

EUROPEAN IMMIGRATION FROM THE COLONIAL ERA TO THE 1920s

A Historical Perspective

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Table of Contents

	Page
Preface	iv
Introduction	v
European Immigration from the Colonial Era to the 1920s	1
Immigrants All	1
The Colonial Era	1
The Hunger for Labor	2
Non-English Immigrants	3
The First Census	3
1790 to 1890	4
Europe's Surplus Population	4
Ireland's Potato Famine	4
Germans' Mixed Motives	5
The Scandinavian Influx	5
Two-Way Flow	6
Factors Influencing Destinations	6
The Population in 1890	7
From 1890 to Restriction	8
Return Migration	8
The Waning Welcome	9
Forces Encouraging Immigration	10
Italy's Economy	10
The Jewish Exodus	11
Three Groups of Slavs	12
Adoption of Immigration Restrictions	12
Calls for Curtailment	12
The Restriction of Immigration	13
Student Background Essays	14
The Photograph Collection	15
Bibliography	18
Photo Credits	21
Front Cover	21
Back Cover	21
Text	21
The Photograph Collection	21
Map of Europe, c. 1926	Back Cover

European Immigration from the Colonial Era to the 1920s

Immigrants All

People who came to this country after the declaration of American independence from England are considered immigrants to the United States. Europeans who lived, prior to 1776, in the English colonies along the Atlantic Coast that became the 13 original states are usually referred to as colonists. Those colonists, however, were also immigrants to America or the offspring of such pioneers. Likewise, Hispanics who, during the eighteenth century, established frontier colonies in what later became the southwestern United States were migrants from Mexico and, more remotely, heirs of Spanish immigrants to the Americas.

Africans brought by force to the colonies and to the United States prior to the end of the slave trade in 1807 are usually distinguished from immigrants and colonists. As bondsmen and bondswomen, they had no choice about coming. Still, these Africans shared the experience involving permanent movement from one continent to another. The peoples known to the colonists as Indians have ancient ties to the northern tier of the Western Hemisphere that entitle them to the name Native Americans. Many scholars theorize that these peoples descended from forebears who came from Asia thousands of years ago.

The story of those who migrated from Europe to America between 1607 and the passage, in the 1920s, of laws that made entry difficult for people of many nationalities shows the fundamental role Europeans played in shaping the nation and creating its institutions. It also illustrates how fundamentally similar, across the centuries to the present day, the forces and hopes driving and inspiring men and women to migrate to the Americas have been.

The Colonial Era

The first Europeans to establish a permanent colony in the territory that would embrace the original 13 states of the American union arrived in the region of present-day Virginia in 1607. The 104 survivors of the Atlantic crossing began building their colony 30 miles inland from the mouth of the river they named in honor of their

king, James I of England. The newcomers soon fell on desperately hard times, in part because their expectations about their new home were misleading. They had hoped to duplicate the experiences of Spanish colonists who had found, in Central and South America, gold and silver as well as large, stable populations of conquerable native people. The English colonists, however, discovered neither valuable minerals nor a short-cut route that would lead them to Asia. Moreover, the native inhabitants, though willing to trade with the English, resisted them or faded into the forests when threatened with subjugation.

The hardships suffered in Virginia taught the English colonists important lessons. The region of America they had reached could offer prosperity, but not if it were just the site for outposts coordinating the exploitation of local labor and resources. These colonists had to be willing to establish self-supporting communities of people farming and performing the other ordinary tasks done in the villages and towns of Europe. Indeed, some people might even earn riches by providing—not only for nearby but also faraway markets—tobacco, rice, fish, furs and other products that could be grown or found more easily in America than in England.

Starting in 1620 English travelers expanded their area of colonization to the region of America where the demographic characteristics and economic pursuits would most closely resemble those of England. The peopling of the aptly named New England colonies began with the arrival of the Pilgrims at Plymouth. The town lies on the coast of present-day Massachusetts southeast of Boston, which a group of English Puritans founded in 1630. Pilgrims and Puritans were Dissenters, people who were dissatisfied with the established Church of England, which was the ecclesiastical beneficiary of the royal government's financial and political support. Like the Anglicans, as members of the Church of England were known, the Pilgrims and Puritans were Protestants. However, these Dissenters thought that the officially endorsed church remained too Catholic in spirit and did not adequately put into action the changes in beliefs and practices associated with the Reformation.

