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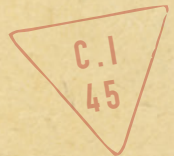
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DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION AND COLONIZATION IMMIGRATION SERVICE



CHALLENGING RACISMS PAST AND PRESENT



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Canada-China Focus

Stop Anti-Asian Hate Crimes Advocacy Group

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*Our work and offices are located on the unceded,
traditional territories of Indigenous Peoples of the Pacific Northwest*

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FOREWORD

CHALLENGING RACISMS, PAST AND PRESENT

One hundred years ago, the Canadian government passed “An Act Respecting Chinese Immigration” that came into effect on July 1, 1923. Known as the Chinese Exclusion Act, it was an overtly racist law prohibiting the arrival of newcomers from China. It also required all people of Chinese heritage, including the Canadian-born, to register with the federal government in order to stay in the country.

Chinese Canadian communities across the country mobilized to lobby against the act but in the end their efforts failed to stop its passage. Thus, July 1 came to be known as “Humiliation Day” for many Chinese Canadians. The impact of this legislation would have dreadful, long-term impacts. This year, many Chinese Canadian community organizations, including the new Chinese Canadian Museum of British Columbia, will mark this difficult anniversary.

In preparing this booklet we reviewed what happened in the ten years preceding the 1923 legislation to better understand its origins, how it related to Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities, and to Canada’s history of settler colonialism. What we found was startling.

The 1923 Act was accompanied by other regressive measures including: further restrictions on immigration from Japan; reductions in fishing licenses for Japanese Canadians; dispatching the RCMP to intimidate the Six Nations of Grand River; and BC’s ratification of measures to cut off reserve lands in the province.

The pressure to pass this legislation came from a racist coalition of business associations, politicians, the media, white women’s groups, and labour organizations in “British Columbia,” working with federal politicians. This bloc coalesced in 1920 while resisting an attempt by Japanese Canadian veterans to secure their right to vote. Its formation coincided with the Borden government’s drive to reinforce state control over Indigenous peoples and social movements, a process that continued under the King government, elected in late 1921. The results were devastating for all racialized communities and for labour.

However, inspiration can be found in this otherwise difficult story. The white backlash that arose in 1920 was, in fact, a reaction to the newly won confidence

and organizing that Indigenous peoples, radical labour, Black, Asian, and other racialized communities were asserting after the 1907 race riots. The year 1919 was a watershed in that regard. These movements provide a precious legacy for social movements today. Yet, isolated one from the other, they were unable to overcome the forces arrayed against them.

Much has changed since the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923. The immigration colour bar has been pushed back, changing Canada’s demographics. Those of non-European origin make up an increasing proportion of the population, making significant contributions to this country. The growing Black and Asian Canadian presence inspired the anti-racist actions of 2020 (Black Lives Matter, Stop Anti-Asian Racism), alongside movements against Islamophobia. The Indigenous resurgence of the past decade continues, causing many to rethink Canada’s history.

As in the past, however, such movements are also spawning resistance. We see growing antagonism, often taking the form of right-wing populism, or white nationalism. To be sure, this backlash draws inspiration from white nationalism in the United States. But it arises out of Canada’s own specific history as a liberal state that tries on the one hand to co-opt dissenting communities into the structures of settler colonialism, or violently represses them. In that sense, 1923 is a cautionary tale: To succeed, anti-racist and other social movements need to nurture unity, internally and across communities, to defeat the forces arrayed against them. We hope this booklet will add to ongoing conversations, furthering the relationships necessary to bring us to a better place.

This booklet is organized in six chapters, organized chronologically. In conclusion we make a number of observations relating this past to the present.

A caution: In describing the historical dynamics of the past, we use racial categories that may mask the huge diversity within groups or communities. In following the seam of resistance to racism we are being selective in the stories we choose. Not every story can be told, nor every group represented. We hope this publication will facilitate the telling of a broader group of stories and will be a step in the development of inclusive, intersectional analyses to support decolonization.



CHALLENGING RACISM | 1912-1914

1

In the aftermath of the [White Riot](#) (the anti-Asian riots in Vancouver) in 1907, the federal government moved quickly to restrict Asian immigration to Canada. By World War I, the Canadian state had organized white supremacy into the everyday lives of people living in Canada. Genocidal policies converted traditional Indigenous territories into private property, dispossessed Indigenous people from the land, and confined them to reserves. Chinese, Japanese, South Asian, and African people were ghettoized, while facing systemic and often legislated discrimination in employment and access to public facilities. Discriminatory policies limited their immigration to Canada at the same time that white Europeans were being given land stolen from Indigenous people. Chinese, Japanese and South Asian people in BC, Chinese people in Saskatchewan, and First Nations people everywhere could not vote in elections or hold political office. Yet, those who experienced this racism did not stand idly by. In the years leading into World War I, they organized to expose white supremacy and to demand their rights in Canada.

The Nishga Petition

In May 1913, representatives for the Nisga'a Nation traveled to London to present the British king with a petition requesting a judicial ruling on their assertion that they had never relinquished title to their traditional territories. The Introductory Note of the Nishga Petition described its purpose as the pursuit of a judicial determination of the Rights of the Indigenous Tribes of British Columbia given the expropriation and selling of some of the lands belonging to the Nishga by the provincial government. This violated Britain's own policy recognizing Indigenous title to land in North America. The Nishga had been demanding land back since 1887 when a delegation of Nishga and Tsimshian peoples, led by Chief Israel Sgat'iin, arrived in Victoria to protest the government's reserve system. In response to their demands for larger reserves and the signing of formal treaties, BC premier Smithe told them: "When the white man first came among you, you were little better than wild beasts of the field."¹ The petition became a lightning rod as First Nations in British Columbia consistently defended their land and treaty rights before the Royal Commission on Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia (1912-1916), commonly known as the McKenna-McBride Royal Commission, named after federal commissioner Joseph McKenna and BC Premier Richard McBride.

► **PRIMARY SOURCE:** Learn more about and view the original Nishga Petition at: <http://www.nisgaanation.ca/1913-petition>

LEFT: Nisga'a Chief Israel Sgat'iin in Gitlaxt'aamiks, wearing a "silver tipped" grizzly bear robe, circa 1912. Photo: Nisga'a Lisims Government

► **PRIMARY SOURCES:** The *Our Homes Are Bleeding Digital Collection* from the Union of BC Indian Chiefs includes extensive material on the McKenna McBride Royal Commission including testimony transcripts, photographs, maps, and teachers' resources. <https://ourhomesarebleeding.ubcic.bc.ca/index.html>

Challenging Saskatchewan

Activists in both Chinese and Japanese communities in Moose Jaw and Regina convened meetings and mounted sustained protests when the Saskatchewan legislature introduced "An Act to Prevent the Employment of Female Labour in Certain Capacities," in 1912. The law made it a criminal offence for any "white woman or girl" to work in "any restaurant, laundry or other place of business or amusement owned, kept or managed by any Japanese, Chinaman, or other Oriental person."

The legislation, promoted by conservative white labour unions, some white women's groups, and the Saskatchewan Retail Merchants Association, represented the convergence of white paternalism and maternalism in an effort to 'rescue' white working-class women who, in fact, had little interest in such protection. Local police charged Quong Wing and Quong Sing with violating the law after they refused to dismiss their white women employees at their restaurants in Moose Jaw. During the trials in the same city, the women resisted the racialization of their employer, as the testimony of Nellie Lane suggests:



Exchange Cafe. mid 1950s. Clarence Sihoe family photograph.

From the 1912 trial transcript

Q.: What nationality is Quong Wing?
 A.: Well, I treat him as myself.
 Q.: I know, but what is he?
 A.: I don't know what he was, only what people have told me.
 Q.: What is he Mrs. Lane?
 A.: I could not tell you.
 Q.: What language does he speak?
 A.: He can speak two, he can speak English and he can speak Chinese.
 Q.: Is he English?
 A.: No he is not English, but I could not tell you where he came from, it would be hard for me to say, but he is as good as me and all.²

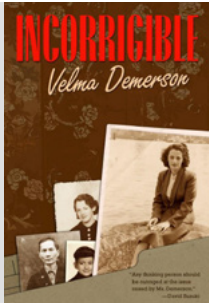
Despite Nellie Lane's testimony, Quong Wing and Quong Sing were convicted and fined. With the support of the Chinese community, they challenged the outcome right to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London, without success. The legislation was eventually amended in response to local and diplomatic protests, resulting in the removal of race-specific prohibitions to employing white women.³ Instead, the act required employers to apply for municipal licenses to hire white women workers, which gave local governments the liberty to continue

racially profiling and discriminating against Asian business owners. The law stayed on the books until 1969 and also inspired similar legislation in Ontario, BC, and Manitoba.

In 1924, Yee Clun of Regina again challenged the legislation.



▶ **VIEW** Yee Clun's story is told through a short film about this artistic exhibit part of the *Lost Stories* project. Watch the film: <https://loststories.ca/regina/index.html#video>



► **READ & WATCH** Legislation similar to that preventing white women working in Asian restaurants was also passed preventing women from having intimate relations with Asian men. See the story of Velma Demerson in her autobiography *Incorrigible* a new film by the same name by filmmaker Karin Lee, available to watch for a limited time free on Knowledge Network:

<https://www.knowledge.ca/program/incorrigible-film-about-velma-demerson>

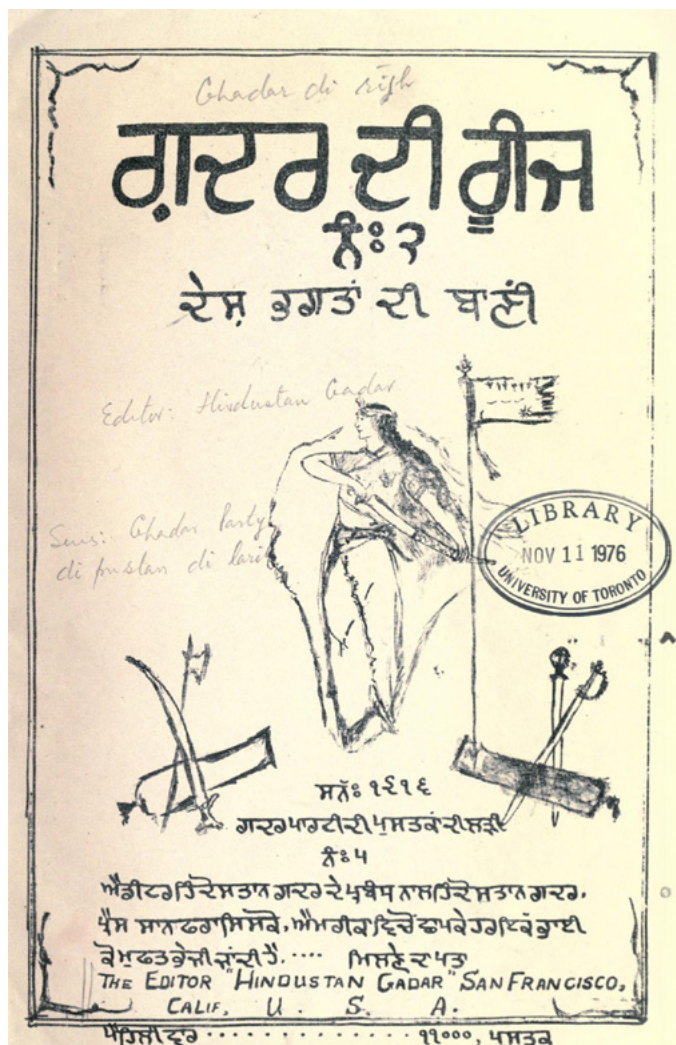
The Ghadar Movement

“Ghadar” – meaning “rebellion,” “mutiny,” or “uprising” in Punjabi and Urdu – was the name of a group and political movement created by immigrants from the Indian subcontinent living along the Pacific Coast of North America. From San Francisco to Vancouver, Ghadar inspired waves of anti-colonial, anti-British, and revolutionary ideas across the Asia Pacific region. In June 1913, Sohan Singh Bhakna and Lala Har Dayal inspired a meeting of minds that led to the creation of the Hindu Association of the Pacific Coast, later known as the Ghadar party. The aim of this party was simple – to advocate for an independent India free from British rule.

The main newspaper for the party was *Ghadar*. In its inaugural 1913 issue, *Ghadar* printed poignant words expressing the goals and stakes of national liberation:

Pay: Death
Prize: Martyrdom
Pension: Liberty
Field of Battle: India

Many Ghadarites had Vancouver and Abbotsford connections and were known to give powerful speeches at gurdwaras, or Sikh places of worship. Though violently repressed by the British, the Ghadar party’s influence lasted until the late 1920s. The Ghadar movement helped India achieve independence from British rule in 1947 and the impact of this diaspora-driven anti-colonial movement continues to this day.



Ghadar di gunj (“Echoes of Mutiny”) is an anthology of nationalist and socialist poetry, here in its Punjabi edition. 1916. Photo: South Asian American Digital Archive.

The Ghadar party effectively used the art of poetry, as seen in *Ghadar Di Gunj* (Echoes of Mutiny), an amazing anthology of Ghadar party poetry with an initial run of 12,000 copies. A short but powerful example of a poem in this anthology reads:

**No Pandits or Mullahs do we need,
 No prayers or litanies we need recite,
 These will only scuttle our boat.
 Draw the sword, it's time to fight.**

► **VIDEO** The South Asian Studies Institute, University of the Fraser Valley, has a large collection of short films such as *Solidarity Lives* available on their YouTube channel, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=br3BA5cckRo>



Vancouver Public Library 6231 PNG. 1914.

Komagata Maru

In May 1914, the SS Komagata Maru arrived in Vancouver with 376 passengers. The government denied them entry to Canada, and they had to remain onboard in the harbour for two months before being forced to leave.

The ship sponsor, Gurdit Singh, seen in the left foreground of the photo above with his son, was a leader of the Ghadar movement. On racism in Canada in particular, Gurdit Singh reflected:

But what about the Indians who are said to be British subjects protected by their benign government? What most grievously hurt them was that Indians living in Canada had sent for their wives and children who purchased tickets... When they were about to land the Canadian government stopped them with an order to return back to Hong Kong. Pause for a moment to imagine the heart-rending scene on the docks. Fathers had come to receive their children, husbands had come to receive their wives but the Canadian Government's brutal order stood between them. To sigh and shed tears in silence was all they could do.

– Gurdit Singh, from his autobiography *Voyage of the Komagata Maru or India's Slavery Abroad*

Upon the passengers' return to India, British authorities prepared to detain many upon suspicion they were Ghadar supporters. A riot resulted, and many of the passengers were killed or injured.

► **COMMUNITY RESOURCE** Learn about the Komagata Maru story by visiting its designated website hosted by the South Asian Canadian Digital Archive: <https://sacda.ca/exhibits/km/index.php>

► **LISTEN** to *The Nameless Collective Podcast*, that discuss the history of Vancouver's South Asian community: <https://the-nameless-collective-podcast.simplecast.com/>



Negro Christian Alliance, Vancouver

On December 18, 1915 the movie *Birth of a Nation* was advertised to be shown at the Avenue Theatre in Vancouver. The film, set during the American Civil War, famously glorifies lynching, the Klu Klux Klan, and anti-Black racism. In response, the Negro Christian Alliance (NCA), founded by Harriet Blanche Davis and Milton P. Fuller in Vancouver, penned a letter to the editor opposing the screening and describing the film as “offensive to all the coloured people throughout the earth.”⁴ The NCA’s intervention ensured that racist propaganda would not go uninterrupted in Vancouver.

