

AP United States History

Unit 6: The Nation Expands

Topic- Immigration and Migration in the Gilded Age

Explain how cultural and economic factors affected migration patterns over time.

The industrial workforce expanded and became more diverse through internal and international migration.

Immigration and Migration in the Gilded Age

From 1865-1915, a 50-year period stretching from the conclusion of the Civil War to the beginning of the second year of warfare during the First World War in Europe, the population of America grew as it never had before in its history. While we tend to think of migration and immigration as controversial current issues, both have been occurring since the establishment of the first colonies by the European powers in the early 17th century. What makes the 50-year slice of time, from 1865-1915 unique, is the sheer number of immigrants who came to America from such a wide variety of places— bringing with them their unique experiences and cultural backgrounds. Prior to the Civil War, American cities were centers of commerce and immigrants came from mostly the nations of Western Europe (Great Britain, Ireland, Germany, Holland, and France). But, when the Civil War came to an end, patterns of internal migration developed as the nation industrialized during the Gilded Age, and large numbers of immigrants came from both Asia and Southern and Eastern Europe. These two processes led to the development of America's great industrial cities and a very diverse labor force that would build the modern American economy during the Gilded Age.

As cities became areas of economic growth featuring new factories and businesses, they attracted immigrants from Asia and southern and eastern Europe, as well as African American migrants within and out of the South. Many migrants moved to escape poverty, religious persecution, and limited opportunities for social mobility in their home countries or regions.

There are two differing types of factors which determine why a person will either migrate from one part of a country to the next, or will move from one nation to another. The first factor is referred to as a pull factor. A pull factor brings people to one nation from another one. The second factor is a push factor. A push factor is defined as one which makes a person want to leave a nation and move to another one. Pull factors for immigrants during this period often included the following: jobs, land, and the opportunity to join other family members who may have already made the move to America. Push factors during this period often included the following: war, poverty, and ethnic or religious (and, racial) tensions. While by far and away the most common pull factors for most of the immigrants who came to America during the Gilded Age were the opportunities to find work or to own land, each of the push factors were certainly important reasons for immigrant families to have the desire to come to America, as well.

The expansion of the American economy, which was fueled by the growth of the Transcontinental Railroad system brought millions of immigrants into the country as the nation's industries and cities developed alongside one another during the Gilded Age. While thousands of Irish and Chinese immigrants made their way into the West to work on the Transcontinental Railroad system, the industrial cities that developed in its wake became a magnet for immigrants from both Asia and Europe. As industries developed in steel, oil, railroads, and in the production of food products and textiles, immigrants came by the millions from Southern and Eastern Europe. It was the lure of work that brought them to New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Land was also a lure for immigrants who were seeking a better life in America. After the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862,

thousands of immigrants came from Northern Europe to settle in the states of Nebraska, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Iowa. Asian immigrants from China, Japan, and Korea, quite often settled in California. While some of these new immigrants from Asia came to work on the creation of the railroad system, others came as farmers.

There were also events inside the United States that would influence two major migrations which brought two differing groups into America's industrial cities. The first was the Panic of 1873 which forced a number of small farming families to go out of business. Many of these families moved back to the East and found jobs working in America's industrial cities during the Gilded Age. A second, even more severe financial depression, the Panic of 1893 forced even more farmers to make the same migration. But, there were other factors which also led to the migration of farmers from the Great Plains back to America's major cities. The rise of commercial farming and ranching forced some smaller operations to go out of business. Blizzards in 1887 and 1888, destroyed the ranching industry for many and forced some of them into America's major cities— even a future American president, none other than Theodore Roosevelt was among them. The second event which forced a major migration into America's industrial cities was the development of segregation and the heinous practice of lynching in the South. Southern violence and the degradation of the practice of segregation forced African-Americans who had the ability to make the trek into America's industrial cities. This migration process which lasted from 1890-1945, is often referred to as the Great Migration. At first, African-Americans found themselves on the receiving end of prejudice and discrimination— segregation, not by law, but by custom. But, when factories such as the Ford Automotive Plant began to pay equal wages to both black and white workers in the early 20th century, it led to a mass exodus of African-Americans to such cities as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and especially Detroit.

