The early population of Niagara Falls was largely of British origin, but from around the 1880s, this began to change with a new influx of peoples of European background. The construction boom that created railways, a post office, fire hall, street car system, steam electric generating plant, water works and numerous churches attracted mainly Italian immigrants. Later on, with the turn-of-the-century hydro electric plants at the Falls, more Germans, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Polish and others began to arrive as well.

The growing close-knit Italian community opened new commercial establishments: groceries, barbershops, shoe repairs, etc., to meet their needs. They settled together, largely according to their areas of origin, in neighbourhoods in Clifton, Drummondville and the Glenview area. The first Italian organization came in 1912 with the construction of St. Ann’s Roman Catholic Church on Seventh Street (now Buchanan Avenue). By 1914 a Sons of Italy Lodge held court in a former rifle hall on Temperance Avenue. The Order Sons of Italy Niagara Falls Lodge was granted a charter in 1917 under the name of Marconi Lodge No. 1280, and an all-ladies Lodge, called Maria Pia di Savoia No. 1747, received its Charter on March 26, 1935.

The Sons of Italy began in New York in 1905 as a benevolent society for Italian immigrants, providing them with a “stronger voice to defend their rights in a land where they felt constantly antagonized. It gave them a sense of identity among many people of different origins and different cultures.”¹ The Lodge provided a place where they could maintain their language and traditions, as well as funding in case of illness or death in a time before the existence of Canada’s welfare, unemployment insurance and health care systems.

The Order Sons of Italy of Ontario (OSIO) proliferated in Ontario through the late 1910s, when Italy was an ally of Great Britain and Canada in World War I, into the 1920s and the 1930s. With the development of events in Europe throughout the 1930s, many Italian organizations in Canada, especially the OSIO lodges, were influenced by consular officials and staff, and did not hesitate to display openly a great enthusiasm for Fascism ideology and Italy’s leader, Benito Mussolini.²

Then, on June 10, 1940, Mussolini declared war on Great Britain and France, and Canada declared war on Italy. About 31,000 Italian Canadians were officially designated “enemy aliens” under the provisions of the War Measures Act. The Act was first introduced during World War I to give the government unlimited powers to protect the state from any internal or external threats, to ban subversive political organizations and to suspend foreign-language newspapers. It also allowed for the internment of Canadian residents born in countries or empires at war with Canada. When Canada formally declared war on Germany on September 10, 1939, around 850 German-Canadians were interned and over 66,000 German and Austrian Canadians (naturalized citizens) who had arrived in Canada after 1922, were forced to report to the police regularly. Later, when Italy entered the war on the side of the Germans, the Canadian government gave the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) orders to arrest Italian Canadians considered to be a security risk. Of the approximate 112,625 Italian-Canadian residents in Canada, 31,000 were officially designated as enemy aliens. Of these, 587 men and 4 women were taken from their homes and separated from their families.³

In Niagara, in the evening of June 10, 1940, simultaneous raids were held by the RCMP and local police on homes and businesses in St. Catharines, Thorold, Humberstone, Merritton, Niagara Falls, and Fort Erie. Members of fascist organizations, fascist literature and regalia were seized during this operation. During the time of the arrests, anyone who had in their possession any minutes, books or other papers regarding the business of the Marconi Lodge would have burned or otherwise disposed of them immediately. Any records seized by the RCMP were never returned. That night, six men in Niagara Falls and Stamford were taken; during June, July and August, 27 men from Niagara Falls, high ranking officials of the Marconi Lodge, and one woman, the venerable of the Maria Pia di Savoia Lodge, were interned, the men at Camp Petawawa, and the woman at the Kingston Women’s Penitentiary.⁴

Across Canada, non-naturalized Italians living in Canada and those who had become Canadian citizens after September 1, 1929, had to present themselves immediately at the local RCMP detachment to be registered and fingerprinted. They also had to turn in any weapons or explosives in their possession. Those Italian Canadians affected by this order had thirty days to comply or face arrest.

In Niagara Falls, the Order Sons of Italy were denied permission to use a city park for a picnic. Whether this was the result of discrimination or the wish of the city to avoid possible trouble between Italian Canadians and others is unclear. In addition, the twenty Italian Canadians employed by the City of Niagara Falls all swore an oath of allegiance but were not
allowed to converse in Italian with anyone during work hours. Still, a motion introduced in Niagara Falls City Council on June 19 to dismiss all Italian Canadians employed by the city failed to get a seconder.  

The local internees for the most part remained at Camp Petawawa for about one year. During the internment and for several months afterwards, the Marconi Lodge remained closed, but by the end of 1942, three of the formerly interred officers decided to try to revive the Association. Slowly but surely the club came back to life, though membership stayed very low until after the war.

Individual rights have been suspended for the common good in extreme times of emergency and war. Italian Canadians were not the only ethnic group interned during World War II. The Canadian government ordered the internment of roughly 800 German Canadians and 700 Japanese Canadians – and more than 22,000 Japanese Canadians were forcibly relocated. Members of both the Communist Party of Canada and the Fascist National Unity Party were interned during the war. Yet the internment of Italian Canadians is little known in Canadian History.

Notes
2 - Ibid p 1
3 - Italian Canadians as Enemy Aliens, Memories of World War II, www.italiancanadianww2.ca
4 - Ibid
5 - Ibid
6 - Ibid