

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Rush of Immigrants

By USHistory.org
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This informational text discusses the tide of new immigration, from the beginning of the Gilded Age of economic growth in the 1870s to the anti-immigration policies put in place during the 1920s. While immigrants of the early 1800s often came from Western Europe, the new immigrants came from southern and eastern Europe, as well as Asia. As you read, note what separated the new immigrants from American society and culture.

Immigration is a central part of the American experience. Except for Native Americans, all United States citizens can claim some immigration experience for their ancestors, whether during prosperity¹ or despair, brought by force or by choice. However, immigration to the United States reached its peak from 1880-1920.

The so-called “Old Immigration” up until the mid 1800s brought thousands of Irish and German people to the New World. But during the New Immigration boom, although those groups would continue to come, even greater ethnic diversity would grace America's populace. Many would come from Southern and Eastern Europe, and some would come from as far away as Asia. New complexions, new languages, and new religions confronted the already diverse American mosaic.



"Italian Immigrants arriving at Ellis Island in 1905" by Lewis W. Hine is in the public domain.

The New Immigrants

Most immigrant groups that had formerly come to America by choice seemed distinct, but in fact had many similarities. Most had come from Northern and Western Europe. Most had some experience with representative democracy.² With the exception of the Irish, most were Protestant.³ Many were literate,⁴ and some possessed a fair degree of wealth.

1. **Prosperity (noun):** success or wealth
2. Representative democracy is a form of government, in which the population votes for representatives to serve their interests in legislative, or law-making, branches of government.
3. Protestantism is a branch of Christianity that is distinct from Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. It has many subgroups.
4. **Literate (adjective):** able to read or write

The later groups arriving by the boatload in the Gilded Age⁵ were characterized by few of these traits. Their nationalities included Greek, Italian, Polish, Slovak, Serb, Russian, Croat, and others. Until cut off by federal decree, Japanese and Chinese settlers relocated to the American West Coast.⁶ None of these groups were predominantly Protestant.

The vast majority were Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox. However, due to increased persecution of Jews in Eastern Europe, many Jewish immigrants sought freedom from torment.⁷ Very few newcomers spoke any English, and large numbers were illiterate⁸ in their native tongues. None of these groups hailed from democratic regimes.⁹ The American form of government was as foreign as its culture.

The new American cities became the destination of many of the most destitute.¹⁰ Once the trend was established, letters from America from friends and family beckoned¹¹ new immigrants to ethnic enclaves¹² such as Chinatown, Greektown, or Little Italy. This led to an urban ethnic patchwork, with little integration.¹³ Most of the newcomers lived in run-down and overcrowded apartment buildings, called tenements, until they could save enough money for an upward move.

Despite the horrors of tenement housing and factory work, many agreed that the wages they could earn and the food they could eat surpassed their former realities. Still, as many as 25% of the European immigrants of this time never intended to become American citizens. These so-called “birds of passage” simply earned enough income to send to their families and returned to their former lives.

Resistance to Immigration

Not all Americans welcomed the new immigrants with open arms. While factory owners greeted the rush of cheap labor with zeal,¹⁴ laborers often treated their new competition with hostility.¹⁵ Many religious leaders were awestruck at the increase of non-Protestant believers. Racial purists¹⁶ feared the genetic outcome of the eventual pooling of these new bloods.

Gradually, these “nativists” lobbied successfully to restrict the flow of immigration. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, barring this ethnic group in its entirety. Twenty-five years later, Japanese immigration was restricted by executive agreement.¹⁷ These two Asian groups were the only ethnicities to be completely excluded from America.

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5. The Gilded Age of American history lasted from the 1870s to 1900, and was an era marked by rapid economic growth and many social problems that were masked by the wealth of industrial and corporate leaders.
 6. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prohibited the immigration of all Chinese laborers.
 7. **Torment (noun):** extreme physical or mental pain
 8. **Illiterate (adjective):** unable to read or write
 9. **Regime (noun):** a particular government
 10. **Destitute (adjective):** extremely poor
 11. **Beckon (verb):** to invite
 12. **Enclave (noun):** an area with people who are different in some way from the people in the areas around it
 13. **Integration (noun):** the mixing of people of different ethnicities
 14. **Zeal (noun):** enthusiasm
 15. **Hostility (noun):** hatred
 16. Racial purists believe that people of mixed ethnic backgrounds should not reproduce.
 17. An executive agreement is an international agreement made by the executive branch of government concerning foreign powers that does not require a treaty or ratification by the Senate.

Criminals, contract workers,¹⁸ the mentally ill, anarchists,¹⁹ and alcoholics were among groups to be gradually barred from entry by Congress. In 1917, Congress required the passing of a literacy test to gain admission. Finally, in 1924, the door was shut to millions by placing an absolute cap on new immigrants based on ethnicity. That cap was based on the United States population of 1890 and was therefore designed to favor the previous immigrant groups.

But millions had already come. During the age when the Statue of Liberty beckoned the world's "huddled masses yearning to breathe free," American diversity mushroomed. Each brought pieces of an old culture and made contributions to a new one. Although many former Europeans swore to their deaths to maintain their old ways of life, their children did not agree. Most enjoyed a higher standard of living than their parents, learned English easily, and sought American lifestyles. At least to that extent, America was a melting pot.

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18. Contract workers are people who work with less commitment to their employer than a traditional employee, often getting paid for a certain amount of work rather than indefinite employment.

19. Anarchists are those who support anarchy, or the absence of government and absolute freedom of the individual.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best identifies the central idea of this text? [RI.2]
 - A. America became more of a melting pot as people embraced their differences from one another and celebrated their heritage.
 - B. America has struggled with its identity as a melting pot due to cultural differences and anti-immigration policies.
 - C. America fails to be a melting pot because people who do not learn English cannot integrate with American citizens.
 - D. America is not a melting pot because many immigrants never considered themselves American, but only wanted to go to America for a time to make money.

2. What does the phrase “melting pot” in paragraph 11 imply about American culture? [RI.4]
 - A. American culture is formed as white Americans steal facets from other cultures without their consideration.
 - B. American culture completely destroys differences between cultures until everyone is exactly the same in their daily lifestyles.
 - C. American culture fears that which is different from it.
 - D. American culture requires those who are different to assimilate, or adopt the ways of American culture such as language and lifestyle.

3. PART A: Which statement best describes how Americans responded to the arrival of new immigrants, according to the text? [RI.3]
 - A. Americans rejected the new immigrants because they were so poor and did not contribute to the economy.
 - B. Americans accepted the new immigrants because they brought new, interesting cultural elements to American culture.
 - C. Americans accepted some immigrants and rejected others often out of fear of losing jobs to their cheap labor.
 - D. Americans rejected all immigrants because they felt that they were not contributing to society.

4. PART B: Which phrase from the text best supports your answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. “While factory owners greeted the rush of cheap labor with zeal, laborers often treated their new competition with hostility.” (Paragraph 8)
 - B. “Gradually, these 'nativists' lobbied successfully to restrict the flow of immigration.” (Paragraph 9)
 - C. “These two Asian groups were the only ethnicities to be completely excluded from America.” (Paragraph 9)
 - D. “Criminals, contract workers, the mentally ill, anarchists, and alcoholics were among groups to be gradually barred from entry by Congress.” (Paragraph 10)

5. How does the author develop the idea that life was difficult for the new immigrants [RI.5] coming to live the “American Dream?” Provide evidence from the text in your answer.