If jobs and the opportunity to own land drew immigrants to America, it was quite often the devastation of conflict and religious and ethnic strife which pushed them out of their homelands. From 1865-1910, the continent of Europe saw two nations appear on the map for the very first time— Italy and Germany. As the United States was fighting its Civil War, in 1863, the Italian city-states were being merged for the first time into a unified Italy. In 1871, Germany, once a collection of small kingdoms in Central Europe was unified into the German nation that we think of today in the present. The conflicts which created these two nations were both incredibly destructive— not to mention the Franco-Prussian War in which Germany defeated France in another destructive conflict which took four years and a tremendous toll on both sides from 1866-1870. The destruction from these three conflicts, plus the expansion of the aging Austro-Hungarian Empire displaced millions of people— many of whom had been small farmers. The Taiping Rebellion, which lasted from 1850-1864, and led to the deaths of 25 million Chinese people and destroyed the Chinese economy led to a wave of Chinese immigration during the 1860s and 1870s. The industrialization of Japan and its occupation of Korea led to another wave of immigration from Asia. But war was not the only push factor which led immigrants to come to America. Pogroms in the Russian Empire, ethnic tensions in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and religious strife that targeted Jewish families in France, Poland, and Russia, each led to waves of immigrants who came to America to escape from these places during this period. It is also important, however, to note that some immigrants also become what were referred to as “birds of passage,” who came to America to make enough money to provide a better life for their families and then returned to their homelands. But, millions of immigrants made the journey to America during the Gilded Age and the vast majority of them became the workers who lifted the American economy up to the point that by the dawn of the twentieth century, our nation was on its way to becoming a global power. The journey to America for most immigrant families was a daunting one and when they arrived, despite their contributions, they were not always welcomed with open arms either.

Most of the immigrants who came into America during the Gilded Age disembarked from large-scale steamships in ports cities such as New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, New Orleans, Galveston, or San Francisco. Most of them sailed on passenger steamships in what was called steerage, or in third-class accommodations. These simple accommodations were the first step for millions of immigrants. After making the journey, the vast majority of the immigrants who came into America from Europe came through the Ellis Island Immigration Station which first opened its doors in 1893. The immigrants who came through its holding areas,

answered questions, took tests, and went through physical examinations. Very few immigrants were deported or sent back to their homeland of origin— but the most common reason for those who were denied entry into the country was that they were carrying an illness. Most of the Asian immigrants who came into the country during this period were processed at the Angel Island Immigration Station which was located off of the coast of San Francisco, California.

Urban neighborhoods based on particular ethnicities, races, and classes provided new cultural opportunities for city dwellers.

When the immigrants landed in America, most of them already had a family member waiting for them to arrive. And most of the immigrants settled in the cities in which they disembarked, such as either New York City or San Francisco, for example. In those great cities, the immigrants created their own neighborhoods (often referred to as ethnic ghettos, or enclaves). Even today, you can find ethnic Chinese neighborhoods in San Francisco, Polish neighborhoods in Chicago, and Italian neighborhoods in New York City and New Orleans. But, it was New York City which hosted the largest number of immigrants by far. In fact, by 1900, New York City had as many Irish immigrants as the population of Dublin, more Italian immigrants than any city with the exception of Rome, itself, more Polish immigrants than the population of Warsaw, and more Jewish immigrants than there were in any city in the world. These immigrant neighborhoods would feature the food, music, stories, and cultural trappings of each of the family groups that would live in them. Quite often immigrants would live together in tenements, or apartment-like dwellings which were often cramped, with no lights, or running water. It was a difficult life for both them and their families. But, they made history and in turn, helped build our modern America. By far and away, a sizable majority of those of us who live in America today can trace their ancestry back to an immigrant family that came into our nation during the Gilded Age from 1865-1900.

Explain the various responses to immigration in the period over time.

Increasing public debates over assimilation and Americanization accompanied the growth of international migration. Many immigrants negotiated compromises between the cultures they brought and the culture they found in the United States.

Social commentators advocated theories later described as Social Darwinism to justify the success of those at the top of the socioeconomic structure as both appropriate and inevitable.

Responses to Immigration in the Gilded Age

While the journey to come to America was a challenge for most immigrant families during the Gilded Age, the response by American society to this wave of immigration is another story, in itself. In short, immigration— at that time, divided American society, much as it does as a current issue today.

