

Lesson 26: The Great Wave of Immigration

What was life like for immigrants in the early 1900s?

Lesson 26 - Section 2: Italian Immigrants

- Millions of Italians came to the United States to escape poverty.
- In the late 1800s, much of Italy, especially southern Italy, was unable support the country's rapidly growing population.
- Farmers struggled to make a living on worn-out, eroded land where crops too often failed, and there were few factories to provide other jobs.



Lesson 26 - Section 2: Italian Immigrants

- After almost two weeks, the travelers arrived at the immigration station on Ellis Island in New York Harbor.
- They were required to pass medical examinations and answer questions about how they intended to support themselves in the United States.
- People who failed these inspections could be forced to return home, even if other family members were allowed to enter.
- Because so many families were forced to separate, Italians started calling Ellis Island “The Island of Tears.”



Lesson 26 - Section 2: Italian Immigrants

- By 1890, Italians made up 90 percent of New York's public works employees and 99 percent of Chicago's street workers.



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- Many Italian immigrants were “birds of passage” — young men who came to earn some money and return home.
- Italians who stayed often settled together in neighborhoods called “Little Italys”



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- These mostly Italian neighborhoods bulged with residents who could afford only the cheapest tenement housing.
- Crowded together in tiny apartments, most families had no privacy.



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- Above everything else, Italians valued family closeness.
- Some Italian parents refused to send their children to school because they feared that learning English would separate their children from the family.
- Besides, a child in school was not earning money to help the family. As a result, many immigrant children never learned the skills they needed for better jobs.



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- Because many Italian newcomers were poor and uneducated, Americans tended to look down on them.
- When a few Italians turned to crime and became notorious gangsters, some people started thinking of all Italians as criminals.
- As a group, however, Italian immigrants were generally more law-abiding than average Americans.



Lesson 26 - Section 3: Jewish Immigrants from Eastern Europe

- For centuries, Russians had discriminated against Jews, who dressed, worshiped, and ate differently from their Christian neighbors.



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- In 1881, assassins killed the Russian monarch Czar Alexander II, and nervous government leaders subsequently blamed Jews for his murder, even though the assassin was not Jewish.
- Angry Russians raged through Jewish villages, burning, looting, and killing in attacks, called pogroms.



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- Many Jews fled such persecution, hoping to find refuge in the United States.



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- From Ellis Island, Jews often headed for New York City's Lower East Side neighborhood.
- There they established shops, newspapers, religious schools, and synagogues (community centers and places of worship).



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- The Lower East Side became the most densely populated neighborhood in the city.
- People lived packed into cheap tenements, often sleeping three or four to a room.



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- Some Jews worked as street vendors, using pushcarts to sell everything from coal to secondhand clothes.
- Pushcart vendors saved their money to buy horse drawn carts and eventually small stores.



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- Although most Jews were poor, they arrived in the United States with a wide range of skills and were employed as cobblers, butchers, carpenters, and watchmakers.
- Almost half found jobs in the city's garment factories.



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- Like other immigrant groups, Jews faced prejudice and discrimination.
- Most private schools and clubs refused to accept Jews.
- Hospitals refused to hire Jewish doctors, and the New York Bar Association would not admit Jews as lawyers.
- Many ads for jobs stated simply, “Christians only.”



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