

Social Tensions

Nativism and Racism

Beginning in 1920, immigration into the United States once again increased dramatically. Approximately 110,000 people immigrated to the U.S. in 1919, and that number increased to more than 430,000 in 1920 and more than 800,000 in 1921. And as before, many native-born Americans saw the immigrants as a threat to their livelihood and their image of America. Congress, reacting to this widespread sentiment, passed the Emergency Quota Act of 1921.

Under this act, a new quota system would stem the influx of foreign-born citizens into the United States. The number of immigrants allowed to enter America for any given country was limited to three percent of the number of immigrants from that country already living in the United States as defined by the census of 1910. To further restrict immigration, in 1924 Congress adjusted the quota system so it was based on the census of 1890 when few southern Europeans had arrived.

The sensational Sacco and Vanzetti trial in 1921 underscored the anti-foreign attitude of many Americans. Nicola Sacco, a shoe factory worker, and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a fish peddler, were Italian immigrants and known atheists and anarchists. When the two were accused of killing a paymaster and a guard in a daylight robbery of a shoe factory, a notorious trial followed. During the trial, the judge and jury appeared overtly prejudiced against Sacco and Vanzetti because of their immigrant background and their political beliefs.

The trial, and determination of Sacco and Vanzetti's fate, dragged on for seven years, while protestors around the world organized rallies to show support and demand a new trial for the two doomed men. In the end, both men were executed on August 23, 1927.

As immigrants struggled for fair treatment, a force of evil had reconstituted. A new Ku Klux Klan, one focused against foreigners rather than blacks, was established in 1915 by William J. Simmons, a former preacher. Simmons would allow only native-born white Protestants into his organization, and he referred to America's melting pot as nothing more than a "garbage can." Klan membership rapidly grew to a peak of five million members in 1923.

Although the movement's strongest support was in the Midwest and South, the Klan's message spoke to individuals in all corners of America. Klan members wore robes, burned crosses, held dogmatic rituals, and organized mass demonstrations to protect its ideal of American life from African American, Roman Catholic, Jewish, and immigrant "corruption."

In the late 1920s, Americans finally recoiled from the hateful messages the Klan espoused and the violence of their actions. Infighting began to plague the Klan as factions squabbled over control of the large amounts of money collected through a \$10 initiation fee. When David C. Stephenson, the leader of the Indiana Klan, was convicted of assault that caused the death of a young woman, many of the remaining supporters deserted the Klan. Finally, a Congressional investigation launched to investigate money-laundering charges, revealed that a large part of initiation fee charged to members was used to pay kickbacks to local organizers to encourage additional recruitment.