

Concentration Camps USA

Review

Alice Detroit

a review of

Keeper of Concentration Camps: Dillon S. Myer and American Racism, by Richard Drinnon, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1987, 340 pp. \$24.95.

Although it was his profession, “a keeper of concentration camps” was hardly Dillon S. Myer’s self-image. He considered himself to be an enlightened administrator, a tolerant, generous individual who incorporated what is best in the American tradition. In focusing on Myer’s career as chief of the War Relocation Authority which incarcerated Japanese-Americans during W.W. II and later as commissioner of the Bureau of Indian affairs, Richard Drinnon agrees that Myer is a typical representative of the American tradition but insists on the odious effects of his practice.

Drinnon’s portrait and analysis of Myer link up with those of Myer’s contemporaries. Jailer-administrators in Soviet prison camps also considered themselves humanitarians, striving to better conditions for “the people” in the newly-imposed egalitarian society. The degree of cynicism and ruthlessness found in Soviet camps never was reached in camps headed by Myer, and readers who seek accounts of sadistic horrors won’t find them in this book. But Drinnon captures the “toady” mentality of this government functionary, the same mentality that Solzhenitsyn railed against in his brilliant history of the Soviet gulags.

Drinnon’s biography and characterization of Myer also provide a historical prototype for Wilhelm Reich’s armored man. Here was an individual whose conception of the world was impervious to contradictory experience, who believed his way of life was appropriate for all. Myer knew nothing of the history, language, religion or mores of the Japanese or Indian people he managed; he became petulant when his well-intentioned decrees were rebuffed.

Myer believed that inmates who rebelled against their jailers were troublemakers who had a grudge against him personally, and if only they would view things “correctly,” they would accept their situation and appreciate his efforts. “With his vision clouded by...ancestral presuppositions and prejudices, Myer could not see an Indian as an individual citizen. Confronted in Albuquerque by delegates from the Taos Pueblo, he could not see Severino Martinez as a man with a serious problem worthy of his consideration, but perceived in him merely an instance of ‘the Indian problem,’ a holdover from the primitive past, an amusing ‘museum specimen...’

“Myer could not see Indian tribes as deeply rooted communities of people, but merely as ‘segregated groups.’ A nomadic bureaucrat himself, he blamed ‘governmental programs’ for tying Indians to the land and could not see that tribes such as the Pyramid Lake Paiutes had their own ties reaching down into ground they had revered for thousands of years.” (p. 237)

A sordid chapter in the history of the American Civil Liberties Union comes out in Drinnon’s history. The national leadership of the liberal organization acquiesced in the round-up of Japanese-Americans and aided Myer and other Roosevelt administration bureaucrats in stifling complaints against the camps. Officers of the national office also tried to thwart the West Coast bureau from investigating the camps.

Another organization that collaborated with government authorities was the Japanese American Citizens League. Its leader in the early 1940s, Mike Masaru Masaoka, was more American than the Americans. He planted informers in the camps and fingered troublesome individuals for isolation.

Masaoka did not remain a stalwart ally of Myer, however. In the 1970s he lobbied Congress to establish a Commission to investigate the Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, and this Commission was finally established in July 1980, two years before Myer's death. Drinnon comments, "Galling beyond words [to Myer] was the fact that JACL lobbyist Mike Masaoka had piloted this loathsome act through Congress." (p.252)

The villains in *Keeper of Concentration Camps* are run-of-the-mill Americans. Racial arrogance and complacent authority—not lust or greed—motivated the crimes of these social workers, administrators and patriots.

Happily, the story has its heroes and heroines as well. Japanese-American "internees" resisted the racist manipulators in ways that were rarely flamboyant, but more than adequate to trouble the administrators. Indigenous Americans, for centuries victims of European duplicity, are learning to fight their battles on many fronts. Their insistence on the right to control tribal affairs and their own lands makes governmental bureaucrats tremble. A number of talented allies joined both groups of resisters in their struggles. Drinnon dedicates his history to all these no-sayers, courageous individuals who resisted one of the United States gross attempts at social engineering.

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