Although the rampage ignited spontaneously, it had complex origins. The riot’s principal roots lay deep in an anti–Asian sentiment that had been smouldering for years in British Columbia. This racial antipathy reached new heights in 1907 when it was reported that the Grand Trunk Pacific Railway was planning to import thousands of Japanese labourers to work on the completion of the railway’s western leg. To add to the tension, over 2300 Japanese arrived in the province in July alone, far more than had been anticipated.

With Japanese immigration soaring to unprecedented levels, the perception grew among West Coast whites that the Japanese had become the leading Oriental threat to their province’s cultural integrity. The Japanese, like the Chinese, had always been regarded as unassimilable, but after Japan’s victory over Russia in the Russo–Japanese War (1904–5) the Japanese image took on an even more frightening dimension. A growing number of white British Columbians now regarded the Japanese immigrant as aggressive, loyal first to Japan, and eager to further that country’s expansionist aims. As alarm mounted over the Japanese influx, hysterical comment about the Japanese “invasion” appeared in the daily press. Accompanying these expressed fears were demands by the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council for measures to stem the rising immigrant tide. Not content to work within the political process alone, the council formed the Asiatic Exclusion League. The league subsequently broke all ties with the Trades and Labour Council and staged the anti–Asian parade that preceded the Vancouver Riot of 1907.