

SECTION  
1

# Americans Struggle with Postwar Issues

## MAIN IDEA

A desire for normality after the war and a fear of communism and “foreigners” led to postwar isolationism.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

Americans today continue to debate political isolationism and immigration policy.

## Terms & Names

- nativism
- isolationism
- communism
- anarchists
- Sacco and Vanzetti
- quota system
- John L. Lewis

## One American's Story

During the 1920s and 1930s, Irving Fajans, a department store sales clerk in New York City, tried to persuade fellow workers to join the Department Store Employees Union. He described some of the techniques union organizers used.

### A PERSONAL VOICE IRVING FAJANS

“If you were caught distributing . . . union literature around the job you were instantly fired. We thought up ways of passing leaflets without the boss being able to pin anybody down. . . . We . . . swiped the key to the toilet paper dispensers in the washroom, took out the paper and substituted printed slips of just the right size! We got a lot of new members that way—it appealed to their sense of humor.”

—quoted in *The Jewish Americans*



▲ Irving Fajans organized department store workers in their efforts to gain better pay and working conditions during the 1920s.

During the war, workers' rights had been suppressed. In 1919, workers began to cry out for fair pay and better working conditions. Tensions arose between labor and management, and a rash of labor strikes broke out across the country. The public, however, was not supportive of striking workers. Many citizens longed to get back to normal, peaceful living—they felt resentful of anyone who caused unrest.

## Postwar Trends

World War I had left much of the American public exhausted. The debate over the League of Nations had deeply divided America. Further, the Progressive Era had caused numerous wrenching changes in American life. The economy, too, was in a difficult state of adjustment. Returning soldiers faced unemployment or took their old jobs away from women and minorities. Also, the cost of living had doubled. Farmers and factory workers suffered as wartime orders diminished.

Many Americans responded to the stressful conditions by becoming fearful of outsiders. A wave of **nativism**, or prejudice against foreign-born people, swept the nation. So, too, did a belief in **isolationism**, a policy of pulling away from involvement in world affairs.

## Fear of Communism

One perceived threat to American life was the spread of **communism**, an economic and political system based on a single-party government ruled by a dictatorship. In order to equalize wealth and power, Communists would put an end to private property, substituting government ownership of factories, railroads, and other businesses.

**THE RED SCARE** The panic in the United States began in 1919, after revolutionaries in Russia overthrew the czarist regime. Vladimir I. Lenin and his followers, or Bolsheviks (“the majority”), established a new Communist state. Waving their symbolic red flag, Communists, or “Reds,” cried out for a worldwide revolution that would abolish capitalism everywhere.

A Communist Party formed in the United States. Seventy-thousand radicals joined, including some from the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). When several dozen bombs were mailed to government and business leaders, the public grew fearful that the Communists were taking over. U.S. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer took action to combat this “Red Scare.”

### A PERSONAL VOICE A. MITCHELL PALMER

“The blaze of revolution was sweeping over every American institution of law and order . . . eating its way into the homes of the American workman, its sharp tongues of revolutionary heat . . . licking the altars of the churches, leaping into the belfry of the school bell, crawling into the sacred corners of American homes, . . . burning up the foundations of society.”

—“The Case Against the Reds”

**THE PALMER RAIDS** In August 1919, Palmer appointed J. Edgar Hoover as his special assistant. Palmer, Hoover, and their agents hunted down suspected Communists, socialists, and **anarchists**—people who opposed any form of government. They trampled people’s civil rights, invading private homes and offices and jailing suspects without allowing them legal counsel. Hundreds of foreign-born radicals were deported without trials.

But Palmer’s raids failed to turn up evidence of a revolutionary conspiracy—or even explosives. Many thought Palmer was just looking for a campaign issue to gain support for his presidential aspirations. Soon, the public decided that Palmer didn’t know what he was talking about. **A**

**SACCO AND VANZETTI** Although short-lived, the Red Scare fed people’s suspicions of foreigners and immigrants. This nativist attitude led to ruined reputations and wrecked lives. The two most famous victims of this attitude were Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a shoemaker and a fish peddler. Both were Italian immigrants and anarchists; both had evaded the draft during World War I.

