

Podcasting the Past
European and world history
Part G: USA, 1918-1968

This document is part of a series that summarises recent research published on the key issues outlined in Section G of the [Higher History Course Specification](#). Although the summaries are wide-ranging, they do not cover all the literature ever published on the key issues. Instead, the summaries highlight some new research findings and directions, and illustrate how new historical research informs old historical debates, broadening our understanding of the past. This document is intended to supplement, not replace, pre-existing guidance on this topic.

1. An evaluation of the reasons for changing attitudes towards immigration in the 1920s

A) Isolationism

- The orthodox view is that the U.S. pursued an isolationist foreign policy in the 1920s, driven by the Irreconcilables in Congress who aimed to separate America from the rest of the world (**Adler 1957; Jonas 1966; Tucker 1972**). More recently, however, scholars have started to reject this interpretation of American foreign policy during the interwar period.
- **Braumoeller (2010)**, for example, argues that American non-involvement in the League of Nations does not mean that U.S. pursued an isolationist policy. On the contrary, the U.S. played a substantial role in the League ‘behind the scenes’ and, through its financial clout, (‘banks, not tanks’) the U.S. exerted considerable power and influence around the world during the interwar period.
- **Blower (2013)** takes a similar view to Braumoeller: according to her, ‘neutrality’ is a better term to describe American foreign policy during the interwar period because the term ‘isolationist’ does not convey the complexity of American opinion at that time (essentially, not all non-interventionists were isolationists). According to her, ‘seeing the United States as a neutral nation, rather than an isolated one, helps to reveal how, caught up in the difficult ethical dilemmas of the day and faced with a collapsing faith in international law, Americans, like others, succumbed to new conceptions of war and neutrality with far-reaching and largely unintended consequences.’

B) Fear of revolution

- The orthodox view is that the First Red Scare was a moment of ‘popular panic’ in the U.S., generated by genuine mass concern with the

perceived 'Bolshevik menace' during a period of labour disputes, racial strife, and acts of domestic terrorism such as the April 1919 mail bombs. Immigrants were vulnerable to intensified hostility during this period due to their precarious legal status as removable 'aliens' and because of a lingering wartime demand for loyalty and patriotism, sometimes known as 'Americanism' (e.g., Murray, 1955).

- **Pope-Obeda (2019)** notes that the deportation of immigrants during this period of acute social tension was 'part of a much longer trajectory of expanding anti-immigrant enforcement and the post-entry social control of foreign-born residents.' The fear of revolution, a prominent theme in the literature, often obscures a more general hostility towards immigrants *because* they were immigrants during this period.
- **Ryan (2015)** argues that activists who provoked the First Red Scare and promoted Americanism in the 1920s also advocated for patriarchal marriage and traditional family values by assailing feminism and sex modernism. Not only for liberal and radical targets, but also for ordinary citizens, sex and gender behaviour was transformed into 'a measure of patriotism' that immigrants often could not, or would not, conform to.

C) Prejudice and racism

- **Lee (2020)** argues that, as well as immigration itself, 'intense xenophobia' characterised the Gilded Age and the Progressive Era. Progressives who advocated for immigration restrictions did so based on 'eugenics, pseudoscientific racism, and the desire to maintain white (Anglo-Saxon) supremacy.' According to Lee, progressives 'legitimised discrimination in immigration policy and ended up subverting the very ideals and American values they were purportedly acting to preserve.'
- In a short essay on the 'perennial fear of foreign bodies', **Kraut (2019)** contends that the U.S. has always been preoccupied by an 'intense, recurring insecurity' about immigration and disease – the 'double helix of health and fear.' During the interwar period, people like Madison Grant (a doctor, lawyer, and founder of the New York Zoological Society) and Edward Alsworth Ross (a sociologist) promoted false, eugenicist ideas that immigrants brought disease and undermined America's health.
- In his book on disability and immigration in the age of eugenics, **Baynton (2016)** shows that eugenics was a key justification for the 1924 Immigration Act. According to the Secretary of Labor James J. Davis, the

Act was necessary because the U.S. had become, or was becoming, 'an asylum for the alien insane, defective, and degenerate.'

