

CHAPTER 4

THE *KOMAGATA MARU*

Gurdit Singh Sets Sail

When middle-aged Sikh businessman and advocate of Indian independence Gurdit Singh visited the Hong Kong Gurdwara in December 1913, he met a large group of mostly young, frustrated Indian men who were hoping to immigrate and find work in Canada, despite the rules in place to keep them out. A previous attempt to charter a ship to take them to Canada had fallen apart. Gurdit Singh was asked to help, and he responded. He searched unsuccessfully for a ship they could charter to sail directly from India to Canada. Eventually he found a Japanese-owned vessel, the *Komagata Maru*, in Hong Kong. Gurdit Singh organized a passenger committee that helped prepare the ship for the voyage. Tickets were set at the usual price for the trip. Although he knew the risks, Singh hoped their challenge of Canada's immigration laws would be successful. He brought his seven-year-old son, Balwant, on the journey with him. At three other Asian ports the ship took on more Indian emigrants for a total of 376 passengers.



**WATCH
THE VIDEO**

Hopeful Passengers

Gurdit Singh and his small son, front left, along with other passengers aboard the *Komagata Maru*. “The main purpose of every Sikh is to fight for independence,” he had said; chartering the ship to Canada was part of Gurdit Singh’s fight. Gurdit Singh acknowledged that the voyage was a test of the British, Canadian, and Indian authorities. He told a newspaper reporter: “If we are admitted, we will know that the Canadian government is just. If we are deported, we will sue the government and if we cannot obtain redress we will go back and take up the matter with the Indian government.” The *Komagata Maru* pressed forward, its passengers only mildly aware of the uproar that it was creating.



Watch Professor Hugh Johnston set the scene for the voyage and what happened when the ship arrived in Vancouver at tinyurl.com/komagata4



Gurdit Singh's Ancestral Home

Gurdit Singh was born at Sirhali in the Punjab in 1860. He came from a long line of warriors; his grandfather and father had served in the British Indian Army. Gurdit left home for Malaya in the late 1880s due to the bad economy and famine in India. By 1913 he had become a strong advocate for India's independence.

Setting Sail

After legal challenges and delays by Hong Kong's governor, the *Komagata Maru* was finally allowed to set sail in April 1914 from Hong Kong harbour, pictured here. Officials in Canada had a chance to stop the departure from Hong Kong, but failed to act in time. The ship went first to Shanghai, where seventy-three passengers joined the original 165 on board. In a letter to relatives in India, passenger Nanak Singh said, "I am leaving on the old man's ship." Next the ship picked up more passengers in Moji, Japan and their final stop, Yokohama. The final total of passengers was 376 — twenty-four Muslims, twelve Hindus, and 340 Sikhs.



Japanese Ship and Crew

The *Komagata Maru* was owned by a small Japanese company and had a Japanese captain and crew, some of whom are pictured here with Gurdit Singh. Gurdit also hired a doctor and priest to travel on board.



