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THE USA: A NATION OF CONTRASTS

1910–1929

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1 Immigration

Key question: Why did immigration become such a major issue in American society?

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries about 40 million people emigrated to the USA. Most of these came from Southern and Eastern Europe and were known as the 'new immigrants'. 'Old immigrants' had arrived from Western and Northern Europe in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. By the early 1920s, there was open hostility towards immigrants as well as growing xenophobia (fear of foreigners) in the USA. Many immigrants from Eastern Europe were thought to be communists or anarchists (people who do not respect authority) and this resulted in the Red Scare. This led to the Palmer Raids and the trial of two Italian immigrants, Sacco and Vanzetti, who became scapegoats for the xenophobia that emerged during the 1920s.

The Open Door policy and reasons for emigration to the USA

People made the journey to the USA for many different reasons. Some people came to America to escape problems where they lived, others were attracted by the promise of a better life.

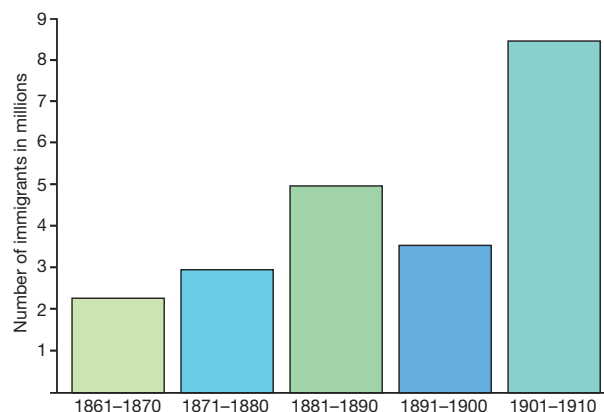
The US economy was booming so factories and farms needed workers. People could start up new businesses quite easily. It was the land of opportunity.

The USA was seen as the land of the free and a country which guaranteed basic human rights. For example, Jews from Eastern Europe were seeking religious freedom and an escape from the **pogroms** of Russia, where many thousands had been massacred.

The US government followed an '**Open Door**' policy. During the late nineteenth century, mass migration was encouraged by the US government which was keen to populate the continent. The Open Door policy was designed to make entry into the country as easy as possible.

Interpretation 1: From the autobiography of Louis Adamic who emigrated to the USA from Slovenia in 1913. His book *From Laughing in the Jungle* was published in 1932

My notion of the United States is that it was a grand, amazing, somewhat fantastic place – the Golden Country – huge beyond conception, very exciting. In America one could make pots of money in a short time, acquire immense holdings, wear a white collar and have polish on one's boots – and eat white bread, soup and meat on weekdays as well as on Sundays, even if you were only an ordinary workman. In America even the common people were 'citizens' and not 'subjects' as in many European countries.



◀ **Source A:** Official government statistics showing the number of immigrants arriving in the USA, 1861-1910



▲ Immigrants at Ellis Island

ACTIVITIES



- 1 Study Interpretation 1. What were the push and pull factors that attracted immigrants to America in the early twentieth century?
- 2 Working in pairs, devise a suitable poster or advertisement to attract people to the USA in the early twentieth century.

Opposition to immigration and demands for restriction

By 1910 there were many in the USA who began to oppose the mass immigration. The immigrants moved to cities where they tended to live with people from their own country of origin and as a result **ghettos** developed. Intolerance began to grow and there was a feeling that the ‘new’ immigrants would take jobs and work for very low wages. It was also thought that the immigrants were responsible for increases in crime, drunkenness and prostitution (see Source B).

There was opposition to further immigration when the USA became involved in the First World War and hostility to German immigrants increased alarmingly. Indeed, the teaching of German was banned in schools in several states. Involvement in the First World War caused many Americans to fear future entanglements in European affairs. They wanted the USA to isolate itself from events in Europe and restricting immigration was a way of doing this.

In the larger cities, the more established immigrant groups such as Irish and German Americans tended to look down on the more recent immigrants from Eastern

Europe and Italy. For many Americans in the 1920s, the ideal citizen was a **WASP** – white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant. Asian immigrants were not white while many recent European immigrants were Catholics, Greek Orthodox or Jewish. Above all, many Americans feared that immigrants would bring with them dangerous political beliefs, especially **communism**.