Established in the fall of 1910, the NCA organized regular community meetings where all were welcome to join, irrespective of race or religion.⁵ The group presented speakers and review papers, hosted discussions and debates, and provided opportunities for local talent to perform. The Alliance also organized debate and discussion over pressing political subjects of the day, from women’s suffrage to prohibition, and supported a Sunday school and numerous clubs and activities for youth. These multifaceted efforts defended Black communities against white supremacy by creating spaces where Black culture, politics, and kinship could thrive.

Siblings Ethel (top right) and Oscar (top left), and Myrtle (right), participated in NCA Youth activities. They grew up in Vancouver on East 10th Street, three blocks from where the NCA first met. Ethel became a classical pianist and accompanist for singers performing in Vancouver. Their father Joseph was one of the signatories for the protest letter against the screening of *Birth of a Nation*. Photos: Salt Spring Island Archives.





9th graduating class of the Overseas Public Chinese School, 1913. Photo: City of Victoria Archives, M07972.

Sites of Resistance

White supremacy in Canada created social and economic structures that reflected the domination of settler elites. However, racialized communities often formed their own institutions allowing for ongoing social interactions. This allowed communities to generate ongoing resistance to discriminatory policies that affected communities. Below are select examples of such institutions.

Chinese Public School

In 1913, Victoria's Chinese school expanded and was renamed the Chinese Public School. During the exclusion era, literacy in Chinese came to be seen as an essential survival skill in a world in which the Chinese might be forced to go to China. As Lee Mong Kow, the founder of what became Victoria's Chinese Public School (CPS), explained in 1899, "[W]e are Chinamen, no matter where we go ... and find that, . . . , it is necessary to have an education in Chinese as well as in English."⁶ The CPS truly was a public school. It was organized by the governing body of the community the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association; it charged no tuition, was coeducational, and starting in 1908 taught curricula approved by the Chinese Ministry of Education and was inspected by its officials. Its graduates could attend high school in China. Its Chinese language classes were suffused with a nationalist Chinese ethos. It also offered English language instruction for students who were excluded from the public schools. In 1915, the first high school class graduated. In 1917, the Vancouver Chinese Benevolent Association opened its own Chinese Public School.

Gurdwaras

A gurdwara means the house of the guru and refers to a building which houses the sacred and spiritual text for the Sikhs, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji. Gurdwaras serve as the epicentre of both spirit and sustenance, serving a vegetarian communal meal to anyone who enters its space. When Sikh men began to migrate to British Columbia, even in the early stages from 1904-1905, there was a keen awareness that gurdwaras were needed. Regardless of the precariousness of a Sikh person's sense of permanent home, often living and working from bunkhouse to bunkhouse across the province, they still needed a gurdwara. Gurdwaras, beginning with the first in Vancouver on West 2nd Avenue built in 1908, and then the second in Abbotsford, built in 1911 – were safe spaces for any person of South Asian descent, be they Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh.

The gurdwara became the site to resist racism at the time, to fight for the right to the vote, to fight for the passengers on board the Komagata Maru. And so, the gurdwaras across British Columbia served many purposes including religious spirituality, a pan-South Asian camaraderie, and a safe political site to discuss and fight racism and white supremacist systems at the time.



Pictured here are families on the steps of the Khalsa Diwan Society gurdwara on 2nd Ave., Vancouver, in 1910. Gurdwaras were later built in Abbotsford, Victoria, Paldi, Cowichan Lake, Hillcrest, and many other sites. Photo: SFU Library, Kohaly Collection

ENDNOTES

- 1 <https://www.leg.bc.ca/content/hansard/36th3rd/19981202pm-Hansard-v12n17.HTM>
- 2 As cited in Constance Backhouse, "The White Women's Labor Laws: Anti-Chinese Racism in Early Twentieth Century Canada," p. 358.
- 3 See Department of External Affairs, Documents on Canadian External Relations, 1909-1918, 1 (1967), 616-645.
- 4 See "Letters to the Editor: Negro Residents Protest," December 18, 1915, *Vancouver Daily World*, 15; "Busy Bee Work Club" for youth and affiliation with Negro Christian Alliance," August 17, 1916, *Vancouver Daily World*, 5; "Little Colored Girls have May Queen Too," May 17, 1919, *Vancouver Daily World*, 26; John Mackie, "This Week in History: 1916 - Birth of a Nation debuts in Vancouver," January 8, 2016, *Vancouver Sun*. Winks, Robin W. "Blacks in Canada: A History" Fiftieth Anniversary Edition, McGill-Queens University Press, 2021, pg. 312
- 5 "Negro Residents Form Alliance," July 20, 1911, *Vancouver Daily World*, 8; "News of Church Circles - Progress of City's Negro," July 4, 1913, *Vancouver Daily World*, 17; "Third Anniversary' Work of the Negro Christian Alliance is Reviewed," November 22, 1913, *The Province*, 29; "Interesting Debate on Woman Suffrage", February 17, 1914, *Vancouver Daily World*, 12; "Prohibition Activity," November 4, 1915, *Vancouver Daily World*, 16.
- 6 *Victoria Daily Colonist*, January 18, 1899, 6.
- 7 A Japanese language source for early Japanese language schools is: Tsutae and Eiko Sato, *Kodomo to tomo ni 50 Nen* [Teaching Japanese Canadian Children for 50 Years].

Japanese Language Schools

Japanese Canadian newcomers hoped their children would learn the Japanese language and schools became important centres for the communities as they developed in different parts of the province. Over 50 schools were in operation before World War II. For example, the Vancouver Japanese Language School was founded in 1906 and continues to this day. Located at the heart of the community near Powell Street (Paueru Gai) it was designated a heritage site by Vancouver City in 1995.⁷



Vancouver Japanese Language School & Japanese Hall first graduating class after the Internment. NNM 1996.170.16.1.12.



Japanese Canadian soldiers of the 10th Battalion. Seated at the left of the second row is Masumi Mitsui. Nikkei National Museum 2010.23.2.4.551

ANTI-RACISM AND THE WAR | 1914 – 1916

2

World War I began in the summer of 1914. The government introduced the repressive War Measures Act that same year, which led to the unjust detainment and incarceration of Ukrainians and other ethnic groups labeled as ‘subversives.’¹

Initially, large numbers of white men enlisted, creating labour shortages at home. Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities faced systemic discrimination in recruitment policies, limiting their participation in the war. However, many persisted in finding ways to circumvent racist policies, such as through the formation of the No. 2 Construction Battalion, an all-Black labour corps. Many racialized soldiers who went to Europe and survived returned with a renewed determination to challenge racism.

Challenging Racism in Recruitment

Indigenous peoples in Canada responded in complex ways to the onset of war in July 1914. Initially, the war department was reluctant to recruit First Nations men because “the Germans might refuse to extend to them the privileges of civilized warfare.”² By late 1915, however, recruiters began to enlist First Nations men, with many joining the Canadian Expeditionary Force.

Haudenosaunee (Six Nations) Confederacy³

In response to the Borden government’s campaign to raise war funds, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy Council asserted that their nations “[did] not belong to Canada and wish[ed] to make their contributions direct[ly] . . . as a token of the alliance existing between the Six Nations and the British Crown.”⁴ The Confederacy Council considered itself to be in a treaty relationship with Britain that predated the formation of the Canadian state. As such, the council would maintain a neutral stance toward the war until King George V made a formal request for assistance.

The Confederacy allowed individual members to enlist, and many did. A Mohawk woman, Edith Monture, became the first Indigenous woman in Canada to become a registered nurse and served in Europe during the war. Because wartime nurses were also awarded the franchise, she was also the first Indigenous woman able to vote, over four decades before Indigenous people were enfranchised. After the war ended, Monture returned to Six Nations Reserve where she worked in a local hospital and fought for better health care for her community. A Patriotic League to support troops abroad brought other Haudenosaunee women to the fore. At the same time, differing views of the war promoted divisions within the

Confederacy, including disagreement over the merits of an elected band council versus hereditary leadership.

The introduction of conscription in 1917 provoked widespread resistance by First Nations. The Port Simpson Band in British Columbia petitioned against the Military Service Act, stating, “at no time have our Indians had any say in the making of the laws of Canada.”⁵ Continuing resistance to conscription finally forced the government to pass an order-in-council, PC 111, exempting First Nations from military duty. Nevertheless, thousands of First Nations men went to war. Many felt they were maltreated upon their return to Canada and excluded from the benefits that white soldiers received.

Long known as loyal to the British crown, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy is composed of six nations: the Mohawk (Kaiienkehaka, the ‘People of the Flint’), Onondaga (Onodada-ge, the ‘People of the Hills’), Oneida (Onyota’a-ke, the ‘People of the Standing Stone’), Cayuga (Gayohkohnyoh, the ‘Dwellers of the Swamp Lands’), Seneca (Onodawahgah, the ‘People of the Great Hill’), and Tuscarora (Skarureh, the ‘People of the Shirt’).



Lieutenant Frederick Ogilvie Loft was a decorated soldier from Six Nations who later founded the League of Indians of Canada. Photo: LAC 3629837

► **COMMUNITY RESOURCE:** Learn more about the Six Nations Patriotic League at <http://www.doingourbit.ca/six-nations-support-war>

Mohawk woman Charlotte “Edith”

Anderson Monture belonged to the Six Nations reserve in Ohsweken, near Brantford, Ontario. When she set out to study nursing as a young woman, Canada’s Indian Act prevented her from registering in Ontario nursing schools, as Status Indians were barred from enrolling in higher education. To circumvent this policy, Edith instead applied for school in the United States, at the Rochelle Nursing School in New York. She graduated top of her class and in 1914 became the first registered nurse of Indigenous descent in Canadian history. Since 2022, Indigenous Nurses Day has been celebrated on April 10th, the birthday of Monture, in honour of her legacy.

Photo: Canadian Encyclopedia



Asian Canadians⁶

Asian Canadian communities also faced major impediments to enlisting. The Japanese Canadian Association formed a company of 227 volunteers that began training in Vancouver. When the Association made a formal offer to form a battalion, Militia Headquarters flatly refused them on the grounds that integration with white soldiers would be difficult. Canadian military officers also feared enlistment of Japanese Canadian soldiers might reinforce their demand for the right to vote, a right the BC government had denied them since 1895. Despite this setback, over 200 Japanese Canadians traveled outside BC to enlist. Fifty-four died in battle and 92 were wounded, with many being decorated for bravery, including Masumi Mitsui, who would later lead the movement for enfranchisement. Under conscription, PC 111 also exempted Japanese Canadians from service.

Chinese Canadians who hoped to enlist in BC were also turned away. Nevertheless, a number traveled to Alberta or other provinces to enlist, including Frederick Lee and brothers Wee Tan and Wee Hong Louie from the Shuswap region in the interior of the province.

A few men of South Asian heritage were able to enlist but in general the colour bar was strictly enforced both because of racism and fear that anti-colonial sentiment might lead to South Asian troops turning their guns on the British.

► **COMMUNITY RESOURCES:** Learn more about Japanese, Chinese, and South Asian Canadians in WW1:

Chinese Canadian Military Museum | <https://www.ccmms.ca>

Canadian Soldier Sikhs | <http://canadiansoldiersikhs.ca>

The Bulletin | “The Japanese Canadian Soldiers of the First World War and the Fight to Win the Vote” | <http://jccbulletin-geppo.ca/the-japanese-canadian-soldiers-of-the-first-world-war-and-the-fight-to-win-the-vote>



Masumi Mitsui, 10th Battalion, WWI.

Black Forces

“They fought their country to fight for their country”.

– Senator Wanda Bernard, presentation at the National Apology, July 9, 2022, Truro, Nova Scotia.

Former senator and author Calvin W. Ruck describes the landscape of war mobilization for Black communities during 1917: “Throughout the country, from Nova Scotia to British Columbia, large numbers of Black volunteers were being rejected strictly on the basis of our colour.”⁷ Yet the Borden government claimed that “no outright ban on Black enlistment existed” and that “commanding officers controlled the selection without interference from headquarters.”⁸ Even if men enlisted, some were not allowed to serve. Some Black volunteers were discharged when white soldiers refused to serve with them. In some cases, the reason noted was that they were “undesirable.” Colonel Ogilvie, the officer commanding Military District 11 in Victoria, BC reported in 1915 that “several cases of coloured applicants have been reported on by Officers Commanding units and the universal opinion is that if this were allowed it would do much harm, as white men here will not serve in the same ranks with negros [sic] or coloured persons.”



No. 2 Construction Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force

By 1916 the Allied leadership was growing alarmed at the blood bath that was taking place on the battlefields of France and Belgium. Casualties were reaching staggering proportions and reinforcements were almost non-existent. On May 11, 1916, the British War Office decided to accept an all-Black labour corps, the No. 2 Construction Battalion.

Despite the easing of racist restrictions to enlistment, racist attitudes were prevalent and unrelenting. Those who did enlist were often derided by the medical staff assigned to examine them.⁹ The first and only Black battalion in Canadian military history, No. 2 Construction Battalion, which included five men from British Columbia, was segregated during its maiden voyage to England in order to avoid “offending the

susceptibility of other [white] troops”.¹⁰ The battalion proved a disciplined unit, put aside the overt racism, and produced double the output of other comparable units while living in segregated camps without proper medical care, rations or equipment.¹¹

Demobilization was an equally discriminatory process, dictated by race, rank, and class. Skilled white officers were not only the first to arrive back in Canada but were also greeted with nation-wide celebrations and fanfare, unlike racialized soldiers. Black soldiers waiting to come home endured anger and frustration as delays in demobilization dragged on. It would not have taken long for them to realize that the racism, segregation, and discrimination they experienced before and during the war was waiting for them upon their return.

White Women Win the Vote

Women won the vote in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta in 1916 and in Ontario the following year. Federally, a limited franchise began during the war. In 1917, white women in British Columbia won the right to vote after a referendum and provincial election that saw the Liberal Party replace the Conservatives.¹³ Interestingly, only men voted in the referendum on whether women should get the vote, casting 43,619 in favour and 18,604 opposed. This was an important victory for white women, but also posed a question: Was the referendum a reflection of an enlightened male constituency or a quest for racial solidarity? White women won the vote in many provinces during and after the war as political elites sought to expand their voting base. Yet their platforms were expressly racist, as they portrayed themselves as the 'mothers of the race' in contrast to Eastern European men (who could vote) and Asian Canadians and First Nations (who could not).

"The Canadian Mother" poster encouraging people to vote for the union government, Ottawa, Ontario. 1914-1918. Heliotype Co. Ltd. Library and Archives Canada, e010697158



Organizing during War

Racialized communities continued their organizing efforts during the war as they faced a multitude of challenges.