In May 1920, **Sacco and Vanzetti** were arrested and charged with the robbery and murder of a factory paymaster and his guard in South Braintree, Massachusetts. Witnesses had said the criminals appeared to be Italians. The accused asserted their innocence and provided alibis; the evidence against them was circumstantial; and the presiding judge made prejudicial remarks. Nevertheless, the jury still found them guilty and sentenced them to death.

## ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

### ROOTS OF COMMUNISM

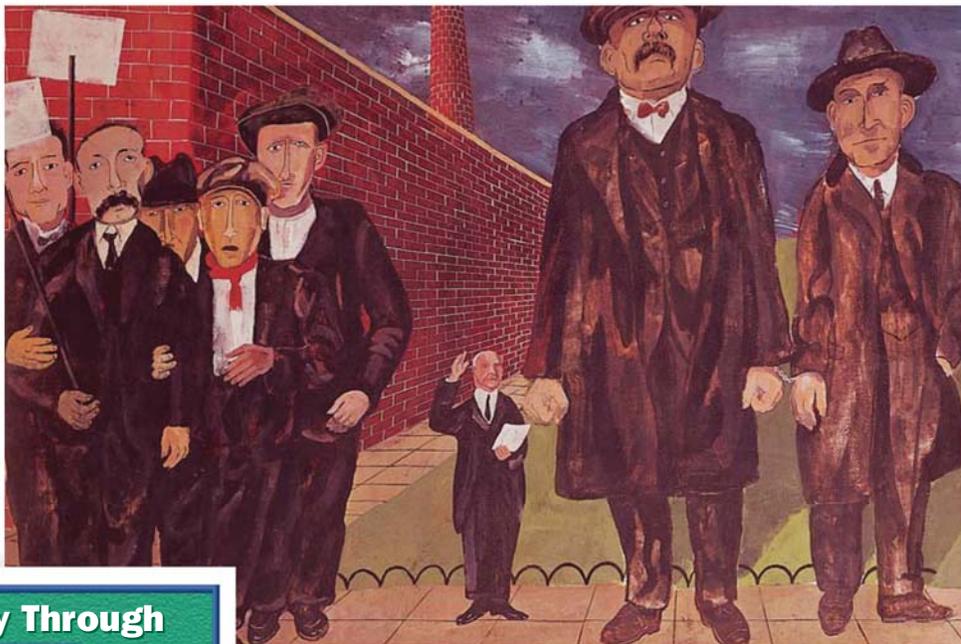
The first Communist government in Russia was based on the teachings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. In 1848, these two had published *The Communist Manifesto*, which outlined a theory of class struggle. It said that a class that had economic power also had social and political power.

It also said that two classes, the “haves” and the “have-nots,” have struggled for control throughout history. During the Industrial Revolution, Communists believed, the struggle was between the capitalists, who owned capital—land, money, and machinery—and workers, who owned only their labor. Marx and Engels urged workers to seize political power and the means of production. Ultimately, they believed, laborers would overthrow capitalism in all industrialized nations.

### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Motives

**A** Why did Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer launch a series of raids against suspected Communists?



## History Through

### Art

#### SACCO AND VANZETTI (1932)

The painting by Ben Shahn shows (right to left) Nicola Sacco, Bartolomeo Vanzetti, a miniature Governor Fuller, and a group of Sacco and Vanzetti supporters.

**Why do you think Shahn depicts Sacco and Vanzetti as so much larger than Governor Fuller?**

Protests rang out in the United States, Europe, and Latin America. Many people thought Sacco and Vanzetti were mistreated because of their radical beliefs; others asserted it was because they were immigrants. The poet Edna St. Vincent Millay donated proceeds from her poem “Justice Denied in Massachusetts” to their defense. She personally appealed to Governor Fuller of Massachusetts for their lives. However, after reviewing the case and interviewing Vanzetti, the governor decided to let the executions go forward. The two men died in the electric chair on August 23, 1927. Before he was executed, Vanzetti made a statement.

#### A PERSONAL VOICE BARTOLOMEO VANZETTI

“In all my life I have never stole, never killed, never spilled blood. . . . We were tried during a time . . . when there was hysteria of resentment and hate against the people of our principles, against the foreigner. . . . I am suffering because I am a radical and indeed I am a radical; I have suffered because I was an Italian and indeed I am an Italian. . . . If you could execute me two times, and if I could be reborn two other times, I would live again to do what I have done already.” **B**

—quoted in *The National Experience*

In 1961, new ballistics tests showed that the pistol found on Sacco was in fact the one used to murder the guard. However, there was no proof that Sacco had actually pulled the trigger.