Much like the process for the Native Americans, the immigrant families who came into the country during the Gilded Age went through the twin processes of assimilation and Americanization. The major component of the processes of both assimilation and Americanization was the public school system. While immigrant adults may have learned English or about American customs in a settlement home (more on those in a moment) or even on the job, immigrant children (unless they were a part of the labor force) usually learned English and American customs in the public school system in America's cities. Gradually, immigrants gave up their native languages and some of their customs (such as their style of dress). Most of the immigrant families worked hard to fit into their neighborhoods and communities. In some neighborhoods and communities there were newspapers which were published in their native languages, cafes and restaurants which served ethnic dishes, and shops and stores which catered to their needs. But, surrounding them was a broader American society and for these immigrant families, the most important goal was to fit in. In turn, immigrants lost some of their cultural identity, but in the process, became American— adopting the values (slowly, over time) of the mainstream culture—

enjoying its amusement parks, theaters, shops, eating establishments, and sporting events (during this period, baseball and boxing were the two most popular sports).

But, immigrant families faced tremendous challenges during this period, as some Americans did not want to share the American dream with their new neighbors or fellow workers. Nativism, which had always been present at some level in American life, emerged during the period. Though immigrants faced prejudice in the process of assimilating, some nativists felt that it was immigrants who were taking jobs away from native-born Americans. Others felt that the immigrants brought disease, and were not willing to change from the customs of their homeland. Religion became an issue— many of the new immigrants in places like New York City were Jewish, which led to tensions. Other immigrant groups were Catholic, or Eastern Orthodox and this also led to tensions in some places. And, then there were the political machines who often promised immigrant families jobs, schools, and better housing conditions. In some cases, as we will study later, the political machines would deliver on their promises and in turn, large numbers of immigrant working-class voters would lend them their support. In other cases, the political machines and the political bosses who ran them would simply take the money as a bribe or as a kickback by overcharging for doing the promised work and then pocketing the money. For the immigrant families who came during this period, there were always traps and pitfalls that could make life difficult, but, even with the specter of nativism and the prejudice that came with it, there was an even darker side that emerged during the period.

It has been mentioned before, in other readings, that both Social Darwinism and eugenics make their appearance during this period from 1865-1900. Both ideas originated as an outgrowth of Charles Darwin's theories of evolution. But, Social Darwinism had a twist to it. In Social Darwinism, people were successful in life because they were simply better people, in other words, they were born to be successful, while other people who were not were deemed to be inferior to them. Social Darwinism can be used to explain why successful entrepreneurs in the Gilded Age treated their workers, at times, with such contempt. They felt that they were superior, which made it easier to work people 10-12 hours a day, six days a week, with very little pay, in conditions that were quite often unsafe. Eugenics took Social Darwinism a step further by suggesting that you could actually breed successful people— or, create a race of people who, by their presence, would help to rid the world of poverty, crime, and disease. This period witnessed a return to nativism, antisemitism (a hatred of Jewish people), the near-extirpation of the Native Americans, the segregation and lynching of African-Americans, the banning of Chinese immigrants, the assimilation of immigrant groups in America and the subjugation of native (or indigenous) groups of people in both Africa and Asia by the powers of Europe. As an outgrowth of both antisemitism and eugenics, the efforts of the Nazis in Germany in the years leading up to the Second World War and during it, with the Holocaust, showcased the ugliness of the era and almost led to the destruction of the Jewish people in Europe.

Many women, like Jane Addams, worked in settlement houses to help immigrants adapt to U.S. language and customs.

One of the most successful efforts to assimilate the tremendous numbers of immigrants from Eastern and Central Europe, occurred in America's cities. It was the settlement house movement. In a settlement home, such as Hull House, which was established in 1888 by Jane Addams in Chicago, Illinois, immigrant families lived together, worked together, and learned together. In a settlement home, immigrants learned how to cook, how to sew, how to take care of a home, how to speak English, and received on the job training. The settlement home experience prepared immigrants to be able to find a job and then a place where they could raise their families on their own. Aside from Jane Addams Hull House in Chicago, successful settlement homes developed in Boston, Philadelphia, and in New York City, where in 1903, future First Lady and the niece of an American president, Eleanor Roosevelt, worked and of course, too, learned to have a heart for those in need. The settlement house movement was successful, and it employed mostly, well-educated, well-to-do, young women from prominent families. Other successful organizations also developed during this period to help the urban immigrant poor, including the YMCA and the Salvation Army— both of which are still with us to this day.

