

IMMIGRATION ANGST: DEJA VU ALL OVER AGAIN?

Throughout American history, no issue has been more intractable for policy-makers than immigration. It still is. Although current attention is focused on our Southern border, for generations the subject of which foreigners are welcome has challenged even people of good will. Indeed, most of our own families' roots sprouted in distant lands and many of our ancestors had to overcome formidable barriers in order to pass through what, popularly, was called "The Golden Door." This essay recalls certain long forgotten but salient events that highlighted the American narrative. Michael Nevins

One hundred years ago this spring, Congress passed the Emergency Quota Act — also known as The Immigration Restriction Act. Although it was intended as temporary legislation, it proved to be an important turning-point in American policy because it added two new features: numerical limits on immigration and the use of a quota system for establishing those limits. It passed without a recorded vote in the House and by a vote of 90-2-4 in the Senate.

Congress had passed an earlier immigration act in 1907 that prohibited Asians from entering the United States. Also, it barred the feebleminded, those with physical or mental defects, those suffering from tuberculosis, children under 16 without parents, and women entering for "immoral purposes." But for many people this wasn't restrictive enough. World War I and fears of the spread of socialism or "radicalism" produced enough pressure for the Republican controlled Federal government to act decisively to shut the Golden Door.

The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 drew on recommendations of the Dillingham Commission that had been established in 1907 to investigate the effects of increased levels of immigration to the United States on the social, economic and moral state of the nation. The Commission employed a staff of more than 300 people, spent better than a million dollars and accumulated massive data. Its 41 volume Report, published in 1911, concluded that immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe was a serious threat to American society and should be greatly reduced, even as restrictions on Asian immigration continued. The Dillingham

Report highly influenced public opinion and played an integral part in the adoption of the Emergency Quota Act of 1921 and the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924.

Eugenicists were thrilled. They'd been arguing that America's genetic stock was deteriorating and that the influx, particularly of Jews, posed a threat to their image of the ideal American citizen: the rural Yankee Protestant who lived a temperate, chaste life; Italians, Poles and Negroes also fell outside this ideal. Madison Grant, the president of the Eugenics Research Association, wrote in his influential book *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) that the idea of the United States as a "melting pot is an absolute failure." Adolf Hitler, languishing in prison and writing *Mein Kampf*, took notice and declared Grant's book to be his Bible.

The Emergency Quota Act limited the number of immigrants admitted from any country annually to 3% of the number of residents living in the United States as of the 1910 Census. Three years later, Congress ratcheted the number down further in the Johnson-Reed Act which reduced the quota to 2% of countries' representation in the 1890 census. Millions of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe, mainly Jews, Italians and other "undesirables," had come to the US since 1880 and these legislative actions successfully restricted their entry. (People from Northern and Western Europe had a higher quota and professionals were admitted without regard to their country of origin.)

To execute the new quota, the visa system (still in use today) mandated all non-citizens seeking to enter the US to obtain and present a visa obtained from a US embassy or consulate before they arrived in the US. Based on the formula, the number of new immigrants admitted fell drastically from 805,228 in 1920 to 309,556 in 1921-22. The average annual inflow of immigrants prior to 1921 was 175,983 from Northern and Western Europe versus 685,531, mainly from Southern and Eastern Europe. The tragic effect of the new restrictions was most evident during the 1930s when millions of Jews were unable to escape Nazi occupation. (The use of the National Origins Formula continued until it was replaced in 1965 by the Immigration and Nationality Act which introduced a system of preferences, based on immigrants' skills and family relationships with US citizens or US residents.)

Albert Johnson, the main sponsor of the Immigration Acts of 1921 and 1924, was the chairman of Congress' Immigration and Naturalization Committee. He was described as "an outspoken anti-Semite, a Ku Klux Klan favorite, and an ardent opponent of immigration." Johnson justified the quotas as a bulwark against "a stream of alien blood, with all its inherited misconceptions respecting the relationships of the governing power to the governed." In his committee's report Johnson included a quote from a State Department official referring to the recent wave of Jewish immigrants as "filthy, un-American, and often dangerous in their habits."

One of the leading eugenicists of the era, Harry Laughlin, was appointed as the committee's Expert Eugenics Agent. He was a staunch advocate of involuntary sterilization of the feebleminded, epileptics and other "undesirables" — estimated by Laughlin as 10% of the general population. At the same time the Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer headed the Department of Justice's newly-created Radical Division whose highly publicized "Palmer Raids," a series of mass roundups and arrests by federal agents of radicals and political dissenters suspected of subversion, touched off the so-called "Red Scare" of 1919–20.