The Allied Tribes of British Columbia

The increasing number of white settlers in BC severely affected the ways of life and subsistence of Indigenous Nations as they struggled to obtain land for agriculture and waters for fishing. Growing disputes over land, reductions in the size of reserves, denial of the Douglas Treaties, and the potlatch ban resulted in an upsurge in Indigenous organizing. In the spring of 1916, a delegation of the Interior Tribes of BC and the Nishga Land Committee traveled to Ottawa to press home their demand for a judicial decision on aboriginal title, as demanded in the Nishga Petition. However, British colonial authorities refused to consider a legal case as long as the Mckenna-McBride Commission (MMC) was operating.¹² As a result, representatives from a majority of Nations met in Vancouver to form the Allied Tribes of British Columbia. The Allied Tribes denounced the MMC, supported the Nishga Petition, and demanded reserves of 160 acres per capita, full compensation for alienated lands, and recognition of Aboriginal title.



Allied Tribes gather at 1922 conference. Photo: Wedlidi Speck. From *Standing Up with Ga'axsta'las* by Leslie A. Robertson and the Kwagu'l Gixsam Clan.

Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) (1914-1921)¹⁴

Founded by Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey in 1914, the UNIA was part of a global movement to unite, empower, and improve the lives of people of African descent. The movement newspaper, *Negro World*, said to have a readership of 200,000, was a key organizing tool and central to the movement's success. The UNIA paid attention to Black women's labour and financial needs, starting the Black Cross Nurses program, which helped Black women find employment outside domestic and factory work.

A dynamic if controversial figure, Garvey first visited Canada in 1917. Within a few years, the UNIA had nearly 5000 members in 32 divisions in Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta, and British Columbia. The UNIA sponsored the construction of several community centres, including in Montreal and Glace Bay, NS – the latter being the only original hall still in existence. The Montreal Liberty Hall was an important centre, providing education and supporting social, cultural, and economic needs. The vast majority of Canadian members were West Indian immigrants, who brought a strong pan-African consciousness to the leadership of the UNIA. The Universal Negro Improvement Association was designated a national historic event in 2018. Today, the Glace Bay UNIA Community Hall runs a cultural museum.

Chinese Canadian Club

Established in 1914 in Vancouver and Victoria, the Chinese Canadian Club was the first group to publicly use the term 'Chinese Canadian.' Originally a young men's social club, within a few years it became politically active, unsuccessfully campaigning for the right to vote for Canadian-born and veteran Chinese people. The Chinese Canadian-born generation would play increasingly important roles in leading the fight against white supremacy in the years to come.¹⁵

Previously, migrants from China coming to Canada did not think of themselves as members of the same group; they spoke different languages and identified with their home counties or places of origin. However, by the 1910s, the common experience of racist oppression led diverse communities to develop a shared identity as Chinese.¹⁶ They built collective organizations to organize self-defence and provide mutual aid. Most important of these organizations were the Chinese Benevolent Associations (CBAs) of the major cities, which were umbrella organizations that brought together different associations. Victoria's Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, the original CBA, functioned as a Chinese-controlled local government as it arbitrated disputes in the community, provided free services including a public school, assisted those in trouble with white authorities, and protested racist measures.¹⁷



The Victoria Chinese Canadian Club, pictured here for a soccer match, were a group of young Canadian-born men who played key roles in campaigning against racism, as well as popularizing the term 'Chinese Canadian.' Photo: Stuart Thomson, Vancouver Public Library, 11801.



Members of the Chinese Labour Corps at Camp Petawawa, 1917. Nearly 50 CLC members did not complete their journey through Canada, and many of their graves are found at a cemetery in what is now a correctional facility in Metchosin, Vancouver Island. Credit: Library and Archives Canada, C-068866.

The Colour of War

Over 120,000 labourers from China joined the war in Europe in 1917. Of these, approximately 80,000 traveled from China to Europe and back again via Canada. Their treatment while in Canada—kept in quarantined camps for weeks and transported in sealed rail cars across the country—was hardly what one might have expected given their status as valuable allies in the war effort. As one historian put it, “Canadians, as a whole, treated the Chinese in Canada badly and treated the Chinese labourers on their way to France even worse.”¹⁸

They were part of a huge contingent of racialized troops and labour battalions that fought in various fronts of the war in Europe, Africa, or the Middle East. This included more than 200,000 African Americans; over 15,000 troops from the Caribbean; over a million from Africa; approximately 1.4 million from the Indian sub-continent; more than 90,000 from Vietnam and Cambodia; and 120,000 from China.

Of the estimated four million or more participants, racialized as non-white in a variety of ways, the vast majority were men and tens of thousands perished. Racialized women also participated in the war, some as nurses and others, particularly in Africa, as carriers or transport workers for supplies for the opposing armies. These included the imperial powers of Britain, France, Russia, Italy, and Japan, who warred against Germany, the Austro-Hungarian empire, and the Ottoman empire in 1914. The United States joined the war in the spring of 1917, while Russia withdrew after the 1917 revolution.

At least nine million people lost their lives in this war, and its ramifications were felt long after. In the end, the colour of war was red – the common colour of the blood shed by all men and women, including huge numbers of civilians, who were sacrificed life or limb in this dreadful conflict.

Endnotes

- 1 This section draws on Donald Avery, "Dangerous Foreigners": *European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979); Reg Whitaker, Gregory S. Kealey, and Andrew Parnaby, *Secret Service: Political Policing in Canada from the Fenians to Fortress American* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), Chapter 3.
- 2 Whitaker, Kealey, and Parnaby, *Secret Service*, 86.
- 3 This summary is based on Katherine A. McGowan, "Until We Receive Just Treatment": The Fight against Conscription in the Naas Agency, British Columbia," *BC STUDIES* 167 (Autumn 2010), 47-69; Genevieve Renard Painter, "A Letter from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy to King George V: Writing and Reading Jurisdictions in International Legal History," *London Review of International Law* 5, no. 1 (2017), 7-48; Eric Story, "The Awakening Has Come," Canadian First Nations in the Great War Era, 1914-1932, *Canadian Military History* 24, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2015), 11-35; Robert J. Talbot, "It Would Be Best to Leave Us Alone: First Nations Responses to the Canadian War Effort, 1914-1918," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 45, no. 1 (Winter 2011), 90-120; Wendy Wickwire, *At the Bridge: James Teit and an Anthology of Belonging* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019).
- 4 As cited in Painter, "A Letter from the Haudenosaunee Confederacy to King George V," 28.
- 5 See McGowan, "Until We Receive Just Treatment," 47.
- 6 The story of Asian Canadian participation in World War I is drawn from James W. St.G. Walker, "Race and Recruitment in World War I: Enlistment of Visible Minorities in the Canadian Expeditionary Force," *Canadian Historical Review* LXX, no. 1 (1989), 1-26; John Price, "Asian Canadians and the First World War: Challenging White Supremacy," in *Dominion of Race: Rethinking Canada's International History*, eds. Laura Madokoro, Francine McKenzie, and David Meren (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017), 54-72.
- 7 Calvin W. Ruck, *The Black Battalion 1916-1920: Canada's Best Kept Military Secret* (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 1987).
- 8 Sarah-Jane Mathieu, *North of the Color Line: Migration and Black Resistance in Canada, 1870-1955* (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 104. See also Mathias Joost, "Black Canadians and Conscription in the First World War," in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2022, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/black-canadians-and-conscription-in-the-first-world-war>
- 9 Walker, "Race and Recruitment in World War I."
- 10 Mathieu, *North of the Color Line*, 108.
- 11 See Prime Minister of Canada, Prime Minister delivers apology to descendants of No. 2 Construction Battalion, 2022, <https://pm.gc.ca/en/videos/2022/07/09/prime-minister-delivers-apology-descendants-no-2-construction-battalion>; Sarah-Jane Mathieu, "Black Canadians and Canada's Military," Canadian War Museum, accessed May 26, 2023, <https://www.warmuseum.ca/learn/black-canadians-and-canadas-military/>; Ruck, *The Black Battalion*; Lindsay Ruck, "No. 2 Construction Battalion," in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2016, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/no-2-construction-battalion>.
- 12 Wendy Wickwire, *At the Bridge: James Teit and an Anthology of Belonging* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019), 227-228.
- 13 On the fight for white women's franchise, see Lara Campbell, *A Great Revolutionary Wave: Women and the Vote in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2020).
- 14 This section is based on Dorothy Williams, "Universal Negro Improvement Association" in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 2022; "Marcus Garvey and the UNIA," Museum of Toronto, accessed May 26 2023, <https://www.museumoftoronto.com/programming/marcus-garvey-and-the-unia/>; Mathieu, *North of the Color Line*, 152-157; Parks Canada Directory of Federal Heritage Designations, Universal Negro Improvement Association National Historic Event, accessed May 26 2023, https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page_nhs_eng.aspx?id=15477.
- 15 Timothy J. Stanley, *Contesting White Supremacy: School Segregation, Anti-Racism, and the Making of Chinese Canadians* (Canada: UBC Press, 2011), 145-170.
- 16 Timothy J. Stanley, "'Chinamen, wherever we go': Chinese nationalism and Guangdong merchants in British Columbia, 1871-1911," *Canadian Historical Review* 77, no. 4 (1996), 475-503.
- 17 David Chuen-yan Lai, "The Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association in Victoria: Its Origins and Functions," *BC Studies* 15 (Autumn 1972): 53-67.
- 18 Xu Gouji, *Strangers on the Western Front* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 73.



John Arthur Robinson was born in the West Indies and moved to Winnipeg around 1909. Robinson was a leader in the formation of the Order of the Sleeping Car Porters, the first black union in North America in 1917. Photo: Archives of Manitoba, P6899/2.

THE REVOLTS | 1917-1919

3

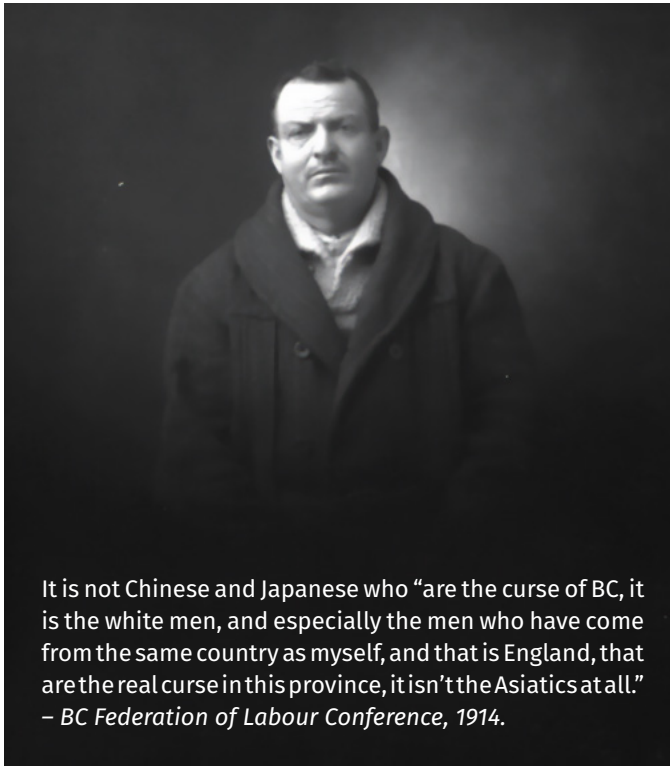
The onset of war in 1914 eventually impacted the economy, increasing the demand for workers in many industries. Faced with racist barriers preventing them from joining the military, racialized workers provided essential labour in key industries, particularly on the west coast. They also demonstrated a growing determination to create or join unions to assert their rights in the workplace, where they had lower wages and poorer working conditions than white workers. The unions described below represent a seldom-recognized era in the history of the Canadian labour movement marked by anti-racist and radical labour politics that forged rare cross-racial class solidarities. For example, South Asian immigrant Husain Rahim was the first racialized person to hold elected leadership in the Socialist Party of Canada. Working on the party's newspaper, *The Western Clarion*, Rahim collaborated with white socialists such as Henry M. Fitzgerald, Joe Naylor, J. Edward Bird, and William Pritchard. These militant and anti-racist trends erupted in a labour revolt toward the end of the war, culminating in the formation of the One Big Union and the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919.

Local 526, Industrial Workers of the World

Formed in 1906, [this union](#) was comprised mainly of Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) longshoremen working the Vancouver waterfront alongside other racialized workers. Meetings were held on səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) territory. Though the union disappeared soon after, the workers remained toiling on the waterfront during the war. The union would later reform in 1924 as the Lumber Handlers' Association, led by Andy Paull, a chief of the Skwxwú7mesh Nation.¹



Longshoremen, many of them Indigenous, at the Moodyville Sawmill in Vancouver, 1889. Some, William Nahanee (centre, with laundry bag) later founded the Bows and Arrows IWW local. Photo: City of Van Archives Mi P2



It is not Chinese and Japanese who “are the curse of BC, it is the white men, and especially the men who have come from the same country as myself, and that is England, that are the real curse in this province, it isn’t the Asiatics at all.”
 – BC Federation of Labour Conference, 1914.

Coalminers Strike (1912-1914)

This bitter conflict saw the coalminers on Vancouver Island defeated. Asian Canadian workers who crossed the picket lines to work were often blamed for this bitter outcome. But to socialist Joe Naylor, one of the leaders of the strike, it was 200 special police who forced them back to work: “They would not have gone to work until the white men had gone if they had been left to themselves,” he told the BC Federation of Labour delegates in 1914. It was not Asian workers who were “the curse of BC, it is the white men, and especially the men who have come from the same country as myself, and that is England, that are the real curse in this province.”¹² This was a turning point as radical unionists began to see racialized workers as allies in the fight against corporations. Naylor would go on to lead the movement for a united labour body in the One Big Union.

Portrait of Joe Naylor. Credit: Portrait of Joe Naylor. Photo: Cumberland Museum, C192-030.

Asian Canadians in the Labour Force

Excluded from professions such as law or medicine, Asian Canadians became an important part of the labour force in the mills, mines, and fishing industries on the west coast. Labour shortages during the war saw Asian Canadians representing over 20 percent of BC’s industrial labour force by 1919.³ This increased their economic leverage and Asian Canadian union activism accelerated along with other workers.



Group portrait of workers at Carlson mill, Nakusp, BC, 1912-13. Names include Jagat Singh, Lashman Singh, Santa Singh, Serhan Singh. Arrow Lakes Historical Society, 2014.003.506.

Fishing

Japanese Canadian fishers were extremely productive and able to obtain fishing licenses in key sectors of the industry. This created resentment on the part of some white and Indigenous fishers that racist politicians tried to amplify using divide-and-rule tactics. In the canneries, Indigenous and Asian Canadians, including large numbers of women, worked together often in isolated stations along the coast.



A prominent Japanese Canadian community was growing in Steveston, BC, a centre for salmon canneries, in the early 20th century. Many Japanese families excelled in the fishing and canning industry. Photo: Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre.



Cannery workers in BC were often diverse, including both men and women of Japanese, Chinese, Indigenous, and European ancestry. Pictured here is a Japanese woman holding a baby standing on a cannery dock on the Skeena River in the 1920s. Staff often lived in designated housing at the cannery sites which were segregated by ethnicity. Women would often work with their babies on their backs. Photo: City of Richmond Archives, 2001 34 9 600.