## Limiting Immigration

During the wave of nativist sentiment, “Keep America for Americans” became the prevailing attitude. Anti-immigrant attitudes had been growing in the United States ever since the 1880s, when new immigrants began arriving from southern and eastern Europe. Many of these immigrants were willing to work for low wages in industries such as coal mining, steel production, and textiles. But after World War I, the need for unskilled labor in the United States decreased. Nativists believed that because the United States now had fewer unskilled jobs available, fewer immigrants should be let into the country. Nativist feelings were fueled by

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Events

**B** According to Vanzetti, what were the reasons for his imprisonment?

#### Background

On August 23, 1977, exactly 50 years after the executions, Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis declared that Sacco and Vanzetti had not been given a fair trial.

the fact that some of the people involved in postwar labor disputes were immigrant anarchists and socialists, who many Americans believed were actually Communists. Racist ideas like those expressed by Madison Grant, an anthropologist at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, fed people's attitudes.

### A PERSONAL VOICE MADISON GRANT

**“The result of unlimited immigration is showing plainly in the rapid decline in the birth rate of native Americans . . . [who] will not bring children into the world to compete in the labor market with the Slovak, the Italian, the Syrian and the Jew. The native American is too proud to mix socially with them.”**

—quoted in *United States History: Ideas in Conflict*

#### Vocabulary

**bigot:** a person who is intolerant of any creed, race, religion, or political belief that differs from his own

**THE KLAN RISES AGAIN** As a result of the Red Scare and anti-immigrant feelings, different groups of bigots used anti-communism as an excuse to harass any group unlike themselves. One such group was the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). The KKK was devoted to “100 percent Americanism.” By 1924, KKK membership reached 4.5 million “white male persons, native-born gentile citizens.” The Klan also believed in keeping blacks “in their place,” destroying saloons, opposing unions, and driving Roman Catholics, Jews, and foreign-born people out of the country. KKK members were paid to recruit new members into their world of secret rituals and racial violence. Though the Klan dominated state politics in many states, by the end of the decade its criminal activity led to a decrease in power. **C**



#### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Issues

**C** What were the main goals of the Ku Klux Klan at this time?

**THE QUOTA SYSTEM** From 1919 to 1921, the number of immigrants had grown almost 600 percent—from 141,000 to 805,000 people. Congress, in response to nativist pressure, decided to limit immigration from certain countries, namely those in southern and eastern Europe.

The Emergency Quota Act of 1921 set up a **quota system**. This system established the maximum number of people who could enter the United States from each foreign country. The goal of the quota system was to cut sharply European immigration to the United States. As the charts on page 416 show, the system achieved that goal.

As amended in 1924, the law limited immigration from each European nation to 2 percent of the number of its nationals living in the United States in 1890. This provision discriminated against people from eastern and southern Europe—mostly Roman Catholics and Jews—who had not started coming to the United States in large numbers until after 1890. Later, the base year was shifted to 1920. In 1927, the law reduced the total number of persons to be admitted in any one year to 150,000.

In addition, the law prohibited Japanese immigration, causing much ill will between the two nations. Japan—which had faithfully kept the Gentlemen's Agreement to limit emigration to the United States, negotiated by Theodore Roosevelt in 1907—expressed anger over the insult.

**▲** In 1925, nearly 60,000 Ku Klux Klan members marched along Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C.

## U.S. Patterns of Immigration, 1921–1929

The map and graph below show the change in immigration patterns resulting from the Emergency Quota Act, among other factors. Hundreds of thousands of people were affected. For example, while the number of immigrants from Mexico rose from 30,758 in 1921 to 40,154 in 1929, the number of Italian immigrants dropped drastically from 222,260 in 1921 to 18,008 in 1929.



Ellis Island in Upper New York Harbor was the port of entry for most European immigrants.