The remainder of this essay is extracted from "Obstruction of Injustice," an article written by Adam Hochschild and published in *The New Yorker*, November 11, 2019. In it the author captures the spirit of the times, a spirit that in too many respects reflects anger, hatred and paranoia that persists a century later.

In 1919, alarmed by the growing presence of "peoples of Asiatic races," the Anti-Alien League called for a constitutional amendment "to restrict citizenship by birth within the United States to the children of parents who are of a race which is eligible for citizenship"—i.e., whites. Senator Wesley Jones, of Washington State, promised to introduce such a measure—a proposal not unlike today's calls to end birthright citizenship. That May, a cheering convention of the American Legion demanded the deportation not only of immigrants who evaded military service during the First World War but of any men who evaded service.... One factor was the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia in November, 1917, which political and corporate leaders feared might incite militant labor unionists in the U.S., who had already shaken the country with a stormy, decade-long wave of strikes.

Lenin had written a "Letter to American Workingmen" declaring "the inevitability of the international revolution." Postwar economic turmoil promised to make the country more vulnerable than ever to radical doctrines....The most worrisome left-wing group was the Industrial Workers of the World, known as the Wobblies. The I.W.W. had more flash than breadth—the number of members probably never exceeded a hundred thousand—but the Wobblies caught the public imagination with their colorful posters, stirring songs, and flair for drama.

The Justice Department began a nationwide crackdown in September, 1917, raiding all four dozen I.W.W. offices and the homes of many activists. In sealed boxcars, Wobblies from around the country were brought to Chicago's Cook County Jail. When they received news of the Bolshevik takeover in St. Petersburg, they celebrated by singing and banging tin cups on their cell bars. A hundred and one leading Wobblies were charged with violating a long list of federal laws as part of a mass trial—still the largest in American history—that ran through the spring and summer of 1918. The jury took a mere fifty-five minutes to render its verdict, finding all the defendants guilty on all counts. They were sentenced to an average of eight years in prison. Tons of I.W.W. records, which the Justice Department had seized in the raids, were later burned.

Fear of bolshevism blended with a long-standing hostility toward certain classes of immigrants. By 1890, those coming ashore at Ellis Island were no longer from places like Britain and Germany; the great bulk were now from Italy, Eastern Europe, or the Russian Empire, and they were Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, or Jewish. There were a lot of them, too: by 1900, the majority of men in Manhattan over the age of twenty-one were foreign-born.

Many Americans shared the resentment voiced in a book published in 1902: "Throughout the [nineteenth] century men of the sturdy stocks of the north of Europe had made up the main strain of foreign blood which was every year added to the vital working force of the country . . . but now there came multitudes of men of the lowest class from the south of Italy and men of the meaner sort out of Hungary and Poland, men out of the ranks where there was neither skill nor energy nor any initiative of quick intelligence; and they came in numbers which increased from year to year, as if the countries of the south of Europe were disburdening themselves of the more sordid and hapless elements of their population." The writer of these words was a young Princeton professor, who, a decade later, would become the President of the United States: Woodrow Wilson.

Wilson's feelings were echoed widely among the American establishment. The Massachusetts senator Henry Cabot Lodge was a prominent political enemy of the President's, but he completely shared Wilson's attitude on this score. In a speech to the Senate about the need to restrict "undesirable immigrants" who came from the "races" he found "most alien," he invoked Thomas Bailey Aldrich's poem "Unguarded Gates," which compared such people to the "thronging Goth and Vandal [who] trampled Rome." For Lodge and others anxious to restrict immigration, Eastern European Jews were definitely among the undesirables. The historian Henry Adams, a friend of Lodge's, declared that "the Jew makes me creep" and wrote of a "furtive Yacoob or Ysaac still reeking of the Ghetto, snarling a weird Yiddish." The novelist Henry James was disgusted by the people he saw "swarming" on New York's heavily Jewish Lower East Side, who reminded him of "small, strange animals . . . snakes or worms."

These immigrant swarms, politicians claimed, were not just unseemly; with their affinity for radical movements, they were a threat to national security. Many leftists, like [Emma] Goldman, were Jewish, and the most violent anarchists were largely Italian-American. In June, 1919, one of them managed to blow himself up as he was planting a bomb at the Washington, D.C., home of Wilson's Attorney General, A. Mitchell Palmer, and among the items he left at the scene was an Italian-English dictionary. . . . The tenor of the deportation frenzy was heightened by the upcoming 1920 Presidential election. Several of those hoping to succeed Wilson saw great potential in promising to deport troublemakers. A leading Republican contender was Major General Leonard Wood, a dashing hero of the Indian Wars and a former Rough Rider, who captured headlines in 1919 for leading military forces against strikes and race riots in the Midwest, and who at one point put Gary, Indiana, under martial law. "Deport these so-called Americans who preach treason," he told an audience in Kansas City.

