Teaching history from
DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

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Asian American Voices for Education

5th Grade Lesson Plan on
Who Gets to Be a Citizen? The Stories of Takao Ozawa and Bhagat Singh Thind

Georgia Social Studies Standards

SSS5H2 Describe U.S. involvement in World War I and post-World War I America.

ELAGSE5RI9 Integrate information from several texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably

ELAGSE5RI3 Explain the relationships or interactions between two or more individuals, events, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, or technical text based on specific information in the text.

Background Information

When the United States was first formed, national laws defined citizenship only for white male property owners. The Naturalization Act of 1790 limited the ability of immigrants to become U.S. citizens to "free white persons" of "good character." After the Civil War, the Naturalization Act of 1870 extended this right to include people of African descent, but still excluded people from other parts of the world. In the 1920s, two Asian immigrants took their fights to the U.S. Supreme Court to test the boundaries of this exclusion.

Takao Ozawa v. United States (1922)



Takao Ozawa was born in Japan in 1875 and moved to California in 1894. He lived in the U.S. for twenty years, spoke fluent English, raised his children here, and worked for an American company. In 1914, he applied for naturalization.
Because the law only allowed white immigrants or people of African ancestry to become citizens, Ozawa argued in court that his skin color was just as white as, or even whiter than, many European immigrants. In 1922, the Supreme Court unanimously rejected his request. The judges ruled that having light skin did not make a person legally "white." Instead, they stated that "white" meant belonging scientifically to the Caucasian race, and since Ozawa was Japanese, he did not qualify.



United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind (1923)

Bhagat Singh Thind was born in India in 1892 and moved to the United States in 1913. He attended college and served in the U.S. Army during World War I. After the war, he was granted citizenship, but the government later took it away, forcing him to appeal his case to the Supreme Court.



Thind knew that the Court had just ruled in the Ozawa case that being "white" meant being "Caucasian." Because scientists at the time classified people from northern India as Caucasian, Thind argued that he met the Court's exact rule.

However, in 1923, the Supreme Court rejected his argument too. The judges completely changed their reasoning, stating that scientific definitions did not matter. Instead, they ruled that the word "white" must mean what the "common man" popularly understood it to mean. Since the average person on the street would not see an Indian immigrant as white, Thind was denied.

The Bigger Picture

Together, these two cases reveal that the government changed its definitions of race whenever it wanted to protect the status quo of white dominance and exclude certain groups. It is also important to note that to try and win their cases, neither Ozawa nor Thind directly argued that the nationalization law excluding Asian people was racist. Instead, they argued that they should be included in the definition of "white." While this was a strategy to get their cases heard by the Court, it meant they did not challenge the underlying unfair system itself.



Complete Article and Lesson Plan

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

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

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History is the context of "**now**", "**why**", and "**how**".

Teach interwoven history.



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