

## **Becoming American: Immigration and Assimilation in Late 19th Century America**

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### **Part 2: How and why did immigration make possible the transformation of the United States from a rural republic to an industrial nation?**

This second great immigration lasted for a century, from the 1820s to the stiff immigration restriction law of 1924. A transportation revolution made America accessible from more and more remote parts, even as a population crisis in rural Europe and the breakdown of traditional agriculture put millions of people to flight. The tide surged to a high point in the 1850s, to a higher one in the early 1880s, and to a crest in the opening decade of the 20th century. Astonishingly varied in its sources, this immigration greatly extended the religious and ethnic variety of the United States. Most importantly, as we shall see in the next segment of this seminar, this massive inpouring shaped an urban, industrial way of life. To a degree unequaled elsewhere, the immigrants peopled greatly expanding cities and supplied an industrial labor force.

From the 1850s on, the newcomers gravitated toward the cities. In 1850, about 1 of 2 of America's foreign-born lived in larger cities, as against only 1 of 8 of the native whites; in 1900, 2 of 3 immigrants were urban dwellers, against fewer than 1 in 3 native whites; and, by 1920, 3 out of 4 immigrants were urban dwellers, compared to just half for native Anglo-Americans. The urban immigrants played a powerful role in the United States. The United States already had its own vigorous middle class. What its highly developed economy lacked was an industrial working class. This second immigration coincided with the industrialization of the United States and provided the bulk of the labor for it. In every decade after 1840, two-thirds of the new workers in the industrial labor force were either immigrants or the children of immigrants. In the 1870s, Irish and French Canadians gave a tremendous impetus to the textile industry of New England. Germans, Jews, and Italians transformed the clothing industry of New York in the next decade. A dozen newly-arrived groups collaborated in the blast furnaces and rolling mills of 1900s Pittsburgh and the meat-packing houses of 1910s Chicago. And in the great mining ranges of 20th-century Pennsylvania and Minnesota, thirty different immigrant peoples made American mining the most productive in the world. After spurring this enormous growth of the American economy, they then filled the great cities that sprang up.

To make adequate use of the enormous supply of European peasants who became available in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was necessary to simplify and routinize factory work. Accordingly, a dependence on unskilled immigrant labor encouraged the introduction of automatic machines and processes. In bituminous coal mining, machines that largely replaced the pick miner increased the proportion of unskilled labor. In ready-made clothing factories automatic machines that an inexperienced immigrant could operate after 3 hours' training did the work formerly requiring skilled basters. In iron making, the use of giant furnaces and continuous-process mills created the largest factories in the world, all dependent on unending supplies of unskilled immigrant labor. In America, the immigrants constituted an enormous working class engaged in manufacturing; and because they did, by 1910 America was able to develop to the full a system of mass production.

The making of an immigrant working class was an always uneven, often violent, transition. No single witness, no solitary analyst, ever captured the remarkable speed and spread of the changes. Nonetheless, four early twentieth-century observers made penetrating analyses: Peter Roberts, a pioneer student of industrial labor, later an advocate of Americanization, spent many years in immigrant mining communities; Emily Greene Balch, a sociologist trained in French and

German universities, a peace activist in both world wars, and a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946, who spent ten years tracing the origins of immigrants and their entry into the American economy; Edith Abbott, one of the first American women to earn a Ph. D. in economics, a founder of the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago, and an adviser to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who wrote a brilliant study of immigrant women at work; and the Interchurch World Movement, a delegation of Catholic, Jewish, Orthodox, and Protestant leaders that compiled an important investigation of the great steel strike of 1919. Selections of these contemporary documents are offered below.

Document 3: Immigrants reshape mining: Peter Roberts, *Anthracite Coal Communities* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1904), pp. 19-24.

Document 4: Immigrants make a new labor force: Emily Greene Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1910), pp. 286-290.

Document 5: Immigrant women in clothing manufacture: Edith Abbott, *Women in Industry: A Study in American Economic History* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1910), pp. 229-234.

Document 6: Immigrants make a steel industry: Interchurch World Movement, *The Steel Strike of 1919* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Howe, 1920), pp. 115-116, 132-137.