

How did Immigration Policy change in the 1920s?

Immigration problems

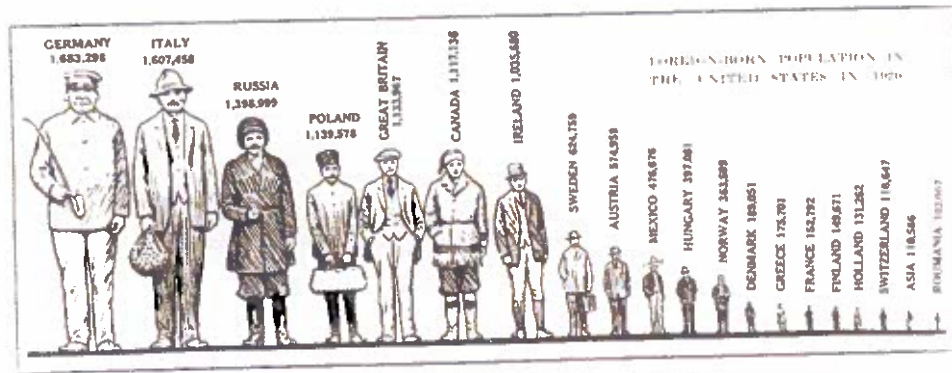
For some Americans these feelings of isolationism went even further. They wanted to end the open-door policy that had brought millions of people to the USA in the nineteenth century.

Attitudes to immigrants had been changing for some time. By 1900 there was not as much land available and, as industry became more mechanised, the need for workers declined. Also, Americans believed that the quality of immigrants was declining - many of the newer immigrants were poor labourers with little formal education.

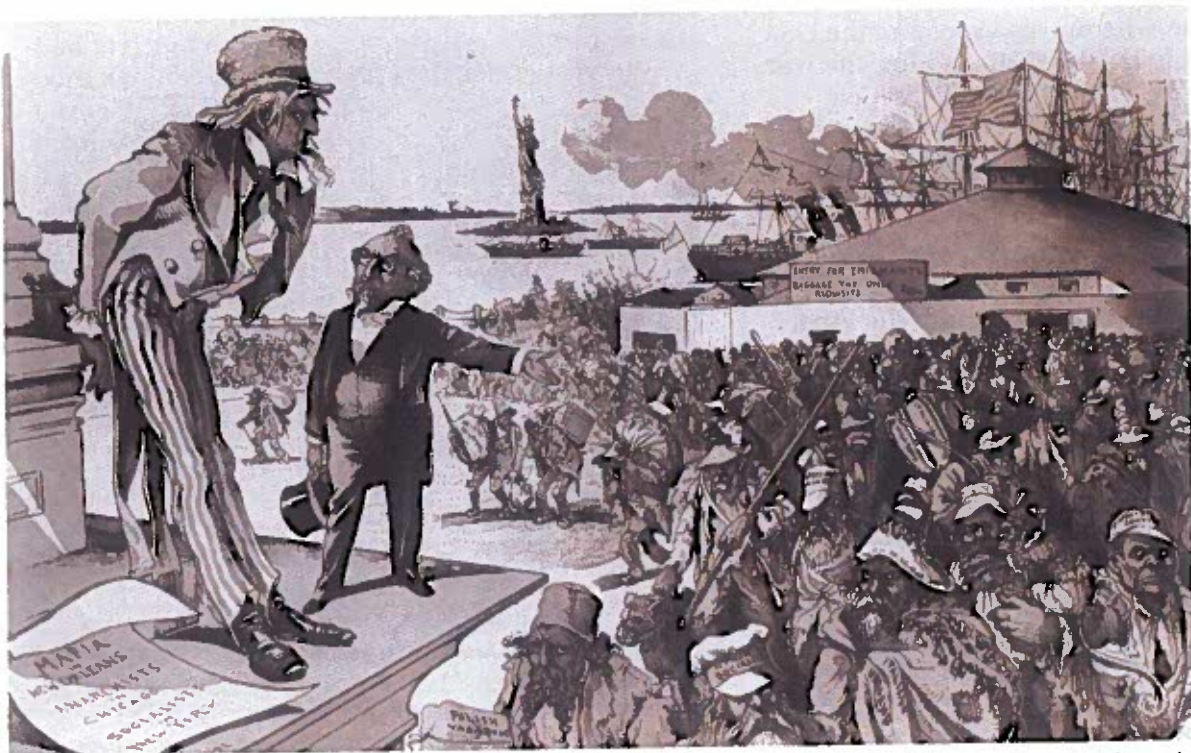
Anti-immigrant feeling had increased during the war, especially against Germans. In 1917 a literacy