► **LABOUR RESOURCE: Union Zindabad! South Asian Canadian Labour History in British Columbia**
<https://saclp.southasiancanadianheritage.ca/union-zindabad-labour-history>

Mining

Workers of Chinese and Japanese heritage were an important part of the labour force in the mines of British Columbia. Stigmatized by racism, they were often relied upon to take on difficult and hazardous jobs. The mortality statistics from the Cumberland Museum reveal the disproportionately higher toll that Asian Canadian miners paid in explosions in the Dunsmuir mines:

- 1901** No. 6 Mine: 64 dead
(35 Chinese, 9 Japanese, 20 White)
- 1903** No. 6 Mine: 15 dead (all Chinese)
- 1922** No. 4 Mine: 18 dead
(9 Chinese, 6 Japanese, 3 White)
- 1923** No. 4 Mine: 35 dead (19 Chinese, 14 White)

Forest Industry

In the saw and shingle mills alone, approximately 3,500 workers were of Chinese, Japanese or South Asian heritage.⁴ As production pressures increased so did strike activity.

Excluded from various professions, workers of Chinese heritage had come together in the Chinese Labour Union (Zhonghua Gongdang) in 1916 to advocate for Chinese workers, who received unequal treatment relative to white workers in the same occupations.⁵ The union would also promote the formation of the Hawkers Association and the Chinese Shingle Workers Union.⁶

Beginning in 1917, a strike wave began that helped catalyze the 1919 general strike in Winnipeg, which was supported by general strikes in many other cities across Canada, including Vancouver and Victoria. Initially, such strikes were local affairs. For example, in July 1917, hundreds of mill workers producing shingles organized by the Chinese Shingle Workers' Union went on strike for the eight-hour day.⁷ Activists reached out to the Chinese workers with Chinese-language leaflets urging the eight-hour day. At the time, *The BC Federationist* reported that the Shingle Workers' Union officials felt that if they could be "as sure of some of the married white workers as they are of the Chinese, there would be no difficulty in enforcing union conditions throughout the jurisdiction... But at that, it's a sight for the gods."⁸ The employer threatened to replace the Chinese workers with white women, the only other labour source available at the time, given the war.⁹



Men working with a barrel machine at Sweeney Cooperage Ltd. Photo: Vancouver Public Library 3542.

Although unsuccessful in gaining the eight-hour day, the strike expressed a new and growing cross-racial class solidarity. A year later, in August 1918, a group of workers in Masset engaged in a job action over wages. According to press reports, seventy Chinese and Indigenous workers “tied up the plant.”¹⁰

The Chinese Shingle Workers Union, affiliated with the Chinese Labour Association, took strike action against coastal mills again in March 1919.¹¹ The mill employers attempted to cut wages by ten percent, provoking a walkout involving hundreds of workers, mainly of Chinese heritage. The chief negotiators were Fung Sing Guong (馮勝光) and Lui Gan (雷根).¹² Unions like these would go on to support labour actions during the general strike wave of 1919.

The Sleeping Car Porters Union¹³

In April 1917, John Arthur Robinson, J.W. Barber, B.F. Jones, and P. White led the formation of the Order of Sleeping Car Porters (OSCP), one of the first Black labour unions in North America. At the time, almost 90 percent of Black men in Canada worked in connection with the railways in underpaid jobs with terrible working conditions.¹⁴ However, the Canadian Brotherhood of Railroad Employees (CBRE) would not allow Black people to become members.

By 1919, the OSCP won a first contract with Canadian National Railways (CNR) with improved wages and job protections for all porters. Canadian Pacific Railways, on the other hand, was even more resistant to unionization than the CNR, forcing employees to sign contracts that prohibited union activity and firing employees involved in organizing.

Porters were largely well-educated university graduates, but segregation in the labour market and racism confined Black workers to low and unskilled job positions where they waited on white consumers and answered to white

managers and bosses.¹⁵ “Smartly dressed and smiling,” Black train porters were a familiar sight for white Canadian travellers and corporate executives.¹⁶ The sight of Black men catering to white people’s needs and desires fulfilled fantasies of white superiority, while structural racism ensured that porters came from a plentiful and expendable labour pool.

As porters criss-crossed the country in Canada and the US, they raised awareness of human rights issues and social and political problems facing their communities across North America, fostering a “powerful diasporic consciousness.”¹⁷ One of the newspapers they distributed was *The Canadian Observer*, known as “The Official Organ for the Coloured People in Canada.” It ran from 1914 to 1919. The porters also established the Sleeping Car Porter’s Business Association, later named “Esseepee Limited,” which served as a credit union and provided investment opportunities for Black people. An important institution of Black activism, the Canadian Government recognized the union as a National Historic Event in 1994.



► VISIT: “Black Railway Porters and their Union Activity” plaque located at 100 des Canadiens-de-Montréal Avenue, Montréal, Quebec https://www.pc.gc.ca/apps/dfhd/page_nhs_eng.aspx?id=1695&i=79942

► WATCH: CBC released a TV series in 2022 about Canada’s railway porters. It can be streamed for free at <https://gem.cbc.ca/the-porter>

Black Porters employed by the Canadian Pacific Railways, 1920s. Photo: Provincial Archives of Alberta, A9167.

The 1919 General Strikes

William Pritchard, the editor of the *Western Clarion* from 1914 to 1917 and a leader of the Socialist Party of Canada, worked fervently with other socialists such as Joe Naylor to bring workers together. Their work resulted in the 1919 convention of the BC Federation of Labour, which declared: “This body recognizes no alien but the capitalist” and “Asian workers should be encouraged [to join] white unions for it is a class problem, and not a race problem that confronts the white millworker in BC.”¹⁸ After taking the BC Federation of Labour convention to Calgary, the labour militants went on to form the One Big Union. This movement had strong support from unions, such as the newly formed and multi-racial Lumber Workers Industrial Union. Out of a membership of 5,000, the Lumber Workers Industrial Union reported that only 34 voted against the OBU.¹⁹

The labour revolt came to a head in 1919 with the general strike in Winnipeg, which spawned sympathy strikes all over the country. These strikes represented an upsurge of worker militancy backing demands for union recognition and decent working conditions. In Winnipeg, 35,000 workers in both the private and public sectors went on strike, shutting down the city. Municipal police, who wished to join the strikers, were fired.

Employers and public officials portrayed the strikers as revolutionaries who were led by foreign agitators, mobilizing conservative veterans, the mounted police, and local militia to violently suppress the strike. June 21, 1919 became known as ‘Bloody Saturday’ after mounted police and militia attacked strikers and their supporters, killing two and injuring dozens. Strike leaders



Crowd on Main Street, Winnipeg, Spring 1919. Photo: Archives of Manitoba, N12323.

were detained, including William Pritchard. He and six others were tried for ‘seditious conspiracy’ and sentenced to a year in prison.

The general strike also attracted the support of the Order of Sleeping Car Porters, who donated to the strike fund, participated in walkouts, and suffered job losses in retaliation for their involvement in the strike.

Indigenous Resurgence

Labour was not the only social movement on the rise in 1919. First Nations had begun to mobilize regionally and nationally and were taking note of the emerging power of organized labour. This created new challenges for white supremacy.

League of Indians of Canada

In 1919, a returned veteran, Frederick Ogilvie Loft (Six Nations) made extraordinary efforts to bring First Nations together in the pan-Canadian League of Indians of Canada. In a letter to Chief Murray in Oka, Quebec, he explained, “We as Indians, from one end of the Dominion to the other, are sadly strangers to each other,” emphasizing that the day had past when “one band or a few bands” could free themselves of “officialdom” or stop the eroding of their lands and rights. Pointing out how political power rests on a foundation of organizing, he said, “Look at the force and power of all kinds of labour organizations, because of their unions.” Indigenous organizing was driven by a desire to win rights for returning veterans, as well as in response to the Ontario government’s attempt to sell First Nations lands through a bill called the Oliver Act.²⁰

► **PRIMARY SOURCES:** Library and Archives Canada: “Materials relating to the League of Indians” <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/patrimoine-autochtone/020016-4102-f.html>



Fred Loft with military medals at the former Ohsweken Orange Lodge at the Six Nations Fair grounds. Photo: Six Nations Legacy Consortium Collection, Six Nations Public Library.

The League faced intense opposition from the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA). One Indian agent wrote to Duncan Campbell Scott, the DIA’s assistant superintendent, regarding the League:

“I do not know if you are aware of the movement but I am suspicious of it, I don’t like the tone of it, it looks like the I.W.W. [Industrial Workers of the World] or O.B.U. [One Big Union] or Balshevic [sic]. I have advised my Indians to have nothing to do with it, at least not until it had your sanction.”²¹

Scott replied, “You are quite right in advising your Indians to have nothing to do with it.”

Despite DIA opposition, the League of Indians initially gained substantial support, expanding rapidly to hold conventions attended by hundreds of delegates in Sault St. Marie in 1919, Manitoba in 1920, Saskatchewan in 1921, and Alberta in 1922.

The Allied Tribes of British Columbia

The first general meeting of the Allied Tribes took place at Spences Bridge in June 1919, where they adopted the now famous “Statement of the Allied Indian Tribes of British Columbia.” The meeting and statement happened in response to the BC government’s release of the McKenna-McBride Commission under the leadership of John Oliver. The commission recommended land increases for reserves alongside reductions that were worth three times that of the additions. Although the report had been completed in 1916, the Department of Indian Affairs had refused to release it, fearing intense opposition to its findings. Those fears were confirmed by the Allied Tribes statement, in which they firmly rejected the report and reiterated their demand for a legal ruling regarding their title to the traditional and unceded territories of BC.

In response, the federal government opted to force through the land theft, introducing Bill 13 in parliament in March of 1920. Despite forceful lobbying on the part of the Allied Tribes, the government pushed ahead, authorizing the government to implement the McKenna-McBride recommendations “without consideration of Indian title, land rights, or past promises and laws.”²² With this legislation in hand, the federal government made a last-ditch attempt to press First Nations to accept the report with minor modifications. Indigenous leaders Peter Kelly, Ambrose Reid, and Andrew Paull refused to concede, demanding the issue of land title be brought to the British court system.

The revolts of 1919 rocked Canada on multiple fronts, echoing a broader global insurgency against racism, imperialism, and colonialism that was taking place throughout the world.



Indigenous activists Andrew Paull, Chief William Scow, and Rev. Peter Kelly (seen left to right) with the First Indian Advisory Committee. Photo: North Vancouver Museum and Archives 2191.

- 1 Based on Rod Mickleburgh, *On the Line: A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement* (Vancouver: BC Labour Heritage Centre/Harbour Press, 2018), 2.
- 2 As cited by Roger Stonebanks, “Joe Naylor: Man of Principle,” *Times Colonist*, 21 September, 1997, available at <https://www.labourheritagecentre.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Joe-Naylor-Stonebank.pdf>.
- 3 For detailed annual statistics see BC Legislative Assembly, *Report on Oriental Activities with the Province*, 1927, 15-16, <https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/bcsessional/items/1.0228001>.
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- 7 19 July 1917, Da Han Gong Bao (大漢公報–Chinese Times), 3..
- 8 As cited in Gillian Crease, “Exclusion or Solidarity? Vancouver Workers Confront the ‘Oriental Problem,’” *BC Studies* 80 (Winter 1988-89), 39.
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- 13 Mel Toth, “How the Black Sleeping Car Porters Shaped Canada,” Cranbrook History Centre, accessed May 27, 2023, <https://www.cranbrookhistorycentre.com/how-the-black-sleeping-car-porters-shaped-canada>.
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- 16 Cecil Foster, *They Call Me George: The Untold Story of Black Train Porters and the Birth of Modern Canada*, (Biblioasis, 2018).
- 17 Sarah-Jane Mathieu, *North of the Color Line: Migration and Black Resistance in Canada, 1870-1955*, (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 18.
- 18 As cited in Rod Mickleburgh, *On the Line: A History of the British Columbia Labour Movement*, (Harbour Publishing, 2018), 65-66.
- 19 As cited in Sacuta, et al., *Union Zindabad!*, 39.
- 20 Peter Kulchyski, “‘A Considerable Unrest’: F.O. Loft and the League of Indians,” *Native Studies Review* 4, no. 1-2 (1988), 95-117.
- 21 As cited in Keith D. Smith, *Strange Visitors: Documents in Indigenous-Settler Relations in Canada from 1876* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 132-133.
- 22 Wendy Wickwire, *At the Bridge: James Teit and an Anthology of Belonging* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019).

CAN IT BE PROPERLY SETTLED WITHOUT HER?



Editorial Cartoon in *The Chicago Defender* (Big Weekend Edition) June 21, 1919. *The Chicago Defender* was founded in 1905 and by the start of WWI had become one of the most influential and widely circulated Black activist newspapers in the US.

BLAISE WALLS

GLOBAL CHALLENGES TO RACISM | 1919-1922

4

The anti-racist and labour movements that rocked Canada in 1919 were part of a broader wave of cataclysmic change following the end of World War I. 1919 was a momentous year in the global fight against white supremacy, with anti-colonial resistance taking place in Egypt, Korea, China, and India, alongside a burgeoning pan-African movement that envisioned Black liberation as an international struggle. Russia's successful communist revolution of 1917 also threatened the global status quo. In response, Canada and other imperial powers sent military forces known as the Siberian intervention.¹

The Paris Peace Conference took place in Versailles in 1919 in order to negotiate a peace agreement and divvy up control of territory amongst nations that won the war. Despite hopes for national and ethnic self-determination, Versailles actually reinforced the victor's imperial division of the world. In Canada, politicians from Victoria to Ottawa looked to Versailles to defend and consolidate Canada's racist and colonial interests.

White Supremacy at Versailles

Beginning on January 12, 1919, the Paris Peace Conference at Versailles brought together the representatives of the victorious powers of World War I, including the big four – France, Britain, Italy, and the United States – as well as Japan, which was a junior imperial power. Along with others, including a delegation from China, they met to determine the terms of peace, including what to do with former territories controlled by Germany and the Ottoman Empire. In the process, the major powers redivided the world, and promoted what would become the League of Nations. While some independent nations emerged from the process and the losing imperial powers were dismantled, many nations hoping for independence were left just as subjugated as before the war: either by new, or existing, imperial countries.



Painting by William Orpen, "The Signing of Peace in the Hall of Mirrors".