Government legislation

Immigration was restricted by a series of measures, as detailed in Table 1.1. In addition to the restrictions on the numbers of immigrants (see Sources D and E), measures were introduced to Americanise them (see Source C). The Federal Bureau of Naturalization organised naturalisation proceedings and patriotic ‘Americanization Day’ rallies. The Americanization Day was designed for citizens to re-affirm their loyalty to the USA. People were invited to put on appropriate ceremonies in schools and similar places. Courses on politics and democracy were organised by the Federal Bureau of Education to prepare immigrants for the citizenship examination.

Date	Measure	Key features
1917	Literacy Test	All foreigners wishing to enter the USA had to take a literacy test. They had to prove that they could read a short passage in English. Many people from poorer countries, especially in Eastern Europe, could not afford to take English lessons and failed the test. In addition, the act banned all immigration from Asia, and charged an immigration fee of \$8.
1921	Emergency Quota Act	This act introduced a quota system. New immigrants were allowed in as a proportion of the number of people of the same nationality who had been living in the USA in 1910. The figure was set at three per cent. In other words, the Act reduced the numbers of immigrants from Eastern Europe.
1924	National Origins Act	The quota was reduced to two per cent of the 1890 census. In other words, since there had been a lot more people arriving from Northern Europe by 1890, more of these groups were allowed to enter.
1929	Immigration Act	This restricted immigration to 150,000 per year. There were to be no Asians at all. Northern and Western Europeans were allocated 85 per cent of places. By 1930, immigration from Japan, China and Eastern Europe had virtually ceased.

▲ Table 1.1: Measures to reduce immigration, 1917–29

Source B: From a speech by a senator from Alabama in 1921 who was in favour of the laws to restrict immigration

The steamship companies haul them over to America, and as soon as they step off the decks of their ships the problem of the steamship companies is settled, but our problem has begun – Bolshevism, red anarchy, black-handers, kidnapers, challenging the authority and integrity of the flag. Thousands come here who never take the oath to our Constitution and to become citizens of the USA. They pay allegiance to our country while they live upon the substance of their own. They fill places that belong to the loyal wage-earning citizens of America. They are of no service whatever to our people. They are a menace and a danger to us every day.

Source C: President Calvin Coolidge, a **Republican**, speaking to Congress in 1923

We must remember that every object of our institutions of society and government will fail unless America is kept American. New arrivals should be limited to our capacity to absorb them into the ranks of good citizenship. America must be kept American. I am convinced that our present economic and social conditions warrant a limitation of those to be admitted. Those who do not want to be partakers of the American spirit ought not to settle in America.



▲ **Source E:** An American cartoon of 1921 commenting on the immigrant quotas

Country	Quota
Germany	51,227
Great Britain and Northern Ireland	34,007
Sweden	9,561
Norway	6,453
Italy	3,845
Czechoslovakia	3,073
Russia	2,248
Romania	603

▲ **Source D:** Annual immigration quotas (in thousands) for some countries under the 1924 National Origins Act

ACTIVITIES

- 1 Describe how restrictions were placed on immigration into the USA after 1917.
- 2 Explain why there was a growth in opposition to immigration into the USA.
- 3 What do Sources D and E suggest about the attempts to restrict immigration in the early 1920s?
- 4 How successful had the US government been in its attempts to restrict immigration by 1929?

