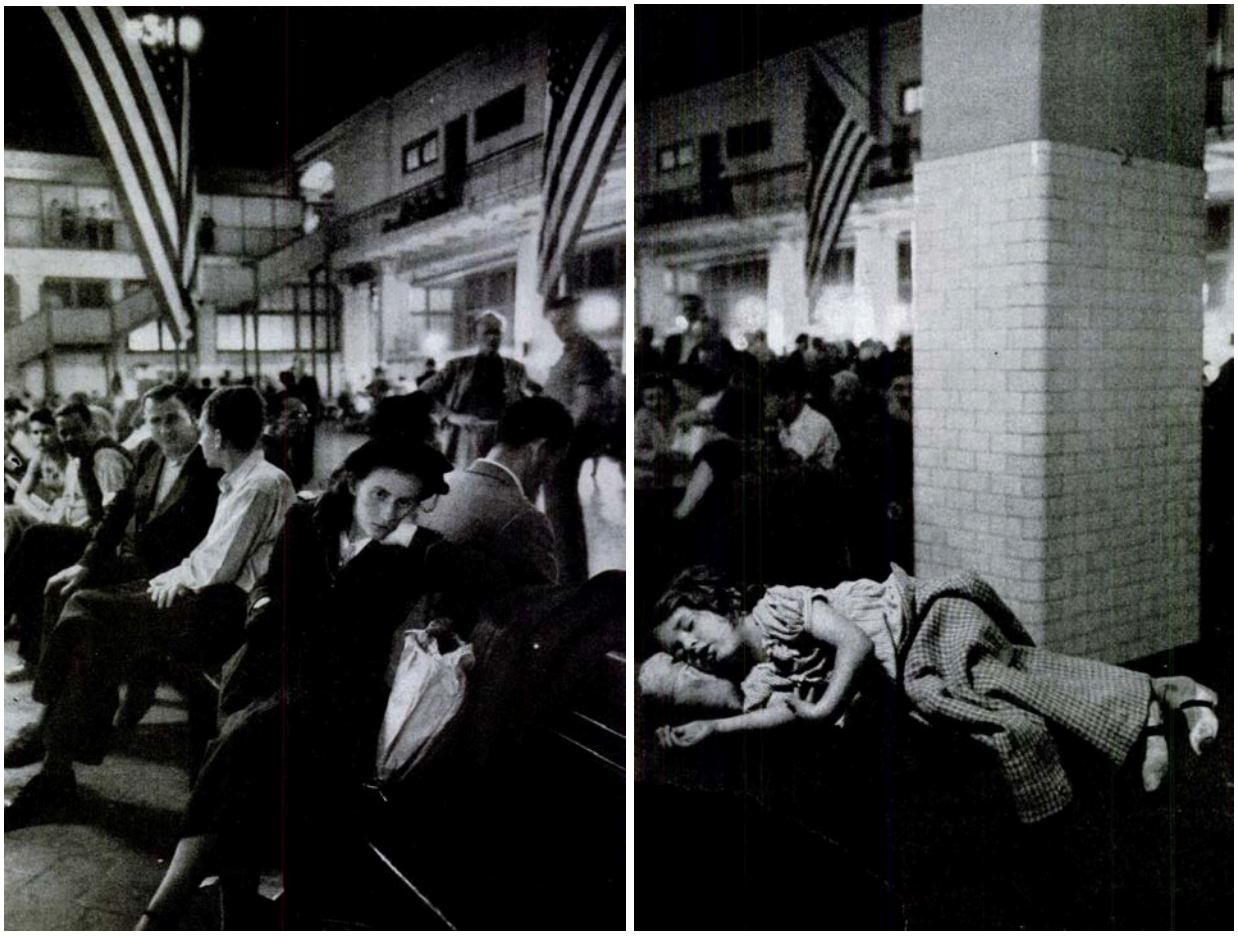
[245] Nofil, "Ellis Island's Forgotten Final Act."
[246] Nofil, *Migrant's Jail*, 96.
[247] Daniel Kanstroom, *Deportation Nation: Outsiders in American History* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 201.
[248] "Ellis Island 1950," *Life*, November 13, 1950, 123.
[249] Nofil, "Ellis Island's Forgotten Final Act."