Pilgrims and Puritans came to America to practice religion in a manner they believed correct. Many also came



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to escape economic problems, such as the loss of farmland to sheep ranchers and a decline in the textile industry. The combination of motives was powerful, and more than 20,000 people came to Massachusetts and the spin-off colonies of Connecticut, Rhode Island and New Hampshire by the 1640s.

The Hunger for Labor

Despite the numerous arrivals in New England during its first decades, peopling the colonies was difficult. Not many men and women were willing to risk a dangerous ocean voyage of almost two months to spend the rest of their days in an alien wilderness. The fundamental truth was that the colonies badly needed people, and their hunger for labor helped shape the character of their communities and eventually of the nation. Indeed, the inability of planters in Virginia and other southern provinces to attract Europeans to perform the unrewarding gang labor involved in producing tobacco was a major reason for the introduction of slavery.

Convincing European immigrants to come to English America required flexibility. Every colony gladly greeted those whose money, albeit insufficient to purchase a

farm in densely occupied Europe, was more than enough to buy cheap acres here. But colonists were also willing to take chances on less obviously desirable arrivals, including those too poor to pay their way to America. About half of the people who came to the English colonies immigrated as indentured servants. They contracted to do labor for a period of approximately four years for whoever had paid for their passage across the ocean. With reluctance, some colonies even received as indentured servants convicts to whom English courts had given the choice of going to America or to jail. The English colonies, to a greater extent than those of the French and Spanish, continued to take in people who were out of step socially and religiously; for example, Maryland and Pennsylvania, respectively, became refuges for Catholics and Quakers.

The colonies' need for workers made the admission of non-English Europeans a logical policy from the beginning. Before slavery took hold in Virginia, many early immigrants were indentured servants from Ireland. When English forces conquered the Dutch colony of New Netherland in 1664 and renamed it New York, the ethnic mix in English domains became even

The mixture of ethnic groups was remarkable. About 19 percent of the population was African. English people comprised just under 50 percent of the population, but their percentage rose to 77 in Massachusetts. Germans accounted for about 7 percent, and for almost one-third of Pennsylvania's people. Scotch-Irish colonists, who were strongly represented in "frontier" areas, amounted to nearly 5 percent, and the Scots close to 7 percent. Estimates of Irish and French in the population were approximately 3 percent and 1.5 percent, respectively, but the former may be low. Dutch amounted to more than 2.5 percent of the population, including more than 15 percent of the people in New York and New Jersey. Almost 6 percent of the population was classified as "unassigned white."

1790 to 1890

Most scholars of immigration believe that the influx to America was modest between 1775 and 1815. Revolutions in the English colonies and in France, disruption of transatlantic trade during those uprisings as well as throughout the ensuing Napoleonic Wars and periodic economic slumps worked to keep down the numbers of arrivals. Most estimates place the influx of immigrants at an average of 5,000 per year, but some researchers believe that figure is conservative. Nevertheless, it can be safely said that the flow of people was much smaller than it would be thereafter. Before 1820 the United States did not consider the number of immigrants great enough to merit counting them.

Europe's Surplus Population

No single factor explains why the nineteenth century became such a great era of European migration. But absolutely essential to the movement was the existence of masses of Europeans who were unneeded in their homelands. That surplus population came into being due to the interplay of several forces. Medical and nutritional advances led to a sharp decline in death rates, especially among children. People who would have died in earlier times lived to have children of their own. As a result, even though the number of children born per woman declined through the century, the European population boomed.

Europe's growing populations entailed problems and possibilities. Farmers did not have enough land to divide among their children and, as technology improved agriculture, they needed fewer workers to produce their crops. Without employment opportunities in the countryside, young men and women drifted to nearby towns and larger cities, where they supplied cheap labor for the industries developing in such countries as England, France and Germany. Not everybody, however, found

work or liked the work they found. For those people, moving farther from home—to the United States, perhaps—became attractive.

America was a powerful magnet for aspiring people. Especially during the first half of the nineteenth century, the United States was a radically different country. The Revolution, and the half-century of subsequent political thinking that spelled out its meaning, rejected the European scheme of values. The first and obvious rebuke was to the monarchy and to the idea that birth into the aristocracy gave special rights to rule. The second and more subtle challenge was to the expectation that ordinary people would enjoy little economic success. In the United States, opportunity seemed to be everywhere; people drove westward conquering a continent, and the legal system evolved in ways that fostered individual initiative and rapid development.

