

## Introduction

# “White Canada Policy”: The Exclusion of the *Komagata Maru*

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This factsheet will examine historical racism and white supremacy in Canada, using the 2004 film *Continuous Journey* by director Ali Kazimi. In the first half of the twentieth century, Canada was able to exclude British Indian immigration through legislation and inhumane tactics. This factsheet will map the mechanisms that made the exclusion possible, so we can understand how power works in order to resist and prevent racism and undermine white supremacy.

## Mechanisms Which Upheld White Supremacy & Excluded British Indians From Canada

### Racist Policy

- In 1908, a young bureaucrat, Mackenzie King, was given direction from prime minister Wilfrid Laurier to create a policy that would prevent South Asians from entering Canada. The government wanted to find ways to build a “white man’s country,” hence, the *Continuous Journey Regulation* amendment to *The Immigration Act* was introduced. The policy meant that people could only enter Canada if they came directly from their birth country. The immigration officers selectively enforced this policy, only choosing to apply it to people from India.
- The Canadian government forced the company, Canadian Pacific, to cancel the only direct passage from India to Canada in 1908. As a result of the closure, British Indian immigration to Canada was reduced significantly.

### Challenging the *Continuous Journey Regulation*: The *Komagata Maru*

In 1914, businessman and Indian nationalist Gurdit Singh chartered a ship called the *Komagata Maru* in Hong Kong to help his countrymen immigrate to Canada. The *Komagata Maru*, carrying 12 Hindu, 24 Muslim, and 340 Sikh people, departed from British Hong Kong and travelled for two-months to Vancouver, BC. They were propelled by Britain’s rhetoric that British subjects were free to go anywhere within the British empire. When they arrived at the Vancouver harbour on the 23rd of May, the British Columbia government refused to let the passengers off the ship. They deployed sketchy tactics to stall the ship, hoping the passengers would run out of crucial supplies such as food, water, and money. The factors below further explain how white Canadians and the state were able to pull this off.

### The White Citizens of Canada

The exclusion of the *Komagata Maru* did not happen because of just one politician or individual; it occurred because of the vast majority of white people within the country who had racist agendas and campaigned for white-only policy. A great number of white people in Vancouver demanded the *Komagata Maru* ship to be turned around and sent back to India.

### The Press

Violence in the form of silencing certain stories and groups of people. The press did not report the harsh conditions of the passengers on the ship. Only the narratives that supported Canada’s idea of a white future were told. An article title that encouraged fear and hostility towards the incoming *Komagata Maru* ship was shown in the film: “Hindu Invasion Now Imminent.”

### The Court

- The government knew that it would be much more difficult to keep the British Indians out if they all got a fair chance in court as individual trials would likely reveal loopholes where some passengers could get through the court and into the country. With this in mind, the government decided to have a one-person trial. The trial of one man Munshi Singh, a 26 year old farmer, would determine the fate of all of the *Komagata Maru* passengers. Canada denied all 376 passengers based on Singh not fitting Canada's targeted Immigration Act requirements (that he must have 200\$ in his possession, he did not engage in a 'continuous journey' and Canada imposed the idea that he would inevitably be an 'unskilled labourer') which led to the *Continuous Journey Regulation* staying active for another 34 years. The court was biased and had no intention of allowing the *Komagata Maru* passengers to gain entry to Canada.

## The Police

- After Munshi Singh lost in court, the government demanded the *Komagata Maru* to leave Canadian shores; they sent a clear message to the ship: “leave our shores you uninvited Indians, or we fire.” They meant it: they sent approximately 150 police officers, alongside Vancouver Immigration Agent Malcolm Reid, to the ship. The event was described through Gurdit Singh’s viewpoint: “Some of the police fired at the passengers, without the slightest warning.”

## The Ending

On July 23, 1914, the government finally agreed to provisions so that the *Komagata Maru* would leave Canadian shores. The *Komagata Maru* left for Hong Kong and Singapore but were blocked entry by British authorities upon arrival. The ship then headed for Calcutta, where they were once again refused entrance, by a British gunboat. The ship was then diverted to Budge Budge in India, where British troops would raid the ship, shooting and killing 26 passengers, with 24 passengers missing afterwards.

## The Future: What We Have Learned & Why It Matters

- As a British colony, British Indians had no governmental support that recognized the “indignities” they faced. They were “insulted, dishonoured, and disgraced” by their fellow British Canadian subjects. *Continuous Journey* shows us the harm done to the British Indian people and how Canada as a nation inflicted such pain. Expert historian Hugh Johnson from Simon Fraser University urges the Canadian public to understand that the deportation of the *Komagata Maru* didn’t occur because of a few racists, rather: “they must understand the generally racist underpinnings of Canadian political and social philosophy.”
- As stated in the film, there was “concealed policy of exclusion” in Canada. There were many moving parts in Canada’s attempt to exclude British Indians from their nation; we have to dissect the injustices of the past to get a deep understanding of how racist events occur. It is long overdue for Canadians to acknowledge the racism that has and still occurs throughout the country. Canadian teachers should teach events like the *Komagata Maru* in their classrooms. The state needs to reconcile with the people that have been harmed so extensively by racism and white supremacy. To move forward, we must learn from these devastating events to prevent history from repeating itself.



This image was obtained from CBC: it represents the great disparity between immigration to Canada for white people and south Asian people in the 1900s. Retrieved from: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/formal-apology-to-b-c-s-chinese-community-questioned-1.2429967>



This stamp was released by Canada Post in 2014 for the 100-year anniversary of the *Komagata Maru*.

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[https://www.canadapost.ca/web/en/blogs/collecting/details.page?article=2014/05/01/komagata\\_maru\\_100th\\_&cattype=collecting&cat=stamps](https://www.canadapost.ca/web/en/blogs/collecting/details.page?article=2014/05/01/komagata_maru_100th_&cattype=collecting&cat=stamps)

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<[https://webapp.library.uvic.ca/videos/view.php?vfn=kazimi\\_Continuous-Journey.mp4](https://webapp.library.uvic.ca/videos/view.php?vfn=kazimi_Continuous-Journey.mp4)>.

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