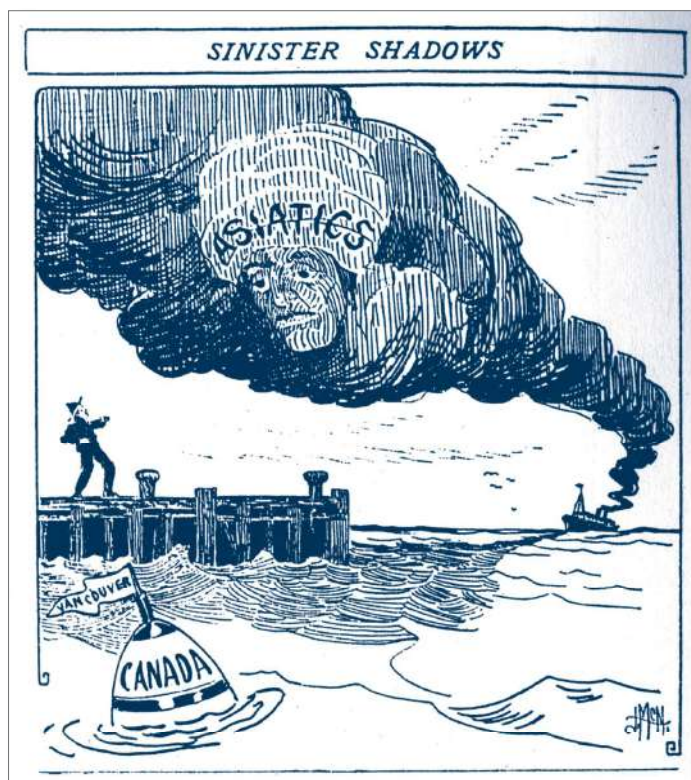
Captain Vancouver Cartoon

In this cartoon, "Captain Vancouver" is speaking to a group of Asian immigrants: "Go back, my labour market is glutted, do you expect me to allow you to take bread from the mouths of my own?" The cartoon was published in the *BC Saturday Sunset* on May 30, 1914.

If we are admitted, we will know that the Canadian government is just.

Docking in Canada

Along the journey, the ship received a couple of important visitors who gave speeches and inspired the passengers. Balwant Singh Atwal, the priest of the Vancouver Khalsa Diwan Society, was on his way back from India when he met the *Komagata Maru* in April at Moji, Japan. He lectured the passengers on the cause of Indian freedom and the importance of their journey. In Yokohama, Bhag Singh, the former priest of the Hong Kong Gurdwara who had been deported from Canada, boarded the ship and distributed issues of the revolutionary *Ghadar* newspaper. He also gave a fiery speech to the passengers. Upon arrival at Canada's shores, the ship landed at the William's Head quarantine station on Vancouver Island, BC. It passed inspection and was allowed to make its way to Vancouver. It anchored for the night of May 22, 1914, across from Burrard Inlet, and later moved closer to Vancouver, dropping its anchor about a kilometre off shore. Here, the ship was placed under armed guard. Instead of being allowed to land as immigrants or refugees, the passengers found themselves prisoners on the ship. Except for twenty passengers returning to Canada and the ship's doctor and family, no one was allowed to leave. The only visitors allowed were senior Vancouver immigration official Malcolm Reid, and the police intelligence agent William Hopkinson, customs and medical inspectors, and the shipping agent for the owners of the *Komagata Maru*.



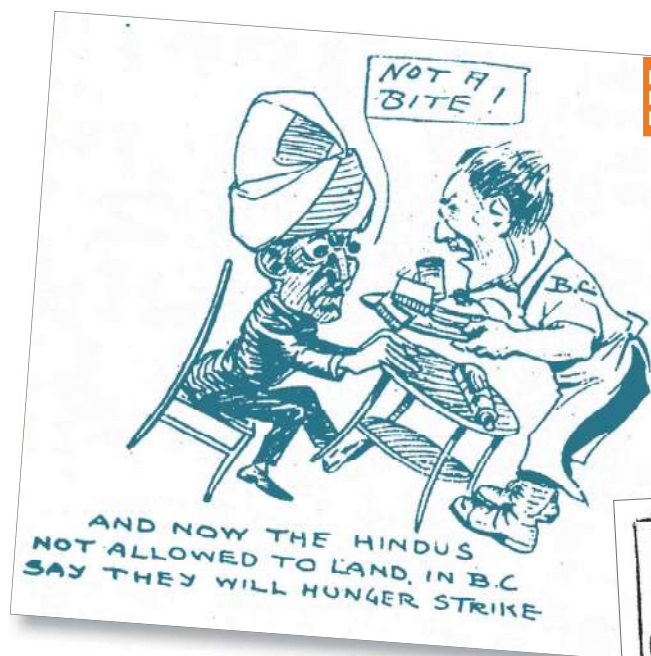
Racist Cartoon

The *Komagata Maru* is pictured in this 1914 cartoon in a Vancouver newspaper. The ship is steaming toward Vancouver with a threatening turbaned man, labelled Asiatics, in a cloud of its smoke. The caption refers to Asian immigrants as “all the same” and as “sinister.” Negative press like this served to increase hostility toward Asians amongst many BC residents.



Ready to Come Ashore

When the ship landed at the quarantine station at William's Head, it was met by a launch hired by resident Indian immigrants and by Reverend L.W. Hall from the Hindu Friend Society of Victoria. Hall asked on behalf of the group for permission to speak to the passengers, but Reid and Hopkinson refused this request. At dawn on May 23, 1914, the 376 passengers stood on deck with bags and parcels packed. Many of the men were well dressed in British-style suits. One local newspaper story read, “Hindu invaders now in the city harbour on *Komagata Maru*.” The general feeling of the public was that these people were not welcome and should be sent back to where they came from.