PACIFIC OCEAN

CANADA

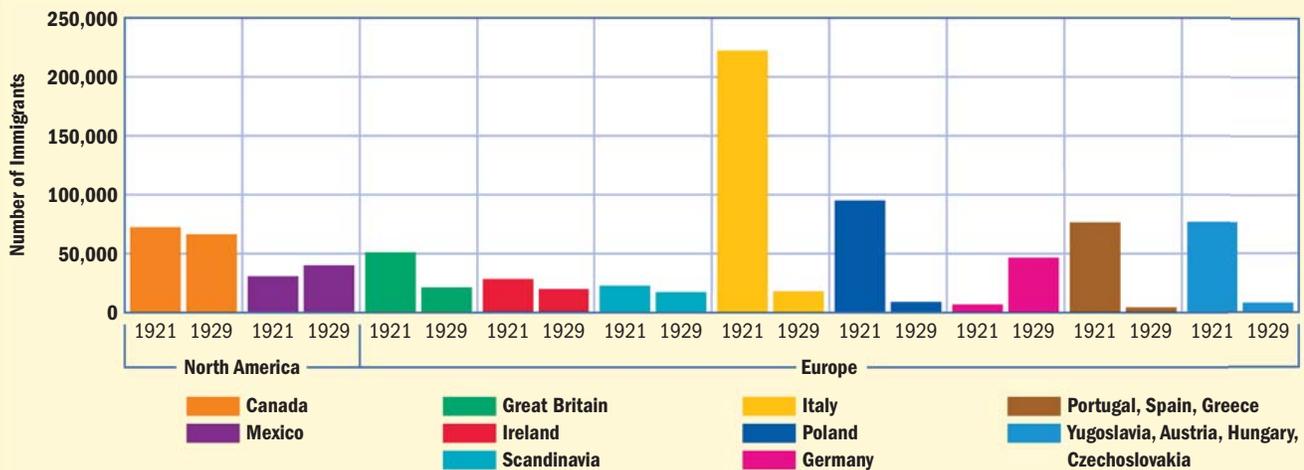
UNITED STATES

MEXICO

ATLANTIC OCEAN

EUROPE

Immigration to the United States, 1921 and 1929



Source: *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*

### SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Graphs

- Which geographical areas show the sharpest decline in immigration to the U.S. between 1921 and 1929? What are the only areas to register an increase in immigration to the U.S.?
- How did the quota system affect where immigrants came from?



SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R28.

**MAIN IDEA****Developing Historical Perspective**

**D** Why did Congress make changes in immigration laws during the 1920s?

The national origins quota system did not apply to immigrants from the Western Hemisphere, however. During the 1920s, about a million Canadians and almost 500,000 Mexicans crossed the nation's borders. **D**

## A Time of Labor Unrest

Another severe postwar conflict formed between labor and management. During the war, the government wouldn't allow workers to strike because nothing could interfere with the war effort. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) pledged to avoid strikes.

However, 1919 saw more than 3,000 strikes during which some 4 million workers walked off the job. Employers didn't want to give raises, nor did they want employees to join unions. Some employers, either out of a sincere belief or because they saw a way to keep wages down, attempted to show that union members were planning a revolution. Employers labeled striking workers as Communists. Newspapers screamed, "Plots to Establish Communism." Three strikes in particular grabbed public attention.

**THE BOSTON POLICE STRIKE** The Boston police had not been given a raise since the beginning of World War I. Among their many grievances was that they had been denied the right to unionize. When representatives asked for a raise and were fired, the remaining policemen decided to strike. Massachusetts governor Calvin Coolidge called out the National Guard. He said, "There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time." The strike ended but members weren't allowed to return to work; new policemen were hired instead. People praised Coolidge for saving Boston, if not the nation, from communism and anarchy. In the 1920 election he became Warren G. Harding's vice-presidential running mate.

**THE STEEL MILL STRIKE** Workers in the steel mills wanted the right to negotiate for shorter working hours and a living wage. They also wanted union recognition and collective bargaining rights. In September 1919, the U.S. Steel Corporation refused to meet with union representatives. In response, over 300,000 workers walked off their jobs. Steel companies hired strikebreakers—employees who agreed to work during the strike—and used force. Striking workers were beaten by police, federal troops, and state militias. Then the companies instituted a propaganda campaign, linking the strikers to Communists. In October 1919, negotiations between labor and management produced a deadlock. President Woodrow Wilson made a written plea to the combative "negotiators."

