

# BBC Bitesize GCSE History – The USA in the 20th century

## Episode 5 - Prohibition and organised crime in the 1920s

**Announcer:** BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

**Datshiane:** I'm Datshiane Navanayagam, a history graduate and BBC presenter.

**Katie:** And I'm Katie Charlwood, a history podcaster.

**Datshiane:** And welcome to our relaxed but informative Bitesize podcast.

**Katie:** If our series on 20th-century American history were a voyage to America, we'd be more than halfway now.

**Datshiane:** So maybe bobbing around somewhere in the Mid-Atlantic Ocean, Katie?

**Katie:** It could be, because we've reached episode five on Prohibition.

**Datshiane:** And we promise you, it's a corker.

**Katie:** Gangster movies were popular in America as organised crime took off.

**Datshiane:** It was a time of great contrast. You've got Christian morality and patriotic groups calling for alcohol to be banned in what would become known as Prohibition.

**Katie:** And then you've got millions resisting it when it becomes law. When Prohibition comes in, people take advantage of the new laws and make fabulous fortunes out of offering illegal liquor. More on all this in a mo.

**Datshiane:** We'll also be suggesting revision tips as we go, so keep your pen and paper or laptop handy.

**Katie:** And remember, every episode links up with BBC Bitesize to help you learn and succeed with 20th-century American history.

**Datshiane:** And our time-travelling reporter will join us from a secret location in Chicago in the 1930s.

**Katie:** Okay, so let's all make sure we'll all be on the same page here. Exactly what is Prohibition, Datshiane?

**Datshiane:** So, Prohibition was the nationwide ban on alcohol in the USA between 1920 and 1933. This covered the production, importing, transportation and sale of alcohol in the years it was banned. The ban was brought in by the federal government.

**Katie:** Well, that's a pretty drastic step to take, isn't it?

**Datshiane:** Yeah, it is. Some people thought it was invasive in their lives. But, you know, supporters of Prohibition saw it as a noble cause. Ultimately though, it failed, and the law had to be repealed, but not before there had been unintended consequences in the rocketing of organised crime. Well, more on that a bit later.

**Katie:** So, what are the main themes for us to consider as we go through our episode on Prohibition?

**Datshiane:** Well, I would say it's important to look at Prohibition as embodying the divisions in American society in the 20th century. Prohibition was supported by people who were worried about alcohol-fuelled violence and crime, and they were concerned about what they saw as a moral decline in society, more broadly. The social and political campaign to ban alcohol is known as the Temperance Movement.

**Katie:** Okay, so that's one perspective. What's the other?

**Datshiane:** Well, the other perspective was that Prohibition was a violation of people's personal liberties.

**Katie:** However, the policy of Prohibition had a lot of supporters, and a number of key groups or societies supported the movement. You've got the American Temperance Society, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League.

**Datshiane:** So, these all opposed alcohol for religious and moral reasons, and there were campaigners who were worried about the impact of drunkenness, crime, violence and domestic abuse.

**Katie:** Added to that, some business leaders who believed alcohol made their workers less efficient.

**Datshiane:** Some people also thought that beer drinkers were traitors, as beer had been imported from Germany whom America was fighting against in the First World War just a few years earlier.

**Katie:** And all of these groups put pressure on the American government to ban liquor or alcohol. And in 1920, they succeeded.

**Datshiane:** So, we can use the front page of a newspaper called The American Issue as a source to show how campaigners in different states thought of this as a victory. The paper's story spoke of states having 'the honour' to vote in the policy. This approving headline in 1919 ran: 'U.S. Is Voted Dry.'

**Katie:** But it didn't last.

**Datshiane:** If you are asked to write about the consequences of Prohibition, we can see a number of reasons why it didn't last.

**Katie:** See, millions of people actually wanted to be able to drink alcohol and they were willing to break the law to carry on doing so.

**Datshiane:** Yeah, so amongst them was the President of the United States himself, Warren G. Harding. Harding had a fondness for whisky, and he drank in violation of the law anyway.

**Katie:** Other drinkers resorted to brewing whisky at home from corn. That was called moonshine or rotgut.

**Datshiane:** The law was also really hard to enforce.

**Katie:** And around one and a half thousand Prohibition agents were given the task.

**Datshiane:** But they faced major obstacles.

**Katie:** Yes, the USA had more than 18,000 miles of coastline and land borders, so it was relatively easy smuggling liquor in by sea or across the border from Mexico to the south or Canada from the north.

**Datshiane:** Yessiree! Smuggling liquor in was known as bootlegging.

**Katie:** The Association Against the Prohibition Amendment, the AAPA for short, pulled in thousands of members, and they said Prohibition was making Americans lose respect for the law and they pointed out that legalising liquor would create legal jobs that had been lost.

**Datshiane:** Businesses whose trade depended on alcohol, like distilleries and saloons, had shut down. People with jobs connected to them, barrel makers to truckers to waiters, they found themselves unemployed, and Prohibition cost the federal government around eleven billion dollars in lost tax revenue, and more than three hundred million dollars just to enforce.

**Katie:** Because one of the biggest downsides to Prohibition were the criminal gangs who got involved in making and supplying illegal alcohol. The gangs ran illegal bars called speakeasies in cellars and hotel rooms.

**Datshiane:** Competition for control of this trade led to gang rivalry and violence. The gangsters made so much money they could easily afford to bribe police officers, Prohibition agents, border guards and judges.

