

The Komagata Maru Incident



<https://searcharchives.vancouver.ca>

In 1914, on the eve of World War I, a Japanese steam ship called Komagata Maru arrived in Vancouver carrying 376 passengers from Hong Kong. The ship was chartered by a wealthy businessman named Gurdit Singh who lived in Singapore. He was a leader of the Ghadarist Movement which challenged British laws in India and around the world. Singh recruited Hindu, Muslim and Sikh supporters from Hong Kong, Moji, Shanghai and Yokohama. When they arrived in Vancouver, some were allowed entry if they were previous residents, but many had to stay aboard the ship.

The ship was asked to leave but stayed for two months and eventually ran out of food and water. A few days before World War I erupted, the Komagata Maru was escorted out of the harbour by the Royal Navy. After sailing to India, a riot broke out as passengers were arrested by the Indian authorities for rebelling against British laws. Gurdit Singh escaped but nineteen passengers were shot and killed during the riot.

The incident highlights the complications of the threat of war while British Columbia was a British Dominion. It also illustrates the complicated nature of immigration policies of 1914, where some immigrants were welcome, while others were turned away.

Remembering this event allows us the opportunity to recognize a period of Canadian history that illustrates the need for understanding. Appreciating people of different cultures who have made Canada their home, contributes to the wellbeing, uniqueness, diversity and inclusion of our country.

A Timeline of the KOMAGATA MARU

MAY 23

1914

On the eve of WWI, a ship named Komagata Maru arrived in Vancouver carrying 376 passengers from Hong Kong, Moji, Shanghai, Yokohama. They hoped to settle and challenge the British Columbia's immigration laws. Many did not meet the requirements to enter Canada so they had to stay on board the ship upon arrival.



JUNE 1

1914

Legal hearings began for the vessel's passengers. Nineteen were admitted by June 9th. The immigration policy at the time required a fee to enter Canada. There was also a law that required immigrants arrive by "continuous journey" from their land of birth or citizenship. This included all "Asiatic countries". When these requirements were not met, officials refused to allow the remaining 355 passengers to disembark.



JUNE 23

1914

1,200 Vancouver residents, including the city's mayor and member of Parliament, met in Vancouver's Dominion Hall. Many demanded that the government send the vessel away due to fears of World War I erupting.



JULY 6

1914

The British Columbia Court of Appeal upheld the Immigration Branch's rejection of passenger Munshi Singh, whose case represented the entire group.



JULY 18

1914

Deportation papers were served, but the passengers refused to allow the Japanese crew to move the ship from Vancouver's harbour. During the night, several police officers and immigration agents attempted to board the Komagata Maru but the passengers threw bricks and rocks at them.



JULY 23

1914

Prime Minister Robert Borden ordered that the naval vessel H.M.V.S. Rainbow move the Komagata Maru ship using force if necessary. Huge crowds gathered to watch on Vancouver's harbor front as the Rainbow escorted the Komagata Maru from British Columbian waters.



SEPTEMBER

29

1914

When the S. S. Komagata Maru reached Budge-Budge near Calcutta, Indian police arrested the passengers. A riot broke out. Twenty of the passengers were killed during the riot when the police attempted to force the group onto a train going to Punjab.



Learn more at
<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/komagata-maru>

Apologies & Reconciliation

In 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper made a formal apology to the South Asian community and to the families of the victims of this incident in a park in Surrey. However, members of the South Asian community protested that the apology should have been made in the House of Commons in Ottawa. The BC Legislature also issued a formal apology.



On May 18, 2016, Prime Minister Trudeau apologized to the descendants of the Komagata Maru and the entire South Asian community in the House of Commons in Ottawa. Since then, the Canadian government has committed to learning from the past.



May 23rd now marks the day that we remember the Komogata Maru incident every year.

Learning from History

For many reasons, Canadian society is open, and inclusive of people from all nations.

The Komagata Maru case is a significant one that calls attention to the fact that different values and laws existed in Canada's past. It is vital to understand the practices of the past in order to find better ways of working and living together in the future.



The experience of the passengers on the Komagata Maru, in Vancouver, challenges us to confront injustice with courage, persistence and resilience. This historic event provides an opportunity to learn from past practices for better appreciation for the South Asian members of the Mission community. This helps us to acknowledge and celebrate their contributions to Mission and Canadian society. Today, Mission Council resolves to recognize this event in Canadian history. The City Council's direction has been implemented through the collective work of Mr. Raj Toor, grandson of Gurdit Singh and Vice President of the Descendants of the Komagata Maru Society, and Dr. Satwinder Bains, Director of the South Asian Studies at the University of the Fraser Valley in collaboration of Miwas under the British Domain, Mission's Community Heritage Commission, the Mission School Board, Mission Parks & Recreation Advisory Committee.



Thanks to the Mission Community Heritage Commission for creating this display.

Thank you to the Descendants of the Komagata Maru Society for bringing awareness to this historic event. Thank you to Dr. Satwinder Bains and the University of the Fraser Valley for providing their expertise.

Thanks to the Vancouver Archives for providing photos and documents.