In the postwar era, the island had more amenities than ever, but the problems which had plagued it as an internment camp persisted. [250] In particular, administrators struggled to define Ellis Island's image. Though immigration officials "highlighted the [island's] relatively humane conditions," critics launched damning accusations that the site was a migrant gulag or concentration camp.[251] Nofil asserts that the rhetoric surrounding Ellis Island Cold War detention played a lasting role in shaping "the public's idea of what 'detention' meant" and generating activism that questioned government agencies' roles in people's lives.[252]



Figs. 31 and 32. Ellis Island detainees awaiting accommodation assignments, 1950.[253]

[250] Nofil, "Ellis Island's Forgotten Final Act."
[251] Nofil, "Ellis Island's Forgotten Final Act."
[252] Nofil, "Detention Power," 124.
[253] *Life,* "Ellis Island 1950," 124–25.

Perhaps the "final straw" for Ellis Island detention was the Supreme Court deciding in *Shaughnessy v. U.S. ex rel. Mezei* (1953) that "if deportation was not an option, an immigrant could be detained on Ellis Island *forever*."[254] Confronted by negative public perception and crumbling conditions, the attorney general announced Ellis Island's closure in 1954, and remaining detainees were paroled or moved to local jails.[255] Ellis Island's closure reflects its problems as a facility, but also illustrates evolutions in the immigration system. Changes like increased air travel led to more flexibility, the dispersal of detention centers, and the expansion of immigration regulation beyond urban zones like New York and towards the center and borders of the nation.[256] In theory, the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 made "detention 'the exception, not the rule,'" and widespread detention for immigration-related reasons was believed to be a thing of the past.[257] Beginning in the 1950s, this contributed to a major change in the immigration detention system which favored European migrants over Latin Americans and Asians, who were more likely to be held in federal detention sites.[258]

However, attitudes towards immigrant detention and deportation are subject to constant evolution. Ellis Island's use reflects transitions between key periods in this cycle. Today, detention is a more ingrained aspect of immigration policy than ever before.[259] Since 2009, Congress has set out that 34,000 immigration beds should be maintained daily, making "US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)... the only law enforcement agency subject to a statutory quota."[260] In July 2025, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act allotted $165 billion to the Department of Homeland Security, "provid[ing] ICE with enough detention capacity to maintain

[254] Nofil, "Ellis Island's Forgotten Final Act."
[255] Nofil, "Ellis Island's Forgotten Final Act."
[256] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 202.
[257] Nofil, "Ellis Island's Forgotten Final Act."
[258] Nofil, *Migrant's Jail*, 7.
[259] Nofil, *Migrant's Jail*, 8.
[260] Monica Muñoz Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 296.

an average daily population of 100,000 illegal aliens."[261] Detention increasingly operates from contractual prisons, mostly in the Southwest, instead of from permanent immigration stations like Ellis Island, which has often worsened detention conditions beyond Ellis Island's level.[262] Simultaneously, the United States has witnessed an increase in activism and resistance towards detention built on a lineage of similar movements to document and improve the system.[263] Some of this public attention emerged in direct relation to Ellis Island.

Direct parallels do not always exist between wartime security initiatives and postwar immigration policies, but certain lines of continuity can and should be drawn. During the war, some INS camps used U.S. Border Patrol officers to guard and prevent the escape of internees.[264] They also repurposed cross country deportation trains and Ellis Island itself for this new type of alien regulation.[265] Buildings from INS camps were used to help facilitate Operation Wetback, Eisenhowers's Mexican deportation program, and to lay the literal foundations of the El Centro Detention Center, in operation from 1945 to 2014.[266] Barron Stofik writes that in 2001, "people of Arab origin were taken into custody without warrant or, according to many, justification."[267] Today, former INS internees attest they see terrifying parallels in immigration crackdowns.[268]

