

# The decade of intolerance and anxiety



Few decades in American history have been as tumultuous as the 1920's; although unprecedented prosperity and dramatic social changes dazzled the public, the restrictions of the Victorian nineteenth century vanished, triggering a sense of intolerance and anxiety that erupted due to international and domestic issues that were originally rooted in the outcomes of World War One. Although the Allies, consisting of Great Britain, France, Russia, and the United States, won the war, America proved inept in the reconstruction of Europe by its refusal to join the League of Nations because it threatened to interfere with domestic affairs and would violate America's traditional isolation policy by consuming the country with the world's problems. American citizens, too, cast their doubts on an international alliance and withdrew the United States from international affairs, bringing the U. S. back to a state of isolationism that ultimately brought the controversial issues of the 1920's. The era known as the "Roaring Twenties" proved to be a crucial factor in the making of modern America due to a decade of anxiety brought forth by the First Red Scare, and intolerance to the transforming social, economic, and political aspects of the United States.

The beginning of the Twenties was marked by a fear of communism. The First World War triggered the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1918, spreading the fear of increasing Soviet-style Communism to America. This fear of the menacing Communist power in Europe and the hatred of Germans after the war led to an increasing level of nativism and xenophobia, the fear of foreigners (Hoover City Schools), bringing America to a more conservative era. A wave of American labor strikes in 1919 convinced conservative Americans that the democratic system was in a fight to the death with

anarchism and communism, beginning the Red Scare (WWV-VL History Central Catalogue 5). Stemming from a wave of terrorism, U. S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer launched an anti-communist crusade against suspected political radicals, disregarding their legal rights. These “ Palmer Raids” assaulted aliens and foreigners, beating, arresting, and deporting many of these victims (West Irondequoit Central School District).

At the center of the xenophobia issue is the Sacco-Vanzetti murder case, in which two Italian, atheist, and socialist men are accused of murdering a factory paymaster and his guard. Although overwhelming evidence proves Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti to be innocent, both men are found guilty and executed because the intolerance to the two Italian men’s social and political background in a Protestant, democratic court (Wukovits 97-109). The trial of Sacco- Vanzetti exposes the increasing sense of nativism in post-WWI America; the ideology of “ 100% Americanism and Americanization” appeared, escalating race tensions and hatred towards foreigners, eventually extending towards the blacks, Asians, and Europeans coming to, or already in the United States.

Americans were convinced that the United States was endangered of becoming a dump for Europe’s “ scum”, leading to racism and antipathy towards foreigners. The resurgent xenophobia demanded a tighter restriction on immigration (Miller 145-148) leading to government regulated naturalization, permitting the deportation of citizens of countries with which the U. S. was at war with; from 1924-1929, the first, second, and third quota laws were established to regulate distribution of visas to foreigners (West Irondequoit Central School District). This decade was marked by growing

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racial and ethnic conflict. Although a multicultural nation was encouraged, many native Americans responded with nativist fear to the increasing cultural diversity, forcing the minorities to remain on the bottom of America's social pyramid (Encyclopedia. com).

Nativism worsened existing racial tensions in twentieth century America; the decade witnessed the revival of the long-quiescent Ku Klux Klan, founded during the Reconstruction era to intimidate recently freed African American slaves. In 1915 William J. Simmons reorganized the secret society and addressed its duty as the safeguard of "comprehensive Americanism" (Miller 143). Following World War I, the newly revitalized Klan spread across the United States. Unlike the nineteenth-century Ku Klux Klan, which targeted its vehemence primarily against African Americans and their white allies, the resurrected Klan of the 1920s broadened its geographical capacity and expanded its list of enemies to include Catholics and Jews. The Klu Klux Klan believed that the Jewish, Catholic, negro, and foreign-born communities were a menace to American institution; therefore, it was necessary to defend American values and combat foreign influences (Percy 2). The Klansmen lashed out and attacked foreigners of all kinds, believing that the future of progress and civilization depended on the supremacy of the white race and that the American stock must not be mongrelized by foreigners (Wukovits 64).

This racial intolerance can be seen in the Sweets Trial of 1925. Doctor Ossian Sweets, a successful black doctor, moved into a new home in Detroit, triggering violent protests from white neighbors. Racial tensions arose, leading to the self-defensive gunfire into the gathering mob outside his

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home, catapulting this riot into the largest court case of the century (Wukovits 69-80). Although renowned attorney Clarence Darrow authenticated Dr. Ossian Sweets' innocence in 1925, the legacy of racial intolerance lives on and penetrates the morality of American citizens.

