Teaching history from

DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES:

High School Lesson on Citizenship: Thind & Ozawa

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Asian American Voices for Education

GA Social Studies Standards

SSCG13 Demonstrate knowledge of the operation of the judicial branch of government.

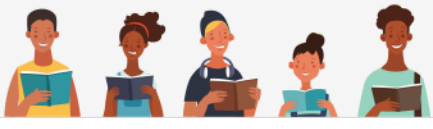
What does it mean to be American? Who gets to be a citizen of the United States? What characteristics or qualifications should a migrant possess to be a U.S. citizen? The stories of two Asian immigrants ---Takao Ozawa and Bhagat Singh Thind---and their court battles answer these core questions.

Not surprisingly, the founders of the United States defined citizenship as the province of white male property owners and designated free white persons as the only group of people who could naturalize to become a citizen. Following the Civil War, Black people gained citizenship through the Fourteenth Amendment and the right to naturalize under the Naturalization Act of 1870. When, by law, only "free white persons" and "persons of African descent" could be naturalized and you are an Asian immigrant, what would you do? In 1922 and 1923, two Asian immigrants, Takao Ozawa and Bhagat Singh Thind, separately challenged the racist citizenship law and took their cases all the way to the Supreme Court.

In 1922, Takao Ozawa, a Japanese immigrant, argued that because his skin was as white as white people's, he should be allowed to become a US citizen. The Supreme Court denied him, saying that being white meant the Caucasian race, and as a member of the "Mongolian" race, Ozawa was not white.

In 1923, Bhagat Singh Thind, an immigrant from India, used the Supreme Court's own words to make the case that he was classified as Caucasian, and thus eligible for citizenship. However, the Supreme Court changed the definition of being white from being Caucasian to what most people believed to be white. The Court said that although Thind was Caucasian, most people wouldn't see him as white, and denied Thind's request. The different definitions of "white" offered by the same Supreme Court within one year of each other reveal how race and whiteness are constructs that shift depending on which definition will best uphold white supremacy.





Here are some resources to engage students in the stories of Ozawa and Thind and the role of courts in the U.S. government:

PBS video clip: How A Supreme Court Case Redefined Whiteness

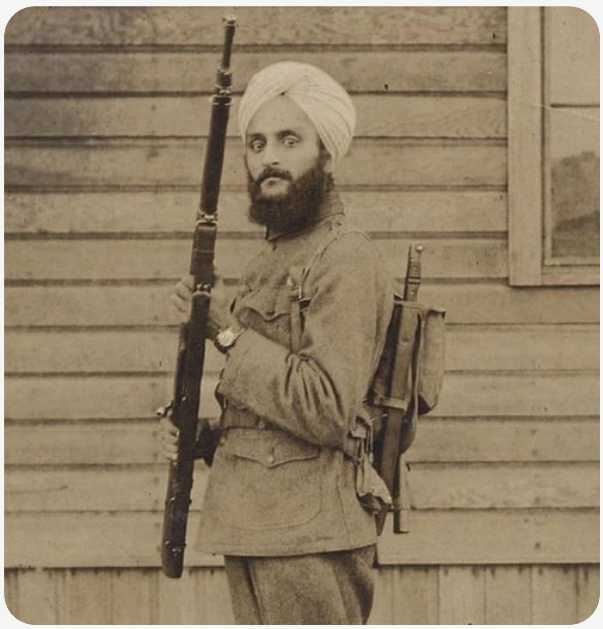
PBS video clip: Racial Identity and American Citizenship in the Court

Ozawa story from Densho

Thind story from National Park Service

Takao Ozawa v. US (1922) court ruling US v. Bhagat Singh Thind (1923) court ruling

NPR: 4 U.S. Supreme Court Cases Where Asian Americans Fought For Civil Rights





Complete Article and Lesson Plan

Photo credit: (Top to Bottom, Left to Right)

- Takao Ozawa (1875-1936). Courtesy Japanese American National Museum (Gift of the Takeya Family, 99.208.1).
- Bhagat Singh Thind, National Park Service/Public Domain
- The Taft Court, 1923. Library of Congress

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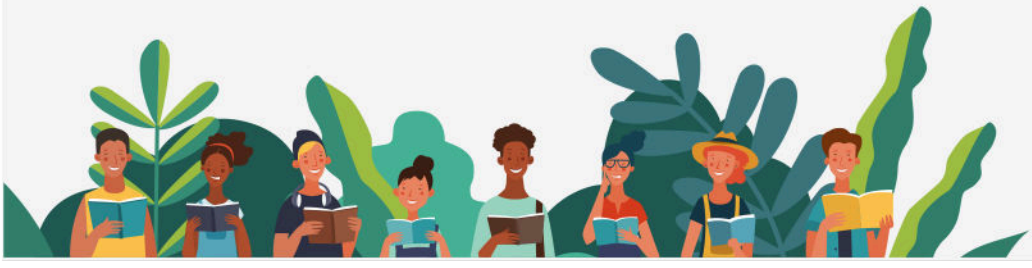

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