### A PERSONAL VOICE WOODROW WILSON

"At a time when the nations of the world are endeavoring to find a way of avoiding international war, are we to confess that there is no method to be found for carrying on industry except . . . the very method of war? . . . Are our industrial leaders and our industrial workers to live together without faith in each other?"

—quoted in *Labor in Crisis*

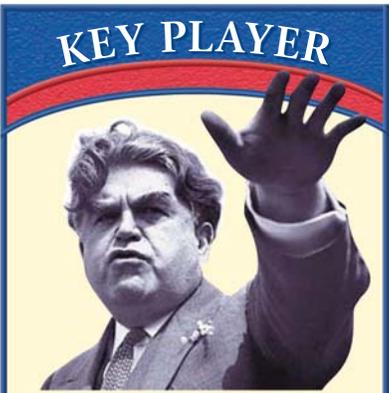
The steel strike ended in January 1920. In 1923, a report on the harsh working conditions in steel mills shocked the public. The steel companies agreed to an eight-hour day, but the steelworkers remained without a union. **E**



▲ Strikers included working women tailors who fought for improved working conditions.

**MAIN IDEA****Comparing**

**E** Compare the results of the Boston police strike and the steel strike.



**JOHN LLEWELLYN LEWIS**  
1880–1969

John L. Lewis was born in the little mining town of Lucas, Iowa. His family had traditionally been concerned with labor rights and benefits.

Lewis grew up with a fierce determination to fight for what he believed companies owed their employees: decent working conditions and a fair salary. As he said years later,

“I have pleaded your case not in the tones of a feeble mendicant [beggar] asking alms but in the thundering voice of the captain of a mighty host, demanding the rights to which free men are entitled.”

**THE COAL MINERS’ STRIKE** Unionism was more successful in America’s coalfields. In 1919, the United Mine Workers of America, organized since 1890, got a new leader—**John L. Lewis**. In protest of low wages and long workdays, Lewis called his union’s members out on strike on November 1, 1919. Attorney General Palmer obtained a court order sending the miners back to work. Lewis then declared it over, but he quietly gave the word for it to continue. In defiance of the court order, the mines stayed closed another month. Then President Wilson appointed an arbitrator, or judge, to put an end to the dispute. The coal miners received a 27 percent wage increase, and John L. Lewis became a national hero. The miners, however, did not achieve a shorter workday and a five-day workweek until the 1930s.

**LABOR MOVEMENT LOSES APPEAL** In spite of limited gains, the 1920s hurt the labor movement badly. Over the decade, union membership dropped from more than 5 million to around 3.5 million. Membership declined for several reasons:

- much of the work force consisted of immigrants willing to work in poor conditions,
- since immigrants spoke a multitude of languages, unions had difficulty organizing them,
- farmers who had migrated to cities to find factory jobs were used to relying on themselves, and
- most unions excluded African Americans.

By 1929, about 82,000 African Americans—or less than 1 percent of their population—held union memberships. By contrast, just over 3 percent of all whites were union members. However, African Americans joined some unions like the mine workers’, longshoremen’s, and railroad porters’

unions. In 1925, A. Philip Randolph founded the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters to help African Americans gain a fair wage.

While America’s attitude toward unions was changing, so, too, was its faith in the presidency.

**SECTION 1**

**ASSESSMENT**

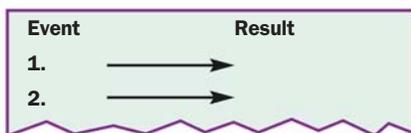
**1. TERMS & NAMES** For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- nativism
- communism
- Sacco and Vanzetti
- John L. Lewis
- isolationism
- anarchists
- quota system

**MAIN IDEA**

**2. TAKING NOTES**

In a cause-and-effect chart like the one shown, list examples of the aftereffects of World War I.



What event do you think was the most significant? Explain your choice.

**CRITICAL THINKING**

**3. EVALUATING**

Do you think Americans were justified in their fear of radicals and foreigners in the decade following World War I? Explain your answer.

**Think About:**

- the goals of the leaders of the Russian Revolution
- the challenges facing the United States

**4. ANALYZING ISSUES**

In the various fights between management and union members, what did each side believe?

**5. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS**

What do you think the Sacco and Vanzetti case shows about America in the 1920s?