



## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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# Asian Canadians and Canada's Military

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## Historical Overview

Asian Canadians have served in the Canadian military since at least the First World War. They did so despite not enjoying the same rights as other Canadians. Most Chinese Canadians, Japanese Canadians, and South Asian Canadians, for example, were not allowed to vote prior to the Second World War and did not attain full voting rights until after the war. Asian Canadian veterans often pointed to their military service as proof of their loyalty to Canada when campaigning for political equality.

## First World War

As many as 300 Chinese people living in Canada served in the First World War. Some died or were injured on the battlefields of Europe. Despite these sacrifices, life for Chinese people in Canada became more oppressive after the war. In 1923, Canada went as far as to ban immigration from China.

At least 222 Japanese Canadians fought for Canada in the First World War. They served in major battles like the Somme and Vimy Ridge. At least 91 were wounded and 54 were killed in combat. Many received gallantry awards.

Those who returned home to Canada wanted the right to vote. They lobbied the government to allow all Japanese Canadians to vote.

In April 1931, they were partially successful: Japanese Canadian veterans obtained the right to vote, but all other Japanese Canadians were still denied this right.

South Asian Canadians also faced significant discrimination prior to the First World War. An amendment to the 1908 *Immigration Act*, for example, forbid the landing in Canada of any immigrant who had not come on a continuous journey from the country in which they held citizenship—a rule that was enacted to keep out South Asians and Japanese. Most South Asians in Canada at that time were Sikhs from the British-ruled Indian subcontinent. Around 10 Sikh Canadians served in the Canadian Expeditionary Force during the First World War.

## Second World War

When the Second World War erupted, young Chinese Canadians were once again eager to enlist. Many were rejected at recruiting offices simply because they were Chinese. Although born on Canadian soil, the members of this generation were still treated as second-class citizens. Most could not vote. They were also usually confined to low-level jobs in segregated neighbourhoods. In addition, the ban on Chinese immigration was still in effect. Within this environment, young Chinese Canadian men and women believed that volunteering to fight would prove their loyalty to Canada and help their community win the right to vote.

When Japan entered the war in 1941, there was a new opportunity to serve. Chinese Canadians were recruited and trained by Britain's Special Operations Executive, serving with Force 136. They specialized in espionage and sabotage and were assigned to operations behind Japanese lines in Southeast Asia.

By war's end, more than 600 Chinese Canadians had enlisted and served all in every theatre of the conflict. Around thirty Japanese Canadians volunteered to fight for Canada when the Second World war began in 1939. Two years later, when Japan entered the against Canada and its allies, life for Japanese Canadians quickly became more perilous.

In 1942, the Canadian government forcibly relocated and interned thousands of Japanese Canadians because of their race. Whole families were forced to move away from the British Columbia coast, leaving behind homes and fishing boats that were seized and sold off. The government felt that people of "Japanese racial origin" might be disloyal to Canada. In spite of this treatment, in 1945, an additional 160 Japanese Canadians joined the Canadian army.

Some served as interpreters and interrogators, including in war crime trials involving Japan.

After the Second World War, the Canadian government deported 3,964 Japanese Canadians to Japan. (In 1950, about 30 of them joined the Canadian Army, enlisting from Japan and fighting in Korea. After the war, they were able to return to Canada. Another 20 Japanese Canadians living in Canada also served in the Korean War.)

## After 1945

When the Second World War ended, most Asian Canadians did not have the right to vote in federal elections. Asian Canadian veterans were at the forefront of campaigns to change this and achieve political equality with other Canadians. They used their status as veterans to demonstrate their loyalty to Canada and prove that they were willing to risk their lives for their country.

In 1947, British Columbia granted Chinese Canadians and South Asian Canadians living in the province the right to vote in provincial and federal elections. The following year, amendments to the *Dominion Elections Act* meant that race could no longer be grounds to prevent someone from voting in federal elections anywhere in Canada — regardless of exclusions individual provinces might enact.

This meant Japanese Canadians could now vote in federal elections. Finally, in 1949, the last restriction on Asian Canadian voting rights was removed when British Columbia allowed Japanese Canadians to vote in provincial elections. All these advances in political equity were at least in part attributable to the impact Asian Canadians' military service had on broader public opinion.

Today, Asian Canadians serve in all branches of the Canadian Armed Forces, continuing a tradition that began more than 100 years ago with a determination to fight for their country even though it didn't yet treat them as equals.