Prior to the conference, Canada’s prime minister Robert Borden promoted an imperial Anglo-American alliance between Canada, England, and America to U.K. prime minister Llyod George. In a letter to George, Borden described the role of such an alliance as “undertak[ing] worldwide responsibilities in respect of undeveloped territories and backward races similar to, if not commensurate with, those which have been assumed by or imposed upon our own Empire.”²

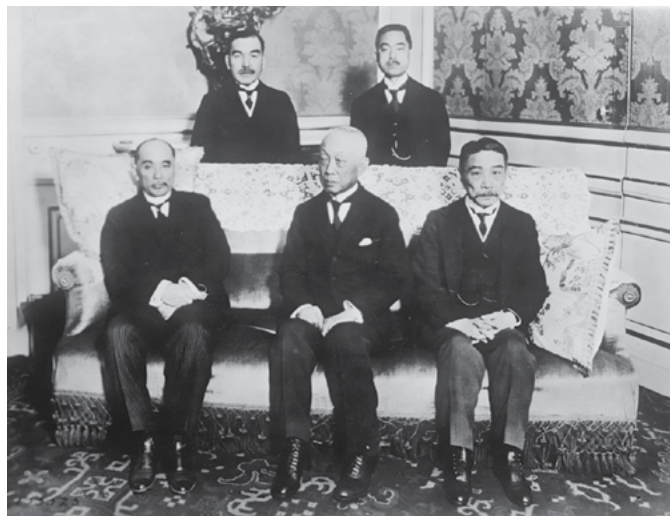
This call to create an Anglo-American bloc to dominate the world under the guise of the ‘white man’s burden’ was an extension of the civilizing mission that led to genocide against Indigenous peoples in Canada. Buttressed by white supremacists in California and British Columbia, Borden saw Versailles as an opportunity to organize the power of white people and nations over Indigenous and racialized peoples.

BC Legislature Messages Versailles

The end of the war saw BC legislators messaging prime minister Robert Borden in Versailles and demanding that he uphold and defend Canada’s right to maintain anti-Asian immigration policies. The first resolution, passed in March 1919, resolved that “Canada’s representatives at the Conference be asked to adhere firmly to the principle that Canada shall always exercise full control over immigration to this Dominion.”³ A month later, the legislature again resolved “to urge upon the Peace Conference, as a matter of the immigration into Canada of those races which will not readily assimilate with the Caucasian race.”⁴



Robert Borden (left) and Winston Churchill in London, England, 1912.
Photo: LAC, C-002082



Japanese delegates to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. Photo: Bain Collection, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540.

Racial Equality Clause

Although Japan was an imperial and colonial power in Asia, the Japanese delegation to Versailles had a stake in fighting white racism abroad, as its diasporic population endured racist policies and attitudes in settler colonial nations such as the US, Canada, and Australia. The delegation proposed that a racial equality clause be included in the proposed charter for a new League of Nations.⁵ That proposal met stern opposition from the British delegation (which included Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa) as well as the US A watered-down version of the clause achieved majority support, but was vetoed by US president Wilson. Wilson’s veto reflected the power of white supremacy at Versailles – as well as the complex global race hierarchies that could see an imperial ally like Japan struggle to make headway when its interests conflicted with more powerful, white imperial nations.

The International Labour Organization (ILO)

The formation of a labour organization was part of the discussions at Versailles. The proposed charter for the ILO originally included the clause, “in all matters concerning their status as workers and social insurance, foreign work men lawfully admitted to any country and their families should be ensured the same treatment as the nationals of that country.” Opposed by Canada and others, Borden personally took the initiative to eliminate that clause because it would offend provinces such as British Columbia, which “reserves certain industries for white labour.”⁶

The Mandate System

The new League of Nations embraced the liberal imperial concept that countries such as the US, the U.K., and Japan had a 'civilizing mission' regarding former enemy territories that were part of what today is known as the Global South.⁷ Thus, rather than granting independence to such territories, they were placed under the control of specific imperial powers. For example:

- France was given control of Syria and Lebanon;
- the U.K. was given control of Palestine, Transjordan, and territories in Africa.
- Japan was given control of several Pacific Islands, today part of Palau, the northern Marianas, Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands. Versailles also recognized Japan's seizure of Shandong in China.

Earlier, the United States successfully pressured participants to recognize the Monroe Doctrine, a foreign policy that opposed European intervention in the Americas while naturalizing the US's exclusive right to meddle in other countries in the western hemisphere.

While Versailles could have been an opportunity to forge a world system based on mutual respect for national self-determination, it instead represented the triumph of white supremacy and racial capitalism, only making changes that extended and sustained the domination of Anglo-American empires.

Fighting Exclusion at Versailles

Racialized and colonized peoples were already demanding a voice in their future when the peace conference convened in 1919. Many came to Versailles with the hope of lobbying world leaders and claiming their rightful place in a better world. These protests augured the onset of decolonization.

Among those who exposed the relationship between racism and empire was the prominent African American activist W. E. B. Du Bois. He was a key organizer of the [Pan-African Congress](#), linking colonialism in Africa with the oppression of African Americans. The congress gathered in Paris during the peace conference but was denied access to the official proceedings.⁸ Instead, fifty-seven delegates, including two women, Helen Noble Curtis and Addie Waites Hunton, who represented fifteen countries had their own meeting at a separate location. Other Black leaders in that era, including Marcus Garvey, would criticize the Pan-African Congress for being too moderate in its demands. The Pan-African Congress would remain an important if moderate voice for decolonization in subsequent years.

Also present at Versailles was a representative of the Korean independence movement against Japanese occupation.⁹ Kimm Kyusik travelled with the Chinese delegation to Paris. Other Korean representatives in the US had been refused passports by the state department and were prevented from attending. Nevertheless, Kimm appealed to the Versailles conference and various governments, only to be refused any standing at Versailles or even a response to petitions and appeals for recognition. The US and other imperial powers had appeased Japan's expansion in Korea as early as 1905. At that time, the US secretly recognized Japan's control of Korea in exchange for Japanese recognition of US control over the Philippines.

The Group of Annamese [Vietnamese] Patriots was also present in Paris and activists such as Phan Văn Trường, Phan Châu Trinh, and Hồ Chí Minh drew up a [petition](#) to the French government, then in control of Vietnam, demanding freedom of the press, release of political prisoners, and self-determination. They also sent the petition to the US and other delegations at Versailles. The petition was met with indifference but represented a step on the road to decolonizing Vietnam.



1918 passport photo of Ida Gibbs Hunt. Ida was born in Victoria, BC, on November 16, 1862, daughter of Maria and Mifflin Gibbs. She attended Oberlin College, Ohio, and became an activist promoting civil rights and women's rights. With her marriage to diplomat William Henry Hunt in 1904, she travelled extensively, was fluent in French, and acted as a translator at the Pan-African Conference.

Decolonizing Insurgencies

During and after Versailles, a global wave against colonialism and racism swept across the continents, as activists in the colonies demanded freedom from imperial rule, no doubt in some cases, as a response to the disappointment of the post-war peace treaty.

March 1st Movement (Korea)¹⁰

Among those standing up for national liberation at this time were the Korean people. Simmering opposition to Japan's 1910 annexation of Korea broke into open rebellion on February 8, 1919, when Korean students studying in Tokyo, with young Japanese allies, wrote and released an independence manifesto at the Tokyo YMCA. In Seoul's Pagoda Park, demonstrators there read another declaration of independence on March 1.

This was the sign for a massive uprising involving millions of demonstrators across Korea demanding independence from Japan. Frederick Arthur McKenzie, a Canadian correspondent, noted, "The most extraordinary feature of the uprising of the Korean people is the part taken in it by the girls and women."¹¹

Japanese imperial forces responded with a brutal crackdown, killing and arresting thousands including 17-year-old Yu Gwan-Sun who was imprisoned after helping organize demonstrations in her hometown. Tortured, she died in prison in September 1920. March 1st became an emblem of national independence. Korea finally won its freedom after the defeat of the Japanese empire in 1945. It was arbitrarily split into north and south by the Allies, and descended into civil war, a state that continues to this day.

May 4th Movement (China)

The Chinese delegation at Versailles actively worked to regain control of Chinese territory formerly controlled by Germany. The US and the UK, however, agreed that Japan could take over those territories, which had been occupied by Japanese imperial forces during the war. This decision provoked huge protests in China, known as the May 4th movement. Thousands of students from campuses around Beijing gathered in protest of the betrayal at Versailles and the weakness of the Chinese government. The movement spread to campuses across the country with merchants and workers organizations also participating. May 4th marked the beginning of cultural and political movements in which traditional Confucian values came under fire, inspiring many who would become future leaders of the Chinese communist movement.



Female students participate in the March 1, 1919 movement demonstrations. Image: Korean Quarterly



Yu Gwan-sun's prisoner identification card



Around 3,000 students from 13 universities in Beijing gathered in Tiananmen Square on May 4, 1919 to oppose Article 156 of the Treaty of Versailles, which gave territories in Shandong to Japan.

Egyptian Revolution¹²

The British government had substantial control over Egypt from 1882 and declared it a 'protectorate' when the 1914 war began. After the armistice, Saad Zaghlul and other nationalist leaders demanded an end to the protectorate and the right to attend Versailles as an independent delegation. Zaghlul and the Wafd (Delegation) party developed strong ties with the Egyptian people. When the British exiled Zaghlul and other Wafd leaders to Malta to stop them from traveling to Versailles, the country rose up in mass demonstrations and partisan attacks against the occupation, only to be met by British violence. Over 800 people died and hundreds more were injured. The British government was forced to recognize Egyptian sovereignty but retained power in the country by maintaining control of Egypt's foreign affairs and by keeping its troops in the country.



Egyptian women addressing a crown at a protest in Cairo, May 1919.
Photo: Bettman Archives



The centre panel from a triptych artwork by The Singh Twins, titled, "Jallianwala: Repression and Retribution" from their 'Slaves of Fashion' series. Artwork copyright The Singh Twins: www.singhtwins.co.uk

Jallianwala Bagh¹³

April 13, 1919 marked the harvest festival of Baisakhi, and for Sikhs, the celebration of the birth of the Khalsa tradition, founded by Guru Gobind Singh. On this day, a public meeting was convened in Amritsar, Punjab, India, to challenge the British Anarchical and Revolutionary Crimes Act (Rowlatt Act), which banned public gatherings, imposed a curfew, and criminalized dissent. An estimated 20,000 people had gathered when British Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer ordered the British Indian Army to begin firing, without warning or provocation, at men, women, and children. Though official accounts reported 379 people killed and 1200 wounded, many scholars, activists, and medical professionals present at the time argued that the death toll was much higher. This slaughter ignited and reinvigorated the anti-colonial movement that had been sweeping the Indian subcontinent for decades. For many, it would mark the single greatest catalyst that would finally rid India of its British rulers in 1947.



The Black Wall Street Mural, painted on a wall of an elevated portion of Interstate 244 in Tulsa, depicts the prosperity of Tulsa's historical Black community before the violence that befell it in 1921. Photo: The Black Wall Street Mural Facebook page

Global Black Resistance¹⁴

The war and its immediate aftermath birthed both moderate and radical streams of resistance among Black movements in England, America, and the Caribbean. For the hundreds of thousands who had participated in the war, there was a growing confidence and an expectation of fairer treatment upon return to civilian life. This was a major factor that inspired a Black resistance movement in 1919 that ended in unparalleled confrontations and anti-Black riots. In Britain alone, anti-Black riots broke out in nine British port towns, including Liverpool, leaving five people dead, hundreds arrested, and many more detained for 'protective custody.'

In the United States, a new determination to resist white supremacy emerged alongside heightened anti-Black violence. In 1919 alone, there were seventeen anti-Black riots, often precipitated by police violence against Black demonstrators trying to protect themselves or their communities. The Tulsa anti-Black massacre of 1922, directed at the successful Black community in Tulsa, ended with as many as 300 people dying. Though initially sparked by rumours of a Black man accosting a white woman that were later proven to be false, the mob action was undergirded by Jim Crow laws that enforced segregation and the competitive desire to own and control land.

Similarly in the Caribbean, Black peoples of the islands and surrounding areas stood up to discrimination and colonialism. Among the 1919 resistance movements of that era is the little known Black Revolution in Belize (then British Honduras), which saw returned servicemen march down the centre of Belize Town to protest their poor treatment during the war and the systemic discrimination they faced upon their return. They were joined by thousands of others. For many in Belize today, this uprising marked the first shot in the quest for independence from the British.

The anti-racist and anti-colonial uprisings of this year marked the onset of global decolonization. Unfortunately, a global white backlash also arose, signaled by Versailles and prolonging the struggle for decades. This was also the case in Canada.



100th anniversary remembrance march of the 1919 Black Revolution in Belize City, July 2019. Photo: 1919revolution.weebly.com

Endnote

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Joe Hope (Low Kwong Joe 劉光租) was an important community leader who helped found the Chinese Canadian Club in Victoria, actively supported the anti-segregation school strike of 1922, and traveled to Toronto and Ottawa leading the movement against the Chinese Exclusion Act. Photo: John Adams.



BACKLASH | 1920-1922

5

The tumultuous years of the war and its aftermath saw a growing assertiveness on the part of Indigenous, Black, and Asian Canadian communities as well as radical labour. White elites, however, responded aggressively – at Winnipeg and in Versailles. Measures imposed by the Borden government in 1918-1919 impelled the state toward repressive actions. The forces of white supremacy realigned as they attempted to renew and reinforce control over racialized communities and Indigenous land.

In British Columbia, economic and social elites came together, renewing alliances and fomenting a backlash in BC's fertile racist terrain. This coincided with the federal government's attempt to gain greater control over Indigenous peoples. Confrontations ensued as racialized peoples fought to defend their ground while coping with divisions within their respective communities.

Riots in Toronto, Wales, and Halifax were initial signals of troubles to come.

Anti-Greek Riot (Toronto)

In the summer of 1918, a drunk veteran had abused a waiter and been ejected from the Greek-owned White City Café in Toronto. The next day, thousands of veterans gathered to loot and attack every Greek-owned shop in downtown Toronto. The riot reflected continuing prejudice against eastern and southern Europeans by dominant Anglo groups, who spread rumours that Greeks did not fight in the war and were "pro-German."

Anti-Black Riot (Wales, UK)

In early 1919, white Canadian troops rioted in the Kinmel Park barracks in North Wales while awaiting transportation home. When sergeant major Edward Sealy, on duty as military police and member of the No. 2 Construction Battalion, attempted to arrest an unruly white soldier, the reaction was swift. White soldiers attacked hundreds of members of the Black unit as they went for baths. A biased military report encouraged readers to conclude, according to historian Melissa Shaw, that Black troops had "audaciously transgressed 'proper' racial boundaries."¹ Further riots by white Canadian soldiers were interpreted by the Canadian media as a response to Black American troops returning home before them.²

Anti-Chinese Riot (Halifax)

Returned white soldiers rioted and mobbed Chinese stores in February 1919 after a veteran refused to pay his bill and "abused the Chinese proprietor." When asked to leave he tried to steal cigarettes and cash. After being ejected, he later returned with others and began a two-night rampage, destroying mainly Chinese restaurants and injuring several Chinese residents.³

These riots illustrate how some white veterans vented their frustrations against racialized groups who increasingly stood their ground, refused to be intimidated, and defended their comrades, businesses, and communities. The riots, however, were only the beginning.

