

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

Episode 3 – The United States and immigration in the 1920s

Announcer: BBC Sounds, music, radio, podcasts.

Datshiane: I'm Datshiane Navanayagam. History graduate and BBC presenter.

Katie: And I'm history podcaster Katie Charlwood.

Datshiane: And this is Bitesize History.

Katie: This is the third episode in a nine-part series on 20th-century USA.

Datshiane: Throughout this series we'll be focussing in on key themes in American history and how they all mesh together to make the country what it is: its politics, society and culture.

Katie: This episode is all about immigration in the 1920s. We'll focus on immigrant experiences, xenophobia and intolerance, the Red Scare, and an infamous trial that sent two Italians to their deaths.

Datshiane: And we'll be sharing our revision hints on how to remember those key facts. There'll also be exam and essay-writing advice. So, keep a pen and paper or your laptop to hand to make any notes you want. And feel free to press pause whenever you need to.

Katie: And we'll be sending our friendly time-travelling reporter back to the last century to report from the scene.

Datshiane: In this episode, we'll be focussing in on prejudice which links to other broader themes in a series of migration and culture.

Katie: See, America originally had what is called an 'open door immigration policy'. This meant that immigration was positively encouraged. And this policy enabled the USA to develop and prosper.

Datshiane: So, let's look at the causes of migration to the USA before the First World War. Then, we'll examine the consequences it had.

Katie: That's those causes and consequences again. Being able to identify and examine their significance will really help you with your exam preparation.

Datshiane: And we're going to use sources as evidence to reinforce our argument. Remember that too?

Katie: So, Datshiane, have a look at this census map showing immigrant populations in the USA in the 1900s. It tells us nearly 14% of the population, which is around ten and half million people, were born outside of the USA . And between 1850 and the First World War in 1914 forty million people came from Europe to America.

Datshiane: Let's go through the causes using our Ws.

Katie: That's the who, where and why. They're going to be important.

Datshiane: So, Christian and Jewish people fled religious persecution. Some migrants fled because of their political beliefs.

Katie: The Bill of Rights is a good source to explain why persecuted people migrated to the USA. It guaranteed freedom to practice your chosen religion. And the Declaration of Independence that we also looked at, stated: 'All men are created equal.'

Datshiane: Okay. But what about women?

Katie: It did apply to them too. And we look specifically at the experience of women in Episode 8.

Datshiane: Another cause of migration was that many European towns and cities were overcrowded. Land was in short supply, so it was expensive.

Katie: Much of European society was still divided by class. And it was very difficult for working class people to improve their lives.

Datshiane: And it is true that at this time the standard of living was higher. Many workers were paid more in America. There were jobs in industries like steel, coal and textile production. And don't forget the motor car, electrical and chemical industries.

Katie: The American dream appealed to these people. The phrase was coined in a bestselling book that came out in 1931 called *Epic of America* by James Truslow Adams. It was the idea that every person has the freedom and opportunity to succeed. And this was helped by vast areas of American land that was cheap and fertile with a wealth of natural resources like cotton, oil and timber.

Datshiane: So, it's no wonder that so many people came to America looking for greater prosperity.

Katie: Okay, so if those were the causes let's look at consequences of immigration in the USA.

Datshiane: Like, did everyone achieve their American dream.

Katie: Now of course some achieved great success. They opened thriving businesses with a good standard of living. Others found working and living conditions difficult. Cheap labour was in high demand in America's growing industrialised cities. Employers often paid new immigrants lower wages.

Datshiane: As a result, some Americans thought that immigrants were out to steal jobs.

Katie: This says a lot about some attitudes in society. Intolerance and xenophobia, or the dislike of people from other countries, were part of that.

Datshiane: More immigrants had come from the late 1800s from southern and eastern Europe. In some cities, concentrated areas of ethnic communities had taken shape; such as Little Italy in New York.

Katie: And immigrants were often resented if they were poor or couldn't speak English or had different traditions or religious practices.

Datshiane: We can add two other main causes for the negative attitudes to immigrants that some Americans had. One, the First World War had stoked a mistrust of foreigners generally.

Katie: And the Russian Revolution of 1917 saw citizens rise up to overthrow the government which was replaced by a communist one.

Datshiane: So, many Americans feared communism which they saw as a threat to capitalism and the American dream. And they wanted to make sure that it didn't take over in the USA.

Katie: And there was another group that Americans feared in the 1920s. Anarchists. People who were against all forms of government or authority.

Datshiane: An anarchist had shot dead the American president William McKinley in 1901. The assassin, Leon F Czolgosz, had been born in the United States and he was the son of immigrants.

Katie: Czolgosz's motive for killing the President was to draw attention to social inequalities and express his disillusionment with the government and capitalism.