test meant that immigrants had to prove they could read a 40-word passage before they would be allowed into America. These tests disadvantaged people from eastern Europe, Italy, and Russia as many of them had not been to school.

After the war, problems for new immigrants in the post-war depression got worse. Immigrant GHETTOS were appearing in the big northern cities of America. They were often dangerous places with violent crime, drunkenness, and prostitution. Many Americans believed the immigrants were to blame for these urban problems. This led to a widespread intolerance of foreigners which continued into the 1920s.

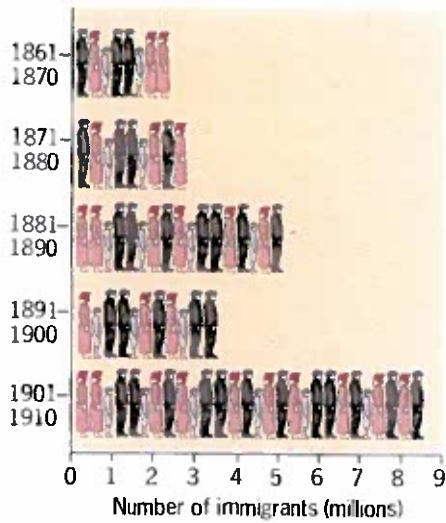


SOURCE 3 Foreign-born population of America in the 1920s



SOURCE 4 A cartoon from 1891, showing immigrants bringing problems into the USA. The judge is saying to Uncle Sam, 'If immigration was properly restricted, you would no longer be troubled with anarchy, socialism, the Mafia and such kindred evils'.

SOURCE 36



Immigration to the USA, 1861-1910.

Prejudice and intolerance

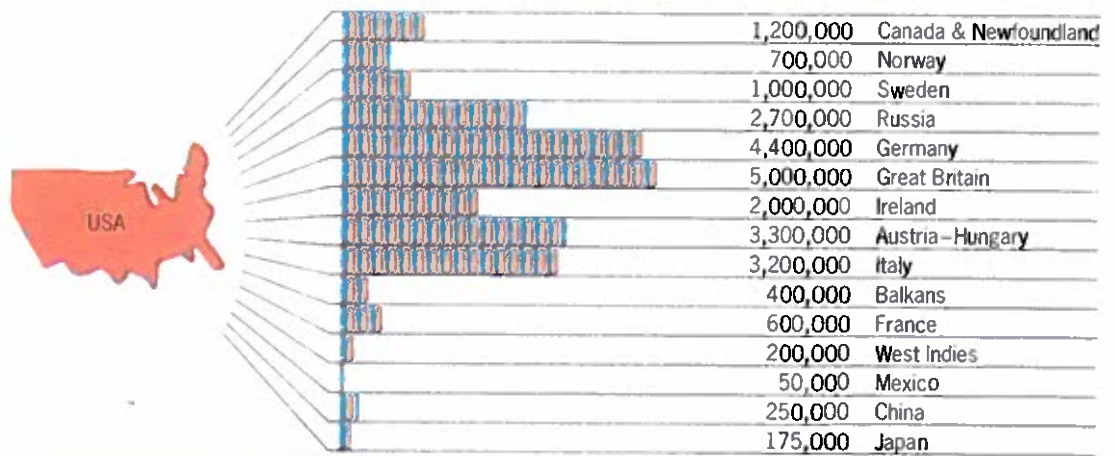
At the same time as some young Americans were experiencing liberation, others were facing intolerance and racism.

The vast majority of Americans were either immigrants or descendants of recent immigrants. Source 37 shows you the ethnic background of the main groups.

