

Social tension of the 1920s and nativists

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Christopher Nieves The social tension of the 1920s was to a large extent due to backlash from Nativists and the KKK towards immigrants. With the immigrant surge threatening jobs and tainting the white Anglo-Saxon society, the idea of nativism began to proliferate through the minds of native born Americans. Social conflicts often came to violent ends by the hands of members of the “ Ku Klux Klan”, they too had a nativist mindset however they focused primarily on African Americans but harbored hatred towards anyone who is not of Anglo-Saxon descent.

These two movements made for a dangerous society, and made matters even more difficult for penniless immigrants trying to survive. Starting up around 1890 but plateauing in the 1920s nativists and labor unions fought for immigration restriction. In 1921, an emergency immigration act was passed which established a quota system that decimated the amount of immigrants granted access to the States. America had never before seen such a surge of immigrants before, over 25 million people over the course of thirty years, and this was the first time that Italians, Poles, Jews and Slavs had come to America in mass.

Nativists worked to do anything they could to belay immigrant progress in society, and with the economic prosperity of the twenties they realigned their beliefs behind religious and racial nativism. Following the First World War, nativists throughout the twenties focused their attention on Catholics, Jews, and southeastern Europeans. These people were different than the immigrants that had come before in that they had much more difficulty assimilating with the language barrier and even in appearance. Difficulty

communicating made getting a job and education much more difficult and for Hasidic Jews stood out with their distinct religious garb.

When the migrants from England and Ireland and the like came over they could communicate much easier with Americans which significantly helped them out. Well over half of the American population before the immigrant surge could trace their lineage to either the British Isles or to Germany, these people also tended to be fair-skinned and Protestant. The racial concern of the anti-immigration movement was closely linked the eugenics movement that was gaining popularity in the twenties. Nativists grew more concerned with the racial purity of the United States, such groups as the Ku Klux Klan were able to flourish as a result of this movement. The rebirth of the KKK or the second Klan was strongly due to the anti-immigrant attitude of America in the twenties, as it had basically died out after the civil war. They also tended to view the darker-skinned, Catholic or Jewish new immigrants as "inferior" and lacking the Anglo-Saxon temperament required to maintain a free society. Furthermore these "threats to society" lacked work ethic, self-discipline and could not be trusted not to throw their votes away to machine politics which were largely successful during this time period.

The film *The Birth of a Nation* was released in 1915 glorified the KKK, and although its director didn't intend to, the film helped gain the Klan popularity. At first the Klan like it always had focused on intimidating blacks, however focus turned towards Catholics, Jews and foreigners. The Klan devoted itself to purging American life basically of anyone not a white Anglo-

Saxon, proving their devotion by lynching impure, foreign people and burning crosses.

To say this hate was group engaged in “ social conflicts” is an understatement. The economic prosperity of the “ roaring twenties” overshadowed its escalating social tension. Although America was colonized by immigrants, the “ nativist” movement worked to throttle immigration and ostracize migrants viewing them as impure and inferior. The hypocrisy of the entire movement is incredible. Extremist groups like the KKK took racism to a new level resorting to medieval tactics like lynching and cross burning.