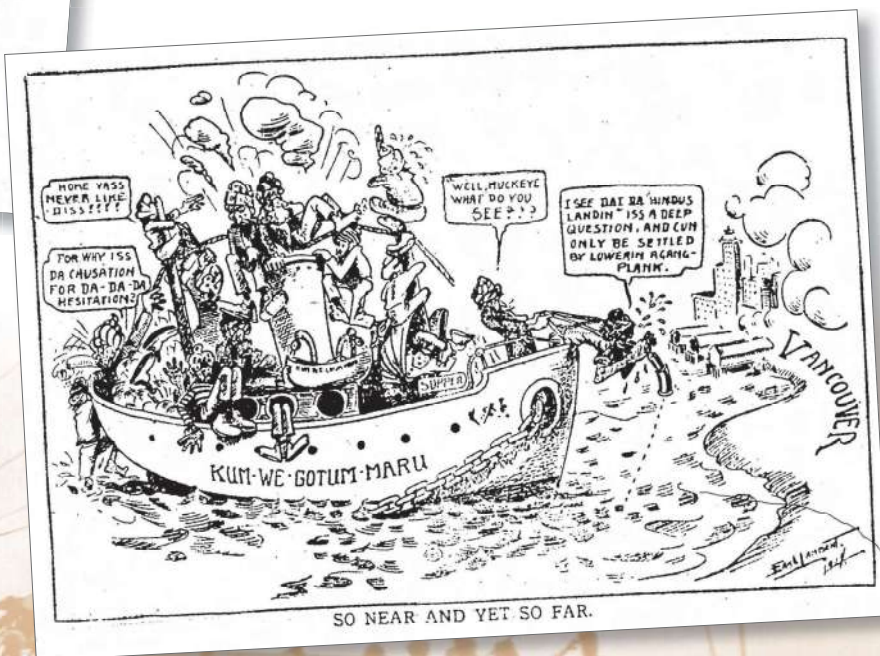
WATCH THE VIDEO

Hunger Strike

The passengers of the *Komagata Maru* went on a hunger strike to protest not being allowed to disembark in Vancouver. The local media were very hostile, and racist in their depictions. This cartoon shows a man with a BC label holding out a tray of food that the turbaned man refuses, flipping the table.



Watch as Doreen Indra talks about racism in the media and how it affected society's perception of the immigrants, as well as the Indian community, at tinyurl.com/komagata5



Making Fun

Published in the Vancouver daily newspaper *The Province* on June 2, 1914, this political cartoon portrays the ship at standstill in the harbour as comedic. The dialogue mocks the immigrants' English-language skills.

Instead of being allowed to land as immigrants or refugees, the passengers found themselves prisoners on the ship.



"We are determined. . ."

When Gurdit Singh told members of the press at William's Head, "We are British citizens and we consider we have a right to visit any part of the Empire. . . We are determined to make this a test case and if we are refused entrance to your country, the matter will not end here. What is done with this shipload of my people will determine whether we shall have peace in all parts of the British Empire." For many Indians, this was a test of the true value of their status as British subjects. Advocates of Indian independence saw it as proof that all British subjects were not equal.



One at a Time

After several days of delay, passengers were brought ashore one at a time for hearings by immigration officials to determine whether they could be cleared to land in Canada. The passenger committee and their lawyer, Edward Bird, tried to get these cases heard by a court, but the local immigration officer Malcolm Reid used "sharp practices" to prevent the passengers from having their day in court.

Hungry and Restless

Canadian authorities refused to provide food and water to the *Komagata Maru* passengers for two weeks after the ship's landing. The processing of each passenger was so slow, the passengers grew restless and desperate. Fights over water broke out on board with the Japanese crew, and threats were made on Gurdit Singh's life. Vancouver lawyer Edward Bird was hired by a special "shore committee" that had been organized by the Vancouver Indian community to represent the 376 passengers. He was not allowed on board the ship to speak with the people he was representing. Immigration officials permitted only letters back and forth. Edward Bird reported to his superiors in Ottawa: "Gurdit Singh is even more a prisoner than if he were in a penitentiary."