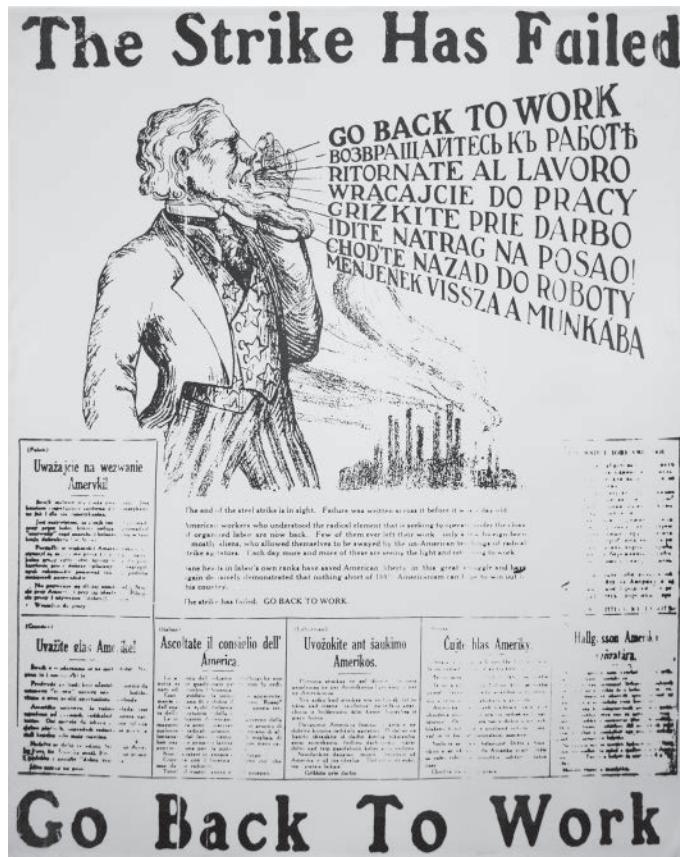
The growth of xenophobia

As more and more immigrants entered the country, especially from the countries of Eastern Europe which had experienced political changes resulting from the First World War, there was a corresponding growth of **xenophobia** within America. This displayed itself in a number of ways:

The 'Red Scare'

The '**Red Scare**' was a reaction from many US citizens to developments in Europe in the years 1917–19, especially the fear of communism. In Russia in 1917, the **Bolshevik** Revolution led to the establishment of a **communist** government. In Germany, a group of communists attempted to seize power in January 1919.

Many Americans were convinced that revolutionary ideas were being brought to the USA by immigrants, especially from Eastern Europe. Moreover, Americans tended to see any new political ideas, especially **radicalism** and **anarchism**, as branches of communism (see Source G). All people who believed in these ideas were classified as 'Reds' (communists). When a communist party was formed in the USA in 1919, many Americans began to fear that there would be a revolution in their own country.



▲ **Source F:** An advertisement in a US newspaper encouraging steelworkers to return to work, 1919. It was written in eight languages, which linked union leadership with foreigners and the un-American teachings of radical strike agitators

Strikes

There were 3,600 strikes in 1919. They were protests against poor working conditions and low pay. Even the police went on strike in Boston. To many members of the American public, the strikes looked like the beginnings of a communist revolution.

A **general strike** in Seattle was led by an organisation known as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a name that many found strongly suggestive of communist ideals. The strike failed and one consequence was the loss of orders for the dockyards, which resulted in an increase in unemployment.

During the steelworkers' dispute, the steel company owners published circulars which attacked foreign-born strikers. The press generally portrayed the strikes as anti-American actions which threatened the US government.

Source G: From 'The case against the Reds', an essay by Attorney General Mitchell Palmer, 1920

It is my belief that while they have stirred discontent in our midst, while they have caused irritating strikes, and while they have infected our social ideas with the disease of their own minds and their unclean morals we can get rid of them and not until we have done so shall we have removed the menace of Bolshevism for good.

Events connected with anarchists

In 1919, there was a series of bombings by extreme anarchist groups. Anarchists were anti-government in their views and did not respect the rules of law and order. Their aim was to disrupt and ultimately destroy the functions of government. In one famous attack, the home of Mitchell Palmer, the Attorney-General (Head of the US Department of Justice), was bombed. In April 1919, a bomb planted in a church in Milwaukee killed ten people. In May, letter bombs were posted to 36 well-known Americans.

Source H: An anarchist pamphlet called the *Plain Truth*, found near the house of Mitchell Palmer in 1919

There will have to be bloodshed. We will not dodge. There will have to be a murder. We will kill. There will have to be destruction. We will destroy. We are ready to do anything to suppress the capitalist system.

The Palmer Raids

The press whipped up public feeling and insisted that the attack on the home of Mitchell Palmer was further evidence of a widespread communist takeover plot. The police attacked **socialist** parades on May Day 1920 and raided the offices of socialist organisations. Many innocent people were arrested because of their supposed dangerous political beliefs. Amongst those arrested were **trade unionists**, black people, Jews and Catholics. These arrests were known as the 'Palmer Raids' as they were organised by Mitchell Palmer. These raids were illegal but there were few who protested against them. In all, more than 6,000 suspected communists were arrested in 36 cities across the USA. Several hundred Russian immigrants were sent back in a ship nicknamed the 'Soviet Ark'.

ACTIVITIES

- 1 What do the following terms mean: communism, anarchism and radicalism?
- 2 Explain why there was a fear of revolution in the USA in 1919.
- 3 What do Sources G and H tell us about the fear of revolution in the USA by 1920?