As you can see from Source 36, immigration to the USA was at an all-time high from 1901 to 1910. Immigrants were flooding in, particularly Jews from eastern Europe and Russia who were fleeing persecution, and people from Italy who were fleeing poverty. Many Italian immigrants did not intend to settle in the USA, but hoped to make money to take back to their families in Italy.

The United States had always prided itself on being a 'melting pot'. In theory, individual groups lost their ethnic identity and blended together with other groups to become just 'Americans'. In practice, however, this wasn't always the case. In the USA's big cities the more established immigrant groups – Irish Americans, French Canadians and German Americans – competed for the best jobs and the best available housing. These groups tended to look down on the more recent eastern European and Italian immigrants. These in turn had nothing but contempt for black Americans and Mexicans, who were almost at the bottom of the scale.

SOURCE 37



The ethnic background of Americans.



7.1 Immigrants from Italy arrive in the USA

RESTRICTIONS ON IMMIGRATION

- 13 million immigrants had come into the USA, 1900-19. Many of these were 'new' immigrants from southern and eastern Europe: Italy, Greece, Poland and Russia (see 7.1). They were often Catholics and some were socialists.

American institutions rely on good citizenship. New arrivals should be limited to our capacity to absorb them into the ranks of good citizenship. America must be kept American. For this purpose, it is necessary to continue a policy of restricted immigration. I am convinced our present economic and social conditions warrant a limitation of those to be admitted.

Source B: Part of a speech made by President Calvin Coolidge to Congress on 6 December 1923.

Changes in immigration policy

Immigration was restricted by a series of measures, as detailed in the table below.

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.
1921	Immigration Quota Act	This act introduced a quota system. The number of new immigrants allowed in from a given country was proportional to the number of people from the same country who had been living in the USA in 1910. The figure was set at 3 per cent. So if there had been 100 Italian immigrants in the USA in 1910, then three Italians were allowed in in 1921. This measure reduced the numbers of immigrants from Eastern Europe because relatively few Eastern Europeans had emigrated before 1910.
1924	National Origins Act	The quota was reduced to 2 per cent of the 1890 census. Since there had been a lot more people from northern Europe living in the USA in 1890, people from these countries now made up a greater proportion of the people allowed to enter.
1929	Immigration Act	This act restricted immigration to 150,000 per year. There were to be no Asians at all. Immigrants from northern and western Europe were allocated 85 per cent of places. By 1930 immigration from Japan, China and Eastern Europe had virtually ceased.

Summary information Exan type sources.

How did policy on immigration change in the 1920s?

- The USA had traditionally welcomed immigrants, but after the First World War attitudes began to change.
- Restrictions on immigration. The USA had always had an 'open door' policy towards immigrants. Now restrictions were put on the numbers being allowed in.
- A literacy test was imposed in 1917.
- The total number was restricted from 1921. In 1924 it was set at 150,000 a year and immigration from Asia was banned altogether.
- A quota system let in numbers of people according to their presence in the US Population. This favoured WASP immigrants and worked against 'new' immigrants from Italy, Spain, Poland and Russia.

Why did the US government change its policy?

- During the 1920s, the population of the USA grew from 106,000,000 in 1920, to 123,000,000 in 1929. The main reason was immigration.