A Proposal

Through his lawyer Edward Bird, Gurdit Singh, seen here in the background with arms raised, proposed that a detention shed be provided for the *Komagata Maru's* passengers at his expense, and that the ship be released back to its Hong Kong owners. All passengers could then be detained ashore, subject to their deportation or admittance to Canada. Immigration official Malcolm Reid strongly opposed this idea, claiming to be afraid of white riots should the passengers be allowed on shore.



Big Attraction

A huge crowd of curious local residents and reporters gathered in Vancouver to watch the *Komagata Maru* situation unfold.

ਜਗਜੀਤ ਸਿੰਘ

[illegible]

"It is not about 376 Hindustanis on the ship but the fate of 330 million Indians..do not send less than 5 dollars please"

Fundraising on Shore

With demands for fees from the shipping agent mounting, leaders of the Vancouver Sikh community, Bhag Singh and Rahim Singh, organized an appeal to collect money from the Indian community. A meeting at the end of May 1914 was attended by more than 500 community members. They called for a return of the spirit of 1857 (the Mutiny), the need for unity against the British, and the inevitability of revolution if India did not gain self-rule within a few years.

Gurdit Singh wrote that William Hopkinson asked for a bribe of 2,000 pounds to solve the issue.

Private Meeting

As they waited in Vancouver, Gurdit Singh related that police agent William Hopkinson, shown in the centre of photo, above ladder, asked to meet privately with him. In his journal, Gurdit Singh wrote that Hopkinson asked for a bribe of 2,000 pounds to solve the issue. "Mr. Hopkinson held out that this was the only way open to us for effecting our landing and I agreed to relieve the sufferings of the passengers. I was to hand over to him an earnest of 1,000 pounds in gold, the remainder to be paid when all my passengers had landed." Hopkinson wanted Singh to swear on the Sikh holy book that he would not mention the deal to anybody. Singh refused since he would have to ask the community for the money. Hopkinson left empty-handed with the threat, "I will see you."

Stand Off

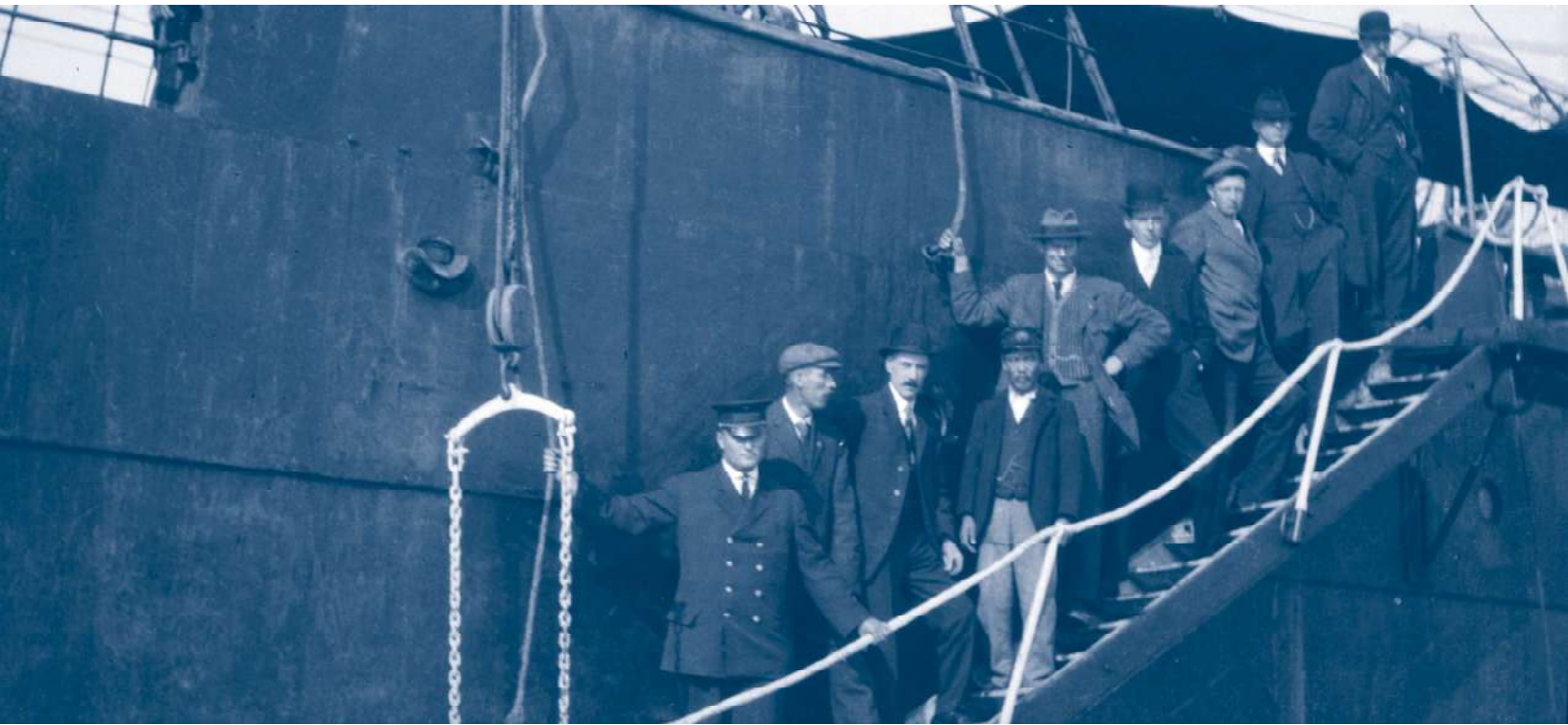
By the end of the first week of June 1914, about two weeks after their arrival, the passengers clearly lacked food and water. Immigration officials, pictured here, sent water but no food. On Friday, June 6, Gurdit Singh sent a telegram to the King of England and the Governor General of Canada via immigration officials. "No provisions since four days. Reid refuses provide. Charterer and passengers starving. Kept prisoners." The doctor on board sent a note ashore, warning that he and his family had nothing to eat and that he was unable to look after the health of passengers aboard. At Gurdit Singh's expense, Hopkinson provided one meal for passengers the following Monday night.



