**Immigrants in Postwar America: Modern World**

**By June Granatir Alexander**

For many immigrants, getting involved in the war effort was the first time since they had set foot on American soil that they participated in life beyond their ethnic colonies. Even as communities organized their own activities, doing their bit to help win the war provided foreign-born men and women with unprecedented opportunities to share in the country's sense of dedication to a national purpose. But, while native- and foreign-born inhabitants were drawn together by common aims, many Americans still could not shake their suspicions or disdain for the "foreigners" in their midst. When the Great War came to an end on November 11, 1918, the intolerance toward the foreign born and foreign ways that had characterized the war years did more than flow easily into peacetime; it became a torrent of hostility.   
  
In an ongoing atmosphere of intolerance, Americanizers pushed forward with programs to transform aliens into English-speaking citizens. During the war, some particularly zealous public officials had taken strong measures to try to wipe out foreign languages. The governor of Iowa, for instance, issued an order prohibiting the use of any language except English in schools, religious services, public conversations, and telephone communications. Following the war, an English-only tidal wave swept over much of the nation. Reflecting the same attitude evident in Iowa's wartime dictate, Nebraska required that meetings, except for religious services and lodge gatherings, be held in English. Determined to do away with foreign tongues, 15 states ordered that English be the sole language of instruction in every public and private elementary school. Several states enacted new regulations requiring that public school teachers be U.S. citizens.   
  
Industrial jobs could still be linked to language competency or citizenship status. Stories in the immigrant press revealed that some employers were continuing the practice of discriminating against both aliens and naturalized citizens. In 1920, one immigrant organization informed its members that a Newark, New Jersey, firm had advertised that it would employ only persons who "can talk the English language." Workers who did not lose their jobs might still face pressure to attend Americanization classes. Factory schools sponsored by companies remained popular as Americanizers emphasized their potential for reaching larger numbers of immigrants. The Department of Interior's Board of Education reported that in 1919 more than 800 Americanization committees were hard at work in industrial plants. Antiforeign sentiment became extreme when companies adopted measures similar to those at a Baltimore establishment that announced it planned gradually to "discharge all foreigners, even if naturalized" and to replace them with "genuine Americans." While some employers openly targeted immigrant laborers, some state legislatures passed laws permitting discrimination against foreign-born professionals.   
  
The continuing stress on Americanism and English-language proficiency was part of the popular climate affecting the real-life existence of ordinary immigrants, but, despite such relentless emphasis, immigrants did not simply cave in to aggressive Americanization. Some fought back. English-language editorials in immigrant newspapers lambasted proposed legislation that would make studying English obligatory for every non-English-speaking person between the ages of 21 and 45. One editorialist typified the attack on compulsory Americanization by pointing out that the idea was "inhumane" and "stupid," especially for laborers who worked 10 to 12 hours every day or for women who would have to leave children and household duties to attend school. There was, he admitted, no quibbling with the premise that "every resident of this country" should be encouraged to study English "as a matter of expediency." Like so many immigrants, he did not question the necessity of knowing English or challenge its proper standing as the country's premier language; rather, he rejected heavy-handed measures aimed at wiping out all other languages. He and the many immigrants whose views he articulated called, instead, for encouraging bilingualism. While some foreign-born journalists and organization officers railed against forced Americanization, ordinary immigrants who opposed the idea reacted by refusing to enroll in programs. Even in the weighty climate of 100 percentism, into the 1920s advocates of Americanization continued to complain about the poor and irregular attendance at the adult classes.   
  
Besides being the objects of intense campaigns to Americanize them, immigrants also became targets of a hysteria that gripped the nation in 1919 and 1920. Only a few months after the guns of war fell silent in Europe, America experienced the early stages of what came to be known as the "Red Scare." Lasting for nearly a year and a half, this was a period when many Americans believed that radicals were hatching plots to overthrow the government. Because, in the popular mind, immigrants were associated with radicalism, much of the paranoia that characterized the Red Scare focused on them.   
  