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[261] "Secretary Noem Commends President Trump and One Big Beautiful Bill Signing into Law: Historic Win for the American People and the Rule of Law," Department of Homeland Security, July 4, 2025, https://www.dhs.gov/news/2025/07/04/secretary-noem-commends-president-trump-and-one-big-beautiful-bill-signing-law#:~:text=The%20One%20Big%20Beautiful%20Bill%20(BBB)%20Act%2C,aliens%20and%20secures%2080%2C000%20new%20ICE%20beds.
[262] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 201.
[263] Nofil, *Migrant's Jail*, 218.
[264] Jarboe Russell, *The Train*, 55.
[265] Pegler-Gordon, *Closing*, 91–92.
[266] Nofil, *Migrant's Jail*, 112; Don Mitchell, "Operation Wetback: Preserving the Status Quo," in *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle over Industrial Farming in Bracero-Era California* (University of Georgia Press, 2012); Jessica Ordaz, *The Shadow of El Centro: A History of Migrant Incarceration and Solidarity* (University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 2–6.
[267] Barron Stofik, "Ellis Island During World War II," 96.
[268] Dean Zach, "Repeating History: Survivors of South Texas' World War II Internment Camps See Terrifying Parallels in Trump's Immigration Crackdown," *San Antonio Current*, August 7, 2025, https://www.sacurrent.com/news/repeating-history-survivors-of-south-texas-world-war-ii-internment-camps-see-terrifying-parallels-in-trumps-immigration-crackdown-38209624/.

Immigration policy and the INS itself have undergone great changes,[269] but each new movement builds on prior experience.

Wartime internment remains highly significant from multiple different standpoints. Strategies of dealing with enemy aliens demonstrated how emergency situations can green-light actions that would not be permissible in times of peace and raised questions regarding what should be deemed a "necessity," thus prompting us to explore better ways of dealing with similar situations in the future. Legally, internment emphasized the vast power of executive orders; sharpened the distinctions between citizen, noncitizen, and enemy alien; and raised questions regarding due process for detainees. While some of the rulings on internment are well-known (e.g. *Korematsu v. United States* [1944], *Ex parte Endo* [1944], and *Hirabayashi v. United States* [1943]), other aspects of internment's critical legal legacy remain comparatively obscure. In the 1980s, the federal government conducted hearings on wartime interment and passed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, formally apologizing and providing reparations to Japanese American survivors of internment.[270] In 2000, the Wartime Violation of Italian American Civil Liberties Act acknowledged the injustices Italian communities faced due to wartime restrictions and their classification as enemy aliens.[271] The same has not been done regarding German internment.

A key focus of this thesis has been the importance of examining internment from multiple angles: physical, logistical, legal, and symbolic. Today, Ellis Island is preserved as one of the foremost symbols of American acceptance and diversity. Some three million tourists travel to the island each year to explore its impressive architecture and search for their ancestors in passenger

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[269] In 2003, the INS was replaced by Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). "Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS)," Cornell Law School Legal Information Institute, accessed February 27, 2026, https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/immigration_and_naturalization_service_(ins).
[270] Minoru Hohri et al., *Resistance: Challenging America's Wartime Internment*, 129.
[271] "H.R.2442 - Wartime Violation of Italian American Civil Liberties Act," Congress.Gov, accessed January 23, 2026, https://www.congress.gov/bill/106th-congress/house-bill/2442.

databases.[272] Like most literature, the Ellis Island National Museum of Immigration's exhibits focus on its early years and devote limited attention to detention. The Baggage and Dormitory building has narrowly avoided demolition and is one of few unrenovated buildings on the main section of the island despite being placed on the World Monuments Fund's World Monuments Watch because of its rapidly deteriorating physical conditions and historic graffiti.[273] Its hulking figure stands inconspicuously among other red brick structures, but a close look shows that B&D's windows are boarded with black material and visitors are not permitted to enter.

Since the Reagan-era efforts to repair Ellis Island, impressive feats have been accomplished in restoring and preserving the island. However, excluding the histories of detention and internment does not make these realities vanish either physically or symbolically. Visitors at Ellis Island display a genuine interest and involvement in understanding the past. They actively seek out information, understanding that some stories are joyful while others are defined by their tragedy or complexity. Acknowledging and including narratives of internment on Ellis Island and in scholarly literature is a means of adding additional depth and personal history to a location which is built on individual and collective stories, while also balancing out outdated and exhausted views of American exceptionalism. The history of Ellis Island's use as a WWII internment camp and deportation station was not forgotten, only filed away, but today, the United States's greatest strength in dealing with its complex historic treatment of noncitizens comes from honesty, recognition, and empathy, even and especially when dealing with complicated and challenging topics.

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[272] "Park Statistics," Ellis Island - National Park Service, accessed February 27, 2026, https://www.nps.gov/elis/learn/management/statistics.htm.
[273] "Photographs: Historic American," 36–37; "Ellis Island National Monument—Baggage & Dormitory Building," Our Work / World Monuments Watch, accessed December 29, 2025, https://www.wmf.org/monuments/ellis-island-national-monument-baggage-dormitory-building.

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