Hungry and Restless

The Court's Verdict

Almost three weeks after the ship landed at Vancouver, only about fourteen of its passengers had been processed. None had been ordered deported. Immigration officials were applying pressure by not providing food or water, claiming that the shipping company and its charterers were responsible for the passenger's provisions. Eventually the shore committee brought food and paid the money owed to the shipping agent, which gave them temporary control of the charter. Despite opposition from Canadian immigration official Malcolm Reid and local MP H.H. Stevens, federal government lawyers eventually ordered Reid to bring two passengers of the *Komagata Maru* forward to be tried as a test case under the *Immigration Act*. The test case ended in failure for the *Komagata Maru* passengers. Canada's right to limit immigration based on race was unanimously upheld by the five judges of BC's Court of Appeal.



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Closely Watched

Immigration officials are seen here on board the *Komagata Maru*. While the passengers were slowly processed on shore, an immigration launch with armed guards sailed around the ship at all hours keeping a close eye on passengers in order to prevent possible attempts to come ashore.



Defeated

The decision in the test case was that the passengers could be deported from Canada and denied the rights of other British citizens. The judges accepted the government's argument that it was permissible for the Canadian government to limit the civil rights of citizens, as it had already done so in the case of Indigenous people, such as those shown here.

Newspaper Coverage

The *Komagata Maru* situation was heavily covered in local press. In these three articles from the end of June 1914, a variety of quotes indicate the drama that was unfolding: "The Sikhs are an obstinate race . . .", "Gurdit Singh's life is in danger from passengers . . ." One article reports on various municipal meetings held in support of the exclusion of Indians. "Send the passengers to Ottawa if they are allowed to disembark . . ."