A combination of international and domestic events stoked popular fears that foreign radicals in America were allegedly conspiring against the United States. The Russian Revolution, which occurred in November 1917, stirred apprehension, especially as the victorious Bolsheviks called for working classes around the world to rise up in revolution. In 1919 and 1920, turmoil shook industries far and wide in the United States. The Russian Bolsheviks did not instigate them; nevertheless, approximately 3,600 work stoppages involving perhaps 4 million workers put the country's nerves on edge. Three strikes in particular grabbed national attention. A citywide strike, which paralyzed Seattle for a short period in January 1919, followed in September by Boston policemen walking off the job led many to accept the idea that radical conspiracies were afoot. Then, as the Boston police were on the picket lines, 365,000 steelworkers went on strike. In the public's mind, a massive nationwide strike in an industry with an enormous immigrant workforce reinforced notions that radicalism flourished among the foreign born. Although workers were striking for fewer hours and better wages, popular opinion blamed unrest in so many industries on foreign radicals who wanted to ignite a class revolution.   
  
At the same time that a rash of labor strikes rocked postwar America, a series of bombings and failed attempts deepened the national panic. In the spring and early summer of 1919, mail bombs were addressed to judges, government officials, legislators, and business tycoons. In June, a bomb exploded at the home of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. Evidence at the scene suggested that the bomber, who inadvertently blew himself up, was an Italian immigrant. No one ever claimed responsibility for any of the bombings or botched tries, and neither local nor federal law enforcement officers ever uncovered evidence of conspiracies or arrested anyone. Nevertheless, in an environment shaped by panic and stereotypes, the unrest in the nation was blamed on "foreign agitators."   
  
Legislators and authorities at the federal level helped inflame the public temper. By amending legislation governing deportation, the U.S. Congress made it easier to expel radicals. Accepting guilt by association, in October 1918 it changed the rules so that—regardless of how long they had lived in the United States—aliens could be deported solely on the grounds of membership in an organization that advocated revolution or sabotage. Armed with this law, Attorney General Palmer launched his own crusade to crush the "Reds." In the fall of 1919, when strikes, bombs, and disturbances had already frazzled the nation's nerves, Palmer helped further whip up the frenzy. Claiming that foreigners made up 90 percent of the country's radicals, he undertook to banish the extremists from America. Under his leadership, Justice Department agents began rounding up immigrants suspected of being radicals. The dramatic end to these first actions came on December 21, 1919, when 249 people were put aboard the *Buford,* which was dubbed the "Soviet Ark," and deported to Russia. Subsequent investigations revealed that the majority of the immigrants forced to set sail on the ship had never engaged in violence and did not have criminal records. Forty-three were anarchists already slated for deportation and another 199 were expelled because of their membership in the Union of Russian Workers, which was deemed a radical organization. The other seven individuals fell into the "public charge" and "criminal" categories.   
  
A few weeks after the *Buford* chugged out of New York Harbor, the Red Scare reached a climax. On January 2, Justice Department agents, assisted by local police, conducted simultaneous raids in 33 cities in 23 states. During this nationally coordinated operation, agents barged into people's homes and burst into meeting halls, pool rooms, and anywhere else immigrants gathered. As a rule, everyone on the premises was arrested and taken to detention centers or police stations. An estimated 4,000 individuals were carted off to jail that day. Some persons were let go immediately, but many remained in cramped cells for weeks while awaiting a preliminary hearing. In some instances, persons who visited the detainees were arrested. All told, of the estimated 5,000 to 6,000 people netted in raids carried out in December and January, only 591 persons were finally deported. A careful study by the Department of Labor, which had jurisdiction over deportation proceedings, revealed that the vast majority of immigrants snagged by the Justice Department and its accomplices were guilty of no wrongdoing.