Fomenting a Backlash

In British Columbia the signs of backlash came fast and furious after the war ended. New Westminster city council passed a motion in February 1919 resolving that “all Asiatic immigration be stopped” and that “all enemy Aliens, as well as Aliens who rendered service to the State during wartime be deported.”⁴ The neighbouring municipality of Burnaby opposed “Orientals acquiring land,” and lobbied to restrict Chinese Canadian green grocers and “Oriental retail or wholesale traders.”⁵

Farmers’ organizations lobbied against Asian Canadians acquiring agricultural land. They were joined by the United Farmers of British Columbia and the BC Fruit Growers’ Association, as well as white veterans’ associations, boards of trade, and municipal councils, particularly in the Okanagan. At a Kelowna meeting, these forces declared “the ownership of land in BC by Japanese and Chinese is continually increasing, and constitutes a peril to our ideal of a white British Columbia, as it is impossible for Japanese and Chinese to become assimilated as Canadian citizens.”⁶

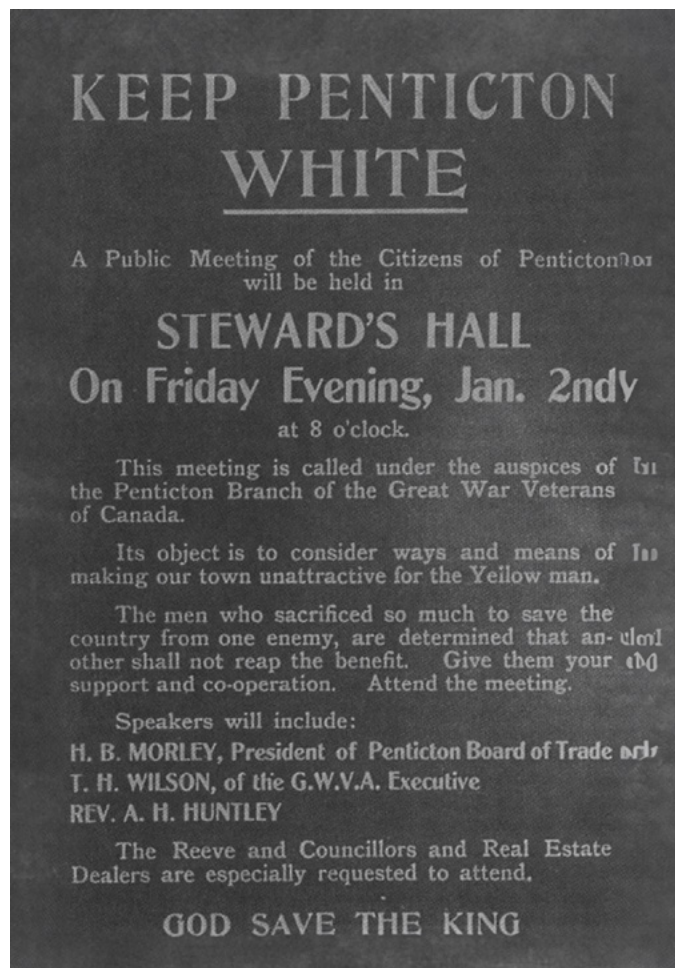


Photo from W. Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever* (2002), p.125.

Japanese Canadian fishers came under attack as well, having become an important force in the west coast herring, salmon, and cod fisheries.⁷ In December 1919, the federal Department of Fisheries issued instructions to reduce the number of gillnet licenses issued to Japanese Canadian fishers every year.⁸

Signs of cross-racial solidarity that had surfaced with the rise of social unionism in 1914-1919 faced major obstacles as craft unions reasserted control over the Vancouver and Victoria Trades and Labour Congress. These organizations actively re-engaged in smearing Asian workers as unfair competitors and inassimilable.

In 1920, white backlash overwhelmed attempts by Japanese Canadians to win a limited right to vote for veterans.

Japanese Canadian Veterans demand the Vote

The Japanese Canadian Association, on behalf of Japanese Canadian veterans who had survived the war, approached the provincial government to revise the voting act to give the 196 veterans the right to vote. Believing they had the support of the Vancouver chapter of the Great War Veterans Association, the government initially accepted the proposal, including an amendment giving them the right to vote in a revised voting act submitted to the legislature in early 1920. The reaction was swift.

White politicians, veterans, unions, farmers, and women’s groups raised furious objections to stop this extremely limited right to vote for 196 Japanese Canadian veterans. In the legislature, MLAs such as W. R. Ross took advantage of the narrow scope of the proposed bill to underscore how it would not give the vote to “Hindus and other East Indians, British subjects, who served the Empire in the war, nor to those Indians of the Province, many of whom enlisted and served overseas.”⁹

The Women's Canadian Club spoke out formally, stating the issue was one that concerned "the very woof and fabric of the Anglo-Saxon civilization."¹⁰ They strongly disapproved of any measure granting the vote to the "Japanese or Chinese on any grounds whatsoever," because to do so fundamentally means the "jeopardizing of our racial traditions and the undermining of Christianity."

Great War Veterans Associations mobilized widely against the legislation, sending a delegation to Victoria to lobby the cabinet. Labour MLA J. H. Hawthornthwaite stated that he "disliked to draw the colour line," but from the "standpoint of labour there were objections...the fact that in the past the Japanese had worked for less wages and under conditions under which the whites could not labour had created antagonism between white labour and the Orientals."¹¹

On April 20, the premier formally announced the withdrawal of the proposed legislation enfranchising the veterans. Japanese Canadian veterans, while continuing to lobby for the vote, also persisted by other means, financing a memorial in Stanley Park to their fallen comrades days after the legislation was defeated.



Members of the Canadian Japanese Association at the Japanese Canadian War Memorial in Stanley Park, circa 1920. Image: NNM 1994.41.14

The 1920 campaign against Japanese Canadian veterans' right to vote heralded the renewed racist ties binding white elites and sectors of civil society, who would go on to propel a white backlash over the next two years. At every turn they would take advantage of divisions between and within communities to advance a racist agenda that would have grave implications across the country.

The Racist Wave Takes Shape

In Vancouver, the Board of Trade declared in 1921 that Asian Canadian landholding should be restricted and that they “would do everything in our power to retain British Columbia for our own people,” by which they meant white people.¹²

The Victoria Chamber of Commerce created a “Committee on Oriental Aggression” that year. The committee submitted its report in November, recommending a complete ban on immigration from Asia, the enforcement of health and sanitary standards in Chinese communities, a ban on Asian Canadian ownership of property, and segregation of Chinese students in public schools.¹³ J. O. Cameron, a US timber baron and committee member, told the Chamber “the present system of public education was encouraging social equality and should be remedied.”

Media and culture opportunistically catered to and enflamed racism and xenophobia. The *Vancouver Daily World* began a concerted anti-Asian campaign led by journalist J. S. Cowper. The *Vancouver Sun* joined in, publishing the racist novel *The Writing on the Wall* by H. Glynn-Ward. A new racist newspaper, *Danger: The Anti-Asiatic Weekly*, had a brief but destructive existence.

On August 16, 1921, trade unions, veterans groups, and business associations gathered at the Vancouver Labour Hall to re-create the Asiatic Exclusion League (AEL) of Canada. Its goal was to create a ‘White Canada’ through “a campaign of education and organization to meet the dangers confronting the population of British Columbia from the ever encroaching industrial and commercial pursuits of Asiatics.”¹⁴ A month later, the Vancouver Board of Trade joined the AEL and called for the “ultimate total cessation of Oriental immigration,” as well as a prohibition on “further acquiring of lands in this province by Orientals.”

The provincial legislature joined the fray, passing a resolution demanding that the federal government “totally restrict the immigration of Asiatics into this Province, keeping in view the wishes of the people of British Columbia that this Province be reserved for people of the European race...”¹⁵ A similar resolution passed in 1922.

The federal parliament appointed a fisheries commission in 1922 that included anti-Asian politicians A. W. Neill from Comox-Alberni and W. G. McQuarrie of New Westminster, who had demanded that “steps be taken toward restoring the fishery to white fishermen and Indians.”¹⁶

It didn’t take long for McQuarrie and federal politician H. H. Stevens of Vancouver to amplify the backlash. In the spring of 1922, they introduced a non-binding resolution in parliament calling for an end to all Asian immigration to Canada. The May 8th resolution represented a well-organized drive for exclusion and found support among many members of the newly elected Liberal party.¹⁷ It was an ominous sign of things to come.

THE VANCOUVER SUNDAY SUN, VANCOUVER, B. C., DECEMBER 4, 1921

Liberal Candidates are pledged to a White British Columbia

Who is to dominate British Columbia--the White or the Yellow man? Shall it be through the negligence of the Meighen Government as represented by the Hon. H. H. Stevens, that the development of this wonderful Province of ours is to come under the domination of the Yellow Race? Speaking at the Opera House on the evening of September 19, eleven years ago, Mr. Stevens promised—

"that one of my first acts, if elected, would be to try to improve the conditions of fishing on the Pacific Coast." The report of that meeting also states that Mr. Stevens "regretted to see the B. C. fisheries so largely in the hands of the Asiatics." And, still at another meeting at the Horse Show Building on Monday night of September 18, in the same year, the report reads: "Mr. Stevens, raising his hands aloft, told them "what mighty things he would do, if he were sent to Ottawa. About eleven years have passed. What has Mr. Stevens done? Absolutely nothing! What are the results? 7466 Japanese and 20,342 Chinese have been admitted in the last ten years. One birth in every nine in British Columbia this year is that of an Oriental child. Over one hundred logging and shingle camps are now entirely Japanese. Out of 2961 salmon licenses the Japanese hold 2006. The Japanese control 10,167,004 acres of British Columbia's choicest orchard lands. The Chinese control 16,731.73 of the choicest truck farm lands. These are the bare facts.

What is the Remedy?

Each Liberal Candidate has pledged himself to make a White British Columbia. Sitting on the Government side---as they undoubtedly will under the new Government---they can achieve this purpose. They will make British Columbia a White man's country. They will develop our boundless resources, our mines, our forests, our fisheries, and our fertile valleys for the profit of the White man. Each Liberal Candidate believes that every "job" in British Columbia should be occupied by the White Man. It is indeed a sorry state of affairs when a returned citizen, who has won the highest reward at the disposal of his country--Michael O'Rourke, V.C.--publicly states that "the Meighen Government and the Oriental have forced him into the bread line." If you would remedy these conditions you will mark your ballot on December 6 FOR THE LIBERAL CANDIDATE!

VICTOR ODUM
"Of Course and Right"
Liberal Candidate
VANCOUVER SOUTH

MAYOR GALE
"An Aigger Vancouver"
Liberal Candidate
VANCOUVER CENTRE

M. A. Macdonald,
K.C.
"Canada's Own Young Lion"
Liberal Candidate
BURNABY

The Vancouver Sunday Sun, 4 December 1921, p.19.

Confronting the Backlash

However, resistance to the crucible of white reaction also intensified.

The Japanese Labour Union¹⁸

A delegation of this union protested the formation of the Asiatic Exclusion League in Vancouver at its offices in 1921. The union had been established in April 1920, after Japanese and Chinese workers joined with white workers to strike at a lumber mill in Swanson Bay, located on the central coast of BC, for better wages and working conditions. Soon after, workers who participated in this strike, together with local activists Sukuzi Etsu and Umezuki Takaichi, formed the Canadian Japanese Labour Union (Kanada Nihonjin Rodo Kumiai). Feminist and community activist Tamura Toshiko was an important supporter of the union. The union fought for the rights of workers in the forest and fishing industries as well as for day labourers and laundry workers. It sponsored the labour papers, *Rodo Shuho* (Labour Weekly) and the *Nikkan Minshu* (Daily People and later became the Japanese Camp and Millworkers' Union).

Chinese Students Strike

In 1922-23, the Victoria Chinese community organized a students' strike in opposition to the Victoria School Board's order to segregate all Chinese students in Chinese-only schools, including those who spoke English as their first or only language. According to the board, segregation was necessary to provide special instruction in English to the Chinese, but racism was the real reason; as one trustee explained, "the mixture of white and Chinese students in the public school is abominable."¹⁹

A youth organization called the Chinese Canadian Club (CCC) initiated the strike, working with the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association to mobilize the entire Chinese community behind their cause. Their rallies drew thousands of people and raised thousands of dollars in Vancouver and Victoria, organizing enough support that two trustees opposed to segregation were elected to the Victoria school board.²⁰ CCC president Joe Hope noted many years later that the students' were able to build the solidarity of the entire Chinese community, bringing together people of diverse origins, languages, and interests, as well as competing associations and rival political parties. This unity enabled the community to survive the challenges of the Chinese Exclusion Act.²¹



Chinese schoolchildren going to school in Victoria, British Columbia. BC Archives, F-06763.

Canada-Wide Fight against the Exclusion Act

The 1922 parliamentary resolution calling for an end to all Asian immigration galvanized Chinese communities across the country. The Liberal government (replacing the Conservatives in late 1921) focused its energies on pursuing Chinese exclusion while finding other solutions to limit Japanese and South Asian immigration. Chinese government representatives in Canada shared this information with Chinese Canadian leaders and communities began to mobilize.

Many organizations and sectors of society rallied to organize opposition. Chinese Benevolent Associations played a leading role, communicating details of the proposed Exclusion Act and urging members to unite to defend their rights.²² Associations were set up in cities and small towns across Canada, collecting funds and arranging demonstrations. Trade unions such as the Chinese Labor Association of Vancouver, the Chinese Shingle Workers' Federation, and the Chinese Produce Sellers group responded publicly to the proposed Exclusion Act with a counter-proposal. Protests only mounted going into 1923.

Anti-Indigenous Racism

The rise of the racist coalition in “British Columbia” and the pressure to pass a Chinese Exclusion Act coincided with the attempt on the part of the federal government to reinforce state control over Indigenous peoples and social movements. As deputy superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA), Duncan Campbell Scott came to play a powerful role as a bureaucratic steward of white supremacy. His specific goal was to overcome Indigenous resistance to Canada’s genocidal policies of seizing their lands and destroying their communities.

In the face of ongoing Indigenous resistance to residential schools, for example, Scott advocated for parliament to amend the Indian Act in 1920 so that it became compulsory for all Indigenous children to attend the schools.²³ Thousands would die there, their bodies were not returned to their families, and today are being found in unmarked graves.. The residential school system remains a travesty that continues to haunt survivors and families, directly and through intergenerational trauma, as shown by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.



A Kwakwaka'wakw potlatch with dancers and singers in 1914. Photo: Edward Curtis.

At the same time, Scott oversaw stricter enforcement and adherence to laws banning the Potlatch. This amendment to the Indian Act was introduced in 1884 but many First Nations continued the tradition, particularly on the west coast. At the behest of DIA agents, Scott urged a crackdown to reinforce the government’s policy of forcing assimilation by attacking Indigenous institutions.²⁴ Resistance to such policies never ended.

► **COMMUNITY RESOURCE:** “The History of the Potlatch”. U’mista Cultural Centre | <https://www.umista.ca/pages/collection-history>

► **LISTEN** to the award-winning podcast *Stolen: Surviving St. Michael's* | <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/stolen>

Six Nations Confront the State

In 1920, Scott and the DIA began a crackdown against The Six Nations of Grand River. Taking advantage of divisions in the community that had arisen during the war (see chapter 1), Scott began to undermine the traditional Confederacy Council headed at the time by Deskaheh (Levi General). Deskaheh had become speaker for the Six Nations Council after the DIA tried to impose military conscription. He openly defied Canadian control, traveling to London, England on a Six Nations passport to ask the British monarchy to support Haudenosaunee sovereignty. Scott was determined to get rid of Deskaheh and replace the Confederacy Council (composed of hereditary chiefs often appointed by clan mothers) with an elected band council mandated by the Indian Act.

