

Italians, Eugenics and Restrictive Immigration Laws

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IGG Meeting, June 10, 2023

Eugenics:

- The belief that a better society could be created if the “best people” married and had children with the “best people.”
- “Let us do what we can to encourage the multiplication of the races best suited to invent and conform to a high and generous civilization.” Francis Galton, English “scientist.
- Humans, like peas in Gregor Mendel’s study or horses that were bred for speed or strength, could be “improved” through selective breeding.
- If marrying two “superior” beings resulted in a better stock, wasn’t it reasonable to think that the reverse was also true? This resulted in Negative Eugenics.

Restrictive Immigration Laws:

Page Act of 1875: prohibited the admission of undesirable immigrants such as prostitutes and convicts.

Immigration Act of 1882 (Chinese Exclusion Act): introduced 50 cent head tax and increased prohibited classes to include persons likely to become a public charge (LPC), lunatics and idiots. Excluded Chinese workers.

Immigration Act of 1885: Prohibition against admitting contract laborers.

Immigration Act of 1892: added those with contagious diseases and polygamists to the list of excluded.

Immigration Act of 1903: added anarchists, epileptics, beggars and importers of prostitutes to the excluded.

Immigration Act of 1917: established a literacy requirement for immigration.

1921 Immigration Act (Emergency Quota Act)

- Used a “National Origins” formula to limit immigration from a country based upon 3% of the number of foreign-born people from a country in the U.S. in the 1910 Census.

- Aimed at reducing immigration from countries of Eastern and Southern Europe.

Johnson-Reed National Origins Act of 1924

- Limited overall immigration to 155,000;
- Used the National Origins formula to allocate slots to various countries;
- Changed the specifics of the formula – 2% of the foreign-born from a country in the 1890 Census;
- The 1890 census was used on purpose since the number of southern and eastern Europeans in the U.S. was much lower than in the 1900 or 1910 census.
- 82% of the quota slots went to countries in Northern Europe.

Contract Labor Prohibition

The Alien Contract Labor Law aka the **Foran Act of 1885** prohibited any company or individual from bringing unskilled immigrants into the United States to work under contract.

For more information:

Books:

Okrent, Daniel. (2019). The guarded gate. Scribner.

Websites:

For information and background on the 1921 Immigration Act and the 1924 Johnson-Reed National Origins Act

(U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian):

<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/immigration-act>

www.nps.gov/articles/closing-the-door-on-immigration.htm

<https://academic.oup.com/jah/article/109/2/271/6747696?login=false>

Eugenics:

<http://eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/list3.pl>

www.history.com/topics/european-history/eugenics

www.genome.gov/about-genomics/fact-sheets/Eugenics-and-Scientific-Racism

Forced Sterilization:

www.pbs.org/independentlens/blog/unwanted-sterilization-and-eugenics-programs-in-the-united-states/

Related Articles in the IGG Newsletter (may be accessed in the Newsletter Archive on the IGG website):

San Raphael Society for Italian Immigrants	December 2019
Eugenics and the 1924 Immigration Law	February 2020
Eugenics Revisited	March 2020
The Italian Migrant	January 2021
Return Immigration to Italy	November 2021
Non-Quota Admissions Under the 1924 Immigration Act	February 2022
Book Review of The Guarded Gate by Daniel Okrent	November 2022
1920s Song Lyrics Mirrored Calls for Restricted Immigration	January 2023
The Immigrant Derby	February 2023
The Immediate Impact of the 1921 Emergency Quota Act	March 2023
The Dillingham Commission	April 2023

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