



Undesirables: White Canada and the Komagata Maru -- An Illustrated History

Ali Kazimi

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In May 1914, the Komagata Maru, a ship carrying 376 immigrants from British India, was turned away when it tried to land in Vancouver harbour. Many of the men on board, veterans of the British Indian Army, believed it was their right to settle anywhere in the empire they had fought to defend. They were wrong. Enforcing the "continuous journey" regulation, immigration boats surrounded the ship a half-mile off shore, making the passengers virtual prisoners. Thus began a dramatic stand-off that would escalate over the next two months, becoming one of the most infamous events in Canadian history.

Why would Canada turn away these South Asian migrants when it had accepted more than 400,000 immigrants the previous year? Why were some of the passengers killed upon their forced return to India? How did this ship pose a threat to the mightiest empire the world had ever known? In Undesirables: White Canada and the Komagata Maru, award-winning filmmaker Ali Kazimi addresses these and other provocative questions, creating a historical framework that allows readers to view events through the eyes of earlier South Asian migrants to Vancouver, authorities of the Dominion of Canada, and imperial officials in Britain and India. At the heart of the story lies the struggle between Canada's desire to build a homogenous nation of white immigrants--preferably from Britain and northern Europe--and the British empire's need for stability.

Weaving text together with rarely seen photographs, key documents and other striking visual materials, Kazimi explores what the current federal government has acknowledged as a "dark chapter" in Canada's past. By setting the story in a global context and against the early histories of Chinese, Japanese and African-American immigrants to Canada, he shows that the Komagata Maru "incident" was far from incidental. Today, with Canada's immigration and refugee framework under intense scrutiny, the story of the Komagata Maru is all the more relevant.



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