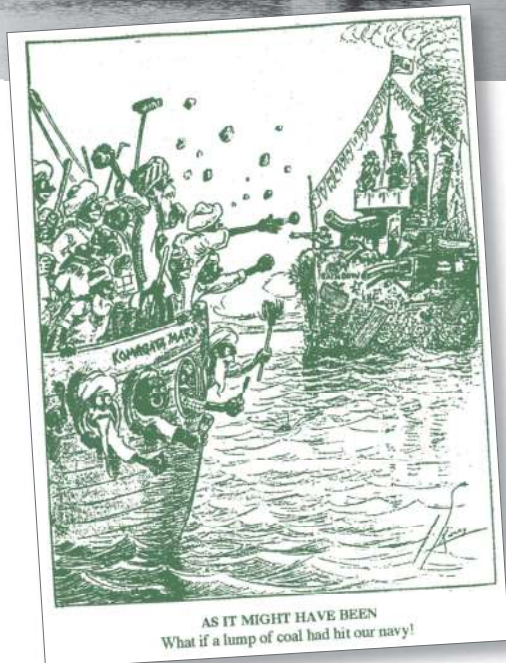
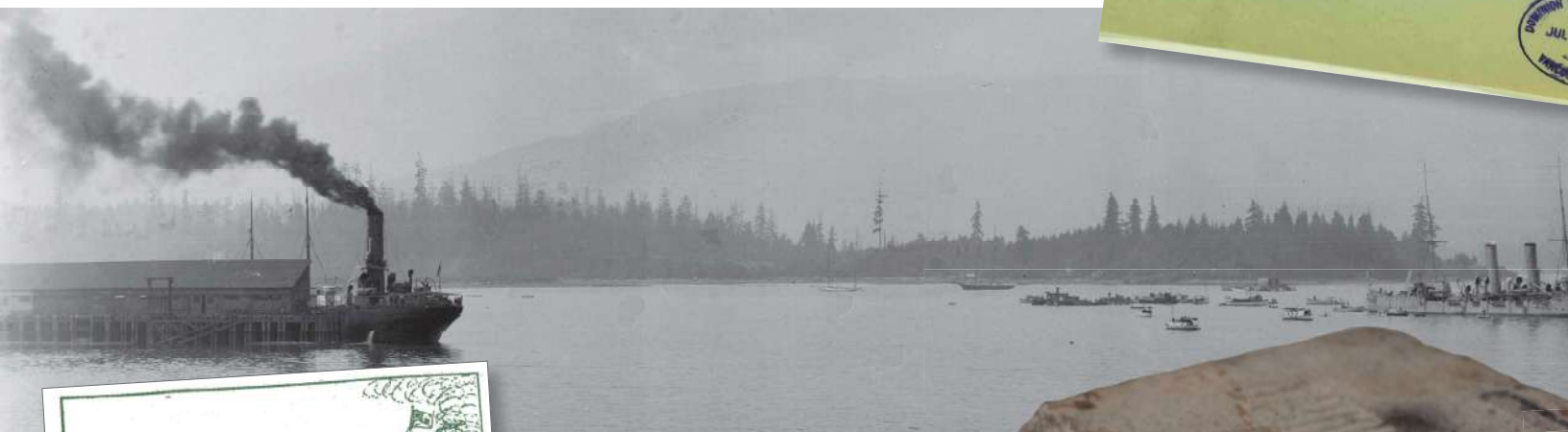
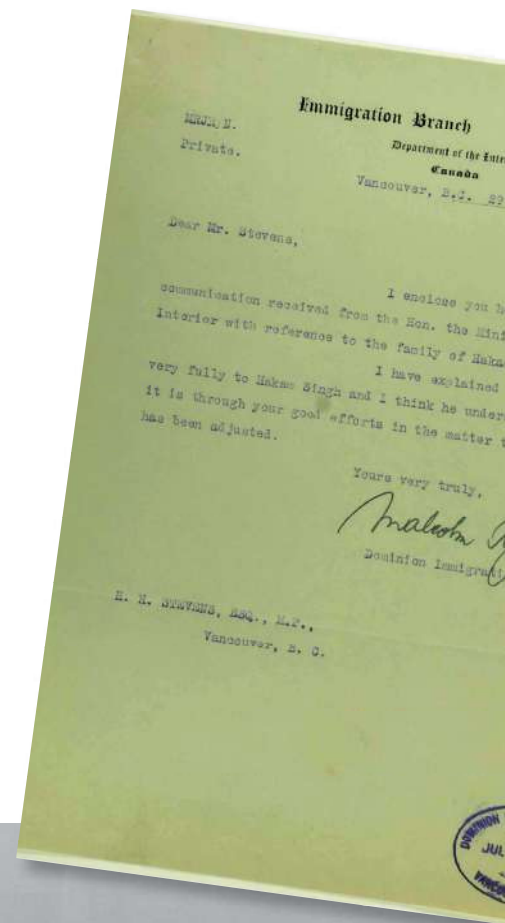


Shore Committee Provides Support

Members of the Indian shore committee are seen here with an immigration official. The shore committee raised money in the Indian immigrant community to pay for the charter costs, food, and supplies for the passengers. They spent more than \$70,000 (in 1914 dollars) to support the potential immigrants during the two months of their forced confinement on the ship.