Palmer continued to fan public fears and keep the panic over the so-called foreign threat alive. His predictions that a plot to overthrow the government would get under way on May 1, 1920, finally helped bring the public delirium to an end. When May Day came and neither the predicted wave of bombings nor the massive general strike took place, Palmer's credibility with the public died and the national hysteria waned. Although Americans remained ever wary of foreigners in their midst, by the fall of 1920 the Red Scare was over.   
  
Despite its spectacular nature, the Red Scare that seized the nation was also local. It brought immigrants in contact with government agents and their civilian accomplices. At the community level, authorities and volunteer groups hounded foreigners. It was not unusual for the police to arrest individuals whom they judged suspicious looking and to hold them overnight. Russian immigrants, in particular, could expect this treatment. The sympathy that Russian Jews displayed for a revolution that overthrew the czarist government, which had historically sanctioned anti-Semitic violence and discrimination, reinforced the misguided tendency to link them to radicalism. Instances of immigrants being physically abused or tarred and feathered also occurred.   
  
After the Red Scare subsided, superpatriots still stalked communities. Hundred percenters continued to take aim at new immigrants, especially as the hatred of Germans gave way to a resurfacing disdain for peoples from southern and eastern Europe. One foreign-born commentator portrayed what ordinary immigrants were coping with when he proclaimed, "We are living in an age of confused slogans" and "are still living in the atmosphere of the war." Another immigrant gave voice to the cynicism and resentment that many surely felt. "If you haven't yet found your place in your community, just pick on the foreigners," he sneered in the spring of 1920. Immigrants lived in a hostile society, and they knew it.   
During the 10 years spanning 1910 to 1920, language patterns and citizenship trends did change. In 1910, more than 2.6 million immigrants twenty-one or older admitted they could not speak English; by1920, this number had declined to just less than 1.4 million. In 1910, individuals unable to speak English made up slightly over 22 percent of adult immigrants residing in the United States at the time of the census; by 1920, they represented just more than 11 percent. The percentage of immigrants that had become naturalized citizens or, equally important, had taken out their first papers had also risen. With slightly over 1.6 million people filing between 1914 and 1919, the war years experienced a significant spike in declarations of intention. Still, by 1920, nearly one-third of immigrant males were aliens who had taken no steps to acquire U.S. citizenship. Because the citizenship status of married women remained linked to that of their husbands, patterns for females cannot be determined.   
  
Fears about "undesirable" immigrants pouring into the United States added a sense of alarm to the already rapidly resurfacing of nativist sentiments. In 1920 and 1921, for example, readers of the popular *Saturday Evening Post* came across dire predictions about an impending deluge of "undesirables." In a series of articles, Kenneth L. Roberts, a longtime critic of the new immigrants, embellished self-proclaimed "emergency" warnings by adding his own firsthand descriptions of ports in Europe. According to him, thousands were supposedly waiting to set sail. He was putting the country on alert: An ignorant humanity, infested with contagious diseases, was going to swarm into the United States and sink into the country's slums. These were not oppressed human beings in search of asylum. Instead, Roberts claimed, they were economic refugees who would become "parasites on the community." Roberts's diatribes did not represent an exception. Anti-immigrant materials regularly appeared in the media.

News reports occasionally added to popular fears. In late September 1920, the *New York Time*s reported that a "near riot" at Ellis Island forced the commissioner of immigration to halt temporarily the landing of passengers so the "congestion" at the receiving depot could be relieved. According to the report, "so many immigrants" had arrived that they could not be quickly processed. Weary of waiting for their relatives or friends, people outside stormed the gate. Although only a small portion of the country's newspaper readership likely saw the story, the event nevertheless pricked fears lurking in the popular mind. Even longtime sympathizers of the foreign born were pondering whether, perhaps, the time had come either to reduce or temporarily suspend immigration. This was certainly the view of a majority in the U.S. Congress when it passed the Quota Act in May 1921 and thus imposed measures that were designed to reduce immigration at least for the short term.

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