Despite its attractions, going to the new nation was a major step. Emigration was often an irrevocable decision in the middle of the nineteenth century. Costs, modes of transportation and the kinds of work people pursued made returning to Europe unlikely. Immigrants often followed a kind of chain in their travels. An intrepid soul—usually, but not always, male—would leave home for the "New World." Once established, the pioneer would write back, telling relatives and friends of what had been encountered. In many cases, the immigrant would advance passage money for others to follow. Those who came repeated the practice. The men and women who took the leap formed the cores of ethnic neighborhoods and communities that soon emerged in the cities and rural areas of the United States.

Although emigration involved a radical decision, the goals of those people undertaking emigration could be quite conservative. European farmers with too little land to divide among their children could sell their property and use the proceeds to buy many acres in the United States. This way, their offspring need not abandon the soil. Skilled European workers, threatened with increased competition as improved transportation and political changes brought markets closer together, could get to a place where their talents were in demand. They, too, could increase the prospects that their children would continue to follow in their occupational footsteps.

Ireland's Potato Famine

Not all Europeans who came to the United States had the luxury of thoughtful decision and careful planning. Emigration from Europe was sometimes an unavoidable flight rather than a voluntary choice. That was certainly the case for many who escaped Ireland during the potato famine of the mid-1840s. Their coming was the earliest

mass ethnic migration and one of the most important and compelling elements in the story of nineteenth-century immigration.

Ireland is not an inherently poor country. Its soil is fertile, and Irish farmers fared well during the era of the Napoleonic Wars. Prosperity encouraged early marriages and larger families. The population grew so fast that by 1840 the island was densely occupied. Approximately 8 million people lived there, about twice Ireland's current population. Farms were extremely small—many fewer than five acres—and the fact that the agriculturalists were frequently tenants of absentee owners complicated the situation. Forced to sell their grain crops to pay the rent, many Irish relied for survival on the potato, which produced a large, nutritious yield from little land.

The failure of the Irish potato crop in 1845 and the years immediately following set off a dramatic exodus of people fleeing starvation and the diseases that prey on the hungry. The worst off probably had the least chance to get away, but even those who escaped were often in pitiable shape. Decisions by callous landlords to ship their tenants off to the United States rather than to pay for their relief in Ireland aggravated the suffering. Because of the weakened physical condition of the passengers, some of the ships carrying Irish people across the Atlantic had death rates 20 times as high as those usually encountered on African slave ships, whose owners had an economic interest in keeping their human cargo alive. The best estimate is that Ireland lost more than 1 million people to the famine. Perhaps half of those died; the remainder emigrated, mostly to the United States.

Germans' Mixed Motives

Germans constituted the most numerous European ethnic group to come to the United States during the nineteenth century. They were often identified in immigration records, however, as Bavarians, Prussians or subjects of some other kingdom or principality because the unification of the hundreds of states that joined to form modern Germany was not completed until 1870. Although some Germans were victims of the same potato blight that struck Ireland, and others were political activists who fled after the collapse of the Republican revolutions of 1848, most were ordinary folk—small farmers, artisans or unskilled laborers hopeful of improving their fortunes.

German migration to the United States reached a peak during the 1850s, surpassing the fading influx from Ireland. More than 1 million Germans landed in the United States between 1845 and 1854. All immigration from Europe then ebbed during the tumult of the Civil War and into the 1870s, when the United States saw a prolonged economic depression. German emigration finally

reached its record high during the 1880s, when almost 1.5 million people departed.

The Scandinavian Influx

After the Civil War, Irish and German people remained the two largest groups in the European immigrant influx. Arrivals from Scandinavia, however, joined the ranks of the newcomers in increasing numbers. Sweden, the most populous of the Scandinavian nations, sent the largest numbers; more than 700,000 Swedes arrived between 1869 and 1893. In terms of a proportion of population, however, Norway suffered the greatest loss; the more than 260,000 Norwegians arriving between 1879 and 1893 amounted to more than two-thirds of the nation's surplus of births over deaths in those years. Denmark sent the fewest of its citizens; almost 160,000 Danes emigrated between 1869 and 1893. The estimate of Danish immigration may be low by about 50,000, because it does not include Danes who left Schleswig and Holstein after the German state of Prussia seized those districts in 1866.