Numbers of immigrants to the USA

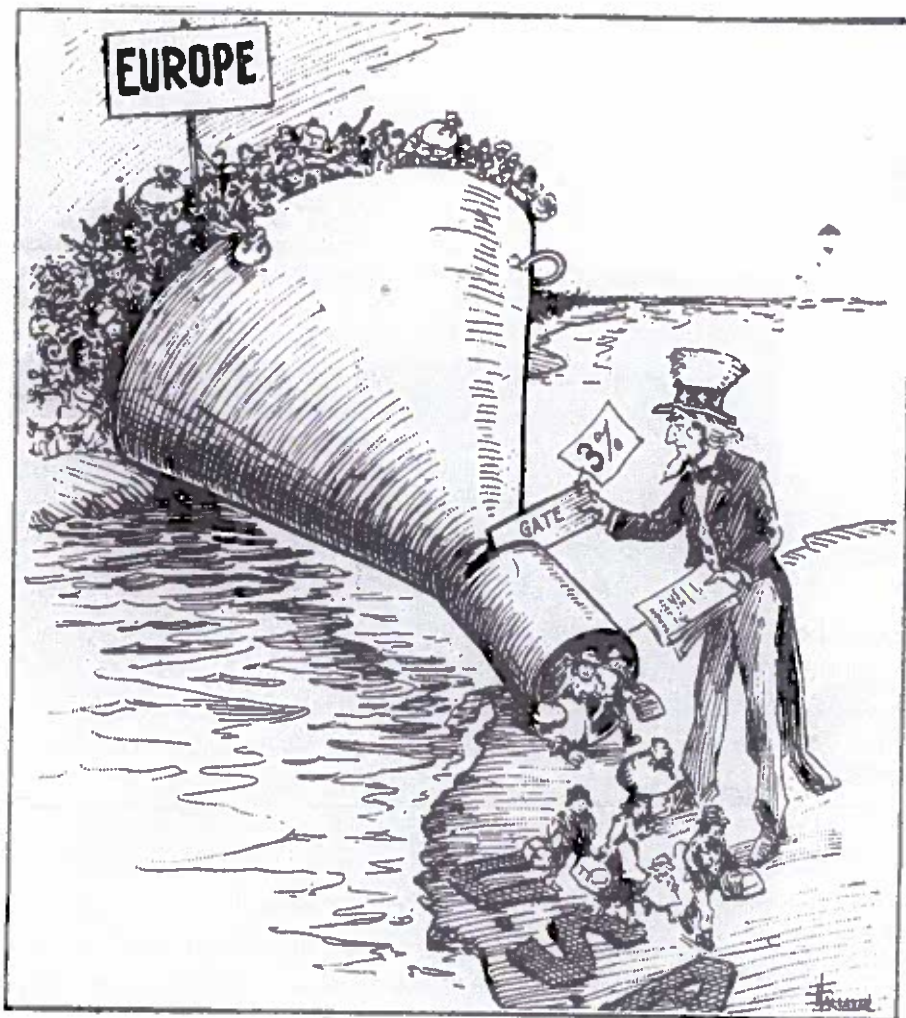
1919	140,000	1925	310,000
1920	400,000	1926	320,000
1921	802,000	1927	340,000
1922	370,000	1928	350,000
1923	520,000	1929	280,000
1924	690,000		

- The Russian Revolution in 1917 led to a 'Red Scare' and many socialists were arrested.
- There was an increasing number of immigrants from Italy, often connected with the Mafia, as the Italian dictator cracked down, often very violently, on crime.

What effects did the changing policies have?

Anyone with left wing ideas became suspect. Trade unions were harassed; membership fell in the 1920s. Henry Ford refused to allow his employees to join a trade union.

- Socialists were harassed. Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italian Anarchists, were accused of robbery and murder in 1920.
- Their trial was a farce because the judge was obviously biased. The case dragged on for seven years before the two were executed in 1927, even though somebody else actually confessed to the murders.
- They were scapegoats for the fear and hatred felt by many Americans.



Source A: A cartoon published in a US newspaper on 19 May 1921.

Examination question

What can you learn from Source A about immigration to the USA in 1921? (3 marks)

SOURCE 1 In the election campaign of 1920 the Republican Party described their immigration policy in this way

“ The immigration policy of the U.S. should be such as to insure that the number of foreigners in the country at any one time shall not exceed that which can be assimilated with reasonable speed, and to favour immigrants whose standards are similar to ours. ”

SOURCE 2 In 1921, a Senator from Alabama gave this explanation of why he wanted more immigration controls

“ 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 and kidnappers, challenging the authority and integrity of our flag ...

Thousands come here who never take the oath to support our Constitution and to become citizens of the United States. They pay allegiance to some other country while they live upon the substance of our own. They fill places that belong to the loyal wage-earning citizens of America ... They are of no service whatever to our people. They constitute a menace and a danger to us every day ... ”