Racism persists throughout American history, but so does the legacy of religion in American society. Although religion still held an important role in American society during the 1920's, rapid change, moral decadence, and the erosion of traditional beliefs led to a decline in its influence (Hoover City Schools). Where religion remained strong, people repelled modernism and were appalled by the impurity of American lifestyle. These people expressed intolerance to Science and Darwin's theory of evolution and continued boasting that it was God who created man (Miller 229). Further intolerance erupted in America's educational system in 1927, when high school biology teacher John Scopes challenged the theory of creationism and allegedly taught the theory of evolution to his students. This violated the Butler Act, which prohibited teachers to deny the Biblical account of the origin of man and prevented the teaching of the evolution of man, provoking the epic Monkey Trial: Scopes v. the State of Tennessee. This trial demonstrated the intolerance of the state to combine the theory of evolution in a society where God created life and his breed of humans (WWW-VL History Central Catalogue).

Another revelation that threatened traditional values and demoralized society's values blossomed from the teachings of Sigmund Freud. Freudian psychology developed in the 1920's during an upheaval in morality, shattering previous standards of behavior of American youths (WWW-VL

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History Central Catalogue). Sigmund Freud's theories emphasized the importance of the interpretation of human motivation, which goes against America's Victorian past; it was an escape from the sexual repression, patriotism, fundamentalist religion, and idealism (Miller 216) of conservative America. Traditional, conservative Protestants hammered Sigmund Freud as the Devil, claiming that his new scientific theory strived to take the present and future generations into chaos and destruction (Wukovits 143-145). Anxious traditional Americans saw the new fangled trends of the Roaring Twenties as a revolution that aimed to terrorize traditional Victorian attitudes, further enhancing the anxiety and intolerant philosophy felt by the isolationist citizens of the United States

Although it lost much influence in American society during the 1920s, religion sparked the flame of Prohibition throughout the country. During a time when liquor was a source of freedom and hedonism, Anti-Saloon reform organizations argued that liquor led to many of society's ills and claimed that an alcohol-free nation would see a decline in crime and the restoration of past, traditional values (Wukovits 10). The creation of the Eighteenth Amendment prohibited the sale, distribution, and creation of alcohol in America. At the conference of the World League against Alcoholism, Reverend A. C. Bane stated that America will plant the standard of Prohibition to drive the demon of drink from all civilization (Wukovits 116-117). Little did he know that within a few months, the majority of American men and women would regularly sneak away and drink alcohol illegally in wildcat alcohol parlors, promoting additional illegal acts (West Valley College

3), such as the sophisticated organized crime networks of the most infamous gangster in American history, Al Capone.

Al Capone is America's best known gangster and the single greatest symbol of the collapse of law and order in the United States during the 1920s Prohibition era. Capone held a commanding position in the illegal activities that bestowed to Chicago its reputation as an unrestrained city. The creation of the 18th Amendment opened up many opportunities to many infamous gangsters, rapidly propagating greed throughout the nation. They began to explore more demoralizing fields of work by opening speakeasies, which led to notorious gang fights, such as the horrifying St. Valentine's Massacre on February 14, 1929, where seven members of the Moran gang hijacked beer trucks belonging to Capone and were thus subjected to a mass killing in the heart of Chicago, Illinois (Miller 313-314).

A picture book view of the Roaring Twenties exposes it as a time of excitement, hedonism, and prosperity, but in reality, the 1920's was a decade fueled by the chaotic mentality of intolerance and anxiety that materialized at the end of the First World War. The trends of the Roaring Twenties shattered all barriers from America's deeply rooted Victorian tradition, and its legacy lives on into modern day America. In the twenty-first century, trends that were once considered indecent and harmful to society, persists just it has for decades. Modern America suffers from previous barriers of traditionalist American society as well: just as racism and nativism flourished in the infamous era after World War One, modern day illegal immigrants are often deported due to a sense of overwhelming suffocation by foreigners in America; the alcoholism issue stemming from the Roaring

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Twenties bred intolerance to society's ills, which continues to soil the "purity" of traditional American society; thanks to Freudian psychology, traditional barriers have broken down, and the era of the modern generation has been born. The era of the Roaring Twenties served as a guiding light to modern America's sophisticated new ideas and experiments. Although conservative, traditionalist, Victorian ideals plagued the nation of forbearance and growth, the intolerance and anxiety experienced in the 1920's gave way to the modern making of twenty first century America.