Scandinavians migrated for the same reasons as Irish and Germans, though they did not experience the extra push that the potato failure created in Ireland in the 1840s. Scandinavians who were farmers, or who wanted to be,



A Norwegian woman preparing to leave for America

American workers. They claim that the labor performed by the immigrant newcomers liberated most existing employees to do more creative and better-rewarded tasks. Moreover, historians have focused on a disturbing tendency among the critics of immigration to blame the problems of the era on the newcomers themselves or at least on those among them who belonged to the “new immigrant” nationalities.

Many of the unwelcome features of later immigration were not new or reflected changes occurring in the broader society. A high percentage of unskilled labor and a low proportion of farmers among immigrants had been common since the time of the Civil War. Persisting trends in those directions indicated the growing importance of industry on both sides of the Atlantic. Likewise, concentration in large cities was a continuation as well as an intensification of a pattern. Among European arrivals only Scandinavians were more likely than not to be found in rural areas. Even in the middle of the nineteenth century, immigrants, including Scandinavians, had been more prone than established immigrants to live in cities. Finally, except with regard to remigration, immigrants from northern and western Europe in the post-1890 era were socially quite like their contemporaries from southern and eastern Europe.

Forces Encouraging Immigration

The general forces causing people to forsake the lands of their births for America were much the same in 1900 as they had been in 1850. The demographic shift away from northern and western Europe was evidence that the crisis of overpopulation was easing there, as births and deaths came into better balance and as industrialization provided greater occupational opportunities near home. The greater involvement of southern and eastern Europe showed that those regions had achieved the level of modernization reached earlier by their neighbors and had become integrated into the commercial and transportation networks of the Atlantic community. Beyond the broad forces at work, however, unique conditions affected emigration from every nation. A brief look at the experiences of Italians, Jews and Slavs, the leading ethnic groups involved in the post-1890 movement, can provide insights into those factors.

Italy's Economy

Like Germany, Italy was a nation that achieved unification by 1870. Unlike Germany, it was a country of little growth and poor prospects. Italy's economy was sharply

divided between an industrializing northern region and a backward southern one. Mountains and hills made up 75 percent of the country, and the plains covered only 19 million acres. Out of every 10 Italian men, nine engaged in farming, but not more than 10 percent of those owned even five acres of land. The rest of the agricultural workers were evenly divided between those who rented small plots of land and those who toiled as day laborers. Poverty was most severe between the southern city of Naples and the island of Sicily, which lies off the tip of the Italian boot. In that region the land was divided into such small holdings that almost nobody prospered, despite the severe exploitation of the illiterate peasantry.

Italy was ready for a wave of emigration at the end of the nineteenth century, and a series of crises—including high taxation, the ravages of the olive fly and the spread of disease in the vineyards—increased the numbers of people departing. The southern provinces accounted for approximately 80 percent of the exodus, with Sicily contributing 30 percent and the region around Naples 27 percent. The first Italians to migrate after unification had favored Argentina and Brazil. By the beginning of the



Italian immigrants leaving for America

twentieth century, however, two-thirds of the emigrants headed for the United States.