Another Republican candidate, the president of Columbia University, Nicholas Murray Butler, said in a speech, "Today, we hear the hiss of a snake in the grass, and the hiss is directed at the things Americans hold most dear." He called for deporting "Reds" to the Philippines. The Republican senator Miles Poindexter, of Washington State, also eyeing the Presidential nomination, called on the government "to deport every alien Bolshevik and to punish rather than protect those who practice their savage creed in this country." Poindexter suggested that Attorney General Palmer was pursuing the deportation of these savages with insufficient vigor: "The government had positively refused in many cases to allow them to go."

But Palmer, a Democrat, had his own hopes for the Presidency. An imposing-looking man with a shock of gray hair who wore three-piece suits crossed by a watch chain, he was not about to let anyone outflank him in enthusiasm for deportations. And, unlike the out-of-power Republicans, he had the authority to back up his words. Raised as a Quaker, Palmer had declined the position of Secretary of War, when Wilson had offered it, in 1913, but, when he accepted an appointment as Attorney General, in 1919, his faith did not prevent him from waging a kind of domestic war the likes of which the United States has seldom seen. The bombing of Palmer's house, which was clearly intended to kill him, his wife, and their ten-year-old daughter, understandably left him terrified. Eight other bombs went off the same night, mostly at the homes of prominent politicians or judges. Some five weeks earlier, a mail bomb had exploded in the home of a former U.S. senator from Georgia, blowing off the hands of his maid, and thirty-five additional mail bombs addressed to Cabinet members, judges, and business moguls were intercepted before they could go off.

Immediately after the spate of bombings, Palmer founded the Radical Division of the Justice Department to track subversive activities of all kinds, and he put J. Edgar Hoover in charge. This post, as Kenneth D. Ackerman shows in his biography "Young J. Edgar," was a key step on this precocious man's path to power. Hoover, during an earlier job at the Library of Congress, had come to love the great information-management technology of the day: file cards. Within two and a half years in his new job, he would amass a database of four hundred and fifty thousand cards on people and organizations, carefully linking them to documents in the Radical Division's files. To those in power, signs of a simmering revolution were everywhere. Two rival Communist parties each promised to reproduce on American soil the Bolshevik takeover. In 1919, amid the largest strike wave in U.S. history, one in five workers walked off the job—everyone from telephone operators to stage actors. An unprecedented general strike briefly brought Seattle to a halt. In September of that year, most Boston police officers went on strike. If even those sworn to defend law and order were in rebellion, what could come next? Senator Henry Myers, of Montana, warned that if America did not hold firm, it would "see a Soviet government set up within two years."

At the same time, agents provocateurs played a significant role in the turbulence. Many came from the ranks of private detectives; the three biggest such firms had a hundred and thirty-five thousand employees. In July, 1919, the U.S. attorney in Philadelphia wrote to Palmer to tell him that many of the most extreme

agitators were undercover operatives “actively stirring up trouble” because “they know on which side their bread is buttered.” Justice Department officials in Los Angeles concluded that private detectives, in order to create more business, had planted bombs in nearby oil fields. But none of this deterred Palmer, who was now on an anti-dissident crusade, with mass deportations as his main goal. Ninety per cent of Communist and anarchist agitation, he maintained, “is traceable to aliens.”

Millions of immigrants, even if they had arrived decades earlier, had never bothered to become American citizens. The bureaucracy of doing so could seem intimidating, especially for those who didn't speak English well, and naturalization hadn't seemed important at a time when the country professed to welcome newcomers. Now, however, lacking citizenship became an enormous liability. Emma Goldman, a prime target, was under close surveillance—her mail was opened, her phone calls were tapped, and her secretary, unbeknownst to her, was a government informer. Goldman believed that she had become a citizen thirty-two years earlier, by marrying a naturalized immigrant, Jacob Kershner. But Hoover contended that the rabbi who performed the ceremony was not properly ordained; moreover, two decades after their divorce, Kershner's citizenship had been revoked, because he had falsified something on his original application. It was deemed that Goldman had thus lost her status as a U.S. citizen as well.... The crackdown at the time of Goldman's deportation came to be known as the Palmer Raids, although they were planned and closely supervised by the much younger Hoover.