▲ **Source I:** The aftermath of one of the Palmer Raids on the offices of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), 15 November 1919

The Sacco and Vanzetti case

On 5 May 1920, two Italian labourers, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, were arrested and charged with the murders of Fred Parmenter, the paymaster of a shoe company, and a security guard during an armed robbery in Boston on 15 April 1920. Before his death, Parmenter described his attackers as slim foreigners with olive skin.

The Sacco and Vanzetti trial began in May 1921 and lasted 45 days. Owing to the heavy publicity given to the case,

it took several days to find a jury of 12 men who were acceptable to both the prosecution and defence. In all, 875 candidates were called to the court. On 14 July 1921, the jury delivered a guilty verdict. There were demonstrations all over the USA in support of the two condemned men (see Source L). Sacco and Vanzetti took their case to appeal in several higher courts but all attempts failed. The last appeal was in 1927. The two men were executed by electric chair on 24 August 1927.

THE EVIDENCE AGAINST SACCO AND VANZETTI

- They were anarchists who hated American **capitalism** and the American system of government.
- Vanzetti had been convicted of armed robbery in 1919.
- Sixty-one eyewitnesses identified the two men as the killers.
- Sacco and Vanzetti were carrying guns on the day they were arrested.
- The two men told lies in their statements to the police.
- Forensic evidence matched the pistol that killed the guard with the one carried by Sacco.
- Vanzetti refused to take the stand at the trial.



▲ Bartolomeo Vanzetti (left) and Nicola Sacco (right)

THE EVIDENCE IN THEIR DEFENCE

- Vanzetti refused to take the stand because he feared that his political activities would become a major focus and that he would be found guilty of these rather than the robbery.
- One hundred and seven people confirmed the two men's alibi (their claim that they were somewhere else when the robbery was committed). However, many of these witnesses were recently arrived Italian immigrants whose English was poor.
- Some believe that the forensic evidence about Sacco's gun was rigged.
- Evidence from the 61 prosecution witnesses often disagreed in important details. Some witnesses had changed their stories by the time the trial started.
- The two men said they lied to the police because they feared that they would be discriminated against because of their support for anarchism.
- Several other men confessed to the crime.
- The judge, Webster Thayer, seemed determined to find the two men guilty.

Importance of the trial

- The trial was reported all over the world and showed the intolerance of American society. As Italian immigrants, the two men were victims of racial discrimination and were denied rights that they were entitled to.
- It exposed the unfairness of the American legal system. The two men were convicted on flimsy evidence, although subsequent evidence suggests that Sacco may have been guilty.
- In the 1970s the **Governor** of Massachusetts granted Sacco and Vanzetti a formal pardon and agreed that a mistrial had taken place.

Source J: Freda Kirchwey was in Germany during the last few weeks before Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were executed. She wrote about her reaction to the execution in *The Nation*, 28 August 1927. *The Nation* was a radical American magazine

We've hardly talked about it – but every time we got within range of a newspaper we've rushed to it hoping, without any real hope, that some miracle of mercy would have descended on the Governor or someone else. It was hard to sleep through some of those nights. And everywhere we went – from Paris and Berlin to Heiligenblut in the Austrian Tyrol – people talked to us about it with horror and a complete inability to understand. It whipped up further opposition to immigrants, intensified the 'Red Scare' and seemed to strengthen the case for restrictions on immigration.

Source K: A comment made about Judge Thayer who presided over the original Sacco and Vanzetti case. It was made in 1930 by Felix Frankfurter, a lawyer who campaigned for a retrial, and who wrote a book which criticised the original trial

I have known Judge Thayer all my life. I say that he is a narrow-minded man; he is an unintelligent man; he is full of prejudice; he is carried away by fear of Reds, a fear which has captured about ninety per cent of the American people.

ACTIVITIES

- 1 Examine the evidence for and against the two men on pages 12–13. Copy and complete the table below. Now make your own decision: guilty or not guilty? Write two paragraphs explaining your decision.

	Guilty	Not guilty
Most convincing evidence		
Least convincing evidence		

- 2 Was the fear of communism the most important reason for the restrictions on immigration into the USA in the 1920s? Use your own knowledge and understanding of the issue to support your answer.



◀ **Source L:** Demonstrators in Boston in 1925 in support of Sacco and Vanzetti

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