

# Historica Canada Education Portal

## Morris "Two Gun" Cohen

### Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the "Two Gun" Cohen biography from [The Canadians](#) series. The video combines both the biography of a unique Canadian, Morris Cohen, with a history of modern China. Cohen, was an outcast and criminal within Canadian society, but he made a significant global contribution as Dr. Sun Yat-sen's personal bodyguard and close friend.

### Aims

Students will study the story of "Two Gun" Cohen to learn more about a variety of themes in Canadian and World history. Students will examine: the history of race and ethnic conflict in Canada, the connections between the development of modern China with Canada, the power structures within a society and the history of immigration in Canada.

### Background

China – for thousands of years an unknown, closed nation. In 4,000 years of history, the start of the twentieth century was the most volatile. During these formative years there was one man inside the corridors of

power who was not Chinese. Personal guard to the father of modern China, Sun Yat-sen, he was a warrior with a heart of gold. He became a general in the Chinese army who was known for his honesty, loyalty, and for always carrying two large-caliber pistols. He was "Two Gun" Cohen.

Morris "Two Gun" Cohen is one of Canada's more spectacular and completely forgotten personalities. A Jewish cockney from London, he was sent to Saskatchewan by his parents in 1905, at sixteen years of age. There he learned to gamble and shoot, eventually ending up in the boom town of Saskatoon. After saving a Chinese restaurant owner from a robbery, he began an association with Chinese culture that lasted all his life. He was chosen to bodyguard Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the father of modern China, as he toured across Canada. Trying to raise money to overthrow the last emperor, there was a one million dollar price on the Doctor's head. With "Two-Gun" as his guard, there were no incidents in Canada. After serving in the First World War, Morris Cohen moved to China and became Sun Yat-sen's personal aide and bodyguard.

Travelling with Sun Yat-sen, being privy to the corridors of power in China and Hong Kong, Morris Cohen had insight into China like no other westerner. In one of the many civil wars and battles, he took a bullet in his right arm, which led to the decision to become ambidextrous with his guns. From then on he packed two 45. calibre automatics. He soon became known as "Two-Gun" Cohen, with many an incident to add to the legend.

It was a volatile time, and his adventures were frequent and extraordinary. Attempts were made continuously on Sun Yat-sen's Life. One such attempt had four paid assassins who ambushed their train at a remote stop, armed with machine pistols and bombs. "Two-Gun" spotted them crawling from underneath the train, shielded Sun Yat-sen with his

large body, and let fly with both pistols, foiling their plans. He encountered loads of enemy troops trying to sneak into the compound, spies in the guise of wounded soldiers with guns in their bandages, frontal attacks by small armies, and the list goes on. Instrumental in purchasing and smuggling arms into China, he was later made a general in the Chinese army by Sun Yat-sen.

After Dr. Sun's death, Cohen worked for his son, Sun Fo, in Canton. He was later interred by the Japanese in Hong Kong. The last years of Cohen's life were spent back in Montréal.

## **Activities**

**Time Allowance:** 1 - 4 hours

## **Procedures:**

The video captures the political, economic and social climate of early Canada by revealing the tensions between the dominant white and Chinese immigrant cultures in Saskatoon. Despite his ethnic difference, the Chinese-Canadian community embraced Cohen as their own – a relationship from which his passionate conviction to defend Sun Yat-sen evolved.

The video is well suited for both Intermediate and Senior courses that deal directly with either Canadian or Modern World History content. Cohen is representative of a Canadian working abroad and creating change. His history is worthy of study as it raises some compelling questions about the complexities of ethnic and economic relations, political movements, and individual self-definition. The paradox within any

society - the conflict of needs between the individual and the community - is examined critically in the documentary. This portrait of Morris Cohen resonates with larger questions that can be adapted to most curricula.

1. Use this video as an introduction to the history of race and ethnic conflict in Canada. Trace the progress in Canadian history from the overtly racist policies and sentiments from the nineteenth century to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms of today. Students could recreate a scenario in which Chinese and Anglo-Saxon Canadian citizens interact in which they would assume roles to highlight the interracial tensions and biases.

2. Have your students search, using *The Canadians* series and other sources, for names of other Canadians who had an impact on other countries, for example, Dr. Norman Bethune, Max Aitken (Lord Beaverbrook) and Conrad Black. Ask your students to compare the contributions and influence of these Canadians with that of Cohen.

3. Use the video in a World History context to link the development of modern China with Canada to provide relevance and create interest. It could also serve to compare and contrast political ideologies and the tensions between them (specifically democracy, communism, socialism). A debate between competing interest groups, each arguing what China should be, would highlight the tensions.

4. Use the video as a starting point to raise awareness of the power structures within a society. Who is alienated? Why? Specifically, the video serves to introduce class and race issues. Research could stem from this into other examples of conflict between dominant and marginalized society members toward the aim of understanding what unites Canada? Ask the students to produce a collage of images to

illustrate this theme of conflict based on class and race in Canadian history.

5. Use the video in context of the history of immigration in Canada. Students could create a visual or written portrait of one ethnic group's experience of arriving in Canada. What obstacles did they face? Where did they arrive? Where did they go? Using primary and secondary documents to personalize the history of immigration would create windows into our collective experience of the formation of a nation. For examples of the immigrant experience visit the [Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21](#) Web site.

## **Resources**

[Morris Cohen Worksheet](#)

[Morris Cohen - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Soldier of Fortune - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Levy, Daniel S. *Two-Gun Cohen: A Biography*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.

