

The racial quota law that inspired Hitler

100 years since the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924

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23 May 2024

On May 24, 1924, following an overwhelming bipartisan vote in Congress, President Calvin Coolidge signed into law an immigration law that Nazi jurists would reference in drafting the Nuremberg Race Laws and that Adolf Hitler would praise in *Mein Kampf*.

“There is currently one state in which one can observe at least weak beginnings of a better conception” about immigration, Hitler wrote. “This is of course not [Germany], but the American Union... The American Union categorically refuses the immigration of physically unhealthy elements, and simply excludes the immigration of certain races.”

The Immigration Act of 1924 (also referred to as the National Origins Act or the Johnson-Reed Act for its congressional architects) fundamentally altered the demographics of the United States in the 40 years it remained on the books. By restricting immigration almost to zero from Southern and Eastern Europe based on a “national origins quota” tied to 1890 census figures (a justification to exempt immigrants from racially “pure” Northern Europe) and by maintaining the exclusion on immigration from Asia and Africa, the law reduced the proportion of the American population born outside the US from roughly 15 percent at the time of its passage to just 5 percent at the time of its repeal in 1965.

The Johnson-Reed Act has been singled out for praise by the architects of Donald Trump’s fascist attacks on immigrants. In 2015, Trump’s future Attorney General Jeff Sessions denounced the presence of foreign born in the United States during a radio appearance with fascist Steven Bannon: “In 1924, the president and Congress changed the policy, and it slowed down immigration significantly... We’re on a path to surge far past what the situation was in 1924.” In a series of emails published by the Southern Poverty Law Center in 2019, Trump’s immigration adviser Stephen Miller repeatedly upheld the 1924 Act as a model for federal immigration policy.

The Trump wing of the ruling class is not alone in advancing policies that mimic the restrictive character of the 1924 Act. The Biden administration has closed the southern border, imposed blanket bans on asylum, and recently argued before the US Supreme Court that the executive branch may permanently separate citizens from their immigrant spouses without any due process. The minimal press coverage of the centenary of the act has focused only on its explicitly racist character, with the *Washington Post* referring to the act as an effort “to circle the wagons around some ancestral White American identity.”

But any appraisal of the contemporary significance of the Johnson-Reed Act is incomplete without understanding it was a highly conscious attack by American imperialism on the international working class—that it was a reaction to the threat of revolution. The nationalist, racist and antisemitic character of both parties’ justifications for race-based restrictions on immigration gives a sense of the forces of extreme political reaction on which the ruling class relies to suppress the threat of socialism from

below. This is the essential thread connecting the policies of Coolidge with those of Trump and Biden.

The impetus for the 1924 Act: “Much of the world is in revolution”

In his 1920 speech accepting the Republican nomination for president, Warren G. Harding issued an urgent warning to the political establishment: “Much of the world is in revolution.” The international socialist movement, after seizing power in the Russian Revolution of 1917, “lighted their torches among other peoples, and hopes to see America as part of the great Red conflagration.”

The revolutionary tide inspired by the October Revolution, and given political direction by the newly formed Communist International, had spread far beyond the borders of Russia. Revolutionary upheavals swept across Europe, including in Germany, Hungary, Finland, Italy and elsewhere. In the United States, 1919-20 saw the largest strike wave in American history, bringing together workers of various national backgrounds in a series of powerful struggles. The ruling class responded by escalating a ruthless crackdown on democratic rights initiated by Democratic President Woodrow Wilson, whose administration jailed socialist leader Eugene Debs for opposing the First World War and orchestrated a series of immigration raids aimed at deporting socialist immigrants, directed by Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer. The Harding administration pledged to intensify the reaction. Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, who would play a prominent role in the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, declared: “We must be now and forever for Americanism and Nationalism, and against internationalism.”

In 1921, Congress passed an emergency immigration act which first implemented the national origins quota system that would be extended and made permanent in the 1924 Act. Immigration historian William Bernard explains that business organizations which had supported immigration as a source of cheap labor began demanding a crackdown: “For the first time important sections of Big Business, as a result of the fear that immigrants might propagate the ideas of the Russian Revolution, took a stand for the restriction of immigration.”

