

Historica Canada Education Portal

Komagata Maru

Overview

This lesson examines social attitudes towards East Asians in the early 1900s in British Columbia and Canada. The arrival of the Komagata Maru in Vancouver harbour in 1914 challenges the Canadian government's continuous passage rule.

Background

"Komagata Maru, a Japanese-owned freighter chartered out of Hong Kong in April 1914 by 376 Punjabis, mostly SIKHS, bound for Canada. At the time, East Indians were kept out of Canada by an order-in-council requiring them to come to Canada by continuous passage from India, when no steamship line provided the service. Before the Canadian government, under tremendous pressure, closed the door in 1908, about 2000 Sikhs had settled in BC. In 1913, 38 Sikhs contested the continuous-passage order and were admitted. This encouraged others to charter the Komagata Maru.

When it arrived at Vancouver in May 1914, most of the passengers were detained on board. They waited for 2 months while immigration officials maneuvered to keep them out of court and, after they had lost their case, while their leaders negotiated departure terms. The arrival of the RCN cruiser RAINBOW on July 20 added to the Canadian pressure, and on

July 23 Komagata Maru sailed for Calcutta, where it was met by police suspicious of the organizers' politics. On disembarkation, 20 passengers were killed in a shooting exchange. The affair strengthened Indian nationalist feeling, but did not significantly soften Canadian immigration law."

(Hugh Johnston, "Komagata Maru," The Canadian Encyclopedia)

Further Information:

Legislation, as well as ill treatment, blocked the immigration of many groups. In 1914, the Komagata Maru attempted to bring a boat-load of immigrants from India to Vancouver. Because they had stopped in Hong Kong, the people were not allowed to disembark. After staying in Vancouver Harbour for two months, the boat returned to India, still full.

Most of the photos of this time illustrate mainly Sikh immigration owing to the fact that early settlement from Punjab was predominantly Sikh. In the early part of this century all immigrants from India were indiscriminately called "hindoo" or "hindu" regardless of religious affiliation. The term "hindoo" was also sometimes used in a pejorative sense for anyone from that continent.

Activities

Procedures:

Begin the activity by posing the questions:

*Is everyone who applies to come to Canada as an immigrant accepted?
Has this always been the case?*

Display an overhead transparency of the photograph of the Komagata Maru. (You could use the photo [attached](#)).

Ask students if they recognize the picture or understand its subject.

Describe the history of the Komagata Maru for students and use additional photos and charts from web sites or books to discuss the historical images and information.

From the perspective of a passenger aboard the Komagata Maru, write a letter to Prime Minister Robert Borden. The letter should include a description of who you are, why you want to immigrate to Canada and what you can offer Canada. Defend your position using evidence from the documents (Document 1, 2, 3, etc. – cite as D1, D2, D3) and the visual evidence presented in class. Your letter should consider two criteria: whether it is historically realistic given the time, and whether it represents a thoughtful understanding of a passenger.

Resources

[Komagata Maru - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Hou, Charles and Cynthia.(1997) *Great Canadian Political Cartoons 1820-1914*. Vancouver: Moody's Lookout Press.

Lewis, Harry. et al. (2002) "Komagata Maru." *Immigration in the 20th Century Canada: Critical Challenges Across the Curriculum*.

Manak, Sonia. (1998) *The Sikh Immigrant Experience* 31:4 34-38

Roy, Patricia E. "British Columbia's Fear of Asians," in W. Peter Ward and Robert A. J. McDonald (eds.), *British Columbia: Historical Readings* (1989)

Roy, Patricia E. (ed.), *A History of British Columbia: Selected Readings* (1989).