

Social Tensions

Prohibition

The era of national prohibition began in 1920 with the establishment of the Eighteenth Amendment and was enforced by the Volstead Act passed by Congress that same year. The Act forbade the manufacture and sale of beverages with an alcoholic content greater than .5 percent. Zealous supporters of this law, including many women and parishioners, believed that prohibiting the manufacture and sale of alcohol would eliminate the social problems caused by intoxication.

Many Americans began fighting for prohibition long before 1920. Near the beginning of the twentieth century, the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League crusaded for legal prohibition. The Anti-Saloon League became a powerful special interest and mobilized Protestant churches to elect candidates that were anti-alcohol. The practice of self-denial that emerged in support of the war effort led many to view alcohol as an unnecessary luxury. The Lever Act of 1917 outlawed the use of grain and other foodstuffs in the production of alcoholic beverages.

By the time Congress enacted a national prohibition, almost 75 percent of Americans lived in counties or states that already prohibited drinking alcohol. The movement, however, faced great resistance in large eastern cities where many social activities were built around the consumption of alcohol. Those who wanted to drink found ingenious ways around the law. Secret and illegal supplies of highly concentrated alcohol sprang up overnight. Citizens began regularly visiting "speakeasies," secret bars where individuals gathered to socialize.

Americans consumed tremendous amounts of alcohol during prohibition. Women began drinking in record numbers, and youth found it exciting to "bootleg," or smuggle liquor. Bootlegging became a major business, as many smuggled alcohol into the United States. Others found a new hobby in manufacturing "bathtub gin" and "home brew" for their own personal consumption. Sometimes, drinking highly concentrated homemade concoctions resulted in blindness or death.

Prohibition supplied organized crime with a massive influx of income. Although organized crime had long been a component of the landscape in large cities, mobsters like "Scarface" Al Capone reveled in their increasing power as booze distributors. Capone's criminal empire, which extended beyond the sale of alcohol to include gambling and prostitution, netted him nearly \$60 million in 1927. In Chicago's gang wars of the 1920's, mobsters killed about 500 rivals in an effort to control the billion-dollar business of the underworld.

Law enforcement officials were unable, and in many cases unwilling, to stop the endless stream of illegal alcohol. The state and federal agencies charged with enforcing prohibition were understaffed, and many enforcement agents were susceptible to bribery. Many opponents of prohibition believed that the only way to change the law was to break it on a massive scale, so they tried to undermine enforcement efforts so that the law would be seen as meaningless.

In the end, the “noble experiment” of prohibition did not succeed. Few politicians called for an outright repeal of the amendment before 1930; however, leaders recognized the need to at least overhaul the law if it was to be enforced. The prohibition lobby rejected outright all attempts to modify the law, but enforcement of the law remained grossly under funded and understaffed. In 1933, the Eighteenth Amendment upholding national prohibition was repealed by the ratification of the Twenty-first Amendment, which allowed the states to decide for themselves whether or not to support prohibition.

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