**Katie:** The millions of dollars they were making could have gone into the mainstream economy.

**Datshiane:** But, in the course of thirteen years, the illicit trade made some gang leaders staggeringly rich, and it gave them power, leverage and influence in society.

**Katie:** And not surprisingly, no witness was ever keen to testify against them.

**Datshiane:** You could say their arm had a long reach.

**Katie:** And they stayed out of jail.

**Datshiane:** But the end was in sight for Prohibition, and the gangs benefiting from it. In the 1932 presidential election, the Democratic Party candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt promised to make drinking alcohol legal again if he was elected.

**Katie:** And Roosevelt won! Check out the Bitesize website for more.

**Datshiane:** Big-name movie stars featured in gangster movies loosely based on the life of the gang leaders. These thrillers were laced with violence. Some of the best-known gangsters were 'Lucky' Luciano and Vito 'Chicken Head' Gurino.

**Katie:** But perhaps the most famous was Al Capone, also known as 'Scarface.' He is said to have made ten million dollars a year from racketeering alone. Let's make contact with our time-travelling Bitesize reporter Jordan, somewhere in 1930s Chicago.

**\*\*Jordan:\*\*** I'm inside an illegal speakeasy in Chicago. Prohibition, which has banned alcohol from 1920, has transformed this city into a hub of underground activity. Flappers in beaded dresses swirl on the dance floor, while men in fedoras and double-breasted suits exchange knowing glances over illegal cocktails. Al Capone, Chicago's infamous crime boss, made a fortune smuggling liquor and running underground bars. He has recently said, 'I am like any other man. All I do is supply a demand.' And the Chicago Daily Tribune has written that, 'Prohibition has made nothing but trouble.' This echoes the thought of many here. They see Prohibition as a failed experiment. Yet, Eliot Ness and his special unit of law enforcement agents, known as The Untouchables, are determined to bring down the bootleggers. He has said, 'You can get much further with a kind word and a gun than you can with a kind word alone.' For many, these speakeasies represent freedom and excitement in a time of oppression. Prohibition, it seems, is not just about banning alcohol, it's about also personal liberty, and Chicago is right in the middle of it. This is Jordan, reporting for Bitesize. Back to the studio.

**Datshiane:** Thanks, Jordan. So, let's think about how we might tackle a question that asks us to consider the ways Prohibition changed American society. Katie, why don't you go?

**Katie:** So, to answer, I would quickly sum up what it was like before Prohibition. Alcohol was widely available in many states. Morality and religious campaigners believed a ban would counter what they saw as 'declining moral values' and remedy social ills like addiction and debt.

**Datshiane:** Now for the consequences or changes as a result of Prohibition. Well, in the thirteen years that it was law, Prohibition drastically changed America. It prompted the emergence of

organised crime syndicates, who bribed and corrupted officials, it hammered the economy and hit jobs, and it shaped culture, spawning thrillers and films about gangsters.

**Katie:** And the real-life gangs made fortunes from running illegal bars called speakeasies. They sold alcohol smuggled into the country. Speakeasies mushroomed, and by the end of the Prohibition era the ones in New York overtook the number of bars that had been there before the policy was introduced. People from all walks of life carried on drinking alcohol, including the American president Warren G. Harding. Some people resorted to homemade moonshine and there was a loss of confidence in law enforcement and the judiciary, with many being paid bribes by the gangs. But the movie industry was galvanised with a new trend of gangster movies showing art imitating life.

**Datshiane:** Great stuff. Right, test time again. No buzzers to stand by but three questions and five seconds to write down your answer, or feel free to press pause if you need a bit longer. Here we go.

**Katie:** Okay, so, name some of the main campaign groups in favour of Prohibition.

**Datshiane:** You can have the American Temperance Society, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League, all of whom supported the overall temperance movement.

**Katie:** Next, why did Prohibition fail?

**Datshiane:** Well, it was unpopular. Many people still wanted to consume alcohol. It was almost impossible to enforce, it fuelled organised crime, and it led to the corruption of some police officers and even judges.

**Katie:** And finally, when did it end?

**Datshiane:** In 1933, after Franklin Roosevelt was elected president.

**Katie:** Okay, well done, everyone! I'm sure we all aced it.

**Datshiane:** Right, time to go over our main points.

**Katie:** Prohibition was the nationwide ban on the production, importation, transportation and sale of alcohol between 1920 and 1933.

**Datshiane:** Politicians who supported a ban thought it would make America a better, healthier place, as did many religious organisations and churches.

**Katie:** But Prohibition was hard to enforce. People brewed their own alcohol, and liquor was smuggled in. Violent criminal gangs made enormous profits. By 1933 there were around 200,000 speakeasies.

**Datshiane:** And it had cost the country millions in lost revenue, enforcement and jobs.

**Katie:** And the new president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, axed the policy.

**Datshiane:** Head over to the Bitesize website for more on this and loads of other GCSE history.

**Katie:** I feel like we're really starting to get under the skin of America and the Roaring Twenties and beyond.

**Datshiane:** But, Katie, did the thirties get off to a roaring start with Prohibition over?

**Katie:** Well, some Americans might have thought so, but it was all about to come tumbling down. And yes, you've got it, the Wall Street Crash.

**Datshiane:** Hold on tight and we will see you in Episode Six.

**Katie:** Thanks for listening.