Forced to Leave

Following the court decision, the *Komagata Maru* was ordered to leave with its passengers on board. Gurdit Singh refused to sail without adequate food and water, the removal of garbage, and proper sanitation onboard. By Friday, July 17, 1914, the *Komagata Maru* was cleared to leave. The ship was supplied with water but no food. The ship's doctor, Raghunath Singh, along with his family and twenty-two other passengers who were former residents of Canada, were allowed to come ashore to stay. That evening, the passengers on board would not let the ship's captain sail until food was provided. The police and the military were called in, and the confrontation escalated into violence. Finally, Prime Minister Borden sent a man to negotiate a settlement. Once food was provided, the passengers agreed to leave. On July 23, 1914, the *Komagata Maru* raised anchor and left Vancouver under an armed escort.



Fighting Back

Hard-line government officials decided to use force to take control of the ship and require it to depart. The authorities gathered more than 150 police and officials, armed with batons, revolvers, and rifles. They boarded the tugboat *Sea Lion* at one o'clock a.m. The passengers fought back, hurling lumps of coal, bricks, and other debris at the tugboat when it tied up alongside and police attempted to board the ship. Fifteen minutes after tying up to the *Komagata Maru*, the tug retreated. The passengers cheered their victory.



Brick Thrown at *Sea Lion*

This brick was one of the weapons used by passengers of the *Komagata Maru* to repel the *Sea Lion*. Officials were trying to force the ship to leave before it was supplied with food for the voyage.

Going for Guns

During the stalemate between the government and the *Komagata Maru*, several Sikh men were arrested on both sides of the BC–Washington border bringing guns and ammunition into Canada. One man, Mewa Singh, was known to police as an activist promoting Indian independence. This letter from Malcolm Reid warned officials about the arrests of Harnam Singh (activist from Victoria), Balwant Singh (Vancouver priest and activist), and Bhag Singh (former priest of the Hong Kong Gurdwara and now an activist and priest at Vancouver's Khalsa Diwan Society). They had been caught carrying revolvers and ammunition and were jailed in Washington. Officials concluded that the weapons were destined for the passengers of the *Komagata Maru*.

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Under Guard

This panoramic image of Vancouver Harbour shows the *Komagata Maru* completely surrounded by boats. The naval warship HMCS *Rainbow*, anchored a few hundred metres from the *Komagata Maru*, and patrolling immigration launches and the *Sea Lion*, armed with riflemen, surrounded the ship. People in private boats and launches also circled, hoping to catch a glimpse of passengers and get a closer view of the action sure to follow.

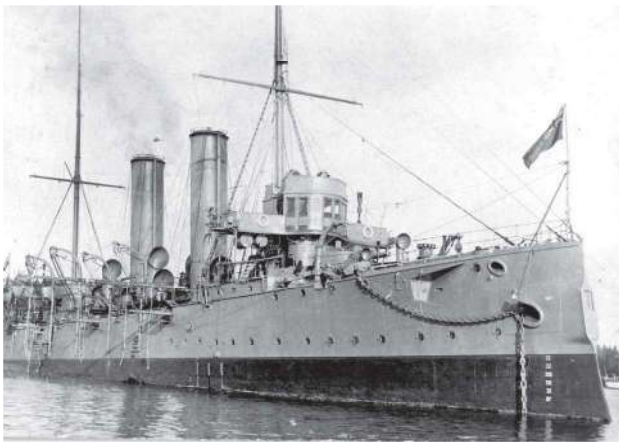
Disagreement on Handling the Situation

Malcolm Reid was determined to get rid of the *Komagata Maru*, even if it meant a violent end. Hopkinson, bottom left, disagreed with Reid's intention to send the ship off in the night. When violence broke out between the passengers and immigration officials aboard the *Sea Lion*, Prime Minister Borden became involved. He recognized that the use of violence against the passengers could ignite serious protests against the British colonial government in India.