To advance their campaign against immigrant workers, the Democratic and Republican parties came to rely upon the most backward and reactionary segments of society. Calls for restricting immigration were supported by the nascent Ku Klux Klan and slightly more “respectable” societies such as the Immigration Restriction League, which promoted pseudo-scientific racist views about the mental and physical inferiority of non-Anglo immigrants. The campaign to restrict immigration was

likewise supported by many Progressive “reformers,” the leadership of the American Federation of Labor and prominent black capitalist Booker T. Washington, who said, “the Negro [is] more like the southern white man, more willing and able to observe the ideas of the culture of the white man [than] any other race which is now coming into the country.”

Among the “evidence” offered by anti-immigrant activists to Congress in support of immigration restrictions were a series of reports from US State Department officials led by the virulently racist head of the consular division, Wilbur Carr.

The reports, which were requested by Congressman Johnson, give a sense of the forces upon which the American ruling class relied: Sicilian immigrants are described by State Department officials as “inimical to the best interests of the United States... For the most part they are small in stature and of a low order of intelligence.” Jewish refugees from Poland and Russia are described as “filthy, un-American. And often dangerous in their habits,” “filthy and ignorant and the majority are verminous,” “decidedly inferior,” and comprised largely of “Bolshevik sympathizers” and “political and labor agitators.” In response to these reports, the *New York Times* editorial board expressed shock: “American institutions are menaced” by “swarms of aliens” bringing “diseases of ignorance and Bolshevism” as well as “loathsome diseases of the flesh.”

Dan Okrent, who reviews this material carefully in his excellent book *The Guarded Gate*, summarizes: “There it was, reproduced in House Report 1109, 66th Congress, 3rd Session, issued from the Government Printing Office—an official document from the Department of State that, in its assignment of both specific and generalized deficiencies to particular ethnic groups, essentially confirmed what the scientific racists had long argued.”

In his book *Hitler’s American Model*, Yale law professor James Q. Whitman explains: “The reality is that the Nazis took a sustained, significant, and sometimes even eager interest in the American example in race law... when Nazis rejected the American example, it was sometimes because they thought that American practices were overly harsh: for Nazis of the early 1930s, even radical ones, American race law sometimes looked *too* racist.”

The impact of the Act

The bipartisan attack on immigrants met with substantial opposition within the working class. Daniel Tichenor explains in *Dividing Lines: The Politics of Immigration Control in America* that the AFL’s support for restrictions took place only “after heated debate and a ‘sharply divided’ vote among the AFL’s rank and file.” Publications of the Communist Party from the spring of 1924 show advertisements for “monster mass rallies” against the bill.

But by that year, a period of global reaction had set in. The revolutionary offensive of 1919-23 had been defeated, in particular by the suppression of the German revolutions of 1921 and 23. The same process strengthened the bureaucratic apparatus in the Soviet Union.

WSWS contributor Tom Mackaman notes in his book *New Immigrants and the Radicalization of American Labor, 1914-1924* that “in the early 1920s, new immigrants found themselves caught in a dual reaction, in new world and old. In most states of Eastern and Southern Europe, by the late 1920s, revolutionary movements had failed and fascist, royalist, or military dictatorship had come to power... Even the Soviet Union and its Comintern, by 1923, were caught in the ebb tide of revolution, which found expression in the gradual consolidation of bureaucratic power under Joseph Stalin.”

In the decades that followed, the US government employed the 1924

Immigration Act to bar countless immigrants from Europe and Asia. During the 1930s, the State Department systematically used the 1924 Act’s restrictions to prohibit European Jews from escaping Nazi Germany. Tichenor explains in *Dividing Lines* that the State Department abused the “public charge” provision of immigration law (which barred admission to immigrants unable to prove they have sufficient financial resources to avoid reliance on social programs or charity) to deny entry to Jewish immigrants whose wealth had been confiscated by the Nazis:

