

Jewish Involvement in Shaping American Immigration Policy, 1881–1965: A Historical Review

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This paper discusses Jewish involvement in shaping United States immigration policy. In addition to a periodic interest in fostering the immigration of co-religionists as a result of anti-Semitic movements, Jews have an interest in opposing the establishment of ethnically and culturally homogeneous societies in which they reside as minorities. Jews have been at the forefront in supporting movements aimed at altering the ethnic status quo in the United States in favor of immigration of non-European peoples. These activities have involved leadership in Congress, organizing and funding anti-restrictionist groups composed of Jews and gentiles, and originating intellectual movements opposed to evolutionary and biological perspectives in the social sciences.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic conflict is of obvious importance for understanding critical aspects of American history, and not only for understanding black/white ethnic conflict or the fate of Native Americans. Immigration policy is a paradigmatic example of conflict of interest between ethnic groups because immigration policy influences the future demographic composition of the nation. Ethnic groups unable to influence immigration policy in their own

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interests will eventually be displaced or reduced in relative numbers by groups able to accomplish this goal.

This paper discusses ethnic conflict between Jews and gentiles in the area of immigration policy. Immigration policy is, however, only one aspect of conflicts of interest between Jews and gentiles in America. The skirmishes between Jews and the gentile power structure beginning in the late nineteenth century always had strong overtones of anti-Semitism. These battles involved issues of Jewish upward mobility, quotas on Jewish representation in elite schools beginning in the nineteenth century and peaking in the 1920s and 1930s, the anti-Communist crusades in the post-World War II era, as well as the very powerful concern with the cultural influences of the major media extending from Henry Ford's writings in the 1920s to the Hollywood inquisitions of the McCarthy era and into the contemporary era. That anti-Semitism was involved in these issues can be seen from the fact that historians of Judaism (e.g., Sachar, 1992, p. 620ff) feel compelled to include accounts of these events as important to the history of Jews in America, by the anti-Semitic pronouncements of many of the gentile participants, and by the self-conscious understanding of Jewish participants and observers.

The Jewish involvement in influencing immigration policy in the United States is especially noteworthy as an aspect of ethnic conflict. Jewish involvement has had certain unique qualities that have distinguished Jewish interests from the interests of other groups favoring liberal immigration policies. Throughout much of this period, one Jewish interest in liberal immigration policies stemmed from a desire to provide a sanctuary for Jews fleeing from anti-Semitic persecutions in Europe and elsewhere. Anti-Semitic persecutions have been a recurrent phenomenon in the modern world beginning with the Czarist persecutions in 1881, and continuing into the post-World War II era in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. As a result, liberal immigration has been a Jewish interest because "survival often dictated that Jews seek refuge in other lands" (Cohen, 1972, p. 341). For a similar reason, Jews have consistently advocated an internationalist foreign policy for the United States because "an internationally-minded America was likely to be more sensitive to the problems of foreign Jewries" (Cohen, 1972, p. 342).

However, in addition to a persistent concern that America be a safe haven for Jews fleeing outbreaks of anti-Semitism in foreign countries, there is evidence that Jews, much more than any other European-derived ethnic group in America, have viewed liberal immigration policies as a mechanism of ensuring that America would be a pluralistic rather than a unitary, homogeneous society (e.g., Cohen, 1972). Pluralism serves both