- Prejudice based on notions of illness, disease, and disability extended even to disabled children like Paula Patton. Patton came to the U.S. as a child. Her parents were admitted at Ellis Island, but she was deported on the grounds of her 'mental deficiency'. When the First World War broke out, she was given a temporary right to remain in the U.S. (the ship she was on returned to port). She was only given a permanent right to remain eleven years later thanks to section 14 of the 1924 Immigration Act, a provision which allowed children who had arrived in the U.S. before they were 16 and who had a parent who was a U.S. citizen, a permanent right to remain in the country. This provision was only made law because of the tireless activism of civic leaders like Clara Kinley and Mrs. Walter W. Steele, both of whom fought for the rights of disabled children in the immigration system (**Golden and Duffy, 2020**).
- Arguments in favour of immigration quotas (in, for example, the 1921 Emergency Quota Act, the 1924 Immigration Act, and the 1930 Harris Bill), were predicated on the false, racist belief that immigrants were racially inferior to native-born Americans. **Montoya (2018)** has made this argument in relation to attempts to restrict Mexican immigration to the United States in the late 1920s. This recent research corroborates the orthodox view that proponents of the 1924 Immigration Act sought to establish a distinct American identity by preserving 'ethnic homogeneity' (**Jones, 1992; Stephenson, 1964**).
- After racist federal policies became law, policing, and enforcement practices branded all foreign-born Europeans in cities like Detroit as undocumented immigrants regardless of their legal status (**Johnson Bavery, 2018**).
- Even although the interwar immigration regime was intended to 'bolster America's "Anglo-Saxon" identity', it also 'exposed the limits of Anglospheric kinship by closing the gates to white Britons' as well as south-eastern Europeans. According to **Rees (2019)**, 'in the 1920s and beyond, the U.S. quotas had international reverberations that extended far beyond the 'undesirable' migrant nations that were the intended focus of the restrictions'.

D) Social fears

- In his study of Albert Johnson, the co-sponsor of the 1924 immigration Act, **Allerfeldt (2010)** observes that, among restrictionists, there was

very little agreement on who constituted a 'desirable immigrant' because the movement represented such a disparate array of social fears. Allerfeldt's conclusion is that the resulting immigration regime was 'a fudge at best, if not a farce' despite the fact that Johnson was a capable politician who was familiar with the various strands of the immigration debate.

- **Pegram (2018)** notes the role of the Ku Klux Klan in stirring up social and economic fears about immigration. According to him, in the 1920s, Klansmen 'constructed an alternative movement [to labour unions] celebrating white Protestant unity and cultural ascendancy.' As several of its demands, such as immigration restrictions, became law, the 'extremism' of the Klan was 'softened' for some of its converts. As Pegram concludes, 'the quota laws of 1921 and 1924 passed without significant Klan input, but their popularity reflected the power of Ku Klux appeals to a selective American identity.'

E) Economic fears

- The orthodox view is that the recessions that followed the First World War reduced trade and industrial activity and increased unemployment in the United States. The downward pressure on wages and, thereafter, competition for fewer jobs gave some Americans another reason to fear immigrants and oppose immigration (**Brogan, 1999**).
- **Weber (2013)** has found that, by the late 1920s, the immigration debate had moved South. Surplus immigrant labour in South Texas became the basis for legislative attempts to restrict Mexican immigration to the U.S. When those legislative efforts failed, however, a campaign of 'large-scale deportations' swept across southern Texas in 1928-9, a practice that represented 'a clear continuity of immigration restriction' in the early part of the twentieth century.
- Building on Weber's work, **Sullivan (2019)** has shown that the 'labour-nativist alliance' in Congress 'overreached' when it sought to expand immigration restrictions to Mexico and Canada in the late 1920s and early 1930s. By that time 'business interests aligned with immigrant rights activists to prevent nativists and labour communitarians from achieving their goal of extending Eastern Hemisphere immigration quotas to Western Hemisphere countries.' There was clearly a business case to be made in favour of immigration.