The first big raid rounded up members of the Union of Russian Workers, an avowedly anarchist organization that also offered classes and social activities. Offices of the union in more than a dozen cities were raided during the night of November 7, 1919—pointedly, the second anniversary of the Bolshevik coup—and 1,182 people were arrested and interrogated. A far larger number were roughed up, briefly detained, and then let go. Hoover's agents were helped by local police. A raid of offices near New York's Union Square, where members of the anarchist group had been attending night-school classes in mathematics and auto repair, left the building looking “as if a bomb had exploded in each room,” the *New York World* reported. “Desks were broken open, doors smashed, furniture overturned and broken, books and literature scattered, the glass doors of a cabinet broken, typewriters had apparently been thrown on the floor and stamped on,” and there were “bloodstains over floor, papers, literature &c.”

The Times, although it backed the arrests, acknowledged that “a number of those in the building were badly beaten by the police during the raid, their heads wrapped in bandages.” The raids, which were recorded by newsreel-makers for greater impact, produced the outcome that Hoover and Palmer wanted: foreign-born radicals began filling immigration prisons like the one on Ellis Island. President Wilson, incapacitated by a stroke at the time, never publicly addressed the raids, but just before falling ill he had spoken of the “disciples of Lenin in our own midst,” from whom “poison has got in the veins of this free people.”

The Palmer Raids reached their climax on January 2, 1920, with night sweeps in more than thirty cities and towns. Their professed targets were the two Communist parties, whose combined membership was no more than forty thousand but was ninety per cent immigrant. Many of those arrested had only a tangential connection, if any, to the Communists, including, in Nashua, New Hampshire, a hundred and forty-one Socialists. In nearby Manchester, it was everyone dancing at the Tolstoi Club; in Chicago, all the patrons at the Tolstoy Vegetarian Restaurant; in Lynn, Massachusetts, thirty-nine bakers, a third of them American citizens, in the middle of a meeting to discuss forming a coöperative; in New Jersey, a group of Polish-Americans soliciting money for a funeral; in Philadelphia, the members of the Lithuanian Socialist Chorus, mid-rehearsal. There are no complete records of how many people were seized, but a careful study by the Danish scholar Regin Schmidt estimates the total arrested in the Palmer Raids at ten thousand.

More than five hundred of those arrested were jammed into quarters at Ellis Island, which ran out of cots and bedding. Several inmates died of pneumonia. In Detroit, some eight hundred men and women were held for up to six days in a narrow, windowless corridor of a federal building, with a bare stone floor to sleep on and one toilet and one drinking fountain. They were without food for twenty hours, and then could eat only what their families and friends brought them. In Boston, a hundred and forty prisoners in chains and leg irons were marched through the city's streets, then locked up in an unheated prison on an island in the harbor. One despairing prisoner committed suicide by jumping from a window.

A. Mitchell Palmer, with one eye on justifying these mass arrests and the other on his Presidential campaign, issued a series of press releases. One was headed “warns nation of red peril—U.S. Department of Justice Urges Americans to Guard Against Bolshevism Menace.” The department's press office distributed photographs of prisoners, taken after they had been jailed for days without the chance to shave or

wash, captioned “Men Like These Would Rule You.” And Palmer published a magazine article warning that Communism “was eating its way into the homes of the American workman, its sharp tongues of revolutionary heat were licking the altars of the churches, leaping into the belfry of the school bell, crawling into the sacred corners of American homes, seeking to replace marriage vows with libertine laws.” (In fact, a survey by a church organization found that a large majority of the arrested men—eighty per cent of whom had lived in the United States for at least six years—were married.)

The arrests continued, and Palmer promised that deportations by the thousands would follow. New Yorkers would soon find, he told an audience in the city, a “second, third, and fourth” ship like the Buford, “sailing down their beautiful harbor in the near future.” Hoover personally led a raid in New Jersey in February, 1920, and Palmer began predicting that a nationwide Communist uprising would erupt on May Day of that year. Palmer and Hoover had assumed that they could deport most of those seized in the raids. A high proportion were non-citizens, and a law passed in 1918, during the martial fervor of the First World War and the anti-Bolshevik hysteria, said that any alien who advocated anarchism or violent revolution, or who belonged to an organization that did so, could be expelled. There was, however, one considerable roadblock: although it was Palmer’s Justice Department that had the power to arrest people, deportations were under the authority of the Immigration Bureau, which was part of the Labor Department.

It couldn’t happen again. Could it?

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