In late 1922, during an arbitration process, the RCMP raided Six Nations territory and shot one of their warriors. Speaking to the momentous nature of the transgression, Deskaheh wrote at the time that it was unprecedented for the government to send mounted police to their land. “They had no right to shoot any Indian. They shot him five times...is this what you call a protection according to our treaty.”²⁵ In response, Deskaheh and the Confederacy Council decided they had no choice but to appeal to the newly formed League of Nations to recognize their status as a sovereign nation.

With the Six Nations rising in defense of their sovereignty while Chinese communities fought hard against racist exclusion, 1923 was shaping up to be a year that would determine the course of Canadian history for decades to come.

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DOMINION OF CANADA
DEPARTMENT OF IMMIGRATION AND COLONIZATION

C. I.
45

CHINESE IMMIGRATION SERVICE

Annie Avis Victoria Fong

No. 45450

This is to certify that 263 St. George St. Montreal P.Q.

whose photograph is attached hereto, has registered as required by Section 18 of the Chinese Immigration Act, Chapter 38, 13-14 George V.

Dated at Ottawa, Ontario.

this 20th day of June 1924.



Henry Reid

Controller of Chinese Immigration

This certificate does not establish legal status in Canada.

CI-45 Registration certificate of Anne Fong. Born in Montreal where she lived all of her life until the age of 100, she kept the certificate her entire life. CI-45 certificates were issued to all Chinese residents with the implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1923. CI-45s were branded with "Department of Immigration and Colonization" with fine print that read "this certificate does not confer any legal status in Canada", even though most children issued the card were Canadian born and raised. Photo: Tim Stanley.

THE CHINESE EXCLUSION ACT AND MORE | 1923

6

1923 was a year of major setbacks for anti-racist and anti-colonial struggle in Canada, as two years of racist backlash in BC converged with harsher federal policies towards Indigenous and Asian people. Canada's parliament passed Bill 45, An Act respecting Chinese Immigration, excluding Chinese people from immigrating to Canada and introducing new modes of surveillance on Chinese Canadians. Japanese Canadians were also targeted and the government moved to suppress the sovereignty of The Six Nations of Grand River.

The Chinese Exclusion Act

Parliament had already set the scene for the Chinese Exclusion Act when in 1922 it passed a resolution calling for the restriction of Asian immigration. Chinese communities across Canada took actions to dissuade the government from such a path. Unfortunately, their allies were few.

Initially, the Liberal government explored the possibility of negotiating a quota system with the Chinese government, similar to Canada's agreement with the Japanese government that restricted the number of newcomers per year. However, Immigration Department officials objected. Instead, they promoted complete Chinese exclusion, using legislation as the means to do so. Having focused their attack on Chinese Canadians, the government also took measures to further reduce immigration from Japan.

Parliament began discussing Bill 45 in the spring session of 1923. At the time, a few missionaries argued against the legislation, but for the most part Chinese Canadians waged a brave but lonely struggle for justice. Arrayed against them were almost all members of parliament, the national Retail Merchants Association, the Trades and Labour Congress, and many others.

Much of the discussion in parliament focused on assuring that merchants and students would also be excluded. Though a few minor details of the bill were changed as it passed through the parliamentary process, overall, the legislation remained drastic.

Local and diplomatic efforts to stop the Chinese Exclusion Act failed. An editorial published in the

Chinese Times attributed the failure to defeat the bill to internal divisions among the Chinese in Canada and political weakness and disunity in China.¹

In the end, not only was Chinese immigration halted but the legislation also imposed new restrictions on all Chinese Canadians, including strict measures of surveillance.



Victoria Chung, named after the BC city where she was born, earned a medical degree at the University of Toronto. In 1923, the Women's Missionary Society sponsored Chung to work at hospital in Southern China, where she spent the majority of her career as a physician. Pictured here is her CI-9 in 1923. CI certificates were a series of identity documents issued exclusively to all Chinese people living in Canada, including those born here. Photo: Library and Archives Canada.

“Details of overseas Chinese July 1 commemorations (Vancouver) on July 1, 1923,”

– *Chinese Daily Times*. July 2, 1924.

The Committee for July 1 Humiliation to Overseas Chinese held a meeting in which speeches were made by community leaders. On the same day, investigators went out to check if any Chinese did not follow the plans by the Chinese Benevolent Association. If anybody was found violating (going against) the plans, their name would be printed in newspapers and made public.

All Chinese were advised to do the following:

1. To wear the July 1 Humiliation to Overseas Chinese Commemoration badges,
2. All merchants to post the July 1 Humiliation to Overseas Chinese Commemoration banner on the windows of their stores,
3. No display of Canada flag in residences and stores,
4. No visits in playgrounds and participation in parades, and
5. No music in the area where Chinese lived.

More than 10 investigators were out to check on the situation. It was reported that all Chinese followed the plans. No Chinese were found taking part in the parade. At the meeting, several community leaders spoke about the severe humiliation Chinese people had suffered from the restrictive immigration policy. They further advocated to organize activities every year to commemorate July 1 as the Humiliation Day in the Chinese community.

– *Translation provided by The Critical Thinking Consortium.*



► **PRIMARY SOURCE** For more primary sources about the Chinese Canadian community’s responses to the Chinese Exclusion Act, visit <https://tc2.ca/sourcedocs/history-docs/topics/chinese-canadian-history.html> and view the collections “Consequences to the Chinese Exclusion Act” and “Reactions to the Chinese Exclusion Act”. Credit: The Critical Thinking Consortium.

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The Contested Path to Exclusion in Parliament, 1923

March 2 Charles Stewart (Acting Minister of Immigration and Colonization) introduces Bill 45, An Act respecting Chinese Immigration.

April 29 Close to 2,000 people from Chinese communities across the country gather in Toronto to protest the proposed act.²

April 30 Stewart moves the second reading of Bill 45. The House Commons discusses the bill in detail.

May 4 Bill 45 is read a third time and passed.

May 7 A delegation from the Chinese Association of Canada arrives in Ottawa to deliver a petition against the bill and lobby senators.³

May 8 Bill 45 is introduced in the Senate for approval. A special Senate committee is later struck to discuss the bill.

May 17 Sun Yat-Sen, head of the southern government in China, writes to the Canadian government to demand suspension of Bill 45. His request is dismissed.

June 26 The Senate adopts amendments regarding undocumented workers and non-English speakers, and passes the bill.

June 30 Following the House of Commons' approval of the Senate's amendments, the Governor General gives Royal Assent to An Act respecting Chinese Immigration.

From the Parliamentary Discussions

Mackenzie King (Prime Minister)

"For years past it has been recognized that it is not in the interests of Canada to admit to this country large numbers of persons from the Orient."

Simon Fraser Tolmie (Victoria MP, future premier of BC)

"British Columbians as a whole are anxious to maintain international relations and also to maintain our high standards as a Christian community; but we do not want to do that at the expense of giving up our country to the Asiatics."

W. G. McQuarrie (MP for New Westminster)

"I have every respect for the industry of the Chinaman, and as far as it goes in their own country, the Chinese are a very estimable people. The great difficulty is that in this country they cannot be assimilated and therefore they always exist as a foreign element in our midst."

A. W. Neill (MP for Alberni-Comox)

"I will say that the only fault I have to find is that the minister did not insert the words "Asiatic origin" which would make it apply to the Japanese."



Charles A. Stewart, P.C., M.P.



William Lyon Mackenzie King
P.C., O.M., C.M.G., M.P.



Simon Fraser Tolmie, P.C., M.P.



William Garland McQuarrie, M.P.



Henry Herbert Stevens

Pictured above are but some of the many white MPs who worked to get the Chinese Exclusion Act passed.

The final version, given Royal Assent on June 30, 1923, was draconian and became known as the Chinese Exclusion Act. The Act went into effect on July 1, 1923, Dominion Day (now known as Canada Day). Chinese people living in Canada had until June 30, 1924, to register with the immigration office. The Act required that “every person of Chinese origin or descent in Canada, irrespective of allegiance or citizenship, shall register with such officer or officers and at such place or places as are designated by the Governor General in Council for that purpose, and obtain a certificate in the form prescribed.”⁴ Failure to register by the deadline could result in fines, arrest, or deportation. In the years following, July 1st was observed as Humiliation Day by many Chinese Canadians.⁵

One of the immediate outcomes of the exclusionary measures was a complete stop in the growth of Chinese Canadian communities in Canada. In the twenty-four years during which the Exclusion Act was in effect, some Chinese men returned to China, while the lack of Chinese women and new immigrants drastically slowed down the growth of Chinese communities. It became more common for Chinese men to intermarry with women outside of the Chinese community.

Not only did families struggle to grow, but they also coped with devastating separation. Most of the Chinese living in Canada had arrived alone to seek work opportunities overseas. The exorbitant cost of the head tax prevented most people from bringing their wives and children to Canada. While some men were able to save money to return to China to visit their families, others remained in Canada and were separated from their family in China for decades, leading to the creation of diasporic ‘bachelor societies.’



In the early 20th century, Chinese Canadian men were often separated for decades from their wives and children. To bridge the distance, it was common to take two photos, one taken in China, the other in Canada, and merge them into one image, a family photograph that could never be a reality for many. Here, the woman and child were superimposed into the photo with the two men, circa late 1910s or early 1920s. Credit: City of Vancouver Archives 2021-034.262.

► Set in Southern China in the 1920s, Yuen-fong Woon’s *The Excluded Wife* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1998) tells the fictional story of Sau-Ping, who is unable to join her husband in Canada. Based on interviews with real women, Woon’s novel focuses on the effects of the Exclusion Act for ‘grass-widows,’ the Chinese women in China who were separated from their husbands, navigating patriarchy, historical upheavals, war, and natural disasters as married, and yet single, women. Available in public libraries.

The Chinese Exclusion Act remained in place until after 1947 but the hardships that it created persisted far longer. Even after the war, Chinese immigration policy limited immigration to a quota of a few hundred per year and employed a restrictive family reunification program.

► **VISIT** To recognize the 100th anniversary since the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Chinese Canadian Museum in Vancouver is hosting a major national exhibition, “The Paper Trail to the 1923 Chinese Exclusion Act”. Opening on July 1st, the in-person and online archive features hundreds of the certificates of identity documents (C.I. certificates) that were issued to Chinese Canadians. Learn more at: <https://1923-chinese-exclusion.ca>

Exclusion Plus

The Chinese Exclusion Act was not the only regressive measure in 1923. Other measures were taken against Asian Canadians while federal and provincial governments cracked down on First Nations, including:

Japanese Immigration Further Reduced

Under pressure to expand the Chinese Exclusion Act to include a ban on all Asian immigration, prime minister Mackenzie King opted to negotiate separately with the Japanese government. King explained that the Japanese government could be pressed to make the reductions itself in order to avoid “invidious legislation.”⁶ The Japanese government reluctantly agreed to reduce annual emigration to Canada from the previous quota of 400 per year to 150 on August 23, 1923.⁷ In 1928, spouses were no longer permitted to join their husbands in Canada.

BC Government Ratifies McKenna-McBride Act

On July 26, 1923, the BC government ratified the McKenna-McBride report, as did the federal government the following year. In response, the Allied Tribes of BC went directly to the Canadian parliament, submitting a petition demanding a special parliamentary committee to consider their title claim. The parliamentary enquiry took place, but in 1926 it repudiated the Allied Tribes’ claims. In order to quash any further legal appeals by First Nations, the federal government subsequently introduced Section 41 of the Indian Act, which made it illegal for Indigenous Nations to pursue legal actions regarding land claims. Indigenous resistance continued in various forms, but the Allied Tribes would disappear, as had the League of Indians.

The effects of 1923 were felt by racialized groups across the board. Stricter enforcement of immigration regulations from 1919 targeted eastern Europeans and officials were “detaining and deporting Jews for the slightest of reasons.”¹⁰ This period saw a rise in antisemitism, particularly in Ontario and Quebec, where anti-Jewish property covenants proliferated, media stereotypes regarding Jews increased, and universities introduced quotas for Jews.

The communities involved were, for the most part, each fighting their battles in separate corners and often faced internal divisions as well. In this light, it was not possible to achieve victories against the racist backlash and assaults of 1920-1923. That does not mean that Indigenous, Black, and other racialized peoples in Canada did not continue to resist white supremacy. They organized carefully, avoiding for the most part direct confrontations with the government or the RCMP. The ensuing years were difficult as community populations in several cases reached new lows. At the same time, new generations were born and would soon take active roles in challenging racism and white supremacy.

Japanese Canadian Fishers Restricted

In 1922, the federal government created the BC Fisheries Commission, that included MPs W.G. McQuarrie (New Westminster) and A.W. Neil (Alberni-Comox). Based on the BC Fisheries Commission report, the Department of Fisheries issued 800 fewer gillnet licenses to Japanese Canadian fishers in 1923 than in 1922. Nor were they assigned any licenses for salmon purse seine or drag-seine fishing boats. Licenses were further reduced in the following years.⁸

DIA Attacks Six Nations Confederacy

In the spring of 1923, the government stationed a permanent RCMP detachment on Six Nations territory (Ohsweken) and selected a white lawyer to conduct an “inquiry” into Six Nations affairs, provoking the Confederacy Council to seek recognition of their sovereignty abroad. Meanwhile, the DIA inquiry recommended replacing the Confederacy’s hereditary leadership with an elected band council. The following year, the DIA forcibly dismissed the Confederacy’s traditional council and imposed a band council. A small group of 56 Six Nations’ members voted in elections for the band council and 800 members signed a resolution condemning the government’s actions.⁹



Chief Deskaheh with the Iroquois Commission and Swiss supporters, in front of the Palais de l'Athénée, Geneva, Switzerland, 1923. Credit: Library of Geneva.

Deskaheh: "I Am Going to Geneva"¹¹

In 1923, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (also known as the Six Nations or the Iroquois Confederacy) dispatched their spokesperson, Deskaheh, hereditary chief of the Cayuga nation, to Geneva to lobby the League of Nations to recognize the Six Nations as an independent nation under Article 17 of the League's covenant.

Deskaheh first crossed into the United States and then traveled to Europe carrying travel papers issued by the Haudenosaunee Confederacy.¹² Accompanied by George Decker, a lawyer, Deskaheh went first to London where he told the British people, "I am on my way to the League of Nations, and stopped off to tell why, to you who care to know. I go because your Imperial Government refused my plea for protection of my people as of right against subjugation by Canada. The Canadian "Indian Office " took that refusal to mean that it could do as it wished with us. The officials wished to treat us as children and use the rod. This trouble has been going from bad to worse, because we are not children. It became serious three years ago, when the object, to break us up in the end as tribesmen, became too plain for any doubt."

The Six Nations spokesman remained in Geneva over a year, supported by a Swiss group, the Bureau International pour la Défense des Indigènes. Numerous state representatives supported Deskaheh's appeal, but British objections prevented a formal hearing by the League of Nations.

A wanted man in Canada, Deskaheh returned to live with his friend Chief Clinton Rickard on the Tuscarora reservation in western New York, where he died in 1925. The Six Nations continue to use their Haudenosaunee passports for international travel to this day.



Image of Deskaheh from the newspaper, *The Graphic*, 1922.

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AFTERWORD

ECHOES OF 1923?

Much has changed since 1923. Or has it?