The Jewish Exodus

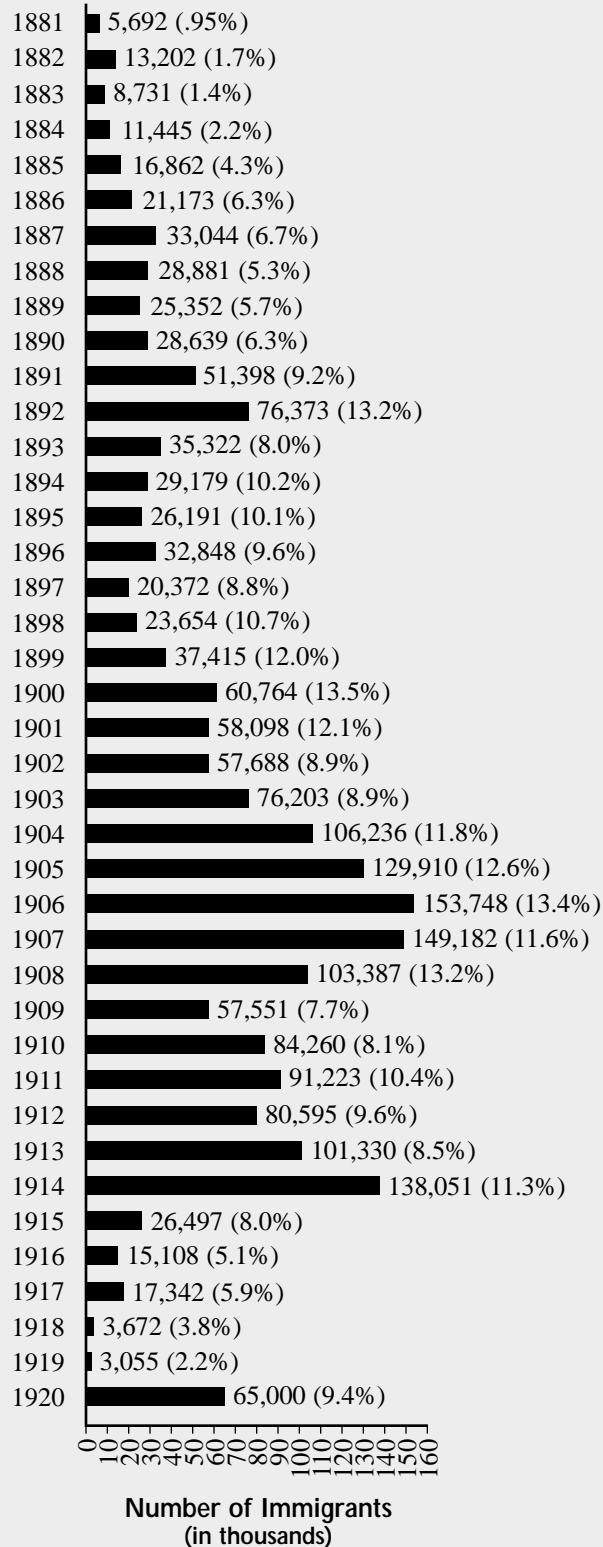
Jewish immigrants to the United States did not come from a single country. In the mid-1880s Jews appeared among the many newcomers from Germany. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century, their principal points of departure lay to the east. During those years, central and eastern Europe lost more than one-third of its Jewish population, and 90 percent of the emigrants came to the United States. About three out of every four Jewish immigrants came from Russia or from other territories controlled by the *czar*, including the area that would become Poland after World War I. Almost 20 percent came from lands of the Austro-Hungarian empire; most of the remainder came from Romania.

European Jews valued early marriages and large families. Moreover, the sanitary and dietary practices prescribed by their religion helped protect them against some diseases. Increases in the population put at least as much pressure on Jews as on their neighbors. Furthermore, Jews were outsiders in Christian Europe. Especially within areas controlled by Russians, the state policy had been, through persuasion or force, to separate Jews from their culture. The *czars* limited where Jews could live to a circumscribed area of western territory known as the Pale of Settlement. They also blocked the Jews from certain economic pursuits, including the ownership of farms, and forced them into commercial and industrial occupations.

Jewish emigration started, ironically, among those who already had been loosened from their roots. The first to go were those who had abandoned the traditional Jewish villages, or *shtetls*, to seek work in cities such as Warsaw and Vilna. Among them were many who had been exposed to such secular intellectual movements as the *Haskala*, which called for the modernization of Jewish life; Socialism, which appealed to their economic rather than ethnic or religious interests; and Zionism, which supported the creation of a Jewish state.

Initially, a disproportionately large number of Jewish emigrants originated in Lithuania, Byelorussia and other districts in the northwest sector of the Pale. Departures later quickened in the south, when *pogroms*—organized physical attacks on Jews—broke out there in the first decade of the new century. But, even without persecution, the flight of the Jews from Europe would have been massive. The rate of Jewish emigration from the relatively benevolent Austro-Hungarian empire, for example, was three-fifths as high as that from the more hostile states of Russia and Romania.

Forty Years of Jewish Immigration and Its Relation to Total Immigration to the United States, Annually, 1881–1920



Source: Developed from data provided by the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service, Washington, DC.

EUROPE, c. 1926