Datshiane: So, there was a prevailing fear of anarchists and communists or 'reds' as they were called.

Katie: This view was heightened as just two years after the Russian Revolution, a bomb destroyed the house of the Attorney General Alexander Mitchell Palmer who had been in charge of law and police. And guess what, a communist newspaper was found next to the body of the man who planted the bomb.

Datshiane: Hmm. Now this could have been circumstantial or a setup. But it fanned the flames of fear. Palmer swore to get rid of the reds and anarchists from America. Around six thousand suspects, possibly more, were rounded up. Some, just for having a foreign accent. This was known as the Palmer Raids. Which brings us to Sacco and Vanzetti.

Katie: So, how are you at historical detective work?

Datshiane: Well, the case was solved wasn't it? The two men, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were both convicted of murder and executed.

Katie: Right. But... the trial and verdict were controversial. Here's what happened. The pair, both immigrants, Italian-born and anarchists, were charged with murder during an armed robbery on a shoe factory on the 15th of April 1920.

Datshiane: Their initial trial lasted for forty-five days. But the jury found them guilty in just a couple of hours. But, for seven years their execution was put on hold as their lawyers disputed the ruling.

Katie: See, there were doubts about the evidence. The men could not understand English very well but protested their innocence.

Datshiane: And there were also protests around the world. Protestors said the trial was unfair and accused the judge and members of the jury of bias against them because of who they were and not what they had done. Their defence continued to fight for justice for another seven years. Then, in April 1927, they were both finally sentenced to death.

Katie: Let's head back to that moment with our time travelling reporter, Jordan.

Jordan: Today, in this courtroom packed with anxious spectators, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti the two Italian immigrants and known anarchists, were sentenced to death for the 1920 murders of a paymaster and a security guard during a robbery in South Braintree, Massachusetts. The sentencing has drawn widespread outrage and sparked international protests, as many believe the two men were victims of prejudice and an unfair trial. The trial, which has lasted seven long years, has been clouded with accusations of bias against the defendants due to their immigrant status and radical political beliefs. Throughout the case, Sacco and Vanzetti maintained their

innocence saying they were being persecuted not for the crime but for who they were. In an emotional statement to the court, Bartolomeo Vanzetti declared, 'I've suffered because I was an Italian. And indeed, I am an Italian.' Nicola Sacco also spoke passionately saying, 'I know the sentence will be between two classes. The oppressed and the oppressor.' His words underscore the sentiment held by many supporters: that the trial was a grave miscarriage of justice influenced by the anti-immigrant and anti-anarchist atmosphere of the 1920s. Back to the Bitesize studio.

Katie: Thanks for that, Jordan. With hostile feeling towards immigrants on the rise before the end of the First World War, the Government began introducing laws preventing some people from entering the USA. Then, it took more drastic action to reduce numbers with quotas. You might want to write these down.

Datshiane: First, the 1917 Literacy Act banned anyone over 16 who could not read a sentence of forty words.

Katie: Next, in 1921, the Immigration Quota Law, set the limit of 350,000 immigrants per year.

Datshiane: And the 1924 National Origins Act reduced that to less than half.

Katie: Well, we've covered a lot in this episode. Let's revisit some key points with a quick test. Usual rules - three questions, five seconds for you to answer. No points, no prizes, just the joy of knowing that those facts have stuck.

Datshiane: Who were Americans afraid of during the Red Scare?

Katie: That would be communists as well as anarchists.

Datshiane: Okay. Now name the two Italians who were sentenced to death in 1927 for a murder that they probably didn't commit.

Katie: Sacco and Vanzetti.

Datshiane: And how did the American government cut immigration?

Katie: With laws and quotas. And extra points if you named them as Literacy Act, Immigration Quota Law and National Origins Act.

Datshiane: Okay. It's summary time. So, between 1850 and 1914 around 40 million people emigrated to America.

Katie: Many were from southern or Eastern Europe fleeing persecution or political repression.

Datshiane: Others from Europe wanted to escape poverty and find a more prosperous life. But unease grew in the established population towards the newcomers whose traditions were often different.

Katie: Fears spread that communists or anarchists would try and overturn order in the USA.

Datshiane: The Palmer Raids were a response to bombings in the period known as the Red Scare.

Katie: The case of Sacco and Vanzetti saw a controversial murder trial end in the execution of the two Italian-born anarchists.

Datshiane: And a series of laws were introduced setting a maximum for the number of immigrants allowed into the USA each year.

Katie: There'll be more on 20th-century American history in our next get-together in Episode 4 where we'll be looking at African American experiences.

Datshiane: Head over to the Bitesize website if you can't wait for that. Thanks for listening.