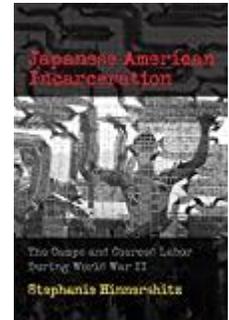


Stephanie Hinnershitz. *Japanese American Incarceration: The Camps and Coerced Labor during World War II.* Politics and Culture in Modern America Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021. Illustrations. 320 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-5336-8.



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Many, in fact most, books on the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II in the United States touch on the issue of labor, within the camps, in the nearby agricultural communities, and in the big cities across the country. Stephanie Hinnershitz's *Japanese American Incarceration: The Camps and Coerced Labor during World War II* is the first book-length investigation into the labor relations of incarceration.

There persists a debate on whether the camps that housed 120,000 civilians of Japanese descent on US soil between 1942 and 1946 were prison camps. This discussion has continued for decades and is exemplified by the disagreement in the appropriate terminology to describe the event. Few authors use "internment" except to talk about the alien camps. Hinnershitz chooses the words "incarceration" and "prisoner" and goes further to argue that we must see the work done by Japanese American inmates in the camps (and on the outside during the incarceration period) as prison labor.

In five chapters, the book delves into the "economics of incarceration" (chapter 1), labor contracts and resistance (chapters 2 and 3), a case study of the Poston incarceration camp (chapter 4), and the entangling of labor and resettlement (chapter 5). Hinnershitz demonstrates that the exploitation of Japanese and Asian American labor had deep roots, especially on the West Coast among the earliest immigrants. Here, she places Japanese Americans along the continuum of racialized labor, the exploitation of ethnic (Asian) labor, and prison labor in general.

Hinnershitz is of course right in that local administrators especially were eager to host camps with the expectation that workers would become available. In addition to directly working on farms close to the camps, inmates at Heart Mountain (Wyoming), for example, completed the Shoshone Canal, which later enabled agriculture and cattle raising in its vicinity. Using the inmates to improve their own living and working conditions and relying on their labor to run the camps from agriculture to administration indeed "blurred the

lines between free and forced work” (p. 4). Inmates signed a working contract, “the defining characteristic of free labor for administrators,” but were not free to resign at will (p. 13). Rather, their employment contracts in the camps depended on the administrators’ needs for inmate services.

It is equally true, however, that many professional inmates got true opportunities in the camps. Although Hinnershitz acknowledges that many inmates were, for the first time, able to get jobs that corresponded to their training, this fact remains a side note to the story of labor coercion. However, data proves that many of those who worked for the War Relocation Authority (WRA) administration in camps were able to extend their experience “on the outside” to become part of the integrated labor market.[1]

Paradoxically, while the WRA wanted the inmates to work to keep up their morale and to sustain the camps, they also started coaxing all able inmates out of the camps. This resulted in camps with shrinking manpower, because the able inmates generally were young and childless. The number of residents remained high, when many older people and families with children found it more difficult to leave for various reasons. At the same time, the decreasing number of workers were still expected to provide for the remaining population.

Japanese American labor in the camps and in the nearby farming communities was characterized by exploitation, poor working conditions, and, especially in the case of the camps, nominal wages. In the cities, meanwhile, racial discrimination was more blatant. Hinnershitz gives as an example of the Chicago Brotherhood of Railway Clerks, which protested the employment of Japanese Americans with arguments about defense, safety, and unfair labor competition. The threat of a strike led to a reassessment of the former inmates’ leave permits, resulting in revocation of a few permits and the relocation to other tasks of

several individuals. Many other unions continued to prevent Japanese Americans from joining.

I have to say I struggled with this book at first. Hinnershitz approaches the issue of incarceration from almost the opposite starting point from my work: whereas I have focused on the ordinariness of life and the creation of meaning through networking, Hinnershitz frames the event as the government’s conscious attempt to exploit the inmates. The more I read and thought about the issue, the more I attached to her portrayal of labor as a redemptive act. To many inmates, especially the Nisei and the patriotic Japanese American Citizens’ League in particular, incarceration in itself was seen as an opportunity to redeem the reputation of the Nikkei. A significant act of redemption, even in the eyes of whites, was generated by Nisei military service. But Hinnershitz convincingly shows that labor, both within the camps and especially outside, became a redemptive service both from the authorities’ and the inmates’ point of view: “Here, the imprisonment of Japanese Americans was rehabilitative rather than punitive. The redemptive power of labor as the mechanism for Japanese American cultural rehabilitation was a central component of resettlement” (p. 231).

The WRA successfully framed the entire incarceration as a “rehabilitative undertaking”: whereas the majority of Japanese Americans had previously been “on the margins of American society,” they were now permitted “to learn the proper skills ... to fully integrate and adapt” (p. 231). This argument extended not only to labor but to the so-called community governments as well. With the assumption that Japanese Americans had to learn about democracy to become properly Americanized, the authorities created a system of inmate government to teach their subjects. By extension, as Hinnershitz writes, “the prison element of their [the inmates’] experience faded” (p. 248). Such glorification of the sacrifices the inmates made—their military service, labor, and endurance—drew the attention away from the breach of civil

rights and, for a long time, contributed to the silencing of the Japanese American community.

Because the book is structured around the typical chronological narrative of incarceration (the attack on Pearl Harbor and its aftermath, the assembly centers, the “permanent” camps, and resettlement), a reader thoroughly familiar with the events will perhaps struggle to dig out the bits of information that are truly new. However, *Japan-*

ese American Incarceration should prove an important book to labor historians, especially those who study the intersections of labor, race, and ethnicity.

Note

[1]. See Saara Kekki, *Japanese Americans at Heart Mountain: Networks, Power, and Everyday Life* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2022, in press).

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