Armed and Ready

Armed police, military, and immigration officials were all called in by the federal authorities to force the *Komagata Maru* and its passengers to leave Vancouver.



Naval Warship Requested

Following the failure of the authorities to board the ship, local MP H.H. Stevens sent a telegram to Prime Minister Borden: "Hindus on ship apparently desperately revolutionary and determined to defy law. Absolutely necessary that strong stand be taken and would urge that Rainbow or some Naval Department vessel be detailed to take charge of situation." Canada's just-formed navy had HMCS *Rainbow*, shown here, on the west coast. It carried twelve heavy-calibre guns and had fittings for machine guns.

Threats Made

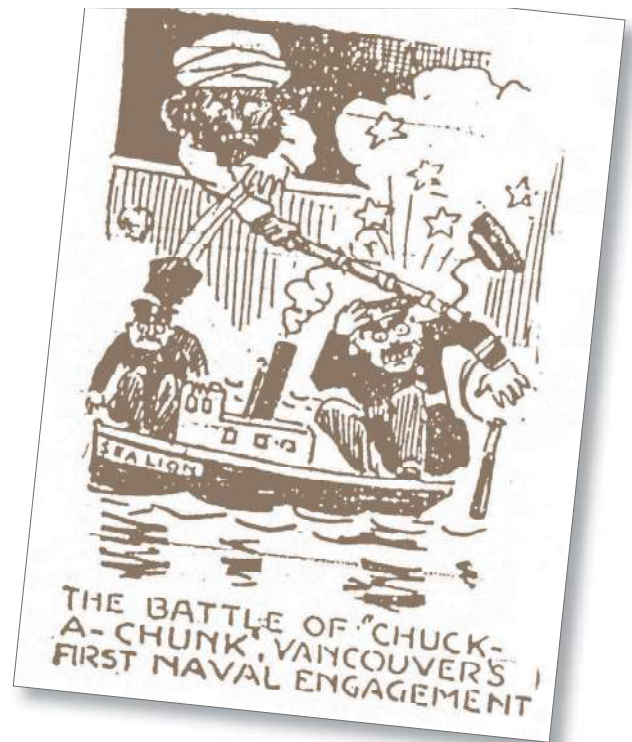
Sailors and armed members of the military, on board HMCS *Rainbow*. In a message to the Indian shore committee, Daljit Singh, head of the passenger's committee, wrote, "We are ready to die and kill." Gurdit Singh described the confrontation in his memoir: "The warships were preparing for action and on the other hand we were preparing for death. On behalf of the government, the commander sent the message 'Leave our shores you uninvited Indians or we fire.' Our reply to this command was that if Canada will allow us to provision the ship we will go, otherwise 'Fire away. We prefer death here than on the high seas.'"





Anti-Asian Propaganda

This newspaper cartoon's caption reads, "One Dark Cloud Removed." It shows the head of a sinister-looking Sikh and refers to the success of Vancouver officials in sending the *Komagata Maru* back to India. In 1913, more than 400,000 immigrants arrived in Canada, whose population was eight million at the time. Asians, although a tiny percentage of that number, were the targets of many people's fears of being overrun by "foreigners." The government pursued a policy of restricting immigration to just Europeans.



Violent Encounter

Federal cabinet minister Martin Burrell was sent from his Kelowna home to Vancouver by the prime minister. Burrell was told by Commander Walter Hose that it would probably cost one hundred lives to take control of the *Komagata Maru* by force. Burrell knew that this would be politically disastrous for the Canadian government, for the British authorities, and for the colonial government in India. With the *Rainbow* on hand to intimidate the shore committee and the passengers, Burrell offered small concessions and won agreement that the ship would leave.



Armed Escort

At the height of the confrontation, the British ruler of India — known as the viceroy — had informed the British government that using military force against the passengers would have "a very bad effect in India." When the ship sailed away from Vancouver on July 23, 1914, HMCS *Rainbow* followed it for 200 kilometres to assure the authorities that it had departed.