Refugee advocates demonstrated that Jewish immigration admissions in fact declined in the months following FDR’s 1934 instructions to consular officers. The Immigration Bureau, which became the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) under a 1933 executive order, assumed a similar stance when it informed all of its personnel serving at American consuls overseas that “the economic situation” continued to dictate “a rigid application of the public-charge clause.” Consular officials required Jews to present letters from “bankers or other reputable persons” of their native country attesting to their good character, irrespective of whether they were subject to official persecution. In addition, American consuls were urged to share information about excluded aliens so that cases would not be reheard at a different consular office. “There is no appeal from the consul’s [initial] decision,” Washington officials told inspectors. As the *New York Times* reported, German Jews faced “double barriers” since U.S. consuls required evidence of economic self-sufficiency while Nazi officials prevented “emigres from removing capital from Germany.”

The Immigration Act of 1924 reverberated beyond American borders, playing a role in the Holocaust—and in the rise of Zionism. It is estimated that more than 2 million Jews arrived in the US between 1880-1920, part of a still larger wave of immigrants from Russia, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Romania, and Hungary. After the Immigration Act, these countries were given a quota of roughly 11,000 spots per year, *combined*.

As a direct result, masses of Jews who would otherwise have emigrated to the US to join relatives—immigrants who had contributed decisively to socialism, the labor movement, and the arts—were instead trapped in Europe during Hitler’s rise, and were murdered by the millions in the Holocaust.

The direct, criminal role of American immigration policy in the Holocaust is highlighted by the case of the *MS St. Louis*, a passenger ship carrying 937 Jewish refugees blocked from American ports by the Roosevelt administration in 1939. Forced back to Europe, most were killed by the Nazis in the following years. But the *St. Louis* deaths were a drop in the ocean. Every Jewish American family can speak of relatives lost in Hitler’s camps.

America’s rejection of the Jews was profoundly disorienting. The US had long been viewed as a refuge from the pogroms and vicious antisemitism of the old continent. Barred from America, some 300,000 Jews fled eastern Europe for Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s. The Zionist ruling class that emerged on top of this emigration committed another crime—and one that is ongoing—the ethnic cleansing of the native Palestinian population.

Lessons for today

The National Origins Act culminated a movement away from the open immigration that the founders of the American Republic had put in place in what Tom Paine hoped would be “an asylum for mankind,” and which was carried forward by the Radical Republicans after the Civil War with the Fourteenth Amendment affirming birthright citizenship.

In 1882, the US banned Chinese immigration with the notorious Chinese Exclusion Act. In 1903, the Anarchist Exclusion Act took aim at those with political beliefs “undesirable” to American capitalism, as well as those thought likely to become “wards of the state.” In 1907, the so-called “Gentlemen’s Agreement” with Tokyo ended Japanese immigration.

But the 1924 act represented a qualitatively new development. It expanded those countries subject to immigration control to include the entire Eastern Hemisphere. And it implemented a far-reaching police-judicial-prison regime to enforce it. Johnson-Reed was repealed in 1965 but its quota system remains, and the police infrastructure required to enforce it has grown to massive proportions. This police-state apparatus poses a threat not only to immigrant workers, but to the entire working class.

Those interested in fighting the contemporary attack on immigrants must learn the vital lessons of the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 a century ago. There is no separating the defense of immigrant workers from opposition to imperialism, which, as Lenin explained, is “reaction down the line.”

The reactionary wave which produced the Immigration Act of 1924 emerged out of the mobilization of forces of extreme political reaction to suppress the class struggle and opposition to World War one. In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, the American ruling class, fresh from deploying Wilson to lecture the world about the wonders of capitalist democracy, turned to fascistic elements that they could not contain.

The defense of immigrants is not only a democratic question, it is also a question of strategic importance for the revolutionary movement. The international working class is more integrated by the process of production than ever before. Advances in transport and technology have facilitated mass migration, while climate change and the devastation wrought by world imperialism in recent decades has forced hundreds of millions to flee their homes.

The capitalist parties and trade union bureaucracies promote nationalism in an attempt to promote their “own” imperialist governments and weaken the potential social power of the global working class. The development of an internationally unified, politically self-conscious working class therefore requires the defense of the rights of immigrant workers and their defense from state persecution everywhere.



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