After World War II, the Canadian state entered a period of liberal reform. Indigenous, Black, other racialized communities, women, labour, and LGBTQ2S communities made important social, economic, and legal gains, often at great personal, physical, and emotional cost. These gains included the repudiation of the Chinese Exclusion Act, voting rights for racialized peoples, legal victories for Indigenous peoples, the end of overtly racist immigration laws, and improved civil and labour rights.

These steps provided footholds for ongoing challenges to racisms that were continuously adapting, retaining the power to racialize, exclude, and impact specific groups. Thus, beneath a veneer of equality and adherence to multiculturalism, there evolved a “tangled, often-invisible web of prejudice that make up what we call systemic racism. This web includes the social standards against whom all are judged and usually reflects a

normative white settler experience, affording those of European heritage the perennial advantage of white privilege.”¹

Systemic racism affects many parts of Canadian society. Deeply embedded within institutions, latent or ambient racisms constantly produce micro-aggressive reminders of who is “in”, and who is “out”. People in anti-racist or decolonizing movements regularly encounter this web of racism – at times as invisible but real walls of apathy or inertia, or in active resistance to change within organizations.

Moreover, overt forms of white supremacy also persisted – the racist murder of Nirmat Singh Gill at the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara in Surrey in 1998 being a case in point. Today, we recognize the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and police violence against



Red dresses, symbol of missing and murdered Indigenous women, hung at Unist’ot’en healing centre to highlight the dangers of industrial development in the area. Amanda Follett Hosgood, the Tyee.

Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities as overt, institutionalized forms of white supremacy.

However, ongoing Indigenous resistance, anti-racism, and other progressive social movements have continuously mobilized for systemic change.

In 2020, a global anti-racist uprising occurred. In Canada, First Nations mobilized against environmental racism and demanded land back; a vibrant Black Lives

Matter movement erupted against police violence; and new social groups contested anti-Asian racisms related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Building on a decade of Indigenous resurgence that emerged with Idle No More in 2011, this uprising pointed towards the end of Canada as a settler colony. Reflecting generational changes, new demographics, and innovations in education, a new social mood encouraged not only redress for past injustices, but a revisioning of our collective future.

A New Backlash?

We worry, however, that we are currently witnessing a change in momentum, a conservative shift that could turn into an organized backlash against racialized communities and social movements. Such a backlash would turn back the clock and could instigate another era of repression and reaction, just as the backlash in the 1920s marked the onset of two hard decades.

One sign of this shift was the so-called “Freedom Convoy” of January 2022 that illegally occupied downtown Ottawa for weeks. Abetted by police, this protest attracted a wide assortment of supporters yet seemed firmly rooted in notions of white supremacy. Many of the leaders of the convoy, including Tamara Lich, B.J. Dichter, and Pat King identify with white nationalist movements. King had advocated the ‘great replacement theory’ that harkens back to 1920s tracts such as *The Writing on the Wall*. The racism appeared in the double standard enforcing the law – handling the mainly white demonstrators in Ottawa with kid gloves while using undue and often deadly force against land defenders and environmental activists.

Across Canada, racialized communities felt targeted by local demonstrations in support of the convoy. When Selam Debs, an anti-racist educator in Waterloo, posted criticism of the “Freedom Convoy” on Twitter, she was swamped with hate mail and racist posts. Often buried under a veneer of Canadian politeness, the racism and hatred associated with white nationalism quickly surfaces when challenged.

Unfortunately, populist politicians are continuing to fan these flames, embracing or encouraging white nationalism in the hope of stirring up a conservative backlash. Instances of anti-gay/trans attacks are increasing, and we are frequently hearing “anti-woke” tirades, not dissimilar to what is happening in the United States. Is this the onset of a conservative shift, intersecting with persistent currents of racism?

Increasing Sinophobia

Since the arrival of newcomers from China, white settler’s racial anxieties generated a stream of “yellow peril” narratives that led to serious exclusions beginning in 1872 when Chinese Canadians and First Nations were denied the right to vote. Today, we are seeing a revival of anti-Chinese racisms.

New racist narratives have accompanied the economic rise of China, welcomed with one hand yet labelled a threat on the other. This exploded into a full-blow crisis with Canada’s detention of Meng Wanzhou and the arrest of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor by China, amplified by the anti-Chinese racisms arising out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Though the pandemic receded, racism related to China and Chinese Canadians has accelerated, this phase marked by accusations of Chinese interference in Canada. Much of this current panic has been stimulated by CSIS, focusing its fire against China, aided by convenient leaks to conservative media. This has produced a “dangerous hysteria gripping Canada.”²

Sinophobia today is rampant, yet not easily challenged. Justifiable criticisms of the Chinese state may be overstated, supporting the CSIS-inspired notion that China is a threat to Canada, and inflaming divisions among communities. Unfortunately, the opposition parties in parliament have seized on this issue for political gain, forcing the resignation of David Johnston, the former governor-general of Canada. Will this in retrospect mark another tipping point towards calamity?

Persisting Islamophobia

In January 2017, Alexandra Bissonnette murdered Khaled Belkacemi, Azzeddine Soufiane, Aboubaker Thabti, Mamadou Tanou Barry, Abdelkrim Hassane, and Ibrahima Barry and wounded five others at the Islamic Cultural Centre of Quebec City. The perpetrator was



Forest Forest fire over Barrington Lake, Nova Scotia, May 2023. Photo: NS Government.

an avid follower white nationalists. Four years later Nathaniel Veltman drove to London, Ontario and used his bull-bar equipped truck to mow down the Afzaal family- murdering Salman Afzaal, Madiha Salman, their daughter Yumna and her grandmother, Talat Afzaal. Their son, Fayez, was seriously injured. This was also a premeditated act on the part of a white supremacist. Though the “war on terror” that inspired Islamophobia has receded, the attacks on Muslims have intensified. Why?

Islamophobia gained traction in Canada after the 9/11 episode in 2001 that prompted the US-led “war on terror”. Islamophobia, the racist targeting of Muslims, became an essential aspect of the campaign. Maher Arar would be among the first casualties, but the list is long and unending. The “war on terror” has led to the continual reinforcement of repressive state agencies such as the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS). Rife with Islamophobia itself, it has harassed Muslim or Arab communities, including Palestinian activists. A reinforced CSIS has now found additional targets, fanning the flames of Sinophobia.

Environmental Racism

The inability of the state to recognize Indigenous sovereignty and reorganize society based on that recognition is perpetuating the dispossession and oppression of Indigenous peoples. This takes many forms. In the context of current climate disasters, however, environmental racism is especially acute. As the forests burn and flood waters ascend, Indigenous peoples and rural communities are once again hit the hardest. This reflects the continuous downloading of the negative effects of industrialization onto Indigenous and racialized communities. The fact that Canada’s economy is rooted in lands stolen from Indigenous peoples makes environmental racism particularly virulent. Rather than find remedies, however, the liberal state feeds racial capitalism’s addiction to fossil fuels and resource extraction. It provides subsidies to pipelines or provides RCMP services to attack land defenders or those protecting old-growth forests. Today, smoke engulfs cities everywhere, a reminder that, in the end, environmental racism imperils us all.



Jully Black performing the Canadian Anthem, Feb 2023. Photo: Screenshot from NBA YouTube video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N90FQUXpr8g>

Uniting for a Better World

In February 2023, R&B star Jully Black sang Canada's national anthem at the NBA All-Star game. In her rendition she changed one word – instead of “O Canada! Our home and native land!” she sang “O Canada! Our home on native land.” Her version, recognizing Canada as Indigenous territory, went viral. It resulted in a racist backlash and accusations of disloyalty but also an outpouring of support. Jully Black's action points how communities can come together through the recognition of Indigenous sovereignty.

Meeting the real threats to Canada and the world, the existential crises of environmental destruction, global pandemics, and the threat of global war demands innovative approaches to reimagining a collective future. Indigenous peoples offer important alternatives at this crucial time.

Fifty years ago, the Indigenous leader George Manuel began to outline a radical new relationship between humans and the earth based on his experiences in the Indigenous world: “This is not the land that can be speculated, bought, sold, mortgaged, claimed by one state, surrendered or counter-claimed by another.”³ It was the “land from which our culture springs [...] like the water and the air, one and indivisible. The land is our Mother Earth. The animals who grow on that land are our spiritual brothers.”⁴

Summing up his perspective on the past, he concluded: “The struggle of the past four centuries has been between these two ideas of land.” Many Indigenous communities embrace this philosophy and others are also building unique alliances in the same direction.

Today, activists such as Ingrid Waldron (McMaster University) have worked to bring Indigenous and Black communities together to confront environmental racism and racial capitalism as depicted in her book and movie *There's Something in the Water: Environmental Racism in Indigenous and Black Communities*. Rinaldo Walcott, author of *Black Like Who?* also promotes the need for radical change. In his recent *On Property*, he connects the movement for prison abolition to private property, and advocates for a return to communal relations inspired by Indigenous notions connecting the land and its living beings.

These are the messages that can inspire social movements to come together and create the unity necessary to stave off a conservative backlash and re-imagine a better world, locally and globally.

For endnotes see page 59.

GLOSSARY¹

ABORIGINAL TITLE Indigenous possession (title) of their traditional territories.

AFRICAN DESCENT People of African descent live in many countries of the world, either dispersed among the local population or in communities. The largest concentration can be found in Latin America and the Caribbean where estimates reach 150 million.

ANTI-SEMITISM A discriminatory perception of, and actions against Jews and/or their communities, faith, or institutions.

ASIAN A term denoting people of or from Asia that geographically may include East Asians, Southeast Asians, South Asians, or West Asians.

ASIAN CANADIAN People of Asian heritage living in Canada, who may share common experiential connections of migration and to (de)colonization in this country.

BLACK A designation for people of African or Caribbean ancestry. In the Canadian Census Black is a self-identification choice and is included in the population group Visible Minority.

CHINESE No single definition captures the complex histories of migration and unique identities related to this term. Can refer to people living in China today as well as the historic diasporas.

CHINESE CANADIAN People of Chinese ancestry living and making their homes in Canada, including those here for multiple generations as well as newcomers.

COLONIALISM The subjugation in part or wholly of a people or country by a dominant group or imperial power. In the modern era, European powers attempted to subjugate the world to their control. See SETTLER COLONIALISM as a specific variant.

DECOLONIZATION The process of dismantling the institutions and culture of colonialism that continue to exist and that underpin systematic racism.

DISPOSSESSION The taking of a community's land, culture, language, possessions, or livelihood.

ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM Downloading the negative environmental effects of capitalist development

disproportionately onto Indigenous, Black, and other communities of colour. In settler colonies such as Canada, dispossession of Indigenous peoples is a central pillar of environmental racism.

ETHNICITY A group that shares similar cultural affinities that could include shared origins, language or dialects, culture, or traditions. Can be a subset of a racial category.

GHADAR Meaning 'Mutiny' or 'Rebellion', this movement flourished in the Pacific Northwest beginning in 1913. Its goal was to rid India of British colonialism and to defend the rights of South Asian migrants.

GURDWARA Literally the 'gateway to the guru/teacher'. This refers to the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, the Sikh scriptures and text. First built in BC with the arrival of Sikh settlers around 1900, these spaces served all South Asians at the time, including those of Hindu and Muslim faiths.

INDIGENOUS Communities of peoples who identify themselves as descendants of the original inhabitants of their ancestral homelands and who are land/waterbased cultures disrupted by colonial invasion(s).

INTERSECTIONALITY The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender that often manifest as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

ISLAMOPHOBIA Fear, hatred of, or prejudice against the Islamic religion or Muslims.

PREJUDICE Biased or discriminatory beliefs or attitudes (conscious or unconscious) held by individuals towards a racialized group or people associated (rightly or wrongly) with the group. Prejudice can exist in any community and can be based on gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability, or culture as well as ethnicity or race. Prejudice plus power, whether directed at an individual or more broadly, equals racism.

RACE Imposed categories and hierarchies of people that may share common ancestry and/or ostensibly similar physical traits that might include skin tone, hair texture, stature, or facial characteristics. Humans are intrinsically similar genetically and thus race is considered to be social constructed, often by socially dominant groups, to reflect discriminatory or cultural

attitudes of superiority. With colonialism, race was constructed to justify imperial expansion by white-dominated powers. We generally avoid the term as it can normalize an otherwise unjustifiable notion.

RACIAL CAPITALISM A concept that links capital accumulation with racial exploitation continually producing racial classifications and inequities.

RACIALIZATION The ongoing processes of constructing and imposing racial categories and characteristics on a given person or community.

RACISM When prejudice and power combine to discriminate against a particular group or individuals of a group. This term points to the particular effects of state-sponsored racism such as police violence or divide-and-rule policies towards Indigenous, Black, or racialized communities.

RACISMS Rather than taking one essential form, there are many different racisms, each with its own histories, manifestations, and consequences. Thus, anti-Asian racism will differ from anti-Indigenous racism, or antisemitism. Racisms change with time, place, and with other factors such as gender, class, sexuality, and ability/disability.

SETTLER COLONIALISM The colonial subjugation of Indigenous lands particularly through the deployment of non-Indigenous peoples as settlers who then become the dominant group in the affected territory. British settler colonies today include the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia.

SINOPHOBIA Discriminatory attitudes including hate and fear directed at China or at peoples of Chinese descent.

SOUTH ASIAN The term used by those who identify with this region that includes India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Afghanistan. Indo-Canadian is still used by some but it and 'East-Indian' are less current because of their hyphenated nature and geographical/historical inaccuracy. As the diversity of settlement grows, some people increasingly identify regionally and linguistically, i.e., as Punjabi. The dynamic nature of identity reflects the complexity of migration and settlement.

Glossary Endnotes

1 This glossary is a composite index of terms that draws on the following sources: British Columbia Black History Awareness Society, "Definitions," bit.ly/34Vcjpz; Canadian Race Relations Foundation, Glossary of Terms bit.ly/3n6PvK1; British Columbia's office of the Human Rights Commissioner, "Glossary," bit.ly/3pyXjWp; Chelsea Vowel, *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis & Inuit Issues in Canada* (Winnipeg: Highwater Press, 2016); Denise Fong and Henry Yu, "Usage of Terms" as part of the Exhibit A Seat at the Table – Chinese Immigration and British Columbia," Museum of Vancouver, 2020; Henry Yu, "Asian Canadian History," in Eiichiro Azuma and David Yoo, editors, *Oxford Handbook of Asian American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), and also *Journeys of Hope – Challenging Discrimination and Building on Vancouver Chinatown's Legacies*

Afterword Endnotes

1 Challenging Racist "British Columbia": 150 Years and Counting, 66.
2 Andrew Mitrovica, "The Damage Canada's Spies Do," June 1, 2023, *Aljazeera*.
3 George Manuel and Michael Posluns, *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019; first published in 1974 by the Free Press), 6.
4 Manuel and Posluns, *The Fourth World*, 6

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► READ Our previous learning resource, *Challenging Racist 'British Columbia': 150 Years and Counting*, provides background on topics introduced in this booklet as well as on anti-racist resistance in BC from 1923 to the present.

It is available as both an enhanced digital edition and printable pdf, at <https://challengeracistbc.ca>