

S5**Backgrounder: Immigration**

All of us are immigrants. We arrived in the geographical area we know as the United States at different times. But we all immigrated, or moved from one country or homeland to another. The first immigrants were the Asian people who crossed a land bridge into this region. Today we call these people Native Americans or Native Peoples. When European settlers came to North America in the 1600s, they, too, were immigrants. Over the years, more immigrants have settled in the United States than in any other nation in the world.

One of the largest groups of immigrants came here between 1880 and 1920. This era has been called the Age of the New Immigrant. In the past, most immigrants had come from northern and western Europe (from countries like Ireland and England). In the Age of the New Immigrant, most people came into this country from southern and eastern Europe (from countries such as Italy and Poland or Russia.)

New Immigrants were also different in other ways. Past immigrants often had a trade or career and often spoke English. Typically, the New Immigrants didn't. In their homelands, they had been very poor farmers and were considered unskilled laborers in the industrialized countries to which they immigrated.

Why did they want to come to this country? There were many reasons. Some **pushed** them away from their homeland; others **pulled** them here.

Some factors that **pushed** the New Immigrants away from their homeland were:

- **Poverty**

Farmers' lives had changed significantly when countries around the world began concentrating on industry and manufacturing. Their crops began to fail and their small farms no longer produced enough to support their families. They had no other way to make a living.

- **Overpopulation**

Europe's population had exploded. Fewer people were dying and more were being born. More and more people were competing for land and jobs.

- **Natural disasters**

Earthquakes, great storms, and crop failures spelled disaster for farmers. For example, in 1845 Ireland's potato crop failed. For many Irish, potatoes were a major part of their diet. Thousands died when the crop failed; thousands more immigrated to America.

- **Forced service in the military and religious persecution**

In Russia and other countries in eastern Europe, people were attacked and killed because of their religious beliefs. They were often forced to serve in the military, especially when their country was taken over by another. For example, many Lithuanians had to serve in the Russian army when their country came under its control.

Some factors that **pulled** the New Immigrants toward the United States were:

- **Free land**

In 1862, Congress passed the Homestead Act. It said that anyone – including immigrants who wanted to become citizens – could own 160 acres of land in the western part of the US.

- **Job opportunities**

As more and more factories popped up in America's cities, the number of jobs grew as well. Immigrants could take these jobs and earn much more than they did in their homelands. This was a big incentive to poor farmers. Some immigrants came here just to earn the money and return home. They were called "birds of passage."

- **Religious freedom**

This fact was particularly attractive to Jewish people, especially those that lived in Russia, where they were the victims of anti-Semitism and government organized attacks called pogroms.

Sometimes the decision to immigrate was not based on one of these factors. For example, some people came to America to be with family members who had already moved here. Every person who came to America had a different list of reasons for doing so.

There's an old immigrant story that goes like this. A young man wanted to immigrate to America because he had heard the streets were paved with gold. Imagine his surprise when he came here and discovered three things: first, the streets weren't paved with gold; second, the streets weren't paved at all; and, third, he was expected to pave them.

Whether the story is actually true or not, it tells us a lot about the kind of life New Immigrants expected and the kind of life they found.

Many of the people who came to the US between 1880 and 1920 stayed in cities on the east coast, such as New York and Boston. There, they lived in buildings of small apartments called tenements. Tenements might not have running water, bathtubs, or heat. However, they

often had a great deal of more unpleasant things, like rats and bedbugs. People lived in tenements because that was all they could afford.

There was one positive aspect of living in the tenements, however. People from the same country tended to live in the same neighborhood, if not the same apartment building. Here the New Immigrants could speak their native language. They could understand and be understood. They could find the foods and clothing they were used to and practice the customs of their homelands while they became Americanized.

These tenements and neighborhoods also gave them protection from others, who often called the New Immigrants insulting names and refused to sell them food or give them jobs.